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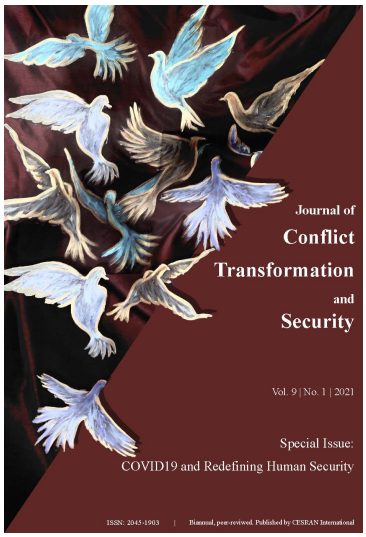

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The Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) provides a platform to analyse conflict transformation and security as processes for managing change in non-violent ways to produce equitable outcomes for all parties that are sustainable. A wide range of human security concerns can be tackled by both hard and soft measures, therefore the Journal's scope not only covers such security sector reform issues as restructuring security apparatus, reintegration of ex-combatants, clearance of explosive remnants of war and cross-border management, but also the protection of human rights, justice, rule of law and governance. JCTS explores the view that by addressing conflict transformation and security holistically it is possible to achieve a high level of stability and human security, requiring interventions at both policy and practitioner level. These would include conflict management, negotiated peace agreements, peacekeeping, physical reconstruction, economic recovery, psycho-social support, rebuilding of primary services such as education and health, and enabling social cohesion. Other macro-level governance issues from constitution writing to state accountability and human resource management also need to be considered as part of this process of change.

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BOOK REVIEW

Omar Sadr
Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan
Oxon: Routledge, 2020, ISBN: 978-1138371057, 242 pp.

The past decade has been an intellectually robust time for Afghanistan Studies, as the burgeoning field has been enriched with new theoretical and methodological insights that challenge teleological narratives of state formation and governance.[1] Omar Sadr's book, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan,* is among these new works. It centers on a dedicated study of cultural diversity while revealing the disjunctures and fissures inherent within the project of nation building from 1992 to 2014. While scholars working on state formation or diplomatic histories of Afghanistan have tended to rely on reading state documents at face value, Sadr's unique approach combining discourse analysis with political theory questions the validity of such records as appropriate representations for a multicultural society that has been politically motivated to assimilate rather than integrate.
One of the largest pitfalls in 'official' accounts of national integration in modern Afghanistan has been the inability of the state to fully recognize itself as ethnically and culturally heterogenous. Moreover, Anglophone scholarship has often repeated colonial and neocolonial myths about Afghanistan's social organization as a solely tribal structure with ethnic hierarchies, leading to misinformed yet unfortunately authoritative knowledge about who the people of Afghanistan are and what Afghanistan is.[2] As a historian of and from Afghanistan, I read Sadr's insider analysis as a refreshing alternative discourse stemming from the fields of International Relations and Political Science that often reify colonial and neocolonial accounts of a singular, homogenous Afghan identity. Given the nature of events in Afghanistan's recent past, Sadr's book is a timely contribution that informs current debates regarding national identity and the demand for ethnic and cultural rights amid ongoing violence, terror, and instability.

Sadr begins the introduction of the book by providing a definition for cultural diversity, describing it as "a plurality of identities, customs, practices, values, modes of political discourse, and ideals in a state" (p. 4). He argues that the idea of Afghanistan as a multicultural state has not been translated into practical terms in a way that resonates with the aspirations of its multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and religiously diverse constituents within its borders. Since the nineteenth century, the effort to establish a national culture gave rise to state-led policies of assimilation rather than integration of its diverse population. A related issue is the historiographic problem of determining what the term *Afghan* means. Across space and time there have been considerable ambiguities attached to the word *Afghan* particularly in its association with Pashtuns and Pathans.[3] The

[1] For instance, see Robert Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Nile Green, ed., *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible*; Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*;

[2] Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. See also, Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, ed., *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia*.
[3] Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83–101.

word *Afghanistan* has also been invoked by different authors at different historical moments spanning across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the nation-state was forming its borders. Debates over the terms *Afghan* and *Afghanistan* continue today as the people of Afghanistan grow more critical of the labels used to indicate their national identity and the stories used to narrate their histories.

Taking this as his starting point allows Sadr to then trace patterns of national integration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries while also considering the shifts in the state's policies and responses to address cultural diversity. He argues that both in the periods of the 1990s and the 2000s, the push for state centralization limited efforts to create a stable, heterogeneous, and peaceful nation. In the 1990s, in wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet-led communist bloc, Sadr posits that the fighting among Mujahideen factions was fueled by ethnic and sectarian tensions that limited their ability to share power and form a centralized, multicultural government (pg. 208). Ethnically mobilized rivalries and the quest for a unified nation did not end with the rise or fall of the Taliban. Instead, they made their way in the 2000s when state building efforts resumed with the involvement of various international actors. Sadr describes the manipulation of internal and external actors that played a significant role in repressing multiculturalism, ostensibly in the name of peace and stability (Chapter 7).

Beyond the introduction, the book is organized into eight chapters spanning a chronology of twenty-two years in the history of modern Afghanistan. The starting point is 1992 when the centralized state collapsed in the wake of Mujahideen groups capturing power and concluding in 2014 marking the end of President Hamid Karzai's second term. Sadr's justification for focusing on these years is his assertion that the genesis of claims for ethnic rights can be traced back to the 1992-2014 period. However, as early as the nineteenth century, rebellions led by minority groups challenged internal subjugation enforced by the state and points to a much longer historical trajectory of rights claims in the region. For example, in Chapter 3, Sadr discusses rebellions led by "common people" against the colonial strongarm of the British: "The interaction with [the] British and transformation of military technology in the 19th century in South-Central Asia brought the marginalized people into politics…in both first and second British invasions to Kabul and Qandahar, it was the common people – non-state actors – having no role in politics in the past, who defeated [the] British" (p. 62).

While Chapter 1 focuses on state-led policies that led to assimilation rather than accommodation, Chapter 2 provides a critique of literature on state formation within the field of International Relations, highlighting the need to include the role of culture and cultural diversity in forging a nation-state. Chapter 3 provides a detailed historiography of nationalism in Afghanistan, one that, as discussed above, has privileged Pashtun identity and language. Chapter 4 carries this theme forward by highlighting several measures of cultural assimilation pursued by the state including institutional discrimination, formation of a singular national identity, monolingual domination, and lack of investment in the local languages of minorities coupled with religious discrimination. The remaining chapters (5-7) of the book are empirical studies examining a host of topics including modes of cultural integration, multiculturalism, the politics of intercultural dialogue, and minority rights, among other notable themes. In summary, Sadr seeks to demonstrate how the present proclivity for ethno-nationalism has antecedents in a historiography of the nation that has been Pashtun-centric. He advocates for the rights of marginalized communities who have been excluded from participating in the making of their country.

Sadr's analysis of colonial knowledge production in Afghanistan is particularly noteworthy. His discussion in Chapter 3 is reminiscent of what historians have long argued/critiqued, that Afghanistan as a nation is both a material and ideational construct built upon a Pashtun ethnocentric ideology.[4] While

[4] Among works by historians include Nile Green, ed., *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83–101.

Sadr does mention works produced by Afghans he did not reference the work of Shah Mahmoud Hanifi who has criticized the colonial founding myth about Afghanistan at length.[5] Sadr highlights that the early Afghan nationalists ignored the basic point that Afghanistan has been materially and ideationally a colonial construct. This has severely impeded it from successfully articulating a coherent and durable national identity. For example, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) the British colonial officer whose book, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (1815), has served as authoritative knowledge about Afghanistan, claims that Pashto speakers are the 'original' Afghans. He portrayed the Afghan rulers, or the Durrani elite – as urbanized, culturally Persianized, and tame in comparison to the majority of rural inhabitants who were also Pashto speakers and practitioners of a normative tribal code of conduct known as *Pashtunwali*. The intellectual legacy of Elphinstone is a stifling understanding of Afghanistan that is not only ethnocentric but pits an Afghan-Pashtun ruling elite against a rural Pashtun-Afghan nation. What comes into full view, then, is a myopic understanding of a vastly diverse geography composed of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual inhabitants. Colonial accounts have served as the standard reference on Afghanistan and reduce the country to a monoethnic, tribal nation that ignores its cultural diversity. As such, Sadr's analysis provides a necessary corrective in the fields of International Relations and Political Science by problematizing such essentialist approaches to the study of Afghanistan and illuminating the difficulty of coalescing a multicultural nation under the banner of an ethnocentric Pashtun identity.

Sadr also addresses the politics of language in establishing an ethno-nationalist state (pps. 74-77). Citing examples from the newspaper, *Seraj ul Akhbar*, he notes how the early visionaries of the Afghan state in the 1920s and 1930s, including the intellectual Mahmud Tarzi, advocated for Pashto as the singular national language. Tarzi is often cited as the father of Afghan modernism and the founder of journalism in the country.[6] Literary associations were also established that promoted Pashto and attempted to establish a consciousness for Afghan nationalism (pps. 77-83). While the arguments and examples presented buttress the idea that the state was invested in promoting and officiating Pashto as a national language - which it undeniably was - what it does not include is a discussion of how, despite these attempts, the Persian (Dari) language persisted in both its formal and colloquial usages, even among those advocating for Pashto. For example, in 1944 a cadre of Afghan scholars founded the Encyclopedia Association in Kabul and created the first encyclopedia in Persian.[7] Efforts like these counterposed the ethnocentric impulses of the state that aimed to valorize Pashto as a national language at the expense of Persian. Many of the policies enacted to promote Pashto faced serious roadblocks. For example, given the historical primacy of Persian as the language of education and bureaucracy, the state struggled to implement its Pashto-only language policy and had to recognize Persian (Dari) as an official language in the 1964 Constitution as well as the 2004 Constitution. The radio – a state sponsored and supported communication technology – broadcasted programs in the two official languages of Dari and Pashto and by the 1970s and 1980s, also included other regional languages including Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, Pashayi, and Nuristani.[8] Nonetheless, Persian remained the cohesive cultural force throughout the country as the traditional language of bureaucracy and education. Even Elphinstone's 1815 account describes how the Pashtun rulers of Kabul were Persian speakers who did not use Pashto. In fact, his book was also published in the Persian language while Elphinstone himself

Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

[5] Among works authored by Shah Mahmoud Hanifi on the founding myth of Afghanistan, see *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83–101; *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia*.

[6] Mujib Rahimi, *State Formation in Afghanistan*.

[7] See Aria Fani. "Disciplining Persian Literature in Twentieth Century Afghanistan", 675-695.

[8] Mejgan Massoumi. "Soundwaves of Dissent", 697-718.

demonstrated no knowledge of Pashto or a need to use it.[9]

Chapter 5 and 6 were also of particular interest for their discussions of multiculturalism as a movement from below and introducing lesser-known historical figures. For example, Muhammad Tahir Badakhshi, an ethnic Tajik and leftist intellectual, was a pioneer in advocating for cultural pluralism in Afghanistan. In the 1960s, he argued that Afghanistan was a multinational state comprising of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Pashtuns, Hazaras, and others, and that each nation (ethnic group) had the right to preserve its own language, culture, and history. Badakhshi proposed a thesis that became known as the "National Oppression Struggle" in which he argued that oppression in Afghanistan was not limited to class struggles, but rather heightened by ethnic struggles (pg. 138). He was a strong advocate for minority rights and representation. Despite his literary activism, Badakhshi's thesis did not reach a broad audience and had little impact. He was imprisoned and hanged after the communist coup in 1978 (pg. 140).

Another example Sadr discusses to showcase multiculturalism as a movement from below is through the amendment of the Shia Personal Law of 2009 which regulated personal affairs such as family issues, marriage, inheritance, divorce, guardianship, among other domestic issues. (Chapter 6, pg. 197). What is interesting about this law is that while civil society activists worked to ensure the right of the Shia community to have a separate law regulating their personal affairs, they also had to ensure that the law did not violate or contradict human rights and the rights of women. The Shia Personal Law of 2009 contained some controversial clauses that violated the individual rights of women including restrictions on her movements outside the home, as well as having to defer to her husband's "inclinations for sexual enjoyment" as well as his demands for her to "apply makeup." It also allowed for a man to have intercourse with his wife without her consent. (pg. 197). While these provisions resulted in different reactions within the Shia community, many of the clauses that violated human rights were withdrawn or changed (pg. 198).

While Sadr's book employs an erudite understanding of both political theory and international relations theories as it applies to cultural diversity, it also assumes its reader may be well-versed in this literature, making it, at times, difficult to access for non-specialists. Nonetheless, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan* gives readers a good understanding of cultural diversity in Afghanistan and addresses the key challenges and opportunities which lie ahead. The book succeeds in tracing patterns of national integration and state construction in twentieth-century Afghanistan. Sadr aptly employs literature produced by scholars of Afghanistan including the seminal writings of Bashir Ahmad Ansari, Mohammad Seddiq Farhang, Mohammad Ghulam Ghobar, Saif Heravi, Rawan Farhadi, Mahiudeen Mahdi, Sayed Askar Mousavi, Mujib Rahimi, Amin Saikal, among others. Given that most scholarship on Afghanistan produced in the fields of International Relations and Political Science do not rely on sources in original languages, this is a particularly important and essential contribution.

Sadr's discussion of state-led attempts to homogenize the people of Afghanistan through ethnocentric policies could have been further nuanced with the inclusion of examples of people's resistance to these policies. One way in which resistance is seen is through visual and performing arts, and literature, which are avenues that the author could have pursued. This could have been done to showcase the ways in which everyday people resisted against state-led attempts to subjugate them, particularly from the 1990s to the mid 2010s, the period covered in this study. In my own work on radio in Afghanistan, I discuss how despite being the son of a prime minister, the country's most famous musical icon, Ahmad Zahir, sang songs of revolution and of society's social ills in the 1970s, and remain relevant today.[10] Recent examples from the past two decades include performing artists on the popular TV show, *Afghan Star*, including the Hazara rapper, Sayed Jamal Mobarez, who sang

[9] Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 88.

[10] Mejgan Massoumi. "Soundwaves of Dissent" 697-718.

of dire economic and political conditions of the Afghan state.[11]

This book will be of interest to students, scholars, researchers, and practitioners who are interested in politics, international relations, and especially those interested in multiculturalism, state-building, nationalism, and liberalism in the case of Afghanistan. Students in cultural history, Afghanistan Studies, South Asian studies, and other related fields will also benefit from the findings of Sadr's work.

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[11] Munazza Ebtikar, "How a Rapper Won Over Afghanistan's Hearts" 20 November 2017. https://ajammc.com/2017/11/20/rapper-afghanistan-sayed-jamal-mubarez/ (Accessed 1 September 2022)

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