

## **Kuchis Losing Their Way**

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Many nomadic farmers are being forced to abandon their centuries-old way of life.

The Kuchi tribes of Afghanistan are increasingly being thwarted from making their traditional migration due to hostility from local residents.

Hundreds of families have ceased taking their herds on the annual journey from eastern regions to summer pastures in central parts of the country because the latter are being used by local farmers. And Kuchis moving north from western areas this month were driven back by attacks in which some were killed.

Tension between nomads and non-migratory people is as old as history, but the wars in Afghanistan and recent years of drought have exacerbated the troubles, and peace has not resolved them.

War prevented some Kuchis from returning to their summer grazing lands for many years and, in the interim, locals converted the pasture to farmland. During Taleban times, Kuchis in a number of areas angered locals by allowing their animals to graze on fields used for agriculture.

Earlier this month, about 60 people were killed in fighting that broke out between nomads and locals in Badghis province in northwest Afghanistan, said Haji Mir Hamza, the leader of Herat Kuchis. Hamza was among 10 of the community's leaders who came to Kabul last week to ask for help from central government.

Shahbaz Ahmadzai, advisor to President Karzai on nomad affairs, confirmed that Kuchis had been killed in the fighting, but said local Pashtuns were among the dead as well.

Hamza said commanders of warlord Ismael Khan, governor of Herat, joined in the battle on the side of the locals, who are predominantly Tajiks and Uzbeks. The locals accused the Kuchis of being members of the Taleban and al-Qaeda.

This and similar battles forced the Kuchis back to Helmand and Herat provinces from their pastures in Faryab, Badghis, Jowzjan, and Mazar-e-Sharif.

An official in Jowzjan, who did not want to be named, said that in March, a brother of local commander Kamal Udin killed a Kuchi and took his 200 sheep, and that in the past two months there have been 150 complaints to the provincial governor about violence against nomads and theft of their animals. He said the authorities have so far failed to do anything about the incidents.

The official added that in some cases former Kuchi lands in Jowzjan and other northwestern provinces have been converted to poppy growing, and that there is general opposition to the nomads from locals who want their region to be only one ethnicity - Uzbek and Turkmen.

The Taleban's good relations with the Kuchis - both are ethnically Pashtun - has complicated matters.

Under the Taleban, some Kuchis returned to provinces that had been battlefields during the war against the Soviets and subsequent civil conflict. Locals in those areas had converted the nomads' traditional pasturelands to farming, but the latter felt they had the right to allow their animals to graze on the crops.

In northern Kabul, the Taleban encouraged the Kuchis to let their animals eat trees and tall grasses to remove hiding places for their opponents.

The Kuchis protest that they are not Taleban or al-Qaeda. "We just want to graze our animals on our lands," Hamza told IWPR.

Since the fall of the Taleban, some Kuchis have tried to use the courts to reclaim lands officially granted them 30 years ago, but locals have defied the rulings which have favoured the nomads. And although a new law restates the Kuchis' right to graze animals on their traditional lands, it has yet to be enforced.

Kuchis from Laghman are attempting to move to Ghazni, even though they fear they will be attacked as they were last spring, said 60-year-old Hazrat Mulakhel, one of a group of 50 families passing through Kabul last week.

"Last year, when we moved to the Nawar Mountains from Nawar district [in Ghazni], the local residents stole our animals and claimed that those pastures were theirs," he said. "Because we have had the deeds for those pastures since Mohammad Daud Khan's regime (in 1973), we won the case in Ghazni court. But even though we won the case, they still didn't let us graze our animals in those pastures. This year, we don't know what our fate will be."

Police officials in Ghazni said residents of Nawar district, most of whom are Hazara, claim the Kuchis let their animals feed on crops during the Taleban era. But they said they would help enforce the court decision this year, nonetheless.

Nomads attempting to return to Maidan-Wardak province, adjoining Kabul, said they are facing the same problem.

The diminishing access to pasture lands has kept more and more families in one location for the whole year. The 600 Ahmadzai Kuchi families from the east and southeast who during the Taleban regime migrated to Bamiyan in central Afghanistan have dwindled to three households.

One of the leaders of the three families, Abdul Latif, told IWPR, "We live and work in Bamiyan with the help of one local commander. If he were not there to help us, no one will let us do that even for a day."

The lack of mobility has grave consequences for the Kuchis. Their herds have reduced in size drastically, and the animals that remain can't fatten up on the lean grazing land available, said Mohammad Omar Babrikzai, deputy minister of tribal affairs.

That means they have few animals to sell and not enough for their own families to eat. Even the children, who are always the first to be fed when food runs low, are not eating for two days, Babrikzai said.

In the past several decades, others have given up the traditional lifestyle altogether, making a new life in the cities or leaving for Pakistan.

The Kuchi's legal right to pasturelands was originally set out in the 1964 constitution. President Karzai's council of ministers updated the law about four months ago, specifying jail terms from 10 days to six months and fines of 10 to 120 US dollars for anyone converting pastures to agricultural lands.

Babrikzai said all the provinces have been notified about the law, and officials in relevant ministries and nongovernmental organisations have been told to implement it.

But the Kuchi's principal leader, Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai, told IWPR that the legislation is not being enforced.

"The Kuchis are not allowed to use their own pastures, or have been threatened at [illegal] checkpoints on the way from Kabul," he said. " I have discussed the problems of the Kuchis with (senior government officials) all of whom have promised to help, but they are unable to control some of the local commanders."

Ahmadzai said the government should appoint a special police force to protect the Kuchis or allow them to carry their own weapons.

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**Location:** Pakistan  
Afghanistan

**Focus:** Afghanistan

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kuchis-losing-their-way>