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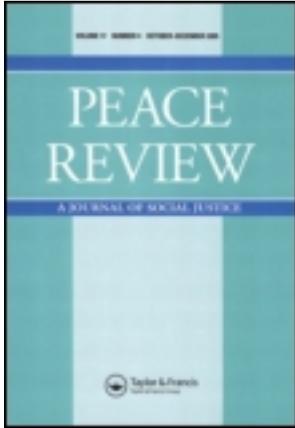
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### PEACE PROFILE: Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Nonviolent Jihad

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## Peace Profile: Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Nonviolent *Jihad*\*

LESTER R. KURTZ

Conventional wisdom often claims that nonviolent movements—especially when successful—will emerge from a peaceful culture, with people confronting a genteel enemy. That may sometimes be true, but it is certainly not in the case of Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his nonviolent army of Pashtuns in colonial India's Northwest Frontier Province, which he mobilized to engage in civil resistance of British rule.

Similarly, many insist that Islam is fundamentally violent. Muslims (like other faith adherents) are sometimes violent, but Ghaffar Khan founded a movement rooted firmly in the Qur'an and based on the assumption that nonviolent struggle was a "weapon from the Prophet," which exemplified the spirit and fundamentals of Islam.

In 1929, at the insistence of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress (INC) passed a resolution at its annual conference in Lahore calling for complete independence from the British and promising a massive campaign of civil disobedience. It was not granted as demanded by midnight at the end of the decade, of course, but Ghaffar Khan was among those celebrating independence, even though it was not formally granted for another 17 years. He mobilized his "Kudhai Kidmatgars"—the "Servants of God"—in the cause of the Indian Independence Movement. Originally founded as a movement for the general improvement of Pathan society and culture in India's Northwest Frontier Province, the movement grew exponentially as it joined in a formal alliance with the Indian National Congress and became a formidable force during and following the civil disobedience campaign of 1930–1931, which was launched by Gandhi's famous "Salt March" in defiance of British rule.

**A**bdul Ghaffar Khan was born in Swat, that region of ubiquitous violence in what was, at the time, the Northwest Frontier Province of British India, which was very significant strategically as the overland gateway to

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\*Some portions of this profile were published online on the website of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

India through the Khyber Pass. The British were tenacious in controlling the province, and military brutality against the Pashtun residents of the region was common, including those not even active in the resistance. Personal humiliations, homoerotic punishments, torture, and other acts deliberately denigrated their honor; lives and homes were destroyed. Efforts to obtain independence from Britain by indigenous Pathans were part of a tradition of struggle against various conquerors over the centuries in this borderland that was, as Jawaharlal Nehru noted, the ancient meeting place of Greek, Indian, Chinese, and Iranian cultures.

Gandhi's secretary, Pyarelal Nair, who knew Ghaffar Khan well, explained in *Thrown to the Wolves: Abdul Ghaffar* how Khan's background helped to shape his personality and outlook. From his mother, he inherited his devout, religious bent, and from his father, his instinctive adherence to nonviolence. Both of them were unlettered and both lived more in the world of the spirit than of the flesh. According to Khan:

My mother would often sit down after her *namaz* (Muslim prayer) to meditate in silence and stillness. . . . My father throughout his life made many friends but no enemies. . . . He knew no revenge and he had something in him, which told him that there was no dishonour in being deceived; it lay in deceiving. He was a man of his word and he was so transparently truthful that not even his enemies dared to disbelieve or contradict him.

Thus, Badshah Khan was shaped, as all of us are, by his family and sociopolitical context. Because of his creative resolution of some conflicts between them, he became a peaceful warrior fighting for justice by mobilizing a social movement.

“The Founding of the Khudai Khitmatgar”

We are the army of God,  
By death or wealth unmoved,  
We march, our leader and we,  
Ready to die!

. . .

By cannon or gun undismayed,  
Soldiers and horsemen;  
None can come between  
Our work and our duty!

—“Kudhai Kidtmatgar” Marching Song

The “Kudhai Khidmatgar” movement, led by Ghaffar Khan, was part of a complex pattern of resistance to various forces, notably British. That resistance was part of his family's legacy: His great grandfather had been

sentenced to death by the British, and his grandfather and father were both part of a Muslim *jihad* against British rule. During much of the time prior to independence, the forces of resistance were divided between the Indian National Congress, on the one hand, and the Muslim League on the other, although the latter's opposition to the British was at first quite tepid, which is what led the "Kudhai Kidtmatgars" to join with Congress instead. Ghaffar Khan sometimes operated uneasily between the two as a devout Muslim working with the Hindu-dominated Congress in a predominantly Muslim territory. The *mujahideen* attempted, without success, to mount an armed resistance against the Raj in the previous century, but it had pretty much collapsed by Ghaffar Khan's time.

As Ghaffar Khan explained in 1934 to the Indian Christian Association, "Our fault is that our province is the gateway of India. Because we live there, the government calls us the gatekeepers and openly tells us, 'How can we give reforms to the gatekeepers? If we give them anything, India will go out of our hands.'" Although originally conceived as a social reform and economic mobilization movement, the "Kudhai Kidtmatgars" bourgeoned as a formal ally of the Congress and Gandhi's independence movement. Pyarelal observed that "Up till April, 1930, the Khudai Khitmatgar did not number more than 500. In 1938, their figure stood at over one hundred thousand." The movement became a mainstay of the INC's civil disobedience movement, but also had its own unique characteristics from its Pathan and Muslim root, as well as the impact of the founder's forceful personality and passionate commitment.

Although Ghaffar Khan himself modestly refused the title and some Pathans found it condescending, many used the title intending the greatest respect and because of his close connection with the Mahatma. The British sent Ghaffar Khan into exile in 1934, so he and his physician brother joined Gandhi at his ashram. Dr. Khan opened a clinic and went into the nearby villages to provide medical care. Ghaffar Khan spent hours working on the ashram and talking with the Mahatma, who was anxious to learn more about Islam from the broad-minded Pathan. Pyarelal reported, "Often Gandhiji would ask him to read out passages from the Holy Quran with his commentary at the evening congregational prayer." The radical synthesis of spirituality and politics that the two shared, despite their religious foundations, drew them together in a shared sense of purpose and commitment. In October of 1934, Ghaffar Khan accompanied Gandhi to the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress, where he was received as a celebrated hero and offered the presidency of the Congress, which he humbly declined. His participation in the Congress movement gave it, and Gandhi, considerable legitimacy in the Northwest Frontier Provinces, despite the growing tension between Hindu and Muslim leadership within the Congress.

The mobilization of the Red Shirts resonated with a deep cultural chord among the Pathans. Ghaffar Khan's role was key, but not singular. As he himself observed, "great movements have deep underlying causes, and therefore, the credit for creating a national awakening and building up powerful organizations does not belong to an individual, but to a people as a whole." The movement embraced a number of contradictions that complicated its development. Although based on the universalistic spirit of Islam, it was also founded in the unity of the Pashtuns as a distinct identity group. Moreover, it was a nonviolent movement created in the wake of violent resistance to British rule with some of the same participants. Badshah Khan observed that there were two freedom movements in the region: one violent and the other nonviolent. He claimed that the violent movement preached hatred and more violence, and that the nonviolent movement preached love and brotherhood, speaking of "a new life for the Pathans," and "a great splendid revolution in art, in culture, in poetry, in their whole social life," according to Muhammad Soaleh Korejo. When the British moved him to a Gujarat prison, he met Hindu fellow resisters and took the opportunity to study the Bhavagad Gita and the Sikh scriptures, even trying to institutionalize classes in the Gita and Qur'an.

Deeply spiritual himself, Ghaffar Khan was a serious critic of those Muslims whom he believed betrayed the faith. Gandhi's secretary Pyarelal recalls first meeting Ghaffar Khan when he came to visit Gandhi in 1931, when he alighted at Bardoli railway station with just a handbag containing only one change of clothes and his papers—no bedding, no travelling kit of any kind. Yet he had come, not on a quick visit to return by the next available train, but to "put myself at Mahatmaji's disposal for as long as he may wish." Within minutes of their meeting, Badshah Khan was speaking with great passion against those who "have reduced Islam . . ." Islam, he emphasized, meant submission to the will of God, serving Him through service of His creatures, irrespective of caste, creed, or color, and striving ceaselessly for truth and justice.

Moreover, as Ghaffar Khan reportedly told Mahadev Desai, "For, what is faith until it is expressed in one's life? It is my inmost conviction that Islam is *amal*, *yaqeen*, *muhabat* (work, faith and love) and without these the name Mussulman is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal," according to Pyerelal. This centrality of service at the core of his faith is what provided much of the motivation for his work in the causes of the Khudai Khitmatgar and the Congress and guided his theology.

His personal practice of the faith was disciplined and integrated with his entire style of life. Pyerelal claimed that Ghaffar Khan "never missed a single *namaz* (prayer) or *roza* (fast)," but that he combined that practice with "a rarer catholicity of outlook." Pyerelal quoted him as saying that, "the fundamental

principles of all religions are the same, though details differ because each faith takes the flavour of the soil from which it springs.”

Ghaffar Khan brought to the table the same synthesis of religious, political, and social forces that Gandhi combined. In a 1931 interview, he told journalist Robert Bernays that, “My movement is social as well as political. I teach the ‘Red Shirts’ to love their neighbours and speak the truth. Pathans are a warlike race; they do not take easily to the gospel of non-violence. I am doing my best to teach it to them.” Islam, like other major world religions, includes both warrior and pacifist motifs in its scriptures and teachings. The Qur’an and the *Hadith* (authoritative stories about the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) both affirm the sanctity of life and the importance of showing mercy to fellow human beings while, at the same time, insisting that Muslims fight against injustice. In the Qur’an, the most honored name of God after God (*Allah* in Arabic, or *Alaha* in Aramaic, the language of Jesus) is the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. This formula, “In the Name of God, the most Compassionate, the most Merciful,” introduces every chapter of the Qur’an except one, and is the proper beginning of any speech or recitation according to Islamic etiquette. Thai scholar Chaiwa Satha-Anand contended that “unless Muslims forsake the methods of violence, they cannot follow the seemingly contradictory injunctions” found in the Qur’an. It is, according to Rabia Terri Harris, precisely this conclusion that Abdul Ghaffar Khan reached as he studied the Qur’an in prison during the Indian Freedom struggle:

As a young boy, I had had violence tendencies; the hot blood of the Pathans was in my veins. But in jail I had nothing to do except read the Qur’an. I read about the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, about his patience, his suffering, his dedication. I had read it all before, as a child, but now I read it in the light of what I was hearing all around me about Gandhiji’s struggle against the British Raj.

In 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that: “The man who lived his gun better than his child or brother, who valued life cheaply and cared naught for death. Who avenged the slightest insult with the thrust of a dagger, has suddenly become the bravest and most enduring of India’s non-violent soldiers. That was due undoubtedly to the influence of one man— Abdul Ghaffar Khan—whose word was almost law to his people, for they loved and trusted him.”

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Ghaffar Khan story is his transformation of a legendarily violent culture from a violent to a peaceful one. As Robert C. Johansen noted, the Pashtuns of the area “had established a long-standing reputation for being skilled in the arts of both war and interpersonal violence.” It is quite possible that the image of the savage Pathan was, in part, British propaganda to justify their brutal rule at the colony’s doorstep.

But even Ghaffar Khan's colleagues and allies in the freedom movement also underscored the image. According to Prime Minister Nehru, for example, "There is nothing so surprising about our Frontier Province as the conversion of a war-like people to the doctrine of nonviolence."

Sociologist Georg Simmel wrote about the importance of the valence of interactions, whether they are positive or negative, as well as such factors as their intensity and the amount of the self that is involved, which is basically an identity issue. One might also think about the valence of conflicts and identity issues in analyzing Badshah Khan's contribution to our understanding of violence, nonviolence, and the relationship between the two. If the lore about the Pathans was true—and there is some evidence to suggest it was, to some extent—then it is significant that the intensity of the "Kudhai Kidmatgar's" nonviolence was proportionate to the legendary Pathan violence.

**A**lthough Badshah Khan was himself something of a pathbreaker in Islam (along with Maulana Azad, one of Gandhi's closest inner circle during the Freedom Movement), the religion has also been a wellspring of nonviolent civil resistance in recent years throughout the Middle East. Many Islamic scholars, such as Chaiwat Satha-Anand, see nonviolence not as a transformation of the Islamic tradition, but a fulfillment of it. Indeed, Rami G. Khouri noted parallels between the U.S. civil rights movements and many human rights movements in the Muslim world, contending that "the sentiments of ordinary citizens throughout the Middle East profoundly mirror the desires of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s."

One major lesson of Badshah Khan's contribution is that we often may be looking for love and peace in all the wrong places. Although we should certainly cultivate peaceful societies, we might find that they are hidden underneath warrior cultures.

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