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# Street Fights: The Commodification of Place Names in Post-Taliban Kabul City

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The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 ended the Taliban rule and brought to power a coalition government whose members had spent most of the previous decade fighting each other. After 2001, the rivalry between these groups was mainly pursued in the cultural sphere where each was fighting to shape the narrative of the war. Place names have been one of the main domains in which this ideological conflict has been fought. The contestation over place names in Kabul city has turned these mundane geographical signs into coveted commodities of great symbolic significance. This article examines the practice of place naming in post-Taliban Kabul to explore the cultural challenges of state-building in a postwar city. Based on official data and field observations, this article is informed by recent theoretical developments in the field of critical toponymy and specifically draws on the emerging debates on commodification of place names. In the post-Taliban era, the article shows, place names have turned into resources for accumulation of symbolic capital and political recognition. As a result, the state offers toponyms to buy political loyalty and nonstate groups often appropriate them illegally. The article contributes to existing scholarship on commodification of place names by linking it to questions of postwar state-building and spatialization of ethnic identity. *Key Words: commodification, critical toponymy, Kabul, place naming, postwar city.*

美国于 2001 年入侵阿富汗, 终结了塔利班政权, 并使得一个由过去十年间不断相互斗争的成员所组成的联合政府开始掌权。2001 年后, 这些团体之间的对抗, 主要是在每个团体各自力图形塑战争叙事的文化领域中进行。地方名称则作为主要的斗争场域之一, 意识形态的冲突便于其中相互竞逐。在喀布尔城市之中, 地方名称的竞逐, 已将这些日常的地理标志, 转化成为具有巨大象征重要性并受到觊觎之商品。本文检视后塔利班时代于喀布尔的地方命名行动, 以探讨战后城市中的国家打造之文化挑战。本文根据官方数据与田野观察, 从批判命名学领域中的晚近理论发展中取得信息, 并特别运用逐渐兴起的“地方名称商品化”之辩论。本文将展现, 在后塔利班时代中, 地方名称已转变成为象征资本积累和政治承认的资源。国家因而透过提供地方命名来收买政治忠诚, 而非国家团体则经常以非法的方式挪用地方命名。本文透过将地方名称商品化连结至战后国家打造与族群身份认同空间化的议题, 对既有的学术研究作出贡献。关键词: 商品化, 批判地名学, 喀布尔, 地方命名, 战后城市。

La invasión de EE.UU. a Afganistán en 2001 acabó con el régimen talibán y llevó al poder a un gobierno de coalición cuyos miembros han gastado la mayor parte de la década anterior peleándose entre sí. Después del 2001, la rivalidad entre estos grupos se libró principalmente en la esfera cultural donde cada uno luchaba por configurar la narrativa de la guerra. Los nombres de los lugares han sido uno de los principales dominios donde este conflicto ideológico ha sido disputado. La impugnación a nombres de lugares en la ciudad de Kabul ha convertido estos mundanos signos geográficos en productos apetecidos de gran significado simbólico. Este artículo examina la práctica de asignar nombres de lugares en la Kabul postalibán para explorar los retos culturales de construir estado en una ciudad de posguerra. Con base en datos oficiales y observaciones de campo, el artículo es ilustrado con desarrollos teóricos recientes en el campo de la toponimia crítica y específicamente se apoya en los debates emergentes relacionados con la comodificación de nombres de lugares. En la era postalibán, indica el artículo, los nombres de lugares se han convertido en recursos por la acumulación de capital simbólico y reconocimiento político. Como resultado, el estado ofrece topónimos para comprar lealtad política y los grupos no estatales a menudo se los apropian ilegalmente. El artículo contribuye a la sabiduría existente sobre comodificación de nombres de lugares ligando esto con cuestiones de construcción de estado en el contexto de la posguerra y la espacialización de la identidad étnica. *Palabras clave: comodificación, toponimia crítica, Kabul, asignación de nombres, ciudad de posguerra.*

On 2 October 2014, on his first day in office as the new Afghan president, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani changed the name of the Kabul International Airport to Hamid Karzai International Airport in

honor of his predecessor. In most countries, it would be highly unlikely to rename the nation's largest airport after a living president with a problematic legacy. In Canada and the United States, for instance, it is against the law to

name a public place after a living person (Cohen and Kliot 1992). In Kabul, questionable place naming has been a common occurrence, especially since 2001, when the U.S. invasion ended the Taliban rule and installed a new government in the country. This new coalition government, which was established with mediation of the international community led by the United States, was built on the ashes of a decade-long civil war. The new government was mostly composed of former rival groups from different political and ethnic backgrounds who had laid down their arms and came together to build a representative and democratic government. In the Afghan capital, the war was finally over; the fight, however, was not: The former enemies in the post-2001 period soon engaged in an intense political confrontation in the cultural sphere in an effort to shape the narrative of the war and gain public recognition. Urban public spaces have been one of the main domains in which this ideological conflict has been fought. The renaming of streets and public institutions, the building of monuments, and other similar place-naming and place-making practices in Kabul city have turned the streets of the Afghan capital into a political battle-ground.

In recent years, scholars from various disciplines have shown great interest in critical toponymy, producing a growing body of scholarship on the power politics embedded in the practice of place naming. Those engaged in this new critical approach toward the “power-laden character of naming places” (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009, 1) have examined the role toponyms play in the reproduction of ideological discourses in the spaces of everyday urban experience (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010). As revealed by the recent critical toponymy scholarship, the place names in modern cities are the products of decision-making processes that are mostly driven by ideological agendas and strong political and commercial interests (Cohen and Kliot 1992; Myers 1996; Alderman 2000, 2003; Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009; Rose-Redwood 2011). In particular, commemorative place naming—which has been the most controversial form of place naming in Kabul—carries a great deal of political and historical significance as a result of its ability to spatialize social memory and cultural recognition in the city (Azaryahu 1996, 2012; Alderman 2000). In this case, the contestation over place names is a war of narratives, a battle over determining “whose conception of the past should prevail in the public realm” (Till 2003, 290). As a powerful spatial practice involving language, geography, and identity, place naming is

especially contested in multiethnic, multilingual, and war-plagued cities such as the Afghan capital.

An emerging trend in critical toponymy is questioning the commodification of place names by examining the economic aspects of the urban namescape (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010; Light 2014; Medway and Warnaby 2014; Light and Young 2015). Although naming places after individual or corporate sponsors has been common for a long time in Western cities, a new trend is emerging in cities of developed nations where “the right to name a place is literally sold for a monetary value like any other commodity” (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010, 466). In these cases, the owner of a public space (state or nonstate) sells the naming rights of the place for a specified amount of money and a specified period of time. In general, the rules are clear, the deals are transparent, and the practice is mainly commercial in nature. The studies on commodification of place names have explored many topics, including the role toponyms play in tourism (Light 2014), the practice of place branding (Medway and Warnaby 2014), and sport stadia and other social spaces (Light and Young 2015). This article, however, seeks to broaden the scope of place-name commodification by putting it into conversation with debates about the challenges of postwar recovery. In the case of postwar Kabul city, I argue that there are no established regulations to govern the selling of place names; instead, government corruption and ethnic rivalry drive the practice. As a result, urban toponyms are commodified and traded in exchange for political or economic favors. In Kabul, a living former president has an airport named after him, a sitting attorney general had a street named after him, and several streets are named after men who are accused of war crimes. At the same time, there are streets in the city named after “Democracy,” “Human Rights,” and “Freedom of Expression.” In the process of place naming in Kabul, the line between the symbolic capital and the economic capital is blurred. Place naming is used as a strategy to settle political disputes, as a power-sharing mechanism, and as a tool to buy political loyalty for a government whose existence has constantly been threatened by insurgents and warlords.

This article assesses the commodification of place names in Kabul to highlight the complexities of the Afghan state-building project and the associated ideological confrontations over the country’s past and present. Much of the scholarship on the geography of Afghan conflict has been focused on the postcolonial and imperial operations of the Western powers in the country. Several geographers have written on the

geopolitics of violence, international aid, gender, and coloniality in Afghanistan as part of the larger discourse on the war on terror, providing us with insights into the ways in which the apparatuses of counterterrorism after 11 September 2001 have produced new geographical realities in Afghanistan and other places (Gregory 2004, 2006; Fluri 2009, 2011, 2012; Esser 2014). This article contributes to the literature by exploring the local power politics in Afghanistan and the dynamics of post-2001 state-building projects.

In what follows, I first review the relevant literature in critical toponymy with a focus on commodification of place names. Then, I provide a background discussion on Kabul city and the politics of place naming in the pre-2001 era. In discussing the postconflict period, I then examine how the practice of place naming reflects the ethnic power struggles and the challenges of building a representative state after the civil war and the collapse of an authoritarian regime. The data used here are based on an unpublished official document containing the complete list of place name changes in the post-2001 era. This document was acquired from *Komisyon-e Namguzari Jadaha* (the Commission for Naming Streets), a government body chaired by the Minister of Information and Culture. The Commission is not part of the Kabul Municipality but its office is located in the Municipality's Directorate of Cultural Services. The list, of course, offers only the official place names, which sometimes are different from the place names that the public uses. Therefore, these data were supplemented by field observation conducted in the summer of 2012 in Kabul city and by the study of user-generated online maps such as Google Maps and OpenStreetMap. The information on more recent cases of place name changes was collected from reports and news articles in the local press.

## The Political Economy of Place Names: The Pursuit of Symbolic Capital

Toponymy, an area of research in several disciplines, including geography, cartography, anthropology, and history, traditionally has been engaged with the study of etymologic and linguistic aspects of place names and was, for a long time, "characterized by political innocence to say the least" (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009, 1). In recent years, however, attention has been focused on critical aspects of place names and their complex relationships to power, memory, and national identity. The new studies put both the

functional and symbolic dimensions of place names under scrutiny. Place names are now seen as urban media forms that communicate layers of geographical and political meanings and influence our understanding of everyday experiences in the city.

Place-naming practices are particularly controversial in countries that have experienced undemocratic regime changes, coups, revolutions, and occupations. In the aftermath of these types of political events, which are mostly driven by certain political ideologies, place names are used as tools to establish political authority and symbolic control (Cohen and Kliot 1992; Berg and Kearns 1996; Azaryahu and Kook 2002; Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Light and Young 2014). This form of place naming is usually part of a larger project of nation-building and state-building, a way to produce a shared past and determine what the public should remember and what they should forget (Alderman 2000). For instance, during the communist era in Bucharest, Romania (1948–1965), street renaming was a key strategy of the government to shape the new political identity of the country and express the authority of the ruling regime (Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002). A similar program of street renaming was implemented in almost all other Soviet countries as well (Saparov 2003; Palonen 2008). This program, after the fall of the Soviet Union, had to be undone: Former communist cities experienced a "toponymic cleansing" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010, 460) to remove the signs of the Soviet past and install new symbols of nationhood and political identity (Azaryahu 1996, 2011; Light 2004; Gill 2005).

There is a significant economic dimension in the practice of place naming. Place names are seen as commodities with real, as well as symbolic, exchange values. The economic aspects of place names are debated from a variety of angles. In some studies, place names are considered arenas of accumulations of symbolic capital (status, recognition, honor). These studies, drawing from the works of Bourdieu, have employed the concept of symbolic capital to explain the political economy of place names and the ways in which they construct new identities by transforming the urban environments (Dovey 1976; Harrison 1995; Forest and Johnson 2002; Hagen 2007; Alderman 2008; Rose-Redwood 2008). Different groups, elite and oppressed, compete to gain symbolic capital to acquire public visibility and cultural recognition. As Forest and Johnson (2002) showed, the political struggle over symbolic capital intensifies in the aftermath of radical transformations in political systems,

such as regime changes, when power is decentralized and the groups, hitherto underrepresented, have the freedom to compete with the dominant class in pursuit of power and capital—real or symbolic. It is not only in the postconflict cities where the symbolic capital of place names stirs tensions but, as Alderman (2008) argued, in a stable democratic country such as the United States, too, the place names are sites of struggle because of their ability to “bring distinction and status to landscapes and the people associated with them” (196). He examined the way real estate developers in the United States employ place names as tools to enhance the marketability of their properties. At the same time, marginalized racialized groups use place naming as a “symbolic resistance” against white cultural hegemony. In their struggle to gain symbolic capital, African Americans challenge the official narratives by demanding to have representation in the cultural landscape of place names in the country (Alderman 2008).

Purchasing place names is a new global phenomenon that has recently gained popularity in the critical toponymic literature (Boyd 2000; Yurchak 2000; Rose-Redwood 2011; Light 2014; Light and Young 2014; Medway and Warnaby 2014). Naming places after corporations has long been common in the world, but recently local authorities systematically are selling the naming rights of public places to create a new source of revenue. In 2006, the city authorities in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, for instance, came up with a plan to sell the naming rights for half of the metro stations in the city to corporate sponsors. The Dubai Metro authorities launched a campaign with the tempting motto of “Turn Your Brand Into a Destination” to attract possible bidders (Rose-Redwood 2011, 35). A more recent study on this topic has provided further analysis of how corporate sponsorship has created a new system of place naming that is changing the namespaces of public spaces, institutions, and infrastructures in Western cities (Light and Young 2014). The commodification of place names has enabled private companies to occupy spaces that were previously public properties. This increasingly popular practice has therefore threatened the use value of public spaces by giving corporations a chance to expand the sphere of their influence, reshaping the boundaries between public and private spaces, a process that could limit the *publicness* of the spaces of assembly and leisure in the city (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010).

The neoliberal approach to privatizing the public realm has gone so far that there are entire cities now

named after corporations, such as Half.com, a town in Oregon, named after an online retail company (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010). Place-name commodification, as discussed by Light and Young (2015), Rose-Redwood (2011), and others, is going to grow larger as resource-limited cities increasingly look at selling place names as a way to fund new infrastructures and provide services. This trend can expand the power of corporations in shaping the everyday spaces of the cities. In a city dominated by a corporate namescape, it would be difficult for ordinary citizens to differentiate where the private ends and the public begins, as there is a close tie between naming and owning.

The critical study of place names exposes these subtle exercises of power and highlights the political nature of public spaces and the way they are produced to serve commercial and ideological interests. This article adds a new angle to these debates by examining the interplay between the commodification of place names in the postwar Kabul city and the ways in which various groups compete to achieve greater share of the symbolic capital that inheres in a toponym.

## Kabul: A Background

“Kabul: Streets with no names” (Qadiry 2011), said a BBC report, and Agence France-Presse (AFP) ran a similar story with a similar title: “Delivering mail in Kabul, where streets have no name” (AFP News Agency 2013). The popular belief that Kabul is a city “where streets have no name” is only partly true. It is the case that most of the streets in Kabul have no official names and, with the exception of a few affluent neighborhoods, houses have no numbers or proper postal codes; this, paradoxically, does not mean that Afghans do not value, or need, place names. In fact, place names have always been a contested commodity in Kabul and they have become even more so in the post-Taliban era.

Afghanistan has never conducted a complete census. Therefore, all demographic and statistical data in the country are estimations based on sampling surveys or an incomplete census that was initiated in 1979 and left unfinished. Data concerning Kabul’s urban population and socioeconomic situation are especially scarce and the existing statistics are not reliable (Karimi 2014). One estimate puts the population of the city around 6 million (Rasmussen 2014). Because of rapid population growth and the lack of master planning, about 80 percent of the city residents live in unplanned,

irregular, informal settlements, where access to basic municipal services is very limited (Schütte 2009). The lack of reliable data on the physical and socioeconomic conditions in Kabul is one of the main reasons why the Afghan government has great difficulty managing the city—the primary reason, of course, is because Afghanistan is ranked as the fourth most corrupt country in the world (Transparency International 2014).

The city is also unofficially divided among different ethnic groups who live in their own enclaves (Karimi 2011). Afghanistan, more generally, has a heterogeneous and geographically divided population consisting of several ethnic groups, sects, religions, and languages. The major ethnic groups by population in Afghanistan are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and some less numerous minorities. Afghanistan, as a geopolitical reality, was founded in 1747 by Pashtun tribes and since then it has been ruled by the Pashtuns (with the exception of six years or so in which Tajiks were in power, once for nine months in 1929 and then from 1992 to 1995 during the civil war). As a result of this political monopoly, the Pashtuns have “enjoyed institutionalized military, political, and economic dominance” (Ahady 1995, 621–22) throughout Afghan history and, to the same extent, the non-Pashtun groups have been marginalized. This monopoly came to an end in 1992 when the communist regime collapsed and a civil war broke out among different mujahedeen groups who failed to share power because of ethnic and religious rivalries. In 1995 the Taliban emerged and restored the Pashtun monopoly by establishing an Islamic Emirate—a rule that lasted until 2001, when the mujahedeen returned to Kabul as part of the new U.S.-backed government.

## Place Names in Kabul

In the 1930s, Afghanistan’s state policies were driven by Pashtun nationalism thanks to inspirations from Germany’s National Socialist movement, which advanced the superiority of the Aryan race. In Kabul, German Nazi ideas were so popular that Afghans used to call Germans *Kaka German* (“Uncle German”) by claiming to be fellow Aryans (McChesney 2002, 85). According to a government daily, *Islah* (3 March 1937), German diplomats in Kabul advised Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim Khan to make Pashtu the official language of Afghanistan—a damaging experiment that did not succeed (Rahin 2014).

After failing to turn Pashtu into the lingua franca of the country, the state used place naming and renaming

as an instrument to Pashtunize the country’s public realm and erase the historical memory of its Persianate culture. In 1951, the Afghan government systematically named or renamed the majority of streets and neighborhoods in Kabul. This mass naming effort was part of the twentieth-century Pashtun nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Nationalism in Afghanistan has always been an “internal colonialism by a Pashtun ruling class over the country’s many ethnic minorities” (Hyman 2002, 299). In this place-naming project, 122 places in Kabul were named or renamed. The two most distinct elements in the names were the people after whom the places were named and the language one used: The majority of the new names belonged to poets or politicians of the ruling class, the Pashtuns, and the Dari words *Jadah* (street), *Kochah* (alleyway), *Kuh* (mountain), and *Bagh* (garden) were changed to the Pashto equivalents *Watt*, *Kusa*, *Ghar*, and *Ban*, respectively. The Dari-speaking residents of Kabul now had to say *Da Nader Pashtun Watt* instead of *Jada-ye Nader Pashtun* on an everyday basis. Most of Kabul’s historical names were replaced and some were simply translated into Pashtu, such as *Koh-e Asmai* (Mount Fairy), which became *Da Pari Ghar* (Gharghasht 1970).

Most of the place names in Kabul city, prior to the systematic name changes in the mid-twentieth century, had what I would like to call folkloric naming, as opposed to institutional naming. In folkloric naming, streets and areas are named mostly in relation to the people who use, inhabit, and own them. The name-giver is not a person or institution but the public itself, which creates names that are mostly descriptive and serve the single purpose of geographic orientation. Folkloric place names are common in Kabul, partly because of the oral culture of the city. In the main bazaar, most of the streets are named after the kind of traders or artisans who once worked there, such as *Kahforushi* (Straw Sellers), *Shamrizha* (Candle Makers), and *Sangtarashi* (Stone Cutters), or after tribal or ethnic groups who once lived in an area such as *Guzar-e Achakzaiha* (Achakzais’ Neighborhood), *Qalaye Hazaraha* (Hazaras’ Fort), or *Deh Afghanan* (Afghans’ Village).<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, there were strong relations between the places and the people who used them, as suggested in these names: You knew what kind of people lived or worked in a particular area just by knowing the name of that place. Today, however, those toponymic distinctions no longer exist and some of these streets are either mixed use or are used for a different purpose—such as the Straw Sellers Street that now is a bird market.

## Postwar Recovery: The Return of Warlords

In December 2001, in a conference in Bonn, Germany, Afghan rival groups were negotiating to form a government for the post-Taliban era. With the mediation of the United States and the United Nations, they agreed to include all ethnic groups in a power-sharing deal, but they were not able to agree on a candidate to be the interim president during the transition period. Two main groups competed for the post: the Northern Alliance (a mostly non-Pashtun group of anti-Taliban fighters) and the Rome Group (the royalists close to Mohammad Zahir, the exiled former king of Afghanistan). According to media reports at the time, most of the delegates supported Abdul Satar Sirat, an Uzbek from the Rome Group, for the job (McCarthy and MacAskill 2001). The Americans, however, had another person in mind: Hamid Karzai. Zalmi Khalilzad, the behind-the-scenes show runner sent from the White House, helped persuade King Zahir's circle and other Afghans in Bonn to accept Karzai, a Pashtun from Kandahar, as the interim president. Khalilzad, an Afghan American of Pashtun origin himself, finally succeeded in his efforts, which included locking up displeased delegates in a hotel room and threatening them, to form a government that was based on a shaky compromise (Fairweather 2014). Later, Karzai himself mastered this type of back-channeling and turned it into his main way of governance during his fourteen years in office.

In return for supporting his government, Karzai and his international backers offered favors to King Zahir, the Northern Alliance, and the tribal leaders who would be feared to challenge the new administration. These favors included key government positions and cash. Throughout his presidency, Karzai maintained a special fund in his palace for regular payouts to tribal strongmen, political parties, and warlords. This fund was supported by off-the-books CIA payments (Rosenberg 2013) and the "bags of money" he admittedly received from Iran (Boone 2010). The allies of the government wanted more than cash and power, however. They wanted something they did not have: public legitimacy via symbolic capital.

The ex-warlords valued symbolic capital more than the economic capital, partly because it could improve their public image. A significant part of the society that suffered from the atrocities of the civil war regarded the returning mujahedeen as the remnants of a dark past who did not deserve to join the new system. In the first

few years of the post-Taliban era, there were serious calls for the Afghan government to take the civil war warlords to a criminal court (Human Rights Watch 2003). International human rights investigators published reports accusing some of Karzai's top officials, from the former mujahedeen, of war crimes (Afghanistan Justice Project 2005; Human Rights Watch 2005). Despite the pressure, however, Karzai and his international friends did not want to wage a war they were not sure they could win. Instead, the government supported the mujahedeen leaders with cash, official positions, and symbolic capital—the most effective defense mechanism against accusations of war crime.

The commodification of place names was a product of the postwar state-building strategy, a process that turned the name into a coveted commodity, a currency with a high exchange value. Two types of names formed the symbolic capital that was traded in the postwar recovery deals: official titles and place names. In 2002, as Karzai owed his post to King Zahir, he offered the king the title of the Father of Nation and even included it as an article (158) in the new Afghan Constitution. Zahir needed such a title, as he was widely regarded as an oppressive ruler during his forty years on the throne (Farhang 2001). That symbolic name, in a way, helped Zahir die an honorable death in 2007 in Kabul.

The warlords of the Northern Alliance, who fought against each other in the civil war and then against the Taliban, were also offered symbolic names. In 2002, Karzai gave the title of the National Hero of Afghanistan to the slain Tajik leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed on 9 September 2001. In addition, the government built a monument for Massoud and named a major road in Kabul after him. It was the first place renaming in post-Taliban Kabul honoring a man who was accused of war crimes by international human rights organizations (Afghanistan Justice Project 2005; Human Rights Watch 2005). This tradition continued in the following years and more people accused of war crimes were memorialized on street signs.

In critical toponymy, place names, or any other symbolic capital, have no monetary value but, as commodities, they have an exchange value (Rose-Redwood and Alderman 2011; Light and Young 2015). The exchange value that is inherent in place names merges their symbolic and economic functions and turns them into commodities. In the case of Afghanistan, the institutionalized corruption commodifies any symbolic capital that is owned by the state and turns them into sellable items. In a postwar

situation where nonstate armed groups are still strong and the nation is divided, the government offers these commodities to negotiate reconciliation and solidify its state-building program.

In addition, in the case of postwar Kabul, the warlords, too, needed to reconstruct their political identity and transform their public image from warmongers to heroes to join the new system. As the majority of the Afghan population was illiterate, public spaces offered an arena where that task could be carried out by exhibiting their dominance, presence, and relevance. The value of place names increased as ethnic leaders, in pursuit of redemption, tried to acquire them. As a result, a fierce competition began among these men, on the cityscape of Kabul, to occupy a place in the new era.

The contestation over place names in post-Taliban Kabul, which included selling, buying, and plundering this coveted commodity, resembled a previous moment the warlords contested over Kabul city. In the aftermath of the communist regime in 1992, various armed groups, who came from different ethnic backgrounds, flooded the city. They plundered public and private properties and fought with each other to capture greater, and better, parts of the capital. Soon, Kabul was remapped based on ethnic lines where ad hoc checkpoints were installed on streets, manned by armed militia who would search anyone passing through their territories. West Kabul became the territory of the Hazaras, a long-persecuted Shia minority group. North Kabul was the territory of the Tajiks, a Persian-speaking ethnic group who dominated the postcommunist Islamic State of Afghanistan. Pashtuns controlled the east, far west, and parts of southern Kabul. Uzbek gunmen were mostly stationed in the city center and northeast suburbs. These territorial boundaries, of course, were not fixed and would shift after constant clashes among the various factions (Dittmann 2007; Sayed 2009; Karimi 2011).

In post-Taliban Kabul, conflict has not been violent but, instead, cultural. Nevertheless, the ongoing contestation over place names should be seen as an extension of the civil war. The place names, in the new era, function as men with guns who mark territories and shape ethnic boundaries. Since the civil war, the ethnic minorities who had been long absent from the public sphere have found a chance to fight for public recognition and the right to take part in decision-making processes.

The practice of street naming is a task of the authorities. It is an administrative procedure that expresses

political power and territorial control (Azaryahu 1996). In an authoritarian state, only the ruling elites are the name givers, as this group has access to the sources of symbolic (and economic) capital. The collapse of an authoritarian state decentralizes power and allows new groups to lawfully gain, or plunder, the sources of symbolic (and economic) capital. The new players compete over place names the same way they compete over capturing public properties and institutions. As Forest and Johnson (2002) showed, this was what happened in Russia after the Soviet Union disintegrated. A small, politically influential group captured the bulk of the economic resources during the 1990s transformations and the same group controlled the symbolic capital, such as public monuments and place names.

In Kabul, if it was the ideology that defined the toponymical practices in the pre-2001 era, after the fall of the Taliban and the emergence of a rentier state, free market, and the growth of an economy driven by government corruption and the drug trade, place names have turned into commodities. The billions of dollars in aid money that foreign military and civilian agencies pumped into the country while Afghan institutions did not have the capacity to manage it worsened the widespread corruption in the Afghan administration (Suhrke 2013). It was the government corruption, among other factors, that turned place names into political and economic *baksheesh*—literally, a “gift” but colloquially, a bribe.

### Place Naming: Corruption and Political Negotiations

Immediately after the new government was installed in 2001 in Kabul, the commodification of place names emerged as the new administration, while having no army or money when most of the population were armed, tried to purchase political loyalty by offering symbolic capital. In 2002, the Sehat Amma Square and the road leading from it to the U.S. Embassy were renamed after Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik leader who was killed by al-Qaeda a few months earlier. The Great Massoud Road was in fact an act of political negotiation settled through commemorative street naming, a way to recognize the role of Tajiks in the resistance against the Soviets and then the Taliban (and forgetting Massoud’s role in the civil war). In return, the Tajiks, who felt entitled to more power because they led the fight against Taliban, were expected to pledge their support to the new government. This place renaming



was followed by the renaming of several other places after mujahedeen figures who were, interestingly, enemies during the civil war.

In 2006, for instance, the main road in the Hazara ghetto in West Kabul was renamed after Abdul Ali Mazari, a Hazara leader who was killed by the Taliban in 1995. He was the main rival to Massoud during the civil war and considered a hero by the Hazara community, although others considered him a warlord. Karzai also named a street and a square in the Makrorian area after Abdul Haq, a friend of his who was also killed by the Taliban. When Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Tajik leader (who was president during the civil war, an ally of Massoud) was mysteriously assassinated in his home by a suicide bomber in September 2011, Karzai, again, used place name as a tool to prevent Rabbani's followers from engaging in violent reactions. The government renamed a street and the Education University of Kabul after Rabbani, which caused controversy at the said university and divided the students and the faculty (Bezhan 2012). This was especially controversial as the university is located in the Afshar neighborhood where, during the civil war in 1993, Rabbani and Massoud launched an indiscriminate massacre of its residents, the Shia Hazaras (Afghanistan Justice Project 2005; Human Rights Watch 2005). In April 2014, the National Defense University was renamed after Mohamad Qasim Fahim, Karzai's vice president and a Tajik warlord who was Minister of Intelligence in Massoud-Rabbani's government during the civil war. This renaming came after Fahim unexpectedly died of illness on 9 March 2014 (Lamothe and Constable 2014). Karzai's policy of honoring warlords with place names was part of his efforts to maintain the support of the Tajiks, an ethnic group who could challenge the authority of the central government. This tradition of place name "gifts" continued under his successor, Ashraf Ghani.

The new president, Ghani, offered the name of Kabul International Airport to Hamid Karzai as a political gift. The airport renaming came right after a disputed presidential election in 2014 that took six months to be settled. During that time, Karzai, the incumbent president, sided with the presidential candidate Ghani in rejecting the allegations of systematic electoral fraud claimed by the opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, and international electoral observers<sup>3</sup> (Gall 2014; Mason 2014). The airport renaming, therefore, was a bribe not in cash but in commodified symbolic capital.<sup>4</sup>

Two weeks after he renamed the airport, Ghani met with Kabul Municipality's officials, where he

complained, "Kabul is the only city in the world where a living, sitting Attorney General has a street named after him" (Royesh 2014). He was referring to a street that the mayor of Kabul, Yunus Nawandish, named after Ishaq Alako, the attorney general during Karzai's presidency. Mayor Nawandish was, for a long time, under pressure from a group of Afghan parliamentarians who demanded his resignation over allegations of corruption. The members of Parliament had a protest sit-in for several days in front of the municipality building. They eventually gave up on their demands after the attorney general declared the mayor clean of any corruption. The mayor, having survived the protests, renamed Sanatorium Street after Alako as an expression of gratitude<sup>5</sup> (Royesh 2014).

There is a strong ethnic element in these place names. Despite all of the controversies, the commemorative place naming in Kabul allowed minorities to see, for the first time, their names on the city's street signs. The street names are usually in alignment with the ethnic demography of each neighborhood, such that just by looking at street names you can understand in whose territory you are—very similar to the ethnic distribution of the city during the civil war. In mixed neighborhoods, place naming is more controversial. A good example is the Katib Road, a street in West Kabul that runs through a Hazara and Tajik area from Pul-e Sukhta Bridge to Darulaman Palace. On 18 October 2014, the government officials inaugurated this newly paved road that was named, by the previous administration, after Fayz Mohammad Katib, a historian from the Hazara minority group. The trouble emerged when residents noticed that the new government had removed the street sign bearing Katib's name. This provoked the Hazaras to organize rallies and online protests for several weeks. The issue grew so sensitive that the government cabinet discussed it in at least three different meetings without coming to a workable conclusion (*The Kabul Times* 2014; Royee 2014). Fayz Mohammad Katib (1881–1931) was a respected and arguably the most authoritative historian in Afghanistan. He served most of his life as an official historian in the royal court. This place renaming also brought the questions of scaling and location of the names into the debates. The way non-Hazaras rejected Katib's name on a street resembles the ways in which some white neighborhoods in the United States oppose renaming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr., a man whose name is more readily associated with black culture and neighborhoods (Alderman 2003). In the end, the Hazara activists installed a small, homemade street sign on the



**Figure 1.** After the official sign was mysteriously removed from Katib Road, the Hazaras installed a billboard instead. (Color figure available online.)

road. A local businessman, then, installed a huge billboard next to it with Katib's photo on it and the following text in Pashto, "Fayz Mohammad Katib Road," and another text in Dari: "Welcome to Fayz Mohammad Katib Road" (Figure 1). The billboard still stands and the official street sign has not yet returned.<sup>6</sup>

When place names turn into commodities, they can be stolen—like commodities. Place names are public properties and the government owns them. In a failed state, like Afghanistan, where the government is incapable of guarding public properties, people plunder place names with impunity. Activist groups of all stripes occasionally install unauthorized names on streets honoring their favored causes or persons. A recent example is Farkhunda Street, named after a woman who was beaten and lynched by a mob on the street after being falsely accused of burning the Quran. Her brutal death shocked many Kabul residents, who staged a protest demonstration on 24 March 2015. After the demonstration, at night, a group of men installed a new sign on the street where Farkhuna was killed (Latifi 2015). Another example would be the Bacha Khan Street sign in Kabul city installed by Ismael Yun, a nationalist Pashtun politician. The hand-painted sign reads, in Pashtu, "The Pride of Afghan Bacha Khan Street," honoring the Pakistani

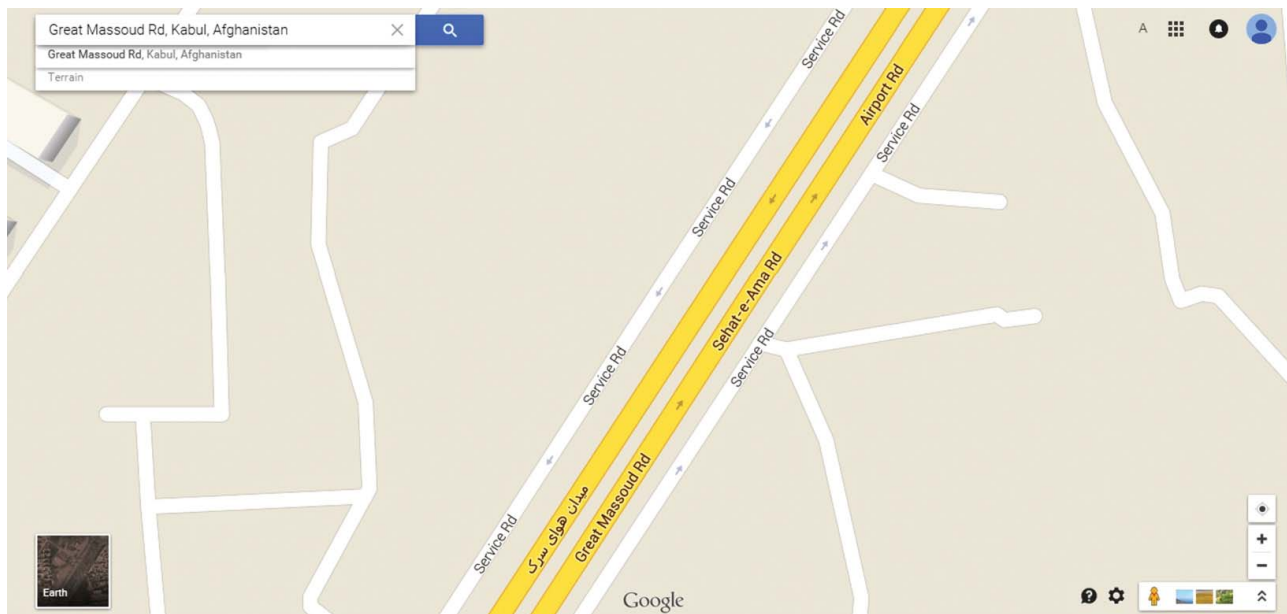


**Figure 2.** Members of Tahrik Milli, a Pashtun Nationalist group, installing a home-made sign for Pashtunistan Street. Source: <http://www.taand.com/archives/5804>. © Abdul Khabir. Reproduced with permission of Abdul Khabir. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

Pashtun who advocated for an independent Pashtunistan. The name of Yun's political party is placed at the bottom: "National Movement." He has also installed a similar sign for Pashtunistan Street, after its previous sign was removed by non-Pashtuns (Figure 2). The municipality has so far turned a blind eye to name changing of this sort, as Pashtun nationalists hold a prominent role in the government. So do the Tajiks, who recently installed, again at night, new place names on two roundabouts in north Kabul. On 8 September 2015, a group of ethnic Tajiks renamed the Lab-e Jar roundabout in Khair Khana area after Habibulla



**Figure 3.** Two men installing a homemade street sign on a Kabul roundabout honouring Habibulla Kalakani, an early twentieth-century Tajik rebel (Dari News 2015). © Mohammad Fahim Kohdamani. Reproduced with permission of Mohammad Fahim Kohdamani. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)



**Figure 4.** As of 22 December 2015, the road from Massoud Circle to the Kabul Airport on Google Maps, has four different names (Map Data © 2015 Google). (Color figure available online.)

Kalakani (Figure 3). Kalakani, known as *Bacha-e Saqaw*, “the son of water-carrier,” was a Tajik rebel who dethroned the modernist king Amanullah Khan in 1929, for which the Tajiks consider him a hero and the rest, a criminal (Dari News 2015). The other roundabout renamed is near the Salim Karawan apartment blocks, which now bears the name of Atta Muhammad Nur, the governor of Balk province, a Tajik warlord who is still alive and in office (Aryan 2015).

Online, user-generated cartographic tools such as Google Maps and OpenStreetMap have also provided a site for people to appropriate the symbolic capital of toponyms. There are street names on these maps that do not exist on real streets. As an example, there is a road called *Tajikan* (“The Tajiks”) on Google Maps in north Kabul. The real road does not have any street sign, but the people living there call it *Jada-e Rusi* (“Russian Road”). The Great Massoud Road, discussed earlier, is a controversial one on Google Maps, where it has four different names: Massoud Rd., *Sehat Amma* Rd., *Maidan Hawaii* Rd., and Service Rd. The names *Sehat Amma* (“Public Health”) and *Maidan Hawaii* (“Airport”) are the folkloric names, as one end of the road is connected to the Kabul airport and the other to the Ministry of Public Health. The Service Rd. on the map is an English mistake, as it should be the Bus Lane (Figure 4). The Apple Maps application, which is based on OpenStreetMap, a

crowdsourced online map, has even more problems. For instance, a street in Kabul known as *Guzargah* was anonymously renamed “Bad Monkey” on Apple Maps (Oremus 2013).

The commodification of street names in Kabul occasionally takes a strange form. In 2011, the Kabul Municipality, following the advice of U.S. advisors, came up with a plan to increase municipal revenue. One of the ideas was to allow a telephone company to advertise on the actual street signs for “a small revenue potential”<sup>7</sup> (United States Agency for International



**Figure 5.** A sign made by Afghan Wireless Communication Company in Wazir Akbar Khan, an affluent area of Kabul, where foreign embassies and organizations are located. (Color figure available online.)



**Figure 6.** A street sign made by Afghan Wireless Communication Company in Sheberghan city in northern Afghanistan. Similar street signs are installed in parts of Kabul and other cities. *Source:* <http://www.uzbekwebloggers.blogfa.com/post-18.aspx>. © Sattar Faryabi. Reproduced with permission of Sattar Faryabi. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

Development 2013, 7). The company, Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC), signed an agreement with the Kabul Municipality to install all city street signs within two years in exchange for placing its logo on the signs. In the signing ceremony, the Kabul mayor, Yunos Nawandish, held a prototype sign that was a gray metal plate with a street name and house numbers on it and a small AWCC logo placed on the right side of the sign (Khetaab 2011). When the company started the work, they instead installed large orange and white street signs (the company colors) with a big AWCC logo at the bottom. The signs look like AWCC ad posters from a distance (Figures 5 and 6). After a pilot phase in District 10, the company abandoned the plan and the municipality has not yet found a way to finish the project.

## From “Freedom Street” to “Lincoln Street”

In the post-Taliban era, a Commission for Street Naming was formed, chaired by the Minister of Information and Culture, to administer place naming in Kabul. So far, however, it has done little to assign standardized names and install signs on streets of the city. In 2014, the Commission finally finalized a list of the names to be assigned to various places in Kabul. The list, which contains 181 names, shows a significant

shift from the Pashtun nationalist names of the pre-2001 era. Of the twenty-two municipal districts of Kabul, places only in thirteen districts have been named or renamed (for unclear reasons, Districts 1, 13, 14, and 17–22 are not included). Although Pashtun names are still considerable in the new list, they are not the majority. Most of the names belong to long dead poets, saints, sufis, and sages from Afghanistan and the Persianate region (many of them known only to literary scholars).

Influenced by the dominant presence of international community in all aspects of Afghan public life since 2001, some foreign nationals are also recognized in the new street names, including Abraham Lincoln, Goethe, Ataturk, and Indira Gandhi (the name of Malek Fahad, a Saudi king, is struck out with pen in the final document).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these choices are not too surprising, as the Afghan government is a rentier state, heavily subsidized by international aid. These renamings make clear that the ruling elites feel no obligations to be accountable to the public, as they do not rely on internal revenue. The place names honoring foreign personalities are in fact commodities, or *baksheesh*, offered as part of a political negotiation to make the international donors believe Afghanistan is democratic, progressive, and cosmopolitan. This is one of the ways that the state hopes to keep its present international revenue streams running. These same ambitions are reflected in other recent renamings that reference to civic values promoted by international nongovernmental organizations that have been active in the past decade and a half: *Azadi* (Freedom), *Kargar* (Worker), *Qurbanian-e Jang* (War Victims), *Azadi Bayan* (Freedom of Expression), *Mashrutiat* (Constitutional Movement), *Qanun-e Asasi* (Constitution), *Esteqlal* (Independence), and *Demokrasi* (Democracy). The list was approved by the Minister of Information and Culture, Makhdum Rahin, on 8 August 2014. He has added on the margins: “This is very good. I only did not recognize Khan Popalzai. The rest are totally appropriate. I hope the signs get installed soon” (Kabul Municipality 2014, 19). As of September 2015, most of the place names on this list still remain only on paper and Kabul city has yet to get all the new street signs. Even if that happens, most of the streets in the city, particularly in the informal settlements, will remain unnamed.

The commodification of place names has been part of the postwar stabilization program in Afghanistan. After fourteen years, however, the policy of keeping warlords happy has not been effective in bringing peace, stability, or security to the country. Instead, it

has further undermined the state authority and has overshadowed its symbolic presence even in the capital Kabul, where some of the main streets and large institutions are named after these warlords. Place names influence the public imagination, collective memory, and everyday language in a profound way. If a place is named after a mass murderer, as is the case with several streets and public institutions in Kabul city, this name enters into everyday dialogue. Even if this person murdered a loved one, you have to say his name in everyday conversations, use it on addresses, see it on maps, and hear it on the radio. Mundane street signs have an exceptional ability to shape the everyday experiences in the city and are one of the most powerful media forms in the urban sphere.

## Conclusion

On 21 September 2001, two weeks after the United States started bombing Taliban bases in Afghanistan, a U.S. security expert was asked on TV whether the United States could find reliable Afghans as its allies. "There's an expression," replied Edward Girardet: "You can rent an Afghan, you can never buy him" (Jones 2001). This expression, right or wrong, could sum up the post-Taliban state-building strategy in Afghanistan, where the Karzai administration and the United States attempted to bribe their way to peace and stability. As part of a postwar recovery policy, the state "rented" allies by offering favors to them that included economic capital (cash) and symbolic capital (honorary titles, positions, and place names). This policy, as I have examined in this article, commodified place names and blurred the line between their economic, symbolic, and functional operations. When place names turned into commodities, the competition to appropriate them intensified among men of power, particularly former warlords from various mujahedeen groups—a competition that is mostly expressed through these groups' efforts to use place names to occupy a more prominent place in the urban public sphere.

The commodification process reduced place names to material properties: People could appropriate them as they could plunder other public properties. Place naming in post-Taliban Kabul also functions as an act of purging: legitimizing contested figures of Afghan history by representation of them as reborn heroes of whom citizens must be proud.

Kabul is an understudied city, especially considering its persistent presence in international news headlines. With frequent terror attacks and poor living standards,

this city surely has more serious problems than place names. Understanding the clash over place naming, however, helps us understand how ethnic politics and government corruption shape not only the structures of political power but also the everyday spaces of social life. Today, Kabul suffers from broken infrastructures and the insufficient delivery of basic municipal services. A highly militarized, contested, and violent city, Kabul is a geography of conflict. The scholarship on the conflict in post-2001 Kabul remains predominantly focused on insurgency, terrorism, and other forms of violence. The conflict in this city, however, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon of which the contestation over place names is only one facet.

Previous studies of place-name commodification (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010; Light 2014; Medway and Warnaby 2014; Light and Young 2015) highlighted a range of issues in relation to purchasing naming rights practices. I wanted to add to these studies by providing a new perspective to the way place names are commodified in a postconflict situation where armed groups challenge the power of the state. Whereas in the West, the practice of selling place names is transparent and regulated, in a postconflict city such as Kabul, how place names are appropriated is far different. It is critical for future research on Kabul and other similar cities to investigate how residents navigate an overcrowded city where most parts of it have no place names. In addition, the question of commodification of place names in the critical toponymy scholarship has predominantly been addressed in a Western context. We need to broaden our knowledge about the complexities of this practice by including the cities of the Global South as well—the cities with limited resources and great challenges.

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## Notes

1. The Pashtuns, who are originally tribes from the Sulaiman Mountains in northern India (now Pakistan), moved to the areas now known as Afghanistan in the early fifteenth century (Ariyanpour 1997, 79–118;

- Noelle 1997, 158–219). They probably form between 38 and 44 percent of the Afghan population (Nichols 2011, 263). Pashtuns rose to power in Afghanistan in 1747 and since then have been ruling the country.
2. Even in recent times, some place names in Kabul have been generated in folkloric ways. One example is the Brezhnev Bazaar, a makeshift bazaar during the Soviet occupation that used to sell items from the Soviet military. Another is the Bush Bazaar, a similar place that emerged under the U.S. occupation in Kabul that was named jokingly by the public after the former U.S. president (Barker 2006).
  3. The disputes were settled after U.S. President Barack Obama called the rivals three times and Secretary of State John Kerry paid two visits to Kabul to mediate between the men and called them twenty-seven times. Finally they agreed to share power: Ghani became the president, and Abdullah became Chief Executive Officer—a position made up by the Americans (Trofimov 2014). Ghani ran in the 2009 presidential election, too. Back then, Karzai won the election and Ghani finished fourth, getting less than 3 percent of the votes (Mashal 2015).
  4. Ghani also paid Karzai in economic capital: In the same decree in which he authorized the airport name change, he also offered Karzai a government house as a farewell gift (Office of Administrative Affairs and Council of Ministers Secretariat 2014).
  5. After Ghani came to power, he fired both Alako and Nawandish. The street sign bearing Alako's name was also removed.
  6. In June 2015, the Hazara community noticed that in the list of place name changes approved by the Commission for Street Naming (Kabul Municipality 2014), the name of Mazari Road (a Hazara leader) in West Kabul is suggested to be changed to Katib Road (a Hazara historian) and Katib Road was renamed Chardehi Road (the historical name of the West Kabul valley). Hazaras held several street demonstrations against those who made the suggestion. Also, both former Vice President Karim Khalili and the current deputy of the Chief Executive Officer, Mohammad Mohaqiq, released strongly worded statements condemning the suggested renaming. As of September 2015, the name change had not occurred and it is unlikely to happen (*The Daily Afghanistan* 2015).
  7. Other than this odd method of increasing revenue, the practice of naming university buildings after donors is also becoming popular in Kabul, thanks to the Americans. Western universities have a long history of naming buildings after people who donate to the institution. In Afghanistan, this type of place naming has been very rare, and only in recent years has the American University of Afghanistan (established in 2006) brought this tradition to Kabul by naming two of its buildings after Bayat, a wealthy Afghan family (who owns AWCC), and another building after Azizi, an Afghan banker who owns a bank of the same name.
  8. There is another American who is going to get a place named after him in Kabul. In March 2015, during his first visit to the United States as the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani gave a talk to a group of U.S. veterans of the Afghan

war at the Pentagon. Among the audience was Susan Myers, the widow of Major General Harold Green, who was killed in Marshal Fahim Military Academy in Kabul in August 2014. As an act of gratitude, Ghani promised her to name a section of the academy after General Green, who was the highest ranking U.S. official killed in Afghanistan since 2001 (Brannen 2015).

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