



Elisabeth Leake. *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-65.* Cambridge Studies in US Foreign Relations Series. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-57156-3.

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Informed by an ethos of transnationalism, Elizabeth Leake's text aims to blur regional and global histories of the Afghanistan-Pakistan (henceforth Af-Pak) borderlands. In the era of decolonization, in various shifting reorganizations of power, the Af-Pak borderlands came to hold a central position in events taking shape on the international stage. Leake traces the period of decolonization from 1936 to 1965, despite the official 1947 marker of independence of the subcontinent from British rule, to suggest a wider decolonization effort that extended far beyond such neat historical breaks. To this end, she repositions the histories of Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with the regional involvement of India and the Soviet Union, in relation to British and later US intrigues, to explicate the geopolitical "enduring appeal" of the Af-Pak borderlands in the entangled imaginaries of various empires and nation-states (p. 1). What is commendable here is Leake's effort to reintegrate Afghanistan's history into the history of South Asia. Further, Leake argues that the tribal area, despite being a region that has been so central to shaping imperial, postcolonial, and neo-colonial policies and attitudes, has received little attention in the study of empire, the Second World War, decolonization of the so-called Third World, and Cold War history. Perhaps most inter-

estingly, Pashtunistan, the movement for an autonomous Pashtun homeland, is a central concern for Leake throughout the book. In tracing the appeal of the borderlands for various powers, Leake, through gaps in the archives, weaves an intricate historical description that resists any homogeneous linear narrativization of Pashtun as an identity and Pashtunistan as a movement and the complex entanglement of the latter with Kashmir. These contributions are particularly relevant for the current political moment unfolding in Pakistan named the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—a movement to demand an end to the violence inflicted on the lives of those in the Pashtun borderlands. With the exception of some secular assumptions embedded implicitly in several arguments, which I will turn to shortly, Leake's book is widely appealing.

The discussion in chapters 1, 2, and 3 is important for the historical contextualization it provides of the Af-Pak borderlands and for the expansive citational scope of scholarship on Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the British Empire. Leake focuses on the construction of the remoteness of Pashtun areas, which are divided by the Durrand Line between northeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, with Kashmir to the north and Balochistan to the south. On the Pakistani

side of the border, Leake distinguishes between the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) Pashtun areas—which have been more present in historians’ accounts of the region—and those areas that fell right along the Durrand Line in the deliberately politically isolated “tribal belt” (p. 21). Enduring British attitudes about the tribal belt as a “frontier” to the empire and an outpost to the Middle East, and as a “buffer” zone to Axis and Soviet intrigues, led to huge financial investments in securitizing the frontier and to continued tribal unrest (p. 22). In the interwar years, the British moved from isolating the tribal zone to occupying it and using aerial bombing to thwart unrest to accelerating development projects in the region.

Immediately after independence in 1947, a war between Pakistan and India broke out over Kashmir, a conflict that embroiled Pashtuns as well. From 1947-8, Pashtun tribes infiltrated Kashmir to fight Indian forces, responding to a call for pan-Islamic solidarity issued from NWFP. In chapters 4 and 5, Leake shows us that while the governments of Pakistan and India considered the dispute over Kashmir to be a matter of highest concern, the British were no less involved. Beyond the nascent nation-states, the conflict had the potential to draw in Afghanistan and even the Soviet Union, and lead to more British defense spending. Meanwhile, a call similar to the demand for Pashtunistan (supported by Afghanistan and India) was now being echoed in Kashmir (supported by Pakistan). The complex geopolitics of the region has usually left out the locals themselves. While Kashmir is usually seen as a struggle between India and Pakistan, the demand for Pashtunistan and continued Pashtun politics after independence from the British is reduced to state politics between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. However, in these sections of the book, Leake focuses on Pashtun politics that resulted in their presence and raids in Kashmir (however, due to the scope of the book, we of course do not see

much of a discussion of Kashmiri reactions to Pashtun presence in their homeland).

Besides highlighting the issue of Kashmir in Pashtun-related archives, the discussion in chapters 4 and 5 is also useful to understand how in the post-independence years (1947-65), the Af-Pak borderlands continued to hold a crucial space in the political imaginary of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India in other ways. The former two engaged in performances of state sovereignty in the borderlands to define their territorial boundaries, while the latter remained invested in ensuring no hostile power gained access to NWFP and became increasingly interested in maintaining friendly Indo-Afghan relations in case of future hostilities between India and Pakistan. In chapters 4 and 5, Leake argues that the US reinforced British attitudes, evident in the famous U2 spy plane incident—a plane that took off from an airbase in Peshawar, NWFP. The author contends that dominant scholarship on US interests in South Asia has ignored the significance of Af-Pak borderlands in the Cold War. Further, Leake shows us how the borderlands became a way for Pakistan to ensure continued military aid from the British to the US. This led the government of Ayub Khan in Pakistan to begin a renewed neocolonial effort to develop, integrate, and civilize the frontier, in which he attempted to pacify tribal elites through a framework of “benevolent authoritarianism” (p. 208). Continued attempts to undermine tribal sovereignty, such as through programs to absorb tribal youth into border police, led to reinvigorated support for armed confrontations against militarized developmental forces. Pashtuns in the tribal area resisted the state’s expansion of control and attempts to erode their autonomy. Leake shows, however, that this did not mean they favored claims of an independent Pashtunistan. Continued imperial and neocolonial tensions ensured that aid continued to flow into the region and militarize the local economy, but the semiautonomous legal and political tribal structure of

the region ensured continued evasion of state integration.

With this summary at hand, perhaps the most interesting tension that emerges in the book is around the question of “tribe” and Pashtun identity. Leake draws an important distinction between “tribal” and “provincial” Pashtuns, and discusses the politics of Islam within the region. Prominent scholar Talal Asad has polemically argued that the concept of the “tribe” ensures continuation of colonial obsessions with genealogies that would ideally provide culturally coherent and recognizable units and actors for understanding. Asad argues that narratives about Muslim societies usually emerge in preconceived scripts that posit “protagonists engaged in a dramatic struggle. Segmentary tribes confront centralized states. Armed nomads ‘lust after the city,’ and unarmed merchants fear the nomads.” Crucially, he suggests that we can begin to move toward an adequate anthropology of Islam and Muslim societies “only when the anthropologist takes historically defined discourses seriously, and especially the way they *constitute* events, that questions can be asked about the conditions in which Muslim rulers and subjects might have responded variously to authority, to physical force, to persuasion, or simply to habit.”[1] Leake acknowledges the concept of the “tribe” as problematic but uses it throughout the book, “accepting the currency of the discourse of tribe,” to elaborate a complex formation of a collective ethnic identification that nevertheless did not provide any linear cohesion to politics in the region (p. 10). Heeding critiques of hegemonic scholarship on Pashtuns, she aims to try “to understand Pashtun ‘tribes’ as *more* than an outlying resistance to the state and its accompanying modernity” (p. 12). To this end, she differentiates how even though the demand for Pashtunistan gained ground among province Pashtuns affected by years of colonial interference in governance, it held little relevance for tribal Pashtuns, who had governed themselves with relative legal and political autonomy. Such political autonomy had been

aided of course in part by British efforts to isolate the tribal area from the province and partly by British racism about the ungovernability of tribal Pashtuns and their barbaric and warlike nature. Leake concludes that even as resistive currents continued post-independence, Pashtuns at the time of Partition largely came out in favor of joining Pakistan based on religious affinity but also negotiating the economic incentives offered to tribal elites offered by the new nation-state in the form of continued imperial militarized aid. In this way Leake attempts to move away from a description of Pashtun societal structures that delineate any type of static society. She also highlights the varied ways Pashtuns negotiated their interests in a shifting political structure. Overall, in the book, the most enduring and persistent politics of the region emerges as continued attempts to evade any type of colonial or postcolonial state governance in regional politics and religious life. In fact, Leake argues that one of the reasons the demand for Pashtunistan could have potentially failed is also because it could have undermined tribal structures and autonomy. However, Leake by no means implies that the region has remained politically static. Instead she shows us how through negotiating wider pan-Islamic and decolonization waves, Pashtuns in the Af-Pak tribal borderlands were able to maintain relative degrees of autonomy.

Leake’s book is most intriguing for its contributions to the understanding of the movement for Pashtunistan. She provides necessary complexity to given understandings of culturally cohesive “Pashtuns,” troubling neat understandings of identity formation, even as she uses the concept of tribe. Her discussion is significant to provide historical contextualization of how multiple agendas operationalized locals for different ends, and at the same time became a source of (noncoherent, nonlinear) resistance to state interventions geared at erosion of autonomy in the form of militarized development. By articulating a complex notion of everyday politics that did not emerge as

unified demands for independence or a nation-state, Leake moves away from linear progressive narratives of history by weaving a complex tale that moves back and forth and around itself that illuminates the process of history itself. She traces through new archives the historical complexity and centrality of the Pashtun borderlands in the imaginaries of imperial and post(neo)colonial nation-states. Through her work we see glimpses of what the archives can tell us about the at times waning at times thriving Pashtunistan movement, which brings us to a nuanced understanding of the present PTM almost five decades after Leake's book ends—a civil rights movement of the Pashtun population, demanding an end to militarism, droning, bombing, disappearances, and other types of violence of their homes and livelihoods. While PTM has drawn much international and on-line social media attention, it has either been ignored on dominant national media within Pakistan or else been called “ethnofascism” and the work of “foreign agencies” by other pro-establishment bodies. Meanwhile, PTM's demand has been similar to what Leake has weaved together for us—a demand for an end to the varied forms of neo-colonial violence that has been inflicted on the borderlands and those inhabiting it.

However, Leake's arguments sometimes do implicitly reinforce assumptions that Asad has argued pervade anthropologies of Muslim societies. For example, while Leake is sensitive to racialized stereotypes about Pashtuns in scholarship, we also see statements such as these within the text: “In invading Kashmir, Pashtuns of the frontier tribal area followed some of their historical strategies: combining religious inspiration with the potential for plunder” (p. 127). Following Asad's lead, we might inquire about what historical structures constitute and make possible such events. While in another place in the book, when discussing tribal raids on neighboring settlements in the province, Leake hints that the blame could potentially be on the British government for necessitating such conditions and reports of fanati-

cism and violence; in the case of Kashmir, we do not see much of an exploration of *why* this historical *potential* for plunder might be. However, we do get new archival material from Leake to understand the pan-Islamic call issued within NWFP to support Muslim brethren in Kashmir. Pashtun raids in Kashmir brought together the struggles of the regions in more ways than one. They raised Pakistan's fears about the military strength that could easily lend itself to a struggle for Pashtunistan in the future. Pakistan's call for Kashmiri self-determination also became entangled with Afghanistan's calls for Pashtunistan, bringing the histories of the two regions closer together, leading also to the United States' experimentations with new policies of containment in these regions.

Perhaps one thing left to be desired within Leake's book is a deeper analysis of Islam and secularism within the racialization of Pashtuns. While Leake sporadically throughout the book highlights the influence of Islam on the geopolitical investments in the frontier and reactions of those inhabiting it, an analysis of erosion of or struggle for autonomy is at times reduced to a simple understanding of geopolitical currents or recourse to the argument that development aimed to extend military control. While true, quotes mentioning racialized civilizational imperatives against a form of conservative Islamism in the tribal area from the archives are sometimes left un-commented on (for example, on pages 62, 81, and 117). However, with the archives investigated by Leake and the historical story provided by her, we can come to see how forces of secularization have long been at work to “integrate,” “develop,” and essentially civilize the autonomous religious tribal codes of conduct, by both imperialist powers and postcolonial nation-states. At times, we see Leake slip into secular narratives, such as when she suggests that the tribes followed their own “barbaric Frontier Crimes Regulation” (instead of colonial law); the qualifier that never precedes any state brutalities in the region is operationalized to illuminate tribal structures, not

very differently from colonial understandings (p. 31). Similarly, Leake also slips into secular assumptions at times when discussing why tribes might have felt threatened by court regulation of their religious lives in a case: “*regardless of its intentions*, the court appeared to be policing the personal lives of imperial subjects in a region where Islam played a vital political and cultural role” (p. 34, emphasis added). Such scholars as Hussein Ali Agrama and Saba Mahmood, building on Asad’s work, have argued that secular structures within modern law operate in more complex ways than “intended” restrictions on religious life.[2] The fact that religious life is subjected to this regulatory scrutiny, and not the other way around with the same powers of enforcement, should be grounds for elaboration of how secular structures threatened Pashtun practices. Nevertheless, these moments are few in the text, and the history provided rich and nuanced. Scholars of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, India, British and US Empires, and Soviet investments in Central and South Asia would all find much of interest in this expansive book.

Notes

[1]. Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1-30, esp. 11-12. See also, Talal Asad, “Market Model, Class Structure and Consent: A Reconsideration of Swat Political Organisation,” *Man* 7, no. 1 (1972): 74-94.

[2]. Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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