

Central Asian Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations

Farsiwan in Afghanistan

Summary of Key Issues

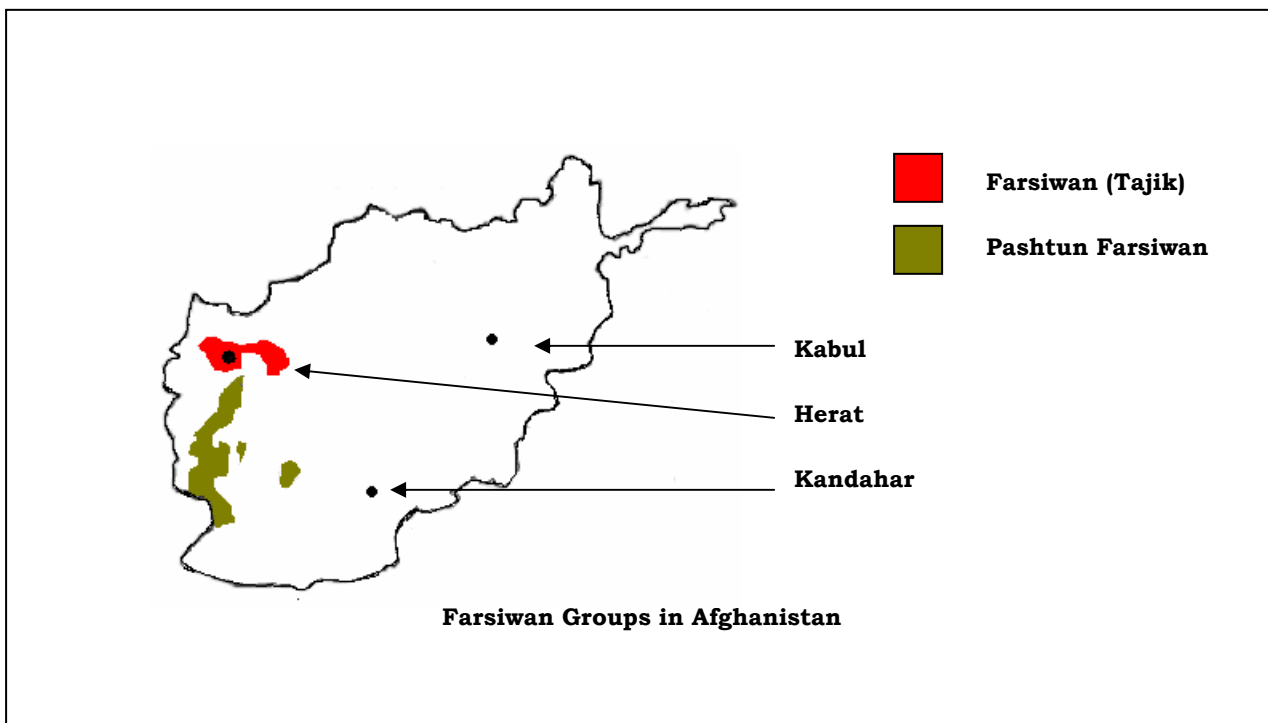
- Farsiwan is a group of people in western Afghanistan who speak Persian. The term “Farsiwan” means “Persian (Farsi) speaker.”
- The Farsiwan are not strictly an ethnic group, but are rather made up of two different ethnic groups, the Tajiks and the Pashtuns.
- The term “Farsiwan” primarily refers to a linguistic group, although this linguistic group has developed a historical identity that makes the term a quasi-ethnic identifier.
- The Farsiwan group is also predominantly Shia Muslim, which also differentiates Farsiwan from the rest of their ethnic group and from the rest of Afghanistan.
- The term Farsiwan is sometimes used interchangeably with Tajik to refer to Tajiks in western Afghanistan.
- Pashtuns sometimes imprecisely use the term “Farsiwan” to refer to all non-Pashtu speakers.
- The Farsiwan are remnants of the Iranian empire that once included much of Afghanistan.
- The Farsiwan are located in western Afghanistan, along the Iranian border. The Farsiwan are mostly concentrated around the western Afghan city of Herat.

Ethnic Group

The Farsiwan are not strictly an ethnic group. Farsiwan is primarily a linguistic group that has developed a historical identity with connections to two different major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Farsiwan literally means “Persian-speaker,” and refers to groups of Afghans in western Afghanistan who speak Persian (Farsi).

According to 1995 estimates, there are between 600,000 and 830,000 Afghans who identify themselves as Farsiwan, in addition to their main ethnic identity.

People from parts of two ethnic groups in Afghanistan call themselves Farsiwan: Tajiks and Pashtuns. The term Farsiwan is more usually used to refer to the Tajik Farsi-speakers. Sometimes the term Farsiwan is even used interchangeably with the Tajik ethnic group in Afghanistan. This is not accurate, however, as the Tajiks in the north and northeast of Afghanistan do not refer to themselves as Farsiwan.



The Farsiwan are mainly concentrated around the city of Herat. The Pashtun Farsiwan are located farther to the southwest, along the border with Iran.

Ethnic Description

Cultural History

The Farsiwan are Persian-speaking Afghans of the Tajik and Pashtun ethnic groups. Over time, they have developed a historical identity, as well as a linguistic identity.

The Farsiwan are mainly groups of people who were a part of the Iranian empire. When Afghanistan was created, they were left on the Afghan side of the border.

The Farsiwan, in addition to the Hazara and Aimaq Afghan groups may have some connection with the eastern Iranian Berberi.

Physical Appearance

The Farsiwan do not look different than other Afghans. The Farsiwan are primarily a linguistic group that has developed an historical identity.

Cultural Attitudes

The Farsiwan have generally friendly views of other northern Afghanistan groups. The Farsiwan generally do not have warm feelings towards the Pashtuns. The Pashtun Farsiwan and the Durrani Pashtuns have particularly negative views of one another.

Lifestyle

The Farsiwan have lifestyles that are similar to their respective ethnic groups: the Tajiks or the Pashtuns.

The Pashtun Farsiwans do not intermarry freely with the Durrani Pashtuns. The Durrani Pashtuns view a marriage with a Pashtun Farsiwan as “marrying down.”

Language

The Farsiwan are Persian (Farsi or Dari) speakers.

Religion

Most Farsiwan are Imami Shia. In some urban centers some Farsiwan are Sunni. The predominantly Shia identity of the Farsiwan cause the Farsiwan to be a religious minority inside of Afghanistan.

Sunni and Shia

The split between Sunni and Shia Islam began to occur immediately after Prophet Muhammad's death, with the followers of Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's early disciples, forming the Sunni branch and the followers of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima, forming the Shia branch.



Blue Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif

Legend says Caliph Ali, leader, of the Shia division of Islam, was killed and is buried here. Both Shias and the Sunnis come to this mosque in large numbers as pilgrims, especially at the spring equinox, March 21, the Muslim New Year.

The historical divide of Islam into Sunni and Shia branches was originally caused more by political disputes over successors, than by doctrinal differences. Over time, the differences between Sunni and Shia Islam has gradually assumed theological and metaphysical overtones. Shia have a clerical hierarchy of divinely-inspired religious leaders, attach great value to the

intercession of saints, and embrace different forms of mysticism. Sunnis do not have a clerical hierarchy.

Today, 85% of the Muslim world is Sunni, while only 15% is Shia. The invasion of Afghanistan by Sunni Arab invaders and the establishment of the Sunni-based Ghaznavid Empire in Afghanistan around 1000 A.D. checked the spread of the Shia Islam of the Iranian Empire into Central and South Asia.

In Afghanistan, Shia political activism in the 1980s-90s, mostly by the Hazara ethnic group, has increased the prominence of the Shia-Sunni issue within domestic politics. A Sunni backlash led by the Pashtuns ensued. It is difficult to disaggregate the issues of ethnic identity and religious affiliation in the violence between predominantly Sunni Pashtuns and the Shia Hazaras. Sunni Pashtun leaders have at times claimed that the Shia Hazaras were not "true" Muslims, and therefore could be persecuted. In addition, the Sunni Pashtuns view the Shia Hazaras as remnants of Persian influence in and Iranian domination over Afghanistan. In this sense, the Shia branch of Islam is sometimes described by Pashtuns as inimical to the identity of the Afghan state, which was founded in opposition to the Iranian Empire. Tajiks and Pashtuns of the Farsiwan group have been relatively unaffected by this violence, despite their predominantly Shia identity and despite their geographic proximity and historical affiliation with Iran.

Ithna Asharia Shia

The Farsiwan are predominantly *Ithna Asharia Shia* Muslims. The *Ithna Asharia Shia* or *Imami* or *Twelvers* recognize twelve successive *Imams* or religious leaders, beginning with Ali and ending in AD 874 with the disappearance of the twelfth who will return as a messianic figure at the end of the world. The *Ithna Asharia Shia* consider the *Ismaili Shia* to be heretical Shias.

Ismaili

The *Ismaili Shia* are also known as *Sevens* because in the eighth century their leaders rejected the heir designated by the sixth *Imam*, Jafar al Sadiq (who died in 765 A.D.), whom the Imami accepted. The new group instead chose to recognize Jafar's eldest son, Ismail, as the seventh *Imam*. Ismaili beliefs are complex and syncretic, combining elements from the philosophies of Plotinus, Pythagoras, Aristotle, gnosticism, and the Manichaeans, as well as components of Judaism, Christianity, and Eastern religions.

Ismailis are found primarily in and near the eastern Hazarajat, in the Baghlan area north of the Hindu Kush, among the mountain Tajik of Badakhshan, and amongst the Wakhi in the Wakhan Corridor. The *pir* or leader of Afghan *Ismailis* comes from the Sayyid family of Kayan, located near Doshi, a small town at the northern foot of the Salang Pass, in western Baghlan Province. During the Soviet-Afghan War this family acquired considerable political power.

Cultural Geography

The Farsiwan are agriculturalists of who live in the west near the Afghan-Iranian border or in districts of Herat, Kandahar and Ghazni provinces.

Holidays

Secular Holidays

The Victory of the Muslim Nation is April 28, Remembrance Day is May 4, and Independence Day is August 18.

Islamic Holidays

The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is Ramadan (in Arabic), a period of obligatory fasting that commemorates the Prophet Mohammad's receipt of God's revelation, the Quran. Because the lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the solar calendar, Ramadan revolves through the seasons over the years. Fasting is an act of self-discipline that leads to piety and expresses submission and commitment to God. During this period, Muslims cannot eat from sunrise until sundown.

Id al Fitr, a three-day feast and holiday, ends the month of Ramadan and is the occasion for new clothes and much visiting between family members.

Ramadan is followed by the beginning of the *haj* pilgrimage season during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar. At least once in their lifetime both men and women should, if economically able, make the *haj* to the holy city of Mecca. The beginning of the *haj* is marked by the holiday of *sawab*. The *sawab* is a day for seeing off pilgrims who are leaving on the *haj*. On the *sawab*, hostilities are frequently suspended to allow people to cross factional lines to see off friends and relatives. As pilgrims embark on the *haj*, they are usually driven to their points of departure in highly decorated vehicles.

Id al Adha, the feast of sacrifice, marks the end of the *haj* month.