

**DIALOGUE
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COMMON
GROUND

The Marginalization of Shughni Ismailis in Afghanistan under Taliban Rule

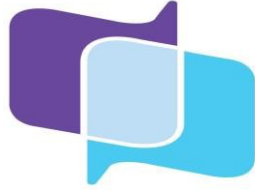
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Data collector and field researchers: Nazifa jalali & Aallam Zewari

Organization: Dialgoue hub for common ground

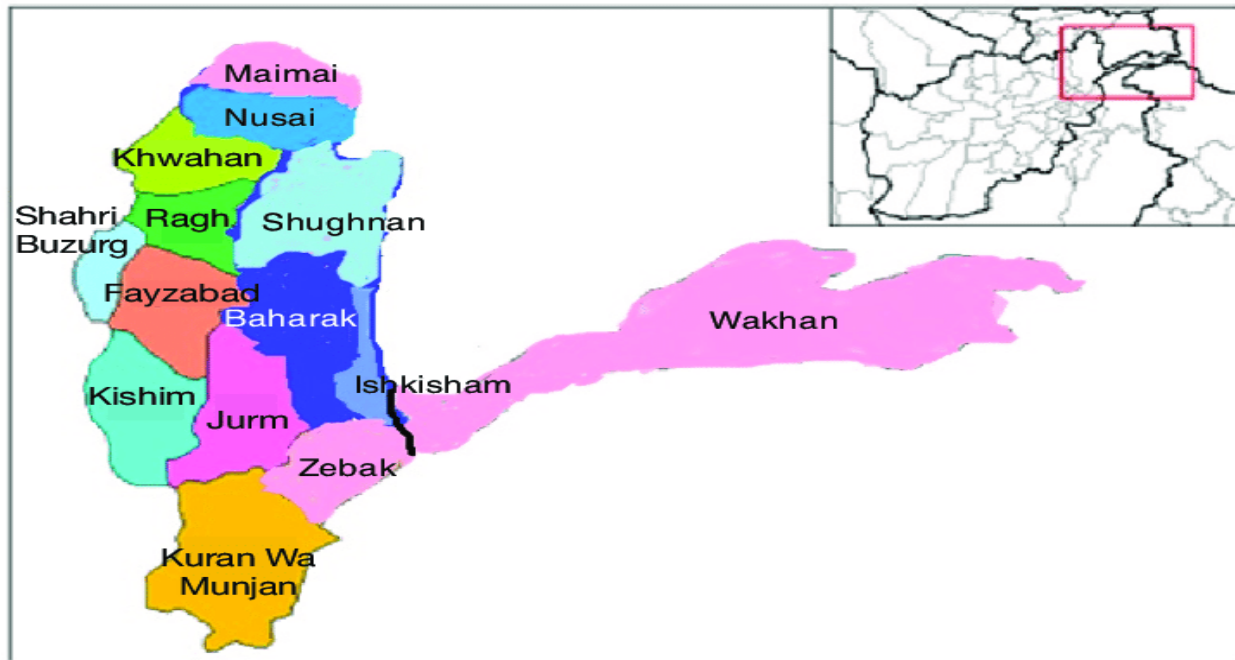
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The Marginalization of Shughni Ismailis in Afghanistan under Taliban Rule:



Abstract

This paper examines the multidimensional marginalization of the Shughni Ismaili community in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Based on qualitative data from 70 interviews (35 inside Afghanistan; 35 in Tajikistan and Pakistan), the study identifies patterns of religious discrimination, cultural erasure, political exclusion, and gender-based violence. The findings indicate layered vulnerabilities due to the community's distinct religious, linguistic (Shughni), and cultural identity. Secondary sources from international human rights organizations corroborate these patterns at the national level.

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1. Introduction

The Shughni Ismailis constitute a distinct ethno-religious minority primarily residing in the mountainous regions of Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan. They are characterized not only by their adherence to Ismaili Islam but also by their unique linguistic identity (Shughni language) and rich cultural traditions that differentiate them from other communities in Afghanistan.

Historically, minority groups in Afghanistan have faced varying degrees of marginalization; however, the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 has significantly intensified restrictions on religious freedom, cultural expression, and access to public life. While much of the international attention has focused on women’s rights and general human rights deterioration, the specific experiences of smaller and more isolated minorities—such as the Shughni Ismailis—remain largely under-documented and insufficiently understood.

This research seeks to address that gap by providing an in-depth, evidence-based account of the lived realities of Shughni Ismailis under Taliban rule. It explores how overlapping factors—religion, language, geography, and political exclusion—interact to produce compounded forms of vulnerability.

By combining primary qualitative data from 70 interviews with secondary analysis of international human rights reports, this study aims to amplify marginalized voices and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of human rights conditions in Afghanistan. The paper also seeks to inform policymakers, human rights advocates, and international institutions about the urgent need to recognize and respond to the specific challenges faced by this community.

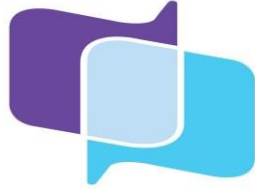
2. Methodology

This study is based on 70 semi-structured interviews conducted between January–March 2026:

- 35 participants inside Afghanistan (Badakhshan and nearby areas)
- 20 refugees in Tajikistan
- 15 displaced individuals in Pakistan

Data collection included individual interviews and small group discussions. Due to security risks, all participants are anonymized. Data were coded thematically.

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3. Findings

3.1 Religious Discrimination and Violence

Participants consistently reported that Ismailis are not recognized as legitimate Muslims by Taliban authorities, resulting in discrimination and threats.

Case Example: A 20-year-old woman reported an attempted forced marriage by a Taliban commander; upon refusal, her family was assaulted and threatened with enslavement.

Across interviews, over half of respondents inside Afghanistan reported direct or indirect religious discrimination (e.g., verbal abuse, coercion, or restrictions on worship).

3.2 Political and Economic Exclusion

Respondents reported systematic barriers to public employment:

- Requirement (explicit or implicit) to conform to Sunni Hanafi identity for government jobs
- Law graduates unable to pursue judicial roles without renouncing Ismaili beliefs

Secondary reports indicate broad exclusion of minorities from governance structures post-2021.

3.3 Educational and Cultural Suppression

Participants described pressure to enroll children in Hanafi madrassas where only Hanafi doctrine is taught.

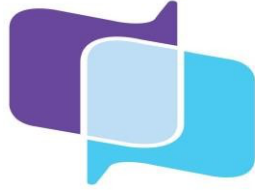
- Prohibition of Ismaili religious instruction
- Reduced space for Shughni language use in formal settings

Approximately two-thirds of interviewees inside Afghanistan expressed concern about cultural and linguistic erosion.

3.4 Gendered Impact

Women and girls face heightened risks:

- Reports of forced or pressured marriage
- Restrictions on education and mobility
- Lack of complaint mechanisms



International data suggest that since 2021, secondary education access for girls has been severely restricted nationwide, exacerbating minority vulnerabilities.

3.5 Displacement and Diaspora Challenges

Refugees in Tajikistan and Pakistan reported:

- Limited legal status and documentation
- Barriers to employment and education
- Psychological stress and uncertainty

4. Discussion

The evidence shows intersecting marginalization: religious persecution combined with cultural and linguistic erasure. While national-level reports document widespread rights restrictions under Taliban rule, this study demonstrates how minority groups experience these restrictions more acutely.

5. Conclusion

Shughni Ismailis face a high risk of cultural, linguistic, and religious erosion. Without targeted recognition and intervention, these pressures may result in long-term community fragmentation.

6. Recommendations

- Recognize Shughni Ismailis as a distinct minority in policy and advocacy
- Monitor and document minority-specific violations
- Enable minority voices in international forums
- Support cultural and language preservation programs

7. References (APA style)

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