

## **Analysis of Radicalization and Pakhtun Cultural Violence in the Wake of War against Terror and its implications on Pashtu literature**

1. Zafar Khan, University of Peshawar
2. Amanullah, University of Swabi
3. Uzma Kamal

### **Abstract**

*This article differentiates radicalization from the Pakhtuns' cultural violence. This study investigated the inherent Pakhtuns' violent cultural traits and the present-day radicalization in Pakhtun society. The study is qualitative in nature. The data collected through in-depth interviews the purposive sampling technique used to select the respondents. The data revealed that the Pakhtuns' cultural violence has a different contextual explanation as compared to the present-day radicalization. The current radical trends such as bomb blasts and human slaughtering had not been part of Pakhtun culture. These radical trends have been diffused to Pakhtun society in the last three decades. It is immensely important to counter-radicalization through different lenses to differentiate it from Pakhtuns' cultural violence.*

**Keywords:** Pakhtunwali; Pakhtuns' Cultural Violence; Radicalization; Social Order

## Introduction

The United States and its allies attacked Afghanistan to purge the complex causal factors of terrorism; however, they might not have ensured desirable peace not only in Afghanistan but also in the Pak-Afghan border region. After the US invasion and the subsequent disruption of the *Taliban* regime<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan, most of the terrorists moved to the adjacent merged districts of Pakistan in search of haven (Marten et al., 2009). The presence of such organizations has not only jeopardized the peace of this region but has also caused problems for global security.

To curb the growing influence of such terrorist organizations in this region, Pakistan, as an ally in the global war against terror, also started military operations against terrorism in the merged districts next to Afghanistan. Its achievements made so far out of such military operations have been marginal to strengthen and develop a local-based response<sup>2</sup> to combat terrorism on a permanent and viable basis. In addition, the existing counter-terrorism strategies have not considered the distinctive features of *Pakhtuns*' culture or have made no recourse to the peculiar code of *Pakhtun* society (*Pakhtunwali*)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, such counter-terrorism approaches, while attempting to curb terrorists' activities and current radicalization, proved detrimental to the traditional social chemistry and social fabric and caused disruption to the social organizations of *Pakhtuns*' society<sup>4</sup>.

The present-day radicalization and terrorism have been associated with the cultural violence of *Pakhtuns* society. For successful counter-terrorism strategies, it is important to differentiate

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Taliban* initiated Islamic movement following a strict interpretation of *Sharia* who took over Afghanistan in 1996 after the Soviet withdrawal.

<sup>2</sup> Local based response refers to the counter-terrorism strategies which recourse to *Pakhtun* cultural values.

<sup>3</sup> The cultural code of *Pakhtuns*' is normally known as a *Pakhtunwali*, which comprises some local features such as *Badal*, (revenge) *Jirga*, (council of elders) *Nanawate*, (Asylum) and *Tigah* (cease fire)

<sup>4</sup> In this study, *Pakhtuns*' society refers to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan and *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* the province of Pakistan.

radicalization and terrorism from Pakhtuns' cultural violence. In this research article, we investigated that how the inherent *Pakhtuns'* violent cultural traits ignite radicalization in Pakhtun society. It also highlights the importance of *Pakhtun* culture in maintaining socio-political order and tracing out the impact of the socio-political disorder on the process of radicalization in *Pakhtun* society.

### **Roots of Violence in the *Pakhtun* Society**

Violence is a complex behavioral phenomenon and needs an integrated quest of various disciplines to elaborate its cultural and psychological dimensions (Monahan & Steadman, 1996). Various biological theories explain instinctual violent aspects of human behavior (Gearan & Rosenbaum, 1996). Biological explanation is not enough to describe all dimensions of violent human behavior. There are various psychological paradigms such as behaviorists, cognitive, and learning to address the different aspects of violent human behavior. Along with the psychological aspects of violence, some scholarly works describe the cultural aspect of violence (Fry, 2006). Culture also carries a significant influence on the violent traits of human behavior. Human beings are not equally susceptible to violence because of cultural variations (Mead, 1956).

*Pakhtuns*, as the largest tribal ethnic group, are also famous for violent cultural traits. However, their inclination towards violence is a debatable issue in an academic circle. Pakhtuns incline in certain situations towards violence, but their tendencies towards violence have a culture-specific explanation. *Pakhtuns'* violent behavior can be interpreted in the light of their famous code of conduct (*Pakhtunwali*). The elements of their code of conduct such as *Toora* (bravery), *Badal* (revenge), *Badhi* (vendetta), and *Peghore* (taunt) allow violence in the culturally defining situation. *Pakhtuns* family feuds which often begin especially over *Zan* (women) *Zamin* (land) and *Zer* (gold). These family feuds do not occur over ideological

differences but mostly when someone socially disgraces them. It mostly associated their honor with *Zar* (gold) *Zan* (women) and *Zameen* (land)(Naz et al., 2011). They resort to violence in reaction when somebody attacks their property or honor(Banerjee, 2000). There is a proverb in *Pashto* that “He is not a *Pakhtun*, who does not give a blow for a pinch”(Ahmed, 1977).

Violence is often exercised when conflict arises over land distribution<sup>5</sup> among close kins, especially cousins(Dupree, 1979). There is one famous Arab proverb “I am against my brother; me and my brother are against our cousin; me, my brother and my cousin are against the world” (Eriksen & Jakoubek, 2018). They become united to fight against other tribes and clans (Shakoor, 2013). Therefore, cousin’s rivalry is considered the motivating factor of violence in *Pakhtun* society. Such kinds of disputes do not occur without logical proof. For instance, there is a *Pashto* proverb “*par me ka nu mar me ka*” (first you have to defeat me by arguments, and then I am ready for death. *Pakhtuns* cannot fight against others until and unless they have a solid justification for it. They follow their norms and do not deviate from their code of conduct during disputes. The expression of violence is also socio-culturally sanctioned to take revenge on their enemies in *Pakhtun* society. Without known reason, they do not become violent. Only in case of social humiliation or *Poza Prekawal*<sup>6</sup> (nose cutting) *Pakhtuns* give a violent response to restore their respect according to the spirit of their culture. This is what the actual picture of violence in *Pakhtun* society is.

However, the present-day violence has diffused into *Pakhtun* society in the last three decades. We have diffused deliberately these violent traits for political purposes. During the Soviet-Afghan war (Yousaf & Adkin, 1992) that gradually distorted the *Pakhtun* code of

---

<sup>5</sup> Land distribution or in other words, land reforms were made by British government. Before proper land distribution system there was *Waish* (*distribution*) system. In this system no one was the permanent owner of the land.

<sup>6</sup> *Poza Prekawal* (nose cutting) is a *Pashto* word meaning disgracing someone.

conduct (*Pakhtunwali*) is actually provided spaces for radical forces. This presents the actual picture of violence in the *Pakhtun* society, while the following line elaborates the importance of *Pakhtunwali* in *Pakhtuns'* socio-political matters.

### ***Pakhtuns Code of Life (Pakhtunwali) in the Light of Anthropological Perspectives***

#### *Culture:*

Culture, as described above, carries a significant influence on human behavior. It refers to the sum of a social group's observable patterns of behavior, customs, and way of life (Harris, 1968). Culture is a socially learned and shared phenomenon. However, culture cannot confine only to observable actions and behaviors. It also comprises ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that characterize a particular group of people or ethnic group (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). The two major cultural perspectives such as ideational and materialists stress both observable actions and beliefs. In order to understand the culture of any ethnic group, it is essential to explore both the observable actions, ideas and beliefs system of people.

Culture has a significant influence on the socio-political matters of *Pakhtun* tribal society. We have attempted to understand *Pakhtuns* cultural values, traditions, customs and behaviors which give insight to us about *Pakhtun* society. In the light of literature, *Pakhtuns* behavior describes as of a contradictory nature in various socio-cultural matters. They (*Pakhtuns*) are avarice, warrior, revengeful, faithful to their friends, hospitable, docile, and brave. For example, they are poor but behave like a king. They like music but hate musicians (Khan, 1994). As one scholar while describing *Pakhtun* behavior states that:

“their voices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity, and obstinacy; they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependants, hospitable, brave, hardy, frugal, laborious, and prudent; they are less disposed than the nations of their neighborhood to falsehood, intrigue and deceit” (Lindholm, 1980).

Hospitality, faithfulness to their friends, revenge, and bravery are an integral part of *Pakhtuns'* behavior. They fight for decades against each other's taking avenging on the blood of their family or clan member. Revenge restores the honor of the fellow *Pakhtun*<sup>7</sup>. To restore the respect of someone *Pakhtuns* take revenge according to the spirit of *Pakhtunwali*.

ii) *Pakhtunwali*:

It is not only relevant to *Pakhtun's* but their interaction is also guided by this unwritten code. It is considered an integral part of their identity. In essence, *Pakhtunwali* (the way of life) is:

“... an inflexible ethical code by which all true Pathans traditionally abide. *Pakhtunwali* requires that every insult be revenged and, conversely, every guest protected. To protect his honor, the honor of his family or clan, a Pathan will sacrifice everything including his money and life” (Ahmad & Boase, 2003).

The elements of *Pakhtunwali* such as *Badal* (revenge) *Ghayrat* (self-respect), *Nang* (chivalry or bravery) *Mailmastia* (hospitality), *Nanawat*, (asylum), *Purdah*, (gender separation) *Namus*, (pride or defense of honor), and *Jirga* (council of the elders) are important pillars of *Pakhtun* society. Its elements collectively glue their overall social structure. Hiro has captured relatively well it (1994: 135) who describes it as:

“to follow the tenants of *Pakhtunwali*, to avenge blood; to fight to the death for a person who has taken refuge with me no matter what his lineage; to defend to the last any property entrusted to me; to be hospitable and provide for the safety of the person and property of guests”(Collins, 2013).

*Pakhtunwali* defines culturally approved behavior. It guides interaction among clans, tribes, and families under commonly held norms and regulates all aspects of individual, social and

---

<sup>7</sup> *Qalang* is a *Pashto* word meaning taking money from people by force.

political life. It also determines the standard of morality to define moral behavior for *Pakhtuns* in different situations. It is a measuring rod to gauge socially approvable and condemnable behavior. It provides a strong ethical code to ensure solidarity in the tribal society. If someone deviates from this code of honor; *Pakhtuns* treat them as deviant person. It is a *Sharam* (shame) in *Pakhtun* society if someone does not follow its traits. The inhabitants of the tribal society follow this unwritten code strictly.

*Jirga*. *Jirga* is an integral part of *Pakhtun* social structure. It is a culturally developed social institution of *Pakhtun* society for resolving social, economic, and political disputes. It is an informal mechanism of conflict resolution. There is no exact criterion for its members (Yousaf, 2019) and anyone irrespective of his economic status can take part in it. All members in *Jirga* set in a circle to avoid any kind of discrimination. The socio-economic disputes/issues are debated openly and are likewise resolved. Nobody can easily violate the decision made by the *Jargees* (members of *Jirga*). However, if anyone dishonors their decision, he/she is punished by society.

The tribal *Laskhkar* (tribal militia) implement the decision of *Jirga* according to the spirit of *Pakhtunwali*. We consider it a collective responsibility of *Pakhtuns* to follow its decision according to the spirit of *Pakhtunwali*. It compels them to cooperate in the fortunes and failure of an individual. Collective responsibility is a dominant cultural norm of the tribal people, which is carried out in the light of *Pakhtunwali*. Collective responsibility has strong roots in a sedentary society (Khazanov & Wink, 2001). Sedentary society (nomadic and hill tribes) is often tied to their land and observes a strict code of *Pakhtunwali*. Typically, sedentary hill tribes show more resistance if someone violates the tenants of *Pakhtunwali*. There is no place for those forces which might damage its essence. Thus, it is a social obligation for them to protect their culture according to its spirit.

International Journal Of Pukhtunkhwa || Volume 6 | Issue I | January-June 2021

Website: <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org>

Email: [info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org](mailto:info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org)

The tribal people always resisted state forces that were/ are against their culture. They considered the British policies against their culture; therefore, they faced strong resistance in *Pakhtun* society (McChesney, 2012). The British failed to control them by force and, therefore; they faced strong resistance in the first and second Anglo war. If the British understood the cultural values of *Pakhtuns*, they would not have failed to control the tribal people. Security experts as interviewed in this study also almost unanimously considered the understanding of their (tribal people) cultural traits as a pre-condition for the success of military operations to curbing radicalization and terrorism.

### **Indifference to Pakhtunwali: A Cause of Radicalization**

Various socio-cultural and political factors handle the current radical tendencies in *Pakhtun* society. The misunderstanding of their cultural values ignites violence, particularly during wartime (Edwards, 1986). The element of *Pakhtun* code such as *nang* (society based on the concept of honor), *Badal* (revenge), and *Badhi* (vendetta or blood feuds between the families) normally fuels conflicts.

*Pakhtunwali* sets a standard for the use of power even during conflict and also allows violence in a culturally defined situation. It allows the use of power against those who violate the peculiar code of conduct. Using force is normally taken by *Jirga* through consensus. The houses of the accused person are sometimes destroyed or punished as per its requirements. Everyone needs justification to use force against other fellow *Pakhtuns*, which is normally given by *Jargees* (*Jirga* members). It strictly prohibited the exercise of power against innocent people according to their code of conduct. *Pakhtunwali* also sets principles for the use of power during conflicts. It is against its spirit if somebody attacks the enemies' children and women. There is one of *Pashto* proverb; “*tha kali woza khu da narkha ma uzaa*” (you can leave the village but you would not be allowed to violate the set standards). It is socially condemnable if

someone violates the dominant principles of *Pakhtuns* society. A person who does not follow the above principles of *Pakhtun* society he/she knew as a *Be Pakhtu*<sup>8</sup> (a person who does not follow *Pashto*). Usually violence exercises in case of deviation from establish principles which normally set in the light their code of conduct.

*Pakhtuns* defend their code of conduct (*Pakhtunwali*) by any cost. Its elements such as revenge and generosity to defeat the enemies are the integral part of *Pakhtun* society. They start resistance if state institutions or individual deviate from their cultural norms. They start resistance against state institutions when states apply power against their cultural spirit. Violating their cultural code instigates violence in *Pakhtun* society. Thus, the misunderstanding of *Pakhtuns* cultural values by states not only creates resistance but also provoke them further towards more violence.

Even the British and USSR failed to deal tactfully with the *Pakhtuns*' code of conduct. They showed strong resistance against the British when they realized the British forces and policies as a threat to their cultural values. *Pakhtuns*' resistance thus compelled them to leave this region (Lindholm, 1977). Because of a misunderstanding of *Pakhtuns* cultural values, the invaders such as British and Soviet Union failed to rule over them for a long time. The culturally blind approaches of these invaders not only created problems for them to control this area but also caused severe violence in the region (Johnson, 2009). Similarly, the coalition forces have almost failed to understand the application of *Pakhtun* cultural values. The United States failed to adopt an indigenous approach.

The current counter-terrorism strategies in this region adopted old narratives about *Pakhtun* society, which might have been based on stereotypical theories. It is difficult to prove logically

---

<sup>8</sup> *Be Pakhtu* it is a *Pashto* word meaning a person who does not follow *Pakhtun* code of conduct.

that *Pakhtuns* are culturally inclined towards war and violence. They assert, as discussed above, to violence when their peculiar code of conduct allows them. Counter-terrorism strategies, which are recourse to their cultural value, can easily handle pakhtuns, and it will be also helpful to counter-radicalization in the region (*Pakhtunwali*) (Cheema, 2008).

### **Social Disorder: A Push Factor of Violence in *Pakhtun* Society**

Social disorder because of cultural distortion, in the wake of war against terror, provides an enabling environment to violence in the tribal cultural setting. Social order in the tribal society strictly stems from the prevalent normative structure (Rumi, 2012). The normative structure plays an important role in the maintenance of social order. The Khaldun's philosophy highlighted the various dimensions of social order in the tribal society. He argued that social solidarity creates public benefits for people who come together and enhance group capacity (Gellner, 1983). Thus, group solidarity among tribal people can be facilitated by their adherence to group norms. Strong group solidarity glues the tribal people and makes them coherent in their social system. Along with the group's norms, the strong traditional institutions of the tribal society play a pivotal role in the group solidarity. We can find strong group solidarity in tribal society as compared to modern/developed society. The tribal social institutions and cultural norms collectively make them coherent in their tribal structure. Tribal depend on their traditional institutions because of strong group solidarity in the absence of state institutions.

The strong cultural norms and values also glue the overall tribal structure (Ahmed, 2013). The inhabitants of the tribal society socializes according to their shared cultural norms and values stop them to deviate from their cultural norms. Therefore, social sanctions ensure social conformity in tribal society. If someone violates the cultural norms or the tenets of *Pakhtunwali* (*Pakhtuns* code of conduct) severe punishment is given to him/her in the tribal

society. Deviation from cultural norms disgraces them and creates conflicts in *Pakhtun* society. However, conflicts in *Pakhtun* society usually resolve in the light of their culture to maintain social harmony. Normally, they use the elements of *Pakhtunwali* such as *Nanawati* (Asylum), *Tega*, (cease fire) *Swara*, to resolve a conflict between the conflicting parties (Sökefeld, 2002). Social disorder occurs because of cultural distortion that further provides spaces for violence in the tribal society. Socio-cultural vacuum, as found in the field, easily creates the problem of social disorder. Their cultural traits and institutions such as *Jirga*, *Malaki* system, kinship structure and *Pakhtunwali* become dysfunctional. Hussian, the General Manager of Bacha Khan Markaz<sup>9</sup>, also states that;

“the tribal society was not that much destabilized before the commencement of war against terror. However, the prevalent socio-political disorder in tribal society emerged in the time of war against terror. Cultural vacuum handles the current social disorder” (Individual interview).

The normative structure has lost grip over the affairs of the tribal people after the socio-cultural disruptions in the tribal society. Therefore, Khaldun's thesis on “social solidarity” gives insight to us to understand the present-day cultural vacuum in Pakhtun society. The current anomic condition in the tribal society could explain in the light of Durkheim's philosophy (Durkheim, 2014). Durkheim philosophy highlights the problem of social order. He discusses mechanical and organic solidarity in his famous thesis; division of labor and holds mechanical solidarity. only characterized that tribal society The tribal society has strong mechanical solidarity and strong collective moral bonds. He argues that forceful changes in moral and social bonds create problem of social order in tribal society.

---

<sup>9</sup> Bacha Khan Markaz is the welfare and research centre of the Awami National Party (ANP).

Therefore, because of cultural distortion, the tribal society has turned into anomic condition. The mechanical solidarity in the tribal society has lost grip over the tribal affairs. Along with the social disorder, the current socio-cultural situation has also provided an enabling environment for radicalization. Thus, violent traits have got diffused into the tribal culture after the socio-cultural disruption.

## Conclusion

They reveal that Pakhtun cultural violence and current radicalization in the Pakhtun society are two different phenomena. We investigate that disruption of normative order incites violence and provide congenial environment to radicalization. *Pakhtunwali* (code of life) guides their interactions and defines their violent traits associated with *Zar* (gold), *Zameen* (land) and *Zan* (women). *Pakhtunwali* and their cultural institutions play a vital role in the maintaining of socio-political order in *Pakhtun* society. It is also revealed that deviation from their cultural code instigate violence, which considered counter-productive to counter-radicalization in Pakhtun society. Social disorder in tribal society provides an enabling environment to violence. Therefore, for the effective counter-radicalization strategies we need to differentiate between the cultural violence and factors of radicalization in Pakhtun society.

## References

International Journal Of Pukhtunkhwa || Volume 6 | Issue I | January-June 2021

Website: <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org>

Email: [info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org](mailto:info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org)

- Ahmad, A., & Boase, R. (2003). *Pashtun tales: from the Pakistan-Afghan frontier*. Al Saqi.
- Ahmed, A. (2013). *The thistle and the drone: how America's war on terror became a global war on tribal islam*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Ahmed, A. S. (1977). *Social and Economic Change in the Tribal Areas: 1972-1976*. Oxford University Press.
- Banerjee, M. (2000). *The Pathan unarmed: opposition & memory in the North West Frontier*. School of American Research Press Santa Fe, NM.
- Cheema, P. I. (2008). Challenges Facing a Counter-militant Campaign in Pakistan's FATA,". *NBR Analysis*, 19(3), 23.
- Collins, J. J. (2013). *Understanding the War in Afghanistan: A Guide to the Land, the People, and the Conflict*. Simon and Schuster.
- Dupree, L. (1979). Leftist movements in Afghanistan: part I: Red flag over the Hindu Kush/by Louis Dupree. *Afghan Digital Libraries*.
- Durkheim, E. (2014). *The division of labor in society*. Simon and Schuster.
- Edwards, D. B. (1986). *Pretexts of rebellion: the cultural origins of Pakhtun resistance to the Afghan State* University of Michigan].
- Eriksen, T. H., & Jakoubek, M. (2018). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years*. Routledge.
- Fry, B. (2006). *Stable isotope ecology* (Vol. 521). Springer.
- Gearan, P., & Rosenbaum, A. (1996). Biological factors in relationship aggression. *I. R.(Ed.), The Psychology of Adversity*, 183-198.
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Muslim society*. Cambridge University Press.

[Record #13 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]

Johnson, D. D. (2009). *Overconfidence and war*. Harvard University Press.

International Journal Of Pukhtunkhwa || Volume 6 | Issue I | January-June 2021

Website: <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org>

Email: [info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org](mailto:info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org)

- Khazanov, A. M., & Wink, A. (2001). Nomads in the history of the sedentary world. *Nomads in the sedentary world*, 1-23.
- Lindholm, C. (1977). The Segmentary Lineage System: Its Applicability to Pakistan's Political Structure. *Pakistan's Western Borderlands: The Transformation of Political Order*, 41-66.
- Lindholm, C. (1980). Images of the Pathan: The usefulness of colonial ethnography. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 21(2), 350-361.
- Marten, K., Johnson, T. H., & Mason, M. C. (2009). Misunderstanding Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area? *International Security*, 33(3), 180-189.
- McChesney, R. D. (2012). Recent Work on the History of Afghanistan. *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 5(1), 58-91.
- Mead, M. (1956). New lives for old: cultural transformation—Manus, 1928-1953.
- Monahan, J., & Steadman, H. J. (1996). *Violence and mental disorder: Developments in risk assessment*. University of Chicago Press.
- Naz, A., Chaudhry, H.-u.-R., & Khan, W. (2011). Pakhtun Social Organization (Pakhtunwali) and Gendered Decision-Making Process in Mate Selection Among Pakhtuns of District Malakand, KPK, Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(2), 134-150.
- Rumi, R. A. (2012). Pakistan: ungoverned spaces. *CIDOB Policy*.
- Shakoor, A. (2013). Pakhtun cultural values, terrorism and the contextual meaning of violence. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), 61.
- Sökefeld, M. (2002). Rumours and politics on the northern frontier: The British, Pakhtun Wali and Yaghestan. *Modern Asian Studies*, 36(2), 299-340.
- Strauss, C., & Quinn, N. (1997). *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning* (Vol. 9). Cambridge University Press.
- Yousaf, F. (2019). Pakistan's colonial legacy: FCR and postcolonial governance in the Pashtun tribal frontier. *Interventions*, 21(2), 172-187.

Yousaf, M., & Adkin, M. (1992). *The bear trap: Afghanistan's untold story*. Jang Publishers Lahore.

# Pukhtunkhwa Journal



International Journal Of Pukhtunkhwa || Volume 6 | Issue I | January-June 2021

Website: <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org>

Email: [info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org](mailto:info@pukhtunkhwajournal.org)