

18/2012

29 February 2012

Kathleen Reedy\*

TRIBALISM OR VILLAGE-ISM? THE  
DANGERS OF "MAPPING" THE HUMAN  
TERRAIN

## TRIBALISM OR VILLAGE-ISM? THE DANGERS OF "MAPPING" THE HUMAN TERRAIN

*Abstract:*

*The concept of tribe has undergone substantial scrutiny in the academic world, but the military and governmental departments involved in Afghanistan remain enthralled by tribal maps. Non-Afghans (and sometimes Afghans themselves) are quick to blame disputes on "tribal" differences or age-old feuds. They expect that maps and lists of tribal elders will help make it clear who makes decisions and how disputes are resolved. There is historical precedent for certain tribes dominating the national political scene and thus we, as foreigners, are quick to look for signs of nepotism and favoritism along these lines. When looking for power players, we look for a segmentary system where sub-tribes owe a certain allegiance to and pay a certain respect to decisions made by elders at a higher level. However, such a neat system rarely occurs in the real world, and the degree to which it exists at all can vary vastly by region. In eastern Afghanistan (Paktika, Paktiya and Khost), for instance, rural villagers can rarely name more than a single level of tribe that they belong to and some have to struggle to come up with even that. What is more prevalent in these areas is what I call village-ism. Many or even most people in a village will often be from the same sub-tribe, and the village will often be named after that sub-tribe, but it will often also have another name more associated with place and tribal elders at this point coincide with village elders. Decision-making tends not to extend beyond these local levels. If a problem cannot be solved by village elders, people's next recourse will often be to go to government for resolution, rather than the next tribal level up. Being aware of what kind of social structure is actually at the heart of decision-making (as well as village naming) can be very important in how we map people (or refrain from doing so).*

*Keywords:*

*Afghanistan, Tribe, Map, Anthropology*

## INTRODUCTION

“Kathleen, the brigade wants to know about the Zadran Arc<sup>1</sup> and the tribal dynamics there. And they want a tribal map of their whole area. And a list of key powerbrokers.”

Of course they did. Every military or political group that has ever occupied the region of Paktiya, Paktika and Khost (Loya Paktiya<sup>2</sup>) has wanted to know about the Zadran—a decently sized, seemingly cohesive tribe in the area that has a history of supporting insurgencies. Currently, the Haqqani family and many of the upper-tier leadership in the Haqqani Network operating in the east of Afghanistan are from the Zadran tribe (Gerda Serai District), so there is a wide assumption that local people are naturally inclined to support these insurgents because they are all from the same tribe. As a result, Coalition Forces’ leadership want to know where the boundaries of this tribe are, who the powerful tribal figures are, and how these figures can be swayed to bringing their tribe to oppose the insurgents. Additionally, with the growing push for reconciliation and reintegration, officials are looking for everyday leaders that can convince low-level insurgents to convince them to lay down their weapons and local populations to allow reconciled insurgents back into their communities. However, without a census, something well beyond the scope of what the Afghan Government can currently accomplish, any kind of map detailing tribes or the area of influence of any particular leader would be nearly impossible to create. More importantly, relying on such maps (and the ideas about social organization underpinning them) to provide information about how “tribalism” and local social organization really work would be dangerously inaccurate.

Such maps start out with broad tribal overviews, then slowly zoom in to be more specific, breaking down from super-tribes (such as the Ghilzai or Durrani) and eventually moving down to levels like the Zadran or sub-tribes like the Ibrahim Khel. (See Figures 1 and 2.<sup>3</sup>)

The Zadran tribe, for example, is listed as Ghilzai Pashtun and covers the areas coloured in yellow across the provincial maps. When you ask people what it means to be a Zadran, they will either shrug or tell you a winding story that begins in Pakistan, of several brothers who moved to the Loya Paktiya. One of them was named Zadran and so he gave his name to the

area. Some can give you names of his sons and their lineages, but that is all most people make of being Zadran. For most, it is an identity, not a model for social organization.<sup>4</sup> If you then ask people if there is some kind of Zadran super-elder, or even some kind of hierarchy, they just laugh and say no.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note of publisher: Region located in the East of Afghanistan, encompassing 9 Districts from three different provinces, namely: Paktiya, Paktika y Khost.

<sup>2</sup> Note of publisher: Loya Paktika or Greater Paktika is a historical region in Eastern Afghanistan, expanding across the territories of today’s provinces of Paktiya, Paktika and Khost, as well as portions of the provinces of Logar and Ghazni.

<sup>3</sup> Programme for Culture and Conflict Studies,  
[http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Docs/PDF%20Maps/East\\_tribal\\_map07.pdf](http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Docs/PDF%20Maps/East_tribal_map07.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See also Shahrani, N. “War, Factionalism and the State in Afghanistan,” *American Anthropology* 104(3): 2003.

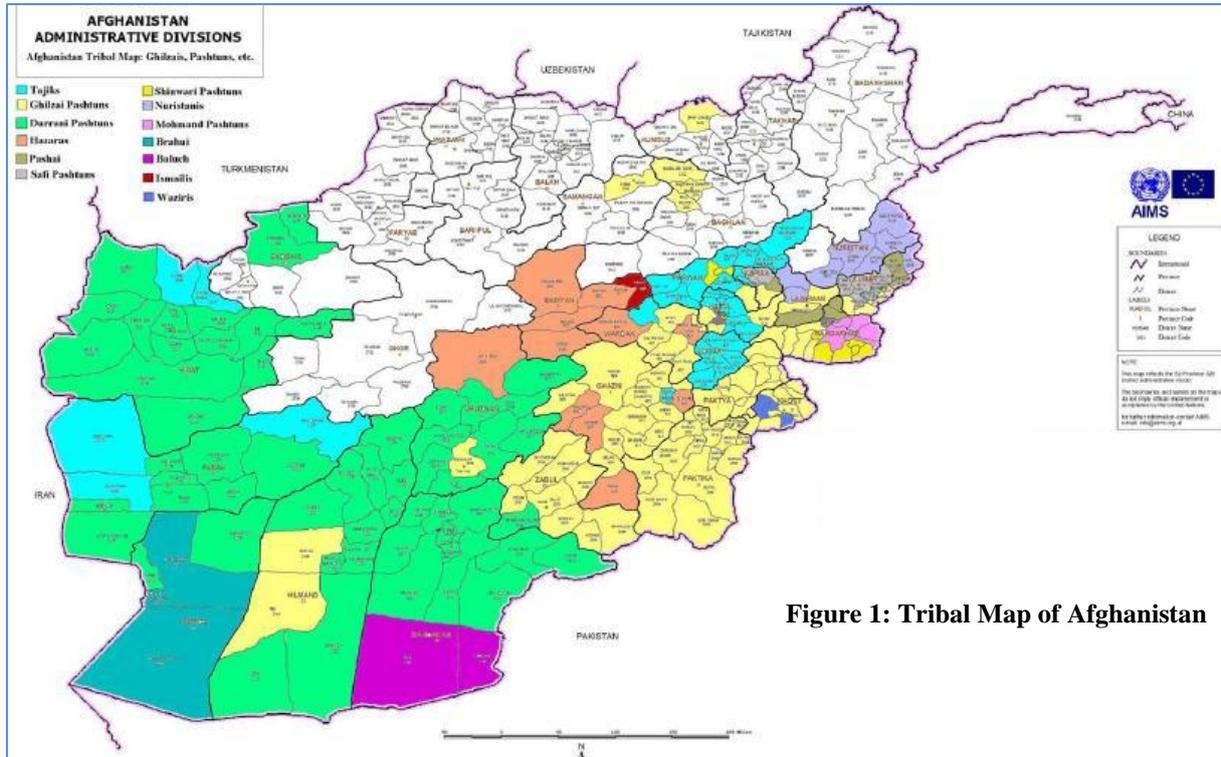


Figure 1: Tribal Map of Afghanistan

In addition to not necessarily being relevant to patterns of real power, maps can wind up obscuring as much as they reveal. The maps in Figure 2, for instance, follow district lines and make it appear as if tribal lines neatly followed those boundaries. They do not allow for social variation between and sometimes even within villages.



Figure 2: Tribal Maps of Loya Paktiya Provinces

In the Pashtun Sharana District, Paktika, there were several villages of Tajiks who had been living there for generations. Relying too heavily on local “tribal” leaders would likely mean that the Tajiks, who do not fit into the local lineages, would be left without a voice. Hence relying on social mapping for making political and other kinds of decisions can be dangerous unless we go village by village, or even neighbourhood by neighbourhood, and that level of detail would be cumbersome on a map.

Identifying powerbrokers and assigning them to a colour on a map can be just as tricky. Afghan government and foreign representatives want to find a few individuals who they can win over and

who will be able to influence the population and bring popular support.<sup>5</sup> Key Leader Engagements (KLE) are a standard method of interacting with the population, and the

<sup>5</sup> This technique has historically worked in parts of Afghanistan with more hierarchical societies, to include some of the southern Pashtun areas. Barfield, T. “Weapons of the not so Weak in Afghanistan: Pashtun

Kathleen Reedy

broader the sphere of influence of a particular key leader, the better. Coalition Forces soldiers and civilians will often turn to the elders who attend district or Provincial *shuras* (council meetings) assuming that they have significant power and influence in the district. However, upon speaking with villagers, one quickly discovers that everyday people do not consider someone from outside their village to be representative of their needs. And in districts where there are 35 elders and over 100 villages, that is a lot of people who feel they are not being properly represented. Regardless of a shared name or tribal identity, self-described or obvious “key leaders,” then, do not always have nearly the degree of influence as we might think, yet we turn to and rely on them all the same.

Underlying the Afghan Government and the Coalition Forces’ desire for maps is a misunderstanding of social dynamics in Pashtun Afghanistan, particularly in the Loya Paktiya region. They see some kind of natural connection between the Haqqani Network and the people there and hope to undermine and develop support for the Government of Afghanistan by identifying another local leader who could compete effectively for their loyalty. But this rests on an assumption that “tribal” societies must follow the kind of hierarchical pattern seen with many Sunni tribes in Iraq. Instead, just as villages felt they were not represented in district shuras because no one from their village was present, people who might identify themselves as Zadran do not look to or answer to any kind of outsider, even if he does share a name. The casual assumption that we can co-opt an entire people (or that they support the Haqqanis) based on tribal ties is incorrect. To act on it is to risk alienating and disenfranchising a lot of people, thereby potentially driving them into the arms of the very insurgents we are trying to overcome. Though it requires substantially more time and effort, it is important that we understand that the village, not the tribe, is the centre of authority, and if the Afghan Government wants to make true headway into winning people’s support, they and the Coalition Forces must do it one village at a time.

### TRIBALISM IN EASTERN AFGHANISTAN

In Figure 1, much of the north and west of the country are blank. Ethnicity, rather than tribalism, is how external groups have identified many of these Tajik, Hazara, or Uzbek areas. The Pashtun regions of the south and east, however, are often defined (by outsiders) by their “tribal” nature. President Hamid Karzai is a member of the Popalzai tribe from Kandahar. This tribe belongs to the Durrani confederation, as does the Barakzai (former King Zahir Shah was from this lineage) and Durranis have generally been ruling in Afghanistan since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The Ghilzai confederation, on the other hand, featured heavily as mujahidin<sup>7</sup> and insurgents and now includes such famous families as the Haqqanis. Scholars of Afghanistan and Pashtun culture, however, are fairly unanimous in suggesting that such tribal groups and confederations do not act as political organizations or work collectively,

---

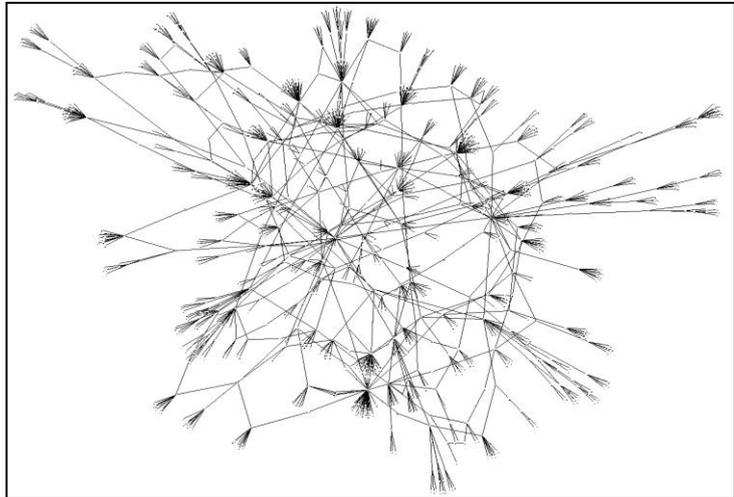
Agrarian Structure and Tribal Organization for Times of War & Peace.” Agrarian Studies Colloquium Series. February 2007, 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> Cheyes, S. *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban*. New York: Penguin. 2006. Barfield, T. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2010. Gladstone, Carey. *Afghanistan Revisited*. Hauppauge, NY: NOVA Publishers. 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Note of publisher: mujahid, holy warrior in Arabic (present participle, same root as Jihad), is the name given in Afghanistan to those opposing Soviet occupation.

even for things like Defence.<sup>8</sup> Most Pashtun interviewees support such an idea. They reminisce about an idyllic time when there was a social hierarchy that was based on honour and respect. The elders (*mashraan*,<sup>9</sup> sing. *mashar*) of villages were respected decision-makers with the power of enforcement; however they operated much more at the village level.

In traditional Pashtun ideology (*pashtunwali*<sup>10</sup>), there is a strict sense of egalitarianism, so local leaders were generally not a hereditary position unless sons proved themselves as competent and respectable as their fathers. Life proceeds according to a segmentary model (me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, etc.) in terms of how people organize politically and socially, but in theory, at least, these only apply within small local groups and do not create for a



**Figure 3: A Map of Loya Paktiya Tribal Organization**

primogeniture-based hierarchy between different branches of families (See Figure 3). In other words, the Pashtun system does not allow for any singular tribal leaders to dominate, at least not for long. Warlords might pop up, but they do not last. State governments such as the Mughal, Durrani, Sikh and British empires might attempt to emphasize and use ideas of tribalism to co-opt the Pashtun regions,<sup>11</sup> but the effects were never permanent. Villages are the source of authority and loyalty—and while villages are often comprised of people related to one another, these local kinship ties are more immediate and egalitarian than the kinds of extended tribal networks many observers expect to see.

It did not always work quite this idealistically, though. Stronger economies in urban areas and the fertile south allowed power to become centralized in the hands of landowning or

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, J. “Khan and Khel: Dialectics of Pakhtun Tribalism,” in R.Tapper (ed.). *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1983. 119-149; Glatzer, B. “The Pashtun Tribal System,” in G. Pfeffer and D. Behera (eds). *Concept of Tribal Society*. New Delhi: Concept Publishers. 2002. 265-282.

<sup>9</sup> Note of publisher: Meshrano Jirga (elders’ assembly) is the given name of the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament.

<sup>10</sup> [Note of publisher: given name, in Pashto, Pakhtunwali, to the] code of honor, hospitality and vengeance that shape the way Pashtuns live as well as their traditional justice system. It is an idealistic system rather than a strictly codified one and is flexible in practice. Pashtuns themselves often do not use the term, but instead say “doing Pashtu.” See Rzehak, L. *Doing Pashtu: Pashtunwali as the ideal of honourable behavior and tribal life among the Pashtuns*. Afghan Analysts Network. March 2011, specifically Note 3; and Glatzer, B. “Being Pashtun-Being Muslim: Concepts of Person and War in Afghanistan,” In B. Glatzer (ed). *Essays on South Asian Society: Culture and Politics II*. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch. 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Beattie, . *Imperial Frontier: Tribe and State in Waziristan*. Richmond: Curzon. 2002; Ferguson, R. and N. Whitehead, “The Violent Edge of Empire,” in R. Ferguson and N. Whitehead (eds.). *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press. 1992.

Kathleen Reedy

elite families, creating a more permanent and hierarchical system,<sup>12</sup> though one based less on tribal dynamics than economic ones. But in the remote, mountainous areas of the eastern Pashtun that are nearly inaccessible even with modern technology,<sup>13</sup> a more rugged, isolated and subsistence-based lifestyle has allowed a more egalitarian organizational structure to flourish where names and tribal lineages are an identity, not a social order.

However, the military and non-military decision-makers currently working in Afghanistan, who understandably do not have the same sort of time for deep ethnographic inquiry, make an attempt to be culturally sensitive and in doing so take for granted that tribalism means hierarchy. When an important figure shows up on the radar with a tribal last name, claiming to represent a certain tribe, they take him at his word and engage him as a significant leader. When there are small-scale (or large-scale) conflicts between Afghans, everyone is quick to point out the tribal nature of the dispute rather than looking deeper into the usually everyday, neighbourly sources of disagreement. To be fair, many high-level Afghan officials and commentators make the same mistakes as either they come from a very different part of the country or from a socio-economic class that makes rural social dynamics as foreign to them as it is to us.

These misunderstandings are further muddled by the fact that there is a pretty significant translation problem involved the word tribe itself. When CF ask about tribe, it gets translated as *qawm*. This, like similar terms used in other languages in Afghanistan, does not mean tribe so much as some kind of "solidarity group."<sup>14</sup> It is a flexible identity and can be based on location, ethnicity, linguistic groups, patron-client relations, or occupation as much as kinship,<sup>15</sup> meaning that when you ask about someone's *qawm*, you very rarely get the kind of answer you expect. However, for an unbiased observer, the answers you do get can be very revealing about how people choose to identify and organize themselves in ways that go beyond the tribalism that so many are inclined to focus on.

At any rate, my case against studying tribalism was not helped by the fact that in early 2010, several members of the greater Zadran region decided to hold a Zadran "unification" *shura*, thereby affirming their cohesion and organization in the minds of the foreign military and civilian forces in the area. However, *shuras* rarely amount to any sort of decisive or tangible outcome (they are more forums to allow widespread consultation and engagement by giving everyone a turn to speak), and this one appears to have been no different, as we shall see below. For all the *shura*'s bold claims, Pashtuns in the east just do not organize that way.

---

<sup>12</sup> Barfield. "Weapons of the Not-So Weak," Pp. 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, F. "Segmentary Opposition and the Theory of Games: A Study of Pathan Organization," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. 89 (1): 1959. Pp. 5-21.

<sup>14</sup> Roy, O. "Afghanistan: Back to Tribalism or on to Lebanon?" *Third World Quarterly* 10(4): 1989, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Tapper, R. "Ethnicity, Order, and Meaning in the Anthropology of Iran and Afghanistan," in J.-P. Digard (ed) *Le Fait Ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*. Paris: Editions du CNRS. 1988, p. 27; Shahrani. "War, Factionalism and the State" p. 717; Roy, O. *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War*. Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press. 1995, p. 108.

## ZADRAN UNITY?

Zadran are by no means the majority identity group in the Loya Paktiya area, just the one of the biggest focuses for GIRoA and CF partners. In my experience, most people in this region have the same understanding of tribalism and organize themselves in similar fashions—that is, tribalism is an identity not a pattern for society, and villages are the basis for authority and real decision-making. The Zadran Arc, though, covers a good bit of territory, spanning three provinces and roughly nine districts, and is made up of some 300 sub-tribes. Much of Loya Paktiya borders Pakistan, so many Zadran served as *mujahidin* during the Soviet occupation, giving them strong ties with the Pakistani regime and Inter-Services Intelligence. Much of the Haqqani’s current basis for cooperation and loyalty is borne of having fought together in the past, rather than some vague notion of tribalism.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the precedence of local or historical ties over tribal ones, on February 10, 2010, some local notables held a Zadran tribal shura with the stated intent of achieving tribal unification, providing local security especially for the Khost-Gardez Road paving project, and cooperating with GIRoA. It was attended by several GIRoA and Afghan Security Forces officials, including the Deputy Minister of Interior, and was chaired by Pacha Khan Zadran. About 280 elders from around the Zadran region participated. It was the third such event, with the first two having much smaller audiences of 30 and 50 elders. At the end of the day, the shura came to a consensus on unity and security, agreed to fight the Taliban,<sup>17</sup> and decided to hold further shuras to continue working with GIRoA and ANSF.

International observers initially hailed this shura as a grassroots attempt to utilize traditional forms of authority and social organization to interact with the government. They hoped that it would lead to the reintegration of a somewhat problematic population into the fold of GIRoA. Some were sceptical, though, saying early on that this shura seemed as likely to be a political ploy on the part of key leaders for their personal gain and power, as many of the attendees were cronies of a handful of men, including Pacha Khan. As a Parliament Member whose power was waning (he lost his re-election bid later in 2010), he was doing anything he could to stay in the political spotlight. As mentioned above, in the Pashtun egalitarian-based ideology, it is hard for any one man to hold power long.

It was over a year before anyone began to speak of trying to hold another one. This one was almost blatant in its political nature, as rather than planning on holding it in a district in the centre of the Zadran Arc, the planners intended for it to be well into Khost. With travel time and tough road conditions, few would have the means to travel that far to attend, ensuring the audience was a select one. As it happened, even the local Zadran elders showed so little interest that it fell through, indicating that even they though such a show of “unity” had no real value or meaning.

---

<sup>16</sup> Gopal, A., M.K. Mauhsud, and B. Fishman. “Inside the Haqqani Network,” *Foreign Policy* 3 June 2010.

<sup>17</sup> The generic name most Afghans use to refer to any and all insurgents.

## ZADRAN LEADERS?

Pacha Khan Zadran actually made a pretty convenient interview topic, as many Zadran knew him at least by reputation. After he lost the election, he managed to rally enough men to stage a protest and cut off traffic on the main highway in the region, which indicates he still had at least some influence. This ability to mobilize people might indicate he still had some lingering authority, or at least enough prestige to draw some men, so it was one way to gauge the types and levels of local power structures.

In Wazi Zadran, Pacha Khan's home district, everyone knew of him and most said they had voted for him. That is no surprise as he was also the Governor in Paktiya Province, and as of 2011 his son is the District Governor there. However, after a little bit of asking, most people admitted that, even locally, Pacha Khan is really more a figurehead than anything else. He may have once had more power to get people to do things, but most interviewees felt that he was well past his heyday and had lost much of the prestige and power that his days as a mujahidin commander had earned him. The sense is that he is now an old man trying desperately to hold on to something of his former glory. He is someone to be respected certainly, but not to be obeyed.

In other districts, Pacha Khan Zadran was also a household name. People always nodded when I spoke about him and never needed any explanation of who he was, even outside of Paktiya. They said, however, that he had no influence over them, nor had he ever. Beyond that, every person I interviewed said that there was *no one* in their area that made claims to represent all Zadran the way he did, because there was no uniting the Zadran—they were too individualistic and disparate. No single person could accurately represent them, not even over smaller sub-regions. And more than one respondent told me that, “Pacha Khan is where he is because of money. It's not tribalism. He got rich and that's why people follow him.” For them, the isolated, egalitarian ideal holds true.

## ZADRAN TRIBALISM

The obvious questions, then, are where does authority lie and how do individuals get into and remain in power? When I asked what people do when they have a problem or need help (as the ability to resolve disputes is a key indicator of real influence), the overwhelming number of respondents said that they would go to their village elders. In the case of conflicts between villages, elders from each would meet to try and resolve them or, alternatively, people said they would then take their complaints to the district government. This last is also what people said they would do if the elders could not come to a decision acceptable to both parties.

The source of their authority is popular approval. It is not enough to be old to be an elder, but a man must be



Figure 4: Meeting with Zadran Elders, Spera District, Khost

Kathleen Reedy

wise, fair, and preferably somewhat educated. He proves this by making decisions, and people indicate their acceptance of his leadership by continuing to go to him with a problem. Most villages will have an elder for every 5-10 families, so bigger villages may have quite a few. Another indication that an elder is legitimate is his ability to mobilize the village or people within it. In Shabak Khel, Shewak District, the police chief complained that the elders who claimed to represent the village in the district shura were not true elders. His proof was that, “if we wanted to recruit local men for the police and they promised to do so, no one in the village would listen to them. They don’t have the ability to convince the men of their village to do anything.” But even for real elders, the line was drawn at the edge of the village—there were no over-arching, hierarchical elders who could mobilize or represent the Zadran.

For instance, in Shamal District, I spoke with some men who said that their sub-tribe covered several small villages in a nearby area. When they have problems, they go to their village elders. There are no elders that have any kind of authority over the tribal grouping—if conflicts between villages broke out, representatives from each would get together to work it out rather than turning to some kind of “next-level up” elder. In Spera District, however, in the town of Shadal, I spoke with a man who said that there were in fact elders for a local sub-tribe that similarly covered several villages. When I asked if they helped solve problems or they had to be listened to, he scoffed, saying that kind of authority was only for village elders. They would take into consideration any recommendations these tribal elders would make and they were respectful of them and their opinions, but they were in no way beholden to them and would only act on their recommendations if they coincided with what the village wanted to do anyway.

What Zadran do have, though, is a sense of tribal identity. Most would list Zadran as one of their array of answers to the “*qawm*” question. There is a certain pride in being a Zadran. There are lines of prestige within and across communities that earn some people an automatic respect. Such tribal “elders” do not necessarily wield any tangible authority, but they would be heard out if they chose to say something. But as I suggested above, identity and social organization are not synonymous, especially when it is only one of many identities they choose to embrace. For the Zadran, it is their identity as a villager that matters most for decision-making and wielding real influence. Anything more than that is just something neat they have in common. As Zadran interviewees told me time and again, at the end of the day, “it’s just a name.”

## CONCLUSION

As the Government of Afghanistan and Coalition Forces attempt to find a path to reconciliation and reintegration of insurgents into mainstream society, they hope to find local leaders and natural organizations that can bring large numbers of insurgents and community members to the table. They are also looking for ways to combat the supposed “natural” support for the Haqqanis in the Zadran Arc by propping up other leaders to provide a Zadran alternative.

Kathleen Reedy

However, relying on such a top-down approach to counterinsurgency, reconciliation and even local governance assumes that Zadran society is defined by a hierarchical tribalism that has singular leaders capable of commanding the respect and actions of many sub-tribes. Nor is this limited to Zadran—different tribal identities across the eastern region behave and organize themselves along the same patterns. Indeed, for any traditional Pashtuns, relying on tribal maps and self-identified “leaders” may lead to ostracizing or disenfranchising the rest of the population. Leaders amongst the Pashtuns are first amongst equals, and even the position of village elder is flexible and must be continuously reaffirmed by a judgmental population.

It is villagers, then, who make decisions about who to support and in what ways, according to what is best for their village. If we want to engage “local authority” in an attempt to strengthen GIROA and undermine the insurgents, outreach should focus at the village, not the “tribal,” level. Repeated attempts to make maps of tribes and lists of key tribal leaders will only stymie our efforts and lose our already tenuous support. Village-ism, not tribalism, is what reigns in Eastern Afghanistan, so if we want to win over the population, we will have to do it the hard way—one village, one person at a time.

i

*Kathleen Reedy\***Ph.D. in Social Anthropology*

---

\* The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors and do not reflect necessarily the thought of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence