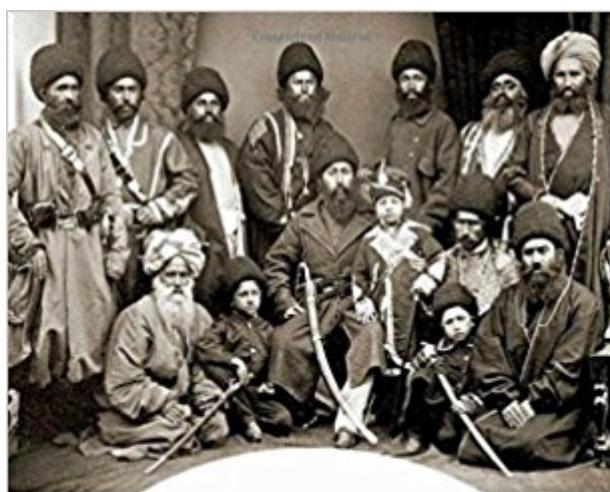


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The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key To The Future Of Pakistan And Afghanistan



THE PASHTUN QUESTION

*The Unresolved Key to the Future
of Pakistan and Afghanistan*

ABUBAKAR SIDDIQUE

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Synopsis

Most contemporary journalistic and scholarly accounts of the instability gripping Afghanistan and Pakistan have argued that violent Islamic extremism, including support for the Taliban and related groups, is either rooted in Pashtun history and culture, or finds willing hosts among their communities on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Abubakar Siddique sets out to demonstrate that the failure, or even unwillingness, of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to absorb the Pashtuns into their state structures and to incorporate them into the economic and political fabric is central to these dynamics, and a critical failure of nation- and state-building in both states. In his book he argues that religious extremism is the product of these critical failures and that responsibility for the situation lies to some degree with the elites of both countries. Partly an eye-witness account and partly meticulously researched scholarship, *The Pashtun Question* describes a people whose destiny will shape the future of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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"After years of dedicated scholarship and often-risky field research, Abubakar Siddique makes an articulate and timely plea on behalf of the long-misunderstood Pashtun people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, while offering a timely road map to peace. I have no doubt that *The Pashtun Question* will become an indispensable guide for those seeking solutions to the bitterly- intertwined conflicts of the region. A must-read." -- Jon Lee Anderson, staff writer for the *New Yorker*, author of *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* "Nobody knows the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan the way that Abubakar Siddique knows his own people. He combines his insider knowledge with decades of

on-the-ground reporting and academic training. This book is the best available survey and analysis of the inter-relations of the wars on both side of the Afghan-Pakistan border." -- Barnett Rubin, professor at New York University and author of *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* "What makes this book different from all the others written on the troubled frontier regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan is that Abubakar Siddique is himself a tribesman from the region, has studied his people closely and offers us insights which are simply not available anywhere else. We are in the hands of a master of knowledge of his region and the wars that have taken such a terrible toll over the past decade. Siddique writes lucidly, provocatively and with enormous knowledge and insight. We know we are in the hands of a master social scientist and story teller from the first pages of this enlightened book." -- Ahmed Rashid, journalist and author of *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan* "This is the book to read for a comprehensive and definitive understanding of the Pashtuns of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and insight into the roots of Islamic militancy in their borderlands. Siddique's scholarly yet highly readable study offers a much welcomed, often first-hand account of contemporary Pashtuns' troubled history and society, driving ideologies, and radical progeny-the Taliban." --Marvin Weinbaum -- Middle East Institute "This is a study of the cultural values and current political affairs of the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line. Siddique, a native of Waziristan, offers a fascinating description not only of his own kinsmen, but of all Pashtuns whom he has visited in various times in their lands. He has interviewed key Pashtun figures with the result that the work is rich in valuable information and insights that can not be found elsewhere. All this makes it an outstanding work of its kind. The book's appearance at a time when the Pashtun heartland is the focus of special attention will be of great value for all, especially for those who have to deal with this fascinating and still largely misunderstood part of the world." -- Mohammad Hassan Kakar , former professor of history at Kabul University and author of *Afghanistan: A Political and Diplomatic History* "A well-researched and racy account of the Afghanistan jigsaw. ... There is a difference between others' books and *The Pashtun Question*. As a tribesman from the region Siddique gives an insiders perspective. Siddique skilfully breaks down the complexities of the region, taking the reader through the history of a resilient people." -- Avalok Langer, *Tehelka*"...well written and comprehensive..." -- Foreign Policy "The Pashtun Question is probably the most important work on the Pashtuns since Sir Olaf Caroe's classic 1958 field study on the subject, *The Pathans*.' -- Brian Glyn Williams, Terrorism Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation "The Pashtun Question is a must read for those engaged in or interested in South Asia. More significantly, the Pashtuns, and more broadly, Pakistanis and Afghans, should read this book to stimulate a debate about their future." --

Eurasianet.org "The Pashtun Question informs readers of the complex political landscape of the Pashtun regions and explores the various hues of political players in an objective and insightful manner. ... Siddique provides an insider's perspective to a body of literature otherwise dominated by a handful of British colonial accounts." -- Business Standard "The Pashtun Question offers a comprehensive report of Pashtun history and present-day politics. Siddique's storytelling skills as a journalist save the book from sinking under its evident scholarship, and by writing of his own people, he offers a genuine understanding that far too many commentators miss because they only focus on whatever political crisis brought them there." -- Gulf News "The Pashtun Question informs readers of the complex political landscape of the Pashtun regions and explores the various hues of political players in an objective and insightful manner. ... Siddique provides an insider's perspective to a body of literature otherwise dominated by a handful of British colonial accounts." -- Business Standard "The Pashtun Question offers a comprehensive report of Pashtun history and present-day politics. Siddique's storytelling skills as a journalist save the book from sinking under its evident scholarship, and by writing of his own people, he offers a genuine understanding that far too many commentators miss because they only focus on whatever political crisis brought them there." -- Gulf News "The Pashtun Question looks carefully at the problem of growing extremism in Pakistan's tribal region. By delving into the history and culture of the Pakhtuns on both sides of the Durand Line, Siddique explores reasons that compelled a peaceful tribal people, who had lived in relative isolation until five or six decades ago, to turn their borderlands into an incubator of extremism ... Siddique's work adds value because of his first-hand knowledge and well thought out analysis." -- Dawn "Abubakar not only asks the Pashtun question, he also answers it, not only for the Pashtuns but also for Kabul and Islamabad." -- peacefare.net "Westerners misunderstand Pashtun society in part because they are often fixated on romantic ideas about Pashtunwali ... the tribal code that is said to prize honour, revenge and hospitality above all other virtues. Understandably irritated that British imperialists and today's foreign correspondents have reduced his culture to an Orientalist fantasy, Siddique points out that, far from relishing the chance to murder one another, most Pashtuns, just like everyone else, would be very happy to live in peace." -- London Review of Books

Abubakar Siddique is a journalist with Radio Free Europe in Prague, specialising in coverage of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has spent the past fifteen years researching and writing about security, political, humanitarian and cultural issues in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Pashtun heartland where he was born. In addition to his reporting, Siddique has spoken at Western thinktanks and has contributed articles, chapters and research papers to a range of publications.

The Pashtuns are a tribal group that live on both sides of the Durand Line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although Pakistan recognizes the line as the border, the government of Afghanistan has never done so. Siddique's work has several goals: (1) To describe the Pashtun people with sensitivity that only a native Pashtun can manage. (2) To rehabilitate the Pashtuns since they have a reputation as a violent, warlike people. (3) To recount the missteps made by the United States and the government of Afghanistan in dealing with the Pashtuns. (4) To make the case that job creation, infrastructure improvement, and better schools should be pursued amongst the Pashtuns if we want to see peace come to this region.

Goal #1: To describe the Pashtun people with sensitivity that only a native Pashtun can manage. As to this goal, I'd give Siddique a C- or a D. The author presents his work as an anthropological study, proceeding geographically, area by area (where the Pashtun tribe lives). He describes the form of Sunni Islam that is followed in each area, who are the important clan leaders, what is the government structure like, what is the infrastructure like, etc., but, honestly, after a few paragraphs, you're lost. It's impossible to keep it all straight and to see the relationships and alliances as they were made and broken and then made with someone else and then broken and made again and then betrayed. In the early 1980s, Margaret Clarkson found herself trying to follow the crisis in Lebanon. She wrote a column in *Newsweek*, with this as its main point: Last week, the crisis in Lebanon became impossible to follow. Hezbollah was doing this, and Hamas was doing that, and the Druze (who follow leader A) were opposing X and Y, while the Druze (who follow leader B) were supporting X, though they couldn't care less about Y, and the Christians in Beirut were trying to destroy A and part of B, but not all of B, because someone from A killed A. Trying to follow Siddique's book made me feel like Clarkson must have felt. You can't see the forest for the trees.

Goal #2: To rehabilitate the Pashtuns since they have a reputation as a violent, warlike people. As to this goal, I'd give Siddique a C. He acknowledges that the Pashtuns recent history would make the assertion that they are a violent, warlike people to be a reasonable assumption. Yet he maintains that it is not their fault. They are the victims of outside agitators like the Soviet Union that tried to take over the country in the 80s, or the mujahedeen (often Arabs from outside the country) who fought the Soviets with American aid, or the Afghani communists or the Taliban or the American-led coalition that scattered the Taliban and put another regime in its place. I might be willing to grant this point to Siddique except for my reading of earlier Afghani history. I first encountered the Pashtun (=Pathan) tribe a number of years ago, when I read a short book by Jock

Purves, entitled, *The Unlisted Legion: part of its witness in the Karakoram and the Khyber*. In an anecdotal style it recounts his adventures working as a missionary from 1926-30 in Pathan country and in Kashmir. This area was not well known in the west, such that the Royal Scottish Geographical Society made Purves a Fellow of the Society in recognition of his travels in this rugged area. In the book, the author recounts how the Pathans (=Pashtuns) were different from the other people groups he encountered. “One of my difficulties was that I had been used to kindly Baltis, cheerful Ladakhis, and peaceful Kashmiris. Now, to be with men [Pathans] who could be fair to my face but whose hands were stained with blood, tested my friendship with them. I could not get used to arriving at a home and being ordered away from it because someone had just been shot, or to seeing weaker individuals badly treated by the stronger.” (p.125). This is but one of many stories of this nature. Another book I read more recently was Charles Miller, *Khyber: British India*’s North West Frontier. This history recounted a number of episodes in British India’s encounters with the peoples across the Durand line (mainly the Pathans). Miller makes his case that this tribe deserves its war-like reputation. So yes, their recent history has been difficult, but they have a well-established reputation and mere assertion of victim status won’t be enough to change that. Siddique is a Pashtun who grew up in Waziristan (Pakistan), though he now works for Radio Free Europe as a journalist, operating out of Prague. I can well understand that he is tired of his tribe being portrayed as a violent group, but I don’t see any other way to read their history. This book contains a lot of special pleading. Goal #3: To recount the missteps made by the United States and the government of Afghanistan in dealing with the Pashtuns. As to this goal, I’d give Siddique a B- or a C+. He criticizes the governments of Afghanistan and the United States with not understanding the tribal nature of Afghanistan and consequently their policies and plans constantly miss the mark. Sounds like a fair criticism and a serious error on America’s part, but in the last chapter, where the author tries to point the way forward, he blames the U.S. for this and that misstep, and this and that error, and on and on. Just like many who come from countries in the developing world, he tries to blame everyone else for the problems faced by the Pashtun people. If this book had been permeated by an ethos of Pashtuns taking responsibility for their own troubles and reputation, I think Siddique would find the west more ready to admit their errors and missteps. As it is, there is little chance of that and so you end with a stalemate. Goal #4: To make the case that job creation, infrastructure improvement, and better schools should be pursued amongst the Pashtuns if we want to see peace come to this region. As to this goal, I’d give Siddique a D. He underestimates the power of

Islam and the Qur'ān can in shaping people's lives. He seems to be a secularized Muslim and assumes others will embrace what he has embraced if only they can gain access to good jobs and better infrastructure and better schools. Really? Only a secularized Muslim or a nominal Christian would have sympathy with this kind of reasoning. Religion is a very powerful force in people's lives, much to the chagrin of political elites everywhere. While reading this book, I gained a new appreciation for the difficulties any leader of Afghanistan or Pakistan would face. How does a leader hold his country together when it is actually made up of warlike tribes who have long-time grievances against each other? Add to this that the tribes also hold to different versions of Sunni Islam and you have a recipe for disunity, if not for disaster. Somehow (the Pashtun) Hamid Karzai and his administration escape serious criticism in this volume. In the west, he was widely regarded as an unstable and corrupt leader. Perhaps Karzai escapes criticism because he is a fellow Pashtun. Perhaps Siddique refused to go there to preserve his access to the country. Regardless of the actual reason, this omission does not pass the smell test. Several times, the author quoted sections from documents written by the Taliban, and he is unclear whether he accepts what they say or regards it as propaganda. The Taliban say they do not allow the sexual exploitation of boys. Huh? What about all those pictures of Taliban leaders where you see the young boys in the background? What about all the testimonies of U.S. Armed Forces personnel who have served in Afghanistan? They have seen the homosexual/pedophilic actions of Islamic leaders for years. Come on, this is simply a PR move and a shameful one. The sexual exploitation of young boys is part of the hypocrisy of the religion of Islam in Afghanistan. They claim to hate the depraved sexual mores of the west, yet they exceed the west in sexual corruption and chaos. So then, this book does not live up to the billing of its subtitle. I can believe that a better understanding of the Pashtuns might be the key to a better future for Afghanistan and Pakistan but that understanding is not given in this volume. Specialists might be helped but the interested reader can give this one a pass.

I've been anxious not to let the summer go by without reading Abubakar Siddique's *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Abubakar is a journalist at Radio Free Europe born in Waziristan, the heart of the "Afpak" border area. Why would anyone want to know more about a question whose predicate is an ethnic group few of us know the least thing about? That's why. While we may not know anything about the Pashtuns, the territory they inhabit on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan has been an important stage for many of the protagonists Americans have had to worry about over the last twenty years. The predominantly

Pashtun but explicitly anti-ethnic and Islamist Taliban, who governed in most of Afghanistan 1996-2001, originated in part there. It is there that Al Qaeda and other extremist groups have enjoyed safe haven and operational freedom, including recruitment among the Pashtuns. The Pakistani Taliban, who continue to wreck havoc in much of Pakistan, also originate there. If you want to make the world safe from terrorism, there are few more important parts of the world than Pashtunistan. Abubakar's wide-ranging assessment of what is going on there is likely to be the definitive work on the subject for a long time to come. This is the book he was born to write. Who can match his knowledge of the territory, the people, their customs, their history and their ambitions? Plus, he has reported on the main events and interviewed the protagonists of the last two decades, with admirable allegiance to the best standards of contemporary international journalism. His *Gandhara* blog, named for an ancient kingdom that corresponded more or less to Pashtunistan, is must reading for those interested in what is going on there. The picture Abubakar paints is up close and personal. He sees the Pashtuns in all their complexity: there are Islamists and nationalists, tribesmen and city dwellers, traditionalists and modernizers, extremists and moderates, democrats and authoritarians, Sunnis and some Shia. The one thing he claims they have in common is that the two countries whose border their homeland straddles--Afghanistan and Pakistan--have both marginalized them. The rise of Islamist extremism among Pashtuns is a reaction to this marginalization. The consequences for Pashtuns have included horrendous atrocities, widespread physical destruction, displacement, social disruption and drastically lowered living and educational standards. Caught on a battlefield where the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan array their forces to fight one or another enemy, or in Pakistan's case to pretend to fight them while actually helping them, many ordinary Pashtuns find nowhere to run, nowhere to hide in their devastated homeland, where extremists now rule the roost. So they move, carrying their hopes and resentments to Karachi and beyond. Given this gloomy assessment, it would not be surprising if Abubakar concluded with pessimism or a clarion call for Pashtuns to unite and throw off their chains, seceding from both Pakistan and Afghanistan. He doesn't. Instead he takes a cautious look at the ingredients for a peaceful Pashtun future. These include a stronger Afghan state able to reconcile with at least some Taliban, a democratic Pakistan that stops providing safe haven to Islamic extremists and trying to control the government in Kabul, and an America that sustains its nation-building engagement in Afghanistan "for many more years." Then he adds something as welcome as it is unanticipated: Sooner or later, the two countries will have to come to terms over the question of the Durand Line, which has vexed relations for seventy years. A Pushto language proverb says: "You cannot separate water with a stick." The Durand Line is the border between

Pakistan and Afghanistan in Pashtun-populated areas. Pakistan recognizes it. Afghanistan does not. Abubakar's view is that it will have to be recognized, then opened to cross-border movement and trade, which have grown enormously since 2001 and have much greater potential, not least because of the youth bulge in both countries' populations. So Abubakar not only asks the Pashtun question, he also answers it, not only for the Pashtuns but also for Kabul and Islamabad. The odds aren't good for the peaceful future he envisages, but he has more than earned the right to imagine it. Daniel Serwer www.peacefare.net

The book is very informative, drawn on numerous first account resources.

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