

Economic Lures and Ungoverned Territories

Overcoming Warlordism

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“Ungoverned Territories”

Several states in Eurasia have been forced to deal with “ungoverned territories,” areas technically within the borders of recognized states but where the state lacks the authority or capacity to provide security or enforce the rule of law. These territories aren’t actually “ungoverned.” They are usually governed by warlords: actors who use a combination of force, charisma, and patronage to control the political economy of small slices of territory, whether a village, border area, or entire province. The presence of warlords is most obvious in Afghanistan and the Pakistani tribal areas, where the state clearly lacks much writ. We have also seen warlord-controlled territories emerge from time to time in the post-Soviet space, though, including in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus, Adjara and parts of Abkhazia in Georgia, and the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. Parts of post-war Kosovo, too, have suffered from warlordism.

The idea of launching military attacks on these areas to restore state rule is often unattractive. Warlords are usually supported by extended clans or networks, whose livelihood depends on organized criminal activity and whose members are skilled at violence. Hence a direct attack carries with it the risk of unleashing years of unconventional warfare or terrorist incidents against the state. If the warlord is from an ethnic minority, this insurgency can be spun as

defense against an imperial interloper. Furthermore, warlords are sometimes supported by powerful outside states (or transnational organizations like al Qaeda), the leaders of which might use attacks against their clients as a pretext for launching their own counterattacks.

The Economic Outreach Option

Reaching out economically to the involved area with humanitarian and job assistance might therefore seem to be a tempting policy alternative. The state might hope to persuade inhabitants that cooperating with the state will bring them a higher standard of living than what the warlord can provide. The goal would be to secure popular loyalty and undermine the warlord from within, appealing to hearts and minds.

But will it work? A study of the effects of outside economic stimuli on the Pakistani tribal areas over history suggests it will not. External funding and assistance is likely to be swept into the clutches of the dominant local warlord network. If a new specific group is empowered by the state from outside that network, its members may simply use those new resources to become warlords themselves, since the state has no means to stop them from doing so in regions where it lacks authority.

Instead, the Pakistani case suggests that the best way to build support for the state is to encourage ordinary people in ungoverned territories to migrate outside those areas for work. The warlords cannot control such migration, if it is easy and cheap enough to do. If wages are sufficiently high, and life in the state-controlled areas offers attractive social services and economic opportunities, migration might spawn a social revolution.

Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)

At first glance, the Pakistani FATA would not appear to be an area where the "warlord" label fits, and some might therefore question whether it is representative of other ungoverned territories. Its official name implies that the region is governed by traditional tribal norms, not individual warlords. Throughout recorded history, the FATA has been considered "ungovernable," a wild place that no state or colonial power could dominate because of its fierce warrior tribes. Indeed, some argue that the Taliban, which is based in the FATA, is actually a tool for traditional tribal rivalry among the Pashtuns.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the ideals of Pashtun tribal culture are the engines of the region's political economy. Since the time of the British Empire, tribal norms have been repeatedly undercut by the lure of economic opportunity. The provision of money and weapons by outsiders has created warlords in the FATA. In the late nineteenth century, the warlords were the favored *maliks* (tribal elders), who received subventions from their British

patrons and then used those resources to buy guns and remain outside their patrons' control. After independence in 1947, the Pakistani government continued this subvention system, because it needed malik support to maintain its western border with Afghanistan. Since the late 1970s, radical mullahs (the leaders of mosques and madrasas) in the region have been turned into warlords, as outsiders helped their jihad in Afghanistan.

The British and the Favored Maliks

Outside empires have always bought off the Pashtun tribes to assist them in their geopolitical rivalries. However, the British Empire was unique. When British forces ousted the Sikhs and moved into the Pashtun region in 1849, they created a list of "official" maliks, individuals who appeared to have the power and authority to sway tribal actions. The British turned this into a regularized table of payments, giving them subventions beyond the payments made to the tribes as a whole, and made "official" malik status hereditary.

This was an incredible disruption of traditional Pashtun culture. In the mountainous regions in question, Pashtun politics had previously been based on a very democratic *jirga* (council) system, where each honorable man in each clan and tribe had an equal say over the choices made, in policies ranging from criminal justice to dealings with outsiders. The fact that the official maliks accepted their British designation is an indication of just how weak tribal norms were in the face of the money offered. The favored maliks used their subventions to buy weapons, allowing them to further threaten British control of the border region. A cycle thus began of outside patrons inadvertently encouraging their local warlord clients to thwart the writ of the state.

Pakistan Continues the System

From independence onward, the new state of Pakistan set up a special constitutional arrangement with the favored maliks which allowed the FATA to remain under *jirga* control, rather than be subject to national laws. The state's influence was limited to a system of appointed Political Agents (PAs), whose responsibilities were to keep the peace and to assist economic development. The FATA maintained its reputation for wild lawlessness, and the PAs obtained what access they had to the region only to the extent that they could bring favors to the tribes. Pakistani leaders believed they needed to maintain this system because it was the only way they could extend the border of their new state to the Durand Line, the artificial border with Afghanistan imposed by the British Empire in 1893. Pakistani leaders especially feared that the tribes might secede and form a new state of "Pashtunistan" with Afghan assistance, since the Pashtun ethnic group straddled the border.

As the official maliks maintained their hereditary status and continued to receive subventions, the result was essentially a feudal system where the

individual PAs and maliks ran the political economy together through patronage and without state oversight. Many local observers have referred to this as a kind of mafia. The maliks controlled everything from state-sponsored scholarships and official visas for foreign travel to the distribution of food subsidies.

This system had a particular impact on state development assistance given to the FATA in the early 1970s, when the state's worries about the "Pashtunistan" scenario reached a peak after East Pakistan declared independence as the new state of Bangladesh in a bloody civil war. Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto sent millions of dollars of assistance to the official maliks, in hopes of buying them off. While he succeeded in dampening support for Pashtunistan, he also further entrenched malik rule. The maliks got "double benefits," ensuring both that the location of the resulting roads and other construction projects would benefit their own businesses and that the contractors for those projects would be family members. Stories abound of how schools and hospitals built on malik land with state funds lacked both security perimeters to keep outsiders away and access to safe drinking water. Unsurprisingly, teachers and doctors did not want to live in the attached dormitories, and parents did not want to send their children to the new schools. The maliks could then claim there was no demand for the schools and hospitals after all and use the buildings financed by Pakistani taxpayers for their private gain.

The New Warlords: Jihadist Mullahs

In traditional Pashtun culture, religious figures were rarely granted much independent authority. In the event of a threat to Pashtun territory, individual mullahs might lead a jihad, justified in religious terms, against the interlopers. Yet, for the most part, the mullahs were impoverished, illiterate, and completely dependent on their malik patrons for sustenance and protection.

This changed radically starting in 1979. In part reflecting fears about the rise of regional Shiite influence following the Iranian revolution, but largely in order to drive their Soviet rivals out of neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistani state authorities began funding and arming a variety of Sunni mullahs and mujahedin movements in the FATA. With time, Saudi Arabia and later the United States magnified those efforts, sending what eventually amounted to 7.2 billion dollars to radical clerics there.

The Pakistani military intelligence services (Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI) thought they could control the flow of those funds by keeping a group of official mujahedin parties under their patronage. Yet once the movements began, they mutated out of state control as new madrasa students graduated. A decade later, the Pakistani madrasas had spawned the Taliban, a group that promised justice and order based on *sharia* law. The Taliban attracted many new adherents from the Afghan refugee population living in Pakistani border camps, as well as among impoverished residents of the FATA who were cut out of the malik

patronage system.

While the Taliban accepted Pakistani state support, as Islamabad continued to try influencing events in Afghanistan, it also received significant financing from international sources, especially from Pakistanis who had emigrated to the United Kingdom. The Taliban did not depend on the state. International support continued long after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, when the Taliban were engaged mostly in fighting off rival Afghan warlords.

The most significant outside support came from the transnational al Qaeda terrorist organization. After Taliban and al Qaeda forces were routed at Tora Bora by the U.S.-led intervention in early 2002, Taliban supporters in the FATA received yet another source of funding, as al Qaeda fighters from the Arab world and post-Soviet Central Asia paid them for their hospitality. The drivers, guides, and homeowners that benefited from the presence of al Qaeda set up their own new mosques and madrasas, in line with the fringe al Qaeda interpretation of Islam, and many became wealthy enough to buy weapons and militias for themselves.

Pakistan today finds itself facing incursions from the FATA into the settled areas of the country (in addition to those into Afghanistan), led by radical Islamist mullah-warlords trying to spread the scope of their state-challenging rule. Once again, resources entering the FATA made it easier for warlords there to evade state control, even though this time around it was a new Islamist set of warlords that emerged. The radical mullahs are now using their militias to threaten and kill the maliks opposed to them, murdering over two hundred in the last several years.

The Exception: Persian Gulf Migration

There was one type of external economic stimulus that did not create or sustain a state-challenging elite group in the FATA: the lure of work in the Persian Gulf, particularly Dubai, during the oil boom that began in the early 1970s. There are no accurate records of how many young men from the FATA migrated to the Gulf for work in the following decade, because the vast majority of them went illegally. Informed observers at the time, however, agree that at least half (and probably more) of all families in the FATA sent at least one member there. Wages for day laborers in Peshawar, the largest Pakistani city near the FATA, skyrocketed due to the resulting labor shortage.

The amount of money the migrants sent home was astonishing. Most stayed for at least two years, and the best expert estimates are that during this time they may have quadrupled their family incomes. The families used this income primarily to build new homes and buy new conveniences, such as toilets, refrigerators, and fancy cloth for clothing. When they returned, many of the men used their earnings to start their own businesses.

Most significant for the argument here, many of these migrants appear to have moved their families out of the FATA and into the surrounding urban areas of settled Pakistan. They may have maintained two homes – a more sophisticated one in the settled areas and a more traditional one back in the FATA (the Pashtun ethnic group has a centuries-long history of families moving between two dwellings, serving as a means both for seasonal migration and for escaping from violent tribal feuds when necessary). In other words, when given the opportunity to do so, these men and their families took advantage of the benefits that the state provided in the settled areas, such as education to make their children literate (the literacy rate inside the FATA today remains abysmally low), electrification and running water, and the opportunity to engage in commerce and to vote in elections under national and provincial law.

While it is impossible to prove cause and effect, it is notable that the major political issue in the FATA today is the question of whether to turn the region into a “normal” Pakistani province (or perhaps a district of another “normal” province), changing the constitutional arrangement which has been in place since 1947 that leaves it largely “ungoverned.” It appears that a majority of the local population supports such a change and is angry that it has been left out of the economic and political opportunities available to the rest of the country. The people most reluctant to embrace change, not surprisingly, are some of the official maliks (who caution that gradual change is best, so as not to provoke instability) and the radical mullahs (who insist that the FATA must have its own *sharia*-based legal system).

Policy Implications

If this pattern holds true across time and space, it has important implications for attempts to move ungoverned territories toward state governance. Namely, sending resources into ungoverned territories is not likely to be an effective engine for political change, because state-challenging elites will find ways to subvert and use those resources for their own ends.

Instead, encouraging ordinary people to migrate out of these areas may build loyalty to the state, especially if people come to realize that the state can provide a better standard of living than the warlords can. In other words, states that want to build their authority inside ungoverned territories using economic means might concentrate on creating new public works and other appropriate projects that employ large numbers of people at high wages in nearby governed areas. Emphasizing the social goods that statehood provides in governed territories may be the best way to attract people away from warlord control.

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