

Response

Afghanistan: The conflict between Hazaras and Kuchis in the Beshud Districts of Wardak Province

Topics/questions:

- What are the main causes of the conflict between Hazaras and Kuchis in Behsud in Wardak province?
- How are the attacks between the groups organised?

Brief information about the background of the conflict

The conflict between Hazaras and Kuchis¹ in Wardak province dates back to Abdur Rahman Khan's regime at the end of the 19th century and the policy pursued by the regime to secure control of the Hazara-dominated central areas of Afghanistan (Hazarajat). In addition to waging war, endeavours were made to establish influence and control by moving religiously educated Sunni Pashtuns into these areas. Taxes were also levied on the Hazaras, arrangements were made to facilitate the buying and selling of Hazara slaves (prohibited in 1923), and Pashtuns from the south, primarily from the Kandahar area, were encouraged to migrate into these areas (Milich 2009).

According to Rassul (2010), the Hazara communities in the central parts of Afghanistan were relatively independent before Abdur Rahman gained control. During the reign of Rahman, many Hazaras were killed or forced to leave the area, and Kuchis allied with Rahman were given rights to grazing land in the areas (Ferdinand 2006, pp. 186 – 188)². Since Abdur Rahman's time, the Hazara people have been exploited and oppressed by many regimes in Kabul, most recently by the Taliban, among other things through taxation, the redistribution of land, forced marriages and the promotion of Pashto at the expense of Hazaragi (the Hazaras' spoken language, a dialect variant of Dari).

¹ Kuchi means 'nomad' in Dari. The term refers to a social group and not to ethnicity. However, the Kuchis are primarily Pashtuns from the south and east of Afghanistan.

² According to Ferdinand (2006), it was primarily Mohmand and Ahmadzai Pashtun who were granted these rights in Behsud by Abdur Rahman.

The consequences of the decrees issued by the Rahman regime, for example making it legal for the Kuchis to use the areas in both the Behsud districts as farmland and summer pastures, are still important factors in this conflict.

While the Kuchis claim that they have been nomads for more than 300 years and that the decrees merely formalised existing activities, the Hazaras believe that the decrees are invalid, among other things because they were annulled under Habibullah³ (Milich 2009; Foschini 2010). *Malik Kako* (as quoted in Ferdinand 2006, p. 189) states that the Hazaras were allowed to return to these areas under Habibullah, among other things because the Kuchis, who had previously been given rights to use the area, informed the authorities that they were not capable of cultivating the area. The PDPA regime took away the Kuchis' rights, but they were reintroduced under the Taliban.

Since 2007, the conflict in Wardak province, especially in the two Behsud districts (subsequently referred to as I and II), has become more intense, with seasonal violent attacks. There is still a lot of disagreement about the allocation and use of the areas in Behsud. Under Karzai, the conflict between the Hazaras and Kuchis is still unresolved, both legally and politically.

Socio-economic conditions

Both the Hazara people and the nomadic Kuchi people have been politically, socially and economically marginalised in Afghanistan, and the intensity of this conflict must be seen in conjunction with the groups' generally weak socio-economic position. Compared with the rest of the Afghan population, a large percentage (more than half) of the Kuchis live below the national poverty line (ICON-Institute 2009, IV Key Indicators, p. xix).

Access to these land areas is crucial for both groups and is fundamental to their continued existence. *Rassul* (2010, p. 8) points to the vulnerability of both groups and the significance this has for the conflict:

Their high level of vulnerability means that an incidence of a herder being denied access to water or pasture land or a farmer having his crops eaten by a flock of animals will have a significant negative effect on their livelihoods and thus become a major issue. [...] Understanding the desperation and frustration resulting from livelihood shocks in these communities is a key factor in understanding the violent potential of this conflict.

The Kuchis are fundamentally dependent on their livestock having access to water and grazing land, while the Hazaras are dependent on cultivating the areas to secure their livelihood.

³ Abdur Rahman's son, who was in power from 1901 to 1919

Ethnicity and regionalism in Behsud

The development of the conflicts concerning right of use of the Behsud areas is related to and influenced by developments at the national level. Dorronsoro (2005, pp. 268-269) points out that one consequence of the war in the 1980s and 1990s was increased regionalisation:

Several groups underwent a change of status during the war, especially the Hazaras and the Uzbeks who in the past had often been mistrusted and excluded from the army and political authority. These changes had tangible effects in relations between ethnicities examples were a ban on Pashtun nomads from pasturing their flocks in Hazara territory, and pressure on Pashtun minorities in the north due to competition of land. [...] Pashtun minorities were often subjected to pressure by their neighbours and therefore generally supported the Taliban.

Political parties and people with power mobilised with an even stronger focus on local support, ethnicity and ethnic loyalty. National developments, regionalisation and ethnicisation have intensified an economic and political conflict that traditionally has strong ethnic and religious undercurrents.

Rassul (2010, p. 10) argues that the Kuchis emphasise ethnic and religious superiority in relation to the Hazaras and that this superiority legitimises the right of use:

The fact that most of the nomads are Pashtun enables them to draw upon the history of this country, which has been shaped by Pashtun leadership to build a sense of superiority. A sense of superiority in this case means that the nomads see these lands as rightfully belonging to them and as having an historical understanding of them that is stronger than the settled communities, mixing a sense of superior right with superior might.

On the other hand, settled Hazaras harbour a deep distrust of the Kuchi people, according to Rassul, and see them as representatives of their main enemy in a historical context, the Pashtuns:

There is a sense of fear in settled communities that the nomads will marginalize them even more, drive them further up the mountains and deprive them of their lands and livelihoods. This fear originates from the historical events kept alive among the people of the nomad/Pashtun conquest of their lands under the leadership of Abdur-Rahman Khan and the hardship suffered during the Taliban. The resulting fear and defensiveness is a powerful tool which enables the mobilization of communities, thus making them vulnerable to political exploitation (Rassul 2010, p. 10).

The Kuchis' association with the Taliban probably contributed to cementing this fear and distrust. During the Taliban regime, settled Hazaras were disarmed, while the Kuchis were given permission to carry weapons. This meant that the Kuchis, who had been absent from the central areas since the beginning of the 1980s because of the security situation, could again migrate into Behsud (Rassul 2010).

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A focus on ethnicity and religious affiliation lays the foundation for political manipulation and an escalation of the conflict. The conflict concerning the areas in Wardak has been raised in parliament on several occasions. In 2010, Haji Mohammad Muhaqqeq, the Hazara leader of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, stated that he would go on a hunger strike unless the authorities took the conflict seriously and removed the Kuchis from the area. A Kuchi member of parliament Alam Gol Kochi is said to have argued as follows: 'They [the Hazaras] started the dispute and now that they are defeated they are complaining. I will reclaim the [land] as it is a right given by God' (Foschini 2010). Several Hazara members of parliament allegedly boycotted the parliament for periods of time in protest against the handling of this conflict because they argue that the Afghan authorities (Karzai) show less willingness to resolve it. One of Landinfo's interlocutors, who wishes to remain anonymous, believes that Karzai supports the Hazaras to a certain extent, while representatives of the opposition believe that Karzai is engaged with an ethnic-political game and in reality supports the Kuchis.

The security situation

Approximately 5-600,000 people live in Wardak province. The Hazaras make up about 30% of the population. They mainly live in the north-western part of the province, which includes the Behsud districts. The Pashtuns, who constitute about 60% of the population, live in the southern and eastern areas (Norwegian Embassy in Afghanistan, email July 2008).

The development of the general security situation in Wardak also affects how the conflict between the Kuchis and the Hazaras is played out. The Taliban has increasingly gained control in the Pashtun areas, while the areas dominated by Hazaras have been more stable. It has been reported that some Taliban groups in the area have supported the Kuchis.

In its security report on Afghanistan, Landinfo (2011, p. 17) writes the following about this conflict:

No solution has been found to the conflict between Hazaras and Kuchis, which occasionally flares up in some of the districts in this province. According to one interlocutor, this concerns the districts Hisa-I-Awali Bishud, Markazi Bishud and Day Mirdad. [...] After compensation was paid also in 2010, the Kuchis withdrew from the area. A commission has been appointed to prepare proposals for measures that can contribute to resolving this conflict between the Kuchis and the Hazaras. According to two interlocutors, a relatively high number of Kuchis from the province are said to have sought refuge in Kabul.

UNHCR (2010, p. 32) points to some consequences of this conflict:

'In May 2010, for example, ethnic clashes over grazing rights broke out between the Hazaras and the Kuchis, mainly ethnic Pashtun nomads, in Wardak Province resulting in four fatalities, destruction of houses and displacement. In August 2010, a land dispute between Hazaras and Kuchis in Kabul resulted in the displacement of 250 Kuchi families. Furthermore, the various divisions within an ethnic group may, in some instances, lead to intra-ethnic tension or conflict'.

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Violent clashes in the period 2007 - 2011

The development of the security situation in Wardak, where both the Taliban and Hekmatyar (Hezb-e-Islami) are becoming increasingly stronger, is probably important in relation to the development of the conflict between the Hazaras and Kuchis. In the mid-May 2011, a reliable source in Afghanistan informed Landinfo in an email that Wardak is one of the most unstable provinces and that there have been reports of kidnappings, looting, thefts and murders, as well as distribution of anti-government pamphlets. According to the same source, almost the whole Pashtun population of Wardak was prevented from voting in the parliamentary election due to pressure from rebel groups.

Every year since 2007, with the probable exception of 2009, there have been serious violent clashes in Behsud I and II between Kuchis and Hazaras during the summer months. At a meeting with the Norwegian embassy in 2010, UNHCR stated that there were no violent clashes in Behsud in the summer of 2009. It was claimed that this could have been due to the upcoming presidential election in August 2009. Karim Khalili, an Hazara by ethnicity, was Karzai's vice presidential candidate, and it was seen as strategically important to keep the area stable in order to secure Hazara votes for Karzai. UNHCR indicated that the Kuchis were given a sum of money as a form of compensation for not migrating into Beshud or other Hazara dominated areas.

The following is stated in Landinfo's security report (2011, p. 17): 'In the election year 2009, USD 2 million was given to key Kuchi leaders to prevent clashes. In May 2010, the conflict flared up again, houses were burned and families had to flee.'

Before the election in 2009, according to Foschini (2010), the Hazara leader Muhaqqeq expressed his satisfaction with an agreement he had entered into with Karzai that was intended to ensure that the Kuchis did not enter the Hazara areas. The content of the agreement is unknown, but Foschini points out that it was reported that Karzai managed to keep the area calm by paying Naim Kuchi, member of parliament, Kuchi leader and former Taliban commander, a sum of USD 2-3 million.

IRIN (2010) also points out that there were no violent clashes in 2009:

Most Kuchis rely on animal husbandry for their livelihoods but their access to pasture has diminished due to conflict, environmental, demographic, economic and social and political factors over the past three decades. This has resulted in regular violence between Kuchi herders and mostly Hazaras over the past few years except in 2009.

Information in OCHA's monthly report (2009a, p. 2) for June 2009 diverges somewhat from the information from sources who describe 2009 as a quiet year. This report states that there were violent clashes in 2009 as well, according to UNHCR. The extent of these clashes seems to have been less dramatic than those reported for the years 2007, 2008 and 2010:

UNHCR Bamiyan reports that there have been sporadic clashes between Kuchis and Hazaras in Behsud I and II districts in Maidan Wardak province that left at least three dead and three injured. UNHCR has prepared a contingency plan for potential

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displacements resulting from the conflict and is holding regular coordination meetings with stakeholders. However, it is hoped that the area will remain relatively calm for the rest of the summer).

In May 2011, a reliable source answered Landinfo that 2009 was a quieter year ‘than most years’, but that some incidents were reported. At the same time, the source believed that 2009 was ‘a bit more tense’ than 2008. In July 2009, OCHA (2009b) reported that the situation in Behsud was still stable and that the Afghan authorities had started to plan winter assistance for the area. According to the above source, Kuchis attacked local militias in Khawat in Nawour in Ghazni and Kajab in Behsud I and II in Wardak on 25 September 2009, without the government intervening. Three persons were allegedly killed and two wounded in the clashes. The same source also described conditions in 2008 as ‘relatively calm’, with only five minor conflicts in Behsud I and II and Daimerdad. The source also stated that, so far in 2011, some families from Behsud have already left for Kabul. In the Kajab Valley, approx. 80% of the population is said to have abandoned the villages. The women and children have left, while the men have stayed to look after their property and land. Local civil servants have also informed Landinfo's source that 360 families from Kajab have been internally displaced in Behsud I and II, while even more have left for Kabul.

Based on the previous and current conflict dynamics, the same source believed that there is a risk of further instability and clashes between Kuchis and Hazaras in Behsud I and II. The source also pointed out that the authorities’ lack of political will to intervene in the conflict and the continual challenges of the coexistence between the settled and the nomadic population have resulted in the conflict remaining unresolved.

The organisation of attacks

Landinfo has no information about how the Hazaras and the Kuchis have actually organised and planned violent acts and attacks. However, the information that is available indicates that the conflict is largely characterised by sporadic violent attacks, limited to the summer months in connection with Kuchi nomads entering grazing areas in Behsud. Since 2007, the clashes seem to have become more extensive than in previous years and to be characterised by the active use of weapons.

In an interview with a resident Hazara, it is stated that heavier weapons were used in Daymirdad in 2008:

[...] Nomads in large numbers armed with different types of weapon, for example, rocket launchers, PK's, Havaan and Kalashnikovs attacked the area. [...] The attacks continued until most of the villages in Kujaab Valley were occupied by the nomads. As a result, nomads in Kujaab killed and injured a large number of people, looted their homes and then set them on fire. For three weeks, the area was under the control of the nomads during which all agricultural fields were totally destroyed (as quoted in Rassul 2010, p. 17).

Foschini (2010) reports that 500 – to 1,000 Kuchis participated in the attacks in 2010, that heavier weapons were used and that the attacks bore signs of strategic military planning, without this being described in more detail. The following was stated in an interview with older Hazaras: ‘They came through Logar and other districts of Wardak: a thousand fighters

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with pickups, rockets and machine-guns. Is it not incredible, they come straight into Hazara villages and nobody notices it!' (Foschini 2010).

It has been reported that around ten people were killed in the years 2007, 2008 and 2010. Considerable material damage has also been reported, for example setting fire to houses belonging to the Hazaras and to the Kuchis' tents. Extensive thefts, for example of livestock, have also been reported. Figures from UNHCR (email, May 2010) show that more than 1,800 families were driven away from the area in May 2010.

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A response consists of answers to specific questions presented to Landinfo by case workers within the Norwegian immigration authorities. Responses are not intended to provide exhaustive reviews of a topic or theme, but should answer the specific questions posed and include relevant background information.

Landinfo's responses are not intended to suggest what Norwegian immigration authorities should do in individual cases; nor do they express official Norwegian views on the issues and countries analysed in them.

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