

Imaginations of a Country. Spatial Perceptions and Mental Mapping in Herat

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Summary

This article is based on field research carried out in Herat. It focuses on mental mapping as a means for the investigation of spatial perceptions and illustrates the importance of such perceptions in the context of the regional orientation of one of Afghanistan's key cities and its inhabitants. In discussing contrasts between individual perceptions and collective patterns of mapping, this contribution argues that collective mental maps do not exist, but despite individual dispersions many maps show also structural similarities often reflected by stereotypes. It describes two individual maps with different focus and structure according to time, age and spatial experience against the backdrop of 'collective' attributes in mental mapping.

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1 Introduction

Afghanistan has often been called a colonial construct since its boundaries were drawn by Great Britain and Russia in the time of the Great Game. Since the establishment of the modern state of Afghanistan at the end of the nineteenth century, the country's various regions have been culturally and economically orienting towards different directions. This is caused by its geographical position between the large cultivated regions on the Indian Subcontinent (Punjab), Central Asia (Transoxania) and Persia (Khorasan). Thus, the regional belonging and loyalty of some parts of Afghanistan was already under question even before the outbreak of the Afghan conflict. One such region is Herat, located in the northwestern corner of Afghanistan. Herat holds a particular position within the country in terms of language and culture, first and foremost because of its geographic location and its role as a gateway to Persia. Herat's political status has been disputed for a long time. During the nineteenth century Iran attempted to recapture the city and to integrate it into its own territory six times. Facing the widespread reproach of being more Iranian than Afghan, the local population has always been assumed to look upon Iran for cultural and political cues. This caused not only political tensions but also resentments among the Herati population.