'They must not call us warlords,'
says Badshah Khan, leaning forward.
'If you call us warlords, we will kill you.'

It is with a great deal of fondness that I dedicate this offering to David Silverman, who reigned as my own powerful, yet benevolent warlord for a period of eight years or so during the 1990’s. David fought fiercely on behalf of his students, which is something that all afforded his protection and pedagogy appreciated greatly.

Several years ago, in an effort to learn more about life in war-torn Afghanistan, I purchased a copy of The Bookseller of Kabul by Åsne Seierstad. The narrative focuses on events in the life of the family that she lived with in Kabul in 2002, just following the retreat of the Taliban. In one chapter, however, the action veers seventy or so miles away to the wild, mountainous borderlands that separate Afghanistan from Pakistan. Seierstad writes of encountering a powerful warlord while shadowing a journalist covering Operation Anaconda, the U.S. military’s major offensive against Taliban remnants in southeastern Afghanistan. I will quote the following passage at length, as it evoked for me a strong sense of déjà vu and one of those wonderful—and admittedly uncommon—sensations that the gap of more than three millennia that separates current affairs from those of the Late Bronze Age is not entirely insurmountable. The past is indeed a foreign country, as is the Near East in general; however, Seierstad’s discussion of a mountain warlord in Afghanistan, and the research that I’ve subsequently conducted on his checkered and ultimately illustrious career, has greatly informed my own thinking about a family of mountain warriors that lived in Lebanon during the second millennium B.C.
By the roadside about thirty men sit in a circle. Kalashnikovs lie on the ground in front of them and ammunition belts are strapped over their chests… Padsha Khan is sitting in the midst of them: the greatest warlord of the eastern provinces and one of Hamid Karzai’s most vociferous opponents. When the Taliban fled, Padsha Khan was appointed governor of Paktia Province, known as one of Afghanistan’s most unruly regions. As governor of an area where there was still support for the al-Qaida network, Padsha Khan became an important man to American intelligence. They were dependent on cooperation on the ground and one warlord was no better or worse than any other. Padsha Khan’s task was to ferret out Taliban and al-Qaida soldiers. His assignment was then to inform the Americans. To this end he was supplied with a satellite telephone, which he used frequently. He kept on phoning and telling the Americans about al-Qaida movements in the area. And the Americans used firepower—on a village here and a village there, on tribal chiefs on route to Karzai’s inaugural ceremony, on a few wedding parties, a bunch of men in a house, and on America’s own allies. None of them were connected to al-Qaida but they had one thing in common—they were enemies of Padsha Khan… ‘No one can own us, they can only hire us,’ the Afghan’s say about themselves and their rapid change from side to side in war.”

Such a slogan might also have been bandied about by Abdi-Ashirta and his descendants in the hundred years or so between the mid fourteenth and mid thirteenth centuries B.C. when they ruled Amurru. This polity, nestled high in the Lebanese mountain range, stretched from a point somewhere north of Byblos to another south of Ugarit, and from the Orontes River to the western foothills near the Mediterranean coast. As can be chronicled from an archive of letters discovered in Egypt and an archive of treaties discovered in Hatti, the ruling clan of Amurru switched loyalties at a dizzying speed. In the reign of its first historically attested leader, Abdi-Ashirta, Amurru paid homage (and tribute) to Egypt and to the Upper Euphrates Valley Kingdom of Mitanni, though apparently to each without the other’s knowledge. His son, Aziru, played the rival powers of Egypt and the Anatolian kingdom of Hatti off of one another to good effect, but at great personal risk, before committing finally to the latter. Abdi-Ashirta’s grandson and great-grandson both apparently stayed loyal to Hatti—though the Hittite treaties reveal Hatti’s own insecurity as to the veracity of this matter, and these are our only sources. The warlord’s great-great grandson transferred loyalty back to Egypt, informing the Hittite king: ‘We were voluntary subjects. Now we are no longer your subjects.’ Defeat in battle and the welcome prospect of being pardoned and reinstalled as ruler by a Hittite king, however, prompted an abrupt change of heart. Abdi-Ashirta’s great-great-great grandson, from what we can tell, kept the Hittite faith. Rib-Hadda of Byblos, an archenemy of the first two Amurrite leaders once rhetorically asked an Egyptian diplomat, ‘Do not you yourself know that the land of Amurru follows the stronger party’ (EA 73)? And judging from history, his assessment of Amurru’s political strategy appears to have been more or less correct.

While both Padsha Khan Zadran and the rulers of Amurru paid lip service to loyalty, an examination of the documents concerning them demonstrates that each manipulated their ostensible overlords to achieve their own ends, even to the point of assassinating governors sent by the imperial powers to monitor their behavior. Yet these mountain warlords for the most part got away with murder and with other treasonous activities, and were in fact ultimately rewarded for their efforts by the very governments they betrayed. In seeking to explain the convergences in their narratives, this essay identifies eight structural similarities between the
warlords of Afghanistan and Amurru. It also poses a series of questions of anthropological and political import. How did these leaders gain such latitude to behave in ways that surely should not have been tolerated? How did they construct their powerbase and maintain it, despite operating on a world stage populated by far richer and more powerful political entities? Why did they court imperial intervention at the same time as they aggressively betrayed the interests of their overlords? And what were the motivations of these men for playing such a dangerous game in the first place? The answers to these questions illuminate at least one variant of the dynamics still apt to occur in polities lying outside the firm grasp of imperial control.

**STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 1: Both Padsha Khan and the men from Amurru occupied rugged mountain environments, which meant that any attempt to fight them in their own territory would have been an extremely expensive endeavor.**

Historically, there has been no more common impediment to the extension of effective government than mountain ranges. Mountains divide regions topographically and frequently politically as well—for those occupying valleys and mountains (to say nothing of separate valleys and separate mountains) may possess quite different worldviews. It is thus not surprising that Afghanistan and Lebanon—countries mapped onto overwhelmingly mountainous terrain—have been politically fractious throughout their histories and up to the present day. The more formidable the barriers to regular communication and the starker the differences in socio-economic circumstances, the less apparent it is to mountain dwellers why those located in lowland regions should wield political sovereignty.

If it is difficult for those located in close proximity to a mountainous region to control it, such difficulties are amplified when outsiders attempt the task. The British, the Russians, and the Americans have all sent armies of occupation to Afghanistan in recent cultural memory, while the foreign powers that have meddled in the politics of Lebanon are legionary. For the ancient Egyptians, who sent their own soldiers to the Lebanese Mountains, the Carmel Range, and the Judean Hills in the Late Bronze Age, the nightmare of participating in a campaign launched through distant mountainous territory became something of a literary trope. Scribal masters, attempting to discourage their students from romantic visions of army life, vividly evoked the perils of such a trek in their writings:

> The narrow pass is dangerous, having Shasu-Beduin concealed beneath the bushes… Your path is filled with boulders and small stones without a toe hold for passage as it is overgrown with reeds and thorns, brambles, and ‘wolf’s-paw.’ The declivities lie to one side of you, and the mountain rises on the other side of you. With your chariot lying on its side, you move along swerving to and fro too afraid to pursue your horses. If they are thrown toward the abyss, your horse collar is left exposed and your harness(?) falls… The team is exhausted by the time you locate a camping spot. You have undergone a miserable experience.6

Chariots, the most vaunted military technology in the ancient Egyptian arsenal, were of little use—in fact were an impediment—in mountainous terrain. Advances in technology since the second millennium, however, still have not solved the problem, for modern weapons of war have fared little better in high altitudes. Tanks cannot ascend steep slopes and scree, while tree cover effectively obscures enemies from the sights of helicopter gunners and simultaneously offers protection to the operators of anti-aircraft missile launchers. Indeed the unique difficul-
ties encountered by soldiers in mountainous zones, and the recognition that some 38% of the world’s landmass may be classified as mountainous, evidently prompted the establishment of the United States Army Mountain Warfare School, which teaches soldiers through strenuous training—during which ‘the physical condition of the student approaches exhaustion’—how to function effectively in such a precipitous environment.7

Because they are so difficult of access, mountains have always attracted outlaws, dissidents, and others that place a particularly high premium on their political autonomy. In mountainous terrain, small forces of guerrillas can typically resist and even defeat much larger units by virtue of an insider’s nuanced knowledge of the environment. Mountain passes are extremely vulnerable to ambushes. Caves and forests offer excellent hiding places, and by virtue of their landscape, mountain strongholds possess natural fortifications far more effective than their intensively engineered lowland counterparts. Today and in the past, lawless territories that lay beyond the control of empires and nation states lie overwhelmingly in mountainous regions. Padsha Khan Zadran’s province had ‘managed to resist Taliban domination just as they had historically fended off other efforts by Kabul to control them… (refusing) to yield their weapons under the Taliban, pay taxes or allow their young men to serve in the army.’8 The same fighting spirit of independence that rendered Padsha Khan’s tribe valuable as anti-Taliban allies, however, did not bode well for their effective incorporation into a new American-friendly Afghan state that would also eventually require them to pay taxes and to surrender their young men to fight the government’s wars.

To make matters even more frustrating from an imperial perspective, not only do mountains impede conquest, and mountain dwellers tend to resist it, but the spoils of such regions are also notoriously poor. Mountains do not lend themselves to agriculture, and thus with a few exceptions, mountain societies are incapable of accumulating the type of agricultural surplus that can support craft specialists, significant civic investment, and other such trappings of civilization. Thus while the rulers of mountain polities may be immensely powerful in terms of their ability to wreck havoc and defy authority, these men by and large seem to adhere to the stereotype of the rough and ragged warlord—powerful precisely because he has so little to lose

**STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 2: Padsha Khan and the rulers of Amurru drove on two primary constituents for their powerbase. Both surrounded themselves with a close cadre of sons, brothers, and nephews, who acted as representatives and who shared in the profits of their successes. Further, beyond their clan, both relied for their fighting men primarily upon individuals who had been rendered rootless by years of warfare.**

When the Amarna letters for the first time illuminate the political situation in mid-fourteenth century Amurru, Abdi-Ashirta was busy enlarging his kingdom, besieging the coastal cities of what would eventually become Phoenicia, as well as polities along the critical pass of the Biqa Valley and also neighboring cities in what is today southern Syria. In these efforts, his armies were augmented by the Apiru, who will be discussed in depth shortly. The core of his powerbase, however, was his immediate and extended family. Certainly, upon Abdi-Ashirta’s death, which seems to have occurred at more or less the same time as Amenhotep III’s, cries sprang up almost immediately about the warlike activites of his sons. These men were at first referred to corporately as ‘the sons of Abdi-Ashirta,’ and attested in letters by snippets such as ‘the sons of the traitor to the king seek our harm’ (EA 100) or ‘the war of the sons of Abdi-Ashirta against me is severe’ (EA 103). It was not long, however, before the mantle of leadership settled upon one son in particular, Aziru.
Aziru continued to draw upon the support of his brothers even after asserting his position of pre-eminence among them, as evidenced by the continued evocations of him together with his brothers and by the fact that they acted on his behalf during his absences. As he writes to the king, ‘May Khan’i arrive safe and sound so that the king, my lord, can ask him how I provided for him. My brothers and Bet-ili were at his service; they gave oxen, sheep and goats, and birds, his food and his strong drink’ (EA 161). Further, when Aziru assures the king of his loyalty, he also feels compelled to add, ‘my sons and my brothers are servants of the king, my lord, forever’ (EA 160). Taken together, the letters provide the impression that although succession to positions of leadership in Amurru ran along patrilineal lines, each ruler’s brothers and sons served as indispensable bulwarks to his power. This impression is furthered by the Hittite treaty with Aziru’s son, which reads, ‘Because your father had spoken your name before me during his lifetime(?), I therefore took care of you. But you were sick and ailing. [And] although you were an invalid, I nonetheless installed you [in] place of your father. I made your […] brothers and the land of Amurru swear an oath to you.’

The other source of strength that Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru drew upon, beside the blood loyalty of their extended family, was their affiliation with the Apiru. Amurru’s arch-enemy, Rib-Hadda of Byblos, states as much in a letter to Amenhotep III, asking ‘What is ‘Abdi-Ashirta, servant and dog, that he takes the land of the king for himself? What is his auxiliary force that it is strong? Through the ‘Apiru his auxiliary force is strong! So send me 50 pairs of horses and 200 infantry that I may resist him in Shigata until the coming forth of the archers. Let him not gather together all the ‘Apiru so he can take Shigat[a] and Amp[’] (EA 71). Moreover, it is not only Rib-Hadda who associates the forces of Amurru with those of the oft-disparaged Apiru. This claim is echoed in numerous other letters from rulers in Amurru’s sphere of influence (e.g., EA 100, 179, 197).

The social category of Apiru was much attested in the second millennium B.C., and it is therefore not surprising that its definition is complex and much debated. In general, the term seems to have designated rather informal, ever-shifting, and often ethnically heterogeneous bands of individuals who were often viewed by their settled contemporaries as dangerous ruffians. In the aftermath of the chaos that marked the end of the Middle Bronze Age in the Near East, vast quantities of once-smoldering ruins and a startlingly shrunken settled population suggest that a great many people were uprooted from their homes due to endemic warfare, which only intensified as the Egyptian empire and then the Mitanni and Hittite empires extended and clashed. Further, the imposition of imperial rule, even when it brought peace, often ensured that levels of government multiplied, such that city-dwellers and farmers now not only paid a tax levied by their local leaders, but they also had to support the extra weight of the imperial overlay. Unsafe conditions and oppressive taxation provoked widespread popular dissatisfaction that led in some cases to peasant revolt and in others to flight. Yet another letter from Rib-Hadda suggests that Abdi-Ashirta took advantage of such widespread disaffection to recruit for his cause, striking fear into the hearts of regional rulers. ‘All the mayors long for this to be done to ‘Abdi-Ashirta, since he sent a message to the men of Ammiya, ‘Kill your lord and join the ‘Apiru.’ Accordingly, the mayors say, ‘He will do the same thing to us, and all the lands will be joined to the ‘Apiru’’ (EA 73).

While a proportion of Apiru pursued itinerant trades, they are most often attested in contemporary sources as bandits or as mercenaries. The social category as a whole was infamous for being just the sort of lawless guns-for-hire that perennially plague loosely controlled conflict-ridden regions. The fact that these armed refugees worked for a share of spoils, rather than out of a
loyalty to a particular place or to family, earned them widespread scorn from the rulers of settled polities. On the other hand, some rulers hired Apiru—if only to ensure that their ready spears were turned outward—and would refer to their own detachments of Apiru neutrally (e.g., EA 195). Of all the polities attested in the Amarna letters, however, it should be stated that Apiru are consistently and emphatically associated with two: Amurru and Shechem. Shechem was a similarly aggressive polity, located high in the Samarian Mountains, and was ruled by a leader whose kingdom was inherited by sons that thereafter acted corporately. There is, therefore, a structural similarity in the organization of these two kingdoms, which may be of importance. The prevalence of the Apiru in both regions, however, likely had more to do with the tendency, mentioned above, for those resistant to state authority to head for the hills.

Although Abdi-Ashirta and his sons ruled their mountain kingdom many thousands of years prior to Padsha Khan Zadran's ascension to power, the latter also relied heavily upon the support of close relatives and also of groups of disaffected fighters. Padsha Khan, a former truck driver, did not inherit a kingdom from his father—although the lineage he belonged to was extremely powerful in the region. Rather, the warlord's following was built upon the basis of his reputation as a warrior during the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation. According to his own rendition of why the populace ostensibly believed that he deserved to rule over three provinces, he paraphrased their supposed sentiments: 'You have been in contact with the people during 23 years of war in Afghanistan. You have been struggling for us. It is your right. There is no need to have three or four commanders. You are enough.'

Because of his 'freedom fighting' efforts Padsha Khan was awarded various appointments as governor by post-Soviet regimes, and because of his attempts to aggrandize beyond his appointed station, he was usually deposed. He remained, however, a force to be reckoned with, largely because his power existed independently of the central government, although recognition from this authority might augment it. A large proportion of his local power was instead due to the fact that the Zadrans are perhaps the most powerful clan in southeastern Afghanistan. Thus, the central government has historically been eager to placate the family, often through the provision of revenue-producing offices in the local government.

Certainly, Padsha Khan relied heavily upon his many brothers, sons, and nephews whom he endeavored to place in positions of power. One of his younger brothers, Amanullah Zadran, was awarded the position of Minister of Border and Tribal Affairs in the 2001 government, set up after the fall of the Taliban. Having his brother in this office was no doubt extremely useful for Padsha Khan when Hamid Karzai appointed the younger Zadran to investigate any potential wrongdoings perpetrated by his older brother in his attack on the city of Gardez. His position also allowed him to produce lists for the Americans of individuals that he claimed were harboring members of al-Qaeda. As early as January of 2002, however, the Americans became suspicious that Amanullah was using the lists to further his older brother's efforts to consolidate power in Paktia province.

Another of Padsha Khan's brothers, Kamal Khan Zadran, served as a general in his army and later was deputized governor of a conquered territory (Khost) by Padsha Khan, much to the chagrin of the central government, whose own choice for governor was not allowed to enter the governor's mansion but had to be content to occupy the guest house (Rohde 2002a). A third brother, Wazir Khan Zadran served as a military commander and also as Padsha Khan's mouthpiece, giving interviews on his behalf to various reporters and serving as a liaison to the US Special forces. When granting interviews himself, Padsha Khan would often be surrounded by a whole cadre of nephews and cousins, who also served his interests. One of these
nephews, Jan Baz Khan, for instance, collaborated with US soldiers stationed at a base in Khost and provided them with intelligence and additional manpower until the veracity of his reports, not surprisingly, also fell under suspicion.18

Padsha Khan’s hopes for his legacy, however, may primarily have rested on the shoulders of his sons. Certainly after one of his sons had been killed in a clash involving special forces, Padsha Khan recalled his son Abdul Wali Zadran from Dubai, where the latter had been the owner of a profitable automobile import-export business. According to his own account, his father had ordered him: ‘Take up the post as commander in the city of Gardez…or don’t call yourself a son of Badshah Khan.’ ‘I told him I didn’t want to go back to that bullet land… I didn’t know what to do but to accept the orders of my father.’19 Because Pashtun society is fiercely patriarchal, the son owed absolute obedience to the father, and even Padsha Khan’s brother Kamal Khan, the general, stated of him that ‘when he sits, no one speaks without being asked first.’20 The importance of sons, even when unwilling to fight and presumably poorly suited to it, thus cannot be overstated.

Nepotism, employed as a tool of governance, is not unusual. Rulers throughout the Near East from the Bronze Ages through and beyond that of Saddam Hussein made (and make) ample use of their sons and brothers as governors, generals, representatives, and enforcers. Such a system makes sense particularly in non-urban environments where family ties are typically the root of all allegiances. The flipside of loyalty to one’s family and clan, however, is distrust and enmity toward those who do not belong and who might threaten the perquisites of the group. So in many cases, clan systems divide society as much as they serve to unify it.

Padsha Khan, however, did not solely rely upon his relatives but also employed the services of numerous Mujahedeen, newly unemployed Taliban, and others whose homes and property had been obliterated by decade after decade of ceaseless warfare. A description of a skirmish between Padsha Khan’s forces and those of a local rival provides a good sense of the recruits that he—and others like him—drew upon for support and military power. ‘Both sides, too, had former Taliban fighters in their ranks, inevitable in a country where men with guns reinvent themselves in fealty to every new power that comes along. In terms of raw manpower, too, they were indistinguishable. Both, overwhelmingly, were composed of men and boys as young as 14 so poor they had no shoelaces, no socks, no gloves for the bitter winter cold.’21 The majority of Padsha Khan’s estimated force of a few thousand men was drawn from this rather tattered assemblage of war-torn refugees.

To tie the two threads of this study together again, one confronts, with the rulers of Amurru and with Padsha Khan Zadran, mountain warlords—men who carved out political polities in areas largely devoid of centralized control solely by virtue of the armed forces loyal to them. These men drew upon close clan ties to rule their realms. Those they trusted to lead their battles and guard their territories were brothers and sons, cousins and nephews. The priorities of blood relatives, at least in theory, could be trusted to be convergent with their own, for any success enjoyed by the leader would buoy the corporate unit of the extended family. In addition, the rulers augmented their forces with others to whom they were not related but rather served as benefactors. Often displaced and impoverished due to war, these soldiers-for-hire relied upon the rulers to provide them with employment in their militias. At a time when countless other livelihoods were too risky (or even impossible) due to war, work as a mercenary in the service of such ambitious aggrandizers was only too easy to obtain. Moreover, success in battle provided such rulers with a means of supporting existing forces and also—with its promise of further plunder—of recruiting others, thereby fuelling an ongoing cycle of violence.
Neither Padsha Khan nor the rulers of Amurru presided over an agricultural economy, which necessitated that funds be raised in a more creative manner. In both realms, kidnapping and banditry netted the rulers a steady supply of ill-gotten gains, as did the capture and control of entrepots and mountain passes crucial to regional trade.

While Abdi-Ashirta was blessed with an easily defensible homeland and fighting men aplenty, he required a steady source of income and access to grain supplies in order to support them and maintain his power. Supporting a sizeable group of followers in a mountain environment inimical to agriculture and devoid of sought-after natural resources virtually requires the cultivation of a relationship with agriculturalists. Such might be a peaceful relationship, based on an exchange of animal products for grain or—in lieu of this—the relationship might instead be violent and parasitical. In the case of the polities carved out by Abdi-Ashirta and Padsha Khan Zadran, violence clearly served as the governing factor. So far as it is possible to tell, Amurru's economy sustained itself through booty, ransom, protection money, and the seizure of lucrative cities. These latter, which ranged from small harbor depots to large population centers, such as Byblos, generally contained grain stores and also served as hubs for trade, so they virtually assured their captors of an immediate and an ever-renewable source of income.

From the letters in the Amarna archive, Amurru's predatory nature emerges in detail. Over the course of the three decades or so covered by the Amarna archive, city after city fell to Amurru and its allies, undoubtedly providing much in the way of material booty. As soldiers in informal armies are often paid in plunder, the capture of arsenals and granaries allow supplies to be replenished on the spot. The beleaguered ruler of Byblos, for instance, was routinely raided by Amurru at harvest time, which left his city racked with famine. His panicky request that the pharaoh pay Abdi-Ashirta the thousand shekels of silver and hundred shekels of gold that the "Apiru dog" demanded in order to desist in his attacks, provides yet another peek into the Amurrite war chest (EA 91). Considering that Aziru's tribute to Hatti, once he was officially bound to this power by treaty, was only 300 shekels of gold annually, it is not difficult to see that so long as the imperial powers turned a blind eye to squabbles between their vassals, the tribute could be easily raised. As it would happen, when Amurru finally did conquer Byblos, Rib-Hadda offered Aziru a bribe in order to restore his city to him (EA 162). Payoffs, apparently, could result from any number of scenarios.

In such conflicts, when protection money was not paid and battle ensued, Amurru generated a great deal of income from the seizure of individuals. The ruler of Qatna wrote to Akhenaten saying, 'Aziru took men of Qatna, my servants, and has led them away out of the country of my lord. They now dwell outside of the country of my lord. If it pleases him, may my lord ransom them' (EA 55). The ruler of Byblos also appears to have felt justified requesting fifty shekels of silver from the king of Egypt to ransom twelve men seized by Aziru and the other sons of Abdi-Ashirta on their way to staff the pharaonic administrative headquarters at Sumur (EA 114). In cases in which ransom was not paid, soldiers were sold into slavery in the land of Subaru, and so the venture remained profitable (EA 108, 109). It is thus interesting that when the Hittites finally drafted a formal treaty with Aziru, they evidently knew of his penchant for sponsoring or tolerating such behavior, and they inserted a clause into the treaty that made Aziru personally responsible for ransoming any Hittite citizen kidnapped in his realm.

Many of the cities attacked by the Amurrites were coastal cities that served as ports of call.
Those who controlled them thus undoubtedly made a tidy income off of import-export duties, harbor taxes, docking fees, and the like. Much to Egypt’s displeasure, both Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru attacked the Egyptian base at Sumur under shady, obviously trumped up circumstances, as will be discussed below. For now, it is important only to explain why this small outpost was so attractive both to the Egyptians and to the rulers of Amurru. Being a coastal port, Sumur represented a guaranteed source of income. It possessed, however, two other charms. First, the guardian of Sumur administered a substantial Egyptian granary that was evoked frequently by vassals in the Amarna correspondence as the source of all good things (e.g., EA 60, 85, 86). The desire to capture a well-stocked grain depot in order to feed their followers no doubt motivated both Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru to attack the pharaonic base, despite the fact that both men claimed to be faithful protectors of Egyptian interests. Much more importantly, however, Sumur guarded the western end of an important pass that struck through the mountains inland to the city of Kadesh. Such passes were few and far between. Thus, whoever controlled Sumur and the Eleutheros Valley pass would be in a position to charge exorbitant fees to anyone who wished to dock in the harbor and/or to move troops, supplies, or trade-goods through the pass.

Sumur and Byblos were to Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru what Gardez and Khost were to Padsha Khan. Many of the activities that brought this latter day warlord in conflict with Afghanistan’s central government had to do with his desire to obtain control over these two cities, both of which were situated on one of the most profitable trade routes with Pakistan. To this end, Padsha Khan launched numerous ultimately unsuccessful attacks against the town of Gardez and installed his brother, illegally, in the governor’s mansion in Khost, as was discussed above.

From Padsha Khan’s perspective, the cities themselves were valuable as regional centers and hubs of trade, but the routes that linked them with each other and again with Pakistan were just as valuable. The route from Gardez to Khost runs through a narrow mountain valley that, according to global.security.org, “is considered extremely dangerous due to the risk of ambush.” In 2002, this fifty-mile stretch of mountain road was dotted with seventeen checkpoints, and government documents record numerous complaints lodged by truck drivers against Padsha Khan’s men, who would use the checkpoints to extort money from them, at gunpoint if such persuasion was necessary. One truck driver reported that if funds were not forthcoming, the armed men would commandeer their trucks and spirit them up to their compounds in the mountains. Indeed, this may well have been the ultimate fate of two United Nations trucks carrying aid supplies for civilians that Padsha Khan’s men brahly seized in 2003.

Padsha Khan’s control of these and similar checkpoints in Gardez and along the porous border with Pakistan served as an irritant to the American soldiers, who wished to use the checkpoints themselves in order to facilitate the transport of troops and supplies and to monitor militants. For this reason, they at times came into conflict with Padsha Khan and supported government efforts to dislodge him. The importance of these routes is readily apparent, for even when the warlord’s illicit holdings were reduced to just a single checkpoint, its revenue ensured that he was able to rebuild his tattered forces and come back to plague the central government yet again. Likewise, the attempts of one unit of Green Berets to dislodge him from a checkpoint led to an ambush in which a battalion chief was wounded, proving once again that in a strategic mountain setting, small, informal militias can indeed prevail, even against the most elite professional corps of soldiers a nation-state can muster.

Of all checkpoints, those that monitored the mountain passes to Pakistan were the most lucrative. Just one produces thousands of dollars annually in customs fees—a fortune in Afghanistan. Further, control of such passes allowed the Zadran family to become deeply
involved in smuggling and in determining (no doubt often for a substantial payment) just which highly sought after persons or populations could be let in or out of the country—a subject discussed in greater detail below.\textsuperscript{30} Padsha Khan’s control of these routes may also have facilitated his ability to kidnap victims and thus to support his men partially through ransom, for the going rate for one Pakistani hostage is roughly $5,000, and kidnapping is often enumerated among Padsha Khan’s many illegal activities.\textsuperscript{31} Clearly, then, in the mountainous regions of ancient Lebanon and modern Afghanistan the warlords operate(d) a predatory economy, relying upon their ability to extort and seize what they desired from the more prosperous lowland economies in their sphere of influence.

\textbf{STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 4:} Because they pose such formidable natural barriers, mountains often serve as border zones between competing powers, and this certainly is and was true for our two case studies.

The inhabitants of Amurru in the fourteenth century BC found themselves at the far-flung nexus of three competing great kingdoms: Egypt, Mitanni, and Hatti. Amurru’s strategic value was appreciated by all three kingdoms, yet its distance from any of the their capital cities and its forbidding terrain meant that none could hope to exercise effective direct control over it. For this reason, the rulers of Amurru seem to have been treated with kid gloves. In letters to their respective pharaohs, Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru assume or were granted an unusually unadorned greeting formula—free from the more obsequious imagined prostrations—and this likely correlated with significant diplomatic perquisites.\textsuperscript{32} These men did not grovel in the way that the mayors of far richer coastal cities did, and when Amurru signed a treaty with Hatti it was on relatively advantageous terms.\textsuperscript{33} This lightness of imperial touch with regard to Amurru was undoubtedly due to the fact that each power feared the consequences for their own freedom of movement if Amurru was driven into firm alliance with one of their enemies.

Padsha Khan found himself in an analogous position, as his territory directly abutted the extremely porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The American-backed government in Kabul and Musharraf’s Pakistan, however, were only two of the more important players. Padsha Khan also ruled over an area once ridden with Taliban, and for this reason, he attracted their interest as well as that of the American forces, who badly needed his help in eradicating the Taliban. The ever shadowy Al Qaeda was also reputed to be operative in this region. Without the aid of local knowledge, such as that wielded strategically by the Zadran family, the Americans were acutely aware of their inability to distinguish former muhadjadin and members of local militias from Taliban or agents of Al Qaeda.\textsuperscript{34} In such a politically complex, strategically vital region, virtually all of the powers detailed above would have desired to maintain amicable relations with Padsha Khan.

\textbf{STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 5:} Both Padsha Khan and the rulers of fourteenth century Amurru chose the strategy of playing numerous powers off of one another rather than allying themselves with one power and staying loyal.

Being located at the loosely bounded juncture of many competing political entities and having their bases nestled high in regions that were notoriously difficult to conquer provided Padsha Khan and the men from Amurru with a certain freedom to determine their own destiny. It is remarkable in both cases, however, that instead of picking their own overlord, negotiating favourable terms, and sticking with that choice, the leaders endeavored instead to work several angles at once. Pretending alliance to different, opposed political factions is a dangerous game
that can end badly, yet it was evidently the preferred strategy in both cases.

At the time that Abdi-Ashirta was attacking cities loyal to the pharaoh and even the pharaonic military base at Sumur, he was ostensibly an Egyptian vassal and aggressively asserted his loyalty in letters to Amenhotep III (EA 60-61, 63-65). As can be pieced together from different references in the Amarna archive, however, he appears also to have been a vassal of Mitanni, to whom he paid (or was supposed to pay) tribute in wool and purple garments, a tax that betrays the pastoral nature of his authorized economy and also his proximity to the murex shells of the Phoenician coast (EA 101).

Given that Egypt and Mitanni were allies, there is nothing necessarily untoward about the two kingdoms sharing a vassal. Moreover, the King of Mitanni’s letters to Amenhotep III are notoriously effusive in their expressions of affection. Piecing together clues from the different letters, however, a more troubling picture arises. There are reports from Rib-Hadda of Byblos that seem to imply that the King of Mitanni intended to push his border with Egypt southward, for he made a personal visit to Sumur and then neglected to follow through on his original intent to travel southward to Byblos (EA 85, 95). Since Byblos lay well within Egyptian territory, an armed incursion would have been in violation of the peaceful relations between the two kingdoms, and it prompts speculation as to whether Abdi-Ashirta’s aggressive actions against Sumur and other neighboring Egyptian vassal cities might indeed have been launched at the instigation (or with the tacit approval) of Mitanni.

Perhaps because Abdi-Ashirta had been withholding tribute, however, the relationship seems to have soured, for Mitanni eventually launched military assaults against Abdi-Ashirta, about which the latter complained to the pharaoh ‘all the [k]ing[s] under the king of the Hurri forces seek to wrest the lands away from my […] and…[….o]f the king, [my] lord, [but I g]uard th[em]’ (EA 60). Even Rib-Hadda uncharacteristically implored the pharaoh to intervene on Amurrus’s behalf, saying that ‘Day and ni[ght it has cri]ed to you [and they s]ay (that) what is taken f[rom t]hem to Mitann[a] is very much’ (EA 86). As a result of these campaigns, Mitanni does seem to have succeeded in its goal to capture Abdi-Ashirta and call him to accounts—a move later repeated by both Egypt and Hatti in their own quite separate attempts to transform Aziru into a trustworthy vassal (EA 90, 162, 170). The final chapter in Abdi-Ashirta’s story is frustratingly ambiguous, for it is unclear whether he died of a terrible illness (EA 95) or had been murdered at Mitanni’s orders because he did not produce the goods asked of him (EA 101, 124).35

If Abdi-Ashirta’s death was indeed caused by Mitanni’s anger over his lack of tribute—and perhaps also the perceived double-dealings that would prompt him to call upon Egypt for defense against the Hurrian forces—then one would think that his son would have internalized the message that it was safest to play by the imperial rulebook. This is not what happened. Instead, Aziru picked up more or less exactly where his father had left off, paying homage and tribute to Egypt, but simultaneously attacking Egyptian allies and even the very same base at Sumur under false pretenses. The difference this time around was that the other power that he chose to court was Hatti, the kingdom that had recently defeated Mitanni in battle. Egypt’s relations with Hatti, however, were far tenser than with Mitanni, and no elaborate declarations of love masked their competing ambitions in the region.

Akhenaten, who had taken over as pharaoh, received innumerable complaints from other vassals about Amurrite aggression and about Aziru’s cooperation with Hittite and Pro-Hittite forces (e.g., EA 97, 140). A particular sticking point was Aziru’s alliance with Aitakamma of Kadesh, another double-dealing vassal whose pro-Hittite leanings had become increasingly apparent (EA 189). Akhenaten writes,
Now the king has heard as follows, ‘You are at peace with the ruler of Qidsha. The two of you take food and strong drink together.’ And it is true. Why do you act so? Why are you at peace with a ruler with whom the king is fighting?.... What happened to you among them that you are not on the side of the king your lord? Con[sider] the people that are [tr]aining you for their own advantage. They want to throw you into the fire. They have lit (the fire), and (still) you love everything so very much (EA 162)!

The pharaoh also chided Aziru for avoiding his messenger. To this charge, Aziru stated that he had just happened at that time to be in Tunip guarding against the looming Hittite menace. This unlikely excuse struck an especially hollow note when other rulers reported that what he really was doing in Tunip was meeting with Hittite envoys and treating them in a more splendid fashion than he typically treated their Egyptian counterparts (EA 161; 165)! Examples of such deceit abound, but all were countered with elaborate excuses and assertions of loyalty. ‘My lord, do not listen to the treacherous men that denounce me in the presence of the king, my lord,’ Aziru writes, ‘I am your servant forever… This is the land of my lord, and the king, my lord, made me one of the mayors’ (EA 161). Indeed, to make matters more confusing to the Egyptians, Aziru requested in one of his letters that ‘if the king of Hatti [advances] for war against me, the king, my lord, should give me… […] troops and chariots [t]o help me, and I will guard the land of the king, my lord’ (EA 157). If the Egyptians could only have trusted Aziru, this request might have been reassuring.

As will be discussed shortly, Aziru did eventually pick a side with which to align himself, after much duplicitous behavior. The Hittites, however, were well aware of Amurru’s practices, and in the reign of Aziru’s son a treaty was drafted with its own particularized clauses. ‘You shall not turn your eyes to another. Your ancestors paid tribute to Egypt, [but] you [shall not pay it…] [If] you commit […] and while the King of Egypt [is hostile to My Majesty you] secretly [send] your messenger to him, [or you become hostile] to the king of Hatti [and cast] off the authority of the King of Hatti, becoming a subject of the King of Egypt, you, Tuppi-Teshshup, will transgress the oath.’

Clearly then, the Hittites did not rest easy in their assurance of complete loyalty, for the reversion of Amurru to double-dealing was an anticipated complication. It is fascinating, then, that Amurru continually adopted this tactic, despite its proven danger and the extra tribute payments that it sometimes entailed. The ever-changing intricacies of Amurrite loyalty have already been recited, but their own status as free agents must have been deemed so crucial (and so potentially profitable) that it was worth the worry.

Like the rulers of Amurru, Padsha Khan Zadran has professed loyalty to many. According to the Global Security website,

Originally a staunch supporter of the US war against the Taliban and al Qaeda, he has so far proven to be beyond Washington and Kabul’s control. Zadran was an ally of Karzai and the United States, as well as a signatory to the 2001 Bonn agreement, but later took up armed opposition against the central government. His renegade forces are based in Paktia province. In November 2002, US paratroopers seized an enormous cache of weapons and ammo—42 truckloads full—belonging to Pacha Khan Zadran. US intelligence officers said that while Zadran was supposed to be a US ally, he was selling those weapons on the side to al-Qaeda.
An even more serious charge is lodged in another Global Security report, which asserts that even though Padsha Khan had been on the American payroll since December 2001, ‘his troops stood by and let al-Qaeda terrorists escape from Tora Bora; many US military sources believed that Osama bin Laden himself escaped, due to the double-dealing of Bacha Khan and his comrades.’

When directly charged with deception, however, Padsha Khan and his spokesmen also fashioned elaborate excuses that ended up portraying the warlord as both loyal and righteous. In defense of one of his relatives, who was charged by American officers with harboring a key member of the Taliban, Padsha Khan’s brother, Wazir Khan Zadran, explained, ‘I told them, ‘You have chosen the wrong friends in Khost, and they have been giving you the wrong information. Serajuddin is no more a friend of the Taliban or Al Qaeda than you are.’’ Misinformation, obfuscation, and aspersion, it appears, continue to be three of the most powerful weapons in a warlord’s arsenal.

STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 6: Both Padsha Khan and the rulers of Amurru committed acts against their overlords that were blatantly treasonous and unabashedly in their own (or in another party’s) interests.

For an imperial government that rotates its personnel frequently, as America does and as the New Kingdom Egyptian government did, disentangling intricate webs of local hatreds and covert alliances is especially difficult. Oftentimes, then, governments are forced to choose the word of one local leader over his rival. There are cases, however, when blame for anti-government actions can indeed be laid squarely at the feet of a particular party and where any excuses offered are rendered illegitimate in the face of a baldly treasonous action.

Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru launched numerous unauthorized attacks on city-states that should have been protected as loyal Egyptian vassals. In this manner, no matter what excuses were offered, Amurru was violating the terms of its vassal status. Of all of the many treasonous acts they committed, however, none was so egregious as the attacks that were launched by both of these men on the Egyptian base at Sumur. For the Egyptians, possession of Sumur was crucial to their imperial strategy as it allowed southern Syria’s main highway, the Biqa Valley, to be penetrated in a timely and cost-effective fashion. For Abdi-Ashirta, on the other hand, control of Sumur meant a substantial elevation in his own power. If the Egyptians had, in effect, to pay protection money to him for the continued well being of their base, and indeed for the privilege of access to it generally, his own personal wealth and influence in the region would be unparalleled.

When accused by an Egyptian official of being an enemy of Egypt (EA 62), Abdi-Ashirta justified his attack on Sumur by claiming that he had in fact rescued it. Similarly, he stated that the slaughter of the garrison had been maliciously laid at his feet by untrustworthy sources (EA 62, see also 71, 83, 84, 91, 138). Even to his own ears, however, this excuse must have seemed far-fetched. It was not only the bold seizure of an Egyptian base that may have rankled the pharaoh, but Abdi-Ashirta’s subsequent actions, too, seem calculated to offend. As Rib-Hadda reported, ‘Now, indeed, Sumur, my lord’s court and [h]is bedchamber, has been joined to h[im]. He has slept in the bedcha[mber of] my [lord], and opened the tre[asure] room of my [lo]rd’ (EA 84). The thought that a rebel would be sleeping in the bedchamber of the pharaoh, as if it was his right, is especially shocking when one understands that the campaign resting places of the king were especially purified for this purpose. If a warlord’s reputation comes in part from his audacity—his ability to openly defy those who would seek to be his masters—one can view
Abdi-Ashirta’s post-conquest usurpation of royal prerogatives as a publicity stunt intended to shock and awe his constituents and his enemies alike.

Perhaps because of the crucial strategic nature of Sumur and because of the danger of letting such flagrant affronts to pharaonic power go unavenged, it appears that the Egyptians sent a military expedition out to confront Abdi-Ashirta and reinstate the Egyptian governor in his base (EA 117 and 68, 108, 138). As will be seen to be typical in the subsequent section, however, Abdi-Ashirta was evidently not punished for his behavior, for he and his family continued to hold power. Indeed, his son’s transgressions with regard to Sumur would appear even bolder. Aziru not only attacked Sumur (EA 103, 104, 106), but letters from Rib-Hadda detail his blockade of it by land and sea (EA 98, 105, 108-109, 112, 114, 116-117), the flight of Sumur’s garrison and personnel (EA 67, 96, 103, 106, 114), the murder of one Egyptian governor (EA 124, 129, 131-132), the surrender of another (EA 132, 149), Aziru’s occupation of the ‘house of the king’ (EA 59) with his own troops and his chariots (EA 67), and the eventual destruction of the city (EA 159-160, 162). Once again, however, the conquest of Sumur was not without its flourishes. In an act of culturally specific terrorism worthy of anything perpetrated at Abu Ghraib, the Egyptian governor was murdered, and Aziru had his corpse flung out into the elements, denying him both burial and funerary prayers (EA 131). The subsequent governor, a man who seems to have grown up at the base and was thus fully aware of the danger posed by Aziru, promptly ceded leadership to him (EA 132, 149). Imperial officials, it seems, were only tolerated by Aziru when they acted under his authority.

Padsha Khan’s antics were no less outrageous. Although Hamid Karzai originally awarded Padsha Khan governorship of his province in acknowledgement of his anti-Taliban war efforts, he quickly withdrew his offer when Padsha Khan besieged the capital town of Gardez that had barred him entry. Following this, the warlord refused to recognize any governor sent from Kabul to rule over territory that he considered his. As discussed above, the town of Khost was Padsha Khan’s equivalent to Sumur, and he was able to occupy the city and install his younger brother as governor for many months, while Karzai’s appointee was forced to occupy the governor’s guesthouse. “He sits in a room and is afraid to come out,” said the warlord tauntingly, running his left hand through his thinning hair. He had removed his turban, laying it beside his handgun and bandoleer. ‘He is not acting as governor. All matters are controlled by me.” (Bearak 2002b). Padsha Khan’s harsh words were not only reserved for Karzai’s governor, but for the Afghan President himself, “He appoints one governor in the morning and another in the evening,” sneered the warlord. ‘I wish he would come and fight me. He can find me in my barracks” (Bearak 2002b). Indeed, Padsha Khan’s interventions against those governors who refused to act as his puppets led in 2002 to the appointment of five Governors of Paktia in as many months (Baldauf 2002). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the appointee in Khost was eventually assassinated under mysterious circumstances (Constable 2006).

Given that Khost lies barely 90 miles from Kabul, Padsha Khan’s continued defiance of governmental authority—except when viewed by himself as not detrimental to his own interests—has worried Karzai, and his activities have also aggravated the American military operative in the region. The many instances in which Padsha Khan’s intelligence information was perceived to be false or in which key insurgents slipped over to Pakistan on his watch have already been mentioned. His men also killed an American officer. The very first American casualty in Afghanistan occurred because Padsha Khan’s men fired at American troops, angry that they travelled under the protection of one of his rivals. “It was a political matter, to force the Americans to switch sides,” Mr. Gul said. ‘Padsha Khan Zadran said: ‘Why are the Americans coming
here without my permission? Why are they coming to Khost with Zakim Khan Zadran? Why are they trying to humiliate me?’ (Burns 2002c). Hell hath no fury like a warlord slighted, the adage might be altered. It should be recognized, however, that here again, the reputation of a man such as Padsha Khan was undoubtedly amplified according to the prestige of the power he openly defied.

**STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 7:** Despite committing treasonous act after treasonous act, both Padsha Khan and the rulers of Amurru appear to have been treated lightly, even when physically delivered into the hands of the governments they had betrayed.

When the strategically vital Egyptian base of Sumur was attacked and taken over by Abdi-Ashirta, it remained in his hands for what seemed to the ruler of Byblos to be an eternity. This man wrote letter after letter to the pharaoh urging him in no uncertain terms to do something about the situation. ‘Why have you sat idly by [and] done nothing, so that the ‘Apiru dog takes your cities? [When] he took Sumur, [I wrote] to you, ‘Why do you do nothing?’ (Then B[it]-a[rq]a was taken.) [When] he saw [that] there was no one [that] said anything [to him] about Sumur, his intentions were reinforced, so that he strives to take Gubla’ (EA 91, see similarly EA 76, 84, 88) And, indeed, this inactivity is puzzling.

Much the same thing happened (or rather didn’t happen) when Aziru recaptured Sumur following his father’s death—this despite the fact that his brazenly treasonous act was topped off by the murder of an Egyptian governor. We have only stern letters from Akhenaten commanding him to rebuild the base, reminding him that the penalty for treason was to die by the axe, and accusing him of purposefully avoiding the Egyptian messenger sent to take him back to Egypt (EA 159, 160, 161, 162). For a number of years Aziru successfully avoided such a meeting—petitioning for postponements sometimes or just happening to be away when the king’s messenger arrived (EA 156, 162, 164, and 165). When Aziru finally was sent to Egypt, it was apparently in return for a large sum of gold (EA 169), and when he came back to his kingdom, he was allowed to resume leadership. Interestingly, one letter provides the information that Aziru had previously been taken by Hittite authorities to Hatti and on this trip too had managed to maintain his grip on power (EA 162).

This pattern of stern warnings and ultimate appeasement when it came to Amurru turned out to be a long-standing tradition. In the time of Aziru’s great-grandson, Benteshina, the Hittite king punished Amurru’s political defection to Egypt by once again capturing its ruler and bringing him back to Hatti. Benteshina, like his predecessors, was ultimately re-instated on his throne. In addition, he was given the honor of becoming father-in-law to one of the Hittite king’s sons and was himself awarded a Hittite princess to be his new chief wife (Beckman 1996: 96-97). So, here too, disloyal activity was met with forgiveness and even the granting of favors rather than by retribution. What, then, was the imperial motivation for tolerating the chronically duplicitous behavior of the Amurrite rulers?

Much of the reasoning has been discussed above. Namely, Amurru was located in a region that would be extremely difficult to conquer by military means. Moreover, even if efforts were successful, the booty to be reaped in the end would hardly be worth the effort. Further, Amurru maintained relations with a variety of potential overlords, and Egypt presumably feared that it might permanently defect if pushed too hard. Indeed, Aziru had no compunction about implying as much in his letters to pharaoh with phrases such as ‘[but if] the king, my lord, does not love me and rejects me, then what shall I say’ (EA 158)? Far from an idle fear, this is exactly what happened, for it was only after Aziru was kept in Egypt for an unusually long time that
he deigned to draw up an official, binding treaty with the Hittites (EA 169; Beckman 1996: 32-37). This move meant that Egypt lost Sumur and access to the crucial Eleutheros Valley transit corridor inland toward Kadesh. The Egyptians would not regain access to either until they could convince Benteshina to renounce his loyalty to the Hittites in the reign of Ramesses II. As we have seen, however, the Hittites responded promptly to Amurru’s defection by enticing Benteshina back into their fold.

So, rather than permanently lose access to these key strategic zones, the Egyptians seem to have preferred to settle for at least a pretense of loyalty. This pretense also included occasional shipments of ‘tribute.’ Abdi-Ashirta and Aziru sent (or claimed to be right on the verge of sending) women (EA 64), lumber (EA 160, 161), and other various items (EA 157, 161, 168) to the Egyptian court. Indeed, it is fascinating that the rulers of the dubiously loyal mountain kingdoms of Amurru and Shechem seem to have been among the most conscientious of Egypt’s vassals when it came to sending tribute (Na’aman 2000: 129-130). These gifts were no doubt welcomed, even if a blind eye had to be turned in accepting them. As the ruler of Byblos warned, ‘The king is to take no account of whatever Aziru sends him. Where are the things that he sends coveted? It is property belonging to a royal mayor whom he has killed that he sends to you’ (EA 139).

Regardless of the origin of the items sent as tribute, the rulers of Amurru shipped more to Egypt than the ever-accusatory Rib-Hadda of Byblos, who may have been less loyal than his endless letters asserted (EA 119 and 126)—and this brings up two important points. First, the Egyptians seem to have supported both the rulers of Byblos and the rulers of Amurru, despite the fact that these two polities spent most of the time covered by the Amarna archive at war with one another. Second, although both sets of rulers professed loyalty, neither seemed to consistently act accordingly. Thus, the Egyptian policy-makers may have come to the conclusion that one essentially untrustworthy ruler was as good as any other and that rather than take sides and risk potentially alienating one, the safer policy was to support both and to thus remain neutral (without seeming so) in the struggles waged between them.

Padsha Khan Zadran, like his counterparts from Amurru, openly defied his supposed overlords—the Afghan government and the Americans. Further, he not only got away with this behavior, even when called to account for it, but was also often openly appeased. His punishment for besieging Afghan cities and impugning Karzai’s legitimacy was typically a good tongue lashing. For example, after Padsha Khan’s first falling out with Karzai, the Afghan President publicly called him a murderer and vowed justice; however, according to The New York Times, Other top officials sheepishly explain that even if soldiers are sent, combat is unlikely. Rather than placing Mr. Zadran in handcuffs, they may merely ask for his solemn promise not to slaughter so many people at one time again. ‘The warlord seems to understand this. ‘You will see what happens,’ he said huffily. ‘They will send more delegations to talk to me. They know how to talk, not how to fight.’ (Bearak 2002b)

This prediction was entirely correct. Further, as late as 2004, when Padsha Khan was arrested by Pakistan and handed over to Karzai’s government, Karzai left his fate in the hands of a delegation of elders from Padsha Khan’s own home region. These men politely requested that the warlord be released. Thus, despite all of his seditious anti-government behavior, Padsha Khan was pardoned and asked only to provide ‘assurances that he will not do things that he has done in the past.’ Indeed, instead of execution or imprisonment, Padsha Khan saw one of his
sons appointed district chief in southern Afghanistan.

The Afghan and American rationales behind such lenient treatment of a chronically wayward vassal are much the same as they were for the Egyptians in the Late Bronze Age. Fear that Padsha Khan would drop all affectations of loyalty and begin to actively work against them was a very real concern, proven well founded when the Americans briefly rescinded their support, and Padsha Khan promptly amassed 42 truckloads of weapons and ammunition to sell to al-Qaeda. As an American diplomat in Kabul put it, ‘Al-Qaeda is hunkered down waiting for an opening and a defection from a regional warlord could provide the cover that allow these guys to climb out of their holes.’ Pacha Khan Zadran may be vain, power-hungry and rebellious, but his help can be worth the aggravation. Further, unlike most representatives sent from the capital to oversee the region, Padsha Khan enjoyed the legitimacy of a native son who has proven himself in battle. The fact that he was at least ‘sufficiently pro-Western’ resulted in his reinstatement to positions of power, even when previously deposed for aggressive, self-aggrandizing behavior.

Classified as ‘an unsavory but necessary ally,’ Padsha Khan was but one of many, and the Americans, like the Egyptians, seem to have taken the tack of supporting two opposing sides in a conflict, if the support of both parties was wished and neither smelled any sweeter than the other. As Seierstad put it, ‘The Americans hedge their bets and work with both sides in the local conflict. The Americans give both sides money; both sides accompany them on missions; both sides are given weapons, communications equipment, intelligence equipment. They have good contacts on both sides; on both sides are former Taliban supporters.’ Rather like a major corporation that contributes political donations to both Republican and Democratic political candidates, so too the imperial governments sought to curry favor with rival warlords. Such tactics, however, as seen in the deliberate targeting of the American officer in Khost, could backfire.

STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY 8: The final point of similarity between Padsha Khan and the Amurrite leaders is perhaps the most counter-intuitive. Namely, that despite all of their anti-government behavior, these rulers actively lobbied to preside as legitimate government officials over their territories. Further, both actively solicited the emplacement of troops in their territory and competed—bloodily—with rivals for the privilege of hosting them.

Sergeant Nathan Ross Chapman, the first casualty in the war in Afghanistan, was shot as a warning to the Americans not to collaborate with Padsha Khan’s rival. The desired outcome of the act was that Padsha Khan and his forces would become the sole American collaborators in the region. Yet given all of the covert ties between Padsha Khan and America’s enemies, as well as Padsha Khan’s proven desire to run his own show, such elaborate courting of the American military seems counter-intuitive. What would be the advantage of inviting a potentially controlling force into one’s own backyard? Yet Abdi-Ashirta, while he was busy consorting with Mitanni and attacking fellow Egyptian vassals, actively lobbied the pharaoh to send him a pharaonic district official, troops, and chariots. His son too was eager to host Egyptian troops and to fulfill recognized positions in the Egyptian administration, despite the fact that he had a greater history of subverting Egyptian interests than of supporting them.

Indeed, the rulers of Amurr and Byblos, who were perennially at war, both requested that they be put in charge of Sumur and granted troops, horses, and chariots. No doubt the fact that government bases were typically well provisioned and that government officials had rights to levy customs dues lay behind this request. According to Aziru’s own narrative of events, he had wanted to enter the service of the king, but was prevented from doing so by the corrupt officials that currently resided at Sumur (EA 157, similarly 171); in the same letter, he requested that
Morris

troops be sent to him so that he could better resist any Hittite forces that might intrude into his area. Given that these missives predated his assaults on Sumur, his final ploy seems to have been to seize the Egyptian base for himself and then to force the Egyptians to deal with him, if they desired continued access. To all indications, however, the rulers of Amurru did wish to continue their relationship with Egypt, for it seems to have been quite profitable.

Abdi-Ashirta had lobbied for and received Egyptian troops (EA 70, 82), and Aziru appears to have been granted a garrison, provisions, as well as payments of silver and gold, much to the annoyance of the ruler of Byblos, who claimed that Aziru then paid the Egyptian funds to the Hittite king (EA 122, 126, 161). Sumur was also the recipient of Egyptian-owned grain supplies (EA 86), and if the rulers of Amurru had access to such stores, then feeding their Apiru dependents would be far easier. Akhenaten himself wrote to Aziru, stating, ‘if you perform your service for the king, your lord, what is there that the king will not do for you’ (EA 162)? His question may well have been a fair one, as vassals who acted as agents for Egyptian interests could receive gold, silver, soldiers, grain, horses, chariots, oil, clothing, and other provisions (EA 70, 74, 76, 79, 85, 86, 100, 112, 125, 126, 130, 137, 138, 152, 161, 263, 287).47 These benefits seem to have been offered also by competing great powers, for in the Hittite treaty he eventually entered into, one of the clauses stipulated, ‘And if you, [Aziru, want something, request it] from the King of Hatti, and take [whatever the King of Hatti gives to you].’ And again, ‘[Now], because Aziru turned [to] My Majesty for vassalage of his own free will, I, My Majesty, [will send] noblemen of Hatti, and infantry [and chariotry, to him from] Hatti to the land of Amurru’48

Such gifts of weaponry, men, and supplies were useful in a practical sense, especially when they could be deployed against personal enemies in the supposed interests of the Egyptian state, but they may also have carried even greater symbolic weight. The elders of Irqata, for instance, requested of the king ‘may he grant a gift to his servant(s) so our enemies will see this and eat dirt’ (EA 100). Like jealous, ever-vigilant siblings, Levantine vassals monitored the gifts given to their contemporaries closely, for such gifts of men and supplies seem to have served as tangible symbols of their comparatively greater access to the pharaoh’s ear and strong arm. Indeed, the numbers of Egyptian personnel stationed anywhere permanently were generally token, with 30 to 50 soldiers being deemed sufficient to quiet even a relatively troublesome area, presumably because a small squadron of soldiers served as a signifier of the many more that might be mustered in case of an attack. Given that virtually all centers that flourished during the Amarna Period were those that enjoyed pharaonic patronage, Egyptian attention evidently brought prosperity along with it—or at least helped foster existing prosperity.49

Like the Egyptians, the Americans also funded key warlords in their efforts to smooth the way towards achieving their goals in Afghanistan, awarding them as much as $200,000 in cash payments (for themselves), as well as supplying their men with uniforms, ammunition, and with $200 per soldier per month. By allying himself with the Americans, then, Padsha Khan could provide his dependents with a relatively healthy, steady income in a region where such a thing was rare indeed.50 Moreover, for Padsha Khan, access to American troops meant extra firepower against his own enemies (all terrorists, of course),51 extra ammunition in his bid for autonomy with respect to Karzai’s government, and extra funds to line his own pocket. Inviting in modest numbers of occupying troops also had its perks, as it did in the Levant, for from an Afghan perspective, even ‘small foreign forces of perhaps 100 soldiers… could prove as useful as having several thousand’ in terms of the symbolic weight they carried.52

Over all of these perks of outside interference, Padsha Khan required a monopoly—hence
the attack on the sergeant. Even after this shooting, however, the Americans continued to fund both Padsha Khan and his most hated local rivals.\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, the battle between himself and the man Karzai had chosen for governor of Khost was for a while played out largely utilizing revenue from international donors as ammunition.

Instead of confronting Mr. Zadran with force, Mr. Taniwal hopes to bury his rival with cash. Mr. Taniwal is mounting a two-pronged effort to show local residents and local gunmen that he has the funds from international donors to pay salaries. At the same time, he is trying to cut off Mr. Zadran’s access to all local government agencies that produce revenue. ‘I am cutting his sources,’ Mr. Taniwal proudly announced tonight. ‘He cannot pay his people’.\textsuperscript{54}

Connections to imperial powers, then, often could be parlayed into revenue streams that paid the salaries of dependents and thus boosted the numbers of men that owed a warlord (or a governor) loyalty. If a warlord could himself become a governor, however, so much the better.

Holding the position of governor in an ‘illegitimate government’ that he did not respect, and indeed openly scorned, was ironically a continual goal of Padsha Khan Zadran’s, from his initial attacks on the city of Gardez in 2001 until his ascendency to the parliament in 2005.\textsuperscript{55} Government positions not only brought in revenue, but they likewise conferred legitimacy to otherwise illegal actions. Ironically enough, appeasing Padsha Khan with government positions for himself and his son may in fact have been Karzai’s savviest move. After being denied in his bid to be governor of his district in 2001, Padsha Khan had actively opposed all ‘legitimate’ appointees, resulting in instability and conflict in the region. The activities of both Padsha Khan and his counterparts in Amurru, then, suggest that what lay behind them was an attempt by these men to convince their respective overlords that no other choice for peace and prosperity existed in the region other than for the government to accept and sanction their own authority. Aziru finally received such recognition in the clauses of a Hittite treaty, while Padsha Khan, last glimpsed banging his fist in parliament, has been safely out of the headlines for three years now. Whether such a policy of appeasement and co-option is ethical or viable in the long run is another matter, but without a doubt it is expedient.

\textbf{Widening the Lens}

Egypt’s policies with respect to Lebanon and America’s policies with respect to Afghanistan are not unique. They find parallels, for instance, in Ancient Persia and its relationship to Iranian pastoralists. As Amelie Kuhrt writes, the Persian Empire accommodated ‘considerable regional diversities in government and variations in the degree and nature of dependence.’ She continues:

The pastoralists of the great Zagros mountain chain…were never fully integrated into the central government system by being turned into a Persian province. The productive capacities of the region were limited and it was difficult to conduct military campaigns in the mountainous terrain. Further, it was hard to pin down the local population because they had refuges and hiding-places in inaccessible peaks and in caves. The Persian king, then regularly presented local leaders with gifts, which placed the recipients under obligation to help him. The king was thus able to use their resources of manpower when necessary, the tribes helped to secure routes for him through the mountains, and their
good will meant that tribal raids on adjacent settled communities was reduced.56

Whether such local leaders were good and worthy rulers was likely outside of imperial interests in ancient Persia, as it was for the Egyptians, the Americans, and the Coalition Government in Iraq. As Rory Stewart writes of the British Government’s choice for a ruler in the notoriously unruly marshes of Southern Iraq,

He had, it was true, probably participated in the looting of the province, profited from the sale of stolen ministry vehicles to the Kurdish areas, stuffed the police and the administration with his tribal relatives, and assaulted his political enemies, but these things were also true of his chief opponents and allies.57

After reporting on Padsha Khan Zadran’s activities in Afghanistan, two New York Times reporters concluded pragmatically, ‘warlords make for strange bedfellows, and the American military has climbed under the covers with a good many of them. Expediency prevails during wartime.’58

As the rulers of sizable polities, men such as Padsha Khan Zadran, Abdi-Ashirta, Aziru, and Stewart’s Prince of the Marshes are much more complicated than mere bandits. Yet as Brent Shaw and Eric Hobsbawm’s writings on bandits demonstrate, they share a good deal in common with the most successful leaders of bandit gangs. Powerful and problematic non-state actors, such men and their followers are uniquely situated to exploit the productive capabilities of their neighbors. Highly mobile, they inhabit inimical, agriculturally unproductive zones that adjacent powers are reluctant to penetrate—the ideal borderlands.59 Further, operating in interstitial areas, free from the shackles of the state, these men offer overburdened peasants and disaffected soldiers an attractive alternative to civilization, with all its discontents. This is particularly so as the communities they craft flourish in violent times, when ruling governments are beset with social and economic crises that alienate their subjects and frustrate attempts to impose order. As St. Augustine queried in City of God (4.4), ‘Remove justice and what are states but gangs of bandits on a large scale? And what are bandit gangs but kingdoms in miniature.’ The difference between a warlord and a freedom fighter, or between Robin Hood and Blackbeard, lies in the point of view of sympathizers and detractors. To the states they act against such men are warlords, but they may also be paid bedfellows.

States and empires are notoriously complicated entities. Even the most mighty—given to hubris—rub up at their edges against areas in which their considerable expertise and abilities are inadequate. Here in these rugged and/or contested peripheries, local rulers find room to exercise their own agency and to exploit imperial vulnerability for their own ends in ways that are often far more difficult for their more firmly rooted, accessible contemporaries. These are the border lands in which it is—and always has been—possible for fiercely independent aggrandizers, warlords fighting for their freedom, to outfox the mightiest emperors.

Notes
Opportunism in Contested Lands, B.C. and A.D.

3 See G. Beckman, Hittite Diplomatic Texts (Atlanta, 1996), 99.
5 J. A. Knudtzon published the Amarna letters in his Die El-Amarna-Tafeln, and since then each has been known by an 'EA' number. See, J. A. Knudtzon, Die El-Amarna-Tafeln mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen (Leipzig, 1915). In this paper, all translations are those of William Moran, from The Amarna Letters.
6 E. Wente, Letters from Ancient Egypt (Atlanta, 1990), 108.
13 D. Rohde, and B. Crossette (2001) 'A Nation Challenged'.
14 F. Clements, Conflict in Afghanistan: A Historical Encyclopedia (Roots of Modern Conflict), (Santa Barbara, 2003), 144-145.
20 I. R. Prusher, S. Baldauf, and E. Girardet, ‘After 23 years of war, key players gather to choose a government’
28 K. Sack, and C. Pyes, ‘Cloak of secrecy’.
41 http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2004/02/07/1040192.htm, accessed 6-7-2009. For another account of when Padsha Khan Zadran was summoned to the capital to account for his actions and emerged unscathed, see Waldman 2002b.
Accessed online June 7, 2009: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/FE06Ag01.htm.


54 D. Rohde (2002a) ‘Afghan Warlord Muddles Interim Government’s Plans’


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