



**TAQIYYA:**  
***PROTECTIVE DISSIMULATION PRACTICED BY***  
***AFGHANISTAN'S ETHNIC GROUPS***

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About Tribal Analysis Center

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*We smile for some people, while our hearts curse...<sup>1</sup>*

*Abu al-Darda'*

*Their honor, if such a word can be used at all in relation to them, seldom extends beyond the vindication of their own rights and has little in it of an altruistic or national character. Plausible and specious in their arguments, they often succeed in imposing upon Europeans with their protestations of good faith and honorable intentions, but experience of a very positive nature impresses on us the fact that no Military Commander should ever rely on their good faith alone for the fulfillment of any promises they may make.*

*Handbook of Kandahar Province, 1933*

Westerners tend to accept at face value the often repeated assertion that Pashunwali, the Pashtun code, is honor-based, requires individuals to keep their word, and to follow through on their promises made. While there are individual Pashtuns as honor-bound as the members of any other culture, circumstances exist through which they may circumvent their own code. Solid evidence exists to the contrary and those doubting this analysis have only to conjure up the spirit of Habibullah Kalikani, the Tajik ruler of Afghanistan who was able to gain control of the country for approximately nine months. Assured of good treatment and leniency, Kalikani “reconciled” to the Pashtuns supporting Nadir Shah’s attempt to regain the throne, but he and his lieutenants were soon executed.<sup>2</sup>

How is this done in an Islamic “honor” society? There is a special dispensation that exists to allow for dissimulation by individuals to protect themselves from discrimination and potential harm and even outright trickery during battle. The little known but widespread use of taqiyya, or

<sup>1</sup> Narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 7, pg 102.

<sup>2</sup> A review of Kalikani’s demise is documented in Amin Saikal’s *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, I.B. Taurus, 2006. The comment on page 97 is revealing “... surrendered to Nadir, who promised him a complete pardon and his life. He should have known better the value of such an oath: on 2 November 1929 he was executed.”

protective dissimulation, allows for fabrication, falsehoods, and betrayals under nearly any circumstance and many Afghans excel at this, Pashtunwali code or not. This paper is not intended to be a general denigration of Afghans, especially Pashtuns, but is a warning to be cautious in dealing with them. Many, if not most, are excellent people. Some are not.

While the concept of taqiyya is well documented among the Shi'ia, Afghan Sunnis also rely upon dissimulation to protect themselves. This is especially prevalent in Afghanistan where Persian culture has had such a wide impact and conflict for in excess of thirty years has created so many casualties, destruction, and continuing animosity that learning to lie creatively was a survival mechanism. It would be incredible for the average Afghan not to adopt some form of taqiyya to protect his family and to ensure his personal survival. There are portions of their holy writings that excuse the use of falsehoods for personal protection and Afghans are better at dissimulation than other Muslims. This occurs as they normally deny that they rely upon taqiyya in their interrelationships, particularly those with the infidels – like the Americans and Coalition soldiers fighting the insurgency.

Afghans and the Pashtun tribesmen are warm, loyal friends once the confidence building between members of two different cultures is completed. As might be expected, building trust in a relationship with someone who has gone through two and in many cases three generations of experiencing potentially savage violence is often a slow process. As westerners enter into this process, they need to remember that like Westerners, Afghans of all ethnic groups have different personalities and varying degrees of personal honesty. Most are capable of becoming close personal friends within warm personal relationships that may last a lifetime, but there are some members of this culture who have generally sociopathic tendencies and can be quite traitorous. Learning how to separate these two groups is difficult, but must be done. Those individuals who have negative personality traits can be very self-serving, dangerous, and may be among the best fabricators in the world. Perhaps their ability to clearly recount their “observations” in great, verifiable detail is based on the religious training that requires a great deal of rote memorization and their fabrications are very difficult to uncover, but their ability to recall that they are in a “battle” that provides religious justification for lying to an potential adversary is unmatched. Some Afghans excel at lying.

## ***Background***

An Islamic scholar explains:

“The word ‘al-Taqiyya’ literally means: ‘Concealing or disguising one’s beliefs, convictions, ideas, feelings, opinions, and/or strategies at a time of eminent danger, whether now or later in time, to save oneself from physical and/or mental injury.’ A one-word translation would be ‘Dissimulation’.”<sup>3</sup>

Taqiyya, dissimulation or plain, right-out lying is often believed to be a Shiite Muslim concept. An example is the Iranian revolution of 1979 where Ayatollah Khomeini presented his struggle as one against the Shah as he invited all Iranians to participate in his “revolution.” However, his primary agenda was the introduction of a theocratic Islamic state based on a vicious interpretation of Sharia, Islamic law. Within a year or so his former “allies”, democrats, Marxists, Communists, and Baha’i were being executed. But taqiyya is not just a Shi’a tradition. Far to the west, the Sunni Moriscos<sup>4</sup> once rode out the Spanish Inquisition by hiding their true views. They would openly conform with church requirements to avoiding punishment by going along to mass and then they washed off the “holy water” when they got home. This is a widely accepted religious doctrine that is not well documented because taqiyya allows for dissimulation when this is discussed.

3 <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter6b/1.html> accessed 13 March 2010.

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morisco> accessed 13 March 2010.

Sunni references clearly indicate that al-taqiyya is acceptable to them:

- Ibn Abbas said: “al-Taqiyya is with the tongue only; he who has been coerced into saying that which angers Allah (SWT), and his heart is comfortable (i.e., his true faith has not been shaken), then (saying that which he has been coerced to say) will not harm him (at all); (because) al-Taqiyya is with the tongue only, (not the heart).”
- It has been narrated by Abd al-Razak, Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Jarir, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Mardawayh, al-Bayhaqi in his book “al-Dala-il,” and it was corrected by al-Hakim in his book “al- Mustadrak” that: “The nonbelievers arrested `Ammar Ibn Yasir (RA) and (tortured him until) he (RA) uttered foul words about the Prophet (PBUH&HF), and praised their gods (idols); and when they released him (RA), he (RA)... went straight to the Prophet (PBUH&HF).

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said:

“Is there something on your mind?”

`Ammar Ibn Yasir (RA) said:

“Bad (news)! They would not release me until I defamed you (PBUH&HF) and praised their gods!”

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said:

“How do you find your heart to be?”

`Ammar (RA) answered:

“Comfortable with faith.”

So the Prophet (PBUH&HF) said:

“Then if they come back for you, then do the same thing all over again.”

Allah (SWT) at that moment revealed the verse: “...except under compulsion, his heart remaining firm in faith.... [16:106]”

- It is narrated in al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah, v3, p61, that: After the conquest of the city of Khaybar by the Muslims, the Prophet (PBUH&HF) was approached by Hajaj Ibn `Aalat and told: “O Prophet of Allah: I have in Mecca some excess wealth and some relatives, and I would like to have them back; am I excused if I bad-mouth you (to escape persecution)?” The Prophet (PBUH&HF) excused him and said: “Say whatever you have to say.”

- It is narrated by al-Ghazzali in his book, “Ihya `Uloom al-Din,” that: safeguarding of a Muslim’s life is a mandatory obligation that should be observed; and that lying is permissible when the shedding of a Muslim’s blood is at stake.
- Narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari, v7, p102, that Abu al-Darda’ said: “(Verily) we smile for some people, while our hearts curse (those same people).”
- The (Sunni) commentator of this volume of Sahih Muslim, Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, provides the following commentary: Telling of a lie is a grave sin but a Muslim is permitted to tell a lie in some exceptional cases, and this permission is given especially on three occasions: in case of battle for bringing reconciliation amongst the hostile Muslims and for bringing reconciliation between the husband and the wife.<sup>5</sup>
- “On the battlefield” (dealing with non-Muslims) outwittings are necessary. Hadrat Ali said that in the battlefield one could not observe the highest standard of truth as a Muslim has been exhorted to do in matters of religion. For example, in the battlefield one has to hide facts and outwit the enemy.” (Hadith Sahih Muslim, Vol. 2, ft. #1446)<sup>6</sup>

The battlefield commentary is the connection to the situation found in Afghanistan for generations, if not centuries. With their lives at risk when Shi’a tribes were confronted by larger more aggressive Sunni tribes, as in the Pashtun attacks on the Hazara population at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Hazaras likely claimed to be Sunnis – denying their actual faith – in order to save their lives. It may be al-taqiyya that caused some Shi’a Hazaras to accept the Sunni interpretation of Islam during that period in Qal-e Naw and in the Panjshir Valley region where they are still believed to be Sunni Hazaras<sup>7</sup> but in reality may still be practicing al-taqiyya after a full century of living under the domination of nearby warlike Sunni tribes. The Qizilbash descendents of Shi’a warriors arrived in Afghanistan during Nadir Shah’s invasion. Later, they supported the British during the 1939-42 war and were forced out of Kabul or practice al-Taqiyya in order to be able to stay.<sup>8</sup>

Louis Dupree understood that taqiyya was present in the Afghan population and explained how it functioned within the Afghan Shi’a population:

“A definition of taqiyya, as it applies to Afghanistan, might be “protective dissimulation.” Rather than precautionary dissimulation.... Afghan Shi’ites use taqiyya in a number of situations and may continue to do so for more than a generation. Taqiyya is practiced to save life and protect one’s property against discriminatory taxation, to obtain and hold government jobs, or simply to prevent unpleasant situations from arising.... It may be prudent to define taqiyya in two distinct ways: the way local religious leaders interpret it, and the way it functions in the day-to-day lives of the people involved.”<sup>9</sup>

5 <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter6b/1.html> accessed 13 March 2010.

6 <http://www.danielpipes.org/comments/12309> accessed in 2008.

7 <http://hazara.no/hazaras.html> accessed 13 March 2010.

8 Dorransoro, Gilles, *Revolution Unending: 1979 to Present*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pg. 32.

9 Dupree, Louis, “Further Notes of Taqiyya: Afghanistan,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 99. No.4, Oct., 1979, pg. 681.

Those “day-to-day lives of the people involved” shifted dramatically not long after Louis Dupree wrote about taqiyya in October 1979. It had been bad enough under Taraki and Amin, Afghanistan’s first two Communist presidents, but their aggressive neighbors to the north, the Communists of the Soviet Union were to invade in late December 1979. Their arrival brought even greater conflict that generally pitted the traditional rural Muslim population against the urban Afghans and their Soviet supporters. Violence and depopulation of entire regions resulted and the rural population must have relied upon taqiyya to survive hostile encounters with one side or the other. The Afghans have long had a character that was essentially centered on survival and they were well prepared to adopt whatever means were needed to live through the conflict that was occurring around them. Taqiyya was something that kept them alive when confronted from their enemies. The Ismailis, in particular, rely upon taqiyya to protect themselves from persecution by their Sunni neighbors and the various governments in Kabul over the centuries.<sup>10</sup>

The British wrote of their view of the Afghan character in 1933:

“The Afghan character is a strange blend of virtue and vice. Hardy, brave, proud, simple in their mode of living, frank, prepared to die in accordance with their code of honor yet faithless and treacherous; generous to a degree yet devoured by greed for money; capable of great endurance and of feats of great energy but constitutionally lazy; merry, cheerful, humorous and fond of music yet inclined to be austere. Cupidity, instability, a suspicious nature, intense jealousy, bitter vindictiveness, excitability, impatience, want of self-control and a complete disregard for truth form the chief characteristics of the Afghan nature. They are capable of strong personal attachments but never forget a wrong. Grossly credulous, superstitious, fanatical and bigoted yet knowing little of their religion. Tribal feuds as seldom allowed to be forgotten but on the threat of a common danger widespread fanaticism kindled by “mullahs” and other leaders would have the immediate effect of uniting all the tribes to meet the emergency. Severity and harsh justice are understood and are not resented but nagging merely acts as an irritant. They appreciate justice, an open hand, firmness, patience, good humor and the English disposition to punish and be friends again. They are great travelers and keen observers, shrewd men of business, good traders indefatigable in pursuit of gain, intellectually wide awake, of mental ability and avaricious to a degree. The race is in short a mass of contradictions, which are accentuated by the strong individuality of the people. Though brave almost to recklessness, they are easily discouraged by defeat or failure. Hospitality is part of their creed. A host will defend a guest at the risk of his own life. On the other hand, a host has no scruples against revealing his guest’s future movements to others, who may have the avowed intention of waylaying and murdering him. Their honor, if such a word can be used at all in relation to them, seldom extends beyond the vindication of their own rights and has little in it of an altruistic or national character. Plausible and specious in their arguments, they often succeed in imposing upon Europeans with their protestations of good faith and honorable intentions, but experience of a very positive nature impresses on us the fact that no Military Commander should ever rely on their good faith alone for the fulfillment of any promises they may make. It is in short useless to make any terms with them unless the observance of such terms can be enforced. The treachery and guile of the Afghans in their dealings with foreigners and enemies are but a phase of Afghan patriotism, of an unscrupulous character, doubtless, according to our own standards, but nevertheless practical in its methods, and not wholly unsuccessful in its results, as we know it to our cost. Afghan races show as much aptitude as the Indian for continuous and conscientious application to their duties, provided that respect for their superiors is maintained.”<sup>11</sup>

10 <http://www.gl.iit.edu/govdocs/afghanistan/Religion.html> accessed 13 March 2010.

11 \_\_\_\_\_, *Handbook of Kandahar Province*, 1933.

## ***Key Points:***

- The warnings from the lessons learned the hard way by the colonial British should be remembered. Caution must be used when negotiating with Afghans. Enter into only the agreements in which you have the capability to enforce the results of negotiations. Rely upon total Afghan goodwill and compliance from the Afghan side of any unverifiable agreement made at your peril.
- Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, view concessions as a sign of weakness, not fairness or compassion. Be aware that they often interpret kindness as timidity and weakness. It is wise to demonstrate resolve and force concessions from them rather than become the conciliatory party.
- Design any agreements as a series of “tests” to be successfully achieved to ensure the gradual compliance within larger agreements. Afghans should complete the initial phases of a trust-building agreement before moving forward to any second stage. Never provide money until the product is received unless basic start-up funding is required to initiate a program or project. Divide all projects into phases and fund each subsequent portion once the initial stages are satisfactorily finished.
- Be very cautious with Hazara interpreters and translators, especially when dealing with matters related to Pashtuns. The more powerful Pashtun tribes, especially the Ghilzai, have been preying upon the Hazara population for centuries and they have good reasons to “dissimulate” when translating or advising coalition forces to put their hereditary enemies in the worst possible light. There is an ancient hatred between these two ethnic groups that is the result of multiple Hazara raids and at least one Hazara rebellion against Kabul’s authority that developed into an ethnic cleansing war that decimated the Hazaras. Many of the surviving families were subsequently enslaved and not released from bondage until the period following World War I. Nadir Shah, an Afghan monarch, was assassinated by a Hazara teenager in 1933 and the animosity between these two groups is both recent and continuing. Having a second language-capable officer present to monitor translations during this type of situation may be very useful. The Hazara are primarily Shi’ia and have very good reasons to dissemble when they have an opportunity to create problems for their Sunni enemies. There are many other Shi’ia tribes in the region, especially in Pakistan’s Kurram Agency, and the “Kabuli” population has many Shi’ia present. The Qizlbash and those individuals identified as “Farsiwans” may also be Shi’ia.
- Afghans were described in a 1933 British Army Handbook: “Cupidity, instability, a suspicious nature, intense jealousy, bitter vindictiveness, excitability, impatience, want of self-control and a complete disregard for truth form the chief characteristics of the Afghan nature.” Caution is indicated in all dealings with Afghans until trust relationships are formed.
- During early meetings with Afghans, experienced individuals develop sound relationships by being pleasant, polite, but firm in their approach to the Afghan. Eye contact is necessary, but staring may be seen as being overly aggressive. A low, calm voice shows the Afghan in the relationship that his visitor is confident, wise, and this demeanor may convince the Afghan that his new relationship involves a respected “elder” from another culture. Nothing should be “promised” to an Afghan that cannot be delivered shortly after the “promise” is made. Loud talking and demanding behavior may have an opposite result to what is desired and the westerner exhibiting this behavior may regrettably learn how effective an Afghan can apply the doctrine of al-taqiyya.

“Taqiyya is obligatory in the realm of Taqiyya, and there is no sin for a man who embraces it in order to ward off injustice from himself.”<sup>12</sup>

Excellent relationships frequently emerge between Americans and Afghans, particularly the more egalitarian Pashtuns who are as independent in their views as are their American counterparts.<sup>13</sup> The American is involved in attempts to manipulate the Afghan into doing something they are reluctant to attempt while the Afghan side of the relationship is manipulating the American. Frequently, they manipulate us into doing something positive and intelligent within a complex culture that few Americans will ever understand, but their manipulation can be understood as reluctance on their part to listen to reason. The gift is developing the ability to sort this complexity out.

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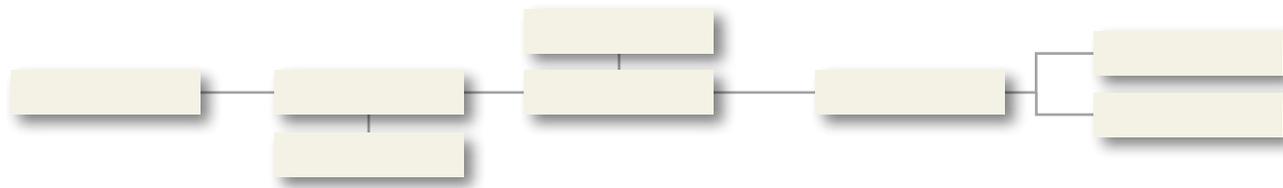
<sup>12</sup> McEoin, Denis, “Aspects of Militancy and Quietism in Imami Shi’ism,” *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11. No. 1, 1984, pg. 20.

<sup>13</sup> In the writer’s 45 years experience with tribal societies, the most helpful, honest individual encountered during this very long period was an Ishaqzai Durrani Pashtun from Kandahar, a member of a tribe that is generally estranged from the central government. Generalizations about members of a particular tribe are often incorrect.

# TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

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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