



Afghan Ethnic Groups: A Brief Investigation

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Comprehensive Information on Complex Crises

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*This report provides a brief overview of the various ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including their historic and present role within society. Related information is available at www.cimicweb.org. **Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.***

Ethnic groups often form an individual's perceptions, behaviours and interactions in society. Afghans have historically identified or associated with ethnic groups, however specific data as to the composition and role continues to be disputed. As the Afghanistan prepares to enter another phase of transition and various areas of the country move to Afghan-led security, it is important to understand the groups affected and their place in society.

Understanding Afghan Ethnic Groups

According to 2010 data from the US [Department of State](#), the [largest ethnic group in Afghanistan](#) is the Pashtun (including Kuchis), comprising 42% of Afghans.¹ The Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group, at 27% of the population, followed by the Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks (9%), Aimaq (4%), Turkmen (3%), Baluch (2%) and other groups that make up 4%. This section will take a closer look at each of the main groups identified above, although the reader should note that other groupings may exist in the country as [demographic data for Afghanistan](#) tends not just to be unreliable and/or difficult to verify, but figures about the ethnic composition of the population are also disputed among ethnic groups.² *Figure 1* presents the general geographic location of ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

To The Reader: *In the course of the research the authors consulted public/open source information. However, current information on ethnic groups in Afghanistan is difficult to obtain and verify. We welcome receiving additional data sets and sources on ethnic groups that we could make available to relevant stakeholders via the Civil-Military Fusion Centre's online portal, [CimicWeb](#).*

When discussing ethnicity, it often proves difficult to draw clear distinctions between terms such as social, ethnic and minority groups. For the purposes of this paper we are using the term ethnic group, which [is generally defined](#) as a social group of a larger society that is bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality, culture or other common values. According to the definition by the Minority Rights Group International ([MRG](#)), minorities, more specifically, are "[disadvantaged ethnic, national, religious, linguistic or cultural groups](#) who are smaller in number than the rest of the population and who may wish to maintain and develop their identity."

¹ The total estimated population in Afghanistan is 27.2 million individuals according to [UN data](#) from 2008.

² This paper draws heavily from information provided by the Minority Rights Group which provides some of the most comprehensive open source data/research available on the Afghan ethnic groups.





The Pashtun social structure is based on the [Pashtunwali code](#) of honour and behaviour. According to research by MRG, the most [important principles for Pashtuns](#) are hospitality, protection of guests, defence of property, family honour and the protection of female relatives.

Although the Pashtuns have been politically dominant in Afghanistan in the past and heavily involved in governing the country, they have never formed a homogenous political group across internal divides. According to research by an anthropological think tank, the Tribal Analysis Center ([TAC](#)), [divisions and rivalries among sub-groupings](#) and interference in each other's affairs have characterized Pashtun group dynamics.

Additional data compiled by MRG shows that roughly 14 million Pashtuns can also be found [across the border](#) in Pakistan. According to the Minorities at Risk ([MAR](#)) Project, [they are concentrated](#) in the Northwest Frontier Province ([NWFP](#)) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas ([FATA](#)) of Pakistan.

Kuchis

Kuchis are ethnic Pashtuns who originate from the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. In a 2008 article, the *Integrated Regional Information Networks* ([IRIN](#)) reported that the Afghan Independent Directorate of Kuchi Affairs (IDKA) [estimated the number of Kuchi at 2 to 3 million](#). Kuchi means 'nomad' in Dari. Kuchis are traditionally nomadic, which means they have no fixed home and move across the country in search of food, water and grazing land. The largest settled Kuchi population can be found [in northwest Afghanistan](#), in an area traditionally inhabited by Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks. MRG reports that the Taliban regime, possibly supportive of the Kuchi due to their common Pashtun kinship, encouraged Kuchi nomads to settle on land that was already occupied by other ethnic groups.

Only a few thousand Kuchis still follow the [traditional livelihood of nomadic herding](#), as it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to support themselves from their livestock, says MRG. More recently, Kuchis have become farmers while others have settled in cities or emigrated. The largest nomadic Kuchi population is estimated to be in Registan, the desert in the south of Afghanistan located between [Helmand](#) and [Kandahar](#) provinces. Those Kuchis that continue the nomadic lifestyle depend on animals for their livelihood. Their movements are thus determined by the weather and the availability of good pastureland. Tensions over pastureland have been characteristic of ethnic group relations in Afghanistan due to the fact that ownership rights are often contentious. As *IRIN* reports, [conflicts have broken out](#) over the issue of land use for years. In May 2010, for instance, Behsud, a town just outside [Kabul](#), saw one of the highest levels of violence in nearly a decade between Hazaras (*see page 4*) and Kuchis. The Afghanistan Analyst Network ([AAN](#)) reported that [Hazara houses were burnt down](#), that people and animals were killed and that many Hazaras were forced to flee.

As a [result of factors](#) such as the spread of modern transportation systems, fighting, the [use of landmines](#) and severe droughts (1971-72 and [1998-2002](#)), the situation for Kuchis has become increasingly difficult over the past several decades. The [loss of 75% of the Kuchi herds](#) during the 1998-2002 drought along with the blocking of their migratory routes [by local warlords](#) demanding taxes and local land use fees, have left the Kuchis among one of the poorest groups in the country, found a [2009 risk assessment report](#) on the Kuchi people by the [Afghanistan PEACE Project](#), a research-oriented NGO.

Tajiks

Tajiks, MRG writes, [are of Central Asian origin](#) and therefore maintain a kinship with the four million ethnic Tajiks in the neighbouring country of Tajikistan. Tajiks can nowadays be found throughout Afghanistan but are mainly concentrated in northern, north-eastern and western Afghanistan. Tajiks have no specific social structure and their loyalties tend to revolve around the village and family. They live in [settled communities](#) rather than



leading a nomadic lifestyle, notes the Program for Culture & Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School ([NPS](#)).

The Tajiks are the second populous ethnic group after the Pashtuns. Rulers from the Tajik ethnic group led Afghanistan during two brief periods: (i) for nine months in [1929 under Habibullah Khan](#) and (ii) from [1992 to 1996](#) under President Burhanuddin Rabbani. Tajik militias and communities were reportedly targeted by the Taliban. Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)) profiles one of the most notable instances of violence by the Taliban, the [massacre of Mazar-e Sharif](#) in 1998, where Tajiks comprised a significant proportion of the [2,000 estimated victims](#). Since 2001, the situation of Afghan Tajiks has changed considerably according to the *BBC*. The Tajik resistance fighters were very influential in the so-called [Northern Alliance](#) that cooperated with US and coalition forces to oust the Taliban.

Hazaras

The majority of Hazaras live in the [Hazarajat](#), situated in the mountainous central provinces of Afghanistan. According to MRG, the Hazaras were [once the largest ethnic group](#) in Afghanistan, comprising nearly 67% of the total population prior to the 19th century. More than half of the Hazara population [is thought to have been massacred](#) in 1893 under the reign of [Amir Abdur Rahman Khan](#). In the late 19th century, many Hazaras settled in western Turkestan, which today includes [Jowzjan](#) and [Badghis](#) provinces. Today, the Hazaras constitute roughly 9% of the Afghan population.

Almost all Hazaras are [Shi'a Muslim](#), although the smaller, and religiously different group of Hazaras are [Ismaili](#) and practice a different form of Islam. Ismaili Hazaras can be found in the [Hindu Kush](#) mountain range. NPS notes that the Hazara have historically experienced discrimination and have been seen as “the [traditional underclass](#) of Afghan society.” However, more recently Hazaras have made [great economic strides](#), says the *New York Times*. A large [cross-border community](#) of Hazaras also constitute an influential ethnic group in the Pakistani city of Quetta.

As a result of repression and their social, political and economic marginalisation, Hazaras joined forces with other Shi'a minority groups during the 1960s and 1970s, says MRG, and played an important role in the Afghan civil war. In the mid-1980s, Hazaras maintained [their own resistance groups](#), some of which had ties with Iran, explains Niamatullah Ibrahim, a researcher from the London School of Economics ([LSE](#)). In 1988, the Hazara opposition movement formed a united [political party](#), the *Hizb-e Wahdat* (Party of Unity). However, MRG further notes that the Hazara were [targeted by the mujahideen](#) repeatedly during the early 1990s.

Uzbeks and Turkmen

Uzbeks and Turkmen both live predominantly, though not exclusively, in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Together they comprise roughly 12% of the Afghan population. According to research by Vogelsang, many Uzbeks came to Afghanistan in the late 19th century and onwards, particularly [after the Russian Revolution](#). The Turkmen stem from the [Turkic-speaking tribes](#) and are closely related to the people of modern Turkey and the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan in the North. The Uzbeks are also a Turkic-speaking ethnic group, but according to MRG they are also said to be [ethnically related to the Iranian people](#).

Uzbeks and Turkmen are mostly grain and vegetable farmers, and they occupy the greatest share of Afghanistan's arable land in the North. Many supplement their income by producing and selling crafts, animal by-products and, [most importantly, carpets](#). According to an Afghanistan country study by the US [Library of Congress](#), many Uzbeks are settled in towns where they are [successful businessmen](#), silver and goldsmiths and leatherworkers. Due to their relative prosperity and small size compared to the overall population of Afghanistan, Uzbeks and



Turkmen have not pursued political influence in the past to the same degree as other ethnic groups. However, according to data from the MAR Project, Uzbeks have more recently been striving for [greater political participation](#) in the central government and greater control over Uzbek-majority areas. Ethnic Uzbeks have called for a federal Afghanistan and autonomy for the northern provinces. Small-scale protest activities and clashes with Tajiks and Pashtuns have been occurring on a more regular basis in recent years, says the MAR Project.

Aimaq

The Aimaq make up approximately 4% of the Afghan population and [live primarily on the steppe land](#) in north-western Afghanistan. Their ancestors can be traced back to a group of tribes that were spread around Afghanistan and Iran, and they belong to a sub-group of the Turkish population. The Aimaq, Vogelsang writes, are generally [semi-nomadic](#). Their livelihood is based primarily on [carpet-weaving](#) and secondly on agriculture. As a result of their nomadic nature, the Aimaq have not been observed as seeking self-determination or attempting to become politically active.

Baluchis

The Baluchis in Afghanistan are estimated to constitute a population of approximately 500,000, according to calculations based on the 2008 estimate of the total Afghan population. They are part of a larger, [cross-border Baluchi community](#) of approximately 8 million, 70% of whom live in Pakistan and the rest in Iran. The Afghan Baluchis live predominately in the southwest and south in [Helmand](#) and [Faryab](#) provinces. Their main source of livelihood stems from agriculture and animal husbandry. The Baluchis have a strong awareness of their ethnic identity, which MAR Project assessments explain is based on [clan and sub-clan affiliations](#) and loyalties to clan chiefs. This has not only caused intra-Baluch conflicts, but it has also led to several rebellions against their respective central governments in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in the recent past. In Pakistan, for example, Baluch nationalists [fought against central control](#) in 1973.

Ethnic Dynamics – Now and Then

As described by Arturo Munoz of TAC, research tends to emphasise the close links between Pashtuns and the emergence of the Afghan state. He suggests that the “[first references to Afghans](#) in historical literature are in reference to Pashtun tribes.” It was also a Pashtun, Ahmed Shah Durrani, who is credited with first uniting the nation of Afghanistan in 1747. Since then, ethnic Pashtuns have ruled the country almost exclusively.

A historic look at various Afghan ethnic groups by Sven Gunnar Simonsen, a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo ([PRIO](#)), showed that Muhammadzai and Durrani Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks and Uzbeks, have generally achieved [positions of political influence](#). Simonsen further claims that the [Hazaras have largely been excluded](#) from government historically, having only minimal representation in public institutions.

The representation of ethnic groups in government continues to be a contentious issue in Afghanistan. The [Brookings](#) Institution’s [Afghanistan Index 2011](#) shows that the number of Pashtun seats decreased by 16 in the 2010 elections, while Hazaras and Tajiks both made gains (*see Figure 3*).



Figure 3. Ethnic Makeup of Afghanistan’s Main Legislative Bodies

Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders)		
Ethnicity	No. of Seats (Percentage of Total)	
Total	102	
Pashtun	36 (35%)	
Tajik	32 (31%)	
Hazara	16 (16%)	
Uzbek/Turkmen	8 (8%)	
Baluchi	3 (3%)	
Nuristani	3 (3%)	
Others	4 (3%)	

Wolesi Jirga (House of the People)		
Ethnicity	2005	2010
Pashtun	114	98
Tajik	64	70
Hazara	35	50
Uzbek	19	17
Aimaq	2	4
Turkmen	4	3
Arab	3	2
Pashayee	4	2

Source: Adapted from Brookings Institution, [Afghanistan Index 2011](#)

In late June 2011, the [Special Elections Court](#), put into place by President Karzai, ordered that 62 candidates who had lost their seats or had been disqualified during the 2010 Parliamentary elections be reinstated. The majority of these are ethnic Pashtuns. While the Special Election Court’s order is still pending and has not been implemented, it has raised concern among non-Pashtun ethnic groups, which are most affected by this turn of events. (See the CFC report, “[Constitutional Quandary: Afghanistan’s Special Election Court](#)”, August 2011.)

Similar concerns about representation have emerged with regard to the [ethnic composition of Afghanistan’s security forces](#). *The New York Times* notes that the ethnic composition of the Afghan National Army (ANA) is roughly proportional to the population (*see Figure 4*), but claims that non-Pashtuns are widely believed to do the bulk of the fighting. This can be observed when combining the statistics in *Figure 4* for Pashtun and non-Pashtun groups (44% and 56% respectively). However, a report on the ANA by the [International Crisis Group](#) cautioned that [data regarding the current ethnic make-up](#) of the ANA varies. Research by the International Crisis Group (ICG) from 2010 found the breakdown of the ANA as 42.6% Pashtun, 40.98% Tajik, 7.68% Hazara, 4.05% Uzbek and 4.68% other groups. Discrepancies in data have the potential to “[fuel factionalism and deepen patronage networks](#)”, the ICG explains in its report.



Figure 4. Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police Ethnicity

	Pashtun		Tajik		Hazara		Uzbek		Others	
	ANA	ANP	ANA	ANP	ANA	ANP	ANA	ANP	ANA	ANP
Officer	42%	41%	41%	47%	8%	4%	4%	3%	5%	3%
NCO	51%	31%	36%	56%	8%	6%	3%	4%	1%	4%
Soldier	43%	47%	29%	36%	12%	4%	9%	6%	7%	7%
Total Force	45%	43%	32%	42%	10%	5%	7%	5%	5%	6%
Nat'l Average	44%		25%		10%		8%		13%	

Source: Brookings Institution, [Afghanistan Index 2011](#)

In a [2002 paper](#), Conrad Schetter at the Center for Development Research (ZEF) at the University of Bonn in Germany argues that ethnic identities in Afghanistan are a 20th century invention. As such he argues that it is important not to overemphasize ethnicity in political representation. Simonson, on the other hand, contends that [ethnicity has become more salient](#) in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime and that ethnic identity and divisions must be considered when developing Afghan government institutions. He recognises, however, that it is also important not to view these ethnic divisions as permanent.

More recently, a group of academics called the [Afghanistan Study Group](#) concluded that “the conflict is a civil war about [power-sharing with lines of contention](#) that are 1) partly ethnic, chiefly, but not exclusively, between Pashtuns who dominate the south and other ethnicities such as Tajiks and Uzbeks who are more prevalent in the north, 2) partly rural vs. urban, particularly within the Pashtun community, and 3) partly sectarian.” This debate seems to suggest that, although problematic, ethnic divisions in Afghanistan *per se* are not insurmountable.

The profile of ethnic groups in Afghanistan contains many discrepancies and lacks currently verified data. Further research and information pertaining to ethnic groups in Afghanistan is necessary. It is our hope that this paper will encourage our readers to continue examining ethnicity in Afghanistan and in the broader region.

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