WAR AND BOUNDARIES IN AFGHANISTAN:
SIGNIFICANCE AND RELATIVITY OF LOCAL AND SOCIAL
BOUNDARIES

BY
BERNT GLATZER

This paper endeavours to describe and analyse notions and
practices of locality, of local boundaries and of social boundaries
before and during the recent war in Afghanistan. Has the war led
to decisive changes in these notions and practices? Since the pres-
ent turmoil in Afghanistan is conceived of by a large group of the
combatants as a ḡāḥād, the question also arises whether notions of
the Islamic frontier, the line between dār al-islām and dār al-harb,
also become relevant. Which local and social limitic structures
have resisted the war? Is the war fought along those boundaries?
Or have there been structural changes?

In fact the war has brought about new “real” (i.e. physically
observable) boundaries, as well as eliminating old ones. Outside
the country and even outside the Asian continent, Afghan bound-
aries have been expanded and narrowed again. In the refugee
camps of Pakistan or Iran, and in European, American and Austra-
lian suburbs people became more conscious of local and social
identities and differences were sharpened, levelled or re-defined,

1 My data are from anthropological field research in the pre-war period, from
observations during my term as an aid worker and consultant with international
NGOs, and from my recent research as a fellow of the Centre for Modern Ori-
ental Studies in Berlin. Besides making use of primary and secondary Afghan
sources of recent years, since 1995 I have been conducting interviews in Peshawar
with Afghans who come as short term travellers from Afghanistan to north-west
Pakistan, e.g. as petty traders, job seekers or accompanying patients to the hos-
pitals and clinics of Peshawar. My interview partners were from all major parts of
the eastern half of Afghanistan and from most of the major ethnic groups. There
is remarkably little variation in opinions between people from different areas or
ethnic groups, but variations over the time are quite significant. My recent re-
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depending on the context. At the same time a new and strong all-
Afghan identity developed which hardly existed one or two de-
cades ago.

The data I have collected so far point clearly to the interactive
and cognitive aspects of locality and of both spatial and social
borders or boundaries. Social boundaries, such as ethnic and tri-
bal structures, are by no means congruent with local ones; instead
there is a complex and changing interrelation between the two.

The Soviet-Afghan war and the subsequent intra-Afghan conflict
have caused a major displacement of populations over vast areas
and long distances. Afghans were forced into a high degree of
spatial mobility. About five million Afghans went on the move and
had to learn from experience how to see their home area from a
distance. At the same time, they had to produce new localities at
great distances from their homes.2 New social and local relation-
ships had to be established, old ones were reflected on and per-
haps revised.

In recent years I have been surprised at how easily and quickly
my interview partners were able to answer geographical questions
and to talk about locality and localization. They were conscious of
spatial attributes and borders and could actively deal with such
categories. My field notes from before the war reveal much more
vagueness when talking about territoriality, boundaries and space.3

Such terms as manteqah (area), ġéy or cîy (place), mamlakat (ter-
ritory of a state), watan (home area, Heimat), hadid (boundary,
limits, end, transition), or sarhad (frontier), are now part of daily
talk and are used in a sophisticated manner. Most informants were
easily able to define these terms.

Let us begin with the term manteqah: It has a range of meanings.
Its fuzziness and flexibility make it comparable to “area” or “place”.

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2 See Pierre Centlivres/Micheline Centlivres-Demont, “State, National Aware-
ness and Levels of Identity in Afghanistan from Monarchy to Islamic State”. In:
3 Bernt Glatzer, “Pastoral Territoriality in West Afghanistan: An Organization
of Flexibility”. In: Michael J. Casimir/Aparna Rao (eds.): Mobility and Territoriality:
Social and Spatial Boundaries among Fishers, Pastoralists and Peripatetics. New York,