

# Dynamic interplay between religion and armed conflict in Afghanistan

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## Abstract

*In approaching this subject the most important thing to understand is how Afghans perceive things to be. On to this must be grafted factors about their environment, beliefs, and character that most affect their response. The physical characteristics of their environment are easy to define and describe, but their character, relationship to Islam, and how the two combine and affect their mode of warfare is more complex – a knot of truly Gordian proportions. However, if the past is accurately factored into the present, this enables contextual understanding, which is the key to unlocking the puzzle.*



In the dawning chapter of the twenty-first century, as a consequence of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the United States and what has followed since, discussion on Afghanistan is dominated by two subjects, warfare and Islam. Allowing for a degree of internal division on the subject, it is reasonable to say that the debate falls into two camps, one following Western interpretation and the other favouring a more local perspective. Both camps share, and suffer from, issues of

interpretation and misunderstanding about each other and events on the ground. These are largely based on misconceptions of the past and present, or a degree of manipulation of both in order to support a view or a political agenda geared to present perceptions of need. The differing, and competing, interpretations on offer complicate the consideration of both religion and warfare in Afghanistan. This article is an attempt to explain the ‘dynamic interplay between religion and armed conflict in Afghanistan’ based on fundamental realities, rather than imagined interpretations.

With such vast and interesting ground to cover, it is tempting, but ill-advised, to charge into this subject in isolation from its operating environment. Inevitably, the landscape, the weather, and the prevailing social conditions leave their mark on the character of the people who must endure the many trials of the environment in which they live. This profoundly affects their approach to life, their faith, and their preferred style of warfare. In seeking to understand the interplay between faith and armed conflict in Afghanistan, it is therefore judicious to first scout the ground and the nature of the environment in which these factors operate. To clear some of the dust obscuring the battle space in question, I have separated the prime governing factors that have most influenced religion and warfare in Afghanistan and drawn heavily on nineteenth-century observers who had both a close association with the Afghans and continuity of contact in a way little in evidence today. I look in turn at the land inhabited by the Afghans, the Afghans inhabiting the land, the faith in question, and the nature of armed conflict in Afghanistan, before a conclusion based on the findings from those four areas under consideration.

## The land inhabited by the Afghans

Afghanistan has been described as ‘the Switzerland of Southern Asia’.<sup>1</sup> Like Switzerland it is a landlocked nation, containing the source of important rivers, and represents home to a mixture of cohabitating races speaking differing languages. However, it is considerably larger than Switzerland, carved out of the north-east corner of the Iranian plateau with a land mass of 647,500 km (making it slightly larger than France).

Within its borders Afghanistan has formidable mountains, described by one early European traveller to those elevated parts as ‘a wild assemblage of hills’.<sup>2</sup> Many of the ‘hills’ involved in that accurate description stretch away into the far distance, rising in ever more impressive elevation to form the foothills of the Himalayas. But Afghanistan is not all mountains, it also contains daunting deserts – straddling its southern and western borders. Having walked in both its mountains and its deserts (wherein you can sink up to your ankles in the fine,

1 Percy Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd, London, 1940, Vol. 1, p. 2.

2 Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, London, 1815, p. 149.

choking surface dust), I can assure the reader that, in their own way, Afghan deserts are no less impressive and challenging to confront on foot than Afghan hills.

The crude ground inhabited by the Afghans is invariably arid and harsh, except for some narrow bands of fertile soil that hold fast to meandering rivers. For most of the year the rivers are reduced to a trickle, or vanish altogether in the summer heat, only to fill again in winter and flood with the spring thaws.

A mid-nineteenth-century writer described the reality of Afghan existence as: ‘Living under a dry, clear, bracing climate, but one subject to considerable alternations of heat and cold’.<sup>3</sup> That is something of an understatement. Having experienced more than my fair share of that ‘bracing climate’ in all seasons – travelling with the mujahideen during the Soviet–Afghan War,<sup>4</sup> I would describe the climate of that severe combination of mountain and desert land as nothing less than merciless – blisteringly hot in summer and sub-freezing in winter.

As a home, or merely as a landscape for the traveller passing through, Afghanistan is a place to be taken seriously. The consequences of underestimating what the land, weather and people are capable of can prove fatal. Dealing with those conditions, largely without the support of twentieth- or twenty-first-century comforts (in terms of accommodations and nutritious food) and under wartime conditions was a humbling experience, more so when my companions were even less well equipped – very few even possessing a good pair of boots or adequate winter clothing.

## The Afghans inhabiting the land

There is academic debate about whether Afghan society is, even among the Pashtun (or Pushtun, Pakhtun, Pakhtoon, etc.), tribal in nature but there is no room here to explore that debate. Tribe or not, the bedrock of Afghan society across the ethnic and geographic divides involved is for the most part a rural peasantry sharing not dissimilar social structures, needs, and experiences. They have more in common with each other than they have differences – although that may not be how an Afghan, with an emotional attachment to the subject, would necessarily describe it.

Richard Tapper defines Afghan society as one that is loosely composed ‘of a localised group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organisation, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins)’.<sup>5</sup> According to an observer writing in the early nineteenth century, the social order of the Afghans represented ‘freedom, which forms their grand distinction among nations of the East’ and involved ‘a mixture of

3 John W. Kaye, *The War in Afghanistan*, 3rd edition, 3 vols, William H. Allen, London, 1874, Vol. 1, p. 11.

4 The Soviet invasion began in December 1979 and ended in February 1989.

5 Richard Tapper (ed.), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, Croom Helm, London, 1983, p. 9.

anarchy and arbitrary power'.<sup>6</sup> It was the same commentator's further view that Western travellers coming from India would be

surprised at the fluctuation and instability of the civil institutions. He would find it difficult to comprehend how a nation could subsist in such disorder; and would pity those who were compelled to pass their days in such a scene, and whose minds were trained by their unhappy situation to fraud and violence, to rapine, deceit, and revenge. Yet, he would scarce fail to admire their martial and lofty spirit, their hospitality, their bold and simple manners.<sup>7</sup>

For the majority of Afghans in the early twenty-first century, it would be true to say that their daily lot differs little from that of their ancestors. Afghanistan is a 'reciprocal' society in which exchanged favours and barter practice are the norm between communities that must compete and co-operate with each other. They must attempt to manage this despite the magnitude of the social disruptions caused by an ever-evolving conflict, which has been active for more than thirty years. Their defence remains primarily the tight social bonding represented by family ties and local community. This social structure is geared to protect the group simultaneously both from outside threat and from the internal pressures and fissures that snake through all impoverished societies.

Afghanistan has a population roughly the same size as Texas and it is no wonder that the unforgiving combination of rock and sand which the indigenous population must endure has shaped much of their character – reputed by those who know them well to be firm. From a Western perspective, Afghans have historically often been represented as having a callous disregard for others, described by Mr Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab in 1855, as 'savages, – noble savages perhaps – and not without some tincture of virtue and generosity, but still absolutely barbarians nevertheless'.<sup>8</sup>

In 1881, in the wake of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, Denzil Ibbetson<sup>9</sup> wrote,

The true Pathan is perhaps the most barbaric of all the races with which we are brought into contact in the Punjab ... He is bloodthirsty, cruel and vindictive in the highest degree: he does not know what truth or faith is, insomuch that the saying *Afghan be iman* (i.e. an Afghan is without a conscience) has passed into a proverb among his neighbours.<sup>10</sup>

Holdich wrote that the Pathan will 'shoot his own relations just as soon as the relations of his enemy – possibly sooner – and he will shoot them from behind.

6 M. Elphinstone, above note 2, p. 148.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

8 H.C. Wylly, *The Borderland: The Country of the Pathans*, Safdar Mehdi, Karachi, 1998 (originally published 1912), p. 5.

9 Denzil Charles Jelf Ibbetson (1847–1908), ethnographer and British colonial civil servant in India; Superintendent of Census in 1881 and author of the well-received *The Panjab Census Report*, 1881; later (1898) Chief Commissioner of the Punjab and Lieut. Governor of the Punjab 1905–1908. He was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India (KCSI) in 1903.

10 As quoted in H. C. Wylly, above note 8, pp. 6–7.

Yet the individual Pathan may be trusted to be true to his salt and to his engagements'.<sup>11</sup> During the mid-nineteenth century John W. Kaye commented,

The people were a race or a group of races of hardy, vigorous mountaineers. The physical character of the country had stamped itself on the moral conformation of its inhabitants. Brave, independent, but of a turbulent [*sic*] vindictive character, their very existence seemed to depend upon a constant succession of internal feuds.<sup>12</sup>

Such comments were written at a time when the views expressed were subject to the circumstances of the age. This can be described as one of confrontational skirmishing, where East and West collided in a state of never-ending near or actual warfare. However, over the dust and drifting battle-smoke of that encounter, a discernable grudging respect grew between the opposing systems of power. In a work published in 1890, Edward Oliver wrote:

When you meet a Pathan, you meet a man like yourself ... He will never allow you to abuse him, but makes up for it amply by never making you wish to do so ... He takes his independence for granted, and seldom parades it in the garb of rudeness.<sup>13</sup>

The more critical commentaries are the sort of judgement made without a fully considered appreciation of the life reality experienced by the Afghans. On the ground, the life of the ordinary Afghan is harsh and unforgiving and he treads that path daily on the brink of extinction. Those who knew the Afghans best, and so had contextual understanding, learned that despite the rough edges there was much to admire about them. According to one commentator,

even when he leaves his native hearth behind, he takes his manners with him. He will come down, a stalwart, manly-looking ruffian, with frank and open manners ... He is certain to be filthy and he may be ragged, but he will saunter into a Viceregal durbar as proud as Lucifer, and with an air of unconcern a diplomatist might envy.<sup>14</sup>

Afghan pragmatism is the lifeline that enables them to survive. In their harsh and unforgiving natural environment, Afghans endure with fortitude whatever the world has to throw at them. It is this firm and robust approach to life that enables them to cope with whatever trials that confront them. Without a keen eye for any advantage or opportunity, no matter how slight, the Afghans would be defeated by their environment long before having to worry about being defeated by their enemies.

My view on the character of the Afghans was learned the old-fashioned way, among the Afghan people in their rural communities, on the ground and on

11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12 J. W. Kaye, above note 3, Vol. 1, p. 11.

13 H. C. Wylly, above note 8, p. 10.

14 Edward E. Oliver, *Across the Border or Pathan and Biluch*, Chapman & Hall Ltd., London, 1890, p. 224.

foot without supports. That sort of passage places the observer in undiluted and close proximity to his hosts, sharing not only the hardships and miseries of the conditions along the way, but also the simpler joys afforded by the everyday companionship of people living life at the edge.

Being largely impoverished in circumstances, what little they do have they will do a lot to defend, as the alternative – to give it up – has potentially fatal consequences. At the same time, most Afghans, regardless of the little they have, delight in being able to offer some form of hospitality. Then again, they are equally capable of relieving the traveller of what they feel is rightfully theirs simply by virtue of commanding greater force. In 1989 I had a worrying discussion under trying circumstances with a *badmash* (bandit) on the Shomali Plain on this very subject. The *badmash's* view was clearly and forcibly expressed – anything that passed through the space that he controlled rightfully belonged to him. He won the discussion thanks to the loud volume of his argument and (after the shooting finished) the very close proximity of the barrel of his AK-47 assault rifle to my chest.

As a consequence of that victory, the *badmash* secured those items that he viewed as a sample of my excessive wealth – my watch and my trousers! When we parted company, which from my point of view could not have been soon enough, he seemed very pleased with his spoils, while I in turn was perfectly content with my side of the bargain – my life. As I hurried on my way, intent on placing as much distance between myself and the *badmash* as fast as possible, I left with a far sharper appreciation of how and why Afghan points of reference differ from those used in the West. I had faced a memorable challenge to survive an encounter with someone living on the brink of extinction in a hostile environment. The *badmash* faced a far harder challenge – he had to survive that hostile environment every day. The wear and tear of that sort of life has a telling effect: the average life span for an Afghan male at the time of my encounter with the Shomali *badmash* was just over forty-one years of age<sup>15</sup> (rising by 2010 to 44.45<sup>16</sup>).

In trying to grapple with the complexities of the Afghans, one must not only consider their terrain and the weather, social order and conditions within it; it is necessary to also unravel something of their history. This tends to differ in factual detail from the perceived impression most often promoted: that Afghanistan has never been conquered. In actuality, the history of conquest in Afghanistan includes the Proto-Indo Europeans, the Oxus civilization,<sup>17</sup> Indo-Scythians, the Persian empire, Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, the Indian Mauryan empire, the Indo-Bactrian empire, the Khushans, Sassanids, Hephthlites (White Huns), Ghaznavids,

15 Public Data, available at: [http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp\\_dyn\\_le00\\_in&idim=country:AFG&dl=en&hl=en&q=afghan+life+expectancy](http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp_dyn_le00_in&idim=country:AFG&dl=en&hl=en&q=afghan+life+expectancy) (last visited 26 November 2010).

16 Index Mundi, available at: [http://www.indexmundi.com/afghanistan/life\\_expectancy\\_at\\_birth.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/afghanistan/life_expectancy_at_birth.html) (last visited 26 November 2010). Data for Afghanistan is notoriously fluid and therefore hard to pin down. It should be noted that age expectancy data leans heavily on assessments based on surveys targeting urban dwellers rather than the more representative rural population, who can expect a shorter life span.

17 The Oxus civilization was all but lost to history until the Russian excavations in the 1970s.

and Ghurids, the Islamic conquest (which began in the seventh century and continued until the conquest by Abdur Rahman in the late nineteenth century of the last pagans in Nuristan), the Mongols, the Timurid empire of Khorasan and 'Babur the Tiger' from Central Asia. When Shah Ahmad Khan Abdali Durrani came to power in 1747, Afghanistan gained its name for the first time. Rapid expansion followed, with the capture of Lahore (1752), Herat (1753) and Delhi (1762).<sup>18</sup>

Repeated social upheaval on this scale leaves scars in the psychological make-up of the society involved. These are compounded when that society is largely impoverished and inhabits an arid, isolated, mountainous region. As a consequence of their history and their geography, it is no wonder that Afghans are suspicious of strangers, pragmatic as far as survival is concerned (they do what it takes) and hardy (you have to be in order to survive).

## The faith in question

Into the weave of the Afghan make-up something must then be added of their belief systems, all sorely tested by the violence of their history. In the modern time-frame, Afghanistan is Islamic. Like the majority of Muslims, most Afghans follow the Sunni interpretation of that faith. In detail, they adhere to the Hanafi school of thought, one of four established branches (tolerating the other three<sup>19</sup>) who recognize the first four Caliphs as the rightful successors of Muhammad. Those who subscribe to the Shi'a persuasion of Islam, who recognize authority inherited by Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, are supporters of the Jaffarite branch of Shi'a practice.

## Islam and its predecessors

In the West, the most common perception is that Afghans are so bound by their religious convictions that nothing can or could persuade them to change, or has ever done so. This holds fast only as long as the time-frame under the microscope is kept very narrow, avoiding the complications thrown up by wider study of the subject. In fact, such wider study reveals that Afghanistan has repeatedly been subjected to total religious overhaul by outsiders imposing their ways over the old ways.

The earliest faith systems in Afghanistan were animist, followed by pagan beliefs of various hues that fused with the older animist ones. The Greeks imported their own gods and further conversion and fusion occurred before the next marked conversion to the faith of the Hindus. That conviction of faith was overturned by

18 The meteoric rise established a western border that included Meshad (modern-day Iran) and the fertile Punjab plains to the east. Durrani assumed the glittering title of *Durr-i-Durrani* (Pearl of Pearls), but after his death in 1772 Afghanistan went into decline, never to recover.

19 The other three being the Malkite, Shafiite, and Hanbalite.

Buddhism before the Zoroastrians emerged and shuffled Buddhism off the stage. The tide of Islam began to sweep across Afghanistan in the seventh century, the last of a long list of religious faiths to which the Afghans have pinned their hopes and aspirations. In the twentieth century, there was a low and slow tide attempting to convert the masses to communism. Some did convert, or at least were willing to assume the public perception of conversion, in order to accelerate personal career paths.

Thanks to the Chinese Buddhist commentator Xuan Zang's pilgrimage (AD 627–643) and his passage through Afghanistan to sacred Buddhist sites shortly before the arrival of Islam, details of the Afghan cult of Zhun are preserved for posterity. Afghans with faith in the Zhun cult were said to have worshipped a golden idol with ruby eyes. When the tide of Islam swept away the overt worship of idols, the practitioners of that belief system proved reluctant to dispense totally with all the old ways. Instead, they preferred to adapt and recycle some of their past faith to safeguard against an uncertain future. As a consequence of this caution, arguably the ghost of the old Zhun cult survives, with adaptations suitable to Islamic belief needs. The ruby-eyed golden idol of the Zhun devotees became a dragon (which may have been at the root of the cult to begin with, as it was not dissimilar to the pre-Buddhist dragon-god religion of Tibet). Seen as a dragon, rather than as an idol, it allowed an associated relevance to the new Islamic faith advancing through Afghanistan, for in his own land the Muslim Caliph Ali is celebrated as the 'dragon slayer'. In the retelling, within an Afghan context, Ali was depicted as slaying the pre-Islamic dragon god as proof of the greater power of Islam over old faiths. Several geological rock formations are still credited by Afghans as being the ossified remains of the dragon slain by Ali.<sup>20</sup>

The tides of history have washed away most of the details of pre-Islamic faith in Afghanistan. The Taliban were at pains to try and erase as much as possible of the visible evidence that remained – most famously in their destruction of the standing Buddhas in Bamiyan, which had gazed serenely down over the ages as Afghanistan slowly advanced towards its future.

## Urban dwellers and rural peasants

In considering the Afghan response to Islam it is worth mentioning the French academic Olivier Roy's observation that

there are two Afghanistans, the place of innovation (*bi'at*); this is the natural environment of the civil servant, the teacher, the soldier ... all 'intellectuals' and 'bare-heads' (*sarluchak*), held to be unbelievers and arrogant; and secondly the province (*ashraf*), the home of religious tradition (*sunnat*) and values which stand the test of time.<sup>21</sup>

20 Of these, the most notable is Azhdar, close to the site where the two giant Bamiyan Buddhas once stood.

21 Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 10.



Both sides, the city dwellers and the rural peasants, tend to regard the other with near contempt. The peasant finds fault with high-handed urban ways, where leadership seeks to expand centralized authority that is at odds with his world of traditional social values and order. On the other side, the more educated urbanite disdains the peasant for what he sees as his shameful reluctance to embrace modernizing change. Each side avows that they are devout Muslims but neither side believes that the other really is. In truth, both sides accept an Afghan blend of Islam that has proved remarkably adept at assimilating older entrenched beliefs that pre-date Islam. This flexibility within religious belief reflects Islam's willingness to make some accommodation with local belief systems in order to gain a tighter bond with the population involved.

The majority of the Afghan population are Pashtun and consider themselves collectively to be the descendants of a common ancestor, *Qaiz*. To reinforce the credentials of their Islamic status, they declare *Qaiz* to have been a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad and personally converted to Islam by him. This plays to a receptive Pashtun audience, who therefore assume superiority over all other ethnic groups in Afghanistan because they, by right of their interpretation of the past, see themselves as original Muslims, not mere later converts.

The next most common agreement among Afghans is to disagree on just about everything else – with the emotive nature of the argument rendering the ensuing confusion even more complex. Many of the issues stem from the unsettled internal divisions within Islam itself, that is, between Sunni and Shi'a camps and the further internal sectarian division of those camps into competing splinter groups (such as differing schools of thought involving Imamia and Ismaili among the Shi'a and Sufi *tariqa* among the Sunni, etc.).

Regardless of these issues, when it comes to Islamic faith in Afghanistan, Afghans all profess to be devout Muslims and can be very sensitive on the issue. The degree of sensitivity is related to the bumpy ride that Islam is having in Afghanistan – contending with the wreckage of preceding faith systems and a populace that resists full compliance in order to cling to identities demarcated by regional, ethnic, and cultural divides.

## Islam and Afghan customary law

Beyond the fissures existing over Islamic interpretations of the right path, Islam in Afghanistan has also had to contend with the competing customary laws of Afghan society. This fault line involves issues of authority, religious and social in nature. This is evidenced by a wealth of titles such as *Akhunzada*, *Malik*, *Mir*, *Malang*, *Mullah*, *Maulawi*, *Maulana*, *Pir*, *Sayyed Khan* and so forth and the ever-shifting level of rank, importance, and social influence that they carry.

Of all the customary laws in play, the most influential is that of *Pukhtunwali*, which is applicable to the Pashtuns who form the majority of the population. *Pukhtunwali* is the unwritten code of the Pashtuns, which orders and influences their society. I say 'orders and influences', rather than controls and commands, as *Pukhtunwali* represents an ideal rather than an absolute – not

dissimilar to Western concepts of chivalry. As such, just like chivalry, it is subject both to personal interpretation (which can be very creative) and to common abuse.

The three central pillars of *Pukhtunwali* are: *nang* (honour, a social concept shared by non-Pashtuns); *melmastya* (hospitality, be it ever so humble; this also is near universal among all Afghans); and the sternest obligation, that of *badal* (revenge, also shared, if not so sternly articulated, with other Afghans and in line with the biblical concept of ‘an eye for an eye’). It is said among many non-Pashtun that the Pashtuns ‘half use the Koran and half use *Pukhtunwali*’ as their guiding principles.

On the sensitive and emotive issue of obedience to Islamic faith, the Afghan neither needs nor seeks the comments of outsiders as, rightly or wrongly, he feels more qualified to comment on that subject than any outsider. In their evaluation of each other, Afghans can prove to be the sternest critics. The seventeenth-century Afghan warrior poet Kushal Khan Khattak,<sup>22</sup> in many ways the epitome of a Pashtun, wrote that Afghan believers in Sufi ‘mystics’ were ‘all one’ with unbelievers.<sup>23</sup> He was no less disparaging of the Baluch and the Hazarah as ‘dirty and abominable ... They have neither modesty nor faith’.<sup>24</sup> While he argued for unity among the tribes in order to resist the Mughals, he despaired of them achieving it and captured something of that despair in a poem entitled ‘Pathan’:

Of the Pathans that are famed in the land of Roh,<sup>25</sup>  
Now-a-days are the Mohmands, the Bangash, and the Warrakzais, and the  
Afridis.  
The dogs of the Mohmands are better than the Bangash,  
Though the Mohmands themselves are a thousand times worse than the dogs.  
The Warrakzais are the scavengers of the Afridis,  
Though the Afridis, one and all, are but scavengers themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Stern as Kushal Khan Khattak was in his judgements of other Afghans on their observance of the tenets of Islamic doctrine, he was, like many Afghans, inclined towards a two-tier system in marshalling his views – how he viewed others and how he viewed himself. When it came to measuring his own performance he allowed himself a generous degree of dispensation, writing passionately of his own love for intoxicating wine and women. This was in an age still eroding its pre-Islamic past and wine was still much in evidence in the community of the Afghans, Herat and Kabul both being famed for the quality of their vines.

22 Khushal Khan Khattak (1613–1690) was, as his name implies, Khan of the Khattak tribe, a renowned warrior and a poet who authored over 45,000 poems. See C. Biddulph, *Afghan Poetry of the Seventeenth Century: Being Selections from the Poems of Khushal Khan Khattak*, Kegan Paul & Co., London, 1890.

23 Henry George Raverty, *Selections from the Poetry of the Afghan: From the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1867, p. 213.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

25 An early name for the people of Rohilkand, ‘the land of the Rohillas’, now known as the Suleiman Mountains and inhabited by the Yusufzais tribes.

26 Translated in C. Biddulph, *Afghan Poetry*, available at: <http://www.afghan-network.net/biographies/khattak.html> (last visited 15 January 2011).

Then, as now, ‘the inherent diversity of attitudes, interpretations and interest which exist in Afghan society’<sup>27</sup> involved some significant contradictions both in how Afghans saw themselves and interpreted Islam and their relationship with that faith; and in turn how they squared this all away with the competing demands imposed by the mores and manners of customary laws that long predated Islam’s arrival. As this subject touches upon issues of honour, it is sensitive and prone to emotive interpretations, both personal and communal in nature.

## The nature of armed conflict in Afghanistan

Before and after the arrival of Islam, the traditional Afghan way of war was pure, simple, brutal and effective, and governed by one absolute rule: win or die. That choice was ideally suited to the pragmatic character of the Afghans, used as they were to stark choices. However, it ran contrary to what might be termed the civilizing demands of a new form of warfare prescribed by the tenets of Islam. In grappling with this, it should be borne in mind that not all rules, new or old, are obeyed to the letter of the law, nor even to the spirit of the law, and least of all when warfare is the subject.

### Islamic rules of war

This new way of war that Islam brought was awkward in the hands of the Afghans, not least because they were new to it, but also because it was more complex and at times at odds with the existing rules of engagement. The new rules governed issues such as ‘collateral damage’ to civilians. This was a grey area under the old system, but under Islamic rules of warfare non-combatants were designated as protected and not to be harmed. The new rules also included restrictions on attacking wounded enemies – under the old system this was an ideal opportunity to inflict fatal damage and proceed to victory, but under Islamic rules the wounded were not to be harmed.<sup>28</sup> Even prisoners, the very spoils of war, were granted protection: under Islamic rules they also were not to be harmed.<sup>29</sup> These were bitter pills indeed in a context where *badal* (blood vengeance) had traditionally formed an integral part of warfare. For the Afghans these new rules went into uncomfortable,

27 Bo Huld and Erland Janson (eds), *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: The Social, Cultural and Political Impact of the Soviet Invasion*, Croom Helm (in co-operation with the Swedish Institute of International Affairs), London, 1988, p. 12.

28 ‘Do not kill the wounded, do not pursue anyone retreating and whoever throws down his weapon will be spared’. Hadith, al-Zuhri, from Imam ‘Ali ibn al-Hussein, as quoted in Imam Muhammad Shirazi, *War, Peace and Non-violence: An Islamic Perspective*, London, 2003, p. 45, available at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/4084892/Imam-Muhammad-Shirazi-War-Peace-and-NonViolence-an-Islamic-Perspective> (last visited 26 November 2010).

29 ‘When ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond (on them): thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded).’ Qur’an, 47:4, 1934 translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, reissued in 2000 by Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, p. 434.

nitty-gritty detail that even extended as far as not harming trees<sup>30</sup> – arguably long anticipating the emergence of green politics challenging all governments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries!

With his head spinning under the onslaught of the new Islamic rules of engagement, what was the hardy Afghan warrior to do? From the start he did what he was good at, what he was comfortable with, and what he had always done. He remained aloof from the minutiae of the details involved, ever more inclined to stick with the big picture and pick his way through the maze of Islamic rules much as he picked a path through the tortuous maze of his mountains – which often necessitated a zigzagging route in order to circumvent natural obstructions and barriers presented by mountains and rivers. This approach allowed Afghans to embrace the broad concept but cherry-pick the details.

Neither the common crowd nor indeed most of the mullahs chosen to guide them through the Islamic maze had a very tight grasp of the Qur'an. Not only were most of the population non-literate, but even if they *could* read they faced a further barrier to clear understanding of the new religion – the Qur'an was written in Arabic, not native tongues. There was thus a wide margin of latitude in interpretation, some well-intentioned and some wilfully creative to suit personal ambitions. In this process there was ample scope for a style of interpretation with which the Afghans were comfortable; one that also edged the new Islamic rules of war closer to the old ways of war and created an accommodation that satisfied the Afghan sense of honour while pandering to concerns about change – as they had learned in a very hard school that all change had unpredictable consequences. This was an approach that played to Afghan strengths, allowing for the appearance of fidelity to faith while retaining the resilience, flexibility, and pragmatism that had long enabled them to cope with an unpredictable and unforgiving world. We can call this the politics of survival. Pennell described this *potpourri* of motivation as 'a strange medley of contradicting qualities, in which courage blends with stealth, the basest treachery with the most touching fidelity, intense religious fanaticism with avarice which will induce him [the Afghan] to play false to his faith'.<sup>31</sup>

This very Afghan arrangement simply left the competing and often opposed rules of Islam and Afghan customary law to bump along together in the same space at the same time. The Afghans' temperament inclined them to focus less on the hand-wringing worries of the conceptual problem than on what mattered more – living with the consequences, and making the solution work. Hence, when decisions had to be made, they almost always chose the side that best suited their immediate purpose at the time. By such means they could be religiously pious or

30 In AD 632, the year of the Prophet Muhammad's death, Abu-Bakr (the first Caliph) assumed leadership responsibility and gave instructions to Usama bin Zayd, the eighteen-year-old leader of the punitive expedition to harass the Syrian border. This included the order 'do not cut down fruit-bearing trees'. Malikis Muwatta, Book 021, Hadith Number 010, as quoted by Sami Zaatar, *The Prophet Muhammad Said Don't Kill Women and Children*, available at: [http://muslim-responses.com/No\\_killing\\_women\\_and\\_children\\_/No\\_killing\\_women\\_children\\_](http://muslim-responses.com/No_killing_women_and_children_/No_killing_women_children_) (last visited 26 November 2010).

31 Theodore Leighton Pennell, *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier: A Record of Sixteen Years' Close Intercourse with the Natives of the Indian Marches*, 2nd edition, Seeley and Co. Ltd., London, 1909, p. 17.

pragmatically ruthless; fanatically dogmatic and yet flexible enough to allow room for manoeuvre. This ideally suited the Afghans, both in their daily lives and on the field of Mars.

By cohabiting and fusing with old beliefs and manners with which it was technically at odds, Islam was eased into a dominant position within Afghan society. Within the framework of this accommodation it became, and remains, the common banner uniting older, unwritten, and coexisting rules that connect the Afghans in their approach to warfare.

### Nineteenth-century Afghan warfare

Outside observers have long been perplexed by the contradictions involved in Afghan interpretations of Islam and their rules of engagement in warfare. Where the British encountered the Afghans in the nineteenth century during invasion or border skirmishing on the North-West Frontier of British India, they found them to be ‘professing Muhammadan,<sup>32</sup> and strict observers of the precepts of the Koran’ but to really have ‘little religion of any sort’ and ‘small reverence for the Mullahs’.<sup>33</sup>

In the months following the Tirah<sup>34</sup> Campaign of 1897–1898 on India’s old North-West Frontier, the British were baffled when they found that recruiting for military service from the very tribes so recently engaged in a bloody encounter with them was ‘never brisker’.<sup>35</sup> This made perfect sense to the Afghans, being no more than a reflection of the flexibility with which they approached the challenges of serving competing systems for ordering their society. Afghans care little for how outsiders judge them – what matters most to them is how they judge themselves.

In truth, East and West were not that dissimilar, the differences being most noticeable in their preferred modes of warfare, with the British employing a conventionally rigid system and the Afghans a less conventional, more fluid system better suited to their environment. In time, the British learned more from the Afghans than the Afghans learned from them, and adopted a style of warfare on the North-West Frontier that was far more like the Afghan approach to warfare – pragmatic, flexible, and opportunistic.

The border warfare of the nineteenth century between the British Indian empire and Afghan tribes was characterized by tit-for-tat encounters involving opportunistic tribal raids followed by punitive columns of British colonial forces intent on exacting suitable retribution as a deterrent to future transgressions, a policy that has been described as ‘butcher and bolt’ – get in quick, wreak as much

32 The term ‘Muhammadan’ is considered offensive by some Muslims because they feel it suggests worship of Muhammad rather than Allah (God). It is retained here in quotation because, being drawn from testimony of that time, it serves to convey some of the confusion inherent in how Islam was interpreted by outside observers during the nineteenth century.

33 E. E. Oliver, above note 14, p. 184.

34 Tirah, originally within Afghan borders, is now in Pakistan, owing to the historical erosion of those borders.

35 H. C. Wylly, above note 8, p. 10.

havoc as possible, then depart as fast as discretion allows. In line with most warfare involving tribes, this sort of conflict had a pattern involving a campaign season in which most of the military activity took place.

With Islam woven into the fabric of Afghan society, mullahs played an important role in these ceaseless conflicts. They often used their position to spur the tribes into martial action in disputes reputedly endowed with Islamic credentials. This differed little, if at all, from the rhetoric to be heard in many parts of Afghanistan today. On occasion, mullahs were able to take advantage of local circumstances, and some capitalized on their personal reputations (for pious behaviour, semi-shamanistic skills for healing, or the provision of charms to ward off misfortune or physical harm) to secure positions of political influence or leadership in the conflicts involved. It was warfare of a very brutal order, where neither side was inclined to take prisoners and wounded left upon the field could expect no quarter. That sort of brutality is frowned upon within the tenets of both Islam and Christianity but was the norm to which both sides, to varying degrees and with differing justifications, generally adhered.

The destruction of a British force retreating from Kabul in January 1842 (the First Anglo-Afghan War, 1839–1842) would have been regarded by the Afghans as a suitable deterrent to another force being sent. They were effective in the destruction of their enemy, but wrong in their assumption that no further force would be sent to exact retribution. The British left no room for error on this score. When they sent a further force into Afghanistan they named it ‘The Army of Retribution’. In Afghan terms this was *badal*, something which they understood very well indeed.

The British field force involved (trapped in Kabul) had first attempted a negotiated departure. The chief British representative in Kabul, William Hay MacNaghten, met with the Afghan Amir’s son, Mohammad Akbar Khan, to thrash out the terms and conditions. This was a tactical diplomatic move that placed him under the clear protection of the customary rules of Afghan hospitality – rules that imposed an obligation on Akbar Khan to protect his guests. That is not what happened. MacNaghten was seized and butchered at the meeting, reputedly by Akbar Khan himself using the pistols previously presented to him by MacNaghten as a friendship gift. Akbar Khan later disputed this charge, claiming that he had not seized MacNaghten but had been trying to guide him to safety. Seized or guided, one thing was certain: MacNaghten was dead and his head on a pike displayed in a Kabul bazaar.

When the British field force set off from Kabul, all guarantees from the Afghans of safe passage were ignored. Contemporary British accounts prefer to focus on the duplicity of the Afghans rather than the folly of their own commander. MacNaghten’s bloody fate should have been enough of a clue that all was not going to go well and that suitable precautions had to be taken for the planned retreat. Instead, the field force fatally offered themselves up as hostages to fortune and in consequence suffered a humiliating defeat.

Unsurprisingly, the British took a pretty dim view of the callous slaughter of almost their entire force. The Afghans saw it in an entirely different light. What

the British regarded as an act of betrayal, all agreements for safe passage having been broken, the Afghans considered merely an expedient means of manoeuvring their target, the British Army, into the least advantageous position in order to improve their chance of victory through its total destruction. Despite disregarding both their own customary laws of hospitality at the negotiations and subsequently the Islamic laws on the treatment of wounded and prisoners, they felt that these events primarily demonstrated the effectiveness of their mode of warfare – an unforgiving sideswipe, combining guile and strength. It was a style of warfare far more geared to guerrilla action than to the mass kinetic encounter of conventional warfare. Guerrilla wars are most often bloody and protracted – a grinding down of the opposing force, rather than knockout decisive encounters. In the end, the British and the Afghans agreed to differ and the British retreated back to India, leaving Afghanistan to settle back into its own rhythm of internal conflicts spiced with border feuding.

The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) was promoted by the British as political necessity and by the Afghans as a *jihad*, or holy war. In reality both sides were being disingenuous. It was not concern over Afghanistan invading India that launched the British back over the border but fear that Russia might gain political influence over the Afghans. The Afghan response was not fuelled by defence of Islam but by defence of territory, in which the best recruiting cry was that of *jihad*. The phenomenon of governments misleading their people over their reasons for going to war, so decried in our twenty-first century, is nothing new.

Victory in Afghanistan is as much about perception as about actuality. Afghan concepts of honour are inextricably tied to a sense of autonomy within their own space. Hence the departure of British forces for the second time, in 1880, was hailed by the Afghans as ‘victory’. It was a strange sort of victory, however, since it saw the removal of two Afghan Amirs in rapid succession (Shir Ali and his son Yaqub Khan), the rejection of the next in line (Ayub Khan, brother of Yaqub Khan), the installation of the choice favoured by the British (Abdur Rahman), and the loss by Afghanistan of control of its own foreign affairs (over which Britain retained control for the following thirty-nine years).

With ‘victory’ the Afghan tribes expected a return to how things had been before. This was not to be. Where the tribes hoped for autonomy in their own space, the new Amir, Abdur Rahman, demanded compliance with increasing control by central government. However, the Amir judiciously measured his demands to reflect Afghan society and religious sensitivities, negotiating alliances where they matched his purpose and applying pressure where they did not. To give him his due, as Amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman proved adept at the tricky balancing act that this role required – being widely perceived as supportive of both Islam and the customary laws, while simultaneously attempting to wean the wider population away from those aspects most challenging to his own authority. In many respects, possession of the Islamic banner was seen by all sides involved to be the key. In the ensuing power struggle, Islam was appropriated in support of both the old ways and the new. That Afghans are without a conscience is debatable; the universal truth that political expediency has no conscience is not.

After the dust settled from the Second Anglo-Afghan War, Abdur Rahman worked to lay the foundations of a new version of Afghanistan as an Islamic nation advancing towards modernity. Meanwhile, the country itself eased as much as it was able back to the seasonal norms of factional internal and border feuding. These were often sparked by traditional causes of Afghan conflict, said by the Pashtun to be *Zar, Zan, Zamin* (wealth, women, land). Perhaps, given the arid nature of most of the land and the impoverished circumstances of its inhabitants, a more accurate observation would be ‘wealth, land, water’ and the ceaseless feuding to control all three elements – wherein the defence of ‘honour’ was inevitably invoked when any of these came under threat.

With the state seeking to expand its influence and secure dominance over both Islamic and customary laws, it was inevitable that it would collide with the population in differing regions at differing times over differing local sensibilities. In this respect, Islam itself also remained in conflict with the customary way of doing things – including the Afghan way of war, where all history taught that there were no half measures if success was to be achieved, and that the price of failure was destruction.

## Twentieth-century Afghan warfare

In Islam, *jihad* is interpreted in two ways, the greater struggle being seen as the daily internal battle that a person faces to keep to the true path of Islamic faith. The lesser form of *jihad* is that fought in defence of Islam itself. To truly qualify as *jihad* in an Islamic context, this latter form *must* be a response to an attack on Islam itself. To such an attack, the faithful can legitimately respond by bringing such force to bear as may be required to destroy the aggressor. Before the twentieth century was over, this type of *jihad* was to cast its deep shadow over the whole of Afghanistan – ironically, in wars fought not against the British but against the Russians, the very nation that Britain had fought two wars with Afghanistan to keep out.<sup>36</sup> The subsequent mode of war involved the dynamic interplay between conflict, Islam, and state that history had long prepared the Afghans for, and was unforgiving in its execution.

After the Soviet invasion of December 1979, with the enemy visibly present and perceived as ungodly heathens determined to overthrow Islam in Afghanistan, there was little ambiguity about the legitimacy of *jihad*. The wider the rebellion spread, the more pressure the Soviets applied to contain it. Customary laws and Islamic laws were both put to the sword and sorely tested. With collateral damage to the civilian population acting as an accelerant, the conflict expanded like a forest fire – burning along a visible front with a heat that seemed to spontaneously combust into new fires in unpredictable places. The resulting conflagration spread faster than could be contained by the combined efforts of the Soviet and

36 The Third Anglo-Afghan War, 1919, was fought for different reasons.



Afghan army forces. By the same analogy, the Afghan army part of the containment strategy behaved like a leaky hose, with a large number of deserting soldiers fleeing to the other side.

Traditionally, the mullahs were solely caretakers of the spiritual wellbeing of the community – a role that did not carry with it any automatic right of authority other than as a guide to spiritual welfare. Despite the fact that they often acted as impartial negotiators in the interests of conflict mitigation within their community and its near neighbours, they were, with a few exceptions, fairly low in the social pecking order of Afghan society. Religious credentials granted them a degree of respect, but not so much as to greatly elevate their station.

With the arrival of *jihad*, however, the uncertainties of warfare increased reliance on spiritual support, and the mullahs, as the spiritual guides of the community, had a growing opportunity to exert their authority. Those with a reputation for particular piety, or who could claim holy descent, began to wield more influence. Yet, although Islam was on everyone's lips, in the early phase of the conflict mullahs were simply one part of an egalitarian society under increasing pressure. When it came to leaders, the Afghans looked towards best use of force more than best use of words. While the first response to the need for leadership was most often made by the tribal elders (with *maliks* and *khans* stepping up to the mark), within the local militias command tended to be reliant on consensus support based on performance and force of personality, far more than on titles, and was always subject to revision.

Of course, when the peasant Afghan society collided with the force of a modern superpower, something had to give, and the war began with the Afghans suffering appalling casualties. Many of the early leaders were quickly killed, creating for others, including the mullahs, a new path for promotion. By degrees, Islamic credentials began to gain more traction in the competition for leadership roles within the militias raised by the local community, and the militias were now definitively regarded as mujahideen (jihadist warriors) rather than the traditional *lashkar* (the temporary volunteer force raised by the tribes to defend themselves or in support of allies).

The new form of warfare was different from the seasonal pattern of warfare typical of conflicts fought in pre-industrialized societies that the Afghans had so far experienced. In this new way of war, no one 'put the stone on the mountain' – the traditional way of signalling the end of that season's conflict in order to ensure that both sides could attend to the harvest, or plough the soil ready for sowing next year's crop. However, the fault line between the old and the new was blurred because the conflict was unequal – the Soviets fighting the new way and the Afghans attempting to fight the old way. As a result, the battle-space involved both pack animals and helicopter gunships; combat boots and bare feet; prompt medical evacuation and death on a hillside from gangrenous infections; radioed requests for fire support and desperate prayers to God for divine intervention. At the spear-point, these dual systems fought and bled on the same ground but involved widely differing experiences of what the interplay between religion and armed conflict truly meant in an Afghan context.

As the war expanded and the scale of Western and Saudi Arabian covert support increased, the slow promotional path for most mullahs became a fast track. In large part this was due to the way in which the West allowed Pakistan to structure the mujahideen resistance – the more fundamentalist factions being granted the most aid. Within this dynamic, the more radical a mullah was, the more likely he was to secure support from one of the exiled political parties through which aid was being funnelled under Pakistani management. Pakistan limited recognition of mujahideen groups to a seven-party political alliance, each in competition with the others. All covert arms and funds provided by other nations were then channelled through that narrow bottleneck. To obtain arms or funds inside Afghanistan, the mujahideen involved had to align themselves to one of these parties. The parties were dismissively referred to by the mujahideen at the dying end of the equation, inside Afghanistan, as *spag dukhana* (Six Shops<sup>37</sup>), where promissory loyalty was traded for material support.

It was not a system designed to encourage a unified resistance to the Soviet threat. Not even the binding glue of Islam could force the parties to work together. The resulting situation ideally served Pakistan's President Zia ul-Haq's stated objective to 'keep the war simmering but not boiling over'. The pursuance of Pakistani interests came at a price – protracting the pain for the Afghans and increasing the financial cost to donor supporters, such as the United States and Saudi Arabia – and created an ideal environment for exploitation by politically motivated fundamentalist jihadists.

In a country of contradictions it is no surprise to discover that not everything was black and white, with pious Afghans on one side and communists on the other. Despite Afghanistan's Islamic credentials, an Afghan communist government remained in office. The majority of the more educated elite proved unwilling to suffer the hardships and risks of a jihadist life in the mountains with the mujahideen. For the most part, they either sat on the fence and hoped things would improve, sided with the communists in order to try and shape the future in their favour, or actively fled into exile abroad<sup>38</sup> – and still managed to regard themselves as good Muslims. In addition, many ordinary Afghans who remained in the country were conscripted into the ranks of the Afghan army and used as shielding cannon fodder by the Soviets, or served with warlord militias supporting the communist government.

With the departure of the Russians on 15 February 1989, America claimed victory, depicting the situation as a Soviet defeat on the battlefield rather than a withdrawal due to wider concerns about economic implosion. Nobody gave much attention to the Afghans, who paid in blood for the result achieved. They did not

37 Under Pakistan management, the covert pipeline funnelled funds and arms to seven political parties, not six, but not all could be taken seriously.

38 An estimated 3.3 million were exiled in Pakistan and almost two million in Iran. For the more educated and wealthy this was mostly the first step to more distant exile in North America, Europe, Australia, etc. Very few of the educated elite remained to fight against the Soviets, leaving the fighting and dying to the least wealthy portion of the population.

win through the delivery of a few Stinger missiles towards the closing chapter of the conflict, nor by dint of better training (which they almost universally lacked), nor by some cleverly designed master plan (which the divisions within the resistance movement prevented). They won by doing things the old way – they outlasted their invaders and, in the painful trial of endurance that this entailed, Islam was the only consistent comfort they had. Under the enormous pressure of the war, the landscape had been scarred and the people scattered or shattered, but two things remained constant: the Afghans' capacity to endure the intolerable and their commitment to an Islamic faith.

However, while the Afghans were committed to their faith, for some the interpretations of that faith started to change. Not only had the religious authority of the mullahs increased, but many of the mujahideen and the mullahs who guided them had now been exposed to more radical interpretations of Islam. The change began with the influences of the austere brand of Islam favoured in Saudi Arabia, known as Wahhabism.<sup>39</sup> In this offshoot of Islam lay the seeds of the radical fundamentalist interpretation held by extremist jihadist groups on the world stage today, such as Al Qaeda.

Afghans learn, and learn well, to be wary of all outsiders claiming to represent their interests. They have hard choices to make and prefer to make them for themselves, especially when it comes to how they order their society and follow their faith. As such, their convictions and determination are never more firm than when they feel under pressure, with their backs to the wall. For the rural population, central government does not automatically constitute a force guaranteeing greater local stability. From their perspective, more often than not, government seems to involve a determination to deprive them of what little they have, by taxation or hard squeezing through the corrupt practices of those appointed through patronage or purchase to govern over them.

This is a long way from the stability of their own traditional system, no matter how uneven, which is reliant on the consensus authority of a community assembly (known as a *jirga* in Pashto). The *jirga* represents a raw form of democracy not dissimilar to the rough political order of ancient Athens, known as *dēmos kratos* (people power), from which the term *dēmokratia* (democracy) was coined.

## Conclusion

The West now demands support for a very different type of democracy, one designed to a modern, Western template and almost impossible to implement in Afghanistan on the heels of more than thirty years of conflict – political, social, ethnic and religious in nature. The attempt to do so is made against the

39 Wahhabism gets its name from the teachings of the eighteenth-century scholar “Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, who hailed from what is now Saudi Arabia and preached a very austere interpretation of Islam, which he claimed was more in tune with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

background of continuing and expanding conflict, further rupturing the fabric of Afghan society and pressuring the Islamic faith of the Afghans into an increasingly more fundamentalist form. Afghans find themselves back in the vice, coerced by outsiders to change their ways, pushed by central government to relinquish control of their own space, and having to deal with the dynamic interplay of Islam and armed conflict within their evolving society.

Within Afghanistan, because of the character of the geography, Afghan society and the people's past, it is easy for the nature of the conflict to become obscured by the 'fog of war' alluded to by Clausewitz.<sup>40</sup> To break free of the smoke-screening rhetoric shrouding the battle-space in the present war, it can be said that, for the people who inhabit the land of Roh, that ancient space we now call Afghanistan, the arenas of both religion and armed conflict are primarily battles for perception.

The evidence is in the mathematics of the conflict. Since 2003 the smaller, weaker side, commanding far less kinetic force, has been gaining ground. For the West, the core of the strategy involved is not in synchronization with the nature of the conflict they confront. Meanwhile, the opposing Taliban force holds fast to what it knows – *how things are perceived* – and exploits that dynamic to great effect, enough to contain and work towards overwhelming the larger kinetic force it faces. If the West seeks resolution by a kinetically led strategy it will founder, as this approach fails to understand properly the true nature of the conflict – the battle for command and control of perceptions. If the outside forces mean well, but are perceived to be wrong and cause collateral damage as they progress (offending the faith and violating the space of the indigenous population), the situation worsens exponentially in tune with their increasing efforts. It is to be noted that, while the West are 'outsiders', it is a mistake to perceive the Taliban as wholly insiders. At its core the modern jihadist manifestation of the Taliban is no less an outside force than the West, merely better camouflaged and more in tune with local dynamics. These differences allow them an early advantage in the perceptual battle-space.

In the physical field, the West is the hornet caught in the spider's web – the more it struggles, the tighter the web becomes, leaving little chance to deploy a decisive killer blow. Escape is reliant on understanding the dynamics of the web and using that information to advantage. The traditional strength of the Afghans is primarily their capacity to endure and outlast their foes – therefore their strategy is to agitate the hornet, to keep it busy, and to wait for it to exhaust itself. The Taliban do not expect to win by storming the ramparts; they expect to win when their exhausted foe loses the will to prosecute the war further, or simply implodes.

When it comes to warfare with the Afghans, having spent considerable time with them under conflict conditions, my best advice would be to listen to

40 'Lastly, the great uncertainty of all data in War is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not unfrequently – like the effect of a fog or moonshine – gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance'. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Project Gutenberg, Chapter II, Section 24, available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-h/1946-h.htm> (last visited 26 November 2010).

them. In the early part of the nineteenth century, General Elphinstone asked an Afghan elder if the Afghans would not be more content living under the control of a centralized government system. The Afghan was crystal-clear in his response: 'We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood, but we will never be content with a master'.<sup>41</sup>

The same holds true today. The way out of the Afghan quagmire is about altering perceptions by creating and supporting alliances at the local level – as it is perceptions at the local level that matter the most. This argues for greater regional autonomy than the present Afghan government structure allows, with the local allies supporting government as an administrative hub rather than a monolithic behemoth inclined towards corruption and reliant on building and deploying a large kinetic force to subdue and command the population. Where the population is inclined to resist, this creates opportunities for the opposing force to influence perceptions more effectively and by this means garner support.

To gain a better result in the Afghan hills, the West must change the way it fights – beginning with the way it thinks about the dynamic interplay between religion and armed conflict in Afghanistan. The ultimate victors will be the side that understands and takes best advantage of the true dynamics on the ground. In essence, the West must learn the old lesson: to prosper in the Afghan battle-space it is necessary to be more like the Afghans: hardy, fast, pragmatic, and flexible.

41 M. Elphinstone, above note 2, p. 174.