

Fabrizio Foschini

# The Social Wandering of the Afghan Kuchis

## *Changing patterns, perceptions and politics of an Afghan community*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kuchis, as nomads are now usually referred to in Afghanistan, occupy a peculiar place among Afghan communities. They constitute, like many nomadic communities in other countries, a particularly disadvantaged group with respect to many social indicators such as access to education, health or livelihood standards. Although many Kuchis are settling down, a growing and unregulated phenomenon taking place at the outskirts of the major Afghan cities, these indicators are still not improving.

At another level, however, the recent trajectory of Afghan nomads has been marked by the political specificity that the post-2001 Afghan institutions have attributed to them under the law. In particular, they have been made a separate electoral constituency. This newly-found political identity has not brought only positive developments. It has enhanced the role of a few powerbrokers in the frequent disturbances related to Kuchi migrations or land claims. Moreover, it has added to the arguments made against the Kuchis by some political and ethnic groups, portraying

them as tools of Pashtun nationalists or even Taliban insurgents.

The combination of the two phenomena, difficult sedentarisation and their new politicised role, has arguably given the Kuchis a 'bad name'. Many Afghans now view the Kuchis as a troublesome lot or as outcasts. They are often perceived by city-dwellers as protesters who periodically block the roads, or as late-comers of urbanisation who join the cities but settle in shabby conditions. Afghan rural communities engaged in conflicts with the Kuchis also have negative perceptions of them. The most infamous instances, like the annual confrontation over access to grazing land, get spiced up with a distinct communal or ethnic flavour that creates political tension at the national level.

The Afghan government has taken initiatives and created institutions to improve the situation and guarantee fair political representation to the nomads. But they have had limited beneficial impact on the masses of disadvantaged Kuchis. At the same time, they have somewhat artificially 'fixed' the common political identity of an internally diverse group at the very moment that its livelihoods are differentiating and diverging. As

a result, those very nomads who stop being such, at least in the traditional notion of the term, cling most strongly to the 'Kuchi identity'. Likewise, at a time when the nomads' livelihoods and economics have become less central to the Afghan economy, their political assertiveness (or the level of political mobilisation stirred in their name) has increased.

One reason for this can be found in the type of political relations established between a small number of prominent Kuchi leaders and their constituencies. State intervention that led to the allocation of ten reserved Kuchi seats in the lower house of the parliament resulted in the establishment of recognised political representatives for the Kuchis. This has, however, not led to the rise of a Kuchi 'intelligentsia' or group of policy-makers focusing on Kuchi issues. Instead, powerbrokers have used their political legitimacy as a tool for patronage, made more effective by the strained settling conditions for Kuchis. Therefore, 'Kuchi politics' more often aim to further personal agendas, than to achieve lasting improvements in the living conditions of the Kuchi population. Still, many Kuchis have found this patronage increasingly necessary to guarantee basic benefits in the face of competition for access to settlements in urban areas and to the job market, a competition exacerbated by their disadvantaged starting position in terms of education and qualifications.

Afghan nomads have fascinated international scholars in the past; this has led to a substantial body of literature about their livelihoods, customs and social structure in pre-war Afghanistan, and about changes during the long decades of Afghan conflicts. Nowadays, however, relatively few scholars seem to have dealt with the Kuchis' participation in the country's politics. Most efforts have focused on their livelihoods, land property issues and aid strategies. Altogether, both at national and international levels, in post-2001 Afghanistan Kuchis have been mostly read through the lenses of humanitarian concern or ethnic conflicts. However, the links that connect their situation with political and economic exploitation have not been exposed.

This paper explores changes in the identity of the Afghan nomads as they develop a Kuchi identity that rests more on political networks than on

shared nomadic livelihoods; how the state's political recognition of a separate Kuchi constituency has influenced this process; and finally the directions in which the Kuchis have been politically mobilised and how far the Kuchis have travelled to develop cohesive tools for action and policy-making.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Long before there was a nation state called Afghanistan, there were Kuchis, traveling a vast land that is hospitable only part of the time. The rhythms and traditions of nomadic culture have been so prevalent that they have crept into the habits and thoughts of even the most urbane corners of Kabul. Most Afghans of Pashtun heritage and many Afghans from ethnic minorities can trace their lineage to nomadic ancestors.*

– Christian Science Monitor,  
9 February 2004<sup>1</sup>

*Apart from legal issues and civil rights, the [mere] existence of wandering nomads in a country, which is talking about democracy and human rights, is disgraceful for it.*

– Kabul daily Hasht-e Sobh,  
19 May 2010<sup>2</sup>

These two introductory quotes, although portraying distinctively different viewpoints on Afghan nomads, originate from a common idea, that of nomadism as an ancient lifestyle. Whether this lifestyle is portrayed as primordial and fascinating, or as primitive and embarrassing, depends on who is talking and for what purpose. Indeed, in the memory of even keen foreign observers and scholars of pre-war Afghanistan, a most recurrent, fascinated reminiscence is that of the black goat-hair tents of the nomads sprawling along the bottom of the hills, or of their endless

<sup>1</sup> Scott Baldauf 'Nomads in a Troubled Land', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 2012, accessed 27 October 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0209/p12s01-wosc.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hasht-e Sobh, 'Temporary Solution to Tension, Dispute Not Effective', *Hasht-e Sobh*, 19 May 2010, accessed 22 September 2012, <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-226947601/afghan-daily-urges-government.html><http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-226947601/afghan-daily-urges-government.html>.

and colourful caravans on the move. Conversely, many Afghans would today pass negative comments on the nomads and their 'primitive' lifestyle.

It would be unfair, however, to take the two extracts – although the opinions expressed in them are widespread – as an example of the hiatus between the romanticised view of the nomads that foreigners entertain and the pragmatic position expounded by Afghan 'modernisers'. In fact, many Afghan urbanites would have, in better times, prided themselves in the age-old way of living of their nomadic fellow Afghans. And, under the caption 'stereotyped image of Afghanistan for foreign consumption', nomad caravans have since long given way to the media icons of the mujahed or taleb brandishing an AK-47 or that of the burqa-clad woman.

Nowadays, Afghan nomads in many respects are a forsaken group of Afghan citizens in the process of losing their traditional lifestyle and livelihoods to the conflict, drought and market competition of the last decades, but not empowered to settle or to access alternative job markets in ideal conditions. The problems they face at the economic, cultural and political levels are coupled with a degraded social standing and the lack of clear options as to their future prospects. This – and not in the abstract idea of 'nomads' – is where the harsh stigmatisation originates of the nomadic lifestyle as a 'shameful stain' for a modern and democratic country, as the above-mentioned newspaper article would have it.

But the situation of those nomads struggling to settle is more complex than the ordinary story of poverty and marginality shared by other rural communities trying to gain access to urban hubs in Afghanistan. Kuchi people, as the overwhelmingly Pashtun nomadic communities are nowadays referred to in Afghanistan, have become one of the country's most-striking paradoxes, in both political and socio-economic terms. On the one hand, they bear the stigma of an impoverished, marginalised and backward social group. On the other, they lean on a newly found political identity, sanctioned by a special parliamentary constituency under a separate electoral system with few parallels in the world. And with it, they have patron-client relations with powerbrokers close to – or able to

negotiate with – the state power. They are thus made dependent on a well-connected political and economic elite that derives its national importance from being the 'Kuchi' elite.

This report explores the social transformations that Afghan nomads have experienced in the last decades, seeing their livelihoods and socio-economic status radically altered – and their traditional, nomadic lifestyle severely limited – while moving to strengthen their common identity as Kuchis. An important focus of the report is, for that reason, on the nomads who are settling around cities, and especially around Kabul, an increasing and yet underreported phenomenon. Despite their abandonment of a migratory lifestyle, and their increasingly diverse livelihoods, all of them face similar problems in settling and resort to the same mechanisms and powerbrokers to cope with them. The idea of a common identity among these Kuchis belonging to different Pashtun tribes was probably strengthened by their recognition as a separate political constituency by the post-2001 Afghan institutions.<sup>3</sup> This emerging political construct may be said to like that of a *qaum*, a group traditionally defined by kinship, ethno-linguistic, or social boundaries, which has come to play a relevant role in Afghan politics, at least at the symbolic level.<sup>4</sup>

Until now, this new political assertiveness does not seem to have given the Kuchis countrywide the ability to improve their social status by enhancing participation in state institutions at the sub-national level. Nor has it provided a strong tool for advocating for coherent and long-term state policies aimed at benefiting the nomads. In

<sup>3</sup> For a list of state initiatives in favour of the Kuchis, see Amir Shah Hassanyar, 'Āīa muzil-e kūčihā hal kwāhad šod?', *Hasht-e Sobh*, 8 August 2011, accessed 3 November 2012, [http://www.8am.af/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=21066:1390-05-22-14-33-41&catid=110:1389-11-18-04-55-07&Itemid=562](http://www.8am.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21066:1390-05-22-14-33-41&catid=110:1389-11-18-04-55-07&Itemid=562).

<sup>4</sup> The flexibility of the concept of *qaum*, primarily indicating a descent group, has been recently enhanced by ethnically-driven political discourse in Afghanistan. For a useful discussion of the term, see Lutz Rzehak, 'Doing Pashto: Pashtunwali as the Ideal of Honourable Behaviour and Tribal Life among the Pashtuns', AAN Thematic Report 01/2011, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 2011, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/publication/pashtunwali-tribal-life-and-behaviour-among-the-pashtuns>, 7–8.

contrast, it has often worked in the negative, as a tool for rudimentary and agenda-driven political mobilisation on the part of some leaders, and even as a catalyst for fears and concerns among other communities, in particular the Hazaras. These polarised attitudes, coupled with low social indicators, inform the image of the Kuchis in the eyes of many common Afghans, and risk becoming closer to reality.

The following chapters present an abridged historical background of the nomadic communities who came to be called Kuchis in modern Afghanistan (2.1). The background focuses on the different ebbs and flows of expansion and decline of their socio-economic range of activities (2.2). These were the results of the politico-economic changes affecting the country in the last century and leading in recent years to a trend of sedentarisation among Kuchis (2.3). However, the problematic conditions in which this process takes place have contributed to alter negatively the perception of the Kuchis among other Afghans (2.4). To this contributed also the numerous land disputes in which Kuchis have been involved (3.1). A separate case is constituted by the almost yearly Kuchi-Hazara conflict regarding the access to highland pastures, which has become particularly charged with political significance (3.2). The paper further looks at the patterns of Kuchi voting during recent elections (4.1) and at the patronage system that has developed between some Kuchi leaders and their constituencies (4.2). Finally, a conclusion assesses possible future shifts of the Kuchis' position in Afghan society.

To this purpose, a diverse set of sources were consulted during the preliminary part of the research, ranging from historical and ethnographic monographs on the nomads dating from the decades before the conflict to more recent studies, assessments, statistics and news media articles. Furthermore, the author conducted several semi-structured interviews with Kuchi and non-Kuchi informants from several Afghan provinces (mainly Kabul, Nangarhar, Laghman, Logar and Wardak), whose names, positions or backgrounds are indicated in the text whenever advisable.

## 2. HISTORY, CONTEXT AND FIGURES

*Kuchis would claim that they are the real Afghans, as the first inhabitants of Afghanistan were nomadic in ancient times. Thus it is to be considered that all of Afghanistan once belonged to the Kuchis. Indeed, they would have it that actually the whole world belongs to them, as all of humanity was once made of nomads!*

– Resident of Kabul<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 What Is a Kuchi?

However provocative and extreme the above claim, put in the mouth of the nomads,<sup>6</sup> appears, the notion that nomadism was more widespread in the past is very common among both nomads and sedentary people in Afghanistan. It is also usually assumed by the foreign public and by some foreign scholars. Pashtuns, however, who nowadays form the core of the nomads in Afghanistan, are overwhelmingly sedentary, and have been so for a long time.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this claim of 'historical precedence', this belief does show that the same nomads had a somewhat limited view of themselves – implying that their lifestyle has been irrevocably reducing in the course of time and may be considered doomed in a modern Afghanistan. Actually, the co-existence of nomads and sedentary communities in the area encompassing the modern boundaries of Afghanistan has been dynamic and variable during the course of history rather than a unilateral, progressive transition from nomadism to sedentary life. Nomadism has

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with West Kabul resident, October 2011.

<sup>6</sup> However, it echoes claims of precedence, as 'original' Afghan citizens, made on more than one occasion by a Kuchi MP of the past legislature, Alam Gul Kuchi.

<sup>7</sup> The possibility of a nomadic past for all, or most, Pashtun tribes has been debated by scholars. Many Pashtun tribes experienced a protracted period of migration and resettlement between the late 15th and the 16th centuries, with some late episodes in the early 17th century. These however were permanent, if gradual, movements of people caused probably by demographic expansion and closely following military campaigns and political upheavals, and they do not necessarily prove original and exclusive nomadic roots for the bulk of the Pashtuns. See a sketch of the discussion on the issue of Pashtun nomadism in Rzehak, 'Doing Pashto. . .', [see FN 4], 5–6.

been enhanced by particular events and hindered by others. Nor is it a lifestyle readily ascribable to some exclusive ethnic groups; history abounds with examples of peoples famous for being nomads at a given time having happily settled a century after, their place 'on the road' taken by others.

The fluidity between nomads and sedentary people has survived, although the trend is increasingly one-way; that is, nomads in Afghanistan tend to settle and rarely if ever revert to full-scale migratory patterns. Indeed, the Kuchi identity presents observers with a particular phenomenon: It is asserting itself – at least in popular and political discourse – at the same moment in which its members are losing their nomadic credentials and their lifestyle and means of production are becoming increasingly like those of other Afghans. Even the adoption of the term 'Kuchi' to refer to all Afghan nomads requires some explanation, in view of the ethno-linguistic and historic complexity of nomadism in Afghanistan.

Traditionally – which in today's Afghan context means largely 'before the Soviet Invasion' – 'Kuchi' was just one of the possible ways to refer to the country's sizeable population of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists and traders, which for practical purposes are usually termed nomads by non-specialists.<sup>8</sup> The term Kuchi now predominates as it is employed by the government and the other national and international actors dealing with nomads. However, it carries only a generic connotation. Its etymology points to people who migrate (*kuch kardan/kuch kawel*, 'to move' in Farsi/Dari and Pashto), and it does not describe a community with clear ethno-linguistic or geographic boundaries. As it is, in Afghanistan the word 'Kuchi' now indicates several communities that were once identified with a wider range of

<sup>8</sup> The term Kuchi was probably in origin an external, slightly derogative term applied to nomads by urban people. It was not used extensively in Afghanistan except for eastern nomads who were in closest contact with Kabul. See Richard Tapper, 'Who Are the Kuchi? Nomad Self-Identities in Afghanistan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, 2008, 98. A useful list of pastoralist categories appears in Frauke De Weijer, 'Pastoralists Vulnerability Study', World Food Programme 2002, accessed 25 October 2013, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/country/afghanistan/kuchi.pdf>, 3.

regional terms that it now supersedes at a national (and international) level.

In Afghanistan, both transhumance (involving a part of the community over short to medium distances) and long-range nomadism (involving the whole group) are largely movements between previously identified winter and summer areas (with more or less intermediate stops involved) called respectively *qishlaq* and (*y*)*ailaq* (Pashto: *zangura* and *elband*).<sup>9</sup> In terms of ethnic background, the majority of nomads in Afghanistan are Pashtuns, with the rest being Baluch, Arabs, Turkmen and Gujjars.<sup>10</sup> In the north and west, pastoralists nomads were – and still are – often called *Maldar* (an ethnically neutral term meaning 'owner of flocks', and it can refer to semi-sedentary Aimaq as well as to Pashtun and Baluch nomads), while in the south (Kandahar, Zabul, Paktika) they are sometimes still referred to as *Powanda*. The last term was used extensively by British colonial sources (in the form *Powindah*) concerning nomads crossing into India during the winter, leaving flocks and families – plus a certain amount of men – in camps in the Punjab, and moving on to trade in the whole of northern and central India.<sup>11</sup> In parts of the northeast, the difference between *Maldar* and Kuchi is sometimes expressed in terms of inhabitation strategy: while the *Maldar* built huts or brick houses in both their *qishlaq* and *ailaq* locations, the Kuchis occupy black

<sup>9</sup> Except for a few cases in the Registan desert of the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.

<sup>10</sup> The Aimaq population of western Ghor and Badghis provinces has been usually described as one of semi-sedentary farmers and livestock owners; they would probably suit the criteria for a 'Kuchi livelihood' better than many Kuchis nowadays left without flocks and consequently transhumance patterns, but they are not considered here as part of the Afghan nomad population because of their clearly defined geographic distribution, their different political representation and because this is in accordance with other studies.

<sup>11</sup> 'Powindah' refers to Pashtun tribes belonging to both the Durrani and Ghilzai 'confederations', and it has occasionally been used even for nomads from eastern tribes like the migrating sections of the Mohmand tribe. See J. A. Robinson, *Notes on Nomad Tribes of Eastern Afghanistan*, New Delhi, Govt. of India Press, 1935; C. E. Bruce, *Notes on Ghilzai and Powindah Tribes*, Peshawar, Govt. Press, North-West Frontier Province, 1929; D. Balland, 'Nomadism and Politics: The Case of Afghan Nomads in the Indian Subcontinent', *Studies in History* 7, 1991, 205–29.



goat-hair tents (*khaima*, Pashto: *kegdey*) at least when residing on summer pastures. This entails another difference, as the *Maldar* do not need camels to transport the tents, and thus possess very few or none. These details hint at an ethnic divide between Pashtun Kuchis and non-Pashtun *Maldar*.<sup>12</sup>

The category 'Kuchi', as understood by state institutions, includes nomads from any ethnic background. However, this political label has become closely associated with Pashtuns during the last decade and has influenced the willingness of different groups to accept it. Actually, those who willingly refer to themselves as Kuchis are mostly Pashtun. Some Tajik and Uzbek households are transhumant pastoralists, especially in Badakhshan. They are indeed referred to as Kuchis when dealing with the technical aspects of their livelihood, but they would certainly not identify themselves as Kuchi at a political level, being drawn towards other, locally stronger, political identities.

The focus of the later chapters of this study will be on those nomads who once moved between the southeastern regions of Afghanistan and the central highlands and who are now approaching Kabul, or neighbouring Logar and Nangarhar provinces, looking for settlement. As the most numerous and visible population of Kuchis in the country, and overwhelmingly Pashtun, they are at the core of 'Kuchi politics' and have influenced the Afghan public perception of Kuchis as having an all-Pashtun identity. How the problems of Kuchi identity relate to both past history, the ethnic belonging, the type of lifestyle pursued and patterns of settlement will also be explored.

<sup>12</sup> In the northeast, local Arab, Turkmen and Tajik/Uzbek pastoralist communities and some of the Pashtuns who moved to the Qataghan area early in the 20th century seem to be called *Maldar*. In particular, those Pashtun families that had established livestock breeding as a commercial enterprise before the war are also less likely to have completely relocated to Pakistan during the conflict years and are probably as integrated in the region as the sedentary or urban Pashtuns.

## 2.2 Rise and Decline of Nomadism in the Recent History of Afghanistan

Returning to their claims of historical precedence, we can fairly accept the nomads' ancient roots in the region. But more significantly, in relatively recent times they have played an important role in the development of the Afghan state.

Scholars of nomadism in Afghanistan attest to an expansion, even a veritable boom in economic terms for the nomads during the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> This was closely linked to political developments dating to the last decade of the nineteenth century, during the reign of Abdul Rahman (1880–1901). The first of these was the relocation of thousands of Pashtun households from Farah, Helmand and Kandahar provinces to the northwest of the country. Many settlers, whom the government hoped to entrust with the defence of the frontier, were livestock breeders, and they re-adjusted their transhumance routes from their new winter areas in the lowlands of what are nowadays Badghis, Fariab and Sar-e Pul.<sup>14</sup> The second event was the Hazara War of 1891–93.<sup>15</sup> The outcome of the conflict, in which the Pashtun nomads and other tribal *lashkars* joined the

<sup>13</sup> Nomads have been a favourite subject for ethnologists, anthropologists and sometimes historians during the 1960s and 1970s, and Afghanistan makes no exception. Among the principal studies: T. J. Barfield, *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan: Pastoral Nomadism in Transition*, Austin, University of Texas Press 1981; B. Glatzer, 'Political Organization of Pashtun Nomads and the State', in *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* ed by R. Tapper, New York, St. Martin's Press 1983; K. Ferdinand, *Afghan Nomads: Caravans, Conflicts and Trade in Afghanistan and British India 1800–1980*, Copenhagen, Rhodos International 2006; G. Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition: A Century of Change Among the Zala Khan Khel*, London, Thames & Hudson 1995; B. Frederiksen, *Caravans and Trade in Afghanistan: The Changing Life of the Nomadic Hazarabuz*, London, Thames and Hudson 1996.

<sup>14</sup> See N. Tapper, 'The Advent of Pashtūn *Māldārs* in North-Western Afghanistan', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36, no. 1, 1973, 55–79. This was only the first major instance of a recurrent policy on the part of the Afghan state, that of colonising underpopulated regions of the north, or areas whose inhabitants were considered not loyal to the state, with Pashtun settlers, mainly Ghilzai from the south and east. It continued well into the 1940s.

<sup>15</sup> See S. A. Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, New York, St. Martin's Press 1997, 131–38.

government, and the resulting status of 'conquered people' that befell the Hazaras, resulted in the opening of the central highlands for the nomads from southern and eastern Afghanistan both for pasture and for market. The nomads obtained access to the extensive grazing areas situated above the inhabited lands by royal decree and developed significant trade relations with the Hazara villages.

The Hazaras villagers were poor but still in need of basic items like salt, sugar and tea, and their isolation guaranteed the nomads – who had another reason (grazing their flocks) to make the otherwise unprofitable trip to Hazarajat – a monopoly on the trade. As the only providers of cash in the highlands (often as advance payments, in exchange for a portion of the coming harvest), the nomads also increasingly came to act as moneylenders. While initially bartering against carpets, cereals and village livestock, they increasingly took over the land of insolvent debtors, usually leasing it to the former owners who worked now as tenants or labourers in exchange for a share of the yield.<sup>16</sup> Some prominent families among the nomads thus became large landowners in a short span of time.

Nomad pre-eminence was not only couched in economic terms, as, during the first decades after the conquest – and indeed for most of the twentieth century preceding the conflict – Pashtun-dominated state institutions viewed the nomads as potential allies in ethnically diverse areas of the country. As Pedersen put it, well-armed 'nomads had thus a government-sanctioned political and military predominance which made the exploitation of the Hazara in trade relations even easier'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The government of Afghanistan had previously rewarded the help of tribal contingents against the Hazaras by giving them large tracts of land in the Hazarajat. Many sedentary groups that would not re-settle there, and could therefore not exploit the land profitably, eventually re-sold their concessions to the nomads, who could oversee their property and collect the profits during their summer transhumance. Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition . . .*, [see FN 13], 130.

<sup>17</sup> Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition . . .*, [see FN 13], 135. For other instances of nomads aggressive economic domination in Hazarajat, see L. Dupree, 'Settlement and Migration Patterns in Afghanistan: A Tentative Statement', *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 3,

In the meantime, the policy of 'Pashtunisation' pursued at times by the government, meant that other Pashtuns, including many Kuchis, had been encouraged or forced to settle in northern and northeastern Afghanistan. In contrast to the exploitative set of relationships that predominated in Hazarajat, the nature of the contact between nomads sedentary peoples in other areas depended on the political clout of the communities involved. The quasi-equal standing between Ishaqzai Pashtun nomads and Firozkohi Aimaq in Ghor – reportedly including bilateral intermarriage – has been documented as originating from their balanced power relation.<sup>18</sup> The semi-sedentary Firozkohi also moved to the pastures in summer and camped together with the nomads; this apparently contributed to inter-communitarian bonds and did not lead to competition.

Altogether, Afghan nomads evidently played a role in the economic and political development of the country in such spheres as the integration and consolidation of the Afghan state and internal market – a major task in a country without a modern communication network for the best part of the twentieth century – through trading activities in marginal areas.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the Kuchis' annual movement offered isolated communities in mountainous areas a market for their products. This, in the absence of exceedingly unbalanced power relations of the type encountered in Hazarajat, could play a positive role in the economy of the mountain-dwellers, being the only occasion for them to obtain cash to spend in the rare occasion of a visit to the nearest town, or to keep as savings for years of crop failure.<sup>20</sup>

1975, 397–413, 402; N. Ibrahim, 'Divide and Rule: State Penetration in Hazarajat (Afghanistan) from the Monarchy to the Taliban', *Crises States Research Centre - London School of Economics*, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> A. Rosman and P. Rubel, 'Nomad-Sedentary Interethnic Relations in Iran and Afghanistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 4, 1976, 545–70, 560–61.

<sup>19</sup> A not-so-marginal Afghan export was the prized *qarakul* lambskin, produced chiefly by some pastoralists communities in the north, and whose commerce helped Afghanistan build foreign exchange reserves during the Second World War.

<sup>20</sup> For the more peaceful aspect of nomad-sedentary relations in pre-war Hazarajat see Khibar Rasul, 'Fractured Relationships: Understanding Conflict

Nomads were, in economic terms, less subsistence oriented and thus less 'primitive' than most farming communities they dealt with. Depending on the grains they purchased from the farmers and the items they got from the town-artisans, they were well-integrated in the economic market, and they were usually the ones to dispose of cash and engage in trade. This last activity constituted a major aspect of Afghan nomadism until the decades immediately preceding the Soviet Invasion of 1979, and it was carried out both by specialised big merchants who had gradually abandoned livestock breeding, and pastoralists who carried on petty trade along the transhumance routes.<sup>21</sup>

The Indus plain was usually another terminal on the nomads' trade route, where the nomads made their winter camps and sold their surplus livestock, wool and hair, plus other commodities like horses, fur, fruit or carpets in exchange for salt, tea, sugar, second-hand clothes, cheap iron-ware and kerosene. The Afghan government rarely subjected this external trade to an effective system of taxation. Although since Abdul Rahman Khan it was understood that the unregulated export of livestock and import of Indian goods was more damaging to the state than the benefits of nomad cooperation in Hazarajat, the Afghan government did not take serious measures to control it until the 1960s, when it started taxing the summer bazaars sprouting in the highlands.<sup>22</sup>

The government of British India had struggled to control the entry of Afghan nomads into its territory, and it even taxed them with some success. It had not, however, sought to stop it altogether and, on the contrary, had unintentionally favoured the movement of Afghan

nomad traders further into India through its improved communication network and public transport system. With the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, however, things began to change. The Pakistani market, already impoverished compared to the pre-Partition period, was finally lost to nomads when, between 1961 and 1963, the Afghan-Pakistani border was sealed due to the political confrontation over the 'Pashtunistan' issue.<sup>23</sup> Even after trade relations between the two countries restarted in 1963, international nomad trade – and winter grazing in Pakistan – never regained its former importance and virtually vanished. The age of the lorry had in the meantime opened up markets for town-based merchants in areas previously inaccessible to them, even in the highlands of central Afghanistan. This competition, plus the government's restrictions on nomad seasonal bazaars in the highlands – some were closed, others transferred in areas under government control and taxed – brought about an overall decline in nomad trade from the middle of the 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

However, a series of catastrophes, like those that caused massive loss of livestock and trade opportunities to the Kuchis who moved from Panjab to Hazarajat, were not what spurred the nomads to settle. For example in the same 1960s decade, the opposite process – a sudden increase in profits from livestock – augmented the transition to a more-sedentary lifestyle of the Arab and Pashtun nomads in northeast Afghanistan. The region between Baghlan and Kunduz, already a focus for the limited industrial planning managed by the Afghan state, experienced an economic boom after the Salang Tunnel opened in 1964. This transformed the region's transport and trade relations with the capital. Direct connection to the huge market for livestock in Kabul – and markets beyond – doubled the value of the flocks and induced many households to switch from a fully-nomadic lifestyle involving the whole family and relying much on the collective work of it, to a

---

between Nomadic and Settled Communities in Wardak's Pastureland', *Cooperation for Peace And Unity*, October 2010, accessed 1 June 2013, <http://www.cpau.org.af/manimages/publications/CPAU%20Report%20-%20Fractured%20Relationships.pdf>, 13–15.

<sup>21</sup> For a study of the commercial ventures of a Kuchi section of the Mohmand tribe in the second half of the 20th century, see Frederiksen, *Caravans and Trade . . .*, [see FN 13]. Even those nomads who had completely turned traders kept some animals 'as safety net in case trading went badly or as a collateral to obtain goods on credit'. Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition . . .*, [see FN 13], 145.

<sup>22</sup> Ferdinand, *Afghan Nomads . . .*, [see FN 13], 198.

---

<sup>23</sup> For how this diplomatic-military confrontation between Afghanistan and Pakistan affected nomadic trade see, among others, Balland, 'Nomadism and Politics . . .', [see FN 11], 222–23.

<sup>24</sup> Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition . . .*, [see FN 13], 144–45.



commercial enterprise which entailed hiring professional shepherds through cash wages.<sup>25</sup>

The nomads become sedentary for two main reasons, both the result of changes in their economic circumstances, according to a diagram developed by Ferdinand and his fellow Danish researchers in the 1970s. First, a nomad would become a casual labourer whenever the nomad economy (livestock breeding, itinerant trade) is in recession, and eventually settles down permanently if he is not able to sustain his livestock anymore. When, on the contrary, he experiences excessive economic expansion due to favourable political and social circumstances, he may become a settled trader out of choice, opening a shop in the bazaar or investing his profits in land ownership.<sup>26</sup> As sedentary life and nomadism are usually adaptive livelihood strategies and not inherent to the nature of a human group, the possibility of switching from one to the other may be open at particular moments. Glatzer showed that alternate trends of 'nomadisation' and sedentarisation were a common feature in southwestern Afghanistan: in the context of economic expansion where the agricultural and pastoral growth potential was limited, households were forced to change their livelihood strategy.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the terrible drought that hit Afghanistan in 1971–72, and whose effects were felt longer and brought further huge losses in livestock, the presence of nomads in Afghanistan was well established up to the Soviet invasion.

According to an unpublished Afghan Nomad Survey for 1978, only 37 out of 325 administrative units in Afghanistan did not report nomadic populations – permanent or temporary. As for their number, estimates from the 1970s vary greatly. A conservative estimate of around 1 million<sup>28</sup> would seem more realistic than the government claims of

2.5 million in 1979 (reduced to 1.5 million in 1983).<sup>29</sup>

The nomads experienced the worst of the war triggered by the Communist takeover in 1978, the mujahedin insurgency and the subsequent Soviet invasion. Not only were their migratory routes cut by frontlines and their flocks victims of airstrikes and landmines, but the massive arming of the rural population made them a prey to local commanders' greed or need. By the middle of the 1980s, many Afghan nomadic households had left the country, mostly relocating to Pakistan. The majority of these refugees would not return to Afghanistan until after 2001.

### 2.3 Kuchis' Changing Livelihoods

*... with the poor prospects for a reestablishment of real nomadism, it is not inconceivable that the poor households will be forced more and more into unskilled labour as a partly or completely settled land proletariat.*

– Gorm Pedersen<sup>30</sup>

In the multitude of post-2001 research and reports about Afghanistan, Kuchis do not figure prominently. A few excellent studies have been carried out though, mainly focussed on the livelihoods of the Kuchis and the conflicts over pastures and land issues that oppose them to sedentary dwellers.<sup>31</sup> The lack of information about

<sup>29</sup> See *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 'Census ii. In Afghanistan', <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/census-ii>.

<sup>30</sup> Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition* . . ., [see FN 13], 221.

<sup>31</sup> See Frauke De Weijer, *National Multi-Sectoral Assessment on Kuchi: Main Findings*, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Kabul 2005. For a more general outlook at the nomads' situation, see Barfield, 'Nomadic Pastoralists in Afghanistan: Reconstruction of the Pastoral Economy', Bank Information Centre 2004; Tapper, 'Who are the Kuchi?' [see FN 8]; and the more specific and policy oriented reports provided by the Afghanistan Peace Project at <http://cnrit.tamu.edu/peace/index.html>. Also, Kuchis figure prominently in a series of land conflict studies carried out by Liz Alden Wily, mainly for AREU (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit – further references in the text), and in M. Patterson, 'The Shiwa Pastures, 1978–2003: Land Tenure Changes and Conflict in Northeastern Badakhshan', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, May 2004, accessed 1 January 2012, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/415E-The%20Shiwa%20Pastures-CS-print.pdf>. Land disputes involving Kuchis and

<sup>25</sup> Barfield, *The Central Asian Arabs* . . ., [see FN 13], 110–22.

<sup>26</sup> See it, for example, in Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition* . . ., [see FN 13], 30.

<sup>27</sup> See Glatzer, 'Political Organization . . .', [see FN 13].

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Janata, 'Beitrag zur Völkerkunde Afghanistans', *Archiv für Völkerkunde* 29, 1975, 7–36, 12–14, 25.

Kuchis is best shown by the difficulties in assessing their overall number, and the percentage still migrating seasonally. In the absence of a national census in Afghanistan, the most comprehensive effort at determining the number of Kuchis was that done by the National Multi-Sectoral Assessment on Kuchi (NMAK) in 2003-2004.<sup>32</sup>

The NMAK put the number of Kuchis at 2,426,304 individuals (2,588,719 if also counting Kuchis who had crossed the border into Pakistan at the time) and 239,859 households (16.056 in Pakistan at the time). The NMAK survey also subdivides these Kuchis into three main categories: long-range migratory (accounting for 52 per cent), short-range migratory (33 per cent) and settled (15 per cent).

These categories, however, must be explained. Both 'migratory' groups include even those Kuchis who used to migrate but whose migratory pattern is now disrupted; that is, they either now move to a destination other than the original one or they do not move at all. The NMAK definition of nomads was that 'a Kuchi is either migratory, or has settled recently due to the loss of livestock during the last drought'<sup>33</sup> (referring to the drought of 1999–2001).

The choice of the NMAK is justified in terms of studying and assessing the problems surrounding pastoralists, as well as ways to help them improve

---

the related resolution mechanisms have also been analysed by S. Schmeidl, 'The Kuchi Nomads of Khost and Paktia Provinces', *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/The Liaison Office*, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> As of today, hugely different numbers are given by various institutions. The Independent Directorate of Kuchi Affairs (IDKA, created in 2006) and the Kuchi parliamentary commission put the total as high as seven million. The same figure is often repeated in the media. The IDKA also cites implausibly high figures for some provinces. It claims, for example, that 352,155 Kuchis resided in Khost province in 2009, while the Central Statistics Organization (CSO) for Afghanistan put the overall population for Khost at 528,900 in the following year. The figures IDKA gave for Khost city and Terezaï – indeed the two areas where most local Kuchis reside – were moreover roughly double the overall district population given by the CSO (237,510 against 129,300 for Khost city, and 111,600 against 42,000 for Terezaï), see Schmeidl, 'The Kuchi Nomads . . .', [see FN 31], 16; CSO statistics are available at [http://www.afghaneic.org/Data/CSO%20Population%20Data/Afghanistan%20SO%20population%20data%201389%20\(2010%20-11\)%20update%20July%208-2010.pdf](http://www.afghaneic.org/Data/CSO%20Population%20Data/Afghanistan%20SO%20population%20data%201389%20(2010%20-11)%20update%20July%208-2010.pdf). The numbers given by the NMAK are far more realistic.

<sup>33</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 4.

their impoverished living conditions, but it is less helpful for identifying the boundaries of Kuchi identity. As noticed by the author of the survey, the criteria applied for identifying Kuchis do not account for some settled communities or households that may still see themselves as Kuchis: 'However in reality, many Kuchis may have settled decades ago, own land or large transportation companies, and still refer to themselves as "Kuchi"'.<sup>34</sup> The choice to focus on people who are either still migrating or who settled during the drought of 1999–2001, in fact, shapes the Kuchi profile that emerges from the survey and explains the high percentage of still-migratory Kuchis it reports. Many households who settled since the beginning of the conflict in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, either after losing their livestock or by choice, and some who settled even before that, do indeed still see themselves as Kuchis. The NMAK report estimates that 40 per cent of the Kuchi population no longer migrates, including those who belong to settled communities (15 per cent) and those still partially migratory households that stay back. But this figure is probably still lower than the number of sedentary Kuchis in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

As our focus will ultimately be more on the political aspects of the Kuchi identity, the criteria employed by the NMAK are not completely adequate for our purpose. In fact, an analysis of the background of the Kuchi political elite that sits in the parliament, and arguably are expected to represent the interest of all Kuchis, would largely put them in the category thus excluded by the NMAK. Other criteria to count the Kuchis, such as the separate voter registration of Kuchi voters, would however be even more fraught with ambiguities and inconsistency, as will be seen later. And, as the data gathered by NMAK is unrivalled to this day, it will provide us more elements of analysis.

However, the assumption here is that an important portion of the people referring to themselves as Kuchis is not consistently nomadic anymore. The old pattern of moving from the winter quarters in the peripheral lowlands to the summer pastures in

---

<sup>34</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 3.

<sup>35</sup> Other authors also pointed at the difficulty in obtaining data on settled and semi-settled Kuchis, as – in some areas – they merge with the population. Schmeidl, 'The Kuchi Nomads . . .', [see FN 31], 15.

the central highlands of Afghanistan has significantly reduced. Many Kuchis now reside for most of the year in a fixed abode, with some provinces hosting a significantly high percentage of them (Khost, Nangarhar and, increasingly, Kabul). This change can be explained by either direct obstacles put in the way of their migration by other groups, or the disappearance of the very reasons that drove their transhumance, the need to graze their livestock. In fact, among the reasons respondents gave to the NMAK for their failure to migrate to summer pastures, the loss of livestock was the most common (79 per cent).<sup>36</sup> The Kuchis lost much of their livestock as a result of war. Several Kuchis interviewed by the author explained that they lost their livestock during their years in exile in Pakistan, when they were unable to move from refugee camps to summer pastures.<sup>37</sup> Many of the Kuchis who were able to keep their animals during their years in Pakistan saw them killed or confiscated by armed groups upon their return to Afghanistan after 1992. This seems to be a continuing problem for isolated Kuchi households breeding livestock in areas with factional fighting and where they lack strong political patrons.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31]. Overall livestock numbers in Afghanistan declined in the decade starting from the mid-1990s, and this, together with the demographic growth of the population, turned the country from being an exporter into an importer of meat. The most significant decrease affected sheep and goats, which were largely owned by Kuchis (possibly over one third of the country's total), Thomson, Chabot and Wright, 'Production and Marketing of Red Meat, Skins, Wool in Afghanistan', *The Macauley Institute/Mercy Corps*, 2005, accessed 30 October 2011, <http://cnrit.tamu.edu/peace/pdfs/McCaulay%20Institute%20livestock%20report.pdf>, 3–4.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with representatives of the Amarkhel and Mullakhel Ahmadzai, Kabul 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Kuchi shepherds from Paghman, Kabul 2011. One of the interviewees, acting as a shepherd for a flock of 160 sheep belonging to himself and four other partners (unable or unwilling to migrate themselves – one was a widow), complained of having been attacked by the men of a famous ex-mujahedin commander of Paghman in mid-August 2011. All his beasts were stolen, 60 were subsequently butchered by the armed group – while the shepherd's attempts to obtain justice only won him a severe thrashing at the hands of the commanders' men. For a study of the changed security environment for nomads see, H. Kreutzmann and S. Schütte, 'Contested Commons – Multiple Insecurities of Pastoralists in North-Eastern Afghanistan', *Erdkunde* 65, no. 2, 2011, 99–119.

Disease and drought, in particular the prolonged one of 1999–2001, also destroyed the pastoral potential of many communities: UN-FAO estimates show a sharp decrease in the sheep and goat populations in Afghanistan (significantly owned by Kuchis), from 31 million in 1995 to less than 5 million in 2001.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding this loss of livestock, a strikingly high percentage (97.5 per cent) of all the Kuchis surveyed by the NMAK, both migratory and settled, still possess some livestock.<sup>40</sup> However, the national average of sheep and goats per Kuchi household recorded by NMAK amounts to around 50 animals, half of the minimum of 100 required for a household to sustain itself economically on livestock breeding.<sup>41</sup> When one adds a serious regional imbalance, with some northeastern provinces featuring much higher numbers of livestock per household and significantly raising the national average, this paucity suggests that nowadays livestock breeding is the principal livelihood for Kuchis only in communities that have been particularly successful in retaining or restocking their flocks.

So what do Kuchis do to survive? The NMAK cites the availability of another income as the second most important reason for settling down, after loss of livestock. This is particularly striking in the east: if countrywide this amounts to a modest 9 per cent of the answers, in the east it rises to a significant 18 per cent.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Nangarhar and Laghman

<sup>39</sup> See L. Milich, 'The Behsud Conflicts in Afghanistan: A Blueprint to Avoid Further Clashes in 2009 and Beyond', *EurasiaCritic*, June 2009, 26–8, accessed 28 October 2011, <http://www.eurasiacritic.com/articles/behsud-conflicts-afghanistan-blueprint-avoid-further-clashes-2009-and-beyond>.

<sup>40</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 24–25.

<sup>41</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 24; 27. This estimate about the minimum of animals required for subsistence is corroborated by other experts on Afghan pastoralism interviewed by the author.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, the most common answer given by Kuchis to NMAK as to their 'income generating activities' was 'labouring' or 'no significant income generating activities'. De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 9, 28. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) indicate that 98.7% of Kuchi households receive income from at least one source other than livestock

provinces have long accounted for a significant portion of the Kuchi population. Kuchis reside there either year-round or at least in winter, and in summer they move to Kabul and its rural hinterland (Parwan, Logar) in search of labour in the city or in the countryside. Traditionally these movements were limited to periods of the year with low pastoral activity, or to those households with a surplus of labour. But in recent years, Kuchis have increasingly depended on the non-pastoral economy for their subsistence.

Many groups who still migrate seasonally appear to increasingly orient their activities towards Kabul. During the last ten years, among Kuchi communities with their traditional winter quarters in the eastern region (Nangarhar, Laghman) and summer pasture in central areas (Hazarajat, Panjshir), an increasing number of households chose to camp from spring to fall in Deh Sabz at the outskirts of Kabul. Previously only a stage on the Kuchi transhumance route, Deh Sabz – and parts of neighbouring Pul-e Charki and Bagrami – has become permanently inhabited by Kuchi families. While this three-stage migration was known before the war, previously only a few individuals would have stopped at this middle stage to engage in labour in the city while most of Kuchis would proceed to the higher pastures. The balance has now been overturned, as the description of a Kuchi group originally migrating between Laghman and Panjshir shows:

*The Khomarikhel kuchi still perceive themselves as nomad pastoralists. However, as a group they now find themselves increasingly divided between a minority of families who still own economically viable flocks of sheep and move through the full cycle of seasonal grazing camps, and those poorer families – in the majority – who no longer own viable flocks. They have effectively ceased to be true pastoralists, becoming satellites of the settled urban and peri-urban populations on whom they are dependent for a precarious livelihood. Even families who still possess sizeable flocks*

---

breeding: A. Roe, 'Kuchis and Water Use in Afghanistan', Center for Policy and Human Development, 2011, accessed 28 October 2011, <http://www.cphd.af/Downloads/Background%20Papers/Kuchis%20and%20water%20use%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf>, 12.

*send young men, surplus to herding and camp duties, away to earn a living from unskilled work.*<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in this community as in others, families who remain camped near to the city or in places that offer the opportunity for agricultural labour now outnumber the minority of 'pure' pastoralist nomads. Kuchis have lost both the virtual monopoly on the meat and dairy products trade they enjoyed in the decades before the war, and the number of livestock per household necessary to subsist on breeding. They can still engage in dairy, meat and wool trade with the animals remaining, and the most profitable way to do so is to settle close to the big markets provided by cities.<sup>44</sup> However, the still existing trade of livestock products is by no means the major economic activity for those Kuchis who settle near urban centres.

Harvesting, along with other menial farm duties, has traditionally been an additional source of income.<sup>45</sup> NMAK figures put the percentage of Kuchi communities involved in it at over 50 per cent.<sup>46</sup> As unskilled workers, their wages can be considerably lower than those of other labourers; something that makes them a sought-after type of manpower.<sup>47</sup> Inside cities, too, Kuchi labourers

---

<sup>43</sup> A. Fitzherbert, 'Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy: Livestock Feed and Products', *AREU*, Kabul 2007, 20.

<sup>44</sup> According to some studies, the Kuchis still play an important role in the meat market: see Thomson, Chabot and Wright, 'Production and Marketing . . .', [see FN 36], 19. Also, E. Graham-Harrison, 'Hidden Casualties of Afghan War: Nomadic Farmers Adopt More Settled Life', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2013, accessed 5 July 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/08/afghanistan-war-nomadic-farmers>.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the very name of Logar province – despite locals claiming an etymology from Loy Ghar, 'big mountain' – likely originated from *lawgar*, 'agricultural labourer' (from a type of sickle), usually referred to nomadic farmhands. For a mention of the term, see Balland, 'Nomadism and Politics . . .', [see FN 11], 225. Tables have actually turned in certain areas of Logar, where some prominent Kuchi families have become big landowners in the last decades.

<sup>46</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 28.

<sup>47</sup> A 2002 study put this at one fifth of the wage of local labourers for works paid in cash, or at half of it for works

seek all types of unskilled work. Construction work in particular is popular as it is available year-round. In fact, Kuchi labour activities are changing in scope and type. They are losing the occasional character they had before the war, or, if they are indeed occasional, that is due to the unavailability of jobs. On the other hand, they are less connected with aspects of traditional Kuchi life like the ownership of animals and the seasonality of their location and employment.<sup>48</sup> The loss of specific areas of activities linked to livestock breeding or long-distance trade not only brought Kuchis closer to the cities, but for the first time put them in direct competition with other disadvantaged strata of the Afghan population for access to land, jobs and resources.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.4 Changing Perceptions of the Kuchis

The term 'Kuchi', which refers specifically to the mobility of pastoralists or traders who migrate seasonally, has gained undisputed prominence at a time when this mobility is waning. The strengthening of an identity through times of social change can in many cases be merely the product of one community's efforts at preserving its cohesiveness and social and economic functioning. Already in the late 1970s, anthropologists noted that different social and age groups among eastern nomads who had settled or were becoming sedentary had diverse views on being Kuchi (though universally identifying as such): 'lorry-drivers, landowners practising pleasure nomadism

in summer to the reaches of the Salang from their estates in Dahana-ye Ghori, [and] poor households permanently settled in winter camps near Jalalabad think of themselves as nomads who are forced out of their vocation.'<sup>50</sup> Tribal linkages are still important in organising the lives of individuals among the Kuchis, as among other Afghan communities. However, today, mechanisms revolving around networks of political patronage are affecting this process of self-identification with a lifestyle that has become less frequent. Foremost is the need of many Kuchis to make some connection to political power when encountering a new and not-so-hospitable environment.

The majority of Kuchis who settle close to cities live in less-than-ideal conditions. Except a few rich businessmen, Kuchis do not have access to valuable, serviced residential areas, and they either acquire land plots at the fringes of town, settle in unproductive areas and try to occupy the land, or lodge in refugee camps turned permanent. The high number of Kuchi 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs), helped create Kuchi refugee camps close to several Afghan cities, most notably near Kandahar. IDPs fleeing from the last great drought, particularly severe in the south, and from the violence that targeted the Kuchis in northern provinces like Badghis and Faryab in 2002–03, took shelter there.<sup>51</sup>

The living conditions of Kuchis near cities are more often than not precarious and shabby, lacking services like electricity or water, and having less than basic hygiene standards. They occupy a low economic rung within the urban population, which does not improve their social standing in the eyes of the Afghan population.<sup>52</sup> Before the war,

---

paid in kind, like harvesting. De Weijer, 'Pastoralists Vulnerability. . .', [see FN 8], 18.

<sup>48</sup> Kuchis would hire pack and transport animals during the inactive winter months, carry out specialised trade or run seasonal shops with livestock products in the bazaar. The poorest among them, at least, also engaged in labour in cities seasonally. In British India they were even differentiated by other Kuchis and labelled 'Charra Powindah' (probably from *chara*, 'occupation', although Balland interprets it as coming from *jara*, Urdu for 'single'): Balland, 'Nomadism and Politics. . .', [see FN 11], 209.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance this US cable from 2007 that relates the return of Kuchi refugees from Pakistan, and their settlement in Butkhak, eastern suburbs of Kabul, 'Update on Afghan Refugees, Deportees, and Squatters' *Wikileaks, Public Library of US Diplomacy*, 24 May 2007, accessed 13 March 2012, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07KABUL1744\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07KABUL1744_a.html).

---

<sup>50</sup> Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition. . .*, [see FN 13], 221.

<sup>51</sup> They amount to as many as 33,000 individuals around Kandahar city, according to the *National Profile of Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan*, UNHCR 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/49ba33a02.html>, 25. For a detailed study of these IDPs' living conditions, see 'Durable Solutions for Kuchi IDPs in the South of Afghanistan', Asia Consultants International 2006, <http://www.unhcr.org/46c993942.pdf>. Many displaced Kuchis from Badghis had also taken shelter in Maslakh ('slaughterhouse') camp near Herat.

<sup>52</sup> A recent report noted that a quarter of the non-Kuchi inhabitants of Deh Sabz interviewed complained that the presence of their Kuchi neighbours affected negatively



educated people and members of the urban middle-class already considered nomads to be *wahshi* ('savage') and underdeveloped, but their physical distance and their relative affluence left some room to romanticise them. They were also somehow credited with interesting and impressing foreign visitors, and thus held by the elites as a source of 'national pride'. Not much of that 'internal orientalism' is left nowadays.

Perceptions of Kuchis have changed, as recalled here in conversations with the author by two individuals of different background, both Pashtun and from provinces with sizeable Kuchi populations (respectively Nangarhar and Wardak):

*Before, city-dwellers did not use to see much of the Kuchis: they came to town only to trade, and they were even renowned for their beauty and honesty. Now they see only the worst sides of being nomad, the poverty, the lack of hygiene. . . . They are not ready to accept this inside their cities.*

*People see them as backward. When I was a kid, people in my village would say "The Kuchis have arrived!" and there would be a caravan and people would stop to gaze at the nomads passing. But now things have changed and people see them as 'ne'er do well' and troublemakers.<sup>53</sup>*

Indeed, the current social indicators for Kuchis as a community are far from exhilarating.<sup>54</sup> They rank at the bottom of the list in terms of literacy, which amounts to only 2.0 per cent for males and 0.05 per cent for females; while attendance to school is likewise appallingly low (6.6 per cent for boys, 1.8 per cent for girls – against a national average of 30

per cent and 15 per cent respectively).<sup>55</sup> These data are based on the NMAK, whose criteria leave out some of the long-settled Kuchis, who are probably slightly better off in terms of literacy and access to school compared to those still pursuing a migratory lifestyle.<sup>56</sup> But beyond the settled-nomadic divide, the economic situation likely plays a more-significant role in determining literacy and schooling among Kuchis. In fact, the previous indicators are higher for those provinces (Balkh, Baghlan, Sar-e Pul and Logar) where some Kuchis are well-off, having settled and purchased large landholdings decades ago (but often still breeding livestock and having thus been included in the NMAK, unlike others who completely stopped being pastoralists once they settled). Kuchis who settled in precarious conditions, or as IDPs, do not necessarily have higher education levels than with Kuchis who are still nomadic.<sup>57</sup>

A similar situation is found with regard to the sanitary conditions of Kuchi households after they have settled down. Research shows that Kuchis who settle in highly populated or cultivated areas, as many do who are looking for job opportunities, actually see their access to potable water decrease.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, this leads to disputes with farmers or with other communities migrating

---

the reputation of the area: 'A Study of the Kuchi Population in the Kabul New City Area', *Samuel Hall*, 2012, accessed 15 February 2013, <http://samuelhall.org/REPORTS/A%20Study%20of%20the%20Kuchi%20Population%20in%20the%20Kabul%20New%20City%20Area.pdf>, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Nahid, Kabul October 2011; Interview with Hamed, Kabul October 2011.

<sup>54</sup> According to a 2008 assessment, 54% of Kuchis live in absolute poverty, compared to a national average of 30%: *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/2008*, EU/Govt. of Afghanistan 2008, [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/documents/afgh\\_brochure\\_summary\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/documents/afgh_brochure_summary_en.pdf), 10.

---

<sup>55</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 40.

<sup>56</sup> Mobile schools – and health centres – meant to follow the Kuchi transhumance have been planned, but insufficiently implemented, as is evident by recent statistics on the number of students enrolled in mobile schools in the last three years, especially when compared to the huge numbers for the Kuchi population given by the IDKA. See 'Kuchi Children to Have 500 More Schools until 2015', *Sada-e Azadi* 14 July 2012, <http://sada-e-azadi.net/Joomla/index.php/en/afghanistan/capital/6287-kuchi-children-to-have-500-more-schools-until-2015>. Also, the institution of boarding schools near cities will not solve problems of attendance for girls, as they would not be allowed to live outside the family.

<sup>57</sup> Another indicator that is often considered a symptom of social backwardness is household size, which among the Kuchis is significantly bigger (10.1 persons) than the national average (6.2). De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 11.

<sup>58</sup> For a study of Kuchi access to water, see Roe, 'Kuchis and Water Use' [see FN 42]. In comparison, NMAK findings report that in 2004, 90% of Kuchis did not have access to safe water, compared to 76% of settled people. De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 35.

to the city, who inevitably see the arrival of the new neighbours as increased competition.

Failure to play their former specific role in the productive system and competition for jobs and basic resources are not the only issues that put the Kuchis in conflict with some Afghan communities. Disputes over land tenure or access to pastures commonly involve Kuchis on one or even both sides, and in some cases these disputes have become huge, highly politicised and seemingly unending stand-offs between whole ethnic groups.

### 3. KUCHIS AND THE LAND

*Before, when the Kuchis used to live with us in winter, they were our hamsayas [neighbours, also implying a dependent position as tenants], now they have become our landlords.'*

– Resident of Nangarhar province,  
referring to a land dispute with  
a Kuchi businessman<sup>59</sup>

#### 3.1 Kuchis and Land Ownership

The common, and superficial, idea of nomads as people without a fixed abode does not summon the idea of attachment to land and of subsequent conflicts over it. Kuchis however, even when moving seasonally from winter quarters to summer pastures, often several hundred kilometres away, can develop a 'sense of belonging' to one of the two places, usually the former. Frederiksen describes the feelings of the Hazarbus Kuchis for their 'homeland' in Kuz Baru, a village in Mohmand Dara of Nangarhar province: 'there exists no official document, but among the Hazarbus there is a consciousness that the territory belongs to them'.<sup>60</sup> Acquisition of land is by no means limited to a tribe's region of origin. The Hazarbus Mohmand, now mostly sedentary, eventually settled not only in ancestral Kuz Baru, but also in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif, where their trade enterprises had brought them. In many parts of Afghanistan, before the war, the more-prosperous

Kuchi households had already purchased land in both winter areas and summer pastures, initially as a way to secure profit made by trade, but increasingly to settle, giving up pastoral duties but keeping on trade longer, if profitable.

Nowadays, not only do some Afghan Kuchis own land, but many are consistently involved in disputes involving its ownership for agricultural or residential purposes. Another major source of confrontation is access to and the rights of usage of pastures.<sup>61</sup> Kuchis own land all across the country,<sup>62</sup> especially in provinces like Balkh (56 per cent of the Kuchi households residing there in winter own land), Sar-e Pul (52 per cent) and Logar (51 per cent).<sup>63</sup> In the two northern provinces, Kuchis own large tracts of land; the highest average per household is in Jawzjan and Sar-e Pul.<sup>64</sup> This is because when the government re-located them there between the end of the nineteenth century and the early half of the twentieth, it often endowed them with land.<sup>65</sup>

On average, nomads actually possess more land per capita than sedentary people do, if only those

<sup>61</sup> For a detailed history of rangeland usage, and of the competing claims by the Afghan state and local communities to it, see L.A. Wily, 'The Battle over Pastures: The Hidden War in Afghanistan', *Revue des mondes musulmanes et de la Méditerranée* 133, June 2013, 95–113, <http://remmm.revues.org/8021>.

<sup>62</sup> According to NMAK criteria, 16% of Kuchi households own some land in their winter quarters, and 7% in the area of the summer pastures. De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 19ff.

<sup>63</sup> A particular case is that of Paktia, where the NMAK found virtually all Kuchi households (96%) owning some land. Environmentally, most of Paktia province comes closer to a 'summer grazing area', as it still is for some Kuchi wintering in Khost. NMAK criteria refer to 'winter location'; however, this does not affect the said Kuchi households, as they are all settled and not dependent on livestock anymore. This reportedly happened in recent times only; tribal links between nomads and sedentary villagers may have facilitated this development, as in many districts of the province they both belong to the Ahmadzai tribe. See also Schmeidl, 'The Kuchi Nomads . . .', [see FN 31].

<sup>64</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 21.

<sup>65</sup> In the 1970s, Dupree would put the number of Pashtuns migrating to summer pastures among those Pashtuns transferred to the north at less than half of the community, and actually term them 'semi-nomads': Dupree, 'Settlement and Migration Patterns . . .', [see FN 17], 404.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with a member from the Meshrano Jirga and village representatives from Rodat, Jalalabad, December 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Frederiksen, *Caravans and Trade . . .*, [see FN 13], 64–7, 71, 266–7.

Kuchis who have at least some land are taken into account. Land-owning Kuchis do not only grow cash crops, but also possess more flocks on average than landless nomads. The apparent success of this strategy of mixed economy gives credit to Pedersen's consideration that 'to be a landowner is seen as the conclusion of a successful nomad's existence'.<sup>66</sup> In some cases, the process has been an age-old one, proceeding at a faster or slower pace depending on the economic and political situation. In Logar, where almost all the land owned by Kuchis belongs to settled ones, Ahmadzai nomads, who used to cross the province during the nomads' golden age of summer grazing and trade in Hazarajat in the decades before the 1970s, invested their profits and bought valuable agricultural land, as reported then by field researchers:

*Their migration route goes through the Logar Valley, which has become a permanent staging area for the Ahmadzai, as well as a place where they own farming land exploited by tenants. They spend from forty to fifty days there during the spring migration coincident with the period of lambing. Some men leave one or more of their wives and children and sometimes their brothers in houses in the valley all year round, creating a variation in exploitation pattern in which a predominantly nomadic group is also involved in agriculture.*<sup>67</sup>

In more recent times, the political clout gained by local Kuchi leaders, like Haji Naim Khan Kuchi, under the Taleban regime, allowed extended families and allies to increase their properties, reportedly by encroaching on state land with the consent of the authorities.<sup>68</sup>

The case of Logar constituted an ideal progressive settlement pattern from the Kuchi point of view,

<sup>66</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 23; Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition . . .*, [see FN 13], 220.

<sup>67</sup> Rosman and Rubel, 'Nomad-Sedentary Interethnic Relations . . .', [see FN 18], 558.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with residents from Logar, Kabul, November 2011. The prosperity of Naim Khan's family has continued after 2001: despite being arrested in 2002 and held in Guantanamo for about two years, he was later fully rehabilitated, made an advisor on Kuchi Affairs to President Karzai and, more recently, a member of the High Peace Council.

but often historical conjunctures forced the nomads to settle hastily and in unfavourable conditions. As mentioned above, after the two-years blockade of the Pakistani border in 1961–63, many nomads incurred such livestock or economic losses that they had to settle where they had temporarily re-located: the central areas of Nangarhar and Khost, where the winters are relatively mild. Likewise, over the past decade the majority of the Kuchis had few good opportunities to settle. Therefore, conflicts with local villagers or state authorities inevitably arose. Increased competition over land and other key resources for settlement – like water or proximity to roads or cities – has made these conflicts increasingly violent and politicised. This is particularly the case where Kuchi settlements in the suburbs of Kabul conflict with the interests of other groups or government construction projects, like the Kabul New City project.<sup>69</sup>

A major element of difficulty in these land disputes is the frequent lack of clear property documents, or the controversial nature of those held by the Kuchis. In fact, the type of property document usually held by Kuchis, if any, is a *qawalla* (a legal deed issued by a state court and, in wartime, also by mujahedin authorities) for a private property, in particular for agricultural land.<sup>70</sup> As for pasture, in many areas nomads traditionally gained access to them through royal *farman* (decree), often dating back to the early twentieth century.<sup>71</sup>

Kuchis who own private agricultural land and have legal deeds are quite sure in their possession,

<sup>69</sup> F. Foschini, 'Land Grabs (2): Deh Sabz, the New and the Old', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 15 August 2013,, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/land-grabs-2-deh-sabz-the-new-and-the-old>. See also F. Bezhan, 'Afghan Nomads Fend Off Authorities in Kabul Land Dispute', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 December 2012, accessed 30 June 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan-nomads-fend-off-authorities-kabul-land-dispute/24798956.html>.

<sup>70</sup> For a detailed explanation of the *qawalla* issuing and functioning, see Patterson, 'The Shiwa Pastures . . .', [see FN 31], 7–13.

<sup>71</sup> This may not be universally true: the same study by Patterson shows how the mujahedin authorities in Badakhshan regulated access to pastures issuing *qawalla* to new users, which often worked retrospectively to certify the rights of previously un-*qawalled* areas. Patterson, 'The Shiwa Pastures . . .', [see FN 31], 11.

except in some areas in the north where they were targeted by violence in the first years after the fall of the Taleban. But in most cases these conflicts involve communal or state land, or land for which it is difficult to ascertain property rights.<sup>72</sup> By laying claim to rangeland, Kuchis may be able to settle informally and provisionally, but their tenure is necessarily among the least secure, because of rival claims by other communities or the risk that the state decides to uphold its rights to its ownership. Thus, even when Kuchis try and settle on lands they have been using for generations as temporary winter abodes, they are often technically landless in what they consider 'their place of origin'.

However, the most notorious instance of conflict involving the Kuchis is not about land for settlement, but rather their access to summer pastures in the central highlands of the country, a region inhabited mostly by Hazaras.

### 3.2 The Kuchi-Hazara Conflict

Access to many of the summer pastures previously used by the Kuchis countrywide has been blocked almost continuously during the past three decades. 'Hostile attitude of resident people' ranks only third, after loss of livestock and availability of other income, among the reasons given by Kuchis for not migrating to their former pastures anymore, and this problem was highlighted mainly by respondents in the north.<sup>73</sup> However, the Hazarajat

<sup>72</sup> The problem of legal property of pastures (and of other types of rangeland), which successive Afghan Land Laws have usually ascribed to the state, while failing to identify other types of property out of a strict distinction between private and non-private (and thus state-owned), has been discussed by L. A. Wily, 'Recommended Strategy for Conflict Resolution of Competing High Pastures Claims of settled and Nomadic Communities in Afghanistan', *United Nations Environment Programme*, 2009, accessed 1 July 2012, [http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/afg\\_tech/theme\\_01/afg\\_rangeland\\_EN.pdf](http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/afg_tech/theme_01/afg_rangeland_EN.pdf), 24–8. For a recent briefing about the ongoing process of reforming the Land Law, see L. A. Wily, 'Land Governance at the Crossroads', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, October 2012, accessed 2 February 2013, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1212E%20Land%20Reform%20I%20BP%20ct%202012.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> De Weijer, *National Multisectoral . . .*, [see FN 31], 17. At the time of NMAK however, the issue of the Kuchi-Hazara conflict had not yet reached the scalding

pastures have become the most-reported and disputed issue involving the Kuchis. These pastures are mainly in Panjab and Waras districts of Bamian province. Local villagers graze their own livestock there, or have converted them into non-irrigated farmland. This has been engendered by both the demographic expansion of the population in the central highlands and the increased political power of the Hazara community since the 1980s.<sup>74</sup>

Kuchis also own agricultural land near to summer pastures in Hazarajat, but in 2004 access was greatly reduced (85 per cent of the households with land in Wardak could not access it; 97 per cent of those with land in Ghazni; and 100 per cent of those in Bamian). Hazaras often say they would recognise the rights of Kuchis over the land they have rightfully acquired, but that they will not let them access and exploit the pastures.<sup>75</sup> In general, they make a political point by differentiating between the land legally purchased by Kuchis, which is guaranteed by *qawalla*, and the pastures. They do not recognise the rightfulness of the royal decrees issued by Abdur-Rahman, as proceeding from a campaign of internal conquest and

---

relevance of later years. Also, it is possible that in the above figure, which only included Kuchis who had stopped migrating to the pastures, some of the Kuchis trying to access Hazarajat were not counted. Other pasture areas where Kuchi access is largely blocked following communitarian strife are the so-called Kohistanat of both Faryab and Sar-e Pul provinces (Lawlash and Pasni areas). See L. A. Wily, 'Land Relations in Faryab Province', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, June 2004, accessed 22 June 2013, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/419E-Land%20Relations%20in%20Faryab-CS-print.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> The Land Law of 1970 (and others) forbade the conversion of rangeland into farmland. At the same time, the lack of clear distinction between state and public land allowed the government to allocate access rights to pastures according to its own will. For a survey of the relevant legislation, see L. A. Wily, 'Looking for Peace on the Pastures: Rural Land Relations in Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, December 2004, accessed 1 December 2011, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/437E-Looking%20for%20Peace%20on%20the%20Pastures%20-%20Rural%20Land%20Relations%20in%20Afghanistan-SP-web.pdf> 44–7.

<sup>75</sup> In fact, some of the Hazara tenants have kept paying the rent or the due share of the harvest to the absent Kuchi landlords, even during the latter's years of exile in Pakistan. This detail has been confirmed on several occasions to the author by both Hazara and Kuchi elders interviewed.

motivated by the political will to enlist the nomads as auxiliary troops to break the resistance of the Hazara.<sup>76</sup>

Technical difficulties relating to a lack of clarity over legal rights are not the only obstacles to solving the dispute. Memories of the nomads' last major foray into Hazarajat, in 1998–99, have elevated its political significance. Led by Naim Khan, then a Taleban official, armed nomads entered Hazarajat wielding political and military superiority for the first time since 1979. Acting as auxiliary troops to the Taleban, they rampaged through the region, collecting arrears in payments from their former tenants, targeting particularly wealthy families to extort cash and livestock, and forcing debtors to sign their land over to them. Finally, Mullah Omar recalled them after delegations of complainants protested with the Taleban leadership.<sup>77</sup>

After 2001, the issue of nomad access to Hazarajat became a driver of ethnic tension and political propaganda in Afghanistan. Its yearly climax is in the months of May and June, when nomads approach the highlands. The first incidents over access to pastures and water sources were reported in 2004 in Jaghatu (Ghazni) and Behsud (Wardak), and the first lives claimed.<sup>78</sup> Since 2007, tension has often broken into open conflict, as the Kuchis have started pushing on the borders of

Hazarajat in an increasingly aggressive and militarised way.<sup>79</sup>

Although the pastures that the Kuchis are mainly interested in lie well inside Hazarajat, the confrontation usually takes place in the first Hazara-inhabited districts encountered by the Kuchis in their migration through Wardak province: Daimirdad and Behsud – often called the 'Behsud conflict' in the press. These places, together with neighbouring Jaghatu district in Ghazni, were transit areas for the Kuchis before the war: they would exploit grazing areas along the road while moving higher to the pastures where they would spend the summer. However, while central Hazarajat was out of their reach from the early stages of the war, these 'border' areas were occasionally accessible to the few remaining Kuchis, at least those who were richer and better armed, who were able to force their way in or to negotiate with the local Hazaras.<sup>80</sup> Ethnic violence increased during the Taleban campaign against Hazarajat. The increased use of rangeland by local Hazaras and the increasing number of returning Kuchi refugees in the post-2001 era contributed to transform an already tense situation into open conflict.

In the spring of 2010, for example, many armed nomads attacked Hazara settlements in these districts, triggering a large exodus of the settled population.<sup>81</sup> Between 500 and 1,000 well-armed Kuchi fighters entered the northern, Hazara-inhabited half of Daimirdad. Most of the local population left the area. Even after a cease-fire was reached, Kuchi fighters remained for several weeks before accepting to withdraw. Altogether, more than 2,500 families were displaced, mainly to

<sup>76</sup> Interviews with Hazara elders, political activists, intellectuals. Arguably, the entrance of a limited numbers of Kuchi families would not be perceived by the inhabitants of Hazarajat as a dangerous re-enactment of past domination by outsiders. Some observers even state that it is already taking place without much fuss (interview with program manager of an NGO working with Kuchis, May 2012). Some Hazara leaders suggest that the Kuchi landlords who legally own land in Hazarajat should take up permanent residence there if they want to make their claims valid.

<sup>77</sup> For a description of the 1998–1999 Kuchi expedition in Hazarajat see L. A. Wily, 'Land Relations in Bamyan Province', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, February 2004, accessed 15 November 2011, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/401E-Land%20Relations%20in%20Bamiyan-CS-print.pdf>, 54–61.

<sup>78</sup> L. A. Wily, 'Recommended Strategy . . .', [see FN 71], 20.

<sup>79</sup> For an early analysis of the issue until 2008, see Milich, 'The Behsud Conflicts . . .', [see FN 39]. A more recent study of the Kuchi-Hazara conflict appears in R. Sexton, 'Natural Resources and Conflict in Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Watch*, 2012, accessed 13 December 2012, [http://www.watchafghanistan.org/files/Natural\\_Resources\\_and\\_Conflict\\_in\\_Afghanistan/Natural\\_Resources\\_and\\_Conflict\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_Full\\_Report\\_English.pdf](http://www.watchafghanistan.org/files/Natural_Resources_and_Conflict_in_Afghanistan/Natural_Resources_and_Conflict_in_Afghanistan_Full_Report_English.pdf), 28–36.

<sup>80</sup> L. A. Wily, 'Recommended Strategy . . .', [see FN 71], 10.

<sup>81</sup> For a narrative of events, see F. Foschini, 'The Kuchi-Hazara Conflict, Again', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 27 May 2010, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=764>.



Kabul.<sup>82</sup> Upon returning, many found their property looted. Their long absence from the fields also meant that the year's harvest was lost. Events of this kind reverberated in the country's public debate, causing scuffles in the parliament and widespread protests by the Hazara sections of Kabul, other big cities and even abroad. The two main (rival) Hazara political leaders have often exploited the occasion to compete for popular support by staging rallies of protest, or to put pressure on the government. In the eyes of many Hazaras, Kuchis have become veritable bogeymen in recent years, symbolising the past (Taleban) oppression and the new challenges. Their accusations range from claims that the Kuchis loot Hazara villages and blackmail the government into paying them to keep quiet, to suspicions that the Taleban hire Kuchis to cause disorder and bully a pro-government community like the Hazaras, or even of comprising a majority of Taleban in their ranks.<sup>83</sup>

The Afghan government has not played a very proactive role in preventing the conflict, apart from deploying army units to enforce a ceasefire after violence has erupted.<sup>84</sup> The single major – and to date most effective – intervention by the government in a 'Behsud conflict' has been the payment of an unspecified sum of money to the Kuchi leaders in 2009, the year of the presidential election, to prevent the nomads from migrating towards Hazarajat and thus avoid violent escalations like those of the previous two years. This was part of an electoral deal between Hamid Karzai and

Mohammed Mohaqeq, a prominent Hazara leader usually siding with the opposition, in exchange for the support of his constituents in Karzai's bid at re-election. This approach backfired the following year, when the Kuchi leaders who had acted as mediators and who, according to some Kuchis, had kept most of the government money for themselves, were possibly expecting to receive the same subsidy, and therefore did nothing to prevent troubles beforehand, but rather accepted the role of mediators after violence erupted.

Usually, government measures are limited to arranging a yearly mediation commission, composed of both government representatives and those from the two opposed communities. Second Vice-President Karim Khalili, in both his official capacity and as a Hazara politician with a stake in the issue, and Naim Khan, as the Kuchi representative of choice for the government, regularly feature in it. However, these commissions have proven unable to provide a solution that goes beyond the usual patching up carried out year after year, which often involves compensation to the Kuchis for their lack of access to the pastures.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, long-term solutions may be opposed by elements inside both camps. In 2011, before the Kuchis' arrival in Daimirdad and Behsud, the elders of the two communities had signed a deal, agreeing to let the Kuchis pass through their territory provided they kept out of villages and cultivated fields. However, other Hazaras, members of a political faction prominent in the higher pasture area at the centre of the dispute, opposed the deal. At the same time, Kuchi violence hit neighbouring Nawor district of Ghazni province, which in recent years had been relatively quiet.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Data collected by UNHCR in mid-June estimated that some 2,800 families were displaced, mainly in Kabul: UNHCR, 'Post Conflict Assessment Mission Report (Behsood I, II & Daimirdad)', 22 June 2010 (not available online).

<sup>83</sup> Interviews with residents of Daimirdad and Behsud II, Kabul in May 2010, May-June 2011, and June 2012. Local Hazaras have claimed that Kuchis were 'raising the white flags of the Taleban' and enjoying the latter's support as early as the first instances of clashes in 2004 and 2006, see L. A. Wily, 'Recommended Strategy for Conflict Resolution. . .', [see FN 71], , 9; 20.

<sup>84</sup> Only in 2013, it seems that the Afghan National Army was deployed preventively to stop the Kuchis before they entered the Hazara-inhabited areas of Wardak, as Kuchis themselves claimed at a protest in Maidan Shahr: 'Kuchis Take to Streets against ANA' *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 10 June 2013, accessed 18 June 2013, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2013/06/10/kuchis-take-streets-against-ana>.

<sup>85</sup> Still, in the last ten years, various Afghan ministries and international organisations have attempted to reconcile the opposing communities and enhance a joint exploitation of natural resources in the areas affected by the conflict, with some success. Many have since stopped because of security issues. For a useful list of these, see Rasul, 'Fractured Relationships. . .', [see FN 20], 19–22.

<sup>86</sup> See F. Foschini, 'Who Cares about the Kuchi-Hazara Conflict, Nowadays?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 23 June 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1823>. As early as 2006, a multi-ministerial team, consisting of MRRD, MAIL and MoBTA, tried to negotiate a settlement between local villagers and kuchis in Nawor district. The deal was prevented at the last moment by

The Kuchis' spring movement towards Hazarajat seems to be partly a half-organised push by their own leaders and partly a spontaneous urge of several communities. Groups of Kuchis left without flocks may see it as an opportunity to get some prize; others are in desperate need of boosting their livestock breeding by gaining access to rich pastures. Some Kuchi communities that traditionally did not move into Hazarajat have even joined the annual Kuchi attempt at gaining access, hoping to derive some benefit from it in terms of looting or compensation.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, local Hazaras interviewed by AAN claim that today's Kuchis are not related to the nomads who used to travel through their areas before the war. In 2011, they reported heavily armed 'black-clad Kuchis', identifying them as Taleban, coming from the greater Kandahar area.<sup>88</sup> Many sides claimed, and some interviewed Kuchis agreed, that a range of armed groups, more or less linked to the Taleban insurgency or following an opportunistic agenda, might have joined in looting Hazara villages on the occasion of the annual confrontation and exploited the chance to disrupt security and government control in previously calm areas.

The Behsud conflict has sometimes led to a geographical escalation. Protests by the Hazaras have taken place in major Afghan cities at the height of the Kuchi-Hazara confrontation in spring, and communal clashes between Hazara and Kuchi communities in the suburbs of Kabul have erupted independent of this conflict, but were certainly

---

some Hazara MPs from Kabul. Frauke De Weijer, personal email communication to the author, 28 August 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Fitzherbert, 'Water Management . . .', [see FN 43], 20.

<sup>88</sup> Actually, the NMAK noted that many Kuchis settled in Kandahar IDP camps claim access to Nawor and other districts in the north of Ghazni province. This could partly account for the 'Kandahari appearance' of the attackers (indeed, in the past, some nomads moving through Nawor came from the southern provinces), but does not forbid a more or less close association of these with the Taleban. The former director of the Independent Directorate for Kuchi Affairs claimed to the US embassy in 2009 that 'half of the Taleban' were Kuchi. He was assumed to be trying to overplay the danger to draw resources for projects focusing on Kuchis: 'Cable 08KABUL2121, Who Will Be a Kuchi Voter?' US Embassy cable, August 2008, accessed 1 March 2012, <http://dazzlepod.com/cable/08KABUL2121/?rss=1>.

influenced by it. In August 2010, in the Dasht-e Barchi area of district 13 in West Kabul, for instance, Hazara and Kuchi residents clashed violently. They fought about a piece of land on which both groups sought to expand their settlements. The level of this confrontation was clearly raised by the identities of the opposing communities, and a symbolic 'transfer' took place, where the communal polarisation of the Behsud conflict was projected into the urban environment.<sup>89</sup>

Other land disputes involving Kuchis can be just as violent, even though they don't have the same level of symbolic significance.<sup>90</sup> Kuchis are often on different ends of these disputes. They may be trying to occupy state land they claim as their own, or that they claim they need. Subsequently, they often face violent repression and re-location by the security forces. They can also be the victims of stronger groups, that – thanks to their political connections or armed power – usurp land that the Kuchis had traditionally used, or extract money from them for usage of what was previously free. Finally they can also be the landowners speculating on high-value real estates, and facing opposition by landless sedentary people.<sup>91</sup>

As a long-term solution to most of these conflicts, the government has occasionally promised to distribute land to the Kuchis. Article 14 of the Afghan Constitution hints at 'improving . . . the settlement and living conditions of nomads', which many Afghans directly interpret as a commitment on the part of the state to settle them. Land distribution to Kuchis was recently planned in five provinces: Kabul, Logar, Nangarhar, Laghman, and Wardak, but when started, they immediately

---

<sup>89</sup> 'Kabul Riots Were No Surprise', The Killid Group, 21 August 2010, accessed 30 October 2011, <http://tkg.af/english/reports/political/232-kabul-riots-were-no-surprise>.

<sup>90</sup> Actually, given their increasing trend of settling in Khost, Nangarhar and parts of Kabul province, Kuchis clash more often with fellow Pashtuns.

<sup>91</sup> Najib Zarab, one of Afghanistan's biggest businessmen, with huge estate interests and construction projects in Nangarhar province, is a Hazarabuz Mohmand Kuchi. People in Nangarhar would routinely accuse him of favouring his own Kuchis when handling local quotas in residential projects. Interviews with Rodat elders, Jalalabad, June 2011.

triggered protests by local residents.<sup>92</sup> A state policy to provide 5,000 Kuchi households with sites in the provinces of Logar, Laghman and Nangarhar was announced by presidential decree in 2010, but attempts to allocate land for the Kuchis have been unsuccessful in the face of corrupt practices by stakeholders or opposition from local residents.<sup>93</sup> Sedentary villagers object to the occupation of state land by Kuchis, arguing that they need a government land-distribution scheme as much as the nomads.<sup>94</sup> Those who oppose or resent the idea of a separate Kuchi identity also point to a basic inconsistency, maintaining that nomads are 'termed by law those who do not possess any land', implying that an allotment of land must eventually transform them into normal citizens.<sup>95</sup>

The Kuchis themselves are not opposed to the idea of being given land to settle:

*Everybody seems to agree that land must be given to us: the Kuchis agree, the [Hazara] villagers agree, the government agrees. Who is the fool who would not agree? For those Kuchis who still have flocks, the opening of the Hazarajat pastures is the priority. For all the others land allotments are more important. In terms of economic opportunities, first comes land, then flocks, and as for the rest, there is nothing else in Afghanistan.*<sup>96</sup>

But as to giving up their specific identity, things are less clear. However, the Kuchis may in reality understand the 'cultural' specificities that separate

them from sedentary people; being Kuchis is often one of the few cards at their disposal by which they can raise their voice and make themselves heard in the realm of politics.

## 4. KUCHIS AND POLITICS

*Kuchis don't have their own media, they don't have any provincial council member or governor, nor ministers or lobby inside the government. People in power remember us only when there are votes in the Parliament, otherwise [they say]: Kuchis [go] to the tombs of your fathers!*

– Parwin Durrani, parliamentarian,  
head of the Kuchi Commission<sup>97</sup>

### 4.1 Kuchis and Elections

The Kuchi-Hazara conflict, though historically originating from rival land claims, brings issues related to the Kuchis directly and deeply into the realm of politics. Indeed, judging by the media, and in strong contrast with the pre-1979 situation, the Kuchis seem to have become one of the most politicised communities in Afghanistan. To address the chronic lack of liaison between the nomads and the state institutions, an Independent Directorate for Kuchi Affairs (IDKA) was created in 2006 under the Presidential Office (previously, Kuchi matters were mostly of pertinence to the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs). The directorate established offices in all but two Afghan provinces; from each provincial Kuchi council one representative is sent to the central committee. The IDKA has been active in mediating over the Behsud conflict, but its other activities have been hampered by the many changes at the top that it experienced, and it has only slowly achieved some degree of effectiveness and hired qualified core staff.<sup>98</sup> According to cables from the US embassy, 'power struggles within the directorate over who

<sup>92</sup> M. Azizi, 'Kuchis to Be Allotted Land Plots in Logar', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 13 January 2012, accessed 15 March 2012, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/01/13/kuchis-be-allotted-land-plots-logar>.

<sup>93</sup> L. A. Wily, 'The Battle over Pastures . . .', [see FN 60], 107.

<sup>94</sup> See 'Stability through Dialogue: Kuchi Conflict Mitigation Conflict Report', *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/The Liaison Office*, 2008, accessed 20 March 2012, <http://www.tlo-afghanistan.org/publications/workshop-reports/stability-through-dialogue-kuchi-conflict-mitigation-workshop-report-1>, 8–9; also interviews with Nangarhar locals, Jalalabad 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Author interviews with Afghan analysts and social workers, Kabul, October–November 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Author interview with a malik of the Mullakhel Kuchi, Kabul, October 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Author interview with Parwin Durrani, Kabul, October 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Civil Service Management Department, 'Independent Directorate of Kuchi Affairs to Undergo Pay and Grading Reform', accessed 12 August 2013, <http://www.csmd.gov.af/index.php/13-home/31-independent-directorate-of-kuchi-affairs-to-undergo-pay-and-grading-reform>.

speaks for the Kuchis have occasionally blocked useful progress.<sup>99</sup>

By far, the most significant institutional reform concerning the Kuchis has been the creation of a separate electoral constituency. As regulated by the electoral decree of 2005, and reiterated by that of 2010, ten seats are reserved for Kuchi representatives in the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the Afghan parliament. Instead of guaranteeing their presence by means of reserved quotas in each province, as was done for women, Kuchis were created wholesale as a single separate constituency, with their own candidates and polling centres. This arrangement was done in an attempt to guarantee fair representation to a transitory community whose candidates could face problems if their constituency were linked to a certain province.

Although this was not the first time that Kuchis received a reserved quota in a government institution – during the so-called ‘Decade of Democracy’, as the liberal 1964–1973 period under king Zahir Shah is sometimes called, they had five representatives in the elected Wolesi Jirga (lower house) – the issue has gained some political controversy.<sup>100</sup> Many critics consider it a ruse by which the government has created a basin of votes managed by loyal political allies. Some non-Pashtun politicians further point out that the ten seats for Kuchis end up being actually reserved for Pashtuns, as all prominent Kuchi leaders are Pashtun, in an effort to offset the parliament’s ethnic balance and increase control over it by the current government.<sup>101</sup>

On 1 May 2013, during the parliamentary debate about the new electoral law, some MPs suggested cancelling the single Kuchi constituency covering the whole of Afghanistan; instead, a Kuchi would

<sup>99</sup> ‘Cable 09KABUL2382, Director of Kuchi Directorate: Few Kuchis Will’, US Embassy cable, August 2009, accessed 21 March 2013, <http://dazzlepod.com/cable/09KABUL2382/>.

<sup>100</sup> The five seats are mentioned in Dupree, ‘Settlement and Migration Patterns . . .’, [see FN 17], 406. The head of the IDKA, however, claimed to the US Embassy that the Kuchis had 20 seats ‘under the king’. ‘Cable 09KABUL2382 . . .’, [see FN 98].

<sup>101</sup> Author interviews with members of the Wolesi Jirga, Kabul 2011.

present his or her candidacy in a single province and compete for a seat together with the other candidates. The Kuchi MPs and many other Pashtuns in the Wolesi Jirga vehemently opposed the idea. However, a split could be seen among the Kuchi MPs, with some being more open towards reform, which would transform the all-country Kuchi zone into several separate constituencies made up of clusters of provinces. Three days later, the Wolesi Jirga voted on the latter proposal, and with 67 votes in favour and 56 against, paragraph 6 in article 7 of the draft of the electoral law was changed accordingly. This led to an immediate protest by the Kuchi MPs, who rushed out of the hall and, in the next days, was followed by threats of electoral boycott and demonstrations by Kuchi representatives.<sup>102</sup>

In 2005, for the parliamentary elections, the single Kuchi constituencies were implemented for the first time (in the presidential election of the previous year, their voting did not differ from other Afghan citizens, although Kuchis could already register as such on their voter cards). Electoral procedures allowed voters to self-identify as Kuchi during the registration process, and in 2005 indeed more than half a million individuals registered as such (different figures, of 534,105 or 532,726, are given). Reports of abuses by electoral officers emerged. For example, some residents of Kunduz province, ethnically Turkmen, were said to be registered as Kuchi against their will.<sup>103</sup>

Predictably, all ten elected Kuchi MPs have been Pashtuns, both in 2005 and 2010. The Kuchi MPs have also drawn criticism from by fellow MPs for

<sup>102</sup> Abasin Zaheer, ‘Kuchi MPs, Elders Warn of Election Boycott’ *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 7 May 2013, accessed 1 June 2013, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2013/05/07/kuchi-mps-elders-warn-election-boycott>.

<sup>103</sup> Tahir Muhammad, ‘Afghan Turkmen Claim They’re Being Written Off’, Institute for War & Peace Reporting 27 July 2011, accessed 20 November 2012, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/afghan-turkmen-claim-they%E2%80%99re-being-written>. By contrast, the author knows of some villages in Herat where the local semi-nomadic Pashtuns could have easily identified themselves as Kuchi during the parliamentary elections of 2010, but for political calculus did not. As they would have had few chances to elect a Kuchi MP from Herat, faced with the competition of Kuchi candidates from provinces with more Kuchi voters, they preferred to cast their vote in the normal provincial list.

their reputation of being staunch Karzai loyalists and of supporting the government in critical votes.<sup>104</sup> The close relationship of some prominent Kuchi politicians with those in higher echelons of government has been criticised by the opposition from an early stage. Karzai has in the past courted some prominent Kuchi leaders, like Naim Khan Kuchi, whom he greeted on his release from Guantanamo jail in 2004 – a release that he is believed to have sought in order to gather the Kuchi vote in the 2004 presidential election.<sup>105</sup> Another prominent Kuchi leader, Mullah Tarakhel, elected for both terms to the parliament, has been accused of hijacking thousands of votes for the re-election of Karzai in 2009.<sup>106</sup>

Certainly, a massive number of Kuchis voted for Karzai during the 2009 elections. This was true in particular at polling centres located in the Kabul outskirts of Butkhak and Pol-e Charki, Mullah Tarakhel's strongholds. There, votes for Karzai easily reached 80 per cent, much higher than the 48.8 per cent that Karzai obtained overall in Kabul province. Even polling stations where relatively few votes were cast showed the same trend, suggesting that the massive vote for Karzai by the Kuchi electorate was not caused by irregularities only (in those cases the boxes tend to get over-filled), but also by very strong voting instructions from Kuchi leaders like Tarakhel.<sup>107</sup> An analysis of Kabul's Kuchi polling centres in 2009 showed a generally low number of votes for Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. Being from a prominent Ahmadzai Kuchi family (his brother Hashmat is chairman of a non-

governmental Kuchi Grand Council), he was expected to receive a fair share of the Kuchi vote. This did not materialise.

No provincial breakdown of the Kuchi vote has been given for the 2005 parliamentary election, but 67 of the candidates were unofficially linked to a certain province where he or she originated or had roots, and therefore could expect more support. Kuchi candidates came from Kabul (10), Ghazni (6), Nangarhar (6), Logar (5), Paktika (4), Helmand (4) and Kandahar (4). The winners' background however showed a different distribution. Three Kuchis from Kabul got elected, along with Haidar Jan Naimzoy (the son of Naim Khan) from Logar, two from Nangarhar, both of the candidates originating from Khost and one from Paktika. The only Kuchi elected from the north hailed from Badghis. Karzai later chose one of the two Kuchi senators in the upper house (presidentially appointed) from northern Balkh. The failure of the southern candidates to be elected, and the failure of the former MPs from Khost, Paktika and Badghis to be re-elected in 2010, points to a deteriorating security situation in those provinces, as well as the disaffection of the Kuchi electorate there. Also, the weight of the economic power of Kuchi commanders or businessmen settled in or around Kabul has increasingly made itself felt over the years. Of the current MPs, all but three (one of them being the incumbent Naimzoy) hail from greater Kabul.<sup>108</sup>

An analysis of the vote cast in the 2010 election confirms the importance of the eastern suburbs of Kabul as the principal concentration of the Kuchi vote countrywide. Most of the 86 Kuchi polling stations of the capital's urban districts were located there, and to these the 20 Kuchi polling stations located in adjacent Deh Sabz district can be added (from the district's total of 57 polling stations). Out of 105,220 Kuchi votes cast in the

<sup>104</sup> An instance of such support for Karzai triggered a brawl between women MPs in the summer of 2011, when a Kabul representative attacked her Kuchi colleague with a shoe after the latter switched from a position critical to the government-backed court investigation on the parliamentary electoral results to one favourable to the court's order to replace some of the elected MPs.

<sup>105</sup> D. Birch, 'A Leader Freed May Reap Votes for Karzai', *Baltimore Sun*, 5 October 2004, accessed 29 November 2012, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2004-10-05/news/0410050095\\_1\\_naim-karzai-afghanistan](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2004-10-05/news/0410050095_1_naim-karzai-afghanistan).

<sup>106</sup> Carlotta Gall, 'Growing Accounts of Fraud Cloud Afghan Election', *New York Times*, 29 August 2009, accessed 18 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/world/asia/31fraud.html?pagewanted=2>.

<sup>107</sup> Electoral results are accessible at the Independent Electoral Commission website, <http://www.iec.org.af/eng/>.

<sup>108</sup> With another, Haji Sher Ali Ahmadzai, coming from Nangarhar, the only eccentric figure with respect to a Logar-Kabul-Jalalabad Kuchi axis, is that of Alhaj Hassan Sahraye, from Ghazni. As his *takhalus* implies, he may really claim to come 'from the desert' (he actually is one of the few educated, although senior, among the Kuchi male MPs). For a backgrounder about Kuchi MPs, see NDI, 'The 2010–2015 Wolesi Jirga Directory', May 2012, accessed 1 June 2013, <http://www.ndi.org/files/AFG-2010-2015-Wolesi-Jirga-Directory.pdf>.



election, 26,481 come from Kabul city, a figure that rises to 27,783 if the votes of Deh Sabz are added.<sup>109</sup> As noted, this area is compactly aligned with Mullah Tarakhel, who got most of his record vote of 26,491 there (which makes him the MP elected with the highest number of votes – by far – in all of Afghanistan).

Another area remarkable for Kuchi votes is tiny Kapisa province northeast of Kabul, where in 2010, 6,371 Kuchi votes were cast, mainly for the candidate with local roots, Habib Afghan. His votes could not compete with those gathered by Mullah Tarakhel, but the two men share one characteristic: though they were both nomads with a constituency spread countrywide, they banked most of their votes in very circumscribed areas. For Habib Afghan, 4,421 of his votes came from a single district of Kapisa, the provincial centre of Mahmud-e Raqi, where he had previously facilitated the settlement of many Kuchis in residential projects that he manages. The same tool of political mobilisation, providing opportunities for settlement, evidently played a major role in Tarakhel's popularity. He is arguably the main force behind the vast 'Kuchi belt' that is developing on the eastern border of Kabul suburbs, from Deh Sabz to Bagrami.

## 4.2 The Nomads' Landholding Political Elite

That the entrepreneurial role of the above-mentioned Kuchi leaders and their political leadership coincided is no mere accident. Several of the serving Kuchi MPs fit this profile. In the case of Tarakhel, his ability to influence the occupation of land around Kabul, its re-distribution and sale, gives him huge leverage over thousands of Kuchi households desperately seeking access to settlement, Kabul's job opportunities and security. Butkhak, until a few years ago a tiny village at the outskirts of Kabul, almost forgotten since being bypassed by the new road to Jalalabad through Mahipar in the 1960s, has now become the centre of a huge residential project which should have the capacity to accommodate more than 80,000

<sup>109</sup> In 2005, Kuchi votes were 200,249 (all figures refer to valid votes).

families.<sup>110</sup> A high school and a clinic have already been built, but the area still has the appearance of a shantytown, continuously expanding in the countryside. Also, Deh Sabz, the main site of the Kabul New City project meant to host the future capital, features a consistent Kuchi population. As a traditional grazing area of the Tarakhel Kuchis during their spring migration – a pit-stop for those searching employment as seasonal labourers – it has experienced a long-drawn-out process of sedentarisation; first of partial and then of whole households. Kuchis now claim the rangeland they used to graze their animals upon, and the value of which now lies more in its prospects of becoming serviced residential areas than in its free pastures.<sup>111</sup>

It is relevant that the most important tool for political networking among the Kuchis is land, as acquisition of it by a powerbroker – as usual in Afghanistan – translates into political capital and support. Some of the more-influential Kuchi MPs and businessmen have engaged extensively in 'handling' state land in the eastern suburbs of Kabul. They first seek to occupy it, reportedly either thanks to the connivance of political authorities, through spurious land titles or by organising mass land occupations by fellow Kuchis. They then proceed to distribute it or to sell it in plots, giving the priority to profitable sales or to the settlement of fellow Kuchi tribesmen who could build up a territorialised constituency. This might depend on the nature of the dealer's political ambitions and on the value of the land: 'They call the more desperate Kuchis and have them build enclosures on state-land at dawn, then they distribute plots to maybe 30 choice Kuchi families and sell the rest to the highest bidders,

<sup>110</sup> A. Alikhil, 'Afghanistan: Life Improves for Kuchi Nomads', United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 29 April 2009, accessed 10 November 2012, <http://reliefweb.int/node/306574>.

<sup>111</sup> Kuchi settlement areas around Kabul reflect not only the decreasing availability of land, but also, as reported for other communities, concerns related to access to their home provinces (see C. Issa and S. Kohistani, 'Kabul's Urban Identity: An Overview of the Sociopolitical Aspects of Development', *Asien* 104, July 2007, 51–64). In the case of the Kuchis, this largely relates to decreased access to their main former movement axis. In this view, settling on the Kabul-Jalalabad road on the eastern outskirts of the capital, in the low-lying areas of Laghman, or in the districts around Jalalabad city, seems a logical choice.

people from Parwan or Kapisa that are interested in speculating on the increasing value of the land in Deh Sabz.’<sup>112</sup>

In many cases, the first victims of the land speculation are Kuchis on the lookout for opportunities to settle, who find out, after having bought the land, that the state does not recognise their titles and threatens to dislodge them. The Kuchi powerbrokers, often the very land dealers who sold the land, or who at least encouraged the destitute Kuchis to settle, then exploit the Kuchis’ resentment and potential for mobilisation and protest. This allows them to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the government and negotiate the allocation of other, maybe less valuable, land parcels for the landless nomads, which of course would be managed by them according to the same scheme.

The unregulated work-in-progress nature of Kabul’s eastern suburbs thus offers more business opportunities than the mediating role between the government and the masses of needy nomads does. Some prominent Kuchis, reportedly including the brother of Kabul MP Allah Gul Mujahed<sup>113</sup> who is involved in the new informal settlements around Deh Sabz, exploit the numerous *bati* (brick kilns) of the area, as an additional economic asset. Kilns are a major source of income for Kuchis, who provide most of the unskilled labours there. Because the Kuchi powerbrokers are able to facilitate or block the hiring of labourers, their help must be sought by the kiln owners.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Author interviews with residents of Deh Sabz, December 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Although elected in the lists of Kabul province, Allah Gul Mujahed, a former Hezb-e Islami commander, has a Kuchi background. His family must have settled in Deh Sabz some decades ago.

<sup>114</sup> These and other charges against Allah Gul Mujahed and his family have been made by the Kabul police at various press conferences in June-July 2013 and passed to the Attorney General. For a list of police accusations against him see, A. Shahid, ‘Police on Lookout for MP and His Brother’, *Tolo News*, 11 July 2013, accessed 1 August, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/11189-police-on-lookout-for-mp-and-his-brother>. Another source of income for wealthy Kuchi businessmen based in Deh Sabz seems to be renting machinery for waste burning. Indeed, many incinerators are active in the area. Author interviews with employees of the Deh Sabz-Barikab City Development Authority, December 2012.

These business strategies have collided with the ambitious Kabul New City project and the powerbrokers whose interests are at stake. A dramatic escalation of incidents between Kuchi settlers mobilised by Allah Gul and the Kabul police took place in the early summer of 2013. The settlers stormed the site of an inauguration ceremony by the new city’s authority in mid-May, and a bloody confrontation followed on 24 June 2013, which left nine of Allah Gul’s supporters dead. The police even took steps to arrest Allah Gul, which they eventually did not do, but the events shook his family’s role in the area at least temporarily.<sup>115</sup> Kuchi leaders inside the formal Kuchi institutions are not necessarily best placed to access state land for personal purposes. Naim Khan, for instance, officially only an advisor to the president, received the management of a Kuchi-settlement program in Logar. Local residents soon accused him of illegally appropriating the 1,500 acres allocated to the land distribution plan for the nomads, while the land-seeking Kuchis were diverted to land owned by locals. According to the protesters, Naim Khan had done this in connivance with the then governor of Logar.<sup>116</sup>

Faced with this level of economic patronage by a few leaders, Kuchi social structure is not surviving unscathed. The *malik* is still a common figure of authority among Kuchi communities. Chosen by the community, and sometimes even paid a salary, *maliks* traditionally oversaw practical administrative affairs, paperwork and relations with state authorities.<sup>117</sup> Today, *maliks* represent their communities vis-à-vis the state. However, nowadays they have more hope of obtaining economic help and political support for their

<sup>115</sup> For more details on this, see Foschini, ‘Land Grabs (2) . . .’, [see FN 68].

<sup>116</sup> M.H.Khetab and M.J.Sharifzada, ‘Protestors Want Logar, Helmand Governors Fired’, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 23 May 2012, accessed 20 November 2012, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/05/23/protestors-want-logar-helmand-governors-fired>.

<sup>117</sup> Frederiksen, *Caravans and Trade* . . ., [see FN 13], 47. During the first phase of nomadic sedentarisation in the 1970s, Pedersen was told that ‘malik was something they had when everybody had sheep and goats, today they don’t need a common leader.’ He himself however noticed that the role of the *maliks* had a more enduring significance for poor Kuchi households. Pedersen, *Afghan Nomads in Transition* . . ., [see FN 13], 218.

communities from powerful powerbrokers like Mullah Tarakhel and Habib Afghan than from the government. For example, according to several interviewees, Tarakhel divided the land in Butkhak in plots and distributed or conveniently sold them to a first row of relatives, allies and prospective clients, some of whom were *maliks* from Kuchi communities other than his own, even from distant provinces. These in turn could decide what to do with the valuable pieces of land near the capital: settle there, bestow them on family relations, or sell them for sensibly higher market prices.<sup>118</sup>

The *maliks* can be co-opted by the new Kuchi elite of businessmen-politicians for support during elections, both to beef up their votes and to help project themselves as leaders of the Kuchi *qaum* at a national level, thus legitimating their claim as interlocutors with the state on behalf of all Kuchis in times of trouble. This would explain the strange voting pattern in some regions (like in the Koh-Daman districts of Parwan and Kabul provinces, but even in faraway Kunar) where Kabul-based Kuchis managed to get big chunks of votes, even when facing strong local candidates. This apparently random distribution of their support base could be explained by their practice of 'buying' *maliks* from other tribes and groups, often through allotments in their 'land projects' in exchange for the votes of their communities. In 2009, Kuchi Grand Council head Hashmat Ghani failed to gather electoral support for his brother Ashraf. One reason might be that his patronage tools, resting mainly on his family genealogical and economic prominence in a major Kuchi tribe, the Ahmadzai, had not been strengthened by any mobilisation of Kuchis countrywide on land issues, redistribution of land plots, or any offer of protection against police crackdowns on illegal settlements.

Tarakhel's nearly 27,000 received votes in the 2010 election incidentally do not mean that Kuchis are becoming a large, unified community that can mobilise cohesively countrywide, but rather that his economic potential to redistribute or facilitate access to land is probably considered a major asset

<sup>118</sup> While some *maliks* of the Mir Alikhel complained of Tarakhel's failure to help people other than his own, another *malik* from the Mullakhel admitted having received from him twenty plots of land, which he eventually re-sold. Author interviews, Kabul October 2011.

by Kuchi voters. The situation in the 1960s, described by Dupree, when the Kuchi MPs 'represented the larger nomadic tribal units and all came from semi sedentary groups', was somewhat similar.<sup>119</sup> Now, however, the gap between the politico-economic elite and their constituency appears to be more significant, and the poorest Kuchis appear to be either completely detached from the political and economic life of the country, or totally dependent on their leaders in their approach to it. At the sub-national level, the presence of Kuchis inside the state institutions has hardly improved since the 1970s.<sup>120</sup> In fact, most of the IDKA staff does not seem to be recruited from among the Kuchis, although its director has to be one, for symbolic purposes.<sup>121</sup> The inability of Kuchis from many provinces to access state-linked political patronage in turn may force them to relocate to Kabul or other major cities, or to grow disaffected towards the Afghan government altogether. As for the existing politico-economic leadership, the land speculations and the construction business in which many Kuchi entrepreneurs from the cities in the eastern and central regions engage appear to endow them with a more dynamic political potential compared with the historically rooted tendency at rural latifundism (concentration of big landholding estates in the hands of a few owners) displayed by the most affluent of the northern Kuchis. The former can offer poor Kuchis more job opportunities, land and protection, and are more strategically situated to successfully lobby with the institutional powers. Kuchis in the north may be rich, but are, with few exceptions, politically isolated.

Therefore, notwithstanding the presence and activities of a few educated and qualified Kuchis inside the government institutions, most notably women Kuchi MPs, only a handful of the more powerful and connected Kuchi public figures can cash in from the problematic state of Kuchi politics. They do so both in their capacity as elected MPs and as acknowledged members of an 'informal' Kuchi elite, who are called in to mediate during the recurrent standoffs between Kuchis and state

<sup>119</sup> Dupree 1975, 'Settlement and Migration Patterns . . .', [see FN 17], 406.

<sup>120</sup> Schmeidl, 'The Kuchi Nomads . . .', [see FN 31], 34.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with the programme manager of an NGO working with Kuchis, Kabul, May 2012.

authorities. Unfortunately, the emergency and alarm which surround most public events and policies related to the Kuchis has facilitated this artificial selection of leaders from among a handful of the most vocal and militant. Little space is left for those who may be more moderate or competent in the popular discourse and political field. During the recent debate on the Electoral Law in the *Wolesi Jirga*, for example, some Kuchi MPs were initially in favour of – or at least debating in a constructive way – the reform of the Kuchi electoral constituency. However, on the day of the vote strong unanimity against it had been achieved, apparently through lobbying by the most powerful among them. The changes eventually brought to the Kuchi electoral system may, incidentally, better connect the Kuchis and government institutions at the provincial level. Linking candidates to a geographic region may limit the ability of the more powerful Kuchi politicians to receive votes countrywide by rewarding local Kuchi community elders. It may thus enhance the chances of those Kuchi leaders with more direct links to their constituencies to compete in the election.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*The problem is that most people in Afghanistan don't want the Kuchis to be an active part of this country and this society. Bad aspects and consequences of Kuchi identity are always portrayed, but Kuchis have also talent.*

– NGO worker<sup>122</sup>

We have seen the main types of problems affecting the Kuchis in Afghanistan today. Their traditional nomadic lifestyle based on livestock breeding is not being preserved. Nor are they being compensated adequately through state efforts to give them fair opportunities to settle. This has led to their loss of status within the broader Afghan society. Their loss is further escalated by conflicts, such as the highly politicised Hazara-Kuchi dispute over access to pastures. The creation of specific institutions and processes for Kuchis, which aimed at bringing a peripheral community closer to state politics, seems to have been a double-edged sword. On one hand, the reservation of parliamentary seats under

a quota system has helped solve the problems of individual Kuchis, who can now resort to the parliamentary Kuchi commission. On the other hand, the nature of political mobilisation has favoured the ascent and consolidation of a certain political class among the Kuchis. Its most prominent actors seem to have carved out their role as mediators between the state and the Kuchis in a recurrent crisis that they are not necessarily interested in resolving. This, moreover, has not been accompanied by the creation of effective Kuchi institutions at the sub-national level, or by the participation and presence of the Kuchis in local governance.

With a separate political identity and elite in the process of formation, the Kuchis could potentially be developing into a 'political *qaum*', of the type Afghanistan has known in the last decades. How far have they travelled in this direction, though, and how far could they go?

Kuchi political action, altogether, appears unsophisticated, compared to the mobilisation of other disadvantaged groups. Although mass mobilisation of the Kuchis has been witnessed repeatedly, this has happened through means halfway between the old kinship and transhumance networks, the imperatives of economic and political patronage created by sedentarisation, and a new militant attitude – sometimes even resulting in an armed militancy that is ambiguous about its anti-state stance. Comparison with their perceived 'natural' opponents, the Hazaras, shows how this other *qaum*, starting from conditions which were far inferior to those of the Kuchis in economic terms, and as isolated and disadvantaged in social and educational terms, has been able to completely change its social standing, through education and political activism.<sup>123</sup>

A small, political elite cannot serve the purpose alone, as such changes must happen at the grassroots' level first. In the Hazaras' case, change could not have happened without the individual itineraries of thousands of individuals, spurred more by awareness of their backward social position than

<sup>122</sup> Interview with worker of an NGO focusing on Kuchi-supporting programs, himself a Kuchi, Kabul May 2012.

<sup>123</sup> For a study of this process, see Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*, Taylor and Francis 2005.

by an organic indoctrination by strong political parties or leaders. However, at both a personal and collective level, a diffused perception of discrimination on ethnic and religious grounds acted as a strong stimulus for social and political 'mass' activism among Hazaras. Addressing the educational shortages of the Kuchi youth, and improving their participation to the broader Afghan society, thus seems to be the priority for any attempt at empowering the Kuchis. A certain awareness exists already: during a recent survey, Kuchi settlers in Deh Sabz hinted at having abandoned nomadic life to improve their children's access to education, placing many hopes in the latter for an improvement of the community's lot.<sup>124</sup>

Kuchis have developed neither autonomous political parties nor strong civil society organisations. Nor do they have a shared narrative of oppression as a community, and finding one may not be easy. Any new identity, to assert itself, needs 'room to manoeuvre', and Afghanistan is full of other, already established strong identities that may appeal to individual Kuchis, when it best suits.<sup>125</sup> Until now, their identification as Kuchis has served mainly as a vehicle of mobilisation during disputes or as a rallying point to lobby the state. Unless this 'confrontational' identity is supported by some sort of intellectual conceptualisation and the setting of values by an educated class of individuals who adhere to it, it is not likely to gain a firm foothold within wider Afghan society. Then nothing will prevent single Kuchi households or communities from gradually being absorbed by more-comprehensive identities (Pashtun, or other regional ones) as soon as their socio-economic integration is achieved. Even their fiercest opponents rarely recognise the potential threat of 'Kuchi politics'; rather, they have denounced their mobilisation as a tool to further broader ethnic agendas, subsuming their role under an alleged attempt by Pashtuns to secure their hegemony.

Kuchi political identity has shown no sign of moving towards a leadership that is organised

according to party politics or committed to transcendent political objectives. Even during their most visible episodes of collective mobilisation, like the yearly push to gain entrance into Hazarajat, the Kuchis lacked political credibility and a realistic approach, and they seemed able to assert their cohesiveness only in a disruptive way. For many Kuchis, their severe social and economic problems ultimately revolve more around issues of settlement than of access to the Hazarajat pastures. However, they seemed unable to exit the impasse that sees their leaders handling both situations with a personalised approach and agenda, and making compromised solutions that fail to lead to stable outcomes.

Kuchis are affected more by the reaction to a socio-economic situation common to many Kuchi households than a real political transformation involving a well-defined group. The pattern explained in chapter 2.2 by which a Kuchi settles landless or as a shopkeeper or as a landowner marks the difference between their potential integration and their alienation. Nowadays, the trend is to have a very small elite of 'Kuchi' businessmen-cum-politicians (or at least with good political connections), long settled, who facilitate the settlement of other Kuchis – or, less frequently, extend support and lobby for those still involved in transhumant livestock breeding. This elite often engages in one of the most lucrative businesses of today's Afghanistan: acquisition of state land and speculation on its economic (and political) value. The Kuchis populace is made up of impoverished households left without sufficient and adequate economic means of production to cope successfully with a pastoral livelihood, and disadvantaged culturally and socially in terms of access to the job market. They either settle landless, and face opposition from other, stronger groups and the state, or they play the card of their leadership's support, when available – in the hope of getting at least a patch of land without being forcefully relocated. At the same time, the Kuchi politico-economic elite derives its political relevance and economic windfalls from the potential for trouble-making of the poorest strata of Kuchi society. Their opportunistic attitude tends toward preserving a 'stalled' crisis, where they channel Kuchis' anger to their advantage, in

<sup>124</sup> 'A Study of the Kuchi Population . . .', [see FN 51], 25.

<sup>125</sup> Conversely, among the Kuchis claiming state land near Mehtarlam in Laghman province, I met several ethnic Pashais who had 'turned Kuchi' in the hope of getting some land. Author interviews with Kuchis occupying land around Mehtarlam, May 2011.



exchange for dispensing small benefits to constituents.

Problems resulting from the decline of nomadic livestock breeding in the face of insecurity, drought and changed economics are thus mixed with landlessness and social tensions triggered by poverty and political propaganda. Distracted by other necessities and problems, but possibly also because few officials really believe that nomadism can find a place in modern Afghan society, the government has been unable to either rationalise nomadic pastoralism and help its partial survival under improved conditions, or to effectively plan and assist the settling of those nomads who cannot cope anymore with a migratory lifestyle. The latter in particular seems to be urgent, if the government

wants to improve Kuchi living conditions. It must be coupled with attempts to select and empower Kuchi leaders and activists who are seriously committed to improving the Kuchis' lot through their participation in Afghan society.

Finding long-term solutions for the vast humanitarian and social challenges posed by the Kuchis' situation does not seem to be on top of the agenda for a government facing the deadlines of 2014. In the meantime, however, managing the situation through patronage networks almost guarantees that the increasingly numerous conflicts involving Kuchis will get out of control, with potential long lasting security consequences in critical areas of the country.

## **ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK (AAN)**

The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is a non-profit, independent policy research organisation. It aims to bring together the knowledge and experience of a large number of experts to inform policy and increase the understanding of Afghan realities.

The institutional structure of AAN includes a team of analysts and a network of regular contributors with expertise in the fields of Afghan politics, governance, rule of law and security. AAN will publish regular in-depth thematic reports, policy briefings and comments.

The main channel for dissemination of the reports is the AAN web site. For further information, please visit [www.aan-afghanistan.org](http://www.aan-afghanistan.org).

## **QUALITY CONTROL OF AAN'S PUBLICATIONS**

The opinions expressed in publications by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) do not necessarily reflect those of AAN. Publications by AAN are, however, subjected to academic style review and peer review to ensure the quality of the research and the reliability of the analysis. AAN thematic reports and briefing papers are read by at least two internal and two external reviewers, discussion papers by at least two internal reviewers and blogs by at least one internal reviewer. For further information about the quality control and the review process of AAN's publications, please contact AAN at [info@afghanistanalysts.net](mailto:info@afghanistanalysts.net).

## **AUTHOR BIO**

Fabrizio Foschini is a Political Analyst with the Afghanistan Analysts Network. He studied History of Asia at the University of Bologna in Italy, and achieved his Ph.D focusing on the modern and contemporary history of Afghanistan, a country where he researched and travelled extensively since 2003. He participated in the EC/UNDP Access to Justice at District Level monitoring program in 2003-04, and later returned to the country for long periods to carry out academic field research in Kabul and Badakhshan province, before joining the AAN office in Kabul in April 2010. Fabrizio has published extensively on Afghanistan and he is fluent in Dari.

© Afghanistan Analysts Network 2013.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without full attribution.