

The Afghan Tribal Society

Please try to imagine that we have no state – no police, no courts, no social security, no schools, nothing!

There is no health insurance. But we need doctors for the story here. Let's assume that there are! Your mother is sick. You take her to a doctor. He treats your mother. She dies. You are convinced that the doctor did something wrong. Your brother is also a doctor. He has emigrated to England. You talk to him on the phone. Your suspicions are confirmed. The doctor is to blame for your mother's death. What do you do?

You hire a lawyer. What for? There are no courts. You report the doctor to the police. So what? There are no police.

Or you run a farm. Another farmer owns much more land. You can call him a big farmer. This big farmer has his eye on your best piece of land down by the river. He comes to visit you. He has brought two sons with him. They are armed. He opens up to you that he wants you to sell him the piece down by the river. He wants to pay a ridiculously low price for it. The big farmer hints that he can muster many more armed men – more sons, nephews, tenant farmers. What now? There are no police. Neither are the courts.

When I tell something like this, I think of Afghanistan. "But there are police there," you will say. That's right. There are schools. But they are lousy. Most of the high school graduates are illiterate. There are also courts, prosecutors and judges. But the police are corrupt and so are the judges. There are prisons. But if you can come up with enough bribe money, you can get out of there. So, there is a lot that looks like the state. But none of that works.

If you complain to the police about the doctor who treated your mother wrongly, he is arrested; but so are you. The doctor pays a bribe and is free. You are suddenly accused of poisoning your mother. Well, she lived with you. There is no pension insurance. You had to pay all the expenses for your mother. Yet, of course, you never thought of killing your mother. But if you still want to get out of this, it's high time you pay a big bribe, too.

After that, you will never go to the police again to get justice. But what do you do then? You have no choice. You have to be prepared to enforce your rights on your own – even by force.

One of our employees came from a rural province. He asked me for a vacation. He had to travel to his homeland to help his brother. An influential family was threatening to seize all his land from the brother. I gave him the leave. Six months later, the same employee asked for a salary advance. His brother had lost the land to the influential family. Now he was living with his wife and children with our employee in the city, and he had to feed everyone.

A colleague who owns land in the province said at the time, "This can't happen to us. If something like this comes up, we can muster 17 gunmen."

For an Afghan, it is taken for granted from childhood that he must defend himself and his own by force if necessary. But he must not only be prepared to fight when it comes to the rights of his own family. It may be that his entire village is threatened.

In Germany, it rains in all seasons. In Afghanistan, there is rainfall in winter and spring. In summer and autumn, when grain and fruit should grow and ripen, it is dry. But in the mountains snow lies and thaws for a long time. So, the rivers have water until autumn. Channels are diverted from the rivers and water is fed to the fields via these channels. A lot of work goes into this. Our village also has such

an irrigation canal. And now imagine that the inhabitants of the neighboring village want to divert water from our irrigation canal to their fields! If we allow this to happen, we will no longer be able to irrigate part of our own fields.

Or a nomadic clan wants to cross the territory of our village. The nomads have sheep and goats and also camels. If they pass through our fields, the grain will be trampled down. A part of our harvest would be lost. We have to force the nomads to choose another way.

In such cases, it is not enough for us to fight back as a family. We have to stick together as a village community. Such village communities are often communities of relatives who all claim descent from a common ancestor. The whole village is a large family. And several such large families form a clan, and many clans form a tribe. Actually, one must divide a tribe even more and more precisely. But for us, these subdivisions are sufficient.

So, I have to be ready to fight for my tribe, my clan, my family association or my family. And I am determined to do so. I owe everything, really everything, to my tribe, my clan, my large family, and especially my family. Without them I would be defenseless. Who else protects me?

You should pause at this question, "Who else protects me?" The question is serious. It is really only the family that protects you. Sure, when we are attacked as a clan, our clan must stick together. But families within a clan often don't have green. When it comes to land ownership or water rights, there are also disputes within the large family. One can only really rely on one's own family. And outside the large family, or even the clan itself, there is no need to hope for help when things get serious. Courts, police, social services or insurance companies, none of that works. The citizen of a Western country has many ways to look for support when he needs it. An Afghan can really only rely on his family. If the family ejects him, he is lost. That's why the cohesion in an Afghan family is very, very strong. We Westerners can rarely appreciate these emotional ties and usually underestimate them by far.



Societies that are structured in this way are called tribal societies. Afghan society is a tribal society.

That sounds warlike, and it is. But most of the time it does not come to a fight. If our clan shows that it can muster many warriors, the nomads will rather choose another way. And if a family has seventeen men under arms, it can live in peace.

Besides, there are elders in the large families and clans. These are men who have influence and can mediate, for example, in a dispute between two families or even in a dispute between different tribes.

However, the readiness to defend oneself must be shown every now and then, even if nothing concrete is at hand. Everyone must know that it is dangerous to mess with us. A certain bravado can help. I often have to make it clear that I belong to the best clan in the world. I sometimes insult another person by making a joke about his clan in front of a third party. Then all listeners know that I dare to do something. But I should be sure that the other person is weak and will not defend himself. Otherwise, such a thing can go in the eye and provoke a warlike confrontation with other clans or clans. Our tribe cannot afford that and neither can our clan. So within these communities there is a pressure on each individual to show macho behavior – but only in good doses.

Material possessions can be helpful in disputes. You can use money to get your way. That's why you show what you have.

In Germany, many people say that they reject war and bloodshed. Afghans prefer not to say that. Everyone else would see it as a sign of weakness. War and fighting are glorified. Everyone wants to be seen as a glorious warrior.

If two large families or clans have been fighting for decades, it is almost impossible to resolve the dispute. Everyone else would think that the two families have become weak and are avoiding a fight. Enmities are lovingly cultivated.

It is important for a family to have many sons, so that it can later muster many armed men. Therefore, Afghans have many children. If a family has only daughters, it is poor. When the father gets older and weaker, the family is defenseless.

Men are the bearers of defensibility. When it comes to fighting, women and their flocks of children are a nuisance. When it comes down to it, they are ballast. Consequently, women play a subordinate role in tribal societies.

In large cities, the individual is no longer so tightly bound to his tribal community. But even there, people are shaped by the reflexes and attitudes that one develops in a tribal society.

What role does Islam play in Afghanistan? I would now like to give just one example that shows that much of what we blame on Islam ultimately comes from the rules of living together within the tribe. Islam has also created rules of coexistence, namely Sharia law. For us, Sharia means chopping off hands and stoning. This is true and not true. You can interpret a lot of things in Sharia law either way. If one wants, one could derive a quite mild legal system from it. What is undisputed according to Sharia – and this is what I am concerned with now – is that people may not be forced to marry against their will. Forced marriages among Kurds or Afghans, which rightly cause offense in our country, are therefore forbidden under Sharia law. A German-Iranian friend, who is now a law professor in Denmark, moans: "If we at least had Sharia law in Afghanistan! This is all still pre-Islamic tribal law."