

Review - Fragments of the Afghan Frontier

Written by Mark Beaument

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MARK BEAUMENT, MAY 16 2012

Fragments of the Afghan Frontier

By Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins

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Fragments of the Afghan Frontier combines painstaking recent anthropological field research with extensive historical analysis to assess Afghanistan's frontier regions and people. It takes aim at narrow definitions of the frontier as a 'territorially bounded tract of land that traverses what today constitutes the Afghan-Pakistan border or as a region that is distinct because of its ... tribal composition'[i]. The authors do this in two ways. They extend their definition and their research into areas at Afghanistan's official western and northern edges, and promote mobility and (often extremely localised, overlapping, or contradictory) difference, rather than simplified similarity, as dominant themes. Above all, this book succeeds in showing persuasively how inter-disciplinary techniques combining history and recent social observation deliver nuanced analysis and raise vital hypotheses. Academics, policy makers and field personnel will find much here to test against their own theories and strategies, and against the capacity of their organisations to engage with greater complexity and subtlety.

The book aims to 'explore the significant rupture between the way the Frontier has been conceptualized, mapped and deployed by local as well as colonial states, foreign powers and international organizations and the everyday modes of perceiving, interacting with and profiting from it by the region's people'[ii]. This is a vital area for research,

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addressing the issues facing any agent of formal political order and interaction (based on states, territorial control, borders or centralising government and institutions) seeking influence where these concepts are weak or disputed. Policy makers looking at options for governance, particularly the interface between local and Westernised mechanisms, will find this highly informative. The first three chapters focus on discrete historical examples that expose this further, specifically: the interplay between formal boundary recognition mechanisms and local concepts of allegiance, territory and ownership; the role of reprisal or collaboration in governance techniques, and; managing protest and the relationship between periphery and centre. The following four chapters look in detail at the experiences of Chitral and communities to Afghanistan's north-west in the present day, though I did not see a clear description of when the authors' field research was undertaken, which would have helped future readers place the analysis in context. Here, mobility is explored in great detail, as a lifestyle, and also in terms of migration, and refugee movements away from hardship, and home again. Valuable observations are made about how these movements affect identity, population control, displacement and relationships with formal state structures. The authors use a range of data and techniques to show that despite ethnographic differences (for example in tribe or ethnicity) these north-western communities are in fact similar to the areas near the formal border with Pakistan that are more traditionally – and for the authors, incorrectly – defined as the frontier.

So, how useful is this book? The style is very readable, and accessible to newcomers to the subject and region, while also posing subtle and detailed concepts and questions to the more experienced. Hopkins (an historian) and Marsden (an anthropologist) collaborate throughout the book, and this alliance within chapters between ethnography and history – and methodologies from each discipline – is powerful, forcing the reader to question and think critically in real-time about their own preferred explanations for the historical events and observations described. This approach is novel, and yields strong advantages, especially for policy makers and readers looking for specific points to challenge real-world strategy and implementation. In this, I found *Fragments of the Frontier* both more challenging and more useful than many volumes in which chapters from different disciplines are collected together but presented separately, or single discipline books which signpost other fields. For academic readers especially, there is great value in exploring the possibilities allowed by such inter-disciplinary methodologies and analysis, to critique (or add weight) to the more common explanations advanced by Western schools of politics and international relations. Accessing oral histories and using social observation, sometimes centuries after the events being studied, is by no means perfect. However, this method casts an alternative light on reasons why Western actions, policies or (social and political) structures may have been accepted, ignored or resisted in the past, and how policies based on lessons from history may be received now. So it is a strong technique when studying areas for which there are few written records of local origin to place against the dominant Western narrative.

Throughout the book there are many hypotheses to test, and warnings to note, for those engaged in the region today. Chapter 1 (that addresses the Persian-Afghan-British boundary discussions in response to the Goldsmid mission of 1870-1872) provides both an historical review of how this took place (largely from written archives) but is counterpointed with social research showing that local people place a low value on legal casework and mapping, yet ultimately try to exploit them within their own local power relationships. There are helpful snapshots for those working on politics, and especially on how to turn a temporary military dominance in to sustainable, locally-led political progress. For example, Europeans (or Westerners) tend to judge political control largely through “the exclusive control of territory”[iii]. Yet, political authority in the Durrani lands was based on tribute, to the extent that “tributary polities formed relationships with multiple overlords, creating overlapping layers of authority, allowing them to play suzerains off against one another”[iv] and so the “overlords’ concern focused on the obligations that tributary relationships entailed, rather than land and its control”[v]. The later, ethnographic chapters explore the decisions available to mobile Afghans, especially the role that formal state structures and institutions (for example, Western immigration systems, in Chapter 7) play in moderating or polarising motivations to take those options. Chapter 6 focuses on Muslim identity, showing again why that single label unhelpfully obscures the way “people living in this expansive trans-regional setting frequently shift between very different indexes and ways of being Muslim during their daily lives”[vi]. This hedging of one's bets, in identity, location, profession and religion is a common theme throughout the research, and is a powerful warning to anyone operating with policies or data collection and categorisation mechanisms that do not allow this plurality.

The grand scope of the work does raise some challenges. The authors show successfully that their academic

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approach yields a complex, nuanced picture of the (now expanded) frontier. The book really demonstrates that “one of the striking features of the region is the extent to which very small differences signal major differences in culture, religious life and political disposition”[vii] and that it is “composed of a collage of interlinked and overlapping space ... and complex and shifting identity formations”[viii]. However, to achieve this, the detailed analysis is spread across both time and geographical area. This limits the persuasiveness for policy makers, as no specific theme or geographical region is assessed in enough detail, or over enough time, to challenge entrenched positions. No group of themes or approaches are shown to have greater merit than another in understanding the complexity. The strength of the inter-disciplinary method would also have been more prominent if the footnotes had shown specifically when key social observations were based on the authors’ recent fieldwork in the region.

Overall, this book succeeds admirably in its aim to “contribute to and improve an ongoing conversation” about the nature of the Frontier and “how it should shape present and future engagement”[ix]. The academic collaboration between disciplines and methods is impressively presented. Readers are left in no doubt that the region contains a rich social tapestry and that there are consequences for simplifying the way this variety and fluidity is presented in policy and action in the region. On policy, I was left with two major questions:

1. Are Afghan perceptions of political leadership today linked more closely to what President Karzai’s government requires local leaders to do (or not do) after control is asserted, relative to the demands made by the Taliban and other competing overlords, or the fact that pro-Government armed forces clear and hold areas of territory?
2. Can certain actions (or inactions) by external actors or central government make certain frontier identities and the related outcomes more or less dominant? In simplest terms, when do frontier residents choose swords over ploughshares, and why?

It could be argued, perhaps fairly, that it is for policy makers themselves, and academics in related disciplines such as organisational and confrontation theory, to answer these questions.

It is also important to assess the practical issues (not least, affordability but also command and control, and delegated authority for civilian political leadership) of bringing the greater nuance and subtlety the authors espouse to government and non-governmental interactions with the frontier. It is quite correct to point out the risks in judging Afghanistan’s areas “in terms of their shortcomings vis-à-vis their European contemporaries”, while the relative merits of Captain Robert Sandemann and Colonel William Mereweather’s governance mechanisms discussed in Chapter 2 mirror a wider debate over engagement and collaboration with locals (as part of state building) and policies based largely on the application of military sanctions, aimed at minimising threats to Western interests and domestic security. This debate will refine how relevant a greater understanding of the frontier peoples really is to achieving those policy objectives. I therefore recommend *Fragments of Frontier* to all those seeking techniques to understand the extraordinary human complexity found here, even if the realities of time and resource pressure, and the limitations of policy implementation and deployed organisations make some eventual simplification likely. It will be time well spent: President Obama’s recent Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan is set to last until 2024, and Kashmir, Pakistan’s stability, water shortages in Central Asia and other issues will keep the region in the political spotlight for decades to come.

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[i] P.2

[ii] P.2

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[iii] P.26

[iv] P.28

[v] Ibid.

[vi] P.175

[vii] P.3

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] P.21