

Beyond the “Wild Tribes”: Understanding Modern Afghanistan and Its Diaspora

Ceri Oeppen and Angela Schlenkhoff, eds.

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We have come to expect nothing but bad news about Afghanistan, nothing but negative prognoses of that troubled state from policymakers, pundits, and journalists. Only rarely do we hear what scholars of Afghan studies have to say. In *Beyond the “Wild Tribes”: Understanding Modern Afghanistan and Its Diaspora*, the country and its people are presented in a far more complicated fashion than the usual this-place-is-doomed mantra. Contributions include a review and critique of research methodologies in Afghanistan and the diaspora, the role of gender in community-based justice, models of national and local governance, the refugee warrior, and migration. There is much to like about this book, and even those knowledgeable about the complex problems plaguing the fledgling state will learn something.

The book's three sections – "Afghan History, Society, and Culture," "Security and Governance," and "A Transnational Afghan Community" – provide broad appeal for both scholars and students interested in subjects ranging from Britain's failed attempts to control Afghanistan to the role of Afghan music in diaspora communities. Written by twelve authors whose expertise ranges from sociology to ethnomusicology, as well as an introduction that speaks to the scope of its contents, this volume contains information on such diverse subjects as the status of women in village politics; the career of Ismail Khan, the well-known warlord of Herat; and the involvement of the diaspora in reconstruction efforts.

The book opens with two introductory pieces on the state of Afghan studies. Ceri Oppen and Angela Schlenkoff's "Beyond the 'Wild Tribes': Working Toward an Understanding of Contemporary Afghanistan" imparts a brief history of the study of Afghanistan and identifies various problems in the field, including outdated sources and a good degree of romanticism. "Challenges to Research in Afghanistan and Its Diaspora" discusses several issues not raised in the opening chapter, among them the use of scholarship in political propaganda, the challenges scholars face due to the country's security situation, and problems related to the organization of diaspora communities, which are often patterned along ethnic or political lines.

The first section's four chapters begin with Bijan Omrani and Charles Vyvyan's "Britain in the First Two Afghan Wars: What Can We Learn?" An analysis of nineteenth-century Britain's missteps establishes a set of recommendations that would improve Afghanistan's political situation. Kathryn Lockett's "The Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan" focuses on gender politics circa 2001-present by offering a hopeful picture in comparison to what the lives of women and girls were like under the Taliban. Armando Geller's "The Political Economy of Normlessness in Afghanistan" argues that the fractured society arising from three decades of war has created numerous and competing norms, a problem seen in the myriad of social ills plaguing Afghan society. The final piece, Deborah J. Smith's "Keeping the Peace; Gender, Justice and Authority, Mechanisms for Community Based Dispute Resolution in Afghanistan," addresses one of the ways conflicts are handled in the country. She argues that in the context of the small community, we find one of the few spaces in which women hold positions of authority.

The second section begins with Antonio Giustozzi's "Dilemmas of Governance in Afghanistan: Between Patrimonialism and Bureaucratization," which discusses numerous styles of government and highlights the importance of community politics. Valey Arya's hopeful "What Prevents Afghanistan Becoming a Landbridge?" identifies the numerous benefits for both Afghanistan

and the region, should this scenario ever happen, while at the same time recognizing that the security situation makes it a challenging prospect. Kristian Berg Harpviken's "The Return of the Refugee Warrior: Migration and Armed Resistance in Herat" examines the importance of shifting political alliances, which is often a question of necessity rather than choice.

The final section opens with an analysis of how refugees are involved in rebuilding their country, in Ceri Oeppen's "The Afghanistan Diaspora and Its Involvement in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan." While many in the diaspora support reconstruction projects, few Afghans repatriate to their homeland due to the lack of security. John Baily's "The Circulation of Music between Afghanistan and the Afghan Diaspora" focuses on music, one of the forces that brings the diaspora together. The final chapter, Alessandro Monsutti's "Afghan Migratory Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem," presents migration as a complicated phenomenon that can be classified as either forced (war, ethnic, and religious harassment) or voluntary (economics) and, like other challenges, results from the country's internal political situation.

Identity is a central theme of this volume, both as a factor that contributes to and is sustained by intra-national conflict. Here, I highlight a few of the places in which the contributors address this subject. According to Geller, the warrior-poet, the Northern Alliance, and the Taliban all participate in the negotiation of normlessness: "[A] coherent notion of norms cannot exist in a society as diverse as Afghanistan – where different spheres of norms, linked to different conceptions of identity, exist on the individual and social level" (p. 68).

Identity functions very differently in the diaspora, where communities seek mechanisms for coming together. Baily demonstrates how music unifies Afghans coming from disparate communities. After providing a history of twentieth-century Afghan popular music, he identifies some of the ways it interfaces with politics in diaspora communities. Referencing Slobin's 1974 study, Baily argues that during the 1970s music functioned as "a centripetal force which gave members of the various ethnic groups making up the Afghan population something of pan-Afghan identity – a fact which remains relevant today" (p. 159). (Still, fights often break out at Afghan music concerts along ethnic or sectarian lines.)

Despite the challenges posed by sectarian and ethnic rivalries, problems exacerbated by the Great Game – the continued involvement of regional powers in Afghan affairs that has contributed to intra-Afghan fighting – there is room for hope. Arya's article explores the question posed at the article's beginning: "Can this region and the world afford to have an unstable Afghanistan

that can easily have an impact on the future resurgence of Asia?" (p. 105). Of course the answer is "no," and Arya goes on to show how, even with its location in "a dangerous neighborhood," Afghanistan's multi-ethnic makeup can contribute to the region's stability: "A revitalized Afghanistan could contribute to the chances of peace and affluence in the countries of the region who share a common future with Afghanistan, even though they encompass various nationalities and ethnic groups. That is why Mohammad Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet, once famously called Afghanistan 'the beating heart of Asia'" (p. 106).

But this heart is under duress, and the question remains: What is the future of Afghanistan? Arya recommends several policies for dealing with Pakistan, Iran, and its other neighbors. For example, Kabul would have to look at Pakistan as a friend, which, given its involvement in intra-Afghan violence, would seem impossible. This brings us to one of the book's central questions: How can Afghanistan ever move ahead, given its historical, political, and geographic location, the latter of which "has been both a blessing and a curse"? (p. 117). Its future rests not just with the Afghan people, but with the policies of its neighbors and allies, both of whom must "focus on interdependence, mutual respect, cooperation, and regionalism – rather than egoistic, narrow-minded, and unilateralist self-interest" (p. 119).

The editors' purpose is not to offer a new vision of Afghanistan; they are honest about the challenges faced by Afghans living both in the war-torn country and abroad. Nor is their purpose to argue for an end to the American occupation, for this is not a political diatribe or an ideological exercise. Rather, the contributors focus on analyzing the many issues that continue to cripple Afghanistan and keep it from moving forward, including the seemingly never-ending meddling by outside countries (currently including, but not limited to, Pakistan, Iran, China, and the United States) and the ongoing rivalries among Afghan groups, and provide some suggestions of how a better future could come about (e.g., its viability as a land bridge to the neighboring states).

Their second purpose is to present a collection of studies that updates the small number of existent studies on Afghanistan. While in the past decade the market has been flooded with journalistic accounts of the country and its wars, such as Ahmed Rashid's excellent *Taliban* (2001) that documented the group's inception and rise, few academic studies on Afghanistan and its people have been published. As editors Oeppen and Schlenkhoff point out, scholars have been forced to rely upon the nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies that remain the standards: "It is telling that what is probably the key background text on Afghanistan [Dupree's anthropological study], still used widely, was published in 1973" (p. 4). Clearly, Afghanistan has changed dramatically since the time when Americans and Europeans visited it en route to India on the

“hippie trail.” *Beyond the “Wild Tribes”* is a timely and original work that will reorient the study of Afghanistan in important ways. Specialists in political science, anthropology, religious studies, and economics will benefit from its observations on the state of Afghan studies as well as the suggestions for moving forward.

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