



Fabrizio Foschini

## Kabul Unpacked

### *A geographical guide to a metropolis in the making*

For the last few years Kabul has grown as fast as the opportunities for foreigners (and some Afghans) to explore and travel to every corner of the city have dwindled. This situation helps conjure up the simplified idea of Kabul as a bi-polar city to people new to it: an administrative and diplomatic Green Zone surrounded by undifferentiated clusters of mud houses or poppy palaces. Kabul is a far more complex environment than that and one worth discovering, or at least trying to understand. Fabrizio Foschini has put together a reasonably comprehensive, yet concise description of Kabul's 22 urban districts (Ali Mohammad Sabawoon and Rohullah Soroush contributed to the research). This goes together with an interactive map, detailing the principal neighbourhoods within each district, their history and landmarks, details about the population and major security trends.

It is not easy to describe Kabul, a city of maybe six million inhabitants (this figure, as many other things about Kabul, is disputed) in a few introductory paragraphs.<sup>1</sup> Probably wiser is to stick to a reminder of its importance and centrality for Afghanistan and whoever looks at it.

Since it became the capital of Afghanistan in 1775–1776, Kabul has been its unrivalled political, cultural and economic centre (more about this historical period in [this AAN dispatch](#)). In recent years, its role as a 'primate city' (that is, a city twice as large and important as the next largest city in the country) has been

reinforced by unprecedented demographic and urban growth and by political trends that contribute all the more to making it a unique place in the Afghanistan context. The other side of the coin is that this burgeoning growth has compounded the problems already afflicting the capital: inadequate housing and sanitation, land grabs and lack of ownership documents, poverty, traffic (read an earlier AAN report about this [here](#)), pollution and criminality. Urban growth has made their solution much less likely and has created new problems, especially because of the increasing levels of political violence to which the city's population has been exposed.

A virtual tour of the city – probably the best use to which these few notes on the city neighbourhoods can be put to – should probably start from the original core of this metropolis. Kabul's history goes back at

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1 This report was based on notes on Kabul's neighbourhoods taken while researching the micro-political economy of the capital for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The USIP research was published as a report, "[Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid](#)" in April 2017. The author's notes have been expanded with on-the-ground research this year.

least 3,000 years. The ancient settlement nestled on the southern bank of the Kabul river, its back shielded by the impassable Sher Darwaza mountain, combined the strategic location of a commercial hub and the impregnability of an administrative centre. It flourished for many centuries under people with different creeds and languages. In due time, the Old City forsook its political role but has retained its commercial importance, at least in the hearts of the city's inhabitants, amid the ruins of its blown-up bazaars.<sup>2</sup>

Politics moved to the flat areas on the northern bank of the river. It is here that the main newer seats of power (the Presidential, formerly Royal, Palace and the American Embassy among others) are to be found. All around this New City (Shahr-e Naw), Kabul has expanded and developed. Pitifully, this centrality nowadays extends to its relevance as a target for political violence. It also entails that whenever a VIP meeting happens in this part of the city, where all roads lead and which is now HESCO-walled more than the old hilltop forts were, communications across Kabul get shut down and the traffic stops (see this [earlier AAN dispatch](#)).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Afghan governments at peace planned expansions of the city to the north, the east and the west. They had a square block layout cut by a regular grid of avenues to form residential areas meant for the modern comfort of an urban middle-class. The city was growing slowly – more or less at the moderate pace by which the Afghan state was attempting to reform and modernise itself – being shaped by and shaping in turn a population of Kabulis who identified with the city and its lifestyle. More recently, the more-central among those areas, Taimani and Qala-ye Fathullah for example, came to host a significant number of expats and NGO offices in a frenzy of refurbishment, relocation and retreat.

West Kabul, by comparison, has probably experienced some sort of 'circular history' that allowed at least parts of it to go through cycles of destruction and back to the (relative) residential quietness for which it was meant. Always separate from the bustle of Kabul down-

town, curse or boon of the lofty range of hills cutting the Kabul plateau in two, the alleys of Kart-e Se and Kart-e Chahar (Kart-e from the French 'quartier') have at times sheltered from the raging political madness those who were not fit or willing to take part in it. A new cycle of violence, this time on sectarian pretexts, is looming ominously over this side of Kabul, like the black clouds of a storm capping the Paghman range.

Meanwhile, many people opted to leave: only a fraction of the pre-war Kabulis (sometimes referred to as *bumi*) remain, and not many came back for good after 2001. Waves of exile hit this landlocked country, and the capital, though with a late start, was among its most-affected parts. Anti-communists disappeared in 1978–79, and leftists left in 1992, followed by whoever could afford to travel abroad during the catastrophic civil war of 1992–96 among the mujahedin factions.<sup>3</sup>

The ruined remains of Kabul were taken over by the Taliban, who added their share of misery to the lives of the inhabitants. Then, with the 2001 intervention came a boom and a new real estate market was born, meaning that many tenants residing in the most sought-after residential areas were evicted simply because their property had suddenly acquired value, and many house owners were pressured to sell. The latest big outward flow of Kabulis is just taking place, with thousands of the city's youth leaving for Europe in search of better opportunities and security.

For everybody who has left, many other people have, in the meantime, arrived. Already during the Taliban times, the city had become a forced choice for those fleeing the battle lines between the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Massud in the Shomali Plateau to the north. Many more returned to the city after 2001 from their temporary shelters in the provinces or from abroad. The massive presence of the international community and the boomtown economy that derived from it made Kabul a magnet for labourers, clerks and students from all over the country.

The construction sector became overnight one of the major characteristics of the city's economy and

2 Kabul's magnificent covered marketplace, Chahar Chatta bazaar, was dynamited by the British 'Army of Retaliation' in 1842; and the whole bazaar area around Jada-e Maiwand was among the worst hit by the shower of rockets that fell on the city during the civil war among mujahedin factions in the 1990s.

3 For an overview of which faction held which territory in the city, the locations of frontlines and artillery positions and where factions launched their rockets, see Chapter 6 of the Afghanistan Justice Project's "[Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: 1978–2001](#) documentation and analysis of major patterns of abuse in the war in Afghanistan".

a major investment sector for the new Afghan elites. People who could afford to would inhabit one of the many new housing projects (*shahraks*) of various styles and scale. Dispossessed nomads and rural inhabitants who had fled violence in their home districts had to make do with living in dilapidated buildings in un-refurbished parts of the city or occupying state land (basically, all the barren, uncultivated areas are considered such) and develop shabby squatters' settlements. Contemporary urban architecture trends could be indeed subsumed under this dichotomy: shahraks and shantytowns (see also this [earlier AAN dispatch](#)).

The impact of this mass of new residents on the city is hard to evaluate. Kabul has grown more mixed and has become a true capital in terms of being more representative of all the provinces of the country. Yet the melting pot is not as effective as it used to be. The centre of the city, despite the destruction, or possibly because newcomers have to splinter to occupy the empty places left and do mingle with people from all walks of life in the process, is today more mixed and is, in its peculiar way, 'cosmopolitan.' This despite the fact that residents of the central areas of the city tend to change residence often, to move close to a new working place or to follow economic and security trends. The constant movement of residents has a disruptive effect on social networks, exemplified by the often-heard complaint that "one does not know one's neighbours anymore." The peripheries of the city on the other hand show a pattern of settlement shaped by communal networks. New immigrants from the provinces tend to settle where they can expect some degree of support from their communities (if they have such contacts) or on the side of town more convenient for them when, at least during the first stages of their rural-urban migration, they continue to commute regularly to their place of origin. Therefore, Panjshiris and Shomalis dwell in the north; Wardaki Pashtuns and Hazaras regroup in the west; Logaris and Paktiawals settle down to the southeast and people from Jalalabad or Mashreqis in general choose the east.

It goes without saying that this process is under nobody's control or planning. Some housing projects indeed apply for and receive approval from the Kabul Municipality (which has a status equal to a ministry) and from the Ministry for Urban Development Affairs (MoUDA). However, there has been no such thing as a

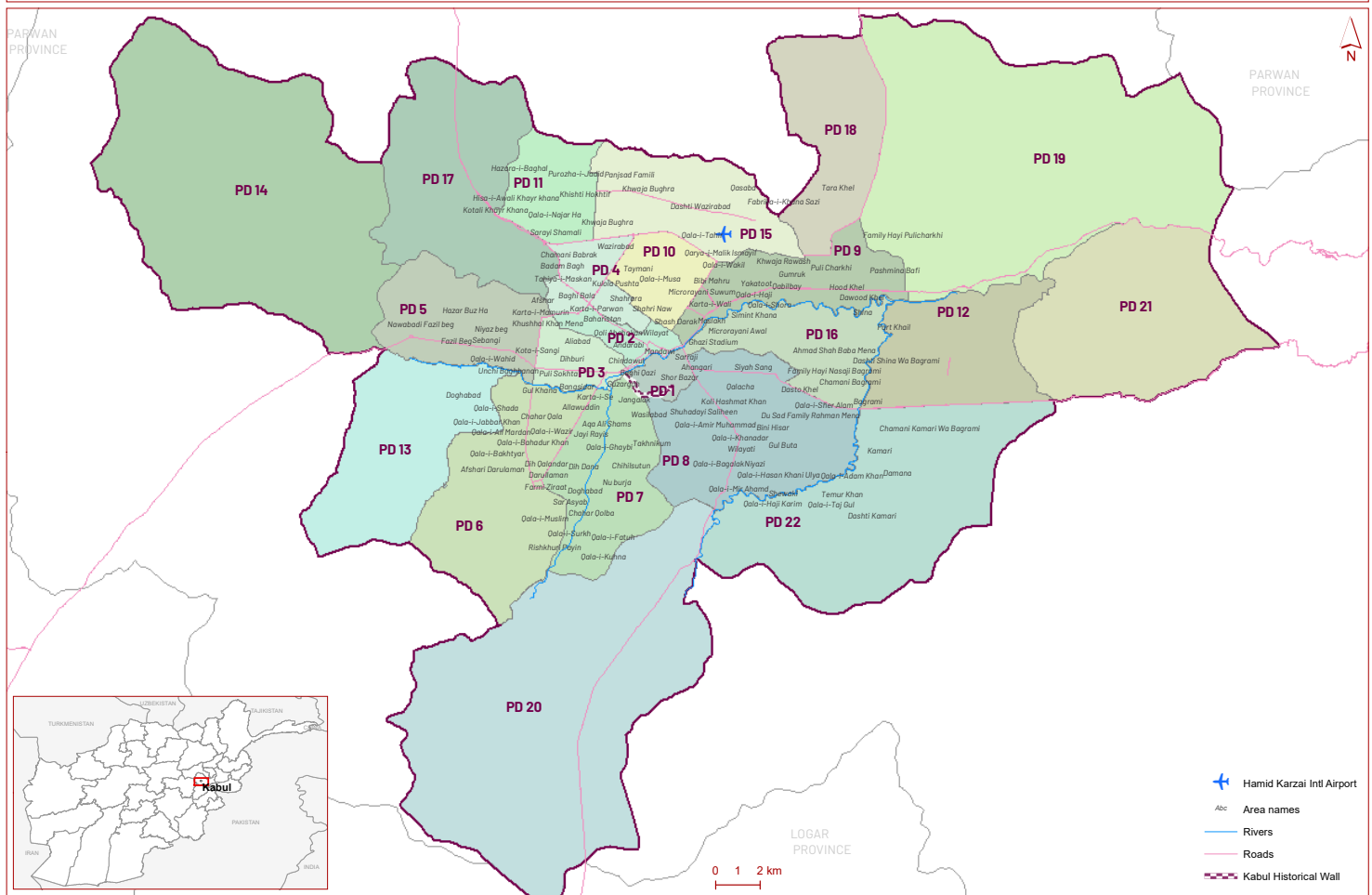
master plan for urban development since 1978, when the city's population was meant to be 800,000. When finally, with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (link to their [survey of Kabul city districts](#)), one was prepared in 2009, it focused mostly on an area outside of the city: Deh Sabz district, where a 'New Kabul' was projected. This immediately drew criticism and with some reason: on the one hand it looked as if, with the impossibility of fixing the capital's many problems, a decision had been made to move out to and plan a brand new city; on the other, concerns were raised about the enormous economic interests that such a plan would involve and given the many instances of land grab schemes carried out by members of the Afghan political elite or their allies, chances of avoiding any such occurrence looked rather bleak.

But the issue of the master plan and the non-recognition by the Kabul Municipality of a majority of the new settlements built all over the city since 1978 have also become highly symbolic of the debate between those expounding a rigidly legal approach and those more inclined towards deregulation and involvement of the private sector (like the MoUDA).

Whatever one's position, the gap between the planned city and the reality on the ground has for some decades now been too wide to bridge. A recurrent characteristic of the housing sector in Kabul seems to be the insecurity of tenure and ownership, and the new developments are often the sketchiest of all. Relatively comfortable shahraks and shabby shantytowns may seem to be situated at the far ends of the social, economic and political divide which is crippling Afghanistan (and which finds in Kabul its most glamorous stage), but they share one thing: they are often, in public perception as in legal status, a *zorabad*,<sup>4</sup> a term that came to describe a place occupied by force (*zor*) without the consent of the authorities and without legal ownership. The informality, illegality and instability – for even the rich developers of many shahraks can fear a sudden reversal of their political fortune and consequently a danger for their ill-gained posses-

4 There is also the term *chorabad*, from the Pashto composite verb *chor-o-chapawel* (to raid and loot), for areas grabbed and 'developed' by political heavyweights, the so-called strongmen. The prime example is Sherpur, the area of the nineteenth-century British army cantonment, where the Karzai government handed out plots to members and allies.

## AFGHANISTAN || Kabul Police Districts



sions – is what links them all to create the landscape of Kabul nowadays.

To float some fixed buoys in this sea of uncertainty, AAN seeks to offer its readers an interactive guide of sorts to Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Namely, the links on the map will present separate maps of each of Kabul's 22 municipal districts and some facts about the neighbourhoods they encompass. Municipal districts or (as they have sometimes been called) city wards will throughout the texts be referred to as PDs (they coincide with Kabul's police districts) or *nahia* (the local Dari/Pashto term for city districts). This is consistent with contemporary usage and will make it easier to distinguish between urban and non-urban districts (*woluswalis*) in those areas where the former have expanded to overlap to some extent with the latter.

<sup>5</sup> Maps have been kindly provided by iMMAP. The spelling of local place names might sometimes differ between the text and the maps.

The descriptions of the police districts (PDs) aim at providing readers with basic information about the following aspects:

- list of the principal neighbourhoods encompassed
- history of the area and timeframe of development, plus landmarks
- main architectural and infrastructural characteristics
- details about the population and population changes in the area throughout the last decades
- main security trends in the area

Kabul figures among the fastest-growing cities in the world and, for good and for bad, this remains one of its main characteristics. Therefore, the neighbourhoods' descriptions – especially details on security – do not aim at being utterly precise and up-to-date, but simply introduce the bits and pieces of the capital of Afghanistan to all those who have not so far been lucky enough to explore it for themselves.







**PD 2 ARG-E SHAHI, DEH AFGHANAN, MURAD KHANI AND PART OF KART-E PARWAN (BAHARISTAN)**

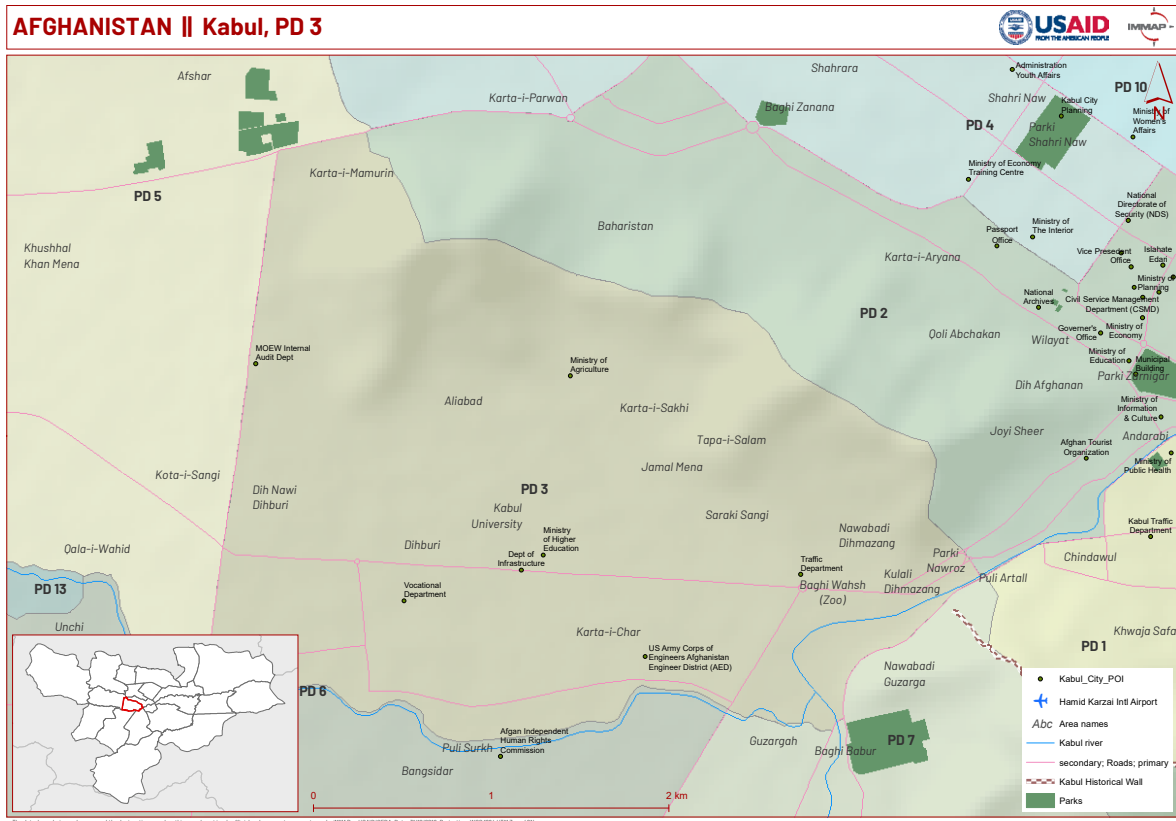
This PD consists of two separate areas: part of Shahr-e Naw, the new city of Kabul developed in the early twentieth century and some older settlements that were originally villages outside the walled city (Deh Afghanan) or residential and administrative quarters developed at the end of the nineteenth century, when the royal palace was moved from Bala Hisar to the current Arg (Murad Khani).

The area is very diverse: It includes the main seats of political power (Presidential Palace, major ministries and embassies), popular commercial areas near the riverbanks, sought-after residential and shopping areas (especially Baharistan) and historic neighbourhoods, some refurbished (Murad Khani) and some not (Deh Afghanan).

Some old Kabuli families still dwell in Baharistan, together with mostly Tajiks from Panjshir and the Shomali plateau. The ethnic balance is tilted towards the Pashtuns in Deh Afghanistan, while the Shia Qizilbash community still lives in Murad Khani. All these are old-settlement groups that come very close to the original definition of Kabulis. Some more recent migrants of rural origin dwell in the higher areas of Deh Afghanistan.

The area represents both the centre of the city and the political life of the country. Major seats of power constitute a primary target for political violence and consequently display a very heavy security set-up. Common criminality has long had hot spots on the northeastern slopes of Koh-e Asmai (TV Mountain) and Aliabad Hill. Otherwise, the residential areas are relatively safe.

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## PD 3 DEH MAZANG, KART-E SAKHI, KART-E CHAHAR, DEH BURI

This PD, together with PD 6, constitutes the core area of West Kabul as developed, in particular from the 1940s onwards, by the government. It includes the campus of Kabul University and other landmarks such as the Aliabad Hospital, the Kabul Zoo and the Sakhi shrine. Along the southwestern slopes of TV Mountain and Aliabad Hill crawl the settlements of Deh Mazang and Kart-e Sakhi.

A large part of PD 3 consists of a flat-lying area with a regular street grid (Kart-e Chahar and Deh Buri) that – coupled with the many educational facilities, green areas and comparatively low prices – makes it a sought-after residential location for middle-class Afghans and (until recently) foreigners. Hill-settlements are less serviced. Both areas were flattened during the 1990s war but have largely been rebuilt.

Kart-e Chahar and Deh Buri have for a long time now been inhabited mostly by Hazaras, while hill settlements like Deh Mazang and Kart-e Sakhi are more mixed, although the latter is also inhabited mostly by Shi'as and features a major Shi'a shrine (repeatedly targeted by radical militants). Among the residents of Deh Mazang in particular many old Kabulis were to be found until recently, although generally from low-income households (it seems many left the country in the last few years). In recent years migrants from Wardak and Logar have joined the neighbourhood as well.

Criminal gangs are present on the higher reaches of TV hill and Aliabad hill; otherwise, this has for long been one of Kabul's quietest and safest areas, despite the presence of some foreign organisations and guesthouses, which started to attract the attention of militant groups after 2010.

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**PD 4 SHAHR-E NAW, KART-E PARWAN, KOLOLA POSHTA, SHAHRARA,  
TAHIYA-YE MASKAN**

This PD comprises the main portion of the new city (Shahr-e Naw) developed for administrative and residential purposes since the 1930s, other residential areas developed from the 1950s onwards (Kart-e Parwan) and historical hamlets once situated at the edge of Kabul (Shahrara). It also includes some conspicuous landmarks like the Shahr-e Naw Park and the Kolola Poshta hilltop fort.

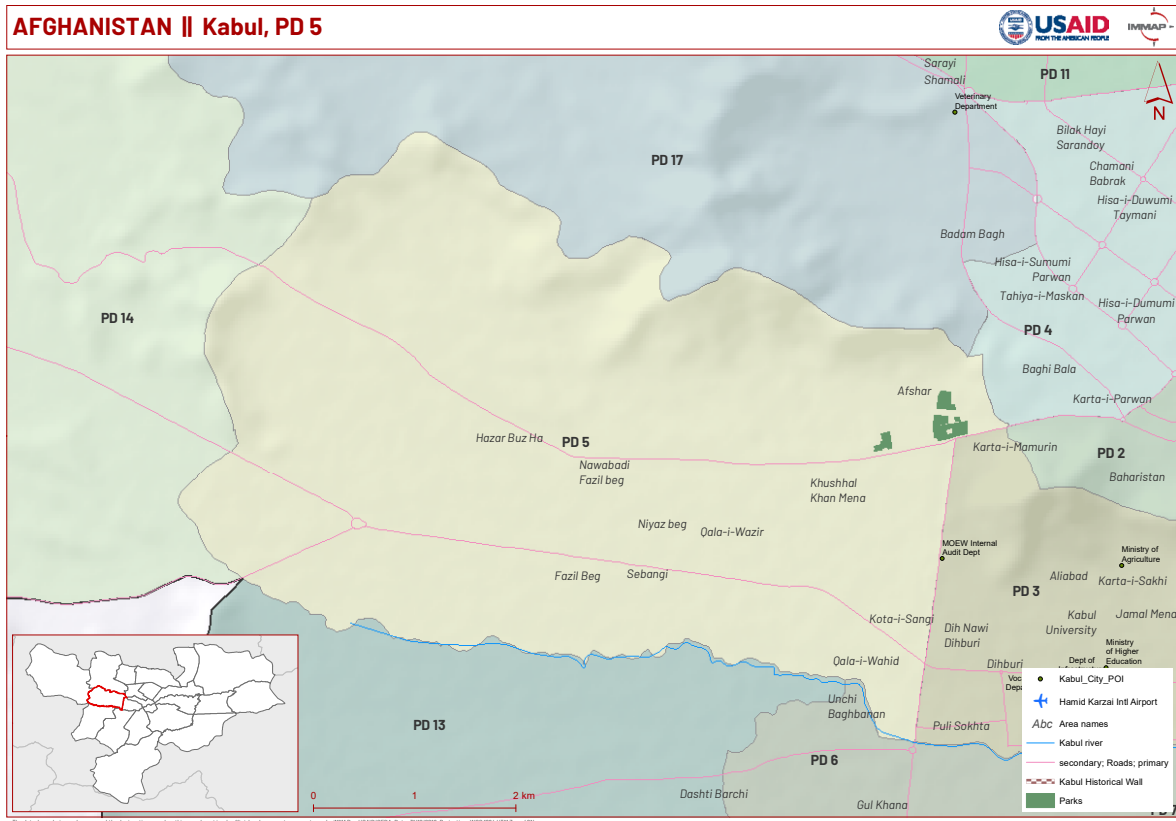
This area was relatively preserved during the 1990s war, and it has always been a central shopping area with many modern commercial malls and upmarket residential areas much sought-after for its central location. It features some high-profile VIP mansions (especially in Kart-e Parwan), many government facilities and local and foreign organisations' offices. Shahrara (a hamlet of oven-makers built in traditional mud-houses) and the less central Parwan-e Dowom, Parwan-e Sewom and Tahiya-ye Maskan host less well-off residents.

The Kabuli middle class traditionally inhabited its central areas, although many now rent their property to foreign or Afghan organizations or have been forced out (market eviction). The area is very mixed in terms of ethnic background, with the partial exception of Kart-e Parwan, which is Tajik-dominated.

Shahrara is a known venue for drug dealers. Security forces are heavily present in the whole area as it is a major target for political violence.

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## PD 5 KHUSHHAL KHAN MENA, KAMPANI, KART-E MAMURIN, AFSHAR, KOT-E SANGI

This *nahia* of West Kabul comprises old (Khushhal Khan Mena) and more recent (Kampani) westward expansions on the road to Maidan Wardak and Paghman, plus some hillside settlements (Afshar, Kart-e Mamurin – the ‘officials’ quartier’). There are some landmarks such as the Polytechnic Institute and the Police Academy.

These are relatively low-profile residential areas, while the main commercial and transportation hub is Kot-e Sangi. Fair grounds for the cattle market can be found in Kampani (Company). Afshar was the site of a massacre of its Hazara residents in 1993, the worst instance of ethnic violence during the civil war of the 1990s. The area is a major transit point as it is crossed by road networks connecting West and Central Kabul (Bagh-e Bala) and Kampani Road to Darulaman (Silo), besides being the starting point of the highway to Maidan Wardak province. Silo Road used to feature a trolley bus line that was destroyed during the 1990s wars. Road infrastructure was recently improved by the broadening of Kampani Road and the construction of the Kot-e Sangi viaduct. Hillside settlements are less serviced; Kart-e Mamurin fares better than Afshar.

Flat areas are inhabited mostly by Pashtuns (Khushhal Khan Mena, Kampani), many from Wardak and Ghazni, but also increasingly from the south (Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan); hillside settlements are inhabited markedly by Hazaras and Tajiks (Afshar, Kart-e Mamurin); the Kot-e Sangi area is mixed. The area hosts one of the biggest IDP camps in Kabul, in Chaharrahi-ye Qambar, between Khushhal Khan Mena and Company; it is inhabited mostly by displaced people from the south, many still living in tents and relying on humanitarian assistance.

The area displays trends of political violence, with insurgents from neighbouring Maidan Wardak bringing pressure on fellow Pashtuns from their areas who are working for the government or NGOs or are simply economically well off. Kot-e Sangi area has experienced common criminality mixed up with insurgents’ infiltration networks into the capital and has often been targeted by police operations.

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**PD 6 KART-E SE, DARULAMAN, ALAUDDIN, QALA-YE SHAHADA, QALA-YE WAZIR, QALA-YE ALI MARDAN**

This PD represents (together with PD 3) a core area of West Kabul that was built mostly from the 1950s onwards, although the first development plans date back to the 1920s, when King Amanullah sought to partially shift the centre of gravity of the city towards West Kabul and had the Darulaman palace built. Towards the southwest of the *nahia* some former farmland has been turned into informal settlements. Other landmarks are the Kabul National Museum, Tajbeg Palace and the mosque Khatam al-Nabiyyin, a newly built major Shi'a religious and educational complex.

Mostly a residential area, it has a regular road grid (especially Kart-e Se) and is sought after by the middle class and (until recently) foreigners. It was extensively damaged during the war (especially the buildings along Darulaman Road) but has been rebuilt since.

This part of the city is traditionally inhabited by Hazaras (especially Kart-e Se), but is more mixed around Darulaman and in other areas. Also, some IDPs from the Hazara-inhabited districts of Ghazni or Wardak moved into informal settlements at the southwestern edge of the ward, bordering PD 13.

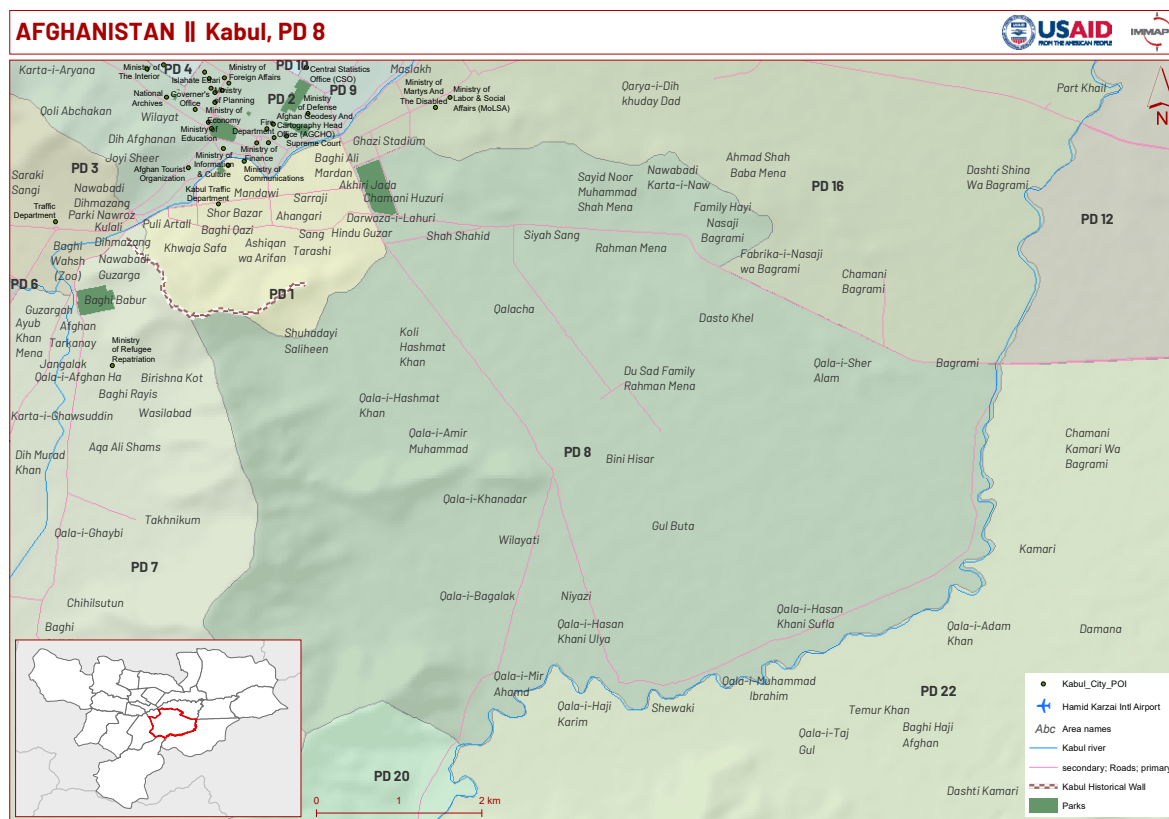
Heroin addicts around Pul-e Sukhta are causing an increase in micro-criminality, and security concerns exist around high-profile installations like the Military Academy and the American University, also found in this PD.

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The central areas are sometimes targeted by political violence or are the site for demonstrations, while the hamlets located at the edge of town are relatively unsafe in terms of common criminality and insurgents' infiltration.

January 2019



## PD 8 KART-E NAW, RAHMAN MENA, SHAH-E SHAHID, QALACHA, BENI HESAR

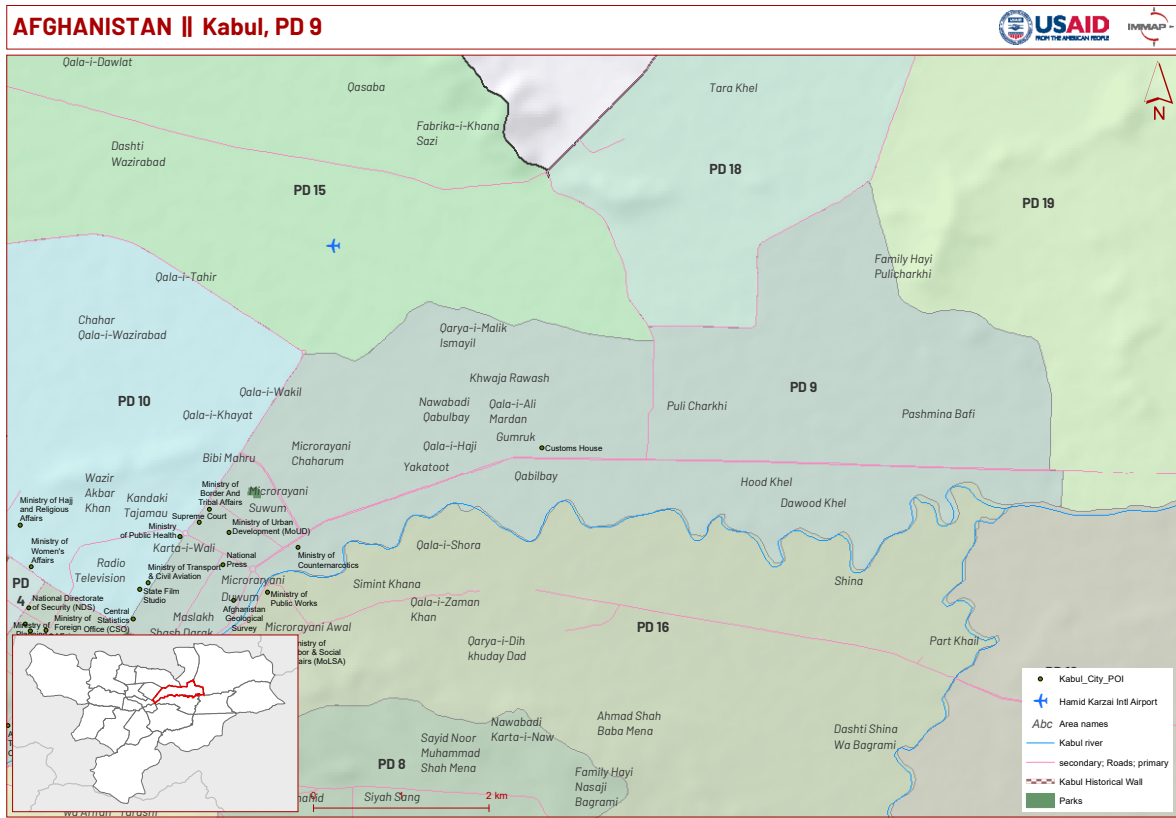
These neighbourhoods are residential expansions dating from different eras (Kart-e Naw from the 1950s, a time when the Shah-e Shahid area was already dotted with suburban hamlets) and of different types, expanding from the old city to the south (along the road to Logar) and east. The main landmarks are the Mausoleum of Nadir Khan on a hill popular with kite-fliers, the cemetery of Shohada-ye Salehin and Hashmat Khan's reservoir (now partially dried up) (see AAN reporting on the water fowl and Afghan ornithologists [here](#) and [here](#)).

Kart-e Naw and Rahman Mena are relatively standardised residential areas inhabited by middle-class residents. Adjacent areas change gradually in terms of layout and economy, becoming poorer and more informal towards Qalacha and Bini Hesar. The quality of the water supply is inadequate in the latter areas. Despite that, Kabul is further expanding along the Logar highway to the south.

The area has been consistently inhabited by a majority of Pashtuns and in recent years the trend has only been reinforced by the influx of many residents mainly from Logar, Paktia and Khost.

The area lies on one of the insurgents' infiltration routes to the capital and the security forces' presence is commensurate. Moreover, some mosques in Qalacha and Bini Hesar are noted for having displayed a political stance in favour of the insurgency in the past and therefore are kept under control. Common criminals are often targeting even central areas like Kart-e Naw with house raids and robberies, despite the police's attempts at securing the area.

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## PD 9 SHASHDARAK; MICRORAYONS TWO, THREE AND FOUR; YAKA TUT; KHWAJA RAWASH HUDKHEL; PUL-E CHARKHI

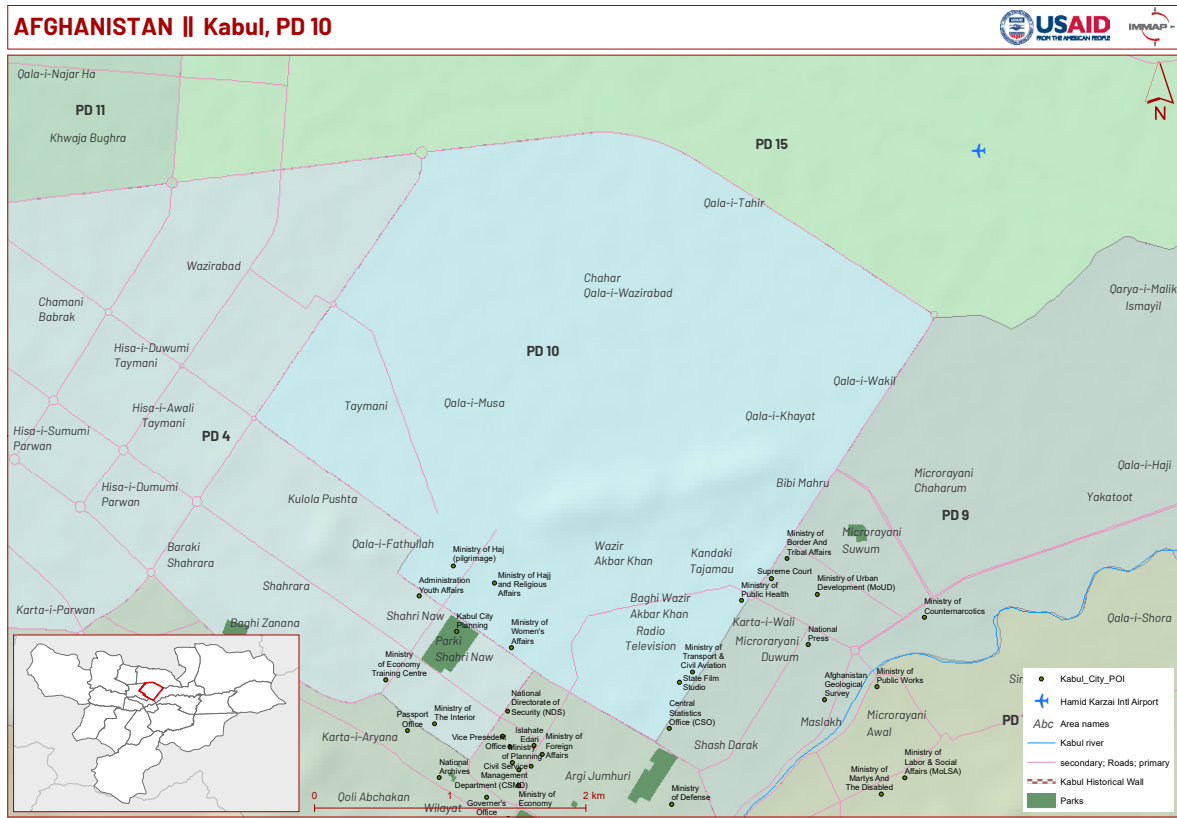
This is a very diverse PD, which features parts of what is sometimes termed the Kabul Green Zone (the high-profile diplomatic and institutional enclave in Shashdarak that is almost secluded from the rest of the city), several Soviet-style blocks (Microrayons, often locally pronounced “Makruyon”) built from the 1960s onwards and newer and sprawling commercial and residential areas along Jalalabad Road that absorbed some pre-existing rural hamlets. Pul-e Charkhi also features some of the biggest industrial parks of Kabul.

The Microrayons’ flats, suitable for small families, were inhabited until recently by people originally from Kabul; now a majority of the residents are newcomers, but they are arguably people who adapt to an environment that is much more ‘urban’ than the suburban settlements and who often reproduce the living conditions of a rural village. Accommodation in the Microrayons is relatively cheap and sought after. In addition, they offer some basic comforts, like centralised heating systems. In contrast, the areas along Jalalabad Road, though mixed in the first tract, increasingly feature large households of immigrants from the east, mainly Pashtun Kuchis and including IDPs. The Khwaja Rawash area is mixed, with Tajiks and Pashtuns, and has been the focus of a public-private high-profile housing initiative between 2013 and 2016 that made it more attractive to the middle class.

The areas along Jalalabad Road, the main gateway to Kabul and therefore a main transit and commercial route, witness a lot of common criminality and occasional targeting by insurgents of government and foreign assets.

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## PD 10 WAZIR AKBAR KHAN, TAIMANI, QALA-YE FATHULLAH, QALA-YE MUSA, WAZIRABAD, SHAHR-E ARYA

Half of this PD is made up of residential areas built according to master plans at different times from the 1940s onwards (Wazir Akbar Khan, Taimani, Qala-ye Fathullah). These areas are nowadays considered an extension of Shahr-e Naw and are at the core of Kabul city centre. The rest of the area (Wazirabad, Qala-ye Musa) included in the past agricultural lands and traditional settlements, but it has witnessed massive infilling in the past decades and is now totally built up. The area called Sherpur at the foot of Bibi Mahru hill was the site of a major forced eviction of residents in 2003, with the land redistributed by the Ministry of Defence to cabinet members in the newly established government, commanders and other clients (read about it [here](#)). There are also newly built modern housing projects (Shahrak-e Arya) along the Airport Road.

Already 'uptown' before the war, since 2001, Wazir Akbar Khan has become an enclave of embassies and the offices of government branches, NGOs and private companies. There are several VIP houses (especially in Sherpur). Taimani and Qala-ye Fathullah are residential areas much sought-after by foreigners and middle-class residents for their central location, high-quality accommodation and lower security profile than Wazir Akbar Khan. During the last decade, many of the twentieth-century garden houses have been pulled down to make room for high-rise buildings. Water, electricity and other services are usually good, although not all side alleys are paved. Wazirabad remains much less serviced and low-key. Distinctive-looking Shahrak-e Arya has been developed in the last decade as a model modern housing project; it hosts well-to-do people in a gated environment.

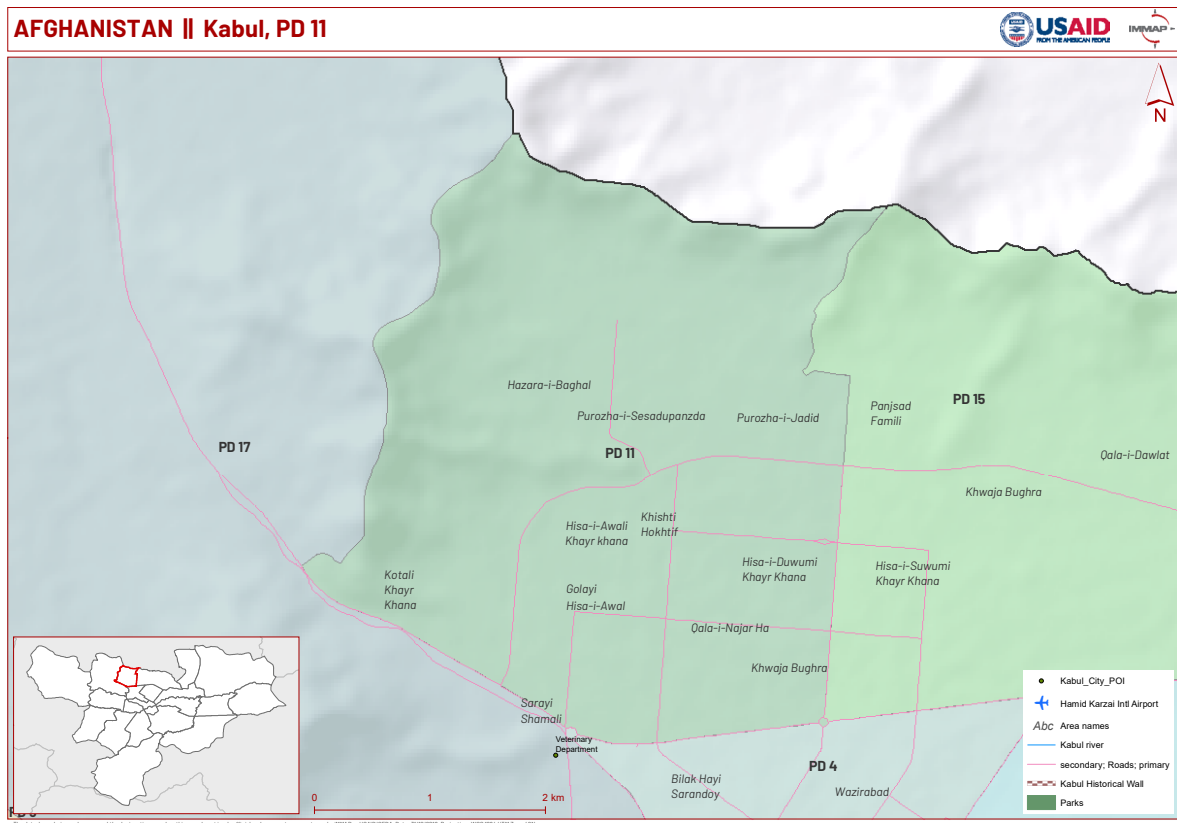
Some residents of Wazir Akbar Khan area were forcefully removed in 2003 (Sherpur); others left for economic reasons (market eviction). The area is now mainly the preserve of the elite and of foreigners. Taimani and Qala-ye Fathullah until recently closely conformed to the original pre-war Kabuli neighbourhoods, with a very mixed population (although with a strong presence of Hazaras). The influx of foreign guesthouses and offices has



significantly altered that, at least in the most central areas. Wazirabad used to be sparsely populated until new settlers came in from various parts and the areas became mixed.

Wazir Akbar Khan presents high-profile targets for political violence and therefore has high security (although the area is not completely walled in – see analysis of efforts in 2017 to secure the ‘Green Zone’ [here](#)); Taimani and Qala-ye Fathullah have for a while benefited from a lower-profile presence of foreigners, but in recent years criminals have started to target the area due to its rich economic performance, and foreigners and Afghans alike have been kidnapped. Wazirabad features higher insecurity because of common criminality, especially at night-time, with instances of robberies and house raids.

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## PD 11 KHAIRKHANA ONE (HISA-YE AWAL)

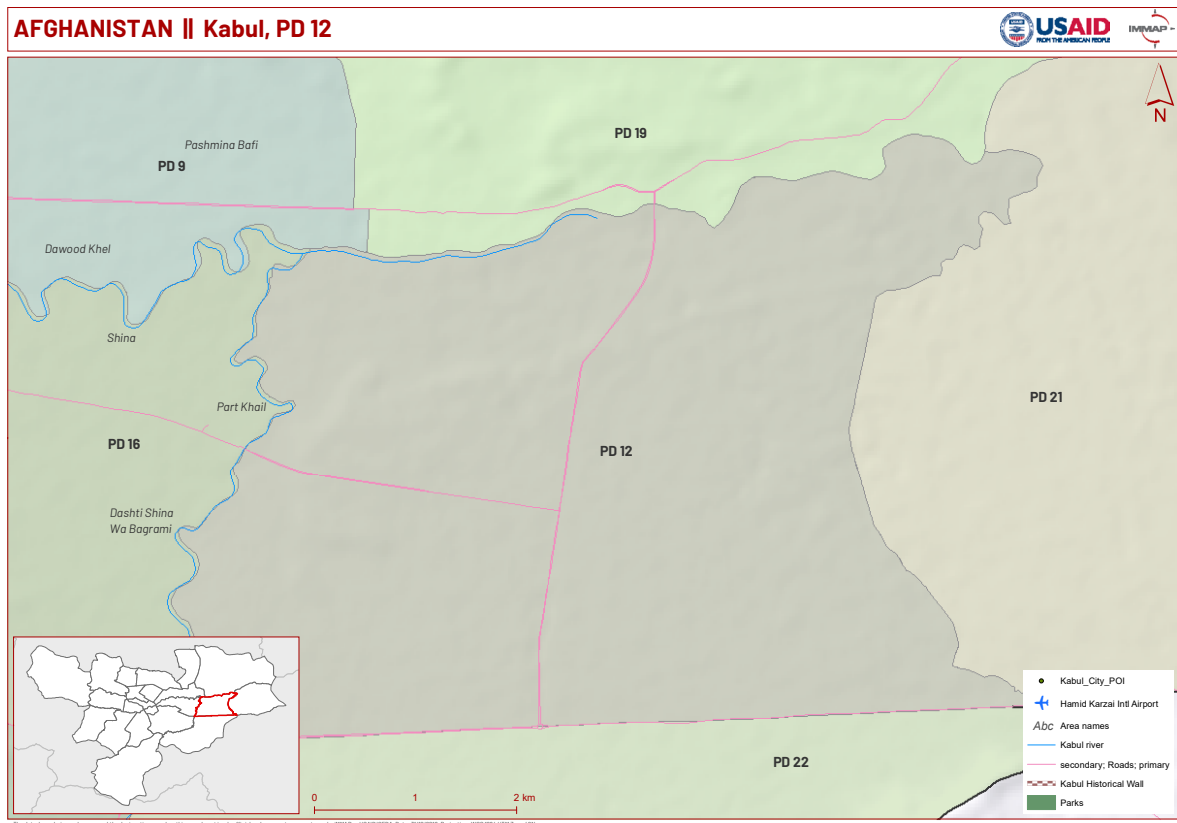
Khairkhana is a residential area north of the city on the road leading to the namesake pass that separates Kabul from the Shomali Plateau. It was mostly built during the 1960s according to the master plan, but with some unplanned additions, like the vast commercial area called Bazar-e Lycee Maryam.

Khairkhana has regular blocks and a paved road grid and is relatively well serviced, although it lacks an adequate water supply. It is a sought-after residential area. VIPs, especially those belonging to Jamiat-e Islami, have built their villas in this neighbourhood.

Already inhabited mainly by people hailing from the districts north of Kabul because of its location, but with a substantial Pashtun element that has mostly now moved away, it has taken on an even more distinctive Shomali/Panjshiri character since 2001. However, at least some residents identify with a more 'urbanised' Kabul identity, and the commercial area is very much mixed.

The presence of VIPs with an anti-Taliban background and the ethnic connotation has a double-edged impact on security. Although Khairkhana is not a permissive environment for insurgents to operate in, organised criminality can be a serious challenge for common residents, with frequent raids and robberies (though not many kidnappings). Episodes of violence are often the product of a sort of 'gang sub-culture' among some local youth, who feel they have enough political cover to indulge in bullying and petty crimes.

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## PD 12 AHMAD SHAH BABA MENA (AKA ARZAN QEMAT)

The main built-up area of this PD represents an eastern peripheral expansion of the city planned in the 1970s but mostly completed during the last decade. It is located close to the old road once leading to Jalalabad from Kabul. The massive Pul-e Charkhi prison just to the east of Ahmad Shah Baba Mena was built in the 1970s.

The neighbourhood is planned and laid out in a regular way, with relatively good infrastructure. It is especially sought-after as a residential area by middle-income immigrant households from the east of the country because of its cheap prices and location.

The area is inhabited chiefly by Pashtuns from the east of Afghanistan (Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar).

The area is relatively safe in terms of criminality, although somehow secluded and apart from central Kabul. Its location and the origin of many of its inhabitants from contested areas of eastern Afghanistan may allow for the presence of insurgent networks trying to infiltrate the city.

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**PD 13 DASHT-E BARCHI, PUL-E KHUSHK, SHAHRAK-E HAJI NOWRUZ,  
SHAHRAK-E OMID-E SABZ**

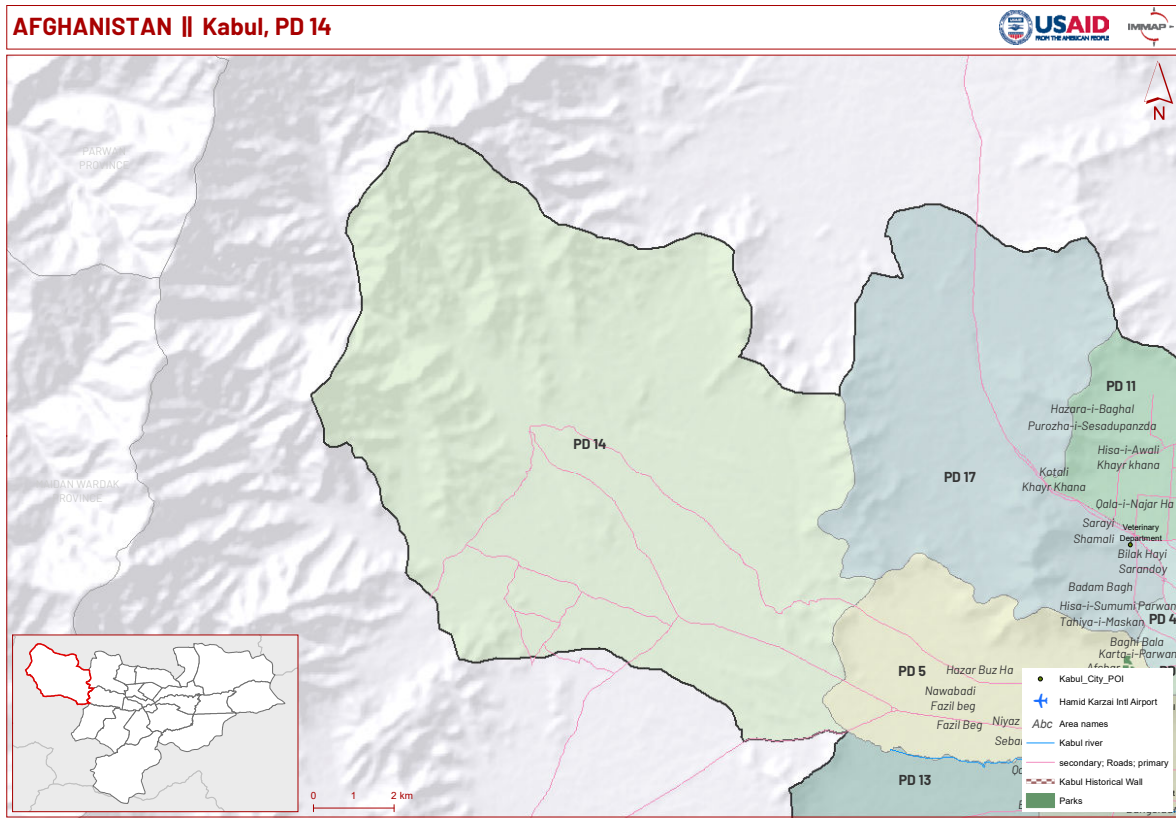
This flat expanse to the west of the city is an area of new settlement, carved out of PD 6 in 2003 when residents started to pour in. Previously it was partly agricultural and partly barren, with only a few hamlets.

The area is now densely populated; most of the settlements are informal and the municipality provides limited infrastructure. Residents are mainly newcomers from the provinces or low-income Kabulis lured here by the cheaper cost of property. However, affluent investors have developed some high-profile *shahraks*.

The area is inhabited mostly by Hazaras who migrated to Kabul from Wardak or Ghazni after 2001. The area has been subject to the periodic influx of IDPs during the worst phases of the Kuchi-Hazara conflict in Wardak and Ghazni provinces since 2007; the IDPs who did not return to their home districts settled with relatives. A smaller number of Pashtun Kuchi nomads had started to settle in the area too, but during the Kuchi-Hazara conflict in 2010, clashes erupted between the two communities in Dasht-e Barchi and the Kuchis were later relocated to Darulaman. Residents of the *shahraks* are more mixed.

Widespread poverty in the area results in some criminality. *Shahraks* are considered to have better security.

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## PD 14 PAGHMAN, BAGH-E DAUD, ARGHANDI, QALA-YE HAIDAR, QARGHA LAKE

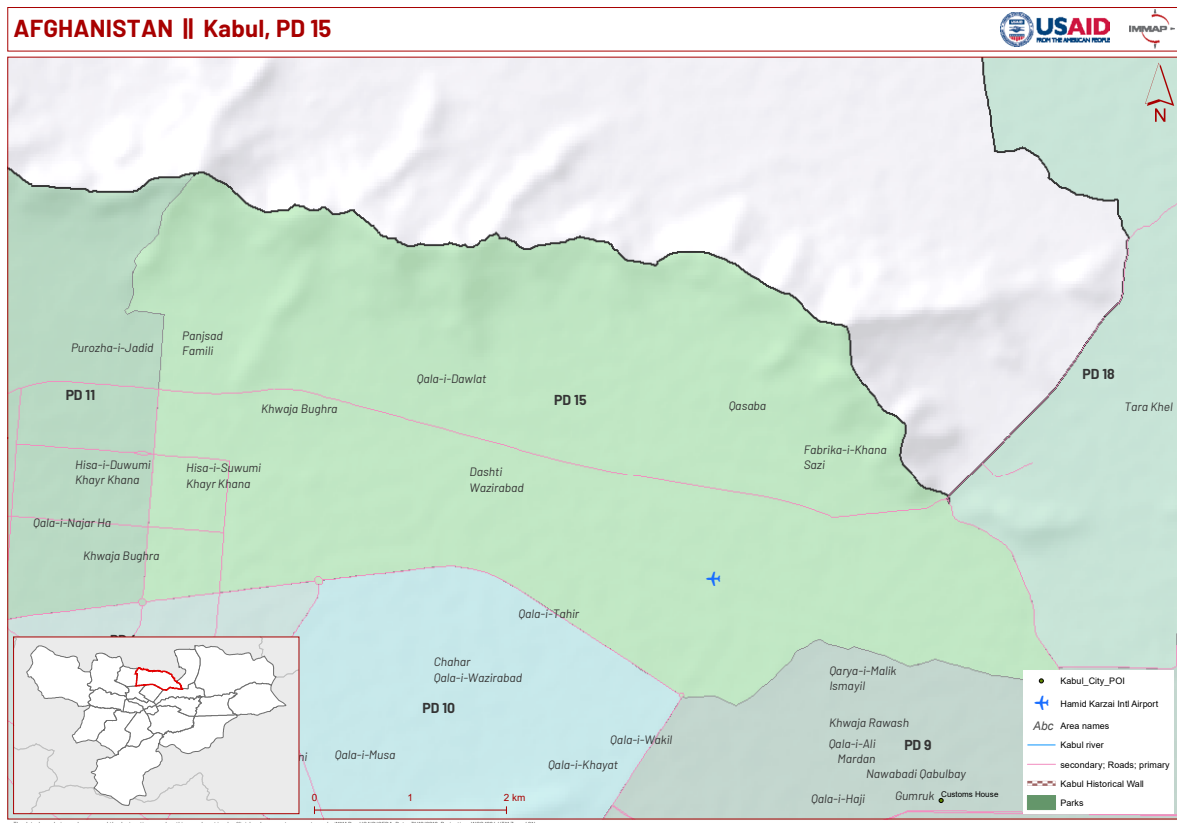
This *nahia* was established in 2003 over much of what is the Paghman *woluswali*. Paghman valley to the west of Kabul was the focus of King Amanullah's project for a summer resort for the elite of Kabul in the 1920s, when it became also the venue for national celebrations and a Loya Jirga. During the 1980s the area was severely affected by fighting between the mujahedin and the communist government. The damaged gardens and triumphal arch (Taq-e Zafar) have been refurbished and a new palace built to host a grand regional Nawruz celebration in 2014 (celebrations had to be moved to Kabul for security reasons). Most of the residential areas in PD 14 have been built since 2001. Other landmarks in this PD include the Qargha reservoir and Bagh-e Daud.

Most of the new settlements are informal. Paghman and Qargha are two favourite spots for Kabul people for outings and picnics, especially in spring and summer.

The only original residents of Paghman are those living up in the valley. Newly arrived residents hail mainly from Maidan Wardak, but also Kandahar, Ghazni and Helmand. In Qala-ye Haidar a majority of the residents are Hazaras from Bamiyan, Daikundi and Ghazni. Altogether this is an ethnically mixed area with Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras and other communities as well.

The higher part of Paghman valley is rugged and has been sometimes used as a hiding place by insurgents or politically connected criminal networks involved in kidnappings. Also, in Arghandi, on the road leading to Maidan Wardak, there have been instances of insurgent activity.

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## PD 15 KHAIRKHANA TWO AND THREE, KHWAJA BUGHRA, QASABA

The residential areas making up this PD (until 2003 part of PD 10) date from the last few decades. Only Hesa-e Dowom and Hesa-e Sewom of Khairkhana have been built according to the municipality master plan. Khwaja Bughra existed already as a suburban village (endowed with the namesake shrine) surrounded by agricultural land during the time of Zahir Khan and Daud Khan. Some politically connected people started developing *shahraks* already in the 1990s (Shahrak-e Massud), but the pace of construction increased after 2001. The PD area encompasses Kabul's civilian and military airports and it hosts the recently built Ministry of Interior and several other government facilities.

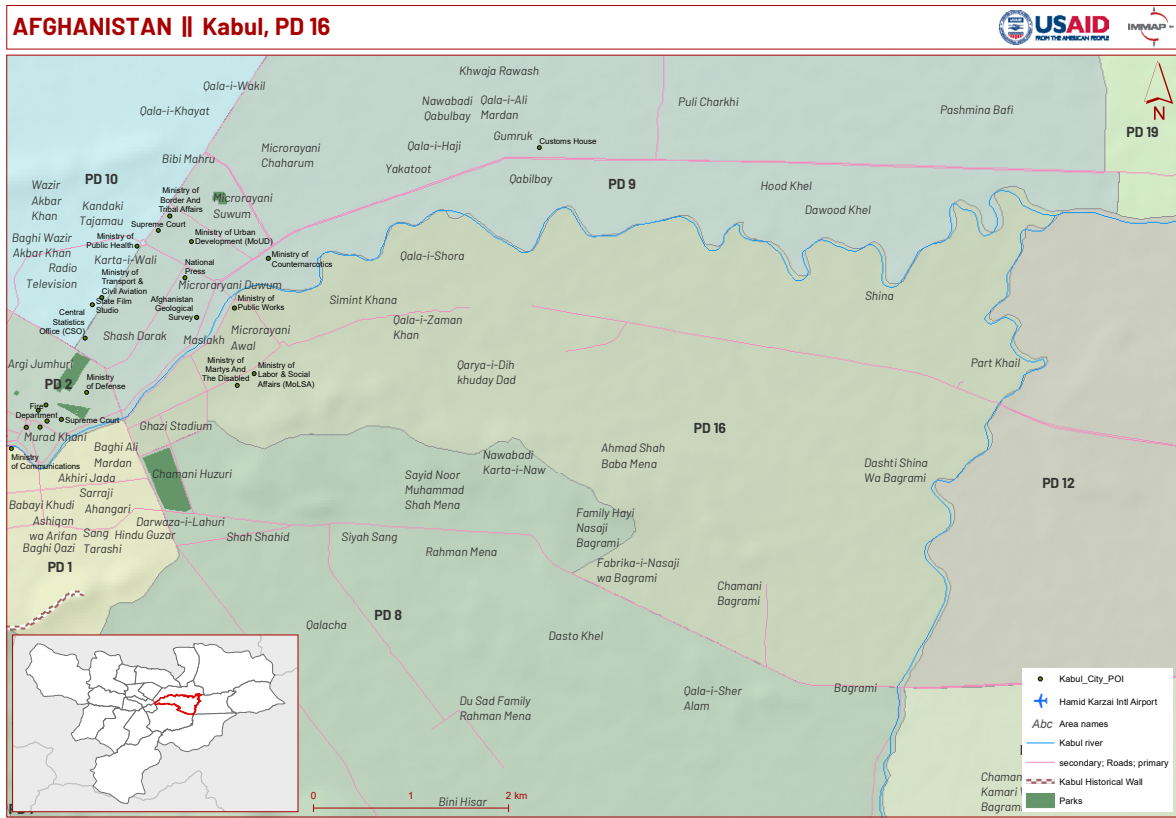
Khairkhana Two and Three have a regular road grid and layout. Khwaja Bughra area has been developed into *shahraks* without planning, and construction extended over what used to be a wetland area, contributing to drainage problems in all of northwestern Kabul. Qasaba area used to be mostly inhabited by low-income residents, but some recently built *shahraks* (bordering on Khwaja Rawash area of PD 9) have raised its status as a residential area.

The original residents of Khwaja Bughra were Shias. Nowadays, the majority of the residents in the area are from the provinces just north of Kabul – Parwan, Kapisa and Panjshir, with some also from Logar. This is the case also for Khairkhana Two and Three.

Security in Khairkhana follows the patterns described for PD 11. The same can be said for Khwaja Bughra, with poverty and remoteness from main roads compounding instances of criminality. Qasaba featured the presence of notorious criminal networks in the past; the recent construction projects in the area will likely change the security environment.

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## PD 16 MICRORAYON ONE (AKA OLD MICRORAYON), QALA-YE ZAMAN KHAN, DEH KHODAIDAD, ALUKHEL, BAGRAMI, SHAHRAK-E KHORASAN, SHAHRAK-E CEMENT KHANA

This PD was carved out of the southern half of PD 9 in 2003. According to officials in PD 16, only Old Microrayon and Qala-ye Zaman Khan have been built according to the City Master Plan. Indeed, Qala-ye Zaman Khan existed as a settlement long before the city expanded in this direction, while Microrayon One was the first such project developed with Soviet aid in the 1960s. Other parts of the PD, save for the pre-existing rural villages (Alukhel and Bagrami – this PD overlaps to some extent with the *woluswali* named after the latter locality), have indeed been occupied and developed privately since 2001, Semet (Cement) Khana in particular.

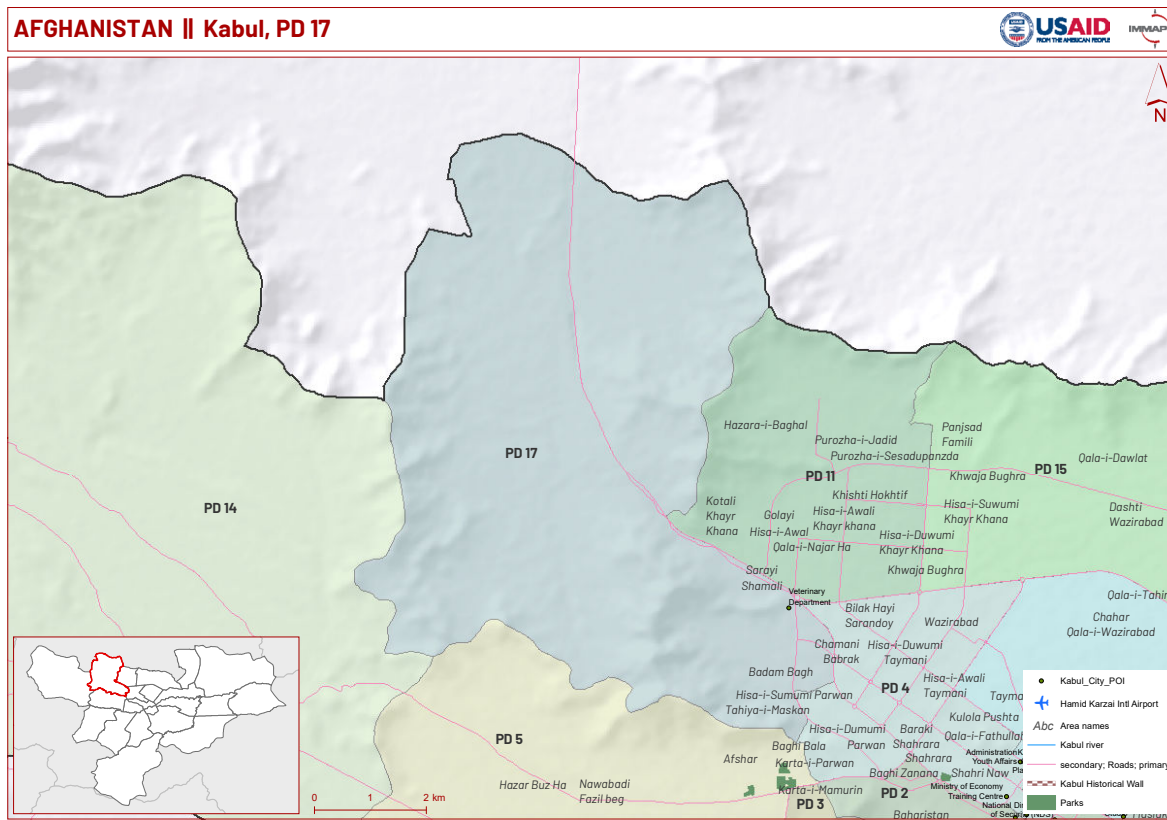
Microrayon One has long been considered relatively comfortable with cheap urban accommodation, but it does not compete with the better-quality newly built *shahraks*. Qala-ye Zaman Khan road has been recently paved, but the area remains relatively underdeveloped. Towards the east this *nahia* still includes agricultural areas, more and more encroached on by construction sites.

The original inhabitants of the villages are Tajiks and Pashtuns. Newly arrived residents are mostly from Parwan, Panjshir or Hazara-inhabited provinces or they are Pashtun Kuchis (nomads). It seems that a majority of the original inhabitants of Microrayon have eventually left for other parts of Kabul or relocated abroad. The newcomers are mixed, originating quite evenly from all parts of the country.

Microrayon used to offer a sort of ‘sheltered’ environment, although population change may have disrupted its social fabric. Remoteness and the comparative poverty of other areas may harm their security.

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## AFGHANISTAN || Kabul, PD 17



## PD 17 BUSTAN-E KABUL, CHAMTALA, BAGH-E AREF KHAN

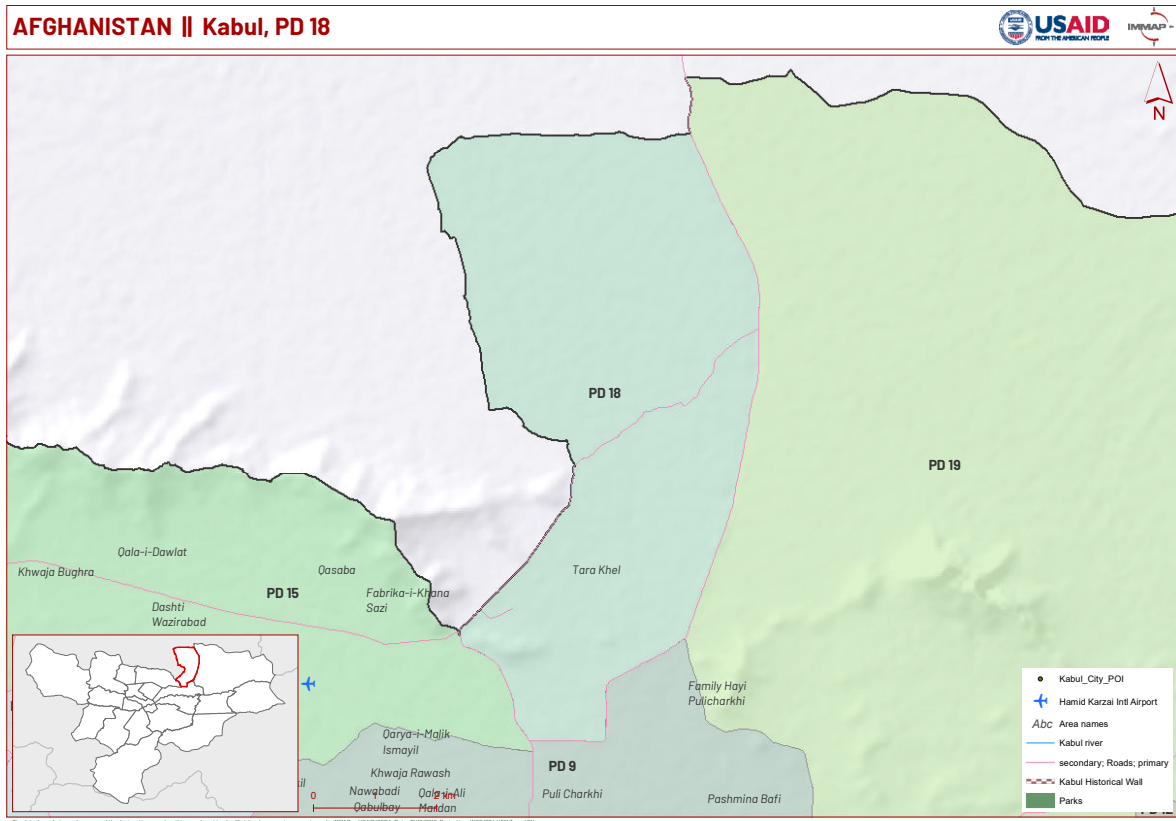
This new PD (established in 2003) covers an area of recent urban expansion at the northern edge of Kabul along the road leading to the Salang tunnel and the north of the country. It is physically located beyond the Khairkhana Pass and thus out of the Kabul Plateau, belonging rather to the Shomali Plateau. The northern boundary of Kabul reaches now the village of Karez-e Mir, started as a model village under the last king, well inside the *woluswali* of Shakardara.

It is a rapidly growing residential area, experiencing a construction boom but still has space to fill in; moreover, the area along the highway represents a major transport and commercial hub both for agricultural products entering the city and people from the countryside accessing goods available only in the city. The development of these areas has been informal or managed by private developers, and they are not well serviced. A peculiar example is Chamtala: Once the site of landfilling for the solid waste of the city, it was occupied and developed as a residential area as soon as the government built some basic infrastructure meant for the waste collection project – which consequently stalled.

The area is inhabited by people from the Shomali (overwhelmingly Tajiks plus some Pashtuns), as powerful commanders from this region control the land development business and facilitate the settlement of their natural constituencies, lobbying with the government for at least a minimum of infrastructure.

Criminal gangs are active due to the presence of people and goods in transit and are often linked to the local commanders' networks.

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## PD 18 DEH SABZ: TARAKHEL, ZARINA, BAKHTIYARAN, ERFAN, SHAHRAK-E MUHAMMADIA

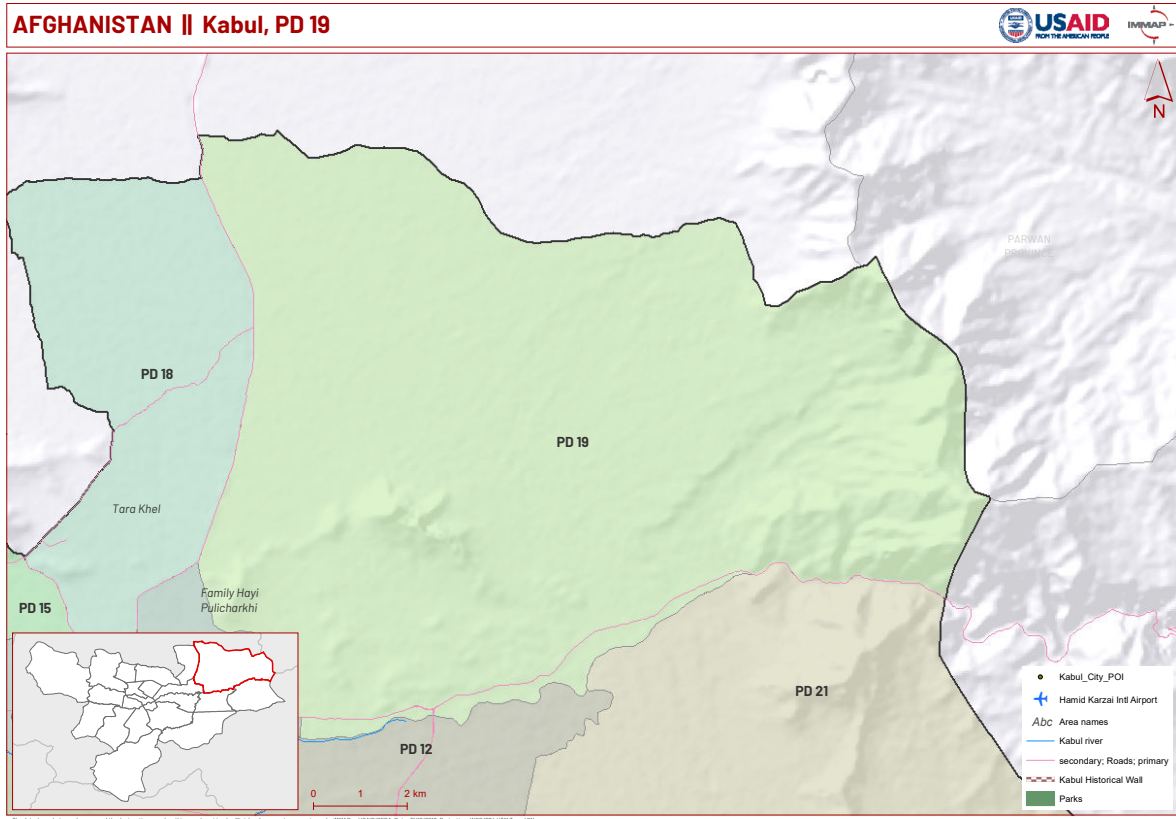
This PD was established in 2004 based on a presidential decree and is located northeast of Kabul Airport, in the *woluswali* of Deh Sabz, encompassing the northern slope of the Khwaja Rawash hills and the flat area west of the so-called New Road leading north to Bagram Airport (which is only relatively new, having been built by the Russians in the 1980s to provide an alternative route to Bagram airbase in the face of increased mujahedin ambushes on the main Salang highway). Settlements consist of four pre-existing villages (Tarakhel, Mir Alam, Zarina and Bakhtiyaran) and two newly built housing projects (Shahrak-e Muhammadia and Erfan).

Most of this area is still agricultural, with residents working on farmland and gardens and selling the products in the city. There are also several brick kilns. The villages are unserved, with most roads unpaved, and in the absence of the electricity grid, many houses have to rely on generators.

Pashtuns inhabit Tarakhel, Mir Alam and Zarina villages while Tajiks live in Bakhtiyaran. Apart from these original inhabitants, many Hazaras from the central provinces of the country have moved in since 2001 and reside in Shahrak-e Muhammadia and Erfan.

The area is strongly influenced in terms of security by the networks of some commanders-turned-politicians and it can be sometimes volatile.

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## PD 19 DEH SABZ-BARIKAB

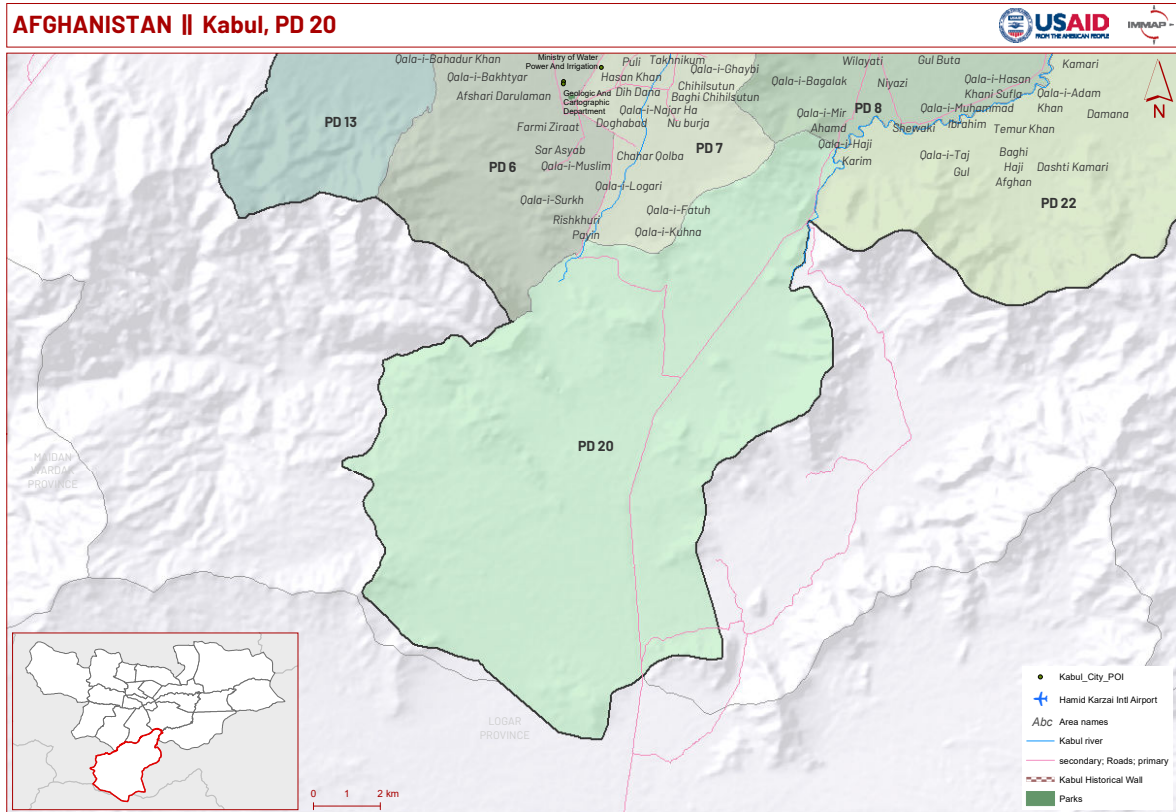
The establishment of this *nahia* in 2004 soon became the source of a controversy between Kabul Municipality and the minister for urban development affairs. In fact, this remote and barren area to the northeast of the city was to host the 'New Kabul' project, a whole new city built according to modern and eco-friendly standards (see AAN reporting [here](#)). The project seems now to have stalled and this PD, lying to the east of the New Road to Bagram, still includes only around 30 rural villages at the foot of the Koh-e Safi range and some manufacturing areas along the main road.

Residents of PD 19 are a mix of old residents and a few newly arrived. Pashtuns are the majority.

Security is relatively good, as the rural areas do not offer major targets for crimes or political violence. However, the nearby Kuh-e Safi range has often served as a transit route for insurgents and is not firmly under government control.

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## AFGHANISTAN || Kabul, PD 20



## PD 20 CHARASIAB

This PD, the largest in terms of area, was created by adding to the city boundaries a large chunk of southern Kabul province down to the border with Logar, including around half of Charasiab and parts of Musay *woluswalis*. Existing settlements include Nawabad, Khairabad, Charasiab, Chehel Dokhtaran, Nawniaz, Yazkhel, Miakhel, Shahrak-e Marjani and phase three of Shahrak Dasht-e Batola.

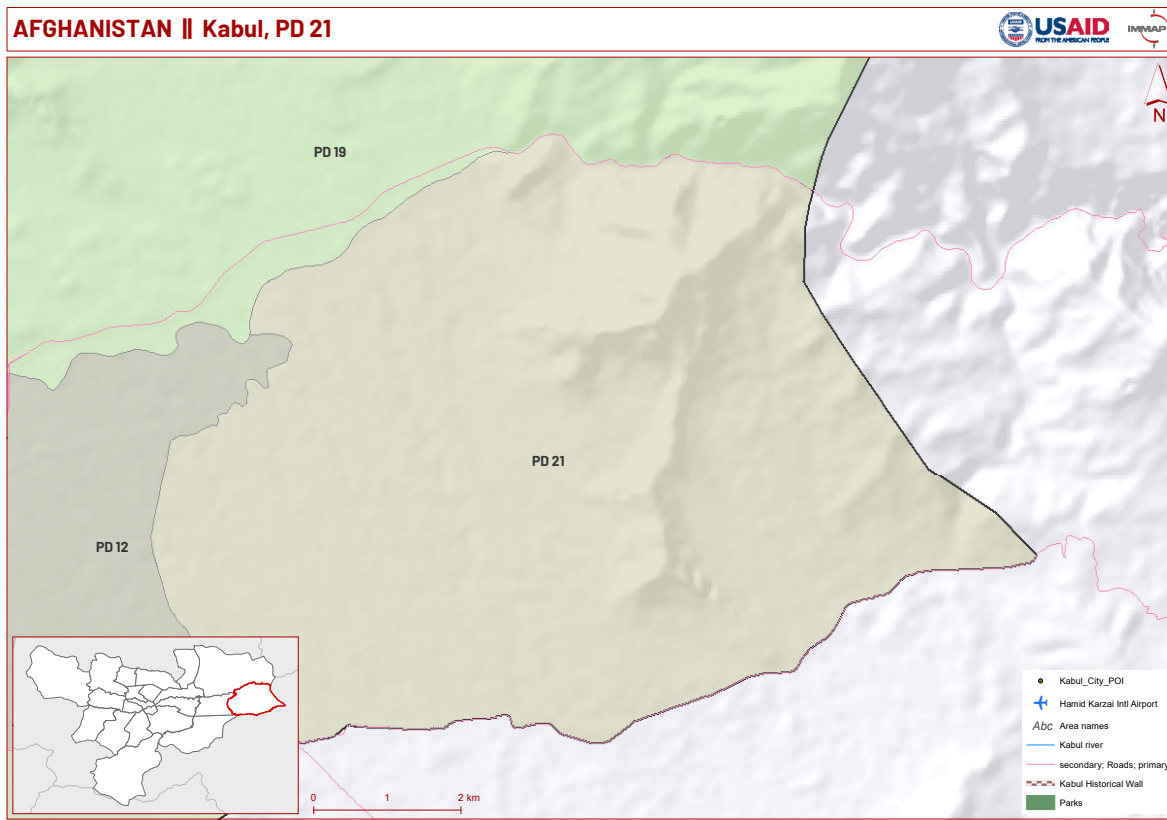
Historically, this has been an agricultural area, and it is still the least urbanised among Kabul PDs, with a large percentage of its area still put to cultivation. Most of the new construction has happened since 2001.

The area features the original inhabitants, mostly Pashtuns and some Tajiks, as well as newly arrived residents, many of whom hail from Khost and Paktia.

The PD's position along the highway leading to Logar and Paktia makes it strategic for both the government and insurgents, and it affects the security of areas along the highway.

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## PD 21 HUDKHEL, DEH KHODADAD

This PD is located east of Kabul city right before the beginning of the Kabul river gorge leading to the Mahipar pass and marking the geographical end of the Kabul plateau.

Settlements have not been built based on the municipality's master plan. Even the government's basic services, like schools and clinics, are not to be found in this PD, and the only education available for boys and girls are in the local mosques. The area hosts the *ada* (bus station) for Jalalabad and the east of the country.

Apart from some Pashtun tribes, like the Babakarkhel and Katakhel, residents moved in after 2001. They are mostly Pashtuns with a few Tajiks.

Security in this PD is far from good, as the area is notorious in Kabul for being a haunt of thieves and robbers.

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Fabrizio Foschini traveled and done research in Afghanistan extensively since 2003. He studied the history of Asia at the University of Bologna in Italy and achieved his Ph.D. on the modern and contemporary history of Afghanistan with a specific focus on oral history. Between 2010 and 2014, he was based in Kabul with the Afghanistan Analysts Network as a political analyst, and he contributes regularly to the organisation's research. Despite not being based in the country currently, he still visits Afghanistan often and continues researching the country's history and society. Besides this, he works with Afghan refugees in Italy, coordinating translation services for the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS). Fabrizio has published extensively on Afghanistan and is fluent in Dari.