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# **Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity And Dissidence**

**A Research Paper**

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# Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity And Dissidence



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**A Research Paper**

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**Afghanistan:  
Ethnic Diversity  
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**Summary**

The creation of a sense of national unity among the diverse peoples of Afghanistan has always been one of the most challenging problems to this country's rulers. Afghanistan is a tribal society, composed of some 20 ethnic groups of various backgrounds and cultures. About the only cohesive element among them is their observance of Islamic law. Unlike the present government, many past rulers took tribal opinion seriously and guided rather than ruled.

Opposition to the regime of President Nur Mohammed Taraki is increasing among Afghanistan's devoutly Muslim and fiercely independent tribal population. The most significant cause for resistance is the widespread belief among the ethnic groups that Taraki's government is Communist, atheist, and pro-Soviet. Equally objectionable are the government's reform measures, which are viewed by the ethnic groups as attempts to displace the traditional social structure based on Islam and allegiance to family, clan, and tribe.

Despite the common antipathy to the Taraki regime and its policies, the diverse Afghan ethnic groups are not united in their resistance to the government. The deep-seated animosities that persist among the groups and the division between the followers of the Sunni and Shia Islamic sects that cuts across tribal groups thwart creation of a strong antigovernment front. The greatest threat to the regime is insurgency among the tribes of Taraki's own Pashtun group. Historically it has been the Pashtun—its members have ruled Afghanistan since the 18th century—who have instigated revolts and overthrown the rulers of Afghanistan.

*The above information is Unclassified.*

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**Afghanistan:  
Ethnic Diversity  
And Dissidence** [redacted]

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Reports on the opposition to the year-old regime of Nur Mohammed Taraki generally refer only to the activities and political relationships of the Afghan peoples involved in the increased insurgency in the country. For a better understanding of the situation, knowledge is needed of the position, beliefs, and social structures of the diverse ethnic groups. This paper briefly discusses the ethnic background and culture of the peoples of Afghanistan and their attitudes toward each other and toward the regime.

**Setting**

Afghanistan, slightly larger than the state of Texas, is the meeting place of diverse physical and cultural worlds. Physically, Afghanistan is an extension of the high land mass known as the Iranian Plateau; nearly two-thirds of the country consists of mountains. In central and eastern Afghanistan the mountains—dominated by the Hindu Kush—present a formidable physical barrier and provide a favorable milieu for tribal separatism. To the north, west, and southwest, however, Afghanistan merges with the high plains and plateaus of central and south Asia. Across this region of transit has come a succession of peoples—Aryans, Medes, Persians, Greeks, Turks, and Mongols—bent on trade and conquest; others have climbed the passes and crossed the plateaus bearing the message of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Islam. It is from this mixture of peoples and cultures that the modern state of Afghanistan has been emerging since the 18th century. [redacted] 25X1

Each of the approximately 20 ethnic groups in Afghanistan has certain distinctive physical characteristics, differing social institutions, and varying sets of

values.<sup>1</sup> The origins and kinships among the many groups are a matter of scholarly controversy because of the lack of indigenous written records, fragmentary historic sources, and scanty archaeological, anthropometric, and serological evidence. By size, the major groups include the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara; other important groups include the Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Nur, Baluchi, and Brahui.<sup>2</sup> Of the total estimated population of 15 million, about 50 percent are Pashtun and nearly 30 percent are Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Total population estimates, however, are confused by the *kuchis*, or Afghan nomads, who number from 2 to 4 million and are members of several ethnic groups. Many of the tribal people have ethnic ties with peoples inhabiting adjacent areas of the USSR, Iran, and Pakistan. [redacted] 25X1

Despite considerable diversity, there are common ties of language and religion that provide some element of cohesiveness among the groups. The common language is Dari, the Afghan form of Farsi (Persian), which is used by all groups but is not the first language of an individual group. Nearly all of the ethnic groups are Muslim and about 80 percent are of the Sunni sect, while the remainder are adherents of the Shia sect. Although the two sects are contentious, the division has not resulted in the bloody confrontations that have occurred in other Muslim lands. [redacted] 25X1

<sup>1</sup> For detailed discussion of selected ethnic groups, see pp. 4 to 6.  
<sup>2</sup> There is no standard or agreed spelling of the names of the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In the absence of an official census list, the names used here are those that appear most consistently in authoritative sources. For example, alternate names for Pashtun include Pushtun (name used in Pakistan) and Pathan (the Indian corruption of Pashtun); Uzbek or Uzbak for ~~Uzbek~~; Turkoman for Turkmen; and Chahar Aimak simply Aimak [redacted] 25X1

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**Ethnic Attitudes and Rivalries**

Tribes and tribalism remain important in Afghanistan, particularly among the Pashtun, whose Durrani tribal families have ruled the country since its unification by one of them in the 18th century. The Pashtun are strong in number; some of their tribes, such as the Durrani, Ghilzai, and Yuzufazai, individually have at least a million members. The degree of tribal loyalty, however, varies considerably among the Pashtun, and tribal feuds and rivalries at times have been divisive forces in the country. The Durrani, though divided into numerous subtribes or clans and widely scattered, usually have rallied to a common cause when the need arose.  25X1

It is the opinion of most of the major ethnic groups that Afghanistan is run by Pashtuns for Pashtuns, and that what prevails is internal colonialism. Pashtun govern most provinces, even those in which another ethnic group is in the majority, and hold most administrative posts. The favored Pashtun position is reflected in the way Kabul thrives, apparently at the expense of the provinces. Its growing modernity is viewed with envy by provincial Uzbeks and Hazaras. Although improvements in health facilities, roads, airfields, and agriculture have been made in other provinces, government efforts have been concentrated in Pashtun provinces or in Pashtun-settled areas.  25X1

Antigovernment, anti-Pashtun alienation is particularly strong among the Uzbeks, a sophisticated and capable people who provide the bulk of the country's professional men and entrepreneurs. The Uzbek often feels no confidence in the economy, feels he has no stake in the country, and prefers to keep his wealth in the local equivalent of a sock under the mattress. On the other hand, the Uzbeks have a reputation among the Pashtun for indolence and procrastination, though there has been little if any active discrimination or hostility between them.  25X1

The Hazaras generally have preferred to keep to their central mountain homeland where they are almost literally inaccessible to all forms of government authority, from tax collection to police. In recent years, however, a few thousand have left their mountains as

Army recruits, or to settle in cities where most of them are employed as manual laborers and servants. Traditional hostility toward them because of their adherence to the Shia sect of Islam combined with their Mongoloid features and their indifference to Kabul has contributed to their inferior social and economic status.  25X1

Of the four major ethnic groups, the Tajiks are the least likely to oppose acts of Pashtun colonialism. They are a peaceful people—traditionally poets, dreamers, and intellectuals—who are unassertive in their pride of being Tajik. The Tajiks have lived in harmony with the Pashtuns, and a number of them have held high government posts. Neither intermarriage nor social intercourse between the two peoples is common, however.  25X1

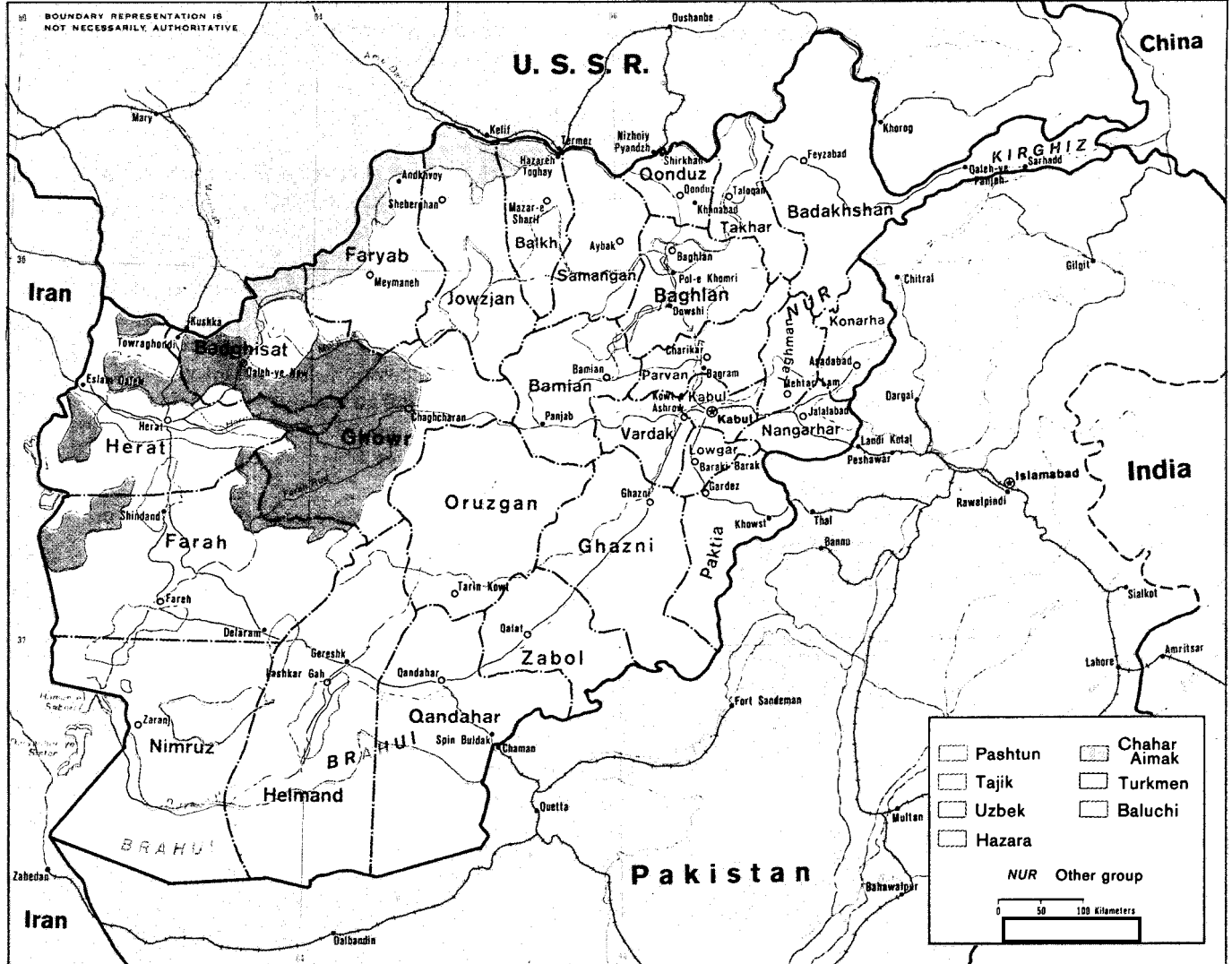
The *kuchis* include members from nearly every ethnic group in the country and possibly represent one-fourth of the total population. The *kuchi* regards his way of life as the most dignified, and he distrusts variation and change. For many years the *kuchi* have taken their caravans to Pakistan and India to trade wool and animal products for goods they could in turn trade to the farming communities in Afghanistan. The poorer nomads go to Pakistan during the winter months to sell their labor. The periodic closing of the Afghan-Pakistan border causes them great hardship. Government attempts to settle the *kuchis* permanently have met with little success because they are highly suspicious of any attempt to restrict their movements or record their numbers, and feel little if any loyalty to the abstract concept of the state or the Kabul-centered government.  25X1

**Resistance to the Policies  
Of the Present Regime**

The most important cause of opposition to the present regime is the belief among the peoples of Afghanistan that the Taraki government is Communist, atheist, and pro-Soviet. During the past year, the heavyhanded suppression of the mullahs and other government

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# Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan



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actions that impinge on the Islamic way of life have rapidly stirred hostility in the villages and rural areas where 85 percent of the population lives. Resentment has also grown among the less conservative urbanites—even among some of those loyal to the government—because they feel the regime challenges basic Islamic institutions that they at least respect. The pro-Soviet stance of the regime and the presence of Soviet advisers in the country arouse historical feelings of mistrust of the “Russians” and fears that the “Russians” are running the country. To an Afghan, the regime’s policies are tantamount to treason and a threat to his fiercely held independence. [ ]

The regime’s programs for social and land reform are another cause of opposition. Most of the resistance is in response to the forcefulness of the government’s action. But, more importantly, the programs are regarded as attempts to displace tribal structure and family ties and are viewed as violations of Islamic precepts of authority and *pardah*<sup>3</sup> (the position of women) [ ]

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In implementing land reform, government officials have found recipients reluctant to accept land because of loyalty to tribal leaders or fear of reprisals if the regime is overthrown. The program has also created hostility between the new landlords and the nomads who have lost grazing rights recognized by the former landowners with whom they had ethnic and sometimes family ties. Pressure from their mullahs and fellow tribesmen, together with the inability to profit from newly acquired land in the short time since the program was initiated, has dissuaded potential new landowners from cooperating with the government [ ] [ ]

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Because only about 10 percent of the people are literate, the government initiated an illiteracy eradication program aimed at everyone from the ages of 14 to 40. Reaction to this program has been particularly hostile, mainly because it forces women out of *pardah* into public life. [ ]

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<sup>3</sup> The institution of *pardah* is particularly strict in Afghanistan. Women must be covered from head to foot in public, and they are generally confined to the home. Even their contact with male relatives is limited. Only when they work in the fields, or if they are nomads or servants, are women freed from some of the constraints of *pardah*. [ ]

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Resistance to these programs has resulted in the assassination of government officials, teachers, and police sent into the provinces to implement the programs. Violent elimination of the uninvited has always been the expedient way of solving local problems in Afghanistan. [ ]

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The greatest threat to the regime is from the tribes of Taraki’s own ethnic group, the Pashtun. In addition to their hatred of his anti-Islamic, pro-Soviet regime, they, as the principal landowners, deeply resent the land reform program. The Pashtuns are responsible for most of the insurgency that is escalating throughout the country, but because of old rivalries there is little cooperation among the various tribes. The spread of their guerrilla forces and an increase in desertions from the Afghan Army are, however, causing a serious drain on the regime’s resources [ ]

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On the surface there is little evidence that old frictions among the various ethnic groups have developed. Thus far the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks have not openly retaliated against Pashtun discrimination, domination, and exploitation. It is probable that they believe that no matter what happens with the present regime the Pashtuns will retain their dominant position in Afghanistan. This belief partly explains why some non-Pashtun personnel have deserted the Afghan Army and joined Pashtun guerrilla forces. Another reason for their desertion may be the growing antipathy, regardless of group or tribal ties, to the idea of Afghans killing Afghans at the instigation of Soviet advisers.

## The People

### Major Ethnic Groups

The Pashtuns have been the dominant people in Afghanistan since its beginning as a nation in the 18th century. They are concentrated in the east and south, but in the late 1900s many were forcibly resettled north of the Hindu Kush. Loyalty to the clan or tribe varies from group to group but is usually strong, and all have extreme pride in their Pashtun identity. The

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majority of them are farmers, usually freeholders, and a number are landlords employing non-Pashtun as tenants or laborers. Except for a few tribes who are Shiites, the Pashtun are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam. They are predominantly light-skinned brunettes, long-headed, with prominent facial features, and of slender build. Brown eyes predominate but hazel or blue eyes are not unusual among them. They speak Pashto, an Iranian variant of Indo-European and related to Persian, Baluchi, and Kurdish. [ ]

The Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group and are scattered throughout the country, with major concentrations in the east and west. They are not considered to be a distinct group, but consist of several peoples who share no more than a name, language (Tajiki, a Farsi dialect), and sedentary living habits. Those in the west are sometimes called Fairswan and probably are distantly related to the people of eastern Iran. Those north of the Hindu Kush are believed to be descended from ancient Iranians who have mixed with Turkic peoples. The mountain Tajiks, who have Mongolian admixture, appear to have been among the earliest or, according to Soviet ethnologists, the indigenous inhabitants of the far northeast. [ ] 25X1

Tajiks are not tribal, but they do have a strong sense of community loyalty. Most are tenant farmers and laborers; some engage in trade or handicrafts. They are not belligerent except for a few groups of mountain Tajiks who some consider as aggressive as the Pashtun. Similar to the Pashtun, the Tajiks are adherents of both the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, but the majority are Sunni. Scanty anthropometric studies describe the Tajiks as round-headed with oval faces and usually of slender build. They are light-skinned brunettes; occasionally there are individuals with reddish or yellowish colored hair. Even among the mountain Tajiks, lightness of skin and hair color can be found blended with Mongoloid traits [ ]

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The Uzbek live north of the Hindu Kush on the plain of the Amu Darya. Uzbek is a name applied to Turkic tribesmen who came to Afghanistan in the mid-15th century. The Uzbek are a mix of Turko-Mongol peoples who intermingled with descendants of an ancient Iranian plateau people. Modern Uzbek have either Mongoloid or Caucasoid features, or a blend of the two. They tend to be round-headed, have yellow-white skin color and broad cheekbones, and occasionally the epicanthic fold. The Uzbek have relinquished their tribal affiliations and nomadism and are mainly farmers; however, many are successful merchants and artisans. Unlike the Pashtun and Tajik, the Uzbek are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam and have no Shiite minority. Their language, Uzbeki, is believed to be a derivation of medieval Turkish. [ ] 25X1

The Hazara homeland, which is called Hazarajat, consists of the upper Helmand valley area west of Kabul. Smaller groups are located farther north in Bamian and in the far northeast in Badakhshan. The Hazara are believed to be of Turko-Mongol origin. They possibly are descendants of Mongol soldiers who intermarried with a mountain Tajik population in the 13th and 14th centuries, although it is more likely that their ancestors predate the Mongol conquests. [ ] 25X1

Whatever their origin, the Hazara culturally resemble the mountain Tajiks but speak a Persian dialect called Hazaraghi. Physically, they have coarse black hair, yellow to yellow-brown skin color, are round-headed with broad faces and prominent cheekbones, and have a high incidence of the epicanthic fold. [ ] 25X1

Unlike the Tajiks, they are divided into tribes and, although some are nomadic, the majority are pastoral farmers. The Hazara are the only major Afghan ethnic group that adheres to the Shia sect of Islam. Reputedly, they are physically strong, enduring, and industrious in tasks that do not require much mental ability. They make good soldiers and are regularly recruited into the Afghan Army. [ ] 25X1

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**Other Ethnic Groups**

To the north and west of the Hazara live the Chahar Aimak ethnic group, which is divided into four main subdivisions or tribes. The main group also includes small cultural groups of mountain peoples, about whom little is known. The Chahar Aimak are generally believed to be of Turko-Mongol origin, but there is a theory that peoples of Indo-European origin have been included in this group. Mongoloid traits, however, are dominant among the Chahar Aimak population. Many of the Chahar Aimak are seminomadic and live in yurts or yurtlike tents; the remainder are farmers. They speak a dialect of Farsi that contains many Turkic loan words, and they follow the Sunni sect of Islam.

The Turkmen, who live mainly in the northwest, are another Turkic group like the Uzbek. Most authorities believe the Turkmen descended from the Oghuz Turks who came to Afghanistan in the 11th century, although they may have other strains in their ethnic background. They speak a variant of a European Turkish dialect and are adherents of the Sunni Islamic sect. The Turkmen, unlike the Uzbek, are still pastoral tribal nomads, and they maintain few contacts with other Afghans. During the 1920s their numbers were swelled by Turkmen entering Afghanistan from the north as refugees from Soviet collectivism. They have a distinct economic role as breeders of Karakul sheep whose pelts—Karakul, astrakhan or Persian lamb—are a main Afghan export. The Turkmen women are the dyers and weavers of the deep-red "Bokharan" rug, another leading export.  25X1

The nomadic Baluchi speak an Iranian dialect and are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam. They are found in the sparsely populated southern borderlands of Afghanistan and are related to the Baluchi who settled in villages south of Herat during the migration of the Baluchi eastward from Iran in earlier times.

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The Brahui, also located in southern Afghanistan, include both farmers and nomads who speak a Dravidian language. They are believed to be descended from an aboriginal people driven south by the Aryans and possibly to share a common ancestor with other dark-skinned, Dravidian-speaking peoples of south Asia.

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The Nur live in the eastern mountains of Afghanistan. Their origin and kinship are ethnic mysteries, for they have a range of skin, eye, and hair coloration that includes a blond strain. At one time they were considered to be descendants of ancient Greeks, but it is now thought they may be related to an earlier people from central Asia. They are renowned mountaineers. Subdued by an Afghan ruler in the 19th century, many were converted to Islam (Sunni sect), and the name of their country was changed from Kafiristan (land of infidels) to Nuristan (land of light).  25X1

The Nur consist of two main groups subdivided into a number of tribes. They speak dialects of an Indic variant of Indo-European that is closely related to Dardic. Their traditional religious practices—now largely unobserved—consist of a combination of animism and polytheism, featuring ancestor worship, animal sacrifices, wooden idols, and grave effigies. The Nur carry on a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy, farming the lower slopes but perching their villages high above the valley floor. They prefer the isolation of their mountains and deeply resent government interference.  25X1

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The Kizilbash, descendants of a Turkish garrison left in Kabul by a Persian conqueror in the mid-18th century, are an urban group, who adhere to the Shia sect of Islam. They generally are well educated, and some hold important government positions or are traders. Other strictly urban groups include Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews, who primarily are merchants, traders, and moneylenders in the towns and cities throughout Afghanistan. The Kirghiz are a pastoral Mongoloid people who speak a dialect of Turkish and are members of the Sunni sect of Islam. They inhabit the Wakhan Corridor area in the far northeastern extension of Afghanistan. Other minority groups are the Moghuls, who live in the western and northern parts of the country and claim descent from Ghengis Khan, and the nomadic "Arabs" or "Sayyid," who live on the northern plains.

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