



ISHAQZAI TRIBE

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Ishaqzai Tribe: Origins of Their Grievances

*Once there was The People - Terror gave it birth;
Once there was The People, and it made a hell of earth!
Earth arose and crushed it. Listen, oh, ye slain!
Once there was The People - it shall never be again!*
Rudyard Kipling

The Ishaqzai tribe, a member of the Panjpai group of the Durrani Confederation, has seen its fortunes wane considerably since the Durrani came to power in Afghanistan in 1747. Their loss of power and prestige was also accompanied by loss of livestock, many lost their nomadic lifestyle, and some were also deprived of a respected status as warriors. With their loss of prestige came a derogatory name that was applied to them as many impoverished Ishaqzai nomads were forced by circumstance to become farmers. To the other Durrani, they became “Sogzai,” or the “Vegetable People.” With their losses came estrangement from the government leaders in Kabul, the very Barakzai monarchs drawn from their fellow Durrani, who made the decisions that cost the Ishaqzai so dearly. This estrangement continues today with more Ishaqzai leaders affiliated with the Taliban than with the Kabul administration of Hamid Karzai, a fellow Durrani.

The Ishaqzai tribesmen appear to be sensitive to their social status in the competition for primacy within the Pashtun – particularly the Durrani confederation – power structure. Their original tribal area is probably located in Helmand Province and Antonio Giustozzi explains their competition with the Alizai tribe, another Durrani Pashtun tribe. Both are members of the Durrani Panjpai subconfederation, but this doesn’t slow their competition.

Giustozzi explains:

“...Ishaqzai communities, which had been very influential in Helmand under the Taliban regime, at the expense of the Alizais who had dominated the province until 1994. With the fall of the Taliban, Alizai circles around Sher Mohammad Akhundzada were again elevated to the power they had been holding in 1981-94 and proceeded to marginalize and “tax” Ishaqzai communities. In 2006, a violent conflict broke out.¹ The Taliban exploited the conflict to consolidate their influence in Sangin district, where the Ishaqzai are the majority of the population, but this did not prevent them from maintaining their pockets of support among Alizai clans hostile to Sher Mohammad, such as in Baghran and in other parts of northern Helmand.”²

1. Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was removed from the governorship in Helmand in 2006. Regardless of his personal shortcomings, Sher Mohammad knew how to manage tribal balance of power better than many of Afghanistan’s governors.

2. Giustozzi, Antonio, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, pp. 60-61.

Leaders:***Taliban***

- Maulvi Abdul Sattar Sanani: Chief Justice of the Kandahar Supreme Court, member of the most senior Taliban at the age of 80.³
- Akhtar Mohammad Osmani: Taliban Kandahar Corps commander, killed 19 December 2006.⁴
- Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor: Taliban Minister of Civil Aviation, member of Quetta Shura.⁵
- Nur Ali Haidery: Director of Ariana Afghan airlines who has since reconciled with the government of Afghanistan.⁶

Afghan Government

- Maulavi Abdullah Fayezi: leader of the Council of Scholars in Kandahar and a pro-government cleric, assassinated on 29 May 2005.⁷ Other attempts were made on his life, including a bomb attack on his mosque in July, 2003.⁸
- Malalai Ishaqzai: A female member of Parliament from Kandahar province's Panjwahi district.⁹

Ideology: Generally Sunni Islam, tribally Panjpai Durrani, and the rural Ishaqzai are generally estranged from the central government. This tribe is oriented substantially toward the insurgency and the drug industry.

The context of the period in which the Ishaqzai suffering occurred is important to understand. It shows well that the Afghan people suffered with great tyranny long before the Soviet Union sent its troops across the Oxus River. Jonathan L. Lee describes the situation in Afghanistan during the 1880's better than most:

“The secret history of what a senior British official termed the “Reign of Terror” contained within the India Office diaries reveal the extent to which Britain’s foreign policy ‘success’ was achieved only at the price of the blood of the peoples over whom the Amir wielded absolute and untrammled power. During the course of twenty-one years Abd al-Rahman Khan probably had as many as 100,000 persons judicially executed, whilst hundreds of thousands more perished from hunger, forced migrations, epidemics, or died as a result of the numerous campaigns which the Amir conducted against various ethnic, tribal and sectarian interests. The fear that the Amir’s atrocities engendered was a shadow which fell across the lives of everyone in Afghanistan. From the heir apparent to the water carrier no-one was exempt from what the Kabulis called the ‘Power that walks in darkness.’

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3. http://www.khyber.org/articles/2003/profiles_of_taliban_leaders-chart.shtml accessed 11 October 2009.
 4. Giustozzi, pg. 47, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akhtar_Mohammad_Osmani accessed 11 October 2009.
 5. Giustozzi, pg. 47, http://www.interpol.int/public/Data/NoticesUN/Notices/Data/2007/49/2007_47849.asp accessed 11 October 2009.
 6. <http://www.waleshome.org/200/08/general-dostum-and-the-flipping-future/> accessed 11 Oct 2009.
 7. http://www.medregion.mepi.state.gov/karen_hugues.html accessed 11 Oct 2009.
 8. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1434643/19-wounded-in-attack-on-mosque.html> accessed 11 Oct 2009.
 9. <http://www.thestar.com/News/World/article/580380> accessed 11 Oct 2009.

“...for the people of Afghanistan, from the Ishaqzai tribesmen of Badghis Province ... it is the atrocities which dominate the folk memories which have survived from this era.”¹⁰

But the Ishaqzai had not always been the “Vegetable People.” They were nomad maldars¹¹ who owned large flocks that left them independent as they wandered across ancient migration routes to summer and winter grazing areas. Their men were warriors and their chiefs were respected leaders who participated in the councils of the great men of the time. One of their near legendary leaders, Musa Khan, also called Musa Dungi,¹² managed to escape the Persian siege of Herat to find salt and grain for his men before returning to the besieged city to share their fate. Later, after the city surrendered to the Persian leader Nadir Shah, and the captured Durrani were forced into Persian service, Musa Khan accompanied Nadir Shah in much of his remaining campaign¹³. Another sign of the relative power of the Ishaqzai tribe during this period of their history is well illustrated by the presence of Musa Khan in the council of senior Pashtuns that selected Ahmad Shah Abdali as the Durrani Confederation leader in 1747.¹⁴

Abd al-Rahman Khan, or Kabul’s “Iron Amir,” saw a large problem along the northwest border of Afghanistan in 1886. The area had been generally depopulated by Turkman raids that were nearly a continuous threat to the region for most of the 19th century. Nancy Tapper studied the situation carefully and wrote:

“The once prosperous settlements north and west of Miamana were abandoned by 1880, having ‘gradually succumbed to the attacks of the Turkomans one after another, in many cases being absolutely destroyed, the people – men, women, and children – all being carried off into slavery, and the result is that no one has dared to go out to those places ever since.’”¹⁵

With a large portion of Afghanistan’s potentially prosperous land left fallow due to depopulation, Abd al-Rahman Khan began to develop a plan to stabilize this crucial border region. In addition to depopulation, this was happening during the “Great Game” between Russia and Great Britain. The Iron Amir – and his British allies – believed that blocking Russian access to the region was still a vital strategy needing done. The British viceroy in nearby India began to provide an annual subsidy as attempts were made to place border guards into strategic locations. These attempts began to fail and the Iron Amir began to introduce large numbers of Pashtuns, his own ethnic group, into the region.¹⁶

Few of the Durrani leaders were willing to migrate with their tribe and some went to Kabul to complain in person. They felt that since their Durrani tribesmen already had land in southern Afghanistan, there was no reason to move north to obtain land. Unfortunately for the Durrani leaders, the Amir now intended to create a more comprehensive Pashtun colonization of the northwest in a move that would involve many of the Ishaqzai and Noorzai families living in Farah Province¹⁷.

10. Lee, Jonathan L., *The Ancient Supremacy: Bukhara, Afghanistan, and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901*, pg. xxiv.

11. Maldars are pastoralist nomads.

12. Musa Dungi is also referred to as Musa Dunki in histories prepared by regional scholars.

13. M. Hayāt Khan, *Hayāt-e Afghān*, tr. H. Priestley, *Afghanistan and Its Inhabitants*, Lahore, 1874; repr. 1981, pg. 169.

14. Tate, G.P., *The Kingdom of Afghanistan*, pg. 68.

15. Tapper, Nancy, *The Advent of Pashtun Maldars in North-western Afghanistan*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1973), pg. 56.

16. Tapper, pg. 57.

17. Farah Province was much larger during this period and included most of southern Afghanistan. Herat and Kandahar Provinces were not a part of this large province. See Adamec, vol. II, for additional information.

The key person in the Amir's plan was Taju Khan, the Ishaqzai chief who was involved in providing security for the first group of migrants into the Badghis region. With the help of Taju Khan's *sowars*¹⁸, a large group of Durrani were collected in Pusht-i Rud and forced them to march northward.¹⁹

Taju Khan was easier to convince than the Durrani leaders of southern Afghanistan. Jonathan Lee explained the reason and the Amir's tactic used to secure the cooperation of the Ishaqzais.

“Whilst the outcome of the power struggle between the Amir and these Durrani chiefs hung in the balance, Abd al-Rahman Khan invited Taju Khan, leader of the Ishaqzai clan, who had already seen service in Badghis some years earlier, to Kabul. The Ishaqzai were nomadic *maldars*, or flock-owners, who already migrated to Ghor during the summer months. Although Taju Khan was regarded by the Qandahari Durrani as a person of no importance, the Amir realized that because the Khan held a very lowly position in the Durrani pecking order, he could be flattered and cajoled into spearheading the migration, whereas the tribal leaders of Qandahar had to be handled with kid gloves. The financial incentives were extremely generous, but it was the Amir's offer of a marriage alliance between Taju Khan's daughter and the heir-apparent, Habibullah Khan, that finally persuaded the Ishaqzai chief to move his tribe to Badghis. No greater compliment could have been offered to this relatively obscure Afghan chief, for by becoming the father-in-law of the future Amir of Afghanistan, Taju Khan's prestige, and that of his tribe was greatly increased and he would be able to demand, if not command, the same respect and honor as a member of the Royal Family.”²⁰

The induced relocation process continued and the composition of a majority of the migrants can be seen through the tribal connections of the men who were placed in charge in Badghis. Two of the senior officials were Ishaqzais and the third was a Noorzai tribesman.²¹

But the spring of 1887 was a disaster for the colonists. They entered a region the year before where there was a crop failure, and the lack of spring rains resulted in failed pastures and, consequently, their animals died in large numbers. The herdsmen soon found life in Badghis to be impossible and they began to return to their former lands in Pusht-i Rud. Those unable or choosing not to return to the south abandoned Badghis and moved toward Miamana and Afghanistan's Turkestan. Their leaders showed the intention of the tribe. Taju Khan and Mir Afzal Khan, the Noorzai leader, returned south.²²

The leaders of the migrating tribes, Ishaqzai for certain and probably many Noorzai, came to believe that Abd al-Rahman had an ulterior motive as he used the migration process to destroy the traditional tribal strictures while forcing the nomadic tribes into farming settlements. Their nomadic lifestyles depended on their sheep which died in large numbers. As news of the disaster was relayed south to other migrating tribes, most, if not all, turned around to return to their tribal lands.

18. Sowars were ordinary cavalry troopers, equivalent the Sepoys serving as infantrymen.

19. Tapper, pg. 65.

20. Lee, *Ancient Supremacy*, pp. 485-486.

21. Tapper, pg. 66.

22. Tapper, pg. 68.

In the end, the Amir's suspected ulterior motives worked well, whether intended or not. Those tribesmen who lost their flocks were forced to accept grain from government reserves as they settled into available valleys they claimed as their own. Predictably, violent incidents ensued between the original land owners and the new arrivals who were becoming settled farmers because of a lack of any other options.

Some of the migrants remained in Badghis, probably those less able to travel due to the loss of their animals in the harsh conditions, while many of the Ishaqzai and Noorzai tribesmen attempted the return journey. From the current scattered presence of these tribes across western and central Afghanistan, it appears that many of the returning migrants gave up on their journey.

As a result, both the Ishaqzai and Noorzai tribes were scattered, lost access to many stabilizing tribal structures, and became farmers from necessity instead of choice. Many of them emerged from the migration process as settled farmers instead of nomads with flocks of sheep.

In their minds, and possibly in reality, their losses were the responsibility of Kabul's central government and an Amir with suspected ulterior motives as the forced migrations were ordered. The resentment felt by the proud Ishaqzai tribesmen appears to have continued to this day. They remain estranged from both the Afghan central government in Kabul and the Zirk Durrani that provided the Iron Amir as their nefarious ruler, while their cousins in the Durrani Confederation began to refer to them as "Vegetable People." Their prestige and honor had slipped considerably since 1747 when Musa Dungi sat in the jirga that selected a ruler for the Durrani tribes.

Given this background and the lack of participation of the Ishaqzai within Afghanistan's national and provincial governments, there should be no surprise when it appears that this tribe is better represented within the Taliban than the national government. Added to their continued estrangement, the Taliban may be "courting" the Ishaqzai and the other Panjpai tribes as they work to split them away from the loose connections afforded them within the Durrani Confederation. Building upon their original grievance toward the central government, this would be a natural course of action for the Taliban to pursue.

The following pair of short case studies reveals the alliances formed by the smaller Ishaqzai groups in northwest Afghanistan after the main group of Ishaqzai under Taju Khan withdrew to Helmand Province. Lacking any Pashtun allies, these weaker, isolated Ishaqzai clans made alliances with the Dari-speakers of the region.²³

One case study involves interaction between Ishaqzai Pashtuns (Omarzai section) and the Dari-speaking Firozkohi population living near Chakhcharan in the Central Hazarajat. The Omarzai winter in



23. This material was drawn from: Rosman, Abraham and Rubel, Paula G., Nomad-Sedentary Interethnic Relations in Iran and Afghanistan, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Oct., 1976), pp. 545-570.

Badghis Province, on the other side of the mountains located northwest of Chakhcharan. Although they are Pashtuns originating from Kandahar, their migration pattern is now in a totally opposite direction.

These Omarzai Ishaqzai developed a permanent winter village in Jawand, Badghis Province, where many of them have farming land and some 20 percent of the Omarzai remain behind in the village to tend crops while their relatives move up to summer pastures with the herds. In addition to their land in Jawand, some of the Omarzai own farming land in a Firozkohi village near Chakhcharan, where Firozkohi tenant farmers share the common harvest. This land was purchased when none of the Firozkohi from the village wanted to buy it.

During the summer, the Firozkohi move with their herds approximately 15 kilometers from the village and set up tents to form a single great encampment with the Omarzai. The Omarzai and Firozkohi are distinct ethnic groups and have different “mother” languages, although both groups are bilingual. They form one summer camp of 40 or 50 tents from each group, although their tent types are so different as to make them immediately distinguishable.²⁴ The two groups represent the nomads and the sedentary agriculturalists, respectively, in the traditionally used categories, but in this case the nomads also farm land and own farmland and the sedentary agriculturalists move with herds of some size from their permanent village to a tent camp nearby. The significance of their living in a single community is reflected in the close relations between their political leaders who refer to each other as “brothers” and operate in terms of their common interests. The reasons for their close alliance, according to Ishaqzai informants from other tribal sections, are because the Omarzai lack sufficient grazing land and because they are the only Ishaqzai in their area and have no Pashtun allies.

Still further west along the road that penetrates the Hazarajat is the town of Shahrak. In this region another group of Ishaqzai Pashtuns, the Sheikhanzai, interact with a different Dari-speaking group – the Taimani.²⁵ The Sheikhanzai are long-distance nomads who formerly wintered to the south of Shahrak, near Gereshk, in Helmand Province, but now spend the winter in Qades near Qala-i-naw, which is northwest of Shahrak. The Sheikhanzai, numbering some 400 households, have their traditional summer grazing land in the area around Shahrak, where the land is held in common and individual family groups have areas within the tribal land to which they go every year. They do not own farming land in the Shahrak area, but may cultivate small patches of wheat along the water courses near their camp. Some still own farming land near Gereshk, which was at one time their winter quarters but is no longer used. These Sheikhanzai act as absentee landlords and receive rent for the use of these irrigated lands from their Noorzai tenants. These Noorzai, a related Pashtun tribe, are linked in marriage to the Sheikhanzai.

In the absence of other Ishaqai subtribes and sections, isolated sections will ally themselves with any of their likeminded neighboring ethnic groups for protection from aggressive tribes in their vicinity. These two examples show Ishaqzai sections allied with the Firozkohi and the Taimani ethnic groups, both Dari-speakers, and the Noorzai, fellow Panjpai Durrani Pashtuns, but these examples are replicated across northwestern Afghanistan where the Ishaqzai were scattered as a result of the maneuvering of Afghanistan’s central government in Kabul. Because of this history of Kabul-based manipulation and the weakening of the Ishaqzai tribe, there is little trust in any central government attempting to govern Afghanistan.

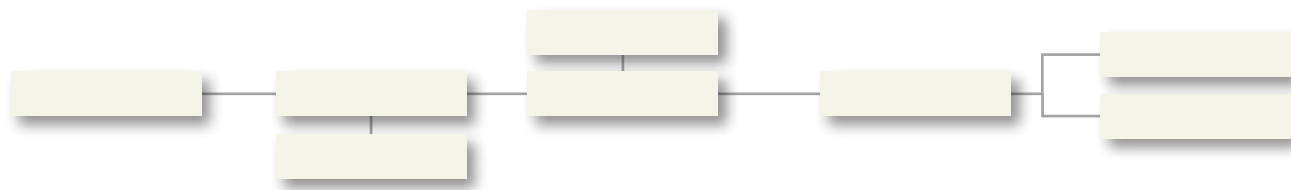
24. The Omarzai live in black tents and the Firozkohi in yurts.

25. The Taimani and Firozkohi, along with two other groups-Timuri and Jamshidi-are usually grouped together as the Chahar Aimaq or Aimaqs. They are all Dari speakers, in contrast to the Pushtuns.

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Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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