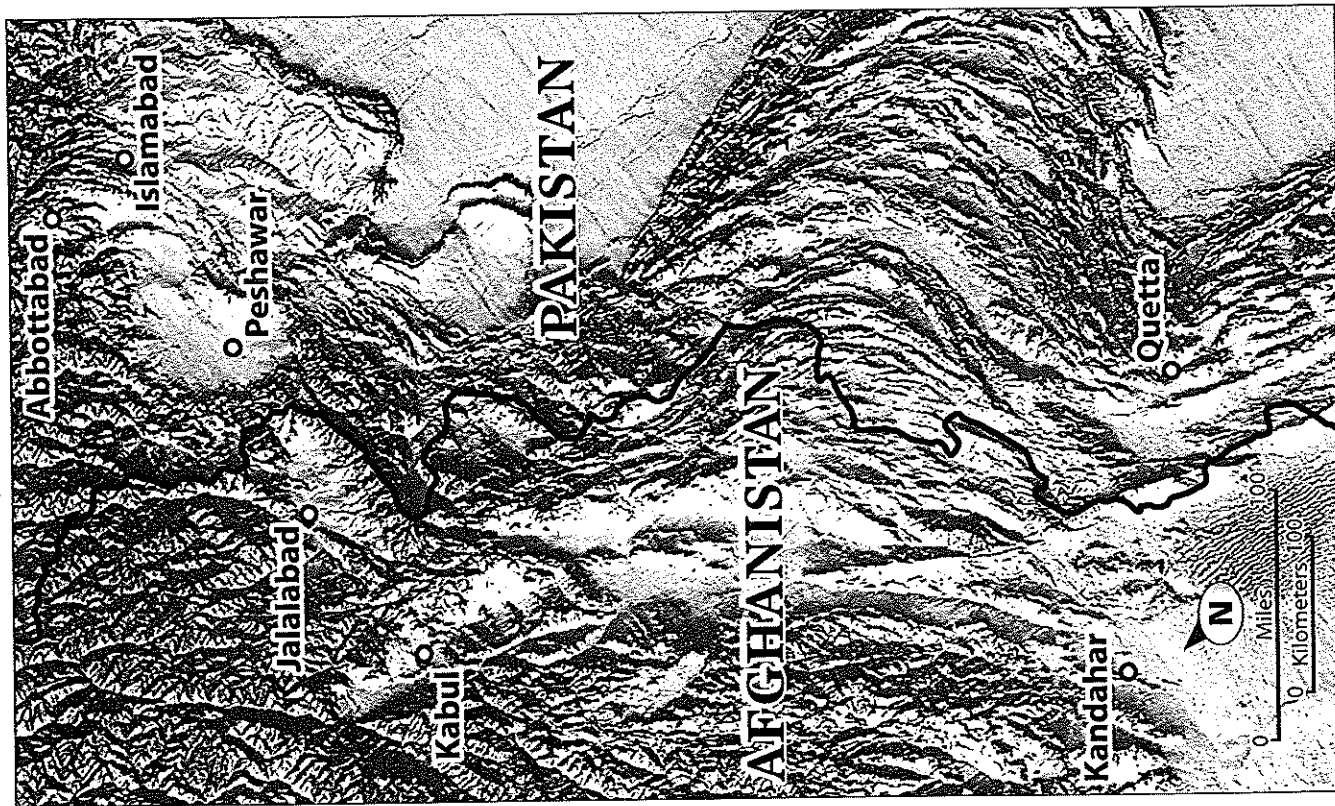


Modern Lives in the  
Afghanistan-Pakistan  
Borderlands

# UNDER THE DRONES

Edited by Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews





The Af-Pak frontier

## Introduction

Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews

Glaning at the front page of any major Western newspaper nowadays, one is likely to see a story about Afghanistan or Pakistan. Such stories tend to engage the same topics over and over: terrorism, militancy, suicide bombings, counterinsurgency operations, corruption, mistreatment of women, and occasional triumphs by heroic Afghans and Pakistanis in the face of nearly impossible odds. Journalistic descriptions primarily privilege the present, seen through the interests and perspectives of Western observers, as the ultimate vantage point for what occurs along the boundary between these two modern nation-states. The people who populate these stories seem to be stuck in a kind of time warp of unchanging "tribal" traditions, eternally isolated since time immemorial and only now coming face to face with realities the rest of the planet takes for granted as part of the modern world. The Taliban, the region's most potent sociopolitical force of recent times, is referred to as "medieval" without anyone batting an eye, even though the social formations that comprise the group have their origins in the 1980s. On the rare occasion

when a historical perspective is invoked, it has only a few oft-repeated markers: Alexander the Great, the "great game" between the Russian and British empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the Soviet invasion of 1979 and its consequent civil war. People who live there would seem to become historical subjects only when acted upon by outsiders, most recently by the Americans and their NATO allies. The most striking image of this engagement with the inhabitants of the region is that of the drone aircraft, piloted from Nevada or Florida, conducting high-altitude aerial surveillance of this rugged borderland and periodically unleashing lethal fire on suspected militants below in what many commentators have understood as a contest between the sophisticated technology of the modern, civilized West and the savagery of a backward foe. In the absence of such intervention, these populations are portrayed as living without any sense of change, eternally wallowing in a world of barbarity, which if left to itself would ultimately strike out against the security of the West.

This book challenges this portrayal of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands and seeks to provide an alternative to thinking about the region that is narrowly framed by Washington's shifting conceptions of security. Drawing away from descriptions predicated on global politics alone, we wish to illuminate aspects of the rich social and cultural worlds that are opaque to cameras mounted on drones flying many thousands of feet above this terrain. Beginning in 2008, policymakers in the United States began to use the neologism "Af-Pak" to denote the territory that the late former UN ambassador Richard Holbrooke characterized as a single "theater of war." Frustrated by the expansion of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and the persistence of "safe havens" for militants on Pakistani territory, Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's special representative to the region, called for an integrated approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2009 the Obama administration not only shifted resources from Iraq to the region but, under General David Petraeus, expanded a counterinsurgency strategy that in turn hinged upon particular conceptions of society, politics, and culture in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Now imagined as a continuous war zone, Af-Pak appeared to be inhabited by populations governed by primitive and archaic norms. Drawing on the authority of social scientists and various contractors and informants

under the Pentagon's Human Terrain System Project, this way of envisioning the region promised a scheme for making these populations legible. The experience of the Iraq war had alerted experts to the problem of sectarian politics, but it was their encounter with "tribes" that suggested a grid of identification that could be exported to this theater. The inhabitants of Af-Pak seemed to be wholly defined by the immutable categories of tribe and ethnicity. Paradoxically, military planners and their civilian advisors seized upon the idea of tribe as the essential key to Afghan and Pakistani identities at a time when the concept had long been abandoned by most anthropologists and scholars in related fields. From the late 1960s, researchers began to question the utility of a term that commonly assumed the timeless existence of closed social units with clear biological boundaries and fixed membership occupying a lower stage of human development. Instead they pointed to the malleability, flexibility, and even dynamic modernity of societies where people maintained meaningful genealogies that interacted in complex ways with other social and political identities.<sup>1</sup> But the search for a "tribal strategy" in planning for Af-Pak was more than an academic skirmish. Tribal identity was thought to determine the political loyalties of entire populations. Moreover, tribes appeared to furnish hierarchical mechanisms of social control as well as civilian groups who could be recruited to fight on behalf of U.S. and NATO forces. When the Taliban emerged in southern Afghanistan in 1994 and seized Kabul in 1996, Western media tended to describe them as fundamentalist zealots. In combating the neo-Taliban resurgence a decade later, however, U.S. military intelligence officers and their advisers had come to highlight the "martial character of Pashtun tribes." David Kilcullen, the most influential theorist behind the new counterinsurgency doctrine developed in response to the Iraq and Afghan wars, contrasted the two theaters by asserting that "it is a rare Iraqi who loves the fight itself," whereas "Afghans do: they like to win, and are certainly not averse to killing, but what they really love is the fight, *jang* (battle), for its own sake."<sup>2</sup>

As the geographic focus of American strategy shifted to the 1,600-mile frontier across which Afghan insurgents retreated to mountain sanctuaries in Pakistan, the Pashtuns residing on both sides of the border came to dominate debates about counterinsurgency. Insurgents fighting the Kabul government and U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan were drawn

from this group, and in 2007 a similar movement, the Tehrik-e Taliban, emerged among the Pashtuns in Swat in northwestern Pakistan, pressing for the implementation of Islamic law in a manner resembling that of the Afghan Taliban. At the same time, Western intelligence agencies concluded that the "tribal" region of northwestern Pakistan also served as a refuge for al-Qaida. Thus the "Pashtun belt" came to be defined by multiple insurgencies and fierce military campaigns waged from the air and on the ground. Meanwhile, the latest counterinsurgency doctrine called for the urgent mapping of Pashtun tribes and customs. The study of the Pashto language, which was offered in only one or two universities in the United States and a handful of military schools, was less a priority than the hiring of Pashtun translators, who could earn \$200,000 a year or more by deploying to the field with NATO forces. Given this language deficit and the increasing inaccessibility of actual Pashtun populations, military intelligence and contractors looked to past research, most of which was conducted decades ago and before the dislocations of the Afghan revolution and Soviet war. This scholarship in turn drew heavily on the ideas and language of British colonial administrators who had themselves resorted to ethnography as a strategy to rule this space.

Yet this engagement with the British colonial record reflected many of the contradictions of Af-Pak strategy. Military planners and advisors rejected the notion that the United States acted as an empire, but they freely adopted policies based on their reading of examples from this imperial past. More important, they tended to adopt colonial representations of the Pashtuns and the mythology of a "wild" frontier that imbued British writing about the region. Similarly, media portrayals of these borderlands stressed their "lawlessness" and the ferocity of the supposedly war-loving population that lived there. First identified as one of the "martial castes" by British administrators after the revolt of 1857 in India, the Pashtuns regularly appeared in colonial literature as perennially armed and spoiling for bloody combat with the "infidels"; and frequent revolts, often inspired by mullahs, led British officials such as the young Winston Churchill to conclude that this was "a land of fanatics [where] common sense does not exist."<sup>3</sup> If Afghanistan was "the graveyard of empires," as many war critics insisted, the frontier was an unconquerable fortress guarded by frenzied tribal warriors.

As many chapters in this book seek to show, the excessively warlike images of the borderland have been based on a very partial and tendentious reading of history. It is true that Pashtuns have expressed pride, including in poetry and song, about the martial prowess of their ancestors, but deeper engagement with the historical record reveals that they were to be found not only sniping at British soldiers from craggy mountain passes but, at least as frequently, serving the queen in the Indian Army and fighting and dying in British campaigns throughout the empire. In the 1820s, for example, local communities rejected calls for jihad that other regions of India found compelling.<sup>4</sup> A century later in the North West Frontier of India they also formed a mass movement, the Khudai Khidmatgars, under the leadership of a "Frontier Gandhi" who was committed to a nonviolent campaign of civil disobedience to unify the Pathans or Pakhtuns (as they were known in India) and oppose British rule.<sup>5</sup> The arena in which these varied politics took shape, the frontier, has been a place of war but also one of commercial, cultural, and intellectual exchange linked to global flows of people, commodities, and ideas. If it has appeared "unruly" or "lawless" at various moments in its modern history, this is not only because men have taken up the gun to resist some kinds of external authority but also because regional governments, imperial powers, and even local inhabitants have at certain times identified their interests with maintaining a particular political regime there.

Even the border that cuts through this space, the famed Durand Line of 1893, has played a distinctive role that has evolved over time. Whereas militants, religious activists, and migrants often disregard its existence, this line has taken on real significance for traders and truckers, as Gilles Dorransoro shows in Chapter 2, because it brings profit to those who move differently valued goods across it. The borderland is a place of transnationalism, but also of the intensification of national politics. Indeed, the history of this borderland, as many of our authors show, is the history of dynamic interconnections, mobile populations, and religious and ethnic heterogeneity and change. From the late nineteenth century on, a succession of great powers have jockeyed for influence in the region, but those external forces are not the sole shapers of the region's contemporary history. The inhabitants of the region have interacted with empires,

nation-states, and transnational actors in a variety of ways beyond the blinkered reading of counterinsurgency theory.

If the social sciences and history represented one key to unlocking the opaque politics of the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands, aerial surveillance has been another. With the complicity of local governments, unmanned drones and other aircraft offered a vantage point that permitted commanders to surmount vast distances and difficult terrain—including the borders of the state of Pakistan—to render visible the enemies below. By the end of April 2011, the Obama administration had approved roughly 240 drone missile strikes in Pakistan alone. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad by U.S. Navy Seals on May 2, drone attacks in Pakistan continued and even increased in frequency. Answering critics who charged that these missile strikes were often based on faulty intelligence and that they killed indiscriminately, the CIA asserted in August 2011 that its drone campaign had not killed a single noncombatant since May 2010. But a growing number of eyewitness accounts of civilian deaths and psychological trauma among villagers (and their animals) who had survived attacks, often to be targeted again as rescuers or funeral attendees, called into question security officials' claims about the technological precision that allowed them to decipher the identities of the inhabitants that they had marked for death under the drones.<sup>6</sup>

To the architects of the new American counterinsurgency doctrines, the struggle to master and pacify Af-Pak was more than a contest between backward tribesmen and modern science: it also entailed a mission that was defined as both humanitarian and political, the fight for "hearts and minds." Inspired by Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* and the work of other Western activists in the region and armed with selected insights from British colonial counterinsurgency, policymakers set out to make the promotion of development, education, and health essential parts of the military project in Afghanistan. In pursuing these efforts to transform Afghan society, the Pentagon could largely bypass the government in Kabul, but in Islamabad it had to contend with multiple and competing state institutions with uneven control over Pakistani territory.

Like other military strategies, the "hearts and minds" campaign reveals an understanding of the societies of the region that is skewed by

American security concerns. Perhaps most important, it has rested on the insistence that these populations remain loyal or at least apolitical. Recipients of humanitarian assistance are thus expected to be not just grateful but acquiescent to U.S. forces and their local allies in all circumstances. American authorities have asked Afghan civilians to accept apologies and compensation payments for injuries and deaths caused by American forces (in 2010, reportedly about \$2,900 apiece to wounded individuals, and \$4,800 apiece to the families of those killed). The government of Pakistan has promised similar amounts of compensation to victims of drone attacks in some cases. At the same time, American authorities have regularly dismissed critiques of air strikes and raids that have caused civilian casualties or, especially in the case of Pakistan, objections to the violation of national sovereignty. Moreover, when several million civilians were uprooted by fighting between the Pakistani Taliban and military in 2009, and by massive floods in 2010, precipitating one of the worst refugee crises in modern times, drone strikes and other counterinsurgency operations continued, while the vast resources of the United States and NATO alleviated the plight of very few Pakistanis. Indeed, over the past four years civilian deaths related to armed conflict in the region have increased yearly. In 2010 these numbered 2,777 in Afghanistan and more than 3,000 in Pakistan. Although various observers attribute roughly 75 percent of these deaths to insurgents, the growing rates of civilian casualties caused by U.S. and allied forces, particularly as a result of drone warfare, suggest the extent to which the ideas that underpin Af-Pak as an uninterrupted war theater are deeply flawed.

The chapters in this book contest the prevailing discourse on the region, which we find to be simplistic, inaccurate, and alarmingly dehumanizing. Singly and together, the chapters aim to subvert existing paradigms by restoring a sense of history to the region, in two ways. First, the authors of the chapters engage various aspects of recent history through detailed analyses that document intellectual and social formations and their evolutions. We contend that the social and historical complexity discussed in this vein should be taken as entirely normal for the region, as it is for the rest of the world. And second, we seek to show that the static and ahistorical image of the region itself has a particular history that is connected to the interests of the empires, kingdoms, nation-states,

and ruling elites that have exerted their influence over the area from the nineteenth century to the present.

We seek to investigate this space as a modern borderland where lives have historically been framed, on the one hand, by state boundaries and, on the other, by mobility and an expansive geographic imagination linking the region to distant trading, religious, and other centers. The chapters in this volume critically engage with the prevalent use of nation-state as the ultimate unit of scholarly analysis. With its distinctive politics and historical trajectory, the region has fitted poorly into universalizing theories of development and counterinsurgency. As in many borderlands, the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier has not been thoroughly colonized by modern state institutions. But this does not mean that its politics are not "modern." From the "great game" of Anglo-Russian colonial rivalry to the Cold War and the post-9/11 era, these communities have interacted with political actors and movements near and far. And although this border is one of the most porous in the world, integration into two very distinct nationalist projects has had real consequences regarding formation of communal identities and participation in economic and sociopolitical networks that prevail in the two countries. Indeed, contrary to prevailing discourses, nationalism rather than religion has a greater role in the formation of the region's modern politics. We seek to understand the transnational dynamics of this border while remaining attentive to the unique historical imprint made by states that have claimed control over this territory and its inhabitants.

The arrangement of chapters in this volume aims to convey the reader through clustered engagements with major issues we must consider to carry forward with the project of rethinking the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. In the first two contributions, Amin Tarzi and Gilles Dorronsoro highlight historical and contemporary nuances that need to be kept in mind to understand the way the region in question has functioned as a borderland since the nineteenth century. Tarzi's chapter is both a historical survey of Afghan and Pakistani attitudes toward the boundary and a concrete policy-oriented prescription for transcending the mistrust that has haunted the dealings between the two countries for more than sixty years. Challenging one of the central tropes about the border, Tarzi highlights the centrality of the Durand Line to nationalist politics in both states and reveals how this boundary—often dismissed by observers as a

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