



# CITIES V. MODERN URBANIZATION AND MODERNIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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## CITIES

### v. Modern Urbanization and Modernization in Afghanistan

Although the history of cities on Afghan territory has been long and rich, modern Afghanistan is nevertheless among the least urbanized countries in Asia. The portion of the population living in cities was estimated at 10-11 percent of the settled population in 1352 Š./1973 (Grötzbach, 1979, p. 10) and at about 14 percent in the [census](#) of 1358 Š./1979, which was, however, not completed for the entire country ([Table 47](#); Grötzbach, 1986, p. 76); almost half of these city dwellers lived in Kabul, the capital. Since 1359 Š./1980 the flight of millions of Afghans, not only out of the country but also to relatively secure cities like Kabul and Mazār-e Šarīf, has been reflected in a sharp increase in the level of urbanization. In 1366 Š./1987 city dwellers were unofficially estimated at nearly a third of the population of Afghanistan.

Leaving aside a few tentative measures adopted in Kabul from the end of the 13th/19th century, the modernization of Afghan cities can be said to have



begun under the reformist ruler Amān-Allāh Khan (1337-48 = 1308 Š./1919-29). The law on municipal government (*Nezām-nāma-ye baladīya*) passed in 1302/1923-24 laid the essential foundation for modern urbanization by granting a certain degree of independence to municipalities (*baladīya*; since 1326 Š./1947 *šahrwālī*). They were able to exercise it only to a limited degree, however, primarily because the funds at their disposal were extremely small. Programs for large-scale urban development and for provision of infrastructure had therefore to be financed by the state. Amān-Allāh Khan himself founded the representative new city of Dār al-Amān about 8 km southwest of the old city of Kabul; it was planned after European urban models but remained unfinished (Hahn, 1964). The king also established a new summer residence at Paḡmān, at the foot of the mountains 20 km west of the capital.

These first attempts at urban development were limited to Kabul and its suburbs; parallel efforts in provincial cities did not begin until the dawn of the 1310s Š./1930s. They were undertaken with two main purposes in mind: to facilitate the circulation of automobile traffic, which had increased greatly, and to satisfy the Afghan government's desire to provide extremely traditional and even partly decaying cities with a modern appearance. In Qaṭagān, at that time the most important region for development, the establishment of industrial enterprises (at Kondūz, Pol-e Kōmrī, Baḡlān Ṣaṇ'atī) and of a new provincial capital (Baḡlān Šahr-e Jadīd) gave fresh impetus to the construction of entirely new cities.

After this first, rather unplanned phase of modernization (until ca. 1324 Š./1945) there was a second phase, in the 1330s-40s Š./1950s-1960s, which was characterized instead by planned urban renewal. After 1335 Š./1956 most urban-renewal projects were carried out within the framework of the Afghan four-year plans, under the direction of the Ministry for public works (Habib, 1987). In 1342 Š./1963-64 a department of housing and town planning was established; it eventually was raised to the status of an independent central authority. City planning and urban construction were strongly centralized within this organizational framework. Municipal administrators were required to implement urban plans that had been drawn up under the supervision of the central authority in Kabul. One result was that not only the master plans for renewing older Afghan cities but also those for laying out and constructing new cities and city quarters became increasingly uniform. As the planning staff of the central authority consisted primarily of foreign architects



(mostly from the Soviet Union) and Afghans trained abroad, Afghan urban development also came to be dominated by foreign cultural models (Grötzbach, 1979; Habib, 1987). It is for these reasons that the new cities (*šahr-e now*, *šahr-e jadīd*) often appear to be alien architectural elements within the traditional settlement landscape. Regular ground plans; *bāzārs* and municipal buildings of concrete; new types of houses; and spacious streets, squares, and “parks” (for which there is hardly any water) are among the most striking foreign elements.

Although renewal plans for the larger cities also included multistoried apartment houses, actual construction of this type of modern dwelling was limited almost entirely to Kabul, where as early as the 1340s Š./1960s the new Mikroyan (Mikro Rayon) residential quarter was constructed with apartment blocks of precast concrete on the Soviet model. The master plan for Kabul, which was originally prepared by Soviet experts in 1343 Š./1964 and revised in 1350 Š./1971 and 1357 Š./1978-79, called for approximately 80 percent of all new buildings to have four stories or more (Habib, p. 270). This scheme, which would have completely altered the architectural character of Kabul, was realized to only a limited extent, however. Similar plans were even less successful in provincial cities. Apartments have not been widely accepted by the Afghan population, for they do not fit the traditional dwelling pattern, which is characterized by the seclusion and intimacy of single-family homes.

The new residential quarters that were actually designed and built before 1357 Š./1978 consisted overwhelmingly of bungalow-type houses set in the midst of gardens or, on smaller lots, of walled houses with inner courtyards. The very open urban layout, with many green spaces, not only conformed to the pattern of the modern garden city but also corresponded to the traditional type of the oasis city. Of course, the greater expanses of land required for such quarters meant the loss of significant tracts of well-watered agricultural land, which had formerly been farmed very intensively, especially in the environs of cities.

Almost all older Afghan cities have been modernized since the 1310s Š./1930s, whether through complete rebuilding or through the addition of new quarters. In 1357 Š./1978 only a very few cities still possessed “old towns” that were entirely or partly preserved: Kabul, Qandahār, Herat, Ġaznī, and Tāšqorġān/Ķolm. In Ġaznī the old city does still exist but only as a residential quarter for traditional or poorer strata of the population; the *bāzār* has been transferred to the new city. The patterns in Aybak, Āqča, Andkūy, Šebarġān,



and Tāleqān are similar. Mazār-e Šarīf, Jalālābād, Balk, Maymana, and Kānābād have been completely rebuilt; in each a majority of the older structures were razed, and a new plan with networks of regular streets was laid out. Since the rebuilding the architectural center of Mazār-e Šarīf has been marked by the shrine of Ḥāzrat-e ‘Alī, that of Maymana by the old citadel.

A number of cities were built, partly on the sites of decayed older cities like Kondūz and Farāh, partly in open fields. Industrial and administrative centers were established in the 1310s-20s Š./1930s-40s at Farāh and in Qaṭaḡān (Kondūz, Baḡlān, Pol-e Kōmrī). Laškargāh (see [bost ii. modern bost](#) (laškargāh) on the Helmand river (the seat of the Helmand-Arḡandāb Valley Project) and Kōst (Paktiā province) followed in the 1320s Š./1950s. Since the 1340s Š./1960s several new provincial centers have been built, for example, Čaḡčārān (Gōr province), Mehtarlām (Laḡmān province), Pol-e ‘Ālam (Lōgar province), Terīn or Tarīn Kōt (Orozgān province), and Zaranj (Nīmroz province).

In both new and reconstructed cities the infrastructure was also extended, as part of a national program of modernization. The greatest advances were made in the educational system: In 1357 Š./1978 all cities possessed secondary schools and regular bus service, many had simple hospitals or health centers, and the most important also had air connections with Kabul. On the other hand, the technical infrastructure lagged behind. In 1357 Š./1978, except for Kabul, Jalālābād, Pol-e Kōmrī, Mazār-e Šarīf, Šebarḡān, Laškargāh, and Qandahār, electrical current was provided from diesel generators only in the evenings, and drinking water from deep wells was still less common.

The population of most Afghan cities other than Kabul rose very slowly in the decade before 1357 Š./1978. Precise data are, however, available only for Kabul, where the population grew from 435,000 to 913,000 between 1344 Š./1965 and 1358 Š./1979, when it began to increase even more rapidly with the arrival of internal refugees; it was estimated at about 2 million in 1366 Š./1987. Since 1358 Š./1979 efforts to modernize Afghan cities have been stalled, except for Kabul and Mazār-e Šarīf. In fact, owing to fighting and bombing attacks, Qandahār and Herat have been largely devastated and abandoned by their populations. Other cities have also suffered destruction, mainly Jalālābād and Kondūz.



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Figure 41. Model of a traditional Islamic city (adapted from Dettmann, 1969, p. 65 fig. 1).

Figure 42. Model of a modernized Islamic city.

Figure 43. Industrialization of Persia, 1304-20 Š./1925-41 (after Wilfried Korby, *Probleme der industriellen Entwicklung und Konzentration im Iran*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients B20, 1977. Copyright Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, Tauernstrasse 11, D-6200 Wiesbaden).

Figure 44. Industrialization of Persia, 1342-52 Š./1963-73 (after Wilfried Korby, *Probleme der industriellen Entwicklung und Konzentration im Iran*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients B20, 1977. Copyright Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, Tauernstrasse 11, D-6200 Wiesbaden).

Table 44. Urban and Rural Population in Persia, 1319-1406 = 1365 Š./1901-86

Table 45. Changes in Rank Size of Persian Cities 1318-96 = 1355 Š./1900-76

Table 46. Industrial Concentration, 1355 Š./1976-77

Table 47. Population of the Largest Afghan Cities