

# Afghanistan:

## Helmand's Deadly Provincial Politics - *Competition and Corruption*



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HUMAN TERRAIN & GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH



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Helmand Province's political scene is perhaps unique in Afghanistan due to several atypical tribal dynamics produced by the unintended consequences of Western development activities. Projects, like the Helmand Valley Development Authority, led to an uneven tribal resettlement process that introduced outsider ethnic groups into the central portion of the province where they had never resided previously. Second, the potential wealth of the illegal opium industry associated with the reclaimed land from the development project and tribal desires to control it has also been a factor in the development of conflict. In addition to this pair of instability factors, the emergence of communism and its disruption of the traditional, stable tribal dynamics led to many of the traditional secular leaders, the khans and maliks, either leaving the region or losing their lives. Into this power vacuum stepped opportunist clerics convincing the rural population that communist, modernist – and secular – forces were not only attacking their tribal structure, but they were also threatening Islam, itself. Local loyalties were complicated by competition for control of the opium trade in this volatile, unstable mix of minority tribes, clans and families having no direct ties to the traditional ruling tribes. As a result, the societal disruption worsened as opportunist mullahs confronted the province's few remaining traditional leaders. Adding a further complication, Western forces now have arrived and are attempting to complete the forlorn hope of the now-vanished communists who created the original chaos with the an impossible task of trying to force these fractious people under the control of a central government.

Helmand's recent conflict has seen the fragmentation of the large, dominant Alizai Durrani Pashtun tribe as three of its five subtribes began to oppose one another in a power struggle. This led them to enter different political parties as they battled the occupying Soviet Army, but their armed groups fought one another just as much, if not more often. The traditional maliks and khans of one subtribe, the Hasanzai, lost control to religious opportunists of the "Akhundzada family" who began to oppose even the Alizai's Khan Khel, the leading subtribe. The leader of the Khalozai, the Khan Khel, opposed the Akhundzada's attempt at primacy in the Alizai tribe as they tried to gain full control of the opium industry. The Akhundzada's and the Hasanzai allied themselves with the Harkati Inqilabi Islami<sup>1</sup> as the Khalozai joined forces with the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-i Islami.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wilsoncenter.org> accessed 01 December 2008.

The third Alizai subtribe joined forces with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a revolutionary opportunist, in a strange alliance between traditionalist khans and a revolutionary Islamist as all sides sought to gain control of Helmand's illegal agricultural wealth.

The conflict over control of Helmand's opium wealth and the political power it represents has broadened following the arrival of Western forces. Now the smaller Panjpai Durrani Pashtun tribes, the Ishaqzai and Noorzai, are also involved and are allied with non-Pashtun elements from the Baluch and the Brahui ethnic groups that also claim an interest in the opium fields and laboratories that turn out much of the world's heroin and export it through a variety of hidden routes that also allow the infiltration of heavily armed insurgents through an unmarked and uncontrolled southern border with Pakistan.

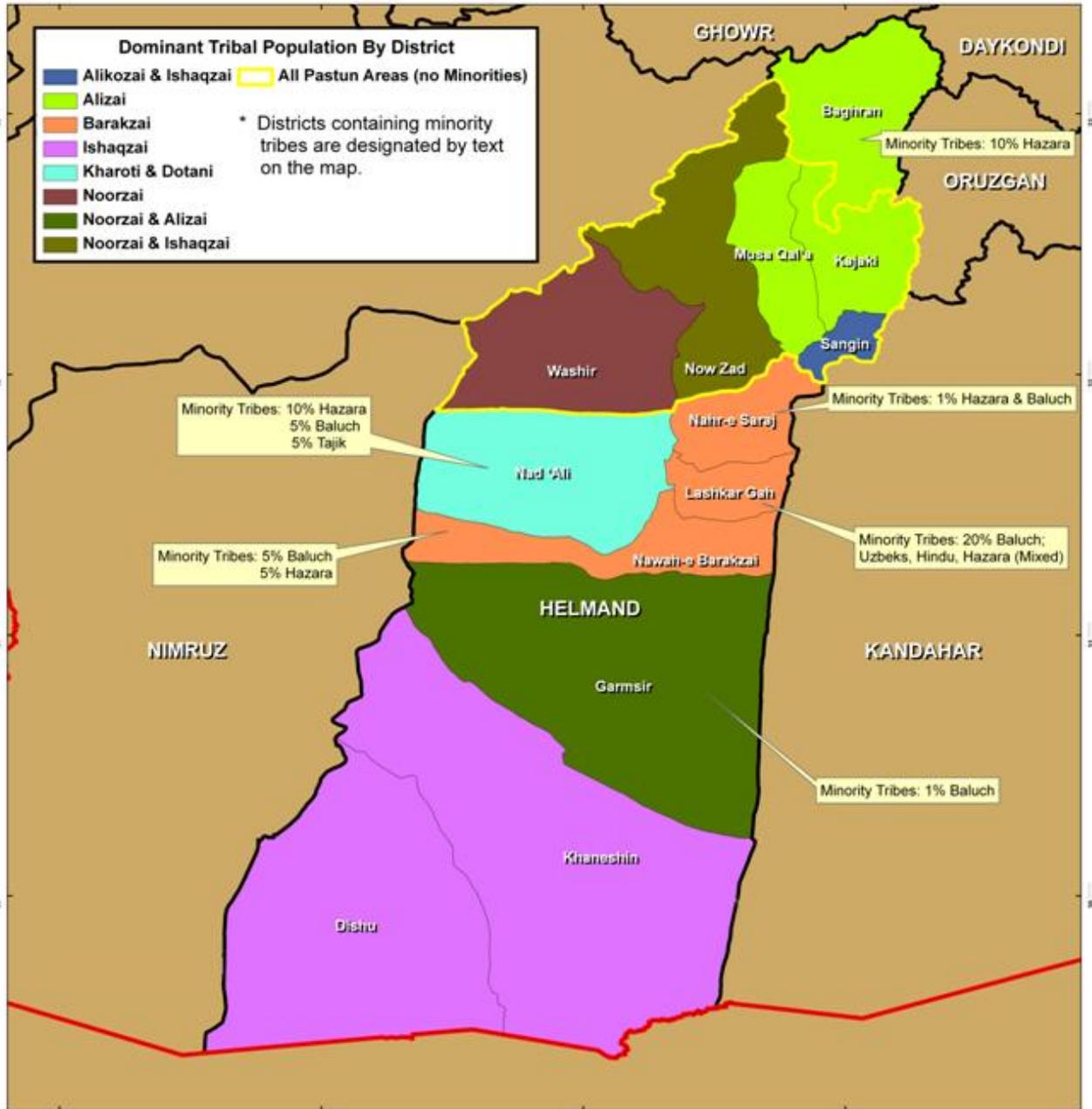
Helmand's complex population mixture is difficult to comprehend, but it can be analyzed by clustering tribal groups according to the regions where they dominate districts. Historically, districts were often designated according to tribal populations and some of this traditional method of designation remains. Using this analytical approach, it quickly becomes apparent that Helmand Province is dominated by tribes of the Durrani Pashtun Confederation. It is also obvious that the member tribes of the Durrani sub-confederation, the Panjpai, are the dominant populations of most of Helmand's districts. It is only in the central section, composed of Nad 'Ali, Nahr-e Saraj, Lashkar Gah, and Nawa-e Barakzai districts, where the Barakzai, Kharoti, and Dotani tribes are found in substantial numbers.

*[See map – next page]*



### Tribal Breakdown of Helmand Province, Afghanistan

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**Legend**

- Red line: Afghanistan Border
- Black line: Province Borders

District  
PROVINCE

Helmand, Afghanistan

1:1,100,000

0 4.5 9 18 27 36 Miles



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Tribal population data source: [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand\\_article\\_62507.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand_article_62507.php)



There are non-Pashtun ethnic groups present in Helmand Province, but their numbers are relatively low and are insignificant when compared to the Panjpai Pashtuns. The largest minority is composed of Baluch tribes, and these non-Pashtuns make up a sizeable percentage of some districts. According to United Nations reports from 2003, the districts of Dishu, Khaneshin, and Lashkar Gah have 20% of their populations composed of Baluch tribes. Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras are also found in Helmand Province, but their total numbers also are small when compared to the Pashtun population. The non-Pashtun Brahui ethnic group is also found in Helmand Province, but their numbers are small and were not reported in the 2003 United Nations surveys.<sup>2</sup> The southern districts are lightly populated when compared to those in the central and northern sections of the province.<sup>3</sup>

The tribal dynamics of Helmand Province involve several power relationships related to the large Alizai tribe, and much of this revolves around the Alizai's powerful subtribe, the Hasanzai, and the "Akhundzadas." Understanding the connection between the "Akhundzadas" and the rest of the Alizai tribe is critical to understanding provincial politics.



Image from BBC News Online

Sher Mohammad Akhundzada (*pictured left*), his father and uncles, used their connections to religion to gain control over a broad region in Helmand Province. The confusing term, *Akhundzada* [related to a religious scholar] is an honorific title used essentially as a surname by these family members of the Hasanzai, an Alizai subtribe, as they rallied rural supporters to take control of most of Helmand Province – and its lucrative opium trade during the early communist period.

Coming from northern Helmand Province where traditional tribal influences – and the maliks and khans – remained strong, Mullah Mohammad Nasim Akhundzada, Sher Mohammad's uncle, set the tone for other religious opportunists as he became a prominent commander in Mohammad Nabi

<sup>2</sup> [UNHCR District Profile](#), dated [2002-12-31](#), accessed 07 December [2008](#). This is an example of a district profile. The remaining profiles may be located at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmand>.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand\\_article\\_62507.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand_article_62507.php) for additional information about Helmand Province's tribes and their general location.

Mohammadi's Harakat-e-Inqilab-e Islami<sup>4</sup> resistance group that opposed the Soviets and the Afghan communists. Anecdotal information suggests that he fought harder against other jihadi parties, particularly the guerrillas affiliated with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, than against the Soviets, in continuous efforts to maintain control over the highly lucrative opium industry. Mullah Nasim's opportunity to assert the power of the "Akhundzadas," his religious family descended from a notable Islamic scholar, an "Akhund," came with the arrival of the first of the communists.

The Afghan Pashtun communists, or Khalqis, began to pressure the traditional land-owning class in 1978 soon after the last of the Durrani rulers, Mohammad Daud Khan, was overthrown. Under this communist pressure, many of the khans left the region as their role was gradually usurped by the Akhundzada family and their tribal allies. Later when the communist government began to lose control of the countryside, Mohammad Nasim Akhundzada's mujahedin assumed more and more control.

A general analysis of this period done in the West looked at the leaders of the families that opposed one another, their jihadi party membership, but analysts consistently managed to miss some crucial information – that scholars routinely ignored or misunderstood its significance. The contending leaders' connection to their subtribe and the status of each in the Alizai hierarchy were critical variables that seldom entered into any analytical calculus. Here is an example of some excellent work – to a point:

*"...Over the following years, three families from among the Alizais of northern Helmand led the jihad. Apart from the Akhundzadas, the two other families were that of Abdul Rahman Khan and of Abdul Wahid<sup>5</sup>, with the one important survivor among the khans being Abdul Rahman, whose family of well-established traditional khans was locked in a conflict with the Akhundzadas leading Abdul Wahid and Abdul Rahman Khan to join forces against the rising star of the Akhundzadas..."<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.afghanan.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=49&Itemid=69](http://www.afghanan.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=49&Itemid=69) accessed 07 December 2008.

<sup>5</sup> This is Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani, also a khan.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/wpSeries2/wp7.2.pdf>, accessed 07 December 2008, pg. 10.

At the basic foundation of this conflict between the Akhundzada family, Abdul Rahman Khan and Abdul Wahid Khan (*pictured left*) were the subtribe



Image from the New York Times Online

differences within the Alizai tribe. The opportunistic mullahs of the Akhundzada family had been partially responsible for driving out the Alizai khans, the traditional and secular powers within their own subtribe, the Hasanzai, as this religious family took control of their subtribe and began to expand their “fiefdom” southward into parts of Helmand occupied by a wide variety of Afghan settlers with no local tribal affiliation. The growing power of this opportunist family began to threaten the position of two other northern Alizai subtribes with Akhundzada’s goal of undermining the subtribe power base of Abdul Rahman Khan and undercutting the control of Abdul Wahid Khan, the Rais al-Baghrani, within his Khalozai subtribe. Unfortunately, the available literature fails to list Abdul Rahman Khan’s subtribe, but it definitely was not Hasanzai or Khalozai. His power center was the town of Giriskh and his followers later made their final stand there against the powerful Akhundzadas following Mullah Nasim’s assassination near Peshawar, Pakistan<sup>7</sup>, as both the Akhundzada family and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar contended for the wealth and power that resulted from the control of the opium trade.<sup>8</sup>

The control of most of the opium trade provided the funds Mullah Nasim needed to control much of Helmand Province.<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Rasul, Sher Mohammad’s father, provided the religious justification for the Akhundzada’s participation in the opium trade:

*“Islamic law forbids the taking of opium, but there is no prohibition against growing it. We must grow and sell opium to fight the war.”<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Rubin, Barnett R. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, Yale University Press, 2002, pg. 213.

<sup>8</sup> Eisendrath, Craig R. and Harkin, Tom, *National Insecurity*, Center for International Policy (Washington, D.C.) pp. 131-132.

<sup>9</sup> Nasim paid cash for the crop at the time of sowing, at low price relative to the yield at harvest, and also set production of 50 per cent of the land to be sown with poppy, inflicting harsh penalties on farmers who did not meet their quotas. See Angelo Rasanayagam’s *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, pg. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Eigen, Lewis D. and Siegel, Jonathan P. *The Macmillian Dictionary of Political Quotations*, Macmillian, 1993, pg. 13.

But others were also interested in obtaining the opium profits. Abdul Rahman Khan, in seeking military support, allied himself with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami (HIG) – even though Hekmatyar had shown no desire to support traditional leaders, such as the land-owning khans. Fight after fight occurred over this “strategic material” and Mullah Nasim was eventually assassinated, presumably by Hekmatyar's fighters. This resulted in a bitter battle between the Akhundzada supporters and Abdul Rahman Khan's fighters at Girishk where Abdul Rahman Khan's forces were defeated and Abdul Rahman subsequently left Afghanistan for France where he lived as an exile.<sup>11</sup>

The conflict between the Akhundzada family and Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani was much like that with Abdul Rahman Khan. Both Abdul Rahman and Abdul Wahid were traditional subtribe leaders at the head of their loyal followers as the mullah “opportunists” challenged yet another traditionalist who viewed himself as the “rais,” or “director” of Helmand's Baghran District. In this case, there was yet another, more important, tribal factor in operation as these two Alizai subtribes continued to fight one another. Abdul Wahid's Khalozai subtribe was the “Khan Khel” or leading subtribe of the Alizai tribe and its superior status was being challenged by the Hasanzais under the Akhundzadas.

“Khan Khel” is an important concept within the Durrani Confederation, if not all of the Pashtuns, as this designates the most prestigious of the tribe's subtribes. In the case of the Barakzai, their Khan Khel, the Mohammadzai, provided Afghanistan's with its most recent kings. The Saddozai, the Khan Khel of the Popalzai, also provided kings during the country's earliest days. The conflict that developed between Mullah Nasim Akhundzada's family (which took control of the Hassanzai subtribe) and Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani (the leader of the Alizai tribe's Khan Khel, the Khalozai) as the mullahs attempted to displace the last of the secular, traditional controls over the entire Alizai tribe was quite predictable.

The three “warlords” of the Alizai tribe were also divided in the Jihadi parties they joined during the fighting against the Soviets. The Akhundzada family joined Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi's Harakat while Abdul Rahman Khan allied his followers with Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami (Gulbuddin), but Abdul Wahid went in a third direction by entering the Jamiat-i Islami of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/wpSeries2/wp7.2.pdf>, pg. 10.

and Ismail Khan, a party dominated by Tajiks. The reasons for their individual choices remain unknown, but this may be as simple as individual opposition to the other leaders of the subtribes as they joined different parties because of personal animosities – further splitting the Alizai tribe. But at the bottom of their animosities was a primary factor: the religious “opportunists” were challenging the secular dominance of the traditional khans, represented by both Abdul Rahman Khan and Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani.

Curiously, the emergence of the “Akhundzada” family as religious opportunists appears to be an isolated occurrence within the region of Afghanistan dominated by the Durrani Confederation. While serving to illustrate a “malik and khan vs. mullah” theme very well, these opportunists may have emerged from the chaos of the early communist period because of Helmand Province’s lucrative opium industry they sought to control. Opium was probably the reason for the fighting between Mohammad Nasim’s Harakat and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s HIG, represented in Helmand Province by Abdul Rahman Khan. It was far more common to see religious opportunists challenging the authority of secular khans and maliks in regions of Pashtun territory where confederations did not exist, such as Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province and its Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The periodic emergence of religious “opportunists” within Pashtun society frequently resulted in open warfare as this pattern of mullah vs. khan and malik was repeated.

To his credit, Sher Mohammad knew tribal balance of power politics better than most leaders in Afghanistan, as he played one group off against another in efforts to win allies as he consolidated his local power. In an effort to develop positive relationships with local tribal elders, he retained many powerful tribal leaders in his administration who had participated in the fighting within the province during the civil war period, but tribal connections remained important considerations as appointments were made. In an attempt to draw supporters from the Noorzai tribe, most security-related posts were filled with individuals from that tribe.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Under Sher Mohammad, the provincial police commander, deputy provincial police commander, police chief of staff, chief of city police, spokesman for the police commander, crime branch officer, director of tribal and boundaries affairs, and most of the district police commanders were from the Noorzai tribe. See [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand\\_article\\_62507.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand_article_62507.php)

Sher Mohammad also selected members of his own Alizai tribe for senior management positions within the provincial government. He held the governor's position and Alizais served as Chief of Staff, Director of Education, Finance Officer, and as district chiefs. The intelligence service, the NDS, was led by an Alizokai, the Health Department chief was a Hazara, and the man in charge of the culture and administration department was from the Ghilzai Confederation. Barakzai tribesmen were in charge of some provincial directorates, but the Ishaqzai tribe did not receive any government positions and was better represented in the Taliban than it was in Helmand's provincial government.<sup>13</sup>

Under pressure from the United Nations and Coalition forces, key individuals were removed from their positions in Helmand's provincial government. Sher Mohammad was replaced along with the Police commander, NDS chief, Chief of Police, and the Director of Education along with family members and supporters of Sher Mohammad, many of whom were killed by Taliban. Sher Mohammad lost an uncle, nephew, relatives, and some of his commanders along with a son and two brothers. Thirty other supporters and the commander of the previous NDS chief, Dad Mohammad Khan, were killed in an ambush in Sangin District.<sup>14</sup>

Dad Mohammad Khan (*pictured right*), one of Sher Mohammad's key allies and an Alikozai<sup>15</sup> in charge of the province's NDS, also had a reputation as a "warlord" with his power base in Sangin District. The story of the attack is related in an especially tilted article in the New York Times that followed an interview with the Taliban leader responsible for the attack on Dad Mohammad Khan's family:



Image from  
<http://www.nps.edu>

*"In June, I was in Quetta as the Taliban fighters celebrated an attack against Dad Mohammad Khan, an Afghan legislator locally known as Amir Dado. Until recently he was the intelligence chief of Helmand Province. He had worked closely with U.S. Special Forces and was despised by Abdul Baqi<sup>16</sup> – and, to be frank, by most Afghans in the south."<sup>17</sup> Mullah Razayar*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "In the dark", *The Economist*, 31 January 2008. The article confirms that Dad Mohammad Khan is from the Alikozai tribe.

<sup>16</sup> Baqi was the reporter's "guide" in Quetta who arranged the interview with the Taliban field commander.

*Nurzai (a nom de guerre), a commander of 300 Taliban fighters who frequently meets with the leadership council and Mullah Omar, took credit for the ambush. Because Pakistan's intelligence services are fickle – sometimes supporting the Taliban, sometimes arresting its members – I had to meet Nurzai at night, down a dark lane in a village outside Quetta.*

*“A few days earlier, Nurzai and his men had attacked Amir Dado's extended family. First, he told me, they shot dead his brother – a former district leader. Then the next day, as members of Dado's family were driving to the site of the first attack, Nurzai's men ambushed their convoy. Boys, cousins, uncles: all were killed. Dado himself was safe elsewhere. Nurzai was mildly disappointed and said that they had received bad information. He had no regrets about the killings, however. Abdul Baqi was also delighted by the attack. He would tell me that Dado used to burn rocket casings and pour the melted plastic onto the stomachs of onetime Taliban fighters he and his men had captured. Abdul Baqi also recalled that during the civil war that ended with the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, Dado and his men had a checkpoint where they ‘grabbed young boys and robbed people.’*

*“Amir Dado's own abuses had eventually led to his removal from the Helmand government at United Nations insistence. As one Western diplomat, who requested anonymity out of personal safety concerns, put it: ‘Amir Dado kept his own prison, authorized the use of serious torture, had very little respect for human life and made security worse.’ Yet when I later met Amir Dado in Kabul, he pulled out a letter that an officer in the U.S. Special Forces had written requesting that the Afghan Ministry of Defense install him as Helmand's police chief and claiming that in his absence ‘the quality of security in the Helmand Province has dramatically declined.’”<sup>17</sup>*

The truth regarding Dad Mohammad Khan lies somewhere between the Taliban's spoon-feeding of the New York Times reporter and the U.S. Special Forces officer reporting reality that he had personally witnessed. Pashtun “warlords,” especially those having the province-wide responsibilities with a

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<sup>17</sup> The reporter's “frank” comment is a personal view that she appears to have absorbed from her guide, Abdul Baqi.

<sup>18</sup> Rubin, Elizabeth, “In the land of the Taliban,” *The New York Times*, 26 October 2006. This unfortunate and highly biased report seems to be simply the dissemination of Taliban propaganda.

smaller power base essentially located in a single district where his minority tribe is located, controls local unrest through the use of force instead of persuasion. The reporter failed to mention that while Dad Mohammad Khan was removed from his position in Helmand Province, he was soon in Kabul's National Parliament. Far from being a Jeffersonian Democrat – there are few of these in Afghanistan – Dad Mohammad Khan followed the time-tested solution for controlling rebellious Pashtuns, not unlike the management techniques used by the same Taliban leaders interviewed by the reporter when they were in power, a fact ignored by the incredibly naïve New York Times reporter. The passage of time seems to reinforce the position taken by the pragmatic U.S. Special Forces officer who apparently wrote that “... *the quality of security in the Helmand Province has dramatically declined.*” There is no doubt that Dad Mohammad Khan used coercion and military power to control Helmand Province, but the results of naïve and Pollyannaish United Nations, meddling diplomats, and New York Times reporters are quite obvious today.

Sher Mohammad Akhundzada also lost family members to Taliban ambushes and he lost his position as Helmand's governor to similar machinations of the international community. Like Dad Mohammad Khan, Sher Mohammad was not an enlightened leader of the people of Helmand Province, but he also was able to maintain substantial levels of control over the security situation, in spite of his violent, deadly feud with Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani. He was finally removed from office following the reported discovery of nine tons of opium in his “offices.”<sup>19</sup> In the complete mismanagement of this incident, American Drug Enforcement Agency officials displayed none of the large quantity of physical evidence as the Afghan government refused to corroborate the reports and Sher Mohammad remained at large, joining Dad Mohammad Khan in Kabul's parliament building with his guilt or innocence of the drug charges unproven but widely reported.

An Afghan with local experience reported the next step:

*“After the election in late 2005 the time arrived for handing over the PRT and control of Helmand to British forces by the US forces that were based*

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<sup>19</sup> “Terrorism”, *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 2005. In the August 8, 2005 issue of U.S. News & World Report, the following was included: ““DEA can confirm the seizure,” said spokeswoman Rogene Waite, but she offered no details. Gen. Mohammed Daud, head of the Afghan Interior Ministry's Antinarcotics Department, denied that any such incident occurred, but another Interior official told of at least two raids on the governor's offices.”

*in Lashkargah. Meanwhile in December 2005 Mullah Shir Muhammad [sic] was removed from his position and was appointed a senator in the national assembly by President Karzai. The removal of Shir Muhammad happened when there was no proper replacement for Shir Muhammad. It was stated above that Shir Muhammad came from a very powerful family and tribe, and he became more powerful during the time he was governor and gained much local support. At the same time many war lords and drug lords were also powerful and were well equipped with weapons because of the easy-going and generous attitude of the Americans. In such circumstances the removal of Mullah Shir Muhammad was a bad idea. It should have been done step by step until there was a proper replacement for Shir Muhammad who could be representative of the powerful tribes, popular amongst the local people, and with diplomatic skills, who could get the full support of the funds for reconstruction, international representatives, tribal elders and local people. But Engr. Daoud was brought in as Governor of Helmand, who belonged to the Safi tribe and was affiliated to Hizbi Islami Hekmatyar, and was a key British ally. All these steps were not taken carefully, which resulted in British troops becoming involved in direct fighting in Helmand from the moment of their arrival.”<sup>20</sup>*

Engineer Mohammad Daoud was definitely not the man needed as Helmand’s governor. While his affiliation with the Safi tribe would have been acceptable, belonging to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s HIG would never be welcome news to a broad segment of the Alizai tribe, particularly the powerful families that supported Sher Mohammad Akhundzada. Even a cursory review of Helmand’s history would have revealed this obvious fact. The Akhundzada family had fought a vicious war with HIG for the control of the opium industry and won. The cost, however, had been high and the two leading members of the family, Sher Mohammad’s uncles, had been assassinated by HIG. No one should have been surprised that many local leaders failed to support Engineer Daoud.

This “key British ally” also had an impact on their early strategy, one that involved the positioning of small numbers of paratroopers in widely dispersed government buildings where these “Platoon Houses” nearly became death traps for the soldiers assigned there. Later, the Defense Committee in the British House of

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand\\_article\\_62507.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand_article_62507.php)

Commons questioned the Secretary of State and General Richards, commander of ISAF at the time, regarding this strategy. Their responses are interesting:

*“When we asked the Secretary of State whether the Platoon House strategy had been a mistake, he told us that the strategy had been developed at the request of the governor of Helmand, Engineer Daoud, and that he remained confident that ‘in the fullness of time they will turn out to be quite a significant contribution to the strategic success of our operation.*

*“... General Richards, who was ISAF commander at the time the strategy was adopted was less certain of the impact of the Platoon houses ... ‘whether or not they achieved some sort of ascendancy over the Taliban in a military sense is something that one might debate, but in terms of hearts and minds they probably are not very helpful.’”<sup>21</sup>*

Two questions result from the decisions made by the continuing Pollyannaish international community advisors to President Karzai that resulted in the removal of Sher Mohammad Akhundzada. First, the group decision resulted in replacing him with Engineer Daoud, a man whose jihad political party affiliation, HIG, placed him at odds with a broad segment of Helmand’s population. The second question involves the reasons the British government and military listened to Daoud regarding the Platoon House strategy that nearly resulted in a disaster similar to that suffered in nearby Maiwand where the British Army once suffered a terrible defeat. Did Daoud intentionally lead the British to this potential disaster or was he just as naïve as they were? Daoud’s connection to the fatally flawed Musa Qal’a Agreement that enabled the Taliban to occupy that town and its immediate area suggests manipulation and Daoud was soon removed from his position as provincial governor.

Engineer Daoud was replaced in December 2006 by an experienced governor who served in both Paktia and Konar provinces, Assadullah Wafa (*pictured right*). In this case, Wafa’s connection to an anti-Soviet jihad party was appropriate for Helmand Province. Wafa was affiliated with Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi’s Harakat party, as was Sher Mohammad Akhundzada’s family and most of his close

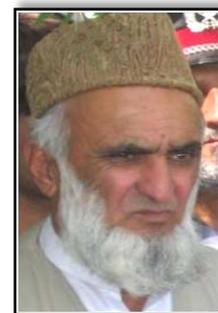


Image from  
<http://www.nps.edu>

<sup>21</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, UK Operations in Afghanistan, Defense Committee, House of Commons, pp. 29-30.

supporters. Wafa's mismatch concerned his tribe. He was from Spin Boldak, in Kandahar Province, and was a member of the Achakzai tribe that was the hereditary enemy of the Noorzai tribe, a group that comprised 16 percent of Helmand's population.<sup>22</sup> These tribes fought one another and were generally on different sides during the fighting against the communists – with significant numbers of Achakzais supporting the communists. Like Daoud before him, Wafa arrived in Lashkar Gah to face an uphill struggle and he was reassigned in February 2008.<sup>23 24</sup>



Image from  
<http://www.nps.edu>

The new governor is Mohammad Gulab Mangal, an experienced politician who has served as governor in both Laghman and Paktika provinces.<sup>25</sup> Being an outsider and a member of the far away Mangal tribe, he is more likely to be accepted by the tribes of Helmand Province than any of his predecessors since Sher Mohammad was replaced. He also seems to be moving toward the position of mediator and has expressed plans to enter into negotiations with the Taliban.<sup>26</sup> His competition from the Taliban, Shadow Governor Abdul Rahim, has been arrested in Pakistan<sup>27</sup> and the Taliban's Mullah Salaam rallied to the Karzai Government, weakening the Taliban leadership in Helmand Province significantly. The fullness of time, however, will tell whether he will be able to bring order to Helmand Province.

Mullah Abdul Salaam (*pictured right*) is another controversial leadership personality in Helmand Province. A local leader during the anti-Soviet jihad, Mullah Salaam is also a former Taliban corps commander who served as governor of Herat Province under the government that fell in 2001. After being involved in secret negotiations with the Afghan government, he defected from the



Image from  
<http://www.independent.co.uk>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Executive%20Summaries/Helmand\\_Provincial\\_OverviewCCS.pdf](http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Executive%20Summaries/Helmand_Provincial_OverviewCCS.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand\\_article\\_62507.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/june262007/helmand_article_62507.php)

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Executive%20Summaries/Helmand\\_Provincial\\_OverviewCCS.pdf](http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Executive%20Summaries/Helmand_Provincial_OverviewCCS.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079672.html>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/8546>

Taliban movement in late 2007, bringing significant numbers of his fellow Alizai tribesmen with him. Salaam is a leader of the Pirzai subtribe of the Alizai tribe.<sup>28</sup>

While Mullah Salaam generally served as a Taliban military commander, he also served as governor of Oruzgan Province. He claims to have stopped fighting following the collapse of the Taliban government and returned to civilian life, but he was arrested by his fellow Alizai tribesman, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, and jailed for eight months.<sup>29</sup> According to local sources of the international media, Abdul Salaam's allegiance has shifted before and this is a result of a complicated "web of tribal feuds and personal grievances" than any other factors. A man named Din Mohammad, a resident of Kajaki, told a reporter that "*He especially abused the Hassanzai.*"<sup>30</sup>

As with any of the Afghans, Din Mohammad's motivation to provide a negative impression of Mullah Salaam is suspect. Mullah Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, the leader of the Hasanzai subtribe and the man who imprisoned Mullah Salaam, is from Kajaki District. This district probably has a substantial population of Hasanzai and Din Mohammad probably is a member of this subtribe. The reporter continued to describe the Alizai tribe, writing:

*"The Hassanzai are one of the three major branches of the Alizai tribe, which largely controls northern Helmand. Abdul Salaam is from the Pirzai sub-tribe; the other major branch of the tribe being the Khalozai. The sub-tribes have historical disputes going back decades, and according to residents, Abdul Salaam used his position to attack his Hassanzai enemies. One of the Hassanzai, however, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, became governor of Helmand after the fall of the Taleban regime in late 2001."*<sup>31</sup>

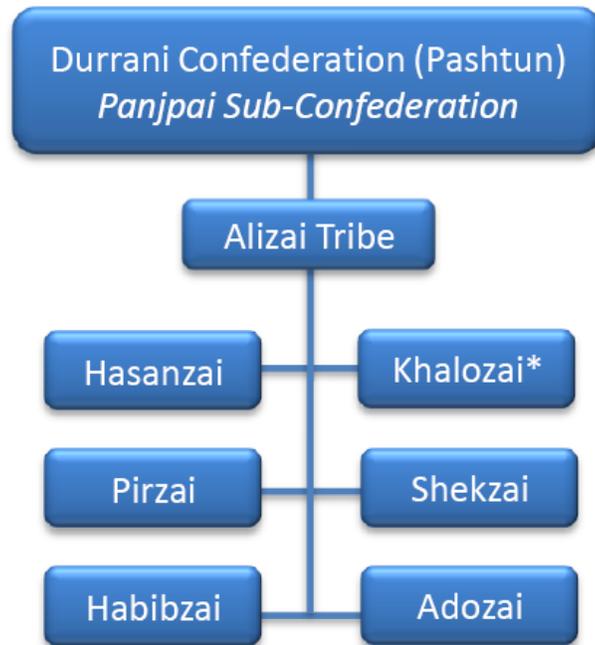
<sup>28</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1567858/Key-tribal-leader-on-verge-of-deserting-Taliban.html> accessed 26 January 2008.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\01\09\story\\_9-1-2008\\_pg4\\_18](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\01\09\story_9-1-2008_pg4_18) accessed 26 December 2008.

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc\\_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=arr&s=f&o=342021](http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=arr&s=f&o=342021) assessed 26 December 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

The Alizai's three primary subtribes, the Khalozai, Hasanzai, and Pirzai have been involved in intra-tribal feuding for decades. Currently, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada leads the Hasanzai, Abdul Salaam is the key leader of the Pirzai, and Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani is in charge of the Khalozai.<sup>32</sup>



\*The Khalozai subtribe is the "Khan Khel" of the Alizai.

[Note: Other sources include the Alekzai and Guerazai as subtribes of the Alizai.]

Mullah Salaam is difficult to deal with and has a history of switching sides during conflict. His complaints include:

- Mullah Salaam says British soldiers are wrecking his attempts to bring security by releasing people he arrests and underfunding his war chest – which he claims is for buying off insurgent commanders.

British Complaints about Mullah Salaam include:

- Lieutenant-Colonel Ed Freely, who commands the Royal Irish troops training Afghanistan's army, said: *"He appears less interested in*

<sup>32</sup> Due to confusing, contradictory reporting, some confusion remains regarding Abdul Wahid's subtribe. Most sources have him listed as a Khalizai leader, but there are minority reporting that shows him to be a Hassanzai, just like Sher Mohammad. He is probably Khalozai, but this needs to be confirmed.

*governing his people than reinforcing his own personal position of power."*

- The British believe he taxed his own villagers more than a ton of opium at the end of the poppy harvest. They also suspect his militia of stealing land, money and motorbikes, and beating people who can't pay. Mullah Salam denies the allegations.<sup>33</sup>

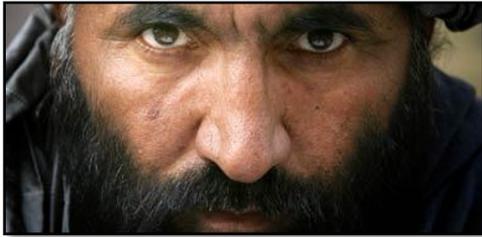


Image from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk>

Abdul Wali Khan (*pictured left*) is another key personality in Helmand Province. He is also known by his nickname, "Koka", but the police chief in Musa Qal'a has a checkered past, if international media reports are believed.

On January 25, 2008, the British reports regarding Koka were negative:

*"The UK does not want Koka here," one British commander in Musa Qala said. "All our good work could be undermined by the baggage he brings with him." Afghan civilians in the bazaar agreed. Wali Mahmoud, a village elder, said: "He was like a king here, doing whatever he wanted. He killed more people than I could count."*<sup>34</sup>

Simultaneously, the Afghan government was taking a very different view of men like Koka, as President Karzai disputed the British demands placed upon his government, requiring him to remove security officials with reported human rights accusations levied against them.

*"Mr. Karzai also accused the British of forcing him to remove key police officials, such as Abdul Wali Khan, also known as "Koka", who was notorious for his human rights abuses and so disgusted local people that they allowed the Taliban into Musa Qala as a favourable alternative to government authority. Yet now his reinstatement, along with a hundred of his fighters, is being considered as a serious option by the Karzai*

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/former-warlord-blames-uk-for-breakdown-in-security-842840.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.military-quotes.com/forum/british-have-made-matters-worse-t52446.html> accessed 26 December 2008.

*Government, despite top-level requests from Nato commanders and diplomats to block the appointment.”<sup>35</sup>*

British officials had a different view of Koka by July 11, 2008:

*“Koka has had a Nato [sic] makeover. As he stares out from a British poster in Musa Qala, tending a wounded civilian, it is not just his beard and hair — once more reminiscent of a Barbary Corsair than a police commander — that have been trimmed and combed. His whole past has been reinvented.*

*“We're lucky to have Koka here,” Captain Chris Howard, the British psychological operations officer who produced the poster, said. “We've kind of turned him into a celebrity.”<sup>36</sup>*

The actual story about Koka is more difficult to determine. He was arrested and imprisoned by American forces for suspected insurgent involvement after the Taleban were ousted in 2001. Once he was released, he was soon a militia commander associated with the Afghan government who had numerous allegations of human rights abuses by 2006. An anonymous UN official claimed that Koka was directly involved in the April 2007 massacre of 40 civilians in a village southwest of Lashkar Gah and Musa Qal'a's current governor, Mullah Abdul Salaam, a former Taliban official, provided equally damning comments:

*“The last time he was here he used to kill people all the time on orders,” Mullah Salaam, Musa Qala's Governor, said yesterday. “And he took \$20,000 (£10,000) a day in opium taxes. There were so many people killed in Musa Qala, either by his militia or the Taleban.”<sup>37</sup>*

Information regarding the tribal affiliation of Abdul Wali Khan, aka Koka, was not available in the literature available at the time of this study. Given the negative comments made by Mullah Salaam, a Pirzai Alizai, the new police chief for Musa

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4312575.ece> accessed 26 December 2008.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4312575.ece> accessed 26 December 2008.

Qal'a is probably not a member of the same subtribe. But his presence is a factor in the unstable politics of Helmand Province. Whether this will be positive or negative remains to be seen. The schizophrenic comments by Coalition officials regarding this man are not helpful and allegations of mass human rights violations from a UN official is also destabilizing. Denigration activities are cottage industries in Afghanistan, as can be seen through the comments regarding Koka by Mullah Salaam, a man with a considerably checkered past of his own that is well known and was ignored by the reporter who developed the "Times" article.

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## Outlook

There are new variables entering into the complex equation that is Helmand Province. Dad Mohammad Khan and his Alikozai supporters in Sangin District will seek Pashtunwali revenge for the killing of Dad Mohammad's extended family by the Taliban leader who also appears to be from the Noorzai tribe. The arrest in Quetta of the Taliban's shadow governor, Abdul Rahim, will be viewed as a blow to the Ishaqzai tribe that remains under represented in both the national and provincial Afghan governments. An important Alizai leader, Habibullah Jan, was assassinated in nearby Kandahar Province recently and this will cause additional tension among the Alizai tribesmen as competition to replace him continues. Finally, the feud between Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani probably continues even though both are now loyal to the Karzai administration. One or the other is a likely candidate to eventually replace Governor Mangal and the political process involved in making this decision in Kabul is likely to open old wounds, regardless of who is eventually placed in the governor's compound.

Overlaying all of this local political and tribal tension, the region has an incredible number of external political and military influences. American, British, Canadian, Dutch, and Australian military and intelligence operations continue in the absence of any realistic unity of command as actions taken by one national entity has an unintended consequence for the others. Widespread tribal populations

inhabiting areas under the “control” of different military elements are influenced by actions taken in distant areas. For example, Dutch and Australian operations in areas of Oruzgan Province may have a negative impact on Noorzai villages in Farah, Helmand, and Kandahar provinces. Ishaqzai subtribes and clans are also widespread – as are most of the other Pashtun tribes.

Even uncoordinated development projects have both positive and negative consequences in a tribal region where clinics, wells, or roads appearing in once tribal area can be viewed negatively by traditional tribal enemies who received fewer development projects. There are far more non-governmental organizations in operation than there are military organizations that often lack centralized coordination and even the provision of a well in one location can antagonize the population of another in Helmand’s volatile, suspicious, and revenge-seeking tribal mix. Understanding tribal dynamics is essential.