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Beyond Long-Distance Nationalism: Khorasan and the Re-imagination of Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article explores the geographical imagination of diasporic activists from Afghanistan. It examines the significance of the historic-geographic region of Khorasan for their attempts to re-imagine Afghanistan and its place in the region and wider world. The article documents ethnographically the forms of intellectual exchange in which these intellectual-activists participate, and their modes of materializing the geographical imagination of Khorasan in everyday life. Rather than analyzing their geographical imagination solely through the lens of ethnicity, it treats it as reflecting the activists' underlying yearning for sovereign agency and as an attempt to forge politically recognizable subjects capable of action.

Keywords: intellectual exchange; ethnonationalism; mobility; Afghanistan; Khorasan; geographical imagination; diaspora; popular sovereignty; transregional

Introduction

This article focuses on the energies diasporic intellectual-activists (henceforth "activists") from Afghanistan invest into reimagining the interrelationships between geography, culture, and the state in their country and beyond. The term "Khorasan" has been in use since approximately 3 CE to refer to a regional entity that spans parts of West and Central Asia that are historically connected yet are today divided by the boundaries of nation-states. Over the past decade, the term has come to be widely associated with the militant group "Islamic State-Khorasan Province" (IS-K) and its attempt to forge an Islamic caliphate. The activism of the diasporic intellectuals explored in what follows centers on deploying the idea of Khorasan to highlight the ways in which national boundaries have disconnected the region's people from one another and their shared past. Yet they approach Khorasan's past not through the lens of universalizing Islam, but in relation to the historical enmeshment of language, culture, and multiple religious traditions within the region's intersecting local and regional identities. This article documents the multiple domains of "intellectual exchange" that have played a role in the activists'

modes of imagining Khorasan and brings to attention the ways in which they materialize this "imagined geography" in the diaspora.

One might assume that the activists' attempts to rethink Afghanistan and the wider region through the historical category of Khorasan constitutes a one-dimensional manifestation of ethnic identity politics. In fact, though, the people at the center of this article invest intellectual work into imagining history and geography at a transregional scale, rendering visible identity formations marginalized by the region's nation-states, and into designing political institutions they think could bring recognition and legibility to Khorasan and its peoples. In the context of the emphasis they place on issues of visibility, recognition, and political form, I analyze the thinking and activities of the activists through the lens of anthropological work on sovereignty. I seek to contribute to Afghanistan studies, political anthropology, and the understanding of diaspora, in two ways.

First, by emphasizing the broader historical contexts from which projects of the geographical imagination emerge along with the forms of intellectual work that inform them, I contribute to the literature addressing the hegemonic status of ethnic discourses in the political dynamics of Afghanistan and its diasporas (e.g., Hanifi 2016; Ibrahimi 2023; Schetter 2005). Attempts to imagine Khorasan, I suggest, need to be understood within a context characterized by the prolonged experience of "compromised sovereignty." Considered against this backdrop, imaginings of Khorasan reflect a yearning among the activists to gain a sense of control over their lives, or what Bryant and Reeves refer to as "sovereign agency." This yearning for "sovereign agency" is manifested in "practices, strategies, and future-oriented claims" that seek to forge "politically recognizable" subjects "capable of agentive action" (Bryant and Reeves 2021). Treating the activists' geographical imaginings in terms of a yearning for sovereign agency elucidates the diverse anxieties and aspirations that they attach to the imaginative space of Khorasan.

Second, an examination of the intellectual exchanges that shape the activists' approach to Khorasan exposes limitations of the concept of "long-distance nationalism" for understanding their activities (Anderson 1998). Anderson defined long-distance nationalism as the "bedrock of an embattled ethnic metropolitan identity" (ibid.: 12) and depicted diaspora actors engaged in such forms of politics as promoting "extremism and radical agendas in the homeland without having to face the realities of violent conflict themselves" (Ho and McConnell 2019: 246). Static models of diaspora, however, are unhelpful in analyzing the forms of circular mobility (Ho 2017; Markovits, Pouchepadass, and Subrahmanyam 2006) important to the lives of the activists engaged here, as well as Afghanistan's political dynamics generally (Hanifi 2016). Looking beyond the home-host binary, I stress the ways in which this project of the imagination has arisen in the context of both transregional and transnational mobility.

Recent anthropological work has highlighted the thinking or personalities of individual intellectuals (e.g., Arab 2022; Humphrey 2023; O'Connor 2023). Here I will accentuate instead the socially embedded forms of "intellectual exchange" in which the activists take part. I use the term "intellectual exchange" to refer to "dialogues, encounters and interactions through which particular ways of knowing, understanding and thinking about the world are forged," and show how these have shaped and directed the activists' modes of imagining Khorasan (Long *et al.* 2023: 14). The domains of intellectual exchange important to the activists are historically layered and informed by their personal and familial backgrounds.

Domains of intellectual exchange explored here include those shaped by the Cold War, the experience of transregional mobility and international displacement, engagement with scholarship produced in universities in the Global North, and active participation in Afghanistan's politics.

Reimagining Afghanistan

Dating back to Iran's Sassanian dynasty (224–651), the idea of Khorasan ("there where the sun rises") as a regional entity has been invested with cultural, political, and ethical significance across successive historical periods. The "longevity of the term" and the manner it has been "constructed and reconstructed" over time (Noelle Karimi 2014: 13) are reflected in its significance to the thinking and activities of activists, powerholders, and wider publics in the present day. Historically, while maintaining "stability as a regional entity," the "outlines" of Khorasan have not always "corresponded" to the geographical distribution of political authority (see Rante 2015). Khorasan has been used to refer to the region that today comprises eastern Iran, the west and north of Afghanistan, and parts of formerly Soviet Central Asia that lie on the southern banks of the Amu Darya. Over time, however, Khorasan's outlines changed, as did the location of its "center of gravity." During the Samanid era (819–999), the Oxus area in Central Asia lay at the heart of Khorasan, but in the Ghaznavid period (977–1186) its center shifted south. In the tenth century CE, "allegiance" to urban centers in the region existed alongside "a broader sense of Khurasani patriotism" (Peacock 2017: 144).

Many of the activists point to the cities of Herat and Balkh as key contenders to become the heart (*qalb*) of Khorasan. In their publications they locate these urban centers in a wider geography incorporating "the major cities of Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, Nasaf, Takhāristān (in present-day northern Afghanistan), and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan" (Balkhi 2022: 113). The emphasis they place on the urban centers of northern Afghanistan indicates their attempt to distinguish the project of imagining Khorasan from both IS-K's focus on the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands (Giustozzi 2018; Tarzi 2018), and the concept of "Greater Iran," which most if not all see as driven by the Iranian state. Given the securitization of much scholarship on Afghanistan, the term Khorasan is associated with radical Islamist groups that "espouse a territorially unbound, anti-national system of an Islamic state or caliphate" (Tarzi 2018: 127).[1] IS-K-affiliated militants have conducted violent attacks in Afghanistan (targeting especially the country's ethnically Hazara Shii Muslims), as well as in Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. The people I focus on here pursue the idea of Khorasan in order to give definition to ethical values and cultural attributes diametrically opposed to those of IS-K. They explicitly articulate a vision of Khorasan as a historic locus of intellectual authenticity, rationality, sophistication, creativity, and innovation; of religious and cultural plurality; and most broadly, of intense modes of intercultural exchange made possible through what they regard as the region's historic lingua franca, Persian.

The activists consistently emphasize the importance of rational thinking (*afkaar-e mantiqi*) both to their project of the imagination and to Khorasan's historical contributions to the world. But they also actively participate in the materialization

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[1]On Afghanistan's "landscapes" of militant jihad, see Devji 2017.

of their imaginings of Khorasan. In a manner comparable to the ways in which in an era of Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia, Urdu poetry in India articulates an alternative political theology to that of the nation-state (Taneja 2022), poetry is an especially critical medium through which the activists imagine Khorasan beyond national boundaries. One poem by an intellectual in his thirties who worked during the 2010s as a cultural advisor for a prominent politician in Afghanistan is especially widely circulated by the activists across social media. It underscores the ways in which they think the division of historic Khorasan into multiple nation states brought its people profound cultural and political loss:

> I am from Bukhara, an original Tajikistani
> I am a citizen of Mashhhad and Shiraz, an Iranian…
> My house in Persian geography is divided
> Kabul, Kulab and Tehran, I am a Khorasani.

Poems positing a shared Khorasani identity across national boundaries are also increasingly popularized through music. In 2024, for example, Sediq Shabab—a celebrated singer from central Afghanistan based in Germany—released a song along with Zulaykho Mahmadshoeva, from Tajikistan. In the song, Shabab sings, "I am a Khorasani man," before Zulaykho replies, "Afghan and Tajik, we are relatives … without doubt, Khorasanis" (*beshuba' khorasaani*).

For the activists, imagining Khorasan and disseminating their ideas about it to actors from the country and the region builds bridges between Persian-speakers divided by national boundaries and challenges globally influential images that depict Afghanistan as a "graveyard of empires" dominated by fundamentalist Islam, unchanging tribal customs, and international isolation. In this respect, they think the idea of Khorasan has the potential to generate a new image for the country around the globe.[2]

The activists are often criticized by people living in Afghanistan and the diaspora. "Khorasanis" are often depicted in social media as being engaged in irrelevant activities that distract attention from the humanitarian and human rights crises facing Afghanistan. More specifically, their critics challenge their ideas in two main if contradictory ways. First, the emphasis they place on Khorasan's civilizational achievement opens them to accusations of promoting divisive ethnonationalism.[3] Voices critical of the idea of Khorasan point to individuals and organizations that advocate for Afghanistan's partition (*tajzia*) and argue that the project is one of Tajik ethnic chauvinism (*fashism-e qawmi*) and secessionism (*tajzia talabi*). Second, after the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Khorasan-oriented activists have increasingly been depicted as pursuing aims that overlap with those of IS-K militants, since both groups are critical of modern Afghanistan's territorial boundaries and opposed to Taliban rule. The activists dismiss such representations as concoctions by Taliban "sympathizers."

Given ethnicity's hegemonic role in the representation of Afghanistan (Hanifi 2016; Marsden and Hopkins 2012) and the country's contemporary political dynamics (Ibrahimi 2023), it is unsurprising that many people from the country

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[2]For critiques of the trope of Afghanistan's isolation, see Crews 2015; Manchanda 2020; and Marsden 2016.

[3]For an analysis of ethnic politics in Afghanistan in the years following the Soviet invasion of 1979, see Schetter 2005.

view imaginings of Khorasan through the prism of ethnic politics. However, to analyze these social actors' activities one-dimensionally in relationship to ethnicity is conceptually unproductive. At one level, the activists treat Khorasan as a "symbolic space" and site of "theoretical-knowledge production" rather than simply an "object of specialist knowledge" (van Schendel 2002: 649); they actively debate among themselves about how relevant categories such as "ethnicity" are to their imaginative project. At another level, in order to disaggregate the subjects they study, anthropologists distinguish between data and the theoretical tools they deploy in its analysis. "Informants themselves make use of essentialist views of culture and ethnic identity," argues Baumann, yet their "reifications … need to be treated as data, rather than peddled as analytical guidelines" (1995: 726). Analyzing imaginings of Khorasani by activists in relation to the reductionist views they advance of culture, ethnicity, and civilization does little to clarify the phenomena considered here. Instead, to analyze the significance imagining Khorasan has for the activists and the wider populations they interact with, I turn to anthropological work on sovereignty.

Imagined Geographies and Sovereign Agency

My analysis of the idea of Khorasan seeks to connect an interdisciplinary literature on the geographical imagination with recent anthropological work on sovereignty. Modern "imaginings" of geography and identity have been conducted on a far wider scale than any single ethnic or subnational level (e.g., Gupta 1992). Edward Said's conceptualization of the geographical imagination in relation to colonial knowledge (1990) led historians to delve into the identity formations of premodern translocal arenas (see Green 2018). Anthropologists challenged the assumption that translocal modes of imagination anchored in specific knowledge ecumenes (Bayly 2007; Henig 2016) were "supplanted" by the "claims of modern science and nationhood." Susan Bayly, for example, documented the ways in which modern thinkers forged expansive geographical imaginaries that drew "inspiration" from older forms of transregional connectivity (2004: 703). Yet modern actors who deployed "translocal and supra-national" scales in their geographical imaginings engaged with European "theories of race, culture and civilisation" (ibid.: 707), meaning their identity projects were often "defin[ed] and delineat[ed] in relation to or even against the nationhood of others" (ibid.: 741).

Recent scholarship on Xinjiang—a context in which a history of attachment to distinct urban centers has existed in a dynamic relationship with a regional identity—builds fruitfully on this literature. Thum argues that an "Altishahri" "regional system of identity" was maintained in the "nonmodern and nonindustrial" context of early twentieth-century Xinjiang through the circulation of people and texts across multiple oasis cities (2012; 2014). Given both its internal coherence and eschewal of "claims of a national alignment between sovereignty and identity," Thum argues that Altishahri identity is reducible to neither ethnic boundary-making nor modern expressions of nationalism (ibid.: 649). A consideration of the activities of activists who debate the value of concepts such as ethnicity (*qawm*), region (*mantiqa*), civilization (*tamaddun*), and statehood (*dawlat daari*) in the context of their attempts to imagine Khorasan can extend the implications of Thum's work. It offers a case study of the ways in which diasporic actors seek to depict "regional identity systems" located at the interface of national and global scales of relevance to the contemporary world.

Political anthropologists have also sought to go beyond Westphalian spatial imaginaries that classify states according to whether they are sovereign or not. Anthropologists have shown that much can be learned about sovereignty by studying contexts in which the "links" between "authority, territory, population, and recognition are severed or attenuated" (Bryant and Reeves 2021: 6; see also Hansen 2021). For Bryant and Reeves, the importance people attach to sovereignty in contexts characterized by its absence raises the question of why people desire sovereign authority and seek to invest it in institutions and people. To address these questions, they develop the twin concepts of "sovereign agency" and "sovereign desire." "Sovereign desire" arises out of a "sense of loss"—of political voice, of legibility, and of order. "Sovereign agency" comprises "the variety of practices, strategies, and future-oriented claims that constitute institution and subject in ways that make the latter politically recognisable and capable of agentive action" (2021: 2). Sovereign desires, they argue, may be attached to the state form, though they need not be. Attempts to secure "recognition and political legibility" in settings of contested sovereignty are often "more aspiration than realization," but the "desire" to regain sovereign agency illustrates it's importance to peoples' attempts "to gain a sense of control over their lives" (ibid.).

Diasporas are especially productive sites in which to investigate sovereign agency and desire. For example, Dzenovska (2021), in her work on the Latvian diaspora, argues that mass migration has resulted in sovereignty becoming "reterritorialized": the existence of the state as "a territorial unit" remains important to selfhood, yet more and more, "sovereign agency" is being "distributed across territories of multiple nation-states" (ibid.: 168). The reterritorialization of sovereignty can result in a sense of "embattled nationhood" in which "culturally distinct people claim a state" while also "exhibiting deep existential fear" about its potential loss (ibid.: 156). Aspirations for sovereign agency in the context of embattled nationhood are visible in the political realm but also "inseparable" from "individual selfhood" (ibid.: 157).

Analyzing geographical imaginings of Khorasan through the lens of anthropological debates about modes of dealing with contested sovereignty reveals critical aspects of the activists' aspirations. If Afghanistan's powerholders often emphasize the country's success in resisting external influences, this disguises the extent of direct foreign influence, a situation Herzfeld identifies as "crypto-colonialism" (2002; Hanifi and Hanifi 2021; Marsden 2021). In Afghanistan, national elites "shielded" the people whom they governed from the "full impact of colonialism and imperialism" through projects of national identity construction (Hanifi and Hanifi 2021: 70). European imperialism played a major role in the bordering of Afghanistan and the emergence of its state structures (e.g., Hopkins 2009; Hanifi 2011; Fuoli 2018). Afghanistan's "independence" from British imperial influence was significant but short-lived (Ahmed 2017). In the postwar period, Afghanistan became a central location for geopolitical competition between the United States and the USSR (e.g., Leake 2017; Nunan 2016). After the Soviet invasion of 1979, the activities of international humanitarian organizations further undermined the country's sovereignty (Nunan 2016). Militarized violent international intervention between 2001 and 2021 rendered Afghanistan's contested sovereignty more legible to its people than ever before (e.g., Coburn 2018). In 2021, the Taliban presented their return to power as a reassertion of Afghan sovereignty. Within and beyond the country, however, many Afghans interpreted the change in administration as the result of a deal between the United States and the Taliban from which they were

excluded. While for some policy makers the Taliban's return raised the prospects for sustainable regional alignments, the projection of power inside Afghanistan by Pakistan became a key issue for diaspora activism.

The Late Cold War, Mobility, and Intellectual Networks

Far from arising out of the experience of "ethnics" ensconced in "metropolitan centers," the activists' modes of imagining Khorasan have been informed by sustained participation in transregional mobility and engagement with intersecting regional and global intellectual currents.

Almost all of the activists engaged in imagining Khorasan hail from Persian-speaking families. Some of their families have historically resided in the historic cities of Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kabul. Many, though, are descendants of families who lived in villages and small towns in provincial settings until the 1960s and 1970s, when they relocated to cities in Afghanistan, especially Kabul. Activists underscore their history of residence in Afghanistan's urban centers at the same time as they identify themselves in relation to their ancestral homelands.

Their familial histories diverge significantly in terms of their political affiliations. In the context of Afghanistan's critical position in the late stages of the Cold War, from the 1960s educated families from a range of regional backgrounds became involved in diverse political movements. The fathers of several activists, for instance, joined leftist movements in Afghanistan. Most were affiliated to the Parcham wing of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) that came to power in the coup of 1978. In contrast to the opposing Khalq faction, scholars generally view the Parcham wing as ethnically mixed, comprised of ethnic Tajiks and Persian-speakers who occupied positions of power and authority. The leftist backgrounds of many of the activists' families have shaped their approach to imagining Khorasan. At one level, leftist movements played a critical role in shaping discussions in northern Afghanistan about the relationship of ethnicity to the state. Building on Marxist theories of national identity important in the Soviet Union (Hirsch 1998), leftist thinkers, notably the Badakhshan-born Tahir Badakhshi (1933–1979), interpreted revolutionary struggle in relation to ethnic and regional inequalities. Badakhshi's Settam-e Milli party—especially influential in northeastern Afghanistan—argued that a socialist revolution would only be possible in the country after the end of the "national oppression" of minority ethnolinguistic groups by the Pashtun political elite (see Nunan 2016).

At another level, those active in leftist movements embraced Marxist ideas critical of Islam's role in modern Afghanistan's political history. Afghanistan's first communist administrations (1978–1980) attacked Islamic symbols and the religious authorities (*ulama*), but then between 1980 and 1986 the administration of Babrak Karmal (1929–1996) sought to make Marxism more acceptable to the country's people, promoting a form of "Islamic socialism" revolving around the concept of "social justice" (*adaalat- ijtimaaye*). Karmal sought to find common ground between his regime and that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, arguing the revolutions of both countries reflected an overarching concern with social justice and the struggle against U.S. imperialism (Klimentov 2022). Under pressure from the Soviet Union to reconcile with the mujahidin, Dr Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai (1947–1996; president between 1986 and 1992), tried to expand his regime's support base by fusing Afghan and Islamic identity (ibid.). Activists formerly active in the PDPA argue that mujahidin leaders and organizations based in Pakistan were

co-opted by the country's intelligence agency and those of its international allies and sought to weaken both the PDPA's progressive ideology as well as Afghanistan's indigenous Islamic culture (see Alim 2022). Darius, for example, is a prominent intellectual-activist who settled in London in the late 1990s and now works as a financial advisor. Many of his close network of friends in London were government officials in Afghanistan during the 1980s. They gather for regular meetings (*nishasthaa; majlishaa*) in one another's houses, and often lament that the PDPA government's 1992 collapse resulted in not only Pakistan's growing influence in Afghanistan but also the percolation of alien modes of being Muslim and cultural forms—from spicy food to clothing-styles, such as the "Punjabi suit."

Other activists who are involved in imagining Khorasan and hail from families involved in leftist politics were themselves school students during the 1980s. Those of this background often say that they experienced cognitive dissonance in the context of the mujahidin's rise to power. Faridun, for example, was raised in Kabul during the 1980s. He told me in the UK how he remembered seeing images during the 1980s of the Pakistan-based mujahidin displayed on the country's National TV station. The TV images, he said, presented the movement's leaders as "monsters" (*ashraar*) devoid of civilization (*betamaddun*) and bent on destroying Afghanistan's historic culture. After the mujahidin entered Kabul, Faridun spent time with fighters who had arrived in central Kabul and found instead that many of these leaders had familial backgrounds similar to his own. Faridun's father, for instance, had been affiliated to the Khalq wing of the PDPA and was forced to flee his home village for Kabul after mujahidin accused him of being a government informer, though his mother's brother (*maamaa*) led a mujahidin fighting unit (Kwon 2010). As a teenager Faridun was exposed to the social and political worlds of both his leftist father and his mujahidin-affiliated uncle.

After 1992, former leftists began shifting their political allegiances to jihadi leaders on the basis of shared regional and ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Men, including Faridun, told me how when younger, in this fluid political context, they came to question the one-dimensional images of the mujahidin the former government had promoted. Faridun, for example, told me that he came to view mujahidin leaders as men who had sought to protect distinctive regional identities and ethnic group interests. Experience of life at this transitory moment played a powerful role in leading people of his generation to think about Afghanistan's history and political dynamics in relational to regional histories and identities.

Not all the activists hail from leftist-oriented families. Several senior figures in the promotion of the idea of Khorasan in the diaspora were active in the mujahidin-led struggle against the Soviet Union. Jalal has been particularly influential over several decades and has lived in London since the early 2010s. In the 1960s, he moved with his family from a small town in the north of Afghanistan to Kabul after his father was appointed to a government position. Upon the Soviet invasion, Jalal moved to Iran where he became acquainted with the work of Iranian intellectuals exploring the fusion between Islam and Persian culture. He also familiarized himself with Arabic and Persian writings on the geographic contours and cultural attributes of Khorasan.[4] In the 1980s, Jalal traveled regularly between Iran and Peshawar and was eventually

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[4]The intellectual refers in his Facebook essays, for example, to *Masālik al-Mamālik* (Routes of the realms) written in the late tenth century CE by Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭakhrī (al-Iṣṭakhrī 1870). He also references several modern Arabic and Persian accounts of Khorasan including Ranjbar (1984) and al-Kīlānī (2012).

appointed as an advisor to the Jamiat-e Islami, a principal organization (*tanzim*) within the broader anti-Soviet mujahidin. During this period, he told me, he was among the first of Afghanistan's intellectuals to advocate for the relevance of the idea of Khorasan to the mujahidin's struggle against the Soviet Union. During the twentieth century, Persian-speaking intellectuals in Afghanistan had argued the case for constructing the country as the successor state of Khorasan (Tarzi 2018). In the 1940s, though, the idea that ancient pre-Islamic Afghanistan had been the "land of the Aryans" received state support, resulting in the term "Aryana" achieving widespread political and cultural currency (Green 2017). Promoting the idea of Khorasan in Peshawar was not straightforward: jihadi leaders warned Jalal that his emphasis on Khorasan risked exacerbating ethnic tensions and laying the party open to accusations of "separatism."

If political leaders did not receive Jalal's intellectual work in the manner he had hoped, it did have longer-term implications. During the 1980s and 1990s, Peshawar was home to many politically influential families from northern Afghanistan, the younger generations of which were receptive to the thinking of individuals like Jalal who were seeking to enhance knowledge about Khorasan's civilizational legacy. Take for instance Jan Agha, who is in his late forties and lives in London. He was educated to university level at institutions established by mujahidin organizations in Peshawar, where he was also instructed in the Islamic Sciences and Arabic by leading religious authorities. After moving to London in the early 2000s, Jan Agha became a leading proponent of Khorasan and since the 2010s he has worked closely with Jalal. Intergenerational relationships have played a significant role in shaping the activists' thinking about Islam's relationship to regional identity.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan intensified transregional mobility, and this played a powerful role in creating the environment in which Khorasan became more sharply defined. In the mid-1990s, for example, Faridun secured a bursary dispersed by Afghanistan's mujahidin-led government to study in Turkey. He told me that his exposure while there to both Turkish nationalism and the attitudes of fellow Afghan students led him to recognize the limitations of narrow forms of nationalism. "All the time," he reminisced, "students from Afghanistan compared themselves to the local Turks, saying they were much better, stronger, and saying how Afghans were brave and had defeated the British and the Soviet Union. I thought all of this was illogical. Look at the situation of our country and look at what these students say about it!" Faridun's disillusionment with discourses about Afghan national identity eventually led him to investigate Khorasan as an alternative way of thinking about Afghanistan's history and place in the world.

Studying and working in Central Asian countries, especially Tajikistan, also played a role in developing the thinking of several activists. Farid, for example, is in his late forties and from northeastern Afghanistan. He served for several years in a government ministry in Afghanistan before seeking asylum in the UK, where he is a company employee while also running a cultural association. He studied for doctoral degrees in the humanities in Tajikistan during the 2000s. During that period, scholars in Tajikistan were active in developing an "ethnonationalist (indeed nationalist) historiography of the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia" (Reeves 2021: 217). Men like Farid shared with academics in Tajikistan intellectual interests in the importance of Persian to the history of the wider region, but they also frequently encountered depictions of Afghanistan as "backward" (*pasmaanda*) and its peoples as "lacking civilization" (*betamaddun*) (Marsden 2016). Having settled in the UK,

Farid maintained and expanded his connections with intellectuals in Central Asia. He was invited to conferences in Tajikistan that addressed regional history and international politics and he established relationships with intellectuals in Uzbekistan active in the promotion of Persian culture and history. Farid's lived experiences in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan excited an interest in Afghanistan's historic connections to Central Asia, a region from which the country had become detached during the course of the twentieth century.

Comparing regional identity constructions in Xinjiang and Afghanistan is instructive not only with reference to the premodern period. David Brophy (2016) has explored the ways in which mobile people, including workers and traders who crisscrossed the borders of China, the Soviet Union, and the Ottoman Empire, played a critical role in the emergence of Uyghur identity during the early twentieth century. The imagination of Khorasan has also been driven by mobile actors influenced by diverse intellectual currents who have forged connections across a range of locales, geopolitical contexts, and institutions. "Long distance nationalism" is of limited value for analyzing the roles intellectual exchanges made possible by transregional mobility have played in modes of imagining Khorasan in the global diaspora, the issue to which I now turn.

Imagining Khorasan: "From Ethnic to Civilizational Identity"

In the mid-2000s, intellectuals living in London, from a range of settings across northern and central Afghanistan, established a cultural association (*anjomaan*) that organized talks through which they collectively sought to rethink Afghanistan through the category of Khorasan.[5] The association's membership was diverse both politically and socially; it included men of modest backgrounds, and the sons and daughters of influential politicians. Several, such as Faridun, having settled as refugees, had embarked on the study of various aspects of Afghanistan's history at British universities. During the 2010s, leading politicians in Afghanistan provided scholarships, bursaries, and other forms of support to help a limited number of well-connected individuals who had already settled in London pursue university educations.

Individuals in the association were connected to organizations established by people from Afghanistan in Europe, the Americas, and Australia who shared similar perspectives. Prominent activists in London were invited to present their ideas in the form of lectures, which were often recorded and made available via DVDs and internet videos. Many also disseminated their thinking on Khorasan in Persian essays they posted on Facebook. Many of those were richly decorated with images of the books they discussed, as well as of figures of Khorasani history ranging from Zoroaster to the poet Rumi (Jalalludin Balkhi) and the scientist ibn-e Sina.[6] They also, though less frequently, publish books, mostly self-financed, which analyzed Afghanistan's modern history. These were initially printed in Iran but once conditions improved in Afghanistan during the 2010s they were also produced in Kabul. These books circulate widely in multiple settings and are often launched at

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[5] I conducted interviews with over twenty intellectual-activists involved in imagining Khorasan and participated in numerous group discussions and collective events.

[6] Being *fa'al* (active) and responsive on social media is a marker of prestige among the intellectual-activists.

well-attended events to which the activists carry them as they travel to give speeches, meet friends, and attend familial as well as intellectual gatherings.

I will now sketch the contours of activists' modes of imagining Khorasan. While I seek to contextualize the lives of individuals, to protect their anonymity I must discuss especially sensitive aspects of their thinking in a more abstract form.

Ethnicity and "Social Justice"

Activists engaged in imagining Khorasan often present the most salient aspect of Afghanistan's politics as being the state's role in defining national identity. Most blame the country's political instability in the second half of the twentieth century on Pashtuns' domination of state structures (see Hyman 2002). Since Emir Abdur Rahman Khan established Afghanistan in 1880, they argue, Pashtun leaders have dominated those structures and sidelined other ethnic groups. Beyond the political and economic aspects of this so-called "Pashtun domination," activists highlight its implications for the country's "national identity."[7] They highlight attempts by Pashtun intellectual and political elites in the early twentieth century to fashion a singular "Afghan" national identity from the top down.[8] For the activists, "Afghan" national identity has been premised too exclusively upon Pashtun identity, history, and culture, while other groups have been marginalized (Badakhshi 2024). They point especially to the erasure of non-Pashtuns peoples, regions, and leaders from official versions of the country's history; they often argue that Emir Habibullah Khan Kalakani—a figure from central Afghanistan who deposed the country's modernizing king Amanullah Khan in 1929—has been unfairly depicted as a poorly educated rebel (*yaghi*) and British-supported "Islamic fanatic."

Activist-intellectuals argue that the marginalization of regional identities and leaders is a feature of the country's recent history. In 2016, for example, I visited the family home in Kabul of Maisan, a UK-based intellectual-activist who holds humanities degrees from UK universities. He had returned to Afghanistan earlier that year seeking employment as an advisor to a politician. In London, Maisan worked as a translator and played a leading role in establishing a cultural association. During my visit he explained to his father—a government official in Kabul in the 1980s with leftist sympathies—that in the post-2001 period influential narratives in Afghanistan depicted mujahidin leaders from the country's north—notably Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001)—as rebels whose actions upon the collapse of the pro-Soviet government brought civil war (*jang-e daakheli*). The use of the terms "*yaghi*," Maisan went on, delegitimized non-Pashtun figures and excluded them from Afghanistan's official history. His father nodded in agreement as Maisan explained that such narratives concealed a more complex socio-political reality. He said leaders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud had built structures of "social justice" in the areas of the country over which they governed and earned legitimacy and authority among local people.[9] Activists deploy the concept of "social justice," developed by the leftist

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[7]For a critique of discourses of "Pashtun-domination," see Hanifi 2016.

[8]On national identity in Afghanistan, see Ibrahimi 2023; and Nawid 2009. On the importance of constructions of the past to these processes, see Green 2017.

[9]On local institutions in rural in Afghanistan, see Murtashvili 2016.

Karmal, to contest negative images of mujahidin leaders and illuminate the layered nature of their intellectual worlds (e.g., Gall 2021).

In discussions with one another, activists contend that one can only understand "Pashtun domination" in the context of broader fields of imperial, colonial, and geopolitical power. In the summer of 2022, for example, I was invited to attend a London gathering of activists held at the home of an active member of a cultural association of Persian-speakers from Afghanistan. Both men and women attend this association's public meetings, but most who attend such friendship gatherings are men, and on this occasion the host had arranged for his wife and children to spend the day away from home so he could attend to his guests there. After we had dined on kebabs cooked by our host, who was introduced to me as a successful "entrepreneur," one of the association's leading figures invited the guests to sit in the garden. People attend such events for joyful social interactions, but they often ensure that at least some time is set aside for focused debate (*bhas*). Two of the guests at this particular event had been well-known figures in Afghanistan's post-2010 media and political landscape and sought refuge in the UK in the aftermath of August 2021. Sensing the tone had changed from informal discussion to serious debate, one of them, Wali, said to those gathered that he was often asked at such gatherings to share his ideas about Afghanistan's future, and with their permission, he would be happy to do so on this occasion, too. Encouraged to speak, Wali declared that depictions of Afghanistan in the UK and elsewhere needed to be understood in the context of knowledge that colonial explorers and officials had produced about the country.[10] He said colonial knowledge had laid the grounds for successive external actors to assume that Afghanistan's legitimate rulers are inevitably ethnically Pashtun. Such ideas, Wali argued, had shaped the notion, evident in policy circles in the UK and elsewhere, that the return of the Taliban was "inevitable." As a result, he concluded, there was an urgent need for people, included those gathered, not to act as victims but to rationally challenge such historic misrepresentations.[11]

The persistence of colonial knowledge into the twentieth century, activists argue, has also affected Afghanistan's international relations. The tendency of foreign policy makers and academics to think about Afghanistan through the lens of ethnic Pashtuns has resulted in the country's relations with Pakistan being prioritized at the expense of those with Central Asia. In 2010, for example, I co-organized a conference in London exploring the relevance of Fredrik Barth's study of Swat (1965) for understanding regional dynamics, which was attended by several activists invested in the idea of Khorasan. Upon the conference's conclusion, I was politely told that instead of organizing yet another event in Britain targeting the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier, I should have approached the country from my own area of expertise, Central Asia.[12] An absence of sustained attempts to explore Afghanistan through this perspective, I was told, was a recurring feature of British policy toward Afghanistan, which had denied non-Pashtuns in the country's north political influence and visibility.[13]

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[10] See Hopkins 2009; and Hanifi 2019.

[11] Many conceive of Afghanistan as a "mosaic society" made up of "multiple minorities and no majority."

[12] On the use of the notion of "'Pashtunistan" as a strategic tool by Afghanistan's political elites, see Nunan 2016; and Leake 2017.

[13] See Nunan 2016; Marsden 2018; and Ibañez-Tirado and Khan 2022.

The activists often analyze the influence of "Pashtun-domination" on Afghanistan's state structures, official historic narratives, and national identity discourses through a consideration of names. In Afghanistan as in Xinjiang, names are "politically contentious" and "tensions" over them are "a product of conquest and colonization" (Thum 2014). Anthropologists have long recognized how names are deployed to authorize social categories (e.g., vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006; Cohn 1987). As Copeman (2015) argues, however, if states seek to fix identities through deploying the power to name, subjects, too, use apparatuses of identification for their own interests. Furthermore, names not only mark identity; they play a role in the "formulation and reformulation of value" (Copeman 2023: 141). In the context of the activists thinking about Khorasan, (re)naming places and peoples expresses sovereign desire and functions as a strategy for achieving political value and legibility in the public sphere.

The notion of Afghanistan derives from the term "Afghan" (pronounced in the north of the country as *awghaan*), an ethnonym, the activists argue, that the country's non-Pashtuns use exclusively to refer to ethnic Pashtuns.[14] As a result of "Afghan" being used to identify citizenship and collective national identity, non-Pashtuns are excluded from both fields. Most activists who advocate the relevance of Khorasan to addressing Afghanistan's internal dynamics and place in the world publicly identify as Persian-speaking "Tajiks." More and more, my interlocutors argue that the term "Afghanistani" better identifies their identity (*huiyat*) than "Afghan." "Afghanistani," they say, identifies citizenship (*shahrwandi*) as defined by the state of Afghanistan rather than membership in any particular ethnolinguistic group (*qawm*).[15]

The politically contentious nature of names and their importance to the activists' attempts to earn visibility and recognition for Persian-speakers are regularly on display at the events they hold in London. For example, Khurshid, a woman from central Afghanistan who plays a public and active role in a London-based cultural association, often stands to speak in events, reminding participants, "We are not Afghans but Tajiks who are Afghanistani citizens." Activists are coming to prefer identifying themselves as Khorasani rather than Afghanistani, and they often use it also as a penname (*naam-e mustahar*). Arguing that they have hitherto lacked the lobbying power of Pashtuns, they have also been forging more links with university-based academics and policy makers in the UK and elsewhere, organizing conferences that seek to attract audiences beyond committed Khorasanis.[16] They often inform non-"Afghanistani" attendees that they should avoid using the term "Afghan." Their emphasis on naming does not simply express essentialist understandings of ethnic identity; it is a strategy for constructing "politically recognizable" subjects "capable of agentive action."

Some activists argue that the culture and territory of Khorasan are of particular significance for Tajik ethnic identity (*huiyat-e qawmi*) and advocate for this to be institutionally recognized through either the creation of a province in Afghanistan or

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[14]On the relation of the category Pashtun to Afghan, see, for example, Hanifi 2011. For the political consequences of these terms, see Sadr 2020. See Rahimi 2017 for a revisionist history of Afghanistan.

[15]The relationship between civic and ethnic identity has featured prominently in debates about citizenship elsewhere, notably Russia (e.g., Blakkisrud 2023).

[16]Foltz notes that the "most enthusiastic response" to his book on Tajik history came from "the Tajiks of Afghanistan" in London (2023: xii).

an independent nation-state. Still others challenge the construction of Khorasan in opposition to Pashtuns and argue that it is better thought of as a historic region that has inherited an inclusive "civilizational identity" (*huiyat-e tamadduni*). For instance, Jalal, the formerly Iran-based activist introduced earlier, is especially active in promoting the concept of civilizational identity. For him, Khorasan's civilization was characterized historically by its people's "acceptance" of religious, cultural, and linguistic "plurality" (*pazirish-e tanawo*). In his posts on social media, Jalal often cites Frederik Starr's *The Lost Enlightenment* (2013), a study that lays out the contributions intellectuals in mediaeval Central Asia made to the modern world and seeks to bring "Silk Road" history into discussions of the economic development of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The book typifies a broader genre of what Hannerz refers to as "geocultural" writing, or ways of thinking "about the world and its parts, and the main features of those parts" (2009: 268). Over a meal at a Persian restaurant in London named after a celebrated Persian poet, Jalal told me that Persian is one of the central "pillars" (*sutoonha; paayahaa*) of the region's civilization. It enabled cross-cultural communication and creativity and achievement of world-historic significance.[17] For Jalal, the region's people's relationship with Khorasan's historic civilization has been broken by ethnic chauvinism (*fashism-e qawmi*), including by actors who think of the imaginative space of Khorasan as exclusively Tajik, by Soviet rule through the creation of national republics in Central Asia, and by the state-sponsored "fake histories" (*tarikhaa-e ja'ali*) of Afghanistan and Iran. He argues that any attempt to give Khorasan an institutional form must reject such approaches and seek instead to forge political forms that can enable its peoples to reconnect with their shared historic civilization.

Hanafi Islam and Religious Sovereignty

Khorasan's religious history is a key topic of debate among the activists. Proponents of Khorasan argue that the forging of modern-day Afghanistan was not just an ethnolinguistic project but also an Islamic one. For them, the country's modern history has excluded non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims from the country's core identity. Jalal, for example, told me that Amir Habibur Rahman, a key figure in the founding of the modern state, Islamized Afghanistan with disastrous consequences for its people; Khorasani civilization was built upon the historic "foundation" (*buniyaad*) of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Islam, and yet the policies of modern Afghanistan (and Iran) have distanced them from historic religious plurality.[18] Politically aligned to Jamiat-e Islam, Jalal nevertheless emphasizes Khorasan's history as an arena of interreligious interaction, recalling that when he was a young boy in northern Afghanistan a street in his hometown was inhabited by Jewish merchants. People adhering to these non-Islamic religious traditions, he argued, lived not as repressed "minorities" (*akhaliyaa*t) but, instead, played a significant role in Khorasan's political, economic, and cultural dynamics (e.g., Balkhi 2022).

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[17]Intellectual-activists are critical of the term "Dari" (used officially in Afghanistan since 1958 to refer to the form of Persian spoken in the country), arguing it imposes national boundaries on Persian in a manner that divides Persian-speakers (*mantiqa*). See Beeman 2010; and Spooner 2012.

[18]On Abdur Rahman Khan's role in the mapping of Afghanistan, see Edwards 1996; and Hanifi 2016.

To underscore their commitment to Khorasan's religious plurality, activists often attend events in London organized by Sikh and Hindus from Afghanistan (see Marsden 2024). In June 2022, I accompanied two activists to an event in a Hindu temple that addressed threats to the built heritage of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus. The event's organizers invited both men—one of whom was visiting the UK from The Netherlands, where he runs a cultural association—to make speeches (*sukhanraani*). Both referred in their orations to Khorasan as region characterized by its religious diversity, one in which Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews had lived alongside one another peacefully. The speaker from The Netherlands encouraged everyone present to resist attempts to divide them from one another: "There is no you and we (*maa u shomaa*), only we" (*faqat maa*), he concluded. Before the meeting, both men had chatted with Sikhs they had known in Kabul during the 1980s when all were members of the PDPA.

When it comes to the role religion played in Khorasan's history and civilization, however, there is considerable intellectual divergence. A substantial cross-section of activists, including Jalal, argue that the Hanafi "school" (*maslak*) of Islamic law (*sharia*) is, along with Persian, a central "pillar" of Khorasani civilization. The school is named after Abu Ḥanifa an-Nuʿman ibn Thabit, an eighth-century CE Muslim jurist who many activists say hailed from present-day central Afghanistan.[19] Some argue that non-Hanafi forms of Islam, especially Shiism and Salafism, are external intrusions in Khorasani civilization that have brought disorder (*fitna*). For Jalal, though, Muslims in the region who follow non-Hanafi legal traditions, including Shii Hazara, are tied to Khorasan's civilization through their adherence to one or another of its "pillars," especially Persian and Islamic "Sufism" (*ilm-e urfaani*).[20]

For illustration, one evening I was invited to a London Middle Eastern restaurant for a dinner attended by several activists. A man in his forties told us that Shii Islam was an external influence that had brought internal turmoil to Afghanistan. A prominent intellectual-activist who held major posts in Afghanistan's leftist government of the 1980s and now lives in the UK retorted that he disagreed with this "point of view" (*nazariya*). He was from a valley in northeastern Afghanistan that was home to both Sunni and Shii Ismaili Muslims and told us that in his village people of differing confessional identities had lived side-by-side for generations.

A smaller but vocal cross-section of activists argue that Islam itself is an intrusive influence in Khorasan. Echoing essentializing representations of Islam (Asad 2001), they argue that Islam's presence in Khorasan is an outcome of the "Arab" conquest of an indigenous (*bhumi*) society, and that the region's pre-Islamic history should be regarded as the foundation of its civilization. For instance, Darius, the leftist-aligned intellectual-activist introduced earlier, works to distance himself and the association he runs from Islamic rituals and practices, such as by greeting his friends using the Persian phrase *durood* rather than the commonplace and Arabic-derived "salaam." During a party at the house of a member of the friendship group, attended by about ten of Darius' friends (*rafiqhaa*), I was told they had each given themselves *naam-e warasta*, or "self-beautified names." These names were Persian rather than Arabic

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[19]Azad (2020) argues that treating Khorasan as the birthplace of Hanafism is "reductionist" because it "only attained the shape of a 'school'" in the later medieval period.

[20]See, for example, Balkhi 2022: 118. Balkhi here also argues that the distinction between rulers and the religious authorities in the region's history point to an indigenous tradition of secular politics, a position debated by diasporic intellectual-activists.

and widely used in historic texts of Persian literature, such as Ferdawasi's epic poem the *Shahnameh.* When the group meets socially, they impose fines upon individuals who use their Arabic rather than Persian names, or the term "Afghan" instead of "Afghanistani." These activists see themselves as culturally distinct people marginalized by both long-term historical processes and the official narratives of modern Afghanistan's history and national identity. The act of re-naming reflects an aspiration for sovereign agency in which the "political realm" is fused with that of "individual selfhood" (Dzenovska 2021: 157).

Differences in opinion about the role of Islam in Khorasani culture emerge not only in informal gatherings but also at public events. I was invited to one held at a London university intended to celebrate the work of a renowned Persian poet from Tajikistan. Also in attendance was Haydar, a well-known intellectual-activist with leftist political affiliations and based in Germany. The organizers decided that after the planned discussion they would hold a launch for Haydar's most recently published Persian book. While introducing the book, Haydar argued that Islamists —be they the mujahidin, IS-K, or the Taliban—were cut from the same cloth: all were the projects of Western intelligence networks (*shabakahaa-e istikhbaarat-e gharb*). When he finished speaking, a member of the audience, a committed Khorasani who had been involved in the mujahidin struggle against the Soviet Union, stood and spoke: "As a representative of the mujahidin here," he announced, "it is my duty to reject the assertion that there is any overlap between the Taliban, ISIS, and the mujahidin. The mujahidin emerged to protect Hanafi Islam and the cultures and traditions of the region (*urf u adaat-e mantiqa*), unlike DAESH [ISIS] and the Taliban that advocate for Salafism and Deobandism." Sometime after the event, he said to me, "Afghanistan is a very traditional society. If the idea of Khorasan is to gain traction, we will always have to work with rather than against Islamic institutions. The influence of those who think otherwise is confined to a few hundred people living in Europe and America." Not all in the audience at the event found his intervention persuasive: a man in his mid-forties stood and stated, "We have heard you make this remark many times, but you never accept responsibility for the mujahidin's legacy on Afghanistan."[21]

The intellectual-activists consider the Taliban an ethnonationalist movement driven by Pashtuns and ideologically shaped by Deobandi Islam.[22] Given that the country's state structures are presided over by Pashtuns who share an ideological commitment to Deobandi Islam, they argue, the country's non-Pashtun populations and their cultures, histories, and identities face an existential threat. That threat, they assert, is materialized in the Taliban using resources at their disposal to establish Islamic schools (*dar-ul uloom*) and colleges (*madrasas*) across the country. For activists from across the spectrum of political positions, such institutions seek to "brainwash" (*shustushoi maaghz*) future generations with Taliban ideology.[23] "There is no place for our people in Afghanistan," people often tell me, "and if the Taliban remain in power, no people with our values will remain in the country." Activists also

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[21]For intellectual-activists, the incorporation of Bukhara within the Soviet Union accelerated the wider region's civilizational decline. See Pickett (2020) on Bukhara's significance for Islamic knowledge.

[22]On the Deoband school of thought, see Metcalf 1982.

[23]Scholars writing about the Taliban in the 1990s argued that the movement had no ideology (Maley 1998), while work on the post-2021 Taliban administration has revealed clearer ideological reference points (e.g., Butt 2023; and Crews 2021).

point to reports of the Taliban resettling Pashto-speakers in northern Afghanistan, and contend that this represents a perpetuation of the early twentieth-century "internal colonization" of Afghanistan by Pashtun elites (Tapper 1973).

In the context of Taliban-rule, the activists fear that their language-based civilizational identity and the territories to which it has historically been connected will be lost. Diaspora associations invest great efforts into enabling younger generations to preserve (*hifz kardan*) Khorasani civilization. For example, events I have attended marking celebrations such as Persian New Year (Nowruz) and Mother Language Day (*ruz-e zabaan-e maadari*), arranged by London and Birmingham associations, have included performances by musicians from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran, traditional foods, and poetry readings. Such events invariably center around speeches given by prominent activists about the history of Nowruz or Persian literature's contributions to world civilization. I interviewed the founding member of a particularly active association, a leftist born in northeastern Afghanistan who was trained in the Soviet Union and employed by the government in Kabul until 1992. He had sought refuge in the UK before returning to Afghanistan in the 2000s to work for an international organization. He told me that instructing younger generations about the region's cultural and linguistic heritage was especially critical now. Beyond enabling the preservation of Khorasan's cultural heritage, teaching them would ensure that "the new generation" (*nasl-e naw*) were less susceptible to the radicalizing efforts of Islamists in the UK. Among the latter he included those supportive of IS-K, a group that had preyed upon the frustrations of young men of "Afghanistani" background and persuaded at least two to travel to fight in Syria, where they were killed. Activists reject the idea that there is any overlap between their imagination of Khorasan and that advanced by Islamist militants. They are cognizant of the ways in which IS-K recruiters may target younger generations of their families, and they seek to mitigate against this by enriching their children's understanding of Persian and Khorasani civilization.

Much of the activists' work focuses on life in the diaspora, but they also seek to carve out a space for institutional and symbolic recognition of the idea of Khorasan in Afghanistan. In the 2010s, several men active in associations in the UK returned there and took up positions in the country's government, NGO sector, and media organizations. Some worked as senior advisors (*moshawarhaa-e arshad*) in posts established by influential, ethnically Tajik politicians. After Ashraf Ghani was appointed the country's President in 2014, the notion of Khorasan came to be a more visible aspect of political discourse in Afghanistan. Many of the activists claimed that Ashraf Ghani relied on a handpicked inner coterie of officials of Pashtun background and ran a "government of three" (*hokumat-e seh nafara*), and that in governing in that way he significantly sharpened ethnic tensions in the country. Activists said they had initially been surprised by the U.S.-educated Ghani's ethnic politics but later came to realize, "However modern and well-educated Afghanistan's Pashtun leaders are, they are unable to jettison their ethnic and tribal preferences or envision different groups playing a lead role in governing the country."

After 2014, more politicians in Afghanistan began invoking Khorasan to argue that the country's political form should be federal in nature, since that would facilitate a more equitable sharing of power among ethnic groups. Those campaigning for a federal system argued that a region of the country should be named Khorasan. Powerful political figures occupying influential government positions also regularly referred to the regions of the country over which they exerted influence

as "*khorasaan zamin*," the land of Khorasan. By doing so, figures such as Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of the northern province of Balkh, publicly challenged the Kabul-centered government by claiming for Balkh, a historic center of Khorasan, a pivotal position in the development of world civilization and Afghanistan's modern geography. Noor's use of "Khorasan" formed part of his attempt to challenge representations of him as a "warlord" (Mukhopadhyay 2014) and depict himself instead as a figure of cultural sophistication with a "strong sense of a pedagogue's obligation to convey Afghanistan's historic past to the public" (McChesney 2021: 310). Noor's use of the idea of Khorasan was no doubt influenced by the large coterie of "advisors" he surrounded himself with and "perceived as an instrument for solidifying power" (ibid.: 313). Noor also gave speeches that addressed Balkh's cultural significance to large audiences at events in cities including London that were organized by diaspora associations. Advisors who worked alongside him included several men active in imagining Khorasan in London during the 2000s.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 curtailed the activities of activists in Afghanistan. In this changed political context, more of them openly argued for the partition (*tajzia*) of Afghanistan and the establishment of a nation-state for the region's Tajiks and Persian-speakers. One successful London-based entrepreneur sponsored a dinner, attended by both men and women, intended to develop strategies that would enable the diaspora to effectively oppose Taliban rule. One invitee asked the gathering if it was not time to advocate for the country's partition. "Pashtuns," he asserted, "side with the Taliban and hold back the country's progress to keep Persian-speakers from being able to live a decent life." Individuals and groups engaged in the imagination of Khorasan have also established "para diplomatic entities" (McConnell 2016; see also McConnell, Moreau, and Dittmer 2012). An activist in the UK, for instance, runs an organization he calls "the United States of Khorasan." His social media accounts display the USK's national flag, citizenship database, passport, banknotes, and a "news channel." This illustrates how ethnicity does play a central role in some conceptions of political structures that some activists think could provide Khorasan an institutional form.

Activists employ Khorasan to imagine and develop modes of achieving "recognition, visibility, and political legibility" for peoples they think have been marginalized by both Afghan nationalism and a wider political and intellectual landscape dominated by colonial knowledge and paradigms grounded in security concerns. All believe Khorasan is a more authentic geographical designation than "Afghanistan," and some argue that it grants recognition to ethnic identity and should be institutionalized as a nation-state. Others emphasize the need to develop a political form that can capture Khorasan's plural "civilizational identity" (*huiyat-e tamadduni*). Khorasan's historical status as a cultural arena that spanned South, West, and Central Asia leads the activists to argue that it can facilitate Afghanistan's integration into multiple political and cultural contexts and serve as a vehicle for creating a more positive place in the world for the country and its citizens (see Jansen 2009: 827).

Experiencing Khorasan: In Search of Recognition and Political Legibility

I will now examine expressions of the forms of sovereign desire discussed above that are inherently political but also "inseparable from individual selfhood." Concentrating on specific expressions of sovereign desire reveals the strategies

adopted by the activists in the face of existential fears they hold about the future of "the physical and political existence of the self" (Dzenovska 2021: 156) in the context of the Taliban's return. I address in particular the importance heritage tourism has for them, bringing attention to the ways in which they think travel to Central Asia can make Khorasani selfhood visible and legible. Anthropologists have addressed the importance of "diaspora tourism" in relation to ways in which dispersed groups "root" their collective identities through journeys of homecomings during which selective understandings of past traumatic dispersals are transmitted and inculcated (e.g., Basu 2007; 2017; Reed 2014). The travel itineraries of Khorasani activists share much in common with such heritage tourism, but they also bring into question the binary between home and host societies and locate authentic identity instead in a transregional arena that crisscrosses multiple nation-states.

Since 2021, most people active in the imagining of Khorasan have either been unwilling or unable to travel to Afghanistan. Those who played a role in the political and cultural dynamics of the country during the two decades of international intervention are widely known for their affiliations with figures in the previous government, and they fear Taliban reprisals in Afghanistan by the Taliban. Most, however, avoid traveling to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan because they see it as a politically resonant act that might legitimize Taliban rule. Many people in the diaspora have traveled to Afghanistan since 2021, and they often return with reports that the country's security situation has improved and that they were able to visit regions that were off-limits during the preceding twenty years. Activists are often angered, however, by the ways in which such visits are covered by social media in Afghanistan. Social media accounts they regard as "pro-Taliban" often include interviews with diasporic Afghans praising the state of the country. The activists think such videos distract from human rights issues, particularly those facing the country's women, and "white-wash" Taliban rule.

Over the course of the summers of 2022 and 2023 several activists I had come to know in London visited Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Several traveled with their families—such journeys enabled their children to forge connections to Khorasani culture without having to go to Afghanistan. Though they were not part of organized tour groups, they were supported by networks of friends from Afghanistan living in Central Asia. Individuals from northern Afghanistan living in Uzbekistan, for example, have invested in the country's thriving hotel sector, much of which caters to "Silk Road" tourism. One businessman based in New York, for instance, is descended from a family of religious notables that fled the city of Samarkand for Afghanistan in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. His family subsequently migrated to Saudi Arabia and from there to the United States. Having made money in industry in Uzbekistan, he opened several hotels catering to local and international tourists in Tashkent and the historic cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. The experiences of Khorasani activists visiting Central Asia's Republics from beyond the region are often mediated through a "human infrastructure" established by people from Afghanistan who are nonetheless connected to the transregional arena widely referred to as Khorasan (Simone 2004; see also Marsden 2016).

I spent time in Uzbekistan with a group of three families, all of whom came from the same region of central Afghanistan and today live in the UK. Over six weeks, the group visited historic sites across Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It was their second collective visit to the region, though during this trip they had decided to visit Tajikistan as well as Uzbekistan. One of the group's men, Jamshid—a former

PDPA member who served in Afghanistan's security forces in the 1980s and early 1990s and runs a business in London—is known for having a pragmatic approach to imagining Khorasan. He spent time in Uzbekistan in the 1990s before moving to the UK and still has several friends from Afghanistan living in that country. During the course of their stay in Central Asia, the families visited sites they perceived to be significant in Khorasan's history, including the tomb of Ismail Samani in Bukhara, the Registan Square in Samarkand, and the historic town of Penjikent in northern Tajikistan. In Tashkent, the three women traveling with the group also bought local styles of clothing that diaspora women from northern Afghanistan have begun wearing. More women activists in London and elsewhere are opting for clothes made of fabric designed and printed in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Both in terms of fabric and design, these clothes are different from women's dresses traditionally marketed in Afghanistan's diaspora as "*gand-e afghaani*," but referred to in Afghanistan as *kuchihaa*, the name of the country's Pashto-speaking nomads the styles originated with. Cultural associations in the UK invite businesses that specialize in selling such clothing to run stalls at their events.

Individuals in the group posted updates about their travels on the WhatsApp "status" tool, mostly photographs of historic sites with voiceovers explaining how these places pictured were related to Khorasan's history. In a voiceover of a picture of Samani's tomb in Bukhara, a former security official exclaimed, "Look! Our Tajik history was over one thousand years old!" In addition to images of historic sites they also posted images of modern parks in Tajikistan, declaring: "If only we also had leaders who provided such facilities to our people." While the travelers' itineraries highlighted the imagining of historic Khorasan, they also demonstrated their commitment to modern forms of social justice.

Beyond the Intellectual

The idea of Khorasan has become ever more visible in Afghanistan's complex, dispersed, and internally differentiated diaspora. Unlike other iterations of civilizational identity important in Afghanistan's modern history (Green 2017), Khorasan's rise has taken place without formal state support. Again, some activists earn a livelihood though entrepreneurship, while businessmen support their activities in more discrete ways such as financing their events. Yet, as I will now explain, more businesses established by a wider cross-section of "Afghanistanis" have been seeking to materialize the imagined geography of Khorasan.

For instance, there is a trend of businesses owned by Persian-speaking Tajiks from Afghanistan who live in the diaspora avoiding "Afghan" and "Afghanistan" in their names and advertising, and instead using printing signs and documents to publicly materialize the idea of Khorasan. This shift is especially evident in the restaurant sector, where "Afghanistanis" increasingly advertise their eateries as serving "Khorasani" rather than "Afghan" cuisine.

Haji Qayyum, for example, owns a modestly sized restaurant in a city on the south coast of England in a neighborhood with an established refugee population mostly from Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and Kurdistan. He himself is from a region of northern Afghanistan that is home to speakers of both Persian and Uzbek, many of whom migrated there from Central Asia after its incorporation into the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Before moving to the UK, Haji Qayyum, like thousands of others from

that region, lived for several years in Saudi Arabia, running a restaurant that served varieties of Afghan food popular there. The influence of his time in Saudi Arabia is evident in his restaurant's food: Arab-style grilled chicken (*dhajaj al-fahm*) is served up alongside classic dishes from Afghanistan, especially the rice and meat dish *qabli palaw*. Haji Qayyum, however, no longer advertises his restaurant as serving Afghan food, and instead a signboard announces "Khorasani cuisine." His restaurant is not the only businesses on the street that uses signage to make a political and historical statement about Afghanistan. Across the road, a shop run by Qand Agha sells commodities imported from China, including hashish smoking paraphernalia and vapes, most of which he procures from wholesale businesses in London run by Sikhs from Afghanistan. Qand Agha—from a region of central Afghanistan known for its inhabitants' opposition to the Taliban—displays in his shop not the flag used by the most recent iteration of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but that flown by both the mujahidin government of the 1990s and the resistance movement that fought the Taliban between 1995 and 2001.

Thus, the activities of the activists are shaping identity formations and playing a role in the materialization of Khorasan within the wider diaspora. Choices such as the naming of businesses and cuisines can be thought of as sovereign "practices" and "strategies" that the activists deploy in order to invite people to materialize and render visible the imagined space of Khorasan.

Conclusion

This article has explored forms of intellectual exchange important to the imaginations of diaspora activist-intellectuals from Afghanistan who share an interest in the historic-geographical concept of Khorasan. It has delved into the energies they invest in imagining Khorasan as a transregional entity whose history is relevant to the future of not only Afghanistan and its citizens but also the region and the wider world. Literature on ethnic discourse and politics in Afghanistan has tended to analyze such activities in relation to state policy, political strategy, and conflict, and has rarely considered the forms of intellectual work invested in them. The present article has excavated activists' geographical, cultural, and political imaginations in relation to multiple and overlapping intellectual contexts. I have drawn attention to a complex if selective interaction between the activists and scholarship on Afghanistan produced in universities in the "global North," and forms of post-Cold War "geocultural" writing (Hannerz 2009). Initially, the activists emphasized the transregional scope of Khorasan's history, culture, and identity in the context of Afghanistan's ever-more ethnicized politics during the 2010s and the Taliban's 2021 return to power. Subsequently, they have forged competing narratives of national identity and statehood. Some of these dwell on the importance of ethnolinguistic identities to future institutional expressions of Khorasan, others on the need to design political forms capable of representing Khorasan's civilizational plurality.

Far from being derivative of academic work from the global North, the imaginations of activists are indelibly marked by their personal histories and participation in intersecting national, regional, and global political and intellectual dynamics. Especially powerful for them are Marxist ideas about ethnicity's relationship to the state and the notion of social justice, and their use of these

ideas displays the ongoing influence on their thinking of intellectual exchanges shaped by the Cold War and its aftermath. Diverse intellectual influences and exchanges have also been informed by histories of transregional mobility, demonstrating how the notion of "long-distance nationalism" has limited value toward understanding their imaginative projects.

I have also emphasized the insights to be gained by placing Afghanistan's modern history of contested sovereignty at the center of any analysis of these activists' imaginings of Khorasan. Their experiences of contested sovereignty during the late Cold War, twenty years of neoliberal international intervention that failed to establish a culturally plural and democratic state, and the Taliban's return to power have all led them to pursue the work of historical and geographical imaginings as an avenue to attain cultural recognition and political legibility. Since international actors remain unwilling to hold the Taliban accountable for human rights abuses, and Afghanistan and other nation-states in the region struggle to address the multiple crises arising from global climate change, the political significance of this and other projects of historical imagination are likely to further intensify.

Against this backdrop, the activists challenge assumptions evident in scholarly and political discourses about Afghanistan that define the country via militant Islamism and its supposedly tribal makeup. The yearnings for sovereign agency I have traced in the activists' desire to give Khorasan an institutional form are also materialized via their concern with names and naming, their active engagement in the politics of Afghanistan, their pursuits of cultural production, and their participation in heritage tourism. These activists' underlying concerns and ambitions are invisible to approaches centered narrowly on ethnicity politics. We can bring them to light by approaching their imaginative and intellectual activities as "practices, strategies, and future-oriented claims" that seek to construct contours of sovereign agency, in a context where links between geography, culture, and the state are becoming ever-more attenuated.

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