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Measuring Perceptions about the Pashtun People

By Amin Tarzi and Robert D. Lamb

A Report of the CSIS Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation and
Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

March 2011

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Center for Strategic and International Studies

1800 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006

Tel: (202) 887-0200

Fax: (202) 775-3199

Web: www.csis.org

Absract

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border region is the traditional territory of the Pashtun people, who have experienced a series of wars and other disruptions since the 1970s. Since then, little academic research about this group has been undertaken, although beliefs about Pashtuns affect policies and strategies in the region, including counterinsurgency. This study's purpose was to measure beliefs about Pashtuns among English-speaking policy makers, experts, and other opinion leaders. The authors analyzed 138 articles and 52 interviews and coded them based on how Pashtuns were characterized. Pashtuns were most commonly characterized as proud, victimized, sectarian, tribal, and hospitable; they were not stereotyped as warlike, misogynous, illiterate, conservative, or medieval. Diversity was widely acknowledged, as were changes Pashtuns have experienced in recent decades. Some saw Pashtuns as natural Taliban allies, while others considered them more opportunistic, suggesting competing schools of thought about counterinsurgency: population-centric versus enemy-centric. This study points to a need for more extensive and systematic research.

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Summary

Afghanistan and Pakistan are sites of intense conflict—and intense international interest. Because the epicenter of the Afghan war is along Afghanistan’s southern and eastern border with Pakistan, and because important combatants use Pakistan’s tribal areas for sanctuary, there is correspondingly intense interest in better understanding the people who live in this border region. The dominant ethnic group there is the Pashtuns, who have experienced a long series of wars and other major disruptions since the 1970s. What little academic research has been undertaken about Pashtuns during this period is sorely outdated. Knowledge about Pashtuns affects policies and strategies in the region—including counterinsurgency—so it is important not only to study Pashtuns but also to study what is believed about them.

This report documents the results of a study about beliefs about the Pashtun people. The purpose was to identify the range of perceptions or misperceptions about Pashtun communities by cataloging “stereotypes” about Pashtuns held by English-speaking policymakers, experts, and other opinion leaders. The authors interviewed 52 officials and experts in the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and analyzed 138 articles drawn from recent academic and popular sources.

Pashtuns were most commonly characterized as proud, victimized, sectarian, tribal, and hospitable; they were not stereotyped as warlike, misogynous, illiterate, conservative, or medieval. Pashtun diversity was generally acknowledged, as were the changes Pashtuns have experienced in recent decades. Some saw Pashtuns as natural allies of the Taliban, while others considered them more opportunistic, which suggests there are competing schools of thought about counterinsurgency in the region (i.e., population-centric versus enemy-centric strategies).

The report concludes by noting the absence of broad, deep, and, most importantly, current knowledge about the Pashtuns. Having such knowledge would be a good in itself, but would also help policymakers and strategists avoid having to make untested assumptions about how important populations might respond to different activities—whether military or political.

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Introduction

Afghanistan and Pakistan are sites of intense conflict—and intense international interest. The United States alone has nearly 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, many of whom are tasked with fighting insurgents who are based not in Afghanistan itself but across the border in Pakistan. The Pakistani military has selectively targeted some of those insurgents, while U.S. unmanned “drones” have flown across the border to target others. NATO troops have fought alongside U.S. and Afghan security forces, but their publics are increasingly impatient with the war and the demand is growing for their return home. While American policy makers and strategists recognize the importance of understanding the local environment to winning an insurgency, many have expressed frustration that they still have better information and intelligence about the insurgents than they do about the populations among whom the insurgents hide and recruit. As some of the most intense fighting in Afghanistan is along the southern and eastern border with Pakistan and within Pakistan, in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, there is correspondingly intense interest in better understanding the people who live there. The dominant ethnic group in that region is the Pashtuns.

This report documents the results of a study, not about the Pashtun people, but about *beliefs* about the Pashtun people. The purpose of this study was to identify the range of perceptions or misperceptions of Pashtun communities among policymakers, experts, and other opinion leaders, including some who have a degree of influence over policy and strategy decisions in the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In a sense, it was an effort to catalog Pashtun “stereotypes”—standardized schemes of thought about Pashtuns—and determine the degree to which those stereotypes are held by English speakers with influence over both public opinion and the policies that affect or are affected by Pashtuns.

The first section of the report gives some historical background about the Pashtun people in the region, focusing in particular on the major disruptions that have taken place in those communities over the past 30 years. The second section reviews the method and data that were used to create and analyze a sample of views about Pashtuns. These included 52 interviews in the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, in person or by phone or e-mail, and the review of 138 articles drawn from recent academic and popular sources in English. These 190 sources were coded according to the way they characterized Pashtuns. The third section of the report shows the results of the analysis of that coding, finding that strong stereotypes exist characterizing Pashtuns as being proud, victimized, sectarian, tribal, or hospitable, but that other expected stereotypes were much weaker or refuted entirely. The report concludes by noting the absence of

broad, deep, and, most importantly, *current* knowledge about the Pashtuns, a gap in knowledge that calls for an extensive survey of Pashtun communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and diaspora communities elsewhere.

Having such knowledge would be a good in itself, but it also would help policymakers and strategists avoid having to make untested assumptions about how important populations might respond to different activities—whether military or political—in the Pashtun communities where they are presently operating.

Background

In 1893, a British colonial diplomat named Henry Mortimer Durand was sent to Kabul to meet with the Amir of Afghanistan, Abd al-Rahman Khan, and negotiate a final border agreement. The British and the Afghans had already fought two wars, and the 1893 agreement, signed very reluctantly by Abd al-Rahman, was meant to delineate the frontier between Afghanistan and British colonial India, the region that later became Pakistan. The border has since been controversial in the region, mainly because it runs through an area that is the traditional homeland of an ethnic group whose members used to be called Afghans, were usually referred to as Pathans in British India, and now are most commonly known as Pashtuns. In today's lexicon and according to the Afghan constitution, the word *Afghan* generally refers to citizens of Afghanistan regardless of ethnicity. The word *Pathan* remains the preferred term for Pashtun among Indians and many non-Pashtun Pakistanis, while *Pashtun* is spelled variously *Pakhtun*, *Pakhtoon*, *Pashtoon*, *Pukhtoon*, and, least commonly, *Pukhtun*, depending on the speaker. Today, the Durand Line, as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is commonly known, divides the Pashtun people between the two countries, although most of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is ungarded and thus does little to restrict movement. The border, never formally accepted by successive Afghan governments, has remained a point of dispute and a source of mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad since the formation of Pakistan in 1947.

Beyond the last century's Anglo-Afghan Wars, several more recent Pashtun-led or Pashtun-dominated movements are noteworthy for their regional or global significance. A nationalist movement in the 1950s was dedicated to reuniting the Pashtuns by creating an autonomous state called Pakhtunistan (or Pashtunistan). This movement, originating in the 1940s discussions to divide the Indian subcontinent, was supported by Kabul but strongly opposed by the Pakistani state. In 1978, with a pro-Soviet party in power, and later in the 1980s, after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan were viciously attacked by the Soviets and their Afghan client state. The Pakistani side therefore became host to Afghan refugee camps and recruiting grounds for the Afghan resistance movement, backed by the Pakistani and American intelligence agencies. With the departure of the Soviets, the collapse of the communist government, and the loss of American interest, a many-sided civil war broke out in Afghanistan. The resulting violence and deprivation faced by many Afghans, especially in the Pashtun areas, led to the emergence of still another armed movement, this one involving mainly Pashtun religious students, known as the Taliban, who, with some Pakistani support, managed to take control of most of Afghanistan by the end of the 1990s. By strengthening their ties with Osama bin Laden, who was in Afghanistan at the time, and allying themselves with his al Qaeda

movement, the Taliban opened themselves to opposition by United States and U.S.-backed forces after al Qaeda killed thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001. After losing power, the Taliban and other opposition forces regrouped along the Afghan-Pakistani border, using the Pakistan side as a safe haven for their insurgency against Afghan and international forces, a situation that continues today.

The English-speaking world knows the Pashtun people mostly through the lens of this violent, century-and-a-half history, much of which was told long ago by British soldiers, colonists, and anthropologists and more recently by Americans and Europeans returning from war. Without looking too closely, a picture emerges of the Pashtuns as fierce, warlike, and vengeful, an illiterate tribal society upholding ancient practices such as honor killings and the oppression of women, but at the same time courageous, proud, hospitable, and, perhaps most importantly, undefeated in battle against invaders and occupiers. The British colonial narrative, Pashtun tales, and Afghanistan's historical narrative have been blended with current writings on Afghanistan from American observers, creating a mutually reinforcing picture that, while having facts within it, does not, on balance, adequately capture the current state of Pashtuns.

A closer look shows a different, more complicated picture.

The Persian language has served as the lingua franca in Afghanistan since 1747 when the Pashtuns formed a regional empire in their ancestral homeland. During the 1890s, however, efforts to centralize authority within the Afghan state included the elevation of the Pashto language as part of Afghanistan's national agenda. The promotion of Pashto as the original "Afghan" language gained further momentum after 1919 when Afghanistan shed its dependency on British India for its foreign affairs. This resulted in Pashto being recognized as one of the two official languages of Afghanistan and in the establishment in the 1930s of the *Pashto Tolana*, or Pashto Society, to serve as an academy to preserve and promote that language. In addition, the rise of Afghan nationalism promoted by the Afghan state through literature and other means in the mid-1940s afforded the Pashtuns a voice hitherto unavailable to them.

The idea of Pakhtunistan as the separate homeland for the Pashtuns initially was proposed by Pashtun activists of the *Khudai Khidmatgar*, or Servants of God, movement in the Frontier Province of British India (northwestern Pakistan today). The *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement opposed the separation of India into two states, in line with the policies of the Congress Party of India; however when the Congress Party and the Muslim League agreed on a two-state solution—the separation of British colonial India into India and Pakistan as two independent states—the Pashtuns within British India switched allegiances away from the Congress Party and voted instead for the creation of Pakhtunistan.¹ After the formation of Pakistan as an independent state, the Pashtuns in newly created Pakistan advocated for self-determination for Pashtuns, encapsulated in the Pakhtunistan or Pashtunistan policy.¹ This policy received the official patronage of the Afghan government, which provoked a social and cultural awakening among Pashtuns on both sides of the border. As a result of this process, two distinct yet interconnected narratives emerged on the two sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

On the Afghan side, this nationalistic narrative can be best observed in the growth of Pashto literature in Afghanistan from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Major themes in the works included the division of a mythical Pashtun homeland (i.e., Pashtunistan); social injustice; fear of domination by Iranian culture, especially by the Persian language, in Afghanistan; and the

¹ For more on the *Khudai Khidmatgaran* and a sympathetic perspective on the budding of the Pashtun nationalist movement in India, see D. G. Tendulkar, *Abdul Gaffar Khan: Faith is a Battle* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967).

suppression of the Pashtuns' aspirations for a greater Afghanistan, which existed only in the constructed narrative being formulated at the time. These more left-leaning tendencies among the Pashtun social thinkers and writers concerned the Afghan government; however, Pakistan was viewed as the main threat to Afghanistan's aspirations for greatness and to its achieving its rightful place within the international system. Therefore, Pashtun social thought, even if openly opposed to the Afghan governing system, was tolerated to a large degree.

On the Pakistani side of the border, Pashtun nationalism has been suppressed and regarded by the Pakistani government as a threat. Pashtun societies in both the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) continue to undergo major changes. The most fundamental and perhaps irreversible change within the communities of Pashtuns of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan has been the introduction of an alien Islamist ideology in the 1980s. This, coupled with the subsequent three decades of war waged mostly from their territories, not only has affected the Pashtun worldview, but has systematically deprived them of their traditional leadership in both secular and religious realms.

This more complex understanding is absent in most contemporary discussions of Pashtuns. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, a scholar of Afghan history, explains that the "blended" narrative of Pashtun tribalism, ethnicity, and nationalism has "retained currency" among American academics, without "substantive ethnographic, historical, or theoretical engagement of Pashtuns." This is important because the majority of work by American academics in recent years on Pashtuns, Afghanistan, and Pakistan has been produced to respond to specific military or policy requirements and thus has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the resulting plans and policies. Misunderstandings, therefore, have costly repercussions. Hanifi continues: "The challenges and failures of the international community in Afghanistan evident today are in no small measure founded on the fragile intellectual architecture of nineteenth-century British colonial constructions of knowledge about Pashtuns."² There is a need to update the intellectual architecture and include the Pashtun voice. A useful early step in that agenda is to map out the dominant scheme of thought about Pashtuns that English speakers hold today and to systematically identify the most common misunderstandings or misperceptions about this ethnic group.

Method and Data

Two sets of sources were consulted for this study. First were open-ended interviews (in person, by phone, or by e-mail) of 52 officials and experts in the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Second were the public media, drawing on 192 English-language articles published by academic journals, newspapers, and Internet sites, including reference works and blogs; 54 of those articles were used for the pilot phase only.

² Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "The Pashtun Counter-Narrative," in *Arguments for the Future of Afghanistan: Competing Narratives on Afghanistan*, ed. Amin Tarzi, Arthur E. Karell, Stephanie E. Kramer, and Adam C. Seitz (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2011, forthcoming).

Pilot Phase

A pilot analysis of the public media yielded a set of 14 “stereotypes” after three iterations: first by an intern, then by the intern with input from a junior researcher, and finally by a senior researcher.

To build the pilot dataset, seven electronic databases were searched: EBSCOhost, Google, Google News, Google Scholar, JSTOR, LexisNexis, and ProQuest. The search terms included *Pashtun*, *Pashtoon*, *Pathan*, *Pakhtun*, *Pakhtoon*, and *Pukhtun*; those same terms combined with *tribe*, *ethnicity*, and *people*; and *Pashtunwali*, *Pakhtunwali*, and variants. Several articles were chosen arbitrarily from among the top 10 results from each search and added to the dataset. Additionally, variants on the term *Pashtun blog* and *Afghan blog* were searched via Google, and several of the top results were selected arbitrarily and their most recent entries added to the dataset. The final pilot dataset contained 54 articles.

An intern was instructed to select 10-12 of those articles at random, identify some of the different ways each author described Pashtuns (i.e., to identify “characterizing statements”), and then analyze those characterizing statements to identify between 10 and 20 common themes or stereotypes. This work was reviewed by a junior researcher and then by a senior researcher; the full team met to review the categories and discuss whether any could be combined or whether any were missing. With the junior researcher’s supervision, the intern was then instructed to review all 54 articles and to recategorize them. Finally, the senior researcher tested and refined those categories by independently reviewing those articles. The result was a list of 14 variables and a description of the standards for selecting values for each.

Data

Two new datasets were then developed: an interview dataset and a media dataset.

Interview dataset

The interviews were with public figures only—that is, experts and officials who either shape public opinion through their publications or appearances in the media or who develop public policy (at the national or local levels) in the United States, other English-speaking countries, Pakistan, or Afghanistan; none were private citizens who would qualify as “human subjects” under the standards of the funder’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). A list of interviewees, with descriptions of their positions but not names, is given in Appendix A. These interviews took place in person, over the phone, and through e-mail.

No attempt was made to create an unbiased sample of interviewees. Doing so would have required selecting some randomized sample of the total population of “people who have influence over policies that affect or are affected by Pashtuns,” and no dataset of this international population exists. With enough time and resources, such a dataset could, in principle, be created, and a random sample of that population could then be selected for an interview. It is not clear, however, that the resources that would be needed to develop the full population dataset and to maximize the response rate of the sample would be worth the marginal improvement in sampling validity that this approach would provide over the approach taken here.

That said, the researchers did have a current list of most of the population of officials and experts in Washington, D.C., who work on Pakistan and Afghanistan in some respect, and they did attempt to contact a sample from that list by phone and e-mail for an interview. First, a 37-person sample from the Washington, D.C., dataset was selected arbitrarily, called by telephone, and asked to answer a few brief questions. A larger, 114-person sample was then selected arbitrarily and the interview questions were sent to them by e-mail. All were asked the same set of questions:

- Are you familiar at all with the Pashtuns or Pathans? [If yes, continue.]
- Could you tell me what you know about them?
- What do you think American policymakers should know about Pashtuns?
- Are you aware of any common misperceptions about Pashtuns? [If yes:] Can you give some examples?

The response rate was extremely low, with only 10 answering any of the Pashtun questions in any serious way; those 10 were included in the full interview dataset.

The remainder of the interviewees were selected from the researchers' network of contacts (and from referrals of those in the network) in the United States, United Kingdom, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The network has been developed over several years of research, including field visits, on issues such as governance, militancy, religion, and conflict in those countries. Interviews were held with 173 people in Washington, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Karachi, and Kabul, and all were asked some variant of the following open-ended question:

- What do you think Americans need to understand about Pashtuns?

Some of the interviewees were asked as well to discuss a range of issues related to the researchers' other interests. In addition, three expert roundtables were held in Islamabad involving a total of 17 officials and experts and addressing a wide range of issues that included one or more questions about Pashtuns. Only those interviewees and roundtable participants who discussed Pashtuns were included in the full interview dataset.

For all interviews, detailed notes of the responses were taken. For the largest roundtable (involving nine people), a transcript was made available for analysis.

After excluding those participants who chose not to answer any of the Pashtun questions or whose responses were so unsubstantial as to amount to a non-answer, the live interviews, roundtables, phone conversations, and e-mail surveys yielded a total of 52 unique participants in the interview dataset.

Media dataset

To build the media dataset, it was first necessary to determine the relative weights that the various spellings of the search term should have: for a dataset containing 200 entries, for example, how many of those entries should be those that used the spelling *pashtun*, how many for the spelling *pukhtun*, how many for *pathan*, and so on? A fairly crude method was used to determine the relative weights.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

- First, each of the seven search terms was entered into Google and the number of hits returned was recorded: *pukhtun* returned 59,000 hits; *pashtun*, 884,000; *pathan*, 7,310,000; and so on (see Table 1, first and second columns).
- Second, the relative values of each term were calculated by dividing each hit value by the lowest hit value, which was *pukhtun*: for example, *pakhtoon* had four times as many hits as *pukhtun*; *pashtun* had 15 times as many hits; *pathan* had 115 times as many; and so on (see Table 1, third column, “Google ratios”).
- Third, the same was done using Google News, yielding relative values for those hits as well (because *pukhtun* returned only one hit, the values for total hits and ratio are the same). Google News was included to help account for changes in historical usage: *pashtun* is much more common today than it used to be and so would tend to appear relatively more in a news search than in a general search; *pathan* was the more common term historically, and that would be reflected in the broader search. Because this study is concerned with general perceptions and misperceptions today, it was decided that historical usage had to be counterbalanced with present usage. (See Table 1, fourth and fifth columns, “Google News hits” and “Google News ratios.”)
- Fourth, therefore, the mean of two relative values (Google and Google News) for each search term was calculated (see Table 1, next-to-last column, “Mean ratio”).
- Finally, to determine how many entries of each search term should appear in the final 200entry dataset, the mean ratios were rescaled to total 200. The results are shown in the last column of Table 1, “200 scale.” (The results do not add up to 200, but to 202, due to the need to round the individual ratios to whole numbers.)

Each of the seven search terms was then entered into full-text searches of six databases—EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier, Google, Google News, JSTOR, LexisNexis, and Project Muse—and the results were sorted to put the most recent articles as the top hits. For *pukhtun*, which had the lowest weight (1 article), the single top result from each of the six databases was noted, and of those six, one was selected at random. For *pukhtoon* (2 articles), the top two results from each were noted, and of those 12, two were selected at random. For *pashtoon*, *pakhtoon*, and *pakhtun*, the top five results from each of the six databases were noted, and of those 30, the appropriate number of hits were randomly selected (4, 5, and 11 articles, respectively). For *pathan* (77 articles), the top 13 hits were selected from each database, and of those 78, one was discarded at random. Finally, for *pashtun*, the first 17 hits were selected from each database, for a total of 102 articles. The full media dataset, therefore, included a random selection of 202 recently published or recently posted articles in which Pashtuns (in some spelling or other) were mentioned in the full text. Of these 202, 49 were not relevant (e.g., written by someone named Pathan), 13 were duplicates, and 2 were inaccessible in full text or had been removed from the database; those 64 articles were coded as irrelevant and excluded from the analysis. That left 138 articles in the final media dataset, and these are listed in Appendix B.

The full dataset, therefore, included 52 interviews and 138 articles, for a total of 190 entries to be analyzed.

Method

The text of each article, the written notes from each interview, and the transcript of the roundtable were analyzed to determine whether any mention of Pashtuns (or one of the relevant search terms) was accompanied by any statements *characterizing* the Pashtun people. Some entries (i.e., articles or interviews) mentioned Pashtuns only in passing; those were retained, but all of the variables were marked as containing no data. Of those entries that contained characterizing statements, the objective was to code the statements as being either consistent with (1, or “yes”) or inconsistent with (0, or “no”) one or more of the 14 stereotypes identified during the pilot phase:

- **Conservative.** No: claims or clearly implies that Pashtuns are open to change, modernization, progress, or outside influence, or do not necessarily oppose concepts such as human rights or international law. Yes: claims or clearly implies Pashtuns want to preserve their traditions, insist on conformity, or oppose modern or outside influences.
- **Hospitable.** No: claims or clearly implies Pashtuns are not especially polite, welcoming of strangers or visitors, or willing to protect guests with their lives. Yes: claims Pashtuns are welcoming to strangers or visitors, treat friends and guests well, protect them, etc.
- **Illiterate.** No: acknowledges some diversity in literacy rates, education level, etc. , or claims those rates are higher than people think. Yes: specifically mentions low literacy or education rates.
- **Immutable.** No: acknowledges that some changes in social structures, beliefs, behaviors, culture, etc. have taken place over time. Yes/Implicit: discusses social structures, beliefs, etc. as if they have never changed. Yes/Explicit: claims there have been no such changes.
- **Medieval.** No: describes Pashtuns as accepting of progress and modernity, or offers counterexamples to claims of backwardness. Yes: describes Pashtuns with words such as *backwards*, *throwback*, *medieval*, *premodern*, etc.
- **Misogynous.** No: claims women are not treated poorly, are treated equally, or are satisfied with their treatment, status, rights, etc. Yes: mentions poor treatment, etc. without counterexamples, or claims outright that women are treated poorly, etc.
- **Opportunistic.** No: claims Pashtuns are capable of stable, intergroup loyalties or alliances (military, business, etc.) or that only extraordinary circumstances cause side switching, or describes Pashtuns with terms like *brotherhood* or *solidarity*. Yes: claims intergroup loyalties or alliances are thin, fragile, manipulable, or for sale.
- **Proud.** No: cites counterexamples to claims of Pashtun pride, or claims outright that Pashtuns are easily shamed, humble, or servile. Yes: claims Pashtuns have a high opinion of themselves or of their own culture, people, values, etc. ; are status-conscious; or are reluctant to accept charity.
- **Sectarian.** No: claims Pashtuns are no more nationalistic or biased toward their in-group than other Afghans. Yes: claims Pashtuns have a strong in-group identity, have a tendency to clash with people who are not like them (except when faced by a common threat), or want their own ethnic homeland; or associates Pashtuns only with ethnic or tribal strife, without counter examples.
- **Taliban.** No: acknowledges that, while most Taliban are Pashtun, most Pashtun are not Taliban, or claims that Pashtuns are not natural Islamists. Yes: mentions Pashtun support

for Taliban without counterexamples, or claims outright a strong link (cultural, familial, etc.) between Pashtuns and Taliban, or associates Pashtuns with Islamism without counterexamples.

- **Tribal.** No: acknowledges existence of Pashtuns without a primarily tribal identity or social system, or claims tribal system is completely degraded. Yes: mentions tribal identity or structures without acknowledging non-tribal Pashtuns.
- **Uniform.** No: acknowledges some diversity in social structures, beliefs, behaviors, etc. across subgroups. Yes/Implicit: discusses social structures, beliefs, etc. as if they are the same across subgroups. Yes/Explicit: claims there is no such diversity.
- **Victimized.** No: claims or clearly implies that Pashtuns are resilient, are not going through hard times, or are not suffering at the hands of others. Yes: claims Pashtuns are oppressed, are being harmed by outsiders, are marginalized, or are going through extremely difficult times due to circumstances they cannot control.
- **Warlike.** No: claims Pashtuns are peaceful people, do not want or welcome war, or are tired of war, or acknowledges their peaceful traditions, such as dispute resolution. Yes: mentions an easy tendency to go to war without counterexamples, or claims Pashtuns love war, are good fighters, or are warlike, fierce, mercenary, vengeful, etc.

This list of variables is not meant to be a typology, as it does not represent a set of mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive characteristics. It would not be unusual, for example, for someone to claim that Pashtuns are “hospitable,” “victimized,” and “warlike,” because it is entirely possible for a people prone to warfare to be abused by a victorious enemy yet still treat with courtesy any visitors to their homes.

Each variable could take one of several values:

- *no data* if the entry contains no mention of that particular variable (e.g., an article that says nothing about the treatment of Pashtun women would not be coded for the *misogynous* variable);
- *no* (“0”) if the entry contains a statement that is inconsistent with the stereotype represented by that variable (e.g., an interviewee who mentions a group of Pashtuns advocating for adherence to international law would be coded with a 0 for the *conservative* variable); or
- *yes* (“1” or “2”) if the entry contains a statement that is consistent with the stereotype represented by that variable (e.g., a description of Pashtuns as fierce would be coded as “1” for the *warlike* variable). Most of the variables are coded on a binary scale, so a *yes* would be coded as “1” whether the stereotype was explicit or merely implicit in the article or interview. But the *immutable* and *uniform* variables are coded on a scale of 0-2 to capture a bit more nuance in how Pashtuns are understood in time and space (e.g., discussions of the traditional Pashtun code, *Pashtunwali*, often give details about the content of the code but not about how widely it is practiced among different groups of Pashtuns; such discussions would be coded “1” for implying that all Pashtuns follow the code, unless the discussion explicitly claims the code rules the lives of all Pashtuns, in which case it would be coded “2”).

Two biases are inherent in this method. First, as was mentioned earlier, no effort was made to interview a random sample of officials and experts. A conscious effort was made to include in the interview sample a mix of ethnic groups, political affiliations, nationalities, and

genders, but it was not possible to collect all of this information from all participants, so it is impossible to rule out selection bias. The authors believe that the random sampling of recent articles from a variety of published sources serves as somewhat of a check on this shortcoming. Second, no effort was made to measure inter-coder reliability, as a single senior researcher did all of the final coding for all 190 entries in the full dataset. In a future phase of research, it would be desirable for a second and possibly a third researcher to independently code the same set of articles and interviews to determine the degree to which they would code the entries the same way as the first researcher and how that might affect the analysis.

Results

To determine the “strength” of each stereotype, the number of entries coded as consistent with the stereotype was divided by the number of entries coded as inconsistent with the stereotype. A ratio greater than 1.0 suggests that that particular stereotype about Pashtuns is more widely believed than not, and a ratio less than 1.0 suggests the stereotype is generally refuted. Ratios very close to 1.0 would suggest a weak stereotype or a weak refutation of the stereotype. Higher ratios (above 2.0) suggest a strong stereotype, and ratios below 0.5 suggest a strong refutation of the stereotype. The cutoffs of 2.0 and 0.5 were chosen as reasonable approximations of statistical significance: a ratio ≥ 2.0 means at least twice as many entries expressed the stereotype as refuted it, and a ratio ≤ 0.5 means at least twice as many entries refuted the stereotype as expressed it. In fact, statistical significance was impossible to calculate for any given stereotype because no stereotype had more than 54 entries containing data, and one had only 4 entries with data (i.e., $4 \leq n \leq 54$); the average n across the stereotypes was only 27 entries. (The low response rate of the interview attempts and the low number of entries expressing particular stereotypes suggests that a study of this nature would need to be scaled up by at least an order of magnitude to get more robust results.) Still, some interesting observations can be made based on the data available.

First, the strongest stereotype (with an infinite strength ratio of 18:0) to emerge from this study was *proud*. Of the 190 entries in the interview and media datasets, 172 contained no characterizing statements related to the *proud* variable; the 18 that did, however, were unanimous in their portrayal of Pashtuns as proud, ranging from their sense of having dignity or being honorable to a feeling of superiority regarding their traditions, language, or culture. In the interviews, this usually amounted simply to a claim that Pashtuns were proud or acted with honor. Media portrayals were similar, but some referred to artistic culture as well as behavior:

Provincial Information Minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain in his emotional speech said that times were tough and symbols of their culture were vanishing owing to extremism but the same culture would strengthen and save them. “My sherenay (beloved) is my homeland now. Our homeland demands that we save the future of our children by risking our lives. Our culture is so powerful that it will help us fight extremism,” he said. . . . Wisal Khayal enthralled and revived Pakhtun spirit through his famous song, “Moong Yoo Da Khyber Zalmi, Pakhto Zumunga Shaan Day” (We Are the Youth of Khyber and Pashto Is Our Pride’) as the show gracefully ended on the pleasant November evening.³

After personal freedom, Pashtunwali demands that a man have an exaggerated sense of personal honor. Although there is no word in Pashto for the abstract Western concept of “honor,” the word

³ Right Vision News, “Nishtar Hall resounds with music, laughter once again,” HT Syndication, November 9, 2010.

nang, representing a man's obligation to protect the inviolability of his person, his property, and his women, best captures this concept. In the past, this has created a great deal of tension between Pashtuns and states attempting to establish their own rule of law. The very concept of justice is wrapped up in a Pashtun's maintenance of his honor and his independence from external authority. Action that must be taken to preserve honor but that breaks the laws of a state would seem perfectly acceptable to a Pashtun. In fact his honor would demand it.⁴

In an outrageous claim, a Pakistani film director has accused India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of "trying to kill off" the Pashto film industry. "1980–1998 were very bad years for the Pashto film industry, with very bad movies that weren't suitable to our culture," the *Express Tribune* quoted director Ajab Gul, as saying. "The main reason was RAW trying [*sic*] to kill us off because they couldn't compete with Pashtun culture and language," he added.⁵

The second-strongest stereotype was *victimized*. Of the 29 entries in the interview and media datasets that contained relevant characterizing statements, 27 associated the Pashtuns with suffering of some sort (without providing counterexamples). This is not to imply that all 27 of those authors or interviewees believed all Pashtuns to be victims, only that their statements or articles did not portray Pashtuns in any other way. Likewise, neither of the entries with characterizing statements inconsistent with the *victimized* stereotype claimed that Pashtuns were not suffering; rather, one pointed out that many Pashtuns were victimizers as well, and the other simply noted that not all Pashtuns were suffering. (The reader is reminded that the findings of this study say nothing about whether Pashtuns are actually victimized, marginalized, or manipulated—only that, on balance, they are *believed* to be so.) In short, one can say with reasonable confidence that, despite the "fierce warrior" stereotype, it seems to be widely believed that many Pashtuns are in a bad place in their history today and that their suffering is widely associated with their marginalization from political processes or with their manipulation by external actors. This was clear particularly among Pakistani interviewees, several of whom claimed that nobody in the world is suffering, persecuted, or abandoned more than Pashtuns. Media accounts ranged widely in this sense:

In one province with many Pashtuns, not one was elected to the Parliament because Pashtundominated areas were so insecure that people were afraid to vote. . . . "I won't call these elections legal and legitimate," Mr. Khan added, "because even though we have a majority of Pashtun people in Ghazni, we do not have any Pashtun representative."⁶

Every day, between 200 and 250 Pashtoons are killed by NATO and Pakistani forces. The Pakistani military has launched major military offensives for the last five years in north and south Waziristan, Swat, and recently in Bajour Agency. These devastating attacks displaced millions of people, who have been driven from their homes and villages. They have been left desolate, without housing, food, clean water or medicine. In the refugee camps, there have outbreaks of cholera, due to the appalling conditions and lack of clean water. No country is offering refuge to these desperate victims. The only place they can flee to is Karachi, where many have relatives. More than 3.5 million Pashtoons are now living outside their homeland.⁷

An elder of the Ishaqzai, a Pashtun tribe in Balkh province, said that since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, more than 100 tribal elders had been killed for ethnic and political reasons.⁸

⁴ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier," *International Security* 32, issue 4 (Spring 2008).

⁵ Sify News, "RAW was trying to kill off Pashto film industry, claims Pak director," November 16, 2010.

⁶ Alissa J. Rubin, "Afghan Election Commission Is Praised for Its Fairness, in Spite of Tainted Voting," *New York Times*, October 21, 2010.

⁷ Dr. Zayar, "Massacres of the Pashtoon peoples," socialistworld.net, December 9, 2008.

⁸ Michael Hughes, "Deteriorating security conditions in Afghan North offset gains in South," Examiner.com, November 4, 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/afghanistan-headlines-in-national/deteriorating-security-conditions-afghan-north-offset-gains-south>.

The third-strongest stereotype in the study—*sectarian*—had the highest *n* value of all the variables, with 54 relevant entries and a strength ratio of 8.0, or 48-to-6 in support of the stereotype. Most of the stereotyping entries talked about Pashtuns in a context of interethnic, intertribal, interreligious, or international conflict, either armed violence or mere politics, without noting the proportion of Pashtuns involved or offering examples of more cooperative or inclusive behavior; a few suggested Pashtuns are xenophobic or spoke of those aspects of Pashtun history when some Pashtuns have resisted outsiders or demanded nationhood. The countervailing entries tended to focus on Pashtuns who identify as Afghans alongside with Uzbek, Tajik, Hazar, and other Afghan ethnicities; one discussed Pashtun solidarity as something that should not be viewed as threatening to non-Pashtuns; and several claimed that Pashtuns have no natural enmity toward outsiders. The authors know of no comprehensive study of Pashtun behavior that could verify any claim about the degree to which Pashtuns behave or have behaved in a more or less sectarian manner than other groups in the region have, so these findings should be considered observations about perceptions of Pashtun sectarianism. But this result does demonstrate the significance of Pashtuns to questions of regional and international security and the importance of understanding what drives the sectarian conflicts that some Pashtuns are involved in—and how much support those Pashtuns have among Pashtuns more generally. One example of many:

The renaming of Pakistan's Pashtun-majority province earlier this month was meant to be a triumph for local pride and one step forward in a broader effort to fight militancy in this region bordering the Taliban's stronghold. Instead, celebrations marking the switch from the "North West Frontier Province," a name assigned by British colonialists in 1901, to "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," a nod to the majority ethnic Pakhtun (or Pashtun) population, were marred by violent protests that left eight people dead.⁹

The fourth-strongest stereotype was *tribal*, with a strength ratio of 7.0. Of the 40 entries with relevant characterizing statements, 35 characterized the Pashtuns as a tribal people, either explicitly claiming their tribal or subtribal identity was a primary loyalty, or simply failing to make any further statements about the strength or breadth of tribal identity across Pashtun subgroups; 5 entries either characterized Pashtuns as an ethnic group or noted that their tribal structures are not very strong or are no longer the primary source of identity for many Pashtuns. Again, the authors know of no comprehensive survey of Pashtuns (from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the diaspora) that could shed light on the degree to which Pashtuns identify with their nominal tribes, or of any other comprehensive study of how Pashtuns relate to their tribal past. (A natural next step in this research program would be to undertake such a survey.) Encyclopedia entries tend to draw from the anthropological understanding of Pashtuns:

The intricate system of tribes has been a prominent institution of the Pashtun people. . . . [S]everal levels of organization exist within the Pashtun tribal system: the *Tabar* (tribe), which subdivides into kinship groups called *Khels*. The *Khel*, in turn, divides into smaller groups (*Pillarina* or *Plarganey*), each of which consists of several extended families or *Kahols*. A large tribe often has dozens of sub-tribes whose members may see themselves as belonging to each, some, or all of the sub-tribes in different social situations (co-operative, competitive, confrontational) and identify with each accordingly.¹⁰

The fifth-strongest stereotype was *hospitable*, although with only 8 entries making relevant characterizing statements it is hard to say with confidence that this would stand up in a more extensive study. Still, the relevant entries came out 7-to-1 in favor of Pashtun hospitality, a strength ratio of 7.0 (the same as the *tribal* stereotype); the one refutation simply portrayed a

⁹ Issam Ahmed, "New province name: Pakistan taps ethnic pride as defense against Taliban," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 29, 2010.

¹⁰ *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Pashtun People."

Pashtun who had tired of his guest. Most of the rest mentioned hospitality in the context of the Pashtun traditional code of honor, the Pashtunwali (a great repository of Pashtun stereotypes if ever there was one), as the following examples show:

The tenets of Pakhtunwali show the true essence of Pathan culture and these rules are followed religiously. It incorporates the following major practices: “melmastia” (hospitality and protection to every guest); “nanawati” (the right of a fugitive to seek a place of refuge, and acceptance of his bona fide offer of peace); “badal” (the right of blood feuds or revenge); “tureh” (bravery); “sabar” (steadfastness); “imandari” (righteousness); “isteqamat” (persistence); “ghayrat” (defense of property and honor); and “mamus” (defense of one’s women).¹¹

Pakhtunwali requires that every insult be revenged and, conversely, every guest protected.¹²

These five stereotypes—proud, victimized, sectarian, tribal, and hospitable—come across pretty strongly; expressions of these stereotypes exceed refutations of them by factors of 7 or more. However, two weak stereotypes emerged (i.e., with strength ratios below 2.0) that are worthy of note: *opportunistic* (1.7, $n=16$) and *Taliban* (1.6, $n=52$). These are particularly important variables because they have strong implications for the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. If Pashtuns who live in the war zones are opportunistic, then they will ally themselves with whichever warring faction offers them a better deal or is seen to be winning; if they are not opportunistic, then the counterinsurgents will need a much deeper understanding of what drives Pashtun loyalty and alliances. If some Pashtuns are sympathetic to Islamist actors and objectives, then a counterinsurgency based on a population-centric strategy of separating Taliban fighters from Pashtun populations will be that much more difficult; if, however, they are not driven by religious or Islamist motives, then, again, understanding their local situation will be key to developing a successful strategy. Even though both of these stereotypes had more proponents than refutations, they had a negative correlation (with a correlation coefficient of -0.58), meaning that many of those who view Pashtuns as opportunists tend not to consider them to be particularly good Islamists and vice versa.

Their low strength ratios and their negative correlation imply the existence of two schools of thought on strategy. A perception of Pashtuns as opportunists implies a strategy based on buying Pashtun loyalty and trying to defeat, rather than negotiate with, the Taliban, in an effort to tip the population balance in favor of the counterinsurgents. A perception of Pashtuns as natural allies of the Taliban implies a strategy that forgoes Pashtun “hearts and minds” in favor of containment and mitigation, or perhaps negotiated settlement and withdrawal. The fact that more than three times as many entries associated Pashtuns with Taliban than portrayed Pashtuns as opportunistic might not imply anything about the relative strengths of these two competing schools of thought on strategy—and this study certainly says nothing about which school of thought has the facts on its side, as this is a study of perceptions, not reality. For that very reason, however, this finding well demonstrates the importance that decisionmakers need to place on having a deep factual understanding of the tendencies and loyalties of the people who live in the war zone about which they are making strategic decisions, and it is not clear that degree of understanding yet exists.

Four additional variables had such low strength ratios that it is probably fair to propose they might not even represent real stereotypes: *warlike* (1.3, $n=34$), *misogynous* (1.3, $n=14$), *illiterate* (1.2, $n=11$), and *conservative* (1.1, $n=15$). This weak showing came as somewhat of a surprise, as these seemed to be among the most familiar of the Pashtun stereotypes that emerge from a reading of the old British literature on the Pashtuns and their codes of honor: the fierce

¹¹ Human Development Foundation, “Who are the Pathans?” YesPakistan.com, 2004.

¹² Kjos Ministries, “The Pashtun: The brutal warriors of the Taliban,” CrossRoad.to/.

warrior, defending the traditions of his people and the honor of his women, uneducated but proud, vengeful but hospitable, and so on. Yet the people and articles consulted for this study do not overwhelmingly associate Pashtuns with these features. Those that do portray the Pashtuns as fierce fighters who welcome war are counterbalanced by those who suggest most Pashtuns have tired of war after having experienced it now for more than 30 years. Those who portray Pashtun oppression of women are refuted by those who portray a few strong and independent Pashtun women. Those who discuss educated Pashtuns or the Pashtun desire for their children to go to school act as a partial corrective to those who mention only the poor literacy rates and educational attainment within many Pashtun communities. The portrayals of the Pashtuns as resistant to change or progress have countervailing portrayals of Pashtun activists and Pashtun demands for modern infrastructure or formal governance.

This leads to the most surprising finding: that more people and articles than not recognized that Pashtuns are neither *immutable* across time (0.4, n=27) nor *uniform* across space (0.9, n=52). These were the only two variables that were not binary: they were measured by three values, with 0 meaning a refutation of the stereotype, 1 meaning an *implicit* characterization of the stereotype, and 2 meaning an *explicit* characterization. It had been expected that most people and articles would not recognize the diversity of Pashtun subgroups or the major disruptions that have befallen them over the past several decades. Yet many did: although 20 discussed the Pashtuns as if they were uniform and 4 stated outright that Pashtuns are the same everywhere, 28 mentioned clearly, or implicitly recognized, their diversity. Similarly, although 1 explicitly portrayed the Pashtuns as a never-changing people and 7 talked about them as if nothing had happened in Pashtun communities during the past 30 years, 19 clearly recognized the changes. There was a strong positive correlation between the two variables (0.77 coefficient) that suggested the simplistic views about Pashtuns over time and space traveled together, and those who recognized Pashtun diversity also recognized Pashtun changes. This is promising from a policy perspective, as it implies that more nuanced thought is going into trying to understand Pashtun communities, and suggests that research demonstrating how the Pashtuns have changed over time and where they have ended up today would find a ready audience among policymakers.

Finally, it is hardly worth noting, but only four entries had anything to say about the *medieval* variable, and all four were quite clear that anyone who thinks Pashtuns are a backward, premodern people are simply wrong. This is interesting only because it suggests that there is a misperception that this particular misperception exists: some people seem to think that other people think that Pashtuns are medieval, but in fact nobody seems to actually think that, at least in this sample.

Conclusion

This study was meant as a preliminary look at the perceptions and misperceptions that exist about Pashtuns among English-speaking opinion leaders in the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Because of methodological constraints, it should not be considered the definitive word on what is believed about Pashtuns. First, there were biases in sampling that could not be overcome, and although some efforts were made to minimize them, the age and social class of the interviewees, as well as any identifying information about the authors of the media entries,

were not captured and so cannot be used to determine how representative of the broader population of opinion leaders this sample was. Second, this simple binary coding of interviews and articles simply cannot capture the true diversity of thought that exists about Pashtuns, which the discussion and some of the quotations could only hint at. Third, the categories of stereotypes were fairly blunt: for example, are there not important differences between opportunistic and pragmatic, or courageous and warlike? Additional categories would be useful, including, at minimum, *religious* and *lawless*, which were not encountered nearly as much in the pilot analysis as they were in the larger analysis.

The usefulness of this study is mainly as a starting point for a broader analysis that should be undertaken regarding not only what people *believe* about what it means to be a Pashtun today, but also what it actually means to be a Pashtun—not whether it is broadly believed that Pashtuns are victimized, but the degree to which different Pashtun communities actually are victimized relative to other similarly situated communities; not whether there are mixed views about how Pashtun women are faring today, but rather how the quality of life for Pashtun women in different areas is actually evolving; not whether Pashtuns are believed to be warlike by nature, but how many Pashtuns are involved in armed conflicts, and why, and whether they are tired of war; not whether they are believed to be involved in sectarian conflicts, but what the drivers of sectarian conflicts involving Pashtuns are; and so on.

In short, this study reinforces the need for a broad and deep survey of the Pashtuns wherever they live, with fresh data and less reliance on existing material. In addition to opinion surveys (and, in the case of Afghanistan at least, a formal census), useful knowledge could be attained from other kinds of studies. For example, what do Pashtun children learn in school? What do their textbooks say about themselves, about their neighboring countries (Afghanistan on Pakistan, and Pakistan on Afghanistan), and finally about “the West”? How might the current narratives being taught to Pashtun children affect their worldviews later? Additionally, it would be important to understand how different Pashtun communities resolve disputes peacefully; how do they resolve land and water disputes, for example? Finally, how do diaspora Pashtuns differ from Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns? How do they relate to one another?

While policymakers involved in conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan certainly would be interested in this data, such a research program would be valuable in itself as well, as an academic endeavor for increasing humanity’s knowledge about one of its own member communities: how Pashtuns relate to each other, to their history, and to their land; how they communicate and solve disputes; and, importantly, how they differ from one community to the next in all of these dimensions. Certainly this data would be useful as raw material to the formation of much more realistic policies and strategies that affect, or are affected by, the Pashtuns than is possible with the paucity of knowledge that exists today.

Table 1**Table 1. Calculations to determine relative weights of search terms**

Search term	Google hits (total)	Google ratios	Google News hits (total)	Google News ratios	Mean ratio	200 scale
pashtun	884,000	15	334	334	174	102
pathan	7,310,000	122	141	141	131	77
pakhtun	224,000	4	33	33	18	11
pakhtoon	240,000	4	12	12	8	5
pashtoon	252,000	4	8	8	6	4
pukhtoon	130,000	2	4	4	3	2
pukhtun	59,000	1	1	1	1	1

Appendix A. Persons Interviewed (n=52)

Afghanistan

adviser, Kunduz province, Baghlan
former mid-level Taliban official, Kabul
former official, Baghlan province, Kabul
independent analyst, Kabul
independent analyst, Kabul
officer, Afghan Independent Journalists Association, Kabul
officer, Afghan National Assembly, Kabul
officer, American Institute for Afghanistan Studies, Kabul
officer, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Kabul
officer, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Kabul
official, Paktika province, Kabul
official, National Security Council of Afghanistan, Kabul
official, Pashtun Shinwari subtribe, Baghlan
official, Pashtun Shinwari subtribe, Baghlan
researcher, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Kabul

Pakistan

consultant, United Nations Development Group, Islamabad
fellow, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad
former ambassador to Afghanistan, Peshawar
former official, Northwest Frontier Province, Islamabad
former official, Northwest Frontier Province, Mardan
former official, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Islamabad
former official, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Rawalpindi
independent analyst, Islamabad
independent journalist, Karachi
independent journalist, Karachi

lawyer, Islamabad
 lawyer, Islamabad
 officer, Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Chitral
 officer, Community Mobilization and Appraisal Program, Islamabad
 officer, Gallup Pakistan, Islamabad
 officer, Pakistan Initiative for Mothers and Newborns, Islamabad
 officer, Pakistan People's Party, Chitral o
 fficer, private company, Islamabad
 officer, Rural Support Program Network, Islamabad
 officer, Swat University, Mardan
 official, National Reconciliation Board, Chitral
 professor, Chitral College, Chitral
 professor, International Islamic University, Islamabad
 professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
 professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
 retired Pakistani military officer, Islamabad
 retired Pakistani military officer, Islamabad

United Kingdom

professor, Nottingham University Business School

Washington, D.C.

adviser, Joint IED [Improvised Explosive Device] Defeat Organization, U.S. Department of Defense
 adviser, Refugees International
 instructor, Foreign Service Institute
 officer, Amnesty International
 official, Program Analysis & Evaluation, U.S. Department of Defense
 professor, William and Mary College
 program manager, Science Applications International Corporation
 senior fellow, Brookings Institution
 senior program officer, United States Institute of Peace

Appendix B. Articles Reviewed (n=138)

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About the Authors

Robert D. Lamb is a senior fellow and deputy director of the Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation (C3) at CSIS. He is also a research scholar at the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland (CISSM). His research addresses subnational and nonstate governance, complex violence, legitimacy, and alternative models to centralized state building, with a current focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Colombia. He joined CSIS as a visiting fellow in late 2009 after completing 10 months of field research on gang governance and legitimacy in Medellín, Colombia. In 2006 and 2007, he was a strategist in the Defense Department's Strategy and Policy Planning offices, where he advised defense policymakers on terrorist, criminal, and insurgent networks. He earned his PhD in policy studies in 2010 from the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, where he researched civil violence and cooperative security as a CISSM graduate fellow and was president of the Policy Student Government Association. He received his BA in interdisciplinary studies from Gettysburg College in 1993, spent half a year in Nicaragua with a microdevelopment project, and then worked for nine years as an editor and journalist, winning a National Press Club award in 2001 before changing careers after 9/11. He was a contributor to *Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Relevance for U.S. Policy and Programs* (USAID, 2011).

Amin Tarzi is the director of Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. His area of expertise is the Middle East and South/Central Asia. In his position, he supports the MCU by providing expertise in the Middle East and South/Central Asia, representing the Marine Corps at various academic and professional forums, and providing expert advice for all Professional Military Education programs. He earned his PhD and MA degrees from the Department of Middle East Studies at New York University. Previous professional experience includes serving as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Afghanistan and Pakistan regional analyst, as senior research associate for the Middle East at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, as political adviser to the Saudi Arabian Mission to the United Nations, and as Iranian Affairs researcher/analyst at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in Abu Dhabi. His latest works are *Taliban and the Crisis in Afghanistan*, a co-edited volume with Robert D. Crews (Harvard University Press, 2008), and *The Iranian Puzzle Piece: Understanding Iran in the Global Context* (MCU Press, 2009).