The latest Afghan news round-up compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service includes Pashtunwali's rules, Afghanistan's Sikhs, the Taliban's drug wars and the memoirs of a carpet weaver

Air Support: Essential Lifeline

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps officer and a civilian adviser in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is an adjunct professor at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. He argues from firsthand experience that without 'some combination of easy-to-maintain transport helicopters and relatively inexpensive fixed-wing or helicopter armed-escort aircraft...the U.S. will have wasted 12 years of blood and treasure'. Put simply, abandoning Afghan ground forces without proper air support would be both militarily unsound and morally unconscionable' (WSJ, 2 June 2013)

Anderson was a civilian adviser in Bala Murghab, the first district to fully transition to Afghan security control in the summer of 2012. The only Pashtun-majority district in Badghis province, it had a strong Taliban presence. The district was a microcosm of the Pashtun-dominated areas of the southeast, considered a good place to experiment.

The transition would be complete by August and at that time the fledgling Afghan Air Force would take over. The effect on the Afghan battalion was immediate and disastrous. Patrolling efforts nearly ceased. Kandak officers were cutting peace deals with the Taliban. By June, the security bubble had shrunk from a radius of 20 miles around the district capital to the confines of the capital.

Primarily non-Pashtun soldiers had essentially mutinied at the idea of unsupported ground operations. They knew very well that the Afghan Air Force in the region had only 10% of what would be required to replace ISAF forces. Any serious wound in combat was a death sentence once the U.S. Army surgical hospital was gone. The Afghans knew that they would be buried where they fell and that the locals would likely desecrate their graves. The prevailing attitude of senior ISAF command alerted to the debacle was: "They need to learn to be self-sufficient."

In Anderson's view, the Afghan Army will soon collapse if ISAF fails to help with air support until the Afghan Air Force is ready in 2017.

He believes until then, that a detachment of U.S. or NATO helicopters is needed for medical evacuation, and to provide armed escort for that purpose, probably four to five divisions with about 20 aircraft each; about a hundred NATO aircraft in a support role. Those detachments should remain until the Afghans provide a replacement capability. Anderson': Put simply, abandoning Afghan ground forces without proper air support would be both militarily unsound and morally unconscionable'.

Pashtunwali: the real rules

Post transition, America will be playing "Let's Make A Deal." Can we learn the Afghan rules of this game?

In the Afghanistan of our imagination, friendship can be bought, respect can be seized, and agreements made under duress are binding even after their basic premises have been turned upside-down. Convenient beliefs, but wrong.

One key guideline: Every deal is precisely as strong as the relationship on which it is built.

A better appreciation of this concept leads to a paradoxically optimistic conclusion: The coming drawdown might actually help the United States form the type of strong relationships that are the foundation-stone of every lasting deal in Afghanistan.

A Pashtun deal is NOT a transaction. Americans view a deal in coldly contractual terms: You give me this, I give you that in return, we shake hands and may never see each other again. This can be done because there is trust in the overall system: rule of law, functioning courts, policemen accountable to the public rather than the local warlord.

In Pashtun society, the law that matters is pashtunwali: a traditional system that relies on interlocking webs of deep relationships in order to function. To make stronger deals, Americans must learn to forge better relationships.

"A deal is for now, not forever," according to the anthropologist Charles Lindholm, who conducted fieldwork among Pashtun of Pakistan's Swat Valley. If the underlying premises change, the deal itself inevitably changes, too. Every agreement is based on a personal relationship, and every Pashtun relationship must be cultivated.

The currency that matters is honor. Money for Pashtuns is primarily as a means of increasing one's izzat. This term is often translated as "honor," but a more precise description might be "good name" or "how I am seen by people who matter." A deal that increases the izzat of a tribal elder is more likely to endure than one which makes him look like a foreigner's bought-off stooge. If he breaks a deal with a foreigner, he may lose izzat far away with people he'll never meet. But nearly every Pashtun family has kin who are Taliban -- kin who will talk about these actions for decades to come. If a deal with an American comes into conflict with obligations of blood, it's usually no contest as to which loyalty prevails.

A smaller footprint may win Americans more friends. Traditional Pashtun society is a bit like a mob-dominated town, with local leaders competing against their rivals to be seen as the godfather. When anyone has a problem that needs fixing, he must plead his case (and owe a debt) to the local patron. For the past decade, ISAF lieutenant colonels have unwittingly seized this role, with the American commander in Kabul playing the part of the capo di tutti capi. Even the 27-year-old captain of an infantry company has far more money in his Commander's Emergency Response Program piggybank (not to mention far more firepower) than the Pashtun elder who had previously been the Big Man in Town. This displaced khan used to be able to demonstrate his status by arming his supporters with Kalashnikovs and donating a dozen goats for sacrifice at Eid. A smaller U.S. footprint will let this khan resume his role as community patron -- and perhaps deal with Americans on a ground less fraught with humiliation.

As recently as the middle of the 20th century, Pashtun society was largely cashless. Trade carried the same taint as it did in medieval Europe; taking a salary was equivalent to becoming a servant, and no self-respecting tribal chieftain would demean himself by accepting a government position. Despite the oceans of cash that have flowed through Afghanistan, there remains a distaste for being seen as a "bought" man. When, as a U.N. official in Kandahar in the 1990s, Thomas Gouttierre sought to forge working relationships with Taliban officials, he found a constant stream of small gifts far more effective than any large pay-offs. Now, in an era of drastically shrinking budgets, the United States may find that friendship is a better basis than

dominance for deal-making.

A central element of izzat is bravery, and true courage requires a degree of recklessness. Pashtuns regard our military superiority in hardware as evidence that we haven't got the courage to meet them in a "fair" fight. With the drawdown, our military presence will be skewed heavily towards Special Operations Forces and other elite small units. A lot of our action will be more "reckless" than a 100,000-strong force would permit. It may help the Pashtuns regard Americans as equals.

For years, U.S. rhetoric has emphasized transition to Afghan authorities, training Afghan troops, empowering Afghans to solve their own problems, while the sheer scale of our military and economic resources has made it impossible for Afghans to step into our shoes. Without an overshadowing foreign presence, Afghans will once again find their own solutions to their own challenges. American trainers, like their Soviet predecessors, try to teach Afghans how to do things in a Western way. That's never the only way to do things, and quite often not the way best suited to the local circumstances. When it comes to dealing with the Taliban, Afghans of all ethnic backgrounds -- Tajiks and Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkomen -- tend to understand the Pashtun rules far better than outsiders do.

A Pashtun proverb states: "A man with the power to fight doesn't need to bargain." Power and money have shielded America from the necessity of negotiation. The drawdown assures greater reliance on deal-making than we've ever had to resort to in the past.

Fort of Nine Towers

Qais Akbar Omar, a student of creative writing at Boston University, is also a native Afghan carpet weaver. "I know how, slowly, one knot follows another until a pattern appears," he writes in his memoir, A Fort of Nine Towers.

His family has survived the Soviet occupation, the mujahedin warlords, and the Taliban, to the war today. "Even the Taliban's strangest laws were easier to survive than the chaos of the commanders," he writes. While Afghans can make "no better friend," they also have a tradition of being "no worse enemy," especially toward foreigners.

Many Afghans lived well before the spiral into violence. In the 1950s, life in Afghanistan included public debate, educated and working women without burqas or veils, and economic progress. Qais describes his family's early privileged life in Kabul. But war soon ravaged the terrain. His family had to flee, and he goes on a geographic as well as an inward journey.

Qais compels readers to see his country unfiltered through a foreign lens. He shows how mine-riddled Afghanistan remains filled with natural beauty. Raw descriptions of suffering and death mix are leavened by the resilience of the people amid the jagged landscape of the Hindu Kush.

Qais's family embarked on an odyssey through multiple regions of the country, listening to BBC World Service. For a time they join the nomadic Kuchi tribes, wandering people who carry animal-skin tents across hundreds of miles every year, always attempting to be a few steps ahead of winter, fishing with hand grenades, offering hospitality despite poverty. Qais describes the arrival of the Taliban in 1996. They reminded him of vampires, their eyes outlined in kohl, beards untrimmed and long, dusty feet slipper-shod. Most of them had snuff in their mouths. A few of them spat brown saliva into the dust and cleaned their mouths with the ends of their turbans. None of them spoke. They looked like men who had come from a forest or caves and had never seen buildings before.

Qais meets a deaf and mute Turkmen girl and learns carpet weaving from her. When the family returns to Kabul during the reign of the Taliban, he establishes a family business. A Fort of Nine Towers concludes with Qais describing coalition members bartering for his rugs. The French are picky; they never pay a fair price, but they have the best food. The Italians are loud, like the Afghans. They pay the full price, but leave in a hurry, because they are always late. The British are imperial in their ways, because they are unable to escape their past. And the Americans? They are friendly, they always pay the full price, and they want to know everything. But even though they are the most agreeable of the new visitors, Qais's father views them with considerable skepticism:

Afghans have fought each other for millennia. We have a long tradition of raiding and plundering each other. But two things unite us: love for Allah and hatred for our invaders and enemies. We are not leaving Afghanistan until we find out if these Americans are our real friends or enemies in the mask of friends.

Afghanistan Sikhs,

Sikhs, a 500-year-old monotheistic people from western India and modern-day Pakistan, arrived in Afghanistan around 200 years ago. Mostly traders, they prospered, numbering about 50,000 by the early 1990s, concentrated in Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar and Ghazni.

War, instability and intolerance have fuelled waves of emigration, reducing the community to just 372 families nationwide, according to Awtar Singh Khalsa, association president of the Karte Parwan gurdwara, or temple.

In the1990s, most of Kabul's solid gurdwaras were appropriated by battling warlords who shelled one another, destroying most. Under Taliban rule, Sikhs had to wear yellow patches, and fly yellow flags over their homes and shops.

Among the goals laid out by the coalition in 2001 was religious tolerance for minorities, about 1% of Afghanistan's population. They are protected, theoretically, by freedom-of-religion safeguards in the Afghan Constitution.

In practice, Sikhs say, Karzai's government rarely counters prejudice by the majority population. Hooligans rob, insult and spit at them on the street, they say, order them to remove their turbans, try to steal their land and tell them to 'go home',
Some Sikhs who have tried to carry out cremations have been beaten up, decried as statue-worshiping infidels whose ceremonies "smell." Islam considers cremation a sacrilege.

While in New Delhi last month, Karzai said that Sikhs are a valued part of Afghanistan and that he was sorry so many had left. "We'll do our best to bring the Sikh community and Hindus back to Afghanistan," he said.

Sikhs, Jews and other minorities enjoyed tolerance and relative prosperity until the late 1970s when decades of war, oppression and infighting set in. Sikhs say they've faced intensified pressures as a minority subject to forced religious conversions and frequent kidnapping, given their limited political protection and reputed prosperity.

Drugs War within a War

Pashtunabad—a suburb of Quetta—is a typical Pakistani town where commanders in the Afghan Taliban lived after 2001. "Long Live Mullah Omar" and "Long Live the Jihad" are scrawled on walls; the black-and-white flag of a pro-Taliban political party flies over many homes.

In recent years, some Taliban commanders have begun moving out of places like Pashtunabad and Karachi's poor Sohrab Goth neighborhood for wealthier developments like Clifton, the vicinity of the Pakistani elite. (The Bhutto family has a sprawling compound in the area; Benazir Bhutto's widower, Pakistani President Ali Asif Zardari, often stays there.)

In these wealthier neighborhoods, Taliban members are building and buying flashy mansions with blastproof windows and 10-foot-high walls topped with concertina wire. Once, a Taliban leader drove around in a beaten-up Toyota Corolla; these men drive new Toyota Land Cruisers, or other luxury cars.

Taliban leaders are a lot richer than they were a few years ago. "The Taliban are more involved than ever in systematically promoting, financing, organizing, and protecting the drug trade," Ghulam Muhammad Woror, the director of narcotics control in Helmand province, told Newsweek. "Drugs are ultimately providing the money, food, weapons, and suicide bombers to the insurgency and the good life to Taliban leaders in Quetta, Karachi, and across Afghanistan."

The drug trade was exploited by former Northern Alliance warlords, corrupt government officials, and local Taliban leaders. Now the Taliban's central leadership wants in.

Mullah Omar outlawed opium production and trafficking in the late 1990s. Yet many local Taliban commanders, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar, have been using the opium industry to fund their local insurgent operations since the early 2000s, and the Taliban has long collected a 10 percent Islamic usher tax on farmers' opium crops. According to a 2009 UNODC report on opium production, this tax is believed to have netted the insurgency some $22 million to $44 million a year. The Taliban may have earned another $70 million providing protection to

drug convoys traveling through their territory.

Why the shift? For years, the Taliban relied partly on donations from sympathetic citizens in the Gulf states to fund their military operations. Recently a lot of that Gulf money has been given to other Sunni Islamic causes such as Palestine, Egypt, and Syria.

But the biggest factor in the rise of the Taliban's drug involvement may simply be that the group's central leadership decided it wanted a slice of what its local commanders had. Already most of the country's opium was being produced in the largely Taliban-controlled areas of the south and southwest—98 percent, according to a 2008 UNODC report. "The insurgency would be weaker without the drug money that has helped to fund the movement at the local level for years," says a senior Taliban officer. "The leadership realized that since it couldn't stop it, then why not get involved and seize control of the trade systematically."

The UNODC estimates that three years ago there were upward of 500 heroin labs operating in the country, and there are doubtlessly scores more now. Most of the insurgency's labs are in the remote, no-go, Taliban-controlled areas of Nowzad and Baghran districts in northern Helmand province, says Abdali, head of the Afghan government's anti-drug task force in Helmand province. "Neither we nor U.S. forces can access those areas. Only U.S. Special Operations Forces could go in. But drug control is not their priority."

The insurgents do not tolerate competition when it comes to drugs, and have driven out smaller traffickers. Bigger traffickers are tolerated if they cooperate with the insurgency on the Taliban's terms.

A rapprochement of convenience has been made with former members of the Northern Alliance, some of whom had long produced opium and refined heroin in northern provinces like Badakhshan—exporting both products north through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and then on to Russia and Europe. Now they are also able to ship this harvest through Taliban-controlled areas in the south and into Iran and Pakistan. "The northern warlords, government officials, the police, and the Taliban are in an unwritten economic understanding that they are both part of one cooperative drug chain," says the Helmand subcommander. "Before the drugs reach Taliban areas, the shipments have been escorted from the north by the warlords, Karzai government officials, and Afghan police." Both sides then share the profits when Taliban couriers deliver the top-grade northern shipments to buyers across the border in Iran and Pakistan. "Today there is more of the highest-quality heroin coming from the north and

being exported by our forces," says the subcommander.

The Quetta Shura—the Taliban's governing body— set up a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the windfall of narcotics revenues is shared from top to bottom. As a result, the council established an economic commission last year to scrutinize the surge of wealth. According to several Taliban leaders, 70 percent of the drug profits are now supposed to be given to the commission to spend on food, weapons, explosives, and medical care for the insurgency, while 30 percent is supposed to go directly to commanders and fighters in the field.

Local commanders feel shortchanged. "Top leaders collect and pocket about 80 percent of the drug revenues from five southern provinces," gripes the Helmand subcommander.

Some Taliban supporters freely express doubts about the insurgency's heavy involvement in narcotics. But these are rather lonely voices. The Taliban now seem more focused on the drug trade than on fighting the enemy. "The Taliban's new definition of jihad is making money from the drug trade," says Abdali.

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