

Introduction: geopolitics, refugees, and urbanization

Something is wrong with this picture

Under the Taliban, Afghans fled the country in large numbers, seeking safety abroad. Today, more than 4.6 million Afghan refugees have come home—one of the largest return movements in history.

—George W. Bush, 15

February 2007¹

During his second presidential term, George W. Bush often focused on US policy toward Afghanistan as a success story, in contrast to the political failures of Iraq, the response to Hurricane Katrina, and the destabilization of the American housing market. The US-led intervention in Afghanistan was still considered a justified response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, the Bush administration argued that a ‘collateral benefit’ of this military intervention was the resolution of a long-standing refugee crisis. He was invoking the politics of ‘military humanitarianism’ that the Clinton administration had begun to develop during its intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

However, repatriation of Afghans was not going well. Three weeks before Bush delivered his optimistic address to the American Enterprise Institute, Washington Post correspondent Pamela Constable wrote about the dire conditions of returnees who had no actual home to return to in Afghanistan. Instead, they were squatting on the outskirts of Kabul—jobless, destitute, and vulnerable to the frigid winters of this high-altitude capital.² A month after Bush’s speech, Abubakar Siddique reported that many Afghans remained in refugee camps in Pakistan, reluctant to surrender their formal international legal status as refugees in exchange for an uncertain life as internally-displaced persons (IDPs) within their home country of Afghanistan.³ By May of 2007, the Musharraf administration in Pakistan decided to close the three remaining camps on the Afghan frontier, and Afghan refugees rioted to resist being forcibly returned to Afghanistan.⁴

1 Bush, George W. 2007. Speech delivered at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., February 15.

2 Constable, Pamela. 2007. “Harsh winter has Afghans struggling for survival.” *Washington Post*, January 22, A12.

3 Siddique, Abubakar. 2007. “Afghan refugees reluctant to leave Pakistan.” *Eurasia Insight*, March 26.

4 “Clashes at refugee camp.” BBC News, May 16.

bits of frozen land.⁵

As she points out, many of the returnees end up being squatters in abandoned houses and ruined buildings, such as the one shown below in figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2. Partially destroyed building, Dar ul-Aman Avenue, May 2003 (author). Squatters have hung curtains in the second and third story bays on the right.

The challenge facing Afghan refugees had been known for some time. The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), funded by the European Commission and the EC Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), emerged as the premier policy research institute from the beginning of the Karzai administration. In 2002, the AREU published a report called “Taking refugees for a ride? The politics of refugee repatriation in Afghanistan.”⁶ In their report they argue the massive repatriation of the refugees served many institutional interests. The UNHCR could use this as an affirmation of its continued relevance; Pakistan and Iran could relieve longstanding internal political tensions around housing an impoverished immigrant population; and Western powers could use it to justify the military intervention in Afghanistan. However, Turton and Marsden are clear that even by late summer of 2002, mass-repatriation was not serving the interests of the refugees themselves.

Although rightly seen as a massive vote of confidence in the new, UN-backed Afghanistan Transitional Administration (ATA), the return of so many people over such a short period, to a country devastated by 23 years of war and nearly four years of drought, was causing widespread anxiety by the end of the summer. Many of those who had returned were finding it difficult or impossible to survive in their home areas and the slow arrival of money pledged by donor states for the reconstruction of Afghanistan was threatening the “sustainability” of the return movement.⁷

Turton and Marsden’s report is not an obscure source. The entire body of AREU publications has been freely available as PDFs on their website since 2002, and I found their reports to be well-known and well-respected among aid workers and diplomats working in Kabul at least as early as 2003.

⁵ Constable, 2007.

⁶ Turton, David, and Peter Marsden. 2002. *Taking refugees for a ride? The politics of refugee return to Afghanistan*. Kabul: AREU. Available online at www.areu.org.af

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Imagining Afghanistan

I focus on this gap of awareness about nuanced, in-depth research on Afghanistan because it remains very difficult to write about issues that fall outside of expected media portrayals of the country. I now classify these as the ‘four expected narratives’ about Afghanistan:

1.	Afghanistan as a source of Islamist terrorism, and an attempt to return to ‘medieval,’ anti-modern conditions.
2.	Poorer Afghans—especially women and children—as victims of violence and poverty.
3.	Afghanistan as a source of opium narcotics.
4.	An incapable, increasingly corrupt Afghan government that abets narcotics-trafficking.

Table 1.1: the ‘four expected narratives’ that create an imagined Afghanistan.

The first pair of stories reproduce a persistent theme in Western literature: what Stephen Hall describes as the portrayal of dominated peoples as both noble and savage: alluring females and cannibalistic males.⁸ Gayatri Spivak argues that there is a political project at work in this way of portraying the ‘native other:’ the justification of foreign intervention, domination, and profitable exploitation. However, for Spivak this project does not operate simply (nor cynically) at a conscious level; it is wedded to the erotic desire of ‘white men to save brown women from brown men’.⁹ Spivak’s expression may be deeply offensive to aid workers, soldiers, and journalists who have risked and often lost their lives in what they understand to be humanitarian efforts. Those personal motivations and experiences have a complex relationship with the wider terrain of geopolitics. Consider one example: in a century where images of women were commodified and objectified, perhaps the single most famous photograph was of Sharbat Gula in 1984, as a twelve-year-old Afghan refugee in a frontier camp in Pakistan.¹⁰ Is it her helplessness, or her beauty—or both—which makes this image so memorable? Consistent with Spivak’s argument that the “native other cannot speak,” it is important to note that Gula’s name was not even known until 2002.¹¹ In this pair of savage/victim narratives, Afghans are reduced to symbols.

The third and fourth narratives also operate in tandem to support a particular understanding of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ societies. In the growth of humans to adulthood, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ are synonyms for ‘mature’ and ‘immature.’ By associated implication, a ‘least-developed country’ such as Afghanistan needs to be treated like a very immature child. I observed exactly this sort of condescension among some Westerners during my fieldwork. This ‘infantilization’ of Afghans profoundly frames the international aid project in the country. The idea of Afghans as immature is reinforced by media reports, presentations, and daily conversations—by public discourse. Before aid programs are implemented, even before they are designed, these assumptions

8 Hall, Stuart, and Bram Gieben. 1993. *Formations of modernity*. Polity Press.

9 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. “Can the subaltern speak?.” in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

10 McCurry, Steve. 1985. “Afghan girl.” *National Geographic Magazine*. June.

11 McCurry, Steve. 2002. “A life revealed.” *National Geographic Magazine*. April.

frame the way the Afghanistan is imagined as a problem-space.

Taking one critical step back, it is worth considering: can any country, can any people be described by only four narratives? Imagine another country you have never visited, but is well-known. Could any four narratives be sufficient to describe that country? Now consider Afghanistan again: thousands of articles have been written about the country since 2001. How many stories have you seen, heard, or read that fall outside of the four narratives described above? They do exist—and journalists such as Christina Lamb, Elizabeth Rubin, Carlotta Gall, and Pamela Constable try to get those stories published—but in a predominantly commercial mediascape, they must also sell stories to a purchasing audience. What do we want to hear? What are we willing to hear? It is too easy to disparage George W. Bush for persistent ignorance about the plight of refugees in Afghanistan, five years after well-known field researchers began to report that something was going awry. But as a demonstrably effective politician, Bush would never have made such an argument unless he and most of his team believed that his claims were credible. Furthermore, after a dramatically different American president was elected in 2008, this shallow narrative characterization of Afghanistan did not deepen. The expansion of the internet since the mid-1990s has facilitated access to a remarkable spectrum of information; but ‘public awareness gaps’ remain an important feature of geopolitics. It remains possible for the socioeconomic and political condition of several million people to remain fundamentally misunderstood for years on end.

The geography of that awareness-gap—particularly among the American electorate—reveals aspects of geopolitics that will be vital for understanding this study of the planning of Kabul. Many populations fall into this gap, including most of sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia. Even cities of geostrategic importance to the United States fall into this gap, such as Port Harcourt, Aden, and Kabul. For example: on May 29, 2006, a city-wide riot broke out in Kabul that caught both the Afghan government and its American backers completely by surprise. This had nothing to do with ‘political Islam,’ nor did any Afghan nor American make any such claim in the interviews that I conducted in the days and weeks afterward. A common incident—US military vehicles smashing Afghan cars in Kabul during rush-hour traffic—triggered the riot in the morning. But over the next eight hours, as thousands of young men joined the riot and it spread across the city, all sorts of buildings were targeted. Aid offices, a new office building, and a television station were all attacked. Word-of-mouth over the following several days indicated that these men were attacking all the symbols of the new wealth that was flowing through the city, and not benefiting them. The fact that they could be out rioting through the middle of a work day was itself evidence of their own argument. They were despairing, and the mood across the city for the next several weeks was of sad, resigned grief. The emotional buildup of that collective expression of despair at the failure of the Western aid project had been missed, in the years leading up to it.

Taking another critical step back, it is worth considering which stories are being missed, which are being eclipsed by the sensational material that has been coming out of Afghanistan since 2001. The story of urban planning told in this dissertation may seem very incongruous. Kabul is generally assumed to be a site of sustained conflict where

social institutions, where social and governmental institutions were presumably wiped out. But why do Westerners presume that chronic warfare erases institutions? The way I have heard Afghanistan described in English over the past decade seems to reference an unstated image: post-apocalyptic settings portrayed in popular American films such as *the Road Warrior*, the *Terminator* franchise, *The Matrix* trilogy, *The Postman*, *The Road*, and *The Book of Eli*. Given the popularity of this genre, current imaginings of Afghanistan reflect a desire to believe that such a condition actually exists; or perhaps the vivid imagery of these many films ‘stands in’ for lack of direct familiarity with anything resembling Afghanistan. The idea that property-claims, municipal agencies, and urban plans would persist through the incredible violence of Afghanistan’s civil war might feel anticlimactic. But by failing to imagine that urban planning is possible in such a city, we all may be missing the really big story: the way the human race is urbanizing.

At least one billion people will be moving into cities in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa over the next twenty years. This is one of the great events of the entire human species. It might be disastrous, as Mike Davis warns.¹² Or it might be fantastic; or most likely, the outcome will be an unexpected combination of the two. Though the outcome of this urbanization cannot be predicted, that does not mean that the process is ungoverned. The very choice of households to shift into urban settings depends upon changes in political economies, changes in the collective rule-setting that governs rights, property-relations, and expectations about life-opportunities. These rules are human products, even if no individual dictates entirely which rules will be effective. Urban planning is a tangible, observable manifestation of this complex process. It is at the level of urban development, and the planning of that development, where one can directly observe this profound transformation of the human experience.

The study of urbanization and its politics can also reveal unexpected aspects of geopolitics, as they are played out at the local scale. The following sections describes in greater detail how geopolitics played a major role in refugee-induced urbanization in Kabul.

This is not nation-building

Following five weeks of aerial bombardment by Coalition Forces, the United Islamic Front (UIF) captured Kabul on November 12, 2001. In order to appeal to Western backers, the UIF is usually called the “Northern Alliance” in English-language media. However the UIF is an Islamist militant organization descended directly from the mujahideen factions who fought the Soviet occupying forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In Arabic, mujahid means one who wages [Islamic] jihad. This label was appropriate up to 1989, because the Soviets were explicitly and officially nonbelievers. After the Soviet withdrawal, though, these same insurgents continued to fight the Najibullah regime, the Afghan National Army, and pro-government militias. Najibullah quickly abandoned the Soviet anti-religious stance, reverted the name of the country to Republic of Afghanistan by dropping “Democratic” from the title, and allowed mullahs to pray, preach, and speak

¹² Davis, Mike. 2004. “Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat.” *New left review* 26:5-34.

publicly. For an increasing number of Afghans, the insurgents no longer merited the title of mujahideen, and were simply called commandan, or ‘commanders.’ In 1992, these forces overthrew Najibullah, and four years later, they in turn were driven out of Kabul by the Taliban. By 2001, the UIF were a commandan force reclaiming Kabul from the Islamic Emirate led by Mullah Omar.

The destruction of the Taliban has made the United States a safer country, but the same cannot be said for Afghanistan.—Peter Maass, January, 2002.

The Bush administration objected to the hasty capture of Kabul, because it violated the terms of the agreement by which the Coalition provided air power support to the UIF.¹³ The Blair administration was more concerned with the political implications of this bad-faith maneuver. At the Bonn Conference in late November, Blair pushed for the creation of an international military force, separate from the Coalition, whose mission would be to maintain security in Kabul. American military leaders were uncomfortable with the potential logistical complications from introducing yet another military organization into the situation, and the UIF representatives at the conference actively resisted an idea that would restrict their ability to define the new regime. However, the three non-UIF factions present at the Bonn Conference strongly supported the idea, because UIF leaders had seized all of the key ministries when they entered Kabul, and were behaving as de facto ministers.¹⁴ This was complicated by the fact that the UIF was allied with Barhanuddin Rabbani, who had been the actual President of Afghanistan from 1994 until he had to flee the Taliban in 1996. The United Nations still recognized Rabbani as the legitimate head of state as of 2001, and he accompanied the UIF into Kabul on November 13. Rabbani did not attend the Bonn Conference, only sending Abdullah Abdullah as the new Foreign Minister to represent his government.¹⁵

Over Rabbani’s objections, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was agreed upon in the Bonn Accord of December 5, 2001. However ISAF had a very limited mission: to secure Kabul itself so that the new Afghan Transitional Administration could establish itself in a ‘neutral political space’ that was not dominated by the UIF.¹⁶ Formed almost as an afterthought in the Accord, British General MacColl had to renegotiate the agreement with Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni when he arrived in Kabul on December 31.¹⁷ Yet once ISAF was in place, it was greatly appreciated by the UN, the returning diplomatic community, and the new wave of small NGOs that had formed to help in the recovery of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration sent strong signals that the United States would remain committed to rebuilding Afghanistan. In media reports and speeches from 2002 and 2003, a common phrase is “after twenty-three years of war,” implying that the

13 Knowlton, Brian. 2001. “The fight against terrorism / Looking ahead: Bush ‘Very pleased,’ though he told opposition not to enter Kabul.” *The New York Times*, November 14.

14 Erlanger, Steven. 2001. “A nation challenged: After the Taliban; After arm-twisting, Afghan factions pick interim government and leader.” *The New York Times*, December 6.

15 Erlanger, Steven. 2001. “A nation challenged: The talks; Delegates meet in first step towards post-Taliban rule.” *The New York Times*, November 27.

16 Erlanger, 2001, December 6.

17 Waldman, Amy. 2002. “A nation challenged: Kabul; Afghanistan endorses plan that gives autonomy to British-led peacekeepers.” *The New York Times*, January 5.

conflicts from 1978 to 2001 were now ended. At his first State of the Union address in January of 2002, Bush stated:

America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We'll be partners in rebuilding that country. And this evening we welcomed the distinguished interim leader of a liberated Afghanistan, Chairman Hamid Karzai.

The last time we met in this Chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free and are part of Afghanistan's new Government. And we welcome the new Minister of Women's Affairs, Dr. Sima Samar.¹⁸

Afghan refugees and the governments of Pakistan and Iran, all interpreted this as a signal that refugees could return to Afghanistan. In the spring of 2002, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) prepared to coordinate the repatriation of up to seven hundred thousand refugees from Pakistan and Iran. Turton and Marsden estimate that more than 1.7 million returned in 2002 alone.¹⁹ The first returnees appeared to be enthusiastic volunteers. But as it became apparent that returnees were facing severe difficulties in Afghanistan, those who had not yet returned became increasingly reluctant to do so. Iran had let Afghans settle and work in its cities informally. By 2005, Iran began enforcing existing employment restrictions against illegal immigrants to pressure Afghans to leave. By 2007, Pakistan was trying to close its last three remaining refugee camps, and the refugees were rioting in protest against being forced to return to Afghanistan.²⁰

In the midst of initial optimism about defeating the Taliban, what Americans failed to notice was that Afghanistan was becoming increasingly insecure with the return of the commanders whom the Taliban had expelled.²¹ Some of the commanders, such as Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf, immediately began pushing for a blanket amnesty for past war crimes during the Bonn Conference of December 2001.²² Six years later as a member of the Afghan Parliament, Sayyaf would succeed in getting this amnesty ratified as law over the loud protests of Afghan human rights groups²³ (only in March of 2010 did Hamid Karzai admit that the law had gone into effect).²⁴ Another commander, Abdul Rashid Dostum, declared himself governor of Balkh Province even as human rights organizations were raising questions about his involvement in a massacre of hundreds of Taliban prisoners at Kunduz.²⁵ A third commander, Gul Agha Sherzai, recaptured Kandahar and declared himself governor of the province.²⁶ It was the corrupt governing of Kandahar by Sherzai and other commanders from 1992 to 1994 that had originally

18 Bush, George W. 2002. "Address before a joint session of the Congress on the state of the Union." *Congressional record*. Washington, D.C.: United States Congress, January 29.

19 Turton and Marsden, 2002.

20 BBC News. 2007. "Clashes at Pakistan refugee camp." May 16. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6662367.stm

21 Maass, Peter. 2002. "Gul Agha Gets His Province Back." *The New York Times*, January 6.

22 Erlanger, Steven, and John Kiefer. 2001. "A nation challenged: The politics; Afghan talks stall in Bonn on comments from Kabul." *The New York Times*, December 1.

23 Salahuddin, Sayed. 2007. "Afghan Assembly grants immunity for war crimes." *Reuters News Service*, February 1.

24 Katyal, Sugita. 2010. "Afghanistan confirms blanket pardon for war crimes." *Reuters News Service*, March 16.

25 Gall, Carlotta. 2001. "A nation challenged: Prisoners; Witnesses say many Taliban died in custody." *The New York Times*, December 11.

26 Maass, 2002.

motivated Mullah Muhammad Omar to recruit his students (his ‘talibs,’ or in Arabic plural, taliban) to engage in vigilante-style enforcement of Islamic law and order.²⁷ Like the United Islamic Front in Kabul, returning commanders began seizing land and houses by force, occasionally fighting each other for local control, and engaging in the opium trade to finance their activities and their retainers.



Figure 1.3. Mansion of Gul Aga Sherzai, in the Shir Pur district of Central Kabul, as of 2005 (Google Earth). This house, on the lot in the center of the image that is three times the area of its neighbors, is located at 34°32'07.42"N by 64°10'23.00"E.

Figure 1.3 is a satellite image showing the private residence of Gul Aga Sherzai in Kabul, which was still under construction while I was conducting fieldwork in Kabul in 2007. Sherzai has been governor of Nangahar Province (east of Kabul) since 2005. I have not found any evidence that he is involved in narcotics-trafficking, even indirectly. But poppy-cultivation increased dramatically in Nangarhar Province after 2005, and the palatial house shown in figure 1.3 could not be built on the salary of an Afghan governor.²⁸

With the removal of the brutally-effective Taliban, most provinces began to revert to the conditions of insecurity and violence that had plagued the country from 1992 to 1996 under the rule of the commanders. Rural insecurity was compounded by the decision of the Bush Administration to focus on rebuilding the Afghan National Army, but not the police nor the judicial system. This reflects Bush’s particular understanding of political sovereignty. During the electoral debates with Al Gore in 2000, moderator Jim Lehrer asked Bush about nation-building, and Bush immediately expressed strong skepticism for ‘military humanitarianism.’ Lehrer guided the discussion back to nation-building in general, and Bush responded:

I think what we need to do is convince people who live in the lands they live in to build the nations. Maybe I'm missing something here. I mean, we're going to have kind of a nation building core from America? Absolutely not.²⁹

²⁷ Eckholm, Erik. 2001. “A nation challenged: Government; Meet the new warlord, same as the old one.” *The New York Times*, December 17.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Bush, George W. 2000. Second presidential debate, October 11. Accessed December 9, 2008 at:

As soon as possible, Bush wanted to restore a sovereign government in Kabul. Consistent with this restoration of sovereignty, he wanted to leave the internal organization of the regime for Afghans to determine. However the United States immediately engaged in rebuilding the Afghan military, the organization that would ostensibly protect and maintain the territorial integrity—the spatial sovereignty—of the country as a whole. Rebuilding of the Afghan police was left to Germany. At that time, the Schröder government met strong domestic political resistance from the Green Party, who challenged the idea that Germany should engage in any foreign interventions. Reconstruction of the judiciary was left to Italy, which was also underfunded and unable to push for strong reforms as a minor partner in the Coalition.

Enabling Afghanistan to defend its borders fits the ideal, Westphalian conception of political sovereignty; but it does not fit the actual practice of politics in the twenty-first century. Once a new regime was established with close ties to the United States; once that regime allowed a major, US-led military force to remain in the country, which nation was likely to invade Afghanistan in opposition to this partnership? Iran? Tajikistan? The only force that was actively opposing the Karzai regime, at least at first, was the retreated Taliban. They, and other insurgents, were infiltrating from Pakistan, the long-standing military ally of the United States. In which case, perhaps the new Islamic Republic needed an anti-insurgent force, but above all it needed the United States to get its own ally, Pakistan, to help protect the territorial sovereignty of Afghanistan.

What the new Karzai regime needed most, though, was to demonstrate that it had the capacity to govern internally. The police and the judiciary would have been the two most important institutions to reestablish fine-grained spatial security and rule of law. Since these institutions were not given substantial backing, crime and government corruption expanded rapidly, as did opium cultivation. Farmers were driven off their lands by returning commanders and narcotics-traffickers, contributing to the growing number of IDPs in addition to the refugees being repatriated from Pakistan and Iran.

Refugee-induced urbanization

In fact one of the few safe spaces in the entire country was the city of Kabul, under the protection of ISAF. To explain how this geopolitical dysfunction became an urban crisis, it is helpful to understand the actual topography of Kabul. Figures 1.4 and 1.5 are two maps of Kabul. The first is a close-cropped map designed to show and label major features of the city. Kabul is situated in two intermontane basins, divided by the central mountains labeled in figure 1.4. The Kabul River cuts through these mountains in a deep gap called the Lion's Gate (Sher Darwaza), flowing north from the Chahr Dehi basin in the southwest into the larger northeastern basin, through which it flows eastward through Jalalabad and into Pakistan. The original city of Kabul, labeled 'Old City' in figure 1.4, was protected by the steep ridge of Lion's Gate Mountain to the south, and Kabul River on the west and north.

<http://www.debat.es.org/pages/trans2000b.html>

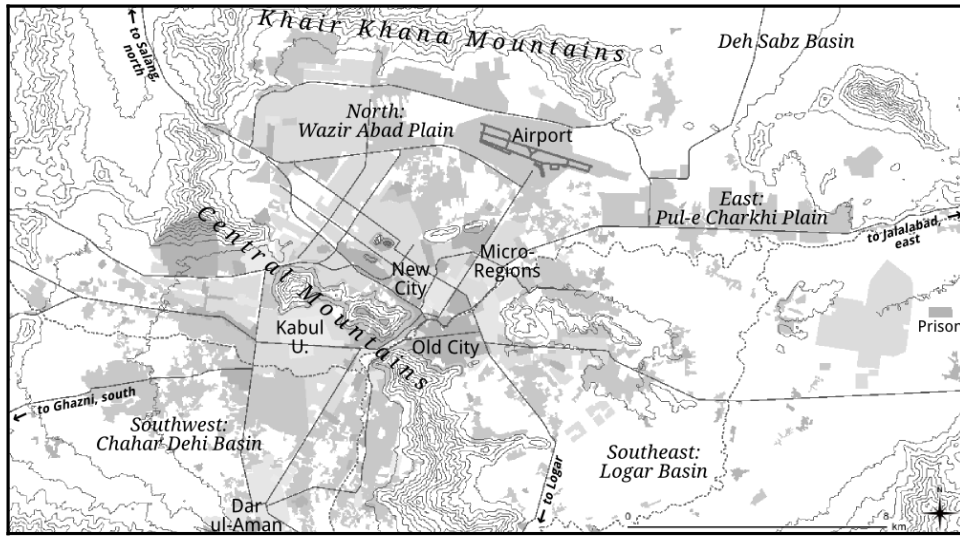


Figure 1.4: Main geographic features of Kabul.

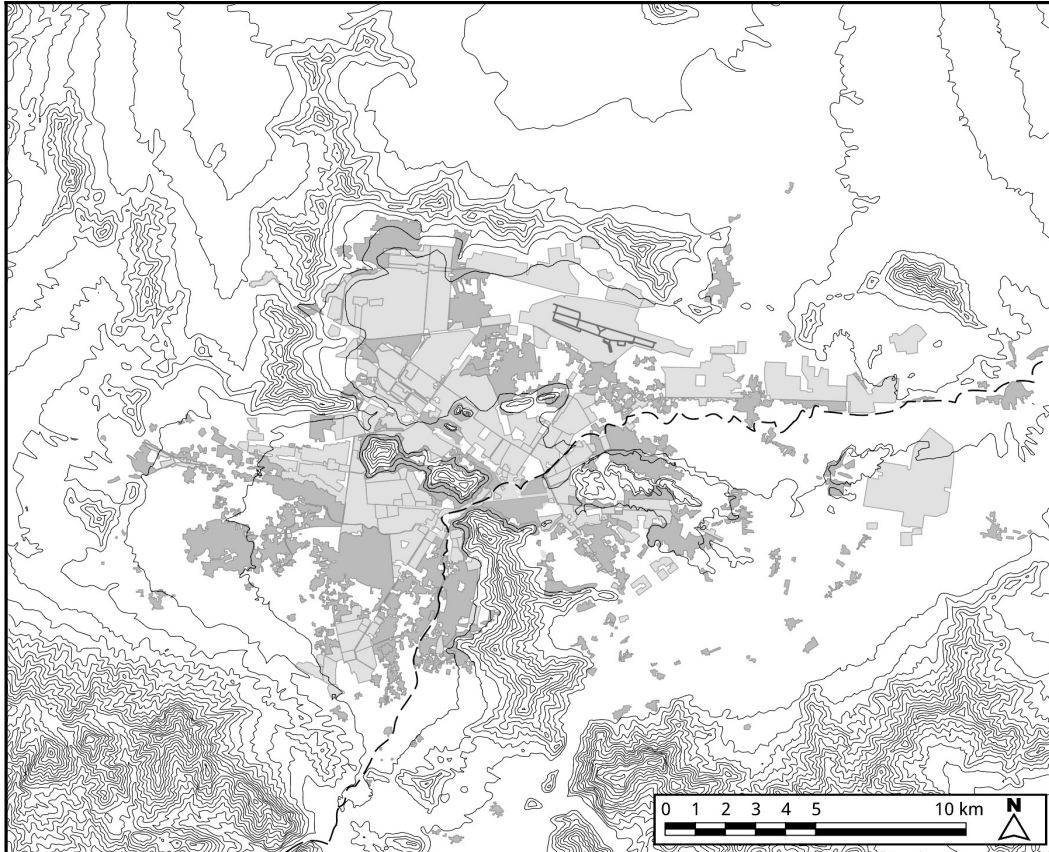


Figure 1.5. Topographic overview map of Kabul in 2001 (author, 2010). Labels are omitted and topography is darkened to show the overall landforms. By securing these two basins, ISAF inadvertently created a 'walled city' at the regional scale.

At a much larger scale, the natural terrain serves a defensive function for Kabul again

in the twenty-first century. The Khair Khana Mountains on the north separate Kabul from the southern tip of the Shomali plain (upper left in figure 1.5), and the dry basin of Deh Sabz to the north and northeast. A series of massifs to the south and east separate Kabul from adjacent provinces. Only a few roads lead into and out of the city, shown on figure 1.4; and ISAF was able to secure the perimeter of the city at these bottlenecks. The ruggedness of the mountains around Kabul facilitated this policy. While the bottoms of each intermontane basin are very flat, the mountains are extremely steep due to strong tectonic activity in the region (see figures 1.6 and 1.8 below).

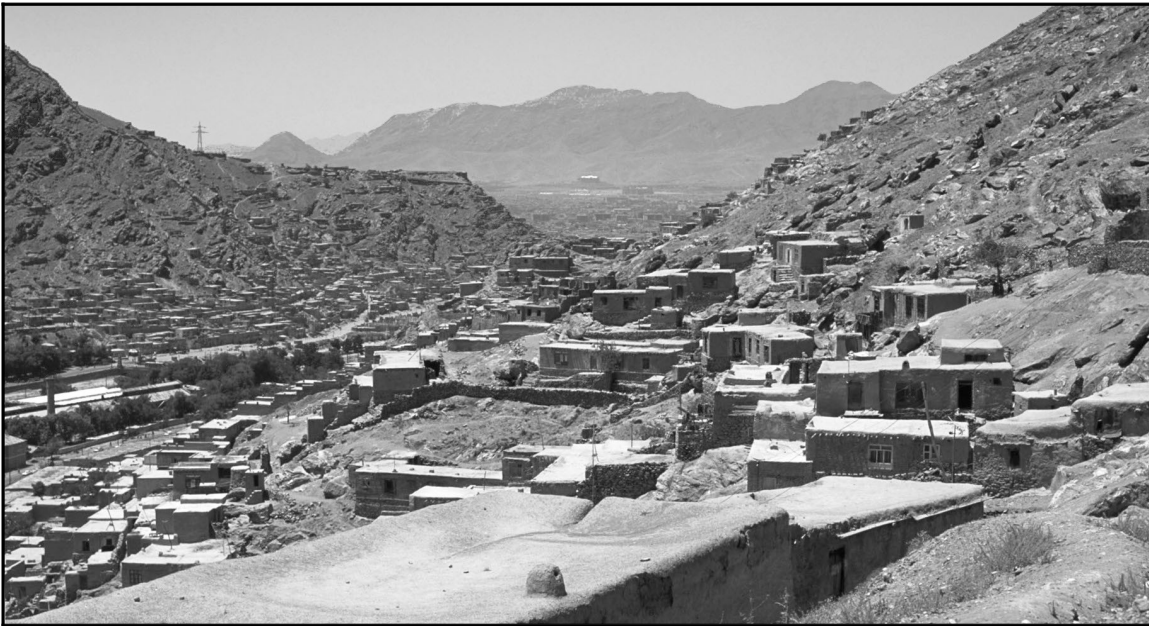


Figure 1.6. The Lion's Gate (author, 2003). In the far distance are the ruins of Dar ul-Aman Palace and the partially-restored Taj Beg Palace; the sun is glinting off the new roof on the latter.

By securing Kabul, and only Kabul in 2002, ISAF had created a kind of walled city within these two intermontane basins. That spatial security was a precious resource for at least half of the 4.5 million Afghans who (were) returned to the country after 2001. Spatial security is a public good insofar as it is non-excludable. In Afghanistan, that security was an extraordinarily important use-value whose worth cannot be captured entirely in the market-price of land. Indirectly, however, the housing market in Kabul began to reflect the presence of this new asset almost immediately, and hundreds of thousands of households sought shelter under the protective shield of ISAF (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.7. Refugee camp in Chaman-e Babrak, western Kabul, 2003 (author). By 2006 this area had been cleared out and turned into a construction-supply depot. Refugees were relocated even further away from jobs, or found their own way into informal housing.

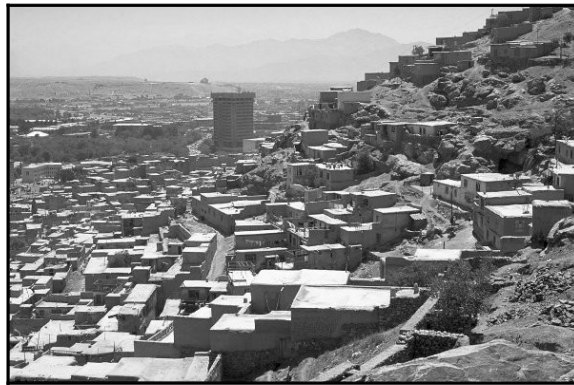


Figure 1.8. New housing extending up the northern slope of Asmayi Mountain (also known as 'Television Mountain'), central Kabul. The seventeen-story Ministry of Communication in the middle distance marks the center of the city (author).

In their effort to find any possible space to live in Kabul, households doubled- and tripled-up in existing houses, and began to build new houses as quickly as possible within every available space within the city. The built area of Kabul is roughly the same area as San Francisco, the second most dense city in the United States after Manhattan. However the population of Kabul was climbing over 2.5 million by May of 2003; already three times the density of San Francisco in the same area.

Informal housing extends hundreds of meters up the flanks of the mountains in and around Kabul (Figure 1.6). As one Afghan explained, "A foreigner arrived at Kabul by night. Seeing the lights of all the houses on the mountains rising so suddenly in the middle of the city, he thought he was seeing skyscrapers." The anecdote is a sweet expression of modernist aspirations; but the steepness of this terrain also reveals that mountainside households are taking a great risk. Kabul is located in Seismic Zone IV, the highest danger. Severe earthquakes are very frequent in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. When earthquakes strike clay-brick houses with heavy, built-up roofs, whole neighborhoods tend to collapse in landslides with 100% fatalities. Randolph Langenbach points out that if the walls of these structures are 'laced' together with inlaid wood

beams, they can be very seismically resistant.³⁰ But twentieth-century deforestation has made wood rare and expensive in Kabul. Poorer houses can only afford the structural wood necessary for the roof-beams, not for inlaid reinforcing. The same poverty that drives households to build illegal housing on steep mountainsides means that they cannot afford to make those houses seismically resistant. Through interviews I found that the risk was widely known among mountainside settlers. They are taking the known, calculated risk of death by earthquake in order to maintain close access to jobs, schools, and other life-opportunities.

The 'permanent fix' that isn't: refugee resettlement policy in Afghanistan

The successful repatriation of refugees is so politically important to the new Afghan regime that an entire national-level ministry was created to address this issue. In 2007 I visited one of the sites where the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) was attempting to permanently resettle refugees with the assistance of UNHCR. The MoRR had secured sites in each province so that refugees who could not return to their ancestral village could at least settle in their own province, and not in Kabul. This was explicit policy: if a household chose to settle in Kabul they would lose their claim to a refugee-resettlement benefit package. Among those benefits was security of tenure: the land that the Ministry obtained was uncontested by other parties, so that the Ministry could subdivide the site and provide the returnees with formal landownership for a minimal fee. At the site I visited, each parcel was 4 beswa (about 400m² or 4,000ft²), and the MoRR was charging settlers AFS 6,000 (US \$120) per lot.

Consider, however, the type of land the government could obtain in Afghanistan that was uncontested. Twelve per cent of the land in the country is arable, and that land has been claimed for centuries. Beyond the arable limit, nomads herd goats, sheep and camels to the limits of vegetation. Beyond that limit are mountains of bare rock and desert. To quote one UNHCR worker, "Land in Afghanistan is like cigarettes in a prison." It is scarce, and it is fought over.

We visited Beni Worsak, the permanent resettlement site for Parwan Province, just north of Kabul. The site had been subdivided into four thousand lots, but only 290 families had settled there. The site is at about 34° 54' N, 69° 19' E, but as of 2010, the satellite imagery used by Google Earth for that area dates from 2004, a year before the site was occupied. What you will see is a small plain, on the south side of a dry river that separates this area from Bagram Air Base to the northwest. Streaks of windswept dust cover the plain. The satellite image may not be updated soon, because the area to the south side of the dirt road is an American weapons range.

The site is accessed via a rough dirt road off the 'back route' secondary highway between Bagram Air Base and Kabul. Other than the weapons range, the area is featureless. As we approached the site I was surprised to see that much of the landscape was covered with about 10cm of dust that was so dry and powdery that it reminded me of the surface of the moon. The water table at the site is about 65 meters (200 ft) deep, so

30 Langenbach, Randolph. 2002. "Survivors in the midst of devastation: a comparative assessment of traditional timber and masonry construction in seismic areas." *Proceedings of the 7th US national conference on earthquake engineering*. Oakland: Earthquake Engineering Research Institute.

groundwater is inaccessible without a motorized pump and its constant fuel expense. There is no electricity. There is no apparent basis for any form of livelihood here.

The families we met at Beni Worsk had been squatting in public buildings in Kabul, and the government wanted those buildings back. So the MoRR offered the squatters a place where they could live in their home province, without constant threat of eviction. In 2005 several hundred families were trucked to Beni Worsk and essentially dumped there. UNHCR was working with MoRR to implement the overall national resettlement policy, but found out about this incident after it became a local news scandal. Technically, it was consistent with the overall strategy of settling refugees back in their own province, so UNHCR followed up by providing building materials to each family, and by trying to develop a livelihoods strategy for the community. CESVI, an Italian NGO, drilled wells and is assisting with the land allocation; the American NGO Women of Hope was providing a nurse; and UNICEF was helping provide education to the third grade level. Nine men were the only functionally literate people in the whole community.

The main source of livelihood for the community at that point was men who commuted to Kabul. They would walk out to the highway, hitch a ride on a southbound truck back to Kabul, and earn money through whatever work they could find. Since the journey from Beni Worsk to Kabul took about five hours, daily commuting was infeasible. Instead, the men would find a place to squat for a week, and then return to Beni Worsk for a week.

I questioned the whole idea of this resettlement program with the UNHCR staff. Why expend scarce resources trying to get households to settle in a place where they don't want to settle? First, they argued that UNHCR respects and abides by the policies of each country in which it operates. Afghanistan is in fact an original signatory to the UN Charter, and was a member of the League of Nations before that. Second, they argued that squatting in abandoned buildings was untenable; the UN needed to find a lasting solution to this problem.

I agreed with respecting the sovereign will of Afghans, but clearly the will of Afghan political leaders was at odds with the will of hundreds of thousands of Afghan households who were trying to find their place in Kabul. What if the UN started shifting its policy to support refugees in Kabul? No, that would trigger an even larger rush into the city. True, I conceded; but is that the worst possible outcome? In 2007 the population of Kabul was about 3.5 million. What if Kabul grew to eight million? Or twelve? The UNHCR workers blanched. That would be catastrophic. Kabul at eight million? That was unthinkable.

Pushpa Pathak, one of the most experienced urban policy consultants in Kabul, explained that she had seen entrenched bias against urban growth wherever she has worked. My surprise at this revealed my provincial American assumption that anti-growth, anti-urban politics and discourse were peculiar to the United States. The UNHCR workers shared some of the same bias as the Afghans who hoped to implement policies of 'deconcentration' to make their own life in Kabul more pleasant. Apparent inaction was in fact a pointed decision by Kabul Municipality to not extend urban services and infrastructure into informal areas. In this case, the deliberate refusal to officially acknowledge the presence of more than half of Kabul's population is the planning

decision. The ‘anticipated future benefit’ is the hope that the newcomers will go away through official neglect and discouragement. Unfortunately this normative position does not allow for imagining the probable: a future in which far more newcomers will be settling permanently in the city.

As urban planners—and here I include both Westerners and the Afghan planners I have worked with—I believe we need to make this scale of urban growth thinkable. The population of Kabul will be eight million, and it may climb to that size in twenty years regardless of formal policy opposition to this trend. About fifteen per cent of Afghans live in cities today. Consistent with Kingsley Davis’ 1965 observation of the urbanization of Western countries during the Industrial Revolution,³¹ Asian and African societies are following a similar trend towards urbanization now. The cause-effect relationships between urbanization, economic growth, rising education, and improved overall health are complex; urbanization cannot be simply equated with ‘development.’ However, the respondents to the social-demographic survey expressed clearly that these are precisely the factors that convinced them to settle in Kabul. How will the urban regime of Kabul respond to the collective aspirations of all of these households? Since a wide array of agencies are part of that urban regime—from the local municipality to the US Department of Defense—the challenge is not just to heed what a population desires, but to figure out who needs to listen and respond, and how.

31 Davis, Kingsley. 1965. “The urbanization of the human population.” *Scientific American* (September).