



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Muslim Tribes and the War on Terror

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed

Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, American University in Washington, DC; Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Chair: Professor Lord Tony Giddens

Life Fellow, London School of Economics

25 June 2013

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Tony Giddens:

Good evening everybody; my name is Tony Giddens. I'm former director of LSE. It's my great pleasure to introduce Ambassador Akbar Ahmed.

Akbar is Ibn Khaldun chair of Islamic Studies at the American University in Washington, DC.

His most recent book is part of a, to me, really powerful trilogy on America and the Muslim world. The title of the book, which he tells me to say is available at all good bookstores across the world, is *The Thistle and the Drone*. It's a terrific title because the thistle refers to the kind of stubborn and resilient nature of tribal societies, based on ancient customs, and the thistle is a metaphor that he took from Tolstoy. Then you have the thistle up against the drones, the kind of symbol and reality of American power – and, as Akbar says, 'misapplied power', in his book. What he argues in his book is that what is going on between the West and these societies is not a clash of civilizations; that's a mischaracterization of it. For him, it's a division between very traditional societies with codes of honour and value on the one hand, and the most modernized society in the world – the United States – on the other. Therefore it has this poignant kind of symbiotic yet conflictual relationship.

Akbar argues there are not just two but three elements involved really in the so-called 'war on terror' and its extension into the era of drones: tribal societies themselves; then there are the central governments which are supposed to administer them; and then there is the United States. So you have a kind of symbiotic but conflictual relationship between three institutions there. At the same time, the whole thing has become globalized and you couldn't find a better example of one aspect of globalization than drones themselves, which are themselves in a way quite extraordinary. Akbar argues however that the US – it can know everything through drones, because you can send surveillance drones which can look in your window while you're in the bathroom, for example, at night, because they've got infrared cameras. So the US knows everything but understands nothing, is essentially what Akbar says about the societies which are involved. This is serious, dramatic and bloody confrontation.

Myself, I've done some work on drones in the context of what I was writing. I have to say, they are the most extraordinary technological developments going on. The future of war is robotized war. If you look at industrial production, it's completely amazing what things can be put in the hands of robots now, transforming industrial production. Also they've now got robots

that almost look like you and me; as long as you're about 10 feet away from them, you can't actually tell that they're robots at all. So it's a bit like going back to *Blade Runner* in some sense.

What the US is planning is a kind of merger of 3D printing, digital manufacture, and armaments while it's on the move. So the US is planning to use 3D printers on its boats, so that it will be able to print essentially drones and other vehicles of war without calling into port – also a quite remarkable change in the kind of structure of warfare.

The title of the talk is 'Muslim Tribes and the War on Terror'.

Welcome again, Akbar.

Akbar Ahmed:

Thank you, Lord Giddens, for that very warm introduction and for agreeing to chair this session. So many of your books have been seminal in my own research, particularly *Runaway World*.

My focus today is, of course, tribal societies: Muslim tribal societies and their central governments. I will be, however, raising some bigger issues emerging from this discussion – issues of religion, ethnicity, leadership, codes of behaviour, the war on terror, the emphasis on security and terrorism. Issues that really, in a sense, involve all of us while we are talking of tribal societies across the world. But perhaps the biggest issue, for me, emerging from this study is the philosophic one of looking at the very nature of the world we are living in, in this part of the 21st century. How do we deal with 'the other' – the other in the most profound sense, that is, tribal society? Go back to the Greeks, the fountainhead of Western civilization. If you recall, the Greeks looked at anyone outside the boundaries of Athens really and described them as barbarians, primitive, savage, backward. Over time and the arc of history, these very concepts have been used by central governments looking at peripheral or tribal societies.

Where my discipline, anthropology – and Lord Giddens' related subject, sociology – help us look at these societies, it is because both these subjects provide a comprehensive overview, or 360-degree look, at these societies. Particularly in discussion of tribal societies, anthropology allows the anthropologist to juxtapose a variety of societies and then draw general conclusions – particularly what anthropologists call the segmentary lineage system, a special kind of tribe, with ancestry which is common, clans, an awareness of a mutual identity, a developed code of honour. These tribes –

and here's a very important point to remember – are not something from the past. They are not something that you would see in a John Wayne movie where he is chasing people on horseback who are shooting arrows at him. These tribes are live. They are from nations. The tribe has just become the modern nation. Saudi Arabia – the entire peninsula is named after the Saudi tribe. Afghanistan, as you at Chatham House are no doubt aware, is from Afghan, the people, Pashtun people, so the entire country is called Afghanistan, the land of the Pashtun people. Balochistan, the land of the Baloch people. So you can see how territory is equated to tribe.

After 9/11, however, the notion of the clash of civilizations dominated the world in terms of analysis. Many commentators asked: what is happening? Why do they hate us? Why did they do this dreadful deed on 9/11? The answers came very quickly and, I think, very superficially, which is: it's the clash of civilizations. The clash of civilizations already has a basis. It is over several thousand years, a basis of conflict between Greece and Persia, between the West and East, Europe and the Asian world, Christianity and Islam. So it fed into an already-existing psychological basis of how we look at each other.

Then, of course, the arrival of the drones; 9/11 allowed us then to see and analyse the impact of the drones on tribal societies. Here is a correlation for you. Ask yourselves: where are the drones most used? They are really segmentary lineage systems: the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan tribal areas, mainly in Waziristan; among the Somali segmentary lineage system; the Yemenis' segmentary lineage system; the Kurds in eastern Turkey, segmentary lineage systems; the Tuareg in West Africa, segmentary lineage systems. An immediate correlation. So there is some connection that we can identify.

The book itself looks at 40 case studies, and not only looks at them in a contemporary frame but goes back in history. So the last thousand years: the period of the emirates' very loose control over the tribes, the tribes able to perpetuate themselves and create a kind of stability for themselves. These tribes, the 40 case studies that the book looks at, range from societies in Morocco right across North Africa and central-east Africa, Middle East societies and nations, and into the Caucasus. Then also societies in the southeastern part of Asia: the Philippines, for example.

So we look at the first stage, the emirates, where you had some kind of loose Islamic rule or administration – very, very loose. So tribal Islam and emirate

Islam, or orthodox Islam, coexisted in a fairly comfortable manner, tribal Islam often dominating the behaviour of these tribes.

Then came the colonial era, starting in the 18th and 19th centuries. That, of course, immediately created tensions between the periphery and the centre, the colonial centre. Here we have the first change in the dynamic of these tribes dealing with powers outside the boundaries, the notion of the centre and the periphery. These encounters were really brutal. If you read the case studies, they involved massive dislocation, killing, murder and all kinds of terrible things.

Then comes the third phase, which is the post-colonial modern state. The people on the periphery felt that we are now part of a nation-state; these are fellow Muslims or fellow tribesmen or people would recognize us, and therefore an assumption that they would have more sympathy, more understanding from the new centres. In fact, this did not happen. If you look at the history of Iraq with Saddam Hussein, if you recall his main victims are the Kurds, tribal; Baghdad, the centre. If you look at Gaddafi, his capital facing the Benghazi, the eastern Cyrenaica people who are also very tribal. So again you see the same pattern being repeated in many of these countries, although now it is a very different dynamic. You have Muslim rulers looking at Muslim tribes. So the notion of jihad is now completely changed and scrambled and shifted. Turkey, a Muslim nation; the capital, Ankara, looking at the Kurds – Muslim/Muslim. Yet the acts of conflict and brutality and so on – and this comes right up to our own times.

Then the fourth era in analysing these societies, and we've done this to all 40 case studies, is really 9/11 and the present era. This is an era of uncertainty. It's an era of confusion: no one seems to know who is doing what to whom. We are not even sure who is fighting these wars and what kinds of robots or technologies or creatures are actually fighting it. We are hearing developments which are almost science fiction, but it's happening, it's real.

For the tribesmen, the drone is the final crossing of every line in terms of warfare. They have no way of combating it. It comes out of the blue, it buzzes overhead – and this is on the basis of a lot of studies and a lot of interviews – and terrorizes the population. So while the bad guys, the militants, are killed, the entire population – women and children particularly – cannot sleep at night because it is buzzing overhead. As a result, many, many thousands of these people have just escaped. Women taking their kids and going down to a shantytown in a bigger city and trying to escape the violence, and finding equal violence in those places. Terrible stories. The Somali escaping one

area, arriving in the capital, being met by Somali uniformed soldiers who then proceed to rape the women. So you can imagine what ordinary tribal women and men who are not involved in the violence are now experiencing as a consequence of all this disruption.

I do want to emphasize that I am not analysing this in simplistic, West versus East, or US-bad/Muslim world-good analysis at all. The three points of the triangle, as Lord Giddens pointed out, are all complicit in this, including the tribes and the tribal people and their leaders. The militants are coming out of tribal society.

What we do know is that in spite of efforts to calm the situation, we have these terrible, tragic occurrences happening over there and over here – as you saw recently in London, as we saw in the United States in Boston. So the spillover, if you like, the emotions, the ideologies spilling over of those confrontations are constantly reminding us that there is a problem. And if there's a problem – and I'm speaking now as a former administrator in charge of Waziristan. I was in charge of three divisions in Balochistan, and that's a huge chunk of Pakistan. I can say that it's not working. If I, as a lawman, as the senior-most executive in the field, am facing a law-and-order situation and over 10 years later you come to me and say, 'We still have the same problem, we need to use more force', I would say: use some other tactic, this is not working.

So in order to understand this, I would say the first thing we need to do is to look at the tribal code of honour. Among the Pashtuns it's called Pakhtunwali. Every one of the tribes that we studied has a similar code, named after the tribe. Pakhtunwali, Pashtun, the land of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and north Pakistan. Pakhtunwali really means 'the way of the Pakhtun', or the Pashtun. This emphasizes honour, hospitality, courage – and above all, revenge. Now, note this and follow the logic. There's a saying among the Pakhtun: 'I took revenge after a hundred years, and I took it too quickly.' Fathers passed this on to their sons: I can't take revenge; you take revenge for me. It becomes an obligation. This is tribal. I want to emphasize this. This is not Islamic, so you mustn't confuse Islam as a source and tribalism as a source. But it is a reality, and this reality we must confront.

There are other aspects of tribal society. We must not romanticize tribalism. It is a very great danger. The British – and I had the privilege of knowing and working with some of them who worked in these areas – have been partly responsible in glamorizing the tribesmen. There are harsh aspects, particularly dealing with women. The educational system doesn't exist. The

literacy rates for tribal women in the tribal areas of Pakistan are absolutely shocking. It is almost zero. How is a society expected to pass on its values to the next generation when the mothers have zero literacy rate? And the men are not much better, maybe five per cent, 10 per cent. Huge challenges.

The three pillars of authority that existed in my time in Waziristan, for example, were clear. The first: based in the tribal elders, and their authority came from their lineage – everyone knew who they were, they were the son of so-and-so, the grandson of so-and-so, and so on. They participated in the *jirga*, or the council of elders. Then the mullah. The mullah's authority was the madrasa and the mosque, but traditionally his role was to mediate, bring people together. Then the central government, the political agent, representing central government authority. My view really was that of the central government's representative, as political agent – but aware that without the other two pillars, I could not succeed. This is one of the most significant, I think, contributions of British imperialism to administration at that time and in that context – and, by and large, successful.

9/11 happens and in the tribal areas of Pakistan, particularly Waziristan, several significant developments take place which change the structure forever. In 2004 the Pakistan army comes into Waziristan with full force: 100,000, 120,000 men. That's a huge number, it's an invading army. This is Pakistan's territory; this is not foreign or hostile territory. The drone strikes start in 2004. Drones have killed almost 3,500 people in Waziristan, and it's reached a point where the new prime minister, in his first public speech, actually said: this is the top priority in my government, to stop the drones. And Imran Khan – you know him as the famous cricketer; he's now a serious politician in Pakistan, a contender for the prime ministership in the future – he has actually said: the first order I will give as prime minister is to shoot down the drones.

So we are seeing the stage set for a future confrontation between allies: the United States, the West, the UK, NATO, and Pakistan. In that region, in that environment, with American troop withdrawal taking place, with all the tensions of that region, all the superpowers interested in fishing in troubled waters – we have all the powers in the region, China, India, Iran, Russia, all interested in that region – we cannot have these cracks between the allies. Pakistan is a major non-NATO ally.

So you can see there are serious issues involved. It's not a simplistic, good/bad kind of analysis that will allow us to understand them. Take a look at the three pillars of authority. The elders – in Waziristan alone, something

like 400 elders have been killed. In the tribal areas, something like 800. This is, to me as an anthropologist and a former administrator – 800 killed in tribal society, with their sparse populations, is like decapitating an entire society. You've just chopped their head off. So the tribal elders – gone. The mosques and the religious leaders are deliberately attacked by the militants. Mosques are blown up – the imam was preaching mediation and conciliation, is killed. Again, the second pillar. The third pillar, the political agent, physically cannot be in these areas because of the violence in the area. And the impact on ordinary people is devastating. If you want to know more, read the UN reports, the New York University–Stanford reports. Read the interviews in this book, which will tell you how ordinary people are now reacting to the events.

And I hate to say this, because there can be no exoneration, no justification, no sympathy for terrorism in any form, but I hate to say this: the notion of revenge is now paramount. When we heard of the tourists being killed recently, just a couple of days ago in Pakistan, foreign tourists, what was the statement given by the militants? They didn't say Islam, the glory of Islam and the greatness of Islam. They said: we are taking revenge for the drone strikes. Straight cause and effect: revenge. They have gone, the militants, into mosques, into GHQ. They've attacked the naval headquarters in Karachi. They have played havoc in Pakistan. Every time they shoot a six- or 10-year-old kid, they will say: we want you to know how we feel in our homes. So it's not a random act of violence, it's a very deliberate act of cruelty. But unless you understand the background, you are not going to understand why they are speaking like that.

Take a look at these mutant militant groups that are emerging: the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), for example. Where is it coming out of? It's coming out of a specific tribe, a specific clan. Al Shabaab: tribal. Tribal: Boko Haram in West Africa. Again, because we tend to jump on Islam as the explanation for what's going on, we are missing this whole tribal basis of the discussion. All of these are coming out of straight SLS (segmentary lineage system) backgrounds.

When Wali Khan, one of the tribal leaders of Pakistan, was asked – and I want you to remember this, those of you interested in the subject – to talk about his identity, he was asked about his identity, he said: I have been a Pashtun/Pathan/Pakhtun for 6,000 years; a Muslim for 1,300 years; and a Pakistani for 25. This was in the early 1970s. So the three layers of his identity, he has clarified that. His first identity is ethnic; second, Muslim, religious; and the third is national. In the West, of course, where the modern state is developed and taken for granted, ethnicity, identity and so on really

comes from the state. You are American or you are British and so on. Here, he's pointing out the nuances in identity.

Yet we miss this point in the analysis. Take the hijackers and Osama bin Laden; 18 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 are Yemeni tribesmen. Ten of these are from the tribes of Asir. They are Yemeni. They happened to be in Saudi Arabia but they are Yemeni tribesmen. Bin Laden himself, Yemeni tribesman. All his rhetoric – read his rhetoric, read his poetry, the poetry he quotes: it's about honour, about raiding, it's courage, it's revenge, it's a man charging with a sword in his hand. These are all very tribal images. A Muslim scholar would not speak in this vein, a Muslim scholar from Al-Azhar or the great Islamic centres, because they would emphasize compassion and understanding and bringing peace. The last two houses that bin Laden lived in: they are called Ghamdi House in Afghanistan; in Abbottabad it is called Waziristan House. These are tribal. If he was truly representing an Islamic vision, he would have called them Mecca House and Medina House, the holiest cities for Muslims. These are clues that we need to pick up and allow us to then come to some conclusions.

Another point to emphasize is the very unhappy – even, I would say, the breakdown of – relations between the centre and the periphery in the modern state in the Muslim world. In that, the onus is on the central governments in these countries. The problems of Waziristan are not the problems of Washington or London; they are the problems of Islamabad. Islamabad has to repair its house. It has to establish its writ in the tribal areas and it has to do so fairly quickly. Simply using force and allowing the Americans to use force and then denying the use of force and so on, will not do. It's been over a decade and the violence is not abating.

Therefore, the central government has to be part of this dialogue and understanding. Yet the Pakistan government now confronts a crisis in Balochistan, where there is a simmering underground movement – and sometimes not so underground – for independence, and a full-scale assault from the sections of the tribal areas that we call the TTP. They are playing havoc in Pakistan. Recently, you may have read the news: they blew up the residency, the last house, in which Mr Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, lived. That is such an iconic building for Pakistanis because Jinnah is the founder of Pakistan and the most respected icon of Pakistan, and yet that building was blown up. Women were blown up in a bus and then these militants followed them to a hospital and killed them. This is crossing all lines. This is neither Islam, this is neither tribal behaviour, codes of honour. This is a breakdown, a mutation. This has to be checked and stopped. It is in the mutual interest of

the capitals of the West and the capitals in the Muslim world, and the solution is not more violence and more violence and more violence, because it has not resulted in anything after over a decade.

Let me try to draw some conclusions. We have examples in the 40 case studies where the relationship between centre and periphery can be harmonious, even with a troubled background. Aceh in Indonesia provides an example. In Indonesia, you have a very troubled relationship between the centre and the province of Aceh. All the ingredients are there: code of honour, tribal background to society, resistance to the centre, lots of violence on both sides. And then the tsunami hits Indonesia, you recall, a few years ago. The tsunami comes as a terrible devastation but also as a miracle, because both mainstream Indonesian society and the people of Aceh are shocked, and they are shocked into realizing where they've got to. So as a result, a process of peace begins, and today you have some harmony.

Let me conclude by reminding ourselves in this great institution that there is a vision of society. To me, as someone coming from Washington, I can say with great pride that it exists in the vision of the Founding Fathers. They are always inspiring, if you read Washington or Jefferson or Franklin; you are amazed at that vision. I know they had problems with slavery and women and so on but this is the late 18th century, it's a different time. Take a look at what's happening in other parts of the world. That vision includes human rights, civil liberties, freedom, knowledge – above all, civility. The only book that Washington writes has the word 'civility' in its title.

America has something to give to the world. These tribal societies on the periphery have always responded to that vision of America. The Kurds in north Iraq, the Albanians and so on, groups throughout the world, have responded to that. Today, unfortunately, what they are seeing is the drone. That is the face of America they are going to see, until of course the *Terminator 4* or *5*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger, comes back in the form of a robot and begins to kill people, and that is the next step.

So I will end by quoting a favourite quotation from the Jewish sages, which is what is needed today: *tikkun olam*, to go out and heal a fractured world. It is a fractured world, certainly, the world of the tribal societies that I'm speaking of. I'm talking, as I said, of 40 case studies and it's very difficult to refute that or to simply say this is a figment of the imagination. They are societies in distress, in turmoil and breaking apart. The consequence of that will involve all of us, because this spans the globe. We need to hold on to this concept of *tikkun olam*. Thank you.