



State-building, migration and economic development on the frontiers of northern Afghanistan and southern Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

The Kunduz River Valley of northern Afghanistan and the Vakhsh River Valley of southern Tajikistan followed what initially appear to be vastly different trajectories. Despite these two adjacent areas having had much in common throughout many periods of history, the present-day region of northern Afghanistan was eventually taken under the control of the Afghan state while the areas north of the Amu Darya and Panj River were to become part of the Soviet Union. However, instead of a divergent course of development and state-building, these two regions were subjected to very similar patterns of agricultural development and migration policies. “Empty” areas were to be populated, by force if necessary, wetlands were to be drained for agriculture, and cotton farming was to become pre-eminent. The end result in both areas was the creation of a socially diverse and economically significant region that was fully integrated into the modern state’s economy and politics. This article analyzes and compares the motives and implementation of the state-building projects in both of these now domestically important regions and finds remarkable similarities despite the obvious differences in the structure of the Afghan and Soviet states.

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1. Introduction

The northern Qataghan region of Afghanistan is now three separate provinces: Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlan. The Kunduz River Valley in particular is an obviously important region in terms of agricultural production (Michel, 1959), but it also has been a strategic objective for numerous military forces. The Soviets and the Afghan Communist government fought the mujahideen in this region in the

1980s and then, after the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the Najibullah government, various militias fought to gain control over Kunduz and the surrounding area. Later in the 1990s Kunduz was taken by the Taliban, but not for long as the American-led offensive would defeat the Taliban in their last northern stronghold in Kunduz. A decade later, the insurgency in Kunduz and the surrounding areas is strong and steadily gaining strength. In terms of social and demographic characteristics of this region, the diversity and social fragmentation are remarkable. To understand this better, this article will provide an overview and analysis of the government-led social and demographic changes that resulted in the confused patterns that exist here today.

Just north of Kunduz and across the river border is the Khatlon Province of Tajikistan, most notably the Vakhsh Valley in the west of the province. This area, also a very

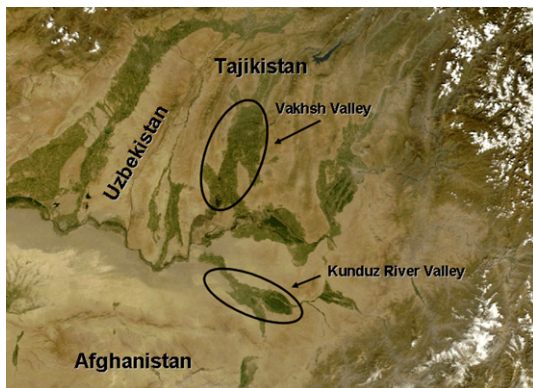
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diverse and socially fragmented region, suffered the brunt of the civil war of 1992–1997, particularly in the first year of conflict as it was the most important strategic objective besides the capital of Dushanbe. The Vakhsh Valley, and various towns within the area, was strongly contested by various militias – resulting in the flow of numerous refugees. At times forming the core of a separate province known as Qurghonteppa, the Vakhsh Valley was historically subjected to similar government policies as the Qataghan region of Afghanistan. This is, of course, despite the development of the Vakhsh Valley being a Soviet project and the Qataghan region being developed according to the imperatives of various Kabul-based governments. Both the Soviet and Afghan governments had a plan to subdue, transform and control these two regions. Kunduz and Vakhsh, which share so much common history and culture, appear to be good candidates for a comparative case study. However, despite the similarities there is only one comparative study – a brief survey of ethnic groups on either side of the border (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont, 1997). This article seeks to fill that gap in the literature with this comparative case study of southern Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan covering a period from the late 19th century into the 1970s.



Map 1. The Vakhsh and Kunduz River Valleys.¹

2. Afghanistan

2.1. Pre-Afghan demography of the Qataghan region

Various Turkic migrations into the Qataghan region (Kunduz, Baghlan and Takhar provinces since 1964) of present-day northern Afghanistan served to displace part of the autochthonous Iranian-speaking population. By the mid-19th century the Uzbeks dominated lower Qataghan, having displaced the Turco-Mongol groups, some of whom had arrived here as early as the 8th century. The Turco-Mongol groups in turn migrated to upper Qataghan and south-western Badakhshan. And in turn, many of the Tajiks ended up being pushed into mountainous areas (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont, 1997, pp. 3–13; Noelle, 1997, p. 63). Thomas Barfield, describing the Uzbeks in Qataghan as

both farmers and semi-nomadic (as opposed to the long-range Arab nomads), states:

At the end of the 19th century we find each of the three ethnic groups, Uzbek, Tajik and Arab, holding a particular niche in a large regional system. Urban centers and irrigated river valleys were under the control of Uzbek. Turkic semi-nomadism was common but involved only short migration; Political and military power had allowed the Uzbek to control the most fertile valleys and plains as well as those accessible mountain valley territories [...] (Barfield, 1978, p. 28).

Yet despite this historical displacement of Tajiks, during the late 19th century the Uzbek population formed a minority amongst the sedentary Tajik population in the important town of Kunduz (McChesney, 1991, p. 257; Noelle, 1997, p. 63). This fits with Friedrich Kussmaul's similar description of Uzbek and Tajik ecological niches. He notes that in this region the majority of the Uzbeks were semi-nomadic while Tajiks were farmers and craftsmen. Furthermore, the Tajiks dominated the towns and bazaars in eastern Afghan Turkestan (northern Afghanistan), resulting in their Persian dialect being the *lingua franca* of commerce despite Uzbeks having political supremacy. This is in obvious contrast to the dominant demographic status of the Uzbek language in the western areas of Afghan Turkestan (Noelle, 1997, pp. 63–64).

2.2. Afghan expansion into northern Afghanistan

Before Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's reign in Afghanistan (1880–1901) there were very few Pashtuns in the north (Barfield, 1981, p. 16; Lee, 1996, pp. 480–481; Shahrani, 1998, p. 221, n. 14; Tapper, 1983, p. 238). After coming to power in 1880, Abdur Rahman started a process that has been variously referred to as 'internal imperialism,' 'interior colonization,' 'Afghanization,' 'Pashtun colonization,' and 'Pashtunization' (Hyman, 2002, pp. 306–307; Lee, 1996, pp. 483, 595; Rasuly-Paleczek, 2001, p. 153; Tapper, 1983). And since Abdur Rahman's rise to power, almost every Afghan ruler until 1979 had a policy of attempting to 'homogenize' the peoples of Afghanistan. As part of this process (hereafter 'Pashtunization'), the Afghan government used Pashtun nationalist ideology, land confiscation, discriminatory taxation policies and forced resettlement that favored the Pashtuns (Aslanov, Gafferberg, Kisliakov, Zadykhina, & Vasilyeva, 1969, p. 74; Lee, 1996, p. 480, n. 135; Rasuly-Paleczek, 1998, p. 216, 2001, p. 156; Schetter, 2005, p. 58; Shahrani, 1998, p. 8). Lee stresses the international dimension to these plans by referring to Abdur Rahman's population transfer policies as the 'Yate plan,' after its British supporter Major Yate (Lee, 1996, pp. 480–483; Tapper, 1983, p. 250). Through this process, Abdur Rahman was able to consolidate his rule and control the non-Pashtun lands in the north. This resulted in the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Tajiks and others in Afghan Turkestan losing their best lands to Pashtun settlers (Aslanov et al., 1969, p. 74; Hyman, 2002, pp. 306–307; Rasuly-Paleczek, 1998, p. 216, 2001, p. 156).

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Abdur Rahman forced thousands of Pashtuns to migrate north to Afghan

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