

Is There Any Hope for Afghanistan?

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Imagine a country where:

\225 Five minutes out of the capital you need armed guards to travel.

\225 Without a national army or police, where only tribes and warlords control each region or fight with each other.

\225 The vast majority are not only illiterate, but are locked in a dreadful marriage of vengeful tribal law and an unenlightened Islam.

\225 That cannot defend itself from any its neighbors or from any great power that wants something there.

\225 That has ancient water systems and fine agriculture, but because of misrule suffers periodic famines.

\225 That does not even know it is a country, but its people identify only with their village or region.

\225 Where its many tribes and regions do not even share a national language.

I am not talking about Afghanistan here, but about Iran in 1920. This once great imperial empire had declined to a hopeless, failed state. What did it take to jump-start it into a country?

We have a template for this in history\227a risky one\227but one that has worked in the past. It takes a fierce leader who has a concept of what a nation-state is\227and is ruthless enough to take on all the forces of reaction that beset it.

In the 17th Century, Russia was such a place\227a backward wasteland that was almost conquered by Sweden. One unlikely monarch, Peter (the Great), was thrust into the role of absolute monarch. Ruthless and intelligent, he began by creating an army devoted to him and then an industry to make military weapons and supplies. For this he needed managers and an educated ruling class\227whose children he sent to school in Europe. When he was opposed by ultra-religious fanatics, the religious nobility who did not want to give up their power, he crushed them. He began by cutting off their beards.

Iran had a similar leader in Reza Shah Pahlavi (1926-1941), who saw Persia/Iran as a nation-state that needed to catch up with Europe to survive. In short order he created:

\225 A national army and national police which set about pacifying the tribes and bandits.

\225 The country\222s first public school system and immediately sent promising children abroad to college and into posts in his government.

\225 Made Persian (Farsi) once more the national language to be taught in all schools.

\225 Connected present-day Iran with its historic past\227even changing its calendar from Islam\222s 1300 years to Persia\222s 2500 years.

\225 Emancipated Iran\222s women from their Muslim thrall by making the veil illegal, along with child marriage and a nasty system of polygamy.

\225 The country\222s first railroad system, a century behind the rest of the world.

\225 A civil service to provide the policing, education, judicial system, and banking\227all of these previously the prerogative of the country\222s religious establishment (yes, the very ones who are ruining Iran today).

But what of Afghanistan? Only a country for the past 150 years, for the prior 2500 years it was the eastern provinces of Persia (Iran), made up of wild tribes in constant conflict with each other. Over time, it became one of the petty kingdoms that shared kinship with Persia\222s empires. It had begun to evolve into a civilized place of trading cities that connected Persia to China.

Then everything changed. Islam swept the region in the 7th and 8th centuries and Afghanistan became a violent backwater: a handful of thriving cities with cosmopolitan merchants, poets, and scholars surrounded by tribes that detested those attributes. Afghanistan\222s vicious tribal system was made worse by its connection to

the most violent form of Islam, with constant warfare, brutality to its women and children, and stubborn resistance to change.

Too bad that we did not let the Russians finish their modernizing work in Afghanistan. They were ruthless and determined to modernize the country and suppress its religion and warlords. We play with elections and an occupying army fearful of offending. That's no way to reverse a horrible heritage.

667 words

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