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# South Asia Notes

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## Afghanistan: Is Ethnic Cleansing in Its Future?

Although the scale of brutalities in Afghanistan's civil war is not comparable to the ethnic cleansing that has occurred in states of the former Yugoslavia, both war-torn regions share disturbing characteristics, including:

- **Intermingled settlement patterns.** Most Afghan ethnic groups inhabit core areas where they form local majorities, although settlement patterns are rarely well defined (*see map*). For instance, ethnic enclaves—some with substantial populations—exist in most Afghan provinces. Complicating matters, some ethnic groups—Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Baloch, for instance—comprise tiny minorities within Afghanistan but maintain ties to much larger populations of ethnic kinsmen across Afghanistan's national borders. Ethnic rivalries thus have no real internal or international boundaries.
- **Refugees.** Some 2.3 million Afghans drawn from most every ethnic community still languish in Pakistani and Iranian refugee camps. The picture is different inside the country, however. According to press accounts, the Taliban's advance into Kabul in September prompted as many as 10,000 non-Pashtuns—Tajiks and Hazaras primarily—to flee the city and seek communal protection in regions where their ethnic kinsmen reside.

- **Availability of modern weapons.** Afghan factions are well stocked with weapons left over from the anti-Soviet *jihad*. Using these arms to annihilate or drive out entire ethnic enclaves would pose political and international problems for Afghan militias, but most have the firepower to undertake such operations against unarmed civilians.

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- **Ethnic panic.** Fear of Pashtun oppression is a recurring theme in Afghan history. The rise of an uncompromising Pashtun movement in the form of the Taliban has brought these latent fears to the surface. Opposition to Pashtun domination tends to unite disparate non-Pashtun factions against the Taliban, thereby deepening the ethnic divide. The absence of an Afghan central government that can defuse potentially murderous ethnic divisions parallels the Balkan experience. [redacted]

Notwithstanding these dangers, we believe it unlikely that Afghanistan will experience largescale ethnic cleansing campaigns. No commander is known to advocate ethnic cleansing as a solution to Afghanistan's political problems. Regardless of ethnic affiliation, Afghan factional leaders are not seeking to carve out independent, ethnically homogeneous mini-states. Moreover, there is no appreciable support for merging ethnic populations into new state combinations—a "greater Uzbekistan" for Central Asian and Afghan Uzbeks, for instance. In theory if not in practice, factional leaders accept the legitimacy of a multi-ethnic, Islamic Afghan state in which minorities share power—albeit as second-class citizens—and enjoy a measure of protection. [redacted]

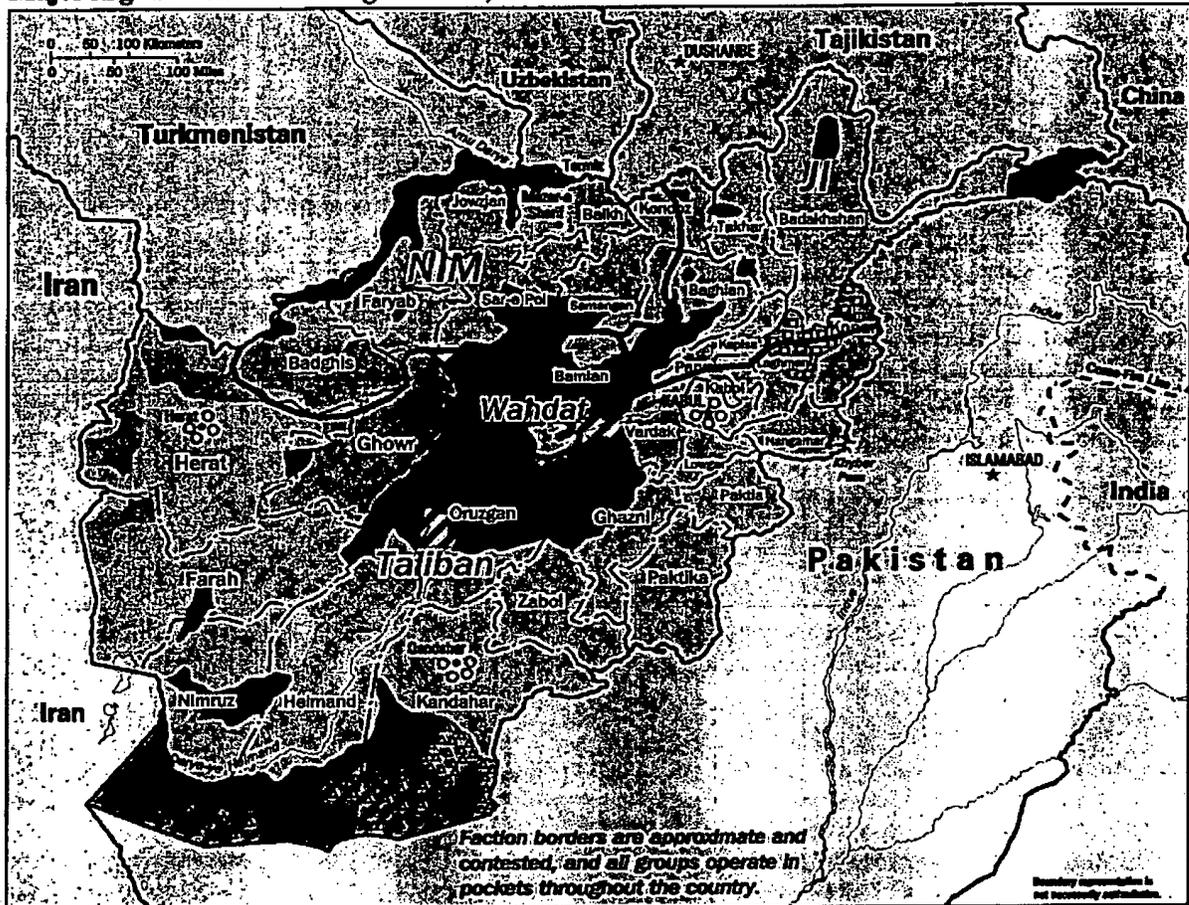


As in the Balkans, we caution that if a rogue commander resorted to a policy of ethnic cleansing, ethnic reprisals would spread quickly and would be difficult to stop. Victim communities would seek communal revenge and possibly look for support from ethnic kinsmen in neighboring states. [redacted]

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**Ethnolinguistic Groups and Territory Held by Major Afghan Factions in Afghanistan, October 1996**



**Percentage of Total Population**

Total population: 21 million

- Iranian
- Baloch
- Chahar Aimak
- Hazara
- Pashtun Durrani, Ghilzai
- Qizilbash
- Tajik
- Turkic
- Kirghiz
- Turkmen
- Uzbek
- Other
- Brahui
- Nuristani
- Faction border
- Jamiat-i-Islami
- NIM National Islamic Movement
- Province boundary

Tajiks  
25.3

Hazaras  
19.0

Chahar Aimaks  
6.3

Other  
1.6

Other Pashtuns  
13.9

Durrani Pashtuns  
11.4

Ghilzai Pashtuns  
12.7

Qizilbash  
1.0

Uzbeks  
6.3

Turkmen  
2.5

