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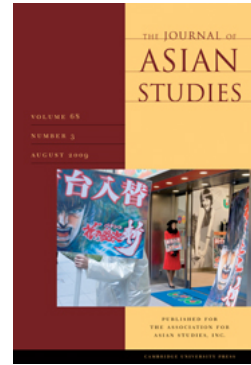
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***A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863–1901.* By M. Hassan Kakar. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 259 pp. \ \$111.00 (cloth).**

Christine Noelle-Karimi

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A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863–1901. By M. HASSAN KAKAR. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 259 pp. \$111.00 (cloth).
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M. Hassan Kakar has distinguished himself by two detailed studies concerning the circumstances in Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century. The author considers the present work the apex of his scholarly achievement. Kakar repeatedly stresses the “excellence” of his historical sources, which, in combination with

his “specialist knowledge of the subject,” enable him to give a “balanced and proportionate account” of the developments during the period spanning the reigns of Sher ‘Ali Khan (1863–78) and ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan (1800–1901) (pp. ix, 8).

This book provides a useful overview of the period in question. It consists of two parts discussing the internal developments (pp. 9–158) and the external relations of Afghanistan (pp. 159–216). The first part is enriched by personal accounts of members of the royal family, such as Sher ‘Ali Khan’s grandson, ‘Abd al-Qadir b. Muhammad Ayyub Khan, and the famous intellectual Mahmud Tarzi. The materials on the relationship between Afghanistan and British India are supplemented by the full text of the treaties concluded between 1855 and 1893.

Despite these interesting materials, the book hardly lives up to Kakar’s promise of a thorough analysis and, in parts, remains curiously disjointed. Part of the problem seems to stem from the fact that the author fails to provide a conceptual framework that would enable the reader to place the described phenomena in perspective. Sher ‘Ali Khan’s efforts at modernization are cast in terms of a simplistic division between “regionalism and tribalism” on the one hand and “centralism and modernism” on the other (p. 22). This dualistic approach does not help to elucidate the complexities surrounding state policies in nineteenth-century Afghanistan. Thus, it would have been useful if Kakar had shed light on the limitations Sher ‘Ali Khan experienced in his bid to centralize the army. There is ample evidence in the archival sources that the amir’s effort at modernizing the military focused on substituting one tribally organized elite (Barakzay Durrānāy) with another (Wardak Pashtuns), which, in turn, curtailed his ability to effect lasting structural change. In his account of the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–80, Kakar attributes the course of events to the well-worn image of “patriotic determination” that seems to act as some sort of natural repellent for foreign domination (p. 38). Yet the nature of this patriotism and the ways in which it translated into political action receive no explanation.

Kakar describes Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan’s forceful “pacification” of the Shinwāray and Ghilzay Pashtuns, the Uzbek principalities of northern Afghanistan, and the Hazaras of central Afghanistan as a successful bid to centralize and institutionalize state power (p. 228). Again, we learn very little about the manner in which these newly organized state institutions worked and shaped political life. In part, Kakar seems to be at a loss as to how to reconcile political phenomena with the powerful myths that continue to shape Afghan historiography to this very day. One such element is the preoccupation with Ahmad Shah Durrānāy as the founder of modern Afghanistan and the concomitant notions of territorial entitlement. By casting ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan as the “second Ahmad Shah,” Kakar fully subscribes to the twentieth-century nationalist notion of Afghanistan as a hereditary space extending between the “natural” boundaries formed by the Oxus in the north and the Indus in the east (pp. 84, 163, 186, 215–16). Not surprisingly, he takes a dim view of the Durand Agreement of 1893, which the British employed to weaken Afghanistan by dissecting “people of the same stock, the same speech, the same system of beliefs, the same mode of life and *weltanschauung*” (p. 187). Apart from adducing evidence

highlighting the illegitimacy of the border thus created, Kakar also points to a clash between the territorial concepts entertained by both sides. For the amir, the definition of separate spheres of influence apparently did not imply an immediate cessation of interaction with the Pashtuns on the other side of the Durand Line (p. 186). This continuing sense of entitlement highlights the difficult transition from customary flexible ideas of sovereignty to the rigid notions of territoriality implied by the imposition of fixed borders. Kakar does notice the dual nature of this process: While colonialist intervention generated territorial loss, it also created a relatively stable environment that “helped the amir to build a nation-state” (p. 216).

By projecting Afghanistan as a historical and territorial entity, Kakar leaves no doubt as to its original and most worthy inhabitants. In his opinion, the Pashtuns formed the “backbone” of Afghanistan, both in demographic and in military terms (pp. 18, 85, 187). The other groups making up the population of present-day Afghanistan are described in less flattering terms. While Kakar’s characterization of the Shighnani men as “peaceful and fatalistic” and the local women as “singularly attractive” leaves the reader wondering how to interpret this sort of information (pp. 110–11), his account of the Hazaras is outright disturbing. Adducing nineteenth-century descriptions of the Shiite institution of *sigha* (temporary marriage), he conveys the impression that promiscuity was a given among this group (p. 124). Apart from the fact that this sort of ethnic stereotyping does little to enhance our understanding of the historical processes in Afghanistan, it also creates the impression that Kakar’s version of Afghan history is not as “balanced” as he would like to think.

CHRISTINE NOELLE-KARIMI

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
christine.noelle-karimi@lmu.de