

REVIEW OF

“AFGHANISTAN’S POLITICAL STABILITY: A DREAM UNREALISED”

By Ahmad Shayeq Qassem, Ashgate Publishing Limited, UK, 2009-12-17

Why is Switzerland, a small, landlocked country in the middle (more or less) of Europe (a continent second to none in the conduct of wars, civil and continental, where religious and ethnic differences of multiple kinds have been murderously exploited, and the party is not yet over), with 3 clearly distinct population groups, 4 official languages, and the largest population share of resident non nationals anywhere in Europe (and probably in the world) regarded as one of the paragons of democratic stability? And Afghanistan, on the surface not so differently situated, considered to be “a failed State”, “a basket case of ethnic conflict”, “Asia’s equivalent to the Congo”? Are the reasons for the contrast to be found in the topography (though both places are near the centre of the main mountain chains of their regions)? In the religious histories (though Calvin’s record for religious persecution is hard to beat, anti-semitism has frequently appeared, and the recent “minaret scandal” has thrown anti-islamic prejudices into the limelight)? In the natural resources within each country (Afghanistan is certainly richer, so maybe more tempting to outsiders)? In the fact that Switzerland has constructed a Confederation ensuring that no centralised official power base, whether political, financial or military, can exist, while Afghanistan has frequently been tempted by the centralising urge? Or is the answer, if there is one, to be sought in the histories and behaviour of the neighbours which surround them, along with the interplay between those neighbours and the country?

Ahmad Shayeq Qassem’s book, the outgrowth of a PhD thesis presented by the author (a former official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) to the Australian National University, argues strongly that Afghanistan has historically been unstable due to the last of the points mentioned above. Although the book makes virtually no reference to the political stability of other States, a surprising omission in today’s world where most of us could reel off quick lists of at least a couple of dozen countries which would qualify as “unstable”, and thus offers no yardstick of relative comparison, the author clearly considers that Afghanistan’s record is poor. He attributes this to a succession of poisonous political cocktails where the internal and external ingredients have been mixed by barmen not lacking in fantasy yet seriously deficient in understanding what the consumption of such beverages might do to the health of the users. The story is certainly a fascinating one, if not original - most of its elements have been well told by other writers, from both within and outside the region, as the copious footnotes to the book demonstrate. Where Qassem does deviate from several others is precisely in the formulation of the title given to the story. He posits a supposed quest for political stability, and indicates that the dream is unrealised. To understand how this shapes the narrative, we need to reflect on what this approach entails.

There are two key things to understand. First, there is the concept of “political stability”. The opening section of the book reviews points made in several of the standard, Western oriented, texts on geopolitics. These works mainly date from several decades ago, and mostly use examples drawn from Europe and the Americas. The “theories” elaborated in these volumes talk about several distinct, though usually intertwined, factors or components of political stability. A country’s “performance” is the resultant of how its record stands in relation to five main indicators. These are: domestic political violence; longevity of governments; changes in the character of the political system; legitimacy of the political system; and the capacity for effective decision making. In essence Qassem argues that Afghanistan has a poor performance in all 5 dimensions. The prime reason for this is the country’s relations with its neighbours in Central and South Asia. It is their situations which have shaped Afghanistan’s politics (and, to some extent, vice versa).

The thesis has several virtues. It places heavy emphasis on the role, over the past 90 years (since Afghanistan obtained Independence), of the relative autonomy of regional actors (with the exception of China, treated only lightly in the book). Indeed, it was in the first half of that period when the power of the British Empire was on the wane, Russia had transformed into the USSR (a place where the “nationalities question”, already discussed by Lenin before the Bolsheviks seized power, loomed large in the thoughts and actions of Stalin) , and the USA was mostly concerned about Iran. For all the upheavals, this was a time when important and long existing forces in the region had some chances to show their real concerns. Those forces were by no means confined to religious matters, vitally important though these are.

Since the end of the 1939-1945 wars, the “opening of political space” to the regional actors has proceeded apace. The end of British India saw the creation of Pakistan, a huge Sunni Muslim neighbour with a large and influential Pushtun population of its own. The creation of Communist China, and the efforts of its political leaders to establish a firm ideological grip even on its Western, predominantly Muslim part, meant that, since the inception of Independent Afghanistan, the country has been bordered by countries of which none espouse the Western, liberal and (with the exception of the US) secular model of society. At end 1970s, the regime change in Iran reinforced the Shi’ite emphasis and pushed aside many, though not all, of the Western tendencies in that country. By the early part of the 1990s, the USSR no longer existed and what was previously a border of close to 2200 km length with a single country, was divided into borders with 3 countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) which, though sharing a number of characteristics, are by no means uniform. In short, over the past 6 decades “who is on the other side of the borders” has altered dramatically for Afghanistan. (The absence of a series of historical maps, tracing how the political contours of Afghanistan and its neighbours have changed over the past century is an unfortunate omission from the book). For all of the 6 States which now share some 5000km of frontiers with Afghanistan, the current political features today are vastly different from what they were one quarter of the way into the 40 year reign of King Mohammed Zahir Shah.

Today’s neighbours of Afghanistan all have serious internal tensions. Indeed, in the course of 2009 the Government in each of them has used violence against some of the population – and each Government employs a strong repressive apparatus to ensure that the domain of political decision making is reserved for a small group. Yet there is also, in each country, an important sense in which a vision of the country is shared by most of the population. That is lacking in Afghanistan. Which brings us to the second matter. What, exactly, is the stuff of the “dream unrealised”? And who is supposed to have this dream?

Qassem himself is at pains, throughout the book, to reiterate two themes which in fact contain the questions just posed. The first of these is ethno-nationalism, which is one way of referring to the “Pushtun push”. The political elite among the Pushtuns in Afghanistan (and those who have resided outside Afghanistan) have long been active in promoting the creation of Pushtunistan. Here is a dream, described in no uncertain terms. But it is not a dream about Afghanistan. In fact, its realisation implies that a substantial part of the territory now within the boundaries of Afghanistan would belong to a different country. It also implies that the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan – the Durand Line drawn by the British at the end of the 19th Century – would have to go. Now that is something which Pakistan is not prepared to accept. For the last many years, and thanks primarily to the opportunities presented by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan has perceived Afghanistan as a client State. Yet this client State has proved troublesome, especially during the first decade of the 21st Century. What Pakistan does not need, and will not tolerate, is the creation of two States, one called Pushtunistan and the other being the remainder of what is now Afghanistan. One important reason why Pakistan would be unhappy is that its own economic

interests in Central Asia transit through the north of Afghanistan – and that would not belong to any Pushtunistan.

So if we leave aside the bulk of the Pushtuns, say 30% of Afghanistan's population, who is supposed to have the dream of Afghanistan's political stability? On the most optimistic interpretation, the answer would be the amalgam of Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and some other smaller groups. It is probably correct to think that these groups could find a modus vivendi with each other, and would prefer to do that rather than, for example, becoming part of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan or other countries. If this were the case, what sort of political structure might accommodate the needs of these groups, be perceived by them to be legitimate, and have some prospects of sustaining itself (economically as well as politically)?

The response must surely lie with some kind of federal structure, rooted in Islam, where power is shared among the groups, and where foreign policy dispenses with any territorial claims (the irredentism identified by Qassem in regard to the Pakistan frontier is essentially linked with the Pushtunistan dream). The prospective economic viability of such an entity would not appear to be any worse than what has in fact been the situation of Afghanistan throughout the past 90 years. At no stage has the Government been remotely in the position of being able to raise domestically revenue sufficient to undertake much in the way of socially and economically useful activities. If you interview local leaders and groups around Afghanistan, you find that expectations as to what the Government might do to assist the struggle against poverty are practically nil. The large volumes of cash and kind from diverse foreign sources, regional and non-regional, which have entered Afghanistan have mostly been made up of military and security related things. The assistance directly related to economic and social matters per se has generally gone to government and government institutions. The perceived limited impact of that assistance has discredited government and been a contributing factor to political controversies (especially in the post 2001 phase).

Where does this leave us?

In the classic "Great Game" period, Afghanistan was put together as a buffer between Russia and British India. That dream, held by foreign powers, was for a long time realised. In the quarter century from the end of the 1939-1945 wars to the Soviet invasion, the political leaders of the country sought to accomplish some sort of social and economic modernisation along the lines of examples elsewhere in the then "Third World" and to that degree adopted a centralising State perspective. But this effort floundered on the twin rocks of hubris: the Pushtun version, which believed it could realise its dream of a "Pushtunistan within Afghanistan", and the Soviet version, which believed it could finally realise the Russian dream in Central Asia. By the 1990s, both dreams had become nightmares. At that stage, two different dreams had made others starry eyed. Pakistan's pan Islamic vision was burgeoning, while the Islamic State of Afghanistan was believing that it could go it alone. From the onset of the present decade, those two pictures had been shattered, though the Pakistan effort to turn dream into reality continued until very recently. Instead, yet another dream/mission, that of "Enduring Freedom", swept to centre stage. As the decade ends, that dream too has disappeared.

Back to Switzerland. It does not exist because it is a first best solution for any of the constituent groups. It exists because it is, for each of them, the modus vivendi which seems to give them less trouble than there would be under alternative political structures, and is also perceived as inoffensive by the neighbours. In a time period shorter than Afghanistan's Independence it has gone from a place where there was considerable poverty to one where economies can and have flourished. This "lower common denominator" approach has happened in several other European

countries where there are severe internal divisions and, on occasion, significant violence – obvious examples are Italy, Spain, Belgium. In all these European instances, nobody's dreams have been realised, the results are not wonderful, but things could have been much worse.

The peoples within Afghanistan must somehow move economic considerations more to the fore, relative to political and ideological ones. The notion that everyone can have just what they want is one which it is very hard to let go of in any place and at any time. Yet a point is usually reached where the costs, not just to others but above all to those with the dreams, rise so high that the dreams themselves have to be laid aside. The experiences of Afghanistan over the last decades have regularly turned dreams into nightmares. In the neighbouring countries, there has on the whole been a move towards more realism, even if that move has frequently happened only after much suffering. For that reason, there is some hope that Afghanistan's neighbours in Central and South Asia are, in their own ways, following paths marked by realism. If Afghanistan can move in the same direction, then greater political stability could be created.