On Mobility in Afghan History

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doi:10.1017/S0020743812001328

If we leave aside the imperial histories of those powers for which Afghanistan has been a strategic concern, Afghan historiography has tended to follow a single trajectory: the history of the Pashtuns and their principal royal clan, the Durrani. The non-Pashtun part of the human ecology of the country tends to be summed up as "other groups," as if that 60 percent of the population only has a history in relation to the royal clan and its state. As the other essays in this roundtable argue, there are many ways to approach Afghanistan's history more inclusively than through Kabul-centric, Pashtun-dominated, top-down narratives or those that focus on the strategic concerns of superpowers. Nile Green sees a half-century gap in the historiography, between the nation-building of the 1920s and the nation-demolishing of the 1990s and beyond, and proposes the study of "subnational and transnational groups" as one way to refine our understanding of the politics of the country during that middle era.[1] James Caron traces an imagined bond with place reflected in rural oral imagery, while Amin Tarzi approaches Afghan historiography itself as a productive field of study. Other areas hardly touched in the existing scholarship are institutional histories (judicial, educational, and fiscal), for which there is a wealth of untapped documentation; the built environment (following the seminal works of Szabo and Barfield[2] on domestic and rural architecture and Schinasi on urban architecture[3]); labor history (including the interconnections of work specializations and industry with ethnic groups); and the history of human bondage in the country.

One way to approach such subjects is by making better use of the country's rich indigenous documentary legacy, as Robert Nichols' roundtable essay notes. Works in Persian written for royal patrons and others over the centuries are largely unknown or ignored in contemporary scholarship, as are the rich documentary holdings of the Afghan National Archives (Arshif-i Milli). A recent work, entitled a "history" of the country and published by a major university press, is noteworthy for having not a single work in its lengthy bibliography in Persian, the language of Afghan scholarship.[4] Is it conceivable to think of producing a history of France, Germany, Russia, or China without referring to works produced by the people being studied?

Here I want to focus on a persistent motif in Afghanistan's history that has, for the most part, only been addressed *en passant*. This is the role of travel and its many forms, impetuses, and ramifications in shaping the Afghan past and present. Travel may be broadly categorized as either voluntary or involuntary. One model of voluntary travel, inspired by the saying attributed to the Prophet to "seek knowledge even unto China," depicts the traveler as seeker of (religious) knowledge (*ṭālib al-ʿilm*). Cropping up here and there in Afghan historical sources, in modern times the *ṭālib* in this sense has taken on a more central and defined role in the country's political history as constituting a distinct subnational group. Voluntary travel in search of forms of knowledge other than religious has also been a feature of the history of modern Afghanistan since at least the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743812001328 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time of ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901)—when Prince Nasr Allah Khan traveled through England, Scotland, France, and Italy with a large party—and continued through the 20th century with study abroad programs for Afghan students, often with foreign sponsorship.

Other types of voluntary travel for religious motives have touched many of the inhabitants of Afghanistan. One was the religious migration or *hijra*, which entailed departing a land under infidel rule and law (the "abode of war") for one under the Muslim rule of law (the "abode of peace/Islam"). For Afghanistan as part of the "abode of peace," *hijra* began when Christian colonial powers began to conquer and rule adjacent territory. The late 19th century was marked by a *hijra* movement out of both British India and Russian Central Asia. Then at the beginning of the 1920s, the Afghan government briefly encouraged a large-scale *hijra* of Muslims from India to Afghanistan. Contrarily, Afghanistan itself, as a predominantly Hanafi-Sunni country, became an "abode of war" for Twelver Shiʿa Hazaras and Qizilbash at various times, with Iran serving as the "abode of Islam."

Another form of voluntary travel is the hajj, the once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, obligatory for Muslims who are able, and the similarly desirable Shiʿi pilgrimage to the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. Such travel has kept the inhabitants of Afghanistan in contact with a broad array of cultural influences. Within Afghanistan (construed in its broadest early 19th-century parameters), *ziyārāt*, or pilgrimages to local sacred shrines, have had a major effect on local economies and helped shape the evolution of cities like Mazar-i Sharif, Qandahar, and Ghazni while broadening the pilgrims' views of the world beyond their village.

Various forms of involuntary travel constitute another central motif in Afghanistan's history. The first is forced exile, a phenomenon experienced across socioeconomic groups almost from the beginning of the country's history, conventionally dated 1747. Involuntary exile abroad (sometimes for very long periods) seems almost a credential for rule and in the monarchical period was a feature of the lives of Afghanistan's Persianized Pashtun elite, including Shah Shujaʿ, Amir Dust Muhammad Khan, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (twice), Ghulam Muhammad Tarzi and his son Mahmud (and the broader Tarzi family), and Sardar Muhammad Yusuf Khan and the Musahiban family (his sons Nadir Shah, Muhammad Hashim Khan, Shah Mahmud Khan, and Shah Wali Khan spent most of their lives in involuntary exile). This is not to mention the hundreds of lesser personages exiled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries or the millions exiled during the last quarter of the 20th.

Internal exile or population transfer was a frequently used Afghan governmental policy with the principal aim of diminishing the resistance/power of an ethnic or tribal group by diluting its percentage of the local ethnic fabric or removing it altogether. Internal exile, like foreign exile, has been experienced across the socioeconomic spectrum. For a member of the ruling elite, being forced to leave Kabul for some minor position in the provinces or simply being banned from the patronage of the court was perhaps even more onerous than being shipped off to India or Bukhara. But it may have helped implant a sense of a country greater than "Kabulistan." For the non-elite, the forcible internal resettlement of entire tribes, clans, and peoples (such as the Hazaras to Qataghan, Mazar-i Sharif, and Jalalabad; the Durrani nomads to Badghis and Afghan Turkistan; and the Ghilzaʾi to Qataghan and Panjshayr) produced long-term pathological effects that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743812001328 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are sometimes manifested, such as in the immediate post-9/11 period, through "ethnic cleansing" of the formerly displaced by the native population.

Then there is forced exile from abroad *into* Afghanistan, which also has had lasting consequences for society, especially in the northern regions (Afghan Turkistan, Badakhshan). The popular image of Afghanistan as an isolated country, uninterested in the outside world, is belied not only by the effect of the exile experience on its own elite but also by the many efforts of those outside the country to make Afghanistan a refuge from war, terror, and economic hardship. The end of World War I produced a wave of Austrian, German, and Turkish exiles seeking refuge (and work) in Afghanistan. The conquest of the Khanate of Khuqand and later the Amirate of Bukhara by first the Russian-tsarist and then the Soviet government produced more waves of refugees. Decades later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajiks took refuge in northern Afghanistan at the same time that Afghans were fleeing civil war in the eastern and southern parts of the country. Each 20th-century refugee wave left profound traces—genetic, architectural, ecological—like the many earlier waves that for millennia had touched the territory of present-day Afghanistan.

Finally, the relative scarcity of resources in Afghanistan has meant that major segments of the population over time have engaged in economic travel, whether as traders or migrant laborers. Rural-to-urban as well as international migrations have long been responses to the endemic facts of local shortages.

All these types of travel—religious, exilic, and economic—have helped form the country's character and shaped its residents' views of the world. Far from revealing an isolated place, "buffered" between superpowers or stagnating in a medieval time warp, new approaches to Afghanistan's past might show it securely embedded in an internationalized world, no more able to escape that world than the world is able to escape it.

NOTES

[1]Recently a significant step toward filling the mid-century historiographical gap has been taken by V. S. Boyko, *Vlast' i oppozitsiia v Afganistane: osobennosti politicheskoi bor'byi v 1919–1953* (Moscow: Barnaul, 2010).

[2]Albert Szabo and Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1991).

[3]May Schinasi, *Kaboul 1773–1948: Naissance et croissance d'une capitale royale* (Naples: Universitá degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," 2008).

[4]Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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