

# Conflict and peace in Afghanistan

## A northern, non-Pashtun perspective

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### ABSTRACT

**Many non-Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan see the continuing conflict in the country as between 'included' Pashtuns and 'excluded' non-Pashtuns. How can a better appreciation of this perspective inform more effective peace policies?**

This article discusses non-Pashtun views of on conflict and peace in northern Afghanistan. Many non-Pashtun communities in the north perceive the current war not as between the Afghan government and an armed opposition, but between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. Such an outlook reflects broader ethnic divisions and centre-periphery splits derived from

entrenched perceptions of a prolonged, Pashtun-led project of 'Afghanisation' to centralise power in Kabul. Western efforts to support the government in Kabul are understood within the same worldview.

If strategies to address violence in Afghanistan are to gain sustainable traction, they need to acknowledge and account for northern resistance to Pashtun influence and its association with both Kabul and external intervention. A priority from this perspective is to revise commitments to centralised authority enshrined in the 2004 constitution in favour of devolved decision-making to regional institutions.

In November 2017, Hezb-i Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar declared to his party convention in Kabul that the current war was not 'between the armed opposition and the government', but between Pashtun and non-Pashtun *qawmuna* (ethno-linguistic groups). A month later Atta Muhammad Nur, Governor of the northern Balkh Province and Executive Director of the Tajik Jamiat-e Islami party, defiantly refused his attempted dismissal by Ashraf Ghani, accusing the President of an attempted power grab.

## “Non-Pashtun grievances among northern Afghans have fuelled rising violence in the region.”

These events are symptomatic of deeper divisions between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, and between Kabul and the north. Such splits derive from what many northern, non-Pashtun Afghans perceive as a centralised, Pashtun-led national project of 'Afghanisation' – a legacy of much older processes of state-building by Pashtun rulers with support from foreign colonial powers dating back to the 1880s. The US-NATO intervention from 2001 and support for central government in Kabul has fed into these dynamics. Non-Pashtun grievances among northern Afghans have fuelled rising violence in the region. They need to be acknowledged and accommodated in efforts to promote peace and political reform in Afghanistan. This article discusses northern, non-Pashtun perspectives on conflict and peace in Afghanistan.

### Afghanisation

The roots of Pashtun-led Afghanisation can be traced to the Durrani Pashtun Empire (1747–1880), which pursued predatory policies of waging war against weakened Turkic empires in northern Afghanistan. British weapons, political support and annual cash subsidies underwrote the reign of the 'Iron Amir' Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901), during which the official boundaries of Afghanistan were established. Abdur Rahman's association with the British undermined his anti-colonial credentials, which encouraged northern communities to reject his rule. Many rebellions broke out in the north in the early 1880s, which Abdur Rahman suppressed through direct force and through administrative, linguistic and cultural violence.

Abdur Rahman's mistrust of northern, non-Pashtun communities drove his policy of Pashtun-centred Afghanisation. Communities of Pashtuns were moved from the south, especially to the north-western regions of the old Turkistan province – today's Faryab, Jawzjan, Balkh, Saripul

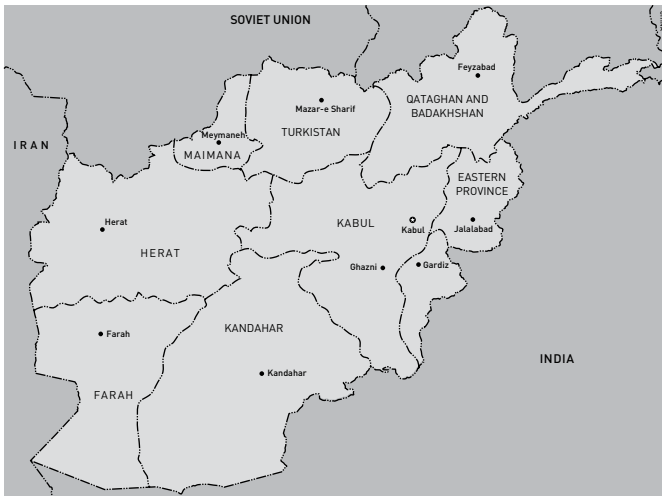
and Samangan provinces. Thousands of Abdur Rahman's Durrani Pashtun *malدار* (mobile herder) supporters were relocated from Kandahar to Turkistan, Qataghan and Badakhshan, where they were awarded prime pasture and farmland. He also forcibly moved many Ghilzai Pashtun Kuchi nomadic herders and farmers from the Eastern province of Mashreqi who had rebelled against him.

King Amanullah (r. 1919–1929), the grandson of Amir Abdur Rahman, reclaimed the country's independence from the British Raj in 1919. But he paid a great cost in terms of lost subsidies, which hamstrung his ability to implement his reformist projects. A civil war ultimately forced the king's abdication in 1929. Amanullah and his father-in-law, Mahmood Tarzi, were the architects of Pashtun-centred Afghan nationalism. They initiated demographic and cultural hegemony in Turkistan, Qataghan and Badakhshan.

The peoples of these regions were systematically disarmed in 1921, while in 1923 Amanullah's government issued its *Nizamnamayee Naqileen ba Samti Qataghan* edict. This provided for Pashtuns from across the country to resettle in Qataghan province, offering eight *jeribs* (half an acre) or four acres of irrigated land for every male and female member of the family above seven years of age for a nominal fee along with preferential tax benefits. This process continued through the 1930s to the 1950s, under the direction of Wazir Gul Mohammad Khan Momand as Minister of Interior and roving special envoy of the state in the north. He is credited with the destruction of non-Pashtun historic monuments and historical manuscripts, and with changing local vernacular names.

The most significant 'administrative violence' against the peoples of northern Afghanistan was perpetrated by the 1964 liberal constitution, which, ironically, was modified to become the new post-Taliban Constitution of Afghanistan in 2004. In the eyes of many non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan, the drafters of the 1964 constitution deployed something akin to Joseph Stalin's infamous 'Nationalities Policies'. The Afghan provinces of Turkistan, Qataghan and Badakhshan were divided into nine new administrative units, Faryab, Jawzjan, Saripul, Balkh, Samangan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan, effectively destroying common Turkistani and Qataghani identities. Up to the 1978 Communist coup, programmes of Afghanisation continued with large numbers of southern Pashtuns being resettled across northern provinces (*Naqileen*). In the 1990s, these resettled Pashtun 'pockets' in the north became the backbone of Taliban support in re-conquering the region.

The decline of central government control in peripheral parts of the country during the 1980s left Pashtun



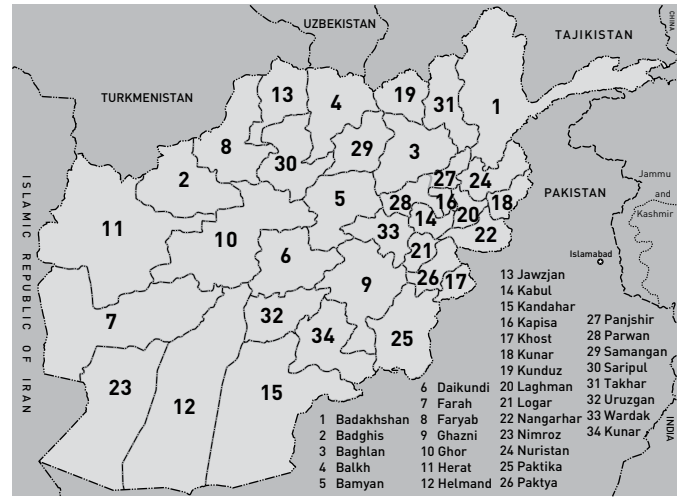
**Afghanistan, major and minor provinces before 1964.**

communities in the north vulnerable to revenge by local Uzbek, Turkmen, Aimaq and Tajik communities when they became armed and organised as jihadi groups to resist Soviet occupation. Many *Naqileen* left for the safety of Pakistan. The larger Pashtun enclaves in Kunduz, Baghlan and Balkh provinces, however, organised and armed themselves with help from Pakistan-based jihadi parties, both to resist the Communists and to protect their own communities against threats from non-Pashtuns. Land in parts of Takhar and Badakhshan provinces that had been left behind by Pashtuns who resettled was appropriated by their Tajik and Uzbek neighbours.

Following the re-conquest of the north by the Taliban after 1997, Pashtun refugees returned from Pakistan, along with new Taliban soldiers from the south and from Pakistan. The non-Pashtuns who fiercely resisted the Taliban re-conquest of their territories, which they had liberated from the Soviets and Kabul regimes, were also subjected to violent reprisals. The Taliban, however, had collaborators and sympathisers among local mullahs trained in Pakistani madrasas. This ultimately created tensions within the non-Pashtun communities. The Taliban's initial routing from Mazar-i Sharif and subsequent triumphant recapture of the city also resulted in mutual acts of revenge, especially among the Hazaras, further aggravating tension in northern and central Afghanistan.

## US-NATO intervention

After 9/11, key commanders of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance were invited to partner with US and NATO forces to dislodge the Taliban. They were handsomely rewarded in cash and were also well represented at the 2001 Bonn Conference, in Hamid Karzai's Interim and Transitional Administrations and in his first term as President (2002–09). The majority were Panjshiris, with a small number from northern Afghanistan in more marginal and symbolic positions. But Uzbeks and Tajiks were systematically sidelined during Karzai's first term, while some key



**Afghanistan – provinces in 2016.**

leaders were assassinated, including former President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Subsequently, most of the US reconstruction funds have been invested in eastern, southern and south-western provinces where the Taliban are prevalent, with little in the relatively peaceful north. There has also been comparatively less provision of security in the north by the government and its NATO and non-NATO allies. Their belief that the Taliban threat could not grow to include the non-Pashtuns has proved wrong, however. Neglect of the north, combined with rampant corruption, graft and ethnic infighting within the state administration, has resulted in reduced opportunities, breeding distrust and anger especially among non-Pashtun youths.

This challenging environment left young men in northern provinces with limited choices. Many from impoverished rural villages went to Pakistan to study in Deobandi madrasas. Others left for Iran as (unwanted) migrant labour, or joined the Afghan army or police in proportionately large numbers compared with other parts of the country. Based on the author's long-term observations in Badakhshan, most recently in July 2017, such conditions have created ideal grounds for Taliban and also *Daesh* (Islamic State in Khorasan – ISK) to recruit disgruntled non-Pashtuns by appealing to their sense of Islamic justice.

Often, for northern non-Pashtun populations, the past has seemed to repeat itself. Similar to the 1921 disarmament initiatives in Qataghan and Badakhshan, non-Pashtuns in the north have been asked to surrender their heavy weapons as part of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. Also reflecting Amanullah's *Naqileen* programme of 1923, the Taliban and post-Taliban governments facilitated the return of larger numbers of Pashtuns to the north, among them many Taliban fighters.



Pashtun malدار camping near Lake Shiwa, Badakhshan, summer 2009.  
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Pashtun refugee resettlement programmes since 2002, combined with poverty and increased tensions between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, are viewed by many locals in the north as the visible consequences of outside interventions by the US and its allies. A detailed 2010 study by the Afghan Analysts Network, *The insurgents of the Afghan north*, stressed that terrorist violence in the north was confined to Taliban attacks launched from the safety of 'Pashtun pockets', primarily in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces.

## Rising violence in the north

The Taliban have exploited evolving circumstances in northern Afghanistan to their advantage. President Karzai, like the Iron Amir and Wazir Gul Mohammad Momand, saw resettled Pashtuns in the north as local allies for his government and was reluctant to confront them. Local non-Pashtuns came to believe that governors in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces appointed by Karzai and later Ghani were protecting the Taliban and their supporters. Such policies have increased tensions within the government between Pashtun and non-Pashtun officials, such as Governor Atta and other northern leaders who now accuse Kabul of complacency about instability in the north. Events like Atta's dismissal or the defamation and exile of General Abdul Rashid Dostum have helped to widen the trust gap between Kabul and the greater north.

The persistent undermining of the social contract between Afghan governments and their *ru'aya* (subjects) has a long history. To avoid contact with alien, oppressive and corrupt officials, people in the north have relied on their mosque-based communities of trust to resolve their conflicts, instead of taking them to the government. These parallel power structures have shielded communities from predatory government agents and have served them well after repeated failures of the state since the 1980s. Such kin- and shari'a-based social units are the most valuable, often democratic local institutions for maintaining order and stability – not only in the north but nationally. Indeed,

the Taliban have used them for administering justice to their own political advantage.

These same local communities of trust in the north also played crucial roles during the successful anti-Communist jihad of the 1980s, and then in the anti-Taliban resistance of the 1990s. The political economy of Pakistan-based jihadi political organisations sponsored by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), however, intentionally created ethnic fissures among resistance groups. Pakistan did not support the formation of Uzbek or Turkmen-led jihadi resistance movements, permitting only one Tajik-led organisation – the Jamiat-e Islami of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a native of Badakhshan.

Pakistan's policy has had very negative consequences in the north. ISI funding enabled Pashtun-led jihadi organisations such as Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami and Abdur Rabb Rasul Sayyaf's Itihad-i Islami to sponsor disgruntled Tajik and Uzbek fronts, in order to rival Jamiat-e Islami throughout greater northern Afghanistan. Turf wars between Hezb-i Islami and Jamiat-e Islami commanders have led to violent conflict with tragic consequences and to lasting tensions. Also, in the absence of external Muslim patrons supporting Uzbek-led Islamic jihadi fronts, some Uzbek leaders such as Rashid Dostum had previously joined the Communist militia to protect their own communities, adding to new conflicts within the Uzbek and Turkmen communities. Today, the Taliban and the Kabul regime alike exploit such these societal fissures in the north.

During the Taliban's triumphant re-conquest of much of the north (1997–2001), in addition to their natural partners in the Pashtun pockets, they also found allies among mullahs and madrasa students. The Afghan Analysts Network 2010 report stated that an estimated 70 per cent of mullahs and over 90 per cent of madrasa teachers in the north had been trained in Pakistan. A number served in or collaborated with the Taliban administration. After the US and NATO intervention of 2001 and especially since 2009, the Taliban have been successful in mobilising young Uzbek, Turkmen, Aimaq and some Tajik mullahs to join their ranks in a number of provinces, especially in Takhar and Badakhshan in the north-east and Faryab and Jawzjan in the north-west. The credibility of Kabul's international patrons among the peoples of northern Afghanistan has also been dwindling, while the diminished circumstances of especially youths in rural mountainous and less accessible districts has made them attractive targets for both Taliban and ISK recruitment.

The Taliban have changed their earlier tactics, now looking beyond reliance on ethnic Pashtuns and instead pitching an Islamic message to question the legitimacy

of 'corrupt', puppet regimes in Kabul and their Western 'infidel' patrons. They have succeeded in garnering support among disenfranchised and marginalised young Pakistani-trained mullahs and madrasa students, and since 2009 in organising non-Pashtuns to form local Taliban fronts in remote parts of Badakhshan, Takhar, Faryab and Jawzjan provinces. The Taliban have integrated Uzbek, Turkmen, Aimaq and Tajiks within their ranks, appointing them to command local units and also to serve in their shadow government.

Today, foreign fighters have relocated from Pakistan to Badakhshan and Faryab provinces, including members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tajik, Chechen and other jihadis. The Taliban has been recruiting non-Pashtuns, substantiating government claims that the violence in Afghanistan is not an exclusively Pashtun phenomenon. At the same time, Pashtun Taliban fighters from Pakistan and southern Afghanistan have also moved to Turkistan, Qataghan and Badakhshan – thereby appearing to continue the long-term project of Pashtun-centred Afghanisation in the north. For some non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan, this process has, intentionally or not, progressed in conjunction with coalition forces. So what are the options to address such challenges?

### **Conclusion: constitutional conflict resolution?**

The project of Pashtun-centred Afghanisation is the product of Afghanistan's problematic political culture, based on prevailing ideals of highly centralised authority, reliance on kinship and tribe, and instrumental abuses of

Islam by powerful, foreign-backed elites. These ideals and practices have been inscribed and justified in all national constitutions since 1923, and affirmed most recently by the 2004 post-Taliban constitution. Addressing them requires appropriate constitutional amendments. These are unlikely to be volunteered by Pashtun powerholders without active external encouragement, however.

The 2004 constitution, like all previous constitutions, denies local Afghans the ability to elect their own governors, mayors and district officers, or to recruit their own professional administrators. The principles of community self-governance that could transform the peoples of Afghanistan from being subjects (*ru'aya*) to empowered citizens (*shahrwand*) has not been prioritised. Recruiting civil servants with local accountability, for example vetted by local *shuras* (elected councils) or committees of peers, can reduce pervasive nepotism and corruption, dilute identity politics and bridge the trust gap between state and society. Indeed, having elected governors could ameliorate the current crisis in Balkh province with Governor Nur.

The existing constitutional provision giving Afghan presidents seemingly royal powers to appoint and remove all government officials, especially at the municipal, district and provincial levels, should not be condoned. If the international community's desire is to enhance long-term security and stability in Afghanistan, it must overtly advocate appropriate amendments to the constitution. In its current form, it is part of the problem – exacerbating conflict and ethnic division.