

ONE

Afghan Sultanates, 1260–1732

The fame of Bahlol and of Sher Shah too, resounds in my ears
Afghan Emperors of India, who swayed its sceptre effectively and well.
For six or seven generations, did they govern so wisely,
That all their people were filled with admiration of them.
Either those Afghans were different, or these have greatly changed.

KHUSHHAL KHAN KHATTAK

Amongst the Afghan tribes it is indisputable that where one [tribe]
possesses more men than the other, that tribe will set out to destroy
the other.

SHER SHAH SURI¹

MODERN HISTORIES of Afghanistan generally regard 1747 as the founding date of the modern state of Afghanistan.² This is because in that year Ahmad Shah, a young Afghan of the 'Abdali tribe, who later adopted the regnal name of Durrani, established an independent kingdom in Kandahar and founded a monarchy that, in one expression or another, ruled Afghanistan until 1978. In fact the history of Afghan rule in the Iranian–Indian frontier can be traced back many centuries before the birth of Ahmad Shah. Nor was Ahmad Shah the first Afghan, or member of his family or tribe, to rule an independent kingdom.

In 1707 Mir Wa'is, of the Hotak Ghilzai tribe of Kandahar, rebelled against Safavid Persia and founded a kingdom that lasted for more than thirty years. In 1722 Mir Wa'is' son, Shah Mahmud, even invaded Persia and displaced the Safavid monarch and for seven years ruled an empire that stretched from Kandahar to Isfahan. Even after Mir Wa'is' descendants were thrown out of Persia, they continued to rule Kandahar and south-eastern Afghanistan until 1738.

In 1717, ten years after Mir Wa'is' revolt, a distant cousin of Ahmad Shah, 'Abd Allah Khan Saddozai, established the first independent 'Abdali sultanate in Herat after seceding from the Safavid Empire and for a brief

period both Ahmad Shah's father and half-brother ruled this kingdom. The dynasty founded by Ahmad Shah in 1747 lasted only until 1824, when his line was deposed by a rival 'Abdali clan, the Muhammadzais, descendants of Ahmad Shah's Barakzai *wazir*, or chief minister. In 1929 the Muhammadzais in turn were deposed and, following a brief interregnum, another Muhammadzai dynasty took power, the Musahiban. This family was the shortest lived of all three of Afghanistan's 'Abdali dynasties: its last representative, President Muhammad Da'ud Khan, was killed in a Communist coup in April 1978. All these dynasties belonged to the same Durrani tribe, but there was little love lost between these lineages. Indeed, the history of all the Afghan dynasties of northern India is turbulent and their internal politics marred by feuds and frequent civil wars.

While dozens of tribes call themselves 'Afghan', a term which nowadays is regarded as synonymous with Pushtun, Afghanistan's dynastic history is dominated by two tribal groupings, the 'Abdali, or Durrani, and the Ghilzai. The Ghilzai, or Ghilji, as a distinct tribal entity can be traced back to at least the tenth century where they are referred to in the sources as Khalaj or Khallukh. At this period their main centres were Tukharistan (the Balkh plains), Guzganan (the hill country of southern Faryab), Sar-i Pul and Badghis provinces, Bust in the Helmand and Ghazni. Today the Ghilzais are treated as an integral part of the Pushtun tribes that straddle the modern Afghan-Pakistan frontier, but tenth-century sources refer to the Khalaj as Turks and 'of Turkish appearance, dress and language'; the Khalaj tribes of Zamindarwar even spoke Turkish.³ It is likely that the Khalaj were originally Hephthalite Turks, members of a nomadic confederation from Inner Asia that ruled all the country north of the Indus and parts of eastern Iran during the fifth to early seventh centuries CE.⁴ The Khalaj were semi-nomadic pastoralists and possessed large flocks of sheep and other animals, a tradition that many Ghilzai tribes have perpetuated to this day.

The Khalji Sultanates of Delhi

During the era of the Ghaznavid dynasty (977–1186), so named because the capital of this kingdom was Ghazni, the Khalaj were *ghulams*, or indentured levies, conscripted into the Ghaznavid army.⁵ Often referred to as 'slave troops', *ghulams* were commonplace in the Islamic armies well into the twentieth century, the most well known being the Janissaries of the Ottoman empire. *Ghulams*, however, were not slaves in the European sense of the word. Unlike tribal levies, whose loyalties were often to their tribal leaders rather than the monarch, *ghulams* were recruited from subjugated

The minaret of the Ghaznavid Sultan Bahram Shah (1084–1157), one of two surviving medieval minarets outside Ghazni.



populations, usually non-Muslim tribes, forced to make a token conversion to Islam and formed the royal guard of the ruling monarch, or sultan. The *ghulams* thus provided a ruler with a corps of loyal troops that were bound to him by oath and patronage and that offset the power of the sultan's tribe and other powerful factions at court.

The *ghulams* were generally better trained and armed than any other military force in the kingdom and were the nearest thing to a professional army. Their commanders enjoyed a privileged status, often held high office and owned large estates. In a number of Muslim countries *ghulams* eventually became so powerful that they acted as kingmakers and on occasion deposed their master and set up their own dynasty. The Ghaznavids were a case in point. Sabuktigin (942–997), a Turk from Barskon in what is now Kyrgyzstan, who founded this dynasty, was a *ghulam* general who was sent to govern Ghazni by the Persian Samanid ruler of Bukhara, only for him to eventually break away and set up his own kingdom.⁶

Given that the Khalaj in the Ghaznavid army are referred to as *ghulams* it is very likely that they were one of many *kafir* or pagan tribes that lived in the hill country between the Hari Rud, Murghab and Balkh Ab watersheds. In 1005/6 Sultan Mahmud, the most famous of the Ghaznavid rulers, invaded, subjugated and systematically Islamized this region. As part of the terms of submission, the local rulers would have been required to provide a body of *ghulams* to serve in the Ghaznavid army. The Khalaj soon proved their worth, repelling an invasion by another Turkic group, the Qarakhanids, and subsequently in campaigning against the Hindu rulers of northern India.

In 1150 Ghazni was destroyed by the Ghurids, a Persian-speaking dynasty from the hill country of Badghis, Ghur and the upper Murghab, and by 1186 all vestiges of Ghaznavid power in northern India had been swept aside. The Ghurids incorporated the Khalaj *ghulams* into their army and it was during this era that they and probably the tribes of the Khyber area began to be known as Afghan, though the origin and meaning of this term is uncertain. Possibly Afghan was a vernacular term used to describe semi-nomadic, pastoral tribes, in the same way that today the migratory Afghan tribes are referred to by the generic term *maldar*, herd owners, or *kuchi*, from the Persian verb 'to migrate' or 'move home'. It was not until the nineteenth century and under British colonial influence that Afghans were commonly referred to as Pushtun or by the Anglo-Indian term Pathan.

During the Ghaznavid and Ghurid eras many Khalaj and other Afghan clans were relocated around Ghazni, others were required to live in the Koh-i Sulaiman, or in the hinterland of Kandahar, Kabul and Multan, where they were assigned grazing rights. This relocation may have been a reward for their military service, but more likely it was a strategic decision, since it meant these tribes could be quickly mustered in the event of war. By the early fourteenth century Afghans were a common feature of the ethnological landscape of southern and southeastern Afghanistan. The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited Kabul in 1333, records how the *qafila*, or trade caravan, he was travelling with had a sharp engagement with the Afghans in a narrow pass near the fortress of 'Karmash', probably on the old Kabul–Jalalabad highway.⁷ Ibn Battuta damned these Afghans as 'highwaymen', but on the basis of the limited sources available it is likely these tribes expected payment for safe passage and the head of the caravan had failed to pay the customary dues. Significantly, Ibn Battuta notes that the Afghans of the Kabul–Jalalabad region were Persian-speakers, though whether they spoke Pushtu too is not recorded.

Other sources from this era portray the Afghans as a formidable warrior race. One author graphically compares them to ‘a huge elephant . . . [a] tall tower of a fortress . . . daring, intrepid, and valiant soldiers, each one of whom, either on mountain or in forest, would take a hundred Hindus in his grip, and, in a dark night, would reduce a demon to utter helplessness.’⁸ These Afghan *ghulams* certainly lived up to this reputation during their campaigns in India and the Ghurids rewarded their commanders with hereditary estates, or *jagirs*, in the plains of northern India. This led to a substantial migration of Afghan tribes from the hill country of what is now south and southwestern Afghanistan to the fertile, frost-free and well-watered lands of the Indian plains. Eventually the Khalaj, by this time referred to as the Khaljis or Khiljis, became so powerful that they placed their own nominee on the throne of Delhi. In 1290 they seized power and for the next thirty years ruled northern India in their own right.

The Khaljis and other Afghan tribes kept apart from their mostly Hindu subjects, living in cantonments, or *mahalas*, based on clan affiliation. Jalal al-Din Firuz, the first Khalji sultan, even refused to attend the court in Delhi and built a new capital a few kilometres away in the Afghan enclave of Kilokhri.⁹ This cultural isolation was reinforced by the practice of endogamy, for the Khalji would only marry women from their own tribe. As for the Khalji tribal leaders, they showed scant respect for the authority of the sultan and there were frequent clashes between them and the crown as the former fought the monarch’s efforts to curb their traditional right to the autonomous government of their tribes.¹⁰ The Khalji were also notorious for their blood feuds, which they pursued regardless of the consequences to the body politic. Rivals even fought each other in the court and, on one occasion, in the royal presence itself. The Khalji, however, were also a formidable military power. Sultan Jalal al-Din Firuz (r. 1290–96) and his successor Sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din, or Juna Khan (r. 1296–1316) even defeated the invading Mongol armies on several occasions and in so doing saved northern India from the ravages they inflicted on Afghanistan, Persia and the Middle East.

The last Khalji, Sultan Ikhtiyar al-Din, was assassinated in 1320 and a Turkish dynasty, the Tughlaqs, seized power, but the Afghans remained a force in the political and military life of northern India. Between 1436 and 1531 one branch of the Khalji dynasty ruled Malwa in modern Madhya Pradesh, while thousands of Khaljis owned large tracts of land in western India and dozens of their military cantonments were scattered throughout northern India from the Punjab to Bengal. The Afghans also continued to provide high-quality troops for the Tughlaq army and some held high military office.

In 1451 Bahlul Khan, a Khalji of the Lodhi clan, deposed the then sultan and founded a second Afghan sultanate, the Lodhi Dynasty, which ruled northern India for 75 years (1451–1526). Under the Lodhis, another wave of Afghans migrated into northern India and perpetuated the tradition of living in separate cantonments and the practice of endogamy. Ludhiana, now close to the frontier between India and Pakistan, for example, derives its name from having originally been a Lodhi cantonment. The Lodhis, while Muslims, were still only semi-Islamized. After Sultan Bahlul Lodhi conquered Delhi he and his followers attended Friday prayers in the main mosque to ensure that his name was recited in the *khutba*, which was an essential act of the Friday congregational prayer service. The *imam*, or prayer leader, observing how the Afghans struggled to perform the prayers according to prescribed rituals, was heard to exclaim: ‘what a strange (*‘ajab*) tribe has appeared. They do not know whether they are followers of Dajal [the Antichrist] or if they are themselves Dajal-possessed.’¹¹

The Mughal conquest of India and Afghan-Mughal rivalry

The Lodhi dynasty came to an abrupt end at the Battle of Panipat in 1526, when the last sultan was defeated by the Mughal armies of Zahir al-Din Babur. Babur, a descendant of both Timur Lang and Chinggis Khan, thus became the latest in a series of Turkic rulers of India whose empire included Kabul and southeastern Afghanistan. Born in Andijan in the Fergana Oasis of what is now Uzbekistan, Babur’s father had ruled a kingdom that included Samarkand and Bukhara, but after his death Babur had been ousted from the region by the Shaibanid Uzbeks and fled across the Amu Darya, eventually taking Kabul from its Timurid ruler. Prior to his invasion of India, Babur had conducted a series of expeditions against the Afghan tribes of Laghman and Nangahar as well as the Mohmands of the Khyber area, and the Ghilzais of Ghazni.¹²

Following his victory at Panipat, Babur did his best to reconcile the Afghan tribes that lay across the key military road between Kabul and the Punjab. To this end he married the daughter of a Yusufzai *khan*, the most numerous and powerful tribe in the region of the Khyber Pass. Dilawar Khan Lodhi, a member of the deposed dynasty, also became one of Babur’s most trusted advisers and was given the hereditary title of Khan Khanan, Khan of Khans. Other members of the Lodhi dynasty were appointed as governors or held high rank in the army. Despite this, there were numerous Afghan rebellions against Mughal rule. In 1540, following Babur’s death, there was civil war between his sons and eventually Farid al-Din Khan,

A Timurid miniature from Herat, early 16th century, depicting a battle scene.



of the Suri clan of the Kakar tribe, who had been a high-ranking officer under the Lodhis, ousted Babur’s son and successor Humayun from Delhi, and adopted the regnal title of Sher Shah Suri. He ruled Delhi and much of northern India for fifteen years, though Humayun’s brothers continued to govern Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul and Peshawar. Humayun himself fled to Persia but after fifteen years in exile he finally regained the throne of Delhi and restored the Mughal supremacy.

Sher Shah Suri’s rebellion hardened Mughal attitudes towards the Afghan tribes. Humayun’s son and heir, Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605), confiscated their *jagirs* and banned them from governorships and high military rank. Racial prejudice too ran deep, with Mughal historians regularly referring to Afghans as ‘black-faced’, ‘brainless’, ‘vagabond’ and ‘wicked’.¹³ The suppressions, confiscations and general prejudice caused deep resentment, for many Afghans continued to serve the Mughal empire faithfully.

One response to this disenfranchisement was the rise of a militant millenarian movement known as the Roshaniyya (Illuminated), which posed a serious threat to Mughal rule in northwestern India for almost half

a century.¹⁴ Its founder, Bayazid Ansari (b. 1525), or Pir Roshan, was from the small Ormur or Baraki tribe, whose mother tongue was not Pushtu but Ormuri. His father was a religious teacher but Ansari fell out with him and his tribe because of his unorthodox opinions. Forced to flee, he made his way into Mohmand tribal territory in the Khyber region and later made his base in the mountain country of Tirah.

From the mid-1570s onwards Pir Roshan began to claim he was the *Mahdi*, the Restorer whose appearance in the Last Days, according to Islamic teaching, would usher in the Golden Age in which all the world would be converted to Islam. After a visit to an unnamed Sufi mystic in the Kandahar area, Pir Roshan declared *jihad* on the Mughals and found strong support for his cause among the Yusufzai, Afridi, Orakzai and Mohmand tribes. The Roshaniyya movement was heterodox in its theology and was condemned by the orthodox Sunni establishment as heretical. Its many critics punning referring to the movement as the *tarikhiyya*, from the Persian word for 'darkness'. At the same time the Roshaniyya had strong nationalistic overtones and one of Pir Roshan's key demands was complete independence from Mughal rule.

The Roshaniyya rebellion came at a difficult time for Akbar the Great, who was already embroiled in a civil war with his brother Hakim, governor of Lahore, as well as the conquest of Kashmir. When Akbar finally regained control of Lahore and Peshawar in 1581, he marched up the Khyber Pass and soundly defeated Pir Roshan at the Battle of Baro in Nangahar. A



The Khyber Pass, looking back towards Peshawar and the Indus plains.

short time later Bayazid died, but the revolt was perpetuated by his son Jalal al-Din, known to his followers as Jalala. In order to strengthen the Indus frontier, Akbar ordered major improvements to the road between Lahore and Peshawar, widened the mule track through the Khyber Pass to facilitate the passage of wheeled carriages and artillery, and built the massive fortress at Attock on the left bank of the Indus as a forward base for military operations against the Afghan tribes.

In 1585 Akbar's rebellious brother Hakim finally drank himself to death and the civil war petered out, leaving Akbar free to concentrate on suppressing the Roshaniyyas. To achieve this end he adopted a policy of divide and rule, securing the support of the Afghan tribes of the Indus plains who had suffered from Yusufzai raids on their villages and crops. To better manage these tribes, the Mughals dealt with them indirectly through representatives, or *maliks*, who were either chosen by the king or nominated by a tribal council or *jirga*. In return for subsidies and other royal favours, the *maliks* were required to keep their tribe loyal, maintain internal law and order and provide tribal levies when required. The *maliks* also were entrusted with collecting the tribes' annual tribute and maintaining security on the royal roads that ran through their territory. Malik Akoray of the Khattak tribe, for example, was responsible for security on the key military road from the right bank of the Indus to Peshawar.

Akbar also sent an army into the Khyber and Yusufzai hill country to suppress the rebels, but the Mughal military machine was not trained or equipped for mountain warfare. The rebel tribes lured the Mughals into the narrowest parts of the Khyber Pass, blocked the exits and proceeded to slaughter the trapped army. When a relief column tried to break through it was repulsed with heavy loss of life. A second column sent against the Yusufzais suffered a similar fate and a thousand more men died before they fought their way out of the trap. Emboldened by this success, in 1593 Jalala laid siege to Peshawar and the city was only saved at the last minute by the arrival of a relief force. Later in the same year the Roshaniyyas sacked Mughal-ruled Ghazni and sent representatives to Kandahar to seek support from the Afghan tribes in that region.

After these defeats Akbar adopted a policy of gradual attrition, knowing that he commanded far more resources in terms of manpower, artillery and cash than the Roshaniyyas. Afghan resistance slowly collapsed and, as one stronghold after the other fell, there were harsh reprisals. Yusufzai resistance was eventually broken and never again did they risk challenging the might of the Mughal empire. The Roshaniyya's legacy, however, inspired subsequent millenarian, nationalist movements among the Afghan tribes

of the Indian frontier, of which the Taliban are the latest manifestation. Another legacy of the Roshaniyya was some of the earliest Pushtu poems written by Mirza Khan Ansari (d. c. 1630/31), a descendant of Pir Roshan.

Akbar's successor, Jahangir (r. 1605–27), adopted a more conciliatory policy to the Afghan tribes, appointing Dilawar Khan Kakar as governor of Lahore while Khan Jahan, a descendant of Pir Khan Lodhi, was given the high title of *farzand* (son). Jahangir records of this individual that:

there is not in my government any person of greater influence than he, so much so that on his representation I pass over faults which are not pardoned at the intercession of any of the other servants of the Court. In short, he is a man of good disposition, brave, and worthy of favour.¹⁵

Afghan fortunes, however, suffered another blow during the reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) when Khan Jahan backed a rival candidate for the succession. Khan Jahan fled to the Punjab, where he tried to raise an army from the Afghan tribes, only for his appeal to fall on deaf ears. On 17 February 1631 Khan Jahan's revolt was crushed at the Battle of Sahindra and he, his sons and many of his Afghan followers were put to death.

Shah Jahan's successor, Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), continued the repressive policy against the Afghans and tried to exert more direct control over them. He imprisoned Khushhal Khan Khattak, a grandson of Malik Akoray Khattak, despite his family having served the Mughals loyally for three generations. When Khushhal Khan was finally freed after a decade of incarceration, he fled to the Afridis of the Khyber Pass and raised the banner of revolt. Aurangzeb responded by distributing large sums of gold as well as titles and gifts to the *maliks* and Khushhal's uprising collapsed. Aurangzeb even paid Khushhal's son, Bahram, to assassinate his father but, despite several attempts on his life, Khushhal Khan died of natural causes at a ripe old age.

Khushhal Khan Khattak's most important legacy, however, is his literary output and he is regarded today as one of the most famous of all Pushtu poets. His works include scathing attacks on Mughal rule and his own people for their preference for Mughal gold, rather than tribal honour and independence. A contemporary of Khushhal Khan, Rahman Baba (c. 1632–1706), a Mohmand, was another great Pushtu poet who was famed for his mystical verses and homilies. His verse is regarded with such veneration that 'when a [Rahman Baba] couplet is cited in Jirga, heads bow down and arguments are settled'.¹⁶

The rise of the Saddozais and the Mughal and Safavid struggle for Kandahar

While the Mughals fought to contain the tribes of India's northwest frontier, further west another Afghan tribe, the 'Abdalis, were emerging as a major political force under the patronage of Safavid Persia. Unlike the Ghilzai, the 'Abdalis are not mentioned in the histories until the middle of the sixteenth century and little is known about their ethnogenesis, though prior to the Mughal era one of their key strongholds was the Obekh valley in the upper Hari Rud. The *Makhzan-i Afghani*, written during the reign of Jahangir, states that the 'Abdalis fought in the army of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, while Mount Stuart Elphinstone, the first European to attempt a systematic account of the Afghan tribes, records that the 'Abdalis claimed their original homeland was the mountains of Ghur.¹⁷ Another tradition states that Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni rewarded the 'Abdalis for some unspecified service by granting them grazing rights in and around Kandahar.

These accounts bear an uncanny resemblance to the early history of the Khalaj and it is possible that they are an attempt to co-opt a rival tribe's history. If there is any historical basis for this claim, however, it suggests that the 'Abdalis too were probably *ghulams* in the Ghaznavid army and, like the Khalaj, probably recruited from the non-Muslim tribes of Ghur. However, in respect of their internal management, the 'Abdalis and Ghilzais differ substantially, which suggests a somewhat different cultural background for the two tribes. The Ghilzais are referred to as Turks in early Islamic sources and at least some spoke a Turkic language as their mother tongue. In 1809 Mount Stuart Elphinstone noted all the leading 'Abdalis at the Durrani court spoke Persian and dressed in the Persian manner. This, of course, was primarily due to having been ruled by the Timurids and subsequently Safavid Persia, though it may suggest that originally the 'Abdalis were a Persianate, rather than a Turkic, tribe from the central highlands of the Hindu Kush.

One of many traditions concerning the origin of the name 'Abdali is that it is derived from '*abdali*, a Sufi title accorded to individuals who have obtained a high degree of gnosis. The 'Abdalis claim that this title was due to them being *mukhlis*, or devotees, of Khwaja 'Abu Ahmad 'Abdal (d. 941), founder of the Chishtiyya Sufi Order.¹⁸ Claiming links to a famous *pir* or a major figure of early Islam is not uncommon among the tribes and dynasties of the region, for it enhanced their spiritual and political legitimacy. However, *ghulams* were usually affiliates of a particular Sufi Order: the Ottoman Janissaries, for example, were all initiates of the Bektashiyya



The 12th-century Ghurid mausolea of Sufi *pirs* at Chisht-i Sharif in the upper Hari Rud. During the Mughal era the Chishtiyya Order was the most prominent Sufi movement in northern India.

Order. Even so, it is improbable that the ‘Abdalis were historically affiliated to the Chishtiyya Order, even though its original centre, Chisht-i Sharif, was just upstream from Obek. Had this been the case this link would have been perpetuated through the centuries. Instead Saddu Khan, the eponymous founder of the Saddozai royal line, was bound to another Sufi Order, the Qadiriyya, which originated in Syria. From the late eighteenth century several of the ‘Abdali tribes affiliated themselves to the northern Indian, Mujadidi *tariqa* of Naqshbandism.

The early accounts of the ‘Abdalis relate mainly to the rise of the royal Saddozai clan. According to tribal genealogies, the many ‘Abdali tribes all stem from four primary lineages, the sons of Zirak. The most senior of these tribes, by right of primogeniture, is the Popalzai, of which the royal house of Saddozai is a sept. The other three lineages are Barakzai, Alakozai and Musazai. Each of these four main tribes are subdivided into dozens of clans similar to the Scottish Highlanders or Maori *iwi*.¹⁹

Tribal tradition states that in or around 1558, Akko, an itinerant *darwish*, paid an unexpected visit to a certain Salih, an impoverished member of the Habibzai branch of the Popalzais. Salih managed to scrape together enough food to provide for his guests and as Akko was about to leave he told his host that he had dreamed that a lion had entered his house. The

darwish then predicted that Salih would have a son who would be as brave as a lion and earn fame for himself and his family.²⁰ Furthermore, the birth of this child would be a turning point in the family's financial fortunes. In due time a baby boy was born and Saleh named him 'Asad Allah (Lion of God), but his family called him Saddu, from which the Saddozai lineage derives its name. Sometime after Saddu's birth the governor of Kandahar appointed Salih as *malik* of the 'Abdali tribal confederacy and, since one of his duties was to collect the tribe's taxes and tribute, Salih soon became a very wealthy man.

Salih's rise to power was the result of a major shift in the geopolitical scene of the Indian–Persian frontier. From the early sixteenth century Kandahar, which was an important frontier town and trade emporium, was fought over by three major regional powers: Safavid Persia, Mughal India and the Shaibanid Uzbeks north of the Hindu Kush. In 1501 the head of the Shi'a Safaviyya Sufi Order in Ardabil, Azerbaijan, proclaimed himself king of Persia and took the regnal name of Shah Isma'il I. Within a decade Shah Isma'il had brought all of Persia under his authority and imposed the Shi'a rite of Islam as the state cult. The Safavid army consisted mostly of members of the Safaviyya Order and many of them were of Turco-Mongolian ethnicity: Turkman, Kurds and Chaghatais. They became known as Qizilbash, literally 'red heads,' from the distinctive red cap worn by members of the Order.

North of the Hindu Kush and beyond the Amu Darya the Shaibanid Uzbeks, a tribal confederacy formed from the remnants of the armies of the Mongol conqueror Chinggis Khan, took Samarkand and sacked Balkh, Herat and Mashhad, sweeping away another Turco-Mongolian dynasty, the Timurids. Two brothers, Mukim Khan and Shah Beg Khan, whose father had been the Timurid governor of Kandahar, then established their own independent kingdom in Kandahar and Kabul. Following Zahir al-Din Babur's conquest of Kabul in 1504, Mukim fled to Kandahar and when, three years later, Babur marched against Kandahar, Shah Beg turned to the Uzbeks for military assistance. Since Babur was already fighting the Shaibanids north of the Hindu Kush, he decided he could not risk opening a second front and withdrew.

Six years later, in December 1510, Shah Isma'il routed the Uzbeks outside Merv and their leader, Uzbek Khan, was killed. Shah Isma'il then occupied Herat, while Babur spent the next decade trying to regain his father's kingdom beyond the Amu Darya. Babur eventually abandoned this quest and decided to carve out a kingdom in northern India instead. In 1520, as the first stage of this campaign, Babur besieged Kandahar. After

holding out for nearly two years, Shah Beg surrendered the city in return for safe passage to Sind. Kandahar thus passed under Mughal sovereignty. Babur pushed on into India where he eventually defeated the Lodhi Sultan and established his seat of power in Delhi.

After Babur's death his son Humayun passed through Kandahar on his way to Persia following the loss of Delhi to Sher Shah Suri. Humayun was given refuge by the then Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp I, and in return for adopting the Shi'a rite and military assistance, Humayun agreed to cede Kandahar in perpetuity to Persia. In 1545, after fifteen years of exile, Humayun regained control of Kandahar with the aid of a Persian army, but once he was in control of the citadel Humayun reneged on his promise and threw out the Safavid garrison. Thirteen years later, in 1558, following the death of Humayun, Shah Tahmasp sent an army to attack Kandahar and demanded that the new Mughal emperor, Akbar the Great, fulfil his father's promise and cede sovereignty over the city. Since Akbar was facing a series of challenges to his power further east, he reluctantly agreed and Kandahar was incorporated as part of the Persian province of Khurasan.

'Asad Allah, or Saddu, was born around the time that Kandahar passed from Mughal to Safavid sovereignty. The appointment of his father Salih as *malik* of the 'Abdalis was undoubtedly due to this shift in the balance of power. The Safavids, while they appointed a Persian governor in Kandahar, perpetuated the *malik* system established by the Mughals as the best method of controlling the local Afghan tribes and ensuring security on the royal highways. It is more than likely Salih Habibzai was nominated as *malik* by an 'Abdali *jirga* and their choice was confirmed by the Safavid military governor of Kandahar.²¹ The fact that the *jirga* chose a poor man with little influence or prestige was nothing unusual: both the Safavid governor and the 'Abdali elders had a vested interest in appointing someone with little power, since he was that much easier to control and manipulate. What is remarkable is that the 'Abdalis, who were Sunni, were not required to convert to Shi'ism, even though the Safavids always required this for the Muslim population of their empire.

Salih's appointment was confirmed by a *firman*, or royal patent, with the title of *malik* and *mir-i Afghan* or *mir-i Afghaniha*.²² His office and its titles were hereditary, and when Salih's son Saddu succeeded him the family adopted the clan name of Saddozai. The 'Abdalis were also permitted to retain their right to autonomy and Saddu later became *kalantar* too, a position similar to that of a magistrate and one that gave him the right to adjudicate on internal disputes and punish criminals.

Such rights and privileges could only have been secured in return for substantial services to the Safavids and, given the Saddozais' subsequent history, it is likely they were a reward for 'Abdali military support against the Mughals. As we have seen, the Mughals had adopted an increasingly harsh policy towards the Afghan tribes of the Indian borderland and they, in turn, resented Mughal domination. The revolt of Sher Shah Suri, Afghan support for Khan Khanan and Akbar's rebellious brother, as well as the Roshaniyya movement, all led to further repressions until the tribes 'preferred a Shia overlord to a fellow-Hanafi who subjected them to such degradation'.²³ From the Safavid point of view the 'Abdalis of Herat and Kandahar were natural allies, for their leading men were already

TABLE 4: The Muslim Dynasties of Northern India, 975–1558

Dynasty	Ethnicity	Ruled	Remarks
Ghaznavid	Turk	977–1186	Sunni Muslim: descended from a <i>ghulam</i> general of the Persian Samanid dynasty
Ghurid	Iranian	1186–1206	From Ghur in the central highlands of Afghanistan. Converted to Sunni Islam under the Ghaznavids
Mamluk ('slave')	Turk	1206–90	Successor dynasties from Ghurids to Mughal, usually referred to as the Delhi Sultanates
Khalji/Khilji	Afghan (originally Turkic?)	1290–1320	Formerly <i>ghulams</i> in the Ghaznavid and Ghurid army
Tughlaq	Turco-Mongolian	1320–1414	1398, Timur Lang (Tamurlaine), of Central Asian Turco-Mongolian stock, sacks Delhi
Sayyid	Arab (claimed)	1414–51	Founded by Timur Lang's governor of the Punjab. The dynasty claimed descent from Muhammad
Lodhi	Afghan (Khalji)	1451–1526	Founder of this dynasty was originally governor of Lahore
Mughal	Turco-Mongolian	1526–40	Zahir al-Din Babur, its founder, originally from Ferghana. A descendant of Chinggis Khan and Timur Lang. Babur's son, Humayun, forced to flee to Persia after rebellion of his brothers and defeat by Sher Shah Suri
Suri	Afghan (Kakar)	1540–55	Farid al-Din Khan, whose regnal name was Sher Shah Suri; ruled N. India after his defeat of Humayun. Humayun's brothers continued to rule Kabul, Ghazni, Kandahar and Peshawar
Mughal	Turco-Mongolian	1555–1858	Humayun defeats Islam Shah Suri, son of Sher Shah, and reasserts Mughal power in Delhi. Mughal rule continued until it was replaced by Britain following the Sepoy Mutiny

Persianized and spoke an ‘uncouth Persian.’²⁴ Many ‘Abdalis were also urbanized and were engaged in the overland trade with India, which was vital to the Safavid economy.

The rise of the ‘Abdalis to political prominence as clients of a Persian, Shi’a monarchy has been largely airbrushed out of modern Afghan historiography and ignored by Western historians. For many Afghans, especially monarchists, it is an embarrassment, for from the early twentieth century successive governments deliberately promoted a national identity constructed on three foundations: the Durrani dynasty’s adherence to Hanafi Sunnism, which was on occasion accompanied by anti-Shi’a and anti-Persian sentiment; Pushtunness and the Pushtu language; and Afghan resistance to, and independence from, the dominant imperial powers of the region, including Persia. To one degree or another all these pillars are based on fallacies and required a significant rewriting of Afghanistan’s early history from school textbooks to historiography. One reason for Afghan historians favouring 1747 as the foundation of modern Afghanistan is that it avoids referring back to the previous two-and-a-half centuries of the Saddozai–Safavid alliance. It also avoids the uncomfortable fact that prior to 1747 Kandahar, which Afghan monarchists would later promote as the dynastic and spiritual capital of Afghanistan, was for many decades an integral part of the Persian province of Khurasan and that the ‘Abdalis were a Persianate tribe. As one modern Afghan historian notes: ‘in reality, little about the Afghan monarchy was tribal or Paxtun.’²⁵

The Saddozai–Safavid alliance

When the Safavids took possession of Kandahar they inherited a prosperous region and an important urban centre that straddled a major trade and military route to northern India. As well as being an emporium for Indian cloth, spices and gemstones, Kandahar was a vital link in Persia’s ‘silk for silver’ trade and profited substantially from foreign currency exchange and the striking of silver coinage.²⁶ When Zahir al-Din Babur took the city, he was amazed at the vast quantities of coins and ‘white gold’ – cloth and other portable goods – found in the storehouses and treasury. The French traveller François Bernier, writing in the 1650s and ’60s, describes Kandahar as ‘the stronghold of a rich and fine kingdom.’²⁷ Another European traveller of the same era noted that Kandahar was home to a large number of Hindu bankers, or *banyans*, who financed the overland trade through loans and money transfers.²⁸ Elphinstone, writing in the early nineteenth century, noted that ‘almost all the great



During the Mughal and Safavid era, Kandahar was a prosperous commercial centre. The trading tradition is still strong, as shown in this 1970s image of Kandahar's bazaar.

Dooranees' had houses in Kandahar 'and some of them are said to be large and elegant'.²⁹ Outside of the urban centre of Kandahar lay large tracts of fertile agricultural land irrigated by the Arghandab, Tarnak and Helmand rivers, while thousands of semi-nomadic Afghan, Kakar and Baluch tribes provided the region with meat, skins, wool and pack animals. As protectors of these military and commercial routes as well as traders in their own right, the 'Abdalis in general and Saddozais in particular became extremely wealthy.

From an early age Saddu Khan is said to have exhibited a warrior spirit. On one occasion he won an archery contest, beating the cream of Safavid marksmen in the process. Later Saddu took the oath of discipleship, or *ba'it*, swearing allegiance to Sayyid Najib al-Din Gailani, *pir* of the Qadiriyya Order, who is said to have presented Saddu with a *kha'lat*, or robe of honour, and the sword of 'Abd al-Qadir Gailani, *pir-i piran*, the founder of the Qadiriyya Order. These precious relics were passed down through the Saddozai line and used as symbols of their spiritual and temporal leadership of the 'Abdalis. Pir-i Piran's sword was eventually lost during the Sikh sack of the Saddozai stronghold of Multan in 1818, but the 'Abdalis' spiritual affiliation to the Qadiriyya Order has been perpetuated to this day. During the Soviet occupation of the 1980s, 'Abdali and other royalist tribes fought under the banner of the Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islami, whose leader, Sayyid Ahmad Gailani, was at the time *pir* of the Order.

The Safavids ruled Kandahar until 1595, when Akbar the Great, taking advantage of a war of succession that followed the death of Shah Tahmasp I, regained control of the region. The conquest was relatively peaceful, for the Safavid prince governor agreed to surrender the province to the Mughals in order to pursue his own claim to the throne of Persia. Once in charge, the Mughals stripped the pro-Safavid Saddu Khan of his privileges and appointed Hajji Jala and Malik Kalu of the rival Barakzai clan as joint *mir-i Afghanihas*. Eventually, the struggle for the Safavid throne was resolved and the new king, Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), set out to reassert Persian power over northeastern Khurasan, which had been overrun by the Uzbeks. In 1598 Shah 'Abbas retook Mashhad and a few months later he defeated the Shaibanid Uzbek ruler, Din Muhammad Khan, and took Herat. The following year Balkh too fell to the Safavids.

We know little about how the 'Abdalis in Herat fared under Uzbek rule but shortly after the Safavids regained control of the city. Malik Salih called a *jirga* in Herat and announced that since he was now in his eighties, he was abdicating in favour of his eldest son, Saddu. Afghan tribal assemblies dislike acting as a rubber stamp for ambitious leaders and the assembly mooted several other possible successors. One key issue was who had the right to succeed Malik Salih, for primogeniture was not traditional among the 'Abdalis. Instead the tribe followed the Turco-Mongolian model of agnatic, or patrilineal, seniority; that is, the headship passed to the next most senior male member of the clan, usually an uncle or the next oldest brother.

Despite several days of debate the *jirga* was unable to agree so Malik Salih decided to put an end to the argument by girding a *kamarband* – a sash that probably held the sword of Pir-i Piran – around his son's waist and declared Saddu as the new *mir-i Afghaniha*, whereupon the majority of the assembly reluctantly accepted this fait accompli. Saddu then made an unprecedented demand, requiring each *khan* to swear an oath of allegiance to him on the Qur'an, an action that indicates Saddu's ambitions to rule his tribe more like a prince than a *malik*. Needless to say, Hajji Jala and Malik Kalu Barakzai in Kandahar refused to accept their rival's appointment and armed clashes ensued between Barakzais and Saddozais.

Following the death of Akbar the Great in 1605, Shah 'Abbas I sent an army to regain control of Kandahar, but the Mughal garrison held out and the region remained under Mughal sovereignty until 1622, when it came to an abrupt end. In this year the then Mughal emperor, Jahangir, received a highly flattering letter from Shah 'Abbas I requesting the return of Kandahar, 'that petty country'.³⁰ Jahangir was not impressed, for at the end of the letter the Safavid king informed the emperor that he had already

taken possession of Kandahar and expelled its Mughal garrison. Jahangir ordered an army to march against the city, but just as it was about to set out his son, Shah Jahan, rebelled and ‘struck with an axe at the foot of his own dominion.’ The Kandahar campaign was abandoned and the army redirected to bring the rebel prince to heel. A furious Jahangir decreed that Shah Jahan, whose regnal name meant King of the World, should henceforth only be referred to in his presence as Shah Bi-Daulat, the Stateless or Vagabond King.³¹

Saddu Khan and the ‘Abdalis once again provided military support for the Safavid reconquest of Kandahar and as a reward Shah ‘Abbas I heaped favours on Saddu and his tribe. The ‘Abdalis were restored to their customary privileges and exempted from paying tribute, their autonomous status was consolidated and Mir Saddu was given the exalted title of *sultan*, prince. Saddu was also gifted the substantial *jagir* of Safa on the Tarrnak river, land which had probably been seized from the Tokhi Ghilzais, whose fortress of Qalat-i Ghilzai was a few kilometres away. Saddu Khan then constructed a substantial fortified palace known as Qal‘a-i Safa in the hill country of Shahr-i Safa, which henceforth was the stronghold of Saddozai power.

Shortly before his death in 1627, Sultan Saddu appointed as his successor his second son, Khizr, a Sufi who spent most of his time in spiritual contemplation. He then tried to convince the *jirga* to endorse his choice by claiming he had received visions and prophecies supporting his decision. The *jirga*, though, rejected Khizr and appointed Saddu’s eldest son, Maudud Khan, a battle-hardened warrior and a bully. The decision not only split the ‘Abdali tribe but divided Saddu’s family into two hostile factions, leading to a feud that would be perpetuated down the generations (see Chart 1).

A few months after Sultan Maudud Khan became *mir-i Afghaniha*, Khizr died from a ‘mysterious illness.’³² His family accused Maudud Khan of poisoning his brother and Khizr’s wife refused to hand over the sword and *kha’lat* of Pir-i Piran, and so denied Maudud’s succession any legitimacy. In response Maudud persecuted her and Khizr’s family until she was eventually ‘persuaded’ to hand over the relics. As for Khizr, the Popalzai tribe regarded him as a *shahid*, or martyr, and referred to him as Khwaja Khizr. On occasions of great importance, the Popalzais even made offerings and prayers in his name.

Maudud’s reign as *mir-i Afghaniha* was both arbitrary and repressive. One story related how one of Maudud Khan’s nephews had been betrothed to an aristocratic ‘Abdali woman, but when the time came for the marriage to be formalized the woman’s father told Maudud’s servants that he had

changed his mind as he had no wish to have his daughter marry into a family of such low social status. An angry Maudud Khan sent his retainers to attack the Khan's camp and kidnap the girl, who was taken to Shahr-i Safa, where the marriage rites were performed without any member of her family being present.

The same year that Saddu Khan died the Mughal emperor, Jahangir, also passed away, followed two years later by Shah 'Abbas I. Shah 'Abbas had been so paranoid about assassination that he had had his sons blinded, so disqualifying them from the succession. A series of bloody purges followed and eventually Shah Safi I, a grandson of Shah 'Abbas, seized the throne. Shah Safi then recalled 'Ali Mardan Khan, the Kurdish governor of Kandahar, but 'Ali Mardan, realizing that this summons was tantamount to a death sentence, refused to obey the order and opened negotiations with the Mughal governor of Kabul. In 1638 'Ali Mardan surrendered the city to the Mughals and its garrison held out despite several attempts by the Persian governor of Herat to reassert Safavid authority over the region. Five years later, when the Mughal governor of Kabul rebelled, Sultan Maudud Khan marched out with the Mughal garrison in Kandahar to bring the rebel to heel, only to be killed while storming the walls of the Bala Hisar.

'Ali Mardan Khan later became the Mughal governor of Kabul and afterwards *wazir* of the Punjab. He later married a Portuguese Catholic woman, Maria de Ataides, who appears to have set aside a building in Kabul's Bala Hisar as a church, which was first used by the Jesuit missionaries attached to the Mughal court and subsequently inherited by Kabul's Armenian community. During 'Ali Mardan's era as governor of the Punjab he commissioned many major public works in Kabul and Nangahar, including the gardens at Nimla on the old Kabul–Jalalabad road and Kabul's famous Chahar Chatta bazaar.

Following Sultan Maudud Khan's unexpected death, a hastily convened *jirga* appointed Khudakka Khan, or Khudadad Khan, Khizr's eldest son, as *mir-i Afghaniha*, only for the Mughal governor of Kandahar to reject his candidacy, probably because he was deemed to be pro-Safavid. Instead the governor appointed Maudud Khan's eldest son, Shah Husain Khan. The 'Abdalis, unhappy about this interference in their internal affairs, informed the governor that: 'if any one of us sought the help of the ruler for the settlement of our mutual disputes, he no longer remained a true Afghan and was considered to be . . . an outcast.'³³ Despite this veiled threat of rebellion, the governor refused to listen and ordered Khudakka Khan to quit Shahr-i Safa. When he refused, the governor, supported by Shah Husain Khan, stormed the Saddozai stronghold and Khudakka Khan fled to Persia.



Kabul's former royal citadel, the Bala Hisar citadel, looking westwards over the Hashmat Khan lake.

Despite this success, Mughal control over Kandahar was weak and was further undermined by Shah Jahan's decision to go to war with Nazr Muhammad Khan, the Tuqay-Timurid Khan of Balkh. Though the invasion initially went well and Nazr Muhammad Khan was defeated, the Mughal lines of communication were overextended and the population refused to feed the army or pay taxes. In October 1647, faced with the prospect of a second winter of hardship, the Mughals handed Balkh back to Nazr Muhammad Khan and abandoned the province for good.

Nazr Muhammad had fled to Persia, where Shah 'Abbas II agreed to provide military support so he could regain control of Balkh. When he set out to reclaim his kingdom, he was accompanied by a substantial Persian army. While Nazr Muhammad Khan and the main army set out for Maimana, another column, supported by Khudakka Khan Saddozai, headed south and besieged Kandahar. The city finally fell in February 1649 and despite three subsequent attempts by the Mughals to regain control of the city, Kandahar and Herat remained under Safavid sovereignty. As for Shah Husain Saddozai, he made his home in Multan, 'the doorway to the kingdom of Kandahar',³⁴ where he was appointed as *nawab* of the province and founded a dynasty that ruled the area until 1818. Multan thus became a haven for Saddozais fleeing the increasingly bloody power struggle between rival clan members in Herat and Kandahar. Among the prominent Saddozais born in Multan was Ahmad Shah Durrani.