



The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

AFGHANISTAN

A SHREDDED TAPESTRY

This paper is an attempt to document straightforwardly the principal geopolitical (cultural and toponymic) aspects of modern Afghanistan. It is not a specialist text, and it will inevitably appear simplistic to the specialist reader. The paper is drawn together from an assortment of material, from a wide variety of sources, all contained in the PCGN *Afghanistan* country file. Personal names are spelt according to conventional practice.

- SECTION A: Outline of Recent History**
- SECTION B: Ethnicity**
- SECTION C: Language**
- SECTION D: Population**
- SECTION E: First-Order Administrative Divisions**

**PCGN
5th October 2001**

SECTION A: Outline of Recent History

- 1 The most recent episode in the history of Afghanistan might be said to have begun in the year 1973, when the country's constitutional monarchy came to an end. In that year, King Zahir Shah was overthrown and exiled by a family relation, Muhammad Daoud, who proclaimed a republic. Daoud presided for five years of increasing political instability, whereupon in April 1978 he in turn was ousted by the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), in a Marxist coup known as the *Sowr Revolution* (*Sowr* being the Afghan month in which the coup took place).

- 2 The new *Democratic Republic of Afghanistan* was run on Marxist lines from April 1978 under the presidency of Nur Muhammad Taraki, leader of the *Khalq* ("Masses") faction of the PDPA. The coup had been encouraged by the Soviet Union, which had urged Taraki to unite his *Khalq* faction with its rival *Parcham* ("Flag") faction in order to introduce Marxist rule. Political dissatisfaction immediately resurfaced and intensified after the coup, however, resulting in serious civil strife as early as spring 1979. Eventually, in the autumn of that year, Taraki was overthrown by a fellow *Khalq* member, Hafizollah Amin.

- 3 Behind the scenes, the Soviet Union had become very concerned at the nationalistic brand of Marxism favoured by Amin, and almost immediately began to engineer his removal. In December 1979, using the 1978 bilateral Soviet-Afghan treaty of friendship and cooperation as a justification, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, having killed Amin and installed as president the leader-in-exile of the PDPA's *Parcham* faction, Babrak Karmal¹.

- 4 There followed an entire decade during which Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union, with a force of up to 120,000 Soviet troops. The early 1980s saw the Wakhan salient in the north-east of the country effectively lost from Kabul's control, becoming a virtual *de facto* annex of the Soviet Union. This brought that empire into direct contact with the former British Raj, causing serious consternation in both Pakistan and India². Soviet-style housing areas were constructed in the cities of Kabul, Jalālābād and Herāt, with Kabul even adopting the Russian term *mikrorayon* for such quarters. In 1983-84, a new port (*Heyratān*: 3712N 6724E) with a planned 40,000 inhabitants was created on the Amu Darya river, directly opposite the Uzbek SSR town of Termez. A new bridge (the "Friendship Bridge") was constructed between these two towns to enable the easier access and egress of Soviet personnel and equipment.

¹ It was during the Amin presidency that the only name changes of modern times were decreed. Jalālābād was to become *Tarun*, and Lashkar Gāh was to become *Nawab*. Amin's term in office was so short-lived that these changes barely registered, and they did not survive his own demise.

² The Wakhan salient had been established in the 1890s precisely to prevent the Russian and British empires from coming into direct contact.

- 5 Meanwhile, the international community was voicing its displeasure at the Soviet occupation. As early as 1980, the United Nations General Assembly had called for the immediate withdrawal of occupying troops, a call echoed by the 1983 meeting of the Non-Aligned Countries. Resistance to the occupation within the country itself was also mounting, and in terms of the Islamic traditions of Afghanistan such resistance amounted to a *jihād*; a term flexible in its meaning but in this instance construed as a “holy war” against an alien and non-Muslim aggressor. By 1984, Ahmed Shah Masood was gaining prominence as the leader of the *mujāhidīn* fighting this “holy war”³.
- 6 In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became president of the Soviet Union and attempted, from the Soviet perspective, to introduce some progress into Afghan affairs. Babrak Karmal was removed from power in Kabul in 1986, and was replaced by Muhammad Najibollah, who as a former head of the Afghan secret police was no more welcome within Afghanistan than his predecessor had been. As a symbol of supposed change, the state title was altered in November 1987 to the less obviously Marxist form *Republic of Afghanistan*. But international concern remained, and in 1988 the Geneva Accords (an agreement involving Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the United States and the Soviet Union as guarantors) established that there should be non-interference in Afghan internal affairs, and crucially that Soviet troops should withdraw from Afghanistan by 1989. Duly, in February 1989, the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan across the “Friendship Bridge”.
- 7 All the while, the *mujāhidīn* forces within Afghanistan continued to fight against the Soviet occupiers right up to the final exodus in February 1989. Just as importantly for the future, the *mujāhidīn* had not been party to the 1988 Geneva Accords and did not consider themselves bound by that agreement. Najibollah, still supported by the Soviet Union after 1989 but now only diplomatically, remained in power until 1992, but in those three years his regime continued to lack credibility and support. The *mujāhidīn* continued to oppose the regime from within the country, and the international community refused to recognise it without proper evidence of a popular mandate. A new constitution in 1990 did not alter this situation.
- 8 In early 1992 the defection of a leading general, Abdul Rashid Dostum, precipitated the collapse of the Najibollah regime. In April 1992, the *mujāhidīn* entered Kabul and established an Islamic Council to run the country. One of its first acts, in the same month, was to change the state title to *Islamic State of Afghanistan*. A political timetable towards elections was established, but its course was interrupted by the precipitate assumption of the presidency by Burhanuddin Rabbani in June 1992. This development could not resolve the country’s internal strife; the existence of rival factions of shifting allegiances, led by figures such as Masood, Dostum, and Golboddin Hekmatyar, ensured the continuation of internecine warfare.

³ The words *jihād* and *mujāhidīn* both derive from the sequence of Arabic root letters *j-h-d*, meaning “to exert/strive”; the *mujāhidīn* being those who strive for the *jihād*.

- 9 By now, Afghanistan had undergone a thoroughly miserable 20 years since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1973. Peace and stability were desperately required, and a new and growing political group appeared to offer the promise of such tranquillity. This group, first coming to prominence in 1994, was known as the *Taleban*⁴. Bearing the seemingly innocuous label of “students”, this group consisted principally of Pakistani-educated Islamic seminarians, from the families of disaffected Afghans who had fled to Pakistan to escape the Soviet occupation during the 1980s. The Taleban gained influence first around Kandahār and gradually spread north-eastwards towards Kabul, which they approached in 1995. By the summer of 1996, President Rabbani had been toppled, and the Taleban appeared to be in control of the capital.
- 10 In October 1997, the Taleban regime announced that the state title of the country would henceforth be *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*. However, the legitimacy of the regime is not recognised by the international community (with very few exceptions; currently Pakistan only). Afghanistan continues to be represented at the United Nations and in 33 embassies around the world by appointees of the Rabbani government which preceded the Taleban regime. This new state title is therefore not accepted outside Afghanistan, and the 1992 title *Islamic State of Afghanistan* remains in use internationally.
- 11 The years since 1996 have seen the Taleban consolidate power in Afghanistan but, like the ruling factions which preceded them, they have had to contend with serious opposition from groups led by figures such as Masood and Dostum. The repression of the population which has become a trademark feature of the Taleban regime has caused unprecedented resentment both internally and internationally. It would appear that the Taleban regime currently controls about 90% of the territory of Afghanistan, but the real level of their support among the population is very much a moot point. The principal opposition within Afghanistan is formed by the UIFSA, the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, popularly known as the Northern Alliance. This grouping consists of some 15,000 troops. Its military wing was led until his death in September 2001 by Masood; the overall political wing is led by the ousted president Rabbani.

⁴ This word, properly *Ṭālebān* in Dari and *Ṭalibān* in Pashto, approximately translates as “religious students/religious pursuers”, and is derived from the sequence of Arabic root letters *ṭ-l-b*, meaning “to search/seek”. For a consideration of Dari & Pashto, see **SECTION C: Language**.

SECTION B: Ethnicity

- 12 The almost 26 million people of Afghanistan⁵ display an ethnic tapestry of astonishing variety, and an understanding of this tapestry is essential for any serious appreciation of current geopolitical developments. A major difficulty in attempting to outline the ethnic diversity of the country comes as a result of the past 20 years of occupation and war. The demographic consequences of this, in particular the quite staggering shifts of population (both internally and outwards into neighbouring countries), have altered traditional patterns in a way not yet properly documented; indeed, not yet properly finalised. Inevitably, therefore, the ethnic tapestry is being somewhat torn to shreds, and the following text depicts a pattern which in part reflects a *status quo ante*.
- 13 The dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan is the Pashtun⁶ group, comprising approximately 40% of the total population and consisting of more than half-a-dozen tribes, such as the *Durrani*. The Pashtun group is principally located in a wide south-central arc, beginning in the west just south of Herāt and sweeping, via Kandahār in the south, all the way to the east of the country around Jalālābād. The Pashtun, who are in general *Sunni* Muslims, have controlled the country for much of its history; the exiled king Zahir Shah is a Pashtun, and the current Taleban authorities are predominantly Pashtun. Until the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, the Pashtun group formed a higher proportion of the total than at present (perhaps in excess of 50%), but this fell as many of the group were particularly anti-Soviet and became refugees fleeing Afghanistan. The spread of the Taleban has begun to increase the proportion of Pashtun once more. There is a tendency for the Pashtun to regard themselves as somewhat superior to the other ethnic groups of the country.
- 14 The second most numerous ethnic group is the Tajik group, also mainly *Sunni* Muslim in religion. This group, comprising perhaps over 20% of the population, is found mainly in the north-east of the country, from Kabul into Badakhshān province (adjoining Tajikistan). There are also significant Tajik pockets in the west, e.g. around Herāt. Masood, the recently deceased leader of the Northern Alliance⁷, was an ethnic Tajik, as is former president Rabbani.
- 15 Both the Pashtun and Tajik groups can be considered broadly in ethnic terms as “Iranian”. Aside from this Iranian grouping, there are also three ethnic groups which can be considered together as broadly “Turkic”, mainly concentrated in the north of Afghanistan. Together, they form perhaps 15% of the total population. Of this percentage, about half is ethnically Uzbek, and there are also smaller numbers of Turkmen (in a narrow strip adjoining Turkmenistan) and Kirghiz (in the Wakhan salient). Dostum, a key figure in the opposition to the Taleban, is an ethnic Uzbek⁸.

⁵ 1990 population estimate; the country is approximately the size of Texas or Manitoba.

⁶ Also known as *Pathan* or *Pushtun*.

⁷ See paragraph 11; the Northern Alliance consists principally of ethnic Tajiks and ethnic Uzbeks.

⁸ See paragraphs 8 & 11.

- 16 There are also several smaller ethnic groups present in Afghanistan. In the central mountainous region around Bāmīān province is found the Hazara group, originally partly of Mongol origin and comprising about 10% of the total population. The Hazara are predominantly *Shia* Muslims, making up most of the 15% of Afghanistan’s population belonging to this particular branch of Islam. They traditionally suffer for their beliefs whenever the administration of the country is in the hands of the *Sunni* Pashtun. The repression handed out by the *Sunni* Taleban to the Hazara is in large measure responsible for Iran’s distaste for the Taleban, Iran being a predominantly *Shia* country. To the west of the Hazara live the Aimak⁹ ethnic group, also partly Mongol in origin. Smaller ethnic groups include the Baluchi of the southern desert plains, and the Nurestani of the mountainous east.

Generalised Ethnic Map of Afghanistan



⁹ Also known as *Chahar Aimak* or *Aimaq*.

SECTION C: Language

- 17 The ethnic patterns of Afghanistan create only one of that country's tapestries. There is a colourful linguistic tapestry also, and there is no direct correlation between the two. Indeed, about 70 languages and dialects are spoken within the country. The 1964 constitution gave two languages official status, and that situation remains true today; these languages are Pashto and Dari. In addition, Pashto was also named in the 1964 constitution as the "national language", though Dari has generally been used for business and commerce. In general, Pashto is the language spoken by the Pashtun ethnic group, though even that apparently straightforward statement is no more than a generalisation. Dari is the name given within Afghanistan to the Persian language; this language is used easily by the Tajiks, Hazara, and (apart from the Pashtun) each of the Iranian ethnic groups in the country. The ethnic Turkic groups speak their own languages; Uzbek, Turkmen and Kirghiz; all of which belong to the Turkic family of languages.
- 18 But the Dari language also serves a broader function; namely, it is an inter-ethnic *lingua franca* for all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, other than the Pashtun. Whilst speaking Dari poses no problem for the Iranian Tajik, for example, it means that those peoples whose native tongue is Turkic (the Uzbek, Turkmen and Kirghiz ethnic groups) effectively have to be bilingual in two altogether different languages in order to communicate on a nationwide basis. Mention has already been made of the Pashtun self-perception of superiority¹⁰, and it is perhaps this which causes them largely to ignore Dari and make Pashto suffice for their own communications. Earlier this year, the Taleban (themselves very largely Pashto-speaking Pashtun) directed local authorities in Kabul city and seven provinces not to use Dari at all in their communications with central authority, nor to accept spoken or written Dari from the inhabitants of their provinces. In the same vein, teachers who continue to teach Dari are being removed from their academic positions, notwithstanding that language's constitutional and *lingua franca* status¹¹.
- 19 The existence of two official languages, both written in Arabic script but in alphabets which differ from each other and which are also extended from that of Arabic, creates problems for toponymists needing to determine the most appropriate romanized forms of Afghanistan's geographical names. Pashto contains additional consonant letters not present in Dari, and clearly any script name containing one of these additional letters can only be romanized as Pashto. But for the most part the alphabets are the same, leaving the language of the original name open to question, and the preferred route of romanization open to choice.

¹⁰ See paragraph 13.

¹¹ Note, however, that many of the most senior Taleban leaders are understood to be illiterate even in their own Pashto language.

- 20 In these cases, the policy adopted by the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) and the PCGN is to treat such names as Dari, and romanize them accordingly. But Pashto readings of such names cannot entirely be ignored where their romanizations would be significantly different; Pashto is after all also an official language and indeed the language favoured by the current Taleban authorities. Perhaps the most important difference between the two languages concerns the letter, present in both alphabets, which would be romanized “v” in terms of Dari and “w” in terms of Pashto, creating noticeably different romanized results. For instance, the script denoting the name of the province to the north of Kabul is read *Parvān* in Dari but *Parwān* in Pashto¹².

SECTION D: Population

- 21 The population of Afghanistan has recently (1990) been estimated at almost 26 million. Given that the years since 1979 have seen nothing but occupation and war, this figure can only be a very rough estimate. It almost certainly includes the several million Afghan refugees (potentially 5 million) who now live in neighbouring countries. As noted in paragraph 12, the demographic consequences of these past two decades, in particular the wholesale shifts of population (both internally and outwards into neighbouring countries), have radically altered traditional demographic patterns; nor is any stable new pattern yet finalised. The following paragraphs endeavour to plot chronologically the demographic changes of the last two decades.
- 22 Before the Soviet invasion, the population of Afghanistan was approximately 17 million, of whom about 750,000 lived within the city limits of Kabul¹³. The other main cities were Kandahār (210,000) and Herāt (160,000), followed by Kondozi, Chārīkār and Mazār-e Sharīf, all with about 100,000 inhabitants. By 1981, Soviet figures placed Kabul into a category of “over 300,000”, suggesting a sharp decline in that city’s population. By 1986, Soviet figures had shown Kabul’s population substantially increased to over 1 million, but figures for other towns and cities maintained the decline initially shown by the capital. The population of Chārīkār, for example, fell from 100,000 to a category of “10,000 to 30,000” between 1981 and 1986. The smaller town of Kowt-e ‘Ashrow, classified as being in the “30,000-100,000” category in 1981, had become too insignificant even to feature in 1986 figures. Most mysterious of all was the case of the phantom city of Tagāb; this village located in the hills of northern Orūzgān province (3352N 6620E) had by 1981 apparently become a most unlikely city of over 100,000 inhabitants, only to disappear from the statistics altogether by 1986.

¹² This matter is further complicated in that the Dari “v” is frequently pronounced like the Pashto “w” in Afghanistan; it may therefore be no easier definitively to distinguish the language of a spoken name than it is of a written name.

¹³ 1975/76 figures.

- 23 The overall pattern during the 1980s, therefore, was one of migration from urban areas into the countryside (and also abroad; the 17 million total population of the years 1975/76 had fallen to under 14 million by 1982). By 1988, however, as the end of the Soviet occupation drew near, a few urban areas had begun to show an increase; these were notably Kabul (1.4 million), Kandahār (225,000), Herāt (177,000), and Mazār-e Sharīf (130,000).
- 24 The next available figures are for the year 1995. The total population of Afghanistan was listed then as 17 million, but it was acknowledged that this figure might include as many as 5 million refugees in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Kabul had halved in size since 1988, down to 700,000, though the population of other principal towns had remained reasonably consistent during this period. Jalālābād had even doubled in size since 1976; its population in 1995 was 111,000. There followed a significant rise in the national total, to over 24 million by 1998, and then to almost 26 million by the year 2000.
- 25 Currently, urban depopulation and outward emigration are once again very significant demographic trends; there are over 2 million Afghan refugees now in Pakistan, with 1 million more attempting to join them. It is also estimated that half a million people are attempting to join the 1.5 million refugees already in Iran, plus some 150,000 trying to cross into neighbouring countries of the former Soviet Union. This outward flight has been precipitated not only by current political developments, but also by drought, which is severely affecting eight northernmost provinces from Bādghīs in the north-west to Badakhshān in the north-east. At border crossing points under the control of the Taleban authorities (principally into Pakistan), permission to leave Afghanistan is very restricted, and is generally granted only to individuals who are demonstrably Pashtun, the ethnic group of most Taleban.

SECTION E: First-Order Administrative Divisions

- 26 The following list, with its accompanying schematic map, shows the 32 first-order administrative divisions of Afghanistan. Each division is known as a *velāyat* in Dari and a *wilāyat* in Pashto; this word is best translated as *province*. In accordance with BGN/PCGN policy¹⁴, the geographical names in the following list are given in romanized Dari form, with romanized Pashto forms following in parentheses if significantly different. There is some doubt as to the existence of two of these provinces, namely *Khowst* (serial 16) and *Nūrestān* (serial 23), but the balance of evidence as co-ordinated with BGN suggests that their existence is real. In August 2001, the Taleban authorities issued a decree transferring provincial administration from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to a new regional administration body directly subordinate to the General Department of Administrative Affairs. Provincial governors now report administrative matters directly to the Taleban through this General Department¹⁵.

¹⁴ See paragraph 20.

¹⁵ Provincial security matters remain under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Province [serial numbers keyed to map] **Province Headquarters** **Co-ords of HQ**

NB: The preceding Dari generic term for the full form of each name is **Velāyat-e**: thus, eg, **Velāyat-e Balkh**

01 Badakhshān	Feyzābād	3706N 7034E
02 Bādghīs	Qal‘eh-ye Now	3459N 6307E
03 Baghlān	Pol-e Khomrī ¹	3556N 6842E
04 Balkh	Mazār-e Sharīf	3642N 6706E
05 Bāmīān	Bāmīān	3449N 6749E
06 Farāh	Farāh	3222N 6207E
07 Fāryāb	Meymaneh	3555N 6447E
08 Ghaznī	Ghaznī	3333N 6825E
09 Ghowr	Chaghcharān	3431N 6515E
10 Helmand	Lashkar Gāh	3135N 6422E
11 Herāt	Herāt	3420N 6212E
12 Jowzjān	Sheberghān	3640N 6545E
13 Kābol (Kābul)	Kābol (Kābul) ²	3431N 6911E
14 Kandahār	Kandahār ³	3137N 6543E
15 Kāpīsā	Maḥmūd-e Rāqī ⁴	3501N 6919E
16 Khowst	Khowst	3320N 6954E
17 Konar (Kunar)	Asadābād	3452N 7108E
18 Kondoz (Kunduz) ⁵	Konduz (Kunduz) ⁵	3643N 6852E
19 Laghmān	Mehtar Lām	3439N 7012E
20 Lowgar	Pol-e ‘Alam ⁶	3359N 6902E
21 Nangarhār	Jalālābād	3425N 7027E
22 Nīmrūz	Zaranj	3058N 6153E
23 Nūrestān	? Kāmdīsh (Kāmdēsh)	3524N 7120E
24 Orūzgān (Urūzgān)	Tarīn Kowt	3237N 6552E
25 Paktiā	Gardīz (Gardēz) ⁷	3335N 6913E

¹ the administrative centre was formerly at **Baghlān** (3611N 6844E)

² the English conventional name is **Kabul**

³ the spelling **Qandahār** is now obsolete

⁴ sometimes seen as **Maḥmūd-e ‘Erāqī**

⁵ the spellings **Qondūz**, **Qundūz**, **Kondūz** and **Kundūz** are now obsolete for both province and town

⁶ the administrative centre was formerly at **Barakī Barak** (3358N 6858E)

⁷ the spelling **Gardeyz** is sometimes seen

26	Paktīkā	Sharan	3310N 6844E
27	Parvān (Parwān)	Chārīkār	3500N 6910E
28	Samangān	Āybak ⁸	3616N 6801E
29	Sar-e Pol	Sar-e Pol	3613N 6555E
30	Takhār	Tāloqān	3643N 6932E
31	Vardak (Wardag) ⁹	Meydān Shahr ¹⁰	3423N 6852E
32	Zābol (Zābul)	Qalāt (Kalāt)	3206N 6654E

Boundaries of Afghanistan:

Pakistan	1520 miles
Iran	585 miles
Turkmenistan	465 miles
Uzbekistan	85 miles
Tajikistan	755 miles
China	50 miles

Total Boundary of Afghanistan = 3460 miles

⁸ the administrative centre **Āybak** is sometimes referred to as **Samangān**, the name of the province

⁹ the province name is sometimes seen as **Meydān-Wardag**

¹⁰ not the same place as **Kowt-e ‘Ashrow** (3427N 6847E), which probably used to be the centre of this province and is still sometimes named as such

