

Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2013. Pp. X1, 424. ISBN 978-0-8157-2378-3.

**Review by Edmund F. Byrne, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
(ebyrne@iupui.edu).**

The author of this book is an anthropologist who at present holds the Ibn Kahldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, D.C. Earlier in his life he was a Pakistani diplomat who served in several posts including what has become an embattled Muslim tribal area in northwestern Pakistan. He is himself Muslim and has written a number of other works about Muslims in the modern world, including two “anthropological excursions” also published by Brookings – one a study of Muslims in the United States,¹ the other a study of the impact of globalization on Muslims in some half-dozen countries.² *The Thistle and the Drone* complements Ahmed’s previous research and experiences by illuminating in all its complexity the conflict between government centers and peripheral tribes both before and after 9/11. Its political agenda: to criticize the faulty assumptions at work in the US involvement in this conflict, and propose changes in policy and practice that must be made if tribal groups are to survive as groups into the future.

The book’s title involves two symbols for opposite but drastically unequal forces competing either (a) to advance the well-being of people who are accustomed to rely on tribal hegemony (thistles) or (b) to undermine in its entirety (via drones) any power that such tribal people might attempt to exercise. In six chapters, it first provides a detailed survey of anthropological basics regarding tribes and types of tribe, and how Islam has been incorporated by some tribes. Next it elaborates on the tensions among the Waziristan tribes of western Pakistan, after which it spells out how Osama bin Laden dealt with these tensions in and beyond Pakistan. Then the key distinction between center and periphery is elucidated with a concentration on how Musharraf and other Pakistani leaders have sought to balance the two. Another layer of complexity is then added to show how post-9/11 US policies have simplistically backed nation-state centers against peripheries with disastrous consequences. The final chapter sets forth proposals for remedying the destructiveness presently being generated.

A tribe, says Ahmed, can be defined as “a unit of ethnic, social, and political organization in which kinship is the defining principle of social organization and interaction” (p. 18). The most successful tribes organize their decision-making according to what anthropologists call a segmentary lineage system. This system

presupposes a tribe and a territory wherein tribal identity is maintained via a code of honor and a law of hospitality. Ideally, the segmentary lineage system has egalitarian genealogy, male cousin rivalry, a council of elders, and a distinctive language (pp. 18-19). Many tribes claim links to Islam, but this link is based on a “fictitious genealogy” (p. 28); moreover, “tribal Islam practiced by largely illiterate tribesmen is antithetical in every way – sociological, ideological, and theological – to fundamentalist or liberalist versions of Islam” (p. 30).

These longstanding tribal arrangements have been undergoing fundamental historical change: though they do antedate modern political structures by millennia, the main political structures of the past several centuries – nation-states, colonies (and, arguably, socialist republics) – have routinely ignored the reality and erstwhile prerogatives of tribes. So the boundaries of countries as of colonies have frequently subjected once unified tribal populations to subordinate status under two or more distinct and often hostile political structures that exercise control over them. As a result most tribes have become peripheral to the political center of the country or colony in which they are located. And to the extent that they rebel against being disregarded or, worse, oppressed, they become the poorly armed targets of whatever social system, say a hostile tribe, controls the center and maintains that control by means of comparatively modern weaponry. This disproportionate advantage of the controlling center has been further exacerbated post-9/11 by the war on terror and its agents’ simplistic openness to any center-controlling group that declares a troublesome peripheral tribe to be linked to terrorists, notably al Qaeda.

Ahmed illustrates this violence-generating scenario first by focusing on Waziristan, where he was a political agent (PA) of the Pakistani government at the time when Russian troops invaded adjacent Afghanistan. The Waziristan tribes had for ages managed their affairs with three distinct sources of authority (the Waziristan Model): a tribal elder, a religious leader, and the political agent representing the central government (p. 49). When the British were in control (until 1947) they practiced “indirect rule” in tolerating this quasi-autonomous system. Once under Pakistani control, the preferred type of Islam became problematic because the government for whom the PA spoke fostered a modern, nationalist version of Islam whereas the religious leader, or mullah, favored a traditional and tribal version. But because the tribal people of Waziristan lived in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the mullah became a favorite of the Pakistani center by training students (“taliban”) who joined the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet troops. When the latter pulled out in the late 1980s the young taliban formed a group that eventually took power in Afghanistan in opposition to Northern

Alliance forces that were not associated with their tribe. When the US invaded Afghanistan after 9/11 it threw out the Taliban and persuaded Musharraf, then president of Pakistan, to invade the Waziristan region. Over the next decade brutality on both sides ran rampant as the government's storming of a mosque led to founding of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007 and then others formed the Mugami Alliance to oppose the TTP as being "bad" Taliban. Adding to the mix, the US began posting drones over Waziristan and, disregarding the Pakistani distinction between good and bad Taliban, targeted them all, including many civilians.³ Especially horrific in this regard was the drone strike on a tribal jirga in Datta Khel (March 2011), that killed 44 people, all innocent. Thus is the Waziristan Model being systematically undermined. The result:

With drone and missile strikes and satellite tracking systems bringing death, global media depicting this land as the nursery of terrorists while denying it a voice, national political leaders never visiting or seeming to care for the population's plight, suicide bombers from the community relentlessly tearing it apart, and a world showing little knowledge of or even interest in their suffering—the age of globalization has arrived in Waziristan like a precursor to the apocalypse. (p. 94)

Against this background Ahmed next locates Osama bin Laden in the tribal world under discussion. The son of a prominent Yemeni construction engineer, bin Laden was raised in accordance with Islamic and (Qahtan) tribal values. In time, however, he came to favor the tribal concept of revenge over the Islamic preference for forgiveness and atonement. This led him to break with his teacher and mentor in Afghanistan and back the militant Pukhtun warriors against the non-Pukhtun tribes embraced by the Northern Alliance. All the while "he explicitly rejected the Prophet's exhortations on knowledge and compassion over martyrdom and conflict" yet was never "fully taken to task for it by religious clerics" (p. 105). As for 9/11, most (18 of 19) of the hijackers were Yemeni, members of the tribes of Asir. Their behavior, says Ahmed, clearly conforms to one of his key findings, that

tribal groups adhering to a segmentary lineage system constitute themselves as a raiding party, based on the genealogical charter and motivated by notions of revenge and honor, and set out to avenge the dishonor of the tribe singing war songs and waving weapons. The Islamic element is conspicuous by its absence . . . (p. 108)

This depreciation of Islamic values Ahmed attributes to Saudi Arabia's intrusion into the

Asiris' country. Formed in 1932, Saudi Arabia annexed most of Asir land two years later, then sent in Wahhabi clerics to rescue the local people's religion from the religion they deemed heretical. It is such domineering intrusion that led Osama bin Laden to form al Qaeda ("the base") in 1988, as a result of which the Saudi government stripped him of his Saudi citizenship and began besieging Yemenis in Saudi Arabia. Undeterred, the Asiris perpetrated the 9/11 attack, merged al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia with the organization in Yemeni, and engaged in other terror attacks around the world. This upsurge in tribal hostility led, regrettably, to the introduction of suicide bombings, by women as well as men, against foes of tribal groups in Turkey, Somalia, and Nigeria. Ultimately at issue in these and other areas around the world where tribes are challenged by central authorities is, says Ahmed, how to strike a balance between center and periphery.

A poor example of how to do this is Ahmed's own place of origin, Pakistan. There Musharraf invaded the tribal areas and thereby engendered conflict throughout the country; but he got the US to provide him military assistance by warning that without it his country's nuclear assets would be at risk. Similar but otherwise different situations exist elsewhere. For example, a caliphate or an emirate (former much larger than latter) might control the center, as did the Kurds in the Caucasus and the Sulu Sultanate in the Philippines.

During the colonial era the occupying country often ruled tribes harshly. The British are the main exception, having learned from their mistakes (in Kabul) that they could maintain "relative stability" via indirect rule. This was their style in Somalia, but less so elsewhere. Other colonizers preferred "the steamroller," as did the Russians in suppressing the Circassians in the Caucasus, where they killed 1.5 million and displaced as many more to the Ottoman Empire. French colonizers ruled brutally in Algeria, where they killed 45,000 people, mostly of the Kabyle Berber tribe, during the nineteenth century and a million and a half more during the Algerian war of independence. Spain was equally brutal in Morocco, as was Italy in Somalia and Libya, especially during Mussolini's reign. The Netherlands killed some 100,000 Aceh people in Indonesia. Meanwhile the Ottoman Turks tried without success to rule the Kurds, especially in Yemen.

With the end of colonization after WW II, dominant local groups took control of their center and proceeded to oppress the periphery with impunity. Here Ahmed distinguishes **five different models**. **Model One**: a strong Muslim center with Muslim segmentary lineage societies on periphery, e.g., Turkey vs. the Kurds, also Iran, Iraq, and Syria vs. the Kurds. A Muslim center in Sudan (where the British had maintained

indirect rule) has killed off hundreds of thousands of Nuba tribal people; similar situations have prevailed in Mali, Azerbaijan, Senegal, and Aceh where after 1974 Suharto crushed the people in order to control the natural wealth in their area (which now, of course, they again control). In Uzbekistan, the Uzbeks took power when the Soviet Socialist Republic there collapsed and have since been pushing the nomadic tribes of Karakalpakstan to extinction.

Model Two involves tribal monarchies, e.g., in Afghanistan, Albania, and Iraq (all now defunct), and currently in Kuwait, Morocco, and Jordan. **Model Three** involves multiple tribal societies in one state (which is the case in most African nations), e.g., Libya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Gambia. **Model Four** involves a modern state dominated by one segmentary lineage system, e.g., clans in Somalia, tribes in Yemen, and (post-USSR) the Teke tribe in Turkmenistan.

Model Five: Non-Muslim centers with Muslim segmentary lineage peripheries. By far the most common, this model receives the bulk of Ahmed's attention. A key example is China, the center of which is dominated by Han (90% of population, 1.3 billion people), but contains 55 minorities, many of which are Muslim. Long persecuted Uyghurs now facilitate the government's access to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Ethiopia different forces dominated at different times and each enjoyed killing off its foes. The Somali, located in four different countries, are worst off in Kenya. In the Caucasus region of Russia, Chechnya has been the locus of several mass murders. Albanians were brutally mistreated in Kosovo until NATO air strikes pulverized the tyrant Milosevic. Then, finally, there are places where a non-Muslim center deals with Muslim peripheries that do not practice the segmentary lineage system. Victimized in such a context are the Muslims of the southern Philippines, the Malay of South Thailand, the Cham of Cambodia and Vietnam, and (most recently in the news) the Rohingya of Burma/Myanmar, the center of which is Buddhist-oriented.

Against this background of diverse contra- and inter-tribal conflicts Ahmed examines the recent history of US and others' involvement in these conflicts, thereby turning them into "a global war against tribal Islam" (p. 260). Gaining access from nation-state leaders, the US has directed frequent drone attacks against two southern provinces of Yemen. Conspiring with the central governments of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, it is actively engaged (via the CIA and Special Forces) in a concerted effort to eliminate Somalis associated with al Shabab ("the youth"), which it ties to al Qaeda, and the system of Islamic courts they now maintain. It directs drones against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) because President Bush accepted Turkey's branding it a "common enemy." When Indonesians of Yemeni descent in the Philippines formed Abu

Sayaf to defend themselves against the Philippine government's onslaughts, the US equated the group with al Qaeda and made them targets of drone strikes. It has also supported central government attacks on tribes in Algeria, Cambodia, and of course Pakistan, in addition to which it pays a number of country centers to help capture and torture alleged terrorists. Not to be outdone in these strategies to control recalcitrant peripheries, China, Russia, India and Pakistan (vs. Kashmir tribes) help expand globalized counter-terrorism.

This being the problem writ large, the solution, says Ahmed, is certainly not to equate the war on terrorism with a simplistic "clash of civilizations," which he finds too many media and political "experts" ready to accept – in part, he suggests, as a way to retain their employment. By not transcending this over-simplification "the United States has been fighting the wrong war, with the wrong tactics, against the wrong enemy, and therefore the results can be nothing but wrong" (p. 327) His counter-recommendation: a "return to anthropology," as a better way to address multiple aspects of data (p. 322) towards the creation of an epistemology of the discipline. One potential result of such a redirection of analyses would be to ameliorate (would that we could undo) the socially destructive impositions of colonial boundaries on cultural communities ever after oppressed as irrelevant to what matters now and into the future. So doing, for example one might no longer unqualifiedly prioritize Iran's oil deposits over the Ahwazi Arabs who live where they are located (p. 344).

This review is perhaps overly complimentary in several respects. For one, the reviewer has not attempted to check the accuracy of totals assigned to the torturing, starving, killing, and displacement that has become so much a part of centers' means of suppressing peripheries they deem counter-productive. Nor has he attempted to counter Ahmed's claim that the basis of "war on terror" hostilities is not pro- and anti-Muslim but center and periphery (p. 331). The author's presentation is so detailed and documented, however, that it must be recognized as a major challenge to mainstream "stateside" accounts. This said, I doubt if there exists a more thoroughly researched and at the same time passionately concerned assessment of the plight of traditional tribes now brought on not as in the past just by inter-tribal rivalries but by superimposed priorities of exploitative global powers in pursuit of their own resource-targeting agenda.

This book provides both a rational defense of human rights and emotionally captivating accounts of the gross and at times genocidal mistreatment of tribal groups that have gotten in the way of globalizational priorities. At the same time the author is fully aware of the amoral counter-attacks perpetrated by victimized tribal activists. Nor does he say in so many words that these bloody reactions are morally justified in light of

the horrors being inflicted upon their people. In fact, he deems them destructive of tribal systems even as he locates their roots anthropologically in the tribal codes. That said, one might be tempted to equate his plea for more enlightened policies regarding the marginalized people of the world with that of any side whose chances of winning a war by force are slim. To canonize this counter-thesis, however, would amount to saying that these socio-political calamities are merely a final disentangling of backward-oriented losers from the forward-oriented winners who maximize the benefits of domination. Suffice to say there is already too much support for this amoral account of human destiny.

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1. *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (2010).
 2. *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (2007).
 3. See *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan*, International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic, NYU School of Law, Sept. 2012.