

Tribes in Afghanistan

Take Aways

- The tribal system is a traditional foundation for social identity in Afghanistan, but it is limited to Afghanistan's Pashtun population.
- Tribal institutions have been weakened due to decades of war, decreasing the relevance of tribes in Afghanistan.
- The Taliban exploits local conflicts, providing reliable institutions to enforce dispute resolution, competing against the Government of Afghanistan at the local levels.
- Understanding the relevance of tribes in Afghanistan is important because new development and counterinsurgency strategies include "Tribal Engagement" efforts.
- Defining local violence as "tribal" can risk obscuring the actual causes and stakeholders in a conflict.

Key Terms Defined

- **Jirga** – A meeting of elders, often ad hoc with flexible memberships, agendas, and jurisdictions.
- **Shura** – A council of elders, usually selected for longer time periods.
- **Mechelgha** – an escrow, guarantee, given by disputing parties and returned after parties abide by and implement Jirga's decision.
- **Loya Jirga** – A Grand Council, called by national government or all tribes to discuss a national issue.
- **Tarbur** – Pashto word for "male, father's-side first cousin," also a word for "enemy." Familial disputes over inheritance are common occurrences.

Key Issues

Characteristics of "Tribes" in Afghanistan:

- **Connected by Kinship** – A group with possible common ancestry, often containing complex associations of competing sects, factions, and clans.
- **Informal Governance** – Often operate outside of modern state-imposed institutions, with informal systems for managing resources and conflicts.
- **Opposition to "outsiders"** – Communities unite to repel "outside influence," which is a relative and often changing definition.
- **Pashtun** – Only 38% of the Afghan population, the Pashtun, can be describe as having "tribal" characteristics. Discussing tribes in the context of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, and many city-dwellers is as relevant as discussing "tribes in France."

Relevance of Tribes – Tribes are one possible source of an Afghan's identity, but tribes are not collectively-acting political units. No evidence exists of tribes coalescing into large-scale bodies for joint-action, including for territorial defense. Tribal identities are flexible and may not necessarily determine behavior or allegiance.

Tribal Organization – Afghan tribes are not hierarchical, there is no "chief" with whom to negotiate or to enforce collective agreements. They are loose collections of affiliated Pashtuns, which often do not organize groups based on family relationships; this has historically stymied attempts by central governments to establish control over tribes.

Traditional Institutions – In areas with both weak and strong tribal identities, Afghan communities generally embrace institutions with similar features: *Jirgas* and *Shuras* (traditional councils). However, there may or may not be strong tribal institutions to enforce obligations and agreements on community members.

'Detribalization' – Decades of war caused many social and economic changes, weakening traditional tribal institutions. Warlords and local strongmen, through their distribution of resources in patronage networks, have overtaken the traditional power of village elders in many parts of Afghanistan.

"Tribal" Violence – Only 20% of local conflicts are between tribal communities. More often violence is local, frequently triggered by land disputes: arable land is prized in Afghanistan's steep valleys, and inheritances can trigger violence between cousins.

The Taliban are not Tribal – The Taliban organize along Pashtun nationalism, pan-Islamism, and anti-Karzai/NATO sentiments. The Taliban exacerbate and exploit local "tribal" conflicts, and through their "shadow government" they quickly provide justice perceived as fair. This widens the gulf between Afghans and their government, which is increasingly seen as corrupt and ineffective.

In the News

In exchange for loyalty and support against the Taliban, **U.S. military commanders gave \$1 million in development aid directly to the Pashtun Shinwari tribe**, entirely bypassing the Karzai government due to corruption fears. After a *shura*, Shinwari tribal leaders vowed to burn down the home of anyone that harbors the Taliban. Many Shinwaris had economic rationales for changing loyalties: the Taliban were encroaching on their smuggling businesses. ([New York Times](#)) 27 January 2010.

Possible Questions

- What are the **long term consequences of directly funding tribes** to secure loyalty against the Taliban? Will this hurt the ability of Government of Afghanistan to govern its people?
- What is being done to **prevent the Taliban from exploiting local conflicts** to expand its influence?
- Are there any efforts to strengthen traditional institutions and link them to formal governance structures?

Further Reading

[My Cousin's Enemy Is My Friend: A Study of Pashtun "Tribes" in Afghanistan, HTS](#)