

## Commentary

### Can 'Pashtunistan' end the Af-Pak war?

By STANLEY A. WEISS

**UDAIPUR, India** - On the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains, tribesmen here know him as the "Afghan Warrior Poet." Like thousands of his fellow Pashtun brothers from the surrounding Northwest Frontier Province, he stood as the first line of defense against troops invading from the West. Eventually, he grew disgusted by the corruption of leaders who lived in the capital cities and rebelled. Despite their armies, these leaders could do little to reach or control him in this rugged wasteland. In the name of Allah, he made it the cause of his life to unite his fellow believers, to create their own nation, and live by their own customs.

His story could be that of any of the young Islamic tribesmen fighting on the Af-Pak border today. And yet, the "Afghan Warrior Poet"--Khushal Khan Khattak--lived more than 400 years ago. Today, his Pashtun descendants stand on the same land against the West, grow equally disgusted by the corruption of leaders in Kabul and Islamabad, and live beyond any army's control. Pashtun tribesmen comprise the vast majority of Taliban warriors in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. As scholar Robert Kaplan has written, "The Taliban is merely the latest incarnation of Pashtun nationalism."

As America readies another 30,000 troops to deploy to Afghanistan, at a time when Washington prepares to send billions in aid and weapons to Islamabad and Kabul, whose armies have proven unwilling or unable to root out extremists, during a month in which a member of the Pakistani Taliban allegedly tried to blow up Times Square, it's time we ask: shouldn't we just give Pashtuns the only thing they've wanted for centuries—to live and be left alone in their own country, Pashtunistan—and finish this conflict once and for all?

There is a reason why Taliban warriors pass so freely across the Af-Pak border, frustrating American troops who cannot pursue beyond it: it is an artificial line that Pashtuns have never recognized. In 1893, Britain was concerned that the Afghans' fight for independence could inspire others, so it pressed Afghanistan into signing a border-demarcation agreement. A British delegation, led by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, haphazardly drew a line between Afghanistan and British India.

The problem is, the so-called "Durand Line" ran straight through ancestral Pashtun territory, literally separating brother from brother. In 1947, the British

handed the former Indian half over to Pakistan. Today, 23 million Pashtuns live on the Afghan side of the border, 12 million live in Pakistan.

A local saying—"all Taliban are Pashtun, but not all Pashtuns are Taliban"—reflects the intense dislike that many Pashtuns have for the Taliban. Public opinion polls suggest that East Afghan Pashtuns are more anti-Taliban than their southern Afghan brethren. Yet, the war against the West has allowed Pashtun leaders to externalize resentment, rather than turning it inward.

The idea that any government will exert influence here is fantasy. Additional U.S. troops might temporarily wound the Taliban, at a cost of many lives, but it will do nothing to change the reality of the region, particularly as the Obama Administration says it will begin to withdraw troops next year.

But imagine instead if America worked through the United Nations and its NATO allies to broker an agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to carve out an independent Pashtunistan framed by the Indus River to the east and the Hindu Kush mountains to the West. The territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan would be reduced, but both would be made more secure, since Pashtun leaders would have little reason to continue their destabilization of either country. Taliban members would turn inward, focusing instead on building their own nation.

As the 193rd member of the United Nations, Pashtunistan and its leaders would be held to the same rules that apply to all nations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Islamic extremists and al Qaeda would no longer be able to "hide behind" the border of U.S. "ally" Pakistan, allowing America to bypass Islamabad altogether. International aid and development funds could be used to incentivize Pashtun leaders to observe UN treaties and agreements, help settle more than a million Pashtun refugees uprooted by war, and develop the Pashtunistan economy.

It won't be easy. But is it any more far-fetched than believing that additional American troops will make anything more than a momentary blip in a centuries-long struggle? The reality here for centuries is that Pashtuns simply want to be left alone: "If you don't mess with them", as Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid says, "They won't mess with you." Isn't it time we try to bring peace by building up rather than tearing down?