

This article was downloaded by:[Open University Library]
On: 18 July 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 773147624]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Conflict, Security & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713411970>

Honour, guns and Jihad—improving childhood and communications in Afghanistan would promote peace

Robin Edward Poulton

Online Publication Date: 01 December 2003

To cite this Article: Poulton, Robin Edward (2003) 'Honour, guns and Jihad—improving childhood and communications in Afghanistan would promote peace', Conflict, Security & Development, 3:3, 407 — 416

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/1467880032000151653
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1467880032000151653>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Opinion

Honour, guns and Jihad—improving childhood and communications in Afghanistan would promote peace

Robin Edward Poulton

Westerners are perplexed, often terrified, by the wave of suicide bombings; so are Moslems, since suicide is forbidden by Islam. In orthodox Islam, suicide is haram. The present article assumes (perhaps rashly) that Western political leaders want to stop the bombings and promote peace. In that

case, we need to define policies that will diminish the threat of terrorism. To end suicide bombings, we need to understand the values of people who are willing to kill themselves with bombs strapped around their bodies, and to explain our values to them. Two-way listening.

Images of the West in the East and vice versa

People say that 'an American defines himself by the car he drives,' whereas 'a Briton defines himself by the way he speaks.' An Afghan defines himself neither by his car, nor by his accent. An Afghan defines himself by honour. Honour is the foundation stone

Dr Robin Edward Poulton is Senior Research Fellow at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) in Geneva, and Weapons for Development Advisor to the European Union in Cambodia. He is currently involved in designing development and disarmament strategies to rebuild a stable Afghanistan.

upon which Afghan society is built.¹ To become a real MAN in Afghan society, you must have children, preferably sons. In Dari (Afghan Persian) the word for a married male adult is *khana dar* meaning 'householder'. A father builds his son a house when he marries. To pass from youth to the status of a real, complete man, you must have a wife, a house and offspring.

In the refugee camps, this passage to manhood is extremely difficult. Marriage requires paying a bride price.² To marry you must have money. A young refugee with no education, no job, no money, has little prospect of marriage. It is important to remember that since the Soviet invasion of 1979, Afghans have comprised the largest concentration of refugees in the world. One third of the Afghan population (at least 5 million people) have been in exile, or internally displaced. Tens of thousands are starving. Without the money to marry and found a family, a young refugee has no prospect of ever becoming a proper, complete man. How then shall he have honour?

Refugees with no schools have nowhere to go but the mosque and the *madersa*, where excitable *mullahs* can fill their minds with *Wahabbist*³ propaganda, distorting Islam for political purposes. Such distortions include their confusion of the West with Satan *shaitan*, and their promotion of suicide as martyrdom and a source of honour. When honour is the most important thing in his culture, and martyrdom procures honour for his family, suicide can seem attractive—especially for a youth raised in poverty, with no proper schooling and no prospect of marriage.

If the West wants to achieve greater security for ourselves and for our children, we have to convince people that we are not evil incarnate. Westerners are remarkably bad at projecting positive images. Hollywood and the TV corporations export films extolling beach nudity and marital infidelity. For many Moslems, degrading the image of Woman constitutes a direct insult to God, who made Woman. Our film industry has achieved the remarkable feat of making Moslems jealous of our wealth while despising us for our way of life. Envy and contempt breed anger.

In place of jealousy of a corrupt and wealthy West, we need to develop the pride of other nations in the achievements of their own culture and economy. People who feel good about themselves will not feel so angry with us. That means doing away with extreme poverty, replacing hopelessness among refugees with self-confidence and self-esteem. If young people see a future full of hope and honour, they will not commit suicide.

Honour is religion in the mountains of Afghanistan

The Afghan people are very religious, highly spiritual, yet Islam is only their third religion—Islam comes after honour and hospitality, and is intimately mingled with these two. Many stories illustrate the importance of honour in Afghanistan and the following is just one among many.⁴ In the dark days of the fifteenth century, when the Sultan Mohamed Shah sent his army from Delhi to conquer the Afghans, the people resisted as fiercely as they did against the Russians in the twentieth century and the British in the nineteenth century.

It was in 1462 that Sultan Mohamed Shah's army moved against the village of Sirhind. The wily Pashtun warriors melted into the hills before the soldiers arrived. The Indians found only a handful of women and children in the village, and a single, ancient old man named Malik Feroz. He was too weak to walk, so the soldiers carried him to prison to be kept at the Sultan's pleasure. For weeks, he remained in solitary confinement, expecting death.

One day the cell door opened, and the old man was dragged out of his cell. He found himself being washed, and dressed in clean clothes. 'You have to be elegant,' laughed his jailors, 'for you are to dine with the Sultan.' Malik Feroz was amazed to be carried into a room filled with high officials and officers of Sultan Mohamed Shah's court (some versions of the story say it was his Governor, not the king himself). Malik Feroz was sat at a table, and plied with rich foods that he could not eat—not only because he was too old to enjoy rich food, but also because for weeks in his prison cell he had been given only bread and soup.

Then the Sultan clapped his hands and called for the entertainment to begin. Soldiers carried in sacks soaked with blood. To the old man's horror, they emptied the sacks on the floor of the dining hall, and he saw they contained the severed heads of Pashtun warriors. Tears streamed down his cheeks, as he realised the Hindu army had returned at night to Sirhind, and found the village men asleep in their houses. The Pashtuns asked no mercy, fighting to the death, and the Indian Commanders Jazrat and Malik Skandar had decapitated every one.

Sultan Mohamed Shah was in a good mood. He ordered Malik Feroz to stand, and to give him the name of each head. Though weak and infirm, the old man rose to his feet and answered the Sultan in a quavering voice. As each head was lifted, he gave the name of the man and some information about his bravery. Then a young head was

raised that he said he did not recognise. The Sultan demanded to know if this was a stranger to Sirhind village. The old man only answered in a whisper, 'I do not know him.'

The gruesome ritual resumed. Suddenly, as one head was held high for inspection, the Commander of the attack on Sirhind called out 'I recognise that one! He was a doughty fighter, it took three of us to cut him down.' Now the officers were encouraged to participate. As the old man gave the name of each villager, Hindu officers described how they had fought each enemy. As they neared the end, Malik Feroz realised that some Sirhind warriors were missing. Perhaps they had escaped. He muttered a prayer to God, begging Him to help the survivors avenge his village.

At last there was only one head left on the floor—the one Malik Feroz had said he could not name. 'I recognise that one,' called out a Hindu officer. 'He was so brave and determined that we fought him for an hour. He must have killed a dozen of my men before finally we were able to wound him—yet even when he was on his knees, he fought until we cut off his head.'

'I also now recognise this head,' cried the old man. He seemed to stand straighter. Despite the weeks of solitary confinement and the hateful experience of the Sultan's dinner party, Malik Feroz seemed to have grown new strength. 'This is the head of my own son, Shaheen. I would not recognise him to you, in case he had not fought bravely. Now I hear that he fought like a lion against the infidel scum that you are, I am proud to proclaim him My Son.' So saying, Malik Feroz collapsed and expired on the floor of the dining hall.

This story and countless others like it are sung by Pashtun girls to encourage their brothers in war and blood feuds. They illustrate the importance of honour to the Afghan people, and to Pashtuns especially. The Afghan interpretation of Islam—and especially the *Wahibbism* of the Taliban—is entwined with concepts of honour and hospitality. The guest is sacred as long as he lives in your house. Hospitality is sanctuary it is sacred and must be honoured, even if the guest turns out to be a rival or an enemy. You may kill him once he has left your house, but you must defend him with your life as long as he is your guest.

Osama Ben Laden was the guest of the Taliban. He was even kin to the leader of the Taliban, one-eyed Mullah Muhamed Omar: they were brothers-in-law and sons-in-law, for they had exchanged daughters. There was no possibility for the Taliban to 'surrender' Ben Laden, they were honour-bound to defend him with their lives, which they did.

The Pashtun tribal code of honour

If we wish to help Central Asians build peace and like our way of life, we must respect their values and build on their sense of honour. At the same time we need to be aware of the divisions between peoples—ethnic, linguistic, historical, religious divisions. In the central mountains of Afghanistan, for example, the Hazaras are feared both because they are Shi'ites, and because they are the descendents of the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan. Most Afghans follow the Hanafite rite of Sunni Islam, rejecting both *Shi'ism* and *Wahibbism*. Islam does not unite this region, it divides peoples one from the other.

The Taliban are Pashtuns (Pathans, Pakhtuns), from the same ethnic group as Sher Ali and his nephew Abdul Rahman Khan who created a buffer state between the British and Russian Empires.⁵ Sixty per cent of Afghans are not Pashtun. Tajiks and Kizilbashs are Persian Indo-Europeans; Hazaras and Uzbeks, Turkmens and Kirghiz are Turco-Mongols. The Pashtuns' origins are nomadic, their ethnic patterns appear Semitic, and some Afridis even claim descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel.⁶

The rest of the Afghan mosaic of different peoples did not get on well with the Taliban. The Taliban ruled because they had weapons supplied by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI). According to the late Ahmed Shah Masood (assassinated on 9 September 2001 with a bomb hidden in a television camera), up to 28,000 Pakistani troops were helping the Taliban. The Pakistani government have denied this, yet the evidence is overwhelming that Pakistani professional soldiers commanded Taliban operations in some battles. Many of Massood's 'Pakistanis' were probably Al-Qaida mercenaries. Osama Ben Laden is/was an Arab, and his men were not popular. Afghans referred angrily to Al-Qaida soldiers as 'those Arabs'.

The official Code of Honour of the Pashtuns, called *pashtunwali*, has greatly contributed to defining the Taliban brand of Islam and its repression of women. The Pashtun code is based on four fundamental rules.⁷

Hospitality

The first law of *Pashtunwali* requires the showing of hospitality *melmastia* to all visitors without hope of remuneration or reward. Some Pashtun claim descent from Abraham and Isaac, both nomads, and this is the Law of the Desert, which (for example) forbids anyone to charge for water (for water is Life). This law includes *badragga*, meaning a tribal escort for visitors. If a *badragga* is violated, a tribal feud will follow.

Revenge

The second law of *Pashtunwali* demands the taking of revenge *badal* over time or over space to avenge a wrong. Here we can recognise the ancient Biblical law ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’. Such practice leads eventually to a land of blind and toothless people.

Sanctuary

Nanawatay derives from the verb to go in. It is used when the vanquished party seeks refuge, or goes to the victors to beg forgiveness. There is no *nanawatay* when the dispute involves injury to women. *Tor* (black) cases concern the honour of women. *Tor* can only be changed to *spin* (white) by death. I remember a UN colleague requesting three days leave to pay blood money, for his cousin had just killed a man as part of a 100-year-old blood feud. My friend would be the next target for revenge; he preferred to offer *nanawatay*. Evidently, women were not involved.

Rules

A Pashtun must obey—to protect his honour—decisions and rules *nang* of Elders and tribal Councils *jirga*. The rules include service in the *lashkar* the tribal army, which implements decisions of the *jirga*. *Nagha* is a tribal fine imposed upon the wrongdoer by the *jirga*, which can be collected if necessary by the mobilization of a *lashkar*. A wrongdoer may have his house burned. *Nang* includes correct behaviour towards your *tarboor* (cousin), who may be a rival for a female cousin’s hand in marriage. Hence the Pashtun proverb ‘there is no hatred, like that between cousins.’

Although *Pashtunwali* is very much the code of the Pashtuns who live on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan frontier, myriad ethnic groups in Afghanistan have intermingled over the millennia so that they share many of the same values. While the Taliban’s protestant *salafa Deobandi* interpretation of Islam derives from (and is bankrolled by) Saudi *Wahhibism*, it is the mixture of Pashtun tribal values and Pakistani politics which has made the Taliban’s creed appear so repressive, so violent and alien to western observers, so anti-Islamic according to many Moslem commentators.⁸

Islam, village politics and refugees

Every tradition and superstition is said by Afghan villagers to derive from the Holy Koran, which few of them actually read or understand. Islam is central to every aspect of life, yet intimately mixed with pre-Islamic ritual. In the village mosque, young boys learn by rote a few passages of the Koran—receiving what passes for a religious education. ‘Childhood’ as invented by Victorian Europeans does not exist in Afghanistan. An Afghan boy remains with his mother, secluded behind the walls of their house, until the age of 6 or 7 years. Then he passes through circumcision into the harsh world of men, of economic survival and protection of honour. A Pashtun boy traditionally receives his first knife at age seven, his first rifle at age 12 or 14. From then on, he can hunt game and kill enemies.

The role of Islam in Afghanistan cannot be overemphasized. Islam is the umbrella under which all Afghan mujahedin can fight the jihad (struggle, not holy war). However, the terms “moderate” and “fundamentalist” are used to describe the various political parties in Peshawar. Only a few “conservative” (a better term) Afghans want to go back to an idealized golden age of Islam, which never existed except in the minds of a few romantics. Virtually all leaders want to use Islam as a weapon to move Afghanistan into the 21st century—Islam’s 16th century.⁹

Meanwhile the women are excluded from the mosque. Women have a second-rate status in Afghan society, influenced by the Indian caste system and linked to pre-Islamic notions of ‘impurity’.¹⁰ This removes women from the central decision making space of the community. A girl remains with her mother behind the walls, until she reaches puberty. By this time, she has been trained as a wife, and is ready for marriage and motherhood.

Life in the Afghan refugee camps of Pakistan and Iran has been miserable for 20 years. Infant mortality and malnutrition have often been as high in the camps as they have been inside Afghanistan. While displacement has brought women new ideas, and experiences beyond the walls of their husband’s house, the radicalization of political parties by the ISI and Saudis has meant greater restrictions, and the imposition of *purdah* on groups that previously did not wear the veil. Repression of women has become almost a token of religious purity; Islam has moved steadily away from mystical *sufi*¹¹ influences of Central Asia towards a hard Saudi *Wahibbism*.

Can we offer an alternative lifestyle to replace guns and jihad?

Since 1979, 4 million Afghan refugees have been survived in the Pashtun tribal areas of north-west Pakistan, where rifles are embedded in the culture. Traditional village weddings resound to the echo of .303 rifles made fifty years ago. I once danced with a nineteenth century front-loaded musket that seemed, as it exploded in my right ear, more dangerous to me than to my rocky target across the valley. Today weddings are celebrated with automatic rifles. Shoaib Khan is one of hundreds of gunsmiths in the Khyber Pass producing an imitation American M-16 or Russian Kalashnikov AK-47 with equal facility. 'Guns are the jewellery of men' he told the Christian Science Monitor.¹² 'Women wear jewellery, men wear guns.'

The problem is not that Pashtuns love rifles, but that—since the Soviet invasion of Kabul on 27 December 1979—hunting rifles have given way to rocket launchers and military assault rifles. The Afghan *jihad*, generously financed by the CIA, the British Secret Service and the Saudi royal family, has transformed Central Asian gun culture. Meanwhile the pool of young men dissatisfied with living in poverty and as refugees has provided a reservoir of gunmen for *jihad*. Fighting as *mujaheddin*, freedom fighters, they won a victory against the Soviet Union. Fighting as *taliban* they sought revenge against the West.

Colossal supplies of cold war hardware came in from the West through Pakistan; of the 6 million Kalashnikovs bought by the CIA (mainly provided by Egypt) for the *mujaheddin*, half are thought to have been kept by Pakistan's ISI to arm the Taliban. The USSR pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, abandoning huge stocks of small arms and ammunition in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Surplus Cold War weapons were sold by Ukraine and other ex-Soviet satellites, while the Chinese army manufactures and exports Kalashnikov rifles that do not even carry a serial number. The arms trade is financed now by opium and hashish (Afghanistan is probably the world's biggest producer), destabilizing Afghanistan and the whole region, threatening its burgeoning oil industry.

US policy is to destroy drug crops by bribing corrupt governments—this partly explains the extraordinary decision of the Bush administration in May 2001 to give \$43 million in cash to the Taliban.¹³ The drug-destruction campaign started back in 1971. The policy has proved futile because it defies the elementary economic laws of supply and demand. Opium and hashish are the only cash crops available to farmers; no one

is offering them an alternative with equal-or-similar financial returns. This is a lesson that needs to be learned.

President Musharraf of Pakistan is expelling nearly 7000 Afghan religious students, and as many Arabs, to reduce the influence of the radical *madersas* preaching the Talibans' *Deobandi Wahibbist* vision of Islam.¹⁴ Afghan refugee children rotting in camps with no schools and no jobs, have no one else to listen to except the mad *mullahs*, who offer them food and medicines as well as Islamic education (channelling Saudi funds and ideology). It is among the refugees that Al-Qaida and the Taliban find most of their recruits. Islamic revolutionary groups in the Al-Qaida network include Uzbeks and Chechens, and a wide range of other nationalities, all of whom are represented in the *madersas*. Peace will come to Central Asia, only when we replace poverty with an active economy in which childhood leads to jobs, not *jihad*. Massive investment is needed, creating economic conditions that provide young men the chance to marry, have sons and gain honour through peaceful activity. Prosperity is the enemy of guns, suicide bombs and *jihad*.

The North can also change its relationship with the South, through creative thinking 'outside the box'. Instead of purveying images of a violent, sexually corrupted Western world, we need to invest massively in independent local film and television industries, which will build self-confidence and pride among the people of Central Asia, as they struggle to find their identity in the post-Soviet era. An indigenous image industry will do more than create images: it will encourage the emergence of a new generation of self-confident, secular leaders, giving them the opportunity to express new ideas and develop their own forms of democratic governance as an alternative to radical Islam. These are the building blocks of lasting peace and prosperity. Peace will bring advantages to everyone except the makers of M-16 rifles in America, the factories producing Kalashnikov rifles in Russia and China, and the master-craftsmen in the gun factories along the Khyber Pass.

Endnotes

1. Honour is not unique to Afghanistan, of course. 'Honour' is a dominant aspect of Arab values, just as 'saving face' is vital to Asian and African cultures, and 'financial independence' is critically important for Western cultures.
2. War poverty has increased the cost of a bride, and correspondingly diminished the status of Afghan women.
3. *Wahibbism* is a minority interpretation of Islam fostered in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi royal family has been promoting their creed for 30 years in Asia and Africa, spending enormous amounts of money on building mosques, funding loans to *Wahibbist* business enterprises, and bringing Moslems to Mecca for reconversion.
4. This version has been checked against the monumental

- Pashtana Tarikh*, 'Pashtuns in the light of history, 550BC—1964 CE' by Sayed Zafar Shah Karkarkhel, a Pashtun language volume of 1399 pages published in Peshawar around 1965 (the date is not printed).
5. Afghanistan's existence was recognised by the British in 1869, by the Russians in 1873. Frontiers were fixed between 1888 and 1893 by British and Russian army surveyors, who added to the north-eastern corner that strange 'finger' in Badakhshan Province, high in the Pamir Mountains, called the Wakhan Corridor. The southern frontier separating Afghanistan from the North West Province of Pakistan is known as the 'Durand Line' after the man who traced it. Since the British were unable to rule the Pashtuns, they divided them, placing half under Afghan rule. Later—to quote the title of a book by the late Sir Penderel Moon—the British transformed 'Divide and Rule' into *Divide and Quit*.
 6. Other sources give the Afridis strong Hellenic links through Alexander the Great; see for example Caroe, Sir Olaf, 1958. *The Pathans*. Macmillan, London, pp. 44–45. The Pashtun language, however, is Indo-European: Dupree, Louis, 1973. *Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, pp. 66–70.
 7. There are numerous sources for the *pashtunwali*, including Caroe, Sir Olaf, 1958. *The Pathans*. Macmillan, London; Dupree, Louis, 1973. *Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ; Ali, Mohammed, 1969. *The Afghans*. Kabul University, Kabul. In compiling these paragraphs I have also used helpful observations from Pashtun scholars Mohamed Nader Ayubi and Ghazi Amirul Momineen.
 8. Rashid, Ahmed, 2000. *Taliban*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CN, pp. 88–90. Ahmed Rashid traces the spread of Deobandism from its origins in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Mutiny, to its 12 *madrassas* in 1879 with numerous Afghan *talebs* (Arabic plural—*taleban*), to the 9000 *madrassas* with which it celebrated its centenary.
 9. Dupree, Louis, 1989. 'Afghanistan: Return, Repatriation, Reconstruction' in the *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*. The late Professor Louis Dupree, my friend and mentor, was the greatest American expert on Afghanistan. This title now rests with his widow Nancy Hatch Dupree, who continues from her base in Peshawar, to work for Afghan peace and development, culture and historical research.
 10. The Brahmanist caste system includes the *sati* tradition of the submissive woman. To understand the position of women in a nomadic society such as the Pashtun, I recommend *The Red Tent*, a best-selling novel about the Old Testament personalities of Rebecca and Dinah, members of Isaac's household. The red tent is a place where women stay during menstruation, isolated from society until they are 'pure' again. Diamant, Anita, 1997. *The Red Tent*. Picador, New York.
 11. Sufism was always an important component of Central Asian Islam. Jalaluddin Rumi, for example, one of the most popular *sufi* poets and founder of the whirling dervishes, was born in Balkh, near Mazar-i-Sharif in 1207. He moved to Anatolia with his father around 1220 to avoid Genghis Khan (who destroyed Balkh in 1226). Rumi died in Konya (Turkey) in 1273.
 12. Baldauf, Scott, 2002. 'Report from Landi Kotal, in the Khyber Pass'. *Christian Science Monitor* 27 March.
 13. This decision was widely covered in the press. See, for example, Scheer, Robert, 2001. 'Bush's Faustian Deal with the Taliban'. *Los Angeles Times* 22 May.
 14. There are 6,000 *madersas* in Pakistan; many in the North-West Frontier Province teach the Taliban's extreme interpretation of Islam (see Endnote viii above). At the beginning of 2002, Pakistan's *madersas* had as many as 600,000 religious students, of whom an estimated 36,000 were foreigners. See, for example, Jehl, Douglas, 2002. 'Pakistan Prepares to Expel Foreign Religious Students'. *The New York Times* 9 March.