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# AFGHANISTAN: STATE, BOUNDARIES, AND THE THREATS OF PERPETUAL CONFLICT

by Elham Gharji



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## KEY POINTS:

- One of the main features of conflicts in Afghanistan has been anti-state violence throughout the country's modern history. Most of these anti-state violent movements originated in the Southern borders of the country, where a blurred border line formally divides Afghanistan from Pakistan.
- The anti-state violence, especially in the context of the current insurgency can be viewed as a consequence of a past self-conflicting state building policy that has promoted a selective Afghan nationalism in regards to border creation and border maintenance.
- The selective Afghan nationalism affected nation building differently in different parts of the country in terms of transforming the political boundaries between the populations in the region into their mental boundaries- understood as nation building in this paper.
- Where political boundaries have been created and maintained for a long time cross-border threats do not exist or are very low. But where political boundaries and the mental boundaries do not match, the Afghan state has been continuously threatened by tribal uprisings and cross-border interferences. The current conflict in Afghanistan presents a clear evidence of the case. Any sustainable resolution of the conflict will include addressing the Southern border problems.

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<sup>1</sup> To view article in Persian visit:  
([http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2011/02/110221\\_109\\_afghanistan\\_national\\_government.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2011/02/110221_109_afghanistan_national_government.shtml))



# INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has been in conflict for the last three and half decades. Violence in the country continues despite the international effort to build a democratic and developed state after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.<sup>2</sup> Insecurity has been the core issue which is generally believed to have undermined all other efforts in the areas of governance and development in Afghanistan. Therefore, it has been at the center of all programs including development programs, designed to support security objectives. However, such efforts have failed to address security challenges and control dynamics of violence. After a decade of presence of the international community, most participating states in the war in Afghanistan are withdrawing, leaving behind a weak state vulnerable to internal and external security threats.

Why did violence re-emerge after the fall of the Taliban? What is there in Afghanistan that continuously undermines all the efforts to build a stable and peaceful country? These questions have been repeatedly asked and answered for many years. However, further investigations and reflections are still needed if we are to gain a better understanding of the security dynamics in the country.

<sup>2</sup> *Agreement on the Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Document adopted at Bonn Conference, Bonn 21, December, 2001. Document available online (<http://www.afghangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>)*



# UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: A NATION-STATE-BUILDING PERSPECTIVE

The list of factors to which the Afghan conflicts during the past three decades are attributed is quite lengthy and include: economic deprivation and poverty; ideological and cultural issues; political exclusion and poor governance; environmental factors; tribal/ethnic animosities; foreign intervention and international conflicts in the region; war economy, opium production; organized crime and corruption; etc.<sup>3</sup> These factors are believed to have contributed to fuel conflicts in Afghanistan over many years. As such, the analysis of conflict in Afghanistan has been presented to be complex, and multi-layered and hence, hard to understand from a single theoretical perspective. Political economic causes, structural factors, socio-cultural issues, and institutional problems all have contributed to producing and reproducing violence in Afghanistan.

However, at the background of all these stands a greater cause, which has made political control of violence less possible. All kinds of conflicts identified above emerged in Afghanistan when the state as a political institution failed to address socio-political conditions which were conducive to violence and which have threatened the state security for the past many years. Generally speaking, one of the main features of conflicts in the past one

<sup>3</sup> See for example *Afghanistan: an Introduction to Sources and Nature of Conflicts*, Creative Associates International Inc. 2002. See also, Report: *Conflict Assessment- Afghanistan, US Labor against War*, (<http://uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=20135>). For economic and ideological factors, See *Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan: losing friends and making enemies*, ICOS, February, 2007.

century in Afghanistan has been the anti-state violence.<sup>4</sup> Violence against the state then provided a structure and opportunities for all other forms of violence that emerged in the absence of state or in the absence of state control and legitimacy. From uprisings against the political reforms of Amanullah Khan in the 1920s to the present time, the state has been the main target of armed oppositions. This paper takes this as a point of departure for the analysis of the current conflict in Afghanistan by adopting a nation-state building perspective to understand the conflicts in the country, especially the context of the current insurgency. This perspective can help us to understand violence in Afghanistan in terms of the conditions in which the modern Afghanistan emerged. It appears that the conflict in Afghanistan can be explained as an implication of incomplete and contradictory nation-state building efforts, which existed in the country ever since the emergence of the modern Afghanistan.



## CONCEPTUALIZING NATION-STATE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

State-building and nation-building are used interchangeably in this paper in order to focus on a specific dimension of state-building, and highlight 'political bordering' as central concept for discussing nation building in Afghanistan.

The modern nation-states have been largely viewed in terms of a political boundary that divides human communities between them and ascribe them distinct political and cultural identities. Boundary is central to the definition of both the state and the

<sup>4</sup> *Exceptions can be made regarding the ethnically driven conflicts in the 1990s though it also in some ways involved state and anti-state features of violence. It applies to the conflicts during the Taliban regime too. Important is to note that state has been a party to violence in all major conflicts in Afghanistan.*

nation. In regards to the nation-state, two types of boundaries coincide to form it: political boundary and mental boundary.<sup>5</sup> The “congruence” of these boundaries is what Ernest Gellner introduced as core idea of nationalism.<sup>6</sup> These two types of boundaries have had a special place in the theories of nation and nationalism. The political boundary is what Barth thought to be important for differentiations and creation of distinct identities<sup>7</sup> and the mental boundary was central to the Anderson’s “imagined communities”<sup>8</sup> defined as nation. If one would want to synthesize Barth and Anderson and apply the notion to the modern nation state, Gellner’s theory of nationalism does help to define nation as “*coincidence of political and mental boundaries*” in a human community, a notion of nation, which lays down the theoretical foundations of this paper too.

<sup>5</sup> *From an anthropological perspective, boundary has at least two important dimensions: social and behavioral. The first refers to “social classification and collective representation” while the second refers to social relations and networking based on the “us” and “them” differentiation (Andreas, Wimmer, “The Making and Unmaking of an Ethnic Boundary: a multilevel process theory” American Journal of Sociology, Voll. 113, No. 4.: 970-1022 (January, 2008) University of California, 2008. When one’s behavior corresponds to his/her understanding of his/her collective identity, a boundary is created or preserved. Political boundary then, can be understood as the political classification. Mental boundary can be understood as the affinitive world of a collective. In this paper, the political boundary refers to the state-borders, and the mental boundaries refer to behavioral dimensions and sense of affinity within that boundary.*

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Barth. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the social organization of cultural difference*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London and New York, 1991.

Although theories of nation vary, all theories somehow define nation as a political identity materialized in the form of a political territory ruled by an institution known as the state or a 'political formation' such as the state. Hence the nation manifested in form of a political formation i.e. state is a physical and political reality and political boundaries have determining role in forming and defining it. Physical and political boundaries, referred to as borders in this paper, have also a long term transformative effect on the social boundaries and identity formation.

From a historical perspective too, the modern nation building has been largely about drawing borders between human communities for the purpose of political differentiations. Boundary 'creation and maintenance'<sup>9</sup> has also been at the core of nationalism as a theory of nation building. Therefore, a successful nation building effort would entail a successful transformation of political boundaries into mental boundaries of a human community. This transformation is to be defined as the nation building. Almost all modern states have followed this path.



## AFGHANISTAN: NATIONAL BOUNDARIES AND CONFLICTS

Nation-state building, in many senses, starts from drawing borders. Therefore, bordering has a key role in political differentiations and states' identity. It is, however, a very difficult task. The challenges of bordering are huge especially in parts of the world with wide network of social and cultural connections and overlapping identities. In Afghanistan, a country that has been at crossroads of many civilizations, bordering has been a very difficult political task because, the region has historically been very much interconnected.

<sup>9</sup> Daneile Conversi. "Reassessing Current Theories of Nationalism: Nationalism as Boundary Maintenance and Creation", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics A Frank Cass Journal*, Spring 1995, Vol. 1. Num. 1



The current Afghan borders with neighboring countries emerged as a result of imperial agreements in the 19th century. Today's Afghanistan emerged between the Russian and the British Empires; Afghan borders cut through communities in the North, East, South and West of the country which shared history, culture, ethnic origins and tribal ties. It is obvious that drawing borders between these communities and managing these borders remained a massive challenge for nation building in Afghanistan.

In fact, border problems have not been specific to Afghanistan. Many countries in the region and beyond have border problems. However, in Afghanistan the border problem, particularly regarding the border with Pakistan has continuously undermined the central state and the political control by Kabul. Cross-border threats to Afghanistan originate primarily in the border areas with Pakistan. The area is populated by a large Pashtun community, which is formally divided by the Durand Line,<sup>10</sup> but in practice no border exists. This condition existed between Afghanistan and Pakistan ever since the emergence of modern Afghanistan, and moreover, it was strengthened by a 'selective Afghan nationalism' policy, which valued active cross border connections with Pakistan for tribal and ethnic-strategic reasons, while strictly controlled borders with other neighboring countries. Historically the Pashtun rulers of Afghanistan did not want to cut their tribal connections with Pashtuns in Pakistan as they perceived their support to be crucial to strengthening their political power in Afghanistan.

The Durand agreement between the Afghan state and the British India in the 19th century divided the Pashtun communities between

<sup>10</sup> *"Durand Line, boundary established in the Hindu Kush in 1893 running through the tribal lands between Afghanistan and British India, marking their respective spheres of influence; in modern times it has marked the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The acceptance of this line—which was named for Sir Mortimer Durand, who induced AbdurRahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan, to agree to a boundary—may be said to have settled the Indo-Afghan frontier problem for the rest of the British period"* Encyclopedia Britannica, (online source) <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/174128/Durand-Line> (accessed April 16, 2012)

Pakistan and Afghanistan on the map, but in fact the national differentiation of the Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns were never institutionalized. The unwillingness to differentiate between the Afghan Pashtuns from Pakistani Pashtuns contradicts Afghans' stand on Turkmens, Tajiks, Uzbeks and other ethnic groups in the country who are strongly differentiated from their ethnic fellows in Central Asia and in Iran. The Afghan Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks are strongly nationally differentiated by Afghan state and the Central Asian states.<sup>11</sup> But, the case is different in the South and East of Afghanistan. The Pashtun communities residing along the Pakistani and Afghan borders move freely between the two countries and cross country traditional and family ties are widespread in these areas. The national differentiation however, occurs in case of a non-Pashtun Afghan such as Hazara or Uzbek trying to cross border to Pakistan. The same might also be true for non-Pashtun Pakistanis entering Afghanistan. But with regards to Pashtun movements, thousands cross borders from Afghanistan to Pakistan and vice-versa without the visa or any documentation on a daily basis.



## SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF THE DURAND LINE

Selective Afghan nationalism in regards to border creation and maintenance has had different impacts on the Afghan populations. In the northern borders with Central Asia and with Iran in the West, the policy has helped to create strong physical boundaries, which are gradually transformed to become the mental boundaries between the Turks and Tajiks of Afghanistan and the Central Asia. As a result, the Afghan nation-state has been effectively established in the minds and behavior of the populations in these areas. But

<sup>11</sup> *There could be some level of affinity towards their ethnic fellows residing across borders among these communities, but to a large extent the national differentiation has occurred as a result of the political borders dividing them.*

in regards to borders with Pakistan, the political boundaries do not exist or are not fixed among the border populations and as a result, Afghanistan as such does not exist in their minds.

This has had strong security implications for Afghanistan in terms of state authority and population control. The Afghan state has not been able to fully insert its authority in the tribal communities in the Southern borders. Formal state institutions and governance structures remain weak and are generally discredited. It is notable that almost all of the uprisings against central government in Afghanistan originated in the South. Only Habibullah Kalakani's uprising (1929) from Kalakan district, North of Kabul led to an overthrow against Amanullah Khan (1919-1929). The South is still a source of instability and insurgency that has undermined the international efforts to support the consolidation of a strong Afghan government.<sup>12</sup>

The reason that Afghan rulers in the past did not want to differentiate between the Pashtuns has to do a lot also with a historical claim that Afghans have over the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. This historical claim was reflected in the term 'Pashtunistan' used by President Dawood in 1970s to question Pakistan's authority over the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. This claim has also had great security implication for Afghanistan. For Pakistan, the Afghan claim over the tribal areas in Pakistan constitutes a national security threat. Pakistanis therefore, would reasonably firmly fight against any Pashtun ethnic nationalism in Pakistan or in Afghanistan. Currently, Pakistan has been fighting it through empowering radical Islamic groups who would have a broader or

<sup>12</sup> *It shall be noted that the geography of insurgency has expanded in recent years. It includes areas in the Northeast and Northwest. However, the spread of insurgent groups has largely been facilitated by tribal networks.*

*President Dawood (1973-1978) wanted to attach the Pashtun tribal areas across the border with Pakistan to Afghanistan. This marked a massive intervention into Pakistan's affairs. Read details on:*

*(<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/pashtunistan-1961.htm>) (accessed April 17, 2012).*

global Islamic agenda than local and ethnic interests. These radical groups have been actively engaged in terrorist activities against Afghanistan and the international forces in the country.

Cross-border tribal networks have provided terrorist and extremist groups in the tribal areas in Pakistan with social access to Afghanistan. Pakistan utilizes these tribal networks to pursue its interests in Afghanistan. It is important to note that in the current conditions, the Pakistani government is also not willing to differentiate between the Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns, first, because they fear ethno-nationalist sentiments to emerge in response to Pakistanization of the Pashtuns, and second, the blurred border line between the two countries, provides Pakistan with social access to Afghanistan through these tribal networks. The latter can strategically be very instrumental for Pakistan in pursuing its interests in Afghanistan. This social access to Afghanistan is valuable to Pakistan also in terms of countering India. Pakistan views Afghanistan as its 'Strategic Depth' and it is benefiting from the situation in the Afghan borders by utilizing its social access to Afghanistan against any government in Kabul, which is close to India and/or is less supportive of Pakistan.

Moreover, Pakistan has successfully aligned its interests with interest of the Pashtun tribes in border areas who view the fluid border as a strategic weapon that can be used to challenge any government in Kabul that does not ensure Pashtun control of power. It might be that some Afghan rulers in the past wanted to benefit from such strategic condition to affect politics in Pakistan. But the condition is now being used against Afghanistan.

The policy that avoided national differentiation between the Pashtuns in Pakistan and the Pashtuns in Afghanistan has created a sense of tribal autonomy for the border tribes. This sense of autonomy is the strongest in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, where Pakistan has minimum control over the population and the area is called the 'safe heaven' of terrorist organizations. This condition can be seen as the long term implication of the selective approach to nation building in Afghanistan, which failed to nationally differentiate the border Pashtuns.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The border areas with Pakistan have been the heartland of insurgency in different periods of the contemporary history of the country. The Afghan state has been always vulnerable to the uprisings on the southern borders and the area is still a challenge to the international community and the Afghan government. In theoretical terms, the mismatch of political and mental boundaries of the border population undermines national control. The failure to draw effective political borders across the border populations makes national identification difficult, which can in turn create space for border violation and infiltrations. Afghanistan presents a clear example of this case, where cross-border infiltration is widespread and population control remains a huge challenge for the central government.

The condition in the Afghan borders in the South has had significant security implications for Afghanistan. The condition has served the interest of Pakistan in terms of creating an opportunity for its continuous interference in the Afghan affairs. Moreover, the condition has helped the insurgent and terrorist networks that operate in the border areas to enjoy freedom of movement between the two countries. The situation seems to perpetuate as long as political efforts fail to address the management of the border populations. Although it is extremely difficult to nationally reorient the border tribes and institutionalize their national deference, it will be an inevitable decision for Afghanistan in longer run if the country is going to see any long term stability.

Such a political socialization is required for Pashtuns in Pakistan too. For the long term stability in the region, it is important that both countries admit the threats originating in the tribal areas and that they improve and strengthen the border management based on national differentiations of Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns. This requires recognition of the Durand Line by Afghanistan as the official international border between the two countries, through acknowledgment of the Durand agreement.

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