

Central Asian Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations

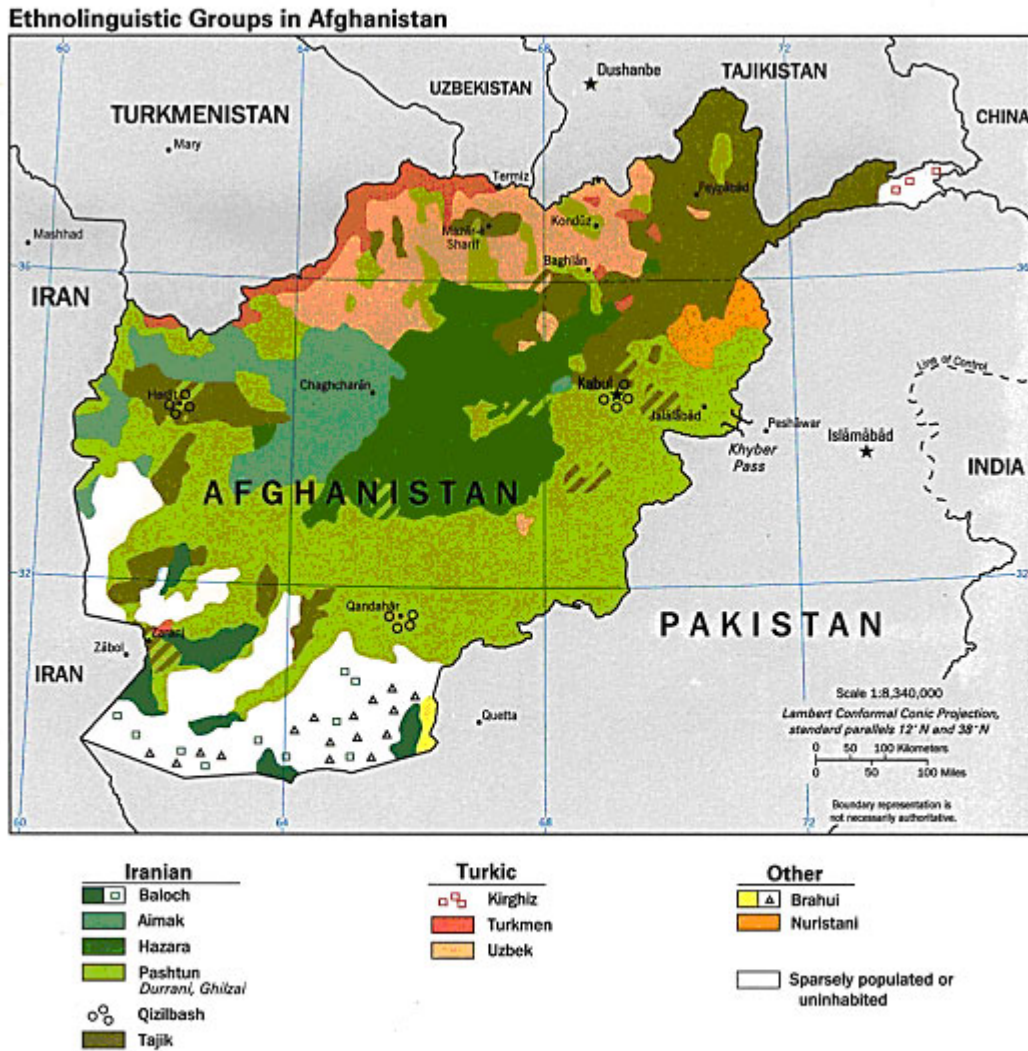
Aimaq of Afghanistan

Summary of Key Issues

- The Aimaq are 5-6 % of the population of Afghanistan.
- The Aimaq are Hanafi Sunni Muslims.
- The Aimaq speak Dari with Turkic words mixed into the language.
- Some Aimaq are semi-nomadic, herding flocks in certain seasons, while others are sedentary farmers.
- The Aimaq population is concentrated in northwestern Afghanistan from Herat into the Paropamisus mountains of Ghowr and Badghis provinces.

Aimaq Ethnic Group

The Aimaq are a collection of tribal groups, not an ethnic group, which are concentrated in the northwestern region of Afghanistan around Herat. The word Aimaq is a Turkish term for “nomad,” and also means “administrative district” in Mongol.



802551 (900434) 6-97

Ethnic Description

Physical Appearance

Many Aimaq have Mongoloid (Asian) features including broad faces, high and prominent cheekbones and sparse beards. They are a subgroup of the Turkic population, so they may bear a resemblance to the Uzbeks and Turkmen of Afghanistan. The Aimaq heritage is mixed, and as a result their physical appearance is not as distinctive as that of other Afghan ethnic groups. Physical appearance is not a conclusive and accurate indicator of ethnicity for the Aimaq.

Cultural History

The Aimaq are divided among five tribes: the Jamshidis, Firuzkukis, Taimuris, Taimanis and the Kala Nau Hazara. The Kala Nau Hazara is sometimes classified as Hazara because of their alternate name Aimaq Hazara, not as Aimaq. As Sunnis, they are distinct, however, from the majority Shi'a Hazara. Whether the Hazara and Kala Nau Hazara are actually ethnically related, they are clearly religiously separate. The distinctions between the tribes of the Aimaq have been blurred over time by government decisions to move, split and combine the tribes.

The Aimaq were independent of state control in the territory they occupied in the Herat area. Amir Adbur Rahman, during his campaign of state consolidation in the 1890s, brought the Aimaq under the control of the governor of Herat. The Aimaq have maintained an existence autonomous of the government, as they remain semi-nomadic. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Aimaq nomads became farmers, but continue to travel with their herds in certain seasons.

Neither the Aimaq as a whole, nor any of the sub tribes, appear to have taken an active role in the *Mujahideen* movement, either independently or in cooperation with another larger ethnic group. The experience of the Aimaq during the Taliban period has not been reported. The Aimaq do not have a representative in the interim government, and have not taken a visible role in the post-Taliban period.

Centers of Authority

Rule of Law

As followers of the Hanafi Sunni faith, the Aimaq agree with the version of the Shariah (Islamic law) that is endorsed by the Pashtun majority. In this respect, the Aimaq are in agreement with the state on the legal code and its application.

Role of State vs. Role of Ethnic Group

The level of Aimaq identification with a particular ethnic group is low relative to other groups in Afghanistan, such as the Pashtuns or the Hazara. Place of residence and territorial ties are stronger claims on Aimaq identity and loyalty than ethnic descent. As a result, the Aimaq feel a stronger affiliation to the place where they live and the people they live amongst, than to either the state or their ethnic group as a whole. As with many who live in Afghanistan, the concept of an overarching Afghan identity that overcomes local identities has yet to develop.

Cultural Attitudes

Group/Tribe/Clan

The Aimaq, like the Tajiks, do not ascribe the same value to ethnic identity as other groups in Afghanistan. This relatively low identification with ethnic lineage may be a product of past government policies to rearrange the Aimaq subgroups and physically relocate them in order to enhance the control of the state over the area the Aimaq occupy. Aimaq have been described as changing their ethnic identity along with a change of residence. Their semi-nomadic existence allows them to alter their ethnic identity without losing their means of income.

Other Ethnic Groups: Pashtuns

The Aimaq inhabit territory that has also been used as pastureland by Pashtun nomads since the rule of Abdur Rahman in the 1890s. Relations between Aimaq and Pashtun in these areas have for the most part been peaceful, in contrast to the Shi'a Hazara response to the Pashtun presence in the Hazarajat.

Other Ethnic Groups: Hazaras

The Aimaq Hazara and the Hazara of the Hazarajat may be of the same ethnic group, although the Aimaq Hazara reject any link with the Shi'a Hazara. While a distant historical link may exist, the Aimaq Hazara perceive themselves to be distinct from the Hazara, primarily because of the conflicts between the Shi'a and Sunni branches of Islam.

Language

The Aimaq speak Dari (Afghan Persian), with Turkic vocabulary intermixed in the language. There are dialectical variations between the subgroups of the Aimaq, but all of these are mutually intelligible.

Religion

The Aimaq are adherents of the Hanafi Sunni sect like the majority of Afghans. Sunnis believe in the Five Pillars of Islam: the recitation of the creed, “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his messenger,” daily prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage. The Sunni sect does not have a clerical hierarchy. Men who lead prayers, preach or interpret the law do so because of their education and knowledge, and are not ordained into such positions.

Customs

Greetings

A handshake is the common greeting among men; close male friends or relatives may embrace when meeting. Men do not touch a woman in public, but women may shake hands or exchange three kisses on alternate cheeks with another woman.

In Dari, “Khubus ti?” asks, “How are you?”

People are frequently referred to by their status titles, even if they no longer hold the position described by the title. An example is the pilgrims who have completed the Haj to Mecca who may be called ‘Haji’ to signify that they have fulfilled this pillar of Islam. Completing the Haj is also a symbol of socio-economic status because of the expense of traveling.

Gestures

Afghans typically sit with legs crossed, but it is considered impolite to point the sole of the shoe at someone. Using the left hand to pass items is seen as impolite and unclean. To ask for divine assistance, both hands are held at chest level with the palms up and open.

Lifestyle

Aimaq society is patriarchal and centered around the family unit. Men tend to the animal herds. Women are primarily occupied with maintaining the household and weaving. Each tribe has a unique pattern that is woven into the carpets that are made and sold, or used by the family.

Most marriages are arranged by women with senior status in the Aimaq community. The negotiations between the families can be weeks or months long. The Islamic rules governing interaction between males and females obstruct dating. Marriage between first cousins is most common, and is done to maintain the lineage of the family and solidarity of the tribe.

Aimaq live in round *yurt* tents made of goat or yak hair that can be easily moved when herding flocks in the summer and fall. Even settled Aimaq will live in *yurts* surrounded by mud walls, although they have become sedentary farmers.

Clothing

Aimaq men wear turbans, sometimes with a skullcap underneath. One end of the turban cloth may be left to hang over the shoulders. Aimaq men shave their heads regularly with the help of other men in a cooperative effort.

Diet

Aimaq rely on their herds for meat, milk and cheese. Aimaq, who have permanently settled to farm or are semi-nomadic, farm wheat, grapes, barley, oats, melons and vegetables.

Cultural Economy

The Aimaq population is a mix of semi-nomads and farmers. Their herds of livestock are first to provide food for the family, and then to serve as a saleable commodity. The food grown by Aimaq farmers similarly is to provide for the family first and foremost. The Aimaq women produce carpets, the sale of which, in addition to the livestock, is the primary way the Aimaq raise money to buy items they cannot grow or make themselves.

Cultural Geography

The Aimaq population is concentrated in the Herat, Ghor and Badghis Provinces in the northwest of Afghanistan.

The Jamshidis are concentrated around Kushk, 40 miles northeast of Herat. The Firuzkohis live in the Badghis and Ghor provinces to the east of the Jamshidi. The Taimani live in Ghor and Herat province, directly south of the Firuzkohis.

Holidays

Certain days have particular relevance in Afghan and Aimaq society. The celebration of Noruz is fixed on 21 March; the day is a Persian festival for the New Year. The exact date of the Islamic New Year shifts by the lunar calendar. Mohammed's birthday is celebrated 25 May in 2002. Although not a holiday, the beginning of Ramadan on 6 November is important in Aimaq and Afghan society. Eid al-Fitr, the conclusion of Ramadan that is celebrated with feasting is 6 December. Eid al Adha is celebrated on 23 February to mark the end of the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca.