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Raymond Scupin
Lindenwood University, rscupin@lindenwood.edu

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Ahmed, Akbar. *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. 2013.

Akbar Ahmed is the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, D.C.; a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; and a Visiting Professor at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, M.D. where he was the First Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies. Ahmed belonged to the senior Civil Service of Pakistan and was the Pakistan High Commissioner and Ambassador to the U.K. and Ireland. He earned his MA at the University of Cambridge and his PhD in Anthropology from the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies. Ahmed has taught at Princeton, Harvard, and Cambridge Universities. Ahmed is also a promoter of interfaith dialogue and an international peace activist.

Ahmed is the author of over a dozen award-winning books, including *Discovering Islam*, which was the basis of a six-part BBC TV series called *Living Islam*. The critically acclaimed *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* discussed Muslim perceptions of the United States and its Western allies. *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* detailed the life of Muslims in the U.S. and the views Americans toward Muslims. His next book, *Journey into Europe: the Specter of Islam, Immigration and Empire* will become his fourth book examining the relationship between the West and Islam. In these books, Ahmed has been critical of the simplistic 'clash of civilization,' thesis perpetuated by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington that became the dominant metanarrative of the U.S. government following the tragedy of 9/11/01. As a Muslim anthropologist Ahmed is aware of the complexity and diversity within the so-called 'Islamic civilization.' His major goal is to describe the realities of Muslim communities so that a true interfaith dialogue can develop between America, the West, and the Islamic world.

Ahmed's recent book *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*, the third volume in his series, is partially based on his experience as a civil service official for the Pakistan government prior to earning his degrees in anthropology. He was a political agent in a number of tribal zones, including South Waziristan in Northwest Pakistan known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the area where the Taliban and Al Qaeda sought sanctuary following the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Ahmed studied the tribal cultures and became familiar with many of the political leaders and elders in these tribal zones.

Within the tradition of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* and the descriptions of the tribal solidarity or *asabiyah* and later Evans-Pritchard, and his close colleague at Cambridge, Ernest Gellner, Ahmed discusses the acephalous (headless), segmentary lineage system as the genealogical and structural basis of clan and subclan units of affiliation and balanced opposition found in many of these tribes. Ahmed characterizes the segmentary lineage system in an ideal form as highly egalitarian segments with a genealogical charter claiming descent from a common, often eponymous, ancestor with a council of male elders to mediate conflicts, the recognition of territorial rights for the different segments through tradition, and a customary code of honor and distinctive language. The *Pukhtunwali* ideological honor code enforcing hospitality and revenge as described by Ahmed in his earlier work on the Pukhtun in *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: a Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (1980), and *Pukhtun Economy and Society* represents the ideal typical model of a tribal group with segmentary

lineage characteristics.¹ Although Ahmed admires the egalitarian spirit and the stability, security, and the authenticity of identity for members of these tribal groups, he admits that the emphasis on genealogical and ethnic exclusiveness, revenge, and the inhumane treatment of women are unacceptable in this era of modernity and globalization.

As is well known the U.S. military has been using drones to kill targeted "Islamic terrorists" in Pukhtun, Yemeni, and Somali tribal regions. Ahmed emphasizes how the drones embody the weaponry of globalization: "high-tech in performance, sleek in appearance, and global in reach." (p. 20). The term 'thistle' is drawn from Tolstoy's novel *Hadji Murad* about a Muslim tribal leader's struggle in the Caucasus region against Imperial Russia in the 19th century. Tolstoy's narrator bends to pick a thistle for a bouquet of flowers but found it so tough and prickly representing the courage, pride, and egalitarianism of the Muslim tribes. In addition, Ahmed notes how the tribal Scots made the thistle their national symbol of resistance of the Highland Clans to British internal colonialism.

Ahmed discusses how the members of these tribal groups define themselves with respect to their Islamic faith as well as blood, clan, and loyalty to their honor codes. They maintain that the Prophet of Islam is "a kind of tribal chief par excellence" (p.28) and trace genealogical linkages and descent to Muhammad, which instills a religious fervor and inspiration for defending the faith against outsiders. Ahmed emphasizes that these tribal Muslim conceptions are antithetical to the formal literalist traditions of Islam associated with the religious centers of Mecca, Medina, and Al Azhar. Tribal identity is based on syncretic pre-Islamic and Non-Islamic cultural traditions such as Zoroastrian and Hindu fire rituals that are used in trials of ordeals by some communities. Muslim modernists and literalists view these tribal traditions as blasphemy and ignorant superstitions.

The major focus of the book is on the four core Muslim tribal groups including the Pukhtun, (also known as Afghan, Pashtun, or Pathan, all referring to the same ethnic group), Yemenis, Somalis, and Kurds who are classified as 'nang,' (honor-code based societies). However, the range of peripheral Muslim groups surveyed in the book is much more comprehensive. There are forty case studies of various peripheral Muslim groups based on a loosely-constructed typology. Aside from the four core groups, a second category includes peripheral Muslim peripheral societies that have segmentary lineage systems of the present or distant past who are not the targets of U.S. drones. This large group includes the Achehnese of Indonesia, the Qashqai and Bakhtiari of Iran, the Azeris of Azerbaijan, the Chechens of Chechnya of Russia, the Baluch in Pakistan and Iran, Bedouin tribes in the Egyptian Sinai and the Negev desert of Israel, and the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank, the Uyghurs of China, the Tuareg of the Sahel, the Uzbeks of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan and others. A third category consists of Muslim groups that do not have the segmentary lineage systems, but are segmented tribal societies that operate within a strong 'nang' orientation based on honor. Ahmed discusses two Muslim minority groups in this category: the Tausug of the Philippines and the Malays of South Thailand. The fourth category embraces non-tribal Muslim groups such as the Cham of Cambodia, the Kashmiris of Indian and Pakistani Kashmir, and the Rohingya of Arakan State in western Burma/Myanmar.

In his analysis Ahmed describes the centralized authoritarian state paralleling what Karl

¹ Recently this model of the segmentary lineage has been emphasized to promote generalizations about Muslims by Philip Salzman in his *Cultural and Conflict in the Middle East*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books (2007) who draws on Charles Lindholm's ethnographic studies of the Swat Pukhtun in North Pakistan described in *The Islamic Middle East: Tradition and Change*. Malden, MASS and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (1996, 2002).

Wittfogel call the 'hydraulic society' or 'Oriental Despotism' in its totalistic power over peripheral tribal regions, as an ongoing dialectic since the evolution of the state in various areas of the world. From the 'center' the periphery was viewed as backward, ignorant, rebellious, alien, and the central government constructed derogatory labels and categories for tribal peoples. Historically, as authority waned at the center, autonomy and independence was emphasized in the peripheries. In the age of 18th and 19th century colonialism tribal peoples that had resided with one another for centuries were often cut off and dispersed as modern nation states were formed by European authorities. For example, the nearly 50 million Pukhtuns were split between Afghanistan and Pakistan while the 30 million Kurds have been divided with residents in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

Ahmed describes how the U.S. military drones often kill innocent civilians, including women and children in these tribal areas. He notes how these innocent Muslim tribal victims killed by the drones are described inhumanely as 'bug splat,' by some within the U.S. military. Ahmed demonstrates that this U.S. drone warfare has become one of the principal causes of more active terrorism in Pakistan, resulting in more recruits for the Taliban and al-Qaeda. His book discusses many other tribal regions of the Islamic world including Yemen, Somalia, and Kurdish areas where the 'War on Terrorism' has increased conflict and violence directed at the central governments, the U.S. and the West within Muslim communities. One of the main themes of the book is how the traditional cultures of these tribal peoples has been disrupted by both the political oppression and violence of their central governments, as well as globalization and violence from external sources. As these people recognize that globalization is not incidental to their lives, but rather is a recognizable transformation in their everyday circumstances, they draw on reconstructions of tribal identity and religious fundamentalism as a means of restoring power over their lives. The reconstruction and reinvigoration of their tribal and religious identity give these people a sense of greater control in what appears to be a "runaway" and destructive world. Fundamentalist religious movements articulate the uncertainties and distress brought about by expanding globalization and loss of control over local realities. These disruptive local and global conditions result in alienation for many of the young people from their tribal and community ties. This destabilization of tribal identity provides a context for the recruitment of young people in these peripheral communities into fundamentalist terrorist and violent activities.

Ahmed discusses how the West ought to win the 'War on Terror' in the last chapter of the book. First, the U.S. and Western governments should learn from the research of anthropologists who have been engaged in in-depth ethnographic studies of Muslim societies instead of relying on 'instant terror experts,' who have very little training and rely on the 'clash of civilization thesis.' These instant experts tend to distort the history and religious culture of Muslims and perceive jihadists in every corner producing global terrorism. In contrast, anthropologists spend years doing field work among these populations and interview and observe not only elites, but people from every sector of society. In this context Ahmed notes that the former commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, admitted that the U.S. military had a very superficial understanding of Afghanistan and its tribal peoples. Yet, Ahmed describes how the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did provide the U.S. military with a much greater understanding of tribal cultures and encouraged commanders to interact with tribal elders. Second, rather than focusing on a 'clash of civilizations,' Ahmed recommends fostering better relationships between central governments and tribal or minority Muslim ethnic peripheries. As these central governments recognize more autonomy, full political participation, and human rights for the tribal or ethnic Muslim communities, the less reason there will be for resistance,

violence, and conflict, and fewer recruits for terrorist groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The ethics of the U.S. drone warfare is a topic of discussion for many Americans and Westerners. If the ability to ascribe responsibility for rights and wrongs committed in the course of combat is integral to thinking ethically about war, does the emergence of these unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) jeopardize this enterprise? The book contributes empirically-based materials and fascinating discussions of, respectively, the false promise and pernicious effect of risk-free warfare, and the implications of the destructive aspects of drone warfare in these tribal areas that have consequences for global developments throughout the world.

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Raymond Scupin, PhD
Lindenwood University
Rscupin@lindenwood.edu