Thomas Ruttig and David X Noack

THE KHOST REBELLION OF 1924: The Centenary of an Overlooked But Significant Episode in Afghan History

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A hundred years ago, tribes led by local mullahs in the area around the town of Khost in southeastern Afghanistan rose up against King Amanullah and his modernisation programme. These events became known as the 'Khost' or 'Mangal' Rebellion, named after the region where it erupted and the Pashtun tribe that was first to revolt. At one point, the rebels proclaimed their own amir. Twice, they came close to threatening Afghanistan's capital. Amanullah's government mobilised lashkars – traditional irregular groups of armed men – among other Pashtun tribes and ethnic groups. By the end of 1924, Amanullah's forces were finally able to suppress the rebellion: its mullah leaders were publicly executed in May 1925, while the rebel pretender to the throne managed to flee. On its centenary, this themed report brings together two reports on the Khost Rebellion. The first, by AAN's Thomas Ruttig, looks at the events of the revolt and the interpretations given to it by historians. The second, by guest author German historian David X Noack, focuses on the role of Britain and Germany during the revolt, based on newly tapped archival sources.

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by Fabrizio Foschini

The 1920s represent a momentous period in the history of Afghanistan. For long decades, the country had been shut to both major internal socio-economic developments and the outside world. This had come as a consequence of the competition between the Russian and British empires, as well as an internal status quo enforced by Afghan monarchs dependent on subsidies from and peaceful relations with the colonial powers. The scenario was suddenly altered by the ascent to power of a group of more dynamic policymakers centred around the figure of Amir Amanullah, from whose reign (1919-29) this period came to be known as the Amani era.

This period was marked by increased government attempts at radically transforming the country and by the reactions against its project. In more recent times, Amanullah has been identified with the struggle for both national independence (by Afghan governments and rebels of all leanings) and modernisation (by reformist-minded Afghans from liberals to leftists).

However, if some features of the Amani era have, in due time, turned into widely-referenced symbols in Afghan politics, the relevance of this decade's events to an understanding of the more recent vicissitudes experienced by Afghanistan has never been appreciated enough. This may be due to the fact that it is separated from the political upheavals and conflicts that have shaken the country since the mid-1970s by forty years of comparative stability – largely coinciding with Zaher Shah's reign (1933-1973). Those forty years have often been portrayed as a 'golden age' of peace and prosperity under the cloak of a timeless 'tradition' by those, Afghans and foreigners, keen to point to a widely acceptable model to which the country could return. Under the pacified surface, however, the tensions and fault lines that first emerged during the Amani decade never disappeared completely.

During the past five, more recent, decades of turmoil, references to the Amani era have usually been limited to assessing contemporary forces at play in Afghanistan's political arena and then identifying them with the two 'camps' that first emerged in the 1920s – secular reformists vs religious fundamentalists. However, besides the

clash between secular and religious leaderships and the competition between state law and sharia, there are other relevant aspects from that era which deserve attention.

During Amanullah's reign and in its aftermath, issues came to the fore which were to prove central for any subsequent Afghan government. These included: the challenges of developing and funding an efficient state machinery and acquiring a monopoly on violence; the need for foreign economic support and the quest for political independence; the risk that centralisation turns into the imposition of political hegemony by one group over others and that local elites, in turn, defend their power and prerogatives in the name of resisting state oppression. Moreover, Afghanistan's international relations, which were boosted by Amanullah after he wrested control of the country's foreign affairs from the British in 1919, started then to become an important arena for the Afghan government to manoeuvre politically and seek economic opportunities. In these years, Afghanistan's diplomatic relations became a sensitive, multi-polar international matter, calling for the attention and involvement of a greater number of nations across the world.

These issues, recurring nowadays under different circumstances, make it all the more important to look back at all the episodes of that decade, not just the most known and debated. As part of its attempts to understand today's Afghanistan, AAN has always been keen to return to past events and assess their lasting significance. Likewise, we are happy now to present these two contributions, brought together in a themed report, on a lesser known but pivotal episode of Afghan history on the occasion of its centenary: the Khost rebellion of 1924, which was the first major challenge faced by the reformist project of an Afghan government.

A LESSER-KNOWN EPISODE IN AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED HISTORY OF MODERNISATION

by Thomas Ruttig

Introduction

In this report, the author summarises the events of the Khost Rebellion, drawing on the few available contemporary as well as secondary sources, some of them Afghan, the remainder Western. Many secondary Afghan sources rely overwhelmingly on Western sources, the good ones among which, in turn, rely on British and German archives.[1]

The author of this paper does not discuss Amanullah's modernisation programme beyond what is necessary to understand the rebellion. Neither is any attempt made to answer the certainly interesting – and open – question of whether Amanullah's rescinding of certain key reforms as a result of the rebellion meant the ulema had politically defeated him, or whether, instead, his modernisation programme was still largely successful. The Khost Rebellion and its suppression, however, are of importance to Afghanistan's history insofar as the rebels violently opposed the first systematic attempts to modernise Afghanistan by Amir (later King) Amanullah (r1919-29), the prelude to over a century of such modernisation attempts (with the push to modernise the country typically coming from the top).

These struggles continue to this day, as a recent Afghan media article by Shamsuddin Azizi reflects in its title, which reads in English: 'Repeated tragedy: The fate of modernism in Afghanistan'.

The division of forces involved in both camps, the reformers and their religious and tribal opponents, is a recurring feature, especially in more recent times.

[1] For a list of sources for of this themed report, see the bibliography.

Some remarks on terminology and geography

In this paper, the author uses the term 'Khost Rebellion' for the events that unfolded between 1924 and 1925, as is more common in the literature.[2] The term refers to "the area which furnished the main rebel forces," as put by William Kerr Fraser-Tytler, a British military officer and diplomat who, between 1919 and 1941, served in both the North West Frontier Province of British India at the Afghan border and in Afghanistan itself.[3]

Khost, administratively, was one of four *alaqadari* – somewhat similar to today's *wuluswali* (districts) of Afghanistan – of the *Hukumat-e Ala-ye Janubi*, the 'Southern Great-District', along the border with British India.[4] In the text, this is referred to as the Janubi, or the South. *Hukumat-e ala* constituted a secondary category of administrative units in 1920s Afghanistan, in contrast to a *welayat*, or 'full' province.

All other areas involved in the Khost rebellion and mentioned here belonged to the Kabul *welayat*, which was much larger than today's province of the same name: Paktia (including its current capital Gardez and Zurmat, to the southwest of it), Logar, Hesarak (today a district in the western-most tip of Nangrahar province; at times it belonged to Logar), Wardak and Ghazni, as well as the districts that constitute the Katawaz region (today split among Paktika and Ghazni). Consequently, there were no administrative officials called 'governors' in Khost or the Janubi, but more subaltern officials, such as a *hakem-e ala*.[5] As

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[2] In contrast, Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar (1897–1978), one of two Afghan historians who witnessed the rebellion and wrote about it, uses the term "rebellion of 1924 in Paktia" (*eghteshash dar Paktia*). His book was published much later, in 1967; Paktia province had only been established three years before that, in 1964, when the southern province was split into Paktia and Paktika.

[3] In 1923 and 1924, just before and during the Khost rebellion, Fraser-Tytler was Secretary to the British Legation in Kabul. Just afterwards, he served in southern British India and in the North West Frontier (1925–28). Before, he participated in the 3rd Afghan-British War/Afghan War of Independence in 1919. In 1928, he worked at the British Legation in Kabul again, then as its councillor and chargé d'affaires from 1930 to 1932, and as its minister from 1935 to 1941. The first edition of his book, Afghanistan: A Study in Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia, was published in 1950. Several updated versions of it appeared later. We have used the 1967 edition.

[4] After 2001, in Western publications and UN and NATO nomenklatura, Afghanistan's southern province became the 'southeast'. Kandahar plus Zabul, Uruzgan and Helmand became "the South." Many Afghans hold on to the old names, which often leads to confusion.

[5] A remark on spelling: we stick to AAN spelling but do not change alternative and (sometimes incorrect) spellings in direct quotes from the sources we use.

to Helmand (then Posht-e Rud), including the Zamindawar area, it was part of the Kandahar *welayat*.

Assessments of the geographical scope of the rebellion vary. According to Fraser-Tytler, "It involved the tribes of nearly all the southern province and at one time spread dangerously among the Ghilzais [mainly in what today are Logar and Ghazni province, then part of a large Kabul province, in Ahmadzai-settled parts of Khord-e Kabul just southeast of the capital, and in the eastern *Hukumat-e Ala-ye Sharqi*]. … Rebel bodies reached a point only thirty-five miles from the capital where at one time signs of panic [it might fall into the rebels' hands] were apparent." Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar, one of two Afghan historians who witnessed and wrote about the rebellion, speaks of a province-wide 'popular uprising'.

Senzil K Nawid, an Afghanistan-born scholar to whom we owe the most extensive description of the Khost Rebellion, also writes that "the whole Southern province was involved" and that it then spread "in Katawaz and Ghazni [and] Zurmat."[6]

United States scholar Ludwig W Adamec, well-known for his historical and biographical dictionaries of Afghanistan, gives a more limited picture.[7] He writes that the rebellion "was confined primarily to the mountain area between Khost and the Altimur Pass [at today's border between Logar and Paktia, now generally known as the Tera Pass], and pockets between Hisarak and the Wardak Valley and [areas] south of Ghazni [city]." The latter most likely refers to Ghilzai-inhabited Katawaz.

In contrast, its political scope is clear. According to Ghobar, the government "came out victoriously against the reactionary rebels but suffered a defeat on its reforms," as the Loya Jirga convened by Amanullah in the summer of 1924 reversed many of them (p810). As Fraser-Tytler put it, its "most serious effect … was to weaken the whole fabric of the state and pave the way for the upheaval which four years later brought about the Amir's downfall." (pp204-5).

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[6] The quote is from her 1999 book, Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan 1919–29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama, Costa Mesa, California.

[7] Here the author quotes from Adamec's book, Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century, Tucson, Arizona, 1974, p88.

How did the rebellion start?

As rebellions so often do, the one in Khost in 1924 was triggered by a minor incident, which has been described thus by Afghan historian Fayz (Faiz) Muhammad (mostly known under his pen name, 'Kateb' – 'the writer'):[8]

> *At this time a man from the Mangal tribe laid claim to a woman to whom he said he was betrothed, declaring that he had been engaged to her in childhood. But some enemies of his went to the governor, 'Amr al-Din Khan, and the quasi-magistrate, Mulla 'Abd Allah, and challenged his claim. With the consent of the fiancée[!], 'Amr al-Din rejected the man's claim. But the magistrate had taken a bribe to see that the girl was betrothed to the plaintiff and so was unhappy with the way this dispute was settled. He sent the governor a letter of protest, asserting that the Shari'ah had been violated. The governor paid no attention to him and so Mulla 'Abd Allah made up his mind to instigate a rebellion. By inciting the plaintiff and appealing to the Pushtun honor of the tribal elders, he was able to ignite the flames of hatred and discord. With appeals, incitements, and promises of Paradise for true-believing Muslims, Mulla 'Abd Allah, the "Lame," succeeded in raising all the tribes of the Southern Province against the government.*

Pakistani author Safia Haleem, however, who wrote a short online article about 'The Mangal uprising' in 2022, claimed that it was the father who refused the girl's marriage on the basis of Amanullah's new laws.[9]

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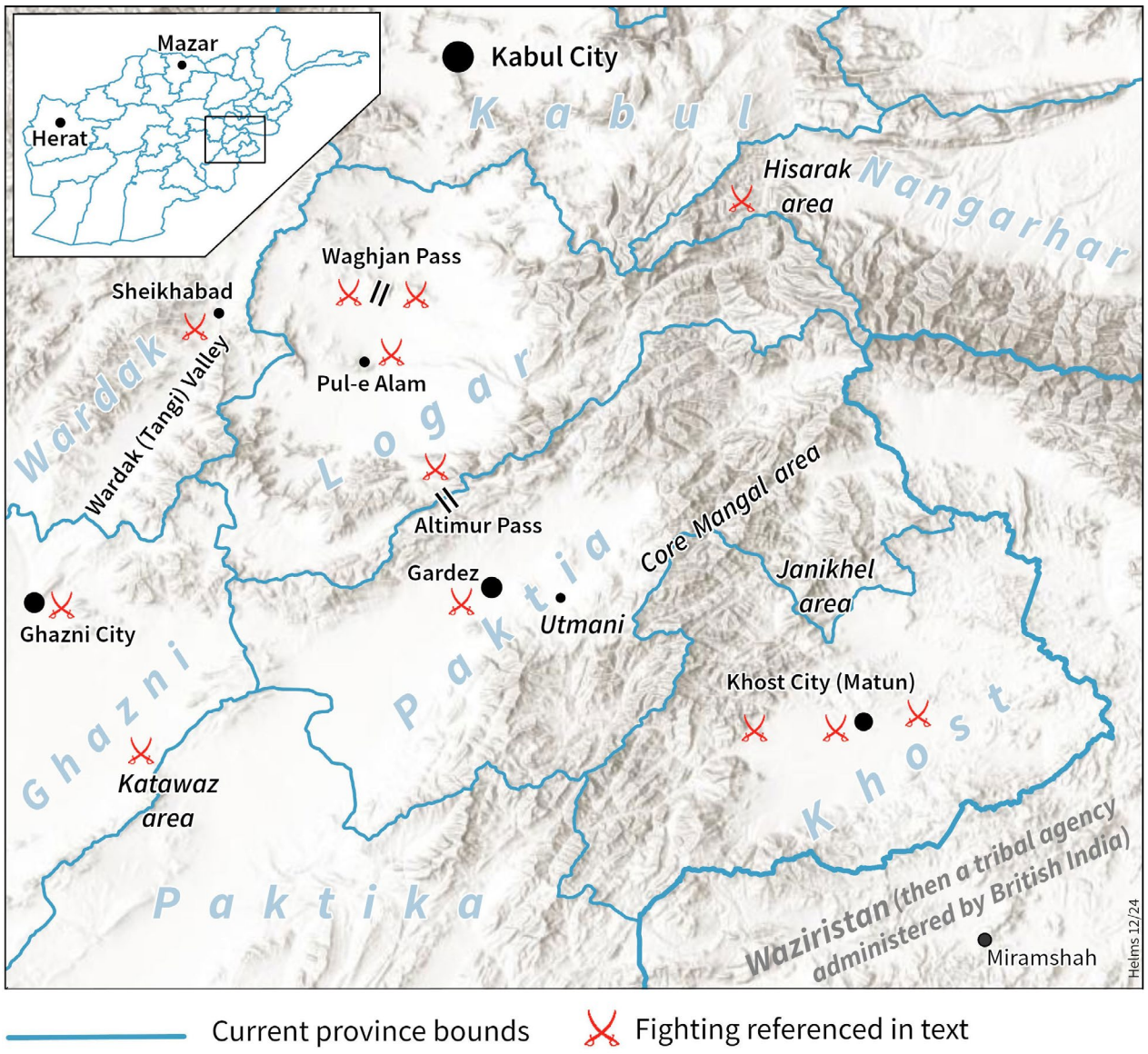
[8] Kateb had earned this nickname by being appointed secretary to the later amir, Habibullah, by the latter's father, then Amir Abdul Rahman (r1880–1901) in the late 19th century. Under Habibullah's rule (1901–19), he became the court's official historiographer. Under Amanullah, Kateb was employed at the Ministry of Education in Kabul, reviewing textbooks and also teaching at the Habibia Lyceum (Lise-ye Habibia). It was during this time that the Khost rebellion occurred. Kateb surely did not witness the incident that led to its outbreak. How he learned about it is unclear. It is in his 1931 book, *Kitab-e tazakkur-e (*or *tazkera-ye) enqelab* (Book of Memories of a Revolution) that focuses on Habibullah Kalakani's 1929 uprising against Amanullah and only seems to mention the episode in passing. Kateb's original, however, does not seem to have survived (either that or it is in Russia). Robert D McChesney (pp 17, 298) writes that Kateb's "memoir, unfinished as it is, comes to us only through a Russian translation" by AI Shkirando, *Kniga upominaniia o miatezhe* (*Book of Memories on a Mutiny),* Moscow, Nauka, 1988. We quote the episode from McChesney's introduction to his 1999 "translated, abridged, re-worked, and annotated" version of the Russian translation of Kateb's book, entitled *Kabul Under Siege: Fayz Muhammad's Account of the 1929 Uprising* (pp13-14).

[9] Haleem quotes three Afghan sources unknown to the author. Nowadays, much as in the 1920s, the Mangal live in the districts of Musakhel and Qalandar of Khost, as well as the districts of Laja Mangal, Chamkani, Janikhel, Mirzaka and Dand-e Patan of Paktia province, then part of the Janubi hukumat-e ala. There is also

Map of the area affected by the Khost Rebellion of 1924-25



Map of the area affected by the Khost Rebellion of 1924-25, showing places where armed activity by rebel forces occurred against the background of the current provincial boundaries of Afghanistan.

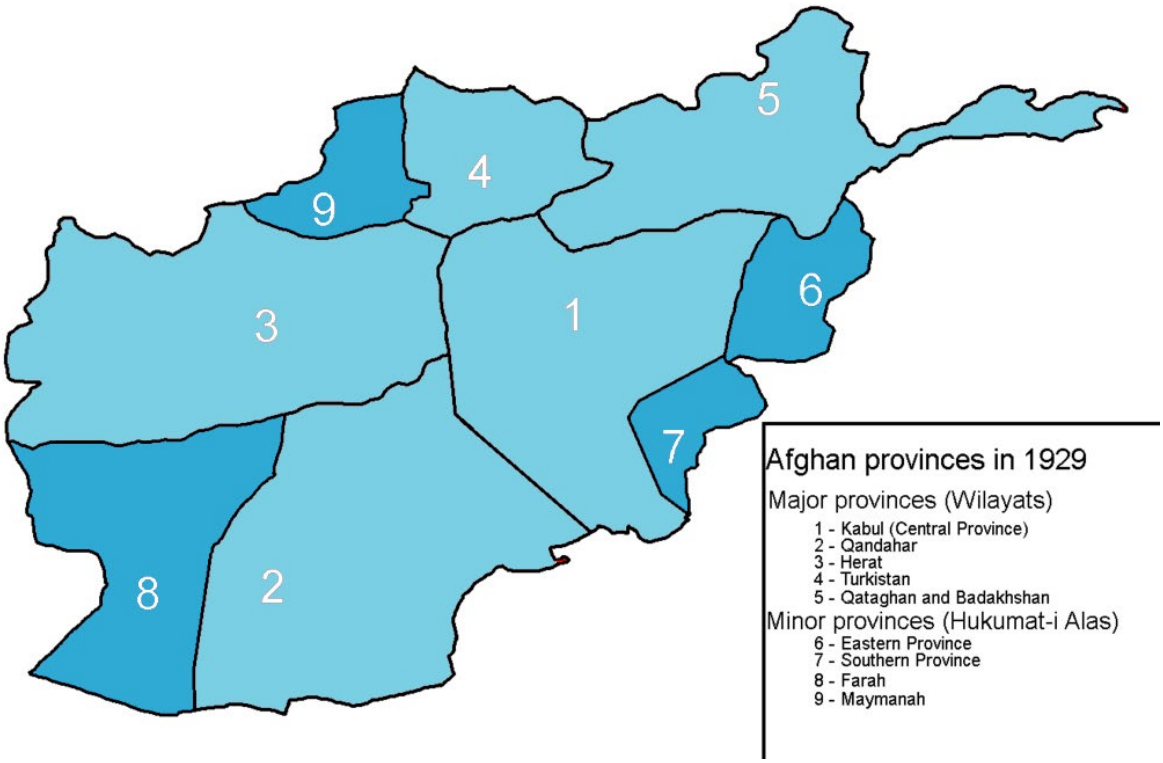
Map: Roger Helms for AAN, 2024

Kateb does not give an exact date or location for the incident. He puts it in the context of Amanullah's new Criminal Law *(tamassok ul-quzzat)* and Penal Code *(nezam-nama-ye jaza-ye umumi*), published "in 1303, equivalent to 1924 in the Christian calendar." From Ghobar's rendering of the events, it becomes clear that it must have occurred in (late) winter of 1924, as he writes that fighting started "in the beginning of [the Afghan solar year] 1303 [1924/5]" – equivalent to the start of

a small Mangal settlement on the eastern side of the Durand Line, in Teri Mangal in the Kurram district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

spring in 1924. Most other authors also put the start of the rebellion in spring/early summer of 1924.

Administrative division of Afghanistan during the 1920s



Map showing Afghanistan's administrative divisions during the 1920s.

Source: Adapted from Page XII of 'Kabul Under Siege: Fayz Muhammad's Account of the 1929 Uprising' via Wikimedia Commons

Kateb's recounting of the episode indicates it might have happened in Khost town, where the government official involved certainly must have been based.[10]

According to Kateb, the penal code was "translated from Turkish … with corrections and addenda [and] prepared by a great military officer from Turkey."[11] The code's

[10] The author has not been able to ascertain how big – or small – Khost town was in the 1920s. Ghazni had "about 1,000 inhabited houses," according to the 1908 British Imperial Gazetteer of India: Afghanistan and Nepal; Kandahar had a population of 31,000, Jalalabad a "permanent population" (without seasonally incoming nomads) of "about 2,000."

[11] Kateb wrongly gives the Turkish officer's name as 'Jamal' – better known in Western sources as Kemal (in Turkish, Cemal) – Pasha. However, at that point, Kemal was already dead, killed by an Armenian in Tiflis in July 1922 on the Soviet side of the Amu Darya where he was leading anti-Soviet Basmachi; see for example in this AAN report. According to McChesney, p277, Bedri Bey (he writes 'Badri Beg'), another Turk in Afghan services who died in Kabul in 1923 "is usually credited" with the code's authorship. In other sources, he is labelled as Enver Pasha's unofficial representative in Kabul.

Turkish–modernist origin was almost as suspicious to many Afghan mullahs ('pseudo-mullas', as Kateb put it), particularly as Atatürk, who, on 3 March 1924 and just before those events, had abolished the Caliphate, which large parts of the Afghan religious establishment saw as the "rationally and legally," only form of government, as was its content.[12] They objected to large parts of Amanullah's new legislation introduced from 1920 onwards, as the extensive literature shows.[13] Ghobar also points to power abuse and misgovernment on the part of the local *hakem*, as well as rising taxes and prices leading to dissatisfaction among local farmers, all of which helped trigger the rebellion.

The laws the mullahs objected to included:

- the 1923 constitution (*nezam-nama-ye asasi-ye daulat-e ali-ye Afghanistan*), which promulgated the equality of all "citizens" (implicitly including women) and indirectly recognised Shiism as a part of the official state religion of Islam on an equal footing (by not giving the predominant Hanafi Sunni *mazhab* priority within the state religion of Islam);
- the Tax Law (*nezam-nama-ye maliya*), which introduced a cash property tax and other taxes;
- the Identity Card Law (*nezam-nama-ye tazkera-ye nofus*), which enabled the enforcement of military service and, in so doing, threatened the Pashtun tribes' autonomy;[14]
- the introduction of obligatory training for judges (*qazi*);
- the extension of government control over religious schools *(madrassa),* which ended the ulema's control over them, as well as the establishment of the first school for girls (in 1920 already);
- Last but not least, their resistance was also to a marriage and circumcision law (*nezam-nama-ye arusi, neka wa khatnasuri*) introduced in 1920, and later amended several times. One of those amendments from 1923 gave women the right only to be married if they consented.

[12] A 'manifesto' to this avail by Kandahari ulema is quoted by Senzil K Nawid, pp80-1, from Ghobar's book. According to US journalist Rhea Talley Stewart, p264, who wrote the book *Fire in Afghanistan 1914-1929* about the religious resistance against Amanullah in 1973, based on archival sources, some Afghan mullahs even declared all Turks 'infidel' for that act. We quote from its 2nd edition, published in 2000.

[13] This includes the books by Vartan Gregorian, Leon B Poullada, Nawid and others mentioned in our literature list.

[14] The system previously in place, the *hasht nafari,* prescribed that one out of eight men in each community had to enlist; communities usually selected poorer members. The tribesmen would generally avoid military service, instead economically supporting the recruit's family.

As Vartan Gregorian in his seminal work, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reforms and Modernization* (Stanford 1969), remarks, "The religious and tribal leaders of the revolt were particularly exercised over the sections of the [Amani laws] that deprived men of full authority over their wives and daughters."

If Kateb's rendering of the rebellion's trigger incident is correct, it could indicate that at least some women were conscious of this new right and made use of it. If Haleem is correct, it would indicate that the girl's father was, at the very least, aware of it. Kateb's rendering also shows that local government officials put Amani law above sharia and Pashtunwali (or what locally was perceived as such) in practice.

What happened: Twelve months that shook Kabul

Only anecdotal accounts exist of how exactly the rebels' leader, Mullah Abdullah – also known as the 'Lame Mullah' (in Dari, *Mulla-ye Lang*; in Pashto: *Gud Mulla*, pronounced like 'good') and his co-leader Mullah Abdul Rashid from the Sahak tribe in Zurmat, rallied the tribes in the Southern Province against Amanullah's reforms. A contemporary British government report, quoted by Nawid, stated:

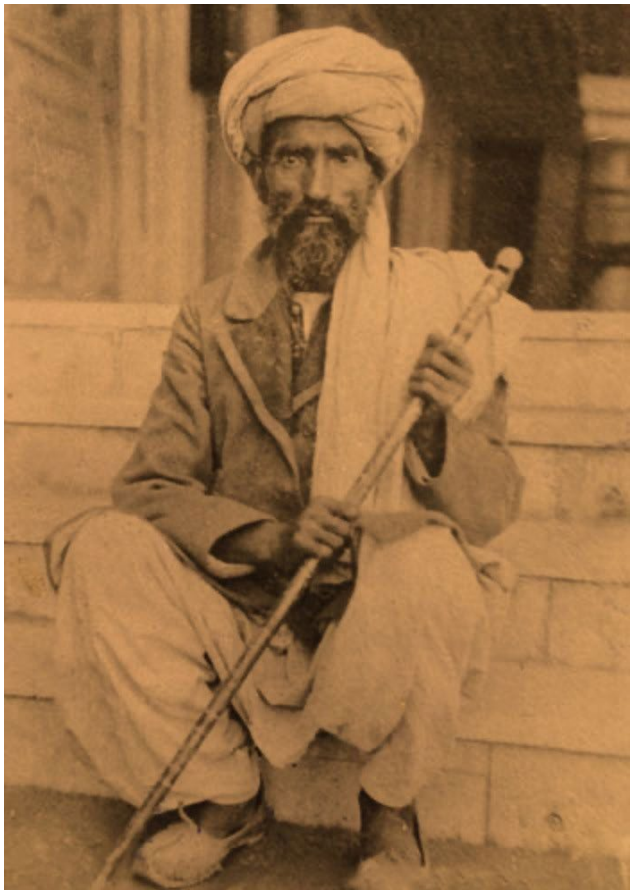
> *With the new [criminal] code in one hand and the Koran in the other, [the mullahs] called the tribes to choose between the word of God and that of man, and adjured them to resist demands, the acceptance of which would reduce their sons to slavery in the Afghan army and their daughters to the degrading influence of Western education.*

Not much has been published about Mullah Abdullah's origins. Apparently, he held an official or semi-official function, as a 'quasi-magistrate', as Kateb puts it. According to Nawid, he "had been deprived by [Amanullah's] legal reform of his authority to settle local disputes," such as the one by the Mangal complainant. She also writes that Abdullah was "lacking the charisma and lineage of the influential tribal religious leaders."

This was very much true. Originally from the village of Utmani, east of Gardez, Abdullah seems to have belonged to the non-local Kharoti tribe.[15] In the official account of the rebellion, published in the Jalalabad government newspaper Ettehad-e Mashriqi on 26 June 1924, he is called "Mullah Abdullah Akhundzada

[15] Many low-ranking mullahs in Loya Paktia and other Pashtun tribal areas hailed from outside the community and were hired by locals to perform religious chores in exchange for a (non-cash) wage.

Kharoti," as quoted by Danish scholar Asta Olesen and Afghan scholar Amin Saikal. There is not much more about him in those older sources.



A photo said to be of Mullah Abdullah, the main instigator of the Khost rebellion.
Photo: From Safia Haleem, 'De Mangalo Patsun'

More recently, however, Afghan sources have published a little more about the mullah's background. One of them, Rawan Dzadran, author of a 2017 article on an Afghan news website, writes that Abdullah was the son of a Mawlawi Abdul Majid who "lived in the Utmani village of the Sepahikhel of the Derkhel Dzadrans," and that they "had given him a house and an amount of agricultural land, to be their *imam* [prayer leader] and give them religious instruction. … [He] was originally not Dzadran, but a native of the Paktia tribes, and lived here in [the] Dzadran [areas]."[16]

Almost nothing is known about his co-leader, Mullah Abdul Rashid, from Zurmat. According to Safia Haleem, Abdul Rashid was Abdullah's son-in-law. She has also published a photo reportedly of Mullah Abdullah.

It seems the rebellion led by Mullah Abdullah started a campaign of agitation and sermons first and only later escalated into fighting. After the reported incident, the government sent Kabul corps commander Sardar (Prince) Muhammad Shah Wali, brother of the later King Muhammad Nader, to Matun, as Khost town is locally known, in an attempt to quell the agitation. Apparently, he asked for the handover of the rebellious mullahs, which was rejected. Historian Sana Haroon reports in her 2007 book *Frontier of Faith*, based on contemporary British sources, that, instead, the "rebel *'ulama* fled to the Afghan Southern Province [more likely, from Khost into the mountains] where they were harboured by the Mangal tribe," to which the

[16] According to the same source, Mullah Abdullah "left a son named Mawlawi Abdul Baqi, the son of which – who was known as Mawlawi Abdul Matin Akhundzada – passed away in the Haki [refugee] camp of Pakistan during the present hijra," a reference to the new refugee movements triggered by the post-2001 war.

complainant in the case mentioned above belonged who “refused to hand the dissidents over to the Afghan authorities.”

After Shah Wali’s failure, a delegation of high-ranking ulema from Kabul went to Gardez to convince the rebels that Amanullah’s laws did not violate the tenets of Islam. They even took with them “a group of small female students who were to demonstrate their knowledge of Islam to the tribesman,” Nawid quotes one of the girls, Tahera Sorkhabi, interviewed in 1976. It did not help.

Delegates attending the Loya Jirga of 1928, where they were issued with and required to wear Western suits. Photo: From the book "Afghan Hindus & Sikhs - History of 1000 years" via Facebook

It was only after this, according to Ghobar, that the “armed rebellion” began. According to Haroon, the Mangals gathered “a lashkar of 6,000” and attacked “army line[s] and posts,” while government troops “in Khost were insufficient to counter the attacks.” Nawid writes that the government had earlier cut troop numbers in the province, so it was relatively easy for the local tribes to successfully mobilise armed

contingents, both lashkar (offensive) and *arbaki* (defensive), according to their customs. In Ghobar's view, the ulema's mission had provided "official recognition" to the rebels as a party to a conflict, by that boosting their morale.

By mid-April, according to Adamec, "the garrisons of the Afghan [government's] outposts in Khost had either surrendered or been driven into the central forts of Gardez and Matun, which were loosely invested." Ghobar confirms a siege of Gardez. Some troops had even fled across the border to British India. Stewart reports the *hakem-e ala* of Khost was also preparing to flee.

On 22 April, government troop reinforcements were ambushed and sustained losses at the Altimur Pass. Five days later, the Turkish-led model battalion *(qeta-ye namuna)* defeated the rebels and reopened communications between Kabul and Gardez.

For Eid-e Qurban, however, on 13 July of that year, the rebels force dispersed. Trying to use this turn of events, Amanullah convened a Loya Jirga on 16 July to renew backing for his reforms and gain support against the rebels. But leading ulema turned against him and demanded a review of the new laws. In Nawid's words, "by the end of the *jerga*, [Amanullah] had capitulated to most of the ulema's objections" and even turned against the reformist ulema, who had drafted the new laws, blaming them for the provisions the conservatives deemed to be in conflict with sharia. Girls' education, for example, was "restricted to religious studies conducted only in their homes," according to Nawid. In return, the leading ulema in Kabul publicly supported the King. By issuing a *fatwa* to this avail, "they effectively imposed the death penalty on their lower-ranking colleagues" among the rebels, while unofficially petitioning Amanullah to forgive them, Nawid writes.

The rebels interpreted Amanullah's withdrawal of crucial reforms as a sign of his weakness and resumed their attacks. Soon, they had once again cut communications between Kabul and Gardez and besieged the latter's garrison. According to Emil Trinkler, a German geologist working for the German-Afghan Trading Company (DACOM) in Kabul in 1923–24, this was still the situation in late August/early September 1924.[17]

[17] This is from Trinkler's 1925 book, *Quer durch Afghanistan nach Indien* (Across Afghanistan to India), published in Berlin.

An 'anti' amir

In the second half of July 1924, a new protagonist arrived on the scene. Abdul Karim, the youngest son of Amir Yaqub Khan, who had been ruler in Kabul for ten months in 1878-79, had heard of the rebellion and wanted to join it in order to regain the throne for his family. According to Stewart (p283), he was 27 years old in 1924. He left Dehradun in British India, where he had lived in exile since his father had been toppled,[18] and apparently entered Afghanistan through Miramshah in Waziristan from where he crossed the border into the Afghan Dzadran area with the help of an elder of this tribe, Boland Khan.[19] The Dzadran put him up in a place called Nawakot, possibly in today's Janikhel district of Paktia, which is mainly inhabited by the Mangal tribe. From there, according to Stewart, he travelled to Mullah Abdullah's home village, Utmani.[20] There, Mullah Abdullah proclaimed him amir of Afghanistan and demanded Amanullah's abdication. According to Stewart, he signed his letter "Amir Abdul Karim Khan of Afghanistan, Khadim[-e] Islam [servant of Islam]." In turn, Nawid writes, Abdul Karim appointed Abdullah as his "major advisor and grand qazi" and Abdul Rashid as grand mufti.

The Dzadran and Mangal tribes pledged allegiance (*baya*) to Abdul Karim, and many, if not all Ghilzai tribes reportedly joined. Most were nomads then and they used to return from their winter pastures in British India with the onset of spring. With them, the rebellion spread to areas such as Ghazni and Katawaz – the core lands of the large Suleimankhel tribe – and to what today is Logar province. According to Adamec, this gave the rebellion "the dimensions of a civil war."

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[18] Ghobar, who describes the Khost rebellion as a British intrigue – which is refuted by most scholars now – even claims that he was a Hindustani who had assumed the Afghan prince's personality. His father, Yaqub Khan, was toppled in May 1879 after he had signed the Gandamak Treaty, which gave control of Afghanistan's foreign policy to British India. He had died less than a year before the events described here, on 15 November 1923. The British plot-theory is widespread in Afghanistan still, see the latest relevant Afghan publication known to authors, Sharif Khan Dzadran's 2019 book, *Ghazi Amanullah Khan: Character and Work Background* – see our list of referenced literature.

[19] Adamec and Stewart, p256, report that before, in April, authorities in British India had arrested "with little publicity," two other sons of Yaqub Khan who were planning to cross the border at Parachinar and join the rebels.

[20] Stewart calls it "Utman" and puts it at "sixteen miles southwest of Matun … and four miles from the frontier." This seems to be incorrect; see the 2017 article by (local) author Dzadran, who puts Mullah Abdullah's home village near Gardez. Indeed, Utmani village is some 15km east of Gardez.

On 2 August 2025, the Logar Ahmadzai and Tutakhel took the Altimur Pass again and handed it over to the Mangal rebels, according to Ghobar.[21] Then, at Baidar, near Logar's current capital Pul-e Alam, they ambushed the army's Jan-Feda regiment ("those who sacrifice themselves"), largely made up of boys aged sixteen or seventeen (Stewart, Ghobar). According to Ghobar, it had been "sent to re-open Tera Pass and link with the troops in Gardez" but was "cut down to the last man." This seems a bit exaggerated as, according to Stewart, on Independence Day (19 August), many wounded government soldiers arrived in Kabul:

> *Many rebels had no weapons except axes. They swung these axes with ferocity. … About 250 [casualties] were carried in lorries to the hospitals at Bagrami and Sherpur on the outskirts of Kabul. Those who worked with them saw that many of the wounds could have been made only with axes. … The commander [in Logar] was killed; the rebels covered his body with gunpowder and set fire to it. They had done this earlier with the body of the former Governor of Logar.*

The killing of the 'governor' (likely *alaqadar)* must have happened on 22 Assad 1303, equivalent to 13 August 1924, when, according to Ghobar, the rebels took Logar's "military fort," likely near the province's present-day capital, Pul-e Alam, and attacked Waghjan gorge, where the road from Logar enters into present-day Kabul province. He says this was when the rebels "directly threatened the capital." In mid-August, rebels also attacked Ghazni city, according to Ghobar. From there, led by Mullah Abdul Ahad and his brother Sobhan, they marched north to Sheikhabad and Takia in Wardak, just southwest of Kabul and plundered local government funds. (Both were later defeated, arrested and condemned to death in Kabul.) Further east, rebels took Hesarak.[22]

Nawid speaks of four fronts on which the rebels confronted government troops at Gardez, "Jalalabad" (more likely Hesarak and/or Khord-e Kabul), Ghazni and Wardak. As Trinkler reported, Europeans who lived in Dar ul-aman, then outside Kabul, left for the city; some even left the country altogether. They feared for their lives, because, he wrote, "the movement of the rebels was indirectly turned against the Europeans." He also says that Independence Day celebrations in Paghman were called off.

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[21] The Ahmadzai were originally part of the Suleimankhel. Today, they are considered to be a separate tribe.

[22] Hesarak is not '5 or 8 miles' from Kabul, as some sources claim, exaggerating the threat. From Hesarak, it is at least 60–70 km to Kabul by road, through Sarobi.

Janikhel district in Paktia province, an area inhabited by the Mangal tribe, where the 'anti-amir' Abdul Karim, whom the rebels wanted to replace Amanullah, resided for a while.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP

Paradoxically, however, Abdul Karim's appearance changed the rebels' fate to their disadvantage in the long run. With parliament's approval, Amanullah declared jihad on the rebels on 14 August, apparently after he saw the soldiers wounded by the rebels coming in, Adamec writes. His argument, that the British were behind Abdul Karim and the rebels, also increasingly gained traction. Major non-Ghilzai tribes in the eastern 'province' and the border areas, the Afridi, Wazir, Mahsud and Mohmand, sent armed contingents to Kabul, as did the Dari-speaking Kohestani, north of Kabul (the area was to be the origin of the 1928–29 rebellion against Amanullah that finally led to his overthrow) and the Hazaras, sympathetic to Amanullah, who had abolished slavery to which they had been subjected since Amir Abdul Rahman's violent conquest of the hitherto quasi-independent Hazarajat.[23] According to British

[23] Trinkler experienced in Kabul that "on the way from their home places into the capital, [the Kohistanis] naturally had plundered all villages, and we were of the opinion that, under circumstances, those wild tribes could become more dangerous than the Mangals" (p193). According to him, these fighters only received new clothing when in Kabul, and also, according to Haroon, "rifles which they could retain afterwards."

soldier, diplomat and scholar, Sir Percy Sykes,[24] these fighters "joined the Afghan army at Kandahar, Jalalabad and Urghun [sic] [Urgun, nowadays in Paktika] to try to encircle the rebels."

In Paktia, according to Ghobar, the Dzadzi and Tsamkani tribes switched to the government's side. In early October, according to Trinkler, the rebels were once again pushed back south across the Altimur Pass. By November, tribal contingents and government troops forced them out of Hesarak and away from Gardez. Only the Dzadran and the Suleimankhel kept on fighting. On 22 December 1924, Dzadran leaders came to Kabul to negotiate a settlement, according to Nawid. It is unclear when the Mangal gave up, or what happened to the Suleimankhel.

The rebellion's aftermath

On 30 January 1925, Abdullah and other leaders were apprehended. Nawid writes only that he was "arrested during an unsuccessful attempt to take refuge in the Mohmand country [agency] across the border with India" and called it a "surrender." Ghobar says local Dzadran caught and handed him over to the government. A few days later, Abdul Karim, pretender to the throne, who had fled back across the border to British India, was arrested in Lahore by the authorities. They declined to hand him over to the Afghan government but banished him to Burma, where, two years later and following his conversion to Christianity (much to the astonishment of the local Muslim community), he committed suicide. This is according to Roland Wild, who was the British Daily Mail's Afghanistan correspondent following Amanullah's December 1927-July 1928 trip to Europe. Adamec and Dupree claim he was assassinated.

Four months later, on 25 May 1925, a large group of leading rebels were executed by firing squad on Tapa-ye Maranjan, then known as Siahsang, "in the presence of enormous crowds," according to Nawid.[25] Among those killed were Mullah Abdullah, his three sons and Mullah Abdul Rashid. The latter, before his execution, still denounced Amanullah and his officials as 'kafirs'. According to Nawid, prior to this, Abdullah had "apparently tried to make a deal with the government by proposing that in return to safe conduct he would expose the entire story of the rebellion and

[24] This is from Sykes' book, *A History of Afghanistan*, vol II, London, 1940. During World War I, he was commander of the South Persia Rifles at the border of Afghanistan. See also Saikal.

[25] Figures differ: Nawid claimed 60 people were killed, while according to Adamec, 53 were killed. Ghubar says it was 25. Stewart speaks of 75 out of 5,000 prisoners having been executed.

reveal the names of certain influential ulema in Kabul and high officials in the government who were involved in the plot." Given the prevalence of torture in Afghan jails, even back then, it can be assumed that the government had the means to extract this information without a deal. The time lapse between Abdullah's capture and execution could be a sign that this, in fact, happened.

According to an eyewitness quoted by Adamec, Sebastian Beck, who worked as a secretary to the German legation in Kabul and took photos of the execution (which are in Berlin at the foreign office's archive), Amanullah himself announced the sentences, saying, among other things:

> *You are no genuine Afghans. I am sorry I have to proceed with such severity to you, my subjects, my children; but you are no longer my children because you have revolted against me. You have criticised my actions. … You said that my new laws were in conflict with the Koran. I have asked you to come to me and debate this with me. You have not done that. Instead, you ran after the adventurer Abdul Karim, have risen against me, and have caused the death of many of my brave soldiers. Therefore I cannot forgive you. Therefore you must die.*

Omar Shahin, writing on the online platform *nunn.asia* in 2016, said that, after his arrest, Mullah Abdullah was brought before Amanullah who told him that he would have forgiven him, had he not joined forces with Abdul Karim, the pretender to the throne.

Adamec also quotes a report by the German legation, saying that, apart from the group executed, "others were sentenced to hard labor and distributed over various provinces. They had to produce hostages to prevent their escapes." Stewart writes that Amanullah had "all Mangal, Zadran and Ghilzai women and child prisoners" released, "except for the Ahmadzai Ghilzais of Altimur, the worst offenders, who were deported with their male relatives to Turkestan, where they were given land."

Prior to this, Amanullah's supporters wreaked havoc in the area of the rebellion, killing and destroying entire villages. Cattle were seized. Trinkler reports that 'terrible' collective punishment was imposed on the Mangals: "1575 men were executed, 600 women dragged to Kabul, 3,000 houses levelled and burned down." The leaders of the tribes who surrendered had to 'repent' with an oath on the Holy Quran, according to Olesen. Gregorian speaks of "some 3,500 houses bombarded

[likely shelled] and burned" and of "450 women and children [who] died of cold and hunger" as a result of the fighting.

After his execution in May 1925, Mullah Abdullah was buried in what became a shrine near Melan, Gardez district of Paktia province.
Photo: AAN archives

Kateb goes on to state, "fourteen thousand people perished and the cost of the government was 30 million rupees." He puts the figure at five million pounds sterling, "or two years' revenue." Gregorian and Fraser-Tytler also use this figure. Ghobar speaks of "one year's tax income." Kateb's casualty figure might be exaggerated, though.

After the rebellion was suppressed, Amanullah had a memorial stele built in Deh Mazang, a central location in Kabul between the Old City and the new urban

expansion along Dar ul-Aman Boulevard, which Amanullah had devised and would later become West Kabul. The memorial, called the Munar-e Ilm wa Jahel, the Minaret of Knowledge and Ignorance – celebrating the former's triumph over the latter – was damaged but not destroyed by the civil war in the 1990s, and was later refurbished. It bears the names of at least some of the Afghan soldiers who fell fighting against the Khost rebels in 1924.[26]

Not only Khost and the South

The Khost Rebellion was not the only expression of, peaceful or violent, dissent triggered by Amanullah's reforms. It is only the most well-known (though still understudied) armed uprising opposing them. It was not even the first. Nawid mentions anti-conscription protests that began in the autumn of 1923 in Zamindawar (today in Helmand province), in Katawaz (today in Paktika), in Kandahar city, and in the eastern 'province', today split into Nangrahar, Kunar, Laghman and Nuristan. In early October, "a group of *mollas* in Jabal al-Saraj protested the appointment of Western teachers" in the so-called Shemali area north of Kabul.

British author Mike Martin calls the Zamindawar protests the "Alizai rebellion" in a chapter on Helmand's pre-1978 history in his 2014 book. Additionally, he briefly mentions that "more localised disturbances" occurred in the rest of what was then called "Pusht-e Rud," the area "beyond the [Helmand] river." These took six months to quell, "as none of [Amanullah's] conscripted battalions in the south would fight the Alizai. (Nawid speaks of the mutiny of one Nurzai battalion only "over delays on pay.") "The rebellion was eventually settled by troops from Herat, who executed the rebel leaders and deported groups of Zamindawaris to Turkestan" in northern Afghanistan, according to Martin, referring to contemporary military reports from the General Staff in British India.

Olesen, using British India Office records, puts the "first signs of the trouble brewing for Amanullah" at the Independence Day 1923 celebrations in Jalalabad on 19

[26] The pillar has recently been incorporated into the precincts of Kabul Zoo to protect it from general damage and pollution better. As two videos broadcast by Kabul-based Ariana TV in February 2022 and December 2023 demonstrate, not many passers-by seem to be aware of its origin or purpose, tending to confuse these with either the War of Independence of 1919 or the civil war of 1928-29. In the videos, the only one who seemed to know about its real origin was an engineer from Paktia, now jobless, on a visit to the Afghan capital.

August where the King read his new *nezam-nama* to "some eight hundred delegates from Afridi, Mohmand, Shinwari, Khugiani, Ghilzai and Ningarhar Wazir," along with leading local ulema, such as the Haji of Turangzai.[27] According to her, one of the ulema "put forward the [still quite modest] view that the *Nizamnama* appeared to injurious to the progress of Islamic teaching."

After the beginning of the Khost Rebellion, the British received word of many problems the Afghan government faced in northern and western Afghanistan. In late August, for example, Uzbeks led by local mullahs, who sympathised with the Khost rebels, engaged regular troops in a skirmish "in the vicinity of Mazar-e Sharif." The incident led to 25 deaths and a "considerable number" of wounded. In Herat, the rebellion led to "general excitement throughout the province" during September 1924. When the army wanted to send troops to Khost, this led to resistance in Herat. In order to mobilise the three regiments of about 1,800 men in the province, the higher-ups had to shoot three officers and hang a further two men, who resisted fighting the Khost rebels. These repressive methods led to "utter chaos" and "looting was freely engaged in" in Herat. The authorities had to declare martial law in order to restore order. Only in early October did the situation become "more or less normal" again.[28]

The Khost Rebellion was not the last of its kind. The ultimate revolt would originate among the Pashtun tribes of eastern Afghanistan in 1928, while Amanullah was still in Europe. It led to his downfall in January 1929. Large parts of the army deserted. After his return, Amanullah tried to fight back but was forced to abdicate and flee the country. He appointed his elder half-brother, Enayatullah, as his successor, who in turn was able to hold out for merely four more days before surrendering the Kabul Arg, the royal palace, to a brigand-turned-soldier from Kohistan (an area north of Kabul), Habibullah Kalakani who, as Habibullah II (the first Habibullah was Amanullah's father), became the first non-Pashtun on the throne in Kabul. Habibullah was derided by his opponents as 'Bacha-ye Saqao', 'son of the water carrier', due to his humble origins (read more about him in this AAN report). Another military campaign led by Amanullah to retake Kabul, between March and May 1929,

[27] Haroon speaks of 1500 Afridi and 2500 Mohmands alone being among the delegates, according to other British records.

[28] This information was provided by David X Noack (author of the following report) based on his research of archival sources. TNA: FO: 371/10987: India Office to Foreign Office: *Events in North East Persia, Northern Afghanistan and Soviet Turkestan*, [London], 05.03.1925. The file contains a letter from the British military *attaché* in Meshed to the Chief of the General Staff in the Army Headquarters in Delhi (Meshed, 30.11.1924).

was short-lived, and he left the country for good soon thereafter. In the 1930s and briefly in 1942 again, Italy's fascist and Germany's Nazi regimes were considering returning him to power as a potential ally in their plan to take over British India. This never materialised. They also never discussed this plan with Amanullah, who died in Switzerland in 1960, after three decades of exile in Italy.

Conclusion

The Khost Rebellion does not seem to occupy a central part in Afghans' historical conscience, unlike the three wars with Britain, for instance – particularly the third war, which resulted in Amanullah regaining Afghanistan's full independence in 1919. Moreover, there is little new Afghan research about the event. AAN spoke to two tribal elders in Sahak, enquiring about Mullah Abdullah and his companion, Abdul Rashid Sahak, but they did not know anything about them. The author heard from other local sources, however, that there is still a shrine to Mullah Abdullah near Melan village, east of Gardez.

The Taleban's Emirate has apparently not held any commemoration of these events, although one can assume they would sympathise with the forces then, pitched against what they must have seen as secular modernisation. In a rare reference, Omar Shahin, already quoted above, writes that, "during the anti-Russian jehad, Martyr Mawlawi Nasrullah Mansur[29] had introduced Mullah Abdullah "as a great *ghazi* and fighting scholar," and commissioned calligraphy work about him "so that the new generation be familiar with his name and achievements and learn about his struggle."

As with later attempts at top-down modernisation in Afghanistan, Amanullah's reforms were not (designed to be) 'anti-religion' but they were perceived as such by opponents. According to Wild, who met him, Amanullah was "never very religious," but there is no doubt he was a Muslim and based his reforms on sharia.

For his opponents, however, who acted out of a combination of conservative religious fervour and a notion that the King was trying to diminish their political and economic power, it was easy to mobilise on the basis of religious arguments,

[29] Mansur was the leader of one of the factions of Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami (Islamic Revolution Movement), which was mainly active in Paktia and Logar. He was assassinated in Zurmat in 2003. His nephew, Abdul Latif Mansur, is acting Minister of Energy and Water in the current Islamic Emirate.

given how strong the mullahs' and ulema's influence was on Pashtuns, who largely opposed modernisation and clung to their 'traditional ways' *(rasm au* rewaj*).* Perceived or real outside influence – then by 'the Turks', today 'the West' and always by the 'Angriz' (the ever-invading 'English' but in general terms, 'Westerners') – was, and effectively remains, to be mistrusted.

A LESSER-KNOWN EPISODE IN THE 'TOURNAMENT OF SHADOWS'

by David X Noack

The foreign powers' eyes on 1924 Afghanistan

As mentioned in the first part of this report, the Khost Rebellion is one of the least studied events during the decade of Amanullah's reign (1919-29). The rebellion itself and outside perceptions of the rebellion have, to date, been understudied. Back then, however, the rebellion, which posed a threat to the Afghan amir and his modernist projects, was closely monitored by foreign diplomats. Afghanistan had regained its independence in 1919: five years later, several great powers had already opened diplomatic representations in Kabul. While France and Italy played no major role in Afghan affairs at the time (beyond archaeology in France's case), the British, Germans and Soviets in particular tried to gain influence in the country. While access to present-day Russian archives remains difficult, the British and German diplomatic files about Anglo-Afghan and German-Afghan relations in the mid-1920s are easily accessible in Berlin and London's respective archives. Based on these diplomatic files, the author has analysed official British and German perceptions of the Khost Rebellion itself, as well as its repercussions within the diplomatic community at the time.[30]

While the Soviets had established their first diplomatic mission in Kabul in 1919,[31] the British envoy Francis Humphrys reached the Afghan capital, Kabul, in 1922 and the German envoy, Fritz Grobba, arrived there only in late 1923. Humphrys, who had initially wanted to retire instead of going to Kabul,[32] would not become an effective

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[30] David X Noack is a German historian who recently published his doctoral thesis, 'The Second Tournament of Shadows: Turkestan and Great Power Politics, 1919–1933' (published in German under the title 'Das Zweite Turnier der Schatten: Turkestan und die Politik der Großmächte 1919–1933'), on which his contribution to this report is based. The author draws mainly on archival sources from the British National Archives in Kew and the German Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin.

[31] Панин, С Б: *Первая советская миссия в Афганистане* (Panin, S B, *The First Soviet Mission in Afghanistan*), in Азия и Африка сегодня, vol 50 (2007), no 8, pp75–80.

[32] Maximilian Drephal *Afghanistan and the Coloniality of Diplomacy – The British Legation in Kabul, 1922–1948*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2019, p139.

representative of British interests in Afghanistan or the wider region. Often, he would only translate official Afghan publications and send the information to his superiors in Delhi and London. Apparently, he did not have substantial connections in the apparatus of the state he was stationed in.[33] Humphrys, who was known to be "a good all-round athlete" and a "very good" horseman,[34] apparently spent more time on the two tennis courts, the swimming pool, the squash and basketball courts or the cricket and hockey fields of the residence than attending to his official duties.[35]

In stark contrast to Humphrys' reports, Grobba himself often wrote detailed reports of the events in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the German envoy relied – according to his own reports – on a wide variety of sources within the Afghan state apparatus and sometimes even within the cabinet itself.[36] However, even Grobba's dogged commitment could not compensate for the relatively minor role the 'Weimar Republic, established in Germany after the defeat of the Empire in WWI, was able to play in Afghanistan. Great Britain, along with British India as Afghanistan's neighbour, played a far more important role in the country's economic, political and military affairs. The Germans, on the other hand, focused on the economy and tried to export goods to Afghanistan via the DACOM[37] and a high number of German advisors worked in the country. The German advisors received, on average, only around a quarter of the payment to which a British national would be entitled.[38]

Furthermore, the Afghans would hire Germans to work in even the remotest provinces in the country.[39] Although Germans were scattered throughout the

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[33] Noack, David X, *Das Zweite Turnier der Schatten: Turkestan und die Politik der Großmächte 1919–1933*, Paderborn: Brill Schöningh 2025, p241.

[34] Drephal: *Afghanistan and the Coloniality of Diplomacy*, p238.

[35] Ibid, p297.

[36] The National Archives (TNA): FO: 371/10984: India Office to Foreign Office: *Russians in Afghanistan*, [London], 09.10.1925.

[37] The DACOM (Deutsch-Afghanische Compagnie AG, in English: German-Afghan Company) was established in 1923 in order to expand German-Afghan commercial relations.

[38] Adamec, Ludwig W, *Germany, Third Power in Afghanistan's Foreign Relations*, in Adamec, Ludwig W/ Grassmuck, George/Irwin, Frances H (eds): *Afghanistan – Some New Approaches*, Ann Arbor (MI) 1969, pp204-259 (p224).

[39] While it is widely known that the German architect Walter Harten helped build the Dar ul-Aman palace in Kabul and three citizens of the Weimar Republic helped to establish the Afghan Postal Service, Germans also served in other parts of the country. For example, in Mazar-e Sharif, far from the capital, a German national led an agricultural testing laboratory. Hauner, Milan L, *Anspruch und Wirklichkeit –*

country, the Weimar Republic's diplomatic mission in Kabul did not regularly receive reports from them. The Afghan government only contracted German advisors privately and therefore, the German government had little influence on Afghan politics through them. Thus, despite being present in many fields of expertise in Afghanistan, the Weimar Republic played only a minor role in Afghan affairs.

All three governments, in Berlin, Moscow and London, showed great interest in co-operating with the Afghan central government. For Germany, Amanullah was the ruler who opened the country up to German trade – maintaining this was the Weimar Republic's diplomats' highest priority. The Soviets had several interests in Afghanistan: they wanted to keep the border secure to prevent the Basmachis – Muslim rebels from the now-Soviet territories of Central Asia – from crossing the border and seeking refuge in Afghanistan or carrying out raids from there. Their hope was that the Afghan government would not become hostile or – in the event of a war with Great Britain – might be able to march through Afghanistan to British India. The British wanted to keep their colonial privileges and continue trading with Afghanistan.

Additionally, London wanted to prevent Afghanistan from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence. In the event of an armed clash with the Soviets, British officers had planned to defend British India by not allowing the Red Army to reach the British colony or to fight them inside Afghanistan. Broadly speaking, for Berlin, Moscow, and London, the goal was to improve relations with Amanullah and prevent the amir from siding with only one party.

Deutschland als Dritte Macht in Afghanistan, 1915-1939, in Kettenacker, Lothar/Schlenke, Manfred/Seier, Hellmut (eds), *Studien zur Geschichte Englands und der deutsch-britischen Beziehungen – Festschrift für Paul Kluke*, Munich, 1981, pp222–244 (p226); Pütz, Franz-Josef: *Afghanistan und der Weltpostverein – Zur Entwicklung globaler Kommunikation*, in Vetter-Schultheiß, Silke/Smolarski, René/Smolarski, Pierre (eds), *Klio & Hermes: Philatelie und Postgeschichte aus historischer Perspektive*, Göttingen 2023, pp183–202 (p186). Fleury, Antoine: *La politique allemande au Moyen-Orient 1919–1939: Étude comparative de la pénétration de l'Allemagne en Turquie, en Iran et en Afghanistan*, Diss., Genf 1977, p291. Later, another laboratory was established in Kunduz based on the model of the one in Mazar-e Sharif. See Boelcke, Willi A, *Deutschlands politische und wirtschaftliche Beziehungen zu Afghanistan bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, in Tradition – Journal of Business History, vol 14 (1969), no 3/4, pp153-188 (p167).

The foreign powers' hold over Afghanistan in 1924

According to British information, after the Khost Rebellion broke out, the Soviet government offered Amir Amanullah help in the form of Soviet ground troops. For Moscow, the reformist king offered many possibilities for co-operation, while the potential ascent of a 'reactionary' king could endanger the growing number of Afghan-Soviet projects. According to the British, the monarch declined. In the case of former neighbouring Bukhara, Red Army troops had entered the country in 1920 and never left. In that same year, 1924, Bukhara would become the southern part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR. The British military attaché in Meshhed feared that 'red troops' would remain in Afghanistan after crushing the Khost Rebellion 'for good'.[40]

The British organised another form of help for Amir Amanullah: first, an officer of the Royal Air Force (RAF) arrived in Kabul in mid-August 1924. The Afghan government had in fact asked for several planes but the British Indian government responded that the requested airplanes were not available. As an alternative, they offered to send Wing Commander Johnston to Kabul. The government of Afghanistan accepted that offer. Having arrived in the Afghan capital, Johnston sought to organise the training of Afghan pilots somewhere in the British Empire, for example in Egypt.[41] The Afghan government refused because this did not help counter the spreading Khost Rebellion.[42] Instead, the British sold two Bristol airplanes to the Afghan government and the RAF organised their flight to Kabul; they arrived in the Afghan capital on 22 August 1924. Colonial governments throughout the British Empire had acquired experience crushing anti-colonial rebellions with airplanes. In Somaliland, Iraq and other territories, the newly established Royal Air Force had played a central role in crushing insurrections by bombing rebels from airplanes.[43] In the Afghan case, this turned out to be

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Egypt nominally gained independence in 1922, but the British continued to control its foreign and defence affairs. See Botman, Selma, *The liberal age, 1923–1952*, in Daly, M W. (ed), *The Cambridge History of Egypt – Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, Cambridge, New York (NY) 1998, S. 285-308; Thornhill, Michael T, *Informal Empire, Independent Egypt and the Accession of King Farouk*, in The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, vol 38 (2010), no 2, pp279-302.

[42] TNA: FO: 371/10984: India Office to Foreign Office: *Russians in Afghanistan*, [London], 09.10.1925.

[43] Hess, Robert L, *The "Mad Mullah" and Northern Somalia*, in The Journal of African History, vol 5 (1964), no 3, pp415-433; Omissi, David E, *Air Power and Colonial Control – The Royal Air Force 1919-1939*, Manchester, New York (NY) 1990, pp8-16.

more complicated: according to British files, Amir Amanullah had decreed the establishment of an air force in 1924. He had already been impressed by the air force's role during the 1919 Third Anglo-Afghan War, when the British had bombed Kabul and Jalalabad, and so tried to expedite the establishment of one.[44] This new branch of the Afghan Armed Forces initially only consisted of two planes the Soviets had given to Afghanistan, two Italian reconnaissance planes from the company Caproni and one British plane, which was forced to land in the country and had apparently been kept there.[45] Due to complications, the Italian and Soviet planes could not take off.[46] When the Khost Rebellion began, this Afghan Air Force was of no help.

Amir Amanullah posing in the attire of the Frontier Pashtun tribes.
Photo: Hugh Dermont Lynch via Wikipedia

When the two newly gifted Bristol airplanes arrived in the Afghan capital, the British were faced with another important issue: no Afghans could fly them. Because of this, the British Indian government ordered British pilots to fly the planes to Kabul and instruct two Germans on the spot on how to use them. In Delhi, colonial authorities perceived the Germans in Kabul as the "only available persons with any qualifications" and the "only practical alternative" to the Soviets, which the British did not want to get involved in – either with their own planes or just as pilots. The Foreign Office in London strongly protested the handing over of the planes to German nationals because the Treaty of Versailles, concluded after Germany's defeat in World War I, prohibited the Weimar Republic from sending military advisors to other countries. In the Afghan case, the pilots had not been sent by the German authorities, but in London the British foreign ministry

[44] On this conflict, known in Afghanistan as the War of Independence, see this report by AAN's Fabrizio Foschini.

[45] PA-AA: R77918: J. Schwager to Auswärtiges Amt, Kabul, 22.04.1925.

[46] Adamec, Ludwig W, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-twentieth Century – Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain*, Tucson (AZ) 1974, p107.

insisted on their interpretation of the Versailles rules.[47] Nevertheless, the two planes arrived in Kabul shortly afterwards and the two German pilots began to fly them.

The Manar-e Ilm wa Jahel erected in Kabul by Amanullah to commemorate the victory over the Khost rebellion.
Photo: Christopher Killalea via Wikimedia Commons

After the British sold two functioning planes to Afghanistan, the Soviets aimed to outdo them: the British received word that Moscow had offered four planes to Afghanistan as a gift. Amanullah's only condition was that the Soviet crews henceforth be employed by the Afghan Air Force. Moreover, even though the Kabul government was in financial straits and urgently needed money, the amir insisted on paying for the Soviet planes. Most likely, he did not want to be seen as dependent on the Soviets. Early in October, four Soviet military planes (based on an old British design, according to the British files) and one civilian airplane, built by

[47] TNA: FO: 371/10984: India Office to Foreign Office: *Russians in Afghanistan*, [London], 09.10.1925.

the German company Junkers, arrived in Kabul with their Soviet crews. Henceforth, the Soviet crews "became the nucleus of the 'air force'" of Afghanistan.[48] The British saw the arrival of Soviet aircrews in Kabul as a threat to British India itself, and in London's Air Ministry, responsible for the Royal Air Force, a file on the "Russo-Afghan Menace and the Measures to Counter" was initiated. In the following years, RAF officers planned for the eventuality of a British-Soviet War and planned to fight the Soviets on Afghan soil.[49] The alleged Soviet menace to British India disappeared in late 1925 when, after a border dispute between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union erupted regarding the river island of Urta-Tagai, Amanullah had the Soviet pilots interned as prisoners.[50]

While the British organised practical help for Amir Amanullah and his government and fixated on an alleged Soviet threat coming from three dozen airmen in Kabul, the German envoy Grobba was shocked by Amanullah's actions. In a letter to one of his superiors in the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin's Wilhelmstraße, Grobba described Amanullah's foreign policy as "quixotic." According to one of his sources, the monarch had organised a conference with the former Amir of Bukhara, who had fled from his Emirate to Kabul when the Red Army invaded in 1920. The two royals allegedly discussed reigniting an insurrection in Bukhara. The Emirate would have been re-established under Afghan suzerainty (the right of a country to control another country's foreign policy and relations, while allowing the other country to maintain internal autonomy). However, the Bukharan amir would proclaim himself Caliph of the Islamic world, something the Afghan amir refrained from doing due to good Afghan-Turkish relations.[51] The beginning of the Khost Rebellion put an end to the "quixotic" plan to re-establish the Bukharan Emirate.[52]

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[48] Ibid.

[49] The National Archives: Air Ministry: 5/608, Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3.

[50] Noack, *Das Zweite Turnier der Schatten*, p241. Urta-Tagai is an island in the middle of the Panj river, which formed a natural border between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (nowadays Tajikistan); in 1925-26, it was contested before finally being recognised as belonging to Afghanistan. See Panin, Sergei Borisovich, 'The Soviet-Afghan conflict of 1925-26 over the Island of Urta-Tugai', in The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, vol 12 (1999), no 3, pp122-133.

[51] The Turkish government under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had abolished the Caliphate in 1924 as part of a series of secular reforms. Afterwards, German diplomats suspected the Moroccan Sultan, the King of Hejaz and Amir Amanullah to be realistic contenders for the title of Caliph. See Noack, *Das Zweite Turnier der Schatten*, pp84-87.

[52] PA-AA: R83443: F. Grobba to Herbert von Richthofen: *Auszug*, Kabul, 06.09.1924.

While the British did not discuss the origins of the Khost Rebellion in their files, the topic was prevalent in Grobba's documents. According to him, the Afghans insisted they had proof of British support to the rebels. The German envoy estimated this was very likely. However, according to Grobba, the British aim was not to topple the Afghan amir but only to weaken him. The fact that the Royal Air Force had sent two planes to Kabul in order to help the amir crush the rebellion seemed negligible to Grobba.[53]

The German envoy quickly received notice of the Soviet offer of aircraft for the newly established Afghan Air Force. Grobba drew his own conclusions from this: it was time for Germany to sell its own planes to Afghanistan. In general, the Khost Rebellion led the government in Kabul to re-route its resources, which is why the Afghans had to delay their plans to buy German electrical equipment and a blast furnace for producing steel.[54] Even though the Khost Rebellion led to the possibility of Afghan purchases of German planes, Grobba was not pleased with the situation. According to the Afghan historian Ghobar, he offered Amanullah the military services of all German subjects in the country during the Khost Rebellion. He does not make clear, though, whether this offer was taken up.[55] The German files do not include this alleged offer.

In April 1925, Joseph Schwager, another employee of the German legation in Kabul, wrote a short message to the Federal Foreign Office. According to him, rumours had circulated that Afghan troops had crossed the border into British India in order to quell the rebellion.[56] If those rumours turned out to be true, it could be a sign that Afghan-British relations had improved considerably. Schwager put it in a larger context and wrote that Amanullah was aware of the rising number of Soviet machinations in his country and tried to play the British and the Soviets off against each other, as both vied for influence in the country.[57] The Afghan government clearly had its own agency amidst the great powers' larger struggle for influence in Central Asia.

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[53] Ibid.

[54] PA-AA: R83443: F. Grobba to Herbert von Richthofen: *Auszug*, Kabul, 06.09.1924.

55 Ghobar, Mir Ghulam Muhammad: *Afghanistan dar masir-e tarikh* [Afghanistan in the course of history], Kabul 1346 [1967], p809.

[56] Schwager later published a book about Afghanistan's foreign relations: Joseph Schwager, *Die Entwicklung Afghanistans als Staat und seine zwischenstaatlichen Beziehungen*, Leipzig, Noske, 1932.

[57] PA-AA: R77918: J. Schwager to Auswärtiges Amt, Kabul, 22.04.1925.

Conclusion

Fritz Grobba concluded in late May 1925 that Anglo-Afghan relations had been strained during the previous year. The Afghan government had insisted the British allow Abdul Karim to flee British India and had even funded him. Furthermore, according to Grobba, British Indian authorities had supported the rebels with weapons and ammunition. Shah Wali Khan, who would later become the general leading the troops in reconquering Kabul from Habibullah Kalakani,[58] told Grobba that the Afghans had no direct proof of British involvement but were, however, strongly convinced that they had played a role in the Khost Rebellion.[59] Similar to what would happen during the Afghan Civil War of 1928-29, the Afghans suspected the British of involvement, although without having proof; the Germans agreed with them.

When the Afghan-Soviet Urta-Tagai border dispute erupted in November 1925, the Afghan Armed Forces moved troops to Afghan Turkestan in the northern part of the country. The German envoy described this as a non-spectacular development because those troops were only withdrawn from the regions close to the Soviet border due to the Khost Rebellion.[60] The Urta-Tagai dispute brought Afghanistan to the brink of conflict with one of its neighbouring great powers, which is why this confrontation led to unprecedented activity among foreign diplomats in Afghanistan as well as in Berlin, Moscow, London and – for the first time – Ankara. After the outbreak of the Urta-Tagai dispute, the Germans did not mention the Khost Rebellion anymore. With events such as the Urta-Tagai border dispute and, later, the Afghan Civil War of 1928-29, the Khost Rebellion of 1924-25 was quickly forgotten.

The British and German reactions to the Khost Rebellion perfectly illustrate the countries' respective approaches. The British acted from a position of strength and quickly sent an advisor, followed by military aircraft. The Germans, on the other hand, identified the possibility of selling German airplanes in the future but could not offer any immediate help to the Afghan government in crushing the rebellion. The fact that German pilots flew the British planes during the

[58] On Habibullah Kalakani, read this report by Thomas Ruttig.

[59] PA-AA: R77918: F. Grobba to Auswärtiges Amt: *Auf den Erlass vom 18. März 1925*, Kabul, 29.05.1925.

[60] PA-AA: R77918: F. Grobba to Auswärtiges Amt, Kabul, 05.02.1926.

suppression of the rebellion was a pure coincidence.[61] Even though the British were far more resourceful in mid-1920s Central Asian affairs, their perception of Afghan matters lacked differentiation: British officers exaggerated the Soviet role in Afghanistan itself and downplayed the role of the Afghan government by not granting them enough agency while describing Afghan affairs. In contrast, the Germans recognised how the government in Kabul tried to play off the Soviets and the British in their affairs.

[61] The British even wrote in their files that the Afghan government had tried to hire French and Italian airmen for their services. However, those attempts were not successful. See: TNA: FO: 371/10984: India Office to Foreign Office: 'Russians in Afghanistan', [London], 09.10.1925.

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