

## ETHNIC VIOLENCE, IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

BY

COLONEL ROBERT HANLEY  
United States Army

### DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:

Approved for Public Release.  
Distribution is Unlimited.

USAWC CLASS OF 2011

This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.



U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 08-04-2011		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Strategy Research Project		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b>	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Ethnic Violence, Impact on Afghanistan				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Colonel Robert Hanley				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Dr. Richard Winslow Center for Strategic Leadership				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution A: Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> Violence has always been a part of the Afghan way of life. Despite beliefs that ethnic differences are the sole factors in triggering violence, there is no single cause of violence in Afghanistan's complex situation. This paper considers such issues as geography, regional and historical factors, ethnic make-up—along with religious, political, economic, and social considerations. It concludes that ethnicity is not the only factor causing violence in Afghanistan and thinking of the conflict in Afghanistan in ethnic terms limits rather than enhances understanding the root causes of the violence.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Pashtun, Geography, Taliban, Conflict, Narcotics, Islam, Politics, Corruption					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  UNLIMITED	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  34	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b>



USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**ETHNIC VIOLENCE, IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN**

by

Colonel Robert Hanley  
United States Army

Dr. Richard Winslow  
Project Adviser

This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **ABSTRACT**

AUTHOR: Colonel Robert Hanley  
TITLE: Ethnic Violence, Impact on Afghanistan  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 8 April 2011      WORD COUNT: 6,646      PAGES: 34  
KEY TERMS: Pashtun, Geography, Taliban, Conflict, Narcotics, Islam, Politics, Corruption  
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

Violence has always been a part of the Afghan way of life. Despite beliefs that ethnic differences are the sole factors in triggering violence, there is no single cause of violence in Afghanistan's complex situation. This paper considers such issues as geography, regional and historical factors, ethnic make-up—along with religious, political, economic, and social considerations. It concludes that ethnicity is not the only factor causing violence in Afghanistan and thinking of the conflict in Afghanistan in ethnic terms limits rather than enhances understanding the root causes of the violence.



## ETHNIC VIOLENCE, IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a country made up of numerous ethnic groups. These groups, throughout time, have used violence to achieve their goals. Their resort to violence could be based upon a combination of family loyalties, or religious and ethnic issues, or local and national politics, or other cultural matters. Many times Afghans respond violently to both internal and external coercive intrusions on their affairs. Other contributing factors that may cause violence include: geography, regional influences, historical effects, ethnic factors, governmental considerations, illegal drug trade, economic and education matters. This research paper analyzes these factors. Certainly, the impacts of culture and political influence on Afghan society cannot be discounted. Finally, the impact of the Taliban cannot be overstated since their influence pervades nearly all aspects of Afghan life. The Taliban incite religious and cultural motivations for violence. The Afghan propensity to use violence has impacted this country throughout history. This research paper concludes that, although there is some ethnic violence in Afghanistan, ethnicity is not the singular cause of Afghan violence.

### Geography

Afghanistan's geological landforms divide and reinforce separation amongst the Afghan people. Afghanistan's mountains divide the country into four distinct zones that support different types of economic livelihood, including agriculture. Within each zone, terrain is highly compartmentalized; so travel, contacts with other people, and political or social unity is difficult. Geographic considerations have determined how the land was occupied and have established the environmental conditions the different ethnic groups faced as they settled over time. Geography's impact on Afghan history and culture is

significant. Afghanistan's mountainous terrain dominates the center of the country and is one of the most prominent features. This dominant feature controls ethnic groups' efforts to produce agricultural goods by providing a water source, either naturally or irrigated. Also the capability to produce crops is limited in the country's higher altitudes. The country's watersheds and water systems have sustained four distinct regions: Herat in the west, Qandahar in the south, Mazar-i-Sharif (Balkh) in the north, and the Kabul-Peshawar area in the east. These areas are part of the Iranian plateau.<sup>1</sup>

In a short distance one can travel from extreme altitudes with freezing winters and harsh winds near Kabul east to warm orange groves near Jalalabad. One can move from extreme summer heat with temperatures over 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the Kunduz region in the northeast to the cool mountain air in the north of Badakhshan in a short amount of time. Many of the Afghan ethnic groups take advantage of the differences in seasons, climate, and altitude to maximize agricultural potential in moderate areas; then they use the high terrain in other areas to avoid the spring floods from the winter runoff. Traders of agricultural produce and livestock bring highland and lowland goods to local bazaars, providing an unmatched diversity of items for their customers.<sup>2</sup>

Nomadic tribes travel significant distances within this region to transport their goods to a market, where they trade with others. They also use the mountainous terrain for grazing their sheep and goats, thereby escaping the scorching summer heat radiating off the desolate desert floors. Conversely in the late summer and early fall, they return to the lowlands to escape the oncoming cold winters. In years past, these

nomadic tribes were known to transit throughout the region to the current state of India to spend their winters.<sup>3</sup>

The mountains within the center portions of Afghanistan are rugged; they resist overland travel. The lack of roads between villages isolates enclaves of civilization and cuts tribes off for extended periods of time during the harsh winters. These geographical features isolate many of the tribes and villages from outside influence—not only from other Afghan groups, but from the entire world. Even with this lack of transportation infrastructure, many laborers move from their isolated villages through this region seeking employment in larger population centers or in neighboring countries. Even though these laborers sustain their ethnic ties to their home villages, they are also exposed to and influenced by the culture to which they have migrated.<sup>4</sup>

The difficult routes through the mountains support the movement of goods for local and international trade. They also expose travelers to a variety of cultural characteristics, so economic and political views are transported along with their goods and services. Through these movements, Afghan people spread their own ethnic biases and various cultures. North and northeast Afghanistan feature high mountain passes that flow into the steppes of central Asia, granting access to Pakistan and India to the east. As they traverse the northern portion of Afghanistan, these routes connect into Turkmenistan.<sup>5</sup> Caravan routes from ancient times are still used—bringing people, animals, goods, and ideas from faraway lands. Ethnic groups coming and going are thus exposed to a multicultural experience.

The rivers that cross the lands of Afghanistan, originating deep in the high mountains, seem deceptively calm the further they flow from their sources. They burst

over their banks during the flood season and go nearly dry at other times of the year. These rivers cannot sustain commerce and do not link to any ocean or other significant body of navigable water. Many of their descents are so extreme that neither humans nor goods are transportable on the violent rushes of water. The Helmand River ends near the Iranian border, while the Kabul River connects with the Indus River in Pakistan, but does not support any trade or transportation. Ethnic groups have adapted to the river systems' limited navigability. They do not enhance movement, communication, and trade.<sup>6</sup> Although Afghanistan's extremes in geography often isolate populations, Afghans are exposed to other culture and ideas as they travel to markets or migrate.

### Regions

The regions that make up Afghanistan have generally solidified over time. Political efforts to delineate boundaries have shaped the country on paper maps; however, ethnic groups have remained rooted to their groups' locations. Basically, the country is subdivided into four regions identified by their long-standing urban centers: Herat in the west, Qandahar in the south, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, and Kabul in the east. The area along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border opposite Peshawar and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) constitutes a fifth region. Each region maintains irrigated plains or river valleys that support their urban center with agricultural products. Despite political changes, the arrival of new population groups within the region, and attempts to superimpose an external identity upon the regions, all five of these areas have maintained their identity as distinct regions over time.<sup>7</sup> Herat and Kandahar typify the differences that distinguish Afghanistan's regions.

The west region, with its major city of Herat, is located next to the Iranian border and exhibits Iranian cultural influences. It is arid and draws sustenance from the Harirod

River that flows through the lowlands from its mountainous source. Farmers utilize underground irrigation systems that draw from the water tables located in the foothills. Sunni and Shi'a Persian-speaking ethnic groups make up the population; these people have historical ties to the silk route joining China and Iran. Both international trade and agriculture have ensured the region's survival over time.



Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>

Utilizing the Helmand River, the southern region's population focuses on Qandahar as its dominant city. Its robust agricultural zone utilizes available water to grow wheat and fruit. Relying on its time-tested irrigation system, Helmand farmers are now growing the new cash crop of opium. Although a geographically large area, the region's population is relatively sparse. The southern portion of the region is dominated by desert and inhabited only by nomadic tribes. The region's dominant ethnic group is Pashtun. The city of Qandahar serves as a major trade center for goods moving between India towards Kabul. Long-standing and accepted boundary lines further reinforce separation of ethnic groups.

## Historical Factors

Throughout history, Afghanistan has been repeatedly occupied by foreign militaries. Afghan resistance to these occupations has contributed to the country's propensity for violence. After 35 years of recent conflict with outsiders, Afghanistan is no longer an isolated buffer state. No longer separating conflicts, Afghanistan now links them. Afghanistan's resistance to outsiders provided relative stability, but the current conflict is more like a civil war. Its central government is subsidized by great powers and accorded legitimacy by all neighbors. But its population is largely isolated in remote valleys with few links to the central government or the outside world. These isolated groups possess small arms, but they have no political organization on a scale that could challenge the state.<sup>9</sup>

Afghanistan borders on eastern Iran. Although this border is shared with a predominantly Shi'a group, the Sunnis dominate Afghanistan despite its conquest by the Persian Shi'a Safavids in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Kabul area became an Afghan kingdom only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ghilzai and Durrani Pashtun tribes strived to establish empires as the Safavids gave way. In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani established the empire as he raided adjacent regions and rewarded the tribes within the territory with the riches he gained during his conquests. Competing imperialistic efforts by the Russians and British produced the newly identified "State of Afghanistan." During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, further unrest resulted from internal and external conflicts, culminating in the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879, which established Afghanistan as a buffer state between the imperial powers. British India then controlled Afghan foreign relations and provided cash and weapons to the emir to maintain the state's stability.<sup>10</sup>

Afghanistan gained its full independence in 1919 after the Russian revolution. A period of relative stability prevailed until 1978. Many factors contributed to this stability. First was the non-interference agreement whereby other nations agreed not to interfere with Afghan internal affairs. Second, despite a lack of large-scale political organization, the Afghan people were generally disarmed, demobilized, and living in isolated communities, so domestic disputes were minimized. Finally, the international community subsidized Afghan security forces to suppress threats from surrounding countries.<sup>11</sup>

Then when the British relinquished its colonial ties to India in 1948, Afghanistan turned to Russia for assistance while the United States focused its support on Pakistan. The influx of capital into Afghanistan following the 1973 oil embargo (the middle east oil producing countries response of no oil exports to the U.S. during the support of Israeli military activities) expanded education and the road network in Afghanistan, drawing many Afghans from rural to urban areas. This internal migration encouraged the Afghan people's engagement in political movements; it also provided the basis for evolution to a cash economy. Foreign aid supported internal development programs, so the Afghan government had no need to impose a national tax. No rural taxation and viable local self-government virtually eliminated any need for a strong central government.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1970s Afghanistan's internal rebellions culminated with the Soviet invasion in 1979. Formal or informal international agreements were then cast aside as Afghanistan became a Cold War battleground. The ensuing Cold War confrontation of the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan overshadowed any regional or sectarian conflicts. Then when the defeated Soviets removed their forces in 1989, they left behind a collapsed state with no political structure or governmental processes, a

non-existent security force infrastructure, numerous armed groups, and a near total reliance on international organizations for subsistence. Afghanistan's economy depended increasingly on its illegal drug trade. Its relationship with Pakistan caused further confusion. Following the partition of India in 1947, the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) provided a cushion between Afghanistan and the core of Pakistan. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, FATA became home to Afghan refugees and a sanctuary for armed Afghan groups conducting operations across the border at will; and a smugglers' transfer point for goods and arms that generated funding for Afghanistan's wars. After the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan's havens for Islamic extremists were exposed. Afghanistan had become a center of global violence. Then the United States invaded Afghanistan to remove terrorist activities hosted by the Taliban. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and apparent defeat of the Taliban government, the United Nations undertook establishment of a new central government in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

The international community's efforts focused on supporting a new Afghan state; but those efforts lacked the necessary oversight to ensure efficiency and preventing corruption in the reconstruction efforts. Afghan insurgents, including a revived Taliban, then began to violently oppose the new Afghan state. The Afghan insurgency further complicated the war on terror already caught in the nexus among the India-Pakistan conflict; the Sunni-Shi'a conflict; the relations of the United States, and NATO; the relationship of Russia, the United States and NATO; and the U.S.-Iran conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Much of Afghanistan's population is no longer isolated; the Afghan people are now exposed to militant groups in both urban and rural areas. These militant groups

attempt to recruit and pressure Afghans to adopt their ideology. Additionally, the Afghan people are developing an awareness of national identity as they are exposed to international information and news. Because of increased population movements, due partially to a constant state of war, Afghans also have the opportunity to expand their awareness beyond their ethnic group or family. Afghanistan's failed economy also exposed Afghans to outside groups that provide humanitarian assistance and other services. Due to its export of illegal opium and heroin, Afghanistan has developed a greater reliance on foreign capital. Although it participates in international politics and warfare; in the global economy; and in labor, commodity, and capital markets—Afghanistan relies on cash transactions that increase the power base of militant and ideological groups. Afghanistan's rural and urban communities' social structure has become less stable and less capable of sustaining their populations, so Afghans are turning to the state for job opportunities and public services. Rapidly moving towards a more urban society, the people are demanding public services and have become politically active. Afghanistan's weak central government, which has dominated the recent history of Afghanistan, cannot support these demands, offset these aforementioned external influences, or support an Afghan security force.<sup>15</sup>

Three Afghan trends portend inevitable social crisis characterized by a rise in ethnic and Islamic political, criminal, and violent activity. First is the rise in conflict among groups seeking power in Afghanistan. Second is the relentless funding received from external sources. Third is the Afghan people's increased mobility. Reducing threats in Afghanistan may encourage investment and economic activity, and greater legitimization of the government could support a functional tax system to stabilize the

Afghan monetary system.<sup>16</sup> Over time, Afghanistan has endured many occupations reinforcing the “us” and “them” mentality, resulting in constant destabilized governmental structures. Violence results from the power struggles among groups; increases in external economic and ideological influences are intensifying this violence.

### Ethnic Groups

Along with historical factors, the roles of Afghanistan’s different ethnic groups and tribal histories must be taken into consideration in analyzing the nation’s violent activity. Throughout the world, ethnic tribal characteristics are similar in that kinship is a factor in establishing the group’s identity. In Afghanistan, there are five major and dozens of minor ethnic groups, many of which are not well studied.<sup>17</sup> The sizes of these ethnic groups are difficult to assess because there is no firm data. Further, members of each group tend to overstate their strength.<sup>18</sup> Large Afghan ethnic groups are Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen, and the Aimaqs.<sup>19</sup>

The Pashtuns make up approximately 40 percent of Afghanistan’s population; they have been the dominant ethnic group since the mid-eighteenth century. Their dominance and overwhelming presence led to proposals to call Afghanistan the land of the Pashtuns, not the land of the Afghans. The Pashtun ethnic tribes are organized into four smaller groups of clans—Durrani, Ghilzais, Gurgust, and Karlanri.

The Durrani are located in the south and southwest of Afghanistan. This group is broken into the major tribal components between the Zirk (Popalzai, Alikozai, Barkzai and Achalzai) and the Panjpao (Nurzai, Alizai, and Ishaqzai). Additional claims of descent include the Yusefzai, Shinwari, and Mohamand, which are some of the most prominent Pashtun tribes in Peshawar. The second largest Pashtun group is the Ghilzais, located throughout the east of Afghanistan. They are made up of tribes

including the Hotaki, Tokhi, Kharoti, Nasiri, Taraki, Suliman Khel and Ahmadzi, among others. The Gurghust, the third group of Pashtuns, are made up of tribes of the Kakar and Musa Khel and Safi, from the Kunar region. The Karlanri are positioned along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This tribe is comprised of the Wadak, Orakzai, Afridi, Wazir, Jaji, Tani, Khattak, Zadran, Mangal, Mahsud, and Khugiani.<sup>20</sup> This breakdown of the Pashtun tribal organization is vast, however not complete.<sup>21</sup>

The Taliban waver between claims that they are a Pashtun nationalist force or a supra-ethnic Islamist group with no acknowledgement of tribal or other ethnic differences, known only as Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Without doubt, the Pashtuns are one of the largest tribal societies in the world. Even though kinship is a key factor within the tribal social organization, Pashtuns are quick to acknowledge that this age-old bond is not as cherished as it was in the past.<sup>23</sup> The Taliban movement is undoubtedly a complex consolidation of religious, tribal, and regional influence.<sup>24</sup> The erosion of the Afghan state over the past thirty years has significantly affected Pashtun tribal society. Societal and political ties are questioned by younger generations. Also the jirga's influence has declined: jirgas are meetings of ethnic leaders whose purpose is to end the gathering with a unified voice. Jirgas remain the most significant way for the Pashtuns to resolve conflicts. However, in many of the Pashtun tribes, the shura, which is a gathering of scholars whose united purpose is to provide recommendations from a religious perspective to advise the leader, still represents a form of traditional political organization. Other shuras are headed by internal strongmen who may or may not have religious ties.<sup>25</sup>

The second major ethnic group is the Tajiks, approximately 30 percent of the Afghan population. Tajiks are a Persian-speaking Sunni nontribal group. Tajiks make up a large portion of Kabul's population. However, most Tajiks are spread out over the northeast mountains. Tajiks assume regional identities (Badakhshi, Panjshiri, Shomali, Salang) or urban identities (Kabuli or Herati). Urban Tajiks have historically been merchants, bureaucrats, and educated clergy. In rural areas, the Tajiks' are mostly subsistence farmers. Historically, because they speak Persian—the language of governmental administration, high culture, and foreign relations—this group has maintained powerful roles, no matter who is in control of the government.<sup>26</sup>

The Hazaras make up approximately 15 percent of the population. Located in the central range of the Hindu Kush (known as Haarajat), they are Shi'a Muslims. They raise livestock and perform subsistence agriculture. Speaking a Persian dialect, they physically resemble Mongoloids, as they are said to have descended from the Mongol armies that conquered Iraq. Historically, they have ranked near the bottom of Afghanistan's ethnic hierarchy. They are victims of prejudice because of their religious and racial differences. They have little social mobility, because they have been excluded from governmental positions and educational opportunities controlled by Pashtun-dominated and Tajik-administered governments. They lost control of the Hazarajat region near the end of the nineteenth century when their lands were conquered. Then they were victimized and sold as slaves. Kabul received a significant influx of this oppressed population: many worked as migrant workers. By the 1970s, one-third of Kabul's population was Hazaras. After being persecuted by the Taliban,

Hazaras have been accorded political equality in accord with Shi'a jurisprudence and Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution.<sup>27</sup>

Approximately ten percent of the Afghan population is Uzbek or Turkmen. Historically nomadic, these Sunni Turkic speaking groups entered modern Afghanistan from Central Asia. In the 10th century, their political dominance was established in the Afghan region. The Uzbeks arrived in the sixteenth century as nomadic conquerors who then settled as sedentary farmers in the irrigated valleys or lower steppes. Other Uzbeks seeking independence and freedom, found new homes in the region during the Russian revolution and Stalinist period.

Turkmen tribes are regionally focused near the borders of Turkmenistan and Iran in the northwest. Until late in the nineteenth century, Turkmen raids for slaves and treasure were the mainstay of their way of life. But Russian forces gained military control of the region and put an end to their violent, nomadic ways. After the Soviet Union was established, a significant number of Turkmen occupied parts of northern Afghanistan. Closely related to their ethnic relatives in Turkmenistan and Iran, the Turkmen contribute significantly to Afghan economic development through exports of their famed carpets and sheepskin. By the 1980s and 1990s, their autonomy and political prowess became recognized in the north of Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup>

The next tribe of significant importance in Afghanistan, said to be from Turkish descent, are the Aimaq. This Persian-speaking group is the smallest of the five major groups. After occupying the mountainous territory east of Herat and west of Hazarajat, they settled in the desert lands, to include a portion of the steppes north and east of Herat. During the nineteenth-century wars initiated by the Kabul government, many of

the Aimaq dispersed to parts of northern Afghanistan. Because of their diversity and dispersion, some anthropologists question their identity as a single ethnic group.<sup>29</sup>

The remaining three percent of the Afghanistan population, although quite varied, have contributed to Afghan history. To gain the loyalty of these smaller groups, former Afghan rulers appointed their tribal members to political and military positions. This tactic proved successful. Given political representation, they would not betray Afghan rulers who appointed them to key positions.<sup>30</sup> These smaller groups include descendents from Arabian armies who now speak Persian. They are well integrated into Afghan markets, but relatively unknown in Afghanistan's ethnic politics.<sup>31</sup> The Baluch, located in the desert south of the Pashtuns, are extensions of a larger population located in Pakistan and Iran. Their language is related to Persian, and they still maintain a nomadic culture. They are renowned as smugglers on the route between India and Iran.<sup>32</sup>

Located northeast of Kabul, the Nuristanis live in isolated valleys and raise cattle and other crops. After their forced conversion to Islam in 1895, those who migrated to Kabul became deeply involved in the military and government, despite their relatively small numbers. Speaking separate languages and occupying different valleys, the Nuristanis maintain their unique identity. Similar to the Nuristanis, the Pashi are also able to maintain their identity. Another tribe, the Qizilbash, was critical in the founding of Afghanistan in the mid-eighteenth century because of their affiliations with Shiite Turkish military units. Political in nature, their defenses against tribal revolts assisted in the development of the Afghan state. Known for their Shi'a affiliation, the Qizilbash's relationship with the Kabul elite forestalled harsh discrimination from the ruling Sunni.

Predominately located in urban areas, they serve key roles in the government and trade.<sup>33</sup>

Even smaller groups are the Jugis and the Jats, who marry within their families and travel constantly. This group moves throughout their region selling and trading their uniquely specialized crafts. They have a marginal social status and are seen as similar to the European gypsies. The Kirghiz, the smallest of the Turkic groups in Afghanistan, occupy the Wakhan corridor and live as pastoral nomads. Their historical ties are with the populations in the Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, and Chinese Xinjiang strategic regions on the “roof of the world.” These affiliations bestow them with a political significance that exceeds their numbers in the region. The non-Muslim populations of Hindus and Sikhs trace their roots back to urban areas such as Kabul. They play significant roles in the currency market and international trade.<sup>34</sup>

Multiple ethnic groups, all with distinct histories, ideologies, and culture, sustain their identities and frequently engage in violent conflicts with other groups over issues of power and of ethnic differences.

### Religion

Religion is another key contribution to violence in Afghanistan. Central to Afghanistan’s future is Islam. Never dominated by zealotry, Afghan Islam has proven it is not afraid to fight for Islam and its honor. The war against the Soviets is an excellent example of this. Most Afghans viewed this conflict as a Muslim holy conflict, a jihad. Prior to 1978, there were two major competitors for power, communism and Islamists.<sup>35</sup> Responding to the lack of rule from the central government and the underdevelopment of communities, the differing groups felt Afghanistan had broken away from traditional Afghan Islam. The radical Islamists and communists were trying to seize local political

power by infiltrating local qawms (groups aligned with tribe, ethnicity, or region) in their attempts to gain influence in the centralized national religious bureaucracy. The Islamists' strategy was to gradually compromise with the Afghan populace, while the communists' strategy provided no compromise.<sup>36</sup>

Using foreign funding, opponents of the traditional Islamic faith included the fundamentalist movement (Wahhabi and Deobandi approaches) based in the subcontinent. Fundamentalists were educated in Islam at madrassas, Islamic religious schools, located outside of Afghanistan. Wahhabism was flourishing in the Pakistani regions; Wahhabi's were teaching Taliban and other extremists. Wahhabism prospered in the refugee camps that had a predominantly Pashtun exile population that was very susceptible to outside influences.

In the meantime, Tajiks maintained their close ties to traditional practices, while the Shi'a Hazaras participated in a bloody civil war that supported Iran's Islamic Revolution. Then they tried and failed to seize power in the Hazarajat. The result was the killing and forcible exile of many secular and religious leaders of the Hazaras.<sup>37</sup> Emerging from the religious networks established during the Soviet occupation, the Taliban established itself separately from the mujahedin. It violated the mujahedin's religious principles by not unifying the Islamic state as a whole. Mujahidin teachings advocate establishment of Islamic states to ward off infidel invasions.<sup>38</sup> Afghans' allegiance to different religious factions has contributed to Afghanistan's violence.

#### Additional Considerations

Religion plays an important role in Afghan violence, as do other factors. Afghanistan is negatively affected by economic reform at the international, regional, and local levels. Its political and social conditions are volatile. Modern technology in

Afghanistan is creating incredible contradictions and necessitating complex coping mechanisms. Many Afghans, along with other Middle Eastern people, have turned to extended families, ethnic groups, and tribes for mutual support and assistance.<sup>39</sup>

In January 2006, the Afghan Government outlined its plans for the next five years, the Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (IADS). It focused on security, governance and the rule of law, human rights, sustainable economic and social development, and counter narcotics.<sup>40</sup> The plan sustains Afghanistan's commitment to create an environment to foster growth of the private sector, while reducing the government's role as a public service body, by increasing contracting to private sector businesses and other organizations. Agriculture remains a primary contributor to the Afghan economy, despite anticipated slow growth in the economy. Further infrastructure improvements would bolster this growth, including power generation and distribution, creation of cold storage facilities, and improved access to markets. Energy improvements provide potential advantages, such as exporting hydro-power energy to neighboring states and fostering additional international investment. Afghanistan could also further promote mining exploration and development of natural mineral resources.<sup>41</sup>

The 2010 Asian Development Outlook (ADO) provided a favorable view of Afghanistan's economic situation. The country's economy has grown steadily in response to efforts to expand the government's institutional capacity and improve governance, strengthen security, create a pro-growth business regulatory environment, and foster social inclusion and equality.<sup>42</sup> Corruption still persists, so the ADO ended its report with recommendations that the Afghan government must continue to push for

social reforms, to improve its transportation and electric systems, and to stimulate additional investment from the private sector.<sup>43</sup>

Tribes produce dynamic social allegiances which are all subject to different interpretations regarding their political and social associations.<sup>44</sup> Many of the ethnic or tribal linkages among Pashtuns can be traced back to the historical composition of the early tribes. Also, the sheer vastness of tribal territories reinforces the need for additional leaders within the tribal framework.<sup>45</sup> In many of these areas, the Taliban has succeeded in establishing parallel governmental services, with parallel provincial and district governors, judges, police, and even taxation.<sup>46</sup>

Afghanistan has not established its own sources of internal revenue because the abundance of international aid and nearly limitless access to foreign funding that directly addresses security and humanitarian priorities allows it not to do so. Additionally, this dependency on external funds limits the government's control over local actors and gives the government little popular legitimacy.<sup>47</sup>

Afghanistan's narcotics production is said to have increased by one quarter since the Taliban regained control of southern Afghanistan, where nearly all of the narcotics come from Kandahar and Helmand provinces. This illicit activity is supported by the Pakistani government, so it is reasonable to assume that Afghanistan and Pakistan are cooperating in the movement and cultivation of opium products.<sup>48</sup> Narcotics cultivation began prior to 1996, to support the Mujahedeen's efforts to expel the Soviets; the drug trade generated funding for the war. Hizb-i-Islam, controlled by Gulbidin Hekmatyar, was deeply involved in laboratories along the Pakistani border. This relationship was vital in the transition to Taliban rule. The all-encompassing narcotics agricultural and

economic base reinforced itself. The Taliban allowed traffickers to move their products by providing security for a price, including transporting drugs by aircraft to countries throughout the world.<sup>49</sup> The Taliban benefits from the narcotics trade and from the drug-trafficking among participating tribes and ethnic centers. These activities enable the Taliban to maintain power and control in these areas. This constant pressure assures that farmers keep growing poppies through the threat of violence if an alternate crop is planted or if no crop is produced. This process has continued for years. Some local farmers have no alternative. They must continue to fund the Taliban and other insurgent activities.

Tribalism is extremely important in the relationship between the insurgency and the narcotics industry in southern and eastern Afghanistan. These relationships extend from Afghanistan into Pakistan. They facilitate trafficking and violent insurgency activities. Cross-border links are prevalent among the Pashtun groups. From the outside, these tribes appear to be local and indigenous. However, their net reaches into Iran, Central Asia, and further.<sup>50</sup> Afghanistan's instability can be traced to the narcotics industry. The insurgency's overriding ability to delegitimize the government is part of a vicious cycle that begins with the protection they provide to farmers and traffickers. This creates a crucial link to many ethnic groups' livelihoods; it also enables the narcotics industry to exert political power.<sup>51</sup>

Heightened educational opportunities, modern communication, and increased movement enable non-traditional tribal and ethnic group members to influence the traditional institutions within tribal organizations. Ironically, all of this change and pressure of modernization, along with constant conflict, has verified the traditional

institutions. For many Afghans, the local village elders provide more access and efficiency and less corruption; they serve as a more trusted agent than the formal state organizations.<sup>52</sup>

Some of the power base of current members of parliament is derived from their control of tribal networks, while others gain their political clout from ethnic political parties or from their ability to provide resources for a specific local community. As they ran for a seat in the parliament or for re-election in the 2010 elections, candidates competed with each other in debates covering a number of issues. This political process increased non-violent tensions, but raised the level of awareness concerning the status of the currently seated government. Key issues were the inability of local leaders and parliament to provide basic services or even a semblance of a representative government to the people.<sup>53</sup> Progress does occur, but complex economic and political issues contribute to further instability.

### Taliban

One of the most overwhelming considerations relating to violence in Afghanistan is the Taliban's uses of crucial aspects of religion, economics, and politics. An effective Afghanistan strategy must acknowledge the Taliban's composition, its culture, and its capabilities. Many of the current Taliban fighters can be classified as discontented Afghans, motivated by their irritations over local issues, not by ideology. The majority of Taliban are Pashtuns.<sup>54</sup> Its organization consists of multiple networks throughout the entire country—and the world. However, its most daunting presence is in the southeastern and eastern regions. Reliant on tribal recruiting, the Taliban fronts are firmly based in tribes and smaller subgroups.<sup>55</sup>

The Taliban's culture is based on comradeship along with religious, political, and tribal factors that were woven together during their united opposition to the Soviet invasion.<sup>56</sup> Standing against the influence of outsiders, the Taliban Pashtun predictably stand against the Afghan Pashtun alliance with Americans. Taliban xenophobia is now enmeshed with the resurgence of a nationalist movement against occupying powers.<sup>57</sup> The Taliban does not want the non-Pashtuns to unite, because this directly conflicts with the Taliban's religious-based educational programs and local traditions. The Taliban is admittedly not bound by tribal or ethnic boundaries. Needless to say, the Taliban's ideology consists of contradictions, breakouts, gaps, and highly idiosyncratic dogma.<sup>58</sup> The Taliban currently profess a lack of interest in global religious dominance.<sup>59</sup> Embracing new technological advances, the Taliban uses communication devices and mass media tools to effectively spread propaganda.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, the Taliban's overall objectives are twofold. First, they want to remove of all foreign troops and influences from Afghanistan. Second, they want to build an Islamic government that will solve Afghanistan's social and economic problems.<sup>61</sup>

However, most Taliban fighters are motivated by personal issues and economic deprivations. Their challenges can therefore be addressed through economic and social incentives. Taliban fighters believe that the Afghan government wants to dismantle and defeat them and that Coalition forces intend to occupy their country forever. Only when these misinformed beliefs are addressed and mollified can the Taliban be effectively dismantled.<sup>62</sup>

### Impact of Ethnic Factors on Conflict

Ethnic issues significantly impact Afghanistan's people and can also contribute to violence. Ethnic characteristics further exacerbate the division between Pashtun and

non-Pashtun tribes, whose insurgencies threaten Afghanistan. Many foreigners believe that ethnic shares in the government should begin at the highest political level they contend that the president should be an ethnic Pashtun, and the two vice presidents should be non-Pashtuns. This view is not strongly supported by many non-Pashtuns, who believe this sharing arrangement keeps them from access to centralized political power.<sup>63</sup> The 2004 Afghan constitution did not specify sharing of positions within the government based on ethnic affiliation. Hostilities among ethnic groups tend to be more localized than nationwide. For example, in Kunduz the rural Tajiks have a tense relationship with the urban Pashtuns regarding agricultural practices. Similarly, Uzbeks and Hazara farmers are in conflict with the Pashtun herders. After the Taliban's defeat in 2001, loyalty to individual warlords often conflicted with loyalty to the central government and creating competing centers for control of the use of "legitimate" force, a key attribute of statehood. Uzbeks located near Mazar-i-Sharif and the Tajiks, engaged in conventional armed conflict (armor and artillery) with the Pashtuns. Indeed, persistent conflict among ethnic groups over land and water rights has plagued Afghanistan history.<sup>64</sup>

The Pashtuns and Hazaras have sustained the most severe and longest-standing conflict between ethnic groups. Tensions remain strong because of differences in race, religion, language, land use, water rights, and social status. The conflict was exacerbated by the 2001 atrocious occupation of the Hazarajat by the Taliban and its allies. Historically occupants of the lower end of the social spectrum, the Hazaras have no desire to return to this status; they regard this latest Pashtun campaign as an effort to force them back into subordination and oppression.

After 2001, Pashtuns have cultivated opium crops, waged an insurgency and conducted terrorist attacks. This violence is mainly contained within the Pashtun group because infighting among clans and families results in death and destruction. Competition for resources and leadership has created uncertainties that have culminated with decades of turmoil. Tribal social structures have been severely stressed. Leadership positions in many Pashtun tribes remain unfilled, so there is considerable tribal competition for these positions. Successful “candidates” often have little support or genuine authority. After decades of conflict, often there is no clear consensus regarding leadership.<sup>65</sup>

There are significantly heightened tensions between the Pashtun regions in the east and south of the country, where opium production and insurgency efforts are concentrated, and the considerably non-Pashtun regions in the west, north, and central parts of Afghanistan. Ethnic competition and stress is heightened where these different populations converge. Increased tension between the insurgent Pashtuns and other tribes is also a response to the allocation of a large portion of state funding to combat narcotics production and terrorism of the insurgent Pashtuns. The competition for foreign assistance—including monetary incentives, security, and social and economic improvements contributes to the attitude that other ethnic groups do not have the same political clout as the Pashtuns. Often capitalizing on the bitterness created by the uneven allocation of benefits, insurgents turn rival tribes against each other by emphasizing the perceived unequal distribution of assets. Lack of leadership at the national level promotes further civil unrest. These internal conflicts then contribute to the radical Taliban’s impact throughout the country.<sup>66</sup>

The complexity of ethnic influence cannot be overstated. For instance, the Taliban attempted to impose Unitary Sunni Islamic religious rules on all Afghans. However, this effort could not break the peoples' links and loyalties to tribes, families, clans, and even to the national identity among all tribes. Continual pressure from the insurgency and polarization of politics in the recent past has enhanced the non-Pashtun tribes' perceptions of a corrupt government heavily influenced by Pashtuns. President Karzai's failure to push forward a Pashtun agenda after the Taliban's killing of his father has reduced the support of many Pashtuns, who originally viewed his nationalist agenda as ethnic betrayal.<sup>67</sup>

A number of factors contributed to the overall positive outlook of all ethnic groups after the 2001 fall of the Taliban. Afghan popular support was demonstrated in the 2004 presidential election. Since that time, this support has declined. Non-Pashtuns see the President supporting the will of the Pashtuns; on the other hand, many Pashtuns have turned against him, because they see no evidence that he supports their interests. Then the 2009 election was perceived as corrupt by the Pashtuns, further promoting ethnic polarization and an unpopular presidency. Afghan economic failures and lack of security are directly placed on President Karzai's shoulders.<sup>68</sup>

The greatest killer of Afghans since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan has been interethnic violence. Afghanistan's tribes either assist with Afghan Pashtuns' support of the Kabul government, or they move across the border to join the insurgency. Tribes, localities, and kinship groups compete with the central government for authority to solve disputes, such as water rights and trade issues. These conflict resolutions allay long-term resentments. These disputes and divisions are not limited to the Pashtuns;

they have also fueled conflicts among and between other Afghan ethnic groups.<sup>69</sup>

Additionally, many members of ethnic and tribal groups have migrated to the cities and thereby reduced gaps between urban and rural Afghans. This movement has assisted in the transformation of traditional relationships within village, tribal, and ethnic communities. Young Afghans' views, altered by their urban experience, have challenged their elders' wisdom and authority. Through this transformation, local organizations have lost much of their authority and power.<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion

There is no single cause of violence in the complex, ongoing situation in Afghanistan. While it is often assumed that persistent violence in Afghanistan can be attributed solely to ethnic groups, other factors are surely involved. Not to be discounted is the Taliban, which has evolved mostly from the Pashtun ethnic group that leverages violence within the country for a number of reasons. Afghanistan's issues remain extremely complex. Numerous factors - including geography, region, history, ethnic considerations, religion, tribal social structure, ineffective governance, and a weak and fragmented economy, as well as the influence of the Taliban—contribute to fragmentation of Afghan society and persistent violence in Afghanistan. Ethnic differences are a factor, but not the sole factor in triggering Afghan violence. More often than not, the underlying struggle is about political power and access to resources, and thinking of the conflict in ethnic terms limits rather than enhances understanding the root causes of the violence.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan A cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 42

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 45

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "World Fact Book: South Asia, Afghanistan" <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/cia-maps-publications/maps/803282.jpg> (accessed March 18, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Transformation of the Afghan State; The Future of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009), 13

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan A cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 24-27

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 4, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan A cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 25

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>35</sup> David Isby, *Afghanistan Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderlands* (New York, NY: Pegasus books, LLC, 2010), 30

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 11, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Laurie King-Irani, "Kinship, Class, and Ethnicity," in *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Jillian Schwedler and Deborah J. Gerner, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008), 336

<sup>40</sup> Peter Marsden. "Afghanistan: Economy" in *EuropaWorld*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2010) in Europa World Online (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 5, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>47</sup> Colin Cookman and Caroline Wadhams. "Governance in Afghanistan Looking Ahead to What We Leave Behind," 11 May 2010, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/05/pdf/afghangovernance.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Sean M. Maloney, "On A Pale Horse? Conceptualizing Narcotics Production In Southern Afghanistan And Its Relationship To The Narcoterror Nexus." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20, no 1, (March 2009). 206. <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=g910305429> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 207

<sup>50</sup> Raggie Johansen, Suzanne Kunnen, and Kristina Kuttig, "Addiction, Crime and Insurgency The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium." (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, Austria. October 2009) 18. [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan\\_Opium\\_Trade\\_2009\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade_2009_web.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 9, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Noah Coburn. *Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan Elections and Instability II*, (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, September 2010), 3. [http://www.areu.org.af/index/php?option=com\\_content&task=view12&id=12&Itemid=53](http://www.areu.org.af/index/php?option=com_content&task=view12&id=12&Itemid=53) (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 12, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>63</sup> David Isby, *Afghanistan Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderlands* (New York, NY: Pegasus Books, LLC, 2010), 189

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 192

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 192

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Ruttig. *How Tribal are the Taliban?* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010), 8, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2011).

