



ALIKOZAI TRIBAL DYNAMICS: A VERY UNUSUAL DURRANI TRIBE

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Alikozai Tribal Dynamics: A Very Unusual Durrani Tribe

The Alikozai Durrans are very unlike the other Durrani tribes located in southern Afghanistan. There is a large concentration of this tribe within the Arghandab Valley and their generally well-defined tribal boundaries may have been responsible for them developing a high degree of independence. They seem, however, to be estranged from many of their fellow Durrans and have demonstrated their independence by affiliating with non-Pashtuns during periods of both conflict and political competition. The reasons for their alienation are deeply rooted in the violent history of the Pashtun tribes. Some of these reasons have been recorded, but much of this history is not available and can only be estimated from the few factors available. Something – probably a series of “somethings” – set the Alikozai along a generally confrontational path with the other Durrans.

Tribal balance of power was clearly a factor in the intra-tribal strife that was always occurring within these competing tribes. At one time, the Alikozai tribe was a highly respected part of the Abdali tribes, a large group that would later evolve into the Durrani Confederation. Their early primacy is illustrated by the fact that an Alikozai, Abd al-Ghani Khan, led the Abdali warriors that were forced to enter Persian Nadir Shah’s service following their defeat at Herat in 1732.¹ As a reward for their service, according to a Pashtun historian who wrote in 1874, “...the valley of the Arghandab falling [sic] to Ghani Khan and his clan the Alikozai for distinguished service by the Abdali tribe to Nadir Shah.”² This rich valley near Kandahar remains the primary location of the Alikozai tribe.

Following Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, Ahmad Khan, a Popalzai, was given the leadership of the Abdalis, which he renamed Durrans, and as he consolidated his power he worked to weaken the other tribes that might later challenge his primacy. For example, the largest of the Abdali/Durrani tribes, the Barakzai, was weakened when Ahmad Khan, now Ahmad Shah Durrani, ordered the tribe’s Achakzai subtribe to be split from the Barakzai as a separate tribe within the Abdali/Durrani Confederacy.³ It is very likely that the Alikozai received similar weakening efforts during the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani.

Ahmad Shah’s efforts were in vain, however, and the Barakzai were able to replace the Popalzai monarchs that followed him, but succession crises that followed allowed unrest to develop among the tribes. In early 1800, the Ghilzai tribes rose in rebellion and soon there were large-scale riots in Kabul between Sunni and Shia. Equal unrest developed within the Durrani tribes, but most of this is difficult to document – especially the court intrigue in Kabul in which individual Alikozai tribesmen were involved. One of them was involved in the blinding and subsequent execution of one of the Barakzai leaders in the region, Fateh Khan.⁴

In the two decades of unrest that followed, Afghanistan was divided into three independent chieftainships ruled from Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar. This was the situation when the British placed Shah Shuja on the throne at Kabul in 1839. By 1842, Shah Shuja had been murdered, and in Herat, Kamran, the region’s ruler, was murdered by his Wazir, Yar Mohammad Khan, an Alikozai, who assumed control of Herat.⁵

1. Noelle, Christine, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan*, pg. 230.

2. Hyat Khan, Muhammad, *Afghanistan and its Inhabitants*, translated by Henry Priestly, 1981, reprint of 1874 edition, pg.63.

3. Noelle, pg. 230.

4. *Ibid*, pg. 6.

5. Le Messurier, Augustus, *Kandahar in 1879*; Lumsden, Harry, *The Mission to Kandahar*, pgs. 2, 3, 4.

In Kabul, an Alikozai named Nawab Foujdar became the British agent at the Amir's court in 1857. He was described as a being loyal to the British government.⁶

In 1856, the Alikozai ruler of Herat was ousted by one of the Sadozai leaders. The Sadozai are a leading subtribe of the Popalzai, another principal Durrani tribe. The violent politics continued in the region and as late as 1880, the Alikozai were allied with the Aimaqs and the Ishaqzai in a futile attempt to place Yar Mohammad Khan's grandson on Herat's throne.⁷

More recently, the Alikozai leader, Mullah Naqib allied himself and most of the Alikozai mujahedin that fought the Soviets and Afghan communists with Jamiat-i Islami, even though this political party was dominated by Tajiks led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. Larry Goodson wrote that the Jamiat was less rigid ideologically and its commanders enjoyed much greater autonomy than was seen in the other mujahedin groups. Goodson mentioned that several of Jamiat's regional commanders, including Ahmad Shah Masood of the Panjshir Valley and Ismail Khan of Herat, rose to national prominence. Mullah Naqib was able to become very prominent locally as the principle Pashtun member of the Jamiat-i Islami.⁸

For some unrecorded reason, probably an event that occurred between the Durrani defeat at Herat by Nadir Shah and his Persians in 1732 and the formation of the Durrani Confederation in 1747, the Alikozai lost their primacy among these tribes. While Abd al-Ghani Khan led these tribes to the Persian victory at Daghestan and had their lost lands returned, their fortunes seem to have waned considerably since that time.

Weakened, and probably alienated, the Alikozai seem to look toward forces outside the Pashtun tribes for support against their Durrani, if not all Pashtun, antagonists. They were allied with Nadir Shah's Persians, the British were supported by Nawab Foujden, an Alikozai, the Alikozai joined forces with the Aimaqs in an attempt to regain control of Herat, and they allied themselves with the non-Pashtuns of Rabbani's Jamiat-i Islami against the Soviets and the Afghan communists. More recently, a substantial number of Alikozai tribesmen publicly supported Tajik Yunus Qanuni against fellow Durrani Hamid Karzai in the 2004 Presidential elections.⁹

While precise reasons for the Alikozai's independence remain unfathomable, there are discernable differences between them and many of the other tribes in the region. For example, the Alikozai's largest population concentration is in Kandahar's Arghandab district, an area northeast of Kandahar City. Having the advantage of well-defined tribal boundaries in Arghandab district – and to a lesser degree in Helmand Province's Sangin district, the Alikozai remained sufficiently strong to retain their independence of action. In this regard, they may be viewed as the probable “Keeper of the Tribal Balance of Power” in southeastern Afghanistan. They also benefited from the consistent presence of a strong, charismatic leader, Mullah Naqib, who consistently demonstrated a pragmatic nature that kept the best interests of the Alikozai foremost during his political maneuvering. His recent unfortunate death left a significant power vacuum within the Alikozai tribe as three factions tend to compete of its leadership: Khan Mohammad's group, those allied with the Wasify family, and Mullah Naqib's supporters backing his young son, Qarimullah Naqibi.

6. Bellew, Henry, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan in 1857*, pgs. 90, 96.

7. Lee, Jonathan, *The Ancient Supremacy*, pg. 400.

8. Goodson, Roy, *Afghanistan's Endless War*, pp. 62-63.

9. Researcher made these direct observations in 2004.

Apparently, the Taliban leadership took notice of the key political and strategic positions held by the Alikozai. There are few positions within the Taliban held by an Alikozai and only one, Mullah Obaidullah, was in a senior leadership position. He was captured by Pakistan's security services in February 2007 and the Alikozai are no longer represented in the Taliban leadership.

Events also seem to indicate that the Taliban have actively targeted Alikozai leaders:

- Haji Granai, a deputy to Khan Mohammad in both the Afghan Militia Force and Kandahar's police department, was assassinated by unknown assailants.
- Akram Khakrezwal, Kabul's police chief, was assassinated by a suicide bomber during Mullah Abdullah Fayez's funeral ceremony in a Kandahar mosque in May 2005.
- Mullah Naqib was nearly killed in a mine explosion that killed one of his sons and severely injured another.
- Abdul Hakim Jan was killed in a large bombing at a dog fight in February 2008.
- Sangin district's Dad Mohammad Khan was killed in a large mine explosion on the highway between Kandahar and Lashkargah. Apparently singled out, Dad Mohammad Khan's extended family and his closest aides have also been attacked. Three of his brothers were killed along with approximately 50 others in an attack at Sangin bazaar two years ago.

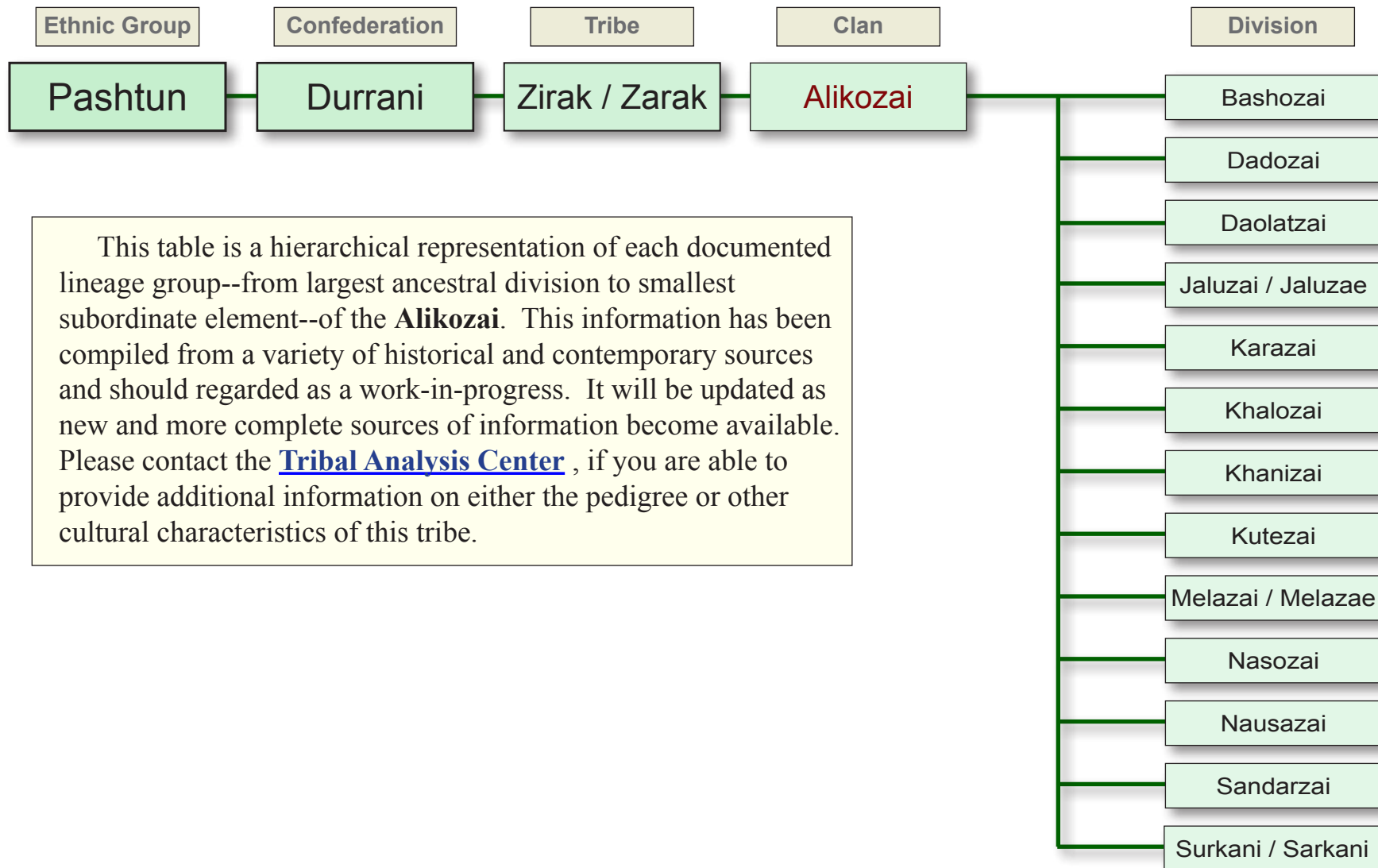
From the Taliban's likely perspective, the Alikozai may be too independent to be trusted. Some of their victims were violent men who were widely despised, but no more so than many of the other local power brokers in southern Afghanistan. But the Alikozai tribe is receiving special attention from the Taliban, and the arrest of Mullah Obaidullah left the Alikozai with few, if any, Alikozai leadership personalities in the Taliban at any level.

The apparent attack campaign may be related to Mullah Naqib's – and his Alikozai faction surrounding his son – support for Hamid Karzai, but the violence could be equally related to the Alikozai's traditional alliance with non-Pashtun power centers, this time with Rabbani, Qanuni, and their Tajik-dominated Jamiat-i Islami. The attacks may be intended to intimidate the Alikozai while producing a general power vacuum into which Taliban-leaning individuals may eventually move. Finally, the Taliban may be maneuvering to separate the Alikozai from the remainder of the Zirak Durrani tribes – the Barakzai, Popalzai, and Achakzai subtribes. They may believe that the Panjpai faction of the Durrani are sufficiently estranged from the mainstream Zirak, and they are now concentrating their efforts to force an open split within the Zirak Durrani by focusing their efforts against the Alikozai.

The Alikozai tribe occupies a unique position in the power struggle in southern Afghanistan and their removal from their general connection to Hamid Karzai and/or to the Jamiat's Tajiks would strengthen the Taliban's position during renewed conflict or in the case of reconciliation negotiations and a political settlement of the Afghan insurgency. Either or both are very possible.¹⁰

10. The researcher worked closely with the tribes mentioned in this study during extended trips into southern Afghanistan in 2003, 2004, and 2005.

Alikozai Tribal Hierarchy

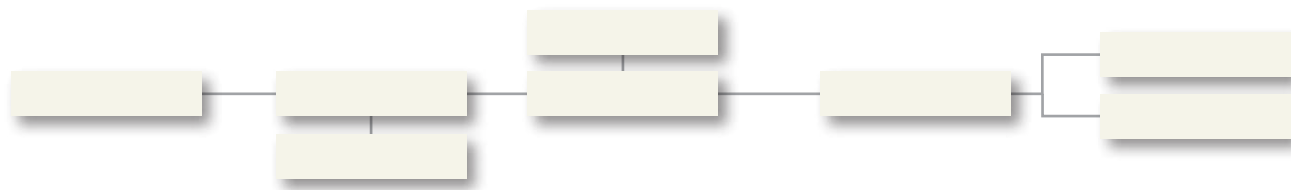


This table is a hierarchical representation of each documented lineage group--from largest ancestral division to smallest subordinate element--of the **Alikozai**. This information has been compiled from a variety of historical and contemporary sources and should be regarded as a work-in-progress. It will be updated as new and more complete sources of information become available. Please contact the [Tribal Analysis Center](#), if you are able to provide additional information on either the pedigree or other cultural characteristics of this tribe.

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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