

AFGHANISTAN INFO

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Kaboul. 12 mars 1976. Photo Micheline Centlivres-Demont

Sommaire / Inhalt	Page / Seite
Faits et dates	2
The Study of Afghanistan: Pathways Followed, Opportunities Ahead	4
Myth and Reality of the Islamic State in Khorasan	6
Zum Phänomen des sog. Islamischen Staates in Afghanistan	8
Kabul Remembered	11
Géo-nostalgie de l'Afghanistan	12
Une anthropologie imaginaire	14
<i>Homo itinerans</i>	16
Instantanés sur les écoles de la province de Bamiyan	18
Notes de lecture	20
La rédactrice d' <i>Afghanistan Info</i> prend congé...	24

THE STUDY OF AFGHANISTAN: PATHWAYS FOLLOWED, OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

Afghanistan is poised to enter the fortieth year since the communist coup of April 1978 triggered its slide into mayhem and carnage. The country is far from being at peace, and despite many positive developments in the period since 2001, its future remains haunted by uncertainty. The travails of the past forty years have been chronicled in successive issues of *Afghanistan Info*, and some of the highlights of this remarkable endeavour, a monument to decades of editorial effort by Micheline Centlivres-Demont, are now available in book form [1]. With the appearance of the 80th issue of *Afghanistan Info*, it is timely not only to pay tribute to its indomitable editor, but also to reflect on the point that the study of Afghanistan has reached, and on what important research questions may lie ahead.

If there is one thing to celebrate about the forty years past, it is the stimulus it has provided for further study of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is sometimes depicted in journalistic accounts as remote and exotic, but there has been no shortage of in-depth research (although the market for more orientalist imagery still seems to be quite strong). In the years immediately following the Soviet invasion of December 1979, the Cold War context and the struggle of the Afghan resistance understandably influenced both reportage and more analytical works [2], but with the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the collapse of the communist regime, a rich variety of works appeared seeking to make sense of the preceding two decades [3]. For obvious reasons, relatively few of these writings originated from within Afghanistan, but Afghans abroad increasingly figured as contributors. It took the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 to inaugurate a new era of research on Afghanistan, which has seen a veritable flood of high-quality books, articles and commentaries that shed light on virtually all aspects of Afghan life.

One striking feature of this literature is the range of disciplines represented within it. Before 1978, it is reasonable to say that anthropology and ethnography tended to be the academic disciplines from which some of the most incisive commentators on Afghanistan came, with Louis Dupree's book-length study [4] offering the starting-point for many commentaries by journalists and essayists. These disciplines remain important, but have now been complemented by important studies from political scientists, sociologists and economists. One of the most valuable contributors to this flourishing has been the presence in Afghanistan of offices from agencies such as the World Bank, which have not only fostered research on topics such as the *hawala* system, but have ensured that the conclusions of such research are circulated to a wider audience via the agencies' publishing programs. Other international actors on the ground in Afghanistan have also supplied crucial information. The evaluation of aid activities in Afghanistan has generated instructive reports from bodies such as the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and data gathering by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has thrown a very unsettling spotlight on civilian casualties in the ongoing conflict.

The study of Afghanistan is also being significantly enhanced by the activities of institutions of learning based in Afghanistan itself. The August 2016 terrorist attack on the campus of the American University of Afghanistan provided a reminder of how threatening an educated populace is to the aspirations of armed opposition groups for whom the vast bulk of Afghans have no sympathy [5], but it did not lead to the permanent closure of the university. This is only one of a range of valuable institutions contributing to the study of Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, headed by Dr Orzala Nemat, produces very high quality publications in English and Afghan languages on issues of development and governance. The Afghanistan Analysts Network provides an online platform for dissemination of research on challenging contemporary political and social issues. And the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), brainchild of Nancy Hatch Dupree, descendant of the ACBAR Resource and Information Center (ARIC) that she set up in Peshawar, and headed by Executive Director Abdul Waheed Wafa, not only houses one of the finest collections of materials on Afghanistan anywhere in the world, but welcomes visiting scholars, and fosters training of young researchers.

It is in this last area that one of the most exciting developments in the study of Afghanistan is to be found: the emergence of a new generation of high-quality researchers. One of the consequences of extensive conflict in a country is that it becomes a gold-mine for fresh research. Verities of the past can no longer be taken for granted, and a veritable avalanche of PhD research topics becomes available for those who are interested in scholarly exploration. This has led to a great deal of excellent work by young researchers based in Europe, North America, Australia, and other countries. But beyond this, the last fifteen years have witnessed a blossoming of a new and vital research community of young Afghan scholars. Assisted by programs such as the Fulbright and Chevening Scholarships, a new generation of Afghan researchers is poised to dominate the field. If there is hope to be found in the recent history of Afghanistan, this is it.

Over all these years, *Afghanistan Info* has played a special role. It has provided a crucial outlet for the publication of short but focussed analyses by specialists on Afghanistan, both from within the country and from abroad. It has brought together contributions in English, French and German, helping to build bridges between scholars using different Western languages. Most importantly of all, it has provided proof that complex social, economic and political developments can be studied in an accessible way. As a new generation of scholars takes up the torch, *Afghanistan Info* provides a luminous model of research at its best. *Vitai lampada tradunt!*

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Footnotes

1. Micheline Centlivres-Demont (ed.), *Afghanistan: Identity, Society and Politics since 1980*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.
2. See William Maley, 'Images of Afghanistan', *Review of International Studies*, vol.13, no.4, October 1987, pp.311-319.
3. See William Maley, 'Afghanistan Observed', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.51, no.2, July 1997, pp.265-271.
4. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
5. See *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2016*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2016, p.51. Interestingly, the proportion of Afghans feeling 'no sympathy at all' for armed opposition groups rose continuously from 36% in 2009 to 77% in 2016.



La mosquée Shah-do-Shamshira au bord de la rivière Kaboul. 12 mars 1976.
Photo Micheline Centlivres-Demont