# Central Asian Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations

# Tajiks in Afghanistan

## Summary of Key Issues

- There are an estimated 6 million Tajiks in Afghanistan (approximately 25% of the 23 million Afghans living in Afghanistan).

- Almost all Tajiks in Afghanistan live in settled, permanent communities. Some Tajiks in the mountains and valleys of the extreme northeast of Afghanistan do maintain some limited nomadic patterns of behavior.

- Geographically, Tajiks are concentrated in the northeast of Afghanistan, though large populations are also spread across the north and west of the country. The largest concentrations of Tajiks are found in the mountainous terrain of the Panjshir Valley in the northeast and in the surrounding provinces of Parham, Takham, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Samargan and Bhakhi. Tajiks also reside in western Afghanistan, primarily in and around the city of Herat. A sizable Tajik population lives in and around Kabul where they have, to a large degree, assimilated with the urban and other ethnic populations.

- The Tajiks are of Iranian background and may have been the first Persian inhabitants of modern day Afghanistan. Tajiks have been living in Central Asia for over 2,500 years. Contemporary Tajiks are the descendants of ancient Eastern Iranian inhabitants of Central Asia, notably the Soghdians and the Bactrians.

- In addition to the roughly 6 million Tajiks in Afghanistan, there are approximately 3.5–4 million ethnic Tajiks living in Afghanistan's northern neighbor of Tajikistan (literally, "land of the Tajiks"). There are also significant populations of Tajiks in Uzbekistan—particularly around the ancient Tajik cultural centers of Samarkand and Bukhara—and smaller groups of Tajiks living in the frontier regions of Kyrgyzstan, the southwest of Kazakhstan, and western China.

- Afghan Tajiks are primarily Dari speakers (Afghan Persian, closely related to the Farsi Persian spoken in Iran). Many Tajiks living in the Hindu Kush mountains of northeast Afghanistan also speak local dialects of Tajik, another Persian language that also borrows from Russian, Uzbek and Turkic languages.

- Tajiks are a Caucasoid people. They are described as slender, above average height, light skinned, and as having aquiline noses and usually black hair. Tajiks of the Panjshir Valley are sometimes described as a sub-ethnic group in and of themselves, as many are characterized by their light skin, sandy hair, and green eyes.

- Like nearly 85% of the population of Afghanistan, most Afghan Tajiks are Sunni Muslims.

- Tajiks constituted the core of the Northern Alliance political/military force. The Northern Alliance held the government of Afghanistan from 1992-1996 before being unseated by the Taliban. From September 1996 until September of 2001, the Northern Alliance operated from a small sliver of Afghan territory in the Panjshir Valley in northeast Afghanistan. After the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, the Northern Alliance served as the main US ally in Afghanistan and played a vital role in defeating the Taliban in the fall of 2001.

- Tajiks reside in Afghanistan's mountains and plains, in its cities and rural areas. Mountain Tajiks are farmers or herdsman and are generally very poor. Plains and urban Tajiks are usually well educated and are involved in the government bureaucracy and work as tradesmen and artisans.

- Among Afghanistan's Tajiks, the tribal organization has essentially disappeared. It has been replaced by village and family ties, and a strong sense of community loyalty. Unlike Afghan Pashtuns, there is no specific Tajik social structure. In many instances, especially in Kabul and the central plains, Tajiks have adopted the social and cultural patterns of their neighbors.

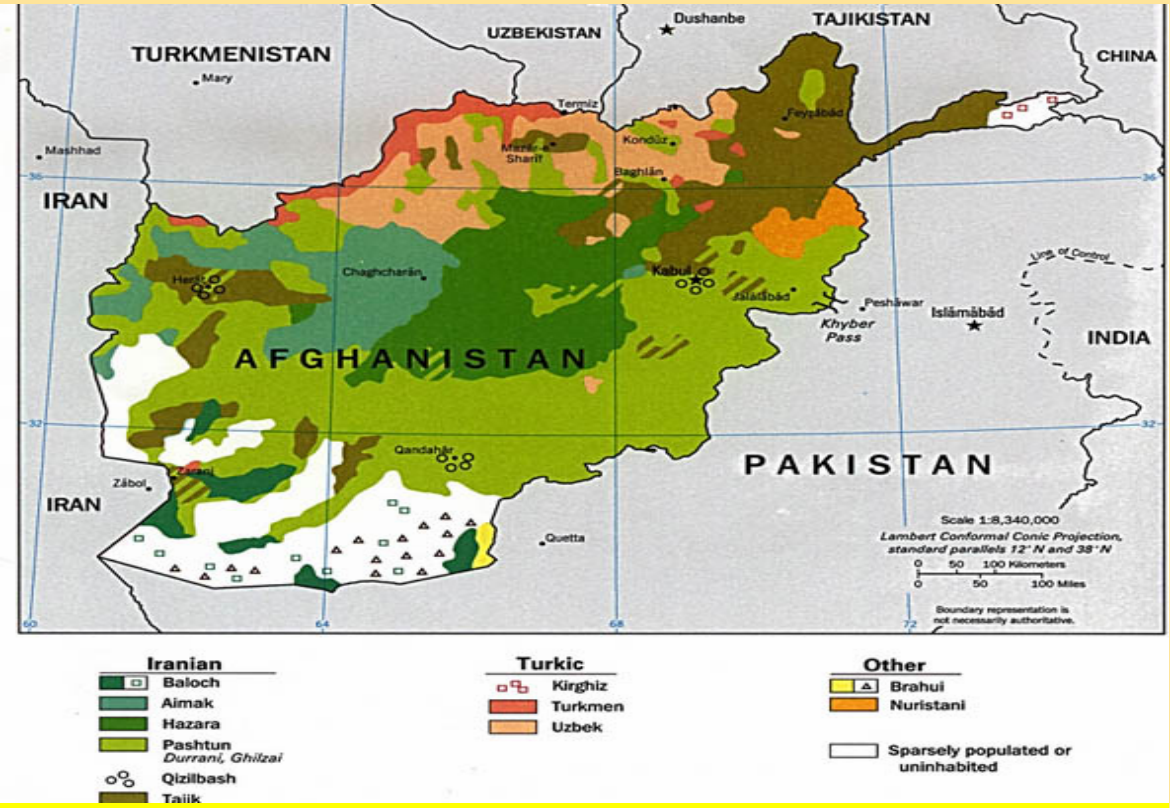
- While Afghan Tajiks identify themselves as an ethnic group and while Afghan Tajiks do generally share a common set of cultural and ethnic characteristics, Tajiks do not have a strong ethnic or tribal identity. The term "Tajik" is often used loosely by other Afghan groups to refer to "de-tribalized" Afghans living in northern Afghanistan.

## Tajik Ethnic Group

Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising between 25-30% of the total population. The Tajik populations are concentrated in the northeast, in the regions of Badakhshan, Parham, Takham, Baghlan, and in the Panjshir Valley. There are also significant populations of Tajiks in the west of Afghanistan, in the Central Highlands and north of the country, and in and around Kabul.

## Ethnic Description

Tajiks lack the ethnic cohesion that marks Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns. They are not organized by tribe, but by geography and usually identify themselves with the village or valley in which they live. The Panjshir Valley is seen as a "spiritual home" for Afghan Tajiks and many of the most influential of the Tajik leaders within the Northern Alliance are originally from there.




**A map of the ethnic distribution of Afghanistan. Tajiks are concentrated in the northeastern portion of the country in the Panjshir Valley and the Badakashan Province. There is also a large Tajik population in the west of Afghanistan and scattered pockets of Tajiks throughout the north of the country.**

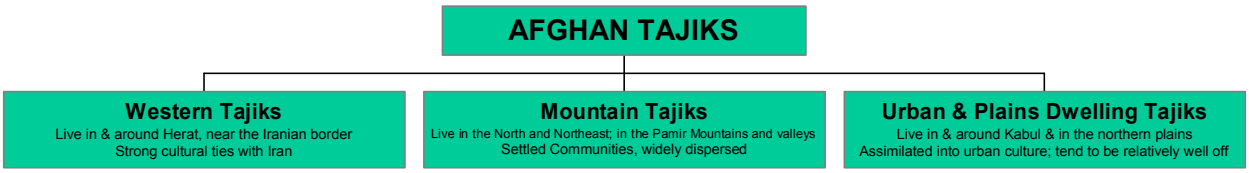
There is ambiguity concerning the origin of the Tajik name and ethnic group. Some believe the name Tajik comes from the Chinese envoy Chang Ch'ien who visited the area now occupied by Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan in 128 B.C. and described the people of the Bactrian kingdom, whom he referred to as Ta-hia. Others believe that the term Tajik comes from the Arabic word from the Sassanid period, '*Taz*' or '*Tat*,' that was used by Iranians to refer to the Arabs living in Iran. This term persisted up until the introduction of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. Other etymologists believe 'Taj' was the word used by the Arabs after their conquest of Central Asia to designate the Persian-speakers in the region, which also was home to large Turkic speaking populations.

Tajiks are spread across much of Afghanistan's north and west, and can be very roughly divided into three categories: mountain Tajik, urban and plain dwellers, and western Tajiks. Mountain Tajiks are the most widely dispersed Afghan Tajiks. They are concentrated in the northeastern sector of the country, but are found throughout the entire northern part of the country. Nearly all mountain Tajiks live in settled communities.

The urban dwelling Tajiks, particularly those in Kabul, are generally financially better off than the mountain Tajiks. These city Tajiks tend to be well placed and are often assimilated into a broader urban culture.

The third group of Tajiks are the western Tajiks that dominate the area in and around Herat, near the Afghan border with Iran. These Tajiks bear a strong resemblance to their Persian neighbors in Iran. They also feel a much closer cultural bond with the Iranians and Persian culture than do the Tajiks of the north, northeast and those around Kabul. These Tajiks predominately speak Persian Farsi, which makes them even closer to the Persians. Often these western Tajiks are referred to as "Farsiwan," which means "Farsi speaker."

## GENERAL CATEGORIES OF AFGHAN TAJIKS



## Centers of Authority

*Description*

The Tajiks lack the genealogical and tribal distinctions of the Pashtuns. Tajik cultural centers of authority are not tribal or ancestral. Afghan Tajik loyalty patterns evolve around village and family. Tribal elders traditionally have never been powerful in Tajik communities, with the exception of some of the mountain Tajiks of Badakhshan and Kohistan. As a strong sense of community and family have replaced tribal organizations, landowners (*zamindars*) have emerged as the village leaders and the primary sources of authority.

*History*

Although Tajiks are a relatively fragmented ethnic group in Afghanistan and widely dispersed throughout the country, they have been brought together by a perceived common threat: the Pashtun ethnic group, and its political and cultural dominance over Afghanistan.

Tajiks have served as administrators and bureaucrats in Afghanistan, but they have been essentially shut out of the high-ranking leadership positions and the military officer class. These positions are primarily dominated by the Pashtun tribes. Tajiks have only held any significant national power within Afghanistan twice in the country's history.

In 1929, a charismatic Tajik bandit, Habibullah Kahn (also known as Bacha-I-Saqqao) seized power from the Pashtun, Amanullah. Habibullah Kahn's rule proved ineffectual and short-lived. He was unseated after only nine months (January-October 1929) by five prominent Pashtun brothers (the Musahiban brothers).

Tajiks did not gain control over Afghanistan's central government again until 1992 when Tajik law professor, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was elected President of the Islamic Council for one year by the *Mujahideen* executive council. Rabbani held onto power in Kabul for four years before the Taliban occupied the capital in September 1996. During Taliban rule (1996-2001), President Rabbani served as the head of the Afghan government that held Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations and which was recognized by the international community. Rabbani also served as the political figurehead of the main military opposition to the Taliban, the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance.

The Northern Alliance played a key role in the 1992 toppling of Najibullah's Communist government installed by the Soviets in 1989, paving the way for Rabbani to come to power. The Northern Alliance is made up of three main ethnic groups: Tajiks, Uzbek and Hazara. Of these three, Tajiks have long played the most important role in the alliance's leadership. Due to ethnic rivalries between these allied groups, the alliance has always been a shaky coalition.

The Northern Alliance was united, however, by the common Taliban enemy, and by the leadership of General Ahmed Shah Masood, known as 'The Lion of the Panjshir.' Masood, like the majority of the core of the Northern Alliance, was a Tajik. General Masood was the

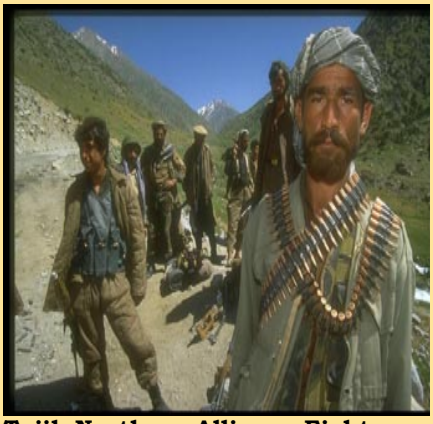
most prominent Tajik leader in Afghanistan since 1996, and the primary source of military and political authority among the Afghan Tajiks.

Masood's reputation was established through his skill as a military commander during the war against the Soviet occupation, and this reputation was enhanced by his ability to resist the Taliban's total conquest of Afghanistan. He was also successful at bringing together three diverse groups of Afghanistan and attracting foreign aid to Afghanistan. Masood received assistance from his old enemy, Russia, as well as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran.

**Tajik General Ahmed Shah Masood, also known as 'The Lion of the Panjshir.'**

Masood was assassinated on September 9, 2001, by suicide bombers allegedly tied to Usama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In spite of his recognized skills as a commander, warrior and alliance maker, many Afghans remember Masood for his ruthlessness and poor human rights record.

The main elements of the Northern Alliance are:



**Tajik Northern Alliance Fighters**

- **Jamait-I Islami (Islamic Society):** A predominantly Tajik Islamists Party that developed as the dominant party in the Persian speaking areas of northeastern and western Afghanistan. The Jamait-I Islami is led by the former university law professor and head of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, Rabbani. Ahmed Shah Masood acted as the party's Defense Minister. He was succeeded as the head of the largest militia in the Northern Alliance by General Mohammed Fahim, also a Tajik. General Fahim was previously head of intelligence under Masood.

- **Junbishi-I Milli-yi Islami (National Islamic Movement):** Founded by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek, the National Islamic Movement is a predominately Uzbek militia. Dostum received extensive military support from both Turkey and Uzbekistan for extended periods during the Northern Alliance's war against the Taliban. Dostum's forces, centered on Mazir-e-Sharif, took that strategically important town from the Taliban in November of 2001.

- **Hezb-e-Wahdat (Unity Party):** Led by Karim Khalili, the Unity Party represents the Shiia ethnic Hazara minority in the Northern Alliance.

*Rule of Law*

Most Tajiks in the Northern Alliance are observant and traditional Muslims who favor the use of some form of *Sharia* (Islamic law) in Afghanistan, although the Tajiks advocate a much less restrictive form of *Sharia* than the Taliban.

Over the past decade, there has been little civil law in the Tajik areas of northern Afghanistan. The rule of Masood and the Northern Alliance was arbitrary and ruthless. Northern Alliance troops committed summary executions, arbitrary arrests, torture and forced 'disappearances.' The Tajiks in the Northern Alliance also played a central role in the flattening of Kabul in 1992. Largely because of the brutality, lawlessness, and violent turmoil of the Northern Alliance, most of the population welcomed the arrival of the Taliban when they entered Kabul in 1996, promising to restore law and order.

*Role of State vs. Role of Ethnic Group*

Afghan Tajiks have rarely been in high positions in the Afghan government, with the recent exception of Rabbani. After the fall of the Taliban, many Pashtuns feared that Tajiks would return to power in Kabul and repress the Pashtun tribes.

In the post-Taliban Afghanistan, the international coalition has attempted to ensure that there is Tajik representation in the interim government, but in a fashion that does not threaten the Pashtuns, and does not inflame rivalries between the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras.

The most important Tajik appointments in the new government are:

- **Younis Qanooni** (Interior Minister): Qanooni was the leader of the Northern Alliance delegation at the Bonn Conference and was deputy defense minister in the 1992-1996 government of Rabbani. While known as a moderate, he was also a close friend of the late Masood.
- **Mohammed Fahim** (Defense Minister): Masood's replacement as commander of the Jamait-I Islami militia after Masood's assassination, Fahim served as Masood's intelligence chief. He also served as Rabbani's minister of national security. Fahim is known as a moderate, particularly in comparison to Masood and Rabbani.
- **Dr. Abdullah Abdullah** (Foreign Minister): Abdullah is of mixed Pashtun and Tajik background (his father is Pashtun, his mother Tajik). He is fluent in English and French. Dr. Abdullah is a close ally of Qanooni, and was a close confidant of Masood. He emerged as the key Northern Alliance spokesman. He also served President Rabbani in this role.

One final prominent Tajik in post-Taliban governance in Afghanistan is Ismail Khan, a warlord and governor of Herat. Khan, like Masood and many others in Afghanistan, was a hero of the *Mujahideen*. He liberated Herat from the Soviets, but was defeated in 1997 by the Taliban. After three years in Taliban captivity, Khan escaped and led his predominantly Tajik forces against the Taliban in fall of 2001. Khan is known as a fiercely independent individual, who also continues to receive considerable support from Iran.

## Cultural Attitudes

*Self*

There is no single Tajik cultural attitude towards the self. While Tajiks do share cultural qualities and attributes, this ethnic group includes a number of diverse sub-ethnic groups that are spread across a large portion of north and west Afghanistan. Most are Sunni Muslim, but there are also significant populations of Shiia Muslims in the extreme northeast of Afghanistan in Badakhshan. Some are highly educated, relatively wealthy, middle class elite living in Afghanistan's plains and towns. Others, including the mountain Tajiks of the northeast, are impoverished farmers and herders, living off some of the roughest terrain in the world. Still others are lifelong warriors, hardened by over twenty years of perpetual conflict.

In addition to the diversity within the Tajik ethnic group, other non-Tajiks use the term "Tajik" to refer to any urban resident who has become de-tribalized. Pashtuns use the term Tajik to refer to any non-Pashtun Dari speaker. Tajik is also used by some to describe the Farsiwans (or Parsiwans, Persian speakers of Farsi, primarily found in western Afghanistan), a closely related, but distinct, ethnic group. In many ways the term "Tajik" is a label, rather than a strong ethnic group. This makes it even more difficult to characterize Tajik cultural attitudes.

Generally, this diversity within the Tajik identity has weakened any sense of tribal cohesion, causing cultural attitudes towards the self to be largely linked to geography. The Tajiks of northeast Afghanistan, for instance, almost always refer to themselves first by the valley or region in which they live—Panjshiri, Darwazi, Raghi—and the governor of Heart, Ismail Kahn, has more of a cultural attachment to Iran than he does to the Panjshir Valley or Tajikistan.

*Group/Tribe/Clan*

The Tajiks possess no tribal organization. They are only loosely bound to one another culturally and tend to define themselves far more often by their locality, community or village. Tajik units of socio-political affiliation are at a lower level than tribe, or even clan. They include extended families, localized groups, and regional or neighborhood groupings. While extended lineage is not of particular importance to Tajiks (as it is with Pashtuns), family and community are important.

*Modern Nation State*

Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and have long played a subordinate role to the Pashtuns in the running of the modern Afghan state. As Afghanistan evolves out of its extended civil war, it appears that the Tajiks are gaining influence in the modern state. Still, the Pashtuns continue to view domination of Afghan politics as their right, and the

tension between Tajiks and Pashtuns persists. It remains to be seen how effectively the Tajiks can use their newfound influence or whether power sharing between the two groups will prove successful. The Tajiks are not likely to willingly relinquish any influence and power in the new Afghan government back to the Pashtuns.

### *Conflict Resolution*

Because of their relatively fragmented ethnic make-up and their lack of tribal affiliations, the Tajiks do not have a specific method for conflict resolution. Tajiks have participated in past Afghan *loya jirga*, including the 1964 *loya jirga* in which the old Afghan Constitution was developed. *Loya Jirga*, however, are primarily a Pashtun cultural instrument.

Tajik military and political leaders and warlords have not displayed one consistent method for conflict resolution throughout the twenty-plus years of war in Afghanistan. Negotiations are commonly used and can be successful as a means of resolving conflicts. It can also be successful as a strategic tool to divide the famously brittle alliances between Afghan warlords. For example, during the fall of 2001, after US intervention, the Taliban would attempt to drive a wedge between Tajik allies by negotiating a peace settlement with one Tajik warlord while trying to fight another.

If negotiations fail, Tajiks, like all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, have also proven quite capable of attempting to intimidate or brutalize a perceived opponent into submission. Under the Rabbani rule (1992-1996), General Masood and his Tajik allies persecuted all three of the other major ethnic groups in Kabul: Hazara, Pashtun and Uzbek.

### *United States*

The Tajiks in Afghanistan do not hold particularly strong views about the United States. Because Afghanistan's history is filled with invasions from outside powers, most Afghans view foreigners with suspicion. Tajiks that do have strong views towards the US—particularly those that fought with the Northern Alliance—are appreciative of the support the US provided during the last months of the Northern Alliance's war with the Taliban.

There is some resentment of US presence on the part of Afghanistan's northern neighbor, Tajikistan, where the Russian influence is strong. Russian troops are stationed in Tajikistan, and guard the Tajik-Afghan border. There is little indication, however, that the Tajiks in Afghanistan share the concerns of the Tajik neighbors to their north.

### *Other Ethnic Groups: Pashtun*

Relations between the Tajiks and Pashtuns are tense and confrontational. The rivalry between the Tajiks and Pashtuns, and the inability of these two groups to share power has been a strong and driving force in the domestic politics and conflicts of Afghanistan.

Pashtuns have historically dominated the government of Afghanistan and have often used this power to impose their cultural preferences and improve their position relative to the numerous other ethnic groups. This has forced the Tajiks and others to learn to live with the Pashtuns on the Pashtun's terms. The Tajiks have resisted this "*Pashtunization*" of Afghanistan. This fear of Pashtun domination—physical, as well as social, cultural and political domination—has helped politically to consolidate the ethnically disparate Tajiks.

> *If you give us four loaves of bread, we will all eat in peace. But if you give a loaf to just one of us, then the other three will fight to get it.*
>
> -Abdul Qadir, a deputy minister of the interim Administration, on the relations between Afghanistan's four main ethnic groups: Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras and Uzbeks[1]

The rivalry between the Tajiks and Pashtuns has been especially sharp since the removal of the Soviet backed Communist regime in 1992. Rabbani, a Tajik, assumed power, and while a few non-Tajiks served as window dressing for the Rabbani administration, the government decision-makers and influence wielders were almost exclusively Panjshi Tajiks. Partly due to their exclusionary tendencies, Rabbani and Masood could not bring peace or order to Afghanistan. This lead to a gruesome war that ultimately pitted the Tajiks (Rabbani and Masood) against the Pashtuns (the Pakistani supported and Pashtun dominated Taliban).

When the Taliban assumed power of Kabul in 1996, Rabbani and Masood tightened their bonds with the Uzbeks and Hazaras (the same groups they had slaughtered while in power). These groups were united only by a mutual hatred of the Taliban, and a fear of having a new Pashtun ideology imposed upon them.

### *Neighboring State: Pakistan*

Relations between the Tajiks and Pakistan are also tense and filled with mistrust.

Pakistan was the primary supporter of the Taliban. Without Pakistani aid, the Taliban would not have been able to depose the Rabbani government in 1992, nor would it have been able to establish and maintain control over the vast majority of the country. Despite the fall of the Taliban, Pakistan maintains an array of interests and motivations in the future of the Afghan state.

- **Internal Dynamics**: Pakistan also has a large population of Pashtuns. Pashtuns in Afghanistan have repeatedly sought to rejoin politically with the Pashtuns in Pakistan in one of the three ways: by separating from Afghanistan and joining with their ethnic relatives in northwest Pakistan; by annexing part of Pakistan's northwest frontier to Afghanistan; or by forming a new state, Pushtinistan, which would include the Pashtun populations of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

  These pressures have been the source of considerable tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and have also served as a primary motivation for Pakistan to intervene in Afghan politics to ensure an Afghan government that will dampen and resist transnational Pashtun movements.

- **Strategic Considerations**: Pakistan sees a friendly government in Kabul as essential to its national security. Given the continued hostility and animosity between Islamabad and New Delhi—a rivalry that has produced four wars since 1947—Pakistan requires a secure northwestern border that would not ally with India in a time of tension or conflict. Pakistan also would like a friendly government in Kabul that would offer Pakistan much needed *strategic depth* for basing its forces in the event of a conflict with India.

- **Energy:** Pakistan also sees a friendly government in Afghanistan as a bridge to the markets and energy reserves of Central Asia.

For these reasons Pakistan actively supported the Taliban against Northern Alliance forces since the mid-1990s. When the Northern Alliance moved to take Kabul in the fall of 2001, Pakistan protested out of fear of reprisals against Pashtuns, and out of fear that this would reduce Pakistani influence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan remains suspicious of the new interim government, and even tried to influence its make-up while the Bonn Conference was taking place. The inclusion of three Tajiks in prominent places in the new Afghan government, and the fact that a majority of the thirty seats in the government were filled by ethic groups affiliated with the Northern Alliance is troubling for Pakistan.

*Neighboring State: Iran*

Iran was an adamant supporter of Tajiks in the Northern Alliance throughout their struggle with the Taliban, providing military training as well as weapons. Iran was strongly opposed to the Taliban for a variety of reasons. Most notably, the Sunni Taliban harshly repressed the Shiia Muslim population within Afghanistan. While Tajiks are originally of Iranian origin, only Shiia Tajiks feel a cultural or ethnic connection with Iran.

As the new interim government has taken over, Iran has been repeatedly accused of giving money and arms to western Afghan leaders and warlords with a tendency to resist strong central government in an attempt to pry these regions away from Kabul and weaken Western influence in the new government.

Iranian has had particularly extensive dealings with the Afghan Tajik, Ismail Khan. Iran has been sending truckloads of goods into the five provinces under Khan's control, providing him with lucrative trade and customs duties. Iran has also provided Khan's soldiers and law enforcement officials with weapons and uniforms, and special squads of Afghan fighters trained by Iran are said to be patrolling the streets of Herat in Iranian jeeps. Khan has denied a split with the new Afghan government, and has said that he has no desire to set up a separate emirate or kingdom of western Afghanistan. Iran will likely continue these attempts to undermine the authority of the interim government in Kabul, primarily through the Tajik minorities in west Afghanistan, to ensure that Afghanistan does not join the group of nations amenable to the US and the West. It would complicate Iran's strategic situation to face Iraq and NATO member Turkey in the west and a western-oriented Afghanistan to its east.

*Neighboring State: Tajikistan*

Tajikistan—like most other Central Asian states—was opposed to the Taliban, and provided considerable logistical support to Northern Alliance forces during their struggle with the Taliban. Most importantly, Tajikistan served as the primary point of entry of Iranian and Russian weapon supplies to the Northern Alliance after the Taliban had driven Masood and his men back into the Panjsher Valley. It was also rumored that Masood had bases in the Pamir Mountain region of Tajikistan, just across the Afghan-Tajik border.

Many Afghan Tajiks sought refuge in Tajikistan in the late 1990s, though Tajikistan—itself a very poor state recently emerging from its own civil war—was unable to accommodate all these refugees. Tajikistan took aggressive steps to block Afghan refugees, even ethnic Tajiks, from entering the country as these refugees are viewed as competitors for scarce economic resources. Stuck between a country caught in civil war and a country that simply could not accommodate them, many of these Tajik refugees took to living on islands in the middle of the Panj river that divides Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

In spite of the refugee crisis—a crisis that appears to be abating after the fall of the Taliban and establishment of a new Afghan government—relations between Tajikistan and Afghan Tajiks remain good. There is little sentiment in either Tajikistan or among Afghan Tajiks to push for a greater Tajik state along the lines of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Tajiks in Badakhshan are closely related by language and the Shiia religion with the Tajiks living in the adjoining Pamir mountain region of Tajikistan, but both represent a minority within their respective Tajik populations.

*Regional Powers: Russia*

Throughout the war with the Taliban, Russia played a crucial role in keeping the Northern Alliance adequately supplied. Military assistance from Russia to the Northern Alliance would cross into Afghanistan via the Tajikistan border, a border guarded by Russian troops. Iranian military supplies would also pass to the Tajiks in Afghanistan this way.

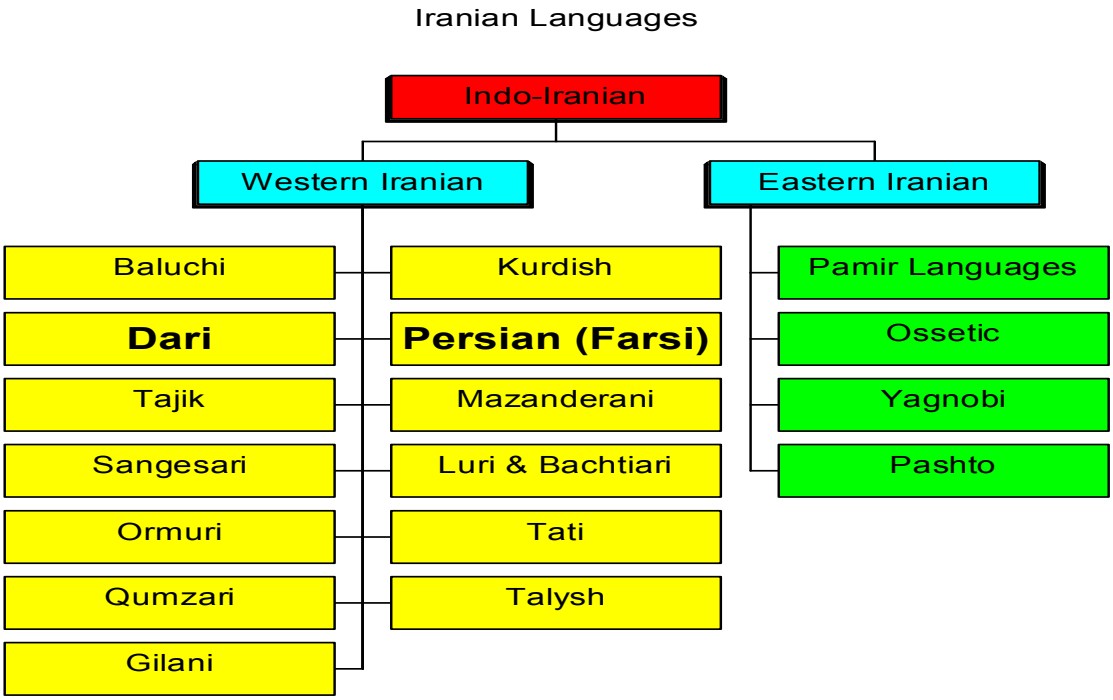
Russia's motivations in helping the Northern Alliance were varied. First, like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Russia feared the sort of radical, destabilizing ultra-conservative Islam being promulgated by the Taliban. Rather than wait until this highly politicized form of Islam took root in Central Asia where Russia still maintains some influence, and where sizable Russian populations still live, Russia chose to meet the threat as far from its borders as possible. Support for the United Front was motivated by Russian fear of the Taliban, rather than solidarity with the Afghan Tajiks or the Northern Alliance. Moreover, Russia also wishes to capitalize on the instability in the region by portraying itself as the "protector of Central Asia against the menace of Islamic radicalism."

Even after the fall of the Taliban, Russia maintains a presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Russian troops guard the long, difficult border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and are taking a more active role in interdicting the drug smuggling activities of the Tajik and Uzbek Afghans trying to get opium into Tajikistan.

## Language

*History*

Afghan Tajiks speak Dari, which belongs to the Western Iranian Branch of the Indo-European language family and is the most widespread language in Afghanistan. Dari is very similar to Farsi, which is spoken in Iran. Dari is sometimes referred to as Farsi-Kabuli. Dari has a long literary tradition, dating back to the 13th Century epic "Mathnawi" written by Sufi master Jlaluddin Rumi in a language considered the predecessor to Modern Dari. Dari is one of two national languages of Afghanistan—the other being Pashtu.




Tajiks living in the Pamir Knots region in the northeast of Afghanistan and Badakhshan speak local dialects of Tajiki, another Indo-European language. Each of these variants may have only a few thousand speakers. Pamiris living in the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan and in and around the village of Eshkashem on the Tajik border speak various Pamiri languages. These are distinct, but similar to Tajik. Pamiris are not technically part of the Tajik ethnic group. However, due to the confusion over Tajik identity, the Pamiris are occasionally included in the broadest definition of Afghan Tajiks. Pamiri languages are spoken languages and are not written. Afghan Pamiris mainly use Dari for literary purposes.

*Dialects*

Kabuli-Dari is the main dialect of Dari found in Afghanistan. It is also the language of the majority of the educated elite. Some sources believe that Tajiki is a dialect of Dari Persian, though Tajiki is not widely spoken among the Tajiks of Afghanistan, particularly those that

live in the cities and plains. Tajiki is mainly spoken among the Tajiks of Tajikistan where it is the official national language.

*Influence on Culture*

The use of Dari as the main language not just by Tajiks, but throughout the non-Pashtun populations of Afghanistan is another area for strong tensions within Afghan society. Dari and Pashtu are the two official languages of Afghanistan. Pashtu is also part of the Indo-European branch of languages (Eastern Iranian branch). It is spoken by roughly 35-40% of the population, almost all of whom are Pashtuns. The two languages are similar, though Dari is considered to be more sophisticated due to its long literary history. During the reign of King Zahir Shah, a Pashtun, the Afghan government tried to promote the use of Pashtu. It was even granted official status in the 1964 Constitution. This effort ultimately failed. The King himself had only a limited knowledge of Pashtu, and preferred to speak Dari.

This "inferior status" of Pashtu has long infuriated many Pashtun leaders and movements, including the Taliban, which forced the Pashtun language on much of the country. The Taliban went so far as to change signs and school textbooks throughout the country. Many Afghans felt that the Taliban's insistence on Pashtu was a form of revenge—an expression of a cultural and ethnic bitterness—for the traditional dominance of the Dari language.

## Religion

The majority of Afghan Tajiks are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. A small minority of mountain Tajiks living in the rough terrain of the northeast Afghanistan, near the border with Tajikistan, are of the Ismaili Sect of Shiia Islam.

**Kabul Mosque**

*Sunni and Shia*

The split between Sunni and Shia Islam began to occur immediately after Prophet Mohammad's death, with the followers of Abu Bakr, one of Mohammad'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-e-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 have gradually assumed theological overtones. Shia Muslims attach great value to the intercession of saints and clerical hierarchy, while 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.

*Schools of Islamic Law or Shariah*

Both Sunni and Shia Islam have four major *Shariah* or schools of theological law. In Afghanistan, the dominant school of the Sunni Muslims is the Hanafi. The Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence was founded by Abu Hanifa, one of the earliest Muslim scholar-interpreters to seek new ways of applying Islamic tenets to everyday life. He died in Iraq in AD 767. Abu Hanifa's interpretation of Muslim law was extremely tolerant of differences within Muslim communities. He also separated belief from practice, elevating belief over practice.

*Hanafi Sunni Religious Requirements Among the Tajiks*

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

*Ithna Asharia Shia*

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 *Ismailis* to be heretical Shias.

*Ismaili*

The *Ismaili Shia* are also known as *Seveners* because in the eighth century their leaders rejected the heir designated by the sixth *Imam*, Jafar al Sadiq (d.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.

The Afghan Tajik Ismaili Shiias are found in the Badakhshan and Takhar provinces in northeastern Afghanistan.

Many Ismaili believe the line of Imam ceased when Ismail died before his father in AD 760; others believe he did not die but remains in seclusion, and will return at the end of the world.

Mountain Tajik Ismailis in Afghanistan are generally regarded with suspicion by other ethnic groups. For the most part their economic status is very poor. Considered less zealous than other Afghan Muslims, Ismaili are seen to follow their leaders uncritically. 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.

*Sufi Brotherhoods*

Sufism began in the 12th century and is a monastic tradition that seeks personal communion with God through mystic moments of union brought about by various methods, including meditation, recitation of sacred phrases, breathing exercises, dancing, hymn singing, music, and physical gyrations.

*Political Influence*

At a cultural level, Tajiks are generally considered to be religious, though they do not carry as strict an interpretation of the *Shariah* as do the Taliban. Thus, while religion does play a role in the politics of Afghan Tajiks, it does not play as prominent a role as it does in the political life of the Taliban and its followers who were literally defined as a political organization by their faith and its strict interpretations.

Religion does play a signficant role for Tajiks in how they perceive Shia ethnic groups. Even before the arrival of the Taliban, Rabbani's Tajik dominated government targeted the Shiia Hazaras for persecution due to the fact that they were not Sunni Muslims. General Masood was known by his supporters as the 'Lion of the Panjshir,' but was known by non-Tajiks as the 'Wolf of Kabul' for the alleged crimes he committed against Hazaras during Rabbani's rule.

That the Tajiks and Hazaras were allies in the war against the Taliban reveals the nature of the overwhelmingly negative feelings non-Pashtun ethnic groups felt for the Taliban.

## Customs

*Greeting*

A handshake is a standard greeting among men. Familiar participants will often embrace. Male handshakes are gentle, though no weakness of character is implied. Always shake hands with the right hand. The left hand is seen as unclean, and to offer it is a grave insult.

Women either embrace or shake hands. Women friends embrace and kiss three times on alternating cheeks. Afghans may also place their right hand over their heart before, during or after a lengthy greeting. A man does not shake hands with or otherwise touch a woman in public, though he may greet her verbally in an indirect way.

A common Dari greeting is *"Khubus ti?"* (How are you?). When addressing or introducing others in formal situations, using an academic or professional title is essential.

*Gestures*

In rural homes, people usually sit cross-legged on the floor. It is improper to point the bottom of one's shoe or foot at another person. It is also improper to point or beckon with one's finger. Afghans use the entire hand instead. Respect is demonstrated by peering downward while speaking to someone. Items are usually passed with the right hand, with the left hand placed on the heart or supporting the right arm.

*Visiting*

Visiting between family, friends, and neighbors provides the mainstay of social life for the Tajiks, who have a reputation for graciousness. However, women commonly spend their adult lives in *purdah*, which means they cannot be seen by males who are not close family members. Consequently, visiting is mostly segregated by gender. On some occasions, though, men and women will socialize together.

Guests are expected to have at least three cups of hospitality tea. Any business discussions occur after refreshments. Guests do not bring gifts. The ability of an Afghan to generously receive guests is a sign of social status.

*Displays of Affection*

Physical contact with the opposite sex in public is not acceptable, even between spouses, significant others, family members or good friends.

*Business*

Islam, family-hierarchies and local, communal relationships are the basis for Afghan Tajik business ethics. The Muslim belief in fate also plays a role. The Muslim saying, 'God willing,' is common, and is usually meant literally. Changes to contracts, shipment dates, quality

standards, and the like, then, are part of this divine will, and never that of the Afghan business partner.

*Gifts*

If you are given a gift, plan on giving something in return in the near future. Gifts from your city or country will be treasured. Postcards or other small cultural items are appropriate. Tajiks often give chocolates, fruit or flowers as gifts.

*Cultural Do's and Don'ts*

- If you step on someone's foot, an apology is required
- Do not use your left hand for exchanges—money, food, gifts, shaking hands. It is considered unclean. Great offense will be taken if it is offered.
- Dress modestly.
- Ask permission before taking photographs of people.
- Men and women should not touch one another in public.
- Blowing your nose in public is considered unacceptable.

## Lifestyle

*Role of Family*

Tajik society is not organized within a tribal structure. The core of the traditional social structure of Tajiks and other sedentary peoples of Central Asia is the extended family, which is composed of an adult couple, their unmarried daughters, and their married sons and their wives and children. The most common dwelling of a settled Afghan Tajik family is a mud-brick structure of several rooms, surrounded by high mud walls. Monogamy is the most typical form of spousal relationship, though polygamy is permitted by Islam so long as a husband can provide equally for all his wives. The high cost and the importance on traditional family ties usually discourage this practice. Adultery is a serious crime, and, under the harshest interpretations of Islamic Law, is punishable by death.

*Role of Women*

There is a wide range of standards set for accepted female behavior, as well as differences in male attitudes toward correct treatment of women. Generally, however, throughout Afghanistan and throughout Afghan history, women have had limited public roles. Contradictions arise between customary, tribal practices, many of which impinge on the rights of women and are alien to the spirit of Islam. Islamic teachings on gender are, however, also subject to diverse interpretation among reformists, Islamists, and ultraconservatives.

During the Taliban government, the most conservative tribal and religious views of women prevailed. The Taliban was largely led by rural Pashtuns from strongly patriarchal backgrounds. Females were segregated from males at puberty, a Pashtun social convention called *purdah*, which lasts throughout life. *Purdah* requires that the female have no contact with non-family males.

The general Tajik view of the role of women is conventional and traditional, though not as extreme as the Taliban.

However, women have not fared well under Afghan Tajik leaders. When the Soviet troops left Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance drove women out of public life. In 1992, Rabbani's government started preventing women from exercising rights to association, freedom of expression and employment, under the pretext that these rights were un-Islamic rights. The report also noted that in 1994, the Supreme Court of the Islamic State of Afghanistan issued an ordinance on women's veils that required women to wear a full-body veil. In the war with the Taliban, Northern Alliance troops were alleged to have harassed women and committed widespread rape during their siege of Kabul in 1995.

After the fall of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance has sought to be more lenient towards women in public life. The head of the Women's Association of Afghanistan, Farkhnas Nazi, organized a woman's demonstration on March 8, 2001 (International Women's Day, celebrated in socialists countries), demanding a ban on polygamy and early marriages (Afghan women are often married at 13 or 14 years old), and access to increased education

for women. About a thousand women took part in the protest, and the Northern Alliance administration did not break up the demonstration or punish those that took part. Moreover, in areas under Northern Alliance command, girls have been allowed to go to school and women have not been forced to wear the *burka*, the full-body covering required in the sternest of Islamic societies. Also, the Tajik governor of Heart, Ismail Kahn, offered schooling for both boys and girls before being driven out by the Taliban in 1997.

These conflicting accounts of Tajik treatment of women highlight differences within the Tajik culture in Afghanistan, and within the different Tajik leadership groups. While Tajik views of the role of women are generally traditional and conservative, they can vary from community to community. The Tajiks are an ethnic group lacking a clear ethnic and cultural identity. Some Tajik leaders and Northern Alliance administrators—perhaps the more urban and secure—allow for a more relaxed interpretation of the role of women (within the strict Afghan frame of reference) than others. In addition, the entire population of Afghanistan tends to see women as second class citizens. Tajiks share in some of these general views of women.

Two of the 30 members of Hamid Karzai's interim administration are women. Sima Samar, an ethnic Hazara, was named Women's Affairs Minister, and General Suhaila Seddiqi was named Health Minister.

Seddiqi, an ethnic Tajik, is a highly respected surgeon who spent two decades in Kabul's military hospital. She was rewarded for her efforts by the pro-Moscow government of Najibullah who awarded her the rank of "General." The Taliban removed her as chief of surgery at Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan hospital after it seized control of the capital in 1996. In an unconventional decision, the Taliban allowed her to return to work after they realized they could not do without her clearly superior skills as a surgeon.

### *Role of Men*

Tajik families are strictly patriarchal. This focus on male authority also extends to social and professional roles at large. Men make the economic, political and familial decisions in Afghan Tajik communities.

### *Dating and Marriage*

Dating is virtually non-existent among Afghanistan's Tajiks. Under the Taliban, sexes were segregated at puberty and females had no contact with non-family males. Even in pre-Taliban Afghanistan, most marriages were arranged, often with senior females playing a prominent role in the process. Matchmakers engage in lengthy negotiations over the bride price and/or dowry. Pre-marital sexual relations are strictly forbidden.

Tajiks in urban areas and in the northeast—because of their lack of tribal organization and emphasis on local communities—have engaged in intermarriage with other ethnic groups. Usually, women from a minority ethnic group in a given valley or region will be married to men from a more dominant group.

## Clothing

*Headwear and Clothing*

Tajiks wear a brightly embroidered cap. In winter and while working in the fields, these caps are covered by a turban.

In many Tajik communities in the north and northeast of Afghanistan, men shave one another's heads about once every month. Each man has his own razor and squats patiently as a friend scrapes the bristles from his scalp.

*Jewelry*

Jewelry made from gold and silver was once common in Afghanistan, but was banned by the Taliban. Many Afghans, Tajiks included, wear an amulet or *tawiz* to protect themselves against evil. This is especially common among Afghan children.

*Women's Clothing*

Traditionally, Tajik women have worn brightly colored dresses over striped trousers with headscarves and slippers. Under Taliban rule, though, bright colors were outlawed and all Afghan women were required to wear a *chadiri*—a garment that covers from head to toe—when in public.

*Men's Clothing*

Most Afghan males wear long shirts over baggy pants that are pulled tight with a drawstring. The shirttail is not tucked in and hangs outside of the Afghan's baggy pants. This tail can be tucked in while a farmer or laborer works. Horse riding groups of the north, including the north and northeastern Tajiks, wear form-fitting pants that make riding more comfortable. Tajiks also still favor heavy quilted coats tied with a sash.

## Diet

Traditional meals include a variety of *pilau* (rice mixed with meat and/or vegetables), *qorma* (vegetable sauce), *kebab* (skewered meat), *ashak* or *mantu (*pasta dishes) and *nan* (bread). Tomatoes, spinach, potatoes, peas, carrots, cucumbers and eggplant are also popular. Yogurt and other dairy products are dietary staples. Urban and rural diets are similar, though city dwellers are exposed to more dietary variety.

*Eating Style*

Afghans use the fingers of the right hand to eat. The left hand is considered unclean and is reserved for cleaning after using the toilet. One never eats with the left hand. Families normally eat together, but if a guest is present, males and females eat separately. In many areas of Afghanistan, a belch is considered a sign of satisfaction with one's meal.

*Alcohol/Drugs*

**An Afghan Opium Crop**

Islamic law forbids the consumption of alcohol. Most Afghans comply with this prohibition. Despite similar prohibitions against drugs, many Afghan men smoke local tobacco, hashish and opium. The last of these drugs is of particular significance to Afghanistan, and the Tajiks of Badakhshan and the northeast. The Taliban banned poppy production in the portion of Afghanistan under its control, although it may have still relied on drug trafficking for income. The Northern Alliance continued to grow and sell the drug throughout its war with the Taliban.

Much of this opium is smuggled across the Tajik-Afghan border. The rest is transferred along drug smuggling routes to Europe, Russia and the Caucasus.

## Cultural Economy

The cultural economy of Tajiks is relatively diverse and is divided between the economy of the mountain Tajiks and the plains and urban Tajiks. Mountain Tajiks are village dwelling farmers and herders who make short seasonal migrations to alpine grazing meadows. During these migrations, whole families move up to the mountains to harvest grain and melons. Tajik areas of Afghanistan are famous for a wide variety of fruits and nuts that are acknowledged to be among the finest in the country. During the off-agricultural season, some Tajik may join the workforce at industrial complexes near their villages.

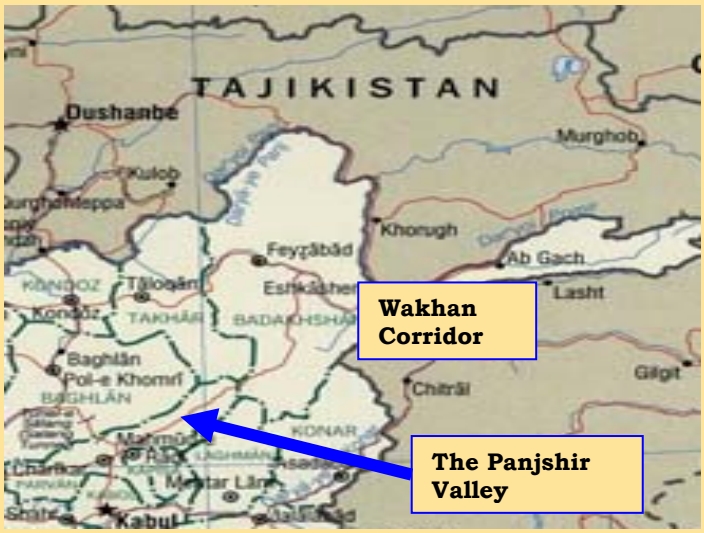
The cultural economy of the plains and urban Tajiks is different. They are more active in business, and are known as skilled traders and artisans. Many find employment in government service. Others work as cooks, houseboys or gardeners in the homes of wealthy Afghans or foreigners. Urban and plains dwelling Tajiks are generally well educated and can be well off. Many urban Tajiks are described as upper middle class.

## Cultural Geography

Tajiks are primarily a sedentary people. The plains dwelling Tajiks live mainly in Heart Province on the Iranian border, in Parwan Province and around Kabul. The largest concentration of Tajiks in Afghanistan, however, is in the northeastern mountains of Afghanistan, particularly the Panjshir Valley and Badakhshan Province.

*The Northeast Region and Panjshir Valley*

Tajiks dominate the ethnic landscape of the Northeast Region of Afghanistan. This region includes Baghlan, Takhar, parts of Parham and Badakhshan Provinces. This is a mountainous, difficult region that, due to its ethnic-minority status, harsh terrain and severe climate, has historically been isolated from much of the rest of the country. The region's isolation has resulted in low levels of fundamental health and human services such as education and health care. This problem is particularly acute in the rural areas outside of Feyzabad.

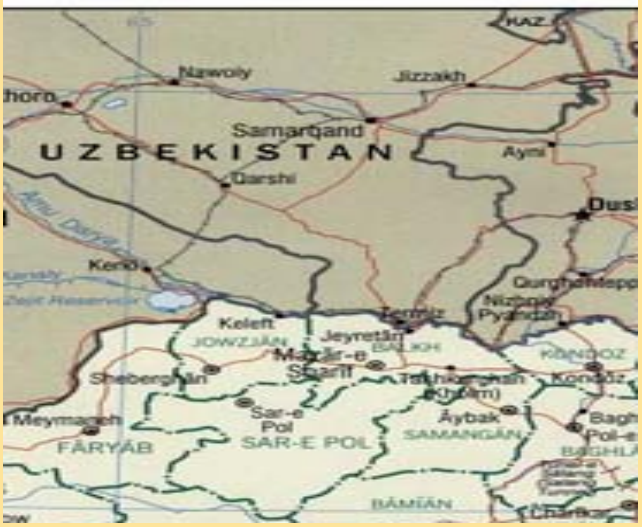



**The Northeast Region of Afghanistan and the Panjshir Valley: The areas with the highest concentrations of Tajiks in Afghanistan.**

Takhar is the northeast's most agriculturally productive province, though the Northeast region more generally is not particularly suited to farming. Agriculture in Badakhshan is especially difficult due to the high elevations and harsh winters. Most of the Tajiks in the province, particularly in the Wakhan Corridor, have relied on livestock herding and animal husbandry for subsistence. In addition, the ban on poppy production by the Taliban in 2000 had a positive effect on the value of poppies cultivated in Northern Alliance held Badakhshan.

Large communities of Tajiks live in the Panjshir Valley, just northeast of the town of Mahmud-e Raq. This is the home of the former Tajik military commander, Masood.

Sizable Tajik populations also live in Afghanistan's Northern Region, particularly around Mazar-e-Sharif and in the Sar-e Pol Province. This region is dominated by Uzbeks and their Turkic ethnic cousins, the Turkmen. While the Uzbeks and Tajiks make up a large portion of the Northern Alliance forces that fought the Taliban, the relationship between the two ethnic groups in the Northern Region of Afghanistan is tense, and their alliance is unstable. Clashes between Tajik and Uzbek warlords in this region are not infrequent. Tajiks clearly play a minority role to the Uzbeks in north Afghanistan.

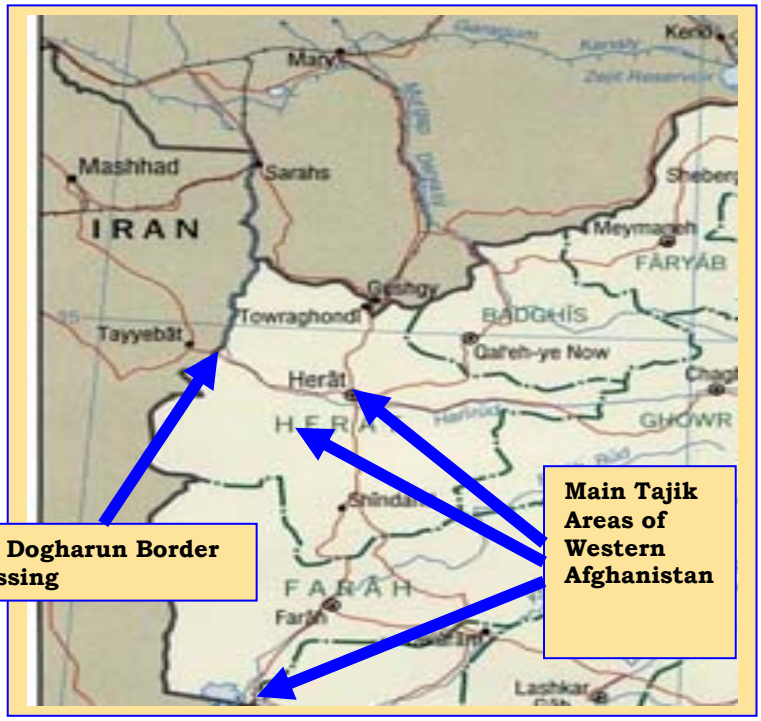



**The Northern Region: The main concentration of the Tajik population is around Mazar-e-Sharif.**

The region itself has the highest concentration of arable land in Afghanistan and traditionally has been the most productive region of the country.

*The Western Region: Herat*

Tajiks make up a large portion of the population in western Afghanistan around the city of Herat. While they are mixed in the west with ethnic Pashtuns, the population of Herat is primarily Tajik. Herat's governor, Ismail Khan is a Tajik with close ties to Iran. The Tajiks and Pashtuns maintain tense, often violent, relations in western Afghanistan.




The Western Region has been devastated by four years of drought and is also overburdened by waves of internally displaced peoples.

Herat is important as a regional economic center due to its proximity to the Dogharun border crossing along the major trading route with Iran. The government in Tehran is expected to make improvements to this road in an effort both to improve trade with Afghanistan, and to further increase its influence in the west of Afghanistan.

*The Central Region*


The Central Highlands region is in the Afghan province of Bamian. It is dominated by ethnic Hazara, although it also includes Tajik minorities. It is known for its remote access, harsh terrain and severe climate. Education levels in the region are poor, as is access to health care and to food. Conditions are particularly harsh in areas where the Taliban engaged in punitive "scorched earth" policies against the Hazara and Tajik minorities living in this region. There is little agriculture in the Central Highlands due to the high altitudes, harsh winters and limited access to water. Poor roads, long distances, lack of access to markets, and a short growing season increase the general sense of economic isolation across the region. Animal husbandry is the main source of economic security in the region.

*East Central Region & Kabul*

The East-Central Region of Afghanistan is the most urban area of the country. Approximately 80% of the population are urban dwellers, mostly living in the capital city of Kabul. A significant Tajik population lives in and just north of Kabul. The Tajiks in Kabul tend to be well placed, influential in government bureaucracies and are often assimilated into an urban culture.

## Culture's Effect on Warfare

The Tajik method of warfare has been heavily influenced by *Mujahideen* tactics as well as by Russian and Iranian training.

There are many similarities between the Tajik style of warfare and that of the *Mujahideen* in that both relied on ambush tactics of quick strikes and rapid retreats, as well as rocket and mortar attacks. This unconventional style of warfare was made necessary in the long struggle with the Soviets by the geography of Afghanistan and by the tremendous Soviet advantages in numbers and firepower. The Tajiks in the Northern Alliance—outnumbered and isolated in a remote northeast corner of Afghanistan—continued to use the *Mujahideen* tactics they had used fighting the Soviets.

However, throughout this war with the Taliban, the Tajiks have been supplied and, in some cases, advised by the Russians and, to a lesser extent, Iran. Tajik fighters have also been strongly influenced by Russian theories and practices that stress a more conventional type of warfare. This influence is not as great as the Russian/Soviet influence on the Uzbeks of the Northern Alliance (most Uzbeks in the Northern Alliance fought *with* the Soviets and *against* the *Mujahideen).* Still, this Russian influence towards more conventional strategies of attack and defense is noticeable among the Tajiks.

In general, the Tajik style of warfare is dominated by circumstance. Tajiks will do whatever the situation facing them calls for to score a military or political victory. Tajiks, like all the forces fighting in the prolonged Afghan civil war, have also repeatedly proven their capacity for brutality. General Masood, in particular, was known for his brutal treatment of prisoners of war and of citizens of Kabul belonging to other ethnic groups during Rabbani's raid on the city.

The lack of tribal affiliations in the broader Tajik culture has also produced an environment in which individuals are promoted based on merit and skill as opposed to tradition or tribal heirarchies. Tajik Northern Alliance forces tend to have good leaders at the highest levels.

## Urban vs. Rural Culture

Urban and rural culture and demography varies to some extent in Afghanistan, however, there is only one truly urban region in the country, the capital city of Kabul and its surrounding areas. The other Afghan cities of Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Ghazni, Gardes, Kunduz, and Baghlan are fairly similar in culture and demography to the surrounding areas in which they are located.

The urban demography around Kabul tends to be more ethnically diverse than the rest of the country. During the latter days of the reign of King Mohammad Zahir Shah in the late 1960s and early 1970s the culture of this urban area became slightly more cosmopolitan, with industrialization, higher levels of education, wider political participation, and a greater role for women in public life. This microcosm of cosmopolitan culture in the heart of Afghanistan caused the population of Kabul to grow out of touch with the indigenous cultures of Afghanistan. This largely de-tribalized culture in Kabul caused residents of this city to retain only nominal identification with their respective ethnic groups of origin.

The nature of Kabul's demographics and cultural identity has been transformed, however, by over twenty years of violence. Kabul has been vastly reduced in size. Much of the cosmopolitan, de-tribalized population from the 1970s has fled. The segment of that cosmopolitan population that remained in Kabul has been re-sensitized to issues of ethnic identity, due to the polarizing effects of the war, where security depended upon allegiance to a particular ethnic group. Much of the current population of Kabul, however, is composed of internally displaced persons migrating from unrest in the rural areas in search of international assistance. This population shares none of the cultural attributes of the cosmopolitan Kabul of the early 1970s.

Tajiks in Kabul are traditionally affluent and well respected, and do mix well with the city's culture. Tajiks in Herat have closer ties to Iran than the Tajiks in the rest of Afghanistan.

## Holidays

Religious holidays in Afghanistan are celebrated according to the lunar calendar, and other holidays such as Independence Day, and New Year's Day are celebrated based on the solar calendar. During many holidays, Afghans usually visit friends and families, prepare lavish meals, and attend special prayers.

*Secular Holidays*

The Victory of the Muslim Nation is April 28, Remembrance Day for the Martyrs and Disabled is May 4, and Independence Day (*Jeshen*) is August 19. Independence Day marks the end of the Third Anglo-Afghan war and the grant of independence from Britain. Although Afghanistan was never a formal British colony, Afghanistan's foreign policy was governed by Britain.

*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. Many start out the festival by wearing new clothes, and going to prayer at the mosque. Afterwards, people visit or entertain their friends and families. Children usually receive gifts or money called "Eidi."

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. This holiday occurs on the tenth day of the twelfth month of the Islamic (Hijra) calendar. The day commemorates the Prophet Abraham's devotion to God. According to the Muslim tradition, Abraham was willing to slay his son Ismael as a sacrifice. Ismael was never killed, however, as Allah provided a lamb for the sacrifice. Muslims who perform the *haj* sacrifice a lamb, and the meat is given out to the poor.

*Persian Holiday of Nowroze*

New Year (*Nowroze*), is the first day of spring and is a Persian festival day. The Taliban repressed celebration of New Year, although it has reappeared in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

*Nowroze* is celebrated on the spring Equinox, the day that the length of night and day are equal. *Nowroze* does not fall on the same day each year, but does fall between March 19th and 22nd in the Christian calendar.

To Iranians and Persians in Central Asia, *Nowroze* is far more than just a New Year's celebration, and throughout the centuries its spirit has helped them through hardship and strife during war and foreign occupation. It is a celebration of Persian culture and achievements, and Persians throughout Central and South Asia return to their home villages to celebrate the occasion with their extended families and friends.

The *Nowroze* holiday season includes several symbolic and meaningful celebrations and rituals. One of the symbolic rituals of the *Nowroze* celebrations occurs on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year (*Chahar Shanbeh Soori*, literally meaning "the eve of Red Wednesday" or "the eve of celebration"). Families gather piles of brush or wood and bonfires are lit in public places. They then leap over the flames shouting:

*"Sorkhi-e to az man, zardi-e man az to!"*
("Give me your vibrant red hue, and take back my sickly yellow pallor!")

Through the *Chahar Shanbeh Soori,* Persians give thanks for the health and happiness of the passing year while also replacing any paleness or evil with the warmth of the flames.

According to tradition, the living are visited by the spirits of their ancestors on the last days of the year, and many children wrap themselves in shrouds, symbolically reenacting the visits. They also run through the streets banging on pots and pans with spoons and knocking on doors to ask for treats. The ritual is called *qashogh-zany* (spoon beating) and symbolizes the beating out of the last unlucky Wednesday of the year. This could be seen as the Iranian version of the Western Halloween night.

There are also several other traditions on this night including:

- The ritual of *Koozeh Shekastan* - the breaking of earthen jars which symbolically hold one's bad fortune.
- The ritual of *Fal-Goosh* - interpreting one's fortune by secretly listening to conversations of passersby.
- The ritual of *Gereh-gosha-ee* - making a knot in the corner of a handkerchief or garment and asking the first passerby to unravel it in order to remove one's misfortune.

The traditional herald of the *Nowroze* season is called *Haji Firooz*. He symbolizes the rebirth of the Sumerian god of sacrifice, Domuzi, who was killed at the end of each year and reborn

at the beginning of the New Year. Wearing black make up and wearing a red costume, *Haji Firooz* wanders through the streets and alleyways, singing and dancing and spreading good cheer and the news of the coming New Year.

In parallel with the rebirth of nature, extensive spring-cleaning is a national tradition observed in almost every household. This is also extended to every person's attire, and it is customary to acquire at least one set of new clothes. On New Year's Day, families dress in their new clothes and start the twelve-day celebrations by visiting the elders of their family, then the rest of their family, and finally their friends. On the thirteenth day families leave their homes and picnic outdoors

On the night before *Nowroze*, the entire family gathers around a table (or spread) with an arrangement of several items, each of which symbolizes a wish or theme. Of all the items in this arrangement, seven of them, starting with the Farsi letter "seen" (the English "S"), must always be included. The Farsi translation of number seven is "haft"—a hence the name *Haft Seen*.

The *Haft Seen* spread is usually put out a couple of weeks before the Nowrooz day and symbolizes the holiday season and its special mood, very much like the Christmas Tree for the Western holidays.

Zoroastrians celebrated the creation of life by offering their deity, Ahura Mazda, seven trays, full of symbolic objects representing truth, justice, good thoughts, good deeds, prosperity, virtue, immortality and generosity.

The seven items starting with the letter "seen" in the contemporary *Haft Seen* are:

- *Samanu* (a Persian snack made of flour and sugar)
- *Sekeh* (coin)
- *Sabzee* (green vegetables)
- *Sonbol* (the hyacinth flower)
- *Seer* (garlic)
- *Senjed* (a dried fruit resembling that of the mountain-ash tree)
- *Serkeh* (vinegar)

Other items often included with the *Haft Seen* are apples, sugar cookies or pastries called *Shirini*, a mirror, candles, eggs, and a bowl with goldfish. Looking at the goldfish at the turn of the year is believed to bring good luck and fortune.

On the thirteenth day of the new year, which also marks the end of the *Nowroze* break for the school children, families leave their houses and head for the outdoors where they eat, play games, and celebrate a happy and healthy holiday season.

This tradition is called *Seezdah Bedar* ("getting rid of thirteen"), and involves all family members. It is intended to end the holiday season on a relaxing and positive note.

Greetings and wishes are aplenty around *Nowroze* time. The following is a list of common greetings, and what they mean:

- *Nowrooz mobarak*: Happy Nowrooz.
- *Nowrooz pirooz*: Nowrooz be prosperous.
- *Sal-e no mobarak*: Happy New Year.
- *Sad sal bi in sal-ha*: May another hundred years be as happy.