



# ACHAKZAI TRIBE

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The Achakzai tribe's primary home region is in the vicinity of Qila Abdullah in Baluchistan, but the tribal lands extend to the vicinity of Chaman on the Afghan border and individual Achakzai clans reside in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province. Their territory includes the built up areas of Quetta, Qila Abdullah, Mian Wali, and the Pashtun areas of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that includes both North and South Waziristan, Baluchistan, and the North-West Frontier Province. The tribe is a strong advocate of a Pashtun national entity, Pashtunistan. Tribal leadership is openly pro-Afghanistan and pro-Karzai.<sup>1</sup> The tribe's senior leader, Mehmood Khan Achakzai, spoke in favor of President Karzai's government in 2003 and has made several trips to Kabul since then. The Achakzai are members of the Durrani Confederation and are Ziraks, just as is Hamid Karzai's Popalzai tribe.

Mehmood Khan Achakzai<sup>2</sup> is also the chairman of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP – Pakhtun Homeland National People's Party). There are two factions of this party.

### **Leaders:**

- Mehmood Khan Achakzai  
(Said Malik Nabi is the district president of the Pashtunkho Mili Awami Party, Chaman, an anti-Taliban party led by Pashtun nationalist leader Mehmood Khan Achakzai.<sup>3</sup>)
- Bashir Khan Tareen

**Ideology:** Left-wing, Pashtun Nationalist

**Composition of party:** Limited to Baluchistan's Pashtun Belt, primarily the Gulistan area of Pishin District, most members are from the Achakzai tribe; reportedly involved in Baluchistan's sectarian violence.

Much of the Achakzai tribe supported the Communists during the Soviet occupation and the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal:

“Astride the road between Kandahar and Chaman (on the Pakistan border) are mainly the Achakzai tribe, along with Nurzai and Alikozai. The Ghilzai dominate the road from Kandahar to Kabul while on the road to Herat around Gereshk we have Popalzai, and also Barakzai, Achakzai, Alizai and Saddozai. The desert is mostly occupied by the Barachi [probably Barech], a tribe mainly into transportation

1. Asfandiyar Wali Khan and Mehmood Achakzai -- the two most influential Pashtun leaders who are pro-Afghanistan, pro-Karzai secular nationalists -- have added their voices to the call for talks with the Afghan resistance.

2. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6198382.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6198382.stm) accessed 30 May 2009. Mehmood Khan's comments included: "The world is asking 'who are you Pashtuns?'" said Mehmood Khan Achakzai, the leader of a moderate Pashtun party in Balochistan province?

'Around the world we are accused of being terrorists, but tolerance is in our blood - it is taught by our mothers. We do not hate people just because their noses are long or they speak in foreign tongues. We demand all the world respect our values, culture and the dignity of our people,' he added."

3. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/FI09Ag01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/FI09Ag01.html) accessed 30 May 2009 and [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=774](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=774) accessed 30 May 2009 states that Mehmood Khan Achackzai is another prominent pro-Afghan and pro-Karzai Pashtun leader.

and narcotics, having extensive lands in Sindh. Barakzai and Achakzai are mostly anti-Taliban, *some of the finest Soviet-era Afghan army generals including the hero of Jalalabad, Gen Asif Dilawar, was an Achakzai* [emphasis added]. Defending Kandahar successfully during the Afghan war was Gen Nurul Haq Aloon [Ulumi], a Barakzai, an artilleryman trained in the US. *Another famous general was Achakzai tribal Juma Chak.* [emphasis added] Good fighters, the tribesmen could be persuaded where their interests are best served. An Afghan is an ally if his ego and friendship is stroked, a stubborn enemy if he is attacked. Because of the bombing, the Barakzai have pledged their loyalty to Mullah Umar even ahead of the Nurzai, and the Nurzais are closer to the Taliban. Afghan loyalties can be won over but the widespread bombing and the “Haq episode” has put a dampener on such efforts.”<sup>4</sup>

The Achakzai were once a branch of the large Barakzai tribe, but Ahmad Shah Durrani was worried over this large tribe as potential competition for control of Kabul’s throne and split the tribe into two separate components and the Achakzai are a separate tribe today. Their original homeland was Maruf District, Kandahar Province.

Achakzai are found over a large area of southern Afghanistan and can be found in Oruzgan Province and as far west as Herat.<sup>5</sup>

The Achakzai occupy the territory between the Kadanai and Lora rivers; western edge of Pishin district; Khojak and Toba Hills; round Kandahar and near Gereshk. Some are found on the Russian frontier where they were moved by Abdur Rahman Khan in 1886 to reinforce the region’s non-Pashtuns against potential Russian aggression.<sup>6</sup>

There are two main sub-tribes of Achakzai currently, one is the Ghabizai under the leadership of Ahmed Khan Achakzai (son of Haji Mohammed Khan Achakzai) and the other is the Ahmadzai which is led by Mehmood Khan Achakzai. Previously, this was one of the most stable Pashtun tribes, but for over nearly two decades they fought a internal tribal war in the area of Gulistan and Addullah Khan in Pakistan which led to the destruction of Gulistan Bazaar and much loss of life. After the death of Abdul Samad Khan Achakzai (the father of the current leader of Amidzai, Mehmood Khan Achakzai), the most favored person to represent Achakzai was Haji Mohammed Khan Achakzai. His desire for reunification with Afghanistan’s Achakzai caused the Pakistani Government to believe that Haji Mohammed Khan could reunite the Pashtun territory in Afghanistan, which would remove a quarter of Pakistan. They prevented this by causing enmity within the tribe. Mehmood Khan wanted to succeed his father, Abdul Samad Khan, in the tribe’s leadership and with the help of ISI,



4. defensejournal.com, “Prosecuting the War.”

5. Notes on the Tribes of Afghan Descent in Baluchistan, 1925

6. Military Report on Afghanistan, 1925

he killed Haji Mohammed Khan and two of his sons in 1990 and declared himself as the new Achakzai leader. The Ghabizais are still a powerful tribe and control Pakistan's Gulistan district.<sup>7</sup>

A Pakistani journalist wrote about the situation within the Achakzai tribe:

“Two sub tribes of the Achakzai tribe viz. Hameedzais [Ahmadzais] and Ghabezais have been at war for over a decade. The former are the original inhabitants of the area whereas the latter are recent migrants from Afghanistan. Ironically, the former encouraged them to migrate into Pakistan to be able to face off Kakar tribe, with whom they have had traditional rivalry. It all started in 1987 when one person named Kakai Hameedzai was killed when he had gone out for a shoot with a Ghabezai by the name of Mohammad Khan. Mohammad Khan claimed the death to be an accident, but the victim's family thought otherwise and suspected him of the perfidious murder. Fearing a chain reaction and further bloodshed as a result, the victim's family shifted to the safe environs of Quetta. Some years later in 1990, the suspected murderer went to Quetta and met the son of the deceased at the latter's car show room. But he refused to shake the hand of the visitor. Soon after Mohammad Khan Ghabezai was killed, not coincidentally, along with his two sons near Pishin on Quetta-Chaman road. Because Mohammad Khan was the chief of his sub-tribe, his people thought that unless they killed his counterpart, the ends of tribal justice could not be met. Mr. Mohammad Khan Achakzai, Chairman of Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP) happens to be the chief of Hameedzai [Ahmadzai] tribe.

“With the murder of Mohammad Khan Ghabezai, basis of an internecine war had been laid and in a tit for tat murder, only a month later, a cousin of Mr. Mohammad Khan Achakzai was killed after he had been kidnapped. This was too close for comfort for the tribal chief of Hameedzai. On 30/31 May 1991; a full-blown war erupted between the two sections of the same tribe and lasted for two to three days. Both sides took positions and fired throughout the day and the night for two days. All kind of weapons short of tanks and armored personnel carriers was used including rocket launchers, grenades and recoilless rifles. Frontier Corps (FC) from all over the province was called to quell the strife. They cordoned the area and laid a siege for 15 to 20 days and succeeded in achieving a cease-fire. 15 to 20 people lost their lives. Very few arrests were made and the situation flared up again after two three months. It was on a much smaller scale and could be controlled by the local FC. Estimates are tentative because it is pointless for the victims to go through the bureaucratic hassle of registering a case and get nothing out of it.

Balochistan is divided into A and B areas for the purposes of maintenance of law and order. Police areas are known as A and generally cover towns and the cities comprising about 5% of the total provincial area. Kila Abdullah bazaar is a police area and is divided right down the middle between the two parties. Tehsil offices and other Govt. offices are located on Hammedzai side of the divide thereby restricting the access of the Ghabezais to these offices. Therefore the Ghabezais cannot go these government offices. The area is inaccessible to one side to the strife that is Ghabezais because the Tehsil office is located in an area controlled by the enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

The Achakzai are enemies of the Durrani Panjpai Noorzai tribe and they have fought one another in the past. For example, a large battle fought in southern Afghanistan during the Soviet and communist period occurred at Spin Boldak where communist Achakzais fought mujahedin militia fighters. Afghanistan scholars Barnett Rubin and Robert Kaplan provide good examples of Noorzai animosity toward the Achakzais:

7. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achakzai> accessed 30 May 2009.

8. <http://sshusain.blogspot.com/2006/03/visit-to-border.html> accessed 30 May 2009.

From Barnett Rubin:

“Ismatullah Muslim was a Soviet-trained army major at the time of the 1978 coup. He was ... of the Achakzai tribe from the area between Qandahar and the Pakistani border. This tribe was known for its raiding and smuggling activities ... and Ismat Muslim was no exception. He had engaged in smuggling at least since the days where he had the distinction of being the first Afghan military officer to be imprisoned there. As early as 1979 he led his tribe into the resistance and was conducting both military and smuggling operations (including the heroin trade) in the area between Qandahar and Quetta.... In 1984, following a dispute with the ISI over his smuggling activities and his refusal to join any of the Islamic parties, Ismat Muslim defected to the regime, which made him a general. His principal role was control of transit points and roads between Pakistan’s Baluchistan and Qandahar.... Ismat Muslim suffered a bloody defeat at Spin Boldak after the Soviet withdrawal.”<sup>9</sup>

But the situation at Spin Boldak was far more complex and involved the long-running tension between Noorzai and Achakzai tribes. Robert Kaplan was traveling in the area during the fighting following the Soviet withdrawal and wrote:

“Spin Boldak ... battle had little to do with the struggle against the Communists ... it was the best case study of Pathan tribalism that the war produced.

“On paper, the mujahedin of the fundamentalist parties, led by Khalis’ Hezb-i Islami, fought the forces of General Ismatullah Muslim of the Afghan regime’s militia. In reality, it was a battle between the Achakzais and the Nurzais, two hostile clans within the Abdali [Durrani] tribal family....

“Ismatullah was a warlord in 1984, unhappy with the amount of weaponry the mujahedin was giving him, promptly switched to the side of the Afghan Communists, who made Ismatullah a general and paid him and his Achakzais handsomely.

“One of Ismatullah’s first moves was to fortify Spin Boldak, a sheer rock mountain rising from the flat desert. This afforded the Nurzais, who claimed it as their territory and held a pistol to the head of Yunus Khalis. Khalis’ teenage bride was one of the twin daughters of Nadir Khan Nurzai, the head of the clan. Nadir Khan had reportedly blackmailed Khalis the day before the wedding, saying, in effect, “I’ll give you my daughter only if you give me and my men weapons to fight Ismatullah.”<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The Achakzai tribe is split into two powerful, feuding groups over the apparent murder of the leader of one group, probably a subtribe. The more prominent survivor of the leadership feud, Mehmood Khan Achakzai, is a Pashtun nationalist who supports the creation of Pashtunistan, a Pashtun homeland. In this regard, he is allied with the leader of the Awami National Party, Asfandiyar Wali Khan – and many of the other Durrani Zirk tribal leaders, including Hamid Karzai and his family. Mehmood Khan has announced his support publicly for the new

9. Rubin, Barnett, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, pg. 159.

10. Kaplan, Robert D., *Soldiers of God*, pg. 203.

Government of Afghanistan and has recently started calling for reconciliation by making the Taliban into an opposition political party, much like Fazl-ur Rahman's Jamiat-i Islami in Pakistan.

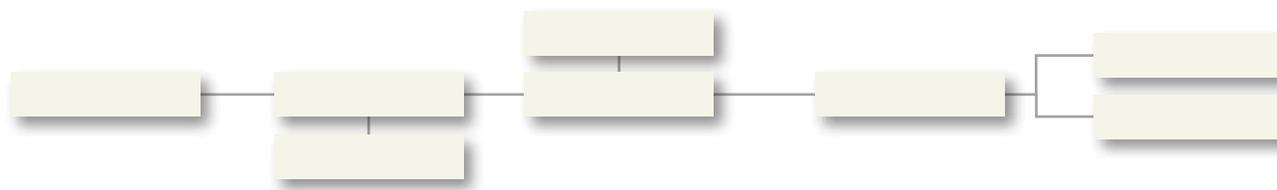
Said Malik Nabi was reported to be Mehmood Khan Achakzai's political representative of the Pashtunkhwa Melli political party in Chaman, Pakistan, a generally Achakzai city near the border with Afghanistan.

The Achakzai tribe is a traditional enemy of the Noorzai tribe, even though they are also Durranis, and given the Noorzai connections to the Taliban the Achakzai generally oppose the Taliban. This will be especially true for the faction led by Mehmood Khan Achakzai that openly supports the Karzai administration.

# 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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