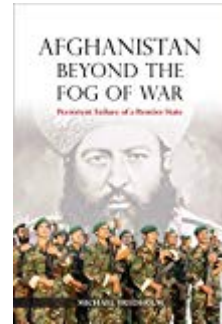




Michael Fredholm. *Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of War: Persistent Failure of a Rentier State.* Copenhagen: NIAS PRESS, 2018. 368 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-87-7694-251-9.



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A bevy of works on Afghanistan's political, economic, and security issues have been published since 9/11. Traditional histories of modern Afghanistan are typically written episodically, treating events as a series of conflicts predicated by a succession of invasions and coups. Similarly, most works in the field focus on the country's immeasurable security issues and reason their way backwards, seeking answers on how to curb violence while overlooking Afghanistan's core political issues. Historian Michael Fredholm addresses both shortcomings in *Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of War: Persistent Failure of a Rentier State*. An exhaustive and sober examination of Afghanistan's recent history, this book argues that the country's political economy was irrevocably guided by Abdur Rahman Khan. Rahman, also known as the "Iron Amir," was Afghanistan's first modern ruler and initiator of a governing model centered on security, modernization, and economic reform. Fredholm examines how the amir sought to implement his model by centralizing power through Pashtunization, the creation of a modern, centralized military, and coopting local power brokers, particularly rural imams. Fredholm further argues that this method of governing impacted and, ultimately, ruined Afghanistan's political development. He claims that Afghanistan's rulers—

be they strongmen, Soviet, or Western-backed leaders—have since sought to implement Abdur Rahman Khan's model, rather than pursuing more accommodationist political arrangements. This desire for centralization has inflamed Afghanistan's ethnic tensions, exacerbated rifts between religiously conservative rural areas and more secular urban centers, and furthered Afghanistan's dependence upon foreign aid, which has undermined its independence.

Fredholm's content is expansive, consisting of ten chapters that stretch from the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan (who reigned between 1880 and 1901) through the coalition troop drawdown in 2014. A final chapter speculates as to Afghanistan's future. Chapters 1 and 2 set up Fredholm's argument by describing Rahman's early state-building efforts. They then examine tactics by Rahman's immediate Barakzai dynasty successors through the first half of the twentieth century and the genesis of Afghanistan's status as a rentier state. The author outlines how Afghanistan's succession of kings wrangled with various local power brokers, foreign interests, and rural religious leaders.

Chapters 3 through 5 cover Afghan political history and foreign relations during the 1960s, political turmoil

during the 1970s, the Soviet invasion, and subsequent Soviet-Afghan War. The strongest material in these chapters is in Fredholm's treatment of Afghanistan's domestic political fracturing prior to the bloodless 1973 coup initiated by Mohammed Daoud Khan. The author interestingly internationalizes the growth of Afghan political radicalism during the 1960s, illustrating that the Afghan Marxist Left and Islamic Right drew inspiration from abroad. As to the latter, Fredholm argues that Afghanistan's turn toward political Islam was rooted in its own experience with student radicalism and academic connections to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (p. 97). Fredholm effectively argues that the ideological core of Afghanistan's Islamic modernist movement was urban and internationally inspired, both of which force a reexamination of common conceptions of Islamic radicalism within the country. While other works (such as Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan*, 2010) have highlighted these phenomena, Fredholm shows how these nascent Islamic movements interacted with traditional conceptions of a nominally secular state and traditional, rural religious interests.

Similarly, Fredholm argues that experiences of the Afghan diasporas—displaced by the Soviet invasion, subsequent civil war, and Taliban control—had profound effects upon conceptions of the Afghan state. Chapters 6 through 10 address the US invasion of the country, the creation of the new Islamic republic, and a multitude of issues related thereto. Central to the author's argument is his catalogue of the growth and influence of the Afghan diaspora and the impact of its visions of Afghan statehood. He asserts that this group of Afghan influencers envisioned a strong, centralized post-Taliban state built upon the Rahman model. It was this clique, embodied best by Hamid Karzai, who led the new Afghan state down a path of hyper centralization. Fredholm convincingly argues that the United States was all too happy to build such a government because it would be in line with international norms and would be conducive to US influence via aid distribution. Unfortunately, as Fredholm contends, the new centralized state undermined traditional regional power brokers, exacerbated ethnic ten-

sions, incentivized fraud, and created an unresponsive political environment.

Fredholm's final chapter speculates on Afghanistan's political future and poses provocative questions as to the nature of political relations and the legitimacy of centralized power. Is it ethical—and ultimately prudent—to achieve security diffusely through local power brokers, often referred to as “warlords?” Is such a label a fair characterization? He concludes by asserting that federalism is perhaps the country's best hope for political stability and therefore the end to active conflict. The final chapter highlights that Rahman's centralization model was dependent upon the successful application of power and the suppression of ethnic and clerical interests. Such a harsh model is no longer possible given modern Afghanistan's political landscape and the international norms hooked to foreign aid.

The work's primary flaw is perhaps its inclusiveness with regard to content. It often reads like a work of narrative history and therefore retreads well-worn ground. Given Fredholm's comprehensiveness, it is at times unclear as to how the various aspects of Afghanistan's recent history fit into his overall argument. Also, Fredholm could have supported his argument with evidence that showed the intellectual transmission of Rahman's model through the country's various regimes, which was especially true after the overthrow of the Afghan monarchy. How did Rahman's ideas of governing survive the removal of the Barakzai Dynasty? How did they make the jump from monarchy to communism to theocracy and to the current Islamic republic? As strong as this work is, one is left to wonder if the Rahman model is causal or merely a consequence of Afghanistan's unique human and physical geography.

Despite these drawbacks *Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of War: Persistent Failure of a Rentier State* is an exceptionally well-done book on Afghanistan's modern political history. Fredholm's political lens poses provocative questions and ties together content that is often presented discontinuously.

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