

### Afghanistan: the rise of ethnic consciousness through history; a comprehensive overview of the origin of the Afghan conflict

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# AFGHANISTAN: THE RISE OF ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH HISTORY

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A Comprehensive Overview of the Origin of the Afghan Conflict

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The ethnic groups that compose the fabric of Afghanistan are little known outside of Central Asian. International news reports have a knack for using “Afghan” as a metonymy for Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara, just a few of Afghanistan’s many ethnic groups. Such generalizations desensitize and ignore the root of Afghanistan’s decade long conflict: ethnic divisions. During the Afghan Civil War, ethnic groups fought for regional power in a conflict that left millions dead and set the precedence for the rise and eventual takeover of the Taliban. Ethnic division, however, didn’t emerge in the 90s when the civil war took place, but rather, had always been an undeniable theme in Afghan history. From the reign of the Durranis to the Communist regime, ethnicity was a recurring motif. This research paper will explore the factors that shaped Afghanistan’s ethnic divisions by paralleling the rise of the Afghan ethnic consciousness with the rise of the Afghan state.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Lying in the heart of Asia, Afghanistan is the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. As a result of its strategic location, a multitude of ethnicities dwell within its borders. This diversity, however, has undermined efforts at peacebuilding. With heightened ethnic tension and fluid ethnic boundaries, no policy, plan, or proposal can adequately address the need of any single group.

Afghan politicians, however, reject ethnicity as a pressing issue. Rhetoric about ethnicity is in a sense taboo to speak about in public<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, as this research report will tell, history says otherwise. Ethnic divisions have always played a significant role in the country ever since the inception of the modern state of Afghanistan. This issue was highlighted during the Bonn Conference of 2001 when the United Nations emphasized the importance of keeping the country multi-ethnic<sup>2</sup>. The conference stressed the importance of safeguarding the political representation and interests of all ethnicities. The events that led to the Bonn Conference, however, are attached to a hazy and somewhat obscure ethnic history.

Ethnic groups in Afghanistan are not subjected to one region and in many cases, overlap, weaving a colorful tapestry of a multitude of languages and cultures that in many ways resemble the intricate pattern of an Afghan rug.

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison, Emma. "Afghan Census Dodges Taboo Topics." - *Newspaper*. 5 Jan. 2013. Web. 2 July 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "AGREEMENT ON PROVISIONAL ARRANGEMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN." *UN News Center*. UN, 5 Dec. 2001. Web. 2 July 2015.

## 2 ETHNIC GROUPS

Afghanistan is home to dozens of ethnic groups such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras, Aimaqs, Kyrgyz, Arabs, Pamirs, Qizilbashes, Balochs, Pashais, and Nooristanis. The primary groups that make up the majority of the country, however, are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras.

Due to the lack of census, the estimated percentage of each ethnicity is highly controversial.

### 2.1 PASHTUNS

Concentrated in the southern and eastern part of Afghanistan, Pashtuns are generally considered to be the country's largest ethnic group. They comprise approximately 40-50% of the total population and speak Pashto, their own language. Pashtuns in Kabul, however, usually speak Dari.

Historically, Pashtuns have been the most powerful ethnic group. In the 18th century, they were handed the reigns of leadership by the British for the Kingdom of Afghanistan. This was when Abdul Khan Abdali of Kandahar established the Durrani Empire<sup>3</sup>.

Under Emir Abdur Rahmon during the 1890s, there was a fierce campaign to "Pashtunize" Afghanistan. Pashtuns were deployed to the north, a region that held a plethora of different cultures and ethnicities, and given generous land grants<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Abdur Rahmon started an ethnic cleansing of the Hazaras, a Mongoloid group<sup>5</sup>. The Hazaras who rose against his rule were massacred and sold into slavery. It wasn't until 1919 that Hazaras were ridden of their label as slave by King Amanullah Khan<sup>6</sup>.

Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan arguably continues till today. Since its creation in 1747, central leadership has been in the hands of a Pashtun except in the cases of Habibullah Kalakani (January 1929-October 1929)<sup>7</sup> and Burhanuddin Rabbani (1996-2001)<sup>8</sup>.

### 2.2 TAJIKS

Tajiks are the second largest group, their percentage ballparked at 25-30%. They mainly live in the north and northeastern part of the country. The definition of Tajik, compared to other ethnic groups, is quite fluid. Tajik has been used to describe Dari-speakers, individuals of Persian heritage, and settled people (also those who have detribalized).

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<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan - Ethnic Groups. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Aria, A. (n.d.). The Creation of Afghanistan. Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Hussain, H. (2009, March 31). Abdur Rahman Khan's Tortures & Massacre of Hazaras. Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Allahwala, R. (n.d.). Amir Abdur Rahman, King of Afghanistan. Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan.com Afghanistan King Habibullah Kalakani Bacha i Saqao. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Burhanuddin Rabbani | biography - president of Afghanistan. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

Up until the 1980s, during which the Mujahidin movement took place, Tajiks were not represented in government but rather had ascended into the economic sector. Meanwhile, Pashtuns remained privileged in all other areas. With the emergence of leaders during the late 20th and early 21st century such as Ahmad Shah Masood, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdullah Abdullah, and Amrullah Saleh, the status quo changed. Tajiks began demanding for more rights and were a big part of the creation of the modern state of Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>.

### **2.3 UZBEKS**

Uzbeks are a Turkic people that dwell in the northern plains of Afghanistan. They speak their own language which is a member of the Altaic language family. Uzbeks are estimated to be 8% of the population.

A good portion of Uzbeks fled to Afghanistan during the Russian conquest of Central Asia<sup>10</sup>. They generally did not have any representation in government until the post 9-11 period when Abdul Rashid Dostum rose to power.

### **2.4 HAZARAS**

Hazaras are a Mongoloid people from central Afghanistan that comprise 7% of the population<sup>11</sup>. They are unarguably the most persecuted and marginalized group in Afghanistan. Unlike most Afghans, they are Shia Muslims. A majority is Imami Shia while a minority is Ismaili Shia.

Under Emir Abdur Rahmon, their land was taken away and distributed to Pashtuns. They also had harsh taxes imposed on them. When the Hazaras revolted, the Emir brutally massacred them and sold the remaining population into slavery. Until 1919, the Hazaras were legally slaves.

Till this day, anti-Hazara sentiment continues. Under the Taliban rule, they were singled out and murdered, most notably in the massacre of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998<sup>12</sup>. Although Afghanistan has developed since then, this sentiment has risen again as Hazara-specific attacks have increased.

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<sup>9</sup> Afghanistan - Tajik. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan - Uzbek. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Afghanistan - Hazara. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> THE MASSACRE IN MAZAR-I SHARIF. (1998, November 1). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

### **3 HISTORY OF “THE HEART OF ASIA”**

Afghanistan’s history dates back to the Pre-Islamic period. Civilization occupied the region of modern Afghanistan as far back as 3000 BC. The very first historical documentation of civilization emerged during the Achaemenid Empire<sup>13</sup>. At 331 BC, leadership shifted from the Achaemenid emperors to the Seleucids. They ruled the land with an infusion of Greek culture. Afterwards, Mauryan India grabbed hold of the south while the north remained Persian. In the mid-third century BC, the Kushan Empire rose and ruled until the 7th century when they were taken over by the Sassanian Empire.

Shortly afterwards, Arab Muslims began converting Afghan tribes to Islam. The first Islamic dynasty consequently rose. The Ghaznavid Dynasty ruled until 1220 when Genghis Khan took the region. Timur then consolidated the country in the 1380s and his descendants ruled the land until the 16th century.

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<sup>13</sup> History of Afghanistan. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

## 4 CREATION OF THE AFGHAN STATE

Afghanistan was hotly contested between the Mughals and the Iranian Safavids following the 16th century. It wasn't until the death of the Safavid leader Nadir Shah in 1747 that the modern country began to form. The Durranis, a Pashtun tribe, rose to dominance as the Durrani leader Ahmad Shah united the Pashtun tribes.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan was yet again caught in another struggle. This time, Russia and Britain began to contest each other for control over Central Asia. Emir Abdur Rahmon balanced the interest of the imperial powers and agreed to the Durand Line Treaty with Britain. Under this agreement, Afghanistan's border with the British colonial territory was defined. This deal, however, only fueled discontent. Pashtuns, who dwelled in the region, were divided in half<sup>14</sup>. One portion of the ethnic group fell in Afghanistan while the other side was in modern Pakistan.

Emir Abdur Rahmon also ignited a campaign to "Islamize" and "Pashtunize" Afghanistan. Northern and central Afghanistan is home to various non-Pashtun groups<sup>15</sup>. In order to fulfill his vision of a Pashtun state, Rahmon shelled generous land grants to Pashtuns. Pashtuns were gifted the most fertile lands in central and northern Afghanistan, robbing the indigenous people of those regions of their lands. This initiative ignited a wave of Pashtuns to leave their home in the south for the promised lands in the north. Under Rahmon's campaign to Pashtunize Afghanistan, however, the Hazaras suffered the worse. Rahmon imposed a harsh tax on the ethnic group in addition to taking their lands<sup>16</sup>. When Hazaras revolted against his rule, he mercilessly massacred them and subjected them to slavery. The Hazaras were considered slaves until 1919 when Zahir Shah lifted the label. Rahmon's rule also sought to Islamize Afghanistan. The Hazaras, being Shia, were further mistreated. The Emir forced thousands to convert to Sunni Islam and shipped them to Herat.

Meanwhile, in the modern province of Nuristan, a region then referred to as "Kafiristan,"<sup>17</sup> Rahmon continued his campaign to "enlighten" the country. The inhabitants of Kafiristan were non-Muslim. In a bloody struggle, Rahmon forced the people to convert to Islam and subsequently changed the name of their province from Kafiristan, meaning Land of the Infidels, to Nuristan, Land of the Enlightened.

Nevertheless, the British-Soviet competition continued. Afghanistan signed the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919, ending the Third Anglo-Afghan war. Amanullah Khan, another notable Afghan king, introduced a constitution in 1923. However, extensive resistance forced him to resign. Afghanistan was then ruled temporarily by a non-Pashtun, the Tajik Habibullah Kalakani. His reign, however, was short lived as Nadir Khan took back the throne.

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<sup>14</sup> Afghanland.com Afghanistan Imaginary Durand Line. (n.d.). Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Central Afghanistan is home to the Hazaras while Northern Afghanistan holds Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens.

<sup>16</sup> Hussain, H. (2009, March 31). Abdur Rahman Khan's Tortures & Massacre of Hazaras. Retrieved July 7, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Kafiristan means Land of the Infidels in Dari.



Afghanistan finally experienced some stability under Zahir Shah who ruled the country for 40 years. During this period, Afghanistan denounced the Durand treaty and attempted to create an independent Pashtunistan but its effort goes unacknowledged by the global community.

Afterwards, Afghanistan started to grow closer to the Soviet Union. When the United States rejected Afghanistan's request for military equipment, the country turned towards Russia. Daoud Khan, the prime minister responsible for this shift, overthrew the king and established a communist republic. In an effort to deal with resistance, the USSR invaded.

Afghanistan entered a period referred to as today as the Soviet War. Resistance by the Mujahidin leaders throughout the country held as the multiple fronts battled Russia.

In 1989, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. The country, however, entered another turmoil as it plummeted into a civil war. Mujahidin commanders who were fighting the Russians had turned on one another and were fighting for control of the country.

As the leaders fought each other, the Taliban, an extremist group backed by Pakistan and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)<sup>18</sup>, consequently rose to power. Kabul is seized and shortly afterwards, Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the main opposition to the Taliban, was assassinated.

The United States got involved in Afghanistan following the 9-11 attacks. The Taliban regime was defeated and Afghan groups met in Bonn, Germany to form an interim government<sup>19</sup>. Hamid Karzai was chosen as President.

From this point forward, NATO started to oversee security in the country, opium production skyrocketed, the Taliban continued to attack the fragile country, and the US established a presence.

Karzai won the election once again in 2009 when his opponent Dr. Abdullah Abdullah pulled out after witnessing widespread fraud in the election process. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah ran once again in 2014 only to go through another set of fraudulent elections. The 2014 elections were halted as Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and his rival, Ashraf Ghani, accused one another of cheating. US Secretary of State John Kerry intervened and created a National Unity Government. Ashraf Ghani was handed the role of President while Dr. Abdullah Abdullah assumed the position of Chief Executive, a newly created position.

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<sup>18</sup> 'CIA worked with Pak to create Taliban' (n.d.). Retrieved July 8, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Afghanistan profile - Timeline - BBC News. (n.d.). Retrieved July 8, 2015.

## 5 ETHNIC RELATIONS THROUGH HISTORY

Afghan ethnic consciousness was sparked at the creation of the Afghan state. Afghanistan was essentially formed by Britain and Russia. Britain, favoring the Pashtuns, handed them the regions of the country. For centuries, the ethnic group ruled the country, dominating almost every single field.

As Afghanistan was ruled by the ethnic Pashtuns, an ethnic hierarchy developed with Pashtuns taking the top. Nevertheless, ethnic conflicts were scarce and tensions were low. It wasn't until the late 1970s, when war broke out, that tension was instrumentalized and at its height.

Nevertheless, history indicates that there were instances in the past that shape today's ethnic relations. The most tumultuous period revolving around ethnic conflict was during the reign of Emir Abdur Rahmon.

Emir Abdur Rahmon (1880-1901) was steadfast in consolidating an Afghan state. Although he sacrificed a portion of the Pashtuns by signing the Durand Line Treaty<sup>20</sup>, he still aimed to Pashtunize the country. Rahmon resettled Pashtuns into the northern part of the country, a region home to Central Asian ethnic groups, in an effort to establish Pashtun domination. Pashtuns were awarded grants of the most fertile properties, igniting a wave of Pashtuns to move to the north. Although there was an effort to establish Pashtun control, Tajik influence still managed to creep through government. Tajiks, who spoke Dari<sup>21</sup>, assumed authority through bureaucracy and as a result were able to spread their language. This caused the Pashtun kings to eventually adopt Persian.

Hazaras, however, particularly suffered during Emir Abdur Rahmon's reign. Hazaras along with who are known today as the Nuristanis were forced to convert to Sunni Islam. Those who resisted were massacred. Hazaras, however, due to their physical features<sup>22</sup>, were even further ostracized. They became legally proclaimed as slaves and subjected to the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy. Although this status was lifted in 1919, they remained socially and economically disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan prior to the 20th century did not have many significant ethnically motivated conflicts. After the rule of Emir Abdur Rahmon, Afghanistan entered a period of modernization. Simultaneously, the Pashtun-dominated government looked towards addressing the problem with the Durand Line. The government of Afghanistan made unifying the Pashtuns a central goal for foreign policy. Their attempts at creating an autonomous Pashtunistan within Pakistan failed however as the world community did not recognize their efforts.

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<sup>20</sup> The Durand Line Treaty set the southernmost border for Afghanistan. The Pashtuns, who inhabit the region, were divided among two countries. Northern Pashtuns remained within Afghanistan's borders while the southern tribes fell into Pakistan, a British Colonial Territory.

<sup>21</sup> Dari is a dialect of Persian.

<sup>22</sup> Hazaras are a Mongoloid ethnic group with East Asian physical features.

## 6 DIVISION

With the 1964 Constitution, Afghans were granted more rights which allowed an increased number of political groups to form<sup>23</sup>. These groups were in some cases, motivated by the interests of a particular ethnic group. For instance, the Shola Jawid, a Maoist group, championed Pashtun interests. At the same time, groups such as the Setam-e-Mili arose as well. Their focus was to fight what they claimed to be “a Pashtun dominance of Afghanistan.”<sup>24</sup>

Following the Saur Revolution, a communist military coup that occurred on April 27, 1978, new groups entered the playing field. Ethnicity, however, remained as a central theme in the political arena. Although the government was communist now, the Khalq and Parcham parties, rival communist factions, competed against one another. The Khalq faction wanted to breakdown the dominance of Dari while the Parcham faction wanted to promote it. Under Babrak Kamal, a member of Parcham, non-Pashtun representation in government increased. At this point, there was an undeniable rise in ethnic consciousness as those who identify as communists separated into either the Khalq or Parcham faction. Both political parties overall aimed to further ethnic interests. Political affiliation in most cases was dictated by ethnicity.

Ethnic consciousness only increased from here on out. Outside of government, the Mujahidin, the resistance who fought against the communist government, was fractioned into groups aligned to ethnicity as well. For instance, mainly Tajiks followed Ahmad Shah Massoud, Hazaras were led by Abdul Ali Mazari, Uzbeks and Turkmens were behind Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Pashtuns were with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. For the Mujahidin leaders, ethnicity proved to be a powerful tool as it aided in mobilizing crowds to join their cause.

In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul and as a result, Afghanistan plummeted into a dark period. Many historians, then and now, refer to the Taliban as a Pashtun nationalist group that aimed to further its ethnicities interests. It's important to note however that the Taliban's rigid policies were not in favor of the Pashtuns. This extremist group adhered to its own version of Islamic law.

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<sup>23</sup> Constitution History of Afghanistan. (n.d.). Retrieved July 8, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Misdaq, N. (2006). *Afghanistan political frailty and external interference*. London: Routledge.

## **7 ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

By the 21st century, Afghanistan was splintered into many groups. At first, it seemed as if the Northern Alliance, a primary Tajik group with substantial Hazara and Uzbek members, was pitted against the Pashtun dominated Taliban. However as time went on and the post-Taliban government was formed, the groups that fought one another during the Civil War days once again arose and were converted into the political groups of modern Afghanistan.

During the nation-building process of Afghanistan during the Bonn Conference in Bonn, Germany, ethnicity was an important factor as it was emphasized by the United Nations. The UN highlighted that under the Durrani Pashtun Hamid Karzai's administration, Afghanistan must be multi-ethnic and that the interests of all ethnic groups must be protected. With that being said, the 30 member cabinet was decided to hold 11 Pashtuns, 8 Tajiks, 5 Hazaras, 3 Uzbeks, and 2 members of other ethnic groups.

Within the government, however, Civil War divisions arose and materialized into modern day political groups. Ahmad Shah Massoud's and Burhanuddin Rabbani's Northern Alliance became today's Jamiat-e-Islami, a primarily Tajik organization. Uzbeks organized under Rashid Dostum's Junbesh-e-Milli. Abdul Ali Mazari's followers were now under the Hazara Hezb-e-Wahdat. And Pashtuns followed Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

The process of defining Afghanistan's conflict as an ethnic one is a complex one. Ethnic consciousness can be traced as far back as the creation of Afghanistan when the Pashtuns were handed the reigns of leadership. Pashtun domination continued and was codified into an ethnic hierarchy under the rule of Emir Abdur Rahmon. As time passed, clashes appeared to have died down until the Communist era. It was during this period that with the rise of several Communist factions and Mujahidin groups, that Afghans began to align themselves with their own ethnicity. These divisions translated over to modern day where the 20th century Mujahedin and Communist groups rebranded themselves as political parties. The existence of such political groups is evidence that Afghan society is ethnically divided. Although political leaders deny ethnicity as the motivation of their organization, history has shown otherwise.

Afghanistan is in a day of age where political affiliation is paralleled with ethnic affiliation. Although physical warfare between the ethnicities has simmered down, another battle has risen in the political arena. This time, guns and grenades have been traded for eloquent speeches and fitted suits.

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