Afghanistan
Cultural Field Guide

This guide provides basic cultural information on Afghanistan. This information is intended to familiarize military personnel with local customs and area knowledge to assist them during their assignment to Afghanistan.

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Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations
Afghanistan Cultural Field Guide

GEOGRAPHY

Afghanistan is located between Iran and Pakistan in southwest Asia. Afghanistan's physical geography is severe, consisting mainly of inhospitable desert and high mountains. The central mountain range, the Hindu Kush, begins in the northeast of Afghanistan in the Pamiri Knot, a region of highlands where the mountain ranges of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, and India meet.

This region, known as the "roof of the world," has many ranges higher than 20,000 feet in elevation. The Hindu Kush range extends across central Afghanistan from northeast to southwest. The central mountain region in Afghanistan is known as Hazarajat, a largely inaccessible area with a sparse population. The deserts are in the southwest along the borders with Iran and Pakistan. In the north, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Konduz are located on a series of lower-lying plains and river valleys.

HISTORY

Once a part of the Greek, Persian, Mongol, and Moghul Empires, Afghanistan was wedged between the Russian Empire and the British Imperial Colony of India throughout the 19th century, when it became a key prize between Moscow and London.

In the 20th century, Afghanistan had several experiments with democracy, but was taken over by Afghan communists in 1978, and later invaded by the Soviet army in 1979. This war between the Soviet-backed Afghan communist government and the Islamic *Mujahideen* resistance fighters lasted for 10 years, with heavy military and financial

Village in Central Hazarajat

assistance from the United States and Saudi Arabia. This foreign military assistance was channeled through Pakistan, a regional state with a great interest in maintaining a friendly regime in Afghanistan.

After the withdrawal of the Soviet army in 1989, the new Islamic Taliban government was founded in Kandahar in 1992, and it took control of Kabul in 1996. The Taliban never gained control over all of Afghanistan, despite on-going assistance from Pakistan. The Taliban continued to fight with a group of northern Afghanistan warlords known as the Northern Alliance. The Taliban was removed from power by a United States-led coalition in late 2001.

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

In 1996, 10.1 million, or approximately 40 percent of the Afghan population was Pashtun, 3.3 million of whom were of the Durrani tribal group and 4.4 million of the Ghilzai group. Tajiks make up the second largest ethnic group with 25.3 percent of the population, followed by

Hazaras with 18 percent, Uzbeks with 6.3 percent, Turkmen with 2.5 percent, and Qizilbash with 1 percent. Other smaller groups, including Kazakhs, Aimaq, Wakhis, Nuristanis, Baluchis, Kyrgyz, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, constitute the remaining 6.9 percent of the population.

Afghanistan lacks a coherent identity at the state level that supersedes ethnicity and unites the different ethnic groups. An Afghan's individual identity is derived from belonging to an ethnic group.

Understanding ethnicity plays only one part in understanding Afghanistan and its people. Afghanistan is organized according to many other factors. For example, far more Pashtuns were opposed to the Taliban than was generally reported, with two of the United Front's (Northern Alliance's) six factions being comprised primarily of Pashtuns. Despite Afghanistan's ethnic diversity, nearly all Afghans share a rugged independence and a generally egalitarian spirit. Afghans are lovers of freedom and are motivated by a common desire to resist outside influence over internal affairs. Ethnic identities fade in significance when Afghanis sense that they are confronted by a common enemy who seeks to control Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity does not prevent the members of the different ethnic groups from interacting. There is a substantial amount of intermarriage between the ethnic groups, which tends to blur lines of loyalty between different ethnic groups.

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity is also complicated by the difference between the Afghan notion of ethnicity and the view commonly held in the West. Ethnicity or identity, known as *qawm* in Afghanistan, is not only defined by a common cultural or genetic group, but also by tribes, families, and geographic regions, or even occupations. In fact, in many instances an Afghan will not primarily define himself as a Pashtun or a Tajik, but as a member of the Zadran tribe or an inhabitant of the Panjshir valley. These types of identifiers include a sense of loyalty to a group that is providing the individual with things that are essential to live. The breakdown of the state during and after the Soviet-Afghan war

made these types of relationships even more important than they were earlier in this century.

In some areas of Afghanistan, the Western notion of ethnicity has become so politicized that it has become as rude to immediately inquire about an Afghan's ethnic identity as it is to ask an American the details of his income.

Population

According to a 2001 estimate, Afghanistan has a population of 23 million within Afghanistan, with an additional 4 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran, and an unknown number of other refugees throughout the world.

Traditionally, there has been a distribution of the population across rural and urban areas, although the mountainous geography has tended to concentrate even rural populations in a relatively small portion of Afghanistan's total territory. Trends of rural-to-urban migration had accelerated since 1960 with the growth of urban infrastructure, but then reversed with the effects of the Soviet-Afghan war.

Religion

Afghanis are almost all Muslims. The level of religious observation varies, but most will profess a strong adherence to the Islamic faith. Afghans express their religious devotion through their commitment to defend their country and their people.

Sunni and Shi'a

Afghans are mostly Hanafi Sunni Muslims, but some are Shi'a. The two major Shi'a communities in Afghanistan are the *Ithna Ashariya* or Twelvers, also called *Imami*, and the *Ismaili*, or the Seveners.

The historical divide of Islam into Sunni and Shi'a branches was originally caused more by political disputes over successors, than by doctri-

Blue Mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif

nal differences. Over time, the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam has gradually assumed theological overtones.

Today, 85 percent of the worldwide Muslim community is Sunni, while only 15 percent is Shi'a.

Arabs are important to Afghan history and Afghan religious identity. The invasion of Afghanistan by Sunni Arabs and the establishment of the Sunni-based Ghaznavid Empire in Afghanistan around 1000 A.D. consolidated Sunni Islam as the majority religion in Afghanistan, opposed to the Shi'a variant in Iran.

The largest Shi'a community in Afghanistan is among the Hazara ethnic group. Sunni Pashtun leaders have at times claimed that the Shi'a Hazaras were not "true" Muslims, and therefore could be persecuted. In addition, the Sunni Pashtuns view the Shi'a Hazaras as symbols of both past Persian influence and Iranian domination over Afghanistan.

Schools of Islamic Law or Shar'ia

Both Sunni and Shi'a Islam have four major *Shar'ia* or schools of theological law. In Afghanistan, the dominant school of the Sunni Muslims is the Hanafi, a school known for its tolerant interpretations of Islam. Recent Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan is contrary to this historical Hanafi tradition.

Islamic Traditions

Islamic law requires prayer five times a day (*munz*), fasting during Ramadan (*rojay*), a pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*) if economic circumstances allow, a donation of 2.5 percent of income to the poor (*zakat*), and the duty to uphold and defend Islam through struggle (*jihad*). Religious leaders (the *Ulema)* issue formal legal opinions (*fatwas*) based on *Shar'ia* law concerning major social, political, and ethical issues.

These Islamic traditions exist in Afghanistan in varying forms. Though some Afghans are extremely devout, many Afghans are not strict in following these traditions.

Jihad

Islam requires that Muslims pray five times a day. During combat, Muslims do not have to observe this requirement if they are fighting what they perceive to be a "Holy War" or *Jihad*. Unlike the traditional concept of *Jihad* in Saudi Arabia and much of the Arab community, the Afghans have a more expansive view of *Jihad* as a defense of the homeland and the tribe.

CUSTOMS

Greetings

Handshakes can be used to greet Afghan males, though it is more common to bow or embrace. Males often kiss twice when they meet, and will walk down the road hand in hand or arm in arm, as this is a sign of

friendship. Verbal greetings are often delivered with the right hand over the heart. A common Pashtu greeting is "*Khubus ti*?" ("How are you?").

Men do not physically touch women in greetings, though they may indirectly greet her in a verbal fashion. Women usually greet each other with a kiss or embrace.

Gestures

To beckon someone, one motions downward with the palm of the hand facing the ground. To request divine assistance, one holds both hands in front of the chest, palms upward. Afghans typically sit with legs crossed, but pointing the soles of the feet toward someone is impolite. Using the left hand for passing items is also impolite.

Sense of Time

The Afghan has a very different sense of time than the Westerner. Afghans are frequently late for meetings. Often, the length of time a task will take is of no importance to the Afghan. The Afghan is primarily concerned with seeing that the task is accomplished. In this regard, the Afghan can be infinitely patient.

Negotiations

In conducting business, it is necessary to visit with the vendor or business person and drink tea and, when offered, eat fruits and nuts. Purchases can often take a substantial amount of time.

Social Visits and Hospitality

When visiting other families, men and women will sit in separate rooms. Guests are expected to have at least three cups of tea, and perhaps something to eat. If guests eat with a host, a few loud belches are considered polite at the end of the meal, and a sign that the meal was well-enjoyed. Any business discussions occur after refreshments. Guests do not bring gifts.

Afghan traditions require that hosts provide lavish hospitality, often beyond their means, even guests they have just met. Receiving a guest reflects favorably on the host and creates a relationship of dependence between the guest and host.

Games

Afghans enjoy wrestling, and soccer is a popular national sport, though only men may play. The game of cricket has migrated into Afghanistan from Pakistan.

Buzkashi, a precursor of polo, is an Afghan game played on horseback, in which riders seek to grab a headless calf and swing it onto their saddle and ride with the calf carcass around a track to score a goal.

Pashtuns perform the *attan*, a dance in the open air that was originally the Pashtun's national ethnic dance, but which has become a part of Afghan cultural life.

Superstitions, Symbols, and Beliefs

Muslims believe that the numbers three, five, and seven are numbers of good fortune.

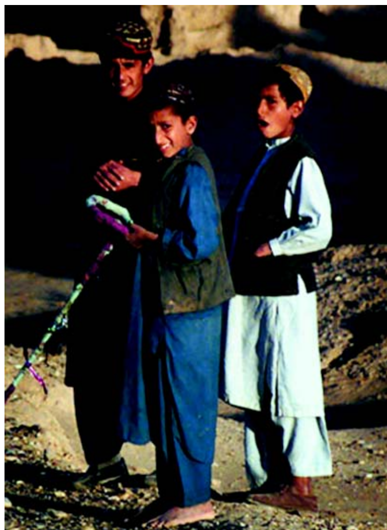
Silver fish pendants are symbols of fertility. These are usually given by the groom's family to the bride prior to a wedding.

Hunters place horns and antlers on the graves of the dead, a practice that is probably pre-Islamic.

Clothing

Nearly all Afghans wear a *perahan tunban*, a knee-length shirt worn over baggy trousers that are pulled tight with a drawstring. During the winter, Afghanis wear a sheepskin coat (*pustin*), a short-sleeved white raw wool vest (*kusay*), or long cloak draped over the shoulders (*paysawal*).

Ethnic clothing is used by all Afghan ethnic groups to build pride and a sense of social superiority, particularly in mixed ethnic zones. The most striking differences are noted in dress, particularly in headgear.



Afghans in Traditional Clothing

Headgear

Afghans wear caps or turbans. Caps are round, conical or peaked, each with material and decoration that makes it a distinctive indicator between and within many ethnic groups. Young boys usually wear caps until they are circumcised, at which time they wear turbans. Turbans (*lungi)* are characteristic of the Pashtun.

Chadiri/Burka

Under the Taliban regime, women always wore the *Chadiri*, a head-to-toe covering, when they were in public. The *Chadiri* is not unique to the Taliban era and will likely continue to be worn after the end of Taliban influence. However, after the end of the Taliban rule in late 2001, some women have elected to not cover their heads entirely while in public.

Diet

Rural Afghans usually eat only breakfast and dinner, though some have a light lunch. Rural Afghans generally eat on a mat on the floor out of a communal dish. All Afghans eat large amounts of flat-loafed bread (*nan*). To eat, one uses the fingers of the right hand, or a piece of *nan*. One never uses the left hand to serve oneself.

Meat forms a large part of the Pashtun diet, with the exception of pork. which Afghan Muslims believe is an unclean meat. Muslims eat only meat that has been slaughtered according to Koranic ritual. Often meat is boiled, seasoned, and served mixed into a rice dish. This dish is called *pilau,* and is generally the main dish served at a meal. *Pilau* can also be used to refer to food in general.

The main *pilau* include: a plain rice dish with mutton or chicken in the center (*chilaw*), a rice dish with raisins, shredded carrots, almonds, and pistachios (*Qabli*), rice with spinach (*sabzi* or *zamarud*), rice with peas (*mashong*), rice with eggs (*reshta*), rice with eggplant (*bonjan-i-sia)*, rice with orange peels (*naranj*), rice with dried meat (*landi*), and rice with the head (including the eyeballs) and feet of sheep (*kala-pacheh*), a speciality usually served to an honored guest. A mixture of pickled vegetables (*torshi*) is normally served with the *pilau*.

Other popular meat dishes include *kabobs* of beef or lamb roasted over charcoal, and *kuftah-kabob*. *Kabobs* are seasoned meat on a skewer, and are usually served with a salad of chopped onions and tomatoes. *Kuftah-kabob* is a roast meatball made with onion.

Side dishes are usually vegetables in tomato sauces, including spinach (*sabzi* or *palak*), potatoes (*kachalu*), peas (*mashong*), eggplant (*bonjan-isia*), carrots (*zardak*), turnips (*shalgham)*, and squash (*kadu*). Yogurt (*mast*) is also sometimes served as a side dish or mixed into the rice. Other milk products served include cottage cheese (*panir-chakah*), sour milk (*dugh*), and dried cheese balls (*qrut*). Meals may include a winter soup (*shorwa*), or a summer soup (*badrang*).

A thick dessert (*faludah*) is made with milk and wheat flour, boiled and served with rice syrup. Other desserts include puddings (*firni*) and fruit.

Chori, a combination of cooked flour, oil, and raw sugar, is distributed to the poor during the month of Prophet Mohammad’s death.

Some men may smoke tobacco in a pipe (*chelem*) after a meal. Some may also smoke marijuana (*chars*) or opium (*teryak*).

ETHNIC GROUPS

Physical Appearance

Ethnicity in Afghanistan has little to do with physical appearance. The majority of Afghans have black hair, dark eyes, and olive complexions. Lighter versions of all these features are found among both Tajiks and Pashtuns, as well as other smaller groups, such as the Nuristanis. There are even some red-headed Afghans, though this trait can also be caused by malnutrition. In addition, older men also sometimes dye their gray beards with henna to produce a red color.

Pashtuns

Pashtuns — also known as Pushtuns, Pakhtuns, Pukhtuns, or Pathans — comprise 38 percent of Afghanistan's population, and are its largest single ethnic group. Since the foundation of the modern Afghan state in 1747 by Ahmed Shah Durrani, Pashtuns have been the country's dominant political group. Much of Afghanistan's early history is known through the association of Westerners — especially the British — with Pashtuns, as Great Britain's Indian Empire shared a border with Afghanistan's Pashtun region.

More Pashtuns live in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, though they comprise only 8 percent of Pakistan's total population. In recent years, successive Pakistani governments have attempted to argue for a guiding role in Afghanistan based on the erroneous claim that Pashtuns comprise a majority of Afghanistan's population, and that Islamabad is swayed by a large percentage of Pashtuns within its army and intelligence organizations.

Beginning in the 13th century A.D., Pashtuns migrated into Afghanistan from what is now Pakistan. Pashtuns have generally proven themselves adept at warfare and conquest. They are well known from the British Raj tales of Rudyard Kipling in which they are depicted as good and

hardy fighters. In their own oral legend, Pashtuns claim to be descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel.

Afghanistan's Pashtuns are divided primarily into two groups: the Ghilzais and the Durranis. The Ghilzais reside predominantly in the eastern mountainous region of the country, and the Durranis are generally found in the southern region centered around Kandahar. Additional pockets of Pashtuns, some of whom were forcibly resettled for their unruliness by past Afghan rulers, live in northern Afghanistan. Others, particularly those in and around urban areas, are frequently referred to as "detribalized Pashtuns" because they have lost much of their individual tribal identification.

Cultural Mindset

The key facets of Pashtun culture derive from a code of conduct known as *Pushtunwali*, the main elements of which are revenge (*badal*), hospitality (*melmastia*), and honor (*namus*). The concept of honor is particularly related to the behavior of the women in a given family, with that behavior determined by the male head of household (not the government, as the Taliban tried to impose). *Pushtunwali* practices are most closely identified with Pashtuns, though they tend to be reflected similarly throughout the country's ethnic groups, particularly in regard to the idea of honor and the duty to extend hospitality. It is no exaggeration to claim that even the poorest Afghan refugee may offer a stranger his last bit of bread and tea and feel proud to do so.

At other times, however, these basic tenets are set aside for political expediency. Men have hosted dinner for their rivals only to slay them. While the Taliban often cited the requirement to provide hospitality as the reason for their sheltering Usama bin Ladin, such niceties did not extend toward those whom the militia disliked. For instance, the Shi'a Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari was killed in 1995 by the Taliban after they had invited him for negotiations.

Open Air Market in Kabul

The Pashtuns have negative views of the Hazaras, who they believe are second-class Afghans. The Pashtuns believe that the Hazaras' Shi'a religion and Iranian identity make them untrustworthy.

The Pashtuns also have negative views of the Punjabis, the dominant ethnic group in Pakistan.

Language

Pashtuns speak an Indo-European tongue of the Iranian family called Pashto (also pronounced Pushtu or Pukhtu). Pashtun leaders have promoted Pashtu as a symbol of Pashtun political domination in Afghanistan, even though many Pashtuns may not speak the language as their mother tongue. Instead, many Pashtuns speak Dari, the Afghan version of Iranian (also called Farsi), as their first language. Pashto and Dari remain the two official languages of Afghanistan, and many non-native Dari speakers learn it as a second language.

Religion

Pashtuns are mainly Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, while a very small number (5 percent) are Shi'a, residing mostly in the Kandahar area. Until recent years, Afghans prided themselves on being relatively tolerant, even though most of the people were (and are) conservative Muslims. Mullahs, a title used for both Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders in Afghanistan, tended to be apolitical and were even considered a nuisance by some. However, beginning in the 1980s, increased contacts with more militant international Muslims led a significant proportion of Afghans, mainly Pashtuns, to become more hardline in the practice of their religion. The Taliban represent the most extreme example of this trend, which was greatly aided by large infusions of money from other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Tajiks

The Tajiks, often defined simply as "Persian-speaking Sunnis," comprise at least 25 percent of Afghanistan's population. They were the earliest known inhabitants of the region, dating back at least to the 4th century B.C. They are most numerous in the relatively densely-populated northern part of the country, as well as in the cities of Kabul and Herat, where they are sometimes referred to as *Farsiwan* (meaning simply "Farsi speakers"). Like most Afghans, the Tajiks derive the bulk of their livelihood from agricultural pursuits.

In urban areas, the Tajiks have become known for success in commerce and finance, and have also served as the backbone of the educated administrative elite. Tajik areas of Afghanistan contain most of the emerald and lapis lazuli mines, which have played a significant role in financing the resistance activities of the Tajiks against Kabul governments. The most culturally advanced ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Tajiks lay claim to the rich tradition of Persian literature.

Twice in Afghanistan's history, Tajiks have held the top government post, with Amir Habibullah Kalakani in 1929, and with Burhanuddin

Rabbani from 1992-1996. Since the 1980's, Tajiks have become well known for having the most effective resistance organizations against both the Soviets and later the Taliban. Their best-known leaders dating from this period are Ismail Khan, currently the governor of Herat province, and the late Ahmed Shah Masood, a former defense minister in the Rabbani government.

Cultural Mindset

The Tajiks' inclination toward resistance predates the 1900s and the British incursions into Afghanistan. The Tajiks claim to have been unfairly portrayed by the British, whom they fault for a legacy of favoritism toward Pashtuns.

Language

The Tajiks speak Dari with considerable colloquial variations among the often isolated valleys and mountain villages. Dari is a classical form of Persian, and has been influenced by Pashto. Dari differs from the Tajik language that was spoken in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan. Dari (like Pashto) is written using the Arabic script. For Westerners, Dari tends to be much easier to learn than Pashto, having a less complicated case and gender system.

Religion

Tajiks are mainly Sunni Muslims, of the same Hanafi sect as the Pashtuns. While some Tajik leaders, such as Masood and Rabbani, were influenced by the more militant internationalist strain of Islam in recent years, the party they formed was more moderate than many of its Pashtun counterparts. Additionally, Tajiks tend to feel betrayed by the global fundamentalist Muslim community for the aid given to the Pashtun Taliban, as well as for its failure to criticize the atrocities committed by Arabs and Pakistanis against the Tajiks, especially in 1999.

Ismaili

The Ismailis are a group of Afghans living in various areas of the northeast who speak Dari, and differ from the Tajiks only by religion. The Ismailis practice a variant of Shi'a Islam, which, unlike the more mainstream form found in Iran, advocates the legitimacy of only seven imams (spiritual leaders). The Ismailis consider their current spiritual leader to be the Agha Khan, whose foundation provides aid to their areas, as well as to other parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The several hundred thousand Ismailis live in the northeastern province of Badakhshan as well as the Kayyan valley of Baghlan province.

Hazaras

The Hazaras are the third largest Afghan ethnic group, comprising 19 percent of the population. Their name means "thousand" in Farsi, and refers to their descent from the soldiers of Genghis Khan who invaded Afghanistan in the 13th century. Modern-day Hazaras still resemble their Mongol forbears, though much intermixing with the indigenous Afghan population has occurred since. Their homeland is in central Afghanistan, and is often referred to as the "Hazarajat." Previous Afghan administrations weakened the Hazaras' political strength by dividing this region into several provinces to dilute the Hazaras' strength. Many Hazaras are also found in urban areas such as Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif.

Cultural Mindset

The combination of their distinctive facial features, their minority Shi'ite religion, and the generally poor quality of the land they occupy has placed Hazaras at the bottom of the Afghan social scale. They were enslaved under successive Pashtun monarchies, and were not emancipated until the reign of the reformist King Amanullah (1919-29), who was later overthrown for his liberalism. Even today in urban areas they generally perform the most menial tasks.

Nevertheless, the Hazaras have proven to be tough and capable resistance fighters against both the Soviets and the Taliban. The Hazaras areas were liberated from communist control early during the Soviet occupation period. Hazara fighters also maintained consistent pressure on the Taliban from mountain bases. Yet the Hazaras have been plagued by infighting and, probably more than any other group in Afghanistan, retain a hierarchical leadership structure within their society, a factor that contributed to their past subjugation.

Language

The Hazaras speak a form of Farsi known as Hazaragi, which is differentiated from Dari by its words of Mongol origin.

Religion

Most Hazaras are Shi'a Muslims, of the same branch of Islam as Iran. A few (20 percent) are Sunni, living in central and eastern Afghanistan.

Uzbeks

Afghanistan's Uzbeks make up only 6 percent of the population, but have played a significant role in Afghanistan history. The Uzbeks of Afghanistan are found throughout northern Afghanistan, particularly in Faryab and Jowzjan provinces. Many of Afghanistan's Uzbeks fled the expanding Tsarist Russian empire or the Bolshevik regime.

The Uzbeks' most prominent leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostam, rose to distinction as a militia leader in support of the Soviet-backed Afghan regime. With the fall of that government in 1992, Dostam refashioned himself as a "secularist," in opposition to the Islamic Taliban government. Dostam has no known religious affiliation or belief.

Afghan Uzbeks and Afghan Tajiks have often joined forces against the Pashtuns, but this has been more out of convenience than out of any historical friendship between the two groups.

Language

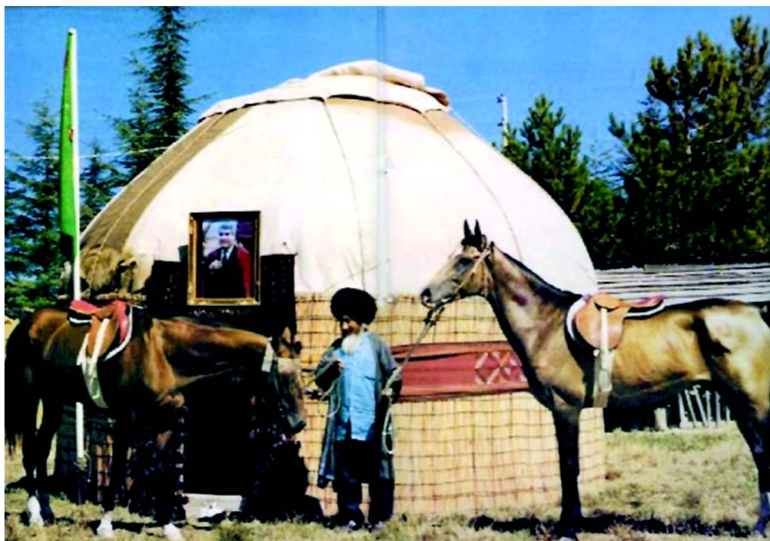
The language of the Afghan Uzbeks is a dialect of Uzbek, which is a part of the Turkic family.

Religion

Most Afghani Uzbeks are practicing Sunni Muslims.

Turkmen

The Turkmen, who comprise only a small fraction of Afghanistan's population (3 percent), share much of the same cultural heritage as do the Uzbeks, with many of their ancestors having fought against the Russians and Soviets in the 19th and 20th centuries. They are primarily concentrated in the northwestern area of the country near the border with Turkmenistan, and are renowned for their carpetweaving.



Turkmen Outside His Yurt with Ahal-Teke Horses

Language

The Turkmen speak a Turkic language also known as Turkmen.

Religion

The Turkmen are Sunni Muslims.

Nuristani

There are 100,000 - 500,000 Nuristani and Pasha'i living in Afghanistan. The Nuristanis were also known for centuries among other Muslim Afghans by the pejorative term *Kafirs* (infidels), due to their historical refusal to convert to Islam. The Nuristanis are a small and ancient collection of 15 tribes in northeast Afghanistan in the provinces of Lagman and Konar along the Afghan- Pakistan border.

Cultural Mindset

The Nuristanis are independent-minded and do not tend to identify with other tribal groups. In general, they feel no fondness for either the Afghans or Pakistanis, and they reserve particularly strong negative feelings toward the Arabs.

Language

Although the Nuristani tribes share similar customs and traditions, they speak five different languages. While there is some overlap between some of the Nuristani languages, many of the Nuristani tribes cannot communicate with one another.

Religion

The Nuristanis have historically practiced their own religion, which is related to Hinduism. Between 1893-96, King Abdul Rahman of Afghanistan formally incorporated Nuristan (Kafirstan) into Afghanistan, forcibly converting the Nuristanis to Islam and officially naming the region Nuristan, which means "Land of Light." Some remnants of the ancient Nuristani religion can still be found in this region.

Qizilbash

The Qizilbash are Shi'a Dari speakers who number less than 100,000 in Afghanistan. They live primarily in the Kabul and Kandahar regions, and are descended from Turkish troops sent by the Persian King Nadir to serve as guards when Afghanistan was part of that empire in the early part of the 18th century. The name Qizilbash was a reference to the red fezzes the original soldiers wore (*qizil* meaning red in Turkish, and *bash* meaning headed or topped). The Qizilbash today tend to be well-educated and highly urbanized.

Sayyeds

The term Sayyed refers to someone who is a direct descendant of Islam's Prophet Mohammed, and as such has Arab lineage. The Sayyeds of Afghanistan trace their arrival in the country to the Arab conquest, which converted most Afghans to Islam starting in the 7th century, A.D. These Arab ties have been considerably weakened, as the Sayyeds have one of the highest rates of intermarriage with Afghanistan's other ethnic groups. Sayyeds live among the Sunni and Shi'a populations of Afghanistan, and speak the language of whatever community they find themselves among, usually speaking either a form of Farsi (Dari or Hazaragi) or Pashto. Several hundred thousand Afghans claim Sayyed ancestry since it is an element of genealogy that is recorded with great pride.

Aibak, Baluchi, and Brahui

These three groups are found primarily in southern and western Afghanistan. The Baluchi and Brahui inhabit a southern swath of Afghanistan territory. Large Baluchi populations are also located in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan and in Iran. The Afghan Baluchis number less than half of a million, and the Brahuis number 100,000.

The Aibak are partially nomadic, and have facial features that suggest a Turkic/Mongol heritage. They number less than one million, and live mainly in the western part of Afghanistan's central mountain region.

Cultural Mindset

The Baluchis are organized in tribal groups that are more hierarchical than those of the Pashtuns. The Baluchis also are generally more nomadic than the Brahuis. Members of both groups are engaged primarily in agriculture or herding. Their non-Pashtun identity was helpful in securing a foothold for the anti-Taliban resistance in southern Afghanistan, particularly in the southwestern province of Nimruz.

The Baluchi are known for their independence, and they do not want anything to do with the state or outside authority or organizations.

The Aibak are organized into several tribes, and are sometimes referred to as Chahar Aibak to connote their four main tribal groupings (chahar means four in Farsi).

Baluchi Nomads

Language

Baluchi speak the Baluchi language, while the Brahuis speak Brahui. Baluchi is a language in the same Iranian family as Pashto and Dari, while Brahui is a Dravidian tongue. Many Brahuis, however, given their close proximity to Baluchistan, also speech Baluchi.

The Aibak are a group of Dari-speaking people.

Religion

The Baluchi, Brahui, and Aibak are Sunni Muslims.

Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Kyrgyz

Hindus and Sikhs number several thousand and are located primarily in the major cities, particularly in the capital, Kabul. Many of these can date their entry into Afghanistan from the time of the British Raj, though a number, especially Sikhs, came to Afghanistan to escape the violence of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Both Sikhs and Hindus are usually engaged either as tradesmen or money lenders. Though their numbers diminished in Afghanistan first during the rule of the *Mujahideen* from 1992-1996, and then under the subsequent Taliban regime, a few have remained and more may be willing to return soon.

Kyrgyz Herdsmen

Of the several thousand Jews who once inhabited Afghanistan's urban areas, very few remain.

While most Kyrgyz have left Afghanistan, there are some Kyrgyz nomads still living in the Wakhan Corridor.

CULTURAL ATTITUDES

Centers of Authority and Views of the State

Pashtun Leadership

Pashtuns often equate their ethnic identity with the state of Afghanistan. Pashtuns therefore believe that someone from their ethnic group should rule Afghanistan. For much of Afghanistan's history, Pashtuns have led the state of Afghanistan. This has caused resentment among the other ethnic groups, who believe they are often not represented in the government. Pashtuns, however, have difficulty uniting under a single leader. The various Pashtun tribes have always competed for power, especially the Durrani and Ghilzai tribes.

The majority of Afghan leaders have come from the Durrani Pashtun tribes. The Afghan royal family drew most of its leaders from various branches of the Durrani tribes of southern Afghanistan. The same was true of the Taliban, which drew its top leadership and provincial governors largely from the Durrani Pashtun tribes in the Kandahar area. Such practices have caused resentment not only on the part of non-Pashtuns, but also from Pashtuns outside of these areas. For example, while King Zahir's reign is fondly remembered by many as a time of peace, it is also considered by many Afghans to have been a period of exclusion. Large amounts of the country's wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a favored few.

Taliban

Now that the Taliban has been removed from power, most Afghans are careful to distance themselves from the Taliban regime. Despite the Taliban's very strict form of Islam, the Taliban's involvement with terror-

ism, and the ethnic atrocities that the Pashtun Taliban leadership carried out against the Hazaras and Tajiks, many Afghans remember that the Taliban re-established some degree of order in the country after more than a decade of fighting.

King Zahir Shah

The Durrani southern Pashtuns are most likely to favor the return of Afghanistan's former King Zahir Shah, because he is remembered in these regions as being a representative of the Durrani tribe. This is true, even though he and his courtiers are far removed from the average Durrani Pashtun villager of the south. Many of the king's men do not even speak Pashto as their native language. The Afghan exiles around the former king tend to be the most liberal and Westernized Afghans. These attitudes would irritate the southern Durrani Pashtuns, who are traditionally considered to be the most religiously conservative Afghans. Furthermore, Afghans, who suffered and endured many years of warfare, tend to harbor some resentment toward those who lived in the relative comfort of foreign exile, particularly in Western countries.

Decisionmaking

Afghans tend to be most comfortable with a relatively democratic style of bottom-up consensus decisionmaking. While a strict "one man, one vote," style of governing is rare for Afghans, traditionally most decisions have been made through consensus. The Pashtun *Loya Jirga* (Tribal Council) is a tribal format for making decisions through consensus. The *Loya Jirga* has historically existed at a local village level, although the format has been reproduced at a regional and national level to validate decisions.

The Afghan tradition of decision by consensus frequently makes it difficult to arrive at a decision. Once a decision is made, the consensus format also makes it difficult for anyone to take responsibility for that decision. This can make negotiations very challenging.

Despite this tradition of decision by consensus, much of Afghan leadership is conducted through authoritarian politics. However, the consensus process is frequently used by strong Afghan leaders to "validate" decisions in the minds of the people.

Military Command

Much of Afghani military history reflects a decentralized military command structure, with groups fighting under different commanders and political leaders. *Mujahideen* units typically consisted of related members from the same village. This further contributed to the decentralized nature of the *Mujahideen*.

The decentralized tendency of Afghan military operations makes it essential for the Afghan military commander to constantly work to maintain the loyalty of his forces. Unhappy forces have little problem resisting the commands of their superiors, or even rebelling against a superior. This causes warfare to be very unpredictable in Afghanistan, with factions pursuing multiple agendas, turning on one another, or even changing sides in a conflict.

To be a military leader, an Afghan must demonstrate courage and bravery on the battlefield. Afghans also judge leaders by their appearance and how they act around their men. Afghans will test a leader's skills.

Attitude Toward Centralization

With the exception of the Taliban and the communist period, most Afghan rulers have allowed for a large degree of decentralization of authority. The ethnic diversity and the character of most Afghan ethnic groups make Afghans respond very negatively to centralized power. Those regimes that tried to implement a greater degree of central control over the population were able to do so only through the application of brute force, and with the benefit of substantial sums of money.

Issues Among Ethnic Groups

Hierarchy

In general, Pashtuns perceive themselves as superior to all other Afghan ethnic groups, and have managed to keep themselves in a position of dominance until recently. The Hazaras tend to be at the bottom of Afghanistan's ethnic hierarchy. Yet all Afghan groups are individually proud of their ethnic heritage.

Non-Pashtuns Versus Pashtuns

Non-Pashtuns argue that they deserve a large share of post-Taliban power, since nearly all of them actively resisted the Taliban. The non-Pashtuns view the Pashtuns as the ethnic group behind the Taliban, although there were many instances in which Pashtun tribes also resisted the Taliban.

Non-Pashtuns believe that their combined majority should give them more influence in the post-Taliban government. Non-Pashtun ethnic groups combined comprise 62 percent of the population of Afghanistan.

Tajiks

The Tajiks suffered heavily at the hands of the Taliban. Most Tajiks view the Taliban as the Pashtun ethnic group, and thus, blame the Pashtuns for much of the suffering. Tajik civilians were brutalized by the Taliban in the Shemali region north of Kabul and in the plains around Taloqan in northeastern Takhar province. The Taliban kidnapped hundreds of girls and women — with trucks commandeered from the United Nations — killed and mutilated civilians, looted homes, destroyed agricultural infrastructure, and often practiced scorched earth policies.

Ahmed Shah Masood

The Tajiks believe one of their worst losses at the hands of the Taliban was the assassination of Ahmed Shah Masood, with the probable assistance of al Qaida. Masood, a hero for many Tajiks, was a military commander in northern Afghanistan for much of the last 25 years. For many Tajiks, Masood embodied the country's spirit of resistance, having defeated at least nine Soviet offensives directed against his native Panjshir valley, and being the only Afghan commander to successfully resist Taliban and al Qaida power. Until his death, Masood maintained control of a portion of northern Afghanistan, despite 5 years of Taliban rule over the rest of Afghanistan.

After the defeat of the Taliban, Tajik concerns have changed. The Tajiks believe that their ethnic group played an especially significant role in maintaining resistance to the Taliban, and that this entitles them to a special role in the post-Taliban government. The Tajiks believe that their leadership helped to ensure the survival of other resistance movements. On several occasions, Pashtun, Hazara, Ismaili, and Uzbek leaders were sheltered in Tajik areas.

The Tajiks are aware, however, that by claiming a new prominent role in the leadership of the post-Taliban government, they will be more exposed to criticism for governmental failures than they ever were in the past. This awareness led many Tajiks to accept the leadership of President Karzai, a Pashtun. By letting a Pashtun rule at the top, Tajiks maintain the ability to separate themselves from governmental failure.

Hazaras

Hazaras believe that they were the most brutalized ethnic group under the Taliban government. The Hazaras view the Taliban government as a form of Pashtun dominance, and blame the Pashtuns for the massacres that the Taliban conducted against the Hazaras. In 1997, the Taliban began to take control of Hazara territory. Immediately thereafter there were reports of massacres against Hazaras. The most infamous of such incidents occurred in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, when over the course of several days, 10,000 Hazaras were slaughtered by the Taliban. The Taliban claimed this act was in revenge for the several thousand Taliban prisoners the Hazaras killed during the Taliban's botched invasion of the same city in 1997. In early 2001, the Taliban destroyed the centuries-old Buddha statues in the Bamiyan province, the heartland of the Hazaras. Although the Hazaras are Shi'a Muslims, not Buddhists, the Hazaras viewed the Buddhas as a part of their cultural symbols. The Taliban destruction of these symbols was viewed by many Hazaras as a Pashtun attack on the Hazaras.

Afghan Perceptions of Others

United States

Before the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, most Afghanis did not have strong attitudes toward the United States. They appreciated the U.S. military assistance that was channeled to the *Mujahideen* resistance movement through the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) during the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979-1989.

This U.S. military assistance did not buy any long term allegiances from the Afghans. The Soviet-Afghan war did not make Afghanis into American allies, and neither can the current U.S.-led effort to liberate Afghanistan be expected to generate long-term support for the United States among the Afghan people.

Early on, the Taliban benefited from a popular Afghan perception that the United States supported the Taliban. This perception has caused some confusion and resentment toward the United States among those Afghan groups who suffered the most under Taliban persecution, particularly the Tajiks and the Hazaras.

Unlike in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, however, there is less widespread, deep-seated hatred of the United States in Afghanistan. Most Afghans view the United States as another imperial power that can be useful in consolidating power in Afghanistan, and that can be played off other international and domestic adversaries.

As long as the United States is viewed by the majority of Afghans as providing Afghans with assistance, they will view the United States as a temporary friend.

U.S. Marine Greeting a Pashtun

Afghan attitudes toward the United States could change suddenly. If the United States is viewed by Afghans as an external power "meddling" in Afghan affairs, or if the United States is believed to have failed to deliver on a promise of assistance to Afghanistan, the United States and United States personnel could quickly find themselves on unfriendly terms with many Afghans.

Pakistan

Pakistan was the home to many Afghan refugees of all ethnicities throughout the Soviet-Afghan war. Pashtuns generally feel friendly toward Pakistan, which has long claimed to be the main supporter of Afghanistan's Pashtuns. The Pashtun ethnic group spans the Afghanistan border with Pakistan. At times, however, this transnational identity of the Pashtuns has been a source of friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially when Pakistan moves to limit border crossings between the two countries, or when other ethnic groups in Pakistan are perceived to be unfriendly to Pashtun ethnic interests.

Iran

Most Afghans view Iran as a former imperial power. Most Sunni Afghans believe anything Shi'a in Afghanistan is connected to Iranian culture and influence, and is therefore something to be resisted. During the Soviet-Afghan war, Afghan Sunni resistance groups generally sought aid and shelter in Pakistan, while the Shi'a turned to Iran. The Shi'a groups generally received far less support from Iran than the Sunnis did from Pakistan. Most Afghan Shi'as are Hazaras. Many Iranians have negative views of the Hazaras. The Iranians did assist in the formation of the Afghan *Wahdat* (Unity) party, which became one of the main Hazara political and military groups in Afghanistan. With the rise of the Taliban in mid-1994, however, Iran began to extend support to Afghanistan's Sunnis, particularly those most threatened by the Taliban, such as the Tajiks' Ismail Khan and Ahmed Shah Masood. Despite Iranian involvement in Afghanistan's politics and wars, Iran does not appear to have exported any revolutionary Shi'a ideology to Afghanistan.

Other Regional Countries

The Afghans' views of their neighbors are heavily influenced by the role those nations played in recent years in the country, particularly in the war against the Taliban. Turkmenistan maintained official neutrality, recognizing the Northern Alliance, but also facilitating arms and fuel supplies for the Taliban through its territory.

The shared ethnicity between Tajiks in both countries caused Tajikistan to be heavily involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. Tajikistan served as a crucial link between the Northern Alliance and supplies from the outside world. Islamic extremists from Tajikistan also maintained contact and relatively cordial relations with the Pashtun Taliban militia.

Afghans view Russia as the hated imperial power that caused more than 25 years of fighting in Afghanistan. Despite this legacy, both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban maintained pragmatic relations with Russia. Russian arms dealers also sold military equipment to both sides.

For much of the 1990s, many Afghans viewed Uzbekistan as a fairly neutral regional power, although many Pashtuns blamed Uzbekistan for providing refuge for Afghan Northern Alliance leader and ethnic Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostam. When Uzbekistan President Karimov launched his own crackdown on Islamic militants, the Taliban began to view him as an enemy. Most of the ethnic groups in the north, including the Tajiks and Uzbeks, view Uzbekistan as an ally. In the south, most Pashtuns view Uzbekistan as favoring the interests of those ethnic groups in the north over the Pashtuns.

Afghans generally view India as being a supporter of the Northern Alliance, and an enemy of the Taliban. India provided funds and humanitarian assistance to the Northern Alliance. However, this assistance did not lead to any long-term friendships between India and Afghanistan.

Attitudes Toward Peacekeepers

Attitudes toward Western peace-keepers are generally positive, although this sentiment could shift rapidly at any time. Assistance does not buy friends in Afghanistan. Attitudes toward Pakistani and Turkish peace-keepers will be affected by the impressions of many Afghans that these countries supported the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, respectively.

General Attitudes Toward Foreigners

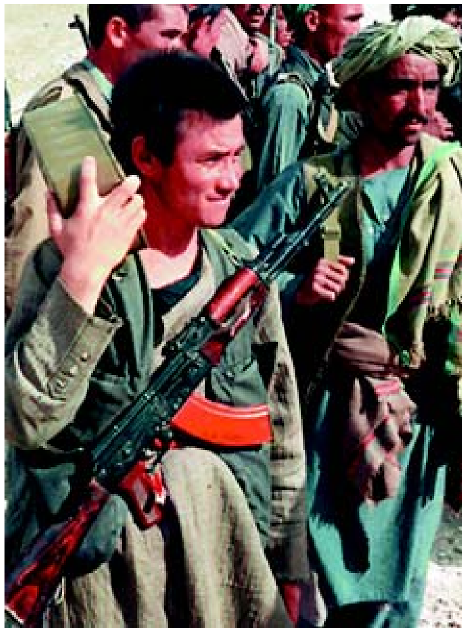
Afghans generally appreciate foreigners who try to speak the Afghans' native language. Pashtuns generally prefer to speak Pashtu, while the other ethnic groups and Pashtun elites tend to prefer to speak Dari. Smaller ethnic groups in rural areas may prefer to speak their own ethnic language, i.e. Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, or a Nuristani language. Afghans are not insulted by a foreigner's attempts to blend in by wearing Afghan clothes.

Culture and Warfare

Approaches to Warfighting

Afghan guerilla tactics draw heavily from experience fighting conventional military forces, such as the British in the 1800s, and the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Afghans are adept at waging irregular warfare. Their country's rough terrain and harsh conditions have made such tactics necessary. Afghan cultural traits, such as decentralized clan-based loyalties, and Afghan cultural values, such as valor and physical fitness, make Afghans ideally suited for guerilla warfare.

The Afghans believe warfare is a contest of endurance over time. They do not think in terms of an integrated military campaign, but rather fight in ebbs and flows. During low points in a conflict, Afghan fighters may conduct negotiations with the other side. There is no social stigma in Afghanistan against switching sides or surrendering in a conflict.



General Dostam's Troops

Afghan fighters value displays of courage while leading an assault more than they value holding terrain or capturing objectives. The purpose of warfare is to obtain glory and recognition for one's tribal clan. Western measures of military victory are secondary. The Afghan warrior values physical fitness and resilience. Afghan males are raised from childhood to handle weapons, and frequently carry weapons, even in peacetime.

During the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, U.S. troops attempted to let Afghan troops play roles in which they would have visibility, and in which they could claim responsibility for success. This often worked to their disadvantage. During one raid on a safehouse, the U.S. forces breached the perimeter and allowed the Afghan troops to come forward, toss in grenades, and rush into the building, laying down a wall of fire. Eager to claim responsibility for taking down the house, the Afghan troops ran to the breached wall, threw in their grenades, and rushed forward, firing their guns before the grenades exploded. As a result, there were serious injuries among the Afghan troops.

During the Soviet war in Afghanistan, Pakistani advisors attempted to get the *Mujahideen* to attack the Soviet oil pipeline along the Salang Highway to the Bagram Air Base. It was an aboveground pipeline and

an obvious strategic target. Nevertheless, the *Mujahideen* did not want to attack it because this sort of sabotage attack would involve no opportunity for glory or combat.

The decentralized structure of Afghan forces has historically empowered Afghans in guerilla campaigns, but weakened them when larger operations were required. During the Soviet war, the division of the *Mujahideen* into seven groups precluded any effective joint operations. This diminished the ability of the *Mujahideen* to launch large offensive assaults. Each group had some heavy equipment, but not enough to be effective individually.

Afghans have historically lacked unit training and discipline. The Afghans do not place great importance on planning military operations beforehand. Afghans do not generally use maps well, but rather rely on physical descriptions of terrain.

Jihad

Jihad is an Islamic concept for “Holy Struggle.” This concept has not always referred only to armed struggle. *Jihad* can include nonviolent struggle against sin, oppression, or injustice. However, in Afghanistan *Jihad* has been consistently linked to armed struggle.

To a Muslim, it is a duty and an honor to fight in a *Jihad* against non-Islamic people in order to defend the Islamic faith. The concept of *Jihad* is that of a defensive war. *Jihad* is not a justification to launch a war. In Afghanistan, the concept of *Jihad* has become linked not only to the defense of Islam, but the defense of the homeland. When Afghans fight a *Jihad* in defense of the homeland, they easily and quickly unite against a common enemy, despite historic blood feuds between the different Afghan tribal groups.

According to the Qur’an, if an Islamic warrior dies while fighting in a *Jihad*, he becomes a *Shaheed* (martyr). A *Shaheed* is instantly forgiven all his sins, and he goes to paradise. A *Shaheed* is buried in his clothes as he has fallen, without washing and without a coffin. When fighting

during the Soviet-Afghan war, the *Mujahideen* commanders would not announce casualties, but instead would say "Allah be praised, we had a number of *Shaheed*!"

If a Muslim fights in a *Jihad* and survives, he is known as a *Ghazi*. A *Ghazi* is accorded great respect, and is known as a holy man, even holier than those who pray regularly and observe other Muslim traditions.

During the Soviet-Afghan war 1979-89 the *Mujahideen* declared that their struggle against the Soviets was a *Jihad*. The *Mujahideen* professed to believe that they were waging a holy war against the Soviet invaders. To some *Mujahideen* commanders, the belief that the Soviets were atheists made the holy war even more significant. To other *Mujahideen* commanders, the motivation to fight this war was less theological than national; they were simply defending their homeland.

Mujahideen and the Afghan Warrior

Mujahideen means Soldiers of God. A member of the *Mujahideen* is a *Mujahid*. The battle cry of the *Mujahidee*n is *Allah o Akbar* (God is great).

During the Soviet war, the *Mujahideen* was a decentralized group. Much of Afghani military history reflects similar decentralized groups fighting under different commanders and political leaders. *Mujahideen* units typically consisted of related members from the same village. This further contributed to the decentralized nature of the *Mujahideen*.

During the Soviet war, the *Mujahid* was typically a volunteer fighter who would fight part-time and then return to civilian life to tend to his household and crops. This seasonal aspect of Afghan tribal warfare is significant, as it causes military activity to escalate and de-escalate in rhythms that may have nothing to do with military objectives or strategy.

The ability of the Afghan fighter to quickly blend back into civilian life both strengthens the Afghan forces, which do not have to maintain complicated logistical support systems, and weakens opposing forces, as it makes it much more difficult to concentrate and isolate Afghan units.