



## British Colonial Imperialism and Pashtun Resistance under Islamic Jihad: An Analysis of Umbeyla Campaign (1863)

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to analyze the British Colonial Rule in the Indian North-West Frontier Region with respect to the Islamic Jihad led by Pashtuns tribes at Umbeyla (Buner) in 1863. The British annexation of this region resulted in bringing the Pashtoons into direct contact with their new master. Afterwards, the British launched almost sixty expeditions against the tribes of this region between 1849 to 1899. The Umbeyla campaign in 1863 was one such expedition which showed British imperial design, the first ever large-scale confrontation between the two opponents in this region. Here, the British tested their forces against the native Pashtoon tribes, where the latter engaged the colonial forces and attacked them frequently. Religious and ideological resistance by the Pakhtun tribes will be focused on in this work. The British successfully defeated the stronghold of Pukhtun tribes in the town of Malka. The Umbeyla Campaign was part of a Britain strategy to assert control of the North West Frontier by countering the increasing unrest and resistance in Buner to British rule. The British succeeded in extending their rule at Pukhtuns' territory but at the cost of huge losses.*

**Key Words:** North West Frontier, Expedition, British, Pashtuns, Umbeyla, Malka

### Introduction

The East India Company occupied Punjab in 1849 and built the foundation of the Victorian British Raj in India. The control of Ranjit Singh's former empire brought forth vast resources in terms of population for the British Indian Army and administrative means for Indian Civil Services that helped to prolong Britain's rule in future of the subcontinent. British also inherited the Sikh's recent most loosely controlled territory, which extended from the east side of the Indus River to the Khyber Mountain Passage. These zones consisted of huge Pashtun demography that became a fascination for Britain. British realized the strategic importance of Frontier and the Pashtuns as unusually violent, religious, self-regulating, and rigid entities. Significance of control on the Frontier was defined by Viceroy

Lord Curzon as "Anvil". In the quest to control the Frontier, the British faced numerous difficulties such as unwelcoming hills-men, harsh weather, violent resistance, and Islamic Jihad campaigns. One author quoted Frontier as the "imperial migraine" (Marsh, 2015: 11-12). North-West Frontier was not supposed to be an easy swallow for Britain where the warriors like Great Alexander, Genghis Khan, Nadir Shah and great reigns like the Mughals resisted bitterly occupying and maintaining control.

### Geography of Umbeyla

The famous Umbeyla Pass is located in Buner. It can be easily reached from Mardan through Shehbaz Garhi and Rustum. It is approximately fifty kilometres far from the Mardan district of KPK. In 1863, the British Army combated a very

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rough battle in Umbeyla against the Yusufzai tribe and Mujahideen, also known as Hindustani Fanatics, by British authorities. The Baba Ji Kandao is a graveyard of martyrs, where Hazrat Saidu Baba (RA) assembled. The battle points of Umbeyla Campaign, the Crag Picket and Eagle's Nest are still visible at Umbeyla Pass. The road from Pir Baba (RA) to Barikot is some forty-five kilometres away that runs through Ilam Mountains into the Karakar Pass. This path to Swat is noiseless and attractive. The main road hikes up to Buner Pass and comes down to China. The main tribes which are living in the area are Yusufzai and Mandar tribes. The Yusufzai tribe resides within the southern area. Baba Ji pass is named after Baba Ji Kondow, which provides a natural borderline between the Yusufzai and Mandar tribes of the region (Buner-Ambala Pass: 2005).

Buner district is situated in the north of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Valleys of Buner are still ringing with fierce battles of the past, where most of the forces lost victories and lives at the hands of tribesmen residing in these dangerous mountains. Writer Olaf Caroes mentioned in his book "The Pathan" that the forces of Alexander the Great and the Mughal Empire crossed the passes of Karakar, Dagar, Umebyla and Malndrai, respectively in 327 BC and 1586 AD. Sir Robin Lane Fox in his book "Alexander the Great", verified and described that the Yusufzai Tribe had settled in Buner soon before 1519 AD. The land adjustments have been made by Sheikh Mali after occupying Buner ([KPK Government, 2019](#)).

In the words of Balfour, "Sitana is a village on the right bank of the Indus River, at the east foot of the Mahaban mountain, thirteen miles above Topi. The village was originally found by the Utmanzai to Sayad Zanian, from Takhtaband in Buner. His descendants allied themselves to Sayad Ahmad, who settled in Sitana, and they aided him in all his ambitious struggles to establish a Wahhabi empire of Muhammadan Islamic ideological reformers on the Peshawar border. The ablest of the Sitana Sayads was Sayad Akbar, who was chosen to become the king of Swat in 1849 or 1850" ([Balfour, 1857: 206](#)).

### **Military History of Umbeyla**

In 1587 AD, Akbar passed this passage through Karakar, Torwarsak, and Daggar with his

armed men, but they were completely defeated at the hands of locals at Malandrai. In this battle, Akbar lost his beloved minister Raja Bairbal and his 8,000 soldiers. Akbar could not even retrieve the body of Raja Birbal for funeral rituals ([Sandhu, 2003: 515](#)). During Sikhs' domination over the Frontier, they failed to conquer the area of Buner. For approximately 130 years, this region served as a harbour and strong fortress for the Muslim freedom fighters of Syed Ahmed Shaheed and later his followers. The great Syeds of Sitana, Takhtaband and Malka, allied and supported those Mujahidins against the Sikh and the British armies ([Population Census Organization \(Pakistan\), 1999: 4](#)). Thus, all the Mujahidins and fighters were socialized and trained on the Islamic ideological conception of Jihad.

The residents of Swat and Buner together formed a state under the headship of the great freedom fighters Syed Akbar Shah Sitana that lasted from 1849 to 1857 ([Population Census Organization \(Pakistan\), 1999: 4](#)). [The War of Independence started immediately](#) after the death of Shah of Sitana. Some claims that war was started exactly on the same day as his death. This region remained leaderless until 1915; this gap is known as the "Era of Pukhtoo", where each tribe was led by its own elders. Invaders faced resistance whenever Malka tried to breach. During Umbeyla Campaign in 1863, a large group of religious fighters (Mujahidin) resisted the British force, which resulted in a full-scale war but was defeated lately. The British convinced the Khans of Buner to seal an agreement to burn a few houses and back off aiding fanatics. British admitted that they lost nearly 1000 officers and soldiers in a single military expedition. They remained unable to establish their writ in Buner until independence in 1947 (KP Government, 2019).

### **Overview of Umbeyla Campaign**

The expedition called the Umbeyla Campaign was one of the biggest counter insurgencies of the 1860s that did set afire the complete area. The mission was named after the Umbeyla Pass. It was commanded by an expert of hill warfare, Sir General Neville Chamberlain. General Neville was only forty-three-year-old, but the hardships and pressures of numerous

expeditions have matured and experienced. He did not want to take charge of Umbeyla expedition as he was injured during the Sepoy Revolt six years back, but he accepted the service upon the special wishes and command of Viceroy the Earl of Elgin. Britain did not want to launch an insurgency against tribesmen, but they were forced into it by the activities of Hindu radicals with the remaining rebels from the Sepoy Revolt and the Yousafzai Tribe. Despite the checks enforced over tribal lands, the fanatics had continued their religious sermons in and around Swat and in the Hazara domain. In July 1863, tribal declared Jihad against the British government and forces. Under the Jihad declaration, fanatics attacked a base controlled by a squad of Guides at Topi. The Guides were almost forced out of post but managed to defeat fanatics. The British Force assembled for the campaign numbered 5100 men with 19 guns. The strategy was to advance from the Peshawar valley over the Umbeyla Pass to the stronghold of the fanatics and Yusafzai at the town of Malka, destroy it and then push the Jihadis out of Malka. British Force was ordered to take positions on the Indus river. The fortified town of Malka was 30km from Umbeyla, on a mountain called Mahabun, a gigantic mountain looming the Indus river and the plain inhabited by the Yousafzai tribe ([Baker, 2011: 64-65](#)).

### **British Field Force Involved in Umbeyla Campaign**

The British Force comprised 5,600 soldiers that were gathered from 71<sup>st</sup> Highlanders, 101<sup>st</sup> Bengal Fusiliers, 100 horsemen of the famous regiment known as Horse Regiment of Colonel Probyn, 100 horsemen of the Guide Cavalry, regiments of Punjab Infantry, one regiment of 4<sup>th</sup> Gurkha's Rifle and 32<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Native Infantry with the Hazara and Peshawar Mountain Train guns, were sent to drove the Fanatics out of the valley then burnt the Malka ([Beeton, 1870: 258](#)).

### **71<sup>st</sup> Highland Light Infantry**

The 71<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Hill was a Scottish Unit in the British Army. Initially, it was established at Elgin by Major General John Mackenzie, Lord MacLeod, in 1777 out of Highland clans as the first 73<sup>rd</sup> (Highland) Regiment of Foot. Lord MacLeod was the first commander of this

brigade. 71<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot hoisted a second battalion in September 1778. Later, it was merged with the 74<sup>th</sup> (Highland) Regiment of Foot under the banner of the Childers Reforms and, as a result, became the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Highland Light Infantry in 1881 ([Cannon, 1852, 2-3](#)). In 1858, it was sent to India during the Mutiny (1857-59) to crush the rebellion at Kunch, Diapure, Matra and Gwalior. The regiment remained in India, taking part in the Umbeyla Expedition (1863) on the North West Frontier before returning home in 1865.

### **101<sup>st</sup> Royal Bengal Munster Fusiliers**

The origins of the 101<sup>st</sup> regiment can be traced back to a century before the Plassey war. During the very initial years of the East India Company, the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay had their own defence forces comprised of Native and European soldiers. The last force was created as a small guard of honour (an Ensign and thirty men) that started serving as the Bengal Regiment in 1652. Until 1756, this regiment expanded into several companies. Later under Clive's command, these companies were assembled to form a brigade, which is recognized as "The Bengal European Battalion". In 1839, another Bengal European Regiment was created, so there were two regiments in total, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiments. In 1858, the Bengal, Madras and Bombay's European forces came under the charge of the Crown. This is how; these Bengal regiments became 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Fusiliers, which were later again renamed in 1861 as 101<sup>st</sup> Royal Bengal Fusiliers and the 104<sup>th</sup> Bengal Fusiliers. In 1881, they became 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the Royal Munster Fusiliers (Messenger, 1994: 261). The regiment took part in the Umbeyla Campaign in 1863 and then boarded for England in late 1868.

### **Colonel Probyn's Famous Regiment of Horse**

Probyn's Horse regiment is known as 11<sup>th</sup> King Edward's Own Lancers as well. It was first raised on August 1, 1857, by Captain Frederick Wale. It was launched as Wale's Horse during the Indian Revolt of 1857 and served at Lucknow. Captain Wale was leading the regiment in the chase of mutineers, and on the

battlefield, he was killed on March 1, 1858. Later, Major Dighton Probyn, VC, took charge of this regiment ([Gaylor, 1992: 68](#)).

### **Guides Cavalry**

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On December 14 1846, the Corps of Guides was installed at Peshawar by Lieutenant Harry Burnett Lumsden under the special command of Sir Henry Lawrence. Sir Lawrence was living at the Lahore British Residence, the metropolis of the defeated Sikh Empire. Primarily, it consisted of a troop of cavalry and two companies of infantry mounted on camels. The Guides Cavalry was trained as a highly organized force ([Janjua, 2018](#)).

### **Magnificent Punjab Regiments**

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The 55<sup>th</sup> Coke's Rifles (Frontier Force) was the unit of the British Indian Army. It was inaugurated in 1849 as the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Punjab Infantry under Charles Keyes ([Cox, 1982: 272](#)) and the 20<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force. In 1863, the Punjab Infantry joined other British forces in the Umbeyla expedition against the fanatics of Sitana. On October 30, the regiment had a fierce clash at the Crag Picquet. At first, it was forced to withdraw from the hill, but later it regained its position. The 20<sup>th</sup> Duke of Cambridge's Own Infantry that is also known as Brownlow's Punjabis was also a British Indian Army unit. It was lifted up in 1857 as the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Punjab Infantry out of the soldiers provided by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Punjab Infantry (Burke, 1917: 165). The unit was founded at Nowshera on August 1, 1857, by Lieutenant Charles Henry Brownlow under the command of John Lawrence, the British High Commissioner of Punjab (Swiss and Company, 1909). In 1863, it participated in the Umbeyla Campaign. The 20<sup>th</sup> Punjab native Infantry helped to regain the British position that they had lost to tribesmen during violent clashes at Crag Picquet in October and November. It successfully defended the position of the British Forces from the repeated fierce attacks carried out by the rebels.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas**

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The 4<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Rifles is also known as Four-GR. It was an infantry unit consisting of the Indian Military Gurkha forces. The Fourth Gorkha Rifles was composed of five infantry battalions.

The regiment was founded in 1857 as part of the British Indian Army. Formerly, the regiment was known as the 4<sup>th</sup> Prince of Wales Own Gurkha Rifle. In 1861, it was ranked as the 4<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Regiment ([Tyagi, 2009: 58](#)).

### **32<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Native Infantry**

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In 1798, a regiment was raised at Janapur by Lt. Colonel J. Guthrie, that later was named as 32<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Native Infantry (1798-1861) ([Roy, 2011: 53](#)). 32<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Native Infantry under Captain Hartshorne in Umbeyla Campaign 1863 ([Hart, 1881: 452](#)).

### **Analysis of Nature of British Colonel Rule and Pashtun Account of Resistance**

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When the British were making their way into the Indian subcontinent, the question of frontier defence that would soon become their possession was on their mind. They were worried about ensuring that there was as much land as could be feasible between them and the Russians, who already had patterns in Central Asia and India. In 1849, Punjab and Sindh provinces smoothly passed over to Britain. Naturally, they wanted to extend their control over Pashtun territory, but they were immediately faced with the resisting Pashtun tribes. In order to coup the problem, they formed a strategy to deal with the warlords.

They first introduced a 'close border policy' according to which British rule was not protracted to the regions that were unable to govern completely. So, only mountain ranges were fortified to keep the tribes away. On the other hand, guerrilla forces and levies were elevated to resist the tribal outbreak on the people residing at the foothills. The British drafted different peace treaties in order to convince the tribesmen. These agreements consisted of goodwill, alliance, grants for cooperation and also promised money and amenities to keep the roads open. British wanted to make sure easy travelling for communication purposes and refute refuge to outlaws from violating the tribal codes. This strategy was not successful.

British authorities took various peacemaking steps with the consultation of experts and policymakers. Agreements were made with the Tribal through which they were offered grants and allowances in return for

their keeping nonviolent behaviour and friendly relations with the government. The tribesmen were permitted to cross the British-occupied areas and to trade without restrictions. On the one hand, British officers were not allowed to enter the tribal region. Nevertheless, repeatedly violations of these agreements by tribesmen were witnessed. Consequently British decided reluctantly to halt their payments and charged penalties, and put embargoes on them, but all these tactics failed.

Later another approach was introduced as "forward policy". According to [Verma \(2011, 139\)](#), the forward policy was aimed to seize and exercise control on the areas in the tribal region, by which important areas were seized, fortified, militarized and linked to the roads, which were rather safe. The government gave tribesmen the freedom to deal with their personal affairs in the expectation that they would slowly learn to live under the supremacy of British rule. But this policy has raised the unavoidable issue of what would be the halfway point between British India and Afghanistan. Consequently, this approach didn't prosper as well. Therefore, military operation after the operation was launched into the mountains to chastise the tribal people. From 1857 to 1877, there were 11 expeditions that were sent into the hills, and from 1877 to 1881, 12 full-scale expeditions took place. It was a clear sign that the no British policy remained successful with tribesmen. Between 1849 and 1899, the government commenced some 62 minor and major expeditions into the Frontier.

The nature of British colonial rule in the North Western Frontier reflects in the history that it was designed solely to preserve strategic goals under the pretence of tribal autonomy and administrative management. The actual concern of the British policymakers should have been the realm of probabilities and its tribes, but their key concern, intent and purpose were purely strategic as to prevent the Russian incursion of British India through the Frontier lines. So, they decided to use an iron fist against tribal to gain strong control over the tribal region to ward off the threat of Soviet invasion, which they achieved successfully. However, the British military lost lives and military expenditures at the hands of fantasies of policymakers. The tribal rebellion was the

true threat to the British army that had the capacity to untenable the British colonel's rule in the whole of India.

Russian threat, to some extent, was real as they intended to breach the borders of the subcontinent through tribal regions as of historical invasions that could entice rebels within the boundary to resist British rule. To the Russian coup threat, the British launched three wars in Afghanistan respectively in 1839-42, 1878-80 and 1919. But ultimately, the actual threat to British colonel rule was put forward from an internal rebellion consisting of approximately 300 million Indians instead of through Soviets by breaching the North-Western Frontier. In later years, British policymakers realized the clear picture of the actual threat, but that was too late to build friendly relations with revolt-prone tribes through diplomacy. Tribal resistance can be seen through several full-stormed armed rebellions launched by tribal against the British. Although tribes didn't have that many financial resources, they presented danger through their potential to quick-learn warfare knowledge.

British management of administrative and economic affairs in the Frontier didn't prove effective as well, that further aggravated the tribes. The British Indian Government introduced a laissez-faire policy of the administration. Tribes received little compensation in return for their cooperation. The government also showed reluctance to spend capital on unproductive and mainly dilapidated land. Tribes were coerced in return of those colonial policies. Political agents were appointed to manage Tribal-government relations in British India. Political agents were paid allowances by levies and Khassadar units on behalf of the British Indian Government in return for their cooperation in managing the tribal affairs. The tribal agencies were given autonomy as they were free from the influence of the colonial system of judiciary, forces and taxation. The tribal agencies fairly worked well regardless of the notable incidence of violence, respectively, in 1897, 1919-1921 and 1936-1937.

Many historians believe that the British remained unable to take complete control of tribal areas, to which British experts respond that it was pointless to control the tribal belt in

the first place and secondly, to control such a state of affairs would have been a huge economic cost that was very much against the vision of British Indian government. That's true, and the British moderately became successful in influencing some of the tribal areas through political agents and some experts, often ex-army officers, but they couldn't hold back the tribal violence and potential disturbances within the region. During all the time, the British authority on the Frontier that was asserted through the Indian Army repeatedly was challenged by tribal Lashkars, meaning groups. The well-trained British army was fiercely combated by a mixture of tribes consisting of Wazirs, Mahsuds and Afridis.

The distinctive feature of colonial forces, especially those of the British army, was the ability to grasp the environment, values and language of colonized, but on the Frontier, it was unable to be seen. The British army was not involved in any activities of Frontier except for strategic and operational purposes. The military was supposed or intended to spend years in the region according to the governmental policy, but officers showed a lack of interest in interacting with the tribal people and understanding their society. Probably, many officers spoke Urdu and Hindi, but very few were able to speak Pashtu. Officers faced with difficulty in managing tribal affairs due to limitations in the tribal military terms. Arthur Parsons (1936) observed that "the average Army officer knows practically nothing about the tribal area, the people who inhabit it, their language and the way that they are controlled" ([Tripodi, 2011: 40](#)). Furthermore, there was little opportunity for the forces to engage themselves with tribes until unless it was an expedition against them. On the other hand, Pashtuns were admired for being good warriors, but they did not have respect or tolerance for others' cultures or

religious values as they were too rigid to mingle with other societies.

## **Conclusion**

The Umbeyla campaign started on October 20 1863, and remained active till December 23 1863. It was launched under General Sir Neville Chamberlain against the tribesmen of Sitana at the village of Malka and carried by Sir Ross. Reasons behind launching the campaigns were serious accusations, the British accused fanatics of Sitana of creating a disturbance and a series of looting along the India-Afghan boundary. The surviving rebels from the war of independence in 1857 took refugees under tribesmen, and together they were still resisting the British rule. Sitana rebels were basically Islamic ideological mindset famously known as Wahabi Hindustanis from Bengal, who settled between the Yousafzai

tribe of the North Western Frontier. After the war of independence, they were fueled by sepoy rebels, and by 1862 they gathered around Sitana, near the Mahabun Hill. Fanatics of Sitana carried out mischievous activities against the British Guides at Topi, and the British were left with no other choice than to launch an expedition. In October 1863, the Viceroy Earl of Elgin commanded Sir General Neville Chamberlain to launch Umbeyla Campaign to

crush the fanatics and their assistance. Sir Neville got injured during the campaign, but it didn't falter the defence as Sir Ross took charge of the British forces. During the expedition, heavy casualties took place on both sides for seizing the hold of 'Eagle's Nest' and 'Crag Piquet'. Finally, British forces succeeded in driving fanatics out and burnt Malka to avoid any disturbance in future. Reportedly, 36 officers and 1080 men were killed and wounded during Umbeyla Expedition.

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