Still waters run deep: Community-based water management as a case for ethnofederalism in Afghanistan

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Still waters run deep: Community-based water management as a case for ethnofederalism in Afghanistan

by

Joel J. Blaxland

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Still waters run deep: Community-based water management as a case for ethnofederalism in Afghanistan

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Date Approved

David Casagrande

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Donald Morris
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LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Afghan Ethnic Groups by Region and Percent Population....................... 12

Figure 1: Ethnicity distribution.................................................................................. 14

Figure 2: Power sharing stages and the various steps of decentralization............. 26

Figure 3: Afghan farmers digging irrigation canals.................................................... 32

Figure 4: Three major Afghan river basins.............................................................. 37

Table 2: Sample of recent large-scale internationally-funded water projects.......... 38

Table 3: Sample of small-scale community-based water initiatives....................... 39

Figure 5: Oxen-powered sakia (Persian wheel)....................................................... 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rawaj</td>
<td>Customary law, tribal customary law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arhad</td>
<td>A shallow hand-dug well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoquq</td>
<td>Customary laws or rights as defined by rawaj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karez</td>
<td>An ancient system of hand-dug, horizontal tunnels used for delivering important sources of water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loya jerga</td>
<td>A political council or assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirab</td>
<td>Tribe, village or community water master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushtarak</td>
<td>Communal land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pashtunwali</td>
<td>Traditional “Code of Life” or customary law practiced by Pashtuns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qanat</td>
<td>A traditional underground water delivery system, which taps groundwater by gravity from aquifers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qanoon madani</td>
<td>Civil law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qabala-i-sharayee</td>
<td>An official ownership title or deed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qabala-i-urfi</td>
<td>Customary ownership title or deed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qawn</td>
<td>Kin, village, tribe, or ethnic group to which Afghan tribal loyalty is traced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakia</td>
<td>A water retrieval mechanism normally powered by oxen, donkeys or horses; also known as a Persian wheel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarband</td>
<td>A surface water irrigation canal that is traditionally built using logs, gravel, sandbags and mud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watan</td>
<td>The place of origin or ‘home area’ to which many Afghans retain strong cultural ties to their ancestors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis explores how, for more than four millennia, neighboring Afghan tribal communities have exercised highly decentralized, community-based freshwater management practices. I argue that these practices can act as both a model for how to structure Afghan polity at large as well as a global lesson in environmental resource management. The staying-power of these highly decentralized institutions is especially confounding for US policymakers because despite enduring nearly three decades of unrelenting violent conflict, these community-based freshwater management practices have remained a bulwark against “modern” western capitalist expansionism. These management practices are exceptionally resilient because they draw their strength from the people-to-people relationships they create and because they place the decision-making power firmly in the hands of the community. These time-honored practices are under attack by economic intervention from western capitalists and the structural adjustment schemes needed for its entrenchment. Using these community-based freshwater management practices as a model for Afghanistan’s political organization at large, I recommend ethnofederalism with consociational power sharing at the center because it fits Afghanistan’s specific cultural and environmental considerations. The decentralized nature of this strategy also leaves the decision-making power firmly in the hands of the tribal communities.
As I stood on the tarmac of Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, and watched the C-17 Globemaster meander slowly down the runway toward me, I could not help but notice the majestic backdrop before me. The Hindu Kush Mountains that frame the airfield climb more than 19,000 feet into the sky and on that clear morning, their sublime gray mass loomed over the entire valley—a sight so awe-inspiring that I almost forgot I was about to head home after many months in Afghanistan. My first trip to Afghanistan did not turn out as I had expected. I arrived flush with excitement and fervor, a young soldier itching to destroy anything in his path. But on that morning, as I waited for my 500,000 pound taxi home, I was leaving a changed man. I was mesmerized by the country’s splendid landscape and captivated by its generous people. But my mind was also filled with questions of how our involvement might forever change the political landscape of a country that had for centuries, vehemently resisted centralization in favor of diffuse local governance.

Water is a fundamental necessity of life and though Afghanistan is a semi-arid country that seldom enjoys more than 30mm of rainfall a month, for more than four millennia neighboring Afghan tribal communities have exercised highly decentralized, community-based freshwater management practices that serve as both models for how to structure Afghan polity at large as well as a global lesson in environmental resource management (McSweeney et al., 2013). Since October 2001, United States military forces have been continuously deployed to Afghanistan in support of the Global War on Terror—a campaign title the Obama administration has since changed to the Overseas Contingency Operation. The War in Afghanistan has claimed nearly 2,300 American
lives and the lives of countless Afghans. Moreover, the conflict has the rather infamous distinction of being the longest running war in US history. For more than three-thousand years, foreign nations have had various political and economic interests that have compelled them to invade Afghanistan. From the forces of Alexander the Great in the 3rd-century BCE, through the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Afghan people have often bore the high costs of long and drawn-out foreign military campaigns. More recently, the United States has labored vigorously to fashion the Afghan government to better suit its own purposes while the Afghan people remain rightfully disillusioned about the agenda of their western guests.

For compelling reasons, Afghanistan is a particularly fascinating case for examining both freshwater management and state-building at large. First, the natural environment of Afghanistan is unique and therefore warrants a reasoned and critical examination of the influence it has had in shaping its social and political institutions. Though the US and Afghan governments have had little success in creating a widespread legal umbrella of control over the country today, this should not suggest that those people living throughout the countryside, and away from cities like Kabul or Khost, do not have considerably complex systems of law. Albeit informal in structure when compared to American political institutions, most of the autonomously functioning tribal councils scattered throughout the diverse landscape have been quietly adjudicating legal matters amongst its people for millennia. Second, much of the contemporary news and literature about Afghanistan—particularly that published in the United States—seldom expand beyond analyses of religious extremism which has legitimized the state-building paradigm. To be sure, it is impossible to study Afghanistan without paying particular
attention to how Islam informs law and policy or how current US involvement has influenced Afghanistan’s political landscape; but it would be a mistake if I did not equally incorporate other elements like ethnic studies, economics and cultural history in my assessment of the current political landscape. Third, the relationship between the environment and politics constitutes something of a new emphasis in the field of policy studies—especially in western comparative political academia. By examining the way the vast majority of Afghanistan’s tribal communities have developed their own formal water management strategies—whether in the absence of, or in resistance to—a centralized system of institutions, I intend to argue that a decentralized political system combined with political power sharing is the best state-building strategy for Afghanistan.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, with the advent of the massive troop drawdown rapidly approaching, and with the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan currently failing; massive changes need to take place if the American-backed Afghan proxy-government hopes to reverse the trends of political turmoil now plaguing the country.

For the purposes of this study, it is critical for the reader to understand that Afghans are remarkably dynamic and complex in their social order. The Afghan people have been influenced by centuries of interaction with countries both near and far from its geographical borders but they have also managed to maintain strong ethnic and cultural ties to their ancestry. It is also a country with a vibrant and muscular internal sociopolitical history of its own. For most Americans though, the history of Afghanistan generally began with the US invasion in 2001. I have found that many contemporary scholars argue that Afghanistan has always lacked stable sociopolitical institutions and was never a particularly civilized society. This presumptive history is why current
western scholars and government officials claim that current nation-building efforts have yielded lackluster results. I intend to argue that because all the pre-existing parts—like the tribal councils—do not neatly conform to the US-prescribed state-building model, policymakers are finding it more difficult to apply the traditional US democratization strategy in Afghanistan. We cannot simply discard the old and replace it with something new. This is precisely why any nation-building effort in Afghanistan will always fail if it does not take into account the long and storied sociopolitical history. Afghan tribal community-based water management practices are pristine examples of local-governance at work there today and this thesis focuses on their philosophy, form and function as a case for ethnofederalism.

Likewise, what I intend to show is that a deeper investigation into Afghanistan’s sociopolitical history yields a much different narrative than that commonly embraced by western scholars. My investigation of Afghanistan suggests that this beautiful country it is not simply a ‘Graveyard of Empires’ or a medieval society teeming with impressionable youths ripe for Islamic fundamentalist recruitment. What I have found, through examining Afghanistan from a more pluralist perspective, is a dynamic nation with majestic mountains and fertile plains occupied by people that are struggling with some of the very same issues about political power-play and natural resource use that has plagued many other nations (including the United States) throughout their own histories. Afghanistan is grappling with some of the very same questions about its relationship with the natural world as Americans did during the colonial era and continue to do today. Conflict over the management of increasingly scarce natural resources like water raises challenging questions for environmental policymakers because embedded beneath these
conflicts are myriad contrasting political, economic, social and cultural influences. I will argue that ethnofederalism with consociationalism is more likely to succeed in Afghanistan than the current approach because it promotes territorial autonomy while accommodating the contrasting influences of the tribal communities throughout.

Background

It is not possible to understand the misfit between US state-building policy and Afghan perceptions of US policy without appreciating the context of recent interventions. Since 2003, the American war effort in Afghanistan was oft eclipsed by President George W. Bush’s wild goose-chase in Iraq. Furthermore, the mission in Afghanistan was never clearly defined and thus difficult for American military commanders to determine their progress. In some ways, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan almost completely mirrored the Soviet invasion two decades earlier. Just as the Soviets employed specially trained Spetsnaz commandos in their initial combat surge, US involvement came first as a subtle trickle of special operations soldiers—mostly backing Afghan Northern Alliance troops—directing airstrikes from the ground in an effort to ferret out Osama bin Laden. Stationary Taliban targets like buildings were virtually nonexistent and those few that did exist were exceedingly difficult to find and destroy without inflicting massive collateral damage to the surrounding landscape. Nevertheless, initial US airstrikes blanketed the Afghan countryside with more than 17,000 bombs—including Tomahawk cruise missiles, 2,000-pound JDAMS or ‘smart bombs’ and laser-guided 5,000-pound ‘bunker buster’ bombs—that indiscriminately killed Taliban, civilians, and ecosystems alike. In November, 2001 the US “began to drop Daisy Cutter bombs, 15,000-pound weapons it
had once used to clear landing zones in Indochina’s jungles and which the North Vietnamese had protested at the time as ‘weapons of mass destruction’” (Tanner, 2009). These ammonium nitrate-fueled bombs and other similar munitions were used in an effort to kill Taliban fighters and flush-out Bin Laden who was allegedly hiding in the vast network of mountainside caves. “There was some question about their use because, as the US had learned at Okinawa and elsewhere, not only soldiers hid in caves during battle” (Tanner, 2009). US intelligence sources estimated between 3,000 to 4,500 Afghan civilians were killed during the October 2001 to January 2002 bombing campaign (Conetta, 2002). Soon thereafter, US commanders realized the futility of their Vietnam War-era carpet bombing tactics and decided that a boots-on-the-ground strategy was better suited for hunting down Bin Laden who was purportedly hiding somewhere in the remote and rugged Afghan terrain.

Then, after nearly a year, and when capturing or killing bin Laden proved to be a difficult task, US forces turned their efforts to toppling the Taliban regime—a much more straightforward job for the growing masses of US troops on the ground. Once the Taliban were quickly dispatched—a job that by all accounts, took Northern Alliance and coalition forces about two months—the US government realized they had completely decimated Afghanistan's stable central government; albeit an oppressive and extremist regime, but a stable one nonetheless. Therefore, the job turned to government building, then economy building and consequently the US found itself engaged in an all out nation building effort that has since spiraled out of control.

Chapter One
We were going to have to bomb them up to the Stone Age


In his book, A Perfect Failure (2012) John L. Cook, a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel and former senior advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Interior (and one of the architects of the Phoenix Program; a search-and-destroy campaign employed during the Vietnam War\(^1\)) lamented that Afghanistan is a “drab, dirty, ugly, exhausted […] failed third-world country”. Additionally, when prompted by reporters about the planning of past bombing operations in Afghanistan, particularly in response to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, an official in the Clinton administration commented that “[w]hen we looked at Afghanistan before, the sense was we were going to bomb them up to the Stone Age,” (Gordon et al., 2001, emphasis added). On the one hand, many American scholars and statesmen argue that Afghanistan has never been a particularly ‘civilized’ place, but on the other, history reveals a much different narrative of Afghanistan. As we will see, Afghan tribal communities have remarkably sophisticated legal systems, environmentally sustainable practices for managing freshwater resources and maintain extraordinarily strong connections to their ethnic and cultural lineages. Furthermore, Afghans have been involved in global economic markets for more than three centuries. History tells us that Afghanistan was actually the epicenter of trade and commerce, where for more than 3,000 years,

\(^1\) For more on the Phoenix Program see, Ashes to ashes: The Phoenix program and the Vietnam War (1990), by Dale Andrad
“[v]aluable merchandise from China, India, Persia, Mesopotamia, Central Asia and the Mediterranean […] would pass through Afghan territory (Rashid et al., 2012).

It is not surprising however, that many contemporary American scholars and statesmen continue to view Afghan tribal life as ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’. “We [Americans] have inherited a somewhat fuzzy [and derogatory] usage of the term ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’ from early British anthropology [which defines tribal peoples or tribes as] ‘underdeveloped’ (formerly called ‘primitive’ or even ‘savage’) minorities, far from the majorities’ cultural and social mainstream” (Glatzer, 2002). In his most influential work, Primitive Culture (1871), the father of cultural anthropology, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, described culture as the “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Americans have often thought our job to civilize the ‘natives’ and though US foreign policy experts have had little success in implementing a strategy for political assimilation of the tribes, this should not suggest that those tribal peoples living throughout the countryside are uncultured, uncivilized and lawless. However, the prevailing western notion about the Afghan culture, and certainly that which dominates contemporary American perception, suggests that the Afghan culture is one informed by religious theology rather than a culture derived from myriad interconnected elements of which religion is but one part. It is particularly important to note that Afghan culture cannot be generalized and framed within nice tidy boundaries. Likewise, Afghan cultural studies becomes remarkably more complex when we see that Afghanistan is home to multiple cultures and those cultures can be further subdivided according to varied, yet distinct, linguistic associations and ethnic lineages. Moreover, the topic becomes
increasingly muddied “by the various groupings to which we attach the label ‘ethnic’—extending from the level of subtribes, to tribes, to the larger and socially more heterogeneous linguistic communities—[that] are currently undergoing significant changes themselves” (Banuazizi and Weiner, 1986). It is no wonder then that in his book, Keywords (1983), Raymond Williams described “culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”.

Similarly to the US, Afghanistan is populated by a variety of distinct ethnic and linguistic groups, each with their own unique and prolific cultural histories, however (and extremely important to remember within the larger framework of this study), America is overwhelmingly composed of recent migrants (and immigrants); and by contrast, Afghanistan contains multiple ‘homeland peoples’. “Afghanistan, particularly rural Afghanistan, provides an excellent example of a place where tribal and ethnic groups take primacy over the individual” (Barfield, 2010). Loyalty is generally traced to kin, village, tribe, or ethnic group (qawnz). The largest of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups is the Pashtuns, followed in general descending order (in numbers) by the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Aimaks, “although a number of smaller ethnic groups have regionally important roles (most notably the Nuristanis and Baluchis)” (Barfield, 2010).

The land nestled between the Hari Rud and the Amu rivers has played a role in influencing the complexity of Afghanistan’s population dispersion over time. Afghanistan boasts one of the most sublime and majestic natural environments on earth and one of the most rugged. The character of the landscape has had as much to do with shaping the cultural history of its people as it did in influencing where the people have built their communities. On the one hand, what we see today in the diversity of Afghan
cultures and the diffuse yet strategic arrangement of their communities has much to do
with topography. But on the other hand, internal customs and values have further
structured how Afghans engage with each other and neighboring states. The landscape
and climate have significantly determined where tribal communities have sprouted and
their cultures and way-of-life have been overwhelminly influenced by the bounty (or
lack thereof) of the land on which they live. Current scholarship suggests that the
mountainous façade of Afghanistan has created a series of political, technological and
ethnic divides between Afghanistan’s many tribal communities. Renowned
anthropologist Robert Canfield (1973) suggested that “where the localized interests of
groups divide, cultural boundaries form because the groups tend to express their different
interests in culturally contrastive terms. Their social distinctions thus develop spatially in
respect to their accessibility.” Afghans have organized themselves based upon ethnicity
(see Table 1) with the highest population density clusters found in and around cities like
Kabul, which is nestled in the fertile valley below the Hindu Kush.
12

Table 1: Afghan Ethnic Groups by Region and Percent Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percent of Population</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Eastern Afghanistan / Western Pakistan</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajik</td>
<td>Northwestern Afghanistan</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazara</td>
<td>Central Afghanistan</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>Northern and Western Afghanistan</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aimak</td>
<td>West Central Afghan Highlands</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td>Northwest Afghanistan / Southeast Turkmenistan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baloch</td>
<td>Eastern Afghanistan / Western Pakistan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pashai</td>
<td>Eastern Afghanistan</td>
<td>~1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuristani</td>
<td>Eastern Afghanistan</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panjais</td>
<td>Northeastern Afghanistan</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>varies</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Hindu Kush Mountains (the name *Hindu Kush*, when translated from Persian, pays homage to the Indian slaves who died en masse as they were transported over the range en route to Central Asia during the 14\(^{th}\)-century) run from the north-east to the south-west and reach heights of more than 19,000 feet. The Hindu Kush remain snow-covered for more than half the year and navigating the overland passes—numbering scarcely more than a dozen—constitutes an extremely arduous undertaking in the winter months. To the east on the modern Pakistani border, lie the Suleiman Mountains, where Pashtun tribes can be found in the highest numbers. Like the Hindu Kush, the Suleiman boast a rugged and snow-covered façade but aside from their geological importance as the natural border separating the two nations, the peaks of the Suleiman embody cultural significance to many Pashtuns. According to Pashtun legend, Qais Abdur Rashid—the father of the Pashtun people—is buried somewhere in the Suleiman Mountains. The
legend contends that “Rashid had once travelled to Mecca, and had converted to Islam under the direct instruction of the Prophet Muhammad” (Rashid et al., 2012). As such, many Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns living nearby make a spring pilgrimage to the Suleiman to pay their respects—in the form of prayer and animal sacrifice—to their most recent common cultural ancestor. The Pashtuns can be considered a transborder ethnic group—ignoring the Durand line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise most Pashtuns do not classify themselves as Afghan, Pakistani, or any amalgam in between. Rather, most move freely back and forth across the border as members of an assortment of Pashtun tribes. Similarly, the Turkoman and Baluchi ethnic groups share lineages with communities in Iran, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan and Iran and Pakistan respectively and so too move freely across international borders, choosing to align themselves with their respective ethnic groups as opposed to classifying themselves as members of an Afghan, Pakistani or Iranian nation. On the aggregate, the relative distribution of the population is diffuse with many tribal communities having thrived for millennia in the fertile valleys, the steppe, as well as in the mountainous regions. It should be noted that the natural shifts in topography—from valley to highland to mountain and the natural barriers they create—generally coincide with divisions in ethnicity (see Figure 1).

Each community (which is generally comprised of multiple tribal villages sharing ethnic and genealogical ties) has figured out how to optimize the use of the natural resources in their respective environment and organized their social hierarchy to manage the use of those resources in a manner to best suit the needs of the community. Though

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2 For more on the Durand line, see Bijan Omrani (2009) The Durand line: History and problems of the Afghan-Pakistan border
some Afghans are pastoralists, the majority (more than eighty percent) of the population is agrarian and I will therefore focus my case study analysis on the social organizational structure of these agrarian tribal communities in relation to water sources.

Afghans have further organized themselves around watersheds, where they have learned to optimize the use of the natural resources through an intricate social organization: the community-based water management institution. Afghans have enjoyed a highly decentralized arrangement of water management that has operated for more than 4,500 years, thanks to leadership from local members of the community.

![Figure 1: Ethnicity distribution](image)

Heretofore, significant numbers of Afghans hailing from all ethnic groups have fled across the borders to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan to escape conflict with the Soviets (1979-89), the Taliban (1990-2001), or the Americans (2001-present). Conflict therefore has dispersed the locality of some tribal communities, who were then forced to
form new social and local relationships. Regardless of locale however, most Afghans retain strong cultural ties to their ancestral place of origin or “home area” (*watan*) (Glatzer, 2001). According to a study by Stanford University, Afghanistan has the most cultural fractionalization and the highest rate of ethnic diversity in the region (Fearon, 2003).

Like many Americans (in the past), Afghans claim distinct ancestral lineages. In contemporary usage in the United States, many have grown accustomed to identifying themselves as decedents of a racial or ethnic lineage—African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, etc. A person who identifies themselves as Hispanic American may wish to communicate that their ancestral lineage or ethnicity is that from a country boasting Latin American or Spanish-speaking origins; like Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or Mexico to name but three. Furthermore, a Hispanic American may delineate their ethnic ancestry further by referring to themselves as Mexican American. Nevertheless, the common theme throughout is obviously the inclusion of the American cultural identifier. Despite the country of origin to which their family, extended family, or ancestors hailed, a person calling themselves Mexican American probably wishes to be subdivided and identified as someone with distinct Mexican cultural ties but also as a contiguous member of the broader American culture. This cultural phenomenon of the premeditated association by distinct ethnic and/or linguistic groups under a larger umbrella culture is not necessarily present in Afghanistan. Americans either have a single national identity with or without an additional ethnic identity or a hybrid heritage. It is not clear that ‘Afghans’ have a national identity.
In Afghanistan, you will not hear someone identify themselves as a Pashtun Afghan, a Tajik Afghan, or a Baluchi Afghan. There are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Baluchs, etc. Furthermore, Afghans often further delineate their qawn by region, village, or tribe: Durrani, Badakhshi, or Kabuli (as a person hailing from the city of Kabul). The purpose of this discussion was to show that nation building—in a deeply divided place where the people do not readily identify themselves as part of the larger national culture—presents a set of exceedingly difficult cultural considerations. For the purposes of this study, it is critical to understand that the people living in Afghanistan today are a people that have experienced centuries of interaction with other societies and do not simply constitute a medieval society teeming with impressionable youths ripe for Islamic fundamentalist recruitment. Afghan culture has not been static in its evolution over time yet most tribal communities have retained much of their ethnic and linguistic ties.

Historically speaking, most Afghan tribal communities have lived in relative peace with one another (the reign of the Taliban in the 1990s notwithstanding). However, casting the history between tribal communities as wholly peaceful would be misleading because warlords have often battled over land appropriation and territorial disputes (particularly since 1992, when the opium poppy became the main cash crop). Indeed most of the literature on internal ethnic violence in Afghanistan can be shortly traced back to the rise of the Taliban in the early 1990s and was comprised mostly of ethnic Pashtun Taliban attacks against Hazaras Shi’a Muslims. In fact, predominant literature on the history of Afghanistan paints a much different picture of ethnic relations than what occurred in the Taliban-ruled 90s or what US strategists feared would result in post-9/11 Afghanistan. Though divided by ethnic affiliations, tribal politics, natural land
barriers or a combination of all three, tribal warriors often banned together when Afghan territorial autonomy was threatened—as it was during the plights of Alexander the Great in the 3rd-century BCE (who barely made it out alive when he was struck by an Afghan arrow during an ambush), a hat trick of failed British attempts (1839-42, 1878-81 and 1917) and the Soviets (1979-89). Violent conflicts in these cases were targeted against, and in response to, foreign forces. It is particularly important to note that many times during Afghan history, foreign invaders endured raucous attacks as they marched their way across the region at the hands of the tribal peoples living in the mountainous regions. Though attacks were common, they were independently led and coordinated by each individual tribe and were not part of a comprehensive nationwide Afghan rebellion led by a central government. Renowned contemporary Afghan poet and former president of the UN General Assembly, Abd al-Rahman Pazhwak (1919-95) wrote his most famous work, *Marden-e Parupamizad* about this very theme. *Marden-e Parupamizad*, a recounting of Alexander the Great’s exploits in Afghanistan (known as Ariana at the time), is a remarkably vibrant (and relevant piece today) describing renowned Afghan patriotism:

*Thousands of wine-filled barrels fail to intoxicate a patriot*

*So much as a tiny particle of the homeland’s dust*

It is therefore not surprising that Afghans from most ethnic and linguistic groups have once again chosen to take up arms against the US-led coalition forces. Furthermore, current literature suggests that a people with a history of conflict (either with each other or against foreign forces on their domestic soil), are more likely to resort to conflict when compared to peoples lacking such a conflict-laden history (Cedarman et al., 2013).
Chapter Two

You can’t fit a square peg into a round hole

The current state-building strategy being employed by US policymakers in Afghanistan is failing. Corruption abounds in Hamid Karzai’s administration—an illegitimately installed puppet regime comprised mostly of his friends and family who have a penchant for plundering instead of rebuilding. Taliban attacks on Afghan government employees have increased with decisive regularity and with often deadly results. While top US commanders insist Afghan forces are shouldering more of the ‘work load’, the casualty numbers for both Afghans and their American counterparts continue to mount.\(^3\) Already the world’s leader in opium production, accounting for more than seventy-five percent of the world’s heroin supply, Afghan warlords have enjoyed three straight years of increased cultivation. Moreover, Afghan civilians from all tribal, ethnic and linguistic groups are rightfully disillusioned and cynical about the gains their western guests keep promising. Over the last thirteen years, answering the question of how to unite the people of Afghanistan under a single political institution has left academics, political analysts and presidents scratching their heads. The ever-elusive ‘peaceful democracy’ in Afghanistan is rather more a question of the incompatibility of the long trusted US democratization model—employed with oft touted but altogether uninspiring results for the domestic citizens in a host of countries, such as the Philippines (1899-1902), post-WWII Germany, Vietnam (1965-1975), and most recently in Iraq (2003-2010). Furthermore, I argue that there is an incompatibility between the

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\(^3\) See Shah and Nordland (October 6, 2013) Bomb kills 4 soldiers in Afghanistan, *The New York Times*. At the time this was written, US and coalition forces had just incurred the worst loss of life from a single combat incursion in almost six months.
fundamental tenants of western consumer capitalism—which theoretically needs a
centralized authoritarian-style government—and the predisposition for political
decentralization in a people that have been historically autonomy-seeking. This is why a
decentralized Afghan government is antithetical to US policy, but better suited for the
ethnically diverse and geographically diffuse tribal communities of Afghanistan.

Certainly history suggests that Afghanistan has always been involved in global markets
but this is more about their dogged resistance to the fundamental principle of consumer
capitalism—the principle that the terms of market transactions be dictated to them by
neoliberal capitalist outsiders. We need to examine why the US-led democratization
strategy is failing in Afghanistan but to answer the why; we must take a closer look at
some of the successes and failures of the model America has employed throughout its
nation-building history.

For nearly the last one hundred years, centripetalism has arguably been the
preferred model of western, American policymakers, for the successful application of
post-conflict peace-building strategies in ethnically diverse places (see the work of
prominent centripetal scholar Donald Horowitz). As its most fundamental tenants,
centripetalism endorses “core democratic institutions such as political parties, electoral
systems, and cabinet governments, and [promotes] the territorial division of state powers
via federalism”, as the way to foster political accommodation among multiethnic groups
(Wolff and Yakinthou, 2011). Moreover, centripetalism encourages “convergence”
towards the center and “often condemn[s] proportional representation” (O’Leary, 2013).
The overriding feature of centripetalism (especially in democratic federalist states), and
what I argue is the main reason for its failure in Afghanistan, is the unabashed and
unwavering allegiance—particularly by American scholars and statesmen—to nationalism (*E pluribus Unum*). By promoting ethnic and cultural assimilation—the proverbial *Melting Pot*—this type of state-building ignores the problem of how power inequality can mire relations once in the cauldron. Furthermore, this type of convergence of cultures in state-building, in addition to creating further ethnic divides in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and despite its proponents’ claims and best intentions, is also particularly well suited for inaugurating a powerful political monopoly that can be enjoyed by the majority while leaving the minority powerless and alienated. “That democracy might lead to domination was the theme of ‘tyranny by the majority’, which deeply concerned eighteenth-century republicans, such as James Madison, and nineteenth-century liberals, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill” (O’Leary, 2012). Under even the most ideal of circumstances however, (i.e. a relatively homogeneous culture boasting a high rate of literacy, abundant natural resources and without the burden of three-decades of near unrelenting violent conflict) a state-building strategy of this type can only hope to enjoy marginal success at best.

The Philippine islands were essentially the first official ‘successful’ test subject in America’s imperialist experiment abroad (Matthew Perry’s short-lived lackluster foray to Japan in the 1850s notwithstanding). “Wrested from Spanish control by American military forces and local revolutionaries, the Philippines included more than seven thousand islands inhabited by more than seven million people, eight thousand miles from Washington, D.C.” (Suri, 2011). Some academics argue that US involvement in the Philippines was prompted by warmongering “jingoes” who feared they had lost touch with their rightful heritage of manliness that was so heroically embodied by their Civil
War forefathers and the only way to recapture it from the gentle clutches of masculine
degeneracy that plagued politics at the time was through a good old fashioned war (See
Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 2001). A more likely and pragmatic
explanation however, is the fact that the Philippines were less than two-thousand miles
from mainland China—a veritable burgeoning economic market that had American
military-neomercantilists and trade entrepreneurs alike, licking their lips. Despite the
arguments over the motivation for military action, it can be agreed that the US sought to
establish a modern, “sovereign, unified, self-governing, and sustainable Philippine state,
serve a united Filipino people” (Suri, 2011). The model for fashioning the Philippines
into America’s likeness was based on the theory that a well-ordered and peaceful
democracy would result after the installation of a strong centralized government that
divided its power between political institutions to which the most dominant ethnic or
cultural group(s) would have access. President’s McKinley and then Roosevelt were
paternalistic and belittling in their assessment of Filipinos as “rudimentary” in their
ability to self-govern and also deprecating by choosing to cast Filipinos as “savage” and
their homeland a “howling wilderness” (Hoganson, 2001). In fact, Roosevelt was so
confounded by the wide array of ethnic and cultural diversity encountered by US troops
on the Philippine islands that he lamented that they [Filipinos] were a population of “half
caste and native Christian, war-like Moslems, and wild pagans” (Hanson, 2003). To be
sure, the people living on the Philippine islands were remarkably diverse. But in
choosing to disregard the vibrant array of Filipino diversity, in favor of a centralized
polity that promoted ethnic transcendence, the US military encountered fervent
opposition from guerilla forces and became embroiled in a fierce three year war that
resulted in at least 4,200 American deaths and more than a million Filipino casualties (Hanson, 2003).

More recently, the US took centripetalism and applied it to Iraq. By the end of 2006, Saddam Hussein was hanging in the gallows and his Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party had been all but bastardized, leaving the country in a state of political disarray and long-lasting bitter conflict. Heretofore, the second largest Iraqi ethnic group (the Kurds with around seventeen percent of the total country population) had been seeking independence from the dominant ethnic group, the Iraqi Arabs, which comprised more than seventy-five percent of the total population. Saddam’s well documented widespread violations of human rights against the Kurds lasted almost three decades and manifested itself in expulsions, forced ‘nationality correction,’ horrific torture, rape and chemical warfare attacks. Moreover, the two dominant Muslim groups, Sunni (Kurds are mostly Sunni) and Shi’a (made up of mostly Arabs,) though having a history of cooperation dating back to the 1920 rebellion against the British Mandate for Mesopotamia, saw an increase in inter-sectarian conflict in post-2003 Iraq. The American-led Coalition Provisional Authority decided that the best way to quell violence and close ethnic and sectarian divisions was to promote a unified Iraqi national identity by dividing political power amongst the Sunnis, Shi’a and Kurds while pushing for a strong centralized democratic republic. Under the direction of Paul Bremer, the Coalition Provisional Authority nominated Sunni Arab Adnan al-Pachachi as the first president to lead what was to be the Republic of Iraq. However, Jala Talabani, a Kurd, emerged from 2005 elections and inter-party negotiations, as the first Iraqi president of the new republic. Despite their efforts, 2006 and 2007 were to be the deadliest two years since the 2003 invasion of Iraq.
Some may argue that the United States is a shining example of centripetalism’s potential. But lest we forget that the American Civil War took four bloody years and cost more than 620,000 American lives—an unprecedented macabre of “[m]en thrown by the hundreds into burial trenches; soldiers stripped of every identifying object before being abandoned on the field; bloated corpses hurried into hastily dug graves; nameless victims of dysentery or typhoid interred beside military hospitals; men blown to pieces by artillery shells; bodies hidden by woods or ravines, left to the depredations of hogs or wolves or time”.¹ Not to mention the irreparable emotional damage that haunted the survived loved ones who struggled to “understand their sacrifice of kin and friends”.²

Interestingly enough, some argue that it was the Civil War which “generated a profound fear of sectionalism, which has arguably made US political scientists into unconscious heirs of Lincoln when asked to think about pluri-national federations” (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009).

Obviously, degeneration into civil war is not favored by US foreign policy experts, however; centralization, even in the absence of consent, is championed for its usefulness in Afghanistan even though the same approach yielded lackluster results in Iraq. As the first step in America’s democratization strategy in Afghanistan, Karzai (a Pashtun) was initially ‘selected’ to chair the interim Afghan administration in late 2001. Soon thereafter, he was then again ‘selected’ by the loya jerga as interim president, a position he officially procured after elections in 2004, amid widespread claims of

fraudulent voting, “particularly, ballot-box stuffing” and Karzai’s own backroom dealings with the other candidates (Gall, 2004).

Chapter Three

*So that you may make a garden & prairie from this desolate desert*

—Excerpt from, *Instead of Hate, May Love Rain Down*, written by Afghan poet, Alaha Ahrar, 2010

What type of state-building strategy is suited for a place boasting high ethnic diversity, four centuries of local policy management and a history peppered with near incessant intervention from foreign powers? At this point I want to stress that centripetalism is not always the worst method for state-building. It is however, not the appropriate methodology for Afghanistan. Furthermore, ethnofederalism is not always the go-to solution for state-building in all multiethnic and deeply divided places; however, it is, as I will argue, the most feasible state-building strategy for use in Afghanistan. Likewise, it is also important to consider the notions of power; especially *power division* versus *power sharing* and the implications of each when coupled with ethnofederalism.

To begin, ethnofederalism (also known as pluri-nationalism) is defined as a “federal political system in which component territorial governance units are invested with ethnic content” (Hale, 2008). More precisely, ethnofederalism grants all parties (regardless of size) significant political decision-making autonomy. Over the last two decades, state-building strategies that combine ethnofederalism with power sharing and *consociationalism* at the center have bred widespread dissent amongst scholars and
statesmen. Some scholars would suggest that the best models should favor ethnic dominance over ethnic autonomy, power division over power sharing, or partition in cases of irresolvable conflict. Moreover, Deiwiks (2009) argues that “ethnofederal states [run the risk] for secession [because] ethnic groups have their own latent state, which arguably gives them reason and opportunity to eventually fight for secession”. The arguments against ethnofederalism from Deiwiks and others could be a case of the old post-Civil War fear of sectionalism. Moreover, the critics of ethnofederalism might be entrenched in their views when they look at the failures of ethnofederation-like states in Africa (see Kenya and Uganda), Asia (see Pakistan and the secession of Bangladesh) and Europe (see Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, to name but two). On the surface, these examples do not showcase an exemplary track record for ethnofederalism. However, by comparison, American centripetalism boasts a similar success rate (see the arguments above). So the question then arises about the usefulness of ethnofederalism.

McGarry and O'Leary (2009) contend that regional autonomy combined with “ethnic inclusion [in government power sharing] at the center” is the best way to ensure that each party is afforded an equal amount of political decision-making power while maintaining their own territorial autonomy. Furthermore, I argue that the applicability of ethnofederalism with consociationalism must be contextual on a case-by-case basis and is furthermore, particularly useful in cases where aggressive forms of centripetalism have failed. Ethnofederalism is nearly the antithesis of centripetalism; however, there are a variety of amalgamations in between. At this point, a brief explanation of these intermediate stages is in order so that we can understand why ethnofederalism is the best solution for Afghanistan.
Figure 2 illustrates how power sharing and various steps of decentralization impact the autonomy of people in multiethnic/multicultural places. The smallest circle (centripetalism) which I described earlier, endorses ethnic and cultural assimilation as a way to promote homogeneous, centralized and unilateral political decision making. As we move outward from the center, the concentric circles become larger because each stage allows a larger degree of multiethnic/multicultural inclusion and more evenly distributes power sharing respectively. As we move further outward from centripetalism, parties need compromise their multiethnic/multicultural diversity less (regardless of the size of their party) as a prerequisite for inclusion in the political decision-making and are increasingly afforded a more equal ‘share’ of the decision-making power. At the periphery (territorial pluralism), communities are neither required to relinquish their territorial autonomy nor their multiethnic/multicultural diversity. Furthermore, power sharing is equally distributed regardless of party size, promoting a high degree of multilateral political decision making.
The results of comprehensive centralization (including the management of natural resources and the environment) raises challenging questions for scholars and statesmen alike—especially when considering deeply divided multiethnic places. Research suggests that people who have historically enjoyed decentralized, community-based political decision-making are more likely to resist intrusion in the form of capitalist expansion and the structural adjustment it requires, especially in cases where conflict has previously occurred (see Cedarman et al., 2013). Research suggests that Afghans are not the only people in environmental history to resist the commoditization of their natural resources. Nor are they the lone case study of dissent against centripetalism in international political history. A brief look into the not-so-distant past at other places around the globe yields rather poignant comparative case studies of how “neoliberal economic [and political] restructuring reach[ed] into the very heart of communities, [and] enrich[ed] the few while impoverish[ed] the many” (Collier, 2005).

Few scholars or policy analysts have not heard of the Zapatista rebellion in the Chiapas (1994-present). “The Zapatista rebellion inspired enormous sympathy from people throughout the world who read about the uprising in the newspapers or watched reports about it on television” (Collier, 2005). In January, 1994, the day NAFTA took effect, Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), embarked on a nearly two decade-long revolution against the maltreatment of the people in Chiapas and government-mandated land reform in the region (led largely by the Mexican government’s desire for the ‘modernization’ that could be achieved through oil development). “Chiapas was the Mexican state that had the highest indices of poverty and the fewest social services” (Collier, 2005). Much like Afghanistan, Chiapas is
considered ethnically and culturally diverse; Chiapas being principally populated by many Mayan Indian tribes such as the Tsotzil, Tzeltal and the Tojobal (Vargas, 1994). Predominantly agrarian, “some peasants in Chiapas [were] able to weather the changes wrought by Mexico’s economic restructuring by diversifying their farming activities, becoming produce and flower merchants, or starting up transport businesses. But many [could] not” (Collier, 2005). On behalf of the people in Chiapas, the EZLN advocated a ‘bottom-up’ approach to politics (as opposed to ‘top-down’) and resisted economic globalization and the impacts it had on local autonomy. The initial rebellion constituted “Mexico’s most serious armed insurgency movement” since the early 1970s (Vargas, 1994). Much like the people of Chiapas, many Afghan tribal communities are currently resisting economic intervention from western capitalists and the structural adjustment schemes needed for its entrenchment. Within the context of this study, there are two profound similarities and one major difference between the people of Chiapas and the Afghan tribal communities. First, prior to outside intervention, both the people of Chiapas and Afghans enjoyed relative decision-making autonomy. Second, both the Chiapas state and Afghanistan as a whole are remarkable case studies in ethnic and cultural diversity. But perhaps most compelling when compared to the people of Chiapas, tribal Afghans have the extraordinary ability to wage war on their own behalf and the profound perseverance to endure the hardships as a result—a fact which has plagued the US forces and their coalition friends over the last thirteen years.

I have argued that ethnofederalism is contextually a good fit for Afghanistan. Likewise, decision-making power in politics is an exemplary lens through which to analyze the usefulness of state-building strategies (particularly ethnofederalism) in deeply
divided multiethnic places. Similarly to ethnofederalism, consociationalism, as one form of power sharing, has drawn considerable criticisms from prominent scholars (see the arguments of Donald Horowitz and Paul Brass). While “the biggest stick with which consociationalists are beaten is the suggestion that they are not democratic […] such critics reason [that consociation] reinforces the presumed sources of conflict” (O’Leary, 2005). In contrast however, advocates of consociationalism argue that “certain collective identities, especially those based upon nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion, are generally fairly durable once formed” and that such durable identities “—can be, and often are, mobilized in a politics of antagonism, perhaps especially during the democratization of political systems” (O’Leary, 2005). Simply put, blood is thicker than water. Consociationalism then, as a viable form of power sharing in multiethnic places (like Afghanistan), can “provid[e] autonomy for communities and facili[tate] sensible intercommunity cooperation” (O’Leary, 2005). There are generally five practices involved with consociation-type power sharing:

1. **Granting territorial autonomy and creating confederal arrangements**
2. **Creating a polycommunal, or ethnic, federation**
3. **Adopting group proportional representation in administrative appointments, including consensus decision rules in the executive.**
4. **Adopting a highly proportional electoral system in a parliamentary framework.**
5. **Acknowledging group rights or corporate (nonterritorial) federalism** (Sisk, 1996).
Afghan tribal communities have placed their confidence in the tribal council—which have existed for centuries and draw much of their influence from ancient tradition and/or the tenants of Islam—and exhibit a great deal of conflict-resolving power and trustworthiness among the people. Albeit informal in structure and procedure when compared to American political institutions, most of the autonomously functioning tribal councils (and in some cases one or two village elders) scattered throughout the country have been quietly adjudicating legal issues amongst its people for millennia. Frequent disruption of the central government over the last century (and more recently leading up to and including the US invasion) has further crystallized the tribal councils, elevating them to one of the most trusted and powerful components of Afghan customary law and politics. The foundation for an ethnofederalist-type structure (the tribal council) is already firmly entrenched in Afghanistan and has been so for many centuries.

Moreover, when considering power sharing solutions like consociationalism, it is equally important to note that “theorists contrast power to and the power over”; where “power to is ability and power over is domination (O’Leary, 2012, emphasis added). Similarly, power over arrangements almost always lead to a “power monopoly” by the person, party or group wielding it (O’Leary, 2012). Power monopolies are commonly exhibited in monarchies (this type of government existed in Afghanistan from 1709-1973 and included a variety of dynasties). Power monopolies, or power over arrangements, imply that there will be a winner and a loser, though there is no perceivable way to allocate the equitable distribution of the losses while the winnings are solely enjoyed by the ruling person, class or party. In stark contrast, power to relationships imply that the involved parties share the power with all other parties and have the authority to either
advocate for their party or defend rights. “Power sharing practices […] often evolve in
direct response to a history of violent conflict” (Sisk, 1996). However, scholars suggest
that the precise implementation of power sharing must be both timely and inclusionary.
As Sisk suggested, “determining when [to implement] a power sharing solution is at best
a difficult judgment call requiring intimate knowledge of the situation, especially of the
true disposition of the parties and their willingness to live together with a common or
shared political framework”.

There is one caveat to this entire framework. Most studies on the use of
ethnofederalism and power sharing solutions like consociationalism have been focused
on places deeply divided by internal ethnic conflict (see Nigeria, Ethiopia,
Yugoslavia/Kosovo, Bosnia or Iraq for similar arguments), while historically speaking,
most Afghan tribal communities have lived in relative peace with one another (again, the
reign of the Taliban in the 1990s notwithstanding). However, current literature suggests
that territorial autonomy-granting solutions (like ethnofederalism) with full inclusion of
power sharing at the center (i.e., consociationalism) may be a viable solution in highly
divided ethnically diverse places both with and without a history of conflict (Cedarman et
al., 2013).
Chapter Four

*Still waters run deep*

Water is a common-use resource and therefore, traditional management models used by developed nations regularly focus on centralized, county and state public works authorities for equitable distribution and objective oversight. Despite the prevalence of this dominant model in the US, conflict abounds over water management. Even in the absence of violent conflict, water management has sparked vivid controversy throughout US environmental history, most notably with the Colorado River and the Catskill Mountains.\(^6\) In the absence of or in defiance to a centralized water management model, conflict can arise.

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\(^6\) See Soll (2013) *Empire of water*, for a complete history of the problems that arose out of the water management proposal in the Catskill Mountains for the purposes of supplying New York City.
institution, Afghan community-based freshwater management ‘institutions’ have been used with remarkable effectiveness and can be traced back 4,500 years to an “ancient settlement near Kandahar” (Qureshi, 2002). The staying-power of these highly decentralized practices is especially confounding for US policymakers because despite enduring nearly three decades of unrelenting violent conflict—the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89), the Afghan Civil War (1992-01), and the current US-led conflict (2001-present)—community-based social water management practices have remained relatively unhampered (for a similar argument see Lee, 2006). “Their prevalence largely result[ed] from widespread availability of both water resources from rivers and streams as well as adjacent land suitable for development, usually along river terraces and alluvial plains” (Rout, 2008). While certainly it can be argued that the advent of the massive drought (1998-2004) indeed required some alterations in the community water management approach, domestic agricultural production (including opium, which is generally considered a water-hungry plant) only moderately declined during those water-starved years. Moreover, the success of local freshwater management practices are particularly astonishing because current research shows that Afghans generally access only the most shallow surface water despite boasting massive groundwater reserves at an estimated twenty billion cubic meters (BCM) (Qureshi, 2002).

Afghans are predominantly agrarian while some substitute their farming with animal husbandry. Despite the lack of usable farm land however—less than 13% country-wide—more than eighty percent of Afghans rely on agriculture as their primary source of income. Moreover, eighty percent of the Afghan population lives in the rural areas far removed from cities like Kabul or Kandahar. Topography informs land use and
land use directly impacts lifestyle. As such, the people living in these agricultural regions are generally sedentary, making a living off of the land. They have stationary homes built with earthen materials and survive through the harsh winter months on the fruits of their growing season labors.

Though the opium poppy constitutes the largest cash crop in Afghanistan, the variety of other tree and plant species found throughout is remarkably broad. This extensive plant variety can be attributed to the diversity of a landscape dominated by marginal desert zones, steppe, and rugged mountains. As with any tree or plant species, topography and climactic conditions determine where they will grow and thrive. In particular, the irrigated valleys nestled below the Hindu Kush contain remarkably fertile soil that is extraordinarily well-suited for raising agricultural crops and fruit trees, as well as for an extensive assortment of wild flowering and berry-producing bushes. The lower valleys are also well-suited for grapes while the Afghan melon, renowned for its sweet flavor, thrives at higher elevations. Additionally, vast orchards of apple, apricot, pear, peach, plum, cherry, fig, and pomegranate trees, to name a few, spread across the lowlands while almond, walnut, and pistachio trees—considered more hardy and capable of thriving with less water—can be found growing in the foothills and rocky escarpments at higher elevations. These orchards and vineyards often have complex and multi-layered ownership distributed amongst the male members of a family or even across multiple families.

Usufruct ownership, like that of the orchards, is a fundamental tenant of Afghan tribal relations and draws its value from the people-to-people relationships it creates among neighboring communities. “Land rights [and the rights to water resources it
contains] are governed by more than one legal regime, including customary law, civil law, Islamic law and state law. While important differences exist, there is also an unusual degree of commonality among these in their treatment of land rights” (Alden Wiley, 2003). Common property such as grazing pastures, forests or water resources are generally protected under rawaj, or Afghan customary tribal legal institutions like Pashtunwali. Access and use can be protected under both Qabala-i-urfi (tribal customary title deed) and/or Qabala-i-sharayee (official title deed drawn up by local leaders) that are generally designed to identify and protect the land and the water resources on it for use by those tribal communities living there. Both forms of ‘title’ can include either customary and/or civil law inspired language, Islamic-influenced language or any number of amalgams of both. What has resulted over the last four thousand-plus years is a highly complex system of tenure rights that draws upon many local, religious and familial influences embodying any variety or combination of customary, civil, and/or Islamic legal principles. The underlining principle behind these types of bottom-up, locally-based arrangements—which are at their most fundamental premises, attempts to avoid a tragedy-of-the-commons—is to ensure that the bargaining power for land tenure is situated firmly in the hands of those communities who are directly impacted by its use. Certainly this sort of tenure system is not without its conflict but “it promotes efforts that can be sustained at the periphery in the hands of ordinary Afghans, operating within local and community-level contexts” (Alden Wiley, 2003). This is fundamentally different from capitalism which replaces relationships between people with market value-based transactions.
Afghanistan’s thirty-four provinces share three major river basins (see Figure 4): the Sistan River Basin with the Helmand River (the longest river in Afghanistan, stretching more than seven-hundred miles) flows towards neighboring Iran in the west; the Indus River Basin containing the Kabul River (which boasts twenty-four BCM, the highest annual flow in Afghanistan) flows eastward into Pakistan; and the Amu Darya River Basin in the northeast with its two major rivers, the Wakhan and Pamir, supply water for more than sixty percent of irrigation country-wide before crossing into neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Rout, 2008). The perennial snowpack from the Hindu Kush melts and flows from the peaks and down into the surrounding valleys and plains below. More than eighty percent of the water used for agriculture, country-wide, traces its origins to the Hindu Kush. The flow also powers the hydroelectric dams on the Kabul river—built by Germany in the 1950s—that generates electricity for more than two-thirds of the country. The Hindu Kush remain completely snow-covered for more than half the year and navigating the overland passes; numbering scarcely more than a dozen, constitutes an extremely arduous undertaking during the winter months.

“There have been a number of large-scale state-sponsored internationally funded irrigation schemes in Afghanistan since the 1940s which have had mixed success: the Helmand Valley Authority (1952-1965); and the Nangarhar and Baghlan irrigation schemes, in the 1960s and more recently in 2008” (to name three) (Lee, 2006). Among these early structural adjustment program initiatives, the US Geological Survey (USGS) conducted a lengthy survey in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province between 1952 and 1969 and concluded that the ‘best’ way to manage the countries freshwater resources was through a comprehensive centralization of all Afghan water management procedures.
The USGS report also suggested that a “competent organization [must be developed] for the collection and analysis of such hydrological data […] for planning drainage, hydro-power development, flood control measures, and further irrigation development” (Westfall, 1969). Furthermore, the USGS reports overarching objective was to advise the Afghan “Ministry of Agriculture (MAI), on procedures and practices in surface-water investigations that [would] permit the most rational use of the water resources of the country” (Westfall, 1969).

Figure 4: Three major Afghan river basins (boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative)

“By the late 1970s, five large-scale modern irrigation systems had been built and were in operation. Land tenure was different from traditional systems [and] parts of the schemes were operated under private land ownership agreements, while others were
operated as State farms ‘owned’ by the government. The Government heavily subsidized these schemes and farmers were given very limited choice of crop selection or farming practice” (Qureshi, 2002). These government-run centralized structural adjustment schemes were embraced poorly by most traditional Afghan farmers and produced meager results until they mostly dissolved after the Soviet invasion in 1979. It has since been estimated that up to fifty percent of the permanent state-funded water delivery infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed while its feeble remains struggle to feed a paltry twelve percent of those living in rural areas (Qureshi, 2002). The ‘father-knows-best’ mindset for Afghan water management that the USGS inaugurated in mid-century has continued up through today though a “comprehensive and detailed data base of all these projects and programs, how much has been spent, and what has be sustainably achieved, unfortunately does not exist” (Qureshi, 2002) (see Table 2 for a sample of recent, large-scale internationally funded schemes in Afghanistan and Table 3 for examples of successful local water management practices from around the world).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Budget (US$)</th>
<th>Basin</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Irrigation and Rehabilitation Program</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
<td>40 million</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Infrastructure Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Project</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
<td>15 million</td>
<td>Amu Darya</td>
<td>Physically completed, not yet closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Basins Project</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
<td>90 million</td>
<td>Sistan</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunduz River Basin Program</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>15 million</td>
<td>Amu Darya</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In spite of war and widespread destruction of state-funded water delivery infrastructure, local freshwater management institutions have effectively managed to persevere relatively unencumbered for at least four centuries. While it is particularly important to remember that each community-based freshwater management practice varies considerably in physical form, the governing body and purpose remains remarkably consistent across cultural and linguistic groups regardless of the community’s proximity to the freshwater source or the architecture of the water distribution infrastructure. Moreover, the governing body has remained relatively unchanged for millennia. “Water management in communities, is [generally] organized between contiguous clusters of villages that are from the same clan group” (Lee, 2006). The chief executives of these local freshwater management institutions are the Mirabs (water masters). Mirabs “share a number of common tasks:

- To ensure and police the equitable distribution of legal entitlements of in-canal and on-farm water.

**Table 2: Sample of recent large-scale internationally-funded water projects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community-Based Initiative</th>
<th>Internationally Funded</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israeli / Palestinian Joint Water Sharing Management in the West Bank / Gaza Strip</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>~5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘aquias’ in New Mexico, USA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>400+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-Based Governance of Freshwater Resources in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Varies by country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘huay y costumbres’ (customary uses) in Andes Mountains, Bolivia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community water sharing in lowland area (mesa central), Guanajuato, Mexico</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>500+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinhalese farmers sharing water with downstream Tamil farmers, Gal Oya, Sri Lanka</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>30+ years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Sample of small-scale community-based water initiatives**

In spite of war and widespread destruction of state-funded water delivery infrastructure, local freshwater management institutions have effectively managed to persevere relatively unencumbered for at least four centuries. While it is particularly important to remember that each community-based freshwater management practice varies considerably in physical form, the governing body and purpose remains remarkably consistent across cultural and linguistic groups regardless of the community’s proximity to the freshwater source or the architecture of the water distribution infrastructure. Moreover, the governing body has remained relatively unchanged for millennia. “Water management in communities, is [generally] organized between contiguous clusters of villages that are from the same clan group” (Lee, 2006). The chief executives of these local freshwater management institutions are the Mirabs (water masters). Mirabs “share a number of common tasks:

- To ensure and police the equitable distribution of legal entitlements of in-canal and on-farm water.
• To supervise and maintain flow in the primary intake as well as in-canal and on-farm structures.

• To mobilize resources for and supervise cleaning and repair of canal beds and banks.

• To reconcile disputes between canal irrigators over water sharing issues.

• To act as mediators between adjacent up and downstream communities who share the same water source (usually a river or spring) over water sharing issues.

• To represent irrigators to district and provincial government” (Lee, 2006).

Mirabs, who are normally elders among their tribe, are chosen by the tribal community to adjudicate water related issues and equitable distribution within the community as well as with other neighboring communities that share the same freshwater resources—both up and downstream. “The selections [of Mirabs] are mostly conducted with two or three candidates, proposed by elders of different villages, located within a community” (Abdullaev and Shah, 2011). As with any election and particularly because water is a politically charged topic in the semi-arid country, the competition for Mirab can incite conflict and dissent among community members. The Mirab is therefore accountable to the elders and like any elected official (even an informal or ad hoc one such as the Mirab) the elders can motion to remove him from his duties if they determine he is not ruling in accordance with the best interests of the community. Recent studies have shown that some Mirabs have accepted “bribes to deliver additional water to landowners”, however, “community pressure or personal financial distress [may have] motivated these corrupt acts” (Dyke, 2008). Furthermore, some studies have shown that in a few cases, those
Mirabs representing communities closer to water sources tend to have larger bargaining power than those representing communities situated further away. Certainly this type of pork barrel politics is not confined to Afghan polity.

As the snow pack melts and the water begins to flow (usually in February or March each year), hundreds of members from each village meet—under the supervision of the Mirabs—to determine the plans and build the irrigation infrastructure along the rivers. Though relatively simple in its materials (wood, mud and sand), the irrigation infrastructure is a marvel of environmental sustainability. Rather than redirect the natural flow of the river, like modern dams or canals, Afghan irrigation canals do not generally alter the natural course of the river or stream. For more than 4,500 years, Afghans have relied on an ancient system of hand dug, horizontal tunnels known as *karez*, for delivering important sources of water. “After digging down into the alluvial fans at the base of the mountains, the Afghans then [dig] out the horizontal tunnels that carry [water] gently downslope from the alluvial fans to basins hundreds to thousands of meters away, where the water emerges laterally outward. Length and depth of the tunnels depend upon the amount of seasonal rainfall, with wetter areas generally having shorter, shallower ‘mother wells’” (Williams, 2009).

In addition to surface water, most community-based freshwater management institutions are commonly made up of *Qanats*, or traditional “underground systems, which tap groundwater by gravity from the aquifer[s],” *arhads* (shallow wells), *sarbands*, (surface water irrigation canals “traditionally constructed with logs, gravel and sandbags”) or any combination of these or other traditional water transport systems.
(Qureshi, 2002, Rout, 2008). Many retrieve ground water from the arhads with the help of a sakia or Persian wheel (which is normally powered by donkeys, oxen etc.).

![Figure 5: Oxen-powered sakia (Persian wheel). Photo used with permission and courtesy of Muhammad Qureshi](image)

Chapter Five

*This is democracy by the whip and the fear of chains with a whirlwind at its core*

—Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (2012)

Written from his cell in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; during his four year incarceration following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001

What happens when someone tries to install a centralized regime in a place like Afghanistan? What is the likelihood that a structural adjustment program will work in Afghanistan? The answer is clear. Aside from the obvious resistance exhibited by Afghans to both past and current programs, a study conducted by Dollar and Svensson
(2000) suggested that the US could have predicted the outcome long before embarking on the thirteen-year state-building catastrophe. According to the study (which corroborates similar previous analyses (see Rodrik, 1996; Tommasi and Velasco, 1995), a “small number of political economy variables can predict the outcome of a [structural] adjustment loan successfully seventy-five percent of the time” (emphasis added). The study indicates that one of the most significant variables to impact structural adjustment program outcome is the degree to which the population is “highly ethnically fragmented” (or ethnic fractionalization). Structural adjustment programs are less likely to succeed in places exhibiting high ethnic diversity than in places with a relatively ethnically homogeneous population. Furthermore, there is a stark contrast between the tenants and purposes of Afghan rawaj and the fundamental principles of western capitalism and the structural adjustment required for its entrenchment. It should come as no surprise that eliminating local solutions, like usufruct rights or the community-based water management practices previously discussed, in favor of centralized control, can cause dissent and even conflict.

Afghans are certainly not the only people on the globe that rely on community-based water management practices (see Table 3). Similarly, they are not the only ones to have aggressively resisted state or international structural adjustment programs to that end. In fact, a remarkably similar circumstance—right on American soil—can be found in the not-too-distant past. The manner by which the US sought to resolve this issue and the resultant policy can serve as a remarkable model for constructing a similar arrangement in Afghanistan.
For the last four-hundred years, the *acequias* in New Mexico have enjoyed a similar arrangement and have just as fervently opposed outside intervention into their customary local water management practices. Derived from the Arabic term *assaquiya; acequias* is Spanish for ‘irrigation canal’ and also refers to the “association of members organized around them” (Crawford, 2006). “The [native peoples] of the Southwest have carried on agricultural operations with the aid of irrigation for centuries [and] and their irrigation systems were built and managed as community affairs” (Hutchins, 1928).

Historically speaking, access to and utilization of these community-based water management systems were free to all local inhabitants while ‘legislation’ and oversight was maintained by local officials. Moreover, infrastructure maintenance was conducted by the community. “Many acequias had been built in the territory acquired by [the US] from Mexico [and the US federal government initially ruled that the] laws theretofore in force concerning water courses should continue in force, except that regulation of these matters should be transferred from the village ayuntamientos to the alcaldes and prefects of the several counties” (Hutchins, 1928). Soon thereafter, the US government codified a series of laws in the 1850s, 1880s and 1890s that were intended to forego community oversight in favor of regulation by county courts and state legislative commissioners. These laws also included legal provisions for “regulat[ing] the amount of labor to be performed by landowners” and for withholding use of the acequias to “delinquent landowners” (Hutchins, 1928). “Yet, in the enactment and judicial construction of the truly modern irrigation laws of New Mexico the time-honored practices and customs of community acequias [were] jealously safeguarded” and many communities successfully lobbied for amendments to these laws that would allow them to continue their traditional
water management practices unencumbered and revert to local community management as it had been for the last four-hundred years (Hutchins, 1928).

**Conclusion**

*Blood is thicker than water*

Over the last thirteen years, answering the question of how to unite the people of Afghanistan under a single political institution has left academics, political analysts and presidents scratching their heads. Meanwhile, Afghan civilians from all tribal, ethnic and linguistic groups are rightfully disillusioned and cynical about the gains their western *guests* keep promising. The ever-elusive ‘peaceful democracy’ in Afghanistan is rather more a question of incompatibility with the long trusted US democratization model—a model that has been employed with oft lauded but altogether uninspiring results in a host of countries over the last 100 years. While there is often disconnect between theory and practice in state-building, the leave-your-baggage-at-the-door state-building model preferred by western scholars and statesmen—devised as a means to transcend culture and ethnicity—is particularly well suited for creating political monopolies, intensifying divisions and increasing inter-sectarian conflict.

Current research from McGarry and O’Leary and Cedarman et al. suggests that ethnofederalism with consociational power sharing is a viable alternative to the popular theory of centripetalism and assimilation when considering state-building in places with high ethnic and cultural diversity. Similarly, research from Dollar and Svensson corroborates theories that suggest structural adjustment programs designed to pool power and control over natural resources are more likely to fail in places with a high degree of
ethnic and cultural diversity. The US state-building model which predominantly features the latter has yielded lackluster results in a host of countries including Iraq and Afghanistan. Afghan tribal communities have vehemently resisted foreign forces bent on assimilation for as far back as written history stretches and there is no reason to assume they will change their minds—especially considering the current quagmire prevailing there today. Afghans have been historically autonomy-seeking and have found ingenious and environmentally sustainable ways to manage freshwater resources while simultaneously fostering inter-community relations. Through a system of interconnected personal relations, Afghans have maintained strong ethnic and cultural ties to their ancestors despite incessant war and continued assimilation efforts by western powers. The community-based water management practices and the Mirabs who oversee them are remarkable examples of local governance and community centered politics at its best. They can also serve as the foundation for an enthnofederlist polity.
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Figure 1:
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Figure 2:
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Figure 3:
Photo used with permission and courtesy of USAID photographer, Ben Barber, 2005. [http://benjaminbarber.net/](http://benjaminbarber.net/)

Figure 4:

Table 2:


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Table 3:


Figure 5:
*Photo used with permission and courtesy of Muhammad Quresh.*
[https://plus.google.com/102371828391843415289/posts]
CV

I am a graduate of Lehigh University’s MA in Environmental Policy Design. I am currently pursuing the PhD in Lehigh University’s history department. At the master’s level, I have conducted research on US energy policy in the Middle East, Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and humanitarian intervention and the laws of armed conflict in Kurdistan. My academic interests also include the historical development and attributes of documentary film-making for communicating research-based knowledge. I spent the better half of a decade in the US military where I was deployed to multiple Middle Eastern and greater Middle Eastern countries. As such, I have predominantly focused my academic study on comparative and diachronic analyses of US/Middle Eastern politics, US democratization strategies abroad and environmental destruction as a result of war. My ongoing research theorizes and evaluates the role of orientalism in US military culture. I also have a personal affinity for comparative studies in unconventional and irregular warfare strategies and tactics used by the US military since the WWII.