The Will Not to Count:

Technologies of Calculation and the Quest to Govern Afghanistan

Mohammad Ali Askar

Department of Art History and Communications Studies

McGill University

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the technologies of numerical information in Afghanistan. It examines the history and politics of the tools used to produce numeral data for the purpose of governance. Based on archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this project assesses the critical role of numbers, or lack thereof, in state practices throughout the modern history of Afghanistan. Grounded in the intersection of Media Studies and Science, Technology and Society Studies (STS), it primarily focuses on three technologies that are used for the task of calculation and control: the street sign, the identification document, and the price tag. These are critical tools, both for the state and the market, to exercise power and impose control. In studying these technologies, this research uncovers new aspects of Afghanistan's long history of attempts to build functioning state institutions and form a stable economy. The literature on quantification has long focused on technologies of surveillance in strong states. This dissertation, however, addresses a critical gap in scholarship by examining the politics of surveillance in a weak state where the rulers have historically used force, instead of knowledge, to govern the population. Despite more than a century of on-and-off efforts, the country still suffers from a lack of reliable information on all aspects of society and the economy. The evidence presented in this research explains how the poverty of information has been contributing to the failure of the state and the economy in Afghanistan.

Resumé

Ce travail se veut une étude dur les technologies de l'information numérique en Afghanistan. Elle analyse l'histoire et la politique des outils utilisés pour produire des données numériques en vue de la gouvernance. Basé sur les recherches archivistiques et le terrain ethnographique, ce projet évalue le rôle critique des nombres, ou de leur absence, dans les pratiques de l'États à travers l'histoire moderne de l'Afghanistan. Ancré à l'intersection des études sur les médias et de la science, de la technologie et de la société, le projet se penche principalement sur trois technologies utilisées pour le calcul et le contrôle : la plaque de rue, le document d'identification et l'étiquette de prix. Ce sont des outils essentiels tant pour l'État que pour le marché permettant d'exercer un pouvoir et d'imposer un contrôle. En étudiant ces technologies, cette recherche révèle de nouveaux aspects de la longue histoire des tentatives de l'Afghanistan pour la mise en place des institutions étatiques fonctionnelles et pour la création une économie stable. La littérature sur la quantification a longtemps été axée sur les technologies de surveillance dans les États forts. Cette thèse aborde toutefois une lacune critique dans la littérature académique actuelle en examinant les politiques de surveillance dans un État faible, où les dirigeants ont historiquement utilisé la force au lieu du savoir pour gouverner la population. Malgré plus d'un siècle d'efforts épars, le pays souffre toujours d'un manque d'informations fiables sur tous les aspects de la société et de l'économie. Les preuves présentées dans cette recherche expliquent comment la pauvreté en matière d'informations contribue à l'échec de l'État et de l'économie afghane.

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Introduction

Number and Power:

On Technolgies of Counting, Knowing, and Governing

Counting is a learned skill, not an innate human faculty. Much like any other skill, whether it is driving a car, opening a window, turning on a computer, or shaking hands, we acquired that knowledge through cultural transmission using language. To state the obvious: we were not born knowing what we know. We learned it from someone else.[1] A skill like counting involved a lengthy learning process. It took millennia of mathematical, linguistic, and technological inventions before humans reached the stage where they can easily count large quantities, calculate complex phenomena, quantify almost everything, and predict things more accurately—skills without which modern economies and societies would not function. From the time our ancestors used tally sticks to quantify things to the current digital age of big data, we have been using numerical techniques and technologies to better represent the phenomena in our world that were either too big or too complex to be represented with any other form of knowledge.

Counting, which was perfected with contributions from a myriad of cultures, is one of the most fundamental invention in the human civilization and the key instrument behind our ability to communicate, trade, and cooperate with each other. If not for numbers, which serve as a

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[1] Caleb Everett, *Numbers and the Making of Us: Counting and the Course of Human Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 125, 128.

universal language, cooperation—and the very idea of human progress—would not be possible. Every aspect of life is somehow intertwined with, and dependent on, numbers. "Number," declared John Locke, "applies itself to men, angels, actions, thoughts; everything that either doth exist, or can be imagined."[2] Throughout history, with every phase in economic progress and scientific advancement, more precise ways of counting and measuring were developed. In particular, the formation of complex economic relations in the modern age greatly contributed to the improvement of the sciences, arts, and technologies of counting.

The economy, however, is not the only sector of the society that depends on numbers. The state, too, especially the modern state, is an institution much of whose power rests on the amount of information it possesses—and information usually means numerical information. In the 17th century, the term *political arithmetic* was coined to mean the "art of reasoning by figures, upon things relating to government."[3] In the 18th century, *statistics* replaced that, a term which initially meant the comparative study of *states*: in terms of their population, size, trade, revenue, health, education, and so forth. A 1770 book, for example, noted: "The science, that is called statistics, teaches us what is the political arrangement of all the modern states in the known world."[4] The close association between states and statistical information, therefore, is no surprise. In order to make policies, deliver services, collect taxes, and police people, states needed information. It had to collect all sorts of information on populations to strengthen its governmental power. Statistics helped represent things too large to be perceptible with human

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[2] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 270.

[3] Quoted in Julian Hoppit, "Political Arithmetic in Eighteenth-Century England," *The Economic History Review* 49, no. 3 (1996): 517.

[4] Quoted in John Durham Peters, "Information: Notes toward a Critical History," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (1988): 14.

senses (the rates of birth, death, crime, or economic growth in a country). In addition to developing systemic ways of collecting numbers, states also constantly refined their techniques and technologies of processing and calculating them. Quantification, in short, serves as the state's primary method of making the population more knowable and more manageable.[5]

The recent growth in algorithmic media has raised public awareness about the politics of numbers and the practice of calculation. Thanks to the increase in computing power, on the one hand, and the availability of big data, which is digital and more flexible, on the other, it is possible to calculate things about which previously we could only guess. The demand for big and bigger data, and the desire for better control practices, have triggered a race whereby state agencies and private companies collect an unprecedented amount of information, treating the population as a limitless data mine. We should note that the age of algorithmic media, when machines do the calculations and make most of the decisions, is only partly a new phenomenon. The use of information for governance has a longer history. The materiality of information and the instruments of calculation might be different now but using the information to exercise power, as mentioned earlier, dates back to, at least, the rise of the modern state in the 18th century. A wide range of calculating techniques, including the census, house numbering, identity

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[5] There are a great number of works on quantification, which include Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Reprint edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Miller and Nikolas S Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Dan Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015); Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1982).

documents, and credit reporting, were introduced in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries to make the abstract population legible. The current datafication schemes are all an extension of an older surveillance machinery that was designed to police individuals and to govern the population.

This dissertation contributes, broadly speaking, to the ongoing conversations on surveillance. It offers a history of quantification in Afghanistan through a discussion of the following three technologies: the street sign, the identification document, and the price tag. The three media that I investigate here are primarily viewed as technologies of calculation that allow the state and corporations to practice governance by counting people, places, and things. I use the word *calculation* as an umbrella term to cover a wide range of numeral practices including measurement, counting, accounting, pricing, taxation, and so forth, which are all embedded in the three technologies that I study. Identification documents, for instance, are used to register and track individuals. Street signs are used to organize and enumerate spaces and control the people who use them. And price tags are used to provide information symmetry in business transactions and give more control to states for taxation and consumers for trust. The technologies of calculation, therefore, refer to all numeral tools that we use to count. As a work of critical information studies, this dissertations falls at the intersection of a number of fields including media history, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and Afghanistan studies.

This research is informed by Michel Foucault's work on surveillance and power. As a study of three technologies of sorting people, places, and things, this thesis looks at the link between knowing and governing and the way an inscriptive regime of control is built and operated. In his discussion of the history of state governance, Foucault argues that sorting was a key feature of the process through which the modern state exercised power. And the city offered

the perfect site for that information-based form of governance. The state envisioned the entire country as a well-planned and well-policed city. He calls the process the "urbanization of territory," which meant turning "the kingdom, the entire territory, into a sort of big town; arranging things so that the territory is organized like a town, on the model of a town, and as perfectly as a town."[6] Why town? Because the town was the birthplace of the police, he says, and it was where the population—their relationship with each other, their circulation and communication—as well as roads, squares, buildings, and markets were governed. In particular, it was the market town, Foucault argues, that "became the model of state intervention in men's lives."[7] The technologies of urban surveillance transformed the population into identifiable individuals with names and addresses. The modern cities, with their networked infrastructures of communication, offer the same surveillance practices with greater reach.[8]

The purpose of this research is to examine how the technologies of producing numerical information serve as hardware of control. Similarly, it discusses the way the lack of such technologies contribute to the failure of states and markets. The current literature on surveillance is more or less shaped by anti-state ideas that were popularized by James C, Scott in his now-classic book, *Seeing Like a State*.[9] His critique of authoritarian development projects that ignore

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[6] Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 336.

[7] Foucault, 338.

[8] Shannon Mattern, "Interfacing Urban Intelligence," in *Code and the City*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Sung-Yueh Perng (London: Routledge, 2016), 49–60; Mike Crang and Stephen Graham, "Sentient Cities: Ambient Intelligence and the Politics of Urban Space," *Information, Communication & Society* 10, no. 6 (2007): 789–817.

[9] James C Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

local contexts was absolutely valid but his emphasis on local practices as an alternative mode of governance set an anti-state trend in surveillance scholarship that since has dominated the discourse on security and state. The idea that I present in this dissertation is that a nation needs a state strong enough to provide it with public services such as security and justice. Delivery of such services is possible only with the availability of a reliable regime of information-based control. Afghanistan is a case in point, a country that suffers from a chronic weakness of the state and struggles with violence and instability caused by powerful non-state actors. It is the opposite of the Weberian state, an institution that is capable of asserting its authority over a population and territory. Max Weber defined the state as a "human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory—and this idea of 'territory' is an essential defining feature." [10] The modern state's control over a territory is primarily facilitated through knowledge, not force as was the case with pre-modern states. State control, therefore, will fail when it lacks reliable information about its territory and population. The state normally uses technologies of enumeration to collect population information for the purpose of administration and control. Information is the key source of power in countries with stable and functioning states.

The kind of reliable population data that people in developed nations take for granted is hard to access in the fragile states of the developing world such as Afghanistan. Either due to insecurity or because of weak state institutions, plagued by corruption, the systematic gathering

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[10] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 33. For recent works on the histories and theories of state formation, see Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

of information on population and their socio-economic qualities is not practiced.[11] In the case of Afghanistan, the government is dealing with a widespread "ghost" phenomenon: it does not know how many people are in the country because it has never conducted a nationwide census, and even accurate data on the number of schools, students, teachers, soldiers, and police officers do not exist.[12] According to one estimation, about half of the population do not have any kind of paper with which to establish their identity.[13] Most of the land transfers are not registered and the government has no way to know who owns what.[14] Streets are mostly not named and houses are mostly not numbered and the task of finding an individual is close to impossible.[15] In the market, most transactions are oral and the state has no way to track the earning history of individuals and businesses for taxation. Taxation, too, is mostly settled by haggling instead of being levied

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[11] Ewout Frankema and Morten Jerven, "Writing History Backwards or Sideways: Towards a Consensus on African Population, 1850–2010," *The Economic History Review* 67, no. 4 (2014): 907–31; Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[12] "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress" (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), January 30, 2016), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2016-01-30qr.pdf; Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/22/afghanistans-demographic-drought/.

[13] Husain Haydari, "Bah Muhajirin-i Afghan Dar Iran va Pakistan Tazkirah Tavziʿ Mishavad," *Hasht-i Subh*, May 23, 2017, https://8am.af/x8am/1396/03/02/id-cards-will-be-distributed-to-afghan-refugees-in-iran-and-pakistan/.

[14] "The Stolen Lands of Afghanistan and Its People - Part 1" (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, August 2014), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_rol_unit_part_1_legal_framework_final-2.pdf.

[15] Ali Karimi, "Street Fights: The Commodification of Place Names in Post-Taliban Kabul City," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 3 (2016): 738–53.

through written regulations that would allow predictability. In a country that suffers from this level of widespread information blackout, building a state that could deliver basic services is a huge challenge.

The ability to locate a person is one of the most, if not the most, important powers of the state. The state cannot carry out the task of administration, and deliver public services, without having access to various forms of population data, in particular those having to do with location and identity. Among other public services, the delivery of justice and security is especially dependent on the state's ability to efficiently identify people and find places. As the scholarship on the history of the 'surveillance society' demonstrates, the modern state, since the 18th century, has been successful in employing a number of techniques and technologies, such as census, identification papers, and property registration, to gather data on the population and their locations.[16] This, however, has not been the case in weak states where government bureaucracy is incapable of collecting information, maintaining its integrity, and using it to enforce the law.

In what follows, I first review the recent developments in the relevant literature, explain the methodology of the research, and offer a brief chapter outline at the end.

A BACKGROUND: THE POLITICS OF MEASUREMENT

"When you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind." This is a quote from the 19th-century Irish mathematical physicist, William Thomson,

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[16] Keith Breckenridge, Simon Szreter, and British Academy, eds., *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2012); Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power and Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

better known as Lord Kelvin.[17] A version of this quote was engraved on the façade of the Social Science Research Building at the University of Chicago that said: "When you cannot measure, your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory." As a physicist, Kelvin meant to stress the importance of exact measurement in physical sciences, not social sciences. In 1940, Frank Knight, a Chicago economist, quipped that for the social scientists it would have been more fitting if the quote said: "If you cannot measure, measure anyhow."[18] Knight's suggestion sounds like a clever, self-deprecating, joke, but he really meant that. He did not believe one could measure social phenomena.[19] Knight wrote extensively on risk, a domain of economics that deals with information. The economic concept "Knightian uncertainty" is named after him. The idea simply means un-measurable risk, or, when any quantifiable information about the outcome of a possible decision does not exist. He distinguished uncertainty from risk, which is a form of measurable uncertainty.[20] His satirical remark about measurement, therefore, was in reference to the struggles of early social scientific research in emulating the methods of the exact sciences.

Techniques of measurement and quantification in social sciences gradually improved and will continue to improve. In certain branches of natural sciences, too, precision in measurement was achieved over time. Take physics, for example, which throughout its history had methods of measurement that were as arbitrary as those of contemporary social sciences. It was only after 1750 that precise measurement began to appear in physics.[21] Arithmetic, of course, was always

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[17] Thomas S. Kuhn, "The Function of Measurement in Modern Physical Science," *Isis* 52, no. 2 (1961): 161.

[18] Kuhn, 161, 164.

[19] Frank H. Knight, "'What Is Truth' in Economics?," *Journal of Political Economy* 48, no. 1 (1940): 18.

[20] David Cowan, *Frank H. Knight: Prophet of Freedom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 27–28.

[21] Theodore M. Porter, "Economics and the History of Measurement," *History of Political Economy* 33, no. 5 (2001): 7.

more precise and useful for any form of calculation and measurement, but in Europe, until the early modern era, scientists preferred geometry over arithmetic, considering the latter a utilitarian instrument chiefly associated with merchants.[22] Astronomy, however, was widely practiced in medieval Europe, but mainly for religious reasons, as the church needed its precise calculations to determine Christian holidays.[23] In contrast, in the Islamic world at the time, exact sciences were thriving not only for religious purposes but also for worldly matters.

In the 11th century, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 440/1050), arguably the greatest scientist of his day, lived in Ghazna (Ghazni, in present-day Afghanistan), the capital of the Ghaznavid Empire. His impressive body of work included a book on how to accurately measure the distance between cities, the kind of knowledge that the rulers of Ghazna needed for their empire-building campaigns. Originally from Khwarazm, present-day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, he was brought to Ghazni in 1018 when Sultan Mahmud (r. 998-1030) annexed the territory to his empire. In Ghazni, al-Biruni was patronized by the court and spent the rest of his life in the city conducting research and also traveling around the empire in search of knowledge. He contributed to mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography and other rational sciences of his time. In mathematical geography, he wrote *The Determination of the Coordinates of Positions for the Correction of Distances between Cities* (416/1025), a book on determining the coordinates of major towns. His calculations, based on the positions of celestial bodies, corrected previous knowledge and proved to be remarkably accurate even with modern standards.[24]

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[22] Porter, 8.

[23] Porter, 8–9.

[24] David A. King, "Astronomy in the Service of Islam," in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, ed. Clive L.N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015), 191.

He was aware of the politics of numerical information. In response to his "stubborn" critics who saw no use in scientific pursuits, al-Biruni argued that scientific knowledge was required for sound decision-making: "we cannot be sure, without knowledge, that what we seek and bring forth is the good, and that which we avoid is evil."[25] The purpose of writing the book, he explained, was to provide "valid methods" for producing practical geographical information. He wanted to show:

(a) The east, or west, longitude of a given place. (b) The north, or south, latitude of a given place. (c) The distance between two specified places. (d) The direction of one place relative to another. My particular, purpose, however, is to determine these data for the city of Ghazna, the capital of the Kingdome of the East, because, as a newcomer, I would like to consider it, by human reckoning, my homeland; though all true reckoning, in reality, is made by God.[26]

Like other works of Islamic astronomy, one of the purposes of the book was to find the *qibla* (the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslims face to say their prayers.) In Muslim settlements, we should note, people already knew the direction of the qibla. You needed that information when you entered a non-Muslim town or when praying in the middle of a desert. Finding the qibla, therefore, was only a minor reason why al-Biruni wrote the book. The obvious assumption here is that the knowledge al-Biruni produced in *The Determination of the Coordinates* was used for

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[25] Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, *The Determination of the Coordinates of Positions for the Correction of Distances between Cities*, trans. Jamal Ali (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1967), 2.

[26] al-Biruni, 32.

commercial and military purposes, the type of knowledge that the emperor needed. In his introduction, he even mentioned "governorship of a district, business and commerce in general, and real estate brokerage" as three vocations that could benefit from sound scientific information.[27] The practical aspect of science was important to him. In critiquing a geographical calculation made by Abu ʿAli Sina (Avicenna), his contemporary polymath from Balkh, he noted that "though Abu ʿAli is renowned for his intelligence and sound intuition, he is unreliable in a matter which requires practical experience."[28]

Throughout the golden age of Central Asian science, which was "during the four or five centuries around AD 1000," sciences of calculation and measurement expanded.[29] A 13th-century polymath, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210, Herat, Afghanistan), wrote *Jamiʿ al-ʿUlum* (c. 570/1175), an encyclopedia of sort on sixty branches of knowledge known at the time. Of the sixty sciences discussed, about half were rational sciences (*ʿulum-i ʿaqli*) and at least ten were fields that dealt with calculations and measurements such as arithmetic, geometry, surveying, and astronomy.[30] This was the corpus of knowledge a student was expected to master. By the end of the 16th century, rational sciences started to fade away as dynasties in Central Asia fell into political and economic decay. In the 17th century, as an example, Khushhal Khan Khattak, a Pashtun tribal chief in what is today Pakistan, authored *Dastar-namah* (1076/1665), a book on the qualities of a tribal leader. He listed forty "arts" and "qualities" for an ideal man but

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[27] al-Biruni, 2.

[28] al-Biruni, 167–68.

[29] S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4, 16–17.

[30] Fakhr al-Din Razi, *Jamiʿ Al-ʿUlum*, ed. Sayyid ʿAli Al-i Davud (Tehran: Mavqufat-i Duktur Afshar, 2003), 71–73.

arithmetic was not one of them. (He, however, included penmanship, poetry, farming, painting, and kinship research.)[31] Numerical knowledge—and, in fact, rational sciences altogether—no longer occupied a prominent place in public culture.

In the 18th century, the "age of quantification," Europeans developed techniques and technologies of counting that helped shape modern science and the modern state. In administration, information replaced violence as the state's primary instrument of asserting its authority over the population. The Muslim world did not notice the passage of the Enlightenment Movement.[32] In Afghanistan, as late as the 19th century, knowledge of any kind was scarce and even the affairs of the state were run mostly orally. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (1880-1901), an intelligent but barely literate man, was aware of the crisis. In 1899, possibly wanting to know the causes of the decline in the Muslim world, he commissioned the translation, from the Arabic, of Ibn Khaldun's seven-volume history of the world, with its famous *Muqaddima* (Introduction) on the rise and fall of civilizations. The Amir could not find any qualified translator in Kabul for the 14th-century book so he tasked a group of Muslim scholars in India with the job. Two years and

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[31] Khushhal Khan Khattak, *Dastar-Namah* (Kabul: Pashtu Tulanah, 1966), 8–9. On how early Pashtun authors, in the 17th and 18th centuries, used numerical information, see, Mikhail Pelevin, "Daily Arithmetic of Pashtun Tribal Rulers: Numbers in The Khataks' Chronicle," *Iran and the Caucasus* 20, no. 1 (2016): 63–83; Mikhail Pelevin, "Demographic Statistics among Pashtuns in Early Modern Period," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University, Asian and African Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 64–74.

[32] The failure of the Islamic world in the modern era, according to post-colonial theorists, should be blamed on European colonialism. This easy explanation is theoretically fashionable but historically incorrect. Although European colonialism's negative impacts on the Islamic world cannot be ignored, most regions, in particular, Central Asia and Iran, were already long in decay before the arrival of the white Europeans. Colonizers made a bad situation worse. We should, therefore, look at the pre-colonial history of these countries for clues to explain the great decline.

thirty thousand Indian Rupees later, when the Amir finally received some sample of the work, he found the quality of the translation so bad that he had to terminate the project.[33] The irony of not being able to find a qualified Arabic translator for a book on the cultural decline was probably not lost on him.

Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan was the man who built the Afghan state and fixed the country's borders. Although he used genocidal violence, mass displacement, and enslavement as his primary methods of pacification and unification, he also relied on information produced by his massive army of spies in order to assert his power over the population. In addition, as discussed throughout this dissertation, he also bureaucratized the government using print, issued identity documents to employees of the state for the first time, and made serious efforts towards enumeration by counting part of the male population for the draft. His technologies of surveillance and quantification were not quite sufficient but they demonstrated the Iron Amir's astute understanding of how information, and, in particular, quantifiable information, could be used as an instrument of power. His successors in the 20th century up until now, despite making some sporadic efforts, have not yet been able to conduct a nationwide census, issue identity documents to every resident, register properties, or number houses in Afghan cities—the numerical technologies that are taken for granted in most parts of the world.

The failure to count is the failure to govern. This is the main idea of this dissertation. I explore technologies of numerical information to explain this failure in governance. Information failure is part of the chronic problem of corruption, a problem deeply entangled with the inner workings of governmental power in Afghanistan. The phenomenon of corruption is best

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[33] Fayz Muhammad Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh* (*ST*, hereafter), vol. 4 (part 2), ed. Muhammad Sarvar Mavlayi (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011), 1-3.

measured by a look at record-keeping practices in a country. Although I do not discuss the issue thoroughly here, record-keeping is linked to all the three case studies in this research because it is the hardware of information in officialdom. Looking at the problem this way, corruption is nothing but how you handle information: hiding, withholding, distorting, destroying, or neglecting to collect, information are all a form of corruption. Similarly, transparency, too, is about information and the way you collect, sort, preserve, and retrieve it.

Some of the evidence I present in this research shows the efforts on the part of Afghan rulers to use inscriptive media—technologies of writing—to produce legibility and transparency. At the same time, I examine evidence showing the opposite: the lack of political will to actually build transparency, accountability, and impersonal bureaucracy. In other words, the ruling elite in Kabul have always regarded transparency as a threat and made sure to keep things opaque so as to maintain their unfair access to political and economic resources. This involved corrupting information by keeping it oral, secretive, distorted, or destroyed. Opacity is power in the same way that "knowledge is power." I would like to use the word numerophobia, the fear of numbers, to explain this phenomenon. A numerophobic state is a state that sees factual numerical information a threat and tries to cook up numbers for political gain. This is a common feature of all the states that deal with failure, fragility, authoritarianism, and corruption. In Afghanistan, numerophobia is best evident in the history of the census in the country, a topic that, like the idea of numerophibia itself, deserves to be examined in a separate project.

The nature of the Afghan state has been extensively studied in several disciplines. Political scientists do not believe Afghanistan has ever been a nation-state in a modern sense. It, instead, had a traditional state, with little governmental capacity, and people relied on tribe and

Islam as universal frameworks to govern their public lives.[34] Afghan rulers, up until the end of the 19th century, had to offer "opportunities for plunder" to earn loyalty. In this respect, the Afghan method of governance followed a "plundering polity model" common in nomadic societies of Inner Asia, where the authority of political leaders was based on their ability to "collect and distribute wealth gained through booty raids of neighbouring territories."[35] For most of the first half of the 20th century, the state remained weak and violent but after World War II things improved thanks to the arrival of foreign aid. In 1978, the communist coup started a violent reaction from Islamists that somehow continues to this day. In the post-2001 era, the state has been weak, dependent, and corrupt but it nonetheless keeps holding periodic elections that are so rigged with fraud that some have questioned the wisdom of holding elections in a country where it cannot count people's votes.[36] There are a wide range of solutions offered to fix Afghanistan, including those by Ashraf Ghani, who co-wrote a book called *Fixing Failed States* before running for Afghan president in 2014 and winning it—by using industrial-scale electoral fraud, of course.[37]

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[34] Barnett R. Rubin, "Lineages of the State in Afghanistan," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 11 (1988): 1188–1209.

[35] B. D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 85–91.

[36] Barnett R Rubin, "(Re)Building Afghanistan: The Folly of Stateless Democracy," *Current History* 103, no. 672 (2004): 165–70; Scott Worden, "Afghanistan: An Election Gone Awry," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 11–25.

[37] Chris Mason, "Fraud and Folly in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/23/fraud-and-folly-in-afghanistan/; Carlotta Gall, "In Afghan Election, Signs of Systemic Fraud Cast Doubt on Many Votes," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/world/asia/in-afghan-election-signs-of-systemic-fraud-cast-doubt-on-many-votes.html.

Historians, however, have been more interested in the eventful story of modernization in Afghanistan. After Gregorian's classic work on the subject, later scholars have focused on more specific aspects of the Afghan encounter with the modern world.[38] In recent years, there have been a number of studies that expand this field by linking Afghanistan to the global network of commercial and political forces, providing a more comprehensive account of the Afghan experience of modern ideas.[39] On specific technologies, too, there are a number of studies that highlight the materialist aspects of this encounter, including works on the arrival of print, the automobile, European fashion, photography, and aviation in Afghanistan.[40] In urban history,

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[38] Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969).

[39] Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion. Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft between the Ottoman and British Empires* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[40] Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah, eds., *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Nile Green, "The Road to Kabul: Automobiles and Afghan Internationalism, 1900-1940," in *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier*, ed. Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 77–91; Thomas Wide, "Astrakhan, Borqa', Chadari, Dreshi: The Economy of Dress in Early-Twentieth-Century Afghanistan," in *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: Routledge, 2014), 163–201; Holly Edwards, "Photography and Afghan Diplomacy in the Early Twentieth Century," *Ars Orientalis* 43 (2013): 47–65; Jenifer Van Vleck, "An Airline at the Crossroads of

May Schinasi's impressive work on the history of the Afghan capital is an outstanding achievement.[41] Despite all the great works on Afghanistan, the country is still under-studied and such areas such as Afghan economic history and social history, in particular, remain to be thoroughly examined.

The present study joins this body of work on Afghanistan by providing a technological approach to power that encourages further interrogation of numerical information and the way it contributes to the formation of state authority and social control. This dissertation is distinguished from other works in Afghan historiography because, on one hand, it privileges the technological dimension of state failure and state power and, on the other, it extensively uses local primary sources, in particular, materials from the National Archives of Afghanistan in Kabul, which were previously not accessible to researchers. The purpose of this work, as previously mentioned, is to examine the way the ability to count, quantify, and measure shapes the power of the state to govern its territory and population. The number, however, as an abstract unit of knowledge, is elusive and one cannot record and transmit it orally, the way people communicate folk stories across time and space. Numerical information, as result, is an inscriptive medium intertwined with writing and paperwork.

MEDIA OF INSCRIPTION

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the World: Ariana Afghan Airlines, Modernization, and the Global Cold War," *History and Technology* 25, no. 1 (2009): 3–24.

[41] May Schinasi, *Kabul: A History 1773-1948*, trans. Robert D. McChesney (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Writing was invented in ancient Mesopotamia by the state for administrative purposes.[42] It was a requirement for basic recordkeeping and efficient governance. And it was numbers, not words, which were first invented. One of the earliest writing systems, for example, created in ancient Sumer some thousands of years ago, was for recording taxes, business contracts, and other financial obligations.[43] Writing is inherently an instrument of power that helps states and companies build institutional memory, a key feature of any functioning bureaucracy. In the modern era, the relationship between the media of information communication and political power has been more pronounced. Friedrich Kittler credited the military for the evolution of the modern media system. He tied the three developmental phases of information inscription and transmission—analog, electric, and digital—to three modern wars:

Phase 1, beginning with the American Civil War, developed storage technologies for acoustics, optics, and script: film, gramophone, and the man-machine system, typewriter. Phase 2, beginning with the First World War, developed for each storage content appropriate electric transmission technologies: radio, television, and their more secret counterparts. Phase 3, since the Second World War, has transferred the schematic of a typewriter to a technology of predictability per se; Turing's mathematical definition of computability in 1936 gave future computers their name.[44]

[42] Haicheng Wang, *Writing and the Ancient State: Early China in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3; James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 139.

[43] Tom B. Jones, "Bookkeeping in Ancient Sumer," *Archaeology* 9, no. 1 (1956): 16–21.

[44] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, film, typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243.

In addition to being historically a state technology, as Kittler suggests, writing is also what separates literate from non-literate cultures and urbanites from rural/nomads. According to Harold Innis: "The development of writing, mathematics, the standardization of weights and measures, and adjustments of the calendar were a part of an urban revolution."[45] It was settled populations, with sophisticated economic relations, who dealt with large amounts of information and had to keep it safe and fixed. No wonder that the Sumerians, an urban people, were obsessed with "orderliness" and "invented writing in order to keep track of things."[46] In a more significant way, writing allows people to have a place in history, whilst those who do not write will either be forgotten or misrepresented by those who write. The term "prehistoric" refers to this fact, designating the era before the invention of writing as a time when history did not exist and folk stories were the sole source of information about the past.

Writing is also a technology of transparency and, as such, can better flourish out of a social order where personal rights are recognized and the state's power is restricted.[47] We see this even in the birth of modern bureaucracy and the way it contributed to the development of representative governance. In the 17th century, for example, the French government "had no manual or single written constitution." The state governance was nothing but layers of "disparate traditions" mostly drawn from feudal culture and church principles. The state was a personal and mostly oral institution that Louis the Fourteenth (r. 1643–1715) tried to reform.[48] In the post-

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[45] Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 55.

[46] Jones, "Bookkeeping in Ancient Sumer," 17.

[47] E. A. Speiser's idea mentioned in, Innis, *Empire and Communications*, 55.

[48] Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 13.

revolutionary France, bureaucracy expanded further and written records were viewed as the material evidence of state actions. The materiality of bureaucracy—or, proper record-keeping—empowered the public by allowing them to monitor the inner workings of the state. Paperwork, as a result, institutionalized state accountability.[49]

When talking about writing we inevitably take a position on orality. The question of orality has become a sensitive topic prone to invoking value judgments by writers and misinterpretations by readers. The early scholarship is marred by biased views towards non-Western peoples whose literacy rates were low.[50] McLuhan, for example, would insert nonchalantly racist remarks here and there when talking about non-literate people.[51] Recent studies of oral cultures refute the established assumption about the oral-literate divide by arguing that there is, in fact, no difference between those who write and those who do not: "The evidence on which the orality-literacy split rests is thin and dated."[52] Writing, according to this new approach, should not exclude non-phonetic modes of representation such as sculpture, painting, masks, architecture, and musical instruments, artifacts widely used by non-literate people and contain information about the past.[53] Although these material objects could indeed yield useful

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[49] Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 19–50. See also, Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42–44.

[50] Jonathan Sterne, "The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 2 (2011): 220.

[51] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 145.

[52] Sterne, "The Theology of Sound," 220.

[53] Sterne, 221. See also the following for a study of how the built environment could serve as a media of communication, Shannon Mattern, *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), chaps. 3–4.

information, calling them media of communication—in a linguistic sense—is too poetic. In this research, therefore, I use the terms literacy and orality in the context of communication in standardized phonetic alphabet only. Paintings, architecture, and other artifacts cannot be used to communicate information on a daily basis in a society with a functioning state and economy.

The bureaucratic practices that emerged in the 17th century saturated all aspects of private and public lives with paper. In contrast to orality, the power of modern inscriptive media came from their ability to produce what the public perceived as believability, validity, and, accountability—or control.[54] Office media, such as forms, certificates, lists, memos, and other mundane official and unofficial paper-based documents were all part of this machinery of control. Recent critical studies highlight this aspect of inscriptive media with works on documents, paperwork, files, passports, catalog cards, music charts, lists, and other bureaucratic media of communication.[55] The field of document studies deals with bureaucratic artifacts and practices that were long studied in business history, an established area of inquiry with classic

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[54] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 132; Craig Robertson, "Paper, Information, and Identity in 1920s America," *Information & Culture* 50, no. 3 (2015): 394.

[55] Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Kafka, *The Demon of Writing*; Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008); Craig Robertson, *The Passport in America: The History of a Document* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Markus Krajewski, *Paper Machines: About Cards & Catalogs, 1548-1929*, trans. Peter Krapp (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011); Will Straw, "Mediality and the Music Chart," *SubStance* 44, no. 3 (2015): 128–38; Liam Cole Young, *List Cultures: Knowledges and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

works on the paper-based regimes of control.[56] Studies on bureaucratic practices in the developing world, too, have contributed to the corpus of growing scholarship on paperwork and power.[57]

The secret power of information lies in its flexibility that allows quantification, a process that helps us understand phenomena too big for one person's eyes and ears. The other source of information's power comes from its supposed neutrality that gives it an almost universally positive connotation. A tabulated form, for example, that records standardized information, on the one hand, allows the gathered data to be easily quantified; on the other, the lack of narrative in the form makes the data impersonal. Information, whether digital or analog, comes in bits. It can contain facts, but it is not a fact itself. According to John Guillory, the fact is abstract knowledge, like the price of a certain stock in the financial market, but when it is transmitted, it becomes information. Information, in this context, has a "shelf life, a momentary value" and if it missed the right moment of transmission, it should be "stored to await its next opportunity."[58] Although information, in a way, exists in every form of writing, it primarily shapes the writing genre in bureaucratic communications.[59] In bureaucracy, information media cannot be innocent

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[56] Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1977); James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

[57] David M. Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); S. K Das, *Public Office, Private Interest: Bureaucracy and Corruption in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[58] John Guillory, "The Memo and Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004): 110.

[59] Guillory, 111–12.

artifacts. Any official document, as Lisa Gitelman explains, does more than display the information it contains, it also informs them of the authority behind the production of the information.[60]

In media studies, there has been a renewed interest in information, and, in particular, numerical information, in recent years. In the area of research to which this dissertation belongs, there are a number of works published just in the past few years that examine the various ways media of numerical information contributed to the building of state and corporate regimes of control. In *Numbered Lives*, Jacqueline Wernimont offers a pre-history of wearable technologies, such as pedometers, and other instruments of counting, to show how the ubiquitous technologies of quantification came to dominate contemporary culture.[61] In *Creditworthy*, Josh Lauer examines the history of financial surveillance in the US, highlighting the role of the private market in the construction of the modern surveillance society.[62] This new interest in information is partly inspired by abusive behaviors of state and corporate data collectors in the digital age, particularly against women and persons of color.[63] The very act of quantification, too, is under scrutiny because of the ways numerical tools are abused by the powerful.[64]

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[60] Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 4–6.

[61] Jacqueline Wernimont, *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

[62] Josh Lauer, *Creditworthy: A History of Consumer Surveillance and Financial Identity in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[63] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018); Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[64] Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016).

My research is situated within this body of literature and contributes to it by exploring the way technologies of numerical information shape the power of the state in a country and their absence leads to state failure. The three objects that I study—the identification document, the price tag, and the street sign—are media of numerical information used in the practice of state and corporate governance. As inscriptive media, they were designed to disrupt the oral modes of information communication. Standardized identification documents produce quantifiable data on the population and allow citizens to establish their identities before the public and private entities. Street signs provide spatial order and help people navigate the city efficiently. In the same way, the written price tags prevent haggling and trickery by building information symmetry in the market. As inscriptive media, these three technologies make information communication an impersonal process. In Afghanistan, as we will learn, the process of making information impersonal has not been easy or successful. Much like the process of Afghan state-building itself, it has been an endless series of big plans disrupted by either war, corruption, negligence, or all three at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is an inquiry into the history and politics of three technologies of numerical information: the identification document, the street sign, and the price tag. The main questions that guide my research are the following: How does information contribute to the practice of governance? What are the technological aspects of state weakness in Afghanistan? Can information practices explain the lack of trust in Afghanistan? How did the three technologies under investigation emerge in Afghanistan and how have they failed?

The sources that I examined in this research were primarily archival materials, contemporary newspapers, government reports, and published works. In addition to these sources, I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork to supplement the data when access to written records was limited. The ethnography included visits to the Kabul bazaar and interviews with merchants using open-ended questions. The main archival institution that I worked in was the National Archives of Afghanistan (NAA) in Kabul. This is a state archive with a rich collection of documents covering mostly the events after 1880 with some documents from earlier eras. The archive lacked a standardized catalog—no surprise here—but some documents had one, or more than one, handwritten number on them. In citing the NAA documents, I mention all the information available including any document numbers. In Kabul, I also consulted the documents from the Kabul Municipality's archives. In the UK, I conducted research at the British Library's India Office Records, The National Archives, and the Wellcome Library, all in London. In addition to these institutions, I have also consulted several online archives/libraries on Afghanistan that I list in my bibliography.

The primary theoretical framework that informs this research is the Foucauldian idea of governmentality. He defined governmentality as a set of techniques, technologies, and practices that the state employs to exercise power. The primarily knowledge-based governance practices emerged in modern times and led to the formation of the "administrative state," an institution that "governmentalized" all aspects of political power.[65] In his own words, governmentality is:

> …the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that

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[65] Foucault, *Security, territory, population*, 108–9.

has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.[66]

In this research, however, I use governmentality to explain not state power per se but state weakness. In other words, I reverse-engineer governmentality to assess the ways in which state weakness could be understood by looking at the techniques, technologies, and practices that produce governmental power. Governmentality uncovers the multi-layered nature of administrative power and it can guide us in identifying the technological aspects of state weakness in a place like Afghanistan. This is also the right moment to define the word "governance." This is a keyword in this dissertation and I use to mean both state and corporate administration.

In his Collège de France lectures, Foucault takes a U-turn of a sort in explaining the politics of state governance. In the past, he was a critic of the modern state's "calculated management of life" that was aimed at the "subjugation of bodies and the control of populations."[67] In his later lectures, however, he pays serious attention to examining liberal and neoliberal ideas on the nature of the state and the market.[68] As a result, he assesses governmentality with a new approach: "What can the end of government be?" he asks in one of his lectures. "Certainly just not to govern, but to improve the condition of the population, to increase its wealth, its longevity, and its health."[69] He argues that the techniques of governance

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[66] Foucault, 108.

[67] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

[68] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), chaps 2-4.

[69] Foucault, *Security, territory, population*, 105.

are not only for oppressive control but also for service delivery and care. Foucault's late sympathy for state governmentality and the free market has earned him the label of neoliberal from some and libertarian from others.[70] (The former is meant as an insult, the latter as a compliment.) I also take the late Foucauldian approach to governance by using it to mean, broadly speaking, the management of public service delivery. In the delivery of services, whether these be health and education or justice and security, the state needs reliable population information to govern.

The idea of governmentality informs the general framework of this research but I also build on several methodological approaches in media studies, particularly those of media archeology, cultural techniques, and logistical media.[71] Media archeology is a Foucauldian approach to media history but the field has been more focused on electronic machines of transmission and signaling, and less with paper media. Logistical media scholarship, however, deals with mundane and neglected technologies that still serve critical purposes. Logistical media "arrange people and property into time and space." Although they do not necessarily transmit or record, they "form the grid in which messages are sent." Logistical media include calendars,

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[70] Daniel Zamora and Michael C Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016); Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Michel Foucault Is the Libertarian's Best Friend," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/11/why-michel-foucault-is-the-libertarians-best-friend/.

[71] Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); John Durham Peters, "Calendar, Clock, Tower," in *Deus in Machina: Religion and Technology in Historical Perspective*, ed. Jeremy Stolow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 25–42; Judd A. Case, "Logistical Media: Fragments from Radar's Prehistory," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 38, no. 3 (2013): 379–95.

clocks, towers, maps, names, archives, census, stamps, and a range of other similar technologies.[72] In this respect, identification documents, street signs, and price tags, too, are logistical media that serve as infrastructures for ordering people, places, and things.

"Cultural techniques" is a recently popularized theoretical approach to media with a strong emphasis on their materialist aspects. According to Bernhard Siegert, to understand a phenomenon, one needs to take into consideration the technologies that define and place it in our culture: "Time *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of time measurement, and space *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of spatial control."[73] The term "cultural techniques" was long associated with agriculture and methods of cultivating the land, but since the 1970s, it "came to refer to elementary *Kulturtechniken* or basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic." Cultural techniques such as "counting or writing always presuppose technical objects capable of performing […] these operations."[74] In this research, I look at governance as a set of cultural techniques that can only be performed with the use of material objects such as identification documents, house numbers, and price tags. Among others, quantification is a key cultural technique on which the stability of the state and the functioning of the market depend.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

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[72] Peters, "Calendar, Clock, Tower," 41–42.

[73] Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 9.

[74] Siegert, 11.

This dissertation consists of three main chapters dealing with three case studies. Although it is possible to read each chapter as a standalone essay, there is a central thread that ties the three case studies together: numerical information. In Chapter 1, I discuss identification as a practice of governance. Subjecting people to fixed identities allows the state to track individuals more easily. The identification document is not a numerical technology per se, but the data bits gathered through it, such as name, address, occupation, and ethnicity, are quantifiable information that can produce concrete numbers about the population. This is particularly the cases in a place like Afghanistan where the country has never conducted a census and all population data are highly-politicized estimations. The identity document, as a result, serves as a key numerical instrument of population governance.

In the late 19th century, when Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman was in power, the first identification documents were issued in Afghanistan that covered only civilian and military employees of the state. He is the man who is credited with building the Afghan state. He also fixed the country's borders and gave it a centralized state and pacified the population through the use of genocidal violence. Although brute force remained his favorite method of governance, he also made great use of paper media to build a surveillance regime. He died one year into the 20th century and his successors so far have not been able to finish the project that he started: building a unified and stable Afghan nation-state. The country still struggles with paperless governance and a poverty of population data. In 2017, the director of the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority, Humayun Muhtat, estimated that more than half of the Afghan population do not have any document to prove their identity.[75] This means that half of the country is practically invisible,

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[75] Haydari, "Bah Muhajirin Afghan."

unable to be recognized before a court or another state institution and unable to engage in private transactions in the market.

I cover all the costs of this failure in governance and discuss the many times the state throughout the 20th century tried but failed to issue standardized identification documents. The National Identity Card, known as Tazkira, is not the only identity document that has failed to achieve popularity; all other forms of identification papers, too, such as certificates of birth, death, marriage, divorce, and so forth have been hard to come by. To make things worse, the Tazkira has been suffering from a widespread problem of forgery to the point that few places now would accept it as a reliable proof of identity. In 2018, President Ashraf Ghani launched the most recent state program to register the population by issuing e-Tazkira, a biometrically-enabled national identity card. The e-Tazkira program is an ambitious step towards bureaucratic reform, but it is not clear if it can survive the most stubborn enemy of transparency which is administrative corruption inside the Afghan government. The chapter will conclude by examining technical issues surrounding biometric identification in a weak state.

In chapter 2, I discuss the street sign and its critical function as an instrument for the geo-codification of cities, and, thus, as a technology of surveillance. Geographical information lies at the heart of modern state power as it can turn abstract territories into concrete, calculable, and controllable geographies. Standardized place names in cities can foster communication and commerce by enabling a more efficient circulation of information and commodities. In examining the history and politics of the street sign in Kabul, I explore the genesis of locative media. The street sign, which I use here to refer both to house numbers and street names, was the first locative medium. This simple instrument that helps us find our way in a new city was the first technology that enabled states to turn urban spaces knowable and governable. The street

sign has been serving as the most effective technology of governance and continues to be used as the primary identifier of our locations. The house number, in particular, allows states to track, locate, and calculate the population and the properties they occupy. In most developed countries, such as the United States and Canada, a person cannot do almost anything without a proper street address attached to their names, not even booking a flight or a hotel room.

The critical role of street signs in the practice of governance is the reason it would be helpful to trace its history in Afghanistan, a country that has long been struggling with the most stubborn case of state failure. It is also a country where streets of its cities are still mostly unnamed and houses are mostly unnumbered. In exploring the way the state identified places in Kabul city in the past, I look at how location information was recorded in official documents, how newspaper delivery men and postmen found addresses, and how merchants identified their stores in newspapers ads. I also discuss the many times the government started, and failed to complete, a city-wide house numbering and street naming schemes. In addition to examining the role of spatial inscription in the practice of governance, I will also show the cultural aspects of place naming by exploring how the state used place names for nationalist purposes. The chapter will conclude with notes on the current state of affairs of technologies of location information in Kabul.

Chapter 3 is about price tags. In the first two chapters, I focus on technologies of identifying people and places, in this one I examine technologies for identifying things. The price tag is an inscriptive medium that identifies the price and other information about a good. This is a ubiquitous technology in most parts of the world. In Kabul, price tags are rare and people rely on their bargaining skills to purchase consumer goods. When there are no fixed prices, transactions will suffer from conflicts. The fixed price usually means the written price—

something that assures customers that they will not be subject to arbitrary decisions and the displayed price will be applied to everyone regardless of their backgrounds. Therefore, it makes it possible to predict and calculate the cost of an exchange. Predictability means security. In the economy at large, the fixed price means the written law—as opposed to the personal feelings of this or that bureaucrat. The written law ideally functions as a price tag, allowing investors to calculate the transaction costs of running a business in a country. If you know the cost, you can predict the consequences of a decision. And if there is one thing that discourages transactions the most, and cripples the market instantly, it is uncertainty.

This chapter explores the price tag in order to question the broader issue of cooperative exchange. Price is the key information in every exchange and the way this information is communicated determines how the economy, the society, and the state in each country behave. Purchasing a shirt from a store, paying for a service such as a cab ride, or paying the tax you owe to the government, all involve a price. If the information about the price of a good, a service, or a tax is set orally it means it is arbitrary and vulnerable to fraud. If the price information is fixed, written, and transparent it means transactions are easy, fast, and secure because it is already known to both parties before the moment of exchange. I look at the price tag from a media studies perspective with an emphasis on the material history of this artifact. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not only to provide a history of this medium, per se, but the history of how price information is communicated, and the way different modes of communicating it affect the market, the state, and the society.

I call the price tag a technology of trust because it produces trust in two fundamental areas: The seller publicly advertises his price only when the price is competitive in the market. Therefore, the price tag helps buyers trust the advertised price as the market price and not feel

exploited after the exchange. The second area in which the price tag produces trust is in the management of the business: the written price suggests that there is a bureaucracy behind the business involving systematic paperwork to manage the inventory. The paper-based regime of control allows the owner to trust salaried employees—strangers— in running the business. It is not the price tag alone, however, the identification document and standardized location information in the form of streets signs, too, serve as technologies of trust. This is a key point that I try to make throughout this dissertation. The so-called high trust societies and low trust societies, I would argue, are distinguished from each other by the way they produce, communicate, store, and retrieve population information.

Chapter 1

The Identification Document: Governing Ghosts

In the late 19th century, a form of financial fraud was making life difficult for many people in Afghanistan. The government courts, too, were fed up with having to deal with all the disputes that involved this type of scam. The practice concerned the use of false identity in business contracts. At the time, in some business transactions, say making a loan, both parties would take a third person to court as a guarantor, or surety. The surety would sign a form letter called *Zamanat-namah* (letter of guarantee, or surety bond) and a court official would provide an attestation. The surety was usually someone credible who would offer an unlimited guarantee of the borrower and agree to be liable in case the borrower disappeared or defaulted. In the absence of banks, this was the only legally bound mechanism by which lending was practiced in Afghanistan.

Afghan fraudsters, however, would make up sham deals and use the system to trap certain individuals as sureties. They would take to court a person as the surety who would use the name of someone else, and the court, in the absence of any formal identification information, would record that name in the surety bond. The lender then would ask the real person whose name appeared in the document to pay the loan which he had no idea he had guaranteed. In other cases, a real surety who actually guaranteed a person would claim he was not aware of the contract and that the borrower had just used his name without his knowledge. The situation meant that the bazaar was filled with distrust, personal wealth was not secure, and the lack of

confidence in contract enforcement meant that few would venture into new enterprises. As a result, economic growth hardly existed and the society remained static.

The problem was that the government had no way to tell who was who and, therefore, could not settle this type of disputes. In 1899, the scam became widespread enough that the king in Kabul, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, had to issue a royal decree on how to deal with this type of identity falsification in business contracts. There were not much the government could do to fight the fraudsters. The Amir's order demanded:

All courts should promise, in writing, that they would perform an investigation on sureties before accepting them in court. The courts should investigate the surety's family, relatives, friends, village chiefs, and neighbors, and after verification of his identity should record his name and [a description of] his face in the surety bond to make sure no one could use a false identity or evade his obligations.[76]

In theory, the identity verification process that the Amir suggested was a great way to fight fraudsters. It was based on the assumption that it was easy for three people to lie to the court, but not for an entire village. Amir's idea, to use a contemporary term, was a blockchain identity verification process that would make it harder to claim a false identity because of the many parties involved. In practice, however, the Amir's suggestion was too much to ask from local

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[76] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 14 Zi al-Qaʿda 1316/26 March 1899. National Archives of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan (NAA, hereafter), Farman, No. 4628/103. On the same day, Sardar (prince) Nasr Allah Khan, too, issued a similar decree on the same issue. Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 14 Zi al-Qaʿda 1316/26 March 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4637/73.

courts and the plan was designed to fail. In addition to being time-consuming, the proposed investigation, even if conducted properly, could not solve the main problem, which was people claiming to be someone else. It was an oral verification process that relied solely on human judgment. If three individuals could lie about the identity of a person, one could ask, what would stop a whole village from lying?

This was the time of paperless governance, the governing of a population of nameless and faceless ghosts. Personal identification papers were not yet issued and no one had any material proof with which to establish their identity. The task of finding out the identity of a person was very manual, for lack of a better term, and required a lot of work. In addition, it was not a sure process. In 1894, as an example, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan ordered his border agents to arrest a man who was spreading provocative letters among soldiers, on behalf of a certain ʿAbd al-Majid, encouraging them to revolt against the king. The man was a trader and would cross the Persian border into the Afghan city of Herat. The wanted suspect was described as follows: "Named Ibrahim, Hazara, average height, red-faced, beardless, tight-eyed, and thirty-five or forty years of age, originally from Fayzabad who is in the wool trade, and has some literacy."[77] The physical description, although seemingly detailed, matches a typical middle-aged man of Hazara background, an ethnic group with strong Central Asian features. If a Hazara man of that age entered Herat, he was in real trouble because, with no paper proofs, it would be difficult to persuade Afghan officials that he was not their wanted man. This type of arbitrary identification process in state practices meant that it potentially let the actual wanted men stay free and put innocent people in danger of receiving the horror that was Afghan justice. That,

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[77] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 4 Ramadan 1311/11 March 1894. NAA, Farman, No. 4634/53.

however, was only one of the side-effects of governing ghosts—controlling an invisible population by the use of force.

In this chapter, I explore the identification document as a technology of governance. Historians, as Ben Kafka puts it, "discovered all sorts of interesting and important things looking *through* paperwork, but seldom paused to look *at* it."[78] In my assessment of identity papers in Afghanistan, I look both through, and at, them to illustrate the history of how ordinary people were treated before the state. The identity document is any document that one uses to prove their identity before a state or private institution. This technology, in a broad sense, includes a wide range of paper media that the state issues to record the identity of a person in order to produce the calculability and trackability of the population. The most important product of the identity document, however, is trustworthiness: it allows you to trust strangers, a phenomenon that is critical in how modern economies function.

In Afghanistan, the country still struggles with the problem of paperless governance, despite having access to print technology since 1870—about one and a half centuries. In 2017, the director of the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority, Humayun Muhtat, estimated that more than half of the Afghan population do not have any document to prove their identity.[79] This means that half of the country is practically invisible. In doing business, among other forms of cooperation, one simply cannot trust an invisible person. Much as in the story from the late 19th century, lending is still rare in Afghanistan despite the existence of several public and private banks. Afghan banks, unlike banks in other countries, hardly issue loans.[80] The reason is

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[78] Ben Kafka, "Paperwork: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 12 (2009): 341. (Emphasis in original.)

[79] Haydari, "Bah Muhajirin Afghan."

[80] "How to Survive as a Bank in Afghanistan," *The Economist*, November 23, 2017, https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2017/11/23/how-to-survive-as-a-bank-in-afghanistan.

simple: they cannot trust the information people provide about themselves (identity, job, earning history, address, business, property, etc.) And no loan means that there is little life in the economy.

The identity document has a long history, but standardized forms of identity papers are the products of the post-print age.[81] I do not wish to offer an exhaustive history of identity documents here. I examine, instead, the history and politics of the technologies that the Afghan state, since the late 19th century, has been using to identify people. I will show how, despite many attempts, the Afghan state failed to gather the political will to issue papers of identity to its citizens. I will also discuss the ways in which this critical failure in the technology of governance has been hurting state institutions, the national economy, and, most importantly, the welfare of the people. When we talk about the identification document, we are not talking only of the Afghan national identity card, known as *Tazkira*. The term includes other forms of paper, too, from civic registration papers (birth, marriage, and death certificates) to travel permits, passports, visas and other documents that bear the identity of its owner. As a result, the genre of identification papers that I discuss here is wide and covers all the paper media that are used by the state to certify the identity of a person.

"To live without paper," Michel Tournier observes, "is to live like a beast."[82] Even some beasts, in developed countries, have identity papers. Millions of people in the developing world,

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[81] Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds., *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Edward Higgs, "The Rise of the Information State: The Development of Central State Surveillance of the Citizen in England, 1500–2000," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 14, no. 2 (2002): 175–97; Simon Szreter, "The Right of Registration: Development, Identity Registration, and Social Security—A Historical Perspective," *World Development* 35, no. 1 (2007): 67–86.

[82] Michel Tournier, *The Ogre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 37.

however, still lack papers. It is close to impossible to live a dignified life if one is not recognized before entities such as courts, banks, schools, hotels, airlines and so forth. Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) says "everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law." Article 15 says: "everyone has the right to a nationality."[83] United Nation's treaty on Civil and Political Rights, too, which has Afghanistan as a signatory, requires nations to register all births and recognize their citizens before the law.[84] Lack of identity papers renders people stateless and deprives them of the ability to travel, do business, and vote. Invisibility is a prison and, no matter how some have tried to romanticize a stateless world where people would live free of surveillance apparatuses, the trust that comes with identity papers gives us freedom and security. Afghanistan is violating international law, in addition to disenfranchising a large portion of its population, for failing to register births and recognize its citizens.

It is not that Afghan rulers could not understand the value of population registration—they did. In the era between 1871 and 1929, the rulers genuinely wanted to register the citizenry but they pursued the idea for the wrong reason: military conscription. This caused public resistance and, eventually, as shall be discussed later, the state had to abandon the idea. After 1929, the Musahiban Dynasty (1929-1978), and the rulers after them, too failed to build a functioning civil registration system. Things became more complicated as the identity documents and the census—two population quantification instruments—got involved in ethnicity politics: universal identity papers would generate accurate numerical data on the population, challenging

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[83] United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2018).

[84] United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (New York: United Nations, 1966), Articles 16, 24.

the long-standing myth that the ruling ethnic group, the Pashtuns, were the majority and deserved to dominate the state's power structures. Pashtun rulers, who used every trick in the book to maintain their monopoly on power, could not take such a risk.[85] The evidence that I provide here on identity documents illustrates a complex history of institutional efforts to issue identity papers to people but, each, for various reasons, failed.

I start with the late 19th century when Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman was in power, the man who is credited with building the Afghan state. He is credited with fixing the country's borders and giving it a centralized state using genocidal violence, forced displacement, enslavement, and other means. One of his key instruments of power, however, was paper, which he did not use in all its potential because brute force remained his favorite tool for governance. He died one year into the 20th century and his successors so far have not been able to finish the project that he started: building a unified and stable Afghan nation-state. On May 3, 2018, President Ashraf Ghani launched the most recent state program to register the population by issuing e-Tazkira, a biometrically-enabled national identity card. The e-Tazkira program, which is funded by Western countries, is an ambitious step towards bureaucratic reform, but it may take a great deal to survive the corruption and power-grabbing fights inside the corridors of Afghan power politics.

THE OLDEST TRACKING TECHNOLOGY

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[85] On Afghan rulers' efforts for Pashtun dominance, see, Anthony Hyman, "Nationalism in Afghanistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 02 (2002): 299–315; Najib Mayil Hiravi, *Tarikh va Zaban Dar Afghanistan* (Tehran: Mavqufat-i Duktur Afshar, 1992), 50–117.

In much of the history of the world, people did not need an identity document. The majority of people lived and died in the same village or town, where everyone knew everyone. It was the need to travel that led to the invention of identity documents. People who traveled usually carried some form of paper, to prove they were under the protection of a ruler, when entering a foreign territory.[86] These kinds of "passports" were invented by Muslim administrators of Egypt in the 8th century. The passport was called a *Sijjil* ("sealed document") that allowed a resident to travel outside the frontier—only after providing someone to stand surety and proving that he did not owe any taxes.[87] Later some Muslim rulers would issue a document called *amān*, a decree of safe-conduct, which was granted to non-resident merchants or travelers so that they might safely move within their domains.[88] Similar travel permits, with different names, were common in all parts of the Islamic kingdoms. The following is an example of an early travel permit, dated 18 February 731, from the Islamic Egypt:

> In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a certificate from ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿAbd Allah, the official in Upper Ashmun for the governor ʿUbayd Allah ibn al-Ḥabḥab, for Constantine Papostoulos, a youth with a scar on his cheek, two marks on his neck, straight hair, from the village of Baskalon Baha in Upper Ashmun. I hereby

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[86] John Wansbrough, "The Safe-Conduct in Muslim Chancery Practice," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34, no. 1 (1971): 20–35.

[87] Anna Selander, "Travel in Coptic Documentary Texts," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World*, ed. Alexander T Schubert and Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 77–99.

[88] Gladys Frantz-Murphy, "Identity and Security in the Mediterranean World ca. AD 640 – ca. 1517," in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology, Ann Arbor 2007* (Ann Arbor: American Studies in Papyrology, 2010), 253–264.

permit him to work in Lower Ashmun in order to pay off his tax (*jizya*) and earn his living. I therefore grant him two months respite from the 1st of the month of Dhu al-ḥijja to the end of the month of Muḥarram of the year 116. Should whosoever of the governor's men or others encounter him, let them not interfere with him during that period, except for his good. Greetings … Written by Ṭaliq. 1st of Dhu al-ḥijja end of year 112. [Appended to the document are ʿAbd Allah's seal and signature.][89]

In Europe, it is believed that the first identity documents were travel permits issued in 15th century England.[90] Identity documents remained rare until the modern era when industrialization, mass migration, and new transport technologies, such as the railway, made international mobility more common. In the 19th century, the identification of strangers became a policing necessity. The state needed to differentiate between nationals and aliens, govern their rights and responsibilities, and produce numerical information about their activities for administrative purposes.[91] On the other hand, the phenomenon of bureaucratization expanded from the sphere the state into the affairs of the market as private enterprises, too, got involved in the governance of the population.[92] Banks, insurance companies, and employers, among others, each had to issue standardized identity documents to better govern the people they dealt with.

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[89] Mostafa El-Abbadi, "P.Cair.Arab Iii 167: A Discussion of the Akhmīm Declaration," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World*, ed. Alexander T Schubert and Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 134–35.

[90] Alan Jacobs, "Miss Marple and the Problem of Modern Identity," *The New Atlantis*, no. 47 (2015): 21.

[91] Higgs, "The Rise of the Information State"; Robertson, *The Passport in America*; John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[92] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 956–57.

In addition to the travel document as a form of identity paper, some states also issued national identity documents for use inside their territories. Countries such as the United States and Canada do not issue such documents. Other countries, mainly in the non-Western world, issue national identity cards because most people would not have other types of documents (i.e. birth certificate, driver's license, and etc.) to establish their identities.[93] In Russia, the national identity document is a booklet commonly known as 'internal passport.' The document is no longer used for travel but every Russian needs it for other activities, such as opening a bank account or buying a cell phone, getting a job, or purchasing a property.[94] It is a technology for tracking the life of its owner. In the United States, the Social Security Number and in Canada, the Social Insurance Number, carry similar tasks but are less widely used as citizens in these countries have their wallets full of other identity cards from health insurance to work ID to documents certifying their membership in civil, entertainment, and financial organizations.

The early 20th century was the time when state and private institutions began issuing identity papers for all matters to quantify and control the population they were administrating. Paperwork was so excessive at the time that in the United States, bureaucracy consumed 30 percent of the country's print industry.[95] Almost every American had to carry various types of ID cards all the time. In 1917, one businessman published a pocketbook titled *Around the World Identification Book* that could hold up to 80 identity cards in its pages.[96] In less developed

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[93] Wendy Hunter and Robert Brill, "'Documents, Please:' Advances in Social Protection and Birth Certification in the Developing World," *World Politics* 68, no. 02 (2016): 191–228.

[94] Masha Gessen, "Passport for Life," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2012, https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/16/russias-internal-passport-is-a-soviet-vestige/.

[95] Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 25–26.

[96] Robertson, "Paper, Information, and Identity in 1920s America," 392.

countries, because of the weakness of the state and the market, citizens did not have this problem. The same is true for authoritarian countries that lacked civil liberty and a free market, such as the Soviet Union, where the state surveillance machinery could watch everyone and everything at all times. There, citizens were treated as "hired employees of the state," in Lenin's words.[97]

The identity document is a medium among many other bureaucratic media. In the second half of the 19th century, according to Max Weber, bureaucracy emerged as the instrument of rational governance. In his study of authority, he theorized bureaucracy as a new organizational form that replaced charisma and tradition as sources of authority. Traditional authority derived from the public's customary loyalty to dynastic rule while charismatic authority came from the public's desire for a heroic figure in revolutionary times. The two disappeared with the emergence of legal authority, which was based on bureaucracy.[98] Weber defined bureaucracy as "domination through knowledge."[99] It is an organization that manages the population by using a range of participatory surveillance technologies and techniques to collect information about their activities. It is a rational and non-personal way of governing people that is a dramatic departure from the pre-modern means of governance that were based on relationships and were inherently arbitrary because of their personal nature that involved human emotions, wants, and prejudices in decision-making. Bureaucratic governance, on the other hand, is run by paper: a cold, soulless medium that—ideally—treats everyone equally.[100]

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[97] Quoted in, Jane Burbank, "Lenin and the Law in Revolutionary Russia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 1 (1995): 35.

[98] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 212–301.

[99] Weber, 225.

[100] See the chapter on Bureaucracy in, Weber, 956–1005.

Bureaucratic paperwork played also an important role in the development of representative governance. In the 17th century, "the French government had no manual or single written constitution." State governance was nothing but layers of "disparate traditions" mostly drawn from the feudal culture and church principles. It was a personal and mostly oral institution that Louis the Fourteenth (r. 1643 – 1715) tried to reform.[101] In post-revolutionary France, bureaucracy expanded further and the written records were viewed as the material evidence of state actions. The materiality of bureaucracy—or, proper record-keeping—empowered the public by allowing them to monitor the inner workings of the state. Paperwork, as a result, institutionalized state accountability—but not the state's responsibility, however.[102]

After the French Revolution, states had many reasons to devise new ways of managing the population. Chief among them, according to Hobsbawm, was the demise of the traditional guarantors of loyalty such as "dynastic legitimacy, divine ordination, historic right and continuity of rule, or religious cohesion," things that were no longer effective in maintaining public obedience.[103] This, Hobsbawm argues, was when the idea of the "nation" emerged. The project of inventing national identities, and persuading people to subscribe to them, was primarily carried out by the medium of print. We learned that from Marshal McLuhan who called the printed word "the architect of nationalism."[104] The national identity helped create long-standing

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[101] Soll, *The Information Master*, 13.

[102] Kafka, *The Demon of Writing*, 19–50.

[103] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 84.

[104] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 170–78. Later, Benedict Anderson expanded on that idea in his study of nationalism, or imagined communities, where he said newspapers, more than anything else, helped countries grow a

myths and mobilized people to grow loyalty to their countries and to the people who ruled them. The myth of the nation required material representation in the form of identity documents, such as national passports, which served as evidence and hardware of this newly-formed imaginary notion. The identity document, among other media forms, materialized the nation and determined who belonged and who did not.[105]

In the 19th century, Muslim monarchies, too, faced the same crises of legitimacy. The most important Islamic state at the time was the Ottoman Empire that found itself in the difficult position of adapting to the modern world where the divine right of the caliph could no longer earn the loyalty of the diverse peoples and regions it ruled. Ottomans, in an effort to maintain the support of their subjects, embarked on a project to create a national citizenry. [106] It was not an easy task. It was tried by its neighbor, Czarist Russia, too, where the state's nationalist Russification project, in Benedict Anderson's words, seemed like "stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire."[107] Ottomans, following European imperial states, attempted "to produce a population which was obedient, but also trained into

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sense of nationhood and belonging. See, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 32–36, 61–62.

[105] Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 121.

[106] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[107] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 88.

espousing the values of the center as its own."[108] The Ottoman Empire was the first Muslim state that passed a Passport Law in 1861 and began to issue national passports in its modern form.[109]

Afghanistan, the country ruled by Afghans (i.e. Pashtun tribes) since 1747, did not have a state in a modern sense up until the late 19th century. Its borders were not fixed yet and its kings were in constant war with rival warlords who controlled parts of the ethnically and linguistically diverse country. Coercion was the only instrument Afghan kings used to assert, and expand, their authority over the territory and population—and it rarely worked. People would easily mobilize to challenge the monarch in frequent popular uprisings, proving, time after time, that the naked sword alone could not secure a throne. The kings still did not pay attention to ordinary people. They only sought the support of powerful tribal chiefs by offering them gifts in the form of land, title, or governorship of a region. After 1871, Afghan rulers made some efforts to bureaucratize the state but personal governance—an inherently oral phenomenon—remained the primary mode of exercising state authority throughout Afghan history.[110]

Bureaucracy has many opponents. Corruption, however, is not the only reason some are against it. Liberal thinkers have long been opponents of state governance. Ludwig Von Mises, the Austrian liberal economist and a major figure in the American libertarian movement, believed that bureaucracy was limiting people's liberty and that it was incompatible with the idea of a democracy where elected officials, not unelected bureaucrats, should make decisions. "Bureaucracy," he believed, "is thoroughly bad and that it should not exist in a perfect world."[111]

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[108] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, 94.

[109] Kemal H. Karpat, *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 110.

[110] Ali Karimi, "Bazaar Rumors and State Propaganda in Kabul, 1873–1949." (Article manuscript under review.)

[111] Ludwig Von Mises, *Bureaucracy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), 1.

Libertarians argue that the logic of the free market should govern the population, not state institutions, and they are particularly against identity documents.[112] Despite such opposition, the US population is one of the most quantified, individualized, and monitored populations in the world, thanks to its government but most importantly to its corporations such as insurance companies, credit agencies, and tech industries that run powerful surveillance schemes.[113]

Bureaucracy is a great indicator with which to measure the strength of a state. Social scientists credit China's rapid transformation, in the second half of the 20th century, to institutional and bureaucratic reform.[114] They also blame India's widespread corruption and chronic poverty on poor bureaucratic practices.[115] The failure of bureaucracy is a serious challenge in South Asia. The states in these countries, interestingly, do not suffer from a bureaucratic vacuum. They, in fact, are suffocated by paper to the point that the bureaucratic organization that was supposed to produce population legibility and transparency has led to illegibility and corruption.[116]

The techniques of identification, among other bureaucratic functions, remain a key point of interest when it comes to reforming broken bureaucracies. This is the reason that, all over the

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[112] Jim Harper, *Identity Crisis: How Identification Is Overused and Misunderstood* (Washington, D.C: Cato Institute, 2006), 100–101.

[113] Lauer, *Creditworthy*; Dan Bouk, "The History and Political Economy of Personal Data over the Last Two Centuries in Three Acts," *Osiris* 32, no. 1 (2017): 85–106.

[114] Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China*, 1–10.

[115] Das, *Public Office, Private Interest*; Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[116] Matthew S Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Nayanika Mathur, *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State in Himalayan India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

world, more and more countries are bringing bioelectric identification into everyday practices of state governance.[117] In India, for example, the state's Aadhaar project aims to issue biometrically-enabled identity cards to all its 1.2 billion residents and link the data to bank accounts, the welfare system, and voter registers.[118] The World Bank, through its Identification for Development program, helps several developing states to register their citizens as a way to improve the delivery of public services and fight administrative corruption.[119] The new digital identification technologies use facial recognition, voice recognition, and the recording of people's iris and digital fingerprints to reduce the chance of mistaken identity significantly. This is a huge upgrade from the 19th century identity documents that would record colors of a person's hair, eyes, and skin on a piece of paper. Despite the dramatic changes in technologies, the body still remains the main medium of identification and a primary site of power struggles in everyday life.

A STRANGER IN TOWN: TRAVEL PERMIT, OR *RAHDARI,* IN AFGHANISTAN

In 1782, George Forster, an Englishman in the service of the East India Company, embarked on a journey to visit the territory of the Durrani Empire, a vast kingdom covering what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Iran and India. He was the first British to visit Afghanistan. In the summer of 1783, Forster reached Kashmir, at the time a Durrani province, where he needed a

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[117] Breckenridge, *Biometric State*, 1–26.

[118] Ronald Abraham et al., "State of Aadhaar Report 2017-18" (New Delhi: IDinsight, May 2018), http://stateofaadhaar.in/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Aadhaar-Report_2017-18.pdf.

[119] *Guidelines for ID4D Diagnostics* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018), 1–5.

travel permit, which he calls "passport" in his reports, in order to pass through. [120] He had to hide his true identity and disguise himself as a Muslim to get the document. One could not apply personally to get the permit but another person, a surety, had to apply to the governor on one's behalf. After two failed attempts, Forster bribed someone to secure a travel permit for him and finally managed to leave Kashmir. He picked the name Eusuff and presented himself as a Muslim merchant. Crossing the first town, his permit was taken and a new one was issued. Happy about his disguised identity, he put the passport in the pocket of his red coat and was careful to keep it safe. One night on the road, however, his "gaudy garment" attracted the attention of a thief and was snatched from under his head. When crossing the next checkpoint, having no passport, he tested the idea of how serious the passport actually was. He told the story of the lost passport to the agent and his servant, a Persian boy, swore to "the beard of his father" that it was true. The guard was not convinced. Forster added that he was a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet, and a "Sayyid never uttered a falsity." Still, the guard was not buying it. He finally offered the officer some cash and he then happily let him cross the boundary without papers. [121]

The travel permit was a document required when leaving a town, not necessarily when entering it because, without it, you could not enter cities. In the 19th century, the southern city of Qandahar, for instance, had gates that were literally locked at night. No stranger could enter the city without the permission of officials. [122] A traveler needed a permit in order to prove to the authorities in the town, on the road, and in your destination town, that you were not a fugitive

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[120] George Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England*, vol. 2 (London: R. Faulder and Son, 1808), 6.

[121] Forster, 2:40–43.

[122] Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara, *Siraj al-Tawarikh* (*ST*, hereafter), vol. 1 and 2 (Tehran: ʿIrfan, 1391/2012), 564–65.

running from crime, a financial obligation, or some other wrongdoing. This was the reason that getting a permit required a surety to guarantee the identity, and the travel purpose, of the traveler. This was in theory. In practice, however, it was not enforced everywhere in Afghanistan. George Forster, for instance, left the western city of Herat for Persia without a travel permit, while all passengers were required to get the document from the governor and produce it at checkpoints along the road. In Ghuryan, an officer asked Forster's permit and he said he did not have it. The officer, though "glad of the omission" as it offered an opportunity for a good bribe, "held out the utter impossibility of passing without the signature of the government, and argued with much delicacy on the crime of disobedience." Forster, who was still in disguise, this time as an Arab pilgrim, put some cash in the hands of the officer. The man quickly changed his tone and said because he was an Arab and a pilgrim, he would gladly "relax the rule" for him a bit.[123]

The road at the time was governed by the *rahdari* system. The rahdari, or "road guardianship," was a toll that travelers paid to road guards in exchange for protection. Each village on the route of the caravans was responsible, before the king, to ensure the safety of travelers. The rule was enforced by local governors whose revenue depended on the safe passages of the caravans, which paid large duties on their merchandise.[124] Again, this was only in theory. In practice, sometimes, it was hard to tell the difference between toll collectors and highway robbers as, in some places, the tolls were basically extortion. In particular, in the East, where Pashtun tribes considered the attack on strangers on the road an "honourable war,"

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[123] Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England*, 2:156–57.

[124] Willem Floor, "Arduous Travelling: The Qandahar-Isfahan Highway in the Seventeenth Century," in *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, ed. Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 207–36.

travelers had to pay tribal chiefs to get gunmen who would escort them out of dangerous territories.[125]

In the 18th century, as we learn from Forster's travel account, the Afghan rulers were only interested in identifying strangers to collect road tolls and customs duties from them. Recording their identities, as a security measure, was not always a priority. Travelers had to use disguises to protect themselves mostly from thieves, highway robbers, and religious fanatics. When Forster arrived in Kabul, he was relieved to see how Christians, Jews, and Hindus lived freely in the city and were protected by the Durrani king. He was relaxed enough that he decided to drop his disguise and introduce himself as a European, a Spaniard. He even traveled from Kabul to Herat as a Christian and faced little bigotry. In the city of Herat, however, his Christian identity got him in trouble. Persian traders would not allow him in the caravanserai to touch the well, for being an unclean infidel, and a fanatic Sayyid wanted to perform circumcision on him—he left him alone only after receiving some money.[126] Another foreign traveler, too, faced a similar problem. He was traveling with a caravan in disguise as a Muslim but on the road, somehow, his fellow travelers found out that he was uncircumcised. They insisted on circumcising him right there but he told them that he preferred to do it in Kabul, and saved himself from a painful roadside surgery.[127]

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[125] These highway "taxes" were called by at least fourteen different names. Hasan K. Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 272; Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, and J. Murry, 1815), 229–30.

[126] Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England*, 2:132–50.

[127] Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, 601.

The word *rahdari* gradually acquired a new meaning in Afghanistan, as it was applied only to the travel permit document. The road toll was called by at least fourteen different names.[128] The following is an example of a travel permit issued in 1875, during Amir Shir ʿAli Khan's rule, which shows how the actual document looked. It was issued to Muhammad Rafiq Khan in Qandahar who was traveling to Kabul with his family, servants, and a slave. Great details were added for identification purposes, including the language and place of origins of his companions and also the color/race of their horses. It did not name the women and children because, much like today, Afghans back then considered women's names to be private information, and just referred to them as ʿayal, the family. It, however, mentioned the pony and the camels that carried the luggage. The document was addressed to road guards and was issued to a family member of ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, a historian, who says the same type of travel permits were common during the early Durrani rulers too:

Let it be known to the guards on the road from Qandahar to Kabul:

At this time, Muhammad Rafiq Khan, the son of Muhammad Siddiq Khan Fufalzay, a resident of Divanbigi Street, Kabul, along with his family are free and are traveling to Kabul. They are as follows:

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[128] In Iran, *rahdari* still means the road toll. In Pakistan, however, rahdari means the special travel permit issued to residents of the border areas who cross the boundary on a daily basis. It is enforced only on Pakistan's Iranian border, as for the Afghan border travelers do not use such papers. Mansoor Akbar Kundi, "Pak-Afghan Borderland Interaction: Alone Together," *Margalla Papers* 20 (2016): 97–98.

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The above-mentioned himself   Haidar, Persian-speaking, from Kabul

Karang horse   Kahar horse

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Karim Allah, his slave   Mirza, Persian-speaking, from Herat

Surkhang horse   Samand horse

——————————————————   ————————————

ʿAbd al-Vahhab, Arab, from Kabul   Kala Khan, his cousin

Surkhang horse   Mishki horse

——————————————————   ———————————————

Dad Muhammad, Persian-speaking   Pony carrying family's palanquin

Kahar horse   and another, carrying green load

————————————

Three loaded camels

No one bothers them on the road. Let them pass. [Illegible.] Written on 17 Rabiʿ al-[off print] 1292/23 [April or May] 1875.

[Seal of the Minister of Finance, *Mustavfi al-Mamalik*, is on the back.][129]

Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, not only for internal mobility, but for cross-border mobility, too, introduced new measures. His rule coincided with the height of the Great Game when he was under pressure both by the Russian and British empires to accept their embassies in Kabul. He

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[129] ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, *Timur Shah-i Durrani* (Kabul: Anjuman-i Tarikh, 1954), 153.

was interested in neither power and preferred to stay neutral. That defiant stance made it difficult for him to settle boundary demarcations with them. His borders, however, though not official, were manned by guards and no foreigners were allowed to enter. In 1873, a British official in Kashgar (now in China) applied for a travel permit to pass through Afghanistan on his way to India, but his application was denied.[130] In 1878, an uninvited Russian delegation began their journey to Kabul but before they could reach the Amu River that served as a border between the Russian Central Asia and Afghanistan, Afghan officials in the city of Mazar-i Sharif sent a letter to them asking them to stop until instructions from Kabul could arrive. According to Ivan Lavrovich Iavorskii, the delegation's physician who later wrote a detailed report on this journey, the head of the Russian delegation was offended and sent an angry letter back, with the same postman, informing the Afghan vice-regent in Mazar-i Sharif that he was coming even if "he loses his head" along the way. On reaching the Amu River, the Russian delegation sent one of their men as an envoy to Mazar-i Sharif to personally negotiate their entry. The Afghan border guards, however, stopped him and after much negotiations, he was not able to convince the guards to let him pass through. He then got on his horse and made a run, trying to go to the city despite receiving a no from border officials. The Afghan guards chased him down and caught him before he could reach far. He was returned back to the other side of the river.[131]

The Russian delegation, after much negotiations with the border guards, was finally let in and, on 9 July 1878, the Amir reluctantly welcomed them in Kabul. The news stirred a lot of drama in India where the British, too, sent a mission to Kabul. The British delegation arrived at

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[130] Sir Thomas Douglas Forsyth, *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Sir Douglas Forsyth* (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1887), 194–95.

[131] Ivan Lavrovich Iavorskii, *Sifarat-i Rusiyah-i Tazari Ba Darbar-i Amir Shir ʿAli Khan*, trans. ʿAbd al-Ghafur Brishna (Kabul: Mayvand, 2010), 55–68.

the Afghan border in Khyber Pass on 3 November 1878 and was refused entry by the border guards. They had to return back, but within a few months, the British army invaded Afghanistan which began the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, before the arrival of the British, left Kabul for Russia but the Russians refused him entry. He died the next year in Mazar-i Sharif. The British installed Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan on the throne.[132]

It was under Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman (r. 1880-1901) that Afghanistan's borders were officially fixed. The British, with his agreement and the agreement of the neighboring countries, demarcated the current Afghan borders, a development that gave Afghanistan a concrete identity in the international sphere. The fixed national boundary was one of the reasons that the new Amir paid particular attention to mobility, both internal and external. He was notoriously obsessed with collecting information on the public and wanted to know all the details about people's lives. Among other offices, he established a Travel Permit Office, *Idarah-i Rahdari*, which was responsible for governing travel rules and control people's movements.[133] Under Amir's rule, no one was allowed to leave the country or enter it without a government permit. Despite all the securitization schemes, most roads were still unsafe, particularly the Pashtun belt in the East and the South. In 1887, for instance, the Amir sent an escort of 50 gunmen to the border in Chaman to make sure a British officer survived the highway to Qandahar.[134] He managed, however, to bring some level of security on the highways by the use of his legendary violence. In Lattah Band Pass, for instance, when he caught a robber, he put him in a cage and

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[132] On the second Anglo-Afghan war, see the second volume of *ST* and J. H. Anderson, *The Afghan War: 1878-1880* (London: RJ Leach, 1991).

[133] See, *Tarikhchah-i Afghanistan* (Kabul: Vizart-i Maʿarif, 1923), 115.

[134] Captain A. C. Yate, "Colonel Yate's Mission to Herat and the Kushk Valley," *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 9, no. 8 (1893): 403–4.

hanged the cage on the side of the road on a pole. He was left there to starvation.[135] In 1903, a traveler saw at least two such cages with human bones in them on his way from Peshawar to Kabul.[136]

A PRINTER IN THE PALACE: THE ARRIVAL OF MODERN TECHNOLOGIES

Identification became simpler with modern technology. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman, sometime in his early years on the throne, issued the first printed rahdari, or travel permit "tickets."[137] It was part of a larger body of official, priced, papers (*sukuk*) that he printed to modernize the bureaucracy—papers such as form letters for property titles, filing suits, or marriage licenses. The print technology entered the Afghan bureaucracy under the previous Amir. He installed a lithographic printer in the Bala Hisar, the royal fortress in Kabul, and published the country's first newspaper, postal stamps, educational pamphlets, and books.[138] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, expanded the use of print in governance, both in official paperwork and in mass

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[135] Angus Hamilton, *Afghanistan* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 237.

[136] Ernest Thornton and Annie Thornton, *Leaves from an Afghan Scrapbook: The Experiences of an English Official and His Wife in Kabul* (London: John Murray, 1910), 196–98.

[137] The word *ticket*, or the corrupted version *tikis*, entered the Afghan bureaucratic lexicon under Amir Shir ʿAli Khan and was applied only to printed official documents. Katib spells it correctly. *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), (Tehran: ʿIrfan, 1391/2012), 424. Most office clerks, like common Afghans today, however, called it *tikis* instead. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirindil Khan, 6 Shaʿban 1308 / 17 March 1891, NAA, Farman, No, 2394/198. The English word "passport," became popularized, and gradually replaced *rahdari,* under Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman and Amir Habib Allah. *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), (Tehran: ʿIrfan, 1391/2012), 405-6; *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011), 394.

[138] Sarvar Khan Juya, "Nazari Bah Matbuʿat va Nashriyat-i Ma," *Kabul*, June 22, 1932, 88–90.

propaganda. The print was considered a technology of power and the print machines were kept inside the royal palace. Later on, newer forms of technologies, too, entered the Afghan bureaucracy but print continued to remain the key technology of identification.

The Amir published many form letters for contracts such as marriage, divorce, lease, land titles, guarantee, etc. for which people would pay a fee and which they would use to conduct the affairs of their lives. Marriage licenses, for instance, were priced differently depending on women's status: virgin women paid 12.5 rupees and widows paid 6.5 rupees.[139] Only those printed forms were credible before the law and the Amir banned even writing petitions on plain papers, saying such petitions would be ignored.[140] These official print forms provided security and trust and generally benefited the public—mostly.

In 1887, a love scandal broke out in the city of Herat. Someone had stolen somebody else's wife while he was away for business. The alleged wife stealer, Dad Muhammad, was an army soldier and the husband, Shir Jan, was a trader. When all parties appeared in court, Shir Jan gladly produced his marriage license, the receipt of the fee he had paid for it, and the witnesses. He was surprised when the other man, too, presented the same documents to the court. The judge was confused. He had to refer the matter to the Amir in Kabul, blaming the woman for the headache, for marrying two men at the same time and asking the Amir to exile "the prostitute" to Murghab—a remote area. The Amir, too, was puzzled and asked the judge "Did you check the dates of the documents? Who was the mulla who officiated the marriages? Who were the witnesses? The documents were issued on the same night or on different dates?" The Amir was asking the right questions. Also, after several months of correspondence, he was personally

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[139] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 241-2.

[140] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 1088-9.

invested in the scandal and asked the governor of Herat to send all the three parties to Kabul.[141] Katib, who had access to documents related to events in Kabul, reports that the Amir examined the marriage records and found that the date of the soldier's document was older than the trader's. But because the trader had bribed the judge, the local judge had sided with him. The Amir returned the woman, Firuzah, to Dad Muhammad and sentenced Shir Jan to two years in prison.[142] The soldier managed to get his wife back thanks to a government book that kept the record of his marriage.

In addition to bureaucratic reform, and generating revenue, the other key purpose of these new papers was gathering population information. The Amir wanted to know the affairs of the population, their economic activities, their properties, and their movements. He had staff tasked with reporting to him all the deaths and births in the country. [143] He also ordered his officials to conduct a census on the male population between the ages of fifteen and fifty (for conscription).[144] He particularly wanted to have greater control over the government employees. He published, therefore, an oath of loyalty forms (ʿahd-namah) that all officials, military or civilians, had to sign. He printed 300,000 copies of them that had blank boxes for personal

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[141] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 24 Zi al-Hijja 1311/28 June 1894, NAA, Farman, No. 128/3634; Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 11 Safar 1312/14 August 1894, NAA, Farman, No. 41; Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 14 Safar 1312/17 August 1894, NAA, Farman, No. 41; Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan and Deputy Chief of Army Faramarz Khan of Herat, 25 Safar 1312/28 August 1894, NAA, Farman, No. 41.

[142] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 409.

[143] Sardar Habib Allah Khan to Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, undated, NAA, Petition (*'arz*), Document no. 35, Farman no. 143.

[144] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 833.

information and an oath that partly said if the holder of the letter disobeyed the king, in this world, he would be punished by him and, in the afterlife, he would appear in line with infidels and "killers of the prophets." This document would serve as a piece of material evidence to remind employees of the fear of God.[145] It also offered a simple quantification solution as it enumerated the population of the government workforce.

The military personnel, however, were under greater control. The Amir ordered special books to be created in the army registering all forms of identification of each soldier (name, father's name, residence, and ethnicity) and his surety, and then calculate their numbers based on regions and tribes. These numbers were important to him. "You should have an answer ready when asked," the Amir instructed his army book-keepers in a manual.[146] In his early years on the throne, the Amir still had no idea of how many people received salaries and allowances from his court. Fraudsters could easily collect allowances under false identities. In 1885, he reformed the paperwork by issuing new documents to all allowance recipients.[147] In 1894, he established a special office, Daftar-i Hayati, to fight corruption in payroll, as some officials could still falsify documents to receive the salaries of the deserters and the dead. This office, which was funded by deductions from employees' salaries, would issue an identity document, *ruqʿah-i hayati*, to each salaried staff that served as their proof of life and attendance to work.[148] The Amir made real efforts in implementing the project. In 1899, the finance office in Herat wrote to the Amir that their scribes were overworked because of handling the affairs of the identity documents. The

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[145] The government employees, however, Katib says, put the letters in their pockets and continued, as usual, to steal from public funds and private properties. *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 1047-8.

[146] *Kitab-i Qanun-i Afghanistan* (Kabul: Matbaʿ-i Dar al-Saltanah, n.d. [1890s])*,* 6-9.

[147] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 241-2.

[148] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 422.

Amir ordered them to hire new scribes for the office.[149] In 1900, however, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan issued a new standardized identity document for salaried staff and allowance recipients that included the military, civilian, men, and women. This new document suggests that the previous ones were not very effective in preventing fraud. The new identity document served as a "proof of life" for salary recipients and was meant to primarily fight payroll corruption.[150] The document was awkwardly named *tikit-i sar khatt* (head ticket.)[151]

Amir's travel permit required a complicated application process. One had to go to the Kabul police station (Kutwali) where a special clerk was responsible for writing the permits. After the applicant paid the fee and provided a surety to guarantee him, the clerk would write the permit and put his seal on the document before presenting it to the Deputy Chief of Army (*nayib salar*) to get his seal too. On 18 June 1893, the sitting Deputy Chief of Army, Parwanah Khan, died and people, without his seal of approval, were not able to get their travel permits. Prince Habib Allah Khan asked his father what to do about that and the Amir asked Prince Nasr Allah Khan to carry out the final approval on the permit papers.[152] In Ghazni alone, according to an 1899 report, 2641 travel permits were issued in three years. Despite that, the police chief complained that some Pashtun tribesmen traveled without the permit.[153] The permit itself, according to the following example, was fairly simple and had almost the same wording as the

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[149] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan and Chief of Finance Muhammad Tahir Khan of Herat, 4 Jamadi al-Thani 1317/10 October 1899, NAA, Farman, No. 4629/176.

[150] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 639-40.

[151] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 639-40.

[152] Sardar Habib Allah Khan to Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, undated [must be shortly after 18 June 1893, the day Parwana Khan died], NAA. Petition (*ʿarz*), Document no. 35, Farman no. 143.

[153] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 394.

travel permit from 1875, quoted earlier. (Except the print version misspelled the word ʿarz, or "along.") It had a header that showed the state emblem, the name of the document, place of issuance, price, and the number of people it was good for. The actual text was a letter with blank spots to be filled out. This rahdari ticket, issued on 10 July 1894 from Qandahar, reads: (printed words highlighted)

> **Guards along the road of** ʿAbd Allah Khan **should know that at this time** one freight carrier named ʿAbd al-Qayyum son of ʿAbd al-Vahhab, Tajiki, resident of Mulla Baz al-Din Akhund Street, of middle height, tan complexion, high nose, connected eyebrows, black hair [illegible] is younger son of Haji Muhammad Aslam **with the guarantee of** Haji Muhammad Aslam, son of Haji Mir, trader [illegible] **is traveling towards there do not bother him along the road and let him pass freely. Written on this day** Tuesday, 6 Muharram al-Haram 1312.[154]

The Amir put checkpoints on all roads to control travelers and verify their permits. In 1891, the Amir ordered his officials in Gardiz, Zurmat, and Katawz, for instance, to strictly follow rahdari rules and allow no one without a permit to pass through. He also demanded a full list of all the routes and checkpoints where officials were stationed to check travel permits.[155] In a similar decree to Khost, a town bordering with India, the Amir ordered his officials to identify all ports and routes and prepare a list of where rahdari is checked and where they are not. "I am ordering

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[154] Robert Jack, *The Revenue Stamps and Printed Paper of Afghanistan* (Self-published, 2009), 103. Translation slightly modified for clarity.

[155] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Jahan Dil Khan, 6 Shaʿban 1308/17 March 1891, NAA, Farman, No. 2394/197.

you," he wrote, "to thoroughly research all the routes and ports of Khost and its environ and note the places where *rahdari* is stationed and where they do not exist." He emphasized that "no road, not even a goat way, [should] remain hidden from your eyes."[156] The Amir published a *Book of Government*, in which a collection of enumerated rules, in plain language, was written to train officials on how to conduct the affairs if their offices. The rule 16 in the book instructed governors to get sworn statements, attested by the seal of a judge, from all village chiefs in rural areas and *kalantars* (neighborhood chiefs) in urban areas that they will not allow anyone without a travel permit, such as fugitive, refugees, or exiles in their areas. The moment a stranger enters their town or village, they had to report it to the governor.[157] The instruction basically criminalized anyone who traveled without an official permit. All travel permits issued were recorded in a book. Each year the finance office in each region would audit the books and give a clearance receipt to the clerk responsible for the permits. This allowed the government to produce quantifiable information on the movement of the people and also detect administrative frauds.[158]

In terms of mobility in Kabul, no one was allowed to travel beyond the city's "six-mile radius measured from the Kabul police station."[159] Things were worse at night. The police force had established a curfew that started at 8 pm and ended at sunrise and no one was allowed to be

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[156] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirin Dil Khan, 6 Shaʿban 1308/17 March 1891, NAA, Farman, No. 2394/198.

[157] *Qanun-i Karguzari dar Muʿamilat-i Hukumati* (Kabul: Matbaʿ-i Dar al-Saltanah, 1309/1891), 13-14.

[158] Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 16 Rabiʿ al-Thani 1320/23 July 1902, NAA, Farman, No. 4533/35.

[159] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 238.

seen on streets during that time.[160] If one had to go outside they had to identify themselves by offering the night code (*ism-i shab*.) Every day at 9 am a different night code was chosen and it was sent to the Amir in a sealed envelope. The codes were also distributed in sealed envelopes to the police and kept in a special book for the record.[161] The night code was a mechanism to monitor the movement of the people and watch who goes where, and who meets whom, in the city. Governing the night was such an important part of the police work that before the Hindi word, Kutwal, was used for the chief of police in Afghanistan, the title was *mir-i shab*, which means "Master of the Night."[162]

In addition to internal travel permits, the Amir also issued external travel permits, passports, to be used outside the country. The nomads who crossed the India-Afghanistan border regularly, those who worked as camel transport on the border, and tribes living in the border areas were issued special passports free of charge. All others had to obtain a passport that was valid for a certain period of time and required a surety in order to get it. The Amir considered it as a tracking document for his subjects when traveling abroad because they had to notify the government and renew their document in case they run into trouble and their stay extended beyond the validity date.[163] If you left the country and did not come back, your property would be confiscated, your family jailed, and your surety would be executed. According to a European servant of the Amir, once a man, with an overdue travel permit, returned to Kabul in order to

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[160] Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan*, 53–54.

[161] Sardar Habib Allah Khan to Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, undated, NAA, Petition (*ʿarz*), Document no. 35, Farman no. 143.

[162] Joseph Pierre Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan* (London: John Murray, 1856), 146.

[163] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 839.

save his surety. He was immediately blown from a cannon.[164] It was not always the case as Amir's law was not applied to everyone equally. In 1893, for instance, a judge, Qazi Mashku, left for the hajj pilgrimage using only the internal travel permit. In Bombay, he also met with Amir's political opponents and when the news reached Kabul, the Amir arrested all the five people who stood surety for him, including his brother, also a judge. After they spent a few days in prison the Amir set them free.[165]

Amir's travel permit was for people who wanted to travel voluntarily. Refugees fleeing his violence had a rougher road ahead. After 1892, when the state announced a jihad against the Hazaras, a Shia minority living in central Afghanistan, the persecution of the Hazaras became a nationwide policy. They suffered genocidal violence by the state army and volunteer armies who were fighting for rewards such as Hazara slaves, their lands, and properties.[166] The refugees of the war were running in every direction to escape violence. They were easily identifiable for their Asian features and it was hard for them to blend in. The Amir banned the issuing of travel permits to the Hazaras in order to make it even harder for them to run. "As a rule," wrote the British news writer in Qandahar in 1895, "men of that tribe, whether in the service of the British

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[164] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 238. On rahdari, also see, Sultan Mahomed Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1900), 200-201 (note); Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*, 89, 93.

[165] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 260.

[166] Fayz Muhammad Katib, throughout the third volume of *ST,* offers the most detailed account of the war against the Hazaras.

Government or otherwise, are not granted passports."[167] Still, they had to run from atrocities, with or without passports. The price of an external rahdari was 3-5 rupees based on the length of its validity.[168] In Bamiyan, the government officers charged a group of desperate Hazaras "twenty rupees and one bolt of barak wool cloth" per person for their travel permits. The group was caught and jailed in Andkhuy before they could reach the Russian border.[169] The Amir dispatched orders to his governors asking them to chase all the fleeing Hazaras on roads, ports, and borders and keep them in custody.[170] He was apparently conscious about his image abroad and preferred to shut off Afghanistan's borders so the news of the violence would not leak outside. The British border agents, too, were cooperating with the Amir. "Some Hazaras who were going towards Chaman without a passport, were arrested and brought back to Kandahar last week" reported the British news writer in Qandahar. "They are now in prison pending the receipt of final orders from His Highness the Amir."[171]

Afghanistan's borders, now official, were tightly guarded. Foreign nationals were not allowed into Afghanistan without an invitation from the Amir. The border agents, new to diplomatic protocols, sometimes run into problems when dealing with their counterparts on the

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[167] Dairy No.156 F. No.2529 (20 April 1895), in M. Gulzari, ed., *Diaries of Kandahar: HAZARAS in the View of British Diaries (1884 – 1905)* (Hazara.net, 2004), http://www.hazarapeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Hazaras_In_the_View_of_British_Diaries.pdf.

[168] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 839.

[169] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 266-7.

[170] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 29 Rabʿ al-Awwal 1317/7 August 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4629/92.

[171] Dairy No. 391 F. No.5876 F. (17 September 1895), in Gulzari, *Diaries of Kandahar*. Also see, Dairy No. 460 F. No.1326 Z. (4 October 1894), about a group of Hazara refugees who had to fight their way into India.

other side. A good example would be an incident in 1889 on the border with Russia. Officials from the Russian side met with the Afghan border guards and reached an agreement on how to handle travelers: if they saw a person on the border they should shout three times at him asking his identity. If he said he was a merchant, it would be fine to let him pass through. If he said he was anyone else, the guards should shoot him. After the Russians left, the Afghans thought about the policy and found some loopholes. They wrote a letter to the Russian side saying that if, for instance, the border guards shot someone and the person later claimed that he actually identified himself as a merchant, what should happen? On the other hand, the guards would claim that they followed the law. Whom to believe here? It would be too complicated and it would be much better to ban border crossings altogether. When the Russians read the letter they were shocked as those were not the rules that they had agreed upon. Apparently, the translator had translated the words wrong as, they wrote back, "our king does not allow us to shoot people."[172] The fact that Afghans rejected the misunderstood agreement based on potential legal disputes, not its ridiculously violent nature, says how serious the border security was under Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan.

Pilgrims from Central Asia were usually granted travel permits to pass through Afghanistan. The Amir, however, put their movements under close surveillance to detect possible Russian spies: at the border, each was given a document indicating their date of arrival. Then their personal information such as name, occupation, place of residence, and date of arrival would be forwarded to governors of towns on the route, so they could check how long they have

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[172] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 23 Rajab 1316/7 December 1898, NAA, Farman, No. 4637/118.

spent in each town. Pilgrims needed a new permit from each town they left.[173] Knowing how hard it was to enter the Afghan territory without getting caught, the Russians used various methods to send their spies in the country. In 1900, for instance, they hired two Iranian subjects to enter Afghanistan in disguise in order to gather intelligence for them. They were trained to act like locals and get used to wearing the Afghan turbans. Somehow, Amir's police force identified them in Herat and put them in jail. The Amir ordered his men to "interrogate them thoroughly and if they were involved in some intrigue, secretly put their heads under the soil."[174]

In administrative affairs, the Amir emphasized paper-based identification and verification and had no trust in orality. His predecessors paid allowances to members of the royal family, the Muhammadzai clan, imams, and the Sayyids (people who claim they are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad). The office handling the allowances maintained poor record-keeping, which allowed people to get allowances undeservedly.[175] In 1888, he established a special office to manage religious endowments (*avqaf*) and use the revenues to pay allowances to imams, clergy, and Sayyids.[176] The big question for the office was how to determine the identity of Sayyids and detect the fake ones. Sayyids traditionally had a written document known as *shajarah namah*, or "family tree," which is carried from generation to generation.[177] You had to

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[173] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 833-4.

[174] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 2 Ramadan 1317/4 January 1900, NAA, Farman, No. 4630/31.

[175] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 241-2.

[176] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 1), 499.

[177] Sayyids enjoyed great economic benefits in society, receiving several forms of charity and religious taxes, in addition to the official allowance. Because of these economic incentives, there were many fake Sayyids. In Iran,

produce your written family tree, according to the rules, in order to get your allowance. One day a man came to the Office of Endowments, claiming to be a Sayyid but did not have a family tree. Officials there told him that with no family tree the state did not recognize him as a Sayyid. After insisting on his claim, the man was brought before the Amir. "What kind of a Sayyid are you when you don't have a family tree?" the Amir asked him. "Your Highness," the man replied. "I don't have a family tree but I'm a Sayyid and have the courage to claim so. You are even a king, do you have the courage to claim lineage to the Prophet with no family tree?" The Amir was impressed and said the man was a Sayyid and should receive the allowance.[178] The story, which suggests that the Amir accepted an oral claim as evidence, is a rarity not the norm in his style of governance.

The identity of a person on paper was verified by their signature or seal. The signature was usually for literate people and the illiterate would use a seal. In the absence of photography, a description of one's face was recorded on the document. In a divorce letter, for instance, the man is described as "tan color, connected eyebrows, brown eyes, high nose, black beard, average height, 25 years of age." The woman is named but not described. The parties and witnesses all have used their seals on the document.[179] Fraudulent seals apparently were a serious issue in the

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where Sayyids enjoy a similar high status, 9 out of 10 of them are fake. See, Willem Floor, "Seyyeds in Qājār Iran According to European Sources," *Studia Iranica* 45, no. 2 (2016): 245–73.

[178] The story of this man is told in a manuscript written by Muhammad Hussain Nusrati whose father was a scribe at the court of Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan and was the person who drafted the royal decree that the Amir issued about paying Sayyids allowances. For a photo of the manuscript pages containing the story see, Sayyid Hasan Akhlaq, "Janjal-i Qavm-i Sadat," *Hasht-i Subh*, June 5, 2018, 7.

[179] Talaq-Namah, Divorce of Shahbaz son of Shir Muhammad Khan from Husn Ara daughter of Muhammad Qasim. Kabul, Rabiʿ al-Awwal 10, 1330/February 28, 1912. NAA, No. NA. The use of physical description in contracts, to

late 19th century as the Amir, in his book of administrative rules, issued new regulations on seal making (*muhr kani.*) According to the new rules, making seals was allowed only in the cities and no rural artisans could make seals. In the cities, seal makers could produce seals only for those who had documents from the government. If any seal maker violated the rules the punishment was from 100 rupees in fine to imprisonment.[180]

Verification of identity was important to the Amir and he wanted it to be done on paper. Sureties who guaranteed a person, for whatever reason, were treated almost like prisoners. In 1898, a government employee sent a man named ʿAbd al-Latif to Herat to take care of his family while he was in Kabul at the service of the government. Latif once stood surety for the release of a prisoner in Kabul and was apparently not allowed to travel. But because he was in Herat on behalf of a state employee he was not treated as a runaway. The Amir, however, ordered Herat governor to investigate if he was really in Herat for the said purpose. Then, every six months, the governor had to take a court-notarized affidavit from him confirming his responsibility as a surety and send it to Kabul as proof of his presence. With the constant surveillance practiced with regular attendance reports, the man was treated as a prissier. In the same royal decree, the Amir also asked the governor for the attendance scroll of Herat's actual prisoners every six months with their names listed.[181]

After the Amir's death in 1901, his son, Habib Allah Khan (1901-1919) became the Amir and ran the country much like his father. He was slightly gentler in his treatment of the public

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do what photographs do these days, was an old practice dating back at least to mid-18th century. ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, *Dar Al-Qazaʾ Dar Afghanistan* (Kabul: Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i ʿUlum-i Islami, 1980), 122.

[180] *Qanun-i Karguzari dar Muʿamilat-i Hukumati*, 12-13.

[181] ʿAbd al-Rahman to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan and Secretary of Finance (*sar-rishtah dar*) Mirza Tahir Khan of Herat, 20 Rajab 1316/4 December 1898, NAA, Farman, no 4637/107.

and had a greater interest in modern technologies such as cars, cameras, telephone, and electricity. The Amir issued a decree inviting all the exiles and refugees, who had fled the country because of his father, to return home.[182] Traveling abroad was not as restricted as before, and Afghan subjects used British passports for international travels.[183] The idea of a standardized visa was yet to be materialized but with Persia, the Amir had a reciprocal traveling agreement.[184] One needed a "passport" from Kabul prior to entering the Afghan territory.[185] Returnees from abroad, such as the family of Mahmud Tarzi, exiled in Ottoman Syria, were given a "passport," which was not a printed form, but rather a long letter with one paragraph at the end instructing border guards and all government officials en route not to molest the bearer of the letter.[186] If a foreigner entered Afghanistan without identity papers he would be jailed.[187] In 1914, a white man entered Afghanistan from Persia and was promptly arrested on suspension of being a Russian spy. He produced a "six-page booklet" as his passport and said he was German. Afghan officials, who had never seen something like that, sent the document to Kabul and asked for further guidance. He was probably refused entry.[188]

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[182] In 1901, on his first year on the throne, the Amir issued proclamations asking all exiles and refugees to return with the exception of Hazaras. *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011), 113. In 1905, he also issued a proclamation, asking Hazara refugees to return, too, and promised to give them lands elsewhere if their lands were taken by Pashtuns. *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 721.

[183] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 218.

[184] The agreement, which was proposed by Persia in 1914, was for a border crossing fee, or haq al-murus. *ST*, vol. 4 (part 3), (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011), 545-6.

[185] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 217, 227.

[186] The full text of the letter is quoted in, *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 340-1.

[187] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 3), 84.

[188] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 3), 544-5.

The Amir, contrary to his father, was less involved in the day to day business of the government which caused a rise in administrative corruption, including the persistent problem of ghosts: imaginary people existed only as numbers on paper. In the absence of strong bureaucratic control, some would make up people to acquire resources. In 1912, for instance, Pashtun settlers from India who were coming to Afghanistan with the Afghan government's invitation were given free lands that were confiscated from the Hazaras. The lands were distributed based on the number of settlers. In order to get more of the Hazara lands from the Amir, the new-comers would send a list of individuals that did not exist in real life.[189] Under Habib Allah Khan, no universal identity documents existed for citizens and fighting this type of fraud was close to impossible. Amir's armed forces were probably the only group who carried some form of identity cards, that at the time were called "tickets."[190]

TAZKIRA: A UNIVERSAL IDENTITY DOCUMENT

The mechanics of governing subjects who had no paper to prove their identity was a painful practice. The pain was particularly felt by those bureaucrats who had to hire, for instance, freight carriers to move commercial and state cargo through dangerous roads. This type of shipments up until the 1920s was done mostly using camels. It was a sector of the government that required greater identification work because it required trust. In cargo transportation, the traders themselves were rarely involved. Contractors who moved commercial goods between cities were

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[189] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 3), 488-9.

[190] The Tazkira law that was issued on 5 Jawza 1302, mentions a number of those "population tickets." See, *Nizamnamah-i tazkirah-i nufus va ususl-i paspurt va qanun-i tabiʿiyyat* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 5 Dalv 1305 / 26 January 1927), 6.

responsible for safely delivering the goods. They were called *kirayah kash* (lit. rental carriers.) The government trade attaché in Peshawar was responsible for vetting all freight carriers and it was not an easy job because none had identity documents. The attaché had to establish their identity by investigating their tribe, family, and place of living. If they suspected any carrier of having an unclear background, they forced the suspected individual to bring confirmation of their identity from their village chiefs. The attaché was required to have a detailed list of all the carriers with their identity information as a form of insurance against theft. If a carrier stole from the cargo and was not found, the attaché was responsible for the damages.[191] This was just one example of the complications involved in the affairs of the state and economy. The next ruler, the young Amir Aman Allah Khan (1919-1929), the son of the former Amir, introduced a revolutionary idea: an identity card for every citizen.

The Afghan national identity card, *Tazkira*, as we know it today, appeared on 16 December 1921, when the first copy was issued to the Amir himself.[192] "Anyone living in the country is an Afghan, without exception," announced Amir Aman Allah Khan.[193] In order to the idea of national citizenship a tangible representation, he decided to issue standard identity documents to all residents, no matter their background. The Tazkira was a letter size paper with two simple tables, one for personal and the other for physical, or anthropometric, information

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[191] *Nizamnamah-i Mamuriyat-i Vakil al-Tijarah* (Kabul: Matbaʿ-i Hurufy-i Mashinkhanah, 1300/1921), 8-9.

[192] Tazkira, His Highness Amir Aman Allah Khan Ghazi, no. 1, 25 Qaws 1300/16 December 1921, NAA, No. NA.

[193] *Aman-i Afghan*, (*AA*, hereafter), v. 6, no. 37, 8 Qaws 1304 / 29 November 1925, 2. The word *Tazkira* is Arabic for "note" but it was also used as "biography." In Afghanistan, its use as a word for the identity document was adopted from Ottoman Turkish, *Tezkere,* which was a form of internal passport common in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The full name of the Ottoman passport was *murur tezkeresi,* or Travel Permit. Karpat, *Studies on Ottoman*, 110.

(titled *Chihrah*, or "Face"), and each contained six blank boxes. Most Afghans did not use, and still do not use, a surname but the Tazkira asked for "Name and Surname" (*ism va shuhrat*) in its personal table. The table also had boxes for the father's name, age, address, ethnicity (*qawm*), and occupation. The table for the physical information included the height, eyes color, skin color, hair color, and distinguishing sign (*ʿalamat-i fariqah*).[194] If the applicant was a child, their physical features would not be recorded on the Tazkira but would be added when they reached adulthood.[195]

At the bottom of the document, there was a statement that read: "The mentioned person, whose name and description and status and occupation are recorded above, has the citizenship of the independent, righteous, Afghan state. This Certificate of Population (*Tazkirah-i nufus*) was given to him to be recognized." The document was certified by two official seals but it did not have a place for the applicant's signature or seal. On the back of the document, there was a summary of the Tazkira law, emphasizing the privileges that the document brought (i.e Tazkira holders would not need a *rahdari* and could freely travel inside the country using their new ID card) and warned about the difficulties for those who did not have it. "The state," it said "will not trust and will not consider the petitions" of those without a Tazkira, particularly in eight areas that it listed:

1. In sale or rent of movable or immobile properties either personally or via a representative

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[194] Tazkira, His Highness Amir Aman Allah Khan Ghazi, no. 1, 25 Qaws 1300/ 16 December 1921, NAA, No. NA.

[195] *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 5. For an example of a Tazkira issued to a 12-year-old boy, see Tazkira, Shah Mahmud Khan son of ʿAbd al-Razzaq Khan, no. 10574, 30 Hut 1301 / 22 March 1923, NAA, No. 2649/245.

2. In filing a suit or notarizing a partnership document in courts or government offices

3. In marriage, divorce, testimony, or legal representation

4. In government employment

5. In getting a passport (*rahdari* for foreign travels)

6. In taking loans and etc.

7. In enrollment of children to school

8. If a foreign national accept the citizenship of the independent, righteous, Afghan state, he must get a Tazkira[196]

The Tazkira's tables, its standardized form, and its unique number indicated the state's desire to use it as a technology of gathering systematic information for the purpose of controlling and calculating the population. The secondary, but not less important, purpose of the Tazkira was to allow people to reliably identify themselves to the state and to each other particularly in the bazaar. The use of Tazkira for the production of standardized population information, however, from the very beginning, proved to be too optimistic. The cold bureaucratic paper was not used for impersonal governance because the information recorded on them was most of the time arbitrary, and a result lacked standards. Amir's name in his Tazkira, for example, included his royal titles and his date of birth was recorded as "30-years old," with no exact date numbers.[197] In another Tazkira, the age of the card-holder is also given as "65 years old" without specifying the exact date of birth. Not everyone, of course, knew their date of birth but the authorities could

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[196] Tazkira, Mulla Ghulam Siddiq son of Mulla Muhammad ʿAbbas, no. 75614/353, 15 Saratan 1303 / 6 July 1924, NAA, No. NA.

[197] Tazkira, His Highness Amir Aman Allah Khan Ghazi, no. 1, 25 Qaws 1300/16 December 1921, NAA, No. NA.

have left a place for it on the Tazkira for those who knew theirs. Plus, the age recorded in population registers was the basis of conscription and needed to be more exact. His address said "Tanur Sazi neighborhood" without naming the city or the province. His Distinguishing Signs said "big nose." [198] The Tazkira also did not have the applicant's signature or their seals and the physical description alone was not the most reliable way to prevent fraud.

When the Tazkira law was announced, each applicant had to pay a small fee for their national identity cards. After the Amir noticed that the public's reaction was less than enthusiastic, he dropped the fees. He made the Tazkira the pre-condition for passports so anyone wishing to travel had to apply for a Tazkira first. In order to make travel more attractive, he also banned the rahdari fees from travelers in possession of passports.[199] Still, people were reluctant to apply for either of the documents. The reason was simple: the Tazkira was used for conscription. Applicants would share all their personal information including their age and place of living with government and the data was used for army recruitment. The resistance was greater among Pashtun tribes. "The majority of people are afraid of getting the Tazkira because it would mean enlisting in the army," wrote a governor in the south to the Amir. People there needed to cross the border, so, having no passport, "the mountainous subjects, because of ignorance, disregard the rules and cross the border using escaping routes without passport and Tazkira." The Amir was not ready to back away and ordered his governor to issue Tazkiras and

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[198] Tazkira, Mulla Ghulam Siddiq son of Mulla Muhammad ʿAbbas, no. 75614/353, 15 Saratan 1303/6 July 1924, NAA, No. NA

[199] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Minister of Commerce Ghulam Muhammad Khan, 23 Hut 1300/14 March 1922, NAA, Farman, no. 1041.

passports to all tribes who wished to cross the borders and record their information in the local population register, *jadval-i nufus*, the database used for conscription.[200]

In 1922, his Tazkira regulations went into effect in the bazaar. The state banned all contracts, transactions, testimonies, marriage, divorce, filing suit and etc. without the use of the Tazkira. It caused huge problems both in the bazaar and government bureaucracy as most people still did not have the document. The Amir, facing revenue loss and public chaos, had to take a softer approach and ordered that all businesses should run as usual until the entire population gets their Tazkiras.[201] After the 1924 rebellion in the South, he also announced that lack of Tazkira no longer deprived people of their legal rights (*huquq-i sharʿiyyah*) such as selling a property or getting a marriage certificate.[202] The economic side-effects of the Tazkira were taken care of, but still, because if its relationship with army recruitment, Tazkira remained a hard sell. In 1925, the Amir visited Qandahar, a traditional stronghold of the Afghan ruling class, to promote his reform agenda including his conscription policy. One day, during his trip to Qandahar, the Amir talked to the public "from 2 pm to the sunset" after the Friday prayers, according to a letter sent to his deputy in Kabul, about his policy on army recruitment.[203] He did not speak Pashto and used a translator, but on the topic of conscription, considering it such an

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[200] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Ministry of Justice, 27 Qaws 1302/19 December 1923, NAA, Farman (*Sultaniyat*), Doc. No. 2230, Farman no. 18. On how the Tazkira data was used for draft see, *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 8-19.

[201] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Muhammad Sarwar Khan, 29 Jaddi 1301/20 January 1923, NAA, Farman, Document no. 5489/245, Farman No. 1538.

[202] *AA*, 14 Sunbula 1303/5 September 1924, 6.

[203] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Muhammad Vali Khan, Minister of Defense and Temporary Deputy of His Highness, 18 ʿAqrab 1304/9 November 1925, NAA, Farman, No. 211.

important issue, he tried to explain it in broken Pashtu. According to this policy, every eight eligible men would use a lottery (*pishk*) to pick one as the recruit. The other seven had to pay his salary.[204] Some among the audience in Qandahar, according to the Amir, liked the idea, some said they would pay instead if they were chosen and some, who could not afford either, asked him to stop the program.[205] The official newspaper in Kabul, however, reported a rosier picture saying that everyone agreed with Amir's policy as it would treat the "sons of the feudal and the farmer" equally.[206]

In addition to Tazkira, the Amir also issued passports. Afghanistan was now an independent state, the official newspaper said, and as such could establish relations with all other states, which would require regulating travelers abroad and the "visiting of friends" to the country.[207] A passport was only issued based on the applicant's Tazkira. Nomads, border workers, residents of border villages, too, needed passports. Political passports required a photo but for regular ones, it was not a requirement.[208] The Afghan government was not ready for

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[204] *AA*, 15 Qaws 1304/6 December 1925, 4. The *hasht nafari* (one-man-in-eight), as the policy was called, was not the Amir's original idea. It was first initiated by Amir Shir ʿAli Khan and it was widely used by Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (he excused Eastern tribes from service) and Amir Habib Allah Khan. Amir Aman Allah was pursuing what at least three kings before him had tried. *AA*, 16 Dalv 1302/6 February 1924, 4-6. On ʿAbd al-Rahman's similar policy see, *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 833.

[205] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Muhammad Vali Khan, Minister of Defense and Temporary Deputy of His Highness, 18 ʿAqrab 1304/9 November 1925, NAA, Farman, No. 211.

[206] *AA*, 15 Qaws 1304/6 December 1925, 4.

[207] *AA*, 30 Hamal 1301/20 April 1922, 1-2.

[208] *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 20-21, 29. Aman Allah's passport requirement did not sit well especially with Eastern Pashtun tribes who were used to free movement between India and Afghanistan. In 1924, it caused a revolt among Mangal tribes which was then violently suppressed by the state. See, Sayyid Shams al-Din Majruh, *Sar*

handling passports. Afghan consulates could not issue a visa before getting permission from Kabul and it caused a lot of confusions for travelers. Lack of clear identification procedures was an issue, too, as in one case an Indian subject was given an Afghan identity document.[209] The political passports, written in Persian and French, had no place for the applicant's signature or seal. According to a document issued on 27 November 1929, to the wife of Shah Wali Khan, ambassador to France, and her two children, did bear the photos of the three travelers but not their names. Even the name of the mother is not mentioned in the document—very similar to the Rahdari from 1875, as discussed earlier. It only says "Her Excellency the wife of His Excellency Shah Wali Khan, the ambassador of His Highness to London, with two of her children." The French side of the document, however, is corrected to show Shah Wali Khan was the ambassador to France, not London. The Persian side is not corrected.[210]

Foreign nationals needed passports and Afghan visa to enter Afghanistan. When traveling inside the country, and if they wanted to stay in a town for more than 24 hours, they also needed a permit from the town's police. Upon leaving Afghanistan, they had to apply for an exit visa.[211] It was a great improvement that allowed people from around the world to come to Kabul. Especially many German nationals came to work on Government projects including people like

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Guzasht-i Man, ed. Sayyid Fazl Akbar (Kabul: Afghanistan Times, 2012), 41; Daniel Balland, "AFGHANISTAN x. Political History," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, July 22, 2011, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan-x-political-history.

[209] "A précis on Afghan affairs from February 1919 to September 1927." BL, IOR/R/12/LIB/107, 335-7.

[210] Political Passport, Her Excellency the Wife of His Excellency Shah Vali Khan, the Ambassador of His Highness to London, with Two of Her Children, General No. 524, Special No. 22, 6 Qaws 1308/27 November 1929. NAA, No. NA.

[211] *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 27-28.

Kurt Wagner, a member of the 1915 German mission to Kabul, who returned to Afghanistan under an alias for espionage.[212] Crossing into Afghan borders required identity papers. In 1925, a Persian traveler, upon reaching the Afghan border in Herat, saw a wooden boom barrier manned by two armed guards. They asked for his papers and after he produced his passport (*Tazkirah-i murur*) they let him in.[213] Border guards were relatively serious in their jobs. In 1923, a group of Germans was traveling overland to Afghanistan and one of them, Emil Trinkler, lost his passport. On the Soviet-Afghan border in Qara Tappa (now Turghundi), everyone was let in except for him. Afghan borders at the time were connected to the newly built telephone network. Trinkler asked the border police to call the governor of Herat as he was expecting him. He was told that the telephone did not work. Bring a "proper *visa* and stamped photographs," the police told him. Trinkler had to travel to the nearest Afghan Counsel, in Tashkent, to get a special permit. There, the Afghan officials gave him "a large sealed document" and his photographs were posted on it. He returned to the border and this time he was let in.[214]

A government-owned Motor Transport Company, since 1912, was moving passengers between Kabul and Peshawar.[215] Under Aman Allah Khan, the monopoly company offered a way to travel, with reasonable fares, which was much better and faster than camel caravans. If

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[212] BL, IOR/L/PS/10/1076, File 4918/1922 Pt 4.

[213] *AA*, 22 Qaws 1304/13 December 1925, 4.

[214] Emil Trinkler, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*, trans. B. K Featherstone (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928), 40–44.

[215] *Siraj al-Akhbar* (*SA*, hereafter), v 1, no 7, 15 Muharram 1330/5 January 1912, 2; *SA*, v 3, no 7, 15 Muharram 1332 / 14 December 1913, 4-5.

one had his one vehicle, it was also allowed in.[216] The policing work on the border was also upgraded with new technologies imported from abroad. In Turkham, for instance, the agents would check passengers' papers and then telephone the next police station to give them the information about the coming travelers including the number plates of the cars and buses.[217] Finally at the gate of Kabul city, too, the police then would verify the passengers' names and the cars' plate numbers before letting them into town.[218] This system was a vast improvement in policing border mobility, compared with the past.

The ease in travel meant that Kabul city, the capital, was expanding in size and population. The city was a site of anxiety and distrust that came with rapid growth. More people were moving in and the streets were increasingly dominated by strange faces. One government periodical published a fictional dialogue between two young men about the latest tricks of thieves in the city in order to educate the residents about the dangers of trusting those who do not know their identities. One trick involved a guy coming to a house with some meat from the butchery and some changes and would say: "the master sent these home and told me to bring him his coat, hat and etc." Then he would take the valuables and disappear. "If they brought a note," one of the characters says, "the problem would be solved." His friend objects. "My dad says that do not trust people who bring a note from me, even if it had my signature on it. Who knows

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[216] *AA*, 8 Qaws 1304/29 November 1925, 7; Sorab K. H Katrak, *Through Amanullah's Afghanistan: A Book of Travel* (Karachi: D.N. Patel, 1929), 26–27. More on arrival of motor cars in Afghanistan see, Green, "The Road to Kabul: Automobiles and Afghan Internationalism, 1900-1940."

[217] Katrak, *Through Amanullah's Afghanistan*, 29–30.

[218] Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi, *Safarnamah-i Afghanistan*, trans. Nazir Ahmad Salami (Zahidan: Ghulam Husain Jahantigh, 2003), 22.

maybe they have forged my signature or have kept in a basement and forced me to sign it."[219]

The distrust of paper felt in this article, which reads like a Public Service Announcement, did not include all papers as the government at the time was promoting literacy and fighting orality. The target was apparently the handwritten paper only, not printed materials—a technology not accessible to people outside the circle of power. As a result, because of automation bias, there was more trust in papers that were mechanically produced, such as the Tazkira. These type of official print media were produced in a printing press that was located inside the Arg. In 1929, during the civil war which cost the king his throne, the Arg suffered major destruction, and among other things, its printing equipment was also greatly damaged.[220]

UPDATES IN THE IDENTITY DOCUMENT

After 1929, when Muhammad Nadir came to power, the Afghan Tazkira and passport got a security improvement. The improvement was the unique serial number. The simple numerical innovation was made possible probably for the new print machines Nadir bought for the government press. He built a new press house, with advanced technologies imported from Germany, and named it Matbaʿah-i Umumi, or Public Press, which in addition to periodicals and

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[219] "Masalan," *Ayinah-i ʿIrfan*, Mizan & ʿAqrab 1303/September & October 1924, 81-9.

[220] Photographs of the Arg after the 1929 civil war. Photographic Collection, NAA, No. NA. After the fall of Aman Allah Khan in 1929, for 9 months, Habib Allah, known as the bandit king, ruled the country. His official newspaper, *Habib al-Islam* apologized in its first issue for its poor quality: "Due to lack of zincograph equipment, we were not able to print the title of the newspaper in large and clear types. God willing the equipment will soon be obtained." The newspaper, however, continued to be printed in the same small type from top to bottom—at least for the first 31 issues. See, *Habib al-Islam*, Hut 1, 1307/February 20, 1929, 15.

books handled *sukuk* (i.e. legal documents) too.[221] In 1939, a law for Sukuk was issued to regulate the identity papers and other official documents that it produced. It was fairly detailed and included the price for each document. (i.e. a marriage certificate for both "virgin" and "widowed" women was set at 10.5 rupees.) Each document printed by sukuk, much like currency, had a serial number that was supposed to be a security measure.[222]

The Tazkira law under the previous king demanded that each identity document should have a number.[223] In practice, the Tazkiras and passports issued did not have any such numbers on them. What they did have were hand-written numbers for record-keeping purposes. The new innovation was a serial number printed on each document at the state printing press. According to a passport issued in 1932 in Herat, the number was only 4 digits.[224] A Tazkira issued in this period shows a six-digit serial number.[225] The serial number was an easy way to track the documents and documents owners. It created security and made it harder to forge the document. All Afghan Tazkiras, passports, and other official documents produced ever since have such serial numbers. Surprisingly, however, that number is ignored by both the officials and the public. According to Afghan bureaucratic practices, the "Tazkira number" means several hand-written numbers that refer to record-keeping which are confusing, vague, unpractical, and untrustworthy.

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[221] Juya, "Nazari Bah Matbuʿat va Nashriyat-i Ma," 90–91.

[222] *Usulnamah-i sukukat va tikit-hay-i mahsuli* (Kabul: Riyast-i ʿUmumiy-i Matabiʿ, 4 Jaddi 1318/26 December 1939), 9.

[223] *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 26.

[224] An image of this passport is available online on this Facebook page: https://bit.ly/2JLHjj9.

[225] Shuhrat Nangyal, ed., *Asnad va Namah-Hay-i Tarikhiy-i Afghanistan* (Peshawar: Danish Kitabkanah, 1998), 45.

The serial number, which is clearly printed on each identity document, is called "sukuk number" and is rarely used. It refers to the Sukuk Press where the numbers are printed on the Tazkira. In fact, the Ministry of Interior that issues the Tazkira is not able to trace a document based on its serial number. The only way they authenticate a Tazkira is finding its record in the *kundahs*, the old books with big tabulated pages, where identities of Tazkira holders are kept. Unlike the serial number which is a single number of several digits, the record-keeping numbers are several numbers and words: "Volume number," "Page Number," "Registration Number" and sometimes words such as "Miscellaneous" are also used in addition to a year for the volume number. These numbers all refer to those dusty books kept in some dark room in the Ministry of Interior. This is a highly inefficient way of identification and verification and this is the main reason it is easy to forge official documents because the verification is so complicated and time-consuming and in most occasions, people do not bother verifying them. Afghan officials had little interest in the integrity of the population information that was generated by the identity document. They were vulnerable to corruption. According to top officials inside the government, the passport office in 1934, for instance, would issue Afghan passports to non-Afghans too if the bribe money was right.[226]

After King Muhammad Nadir was assassinated by a student in 1933, and his brother was assassinated by another student in the same year, the other brother, Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim became greatly suspicious of schools and students. In 1940, the government began a surveillance program directed at all high school and college students by establishing the Office of Student Identities (*daftar-i huviyyat-i talabah*.) The office, part of the Ministry of Education, was responsible for creating a file for every student with their detailed personal information and

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[226] Sara Koplik, *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 110.

photos in it. The file was for recording both a student's academic performance and also personal information such as "talents, capabilities, interest in following educational rules"—all code words for detecting student with political opinions. In addition, schools all over the country were required to report the attendance information of their students to the Ministry every month.[227]

The Second World War turned Afghanistan, a neutral state, into a hotbed of espionage in the region. The Allied and Axis forces were spying on each other and Afghans were spying on both. In 1944, an American journalist reported that Kabul was "swarming with Axis agents, knee-deep in intrigue."[228] Identification of foreign travelers was an issue of interest for all parties. The British Legation had Afghan spies on duty to report on all European travelers entering Afghanistan.[229] More interestingly, they had an agreement with the Iranian embassy to forward all visa applications to them before granting visas to Afghans and European who wanted to travel to Iran.[230] Before the war, Afghanistan was a place of refuge for Soviet runaways. In 1935, a Ukrainian refugee, probably on the run from Stalin's government, entered Afghanistan and out of desperation introduced himself as an airplane engineer. He was hired by the Afghan army but soon it was revealed that he had no knowledge of airplanes. He was kicked out and had no place to live and applied for a visa to India. The British legation in Kabul thought "a white man of his low mentality should not be left to wonder about on the streets of Kabul." They recommended him for an Indian visa.[231]

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[227] *Da Kabul Kalani 1319* (Kabul: Pashtu Tulanah, 1940), 85, 87.

[228] Ernest O. Hauser, "Afghan Listening Post," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 25, 1944, 19.

[229] See a sample of such reports, written in Persian, about an Australian tourist, BL, IOR/R/12/132 File 602/44. Also see, BL, IOR/R/12/165 File 42/43/0.

[230] "Control of Movement of Travelers between Afghanistan and Persia," BL, IOR/L/PS/12/821.

[231] BL, IOR/R/12/64 File 513/IV, f 28

After the War, a major change happened in the way the Afghan government was treating population information. The Afghan rulers wanted to disassociate Tazkira from the dreaded draft. This association with the army was the main reason that, after more than two decades, many Afghans still preferred to live without identity papers. In 1951, the government restructured the office that was responsible for civil registration. On 10 June 1951, it dismantled the Directorate of Statistics at the Ministry of Interior, and all its Population Offices in the provinces, and established the General Directorate of Population Statistics and Civil Registration. The new office, led by Faqir Muhammad Divah Guli, was to gather systematic demographic and socio-economic information about the Afghan population and issue new identity cards. The new Tazkira was no longer a single page but a small booklet that, for the first time, carried the photo of the card-holder.[232] Under the new rules, the civic registration employees would travel around in rural areas to distribute the new identity documents. They also carried a box camera, a simple black and white camera that could produce photos in minutes. In rural Ghazni, for example, the traveling Tazkira missions would sit five children in a row and take their photos at once, in order to save time and photographic materials. Then they would separate the images after developing the photo.[233]

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[232] *Da Kabul Kalani 1330* (Kabul: Da Matbuʿatu Riyasat, 1951), 109.

[233] Telephone interview with Hadi Hakimi, who received a Tazkira in the 1960s from one of these missions (Ottawa, Canada, 15 March 2016). In 1974, President Muhammad Daud, too, sent out Tazkira missions to rural areas. *Pamir*, 29 Larm [ʿAqrab] 1353/20 November 1974, 1, 8.

Sometime around this time the bearer's signature, too, became a requirement on the Tazkira. Those who were illiterate used a fingerprint with ink.[234] The introduction of the photograph, however, did not make physical descriptions obsolete as they continued to remain on the Tazkira. In Europe, as Walter Benjamin explains, the invention of photography revolutionized the process of the identification and undermined the critical role of the signature as the main identifier of a person. Previously, the most important part of an identity paper was the bearer's signature. In the 19th century, the photograph became the most reliable way to identify a person on documents. In fields like criminology, he argues, this invention was as important as the "invention of the printing press was for literature."[235] The Afghan Tazkira continued to have a box for distinguishing marks, too, but they were rarely filled out.

Despite new measures, most Afghans, even in cities, still did not carry identity papers in the mid-20th century. In 1951, an independent newspaper, *Ingar*, published a letter to the editor at the time that was critical of the way government employees treated the public and involved the story of a mistaken identity gone wrong. This was a short-lived period of relative freedom under Prime Minister Shah Mahmud Khan. The author also criticized the way Afghan media ignored the atrocities happening in the country. "We know about the revenues, population, and borders of a so and so South American city, but we do not know where our own dear homeland is located, what its size is, and what its population is," said the letter. As an example of government atrocities ignored by the press, the author then shares the story of a beating he witnessed on a Kabul street on 12 April 1951. According to him, inspectors from Dar al-Masakin (the

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[234] The use of ink fingerprint as identity confirmation was the result of modern criminology that propagated the uniqueness of fingerprints. This is still a common practice in Afghanistan but it is not known how it entered the Afghan bureaucratic and legal procedures.

[235] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938-1940*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 27.

government homeless shelter) began beating a man named Murad for refusing to go to the shelter. Murad was a janitor at the archive of the Ministry of Education. The author says the condition at the shelter was so bad that no one wanted to live there and even if it was good, one should not be forced into it.[236] At the time Dar al-Masakin was responsible for collecting panhandlers off the Kabul streets.[237] This case of mistaken identity got violent because the victim had no paper proof to identify himself as an employee of the government. A poor man, who probably looked homeless, Murad could save himself with an identity card.

In 1965, finally, the government decided to issue Tazkiras to women too. Prior to that, women were not a target group for Tazkira distribution as they did not serve in the army. In 1960s Afghan women were exposed to modern culture and media and wanted to participate in public life more widely. They did not want to remain "onlookers" only in the Afghan society, as a Kabul magazine put it.[238] The government's quantification measures included car number plates too. Although car plates had existed before, they were not implemented properly as in the 1970s, only 75 percent of cars in the Kabul had number plates. This made it difficult to track cars and car owners for policing purposes. In 1970, the government decided to solve that problem.[239]

In 1921, the Afghan Tazkira was issued for the purpose of conscription: the Afghan state wanted to know when people reached service age in order to summon them to the army. Interestingly, however, Afghan officials paid the least attention to age information, which was the most critical data point on a document that determined who should join the army and when. This simple numerical information was carelessly handled and little effort was made to make it

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[236] *Ingar*, 28 Hamal 1330/18 April 1951, 3.

[237] *Anis,* 22 ʿAqrab 1311/13 November 1932, 2-3.

[238] *Zhvandun*, 10 Hamal 1346/30 March 1967, 5.

[239] *The Kabul Times,* 1 April 1970, 1.

precise by recording the proper date of birth with the year, the month, and the day. Most Afghans, having no birth certificate, did not know their exact date of birth. A small minority, however, knew it as literate parents usually record the exact dates of their children's birth inside the cover of their family Quran—a well-preserved item in each household. The officials at Tazkira offices, however, mostly rely on their own guesses rather than using what the applicant thinks is the right information. In one case, a man whose date of birth on the family Quran said he was 28, was given a Tazkira that put his age at 31.[240] The age determination is usually done by the director of the Tazkira office who looks at the applicant and asked how old they are. Then he uses his own guess to record the date of birth as follows: "15 years old of 1379." No month or day is asked. Even the year in this format is vague because when you convert 1379 to the Gregorian calendar, it could be either 2018 or 2019.[241]

In the 1970s, Tazkira was still associated with conscription and that was the main reason people preferred to not get it in order to remain invisible to the state. Those who needed the document, sometimes went to great length to avoid conscription. In 1976, a man used a forged Tazkira in order to persuade local officials that he was underage. The man was caught and tried

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[240] Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Newspaper Hunts Corruption, but First It Has to Pay the Rent," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/world/asia/afghanistan-newspaper.html.

[241] This information is based on my own experience when I applied to get a Tazkira in 2003 and again in 2016 when I got a second copy of it. Some more recent examples of the Tazkira form which are typed (but still filled out by hand), the age box says "age and date of birth." It technically means that the exact date could be recorded too. The problem of Afghans with no dates of birth became global in with the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe. Many young Afghan men, no matter their age, who had no identity papers, introduced themselves under 18 in order to get their refugee claims approved faster. During the 2018 World Cup, a joke was circulating in Sweden that said: "Why Afghanistan doesn't have a national football team?" The answer: "Because everyone there is under 18."

in court.[242] Unlike the post-2001 era, in which, service in the army is voluntary and many join the army to have a stable job, the past was different. Under the communist rulers (1978-1992), when the state was dealing with a widespread insurgency, army recruiters would even patrol the streets to randomly stop people to see if the person had his *tarkhis*, the discharge certificate. Having no systematic information about the population, and, in particular, concerning their location, this was how they could reach possible recruits. The phenomenon was called *jalb va ihzar,* "recruitment summons," and young eligible men were terrified of getting caught by the patrollers, commonly known as *jalbizar*, on the street. As a result, many would carry forged discharge certificates.[243]

IDENTIFICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE E-TAZKIRA SAGA

Every presidential election in the post-Taliban Afghanistan has been marred with fraud. The worst was the one in 2014 when the "fraud engineered on an industrial scale" resulted in months of dispute, bringing the country to the verge of a civil war.[244] The Americans managed to force the Tajik candidate Abdullah Abdullah, the man who arguably had more votes, to accept the Pashtun candidate Ashraf Ghani, the American favorite, as president but join his government as Chief Executive—a made-up post.[245] Abdullah had lost the previous presidential race, too, in almost the same way to Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun. In the power-sharing deal with Ghani (signed

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[242] Muhammad Qasim Hashimzuy, ed., *Rapur-Hay-i Qazaʾ-i Afghani*, vol. 1 (Kabul: Vizarat-i ʿAdliyah, 1976), 43.

[243] *Mandigar*, 3 Jawza 1396/24 May 2017, 4.

[244] Karen Allen, "Afghan Polls: Trading Allegations of Fraud," *BBC News*, June 18, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27897109.

[245] Mason, "Fraud and Folly in Afghanistan."

on 20 September 2014), Abdullah listed a set of demands that Ghani must commit to in his government. One of the key ones was issuing electronic identity cards, something that would make electoral fraud harder: "The national unity government commits to completing the distribution of electronic/computerized identity cards to all the citizens of the country as quickly as possible."[246] In a country with no reliable identity documents, it was difficult to create a credible voter register and audit the votes that were cast. There were so many "ghost polling stations" and "ghost voters" in every election that made even the thought of a reliable electrical process too unrealistic. Some experts even questioned the wisdom of holding elections in a country that lacked basic mechanisms to ensure the credibility of the process.[247]

The Afghan national identity card, the Tazkira, has been the most important official document that establishes a person's identity, but currently half of the population in Afghanistan do not have it.[248] Those who have the letter size hand-written form cannot find much use in it as its forgery is so common that even some government agencies do not recognize it as a sufficient document to prove your identity— unless one returns to the Ministry of Interior's Directorate of Civic Registration, the issuer, and gets an authentication stamp on it.[249] Its rudimentary structure has not changed much since it was first issued in 1921 under Amir Aman Allah Khan. It records basic information including the name, father's name, grandfather's name, place of birth, date of birth, religion, and occupation, and colors of skin, eyes, and hair.

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[246] "The 'Government of National Unity' Deal (Full Text)," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 21, 2014, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/miscellaneous/aan-resources/the-government-of-national-unity-deal-full-text/.

[247] Worden, "Afghanistan."

[248] Haydari, "Bah Muhajirin Afghan."

[249] "Tariqah-i Giriftan-i Paspurt va Maʿlumat Dar Mavrid-i Tavziʿ-i Paspurt," Vizarat-i Dakhilah, July 25, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20180511221302/http://moi.gov.af/fa/blog/how-to-get-a-new-passport.

In addition to the Tazkira, the government, according to the law, should also issue a certificate for every birth and every death in the country. In practice, however, it rarely does. The public, too, does not seem to care about such documents. They apply for a certificate at the Directorate of Civic Registration only when they run into a legal issue: for birth certificates, when they want to travel abroad and some foreign embassies demand birth certificates for their children, and for death certificates, when they try to sell an inherited property. In both cases, the ministry has to issue the certificate years after the birth or the death in question. Only births and deaths that occur in a hospital, a small percentage of the country's births and deaths, receive official certificates.[250] The data collected at the Directorate of Civic Registration, therefore, are not very accurate and the process is prone to bribery and corruption.

The unsophisticated form of the Tazkira has allowed easy forgery. There are accusations that even some inside the government issue fake Tazkiras, particularly when there is an election coming up.[251] There was even a member of Afghan parliament busted for producing fake

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[250] Interview with Zabih Allah, Manager, Birth and Death Statistics (ihsaʾiyah-i vafiyat va viladat), Directorate of Civic Registration (Kabul, 4 June 2016.)

[251] On allegations about government's distribution of fake Tazkiras for rigging the elections see, "Lalay Hamidzay: Hukumat 4 Million Shinasnamah-i Jaʿli Tavziʿ Kardah Ast," *Ittilaʿat-i Ruz*, May 23, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20190526212545/https://www.etilaatroz.com/61114/; "Namah-i Sar-Gushadah-i Humayun Humayun Muʿavin-i Awwal-i Majlis-i Numayandagan Darbarah-i 10 Million Tazkirah-i Varaqi," *Khabarnamah*, April 26, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180426183954/http://khabarnama.net/blog/2018/04/26/an-open-letter-to-the-people-of-afghanistan/; "Dadsitani Kul: 58 Tan Dar Payvand Ba Furush-i Shinasnamah-Hay-i Barchasb Dar Bazdasht Shudand," *Ittilaʿat-i Ruz*, June 14, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20190526214500/https://www.etilaatroz.com/62004/; "Blank ID Cards 'Authorized' In

Tazkiras.[252] In another instance, the police uncovered an underground lab that was involved in mass producing Tazkira and other forms of identity cards.[253] The e-Tazkira program, therefore, has the potential to finally produce reliable numeral information about the population and make it harder for forgers to create ghosts citizens. The biometrically-enabled document would individualize the elusive population that has been evading the eyes of the state for more than a century. This technology could also make it easier for people to identify themselves before the public or private entities and protect themselves and their properties. We should note, however, that the resistance to transparency is strong inside the Afghan government and it takes more than good technology for this program to succeed.

It was after the 2004 presidential elections that it became clear that, without a reliable national identity card it was impossible to experience, among other things, fair and free elections. An electronic national ID card, a technology already in use in the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan, was the obvious answer. In 2005, the Ministry of Interior proposed the idea of the e-Tazkira, but President Hamid Karzai was not very interested and rejected it, citing lack of

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Paktia," TOLOnews, July 18, 2018, https://www.tolonews.com/elections-2018/blank-id-cards-%E2%80%98authorized%E2%80%99-paktia.

[252] See Qutbuddin Kohi, "Faryab Female MP Accused of 'Hijacking' PRD Staff," Pajhwok Afghan News, May 7, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180507224907/https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/05/07/faryab-female-mp-accused-%E2%80%98hijacking%E2%80%99-prd-staff.

[253] The Ministry of Interior, too, busted a fake Tazkira lab. Vizarat-i Dakhilah, May 6, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180506173054/http://moi.gov.af/fa/news/73111. See also, "Raʾis-i Sabt Ahval-i Nufus: Tavziʿ-i Tazkirah-Hay-i Jaʿli Dar Kishvar Jaryan Darad," *Khabarguzariy-i Yash*, May 7, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20190526220803/https://yash.news/?p=12762.

funding.[254] The chatter continued about the subject until three years later, on 21 March 2008, when the Afghan parliament approved the Ministry of Communications' proposal for work on the e-Tazkira that allowed the formation of a joint task force from the ministries of Interior, Communication, Justice, and Finance to work on the project.[255] In February 2009, Karzai's government finally kicked off the actual work on the e-Tazkira. It was an election year, late enough to make sure no one had one before August 20, when the next presidential elections were scheduled. The project would cost $222 million dollars and almost all of it was provided by the US and the European Union. The ministries of Communications and Interior hired the needed staff and gave Grand Technology Resources, an Afghan company, a contract to provide the technical support and purchase the required technologies, but the actual launch of the program faced delay after delay.[256]

Initially, the problem seemed to be the lack of a law to regulate the project. In 2013, a draft of the Population Registration Act went to the Afghan parliament for debate. The touchy issue of ethnicity consumed much of the heated debates as non-Pashtuns were demanding to include it on the card but Pashtuns rejected this and instead insisted on including "Afghan" as the nationality on the card. Finally, the bill was passed on 1 January 2014 and sent to President

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[254] This is what Mir ʿAbd al-Rahman Maʿqul, director of the Civic Registration Department at the Ministry of Interior, told a reporter. See, *Arman-i Milli*, 4 Hut 1387/22 February 2009, 3.

[255] Zmaray Bahir, "Bar-kinariy-i karmandan-i tavziʿi tazkirah-i ilikturunik," *Hasht-i Subh*, December 22, 2015, https://8am.af/x8am/1394/10/01/dismissal-of-employees-distribution-of-electronic-id-cards/.

[256] MEC, "Vulnerability to Corruption Assessment (VCA) of the Electronic National Identification Cards Authority in the Ministry of Interior Affairs" (Kabul: Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, October 2015), 3, http://www.mec.af/files/2015_10_21_E-Tazkira_VCA_(English)_v3.pdf.

Karzai to be signed into law.[257] The bill said that sensitive information, such as ethnicity and mother tongue, should be recorded in registration forms but should not appear on the actual e-Tazkira cards.[258] Five months after the bill was passed Karzai still was refusing to sign it. The parliament asked top officials from the ministries of Interior, Communications, and Justice, for an explanation. They blamed the office of the president and said that they would fire the staff for the project within 40 days if the president did not sign the bill.[259] Karzai's refusal to launch the program continued.

In September 2015, after six years, more than $64 million of the funds were spent ($7.5 million of it on salaries) and still a single ID card was not yet issued.[260] The donor countries threatened to cut off the funding if the government continued to drag its feet and then they did.[261] The new president, Ashraf Ghani, finally signed the bill into law on 1 December 2014.[262] The data collection for the e-Tazkira, which was conducted door to door and involved filling out a form with 31 data points, immediately began. Very soon it became clear how difficult the task was. The form asked for surnames and dates of birth, things that most Afghans do not have. In

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[257] Qanun-i sabt-i ahval-i nufus, *Jaridah-i Rasmi*, 25 9 1393/16 December 2014. no. 1154, b.

[258] See appendix number 2 in, Qanun-i sabt-i ahval-i nufus, 40-2.

[259] "Delay in Digital ID Card Distribution," TOLOnews, May 7, 2014, https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/delay-digital-id-card-distribution.

[260] MEC, "Vulnerability to Corruption," 3.

[261] Martine van Bijlert and Jelena Bjelica, "The Troubled History of the E-Tazkera (Part 1): Political Upheaval," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 25, 2016, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-troubled-history-of-the-e-tazkera-part-1-political-upheaval/.

[262] Qanun-i sabt-i ahval-i nufus, alif.

addition, some houses refused to take the forms as the father of the family was not present.[263] The e-Tazkira rollout had four stages: filling out the form, identity authentication, biometric collection, and printing of the card. The president allowed the first two stages to go on, but he delayed the last two.[264]

As well, Ashraf Ghani, the supposed reformer who had agreed with Abdullah to implement the e-Tzkiara project, followed Karzai's path by delaying the launch of the e-Tazkira even after signing the bill. According to the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC), a watchdog consisting of Afghan and international experts auditing the Afghan government, "political and ethnic challenges and corruption" inside the senior levels of the government were the main reasons that delayed the implementation of the e-Tazkira project. The biggest opponent of the project was president Ghani, himself, who had fought against the project tactically by supporting it on paper and opposing it in action:

The Afghan leadership has been promising to commence the distribution process for three years, and multiple Presidential Decrees and decisions of the Council of Ministers have been issued in furtherance of this goal, but, ultimately, distribution was stopped by the President's verbal orders.[265]

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[263] This a good report on how a team of data collectors interacted with Kabul residents. The reporter, however, calls it a census throughout the report by mistake. Joseph Goldstein, "For Afghans, Name and Birthdate Census Questions Are Not So Simple," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/11/world/asia/for-afghans-name-and-birthdate-census-questions-are-not-so-simple.html.

[264] Bahir, "Bar-kinariy-i karmandan-i tavziʿi tazkirah-i ilikturunik."

[265] MEC, "Vulnerability to Corruption," 3.

Why was there resistance against a project that could produce transparency and accountability? The people were divided from the moment the e-Tazkira project was launched. The reason was the demographic numbers that the project would produce. With no census data, Afghan governments have historically used Tazkira as an indicator to guess population numbers.[266] The non-Pashtun groups, as a result, saw the e-Tazkira as a reliable census technology, an instrument to quantify each ethnicity and help them get a fair share of power. The Pashtuns, however, who have long based their rule of the country on the narrative that they are the majority ethnic group, thus justifying their monopoly of power during much of the country's history, saw that aspect of the e-Tazkira as a threat. If the e-Tazkira was issued, "it would reveal the true population data and the political rank of the government does not want that," argued Amrullah Saleh, a Tajik politician and a former director of the Afghan spy agency.[267] As a result of this tension, the main point of the conflict was whether or not to include ethnicity on the document. Many smaller minority groups were advocating for it as they considered the record of ethnicity to bring official recognition as full citizens. The parliament got involved and managed to pass a law approving the inclusion of ethnicities on the card.

President Ghani, now that he had to agree with the inclusion of ethnicities on the card, ordered the use of "Afghan" to be on the card too. This caused much outrage among non-Pashtuns to the point that they forgot about their previous demand about ethnicity and, now, were fighting against the use of "Afghan" on the card. Nationality is an unresolved issue inside

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[266] See, *Da Afghanistan Kalani 1358* (Kabul: Da Ittilaʿat aw Kultur Vizarat, 1979), 932.

[267] He shared this in a short note on his Facebook page on 11 January 2018. The full text is available here: https://web.archive.org/web/20180714042454/https://www.facebook.com/saleh.amrullah/posts/1561165517281999

Afghanistan. Although in English it is commonly accepted to use "Afghan" for citizens of Afghanistan, in Persian, some people avoid the word Afghan and instead use "Afghanistani" or "from Afghanistan." The word "Afghan" throughout history was used to denote Pashtuns. Pashtun, Pakhtun, Pathan, Afghan are all different variants of the same ethnic group used in South Asian languages. In the 1920s, for the first time, the Afghan constitution applied the word Afghan to all citizens of Afghanistan.[268] It remained a contested issue, especially insofar as, in the colloquial language in parts of the country, the name "Afghan" still only means Pashtun. The protest against the use of Afghan on the e-Tazkira became widespread and critics offered several reasons opposing it. One of the reasons was that mentioning the nationality of a person on a national identity card was redundant. The card already said the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" and "Certificate of Citizenship" and it was not necessary to add Afghan too. People in several provinces rallied in protests carrying signs that said "I am not Afghan" and similar protests emerged on social media.[269]

The project went ahead and president Ghani decided to ignore all the protests. The pressure from the international community, too, was intensifying as some of the donors threatened to cut off the funding if the e-Tazkira was further delayed. They preferred to stay silent on the political aspects of it. Having the backing of the foreigners, on 3 May 2018, Ghani suddenly launched the program by attending to a ceremony where he, and a collection of top government officials on his side, got their first e-Tazkiras. Abdullah was caught by surprise and frantically called a press conference and, while Ghani was getting his e-Tazkira in one side of the

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[268] *Nizamnamah-i Tazkirah-i Nufus,* 38-43.

[269] Ruchi Kumar, "Afghanistan's Identity Crisis Erupts on Social Media," *The National*, February 21, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20190526230834/https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/afghanistan-s-identity-crisis-erupts-on-social-media-1.706857.

Arg complex, he was denouncing the project from the other side of it.[270] The roles now have changed, the Pashtuns who were reluctant to issue the e-Tazkira are now pushing for it and non-Pashtuns, who could not wait to start the program, are now the opposition to the project. The project is off to a rough start as half of the current national unity government is officially against it.[271]

One thing that rarely caused any controversy during the whole saga was the question of private information. The e-Tazkira collects the biometric information of each applicant including their digital fingerprints and iris scan. Elsewhere this would be the main point of controversy, but not in Afghanistan. The reason seems to be a lack of public knowledge about the consequences of this technology and also the fact that it was not new for many Afghans. Since 2006 the US

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[270] On that day, a television crew from TOLONews were filming Abdullah for a documentary and recorded all the events of the day from his perspective. See, TOLOnews, *Documentary: What's Life Like For Abdullah*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_ppn2yd810.

[271] Hamid Shalizi, "Who Is an Afghan? Row over ID Cards Fuels Ethnic Tension," *Reuters*, February 8, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics/who-is-an-afghan-row-over-id-cards-fuels-ethnic-tension-idUSKBN1FS1Y0. More on the e-Tazkira history, see this two-part analysis on the project and its problems, van Bijlert and Bjelica, "The Troubled History of the E-Tazkera (Part 1)"; Martine van Bijlert and Jelena Bjelica, "The Troubled History of the E-Tazkera (Part 2): Technical Stumbling Blocks," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 26, 2016, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-troubled-history-of-the-e-tazkera-part-2-technical-stumbling-blocks/. Also, the three articles that Zimarai Bahir, the head of registration at the newly-established E-Tazkira Distribution Authority, wrote for the *Hasht-i Subh* newspaper provides some good details. Bahir, "Bar-kinariy-i karmandan-i tavziʿi tazkirah-i ilikturunik"; Zmaray Bahir, "Chigunagiy-i tavziʿi tazkirah-i ilikturunik," *Hasht-i Subh*, March 30, 2015, https://8am.af/x8am/1394/01/10/distribution-of-electronic-id-cards/; Zmaray Bahir, "Karmandan-i idarah-i tavziʿi tazkirah-i ilikturunik chi mikunand?," *Hasht-i Subh*, May 2, 2015, https://8am.af/x8am/1394/02/12/what-is-the-distribution-of-electronic-id-cards-to-staff/.

military has been collecting biometric records in Afghanistan as a militarized security scheme, targeting mostly young males.[272] Since its inception, it has expanded considerably and American forces and the Afghan government each maintain biometric databases. In 2011, the records of at least 1.5 million people were collected, which was the "equivalent of roughly one of every six males of fighting age, ages 15 to 64."[273]

Once the US military collects the data, a Biometrics-Enabled Intelligence (BEI) team uses it to create "digital dossiers" for each individual and put certain persons of interest on a watch list. The list is then loaded into hand-held biometrics devices that can "provide immediate feedback if a unit encounters a potential threat on the battlefield or at a base entry point."[274] The US forces believe the program is a technology for "protecting the Afghan populace and ensuring that only insurgents are targeted."[275] The whole program is part of a larger effort to create what the US government calls a "social radar," for the purpose of total surveillance.[276] Some of America's NATO allies in Afghanistan have national restrictions when it comes to collecting private information but the US itself sees few limitations.[277] The idea that everyone is a suspect unless proven otherwise has reduced every Afghan to a target. While biometrics potentially can

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[272] David Pendall and Cal Sieg, "Biometric-Enabled Intelligence in Regional Command–East," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2014): 69–74.

[273] Thom Shanker, "U.S. Military Uses Biometrics to Identify People," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/14/world/asia/14identity.html.

[274] William C. Buhrow, "Using Biometrics in Afghanistan," *Army*, February 2010, 48.

[275] Buhrow, 45.

[276] Roberto J. González, "Seeing into Hearts and Minds: Part 1. The Pentagon's Quest for a 'Social Radar,'" *Anthropology Today* 31, no. 3 (2015): 8.

[277] Buhrow, "Using Biometrics in Afghanistan."

deny anonymity to insurgents, so far, however, it has been not very helpful in preventing terror attacks or strengthening the Afghan state capacity.[278]

In parallel with American biometrics collection, the Afghan government has been collecting biometric information too. In Afghanistan, in addition to the e-Tazkira application, a person should agree to a biometric scan when enlisting in the armed forces, applying for a passport, applying for a driver's license, taking public service recruitment exam, and taking university entrance exams. Although the Afghan government has shown great enthusiasm in using the biometric technology, it has been reluctant in building the needed infrastructure to secure the data it collects. In recent years, Taliban insurgents have acquired hand-held biometric devices that belong to the Afghan security forces. In some parts of the country, they now stop buses on the highway and subject passengers to a biometric screening. In one occasion, the Taliban identified ten members of the Afghan security forces on a bus and executed them right on the spot.[279] Digital technologies require sophisticated physical infrastructure to support their smooth function and safeguard the security of the data they carry. In Afghanistan, where infrastructures of communication are weak and the state is engaged in a brutal war, the security risks involved in technologies of biometric information are particularly serious.

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[278] There are great scholarly works on biometrics as a technology of identification. For three great examples, see Shoshana Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Browne, *Dark Matters*; Kelly A Gates, *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[279] TOLOnews, "Taliban Used Biometric System During Kunduz Kidnapping," TOLOnews, June 5, 2016, https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-used-biometric-system-during-kunduz-kidnapping; Ajmal Kakar, "Taliban Subject Passengers to Biometric Screening," Pajhwok News Agency, February 14, 2017, https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2017/02/14/taliban-subject-passengers-biometric-screening.

The long, tragic, costly, and ongoing, pursuit of identifying people in Afghanistan is a sad example of technological failure. It is a failure rooted in the deep-seated anxieties of a ruling class that sees the transparency that comes with reliable population information as a threat. In addition to the political aspect of the project, the initial mistake of tying the Tazkira with the draft associated the identification project with conscription into the Afghan army, which was a brutal source of forced labor for much of its history.[280] This failure has cost the Afghan people a dignified life and the Afghan state institutionalized stability. The technology of identification is a form of surveillance and it can be used for suppression and violence. At the same time, however, identification technologies can produce trust and offer the freedom that comes with reliable recognition, whiteout which citizens will turn into ghosts—invisible and forgotten.

This chapter was a study of technologies of identifying persons. In the next one, we will discuss the technologies of identifying places.

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[280] Haji ʿAbd al-Husain Maqsudi, *Hazarajat: Sarzamin-i Mahruman* (Kabul: Intisharat-i Maqsudi, 2014), 44–54. Also see, *Usulnamah-i Mukallafiyyat-i ʿAskari dar Afghanistan,* 2nd ed. (1323/1944-1945), 1-4 and 8-12.

Chapter 2

The Street Sign: Control and Calculation

In 1872, a merchant from Qandahar sent a letter to a trader in Kabul. The sender used the official postal service and wrote the following information on the envelope: "God willing this letter may reach the city of Kabul in Shur Bazaar on the shop of Muhammad Khan draper in a felicitous hour. 15 Shawwal 1289 [16 December 1872]. From Muhammad Nabi merchant."[281] The address did not specify the street name or a shop number, as such things did not exist in Kabul. Instead, it simply named the shop owner and the neighborhood the shop was located. In the absence of an exact address, the Qandahari merchant relied on the will of God that his letter would reach the destination. At the time, Shur Bazaar (meaning "crowded bazaar") was one of Kabul's busiest commercial centers. In a relatively large and crowded place like that, a postman had to spend some time asking around before he could find a particular address. The sender of the letter, Muhammad Nabi, therefore, was not the only one who did not know the exact location of the Kabul merchant and his shop—nobody, including the government's post office, had that information.

It was the time of Amir Shir ʿAli Khan (r. 1863-1866 and 1869-1879), a modernist king who introduced print technology in Afghanistan, issuing the country's first postal stamp and publishing the country's first newspaper—two information media that both required exact

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[281] T. K. Tapling, "A Resuscitated Issue of Afghanistan," *American Journal of Philately*, June 15, 1890, 215. The translation was slightly modified for clarity.

addressing for dissemination. Postal communication is an ancient technology that was invented by the Persians of the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC) whose territory included what is today Afghanistan.[282] Despite the lack of proper street signs at the time, the Afghan post office was a functioning institution with a long history that had mastered the art of finding obscure destinations. In 1873, when the first issue of the newspaper *Shams al-Nahar* was printed, the editor used the newly-reformed post office to deliver the weekly paper and asked his subscribers to pay the subscription fee and contact him via postal communication. The post office made it possible for him to run the newspaper efficiently using a system that included a centralized "register" of his subscribers.[283] The editor, Mirza ʿAbd al-ʿAli, was part of a group of Muslim Indians who were brought to Kabul by the Amir to run his reform programs. He apparently had learned the news trade in his home country that at the time was the capital of Persian print culture.

There was clearly a need to install street signs in Kabul, for better postal communication, but it was not urgent enough. The city's literate population was small and the people who would send and receive letters via the post office were mostly government officials and prominent traders who were usually easy to find. On the other hand, letter writing was far from a mass phenomenon, primarily because communication and mobility were rare. In rural areas, where the majority of Afghans lived, people did not have the need or the desire to get out of their villages and valleys. There were several reasons for that, including lack of roads (particularly in winters,)

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[282] Innis, *Empire and Communications*, 69.

[283] *Shams al-Nahar,* Ramazan 15, 1290/November 6, 1873, 3.

widespread highway robbery, and most importantly economic independence.[284] In Europe, too, the street sign emerged when industrial revolution, and subsequently mass mobility, rendered economic relationships more complex. Afghanistan never reached that level of economic activity at which its regions and people were connected to, and dependent on, each other—a phenomenon that would require extensive and sufficient means of communication and transportation.

In this chapter, in examining the history and politics of the street sign in Kabul, I explore the genesis of locative media. The street sign, which I use here to refer both to house numbers and street names, I argue, was the first locative medium. This simple instrument that helps us find our way in a new city was the first technology that enabled states to render urban spaces knowable and governable. The street names and house numbers have been serving as the most effective technology of geographical governance and continue to be used as primary identifiers of our locations. The house number, in particular, allows states to track, locate, and calculate the population and the properties they occupy. In most developed countries, such as the United States and Canada, a person cannot do almost anything without a proper street address attached to their names: you cannot open a bank account or get a credit card, you cannot get health insurance or driver's license, or find formal employment and even booking a hotel or a flight is impossible if you do not have a house number. The knowledge of our *locations* is a key component in the state—and corporate—surveillance apparatuses.

The critical role of street signs in the practice of governance is the reason it would be helpful to trace its history in Afghanistan, a country that has long been struggling with the most

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[284] In rural areas, mobility was limited to wealthy people going to pilgrimage (mostly once in a lifetime) and soldiers—two groups who could afford to protect themselves on the road. See chapter one of this dissertation for more on mobility and travels.

stubborn case of state failure. It is also a country in whose cities streets are still mostly unnamed and houses are mostly unnumbered. The modern state, as we have learned from Max Weber, is a territorial entity. He defined the state as a "human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory—and this idea of 'territory' is an essential defining feature."[285] The modern state's control over a territory is primarily facilitated through knowledge, not force as it was the case with pre-modern states. State control, therefore, will fail when it lacks reliable information about its territory. The street sign makes the geography of the state legible by generating territorial information about the population and, as such, it is one of the key technologies serving the state's administrative power.

It was during the 18th century—the age of quantification—that the house number began to appear in European cities.[286] It was primarily invented as a technology of order and organization, hence, a tool for control and governance. In most European cities it was the state that introduced house numbering for policing and taxation purposes. In the United State, in contrast, it was private city directory publishers who numbered houses and tried to standardize city addressing.[287] In both cases, however, the goal was the same: to convert the placeless mass

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[285] Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 33.

[286] Street names and house numbers have different histories. We know that street names have been around longer than house numbers as, prior to the modern era, they had a folkloric character and would not take any systematic effort to create them.

[287] Anton Tantner, "Addressing the Houses: The Introduction of House Numbering in Europe," *Histoire & Mesure* 24, no. 2 (2009): 7–30; Marco Cicchini, "A New 'Inquisition'? Police Reform, Urban Transparency and House Numbering in Eighteenth-Century Geneva," *Urban History* 39, no. 04 (2012): 614–623; Reuben S. Rose-Redwood,

of the population to identifiable and controllable individuals. Critical geographers use the Foucauldian critique of power and his idea of governmentality to examine histories of the spatial organization. They see street signs—both street names and house numbers—as codes that are used to discipline spaces and the people who use them. These "geo-codes" are applied to all the residents of a territory, a process that converts the whole population to an easily retrievable set of geographical data.[288]

In digging into the history of street signs, we uncover a complex history of technological innovation on the one hand and public resistance on the other, both of which accompanied this humble object wherever it was introduced. All new technologies that disrupt the status quo face such resistance. The street sign, too, was initially not welcomed by the public in Western countries but people eventually embraced it, especially after learning that the service it provided, such as better communication and transportation, out-weighed its hidden function as a technology of surveillance. In contrast, the story of the street sign in Kabul (and many other cities in the developing world) does not have a happy ending. In fact, it does not have an ending yet. After almost a century of attempts, Kabul is still one of the last capital cities in the world whose streets have no standardized names and its houses no proper numbers. The tragic history of this technology in Kabul reveals an endemic failure of the Afghan state: the failure to acquire reliable numerical information about the country and its people. In what follows, I first provide a short history of house numbering and then I discuss the new digital technologies of location information practiced in Afghanistan.

"Indexing the Great Ledger of the Community: Urban House Numbering, City Directories, and the Production of Spatial Legibility," *Journal of Historical Geography* 34, no. 2 (April 2008): 286–310.

[288] Reuben S. Rose-Redwood, "Governmentality, Geography, and the Geo-Coded World," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 4 (2006): 469–86.

FINDING AN ADDRESS: WORDS BEFORE NUMBERS

In Europe, houses had names before the arrival of numbers. It was a practice that dated back to ancient times. In the Roman town of Pompeii, for instance, there were no street signs, but generally streets had names, as did the districts and city gates. Houses were not numbered but some had names. The same is true for ancient Greek towns.[289] Therefore, the general name of an area and the name of a person were enough to locate an individual in an ancient city. This remained the case for a long time when life was mostly lived at a neighborhood level. In the late medieval era, people in Europe still did not feel the need to have an exact address. They were so comfortable with the way things were that even in serious matters, such as credit letters, the name and the street name of the person who borrowed money were deemed sufficient.[290]

House names, as one could image, were not the best way to find a place. First, the name of the house usually was different from the name of the house owner. Not all houses displayed a sign, so names were sometimes known only to the locals. The government was dependent on the knowledge of local lords for locating individuals.[291] In addition, with names, unlike numbers, you could not build sequence for easy navigation. House names also caused a lot of confusions, especially when more than one house used the same name. In the late 18th century, for instance, more than six houses in downtown Vienna had the name "The Golden Eagle." There were 23

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[289] Roger Ling, "A Stranger in Town: Finding the Way in an Ancient City," *Greece & Rome* 37, no. 2 (1990): 204–14.

[290] Anton Tantner, *House Numbers: Pictures of Forgotten History*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 6.

[291] Tantner, 6–7.

more "Golden Eagle" houses located in the suburb of the city that made things even worse. How could a postman tell which of the 29 Golden Eagles was the right destination for a letter sent to Vienna?[292] The same was common in Paris, where there were three houses named "L'Image Notre Dame" (the Image of Our Lady) on one street, just a few doors apart.[293]

And then there was the problem of oversized house signs in places like London. Much like the vanity license plates these days, house names were placed on signs of various shapes and sizes representing the social status of the occupants. In the late 18th century, London houses and shops had swinging signboards but later the government made them illegal as so many of them would fall and injure pedestrians. In one case, a signboard killed four passers-by.[294] In addition, they were not very helpful for finding addresses. In 1898, when house names were still in use in London, *The New York Times* mocked the city's non-modern street addressing system by quoting the address found in an ad: "To be lett, Newbury House in St. James's Park, next door but one to Lady Oxford's, having two balls at the gate, and iron nails before the door."[295] The other problem with name-based addressing was that it was subject to change. If a person sold his property the next owner would find a name for the house that would best represent his own identity, status, and occupation. House names would also change frequently due to change in the political climate.[296]

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[292] Tantner, "Addressing the Houses," 9–10.

[293] David Garrioch, "House Names, Shop Signs and Social Organization in Western European Cities, 1500–1900," *Urban History* 21, no. 01 (April 1994): 23.

[294] Garrioch, 20.

[295] *The New York Times*, 16 July 1898, 6.

[296] Garrioch, "House Names, Shop Signs and Social Organization in Western European Cities, 1500–1900," 26–27.

In Kabul, houses had names too. The practice, however, was limited to the houses that belonged to men of wealth and influence. These men would usually build large fortresses (*qalʿah,* pronounced *qala* in spoken Persian) with tall walls, strong gates, and watchtowers—buildings that would stand out in a neighborhood. Their function as a local landmark for geographical orientation was the reason they were often named—by the public—after the owners. One example includes Qalʿah-i Jabbar Khan (Jabbar Khan's Fort) in West Kabul that is named after Nawab Jabbar Khan, the brother of Amir Dust Muhammad Khan (r. 1826–1839 and 1845–1863). There are many more forts that are named after their powerful owners such as a Qalʿah-i ʿAli Mardan that is named after ʿAli Mardan Khan (d. 1657) the governor of Kabul under the Moghul rule, or Qalʿah-i Divanbigi named after ʿAbd Allah Khan "Divanbigi" who was the chief judge (*divanbigi*) under Timur Shah (r. 1772-1793) and who has also a guzar named after him inside the old city where he lived and worked.[297]

The names of these houses were not official and none were displayed on a sign—they were oral names. The fact that houses were named after the owner was one of the reasons that they did not need to have a sign as it was enough to locate them using the name of the famous owner. Compare that to European cities where houses were normally named after Christian saints or Greek heroes, making it difficult to find an individual in the city's chaotic namespace. The orally-named forts in Kabul were easy to find for postmen, too, who regularly delivered letters to their occupants. In the 1910s, a number of Austrian soldiers who lived in one of these forts in Kabul maintained extensive postal communication with contacts inside Afghanistan and

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[297] For more on Qalʿah-i Divanbigi and its owner, including a copy of the title of the fort, see ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, *Durrah Al-Zaman Fi Tarikh-i Shah Zaman* (Kabul: Anjuman-i Tarikh, 1958), 280–83.

outside.[298] The soldiers had fled Soviet prisons in Central Asia during the First World War and the Afghan Amir had given them shelter in Qalʿah-i ʿAliabad, a fort in West Kabul.

The fort owners in Kabul would house their servants and farmers in and around the building and gradually the area would expand to form a small village.[299] The village, too, then, would be called after the fort's owner. The expansion sometimes would make the actual fort disappear but the name would go on to be used for the growing neighborhood. The forts named above, for example, Qalʿah-i Jabbar Khan, Qalʿah-i Divanbigi, and Qalʿah-i ʿAli Mardan, are all large Kabul neighborhoods now.

In addition to these traditional forts, there were other houses too that had names. They were products of the modern age that began to appear in the late 19th century and all belonged to the royal family. The man who began naming buildings officially was Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (1880-1901) who built royal palaces and houses for members of his family. The building craze under his rule started with the Arg (a Turkish word meaning citadel), a compound for the royal court. In 1880, when the British installed him on the throne, the old royal palace in Bala Hisar was in ruins as the British army had destroyed it during the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). For a while, the Amir had to live in a modest house in Murad Khani neighborhood before the Arg was built. The buildings in this era were distinct in their modern look with a mix

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[298] One of the soldiers wrote a memoir, initially published in 1927 and recently translated into Persian, which chronicles their extraordinary journey. Emil Rybitschka, *Dar Kishvar-i Khudadad-i Afghanistan: Safarnamah-i Afsar-i Utrishi, 1915-1920*, trans. Ratbil Shamil Ahang and Sayyid Ruh Allah Yasir (Leipzig: n. p., 2014).

[299] A former prime minister, Sultan ʿAli Kishtmand, grew up in one of these forts in West Kabul named Qalʿah-i Sultan Jan where his family was farmers of a big landlord. In his memoir, Kishtmand offers valuable details about his childhood life in that fort. Sultan ʿAli Kishtmand, *Yaddasht-Hay-i Siyasi va Ruydad-Hay-i Tarikhi: Khatirat-i Shakhsi*, vol. 1 (Kabul: Maivand, 2002), 40–53.

of European and Persian influences. The Amir had spent 11 years in exile in Tashkent, Russian Turkistan, and was familiar with the Russian colonial style of architecture. In addition, he hired architects from Herat and Qandahar for his Kabul buildings who inserted Persian features to Amir's palaces.[300] He named many of the buildings he constructed, most famously his own residences, Bustan Saray (House of Garden) and Gulistan Saray (House of Flowers.) Both names are an homage to Saʿdi of Shiraz, whose books, Bustan and Gulistan, are classic texts in Persian literature.[301]

After his death in 1901, the Amir's son Habib Allah Khan (1901-1919) continued his father's path in building large, eye-catching structures—albeit in a slower pace. Under his rule, most of the new government buildings in Kabul, both those built for living and those for office work, were officially named. The names of the buildings were either pretentious Arabic names or poetic Persian or Pashto ones. The house built for Amir's most powerful wife (and the mother of Aman Allah Khan, the next Amir) was awkwardly named ʿAyn al-ʿImarah, meaning "The Eye of Building," with an obvious reference to ʿAyn al-Davlah (The Eye of State), which was Prince Aman Allah Khan's official title. Other named buildings included Stur (from Sturai, Pashto for Star) and Dilgusha (Heart's Delight), both still standing with the same names. The named buildings in this era remained limited to a number of projects that belonged to the government or

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[300] In 1893, the Amir hired Ustad Muhammad Yaʿqub for his building projects in Kabul, according to a royal decree in the National Archives of Afghanistan. The master's work equipment, however, was with his architect brother in Herat. The Amir then asked the governor of Herat to send the equipment to Kabul. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 25 Shawwal 1310/12 May 1893, NAA, Farman, No. NA. In addition, several Qandahari architects and builders, too, were brought to Kabul for Amir's construction projects. *Lmar*, Wuray [Hamal] 1351/March-April 1972, 18.

[301] On Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman's buildings see, Schinasi, *Kabul: A History 1773-1948*, 56–87.

royalty and never went beyond those circles.[302] The houses of ordinary people remained nameless, numberless, and hard to find—a problem that was particularly familiar to men who delivered newspapers.

One may wonder how big of a deal newspaper delivery was considering that Kabul's reading population was not that large at the time. It is true that the literacy rate was low and people were too poor to care for newspapers, but reading *Siraj al-Akhbar*, Afghanistan's only newspaper under Amir Habib Allah Khan, was not an entirely voluntary affair. The newspaper (published in 1906 and between 1911 and 1918) was the government's main means of propaganda and it was crucial the Amir kept his employees informed and on board with his programs. That was why important government employees had to read the *Siraj* and the subscription fee would be deducted from their monthly salaries. Location information, therefore, was important for properly delivering the newspaper as poor clerks living even in a remote alley somewhere in Kabul had to receive their newspaper on time—they had paid for it.[303] The information that the newspaper required to locate its subscribers included the full name, the

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[302] Today, naming houses is not common in Kabul but occasionally one comes across a house with a display sign that would read "The House of al-Hajj…" this or that. As a rule, only expensively-built houses would use such signs. Some doctors, nurses, and tailors who offer services at home too occasionally use a sign on their door with their name on it.

[303] *Siraj al-Akhbar* (*SA*, hereafter), Shawwal 1, 1330/September 13, 1912, 6-7; *SA,* Rabiʿ al-Awwal 1, 1332/January 28, 1914, 17. The main government newspaper that replaced *SA* under the next king, too, deducted its subscription fee from salaries of both state employees and royal allowance receivers. *Aman-i Afghan*. Hamal 22, 1298/April 12, 1919, last page. But Amir Aman Allah Khan finally stopped the practice. Fayz Muhammad Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh* (*ST*, hereafter), vol. 4 (part 1), (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011), 640.

address and the job title, which was fairly comprehensive.[304] Still, the subscribers consistently complained about not receiving their papers. In the last issue of the first year, *Siraj* published an ad, responding to some of its unhappy subscribers, which reappeared in many following issues. The ad blamed the deliverymen and promised to fix the issue.[305]

Apparently, the task of newspaper delivery in Kabul proved harder than expected and the paper had to take a different approach. It hired low-level clerks from different government offices to deliver the newspapers to subscribers who worked in the same office. *Siraj* even published the names of the new deliverymen and their places of work, asking readers to direct their complaints to them.[306] The new policy, too, did not solve the issue and deliverymen continued to have problems finding addresses in a city of nameless streets and numberless houses. "No matter how much we tried," the newspaper announced a few months later, feeling defeated, "we could not free ourselves from the arrival of complaints sent by our dear subscribers in Kabul city about not receiving their newspapers." The announcement declared that the newspaper had signed an agreement with the Post Office and the official mailmen would be responsible for delivering the newspaper.[307] It was clearly a move just to shift the blame to the Post Office for future complaints, not fixing the problem—a problem that a newspaper could not fix anyway.

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[304] Mahmud Tarzi, *Vatan* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Hurufi, 1335), b. This booklet was published as an *SA* supplement marking the 6th anniversary of the newspaper.

[305] *SA*, Shawwal 1, 1330/September 13, 1912, 7.

[306] *SA,* Rabiʿ al-Awwal 1, 1332/January 28, 1914, 17.

[307] *SA*, Shaʿban 15, 1332/July 9, 1914, 18. The delivery complaints never stopped, as the same announcement appeared at the end of almost every issue of *SA*—at least to the end of the fifth volume (August 1, 1916).

Despite the lack of an addressing system and the problems with trackability, the Afghan government needed a way to *locate* individuals for basic administrative purposes. You needed to find people such as thieves, criminals, and debtors or use location information in official documents and contracts. In the absence of numbered houses and named streets, people used the popular place names and their personal information in order to record their addresses. In a divorce letter, from the early 20th century, we find an example of this type of location information: On 28 February 1912, a man in Kabul divorced his wife. In the official divorce letter both parties are identified as the following: The man is recorded as "Shahbaz son of Shir Muhammad Khan son of Ismaʿil Khan, resident of Guzar-i Khafi-ha, Chindawul, [Kabul]" and the woman as "Husn-ara daughter of Muhammad Qasim son of Muhammad Mahdi Khan, resident of Qalʿah-i Hazarah-ha, Chindawul, [Kabul]."[308] In both cases, only the neighborhoods and alleys are named but no house numbers. Both alleys are named after the ethnic group who lived there, the Khafis and Hazaras—which indicate the names were not official but popular names, as was the case for many other neighborhoods in Kabul. In addition, both parties' fathers and grandfathers are named which was critical in locating a person in a neighborhood. Postmen, too, apparently, were able to find someone in Kabul's chaotic bazaar, just with a street name and the name of the person, according to a 1917 postcard sent from Peshawar to a Kabul trader.[309]

It is important to consider the urban morphology of old Kabul to understand how communication and orientation were practiced in the city. Up until the mid-20th century, old

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[308] Talaq-Namah, Divorce of Shahbaz son of Shir Muhammad Khan from Husn-ara daughter of Muhammad Qasim. Kabul, Rabiʿ al-Awwal 10, 1330/February 28, 1912. National Archives of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan (NAA, hereafter), No. NA.

[309] The postcard is available on eBay for sale by George Alevizos. See the postcard on an archived copy of the page, https://bit.ly/2YZdChW.

Kabul was a collection of *guzars*. A guzar, which literally means passage, was a neighborhood consisting of one or more than one alleys. Each guzar had a gate that would be locked at the time of wars and riots. The residents of each guzar mostly came from the same ethnic group or clan as we see in guzars named after Achakzays, Furmulis, Rikas, Hindus, and others.[310] Hostility was common in the city and the residents would not trust each other. As an example, Chindawul, a large neighborhood of Shai minority on the west of the city, was basically a walled city inside the city. Still, several times Sunni Kabulis attacked Chindawul despite its fortifications and gates.[311] The air of mistrust gave the city a segregated character where ethnic place names demarcated the socio-spatial divisions. The segregation made the job of geographical orientation easy: if you had a name and a neighborhood it was not very difficult to find someone in the city as residents in each guzar were a closely-knit community.

Being hard to find was a problem that ordinary folks, living in ordinary houses, suffered from. The fort-dwelling lords and royals were easier to find, as mentioned earlier, thanks to their named houses. The practice of naming houses, however, began to fade away in the 1920s as a new king sat on the throne and the city began to expand. The new monarch, Amir Aman Allah Khan (1919-1929), achieved full Afghan independence from the British and opened up the gates of the country to the outside world. This caused a sudden urban growth that put Kabul city under much pressure. New government ministries, new businesses, and of course new embassies, all needed office spaces and places to live. Up until then, no foreign embassy was active in Kabul and only the British kept a news writer in the city. The Afghans had to accommodate the new-

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[310] For a list of Kabul guzar names see, Muhammad Asif Ahang, *Kabul-i Qadim* (Kabul: Mayvand, 2008), 21–30.

[311] On Chindawul conflicts see, Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)* (London: Routledge, 1997), 26–30.

comers. The king gave the Persians his mother's house, ʿAyn al-ʿImarah, to use as their embassy.[312] The Soviets were given the confiscated house of a former finance minister who was hanged for treason.[313] The British first set up shop outside Kabul in Bagrami and then moved to two sarays inside the city, where they were "very uncomfortable," according to their ambassador.[314] All these made the king think of building a new city from scratch, complete with grid layout and ordered houses. He wanted a city worthy of his name as one of the last independent Muslim rulers in the world and a city that would tell the world that Afghanistan was finally determined to join the 20th century.

The Amir thought that the new city, named Dar al-Aman, after himself, would offer a golden opportunity to impose spatial order on Kabul and eventually modernize not only the city but its population. He hired a French architect, Andre Godard, to draw a master plan of the new city to be built in the southwest of the existing capital. While he was busy dreaming big about the city drawn on paper, he ignored the problems of the actual city, including Kabul's lack of street names and house numbers. In 1929, his modernist dreams were disrupted by a popular riot that eventually forced him out of power. Under his rule, therefore, nothing changed in regards to the addressing system and people continued to use named buildings and local landmarks to find their way. One of the few streets officially named in this time was the Dar al-Aman Road that went from Dihmazang to the new city. The Amir named it Sipah Salar Road, after Muhammad

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[312] Schinasi, *Kabul: A History 1773-1948*, 125.

[313] Khalil Allah Khalili, *Yad-dasht-hay-i Ustad Khalil Allah Khalili tay-i mukalimah ba dukhtarash*, ed. Marie Khalili and Afzal Nasiri (Herndon, Virginia: All Prints, Inc., 2010), 25.

[314] The British finally built a new embassy in the northwest suburb of Kabul and moved there in 1926. Maximilian Drephal, "Corps Diplomatique: The Body, British Diplomacy, and Independent Afghanistan, 1922–47," *Modern Asian Studies*, 2017, 12.

Nadir, his chief of the army who later became king.[315] Despite the lack of addressing in the Amani era, we know, however, that postmen continued to deliver letters and newspapers to people's homes the way they did for years: asking around. The official newspaper, *Aman-i Afghan*, published ads asking subscribers to let them know in writing when they changed addresses so they would not miss issues.[316]

In the bazaar, some traders were based in caravansarays (or sarays, for short) where they had shops/offices/rooms. All these sarays were named, which was greatly helpful for finding an address. The saray names mostly came from the name of the owner (Zardad Saray, Muhammad-i Qumi Saray, Haji ʿAbd al-Hamid Saray), but sometimes the type of goods traded there (Tea Sellers' Saray) or the people who worked there (Peshawaris' Saray). Therefore, the name of the saray and the name of a person were enough to locate an individual in Kabul bazaar. In 1928, for instance, a trader from the city of Mazar Sharif sent a letter to his father in Kabul who worked in a saray in downtown. The text on the envelope does not contain a street name or a building number: "This envelope, in the capital city Kabul, at Muhammad-i Qumi Saray, to be presented to, traders, my father Mr. Shahzadah and my brother Shahzadah Masjedi. From the humble ʿAbd al-ʿAziz from Mazar Sharif written on Wednesday Sunbulah 1, 1307."[317]

In the 1920s, we have to note, the Afghan capital was not the only city that lacked standardized street addressing. There were cities in Europe too that still lacked proper street signs. In 1925, Walter Benjamin visited Naples, Italy, where he was frustrated with the lack of house numbers

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[315] Muhammad Ali Khan, *Afghanistan* (Lahore: Vizarat-i Maʿarif, 1927), 88.

[316] *Aman-i Afghan*. Hamal 22, 1298/April 12, 1919, last page. For another announcement on this issue see, *Aman-i Afghan*. Hut 1, 1300/February 20, 1922, inside cover.

[317] Private collections of F. G. Covers (Sweden), used here with permission. Translation slightly modified for clarity.

and standardized addressing. "No one orients himself by house numbers," he wrote in an essay on the city. "Shops, wells, and churches are the reference points."[318] The problem in Naples was probably due to the provincial character of the town and its winding alleyways that made locals prefer landmarks over a numerical system. In other cases, we know that there was an active resistance against house numbering. In the 18th century, the public resisted house numbering mainly for political reasons, considering the practice as a form of state intervention in private spheres.[319]

HOUSE NUMBERING AND THE PUBLIC RESISTANCE

The idea of house numbers, before it was practiced in the real world, was a thing of medieval utopian literature. In a futuristic text about the utopian city, 17th century architectural theorist Nikolaus Goldmann, envisioned a place where: "in every house a number of the door shall be set out in such a manner that one might enquire upon the houses according to their numbers; the number shall be furnished with a place upon which the name of the master of the house might be set out in large letters."[320] When European states decided to install such numbers on houses, it was not an easy task. It was as strange as using science-fiction as a government policy.

In the 18th century, cities in Europe started to expand thanks to the Industrial Revolution that drew large numbers of rural workers to towns, something that triggered the state to look for new technologies to police the ever-increasing population in urban centers. Cities lost their static

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[318] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 416.

[319] Cicchini, "A New 'Inquisition'?," 621.

[320] Tantner, *House Numbers*, 13.

medieval character and gained a dynamic industrial rhythm that was characterized by constant population increase and physical expansion. In order to tame this new world that was driven by advances in science and technology and communication, numbers became the dominant form of knowledge—an instrument that helped the state govern the population, businesses to expand their enterprises, and scientists to measure things more precisely. The same urge that made Diderot compile the *Encyclopédie* (1751) and Darwin write *The Origin of Species* (1859), drove states across Europe to number houses in order to index cities and make the territory knowable. The obsession with quantification turned numbers into a form of political power.

In its early years, house numbering faced a great deal of public resistance. People saw the numbers painted on their houses as a form of invasion of privacy. In 1782, when authorities painted numbers on houses in Geneva, Switzerland, many residents rejected the scheme, considering it degrading to be reduced to numbers and stripped off their traditional identities represented in house names. One woman who had erased the number from her house was brought to court where she defended her action by comparing the house numbering to a form of "inquisition."[321] Similar instances were reported from other cities. Resistance to house numbering continued well into the 19th century, especially in places where colonial governments were in power. In 1850, in Travnik, Bosnia, an Ottoman governor numbered all houses in town by nailing a wooden number sign on all doors. The residents rebelled against the novelty by removing all the signs and piling them up and setting them on fire. This was about to turn into a violent riot against the Turks, to the extent that the governor was recalled back to Istanbul and

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[321] Cicchini, "A New 'Inquisition'?," 620.

protestors settled down. People of Travnik continued to remember him as Tahirpasa "The Nailer."[322]

In 18th century France, house numbers first emerged as a tracking tool when lodging soldiers. In small towns, where army barracks did not exist, soldiers would be assigned to each house in a town. In order to find who went where, all houses in the town would be numbered to make finding soldiers easier.[323] Decades later, in 1805, the French government introduced house numbering in Paris as a surveillance measure.[324] In the increasingly large and diverse urban populations, tracking a person was difficult as anyone could disappear in the crowd. House numbers could make finding people easier. In the early years, European states tried to sell the idea of house numbering as a useful technology both for the public and the police, but it was the police that needed it the most.[325]

In 1836, Balzac made one of the early critical observations about house numbering. In *Modeste Mignon* he exposes the political nature of a range of inscriptive media that were beginning to appear everywhere to collect and control locative data:

Poor women of France! You would probably like to remain unknown, so that you can carry on your little romances. But how can you manage this in a civilisation which registers the departures and arrivals of coaches in public places, counts letters and stamps them when they are posted and again when they are delivered, assigns numbers to houses,

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[322] Tantner, *House Numbers*, 50–59.

[323] Tantner, "Addressing the Houses," 14.

[324] Tantner, 22.

[325] In 1782, the police in Geneva published posters that highlighted the public benefits of the house numbering scheme. Cicchini, "A New 'Inquisition'?," 620.

and will soon have the whole country, down to the smallest plot of land, in its registers?[326]

One of the famous victims of the new technology was not a poor French woman, but a poor French man: Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). The notorious Parisian poet, as recounted by Walter Benjamin, was a fugitive always on the run in a city that was increasingly difficult to hide. He was heavily in debt and his creditors and police were chasing him everywhere. House numbering and property registration made it difficult for him to disappear. He had no choice but to spend the night in cafes and reading circles and live in two places at the same time. He regarded the government's numerical control, "as much of an encroachment as did any criminal," in Benjamin's words.[327] Baudelaire was not the only one who did not like the house numbers and the "multifarious web of registrations" that was taking over France. There was resistance to house numbers elsewhere too. In 1864, for instance, in the working class neighborhoods of Saint-Antoine in Paris people were not comfortable with the numbers: "if one asks an inhabitant of this suburb what his address is, he would always give the name of his house and not its cold, official number."[328]

By the late 18th century, house numbers became common in most European cities. We know, however, that proper street addressing in some cities became standardized only in the 20th century. In London, house numbering was introduced in 1708, but it took 150 years for all of the city's houses to be numbered. In 1851, according to one directory compiler, still, there were

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[326] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2003, 4:26.

[327] Benjamin, 4:26.

[328] Benjamin, 4:26.

many houses in poor neighborhoods of London where house numbers did not exist. In some places that numbers did exist, according to him, they were not very helpful: "I could point to certain streets - where it appears there is a perfect mania for a particular number; thus in George Street, there are at least half-a-dozen no. 4's."[329] It took a long time before cities in Europe standardized their house numbers and came up with a system to maintain them.

In the United States, it was not the government but directory publishers who introduced house numbers in cities—to be perfected later by the government census office. The Americans are also credited with inventing the odd/even system of house numbering. Prior to that, up until the late 19th century, house numbering was mostly confusing and each town had its own system. In 1891, during his European tour, Mark Twain visited Berlin. He was not impressed with the city's addressing system. "At first one thinks it was done by an idiot; but there is too much variety about it for that;" wrote the American novelist unable to hide his frustration, "an idiot could not think of so many different ways of making confusion and propagating blasphemy." To be fair, the Berlin system of house numbering was chaos compared to the odd-even system that was practiced in American cities. In Berlin, houses were not numbered street by street but neighborhood by neighborhood and there was little consistency in numbers. It took years until the city adopted the American style.[330]

The rapid urban expansion of the 19th century played an important role in persuading the skeptic public that numbering houses made more sense than naming them. In the end, the house numbering in cities, as Benjamin had observed, was adopted by every state as an effective locative technology "to document the progressive standardisation" that was dominant in other

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[329] P. J. Atkins, "The Compilation and Reliability of London Directories," *The London Journal* 14, no. 1 (1989): 18.

[330] Tantner, *House Numbers*, 39–41.

aspects of the public life.[331] The Afghan capital remained one of those cities that was very late in realizing the hidden power of numbers and locative media.

HOUSE NUMBERING IN KABUL

On 1 January 1932, a house caught fire in the middle of the night in Kabul. The fire, according to *Anis,* was big enough that some neighbors were preparing to evacuate their homes. The police soon arrived on the scene and, after a long struggle using rudimentary tools, managed to put out the fire at 4:30 in the morning. The incident, *Anis* reported, happened in the house no. 18 in Guzar-i Khafi-ha of the Chindawul neighborhood. This is one of the earliest mentions of Kabul house numbers in an Afghan newspaper.[332] Official documentation about house numbering in Kabul is hard to find because the municipal archives are not fully accessible. The evidence discussed here, as a result, are based on contemporary news reports, laws, and examination of surviving house numbers in the old quarters of the city. Pinpointing the exact date when house numbers were introduced in Kabul is difficult but it is safe to assume that it happened sometime in 1931. It was somehow fitting that the first use of house numbers in a newspaper appeared in a report about fire. The house number is a technology of state surveillance that at the same time offers a public service: when one needs urgent medical care or deals with a fire incident, it is much better to have a house that ambulance drivers or firefighters could easily find. House numbers produce legibility, which could be a curse or a blessing, depending on the situation.

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[331] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2003, 4:26.

[332] *Anis*, 13 Jaddi 1310/4 January 1932, 10.

It was during Nadir Shah's short rule (1929-1933) that house numbering was introduced in Kabul. Interestingly, Aman Allah Khan, Nadir's modernist predecessor, introduced many novel ideas but house numbering was not one of them. In the 1920s, the dramatic era of Afghan modernization, Aman Allah issued more than a hundred laws and regulations with the aim of reforming how justice was delivered, taxes were collected, and security was provided in the country. In 1924, he published the first municipality law, in addition to several building codes.[333] These legislations were expected to enforce spatial order and extend the realm of state authority to the sphere of private property. In none of these new modernist laws, however, was there a single reference to house numbering or street naming. In only one of them, the municipality law, there was one reference to the practice of numbering: it asked city officials to number all street lights for maintenance purposes.[334] In the 1920s, the street sign was more than a century-old technology but the Kabul rulers apparently failed to see any use in introducing it to the city.

Shah Aman Allah was a big supporter of industrialization and issued a special law to encourage local industries.[335] In particular, he promoted Afghan textile products by asking people to purchase from the local textile mill when making cloth. He even carried a scissor in his pocket at all times and would cut the cloth of anyone whose outfit was made of imported

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[333] *Nizamnamah-i Baladiyyah* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Daʾirah-i Tahrirat, 21 Hut 1302/12 March 1924); *Nizamnamah-i Taʿmirat-i Davlat* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Dar al-Saltanah, Saratan 1301/June-July 1922); *Nizamnamah-i Abniyah-i Shahr-i Dar al-Aman* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Daʾirah-i Tahrirat, 19 Asad 1302/11 August 1923); *Nizamnamah-i Taʿmirat-i Paghman* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 29 Saratan 1305/21 July 1926); *Nizamnamah-i Taʿmirat-i Laghman* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 15 Dalv 1305/5 February 1927).

[334] *Nizamnamah-i Baladiyyah*, 33-34.

[335] *Nizamnamah-i Tashviq-i Sanayiʿ* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 15 Dalv 1305/5 February 1927).

fabric.[336] Despite his interest in boosting Afghan industries, he did not see the importance of infrastructures, such as standardized street addressing, in helping local industries expand their markets and state institutions better deliver services. Compared to the past, however, more businesses published newspaper ads in this era trying to persuade people to buy their merchandize, but they could not provide a proper address of their shops. In 1928, for instance, the following ad was placed in the weekly *Anis*:

Anyone who loves and respects the homeland

Dresses his body in clothes of homeland

To follow your Ruler's advice, make clothes out of the colorful,

durable, beautiful, and affordable products of the Textile Mill Company.

Location of the workshop: Lab-i Draya, Haji ʿAbd al-Rahman Saray

Workshop Supervisor: ʿAbd al-Karim.[337]

The ad's reference to "Ruler's advice" suggests the way the company wanted to bank on King's economic nativism. The point they missed was advertising things that people could not easily find was against the idea of adverting. The next king, Nadir, saw this problem and tried to fix it.

In 1931, newspapers, as usual, were able to be delivered to their subscribers based on the descriptive addresses they would give. *Anis* advertised that it will deliver the weekly magazine to

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[336] *Muntakhabat-i Adabi Baray-i Sinf-i Awwal-i Makatib-i Rushdiyyah* (n. p., 1928), 61–62. See also, *Ruydad-i Luyah Jirgah-i Dar al-Saltanah 1303* (Kabul: Vizarat-i Jalilah-i Harbiyyah, 1924), 355–57.

[337] *Anis*, 7 & 14 Saratan 1307/28 June & 5 July 1928, 24.

all subscribers "based on the addresses that they put in the subscription form."[338] It did not say if the address needed a street number. Newspaper ads, too, continued to list their addresses without a shop number. There is also a clue from another place that suggests house numbering was either not yet introduced in the city or they were too new. In the fall of 1931, the delivery men in *Islah*, government's main newspaper, got sick during the flu season. The paper had to hire temporary delivery men, but finding addresses in Kabul proved to be too difficult for them. The newspaper had to place the following ad to address the complaints of subscribers who did not receive their newspapers:

Due to the widespread flu since mid-August, the men who delivered your newspapers got the fever and the new delivery men do not know the job well. Therefore, some of you might have not received your newspaper and some newspapers, because of a mistake or lack of familiarity [with the area,] might have been delivered to the wrong address. Anyone who has missed their newspapers in this period should give a note to our delivery men and we will send you the missing issues.[339]

At the very beginning of the next year, house numbers appeared in newspapers, which suggests the Afghan government must have finally numbered Kabul's houses and shops sometime in 1931. In addition to the fire report that was mentioned earlier, the 4 January 1932 issue of *Anis*

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[338] *Anis,* 18 Asad 1310/10 August 1931, 3.

[339] *Islah*, 25 Sunbulah 1310/16 September 1931, 2. The newspaper itself, in its masthead, wrote its address as the following: "Place of office Dih Afghanan Kabul." That is all. Dih Afghanan was, and still is, a large neighborhood with mixed commercial and residential built up and it would have taken some time to find a place by just asking around.

also published an advertisement that contained a house number. A man named Ghulam Hassan placed an ad in the weekly paper to sell his West Kabul farmland. He asked prospective buyers to come to his home in Qalʿah-i Haydar Khan in Andarabi neighborhood (guzar) to house number 108.[340] Later that year, another ad for a shop located in Lab-i Darya area of Kabul was published in *Anis* that had a street number:

ADVERTISEMENT

If you want your feet not to get cold, and be safe from mud, buy new, affordable, and good

shoes, in any sizes you wanted, for 9.75 Afs from

Ramazan Khan's shop located in Lab-i Darya.

But hurry up before they are finished.

Shop number 178.[341]

Lab-i Darya (River Bank, now called Farkhundah Street) was an area of Kabul with new shops built during Nadir Khan's rule. It was easier to number them, one could argue, compared to old shops in narrow and twisting alleyways. The numbering scheme, however, went beyond houses and shops in the newly-built areas. We see shops and houses in old quarters of the town too that were numbered, such as the house mentioned above located in Andarabi. Nadir's street addressing system was an exciting new technology and a lot of business owners proudly used them in their newspapers ads.

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[340] *Anis*, 13 Jaddi 1310/4 January 1932, 10.

[341] *Anis*, 20 Qaws 1311/11 December 1932, inside the cover.

The house numbers were made out of cast iron. The numbers were not painted but actually cast onto small square plates, demonstrating the state's intention of permanently fixing a numerical identity to each property. In the 1930s, the government factory (Mashinkhanah) in Kabul produced cast iron products and it is very likely that it also produced the plates for the city's house numbers.[342] Most of the numbers have now disappeared due to decades of destructions and constructions, wars, and lack of maintenance. In some areas in old Kabul, however, there are houses that still keep their initial cast iron numbers from 1931. There are two numbers on each plate, as seen on some houses in Murad Khani area of Kabul. One is the house number which is indicated by the letter Kh (initial for *khanah*, Persian for house), and the other is for municipal district indicated by the letter N, which stands for *nahiyah*, Persian for district. According to one source, there were other signs too for numbering *guzars* (alleys/neighborhoods, indicated by G) and *qismats* (part of a *guzar*, indicated by Q.)[343] I did not, however, see any surviving signs for *guzar* or *qismat* numbers in the old quarters of Kabul that I visited.

There is a brief note, in a newspaper article, on the way the city numbered houses. In a not-too-subtle opinion piece, *Anis* criticized the readers who complained about the quality of Afghan newspapers but it actually found a way to criticize the Kabul mayor. It said that the eyes of these "nitpicking readers" were so sharp that "could see the house number on the mayor's

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[342] *Salnamah-i Kabul 1316* (Kabul: Anjuman-i Adabi, 1937), 379.

[343] Interview with Muhammad Yasin Hilal, Director, Directorate of Land Acquisition (*Istimlak*), Kabul Municipality (Kabul, 12 June 2017.) He, however, believed that the house numbering was carried out during the tenure of Ghulam Muhammad Farhad as the mayor of Kabul who was in office between 1948 and 1954. There is a photograph, however, from 1940 that shows the cast iron house number on a house in Shahr-i Naw. It suggests that house numbers in Kabul existed before Mayor Farhad took office. See, Rudolf Stuckert 1940-1946 Collection, Image No. RS 000, Phototheca Afghanica (phototheca-afghanica.ch.)

house" but they could not spend some time reading even the titles of the local newspapers. The mayor's house number, to be fair, was hard to not see. It said:

In the name of God, the most Compassionate, the most Merciful

Dih Ghuchak Alley (*guzar*)

House Number One

The author criticized this house number, first, because it was located in the middle of the street and still received the number one and, secondly, because it came with *bismillah* (a Quranic verse) while other house numbers did not have it.[344] The story shows how a numerical technology that was supposed to bring predictable, standardized, and rational order to city spaces was distorted by the mayor himself—of all people—who sacrificed egalitarian order to maintain traditional hierarchies. Casting pretentious house numbers for men of power that would disrupt the numerical sequence of the houses was not the only problem with the program. Based on the house numbers that have survived in Murad Khani, we know that the numbers did not follow the odd-even system which was common in the West at the time and was applied for each street separately. In Kabul, the numbering was district-based, which meant all the houses in one municipal district were numbered consecutively from first to the last house. It also explains why the district number, too, was written on the plates. The system was confusing and not very helpful for finding an address. The fixed numbers, it appears, primarily served the state's surveillance and taxation programs. Over time, the numbers disappeared for lack of maintenance as both the property owners and the city officials forgot them. House numbers would not survive

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[344] *Anis*, 20 Jaddi 1310/11 January 1932, 2.

without a system in place to make sure changes in ownership, city expansion, repair, and destruction do not affect the numbers assigned to each property.

The question worth asking is whose idea was it to install numbers on all the city's shops and houses? In 1932, several foreign engineers and architects, almost all Germans, worked for the Afghan Ministry of Interior, Kabul Municipality, and the Afghan Post Office.[345] Did any of these men initiate the idea of house numbering in Kabul? There is no way to know. A great number of foreign experts worked under the previous rulers, too, but no efforts were made to modernize street addressing before Nadir. There is a good possibility that it was King Nadir's own idea to use this new technology as a way to generate some form of objective numerical information about the city for policing and taxation purposes. He was a man of information. Unlike his predecessor who was a young romantic dreamer, Nadir was a seasoned general who was treacherous and ruthless in pursuit of power and like all such men knew the power of good information. The country was just out of a civil war and Nadir wanted to know everything about everyone. His all-powerful spy network had the entire city under constant surveillance. People would easily end up in jail for doing things such as whispering in public.[346]

In addition to being an authoritarian ruler, Nadir, compared to his predecessors, had a good understanding of how state power depended on geographical knowledge. In his youth, he was trained in the military school, where cartography was a key subject. He put his cartographic training to good use during the third Anglo-Afghan War (1919), drawing strategic maps of the frontier areas where he was leading the battle.[347] Not only that, he encouraged tribesmen to

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[345] *Salnamah-i Majallah-i Kabul 1311* (Kabul: Anjuman-i Adabi, 1932), 61, 72, 89.

[346] ʿAbd al-Hakim Tabibi, *Khatirat: Chahar Daha Zindagiy-i Diplumatik-i Man Dar Khidmat-i Afghanistan va Jahan* (Geneva?, 1996), 18.

[347] Burhan al-Din Kushkaki, *Nadir-i Afghan*, vol. 1 (Kabul: Riyasat-i ʿUmumiy-i Matabiʿ, 1931), 109, 123.

destroy the British telegraph lines in Miranshah, a move that shows his strategic understanding of information.[348] After the war, Shah Aman Allah Khan appointed him as the Minister of War. In 1922, Nadir headed an inspection mission to the northern regions. In that capacity, too, he used his fascination with territorial knowledge to conduct a geographical and population survey for the first time in the modern history of the country. The survey result, despite its lack of scientific methods, was ambitious in its scope and impressive in its details and included numerous maps.[349] It was not a surprise, therefore, that during his reign he decided to number all houses and shops in Kabul to produce a more objective knowledge of the city and its residents.

His house numbering scheme was part of a larger surveillance apparatus to strengthen the state's governmental capacity. In 1932, the king established a statistics office within the General Directorate of Agriculture to carry out surveys, both in Kabul and provinces, on agriculture and livestock, apparently for reforming the Afghan taxation system.[350] In order to get a better perspective on this initiative, it helps us to see how Afghan farmers paid their tax before: under Shah Aman Allah Khan, the amount of tax was determined based on semi self-reported information. A village chief (*malik*) would prepare a detailed list on lands owned by each village resident, recording their names and places of residence, and submit the information to the local tax office. It basically gave too much power to local chiefs who could bribe people for better tax deals.[351] The law was flawed and Nadir's establishment of the statistics office was to address that flaw and collect detailed numerical information on the performance of the agricultural sector.

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[348] Kushkaki, 1:118–19.

[349] The survey result was published in, Burhan al-Din Kushkaki, *Rahnumay-i Qataghan va Badakhshan* (Kabul: Vizarat-i Harbiyyah, 1923).

[350] *Anis*, 12 Dalv 1310/2 February 1932, 11.

[351] *Nizamnamah-i Maliyah* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 1 Hamal 1299/21 March 1920), 3.

Nadir's heavy hand cost him his head. In 1933, a high school student, ʿAbd al- Khaliq, fed up with his police state shot him dead during a prize ceremony. The king's 19-year-old son, Muhammad Zahir, was put on the throne but in reality, Nadir's brother, Muhammad Hashim Khan, ran the country for the next 20 years. Nadir's successors were harsh despots like him but none had the geographical sensitivity that he showed during his time in power. The house numbering scheme Nadir had initiated went on in Kabul but it never resulted in standardized streets addressing in all parts of the Afghan capital. Even during his time, house and shop numbers were not widely used. In 1932, for instance, an ad that had a street number was published just beside a bookstore ad that did not even list its neighborhood name, let alone its street number.[352] Maybe the bookstore had a street number but they did not care enough about it to use it in their ad. But most probably the store was simply not numbered, as the numbering scheme was not consistently implemented.

After Nadir, his family, the so-called the Musahiban Dynasty (1929-1978), ruled the country. In this era, Kabul experienced major transformations in its size and population growth but one thing that changed little was the street addressing system. People still used shop and house numbers in newspaper ads, but they were not consistent at all. In real estate ads, where one had to provide a proper address, as usual, some people used numbers and some did not.[353] The postal communication was the same, where apparently letters without house numbers continued to be delivered in the city. In 1936, a letter sent to Kabul used the following address: "Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, Pul-i Khishti Bazaar, to be presented to shop of Mr. Sayyid Nasir al-Din

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[352] *Anis,* 20 Jaddi 1310/11 January 1932, 12.

[353] The Ministry of Commerce auctioned a list of houses and shops that some were numbered and some were not. *Islah*, 13 Hut 1315/4 March 1937, 4. In the same year, a house in Bagh-i ʿAli Mardan, a guzar in old Kabul, was put on sale that was numbered. *Islah*, 21 Dalv 1315/10 February 1937, 4.

Shah, trader, for the consideration of the Honorable Haji Fazl Rabi [illegible.]"[354] It did not necessarily mean that the said shop was not numbered, but it simply suggests that the city continued to function without modern street addresses.

In addition to houses and shops, some streets/alleys (*guzars*) were numbered too. Street numbering, instead of street naming, was a feature of some American cities such as a New York that had a grid layout with straight lines. Numbers produced a rational order to city streets that seemed out of place in the winding alleys of old Kabul. A 1937 real estate ad, for a house in Sih Dukanah area in Chindawul neighborhood, mentioned both the house number and the *guzar* number.[355] In the old Kabul, none of the *guzar* numbers have survived and people call all major streets by their popular names. In the 1930s, places outside the city proper were left out of the house numbering program and finding addresses in the suburb was based on asking the locals and using landmarks to find the right way. If you were a foreigner visiting Kabul, you had better have a very detailed instruction for an address outside the city, such as the one the British Legation offered to its subjects wishing to visit Afghanistan for trade:

The British Legation is situated about 2 miles from the city. After leaving the Octroi post, turn at the right to the Pillar commemorating King Nadir Shah's capture of Kabul from the Bacha-i-Saqqao in October 1929. The road then leads straight across the Kabul river, with the Idgah Mosque on the left, and the Chaman-i-Hazuri recreation ground on the right. About three hundred yards from the bridge the road bears to the left between the Aerodrome on the right, and the Dilkusha Palace and Clock Tower on the left. Thence it

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[354] Author's Personal Collection.

[355] *Islah*, 13 Jaddi 1315/3 January 1937, 4.

turns sharply to the left, and after a few hundred yards to the right, it joins the main road leading north from Kabul. It then leaves the ruins of the Habibia Collage on the left, and rises slightly through Shahrara village. Half a mile further brings one to the British Legation (White buildings) on the right.[356]

In 1939 a law was issued that for the first time talked about house numbering. This law suggests that Nadir's 1932 house numbering program in Kabul was far from complete. The law was supposed to reform the municipal taxes. It included articles on the way municipal governments had to assess the value of each property and how they should collect information about the properties in the city. In article six, it mentioned house numbering and declared that "the owners will pay for the numbers that the municipality installs on houses, shops and etcetera." In its last page, the law presented a chart that showed the municipal taxes and fees. The fee for house or shop numbers was set at 0.50 Afs each.[357]

In the late 1930s, the Musahiban rulers resumed the work on Dar al-Aman, a new capital Shah Aman Allah tried to build in southwest Kabul, despite the fact that they considered the exiled king their biggest enemy and did everything they could to erase his name and legacy from Afghanistan. In 1939, they even renamed Dar al-Aman as Dar al-Funun (Abode of Sciences,)

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[356] "Afghanistan: Hints for Commercial Visitors [1938]." India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London (BL, hereafter), IOR/L/PS/18/A.218, 9.

[357] *Usulnamah-i Mahsulat-i Baladiyyah-i Afghanistan* (Kabul: Riyasat-i ʿUmumiy-i Matabiʿ, 4 Jaddi 1318/28 December 1939), 3, 11.

which made no sense because at the time Dar al-Funun meant university.[358] Making sense was not a priority as they just needed to make Shah Aman Allah's name go away. In the 1940s, the new city was renamed again as Navi Kabul (Pashto for New Kabul) and was divided into five neighborhoods or *Mahallahs*. Soon, however, the word Mahallah somehow got replaced with Kartah (a corruption of *quartier*, a French word) meaning neighborhood.[359] Not only the Kartas, but also the streets in New Kabul were numbered. The houses were built with baked bricks and concrete in mid-century modern style and the whole project was supposed to work as a force for social change. "If cities were built orderly, streets were built straight, and buildings were built with standards," declared an article in the 1939 *Kabul Yearbook* about the new city, "the aesthetics of the environment not only would train the people's taste but it would also benefit their health."[360] New Kabul, with its grid layout and spacious modern villas, soon attracted wealthy Kabulis who no longer wanted to live in the dirty and crowded old town. In 1949, Mayor Farhad accelerated urban flight by building a wide new avenue in Kabul that cut through the heart of the old city destroying many houses and shops on its way. Most of the displaced people resettled in New Kabul.

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[358] "Reports to Foreign Office regarding changes in foreign place-names (9 Feb 1939-22 Jul 1944)," BL, IOR/R/12/117 File 133/41. The Dar al-Aman Road, however, was renamed to Dar al-Funun Road at least from 1936, according to a newspaper ad. *Islah*, 13 Asad 1315/4 August 1936, 4.

[359] New housing projects are called differently in Kabul in each era. In 1930-70s, they were called *kartah*, such as Kartah-i Chahar, Cartah-i Sakhi, and Kartah-i Mamurin. In the 1980s, when communists ruled Kabul, the new housing projects were called *puruzhah* (project) such as Puruzhah-i Arzan Qaymat, and Puruzhah-i Khushhal Khan. Since 2001, most new housing projects are called *shahrak* (township), a word borrowed from Iranian Persian. These names, I suspect, were popularised by the planners and architects who designed the master plans of the projects.

[360] *Salnamah-i Kabul 1318* (Kabul: Pashtu Tulanah, 1939), 308.

The house addressing system in New Kabul and other newly-built Kartahs was not very good either. The city's house numbers continued to remain rudimentary even in newly-built areas, mainly due to lack of maintenance and inconsistencies. Streets and houses were numbered, but house numbers would gradually disappear. One reason that contributed to house numbering failure in newly-built areas was construction: it took a lot of time selling land plots and building the houses, considering they came with many regulations and high standards. Some houses in these areas initially were numbered but the uneven pace of development resulted in inconsistency and the eventual disappearance of numbers.[361] The upper-middle-class population, who could afford to buy land and build a house with new standards, were small and it would take years until these townships were properly developed.

In the 1940s, the official daily *Islah* began publishing the registration information of business owners in Kabul that included the location of the businesses. It was the Directorate of Business Disputes Settlement that mandated that this information be publicized via the press. Some of these businesses included shop numbers but many of them did not.[362] This suggests that even in government registers, house numbers and shop numbers were not treated as critical information essential for policing and administration but as a mundane novelty that soon loses its

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[361] A 1944 real estate ad for a house in the Shahr-i Naw (New City) area of Kabul mentioned both the street number and the house number. Apparently, that area—at the time a trendy new neighborhood and now Kabul's central business district—had standardized street signs but gradually they disappeared for lack of maintenance. *Islah*, 17 Sawr 1323/7 May 1944, 2.

[362] Shops in some parts of the town such as Chawk and Char Chattah were numbered. *Islah*, 30 Jawza 1323/20 June 1944, 2. Shops in some other parts of town were not numbered. See, *Islah,* 29 Jawza 1323/19 June 1944, 2. These ads were not from the business owners but from the government register. Lack of shop numbers suggests that those shops were not actually numbered, not that the shopkeepers forgot to include them.

relevance. In the 1940s, probably for the first time, a telephone directory was published in Kabul. There were not many subscribers at the time and it only contained the telephone numbers for businesses and government offices but, unlike city directories used in the United States, no precise addresses were recorded and it did not include people who did not own a telephone line.[363]

In newspapers, advertisers sometimes used shop numbers and house numbers and sometimes did not, much as in the previous decade.[364] Occasionally, however, house numbers were confusing as we see in an ad placed by a man who was trying to sell his bunnies: "house number 37/23, Aʿzam Khan guzar."[365] Did one of the numbers refer to the number assigned to the street? We do not know. In other real estate ads, both for properties located in old quarters of Kabul and the new ones, an inconsistency exists that indicates the spatial organization of the city was chaotic and the state was oblivious to this critical infrastructure of order and organization.[366]

In 1952, a national census was initiated. The Ministry of Interior asked the "responsible government institution" to number houses and apartments before the beginning of the census. The census law emphasized that all literate individuals should volunteer as census takers and all

[363] *Islah,* 29 Sunbulah 1322/21 September 1943, 4.

[364] Two shops in Andarabi and Dih Afghanan, selling products from government's woolen mill, used street numbers. *Islah*, 5 Aqrab 1327/27 October 1948, 4. We know that in 1928, another government enterprise, the textile mill, advertised shops in Andarabi giving only the name of the shop keeper but no street number. See, *Anis*, 7 & 14 Saratan 1307/28 June & 5 July 1928, 24. For more examples see the following ads for shops for rent that most were numbered. It appears that all were Kabul Municipality's properties, *Islah*, 8 Hut 1322/28 February 1944, 4.

[365] *Islah*, 15 Asad 1323/6 August 1944, 2.

[366] See a numbered house in old Kabul, *Islah*, 13 Asad 1315/4 August 1936, 4. An ad for a house in Rika Khana was also numbered, *Islah*, 28 Hut 1315/19 March 1937, 4. See also, this ad for a house on sale in Dihmazang that used a landmark instead of a number, *Islah,* 17 Saratn 1323/8 July 1944, 2.

people should respond to surveyors. Anyone refusing to volunteer or respond to questions would be punished. Even these warnings apparently failed to help the census program succeed.[367] In 1956, a new law for the national identity card (*Tazkira*) was passed that said that the card should register, among other things, people's neighborhood name, guzar name or number, and house numbers.[368] The later editions of the Tazkira laws, too, required this detailed location information, but the Ministry of Interior that issued the ID cards rarely asked for this information and few people may have their house number written on their Tazkira.[369]

In 1973, the Kabul Municipality decided to find out how many shops there were in Kabul. They needed to get a sense of the city's economy and also to quantify the properties and businesses for taxation. They conducted a survey and counted all the shops in the capital. They managed to get a number—22000 shops and 167 restaurants—but we do not know how useful it was for reforming the addressing system as they did not issue property titles or assigned street numbers.[370] In the same year, Kabul Municipality also announced a plan to reform the city's revenue collection system. In the past, each city district had revenue staff who would go door to door in their district and ask people to come to the local municipal district office to pay their

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[367] *Da ʿUmumi sar-shmiranay usulnamah* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Davlati, 1335/1956), 1-2.

[368] *Usulnamah-i Tazkirah-i Jadid-i Shahi* (Kabul: Davlati Matbaʿah, 1335/1956), 3.

[369] Qanun-i sabt-i ahval-i nufus va ihsaʾiyah-i hayati, *Rasmi Jaridah*, 20 Mizan 1356/12 October 1977, 13. My father's Tazkira which was issued in the 1970s does not have a house number. It is a booklet and has several blank pages for the place of residence in case a person changes address. The communist regime, too, kept a box for house numbers on Tazkiras that they issued. Taʿdil-i Mavad-i 1, 18, va 68 Qanun-i sabt-i ahval-i nufus, *Rasmi Jaridah,* 15 Sawr 1359/5 May 1980, 30-31. The current Afghan Tazkira, in circulation since the 1990s, removed the place for house numbers.

[370] *Pamir*, 29 ʿAqrab 1353/20 November 1974, 2.

property tax, known in Kabul as *safayi* (lit., cleaning fee.) It was highly inefficient to chase people around to pay their taxes and there were many opportunities for tax evasion and corruption. The new reform included forms with details of each resident and the tax they had to pay. However, in none of the forms was there a place for house numbers or shop numbers. In the absence of a proper address, the city continued to chase taxpayers as there was no sure way to locate individuals.[371]

On 17 July 1973, the people of Kabul woke up in the Republic of Afghanistan. Zahir Shah's cousin and brother-in-law, Muhammad Daud, overthrew the kingdom in a relatively bloodless coup overnight and announced a revolutionary republican regime. As a young man, Daud was sent to France, by Shah Aman Allah, to study architecture. He soon returned to Kabul, before finishing his studies, and joined a short military course instead.[372] Under Zahir, he served in senior military posts and twice as Prime Minister. A failed architect with a bad temper, he was impatient to modernize Afghanistan by force. The now president Daud immediately initiated a number of reform programs that were impulsive, superficial, and miserably unsuccessful. In 1974, he published a road traffic law in order to bring order to the streets of Kabul. The law was too ambitious and banned many common behaviors in the city, including street vending and jaywalking.[373] According to an American resident of Kabul, the police actually enforced the law, for a while at least. He saw the streetscape change noticeably: taxis were repainted in black and white and policemen issued tickets for violation of traffic rules in large quantities—people were

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[371] *Pamir*, 2 Hut 1351/21 February 1973, 1-2, 4. The announcement included images of the new forms to be used in the reformed revenue collection system.

[372] Majruh, *Sar Guzasht-i Man*, 87.

[373] See for the full list of traffic violations and their fines, Qanun-i Tarafik-i Jadah, *Jaridah-i Rasmi*, 25 Jaddi 1352/15 January 1974, 23-27.

actually fined for jaywalking.[374] While Daud ignored the fundamental infrastructures of order, such as street signs, he showed an outrageous amount of attention to people's behaviors on the street.

On the first anniversary of his coup, President Daud changed the name of a major street in Kabul to 26 Saratan Street to mark the day he dethroned his cousin.[375] His republic lasted until 1978 when another coup, orchestrated by communists in his government, violently overthrew it. The Afghan conflict, as we know it, started with the communist takeover. The Afghan capital kept growing in size and both its population and city officials did very little to organize it. Kabul's houses continued to remain mostly unnumbered—but Kabul's street names received some attention, just some. Naming has always been more appealing to Afghan rulers than numbering.

THE STRUGGLE OVER STREET NAMES

As mentioned earlier, the street name, much like the house number, functions as a code, a technology of identification, hence, calculation. Street naming, therefore, is as important as house numbering in state practices such as taxation, policing, and surveillance. There is a great body of scholarship on "critical toponymy," the critical study of place names, which explores the

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[374] Louis Dupree, "The New Republic of Afghanistan: The First Twenty One Months," Special Paper (New York: The Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, Spring 1976), 12. For the new traffic law, see Qanun-i Tarafik-i Jadah, 2-27; *Pamir*, 17 Dalv 1352/6 February 1974, 3. In addition to these show-off modernist reforms, Daud paid some attention to institutional projects too. He, among others, established the Central Statistics Office that was long overdue. Dupree, "The New Republic of Afghanistan," 12.

[375] *Pamir*, 9 Asad 1353/31 July 1974, 2.

centrality of this ubiquitous technology in how power operates. There are two layers of power politics embedded in a street name: first, its calculative role that codes a marked territory for the practice of control and second, its symbolic value as a medium of meaning-making in the urban landscape. The symbolic function of street names is a particularly contested arena because of its dominant position in everyday life and the cultural sphere. The street sign, in that regard, is one of the key sites of inclusion and exclusion in a city, a medium that displays what the city wishes to remember and what to erase from its history.[376]

We have discussed the struggle over house numbering and shop numbering in Kabul, but the story of street naming is similar in many ways. Street naming did not begin with house numbering, a scheme first initiated in 1932, under King Nadir, because the government had little interest in improving how the public navigated the city. Instead, house numbering was primarily viewed as a policing tool to help the state in its surveillance and taxation programs. This did not mean that the government was unaware of the cultural role of place names and how they could project the authority of the name-giver in the public sphere. The first of such instances of place naming in modern history dates back to Shirpur, a new city in Kabul, designed by Amir Shir ʿAli Khan in 1870s who was dethroned before the city was finished. The name Shirpur is half Persian

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[376] On critical place name studies see, Maoz Azaryahu, "German Reunification and the Politics of Street Names: The Case of East Berlin," *Political Geography Political Geography* 16, no. 6 (1997): 479–93; Maoz Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14, no. 3 (1996): 311 – 330; Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryahu, "Geographies of Toponymic Inscription: New Directions in Critical Place-Name Studies," *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 4 (2010): 453–70; Duncan Light, Ion Nicolae, and Bogdan Suditu, "Toponymy and the Communist City: Street Names in Bucharest, 1948-1965," *GeoJournal* 56, no. 2 (2002): 135–44; Lawrence D. Berg and Jani. Vuolteenaho, eds., *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2009).

and half Hindi that means "City of Shir" referring to the king himself, Shir ʿAli Khan, the ruling Amir. Later on, Aman Allah Khan designed another unfinished new city in Kabul in the 1920s that was named Dar al-Aman, or "Adobe of Peace," with a reference to his own name, *Aman* meaning peace or safety. These examples are part of an almost universal ancient tradition of kings naming cities after themselves. Systematic street naming in cities, however, was a modern invention that arrived in Kabul in the 20th century.

In the 1930s, Afghanistan's state policies were driven by Pashtun nationalism thanks to inspirations from Germany's National Socialist movement, which advanced the superiority of the Aryan race. In Kabul, German Nazi ideas were so popular that Afghans used to call Germans *Kaka German* ("Uncle German") by claiming to be fellow Aryans.[377] Nationalism in Afghanistan has always been a form of "internal colonialism by a Pashtun ruling class over the country's many ethnic minorities."[378] The Pashtuns, probably the largest ethnic group in the country (not the majority, contrary to official claims), have been ruling the country since 1747. Persian had been the language of court and culture for centuries and Afghan rulers traditionally preferred it over Pashtu, the language of Pashtun tribes. In the 1930s, when Iran was pushing for Persian nationalism and Turkey was deep in its Turkish nationalism, Afghan rulers felt they too needed a distinct national identity to set Afghanistan apart from its neighbors. Replacing Persian (a language spoken in Iran and parts of Central Asia) with Pashto sounded like the right idea. In the 1930s, Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim (1929-1946) made Pashto the official language of Afghanistan—despite the fact that none of the top members of the ruling family, including Zahir

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[377] R. D. McChesney, "Architecture and Narrative: The Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa Shrine. Part 2: Representing the Complex in Word and Image, 1696-1998," *Muqarnas Online* 19, no. 1 (2002): 85.

[378] Hyman, "Nationalism in Afghanistan," 299.

Shah, spoke the language.[379] Overnight, all government employees had to take Pashto courses and all schools and newspapers had to use Pashto as the language of education and communication. The experiment was a big fiasco.[380] After failing to turn Pashto into the lingua franca of the country, the state decided to do the next best thing: Pashtunize the country's public realm and erase the historical memory of its Persianate culture. That policy included place naming/renaming and allowing only Pashto to be used on signs of government institutions and businesses. In that way Pashto and Pashtun culture, they thought, would infiltrate the everyday language and eventually become part of the national identity.

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[379] The first instance of Pashtun nationalism began in the 1870s when Amir Shir ʿAli Khan was in power. He translated military titles and ranks into Pashto that are still in use. See, Sirdar M. A. K. Effendi, *Royals and Royals Mendicant: A Tragedy of the Afghan History, 1791-1947* (Lahore, Pakistan: Lion Press, 1948), 134–35. Later, the early 20th-century nationalist movements triggered Shah Aman Allah Khan to promote Pashto language. He spoke some Pashto and encouraged others to learn it. *Muntakhabat-i Adabi,* 57. The Amir established a commission for promotion of Pashtu, putting, among others, a former *Siraj al-Akkbar* writer ʿAbd al-Rahman Ludin on it. The commission was dissolved when it found the task impossible. Sayyid Mahdi Farrukh, *Kursi-Nishinan-i Kabul: Ahval-i Davlat-Mardan-i Afghanistan Dar Ruzgar-i Amir Aman Allah Khan*, ed. Muhammad Asif Fikrat (Tehran: Muʾassisah-i Pazhuhish va Mutaliʿat-i Farhangi, 1991), 148. Aman Allah also intensified the colonization of northern Afghanistan by offering land to Pashtun tribes from the Indian side of the border. *Nizamnamah-i Naqilin-i ba Samt-i Qataghan* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Daʾirah-i Tahrirat, 4 Mizan 1302/27 September 1923). See also, Maymanah Supreme Governorate to the Ministry of Interior, Kabul, 21 Dalv 1302/11 February 1924, NAA, Maktub, No. 412.

[380] Muhammad Siddiq Farhang, *Khatirat*, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Faruq Farhang and Sayyid Ziya Farhang (Tehran: Tisa, 2015), 151.

In 1951, the Afghan government announced a long list of new names for the streets, neighborhoods, parks, bridges, and mountains of Kabul city.[381] In this mass naming project, which was an ambitious Pashtun nationalist move, the majority of streets and neighborhoods in Kabul were named or renamed—122 places to be exact. The project not only renamed places but also banned certain Persian words by replacing them with Pashto equivalents. It was, therefore, more than a toponymic Pashtunization. The majority of the new names belonged to poets or politicians of the ruling class, the Pashtuns, with few names honoring personalities of non-Pashtun ethnic groups. And the Persian words *Jadah* (street), *Kuchah* (alleyway), *Kuh* (mountain), and *Bagh* (garden) were changed to the Pashto equivalents *Watt*, *Kusa*, *Ghar*, and *Ban*, respectively. The Persian-speaking residents of Kabul now had to say *Da Nadir Pashtun Watt* instead of *Jadah-i Nadir Pashtun* on an everyday basis. Most of Kabul's historical names were replaced and some were simply translated into Pashtu, such as *Kuh-i Asmayi,* which became *Da Pari Ghar* (Mount Fairy.)[382]

Most of the place names in Kabul city, prior to the systematic renaming in the mid-twentieth century, had popular names, as opposed to official names. In popular naming, streets and places are named mostly in relation to the people who use, inhabit, and or own them. The name-giver is not a person or institution but the public itself, as in folklore, which creates names that are mostly descriptive and serve the single purpose of geographic orientation. Popular place

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[381] The Literary Society, now called Pashto Tulanah, had already begun renaming places in parts of the country, including a few places in Kabul. In 1941, it had listed renaming places as one of its accomplishment in its annual report. See, *Da Kabul Kalani 1319*, 506.

[382] Muhammad Nāsir Gharghasht, *Kabul-i Imruz* (Kabul: Sharvaliy-i Kabul, 1970), 35–41. Later that year, the mayor of Kabul renamed a major roundabout and a street after Pashtunistan. See, Khadim, "Da Pashtunwali Ihsasat Da Pashtunistan Pa Vraz," *Kabul*, September 8, 1951, 29–31.

names are common in Kabul, partly because of the oral culture of the city. In the main bazaar, most of the streets are named after the kind of traders or artisans who once worked there, such as Kah-furushi (Straw Sellers), Shamʿriz-ha (Candle Makers), and Sangtarashi (Stone Cutters), or after tribal or ethnic groups who once lived in an area such as Guzar-i Achakzay-ha (Achakzays' Street), Qalʿah-i Hazarah-ha (Hazaras' Fort), or Dih Afghanan (Afghans' Village.) Traditionally, there were strong relations between the places and the people who used them, as suggested in these names: You knew what kind of people lived or worked in a particular area just by knowing the name of that place. Today, however, those toponymic distinctions no longer exist and some of these streets are either mixed-use or are used for a different purpose—such as the Straw Sellers Street that now is a bird market.

New names also replaced numbered streets and neighborhoods—a triumph of nationalist emotion over rationalist neutrality. The numbered neighborhoods (Kartahs) in West Kabul were all named. Kartah-i 1, 2, 3, and 4 were named Dar al-Aman, Ghuri Minah, Saffari Kartah, and Shir Shah Minah.[383] In addition, numbered streets in some of the new neighborhoods of Kabul with grid layout were named too. With the exception of Dar al-Aman which still has kept its original name, the three others failed to gain any popularity and people continued to use their numbers instead of names.

The public resisted the new names, by not using them, for other places in the city too. We know that because about 20 years later, in 1973, Kabul Municipality's weekly publication

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[383] Gharghasht, *Kabul-i Imruz*, 35–41. To clarify, the 1st, 2nd and 5th Kartahs, despite being numbered, were mostly known in public by their popular names: Dar al-Aman, ʿAlaʾ al-Din, and Kartah-i Sakhi, respectively. Official numbers, in fact, replaced official names but, still, people continued to use the popular names for these three Kartahs. Kartah-i 5 or Kartah-i Sakhi, was missing in this list. In 1973, it was renamed to Jamal Minah. *Pamir*, 16 Sawr 1352/6 May 1973, 3.

reported that city streets were still "nameless," and in a new initiative, "All Areas of Kabul City are Named" now. The report with the optimistic title referred to a new naming program by the acting mayor, Dust Muhammad Fazl, which aimed to bring spatial order to the Afghan capital by codifying the entire city with names and numbers.[384] In *Pamir*'s next issue, a report titled "Finally the Namelessness Problem in Kabul Areas is Solved" was published that contained the new names and numbers. The following was presented as the rationale for the new reform:

> In the past, it would take hours of wandering to find an address in Kabul and a lot of time would be wasted because most areas of the city were not named or numbered. As a result, foreigners, provincial visitors, doctors, social workers, the police, and firefighters, were all struggling with problems when trying to find an address. In addition, to solve the namelessness problem, some people would call places with strange names, which also presented a challenge. Recently, an authoritative committee has resolved this problem in Kabul by naming and numbering all areas of the city.[385]

Kabul already had 10 municipal districts and the new program added two more.[386] It was apparently not enough. The new scheme divided the city into the following geographical categories: 12 districts (*Nahiyah*), three regions (*Mantaqah*) and about three hundred zones (*Hawzas*). Each zone was given a code number. The codes started at 101 and consistently went up. The idea, in principle, seemed like a postal code but it was not a postal code. Each zone was

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[384] *Pamir*, 5 Sawr 1352/25 April 1973, 1.

[385] *Pamir*, 9 Sawr 1352/29 April 1973, 2.

[386] *Pamir*, 9 Sawr 1352/29 April 1973, 1.

named too. In fact, zones referred to neighborhoods that were now called Minah, a Pashto word, instead of the French Kartah. The whole numbering system was confusing and the reports published by *Pamir* did not help to clarify things. The magazine also published the names and numbers of new zones with their locations and previous names in order to help the public learn the new addressing system.[387] About three months later, the new place names and numbers were installed on street signs all over the city.[388]

The new names, again, were mostly Pashtun names with few non-Pashtun ones. Most of the Pashtun names introduced in 1951 were kept and new ones were added. Remarkably, however, neither of the new addressing systems included house numbering—the key to finding an address. It simply suggests that in both cases, Kabul rulers were too obsessed with Pashtun nationalism to think about solving the real problem of spatial disorder and lack of addressing system in the city. For the rulers of Kabul, place naming was a tool to construct (and erase) public memory using a very public medium: the street sign. It was part of their larger Pashtunisation project in the country that included all arenas of culture.

The public did not find the new 1973 addressing system very useful and treated it the way they treated the 1951 names—they ignored it. Although some names found popular use such as Nadir Pashtun Street and Khushhal Khan Minah, the majority of the new names failed to find any currency. Sayyid Nur Muhammad Shah Minah is still known as Kartah-i Naw (New Neighborhood) and Nadir Shah Minah is called Makruriyan, a Russian word (*microraion*) for "micro-district" because it was built by the Soviets in the 1960s.[389] Even government newspapers

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[387] *Pamir*, 12 Sawr 1352/2 May 1973, 2.

[388] *Pamir* 21 Asad 1352/12 August 1973, 1.

[389] Makruriyan was designed by Soviet architects and built in a Kabul suburb in the 1960s. The prefab apartment blocks were built in several phases and each phase was numbered and that is how they are now known as

today have to use the official names only with the popular names in parenthesis as few people are familiar with the official names. In addition to public resistance to new names, there was another, more important, reason that could explain the failure of official place names: the names remained only on street signs and did not infiltrate everyday communications because people, in general, did not use them on a daily basis as they had no need for them. The popular place names, which did not require literacy, proved to be more convenient for an urban population who communicated mostly orally.

In the 1970s, Latif Nazimi, a Herati poet living in Kabul, once asked a friend where he lived. As usual, the friend gave a descriptive address using local landmarks and directions such as beside this and opposite that. "That's ʿUnsuri Street," Nazimi said in surprise. He then told him where the street sign was and that the name referred to ʿUnsuri Balkhi, an 11th-century poet from Balkh, northern Afghanistan. This happened in the 1970s when things were stable and Afghanistan was yet to slip into war and revolutions. Decades later in 2010, Latif Nazimi, now a refugee in Europe like many other Afghans, decided to return home for a visit. He found that many things had changed in Kabul but some things remained the same. During an afternoon walk in Shahr-i Naw area, he found himself on ʿUnsuri Street, which now had a blue metal sign instead of the stone sign that it had in the past. As a test, he went up to a tailor's shop on the street and asked the tailor where ʿUnsuri Street was. The tailor was confused. "I've worked on this street for 15 years and I've never heard that name before."[390]

Makruriyan 1, 2, 3, and 4. Each block, too, was numbered and the neighborhood remains one of the few areas in Kabul where a postman would have little trouble finding an address.

[390] Latif Nazimi, "Kabul-i Kih Man Didam: Bakhsh-i Duwwum," Deutsche Welle, October 22, 2010, http://bit.ly/2gtdt5l.

THE STRUGGLE OVER STREET NAMES, AGAIN

Kabul city entered the 21st century the way it entered the 20th century: with no proper addressing system. Plus, it was lying in ruins after suffering long years of war that started after communists took power in 1978 and it later fell into a bloody civil war and later into the hands of the Taliban regime. In 2001, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan ended the Taliban rule and brought to power a new democratic and inclusive government. This was a new chapter in Afghan history. A new government, a hopeful nation, support from the international community, and billions of dollars that were pouring in suddenly made it possible to undertake state-building from scratch. This was a golden opportunity to bring, among other things, order to the urban spaces of Kabul and other main Afghan cities through land titling and implementation of a standardized addressing system. Surprisingly, the new rulers of Kabul showed great attention to street signs. One of the first things president Hamid Kazai did was assign new names to some of the prominent roads in the city. Soon, however, it became clear that the attention Kabul street signs had gained were not the kind that would help bring any order to the city.

In December 2001, in a conference in Bonn, Germany, Afghan rival groups were negotiating to form a government for the post-Taliban era. With the mediation of the United States and the United Nations, they agreed to include all ethnic groups in a power-sharing deal, but they were not able to agree on a candidate to be the interim president during the transition period. Two main groups competed for the post: the Northern Alliance (a mostly non-Pashtun group of anti-Taliban fighters) and the Rome Group (the royalists close to Muhammad Zahir, the exiled former king of Afghanistan). According to media reports at the time, most of the delegates

supported ʿAbd al-Sattar Sirat, an Uzbek from the Rome Group, for the job.[391] Americans, however, had another person in mind: Hamid Karzai. Zalmai Khalilzad, the behind-the-scenes showrunner sent from the White House, helped persuade King Zahir's circle and other Afghans in Bonn to accept Karzai, a Pashtun from Qandahar, as the interim president. Khalilzad, an Afghan American of Pashtun origin himself, finally succeeded in his efforts—which included locking up displeased delegates in a hotel meeting room and threatening them—to form a government that was based on a shaky compromise.[392]

In return for supporting his government, Karzai and his international backers offered favors to King Zahir, the Northern Alliance, and the tribal leaders who, it was feared, would challenge the new administration. These favors included key government positions and cash. Throughout his presidency, Karzai maintained a special fund in his palace for regular payouts to tribal strongmen, political parties, and warlords.[393] The allies of the government wanted more than cash and power, however. They wanted something they did not have: public legitimacy via symbolic capital.

The ex-warlords valued symbolic capital more than economic capital, partly because it could improve their public image. A significant part of the society that suffered from the

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[391] Rory McCarthy and Ewen MacAskill, "King's Aide Is Favourite to Be next Leader," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/03/afghanistan.ewenmacaskill1.

[392] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 39.

[393] Matthew Rosenberg, "C.I.A. Delivers Cash to Afghan Leader's Office," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/world/asia/cia-delivers-cash-to-afghan-leaders-office.html; Jon Boone, "Hamid Karzai Admits Office Gets 'bags of Money' from Iran," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/25/hamid-karzai-office-cash-iran.

atrocities of the civil war regarded the returning mujahedeen as the remnants of a dark past who did not deserve to join the new system. In the first few years of the post-Taliban era, there were serious calls for the Afghan government to take the civil war warlords to a criminal court.[394] International human rights investigators published reports accusing some of Karzai's top officials, from the former mujahedeen, of war crimes.[395] Despite the pressure, however, Karzai and his international friends did not want to wage a war they were not sure they could win. The government, instead, supported the mujahedeen leaders with cash, official positions, and symbolic capital—the most effective defense mechanism against accusations of war crime.

In 2002, Karzai gave the title of the National Hero of Afghanistan to the slain Tajik leader, Ahmad Shah Masʿud, who was killed on 9 September 2001. In addition, Karzai renamed Sihat-i ʿAmmah Square and the road leading from it to the U.S. Embassy after Ahmad Shah Masʿud. The Great Masʿud Road was, in fact, an act of political negotiation settled through commemorative street naming, a way to recognize the role of Tajiks in the resistance against the Soviets and then the Taliban (and forgetting Masʿud's role in the civil war). In return, the Tajiks, who felt entitled to more power because they led the fight against the Taliban, were expected to pledge their support to the new government. It was the first place renaming in post-Taliban Kabul honoring a man who, just a few years ago, led a "particularly deadly" force during the

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[394] Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Warlords Face International Criminal Court," ReliefWeb, February 10, 2003, http://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-warlords-face-international-criminal-court.

[395] The following two reports document, in great details, some of the war crimes committed by mujahedeen. Afghanistan Justice Project, "Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: 1978-2001" (New York: Open Society Foundations, 2005), https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/casting-shadows-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-1978-2001; Human Rights Watch, *Blood-Stained Hands: Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005).

civil war, causing "a significant proportion of the destruction of the Afghan capital."[396] This tradition continued in the following years and more people accused of war crimes were memorialized on street signs. Interestingly, some of these honored figures were enemies during the civil war. In some way, the practice was understandable: In a postwar situation where non-state armed groups are still strong and the nation is divided, the government offers these commodities to negotiate reconciliation and solidify its state-building program.

The Afghan warlords, too, needed to reconstruct their political identity and transform their public images from warmongers to heroes to join the new system. As the majority of the Afghan population was illiterate, public spaces offered an arena where that task could be carried out by exhibiting their dominance, presence, and relevance. The value of place names increased as ethnic leaders, in pursuit of redemption, tried to acquire them. As a result, a fierce competition began among these men, on the cityscape of Kabul, to occupy a place in the new era.

The contestation over place names in post-Taliban Kabul, which included selling, buying, and plundering this coveted commodity, resembled a previous moment when the warlords contested Kabul city. In the aftermath of the communist regime in 1992, various armed groups, who came from different ethnic backgrounds, flooded the city. They plundered public and private properties and fought with each other to capture greater, and better, parts of the capital. Soon, Kabul was remapped based on ethnic lines, such that ad hoc checkpoints were installed on streets, manned by armed militia who would search anyone passing through their territories. West Kabul became the territory of the Hazaras, a long-persecuted Shia minority group. North Kabul was the territory of the Tajiks, a Persian-speaking ethnic group who dominated the post-communist Islamic State of Afghanistan. Pashtuns controlled the east, far west, and parts of

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[396] Afghanistan Justice Project, "Casting Shadows War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity," 65.

southern Kabul. Uzbek gunmen were mostly stationed in the city center and northeast suburbs. These territorial boundaries, of course, were not fixed and would shift after constant clashes among the various factions.[397]

In post-Taliban Kabul, the conflict has not been violent but, instead, cultural. Nevertheless, the contestations over place names should be seen as an extension of the civil war. The place names, in the new era, functioned as men with guns who marked territories and shaped ethnic boundaries. Since the civil war, the ethnic minorities who had been long absent from the public sphere have found a chance to fight for public recognition and the right to take part in decision-making processes.

The practice of street naming, usually, is a task of the authorities. It is an administrative procedure that expresses political power and territorial control.[398] In an authoritarian state, only the ruling elites are the name givers, as this group has access to the sources of symbolic (and economic) capital. The collapse of an authoritarian state decentralizes power and allows new groups to lawfully gain, or plunder, the sources of symbolic (and economic) capital. The new players compete over place names the same way they compete over capturing public properties and institutions. This was what happened in Russia after the Soviet Union disintegrated. A small, politically influential group captured the bulk of the economic resources during the 1990s transformations and the same group controlled the symbolic capital, such as public monuments

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[397] Andreas Dittmann, "Recent Developments in Kabul's Shar-e-Naw and Central Bazaar Districts," *ASIEN*, no. 104 (2007): 36; Mohammad Ali Karimi, "'The West Side Story': Urban Communication and the Social Exclusion of the Hazara People in West Kabul (Thesis)" (University of Ottawa, 2011), 79–99.

[398] Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names," 311–30.

and place names.[399] In Kabul, it was the ideology that defined the toponymical practices in the pre-2001 era, but, after the fall of the Taliban, it has been the government corruption, among other factors, that has turned place names into political and economic *bakshish*—literally, a "gift" but colloquially, a bribe.

In 2006, the main road in the Hazara ghetto in West Kabul was renamed after ʿAbd al-ʿAli Mazari, a Hazara leader who was killed by the Taliban in 1995. He was the main rival to Masʿud during the civil war and considered a hero by the Hazara community, although others considered him a warlord. Karzai also named a street and a square in the Makruriyan area after ʿAbd al-Haq, a friend of his who was also killed by the Taliban. When Burhan al-Din Rabbani, the Tajik leader (who was president during the civil war, an ally of Masʿud) was mysteriously assassinated in his home by a suicide bomber in September 2011, Karzai, again, used place name as a tool to prevent Rabbani's followers from engaging in violent reactions. The government renamed a street and the Education University of Kabul after Rabbani, which caused controversy at the said university and divided the students and the faculty.[400] This was especially controversial as the university is located in the Afshar neighborhood where, during the civil war in 1993, Rabbani and Masʿud launched an indiscriminate massacre of its residents, the Shia Hazaras.[401] In April 2014, the National Defense University was renamed after Muhammad

[399] Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 3 (2002): 524–47.

[400] Frud Bezhan, "Afghan Students Protest Renaming Of Their University After Former President Rabbani," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, October 3, 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan-students-protest-renaming-of-kabul-university/24728037.html.

[401] Human Rights Watch, *Blood-Stained Hands*, 70–98; Afghanistan Justice Project, "Casting Shadows War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity," 82–88.

Qasim Fahim, Karzai's vice president and a Tajik warlord who was Minister of Intelligence in Masʿud -Rabbani's government during the civil war. This renaming came after Fahim unexpectedly died of illness on 9 March 2014.[402]

This tradition of place name "gifts" continued under his successor, Ashraf Ghani. The new president, Ghani, offered the name of Kabul International Airport to Hamid Karzai as a political gift. The airport renaming came right after a disputed presidential election in 2014 that took six months to be settled. During that time, Karzai, the incumbent president, sided with the presidential candidate Ghani in rejecting the allegations of systematic electoral fraud claimed by the opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, and international electoral observers.[403] The airport renaming, therefore, was a bribe not in cash but in commodified symbolic capital.

Two weeks after he renamed the airport, Ghani met with Kabul Municipality's officials, where he complained, "Kabul is the only city in the world where a living, sitting Attorney General has a street named after him."[404] He was referring to a street that the mayor of Kabul, Yunus Nawandish, named after Ishaq Alako, the Attorney General during Karzai's presidency. Mayor Nawandish was, for a long time, under pressure from a group of Afghan parliamentarians who demanded his resignation over allegations of corruption. The members of Parliament had a protest sit-in for several days in front of the municipality building. They eventually gave up on

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[402] Dan Lamothe and Pamela Constable, "U.S. General Killed in Attack at Afghan Military Academy," *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/numerous-casualties-in-shooting-at-afghan-training-academy/2014/08/05/434613ba-1cb0-11e4-ae54-0cfe1f974f8a_story.html.

[403] Gall, "In Afghan Election, Signs of Systemic Fraud Cast Doubt on Many Votes"; Mason, "Fraud and Folly in Afghanistan."

[404] ʿAziz Ruyish, "Taʿrif-i Mulkiyat Bayad Taghyir Kunad," *Jamiʿah-i Baz*, September 19, 2014, http://bit.ly/2eTn0lI.

their demands after the Attorney General declared the mayor clean of any corruption. The mayor, having survived the protests, renamed Sanatorium Street after Attorney General Alako as an expression of gratitude.[405]

There is a strong ethnic element in these place names. Despite all of the controversies, the commemorative place naming in Kabul allowed minorities to see, for the first time, their names on the city's street signs. The street names are usually in alignment with the ethnic demography of each neighborhood, such that just by looking at street names you can understand in whose territory you are—very similar to the ethnic distribution of the city during the civil war. In mixed neighborhoods, place naming is more controversial. A good example is the Katib Road, a street in West Kabul that runs through a Hazara and Tajik area from Pul-i Sukhtah Bridge to Dar al-Aman Palace. On 18 October 2014, the government officials inaugurated this newly paved road that was named, by the previous administration, after Fayz Muhammad Katib, a historian from the Hazara minority group. The trouble emerged when the residents noticed that the new government (of Ashraf Ghani) had removed the street sign bearing Katib's name. This provoked the Hazaras to organize rallies and online protests for several weeks. The issue grew so sensitive that the government cabinet discussed it in at least three different meetings without coming to a workable conclusion.[406]

Fayz Muhammad Katib (1881–1931) is considered the most authoritative historian in Afghanistan. He served most of his life as an official historian in the royal court. This place renaming also brought the questions of scales and location of the names into the debates. The

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[405] Ruyish.

[406] "Ex-Cabinet Decision on Naming Faiz Mohammad Katib Road Unchangeable: Danesh," *The Kabul Times*, November 24, 2014, http://bit.ly/2faOTmf; Zafar Shah Ruyi, "Janjal-i Taza Dar Mavrid-i Jadah-i Pul-i Sukhtah Ila Dar al-Aman," *Hasht-i Subh*, November 16, 2014, http://bit.ly/2gUqLEI.

way non-Hazaras rejected Katib's name on a street resembled the ways in which some white neighborhoods in the United States oppose renaming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr., a man whose name is more readily associated with black culture and neighborhoods.[407] In the end, the Hazara activists installed a small, homemade street sign on the road. A local businessman, then, installed a huge billboard next to it with Katib's photo on it and the following text in Pashto, "Fayz Muhammad Katib Road," and another text in Dari: "Welcome to Fayz Muhammad Katib Road." As of 2019, the billboard still stands and the city has not yet returned the official street sign.

When place names turn into commodities, they can be stolen—like commodities. Place names are public properties and the government owns them. In a weak state, like Afghanistan, where the government is incapable of guarding public properties, people plunder place names with impunity. Activist groups of all stripes occasionally install unauthorized names on streets honoring their favored causes or persons. A recent example is Farkhundah Street, named after a woman who was beaten and lynched by a mob on the street after being falsely accused of burning the Quran. Her brutal death shocked many Kabul residents, who staged a protest demonstration on 24 March 2015. After the demonstration, at night, a group of men installed a new sign on the street where Farkhunah was killed.[408] Another example would be the Bacha Khan Street sign in Kabul installed by Ismaʿil Yun, a nationalist Pashtun politician. The hand-painted sign reads, in Pashtu, "The Pride of Afghan Bacha Khan Street," honoring the Pakistani

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[407] Derek H. Alderman, "Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr within the African American Community," *Area.* 35, no. 2 (2003): 164.

[408] Ali M. Latifi, "Afghan Marchers Demand Justice for Woman Killed by Mob," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/world/afghanistan-pakistan/la-fg-afghanistan-womans-killing-protest-20150324-story.html.

Pashtun who advocated for an independent Pashtunistan. The name of Yun's political party is placed at the bottom: "Milli Tahrik" (National Movement.) He has also installed a similar sign for Pashtunistan Street after its previous sign was removed by non-Pashtuns.

The municipality has so far turned a blind eye to name changing of this sort, as Pashtun nationalists hold a prominent role in the government. So do the Tajiks, who recently installed, again at night, new place names on two roundabouts in north Kabul. On 8 September 2015, a group of ethnic Tajiks renamed the Lab-i Jar roundabout in Khayr Khanah area after Habib Allah Kalakani. Kalakani, known as Bachah-i Saqaw, "son of the water-carrier," was a Tajik rebel who dethroned the modernist king Aman Allah Khan in 1929, for which some Tajiks consider him a hero and the rest, a criminal.[409] The other roundabout renamed was near the Salim Karavan apartment blocks, which was renamed after Atta Muhammad Nur, the governor of Balk province, a Tajik warlord who was still in office.[410]

Online, user-generated cartographic tools such as Google Maps and OpenStreetMap have also provided a site for people to appropriate the symbolic capital of toponyms. There are street names on these maps that do not exist on real streets. As an example, there is a road called Tajikan ("The Tajiks") on Google Maps in north Kabul. The real road does not have any street sign, but locals call it Jadah-i Rusi ("Russian Road"). The Great Masʿud Road, discussed earlier, is a controversial one on Google Maps, where it has four different names: Masʿud Rd., Sihat-i ʿAmmah Rd., Maydan-i Havayi Rd., and Service Rd. The names Sihat-i ʿAmmah ("Public Health") and Maydan-i Havayi ("Airport") are the folkloric names, as one end

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[409] "Char-Rahi Khayr Khanah Ba Nam-i Kalakani Shud," Afghan Paper, September 10, 2015, http://bit.ly/2wRJDgA.

[410] Baktash Noorzad, Facebook, September 9, 2015, http://bit.ly/2gTWVUk (archived page.)

of the road is connected to the Kabul airport and the other to the Ministry of Public Health. The Service Rd. on the map is an English mistake, as it should be the Bus Lane. In 2013, Apple's Maps application, which was based on OpenStreetMap, a crowdsourced online map, had also problems. Someone, for instance, had renamed a street in Kabul known as Guzargah to "Bad Monkey."[411]

It took 13 years before the post-Taliban Afghan government made a systematic effort to use street names for ordering the city. After many sporadic talks here and there, in 2014, a Commission for Street Naming was formed, chaired by the Minister of Information and Culture, to administer place naming in the capital. The Commission finalized a list of street names and installed signs on some of the Kabul streets. The list, which contains 181 names, showed a significant shift from the Pashtun nationalist names of the pre-2001 era. Of the twenty-two municipal districts of Kabul, places only in thirteen districts were named or renamed (for unclear reasons, Districts 1, 13, 14, and 17–22 were not included). Although Pashtun names were still considerable in the new list, they were not the majority. Most of the names belonged to long-dead poets, saints, Sufis, and sages from Afghanistan and the Persianate region (many of them known only to literary scholars).

Influenced by the dominant presence of international community in all aspects of Afghan public life since 2001, some foreign nationals were also recognized in the new street names, including Abraham Lincoln, Goethe, Ataturk, and Indira Gandhi (the name of Malik Fahad, a Saudi king, was struck out with a pen in the final document). This was one of the ways that the

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[411] Will Oremus, "Major Afghanistan Streets Renamed 'Bad Monkey' and 'Hillbilly Hameed' by Apple Maps," *Slate*, January 15, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2013/01/15/apple_maps_fails_major_afghanistan_streets_renamed_bad_monkey_and_hillbilly.html.

state tried to look committed to democratic principles and cosmopolitan culture so to keep its international revenue streams running. The same was true for names in reference to civic values promoted by international nongovernmental organizations in the post-2001 era: Azadi (Freedom), Kargar (Worker), Qurbaniyan-i Jang (War Victims), Azadiy-i Bayan (Freedom of Expression), Mashrutiyat (Constitutional Movement), Qanun-i Asasi (Constitution), Istiqlal (Independence), and Dimukrasi (Democracy). The list was approved by the Minister of Information and Culture, Makhdum Rahin, on 8 August 2014. He added on the margins: "This is very good. I only did not recognize Khan Pupalzai. The rest is totally appropriate. I hope the signs get installed soon."[412] The street names, as mentioned, covered only a portion of the city and still most of Kabul streets, particularly in the informal settlements, remain unnamed.

In 2011, American advisors, realizing the inability of Kabul Municipality to install street signs on city streets, came up with a novel plan: outsourcing the job to the private sector. In order to increase municipal revenue and standardize street addressing in the city, they advised Kabul Municipality to hire a private company to install street signs and, in return, allow it to advertise on them.[413] As a result, Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC) signed an agreement with the Kabul Municipality to install all city street signs within two years in exchange for placing its logo on the signs. In the signing ceremony, the Kabul mayor, Yunos Nawandish, held a prototype sign that was a gray metal plate with a street name and house numbers on it and a small AWCC logo placed on the right side of the sign.[414] When the company

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[412] Fihrist-i nam-guzariy-i jadah-ha, 17 Asad 1393/August 8, 2014, Kabul: Kabul Municipality, 19.

[413] "White Paper: Kabul Municipality New Revenue Review" (Kabul: United States Agency for International Development, October 2, 2013), 7, https://goo.gl/TTt5cJ.

[414] Muhammad Hasan Khitab, "Sharvali: Tamam-i Khanah-Ha va Kuchah-Hay-i Kabul Daray-i Adras va Numarat Mishavand," Pajhwok News Agency, December 28, 2011, http://www.pajhwok.com/en/node/346351.

started the work, they instead installed large orange and white street signs (the company colors) with a big AWCC logo at the bottom. The signs look like AWCC posters from a distance. After a pilot phase in District 10, the company abandoned the plan and the municipality did not follow up. Some of the signs, now worn off, could still be spotted in parts of Kabul.

HOUSE NUMBERING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In the post-Taliban era, the government mostly saw the street sign as a resource of symbolic capital that could be employed as a political gift to this or that group, not as a technology of calculation, control, and governance. As a result, street names, not house numbers, were the objects of everyone's desire. The city, however, was in need of house numbers. The residents and, in particular, the large army of western aid workers, contractors, soldiers, state-building advisors, journalists, and spies needed to find their way around in the ever-growing city. In the first year of the US occupation, while the city was still laying in ruins, a small step was taken towards organizing the information related to Kabul's geographical order. The initiative, a directory produced by Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), was led not by Afghans, but by the newly-arrived Westerners who were already accustomed to ordered cities and organized information who found Kabul's chaos too much to handle.

In 2002, AREU published the *A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance*, which was a handbook with practical information about the country.[415] It included a directory of government and non-government organizations in Kabul with their addresses. The guide has been updated almost every year with new information that various organizations voluntarily provide. The

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[415] *The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2002).

addresses used were sometimes vague and sometimes helpful but because of lack of standardization, even places that had street names and house numbers had to provide other information such as landmarks to help people find them.[416] Although the *A to Z Guide* was not precisely a city directory, it could have been one. In the United States and Canada, it was the private city directory publishers that compiled information about residents and businesses of each city and helped standardize street addressing in cities. They were probably the first search engines of locative information. AREU's initiative remained focused on aid agencies and has been serving that community well.

Although no proper city-wide directory has been published in Kabul, at least two companies have experimented with compiling a Kabul business directory. In 2017, a private advertisement company, Chihilchiragh, published a business directory called *Yellow Pages Afghanistan*. It was not related to the international Yellow Pages and only used their name and logo, without authorization. The Afghan Yellow Pages made a website, too, where it used Google Maps to display information about businesses. The company shut down both the print and online directories after a year. It was the second time a Yellow Pages emerged in Kabul. A few years ago MOBY Group, a large media company, made an effort to publish a *YellowPages Afghanistan* but it failed. The emergence of the second Afghan Yellow Pages coincided with an announcement from the original company that after 50 years it will no longer publish the print version of the famous yellow book.[417]

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[416] One organization, Mine Clearance and Planning Agency, for instance, has the following as its address: "Hs. 5, on the left, Shirkat Street Darulaman Main Road Opposite Habibiyah High School." See, *The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2011), 188.

[417] Dearbail Jordan, "Yellow Pages to Stop Printing Directory after 51-Year Run," *BBC News*, September 1, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/business-41125865.

These guides, even if they had succeeded, would not have been able to solve the problem of unnamed streets and unnumbered houses in Kabul. It would take a more fundamental approach to solve that problem in a sustainable way. At the heart of Kabul's lack of addressing lies the murky issue of property rights. The Kabul Municipality has not yet been able to register all the properties of the city and issue formal land titles. That is why much of the city is looted by warlords and fighting over ownership is the most common form of land dispute in the country.[418] It would be difficult to implement a standardized and well-maintained street addressing system without first a formal property registration system in place. In order to address that issue and get a sense of Kabul's properties, the Afghan government has recently decided to use geospatial technology.

The project, called City for All, is funded by foreign donors and is run by UN-Habitat. It aims to count every house in Kabul in order to generate numerical data on the city's properties for fighting land disputes, better taxation, and other government functions. A team of surveyors and GIS experts uses high-resolution satellite imageries to manually count houses and then visit sites to verify the information. This ambitious project would allow the government to practice policing and increase its tax revenue and the data generated may also help the city to end the lack of a street addressing system. The Afghan president Ashraf Ghani is personally interested in this project, talking about it on several occasions. The City for All project wishes to number all houses in Kabul and then, with cooperation from Google, load the data on Google Maps to help people find addresses instantly. There is also another plan to build a mobile application that

[418] Conor Foley, "Housing, Land, and Property Restitution Rights in Afghanistan," in *Housing, Land, and Property Rights in Post-Conflict United Nations and Other Peace Operations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 141–42. Also see, Colin Deschamps and Alan Roe, "Land Conflict in Afghanistan: Building Capacity to Address Vulnerability" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009).

would work offline so those who cannot afford the overpriced Afghan internet could use the navigation technology too.[419]

The UN-Habitat is not the first organization that has been involved with a Kabul addressing system. In the past 16 years, several attempts have been made to solve the issue and each has resulted in failure—much like the efforts made in the previous century. A few years earlier, a French NGO received funding to number Kabul houses. It began its pilot project with numbering houses in district 4 but it never went beyond that. That project, for the first time in Kabul, implemented the odd/even system of numbering.[420] Other numbered areas in Kabul are inconsistent and do not follow a system. They are mostly counter-clockwise such as the apartment blocks in the newly-built Shahrak-i Imarat (Emirates Township.) Afghanistan is now where the European cities were in the 19th century when inconsistency in house numbers made address finding difficult. When a government cannot properly number blocks of apartments that are clearly built in a grid layout, how could it number informal ghettos and hillside settlements? According to one engineer, blocks are numbered based on the numbers that exist in master plans, which traditionally do not use an odd/even system.[421] Master plans of townships, as designed by

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[419] Interview with ʿAbd al-Jalil Sultani, Director, Directorate of Publications, Kabul Municipality (Kabul, 16 June 2017).

[420] Interview with ʿAbd al-Wasiʿ Kuhi, Engineer, Directorate of Planning, Kabul Municipality (Kabul, 21 June 2016.) He did not remember the name of the French NGO or the exact date the program was launched.

[421] Apartment blocks in Sanayi Ghaznavi, too, which is the largest housing construction in Afghanistan, are just numbered consecutively counter-clockwise—not in the standard even/odd system. Interview with Javad Fayyaz, Sales Manager, Residential and Commercial Apartments, House Building Corporation (Tasaddiy-i Khanah Sazi), Ministry of Urban Development Affairs (Kabul, 7 June 2017.)

municipal engineers, use consecutive numbers for all the plots of land with no regard to street addressing.[422]

In 2009, the United States army, too, got involved in the governance of Kabul—from the air. The task of policing and fighting terrorists required the use of technologies of location information that were absent in Afghanistan. When they had no access to the land because of security, they went up in the air to govern the Afghan capital. In was sometime in 2009 when a giant balloon appeared in the Kabul sky. Nobody knew what it was or what it did. It was just before the presidential elections and one blogger in Kabul mockingly called it the "balloon of democracy." He did not know exactly what it was but his poetic speculations were close to the real thing:

The balloon that these days flies in Kabul's sad and sorrowful sky, and with a cold stare looks down on the city's ruins, is thoughtfully and silently devouring everything from above. The balloon knows that the destiny is already made and laughs at the naiveté of all these people who will go to polling stations tomorrow. Everything is apparent in the suspicious silence of this balloon. It doesn't talk, it doesn't broadcast images. The balloon is a treasure of secrets, eating up all the secrets of the city and sends them to far away archives and never spills what it carries inside. You find rarely a person who doesn't ask: "What is that thing that flies over Kabul?" No one knows the definite answer. It has gone up there to show the absurdity of the game known as Afghan democracy. The empty belly of this hallow bird that has appeared like a monster over Kabul will never get full.

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[422] Detailed Plan (*pilan-i tafsili*), Puruzhah-i Qalʿah-i Zaman Khan (1381/2002). Directorate of Planning, Kabul Municipality.

This balloon is the sleazy, the insatiable and, the same time, the anxious eye of Power. An eye that doesn't blink, an eye that its pupil is ruthlessly hostile and even the most private moments of the people of the city are not safe from its gaze. This balloon that is sent up there by ISAF to control the security of Kabul, is, in fact, a one-way stare of the behind-the-scenes showrunners who see without being seen. It is the eye of those who, before finishing their cigarette or their drink, have already made the destiny of this people, this city, and this game.[423]

The speculation of the skeptic writer was not very far off. The balloon, indeed, was a surveillance bird, operated by the American army. The blimp is not the only surveillance technology the Americans use in Afghanistan—they use also an NSA technology to record all telephone calls in the country.[424] However, the blimp is the most prominent and obvious location-identification tool that they operate in Kabul for surveillance purposes. While house numbers, the fundamental infrastructure of surveillance, do not exist in Kabul, "the balloon of democracy," as called by Asad Buda, could do the job. We do not know whether the information it gathers is also shared with the Afghan government and therefore how useful it is beyond surveillance.

In the years since 2001, or the American era, the blame for the failure to implement a standardized addressing system in Kabul should not be placed only on the Afghan government, despite their being the primary culprit. In this era, the job of governance was outsourced to

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[423] Asad Buda, "Balun-i Dimukrasi," Jumhuriy-i Sukut, August 18, 2009, http://bit.ly/2whRBMB.

[424] Denver Nicks, "WikiLeaks Claims Afghanistan Under NSA Surveillance," *Time*, May 23, 2014, http://time.com/109853/wikileaks-afghanistan-under-nsa-surveillance/.

countless non-governmental organizations that flocked to Kabul after the invasion. The policy the Americans were pursuing did not give much value to state-building or state-operated service delivery. Some of these non-state entities took leading roles in urban governance, among other sectors. This is the main reason that despite sporadic efforts by this or that organization, the Afghan capital is still in need of named streets and numbered houses. In this era, capital or expertise was not the main problem, but lack of attention to strengthening state institutions and helping them use the technologies they needed—such as the street signs—to function efficiently.

On 11 August 2017, *The New York Times* published a story about the struggles of a Kabul postman in delivering mail in the city. The *Times* reporter followed the mailman, Muhammad Rahim Khaksar, for a day, as he spent more than one hour on his bike to finally find the address for a letter sent from Sweden to "Atta Mohammed, next to Sajadee Mosque." He had to ask shopkeepers, street kids, and check mosque ledgers to find that person. "He is a detective on a bike," the reporter described him.[425] On social media, many people shared the story expressing amusement, unbelief, or frustration. Christina Lamb, a veteran British journalist, shared her own experience about a time when she sent a letter to Kabul to be delivered to the former Afghan president, Hamid Karzai. The letter came back to her to London with the label "Addressee Unknown."[426] The Afghan post office has a form label that it attaches to letters it cannot deliver—there must be a lot of them. The paper slip has five options that the postman can check: "Unknown," "Refused," "Gone away," "Unclaimed," and "Insufficient Address." In a

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[425] Fahim Abed, "The Mailman of Kabul," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/11/world/asia/kabul-afghanistan-mail-postman.html.

[426] Christina Lamb, Twitter, August 11, 2017, 2:51 PM. https://twitter.com/christinalamb/status/896081707438186497

way, all the five options mean the same thing: this town does not have proper street signs. And it badly needs them.

The house number, a simple 18th-century technology, has yet to fully arrive in the Afghan capital three centuries after it was invented. Thrones were lost, coups were staged, wars were fought, and everything in the country went through transformative changes in long years of war and longer years of peace, but still the streets of the capital remained unnamed and houses remained unnumbered. All the changes have turned the Kabul of today into a different beast, with little resemblance to the provincial town it once was. Despite all the changes on the surface, such as the dazzling population increase and the city's vertical and horizontal expansion, the postman still has to find a house, or a shop, with nothing but a vague name of a person and the name of a neighborhood in a city of countless winding alleys. This information failure is one of the key symptoms of state failure in Afghanistan. The information failure, however, is not only geographical but it includes population information, too, as discussed in the previous chapter. In the next chapter, we will examine another form of information failure: the problem of asymmetric information in the market. In other words, the first chapter examined the identification of people, this chapter was on the identification of places, and the next one explores the identification of things.

Chapter 3

The Price Tag: On Technologies of Trust

In 1924, Dario Piperno, an Italian engineer in Kabul, fell victim to the Afghan culture of commercial exchange, which was oral, unreliable, and prone to conflicts. His story, which will be discussed here, shows the extent to which the methods of communicating information during a value exchange affect the society and the economy at large. In the Afghan bazaar, access to reliable information, such as the price or the quality of a good, was hard to obtain and every transaction involved high risks. This was why you could not function as a person in Afghanistan if you did not know how to haggle. Haggling was one of the most important social skills a child

needed to develop before becoming a responsible adult. (The other important social skill was learning how to bribe officials, which itself was a form of haggling.) Purchasing something from a shop in Kabul was a theatrical ritual that required the ability to interpret the hidden meanings of words and read subtle gestures. It resembled a mind game that you almost always lost. If you were a foreigner, or a villager, you could not even think of winning this game. "How hateful is this bargaining in Afghanistan," you might cry—as did Emil Trinkler, a frustrated German geologist in Kabul in 1924.[427] He managed to restrain his frustrations, but the ill-tempered Italian, Dario Piperno, could not. One day at the post office, he got in a simple fight over a bargaining matter and, from there, things went sideways.

The Piperno incident shocked the European expatriates of Kabul and briefly tainted Amir Aman Allah Khan's relationship with Prime Minister Mussolini of Italy. The Afghan culture of exchange negotiation, admittedly, could infuriate any Western new-comer. In Piperno's case, however, his "methods of dealing with Orientals," as a British official in Kabul put it, were a bit heavy-handed. Once he threw an employee of the Afghan Foreign Ministry onto the street for saying something rude to one of his friends. His fight at the post office, therefore, was not very surprising. Piperno, along with some other Italians, were there to redirect a letter to another Italian in the city of Jalalabad. The postal clerk asked for an additional fee. The Italians refused to pay. Then, instead of haggling, as it was expected from the Afghan side, Piperno started to beat the clerk with a stick. A fight broke out that involved the Italian group, several postal

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[427] Trinkler, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*, 118.

employees, and some German bystanders who joined in to defend their fellow Europeans. The brawl stopped only after the police intervened.[428]

On 27 July 1924, the Kabul police went after Piperno to take him to the police station for questioning. The Italian man resisted as he did not want to be paraded on the streets like a prisoner. He went inside his room and locked the door. The police kept asking him to come out and Piperno, losing his temper, shot through the wooden door and killed a police officer on the other side. He was eventually brought to the police station. Accused of murder, he was put on trial in January 1925. At the court, where other Italian expatriates attended too, the judge sentenced him to death. According to an Afghan witness, the announcement shocked the Italians so much that one of them, Giuseppe Bernardi, turned pale and started shaking, "as if he, too, was about to be executed."[429] At the time most "oriental" countries, like Persia, were governed by the capitulation regime, by which Europeans could not be charged for committing any crime, including murder, in those countries. Afghanistan did not have such an agreement with European powers. The announcement, therefore, was truly shocking news for Europeans of Kabul.

The court, according to Islamic rules, handed Piperno to the family of Muhammad Yasin, the slain police officer, to perform the execution. The Italians, however, managed to get the

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[428] "Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan: Part 4 (1924)," The National Archives, London, UK (hereafter, TNA). FO 402/4, 35. The account is based on information provided to the British Legation by S. Francescangeli, an Italian, who was present at the post office brawl. The official Afghan newspaper, too, reported the incident almost similarly and called Piperno a "violent man." See, *Aman-i Afghan* (*AA,* hereafter), 11 Jawza 1304/1 June 1925, 6.

[429] ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, *Saltanat-i Aman Allah Shah va Istiqlal-i Mujaddad-i Afghanistan*, vol. 2 (Kandahar: ʿAllamah Rashad Akadimi, 2017), 272. The author does not cite a source for this but, as it is the case with a good portion of this book, it might be from a newspaper from that era.

family's forgiveness after paying them the *diyah*, or bloodwite. Piperno survived but the state put him back in jail until the government's case against him, too, was settled.[430] After a few months of jail time, Piperno became impatient and in late March 1925 found a way to bribe the guards and run away.[431] As a fugitive on the road, the Italian engineer was penniless, hungry, and exhausted. He initially wanted to cross the Afghan border into Soviet Central Asia, but mid-way there he decided, instead, to surrender himself to the Afghan officials. He also thought, by then, the Italian diplomats must have cleared his case so it was safe to return. He was brought back to Kabul and put back in jail. This time, Afghans wasted little time and secretly hanged him on 27 May 1925, without even notifying the Italian legation.[432]

Dario Piperno's case brought the Afghan government under much criticism. In response, the official newspaper defended the court. On one occasion, it published a horrific story about the lynching of a black man in the US, under the title: "Listen! What the pseudo-civilized say and what they do. Lawlessness in America." Based on this incident, which happened in Charleston, South Carolina, the newspaper concluded: "The pseudo-civilized call us, the Easterners, crazy and our punishments, which are legal and fit our people's culture, savagery, but they themselves would do anything when they can."[433]

The tragic story of Dario Piperno is, of course, an extreme example of a person losing his mind—and his life—over the way transactions were practiced in Afghanistan. Twice he fell

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[430] *AA*, 11 Jawza 1304/1 June 1925, 6; Trinkler, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*, 202–4.

[431] According to some at the time, his "escape" was arranged by the Afghan government in order to put an end to an embarrassing situation. "Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan: Part 5 (1925)," TNA, FO 402/5, 26.

[432] *AA*, 11 Jawza 1304/1 June 1925, 6; Trinkler, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*, 202–4.; "A précis on Afghan affairs from February 1919 to September 1927." BL, IOR/R/12/LIB/107, 158-161.

[433] *AA*, 20 Dalv 1303/2 February 1925, 2.

victim to a poorly-performed transaction: once at the post office and then at the court. At the post office, stamps carried fixed prices, but apparently, it was not enough to ensure a smooth exchange.[434] The post office was corrupt like all government offices, which meant haggling was a routine practice. Delivery men, for example, would ask letter receivers, too, for payments. This was why people had to write "fee is paid" (*mahsul dadah shud*) on the envelope in order to let the receiver know not to pay again if the postman asked for money.[435] At the court, however, the transaction was worse: the Italians paid the victim's family to save Piperno's life and still the man was hanged. To put this in bazaar terms, the miscarriage of justice was a form of fraudulent exchange, in which the buyer did not get what he paid for.[436]

When there are no fixed prices, transactions will suffer from conflicts. The fixed price usually means the written price—something that assures customers that they will not be subject to arbitrary decisions and the displayed price will be applied to everyone regardless of their backgrounds. Therefore, it makes it possible to predict and calculate the cost of an exchange. Predictability means security. In Piperno's case, the Afghan government behaved arbitrarily and this was why almost every Italian in Kabul left the city after that incident. In 1924, there were 71

[434] We should note that Afghan government employees have little respect for written prices. The price on the national identity card, for instance, is 10 Afghanis but the clerks issuing it usually ask for 30 Afghanis or more. Few people can object to such demands as they are not in a position to haggle. I did not haggle in 2016 when I got a second copy of my identity document from the Ministry of Interior in Kabul.

[435] A letter addressed to Muhammad Bakhsh and Muhammad Siddiq in Kabul (n.d., c. 1881-1890). Private collection of Namatullah Kadrie (Australia). For more examples, see David Feldman SA's Afghanistan collection catalog, available online: bit.ly/2H4hZBZ.

[436] After some pressure from the Italian government, which included stopping a £25,000 worth of Afghan cargo in Europe, the Afghan government eventually admitted its fault and offered an official apology to the Italian government and paid a £6,000 fine, which part of it was for Piperno's family. BL, IOR/R/12/LIB/107, 159-160.

Italians in Kabul, mostly working for the Afghan government, and after the Piperno's case, only 8 remained in the city and the rest left the country.[437] In addition to Piperno's case, one Italian cited other factors for mass departure that included "not being paid regularly" and being "ousted from their jobs in favour of Germans," which both show the arbitrariness of the Afghan contracts that made fair transactions impossible.[438] The Italians, in other words, could not predict the way the Afghan state would behave in the future and that was why they left.

In the economy at large, the fixed price means the written law—as opposed to the personal feelings of this or that bureaucrat. The written law ideally functions as a price tag, allowing investors to calculate the transaction costs of running a business in a country. In countries without the rule of law, governments sometimes offer incentives such as low tax rates, affordable real estate, and cheap labor and still cannot attract foreign investors. Investors refuse such opportunities not because the transaction costs in those countries are high, but because they are unpredictable. Predictability allows you to do the cost-benefit calculation on every decision you make. If you know the cost, you can predict the consequences of a decision. If the cost is not known, you will live in constant uncertainty. And if there is one thing that discourages transactions the most, and cripples the market instantly, it is uncertainty.

This chapter explores the price tag in order to question the broader issue of trust in cooperative exchange. Price is the key information in every exchange and the way this information is communicated determines how the economy, the society, and the state in each country behaves. Purchasing a shirt from a store, paying for a service such as a cab ride, or

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[437] BL, IOR/R/12/LIB/107, 161.

[438] TNA, FO 402/4, 35. For more on Piperno's story see also, May Schinasi, "Italie-Afghanistan 1921-1941*," AION* 47 no. 2 (1987): 131-151.

paying the tax you owe to the government, all involve a price. If the information about the price of a good, a service, or a tax is set orally it means it is arbitrary and vulnerable to fraud. If the price information is fixed, written, and transparent it means transactions are easy, fast, and secure because it is already known to both parties before the moment of exchange. I look at the price tag from a media studies perspective with an emphasis on the material history of this artifact. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not only to provide a history of this medium, per se, but the history of how price information is communicated and the way different modes of communicating it affect the market, the state, and the society.

I call the price tag a technology of trust because it produces trust in two fundamental areas: The seller publicly advertises his price only when the price is competitive in the market. Therefore, the price tag helps buyers trust the advertised price as the market price and not feel exploited after the exchange. The price tag also reassures everyone that they are treated equally as the posted price is fixed for everyone regardless of their relationship to the seller. The second area in which the price tag produces trust is in the management of the business: the written price suggests that there is a bureaucracy behind the business involving systematic paperwork to manage the inventory. The paper-based regime of control allows the owner to trust strangers in running the business. In traditional businesses where there is no paper-based control mechanism, only the owner and their family members could run the business because only they had the authority to negotiate the price and offer discounts if they wished. The introduction of fixed price tags allowed businesses to hire strangers with little knowledge of the inventory to manage the shop. As a result, the price tag is a medium that produces trust between the buyer and the seller and also between the business owners and those who work for them.

Trusting someone is trusting the information that the person presents. Trust, I argue, is inherently about information. It is critical, therefore, to examine the technologies that we use to communicate the information (price and other information) during a value exchange in order to understand how trust works. I am aware that trust is a complex phenomenon and could not be reduced to the price tag—or to the market alone. In a recent interview, the behavioral scientist, David Halpern, called it *"the dark matter of the economy and society,"* something that matters greatly but we do not know about it much.[439] The value exchange is the key arena where one can measure the extent of trust in society. Understanding the price tag, as I will show here, will help us get a better idea of how trust, or lack thereof, works in the economic and political life of a society.

TRUSTING STRANGERS: THE ECONOMICS OF INFORMATION

In the open market trust is the most valuable commodity. It is something that you cannot purchase or construct. It is like credit and grows over time.[440] In colloquial Persian, the same word, *iʿtibar*, applies to both "trust" and "credit." In the lending market, credit and trust are different sides of the same coin, as the word "creditworthy" simply means trustworthy: can we trust this person with our money? Trust, as a norm, only means trust between strangers, otherwise, trust among relatives alone would not translate into a culture of cooperation on a larger scale. In a classic study of a village in southern Italy, sociologist Edward Banfield noticed

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[439] Stephen J. Dubner, "Trust Me," Freakonomics, November 10, 2016, http://freakonomics.com/podcast/trust-me/.

[440] Ian Klaus, *Forging Capitalism: Rogues, Swindlers, Frauds, and the Rise of Modern Finance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 23.

that the villagers trusted immediate family members but took advantage of everyone else. He found that "the extreme poverty and backwardness" of the village was partly linked to the "inability of the villagers to act together for their common good."[441] In communities where trust level is low, business activity is also low. On the other hand, commercial exchange increases in places where people trust each other.

Early theorists of capitalism highlighted the civilizing force of commercial exchange. Value exchange, they argued, was a big part of the daily life and the way people conducted those transactions influenced the whole society. Adam Smith, for instance, believed in the moral virtues of the market and how it could help members of the society to adopt the rules of commercial exchange—that ideally were trust and honesty—in their personal and social lives:

> The man who associates chiefly with the wise and the virtuous, though he may not himself become either wise or virtuous, cannot help conceiving a certain respect at least for wisdom and virtue; and the man who associates chiefly with the profligate and the dissolute, though he may not himself become profligate and dissolute, must soon lose, at least, all his original abhorrence of profligacy and dissolution of manners.[442]

Trust, much like other commodities, is plentiful in some countries and scarce in others. Social scientists talk about high trust and low trust societies. A high level of trust in a society, in the economic sphere, reduces the cost of transactions and in the political sphere, allows the

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[441] Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958), 9–10.

[442] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: J. Richardson, 1822), 261. Also see, Klaus, *Forging Capitalism*, 9–25.

formation of voluntary associations, which is a fundamental feature of democratic governance.[443]

In the economic sphere, trust makes it possible for members of the market to form large-scale business organizations, as opposed to markets dominated by small family businesses.[444] Large businesses are the main driving force of economic growth. Contrary to politicians who romanticize small businesses and mom and pop shops during election times, they contribute little to the economy. It is the large businesses that employ people, innovate, produce, consume, and impact economies on national and international scales.[445] The association of trust and large businesses is the reason that some believe that countries with McDonald's do not go to war with each other.[446] This, rather wishful, idea means that McDonald's, or any other large business, would not take the risk of investing in low trust societies where transaction costs are unpredictable.

Trust is about information, a concept that long occupied "a slum dwelling in the town of economics," as George Stigler, a Nobel laureate in economics, observed about the marginal attention it received from his profession. He said that advertising, a branch of economics that dealt with information, was "treated with a hostility that economists normally reserve for tariffs or monopolists."[447] Since the 1960s, when he wrote about this topic, information has become a

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[443] Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital, Civil Society and Development," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2001): 7–20.

[444] Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital and the Global Economy," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 5 (1995): 89–103.

[445] Robert D. Atkinson and Michael Lind, *Big Is Beautiful: Debunking the Myth of Small Business* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 3–60.

[446] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000), 239.

[447] George J. Stigler, "The Economics of Information," *Journal of Political Economy* 69, no. 3 (1961): 213.

major area of research in economics as well as finance and business. Economists have given the information problem that we talk here a name: information asymmetry. It means a transaction where one of the parties has more information about the product than the other. Information asymmetry kills trust and discourages commercial exchange. This is, of course, a problem that extends beyond the retail market and involves every corner of the economy. In 2001, a Noble Prize was awarded to a group of economists who contributed to its theoretical development.[448]

Information asymmetry concerns both the information about the quality of the product and its price. In the US and Canada, this is not a widespread problem, but it prevails in certain sectors of the market. People do not like to engage in this type of exchange and sectors of the market that involve asymmetric information are usually not very well-liked (i.e. legal and medical services which do not advertise their fees and make it hard to assess their qualities.) People's loathing of information asymmetry, involving the quality, could also explain why they particularly dislike used car salesmen. This issue is discussed in a classic article on the "economic costs of dishonesty."[449] In the US, used car salesmen are famous for hiding information in order to make a sale. In 2017, one salesman earned nationwide praise for doing the opposite: He honestly shared all the information about a rusty old car he was trying to sell. In a salty language, he listed all the problems of the car and mentioned its $900 price in the ad. "No

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[448] Kristin Leutwyler, "Nobel Prize in Economics Awarded for Analyses of Markets with Asymmetric Information," *Scientific American*, October 12, 2001, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nobel-prize-in-economics/.

[449] George A. Akerlof, "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84, no. 3 (1970): 488–89.

I do not have any wiggle room," he said firmly about the price. "You can wiggle yo ass down to another dealership." His honesty earned internet fame—and a happy buyer.[450]

In the 19th century, information asymmetry was much prevalent in the US market. It was almost impossible to buy milk in America, to mention only one example. You did not know what you were paying for was milk, a mixture of water and milk, or worse, a mixture of water, chalk, flour, milk, and other white stuff.[451] The same was true in Britain.[452] It took decades until the state and the market realized that asymmetric information was bad for business. Today, dairy products and all other foods and drugs, contain honest labels, list of ingredients, dates of production and expiration. Customers have no reasons to doubt the information they read on food packages. Therefore, a long history of market fraud is behind the common American expression: "honesty is the best policy." In the US, there are laws forcing buyers and sellers to disclose all the information to each other about each transaction. There are also harsh punishments waiting for those who violate those laws. As an example: if you present false information to a bank, such as not disclosing all your debts, in order to secure a loan, you could spend up to 30 years in prison.[453]

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[450] Michelle Rennex, "People Are Obsessed With This Guy's Super-Honest Ad Trying To Sell His Car," BuzzFeed, February 6, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/michellerennex/people-are-obsessed-with-this-guys-ad-to-sell-his-shitty-car.

[451] Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 86–87.

[452] P. J. Atkins, "Sophistication Detected: Or, the Adulteration of the Milk Supply, 1850-1914," *Social History* 16, no. 3 (1991): 320.

[453] U.S. Code, Title 18, Section 1344, Bank Fraud (1990).

Print technology was crucial in the emergence of the uniformed price system, according to Marshall McLuhan. He argues that the "principles of continuity, uniformity, and repeatability," which are the basis of print, allowed the book to become "a uniformly priced commodity opening the door to price systems."[454] Price, he says, is a "visual technology" and as a result cannot take root in societies that lack literacy and numeracy.[455] James Carey, however, explains that it was the telegraph which helped the development of a price system in the American market. In the early 19th century, prices of the same goods were different from one city to the next because American cities were economically independent of each other and largely relied on local supply and demand. Some merchants, as a result, would use that price divergence to trade between markets to make a profit. The arrival of the telegraph in the mid-19th century changed all that by creating the condition for "perfect information"—when buyers and sellers are aware of all the prices in different markets.[456] In a larger scale, too, the price information communicated via the telegraph helped people trust strangers and take more risks, a critical requirement for economic growth. Compare this to the pre-telegraph era, when business was personal and was done through face to face communication or via mail among individuals who knew and trusted each other.[457]

Almost all the technologies of communication in the modern era, as McLuhan and Carey observed, have been designed to help us avoid communicating personally with another individual. This technological feature is more pronounced in the digital era when almost every

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[454] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 177.

[455] McLuhan, 137.

[456] James W. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," *Prospects* 8 (1983): 314–15.

[457] Carey, 306.

new mobile application offers us yet another opportunity to avoid interacting with others in a face to face manner. As a result, the consumers of today increasingly shop online and if they need to visit a physical store they chose places that are specially designed for people "who hate to talk to human beings."[458] Such customers will not be able to buy things at an Eastern bazaar where the prices are not already posted. In 2015, in New York City, a hotdog vendor sold Americans a taste of such bazaars: the vendor, Ahmed Mohammed, did not post the prices of his hotdogs on his cart, contrary to the municipal laws. As a result, for a hotdog and a soft drink that should not cost more than a few dollars, he would charge people up to $30, based on how exploitable they looked. After some complaints, and media coverage by local reporters, the city asked him to post his prices. This type of practice by food vendors, according to city officials, has led to several street fights between the vendors and the customers in New York City.[459]

THE INVENTION OF THE PRICE TAG

Price tags were invented in Britain, the home of capitalism. In a 1750 travel account, we learn about the "English art of ticketing the trumpery," something that the author, Henry Moses, says he did not see in Indian bazaars. He says English shopkeepers used "ticketing" only on certain display items that were placed behind the shop windows to attract the attention of pedestrians. It

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[458] BuzzFeed News, "The Shopping Experience For People Who Don't Like People," Youtube, March 2, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7PfJtkD3dc.

[459] Chris Sommerfeldt and Reuven Blau, "New York Food Cart Vendor Rips off Tourists with $30 Hot Dog, Soda," *New York Daily News*, May 20, 2015, http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/new-york-food-cart-vendor-charges-30-hot-dog-soda-article-1.2229665.

seems that they were far from systematic price tags and only functioned as window advertisements—part of a variety of other eye-catching window signs that announced things like that the owner was selling everything at "enormous sacrifice."[460] In the early 19th century, however, the use of price tags, or ticketing as they were called in Britain, earned greater popularity. The British were starting to get used to haggle-free shopping in their cities. The Indian bazaar, as a result, felt like a bigger culture shock for the British visitors, who now ruled the country. They knew it was hard to transform the whole bazaar but, at least, according to one Briton living in Calcutta who wrote to his local newspaper, there should be "a class of honest shop-keepers, from whom we could purchase common bazar articles without either haggling or being imposed upon."[461]

The British sometimes had to use a local to do their shopping, who would get a profit on all purchases. If a British man went to the bazaar himself, according to the author, "a scene of haggling and *beating down* commences on every separate article he buys."[462] And there was little chance he could come out as a winner: "he is probably very ignorant of the ordinary prices of half the things he wants, or of any temporary glut or scarcity which may affect their value." The only thing he knew was that "the shop keeper will always take half of what he asks at first."[463] Haggling still existed in small parts of the market in Britain too but the practice of "attaching tickets with the price marked on the articles themselves" was becoming increasingly common and you were able to enter a clothing store in big cities and "suit yourself both with respect to

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[460] Henry Moses, *Sketches of India: With Notes on the Seasons, Scenery, and Society of Bombay, Elephanta, and Salsette* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Company, 1750), 59.

[461] "Indo-British Shop Keepers," *The Calcutta Journal*, June 14, 1822, 622.

[462] "Indo-British Shop Keepers," 622. (Emphasis in original.)

[463] "Indo-British Shop Keepers," 622.

price and quality without asking a question."[464] The price tag, as the author suggests, was one of the first modern media technologies that allowed people to communicate without personally talking to each other. In 1822, in Glasgow, Scotland, a local paper reported that the rate of price tag adaptation was high but still some shopkeepers continued to stick to old traditions. Those who preferred haggling posted signs on their shop windows that said "the lowest price is asked at the first," in order to assure customers of their honesty. "This absurd course," the newspaper, however, pleaded "ought to be discouraged by all respectable dealers."[465]

It was the American capitalists who turned the price tag into an inseparable feature of modern retail, as we know it today. Price tags emerged as part of the bureaucratization of American commerce, a process that allowed businesses to grow large. Business historians have shown the way new modes of communication allowed the emergence of a paper-based regime of control and calculation that made it easy and secure to trust strangers. Up until 1850, most businesses in the US were small enterprises owned and operated by two or three members of a single family and involved little bureaucracy as owners trusted each other.[466] That era of American business is best described as "family capitalism."[467] In the period between 1850 and 1920, the new technologies of communication and transportation paved the ground for the expansion of businesses, a phenomenon that required systematic paperwork, done by professional managers, to control the affairs of the business from far away. An oral method of

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[464] "Indo-British Shop Keepers," 622.

[465] "Indo-British Shop Keepers," 623.

[466] Alfred D. Chandler, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1962), 19.

[467] Chandler, *The Visible Hand*, 9.

management was too arbitrary to take care of a large business. Bureaucracy, therefore, was the only tool that could handle the volume of information involved in a large enterprise.[468]

In 1848, the first "one-price policy" was introduced by Alexander Turney Stewart in New York City. Stewart was one of the pioneers of department stores, large retail shops that offered many goods and because of their size had to be administered by salaried managers. His technique soon spread out throughout the retail industry. The one-price policy was not a price tag but it was close. It did not mean that the prices were fixed and everyone was treated equally. It simply meant that sellers would offer a price and accept no haggling in order to speed up the exchange process. The price information was oral, and that was why a salesman would "estimate the purse of his customer" and offer different people different prices, for the same item, accordingly. The one-price policy, therefore, was a marketing trick to make people believe they were treated equally and fairly. One thing that Stewart is credited with inventing was "open entrance," which meant people could enter his stores and look at merchandise without the intention of buying any. "You may gaze upon a million dollars' worth of goods," he said, "and no man will interrupt either your meditation or your admiration." This did not exist before him.[469]

The person who really brought one-price policy, in the form of *written* price tags, to the retail scene was another department store millionaire, John Wanamaker, a marketing pioneer from Philadelphia. In 1911, John Wanamaker's company published a book on its 50th anniversary, offering a detailed account of its founder's pioneering achievements in the "applied

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[468] Chandler, *Strategy and Structure*, 20–23; Yates, *Control through Communication*, 1–6. On the bureaucratization of American business, see also, Beniger, *The Control Revolution*.

[469] Harry E. Resseguie, "Alexander Turney Stewart and the Development of the Department Store, 1823-1876," *The Business History Review* 39, no. 3 (1965): 309–11.

science of retailing."[470] He is rightly credited for the "commercial morality" of offering everyone the same fixed price by the systematic use of price tags.[471] He opened his first store, a clothing shop, on 8 April 1861. At the end of the first day, there was $24.67 in the cash register and he decided to spend $24 of it on the advertisement. Wanamaker was convinced that only with honest information could he succeed in bringing in more customers. The fixed price for each good was one of the key innovations that he brought to the field of persuasion.[472] (His other innovations were full-page ads and using only facts in his advertisement.)[473] His innovations were very quickly adopted by other retailers across the United States. In the 1880s, price tags became common in all parts of the country and stores, knowing how much people disliked haggling, would use that fact as the main selling point in their advertisements. In 1885, a small-town clothing store in Staunton, Virginia, advertised that "The One-Price System a Grand Success! THE OLD DODGE of asking $20 for a Suit of Clothing, and taking $8, is "Played Out." What the People want to-day is, FAIR, SQUARE, AND HONEST DEALINGS." The ad promised written price tags on all items: "Everything Marked in Plain Figures."[474]

In 1874, when Wanamaker's retail business was the largest in the US, he also offered a new innovation: return policy. He summarized his price and return guarantees in his "four cardinal points:"

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[470] *Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores: Jubilee Year 1861-1911* (Philadelphia, 1911), 81.

[471] *Golden Book*, 146.

[472] *Golden Book*, 126–28.

[473] *Golden Book*, 68, 102.

[474] *Staunton Spectator* (Staunton, Virginia), 29 July 1885, 4.

First — That the prices of our goods shall be as low as the same quality of material and manufacture are sold anywhere in the United States.

Second — That prices are precisely the same to everybody for same quality, on same day of purchase.

Third — That the quality of goods is as represented on printed labels.

Fourth — That the full amount of cash paid will be refunded, if customers find the articles unsatisfactory, and return them unworn and uninjured within ten days of date of purchase.[475]

The logic behind the return policy was to earn the trust of the customers and make them believe the information about the quality of an item written on its labels. "Absolute honesty" was his policy and he asked his employees to make sure marks are "genuinely true, and all statements made verbally, or in print, wholly accurate."[476] At the time, one of the main sources of distrust was the false information about the goods, their quality, and their origin that merchants used as a sales technique. "A foreign label," in Wanamaker stores, "is never used on domestic goods. Paris millinery and Paris lingerie come actually from Paris. London hats for men come from London."[477] The return policy, therefore, was also a managerial technique to discipline the staff in his stores to avoid giving false information about a product to make a sale: "It becomes impossible to give false representations to a customer if each article is liable to come back when the customer has examined it."[478] The return policy was a revolutionary idea in commercial

[475] *Golden Book*, 149–53.

[476] *Golden Book*, 157.

[477] *Golden Book*, 187.

[478] *Golden Book*, 109.

exchange as it reduced the risk of consumers almost to zero, something that allowed transactions to become less contentious and gave consumers more power. On the other hand, stores, too, attained something they badly needed: trust. The return policy made it possible to conduct a commercial exchange with information symmetry between both parties. Customers no longer had to feel exploited when they walked out of a shop. The era of shopping as a fun and leisure activity had begun.

How contentious was the practice of exchange in the American retail sector before the innovations, such as price tags and return policy, were introduced by department stores? Shopping was a violent ritual before the department store and a retail shop much resembled an "Oriental bazaar."[479] The American shopkeeper treated his store as "a trap to catch something from each who enters it."[480] It was impossible to enter a shop and not buy anything. "Shoppers entered stores at their peril, and it took courage to leave without buying, no matter how undesirable the goods." And if you said you were "just looking," you would be "viewed as trespassers."[481] In New York City, once, a young woman entered a store and browsed the items and found nothing interesting. She wanted to leave the place but "the shopkeeper barred the door," pressuring her to buy something first. She eventually "avoided a forced purchase by escaping through a rear window."[482] If a person decided to buy a product, it was also a painful process. Buying a pair of pants, after agreeing on its fabric and fit, would take up to two hours to settle the "nerve-testing struggle" over the price: "no merchant expected to get his 'asking price'

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[479] Resseguie, "Alexander Turney Stewart," 310–11.

[480] *Golden Book*, 137.

[481] *Golden Book*, 137.

[482] *Golden Book*, 139.

except from children and others too weak or ignorant to fight for their rights."[483] It was in this type of environment that Wanamaker's price tags appeared and, according to his own company, "was neither more nor less than the application to merchandising of the immortal note of equality sounded in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence."[484]

In early 20th century London, "free entrance" was still a foreign concept for store owners when Harry Gordon Selfridge, an American businessman, went there to establish a department store. In 1909, he opened Selfridges, a luxury store in central London, where he introduced American retail practices to the British market. Among them was the free entrance. In London at the time, if a shopper entered a store, "never for one moment was she left unattended by someone," noticed the American businessman. Once he experienced it himself in a "leading West End" store. He went inside and just walked around browsing products. A salesman kept following him and asking what he wanted. He intentionally refused to say what he wanted to purchase. "Sir," the salesmen finally told him, "if you will not tell me what you are here for, the best place for you is outside, and the quicker you 'op it the better!"[485] Selfridge's free entrance policy proved popular and other stores copied him. He wanted to introduce the principle of trust to British consumers by leaving them alone to walk around the store without buying anything. The policy, however, increased the problem of shoplifting but still, Selfridge remained loyal to his principle and continued to trust the customers. The local police in London accused him of "pandering to kleptomania" by not doing enough to prevent the problem.[486] But Selfridge viewed shoplifting as an investment for earning trust, a capital that was more valuable in the long run.

[483] *Golden Book*, 136.

[484] *Golden Book*, 145.

[485] Harry Gordon Selfridge, "Selling Selfridge," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 24, 1935, 53.

[486] Lindy Woodhead, *Shopping, Seduction & Mr. Selfridge* (New York: Random House, 2013), 109.

This was what American retailers had learned a long time ago and now they were busy testing another trust-earning idea: self-service. The new technique was invented in 1916 by Clarence Saunders, a man from Memphis, Tennessee, who first introduced it in his supermarket, Piggly Wiggly.[487] It proved very popular with customers and other stores soon followed suit. The rest is history.

GAME THEORY IN THE BAZAAR

The bazaar, despite its many shortcomings, is a functioning institution that is able to hold the economy of a low trust society together. As noted earlier, the biggest weakness of the bazaar is information asymmetry: a problem that keeps buyers particularly in the dark and puts sellers in an advantageous position. Buyers, for example, have to canvas the entire market to find out the true price of a good or a service, a time-consuming exercise that adds to transaction costs. Economists call this the "ascertainment of market price," and usually the easier this process the better is the market.[488] In a market such as the traditional bazaar where "ascertainment of market price" is marred with deception, secrecy, and dishonesty, buyers and sellers engage in negotiation strategies that could only be explained by Game Theory. This is a tool that can help us make sense of the chaotic Eastern bazaars, their spatial organization, and their pricing culture.

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[487] The self-service at the time meant customers had the freedom to explore the store and pick up the items they needed and present them at the cashier for check out. Prior to that, customers provided a list of items they needed and only a store employee was allowed to pick the goods. The Piggly Wiggly store trusted customers to handle the goods on their own at a time when there were no security cameras to watch their behaviors. Mike Freeman, "Clarence Saunders: The Piggly Wiggly Man," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1992): 161–69.

[488] Stigler, "The Economics of Information," 213.

Game Theory is the study of decision-making strategies by rational participants. It is defined as "an intellectual framework for examining what various parties to a decision should do given their possession of inadequate information and different objectives."[489] It has applications in various fields, but it is most useful in economics, where every transaction entails competitive cooperation. In the bazaar, sellers and buyers have competing interests: sellers want to get a good profit and buyers are interested in fulfilling a need. Buyers are in a disadvantageous position for two reasons: they suffer from asymmetric information because they do not access to the same information the sellers have and, as well, the risk involving the transaction is higher for them because there is usually no return policy. They take the risk of investing in a product that could be overpriced, wrongly-labeled, or both. Despite all these problems, both parties prefer to complete the transactions rather than let the bargaining fail.

In order to perform a successful exchange, bazaar sellers and buyers refrain from a zero-sum game and instead try to reach an agreement where both parties could benefit from the transaction. In Game Theory, reaching this point of shared benefit is called the Nash Equilibrium.[490] In the bazaar, a key strategy that produces Nash Equilibrium is the spatial organization of the shops within a town: sellers cluster together with their direct competitors in one place in order to allow buyers to canvas the market faster in search of the right price. This represents great cooperation offered by sellers and the best strategy that they could employ. On the surface, it makes no sense to have shops that sell the same things clustered together in one place. This spatial strategy is effective in places where trust does not exist in the market. In

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[489] Will Hutton, *The State We're In* (London: Vintage, 1996), 249.

[490] Charles A. Holt and Alvin E. Roth, "The Nash Equilibrium: A Perspective," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101, no. 12 (2004): 3999.

Kabul, for example, there are malls (called *market*) where all the shops sell the same things.[491] If you visit Nadir Pashtun Street, an electronic hub, for example, all the shops and malls on the street sell almost the same exact goods and none use price tags. Buyers have to walk from shop to shop and ask the price of the same good until they find what they could consider the market price. A municipal zoning official from the US or Canada, who carefully determines the density of commercial premises to maintain fair access and competition in their cities, would get confused seeing endless shops of the same kind attached to each other all in one spot.

How did the "search" for the market price actually look in the bazaar? It was an exhausting exercise, to say the least, and was carried out more widely if the article was a significant investment for the buyer. Angus Hamilton, a British journalist, who visited the Kabul bazaar in the early 20th century, paints a good picture of the buying ritual that still stands valid:

Customers sit down by the side of the merchant, examining and asking the value of his goods, praising certain pieces and decrying others, until conversation has worked round to the article which it is desired to buy. Ten times the price will be asked at first, perhaps haggled over with all sincerity, until, as the would-be purchaser rises to leave, a few rupees will be knocked off the figure which the vendor has been demanding. It is then prudent to leave, returning some other day to begin over again. The hours spent in an Oriental bazaar are of such supreme interest that they are sacrificed very willingly and are

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[491] Malls in Western cities, too, house several stores of the same goods side by side. Such stores, however, are usually from different brands and target different customer groups.

not easily forgotten. The setting of the scene is romantic, while the life of the city passes in endless, kaleidoscopic changes of character, of costume and of men and beasts.[492]

If sellers were scattered around town, it would cost buyers a great deal of money/time to canvas the entire market in search of the price. This spatial feature is so important in markets with structural asymmetric information that if a seller opens shop in a part of the city where there are no other competing sellers nearby, that seller is most likely to fail.[493] The reason for the failure is simple: buyers will not trust the price he offers and, unable to ascertain the price information by asking the neighboring competitors, they would rather travel to the main bazaar where there is a strip (*rastah*) of shops for every class of goods. The strategy of clustered location, therefore, helps the bazaar function despite the lack of advertised prices on the merchandise.

The only establishments that could survive as lone shops have fixed prices and offer a single good or a service. In Kabul, two such places are public baths and bakeries which are distributed around town serving specific areas with no need of competitors nearby as buyers trust their prices. Public baths and bakeries both provide criterial daily services. The weight and price of Kabul bread, which does not have much variety, are set by the municipality and the same is true for entrance fees of the public baths. No one negotiates prices in these two places. The prices in these two establishments change very infrequently and when they do the information spreads very quickly as people visit these two places on a daily basis. When the price

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[492] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 378–79. Also see, John Alfred Gray, *At the Court of the Amir: A Narrative* (London: McMillan and Co., 1901), 74.

[493] This was the opinion of a tea merchant in Kabul's Saray-i Chay Furushi (Tea Sellers' Sarai) where all the shops sell tea—to wholesale or retail clients. Interview with Janbaz Akbari, tea merchant, Saray-i Chay Furushi, Mandavi (Kabul, 23 June 2016.)

information is known by everyone there is a little friction during the exchange process. There are always, however, a number of other lone shops in a town that can manage to survive without having fixed prices or nearby competitors. They survive simply because they are located in areas where it would be more expensive for buyers to travel to the central bazaar for purchasing of the same good. Or, in other words, buyers in those areas have the luxury of valuing their time more than the price difference lost in the transaction in the lone shop.[494]

Lack of advertised prices helps sellers in one other crucial area too: competition. Secrecy is a key feature of the bazaar. You do not want your competitors to know your prices because that will allow them to outbid you during buyers' "searches." There were legendary rituals involving the way sellers communicated price information to buyers. According to an 18th-century Danish traveler, merchants in one Arab bazaar would conceal their hands in the corner of their dress and touch fingers and knuckles to negotiate prices without using words. All fingers were codified to indicate numerical values, helping negotiators to settle the deal with no need to open their mouths. They did this "not in order to conceal the mystery of their art, but simply in order to hide their dealings from onlookers."[495] Similarly, in Mongolia and China, according to one account, merchants would put their hands into the sleeves of each other and hold each other's hands. They would pull a finger to negotiate prices and the only words they would use were "no" and "done."[496]

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[494] Game Theory is the territory of economists and what I offered here was an ethnographic argument, free of formal mathematical models. For a more in-depth understanding of location strategies in retail, the extensive literature in marketing and business should be consulted.

[495] Georges Ifrah, *The Universal History of Numbers: From Prehistory to the Invention of the Computer* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 48.

[496] Ifrah, 49.

In Kabul, too, price information was sought after and whenever there was a bargain going on, a crowd of onlookers would gather to watch the proceeding. It resembled a competitive game, and much like watching a game, people waited to find out the winner and loser at the end. Some, however, would not just watch but also participate in negotiations. "Groups of idle but profoundly interested spectators," according to Hamilton's account, would gather around every bargaining in the Kabul bazaar. Some would ask the sellers the price they offered, the other would ask the buyer's offer, and some, hoping to get a commission either from the seller or the buyer, would "advise the customer upon the merits of the article he may have chosen or the sum he may have offered."[497] In a situation like that, "it is never wise to hurry transactions," because, according to the author, "time is of no value to the merchant, who regards the overtures with indifference."[498] Time was a cost that the buyer incurred.

Hamilton talks about the sellers' tendency to show little excitement during bargaining. This is, in fact, a negotiation strategy used by Kabuli merchants even today. They act annoyed when clients ask about the price of a good or request to examine an article. They use this strategy to somehow guilt shoppers into purchasing their goods and end their searches. In 1880, one British officer interpreted the apparent indifference of Kabuli merchants as "more European than the attitudes of the natives of India." The author saw merchants sitting in their shops "in easy Afghan attitudes" and "looking as if the advent of a customer would be a most unmitigated bore, and the necessity for running a bargain an evil to be discouraged."[499] Another British who lived in Kabul echoes this observation, saying the Hindu merchants in Kabul would use pleasantry to

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[497] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 379.

[498] Hamilton, 379.

[499] Sir T. H. Holdich, *The Indian Borderland, 1880-1900* (London: Methuen, 1901), 44.

charm customers but Afghan shopkeepers would not even say hello. They maintained an unfriendly attitude. They, for example, would not cut a piece of fabric with a yard or two more than what you wanted, just to make a sale. "Take the lot or leave it," they would tell the buyer.[500] Despite this type of conflict-laden transaction culture, buyers and sellers knew that they needed each other in the future. It was a great incentive that made them cooperate and settle their bargains and resolve their possible disputes.

In the 19th century United States, too, "each store carried but one line of goods," according to one account, "which increased the cost of distribution and the labor of shopping."[501] Soon, however, it all changed. Modern technologies of communication led to the creation of "perfect information" in the market and the rise of large department stores necessitated the use of a systemic inventory to manage the supply chain and pricing system. This process of bureaucratization of the retail industry made the commercial exchange impersonal, efficient, and trustworthy.[502] Today, in much of the developed world, you do not need to open your mouth in order to conduct a transaction. You pay at the cash register and walk out without haggling because, first, you trust that the price tag represents the market price of that item and second, you know that the cashier is most probably not the owner and does not have the authority to change the price. The cashier, on the other hand, knows that all transactions are recorded and the records of their transactions should pass the audits.

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[500] Gray, *At the Court of the Amir,* 73-74.

[501] *Golden Book*, 137.

[502] Eamonn J Walsh and Ingrid Jeacle, "The Taming of the Buyer: The Retail Inventory Method and the Early Twentieth Century Department Store," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 28, no. 7–8 (2003): 773–91.

In Afghanistan, little has changed and still, transactions are conducted the same way as they were done in the 19th century.[503] Much like in the past, the commercial exchange is conflict-full and the bazaar is filled with distrust and dishonesty. Secrecy is common and policing the bazaar is more difficult than ever. In the past, the state intervention in the bazaar was more widely practiced and setting prices was a government task. Today, however, now that Afghanistan is officially a free market economy the state does not intervene in fixing prices except for a select number of necessary goods and services. Policing the prices has always been a big part of managing commercial disputes and a key site of cooperation and conflict between the institutions of the bazaar and the state.

"THE CALCULATOR:" POLICING THE BAZAAR

In cities all over the Muslim world, the rules of commercial life were usually enforced by a man, appointed by the state, who carried the title of the *Muhtasib*. In the absence of impersonal technologies of quantification, this man provided a critical service to facilitate cooperative exchange. The word Muhtasib means "the calculator" which suggests the primary duty of this official was to police the very mechanics of the trade: weights and measures. The Muhtasib, however, did more than that. A 14th-century Egyptian manual for the Muhtasib provides detailed information on the place of this official in a medieval Muslim town and the scope of his duties.[504] The Muhtasib was the top authority when it came to the bazaar life and his office was

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[503] Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 50–52.

[504] Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim Al-Qurba Fi Ahkam al-Hisba* (Cairo: Maktab al-Aʿlam al-Islami, 1976).

broadly defined as an institution for promoting virtue and preventing vice, making him the person responsible for maintaining moral behavior in public. The Muhtasib carried a leather whip called *dirra* on his patrols and would use it to punish those committing immoral acts. He had a stall in the bazaar and had to hang his whip outside as a warning to "ahl al-tadlis"—those who hide negative information about a good when selling it.[505]

In Persian classical poetry, the figure of the Muhtasib appears as a villain constantly mocked for his rigid interpretation of the law and his intolerance of those who pursued earthly pleasures such as love and alcohol. A verse from Awhadi (d. 738/1338), for instance, says: "Tell the Muhtasib to leave the drunks alone / this crowd doesn't have weights and measures."[506]

Medieval bazaars were filled with fraud and dishonesty—or, in other words, information asymmetry. Much as in 19th century England and the United States, fraudulent dairy products were prevalent in Eastern markets, too, where con artists would rip off unsuspecting customers. It was the job of the Muhtasib to make sure milk-sellers, for example, would not add water into their products.[507] There is a 15th century satirical poem about yogurt fraud in Shiraz, Iran and the lack of trust in the bazaar, showing the universality of this type of scam: "If a stranger proffers a

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[505] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 277.

[506] Rukn al-Din Awhadi Maraghah-ʾi, *Divan-i Awhadi Maraghah-ʾi*, ed. Saʿid Nafisi (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1961), 230. The original verse in Persian: "Muhtasib gu dar pay-i rindan marav / Kin jamaʿat ra nabashad sang va gaz."

[507] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 210.

(bowl) of yogurt / It's two cups of water, and a spoon of *dugh** / If you want to hear the truth, hear from me / Those worldly-wise [men] lie abundantly."[508]

One of the Muhtasib's main tasks was to fight *tadlis*. Tadlis is a concept in Islamic law that means withholding information about a good that is on sale. It could be compared to modern truth-in-advertisement laws that are in place to ensure information symmetry. If sellers concealed the defects of a good, that sale was invalid.[509] For a similar reason, selling to a blind person was invalid, unless the blind person had a representative with eyesight present.[510] The article for sale had to be properly specified and quantified. It was not enough to point to the general direction of the article ("I am selling that garment in front of you".) Quality was determined only by physical inspection of the article to be sold and the description alone did not suffice.[511] This was why the sale of a runaway slave or a fish in the river was not valid.[512] Exaggerating about the quality of a good (*talbis*) was also forbidden.[513]

Weight and measures were a great part of policing the bazaar, as it was a source of conflict among traders. The tools such as beam-scales, and other forms of scales, as well as weights and measures, were routinely inspected by the Muhtasib to ensure their accuracy. Stones

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* *Dugh* is a drink common in Central Asia and parts of the Middle East. It is made of yogurt after the fat is extracted from it.

[508] Mavlana Abu Ishaq Hallaj Shirazi, *Vasf-i Taʿam*, ed. Muhsin Azarm (Tehran: Nashr-i Chashmah, 2014), 140. The original verses in Persian: "Gharibi garat mast pish avarad / du paymanah ab ast va yak chamchah dugh / agar rast mi-khvahi az man shinav / jahan-didah bisyar guyad durugh."

[509] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 239.

[510] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 109.

[511] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 114.

[512] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 113.

[513] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 127.

were not allowed to be used as weights because of their vulnerability to manipulation. Only metal weights, bearing the stamp of the Muhtasib, were valid in the bazaar.[514] In the traditional Islamic bazaar, tools and techniques of measuring were apparently important enough that there is an entire chapter in the Quran dedicated to it, where God warns those who cheat in their weights and measures.[515]

The question of price control in the Islamic bazaar was complicated. No one, including the Muhtasib, was allowed to fix prices in the market, according to Islamic law. Once people asked the Prophet Muhammad to impose fixed prices on the bazaar because they fluctuated a lot. He refused and said that only God fixed prices: "Allah is the One Who takes, gives, provides, and fixes prices."[516] The only exception, according to Islam, was during a famine, which required the Muhtasib to impose price control.[517] If a trader, however, would use hoarding to artificially create scarcity in order to cause price hikes, the Muhtasib would intervene and force him to sell off his goods.[518] The Prophet's commitment to a free market and his reference to God as price fixer very much resembles Adam Smith's idea of the "invisible hand:" He believed the state should stay away from the market and let the self-interest of buyers and sellers determine how it worked.[519]

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[514] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 145.

[515] Quran: 83. Quran refers, at least, five other times to sins of under-weighing, over-charging, and frauds of similar sorts in weights and measures. See, 17: 35; 55: 7-9; 7: 85; 11: 84; 6: 152.

[516] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 120.

[517] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 120.

[518] Al-Qurashi, *Maʿalim*, 121.

[519] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 212.

In Kabul, much as in any other typical Muslim city, the Muhtasib was the moral and commercial police of the bazaar and was mostly chosen from the clergy. Under Timur Shah (1772–1793), according to Fufalzay, two men were appointed the Muhtasib: Mulla Sahibdad Khan and Mulla Mahmud Khan.[520] The next king, Zaman Shah (1793–1801), appointed a man named Mulla ʿIzzat Allah as the Muhtasib of Kabul.[521] Even small towns in provinces had their own Muhtasib, appointed by the Amir of Kabul.[522] The Kabul Muhtasib had his official whip maintained great authority in the bazaar.[523] They were also fairly well-paid. In 1894, the annual salary of the Kabul Muhtasib, Mir Husam al-Din Khan, was 1,606 rupiyah and two abbasis.[524]

In the late 19th century, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan would not "give the enemies of law and order a chance." Amir's Muhtasib, according to a report, would punish "dishonest tradesmen who cheat with false weights or adulterate the food they sell."[525] ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan was legendary in his brutal delivery of justice of which some stories have survived in the bazaar folklore. One urban legend is about a shopkeeper on Kabul's Chawk Square who would mix fat from sheep tail into his ghee in order to cheat on customers. Once he was caught underweighting his ghee by one *pav* (less than half a kilogram.) As the punishment, officials stripped him naked

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[520] Fufalzay, *Dar Al-Qazaʾ Dar Afghanistan*, 716.

[521] Fufalzay, 203.

[522] On the Muhtasib of Qandahar in the 1870s, see Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 1 and 2 (Tehran: ʿIrfan, 1391/2012), 841. On the Muhtasib of Herat, see Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 24 Zi al-Hijja 1311/28 June 1894, NAA, Farman, No. 128/3634. In 1906, Amir Habib Allah decided to appoint a Muhtasib in every district in the country. *ST*, vol. 4 (part 3), 190.

[523] *ST,* vol. 4 (part 2), 169.

[524] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 416-417.

[525] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 280.

and rubbed his fake ghee all over his body and paraded him around in the bazaar. A town crier announced his crime and warned others to learn the lesson. The king also wanted to cut one of his hands but he bought it back by paying, instead, a thousand rupees in fine. After that incident, he became known in the bazaar as Haji Pav Kam ("Haji the missing pav.")[526] Because of the power that came with this position the Amir would pick only a pious clergyman for the job. In 1894, the Muhtasib of the royal palace became greedy and started to use his position of power to pressure bazaar merchants into paying him bribes. When the Amir learned about it, he had the Muhtasib paraded around town in chains with a pot attached to his butt. A town crier would ask those who had paid the Muhtasib to come forth and put the list of their bribes into the pot so the government could recover their funds from the corrupt Muhtasib.[527]

Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan wanted to bring information symmetry in the bazaar as a way to reduce conflicts that stemmed from dishonesty and fraud. In 1891, he issued orders to standardize weights and measures by imposing the Kabuli standards on all over the country. Each major Afghan town had its own weights and measures which made it confusing and difficult to conduct long-distance trade. The Amir imposed Kabul standards all over the country demanding each governor to cast iron weights in front of a judge and place an official stamp on them. Then sent the new weights to each village so they could produce copies. After the proclamation, if anyone was caught dealing with old stones, they would be fined 100 rupiyahs.[528]

The office of the Muhtasib was active until the modernist king, Amir Aman Allah Khan (1919-1929) dismantled it and established a modern municipality (*baladiyyah*), a large

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[526] *Lmar*, Sawr 1351/April-May 1972, 3.

[527] *ST*, vol. 3 (part 2), 302-3.

[528] *Qanun-i Karguzariy-i Muʿamilat-i Hukumati* (Kabul: Matbaʿ-i Dar al-Saltanah, 1309/1891), 18-21.

bureaucratic institution with written laws, to regulate the bazaar—not one man with a whip. In his Municipality Law (1923), he listed all the duties of a Muhtasib, such as inspecting weights and measures and bazaar prices and put them under the jurisdiction of the municipality.[529] In 1929, he lost his throne to a religious uprising, led by a bandit, Habib Allah, who governed the country with strict Islamic laws for less than a year. In late 1929, Muhammad Nadir ended his rule and established his own kingdom. In order to avoid the fate of Aman Allah, Nadir tried to appeal to the religious. On 21 October 1929, he issued a proclamation announcing that he would restore the office of the Muhtasib in Kabul to implement the laws of Islam in the city—but still keeping the municipality.[530] In the 1930s, Mulla Mahbub was the Muhtasib in Kabul and even had his *dirra*, the special leather whip. He was probably the last Muhtasib in Kabul, Fufalzay suggests.[531]

PRICES ON PAPER: EARLY PRICE TAGS

It was in 1923 when the price tag—as we know it—appeared in Kabul, a story that will be discussed later. However, the price tag—as a medium for recording a fixed, printed, advertised, financial obligation used for the purpose of building information symmetry and trust during

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[529] *Nizamnanah-i Baladiyyah* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Daʾirah-i Tahrirat-i Majlis-i ʿAliy-i Vuzara, 21 Hut 1302/12 March 1924), 18-27. During the 1929 rebellion, as a desperate measure to calm the public down, Aman Allah promised to restore the office of the Muhtasib, among other things, but no one listened. Senzil K. Nawid, *Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan, 1919-29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 168.

[530] Fufalzay, *Dar al-Qazaʾ*, 592.

[531] Fufalzay, *Dar al-Qazaʾ*, 203.

value transactions—has a slightly longer history in Afghanistan. The latter definition of the price tag includes any paper medium that bears the value information for an obligation, whether in the spheres of state administration or the private market.

The emergence of the printed price dates back to 1871, the year Afghanistan issued its first postal stamp under Amir Shir ʿAli Khan. We do not know how the prices of postal service were calculated prior to that, but the print technology allowed standardization of prices and, as a result, let traders, who were the main customer base of the service after the government, predict their costs. About two years after the postal stamp, the state published Afghanistan's first newspaper, *Shams al-Nahar*, which also required a fixed price. On the masthead of the paper, however, the place for annual and six-month subscription fees were left blank, suggesting that the price was not fixed. The editors, instead, pursued a strange subscription policy: they would send the paper out to top government officials and ask them to pay whatever amount they thought would match their "generosity and reputation."[532] The surviving issues of the newspaper available in three digital libraries do not have any subscription fees, even hand-written ones.[533] However, the collection held at the personal library of Shah Mahmud Khan, the former Prime Minister, apparently had prices written on them, presumably by hand.[534] The only printed price on the newspaper was for its single issues, which was 10 anahs (Indian currency) each.[535]

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[532] *Shams al-Nahar,* 15 Ramazan 1290/6 November 1873, 1-2.

[533] Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (acku.edu.af), Afghanistan Digital Library at New York University (afghanistandl.nyu.edu), and the Library of Congress's World Digital Library (wdl.org).

[534] ʿAbd al-Raʾuf Binava, "Awwalin Jaridah-i Afghanistan, Shams al-Nahar (1290)," *Ariyana* 9, no. 4 (1951): 1–2. The author, who had consulted the Prime Minister's collection, reports that the subscription fee, pre-paid, was 20 for a year and 10 rupiyah-i chihrah-i shahi (Indian rupee) for six months.

[535] *Shams al-Nahar,* 15 Ramazan 1290/6 November 1873, 1.

The next Amir, ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (1880-1901) introduced printed chits, which at the time were common in most parts of the world, as a way to standardize taxation and customs duties. Each chit was modeled on postal stamps with a rudimentary design: it consisted of the emblem of the Afghan state, the year of the issuance, its value, and the tax category it was supposed to serve. The paper was called *mahsul*, which literally means "received" and was, in fact, a proof of payment.[536] Printed prices on each chit ensured traders of fair and equal treatment and saved them from bargaining the tax rate or paying more than once. The printed chits also allowed the state to control its collectors by tracking the revenues of the customs houses, gather quantifiable data on the volume of import and export, and assess the general performance of the national economy. The reform in the customs house was necessary for a state that had few other revenue sources. The printed revenue chits, however, did not end corruption at the customs houses. Some traders would try to evade customs duties either because they were heavy or tax officials would demand more than the printed value.[537] Whatever the reason, some traders considered it cheaper to use smuggling routes to move their goods across the border, a practice that back then was called *gurizi*.[538] And some, like local traders in Maymanah, found Nadir, a young man who could print fake tax chits at home, using a "fire-baked brick," and sell them at half the price of the official chits.[539]

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[536] Revenue chit, Mahsul-i Ashyay-i ʿAdadi (1311/1893-1894), Author's Private Collection.

[537] Customs duties were outrageously high, even for exports, compared to what was common in neighboring Iran and Russian Turkistan. See, *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 466.

[538] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 4 Shawwal 1317/5 February 1900, NAA, Farman, No. 4630/3.

[539] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 500.

The Amir also printed *sukuk*, standardized form letters for legal contracts and other official documents. They had a header stating the name of the document and a price printed beneath it.[540] The Amir sent the printed forms to all governors around the country and asked for receipts. The printed price let the public know about how much exactly they were obliged to pay for each document. In addition, the printed price served as an internal control mechanism, too, allowing the court to monitor the state revenue and audit the account books of each office. This was why if an official failed to send a receipt upon receiving the prints, Kabul officials would send them strongly-worded follow-up letters.[541]

In accordance with Islamic principles, the state would not set prices in the bazaar, except for certain occasions when prices would rise unusually high. If there was a dramatic price hike in a region, then the Amir would intervene by sending a *nirkhnamah*, a list of fixed prices, which everyone in the bazaar had to follow. In 1887, for example, his officials from the eastern region of Zurmat reported a price rise in grains and the Amir sent out a proclamation of fixed prices to stabilize the bazaar.[542] In order to keep an eye on the state of the bazaar, the Kabul court had the regional officials dispatch a biweekly report on prices of basic commodities, along with other information such as news on the weather and diseases. They had to do it whether there were any changes since the previous report or not. Once a local governor was late on his report and

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[540] Iqrarnamah, ʿAbd al-Karim son of Mirza Khan, Issued by Jalalabad Court, 29 Rabiʿ al-Awwal, 1309/2 November 1891, NAA, No. NA.

[541] Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 26 Zi al-Qaʿda 1316/7 April 1899, NAA, Farman, No. 4637/77.

[542] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirin Dil Khan, Sayyid Asghar Khan Zurmati, Muhammad Nasir Khan, and Fayz Muhammad Khan, 1 Rabʿ al-Thani 1305/17 December 1887, NAA, Farman, No. 2394/21; Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirin Dil Khan, 16 Zi al-Qaʿda 1305/25 July 1888, NAA, Farman, No. 2394/55.

received a warning that he would be fined 100 rupiyah if he was late next time.[543] The biweekly price reports were also needed for *tasʿir*, the pricing of goods for tax assessment purposes.[544]

In 1897, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman introduced another fixed, printed, price to regulate Afghan commerce. In that year, he issued a poster announcement fixing the broker's fees in the bazaar. The fee was for brokers who would sell the goods from large traders to retail shopkeepers. Usually, the fee was two paysahs for each rupiyah but after Sayyid ʿAli Akbar, a crafty Kabuli broker, secured a monopoly contract on the Kabul bazaar's brokerage, he raised the rates. The traders and shopkeepers protested the hike in fees by petitioning to the government. The Amir then intervened and issued a poster announcement to all towns around the country. The announcement fixed the fees at its previous rate of two paysahs for each rupiyah and each governor was tasked to distribute it in the bazaar and tell shopkeepers to frame and hang the posters in their shops so all could see the new fees.[545] The printed, fixed, and advertised price was meant to reduce conflicts in the bazaar and encourage cooperative exchange.

In 1912, under Amir Habib Allah (1901-1919), a modern coffee shop opened in Chaman-i Huzuri, a park on the eastern outskirt of the city, which was a novelty in several ways. It had

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[543] Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Ghulam Muhammad Khan, Governor, District of Ghurband, 26 Ramazan 1320/27 December 1902, NAA, Farman, No. 303; Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Ghulam Muhammad Khan, Governor, District of Ghurband, 1323/1905-1906, NAA, Farman, No. 305. Also see, Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 24 Rajab 1319/6 November 1901, NAA, Farman, No. 4623/125.

[544] ʿAziz al-Din Vakili Fufalzay, *Saltanat-i Aman Allah Shah va Istiqlal-i Mujaddad-i Afghanistan*, vol. 1 (Kandahar: ʿAllamah Rashad Akadimi, 2017), 436.

[545] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 22 Ramazan 1314/24 February 1897, NAA, Farman, No. 4631/69; Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 28 Zi al-Qaʿda 1314/28 April 1897, NAA, Farman, No. 4631/146.

two sitting areas, one for the general public and one for the VIP. It offered food and beverages and had a printed menu that listed each item with their prices. Not only was the menu a modern phenomenon, but the coffee shop itself was also a new concept. This was why the state newspaper writing about it struggled with finding a name to call it. It was referred to as "Sitting Circle," "Afternoon Tea Commercial Company Club," "Afternoon Tea Drinking Company" or simply "Afternoon Company." The newspaper reporter also lacked a word to call the menu, settling finally on *listah*, probably from "list," and then explaining what it meant.[546] The coffee shop was located in a park that also had a cricket field and other sports amenities that served as a playground for the royal family and the Kabul elite. The menu at the coffee shop was meant to keep transactions free of price negotiations for the elite clientele.

The previous Amir had tried to standardize weights and measures by imposing the Kabul standards on all over the country, but still, even the Kabul weights and measures were confusing and uncertain. The tools for both weights and lengths, for example, had two categories, *kham* ("raw") and *pukhtah* ("cooked") and their distinction was not always clear, causing conflicts in the bazaar. In 1902, the government embarked a new initiative to standardize weights and measures to end confusions and conflicts once and for all. The Amir ordered the government factory to cast a whole range of standardized weights and measures, bearing the seal of the state, and sent them out to traders in Kabul, for a small fee, and also shipped them to other towns in the country.[547] This new reform was not as successful in the bazaar as the state wanted it to be. More than a decade later, the Amir decided to reform the measuring system again by inventing his own

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[546] The phrases used for coffee shop in the original Persian: "dayirah-i nishimangah," *Siraj al-Akhbar* (*SA*, hereafter), 1 Shaʿban 1330/16 July 1912, 3; "shirkat-i tijariy-i kulup-i chay-khuriy-i ʿasriyah," "shirkat-i chay-khuriy-i ʿasriyah," and "shirkat-i ʿasriyah." *SA*, 5 Shaʿban 1330/20 July 1912, 2.

[547] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 332.

system, calling it *gaz-i shah*, which was loosely based on the metric system. Although the word *gaz* was already in use as a measuring unit in Kabul, he personally coined words for its sub-units, such as *mat*, *gat,* and *nak*, which were the equivalents of a decimeter, centimeter, and millimeter.[548] The new system, too, failed to gain any currency in the bazaar. (We do not know how much the unfamiliar word coinages contributed to its failure.)

In 1904, the king sent an envoy, Ghulam Muhyi al-Din, to India to find out the prices for opium, and certain other Afghan goods, so if there was a profit to be made the government could export them. The envoy landed in Calcutta with a sample of Afghan opium, but without obtaining the special license to carry the drug. There was a reason the Afghan Amir was pursuing the idea of international trade, of opium no less, through informal negotiations directly with Indian retailers. In 1894, the previous Amir had officially proposed the idea of exporting Afghan opium to India, but the Indian government had declined his offer. Now, the new Amir thought he could conduct the trade via informal routes with no need for paperwork. He was wrong as a police officer in Calcutta noticed his man while he was going around in the bazaar, shop to shop, with opium in hand, asking local traders about their offering prices. The police reported him to the Foreign Secretary. The Indian government then wrote to the Afghan embassy politely asking them to stop pursuing their illegal opium export.[549]

The government workshop, *Mashinkhanah*, would use fixed prices for products that it advertised—most of them simple clothing items such as socks.[550] It made sense because products

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[548] Mahmud Tarzi, *Mukhtasar-i Jughrafiyah-i ʿUmumi* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Tipugrafiy-i Dar al-Saltanah, 1915), 64.

[549] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 2), 600-601.

[550] *SA*, 15 Jamadi al-Awwal 1333/31 March 1915, inside front cover. (The Hijri year is incorrectly recorded 1323 on the newspaper). Under the next king, too, the workshop's agents in the bazaar advertised the goods with fixed prices. *AA*, 31 Jawza 1300/21 June 1921, inside back cover.

were sold by agents who had no authority to bargain. The fixed, advertised, price also served as a surveillance instrument: with customers having the price information, agents could not over-charge them even if they tried. A bargain-free transaction would build trust and bring in more customers. For the same reasons books published by private and government publishers too had a price. At the time, ʿInayat Allah Khan, a son of the Amir, set up a private publishing house called ʿInayat. The books published by ʿInayat carried a "fixed price" printed on the back cover. The price information in one of the books, for example, says: "In the capital Kabul the price of this book is 2 Kabuli rupiyahs."[551] The state newspaper, *Siraj al-Akhbar*, too, unlike its predecessor, *Shams al-Nahar*, printed fixed prices for its subscription on its masthead.

What the masthead of *Siraj al-Akhbar* did not say, however, was that buying the newspaper was not voluntary. All salaried employees of the state, from a certain rank on, were automatically subscribed to it and the price of the subscription was deducted from their salaries.[552] *Aman-i Afghan*, the newspaper that replaced it under the next king, Aman Allah Khan, too, followed the same policy of deducting the subscription fees from the salaries of both state employees and allowance recipients whose annual pay was 500 rupiyahs or more.[553] As one could imagine, the practice of forced sale was not very well-liked. Amir Aman Allah Khan, finally, put an end to that policy, making the subscription to *Aman-i Afghan* voluntary.[554] The voluntary subscription payment, however, for people who were used to forced sales, seemed too relaxed and did not feel like an obligation that they had to fulfill. This was why many stopped paying their fees. In 1925, the newspaper published "Official Warning" announcements to such

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[551] Mahmud Tarzi, *Paragandah* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i ʿInayat, 1913), 159, back cover.

[552] *SA*, Shawwal 1, 1330/September 13, 1912, 6-7; *SA,* Rabiʿ al-Awwal 1, 1332/January 28, 1914, 17.

[553] *AA,* Hamal 22, 1298/April 12, 1919, last page.

[554] *ST*, vol. 4 (part 1), 640.

subscribers: "The year has ended and still the majority of subscribers have not paid their fees yet. Some individuals are two years, and some three years, behind on their subscription fees." It asked them to either send cash or the receipt of payment.[555]

In the 1920s, Amir Aman Allah Khan (1919-1929) shook up Afghanistan's economy and society with his bold modernist vision. He launched an ambitious program to reform the way people interacted with each other and with the state, particularly when it came to the issue of value transaction—buying, selling, lending, taxation, and so forth. He recognized that widespread information asymmetry made the Afghan culture of value exchange arbitrary, unpredictable, and conflict-full, which discouraged commercial transactions. Most of his reform ideas, therefore, were to address this fundamental issue. He started with the key problem in value exchange: money.

At the time Afghanistan did not have a unified currency system. People in northern Afghanistan mostly used Bukhara's currency, western regions used Persia's, and people in the south and eastern Afghanistan traded with the British rupee, locally known as *kallah dar* ("[coin] with the head") because the coins had the head of the British monarch engraved on them. The Kabuli rupiyah was the official currency paid to those on the government payroll. It was, however, costly to produce: the country's mint needed to import large amounts of silver and gold bullions to churn out the coins the government needed.[556] The cost was the reason that the Kabuli silver coins contained "an unusual amount of copper," which devalued it against other currencies.[557] Under Aman Allah, with the termination of the British subsidy, and further

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[555] *AA*, 26 Dalv 1303/15 February 1925, 6; *AA*, 21 Hut 1303/12 March 1925, 2.

[556] On the Afghan state's 19th century mint, see Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan*, 215–20; Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*, 145–50.

[557] Frank A. Martin, *Under the Absolute Amir* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1907), 152–53.

devaluation of the official currency, the government was under great financial pressure and producing even non-pure silver coins was a struggle. Aman Allah's half rupiyah coins, for example, were only coated with silver, which would wear off after a couple of weeks of circulation.[558] This was why the Amir embraced the paper currency, which at the time was a novel idea in the world, as a cost-saving solution. In 1920, he released the first batch of his paper notes. The official newspaper published Amir's proclamation on the occasion, in which, he explains that notes were valid only inside the country and Afghan officials abroad would not accept them as a form of payment. In addition, the notes—like all early banknotes—functioned more like a bill of exchange than real currency, they even had counterfoils. If a person, the proclamation said, presented one of the notes to the treasury, officials had to pay him (in coins) the amount written on the note.[559]

A couple of months later, the state newspaper also published a full-page ad introducing the new notes and coins with pictures and their exchange rates against the kabuli rupiyah.[560] Notes were an innovation in value exchange, but it was not enough to influence the bazaar in a dramatic way because much of the trade was done on credit, not cash. Afghan traders were not familiar with the idea of thin profit margins for more sales. They were only interested in buying cheap and selling dear, no matter what. In addition to using bargaining trickeries to overcharge buyers, they also used credit as a way to maximize profit. Aman Allah Khan, to reduce conflicts in the bazaar, encouraged sellers and buyers to trade only in cash. In a proclamation, he banned

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[558] "Report on the Kabul Mission by Sir H. R. C. Dobbs, 1922." BL, IOR/L/PS/18/A194, f. 7.

[559] *AA*, 6 Jawza 1299/27 May 1920, 5.

[560] *AA*, 14 Saratan 1299/5 July 1920, 9. The newspaper called the new notes and coins "amaniyah-gi" and "amaniyah" but the notes themselves used "rupiyah-i kabuli," the name used since Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman's era for the official currency.

sales on credit altogether, effective 21 March 1921, because, it said, "debt is the main cause of poverty, bankruptcy, humiliation, and anxiety." Debtors, it explained, constantly live in worry and sometimes have to take a false oath to free themselves, which is a sin, or die and leave the burden of debt to their families. On the other hand, creditors who seek to double their profit by selling on credit would also suffer by "failing to get the imagined interest and even the principal price of the goods." All they will get from this practice is a "bad name among their peers" and "a worn-off paper with a list of names of this and that person on it." Such traders, the text went on, "spend their days in courtrooms and their nights worrying about their losses." The proclamation encouraged traders to sell only in cash. If merchants knew "the benefits of trading in cash," it said, "they would never sell their goods on credit."[561]

The Amir also pushed very hard to make the payment of government taxes in cash only and not in kind as it was common at the time.[562] It was, however, an impractical idea as some rural communities traded only in barter and cash was hard to come by.[563] The Amir knew this. In fining a group of people in Kunar, he asked his officials to first try to extract the fines in cash and, if not possible, in goods—which then required performing a price assessment first.[564] The assessment, which involved bargaining and negotiation, was part of every value exchange

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[561] Fufalzay, *Saltanat-i Aman Allah Shah*, 2017, 1:325–27. A hand-written amendment at the bottom of the proclamation, Fufalzay reports, exempted the nomads from the ban.

[562] *Nizamnamah-i maliyat-i shash guruhi* (Kabul: Chapkhanah-i Sangiy-i Mashinkhanah, 17 Zi al-Qaʿdah 1337/14 August 1919), 4.

[563] This was true for most of the twentieth century. Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 58.

[564] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Eastern High Governorate, 7 Jawza 1305/29 May 1926, Farman, Afghanistan Center at Kabul University. Digital file: https://bit.ly/2Ten7Gz.

between the state and the public. In a world without the price tag—written, fixed, known, value information—transaction are arbitrary and local officials can use their power to extort people with little consequence. Aman Allah Khan made an effort to fix this problem, too, by bringing all forms of transactions between the public and the state into the sphere of bureaucracy, or paper-based control.

As an example, traders at the time had no idea how much they had to pay at the border—and how many times. There were 28 different taxes at the customs, some were basically extortions. Traders paid import duties to any town they crossed until reaching their destination, a practice that increased the cost of business.[565] They sometimes had to pay duties to officials out in the middle of a desert, which looked like a highway robbery.[566] In 1922, the Amir outlawed all such taxes by issuing a new law. He asked his minister of commerce to immediately order customs houses in the country, via telephone or the post, to replace the past practices with the new regulations.[567] Goods were taxed only once under the new law. There were categories of each good, with clear tax rates, and officials were mandated to issue written receipts upon receiving the taxes at the border. That receipt was valid all over the country, and upon producing it, no other official, anywhere, was to bother the trader.[568] A later edition of this law had a

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[565] *Nizamnamah-i Akhz-i Rusum-i Gumruk* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i Maktab-i Funun-i Harbi, 1 Hamal 1300/21 March 1921), 2-4.

[566] Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, 285.

[567] Amir Aman Allah Khan to Minister of Commerce, Ghulam Muhammad Khan, 22 Hut 1300/13 March 1922, NAA, Farman (*Sultaniyat*), No. 1052.

[568] *Nizamnamah-i Akhz-i Rusum-i Gumruk*, 4.

tabulated list for agricultural products, the most commonly-traded category of goods, showing all their prices and the tax rates levied on them in charts.[569]

These types of reforms were needed as the Amir was trying to bring foreign investment into the Afghan market. Almost as soon as Aman Allah's ascension to power, Italians, Germans, and the French arrived in Kabul seeking business opportunities. The British too decided to send an unofficial delegation of business representatives to Afghanistan. In September 1922, however, the British minister in Kabul warned the Foreign Office of the "lack of manners and business morality in Afghans" and advised that in choosing the potential representatives "patience and tact are as necessary qualifications of delegates as business acumen."[570] It was not only the colonial officials who had a low opinion of Afghan ways of doing business, local modernizers, too, shared that view. Amir's reform programs, therefore, were aimed at preparing the Afghan bazaar and its merchants to deal with Western capitalists. This was why he personally invested in a department store to spread the methods of modern retail.

THE PRICE TAG ARRIVES IN A KABUL STORE

The store in question opened its doors in 1923. It had price tags attached to its merchandise, which was a first for the Kabul bazaar. It was called Shirkat-i Baradaran-i Afghan (Afghan Brothers Company), owned and operated by a joint stock company of the same name. We know the details of its operation thanks to the *Aman-i Afghan*'s decision to publish the entire

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[569] *Nizamnamah-i Akhz-i Rusum-i Gumruk* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 20 Saratan 1307/11 July 1928), 39-42.

[570] "Afghanistan: proposed British-Indian Joint Commercial Mission 28 Aug 1922-6 Mar 1923." BL, IOR/L/PS/11/218 P 3360/1922.

constitution of the company in one of its issues.[571] Citing companies in France and England as its inspiration, Shirkat-i Baradaran used the marketing strategies common in Western department stores: keep the prices low and profit margins thin, earn the trust of customers by offering fixed prices, and play for the long run. The constitution of the company said that it "sells its merchandise with low prices and small profits and the price of every item on sale is written on tickets that are attached to the merchandise." The price tags, the rationale went, were there to help buyers "not waste their [time] haggling over the price or to be cheated on."[572]

A joint stock company owned by a collection of strangers, by definition, could not survive without full trust. That was why Shirkat-i Baradaran had a detailed bureaucracy in place on pricing, accounting, and record keeping, and gave full access to information to all its shareholders. The price tags were part of the other paper-based control practices to build trust among the investors, in addition to earning the trust of customers. The Company was private but the Amir and one of his top officials owned most of its shares. It was the first wholesaler-importer in Kabul that opened a retail shop, bypassing the traditional brokers.[573] The company, according to its constitution, had plans for opening branches in other cities and invited everyone to buy shares in the company.[574] Shirkat-i Baradaran had some noticeable impact on the Kabul bazaar as it inspired other department stores to pop up in the city.

After 1925, a new department store opened in Kabul that was owned by two brothers—actual brothers—ʿAbd al-Hamid and ʿAbd al-ʿAziz. The new store, too, followed the practice of

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[571] *AA*, 13 Mizan 1302/6 October 1923, 8-12.

[572] *AA*, 13 Mizan 1302/6 October 1923, 8.

[573] Schinasi, *Kabul: A History 1773-1948*, 139.

[574] *AA*, 13 Mizan 1302/6 October 1923, 8, 10.

price tagging its merchandise.[575] It even took one step further by introducing the return policy: now customer could bring back an item they did not like for exchange.[576] The policy did not offer a full refund, but still, it was a good marketing nudge to boost sales by reducing the risks buyers had to take for each purchase. Both brothers were savvy traders and had great influence in Kabul's bazaar. In 1922, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz was one of the first Kabuli merchants who traveled to London to sell Afghan *qaraqul* sheepskin, which was becoming Afghanistan's main export item at the time. On his return, he brought new retail marketing skills to his Kabul business and became known in the bazaar as ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Landani—ʿAbd al-ʿAziz the Londoner.[577]

The Afghan bazaar, however, had a fundamental problem that no amount of capitalist marketing trickery could fix. It was the stubborn problem of weights, measures, and currencies. Most shoppers used various weights, made of actual stones, for weighing, and for the measuring of length things were not better. In measuring lands, for example, several units were used including qulbah. In 1889, for instance, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan granted two qulbah of land to a man from Qandahar.[578] Qulbah, which is still used as a unit of measuring land in parts of Afghanistan, meant a piece of land that could be plowed by a pair of bulls in a day—everything is inexact about it.[579] There was simply not a shared numerical language for transactions to help

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[575] Hakim A. Hamid, "Marketing and Business Practices in Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal* 14, no. 1 (1960): 90.

[576] Hamid, 90.

[577] Louis Dupree, "Kabul Gets a Supermarket," South Asia Series (New York: American Universities Field Staff, 1966), 3.

[578] Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Habib Allah Khan, 11 Shawwal 1306/10 June 1889, NAA, Farman (*Sultaniyat*), Doc. No. 2393, Farman No. 137.

[579] For a detailed discussion on Afghanistan's many units of weights, measurements, and currencies see, India. et al., *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1972), x–xv.

traders talk about the price of a good or its quantity without spending a great amount of time understanding each other and still risk getting into conflicts. There were just so many varieties of weights and measures in each town and so many kinds of coins, of various values, in each region of the country, that made it difficult to do business, especially with strangers or a person in another town. Very few people could understand all the units of weights, measures, and exchange rates, even among government employees.[580] Amir's 1920 coins and notes had failed to gain widespread circulation. In short, the bazaar suffered from the worst kind of information asymmetry.

In 1926, he decided to fix that problem by introducing the metric system for weights and measures and a standardized currency, with a new name, for all values. The new units, introduced in a booklet, were to replace all other systems of counting, measuring, and valuing.[581] On 20 March 1926, the Amir also invited a large crowd of merchants from the Kabul bazaar to Gulkhana, a public hall in the palace, to personally sell his innovation. In his speech, he introduced the new weights and measures and the new currency. He named the new currency afghani, after Afghans (now Pashtuns), the ethnic group in power. In addition, he also used Pashto words for parts of the new weights and measures, which ironically made the system anything but standardized. The words "meter" and "gram" and all their sub-units, for example, were kept, but number words for units greater than one meter were in Pashtu: for ten meters one had to say *las mitrah*, even in Persian. Strangely, however, the phrase "one-tenth" in "one-tenth of a meter," and other units smaller than one meter, were still in Persian.[582] It was clear that he

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[580] *AA*, 30 Hut 1304/21 March 1926, 1-2.

[581] *Nizamnamah-i Miqyasat* (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 23 Hut 1304/14 March 1926), 5-6.

[582] *Nizamnamah-i Miqyasat*, 2-3.

saw his innovation both as a nationalist tool for the Pashtunization of the public culture and as a way to fix a problem. Either the Amir's explanations failed to clarify how the whole system worked or the merchants found the strange Pashto words confusing, Kabul traders were not convinced to discard their old weights and measure for the new system. Afghani, however, succeeded in replacing all the regional coinages circulating in the local bazaars to become the national currency—after some time, of course.

It was not only the standardized weights, measures, and currency—numerical tools—that the states used in its push to reform the Afghan culture of commercial exchange, it also used non-numerical methods for this purpose. The official newspaper would occasionally publish education articles on salesmanship, such as a short piece titled "Commercial Instruction" on how clean presentation, such as packaging, could increase sales. Citing America it said: "Today, in the bazaars of the world, the package sells the merchandise."[583] It encouraged Afghan merchants to keep their merchandise clean and their packages appealing. This was just a newspaper recommendation. In a more controversial move, the state ordered all merchants in Kabul to use tables and chairs in their shops instead of sitting on the ground as it was common in the bazaar. Syed Mujtaba Ali, an Indian teacher at the Habibiyah school, witnessed the odd experiment firsthand.

One morning, Ali noticed that about ninety percent of the shops in the city were closed. He was curious to know what was happening. He saw that only one shop, a fancy record store owned by an Indian, was open and went inside to talk to the owner about the bazaar shut-down. The merchant told him about the Amir's order: "The system of doing business sitting on the floor, on the carpet, is hereby forbidden. Every shop has to have chairs and tables like the way it

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[583] *AA*, 24 Mizan 1304/16 October 1925, 12.

is in the West." It was 1928, shortly after the Amir's return from his European tour and the reform was part of his other "modernization" ideas such as forcing men to wear western suits and women to drop their hijabs. Aman Allah was apparently so impatient with the idea that he did not even give prior notice to the bazaar and his order went into effect immediately. Most of the city remained closed for three long weeks, Ali reports. Groceries did business through the back door and "policemen made some extra income." In week four, shops started to reopen, without modern furniture, and the king silently accepted defeat.[584] The Amir apparently recognized that a lot of things were wrong with the Afghan ways of commercial exchange, but he was naïve to think that putting shopkeepers on chairs would fix them.

Levying taxes and duties, which is a form of value transaction much like any other, also remained a site of conflict because of a lack of fixed, written, and predictable numerical information—lack of price tags. In 1928, for example, motor vehicles entering into Afghanistan were taxed 20 percent. The problem, however, was that the assessment was arbitrary and did not involve any fixed formulas—such as horsepower—to differentiate between vehicles and price them accordingly. A memo from the British Legation says that the same rate applied to all types of motor vehicles and the price determination was based on "face value assessed by Customs officials."[585] It basically means that the practice involved bargaining and bribery. It was the same with other items too. Once the customs officials assessed an Indian visitor's personal typewriter by just looking at it and demanding 200 rupees, or £1.5 (£90.93 in 2019 GBP), which seemed outrageously high. The visitor, instead of bargaining, decided to leave the typewriter in the

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[584] Syed Mujtaba Ali, *In a Land Far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan*, trans. Nazes Afroz (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015), 205–6.

[585] "Afghanistan: regulations applying to motor vehicles 17 May 1928." BL, IOR/L/PS/11/295 P 3000/1928.

customs house and pick it up on his way back to India. His friend was charged 7.8 rupees for his musical instrument and he decided to pay the sum, instead of leaving the instrument at the customs house. (Later they complained about it to a high-level Afghan official who managed to get them a refund.) The customs officials had not seen a gramophone yet and did not know what it was. The Indians played some music for them and, as a joke, danced with it a little. The Afghans were so amused that they let the gramophone go for free.[586] In short, the whole process of tax assessment at the customs house was arbitrary and unpredictable, allowing widespread corruption and extortion.

Amir Aman Allah showed less commitment to religious traditions than his predecessors. In the delicate relationship between the state and the market, as mentioned earlier, he abolished the office of the Muhtasib by establishing a modern municipality to police the commercial life of the city. In another more sensitive reform, he broke the longstanding tradition of keeping the state away from price-fixing in the bazaar. These two reforms were partly because if his slightly secularist view on state governance and partly because of economic reasons as his government was in great financial distress—his price-fixing decision, in particular, was an economic one, a measure to curb inflation. In Islam, as Muhammad said, God fixes the price, which sounds very much like capitalism, where an "invisible hand" dictates the market price, as Adam Smith put it, referring to self-interest as the primary price setter.[587] According to Islamic law, only in states of emergency can the state fix prices. Aman Allah, however, was the first king who did away with that principle by directly getting involved in price-fixing in the market. After 1924, his government started to issue an official price list, or *nirkh-namah*, that the bazaar had to follow.

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[586] Katrak, *Through Amanullah's Afghanistan*, 35–36.

[587] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 212.

He mandated the municipality to issue the price list and periodically inspect the bazaar to make sure merchants followed them.[588]

In accordance with the tradition of collecting price information from around the country, the state had up-to-date data on price fluctuation. On a bi-weekly basis, governors would report the price of basic commodities in their region to Kabul. It was the Kabul police, Kutwali, that would then compile the lists, which shows how the state considered the price information as a security issue—and for good reasons, because price rise could easily stir social unrest. In 1920, in a clearly desperate attempt, the official newspaper published a price chart, sent from the Kabul police, showing how cheap things were around the country. It was a report but not a state-issued list of fixed prices. The list contained the prices of seven basic foodstuffs, such as wheat, flour, barley, corn, meat, ghee, and thin rice.[589] The chart listed the price of each item for Kabul and eleven other cities and showed the validity period. I assume that it was after the Municipality Law of 1923 that the state started to fix prices (for foodstuff and heating commodities only.) One example of an official price list was published in *Haqiqat* which was for the city of Mazar-i Sharif and contained the prices for ten basic foodstuffs.[590]

THE STATE CONTROL OF THE BAZAAR

Aman Allah's practice of price fixing became a routine work of the municipality long after he lost the throne in 1929 in a rebellion. His successor, Amir Habib Allah, also known as "Bachah-i

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[588] *Nizamnamah-i Baladiyyah*, 24-27.

[589] *AA*, 18 Hamal 1299/7 April 1920, 5.

[590] *Haqiqat*, 22 Dalv 1303/11 February 1925, 3.

Saqqaw" (*water carrier's son*), ruled the country for nine chaotic months (January – October 1929). The bandit king's supporters looted the Kabul bazaars, forcing people to live under harsh conditions as shops were almost empty of basic commodities and prices were high. In response to the increasing anti-government sentiments, the official newspaper called the people of Kabul "lazy and spoiled" who were too accustomed to their previous comfortable lives. It said a "revolution is not easy" and things such as "famine and spikes in prices" were normal in revolutionary times.[591] The condition was bad enough that the propaganda unit of the state could not deny the problem—as former kings would do in such situations. The next ruler, Muhammad Nadir, who dethroned the bandit king, was an army general whose family, known as the Musahiban, ruled the country for the next half a century (1929-1978). In this era, the state control of the bazaar expanded and the use of the price list became institutionalized.

The state under the Musahiban monopolized much of the export and import sector to exercise greater control on the economy. There were some major reforms, too, introduced in this era which included the establishment of Bank-i Milli, the first bank in the country. The idea of the bank was initially proposed in 1928 by Shah Aman Allah Khan but he did not get the chance to actually work on it.[592] Bank-i Milli (The National Bank) was technically a privately-owned enterprise but because the royal family owned significant shares in it, the bank operated as a government agency. In 1930, in another reformist development, the state opened a Business Dispute Tribunal for specifically settling commercial conflicts. It had offices in some provinces too and was headed by a certain Ghulam Haydar Khan.[593] We do not know how successful it was

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[591] *Habib al-Islam*, 18 Hut 1307/9 March 1929, 16–17.

[592] Kabul Diary, 1927-1928 (28 October 1928), TNA, AIR 5-734, f 3.

[593] *Salnamah-i Majallah-i Kabul 1311*, 108.

in building a legal protection mechanism for those interested in getting into the bazaar. Nor do we know what type of disputes this court was settling. One thing is certain that in a bazaar as oral as Kabul's, its hallways must have been packed every day.

In 1932, Kabul Municipality set fixed prices for horse carriage taxis in the city. In the absence of taximeters or standardized prices based on distance, the carriage fare was a major source of haggling and conflict (especially if one tried to settle the fare *after* completing the journey.) The fixed fares were based on the age and quality of the carriages and the distance of each route. The city officials announced the standardized fares in public and also attached printed charts of the new fares on carriages so passengers would have easy access to the price information.[594] Price tagging taxi fares was a well-intentioned move towards a culture of impersonal transactions and trust building between buyers and sellers. In the same year, the post office, which had acquired six motor vehicles for the first time, also issued standardized fares for the seven passengers that it could fit on its mail buses on the Kabul-Peshawar route. The fare was 20 afghanis per person including 2.5 sirs (about 17.7 kg) of luggage.[595] The use of sir instead of kg suggests that despite Amir Aman Allah Khan's years of efforts, the metric system had failed to gain any popularity, even in government works. (It was not weights and measures only, the currency, too, was yet to be standardized. In the mid-1930s, according to one report, notes had disappeared and various coins from the past, in addition to the current government's coinage, were in circulation.)[596]

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[594] *Anis*, 22 ʿAqrab 1311/13 November 1932, 3.

[595] *Anis*, 13 Sawr 1311/1 April 1932, 12.

[596] Jamal-ud-Din Ahmad and Muhammad Abdul Aziz, *Afghanistan: A Brief Survey* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1936), 125.

One of the most ambitious attempts to bureaucratize the bazaar in order to make transactions written and impersonal—as opposed to oral and personal—was made in 1942, when a new law required almost all merchants and shopkeeper to maintain proper recordkeeping and write down every exchange on a daily basis. They had to keep four different books, according to the new law: a daily ledger (*ruznamchah*), especial account books for each type of transaction, a double-entry ledger for the annual balance of all the accounts, and a correspondence register.[597] Kabul merchants were not happy about this new law, according to a 1943 memo from the British Legation. They were concerned that the "government and its officials would obtain too much information about their methods of doing business."[598] They were not wrong. Every book had to be certified and stamped by the state to be valid and any scratch, marginal notes, or blank lines would mean pandering and would invalidate the books.[599] This level of paper-based control was a huge shock for a bazaar that ran mostly orally. The documentation was clearly there to serve the state, through better tax assessment and easier dispute resolution.

The Second World War interrupted Afghanistan's international trade, causing a shortage of certain goods in the market. Gas, for example, at one point became so scarce that Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim Khan had to travel on a horse—his bodyguards on bicycles.[600] Some merchants saw an opportunity in the crisis. A man who had lost the special cord his radio needed to adapt to Kabul electricity went to the bazaar to buy a new one. After some search, he found one, but the shopkeeper, knowing the trade blockade, asked 400 afghanis for it. At the

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[597] *Usulnamah-i dafatir-i tijarati,* 2nd ed. (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i ʿUmumi, 1 Dalv 1323/21 January 1945), 1-3.

[598] A. L. P. Burdett, ed., *Afghanistan Strategic Intelligence: British Records, 1919-1970*, vol. 3 (London: Archive Editions, 2002), 506.

[599] *Usulnamah-i dafatir-i tijarati,* 4-5.

[600] Khalili, *Yad-dasht-hay-i Ustad*, 162, 168.

time one could buy more than one ton (1,000 kg) of wheat flour with that money. The man obviously had to walk away.[601] According to a government estimate, because of the war bazaar prices jumped "more than a thousand percent" and many lost their jobs.[602] Inflation caused the king to issue 500 afghanis notes.[603] In 1944, a strict rulebook (*layihah*) was introduced to fight hoarding and control prices. As part of the rules, issuance of a receipt, even without the request of buyers, was now required at almost every transaction in the bazaar.[604] It was a paper-based regime of control to survey the commercial life of the city by documenting value exchanges. Inspectors fined a Kabul merchant, Shaykh Salih Khan, owner of Da Iqbal Boot House, on Shahi Street, 500 afghanis for not giving a customer a receipt.[605] He was not alone. At least six other traders were fined for the same reason, just hours after the law went into effect.[606]

Right after the war, foreign firms started to get interested in the Afghan market. The country, however, was not yet completely ready. Some American companies, such as Coca-Cola, published notices in a government magazine in Kabul in order to register their trademarks, but at the time Afghanistan had no laws on trademarks or copyright. The US Legation asked the State Department to inform those companies that the "publication of these notices would appear to

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[601] *Iqtisad*, Hamal 1323/March-April 1944, 3-4. The price of wheat flour, according to the official price list, was 2.5 to 3 afghanis per sir (7.066 kg) at the time. See *Iqtisad*, Hamal 1323/March-April 1944, 45.

[602] *Iqtisad,* Jaddi 1323/December 1944-January 1945, 531.

[603] *Iqtisad*, Hamal 1323/March-April 1944, 54.

[604] The issuance of a receipt was required from all "companies, department stores (*maghazah-ha*), and wholesalers"—but apparently not every shop in the bazaar— according to the rulebook, which is reproduced in full here, "Layihah-i Jilav-giri az Ihtikar," *Iqtisad*, Hamal 1323/March-April 1944, 33-34.

[605] *Islah*, 19 Hamal 1323/8 April 1944, 1.

[606] *Iqtisad*, Hamal 1323/March-April 1944, 55-56.

have no legal effect in this country."[607] This was correct. There was only a law from 1942 that required registration of businesses. The information about registered companies then would be published in state newspapers as public notices and the whole registry was available for consultation for a small fee.[608] This was a reform both for commercial surveillance and also for creating an environment for reliable information on active businesses in order to prevent the type of frauds that are common in markets with a high level of secrecy and a low level of trust. (On copyright and trademarks, however, Afghan laws are still unclear.)

The state's effort to bureaucratize the bazaar in the 1940s was a measure to fight trickery and cheating and produce trust and transparency. In addition to registering their businesses, following price lists, and issuing receipts, merchants had to maintain detailed account books for all their transactions. Those books, as mentioned earlier, then had to be inspected and certified by the state. This was all an overwhelming amount of change to adopt for Afghan merchants who were accustomed to handling information orally. Like all previous efforts to reform the bazaar, however, this episode, too, ended in failure, proving once again the resistant nature of the institution of the bazaar against inscriptive control practices. The reason for the failure was easy to understand: information asymmetry was an integral part of the business for the merchants and they simply could not believe it was possible to make money in a "perfect information" environment. The state had to revoke its law on keeping daily ledgers and recording transactions. A new Commercial Law, signed on 13 December 1955, no longer required traders to maintain such elaborate paperwork. It only required brokers to maintain a ledger for daily transactions,

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[607] "Lack of Afghan Legislations re Patents, Trademarks, and Copyrights," 17 January 1946. The United States National Archives (via gale.com), Gale Document Number: SC5001139677.

[608] *Usulnamah-i sabt-i tijarat,* 2nd ed. (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i ʿUmumi, 1 Dalv 1323/21 January 1945), 5-6.

which made more sense, considering the nature of the brokerage business. It said that if the court

asked for it, the broker had to present his ledger.[609]

In the 1960s, the price tagging of certain goods was mandated by the municipality. The

issuance of a receipt to buyers, too, was still required by the law. Both requirements were part of

the law for the prevention of hoarding and control of prices. The regulation, apparently, was

there to make the life of the customer easier:

> Within three days after the publication of this law, all wholesalers and shopkeeper are
>
> required to attach paper price tags on all existing goods in their stores and issue receipts
>
> to buyers. If it is not possible to attach price tags on certain goods, a list of such goods,
>
> with their prices, must be prepared and hung at the entrance of the store.[610]

This was the height of the Cold War and Afghanistan had turned into a battlefield for American

and Soviet modernization-projects-as-ideological-propaganda competitions. Not only

modernizers, but the hippie trail, too, contributed to putting the country on the map. In the early

1970s, there were around five thousand hippies in Kabul alone, "smoking hashish and sitting in

the sun listening to rock and roll." If they run out of money, they would sell their jeans.[611] With

all the influx of cash and no significant rise in productivity, naturally prices would go up and the

majority of the population—who had no way to benefit from the tourism or aid industries—felt

squeezed. The inscriptive form of price control with price tags was the state's way of asserting

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[609] *Qanun-i tijarat* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i ʿUmumi, 1336/1957), articles 112-115.

[610] "Qanun-i Kunturul-i Nirkh-ha va Manʿ-i Ihtikar," *Rasmi Jaridah,* 26 Mizan 1344/18 October 1965, 3.

[611] Jere Van Dyk, *The Trade: My Journey into the Labyrinth of Political Kidnapping* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 6.

its influence on the bazaar. The state needed to help the population by keeping basic commodities cheap for national security reasons as price hikes could easily lead to rebellion. The shops that catered to the foreigners, however, would use price tags for their own good. In a 1960 article, Hakim Hamid, a former executive at the Afghan Textile Company, reported that most department stores in Kabul—there were not many at the time— had fixed prices.[612] One of the more successful ones of these stores was located in Kartah-i Parvan neighborhood, with large display windows and a big sign in English that said: "Aziz Super Markets."[613]

In 1965, ʿAbd al-Habib ʿAziz, an American educated businessman, founded the Aziz supermarket, initially located in old Kabul. He was from the family of ʿAbd al-Hamid and ʿAbd al-ʿAziz "the Londoner," the brothers who opened a modern store in the 1920s that used price tags on its merchandise and had a return policy. The shelves on Aziz were stocked with imported canned goods, mainly from the US and Europe, and also locally-sourced meat, poultry, and fresh produce. The prices were considerably more expensive than other shops in Kabul. The supermarket also offered Swiss chocolate, cream cheese, and cereals, things that were hard to come by in Kabul.[614] The American anthropologist, Louis Dupree, who visited the store and wrote two reports about it, notes the difficulties ʿAbd al-Habib ʿAziz had to go through to run a "modern" business, which included dealing with government officials who would pick up things from the shelves, nod to him sweetly, and leave without paying for them.[615] After two years of

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[612] Hamid, "Marketing and Business Practices in Afghanistan," 92.

[613] See a photo of the store in Louis Dupree, "Kabul Gets a Supermarket," 9.

[614] Louis Dupree, "Kabul Gets a Supermarket," 1-2; Laurel Pardy, *Life on a Carousel: A Non-Diplomatic Memoir.* (Trafford On Demand Pub, 2010), 16; Maryam Qudrat Aseel, *Torn between Two Cultures: An Afghan-American Woman Speaks Out* (Sterling, Va.: Capital Books, 2004), 7.

[615] Louis Dupree, "Kabul Gets a Supermarket," 10.

operation, the business was booming. The owner's German wife managed the cash register and at least 800 customers, almost all foreigners, visited the air-conditioned store every day to buy their daily necessities.[616] The store's packaged meat was the most popular item, as Kabul butcher shops of the time, like today, did little to keep their workplace sanitary. The store was active until the communists took over in 1978. In the 1980s, a visitor noticed that its building was "turned into something official, the facades being covered with red banners."[617]

At Aziz and other modern supermarkets serving the expatriates, goods were price tagged and buyers enjoyed information symmetry, to a great extent. Outside such stores, the municipality's official price lists were supposed to produce the information buyers needed in order to avoid being ripped off by the bazaar merchants. The official price list was set every two weeks by the Kabul municipality in consultation with representatives of each guild.[618] The list, however, was less for bringing information symmetry between buyers and sellers and more for serving as a measure to forcefully contain inflation. In the 1920s, when it was first introduced, the list included a handful of foodstuffs and fire materials (*maʾkulat va mahruqat*), basic necessities that were produced locally. Now the list included well over 200 items, almost all local products.[619] In the 1940s, the price list not only included locally-produced goods but also the prices of certain imported goods, such as fabrics imported from India.[620]

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[616] Louis Dupree, "A Kabul Supermarket Revisited," South Asia Series (New York: American Universities Field Staff, 1968), 1–3.

[617] C-J Charpentier, *Afghanistan 1986: Ravished Country - a Personal Narrative* (n. p., n. d.), 68–69.

[618] Interview with Hasan Sipahi, President, Afghanistan National Trade Union (Ittihadiyah-i Milliy-i Pishah-varan) (Kabul, 20 July 2016.)

[619] *Pamir*, 3 Mizan 1348/25 September 1969, 7.

[620] *Islah*, 19 Hamal 1323/8 April 1944, 2.

The resistance against fixed prices never stopped. Merchants always found ways to disobey, for example, by not displaying the price list in their shops as it was required. The inspectors from the Municipality's office of price control, who were known in the bazaar as *kunturul-i qiyam* (control of prices), after the office they worked for, were also too corrupt to actually enforce the lists. *Pamir*, the official newspaper of the municipality published a long list of price list violators in its almost every issue, showing how much hard it was to make the bazaar accept the fixed prices. In 1967, a magazine in Kabul published a satire about the death of the price list. It said the municipality's price list has passed away and was buried in the cemetery. "The headstone epigraph, however, like the official price list himself, was written in ice and put under the sun," it said about the ineffectiveness of the list, using an Afghan expression. "The writings, therefore, melted away and could not be read."[621]

In 1973, the municipality came up with the idea of creating separate price lists for each guild. The municipality would print the lists and distribute them to every shopkeeper in the city and they had to hang the documents somewhere in the shop so buyers could easily see the prices. The price list would also have a photo of the seller. This was not the only reform. The city also announced that it will install a sensitive scale at the Mandavi market of downtown Kabul so buyers could weigh their goods to make sure sellers have not cheated on them.[622] Just as the municipality that did not trust sellers would follow the fixed prices or the metric system, some manufacturers, too, were worried shopkeepers would cost them the trust of their customers by haggling with them and hiding the true prices. Coca-Cola, for example, always used the price of

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[621] *Zhvandun*, 3 Hamal 1346/23 March 1967, 25

[622] *Pamir*, 12 Sawr 1352/2 May 1973, 1.

its products in its ads to make sure buyers had access to the correct price information. A 1972 Coke ad said: "The price of one bottle in Kabul just 5 afghanis."[623]

The state intervention in price fixing continued during the 1980s when communists ruled Afghanistan and the 1990s when Islamists, amid fighting with each other, ruled the country. The nature of the Afghan bazaar, however, changed very little from the 1920s when price tags were first introduced in the Kabul market and then failed to gain any popularity despite many attempts in the subsequent decades. The Afghan bazaar remained a market with a mixed pricing system: goods and services that were locally-sourced (some foodstuffs and services such as public baths) maintained prices that were fixed by the state. The prices of imported goods, however, mostly remained in the hands of the merchants. Pricing of those goods was dependent on currency fluctuations, international security, long-distance shipping costs, duties, and other factors that were beyond the control of the Afghan state. Haggling continued to be the most important method of obtaining information in the bazaar and, as a result, as always, the risk in transactions remains high and the trust in the market—and society—remains low.

THE FREE MARKET ERA

A software salesman, Shabbir Ahmed, was convinced that his program for managing small and medium-sized businesses, AdSoft, would have a lot of buyers in Afghanistan. What the Pakistani Pashtun had brought to Kabul was a type of recordkeeping software that is used at cash registers at retail shops in most countries. It requires uniform pricing, price tagging of the merchandise, and an electronic scanner to ring up the items at the register and print an itemized receipt at the

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[623] *Afghan*, 2 Kab [Hut] 1350/21 February 1972, 4.

end. He was shocked that Kabuli merchants showed such little interest in his software. One day, Ahmed, who represented the Peshawar-based AdSoft Technologies, tried to sell his software the old fashioned way: he knocked on the door of almost every shop on Kululah Pushtah Street, an affluent quarter, adjacent to downtown Kabul, and asked business owners to take his software for free and only pay the $30 USD/month maintenance fee. Not a single person wanted to buy the program.[624] The merchants of the Kabul bazaar are still comfortable in the old oral ways of doing business—even in the age of the so-called fintech.

Afghanistan was a closed-off country from 1978 to 2001, partly because of the isolationism of its governments and partly because of foreign sanctions and war. In late 2001, when the Taliban regime fell, the doors of the country burst open to the 21st century. With the US soldiers, an army of foreign journalists, aid workers, contractors, and spies arrived in the war-torn capital. The new-comers, with their deep pockets, shaped the form of the Afghan economy in the post-2001 era. In Kabul, a good portion of the bazaar was dedicated to catering to the expatriates. Several western-style supermarkets emerged that almost exclusively served foreigners and the small class of Afghan nouveau riche. The largest of such stores was the Finest Supermarket chain (opened in 2006), which had a familiar retail design and offered imported and local goods—from foodstuffs to toiletries and from clothing to entertainment—to its expat clientele. The most important feature of the Finest stores was the price tagging of their merchandise. Unlike other shops in Kabul, here, the customer did not need to talk to, let alone haggle with, the sales staff to purchase something. All they needed to do was to pick the items they wanted and pay at the cash register and get a receipt, just like back home.

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[624] Interview with Shabbir Ahmed, representative, AdSoft Technologies (Kabul, 27 June 2016.)

Finest was one of the few places in Kabul that bought Shabbir Ahmed's business management software, AdSoft. It paid off. People liked the impersonal nature of the business environment, despite the fact that most items sold at Finest were the exact same goods sold in other Kabul shops but with higher prices. In fact, Finest would buy things like almonds from the bazaar and put them in a package, with labels and price tags, and make sure everything they sold was priced at least 10 to 30 percent more expensive than the most expensive store in Kabul.[625] The fixed prices written on tags helped customers feel they were treated equally and they had no reasons to haggle. The technologized check out also allowed the store to trust strangers—salaried staff—to handle the cash register, thanks to the AdSoft app that recorded every transaction automatically for recordkeeping. The business took off and soon the store opened five other branches in Kabul. The store's owner, Sayyid Saʿadat Mansur Nadiri, is the son of a wealthy religious leader from the Ismaʿili minority who had returned from the UK in search of opportunities in the post-2001 Afghanistan. He was different from old men of the bazaar who waited all day in their shops to find a naïve villager to rip off or use flattery, lies, or swearing on the Quran to make a sale. Nadiri hired Western and Middle Eastern retail experts in his stores who managed the general operation of the enterprise based on the latest tricks in marketing books.[626]

The only thing about Finest that does not feel like a Western retail store is the way you get into it. Customers have to go through body search by guards, with AK-47 on their shoulders, pass through metal detectors, and leave their bags at the gate. Despite all the security measures, twice the store's branches have been attacked by suicide bombers, once in 2009 and another time

[625] Interview with a former employee of Finest Supermarket (Kabul, 24 May 2016.)

[626] Interview with a former employee of Finest Supermarket (Kabul, 24 May 2016.)

in 2011. A Canadian author, a former expat in Kabul, has written a novella about the attack on the store.[627] In 2014, the US and other NATO countries withdrew the bulk of their soldiers from Afghanistan and, as a result, the Afghan economy, especially the sectors reliant on foreign forces, suffered greatly. Finest had to scale down by closing two branches and now the remaining four serve mostly the Afghan upper class and the few foreigners who still live in the city.

In the 1940s, the state asked stores to record every transaction in ledgers so it could surveil them for taxation, but the demand proved too ambitious and it failed. Now, there is a store that records every transaction automatically, without the state asking for it, but it is the state that does not know how to deal with a transparent enterprise. The AdSoft app that Finest uses can work offline and stores all the data in the Finest server. The tax collectors could easily get the exact numbers by looking at the app's data. One day, however, the Ministry of Finance tax assessor came to a Finest branch and, instead of asking for the data, just sat there and counted how many people shopped at the store and how many goods they bought. Based on that, they did the math for the entire year and assessed the store's tax.[628] This is how the Afghan government does tax assessment for every shop. In the Finest case, because people working at the store were not the owners of the business but employees, they could not haggle with government agents to determine the taxes. In any other shop, tax assessors haggle with the shopkeeper (and after receiving their bribe) settle on a number. In case the two sides could not reach an agreement,

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[627] Ele Pawelski, *The Finest Supermarket in Kabul* (Toronto: Quattro Books, 2017).

[628] Interview with Shabbir Ahmed, representative, AdSoft Technologies (Kabul, 27 June 2016.)

then the assessors wait in the shop and count the sales in a day to determine the taxes.[629] Price tags—fixed and predictable numbers in a value exchange—are still an issue when the exchange is between the state and the public and because of that, much like in the past, a trader still cannot predict the costs of their business.

After 2001, the form of the new government was shaped by Americans who wanted a free market economy and a small government. Much of the public service delivery was outsourced to NGOs and private companies and some public utilities, such as power, were privatized. The office of price control at the municipality was dismantled and price fixing was left to the market itself. Only two guilds, butcheries and bakeries, had their prices fixed by their professional guilds, with no state intervention. In 2014, they, too, stopped fixing prices.[630] A considerable number of shops now use price tags especially in Shahr-i Naw area of the capital, but much of the rest of Kabul—and Afghanistan—still operates on haggling, as the 19th century.

The question that pops to any visitor's mind when going to the bazaar for the first time is how a merchant can possibly remember the price of every item in the shop. Do they make a number up on the spot when a customer asks them about the price of an item? How about record-keeping? Do they write down transactions on a daily basis to keep track of the business performance? "I don't write down any sales," said a tea merchant, sitting in a shop with a wide variety of teas and sweats. He had no price tags on the merchandise but claimed that he

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[629] Interview with Hasan Sipahi, President, Afghanistan National Trade Union (Ittihadiyah-i Milliy-i Pishah-varan) (Kabul, 20 July 2016); Interview with Janbaz Akbari, tea merchant, Saray-i Chay Furushi, Mandavi (Kabul, 23 June 2016.)

[630] Interview with Hasan Sipahi, President, Afghanistan National Trade Union (Ittihadiyah-i Milliy-i Pishah-varan) (Kabul, 20 July 2016.)

remembered the price of everything in the shop. "I sometimes forget the words in my daily prayers," the old man said. "But I never forget the prices of items in my shop."[631]

THE PRICE OF INFORMATION

Before he became the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad was an accomplished merchant. It is not accidental that he showed great interest in bazaar life and put forth detailed rules on how to conduct trade and how to settle disputes. Like any good merchant, he also knew the paramount value of information in the process of commercial exchange and how honesty, trust, and civility were needed for building a prosperous market. The following quote, used in the opening of a 1947 Afghan business guide, is attributed to him:

> The cleanest occupation is the occupation of those traders, who, when they speak do not lie; when they are lent something do not betray; when they promise do not break; when they buy do not decry; when they sell do not exaggerate; when they owe do not delay; when they are owed do not pressure.[632]

In particular, the part that says "when they buy do not decry; when they sell do not exaggerate" is targeting the rhetorical strategies used in bazaar bargains. In bargaining rituals, buyers usually try to point out to weaknesses in the product and sellers would try to exaggerate the product's

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[631] Interview with Janbaz Akbari, tea merchant, Saray-i Chay Furushi, Mandavi (Kabul, 23 June 2016.)

[632] Rahmat Allah Lival, *Rahnumay-i Tajir* (Kabul: Matbaʿah-i ʿUmumi, 1947), 1.

quality and hide its flaws. This is a recipe for conflict and violence. In such an environment buyers, in particular, have little information and have to take huge risks for every transaction.

The price tag, the paper that displays the price information of an item, is more than a price tag. It showcases not only the price of the item for sale but also the paper-based regime of control that exists in the establishment. It is that inscriptive nature of the price tag that builds trust between strangers by telling buyers that the price information is fixed: everyone receives the same information regardless of their status, gender, age, and ethnicity or whether they are a bazaar-savvy urbanite or a naïve villager or a foreign traveler. When the value information in a transaction is written and fixed, both parties have fewer reasons to get into conflict. Fixed price information means people can predict their costs, whether in purchasing something or paying their taxes. When, on the other hand, the price information is up for negotiation, costs are unpredictable and the market will be filled with distrust and uncertainty, things that discourage transactions and fail the economy.

An easy explanation for the lack of written prices in value transaction would be the low literacy rate in the country. When the majority of people cannot read, buyers and sellers have to orally exchange information in order to make a deal. It is true that the price tag is a visual medium and requires literacy but we should know that the price tag is not only an instrument of communicating information but also an instrument of building trust. It does not matter if the buyers cannot read it, the price tag still showcases the fact the price information is fixed and everyone is treated equally. In addition, literacy and numeracy are two different things. Illiterate people usually have basic numeracy and can identify written numbers and that is how illiterate people use the money. There are even illiterate Afghan merchants who are involved in

international trade and frequently travel abroad for business. As a result, illiteracy is not a good explanation for lack of price tag in the Afghan market.

The second explanation is the frequent fluctuations in the value of afghani against the US dollar. Most consumer items in Afghanistan are imported, which means that prices are tied to the US dollar. Sellers think it would require a lot of work to change the price tags every time the afghani losses it value against the dollar. It is more convenient, therefore, to keep the price information oral. This, too, is a misleading argument. The currency fluctuation is real but it is not as frequent, or dramatic, as one might think. Almost every country outside the US deals with currency fluctuation but retailers in those countries do not see it as a major problem. They all use the simple tool known as the "price gun" to attach new tags as part of routine inventory management. The reason is simple: the cost of re-tagging the merchandise is way lower than the cost associated with losing the trust of the customer if they kept the price information oral. In fact, in modern retail, it is not humanly possible to keep the prices oral as no one is able to memorize the price information for all the merchandise in a store. It seems, as a result, that the resistance of Afghan merchants against the price tag comes from their flawed notion of making a profit: the information asymmetry is used as a tool of cheating on customers and making a quick and large profit at the cost of losing their trust—and the future business of that customer.

I used the medium of the price tag here as a prism to look at the larger problem of information asymmetry in the Afghan economy and society. The lack of price tags in the Kabul bazaar, I tried to show, is a symptom of a more fundamental problem which is the lack of trust— not only between buyers and sellers but also between the government and the governed. The price tag refers to all forms of fixed price information during a value exchange. The inscribed information is a technology of producing trust, both in the bazaar and outside of it. It is wrong to

think of trust as an abstract concept that exists in some cultures and does not in others. When we talk about trust, we are talking about information. "I trust you" means "I trust the information that you provide." Trust, much like information, requires hardware and the price tag is a hardware of produces it. When information is oral in a transaction, one party will be tempted to misuse the situation for personal gain. In such cases, the cheated party would either lose their trust by avoiding that person in future or would confront the cheater. The confrontation, as we learned from the tragic case of Dario Piperno and other instances in this chapter, is a common occurrence in low trust markets and usually worsen an already bad situation.

Conclusion

A Note on Information and the State

"If men were angels," noted James Madison, an American founding father, "no government would be necessary." He wrote this in 1788, in the early years of US independence, when American leaders were thinking about the shape, size, and powers of the young state that they had founded. He knew that the state government needed, among other things, strong control mechanisms to monitor both the governed and the governor:

> If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.[633]

The practice of control is facilitated through media of information. In particular, technologies of numerical information have been essential in counting, measuring, weighing, and sorting people, place, and things on a large scale. In a Foucauldian sense, the wide range of media instruments

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[633] James Madison, "The Federalist No. 51," Congress.gov Resources, February 8, 1788, https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers#TheFederalistPapers-51.

that handle this type of data are all technologies of surveillance. The state and corporations, from the 18th century on, have been collecting population information for the purpose of governance. In the digital age, the task of surveillance has become much easier, leading to violations of privacy and restrictions of personal freedoms in many instances. This, however, has been the case in strong states—whether they are democratic like Sweden and the US, authoritarian like China and Saudi Arabia, or somewhere in between like Singapore and Russia. The stability and strength of the state in these countries stem from their ability to collect, store, and retrieve reliable population data and use the data, not force, for the practice of governance. The unprecedented power of information in the modern age, and the various ways it has been abused, has loaded the word surveillance with negative connotations.

In humanities fields, a steady stream of books and articles have been published on surveillance in recent years that almost all reach the same conclusion: the state is evil. This is true about evil states, I have to agree, but not all states. In the US, for a long time, it was libertarians (on the right) and anarchists (on the left) who pushed anti-state ideas. Now it seems that the critics of the state have grown in variety. The current surveillance scholarship and the discourse on digital technology, in general, tend to "construct opposites in a way that makes it seem very Black and White (e.g., celebratory versus critical, technology versus nature, materiality versus users)." It has reached the point that scholars in this filed keep repeating the same things mechanically, making certain positions "more commonplace and accepted than others":

There is much discourse on digital technology insinuating that there are sides to be taken, even claiming that these specific sides are unproblematic. Who, after all, could be against

a reading of Facebook as exploitative and capitalistic in character? Besides representing the usual story, such a reading of Facebook is also the one that, as critical scholars, we are *expected* to tell, supposed to believe in, and frankly, the easiest to defend and get acceptance for.[634]

Taina Bucher, a professor at the University of Copenhagen, is one of the rare voices in media studies who thinks this type of "critical" scholarship is counterproductive. She calls for letting the black and white approach to media go and taking "ambivalence" as a virtue in our scholarship. Ambivalence, she says, takes more, not less, work: "It might arguably be easier to agree with the fact that Facebook is a powerhouse of surveillance capitalism than to think seriously about what the pleasures of the platform would entail."[635] Surveillance, for example, is more than an oppressive technology. According to David Lyon, a sociologist, surveillance refers to all forms of data collection and processing "for the purposes of influencing and managing" people. It includes invasive practices that we regularly hear in the news about this state or that corporation, but also all other ways of data gathering that are so integral to the modern economy and society. "Surveillance practices in everyday life," he says, "is not the product of some capitalist conspiracy or the evil effects of a plutocratic urge." Surveillance, instead, is a needed organizational tool on which the "efficiency and convenience" of our comfortable lives

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[634] Taina Bucher, "Bad Guys and Bag Ladies: On the Politics of Polemics and the Promise of Ambivalence," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (2019): 2.

[635] Bucher, 3. On the virtues of ambivalence, see also Ciara Kierans and Kirsten Bell, "Cultivating Ambivalence: Some Methodological Considerations for Anthropology," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2017): 23–44.

depend.[636] In this research, while acknowledging the perils of information when in the wrong hand, my position on the information in state practices is clear: weak states need population information to strengthen its institutions of public service delivery.

This dissertation examined the history and politics of identification documents, street signs, and price tags in Afghanistan to highlight the idea that technologies of information are a great site to study not only state power but also state weakness. Throughout this research, which covered the history of Afghanistan from the time of Amir Shir ʿAli Khan (r. 1863-1866 and 1868-1879) to the present day, I assessed the many ways information failure contributed to the failure of the state and the market. In this concluding section, I would like to offer a brief overview of the challenges of governance in a country with widespread information poverty. This is a critical assessment of population information and the technological aspects of state power in Afghanistan that I hope will place the previous chapters in a broader context.

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The modern state's efforts to quantify the population and their activities (birth, marriage, work, health, property, movement, earnings, and so on) were designed to produce population legibility by bringing the watchful eyes of the state to the spheres of life that previously could remain private. In Western countries, despite some resistance, the state won over the skeptic public and the new technologies of surveillance gained social acceptance. In a Hobbesian term, this process could be credited to the triumph of civil society: people giving up unlimited individual liberty for the security that surveillance apparatuses provided. This tradeoff for the common good was a

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[636] David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2002), 2.

way to avoid what Hobbes famously called, the "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" life that existed in nature.[637] Much of the rest of the world, however, did not experience the formation of a strong civil society as the West did. In many countries in the developing world, institutions of the state have been weak and, therefore, instead of using disciplinary technologies of surveillance to police the population, the state has been using coercion as its primary tool of governance, causing violence, instability, and chronic insecurity. The weakness of civil society in the developed world could also be explained by colonialism that, by design, discouraged cooperation and voluntary associations—key ingredients of a strong civil society.

Information failure is a key feature of state failure. When the state lacks access to reliable population data, which is common in all weak states, it cannot govern. A ghost state, therefore, is a country where state failure could be linked to information failure: when accurate population data does not exist, the state has to govern faceless, nameless, placeless "ghosts"—an impossible task. The problem of ghosts, however, is not unique to Afghanistan. Other weak states, too, suffer from it. "Ghosts" emerge in all places where the state struggles with failure or fragility. In Afghanistan, there are ghost schools, teachers, and students, ghost voters, police officers and so on.[638] These ghost stories that have become so common in post-2001 era all refer to the same problem: Afghan officials receive large sums of money, mostly from international donors, for military or civilian personnel who only exist on paper and no one can verify their existence. In the absence of accurate numerical information, it is difficult to fight this type of administrative corruption. The cultures of collecting, classifying, and integrating data in Afghan state

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[637] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Parts I and II* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005), 96.

[638] "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress"; Thomas Ruttig, "All Together Now: Afghanistan Is Not Switzerland," *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/09/17/all-together-now-afghanistan-is-not-switzerland/.

institutions are either very weak or non-existent. In addition, the information poverty also means that the state is unable to provide basic services to the public. It is the ordinary Afghans, therefore, who pay the cost of living in a ghost state. Because of the power vacuum created by the failure of the state, everyone is on their own.

The poverty of population information in ghost states is a problem not by neglect but by design: those in power purposefully ignore, distort, destroy, or withhold information in order to create a safe environment for corruption. Properly collected and sorted information brings transparency and accountability that those in positions of power in such states do not desire. This is why countries that are classified as most corrupt are also usually on the list of countries that suffer from state fragility.[639] Corruption, like accountability, is all about the way the state information. The Afghan rulers, even before the wars, had little interest in reliable population information and Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world that has never conducted a complete nationwide census. It was in 1973 that the country established a Department of Statistics for the first time. Its achievements so far have not been very overwhelming.[640] The same is true with the Department for Cadastral Survey that was established in 1963, with American funding, to register lands and properties in the country. Producing concrete geographical knowledge about public and private lands could help the government rule and serve the population better. In 1966, the government launched a cadastral survey but, after eleven

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[639] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2018" (Berlin: Transparency International, 2019), https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/CPI_2018_Executive_Summary_EN.pdf; "Fragile States Index Annual Report 2019" (Washington DC: Fund for Peace, 2019), https://fragilestatesindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf.

[640] "Institutional Assessment of the Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan" (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/30124.

years, it had only covered one-fifth of total arable land and "not a single title deed was The country still lacks proper cadastral data.

State surveillance has its historical roots in the state's quest for domination. Domination in Afghanistan historically meant military domination, which explains why the project of state-building in the country has always had a militaristic component to it. The militaristic state-building is an idea that could be traced back to Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, the man who initiated the efforts to build a modern Afghan state by importing print technology and establishing a disciplined army. In *Tufat al-ʿUlamaʾ* (1875), a book that he commissioned one of his key advisors to write, there is an anecdote about the king of Italy (*rum-i kubra*) who, as a follower of Jesus, neglected to build an army and pursue other worldly affairs. When conflict erupted between him and the king of Austria (*namsah*), and it was about to lead to a military confrontation, the Italian king proposed a peace deal. He knew that his army was small and unprepared for war. He later embarked on building a strong military force arguing that Jesus's advice on avoiding worldly affairs and his saying that "I govern the sprits, not the bodies" belonged to his own time and was no longer applicable today. The modern age, the author goes on, is the age in which "the Kingdome belongs to he whose army triumphs," citing an unwritten rule of political domination in the Islamic world.[642] This anecdote is supposed to justify the Amir's spending on the army and reveals his concerns about the ambitions of the two powerful neighbors, the British Empire in the south and the Russian Empire in the north. (Four years later, the British invaded Afghanistan and easily defeated the Amir's army.)

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[641] Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 58.

[642] Qazi ʿAbd al-Qadir Khan, *Tufat Al-ʿUlamaʾ* (Kabul: Mustafavi, 1875), 57–59.

Shir ʿAli's successors continued the militarized state-building he had started. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman who conducted a census of young males used the numbers only for the draft. Amir Aman Allah Khan who issued the first universal national identification card, Tazkira, used it primarily for the draft, and not as a technology for building effective bureaucratic governance. Tying the identification document to forced military recruitment turned it into a dreaded paper that people avoided at all costs. It was in 2001, with the establishment of a new regime, that finally serving in the military became voluntary. The militarized vision of state-building, however, continued to shape all aspects of the post-war reconstruction even in this era. The international aid money has been mostly spent on an expensive military that does not seem to improve over the years because of the rampant corruption in the top ranks. The anti-sate, small government advocates coming from the West, on the other hand, undermined state institutions by outsourcing public service delivery to the private sector and the NGOs creating a chaotic and an ineffective aid industry and weakening state institutions further. This was a condition that benefited the Afghan elites and international contractors, but left the rest of the population in a vicious circle of violence, poverty, and injustice.

Despite all the efforts, the Afghan state is still a weak state, with limited authority outside major cities. According to one national study, the Taliban group now has a presence in up to 70 percent of the Afghan territory.[643] This is after the spending of more than a trillion dollars in the past two decades and the loss of thousands of lives each year. Militarized security practices not only do not help the state, they undermine the project of state-building by maintaining a perpetual condition of state failure. Security requires accountable, transparent, and participatory

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[643] Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban 'Threaten 70% of Afghanistan,'" *BBC News*, January 31, 2018, sec. Asia, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116.

techniques of population information gathering, which does not exist in Afghanistan. In a functioning state, the military should not get involved in the business of governance, that is, to extend the authority of the state over the population and the territory. Security, and other government services, should remain the domain of a bureaucracy that primarily relies on rules and reliable population information. This is the reason that the US military's constant pursuit of better targeting technologies in Afghanistan is misguided. In order to build a functioning state capable of providing security, justice, and other services, Afghanistan needs better information, not better weapons. In a democratic state, there would be no need for a military force—either national or foreign—to practice governance by dropping bombs. And better information means reliable information on the population and the territory which are both in short supply in Afghanistan.

Flawed, fraudulent, or non-existent, numerical information, I tried to show in this dissertation, has far-reaching consequences that touch all aspects of the state and society. In recent years, the Afghan government and its international partners have been using digital technologies to gather information. These new technologies, like the old technologies used in the past, have not been very helpful in public service delivery, bureaucratic reform, or fighting terrorism. The project of state-building in Afghanistan, since the 2001 intervention, has been particularly expensive, bloody, and, by all accounts, unsuccessful.[644] While studies of the political and military aspects of this endemic failure are necessary, they are not enough. This

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[644] "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress"; SIGAR, "Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan" (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, May 2018), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf.

dissertation, as a result, tried to shed light on the role of population information in state practices and the power politics behind the tools used to produce such information.

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Ingar

Iqtisad

Islah

Ittilaʿat-i Ruz

Jamiʿah-i Baz

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