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ROUNDTABLE

The Future of Afghan History

Introduction

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Compared to its neighboring countries, Afghanistan remains something of a blank on the historiographical map. Falling between Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Central Asian fields of expertise, it is in many respects the last great unclaimed territory of historical studies, not so much competed over as ignored by scholars trained in these areas. Despite a rich burst of scholarship in the 1960s, and the efforts of a small but distinguished cadre of scholars since then, Afghan history has neither truly developed as a historical field in its own right nor been successfully absorbed into the study of any of its adjacent regions. This is not to deny that Afghanistan has received some expert (and inexpert) attention since the U.S.-led intervention in late 2001: several important analytical works stand out among the shelves of other, more or less hastily written, books of the past decade. But anthropologists and political scientists have led the way; historians' interventions in this burgeoning literature have been few. Of the three most significant books on Afghan history published since 2001, two deal with Afghanistan in relation to colonial India, and the other is a survey work written by an anthropologist (albeit benefiting from the analytical cross-fertilization).[1]

Even such a cursory overview of the gaps and interventions in this patchy field of scholarship raises primary questions about how the future historical study of Afghanistan should take shape. Do we need an autonomous field of Afghan history (and if so, how, where, and with what materials should this field's next generation be trained)? Or do both the transnational nature of the subject matter and the changing concerns of historical studies suggest that Afghan history would better develop within a broader regional framework (and if so, what would that linguistic or geographical framework look like)? In short, does Afghanistan even belong in Middle East studies, or would it be better positioned in South Asian or Central Asian studies? Moreover, does the tormented recent history of Afghanistan demand that scholars develop new kinds of skills or methodologies (whether in view of the dispersal and destruction of source materials, the increasing divisiveness of internal ethnic historiographies, or the sheer practical difficulties of doing research in Afghanistan for over thirty years)? Is there an Afghan *Sonderweg* that deserves special treatment, or should this field be construed as a conversation open to all? And perhaps most fundamentally of all, *whose* history is

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Afghan history, and what place do the experiences of women, subalterns, and different ethnic groups have in that history?

This roundtable conversation had its origins at the conference "Great Games? Afghan History through Afghan Eyes," organized by the UCLA Program on Central Asia.[2] Written by leading historians of Afghanistan, the following essays address issues of framing, sources, and subjectivities with regard to the early modern and modern history of Afghanistan. What, then, is the future of Afghan history?

NOTES

[1]Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[2]The November 2011 conference was part of an ongoing attempt to promote Afghanistan studies at UCLA and was made possible by generous funding from the American Institute for Afghanistan Studies. Details of the conference and podcasts of the presentations can be found at http://www.international.ucla.edu/asia/centralasia/article.asp?parentid=123110 (accessed 27 July 2012).

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