

Impact of Armed Conflict on Spatial Morphology and Reconstruction Dynamics of Kabul City, Afghanistan

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Abstract -Armed conflict has profoundly reshaped Kabul Afghanistan over the past few decades, leaving lasting impacts on its urban landscape and social fabric. The prolonged violence and instability have led to considerable changes in the city's spatial structure, as neighborhoods, infrastructure and land use have adapted to the demands of survival, security and reconstruction. This research study examines the significant impacts of war on the spatial morphology and reconstruction dynamics of Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, from 1970 to 2021. Over nearly five decades, political instability, military interventions and social unrest have dramatically transformed Kabul. The study is organized into sections that analyze how these conflicts have influenced the city's physical landscape, urban infrastructure and spatial organization. A mixed-method approach has been followed the complexity of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a deeper understanding of these changes. Armed conflict has led to unplanned urban growth, characterized by a rapid increase in informal settlements and a heightened rate of built-up land, along with land degradation. The unplanned growth has resulted in a fragmented landscape, which has significantly impacted the city's infrastructure. Reconstruction efforts have been challenging, hindered by socio-political instability, inconsistent urban planning and environmental degradation during the post-conflict period. The study reveals that prolonged conflict has disrupted social cohesion due to an imbalance in resources, significantly increasing the city's vulnerability to environmental

challenges. Additionally, it emphasizes the resilience of the habitats of Kabul city in the face of authority and hardship, noting that community-led reconstruction efforts are crucial for rebuilding the city. Ultimately, this research sheds light on how armed conflict transforms urban spaces and reconstruction processes. It offers valuable insights for urban planners, policymakers and international organizations involved in future reconstruction and sustainable development initiatives in Kabul.

Keywords Armed Conflict, Kabul, Spatial Morphology, Reconstruction, Informal Settlements, Urban Growth and Socio-Economic Inequality

INTRODUCTION

The history of Afghanistan since 1970 has been marked by significant violence and conflict, making it one of the most tumultuous periods in the country's history. These conflicts have dramatically changed Afghanistan's political and social landscape, shaping its contemporary reality. The key phases of this turbulent period include the Soviet invasion, civil war, the rise of the Taliban and the U.S.-led intervention after 2001. Each phase has had profound socio-economic, environmental and infrastructural impacts on the country, particularly in its capital, Kabul.

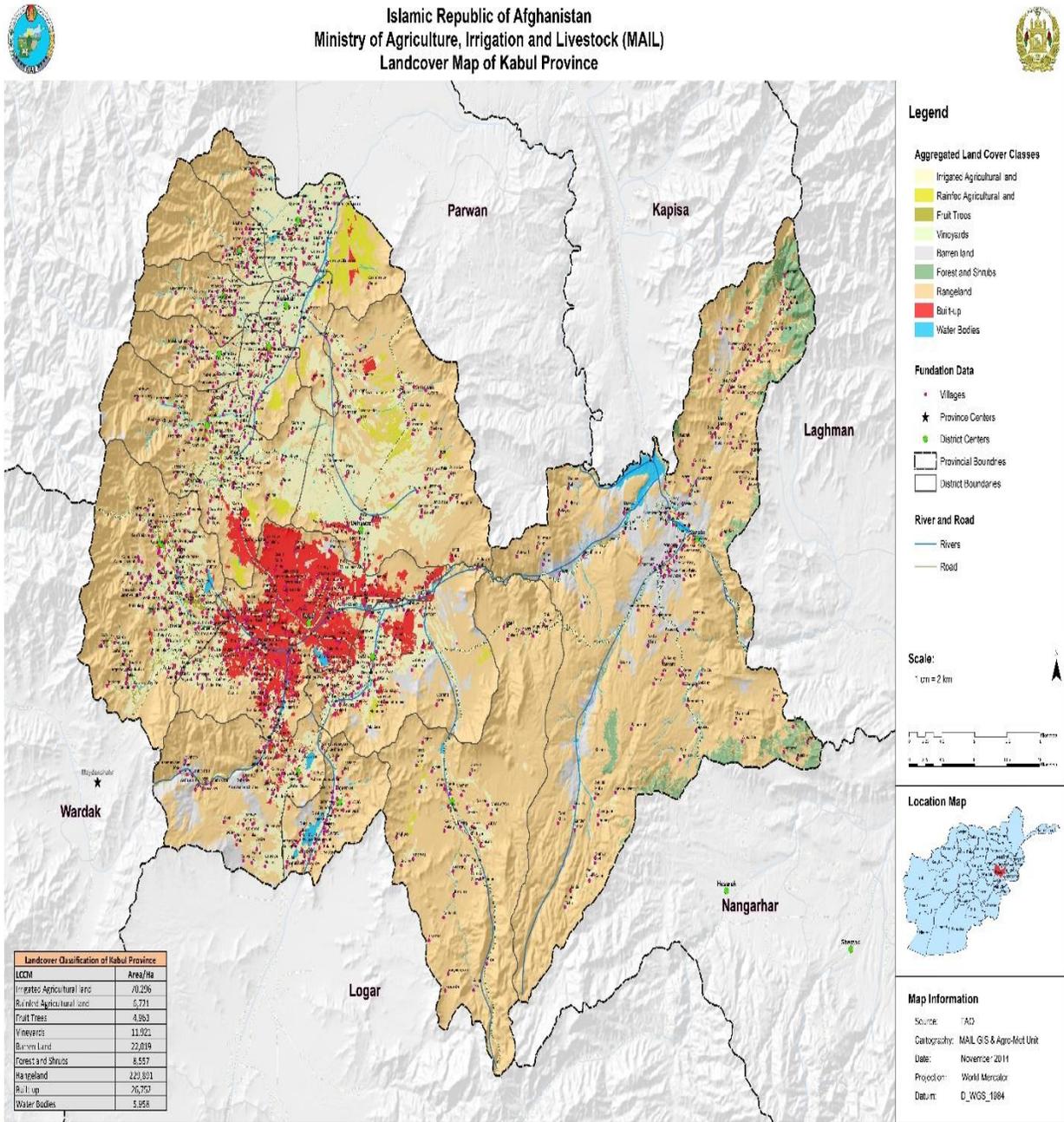


Fig. 1 Landcover of Kabul province (Source: MULD)

A brief historical trajectory of conflict

In the early 1970s, Afghanistan experienced relative stability under King Zahir Shah, who had ruled since 1933. Remaining neutral during the Cold War, Afghanistan received aid from both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. However, economic challenges and political stagnation led to internal dissatisfaction. In

1973, Zahir Shah was overthrown in a bloodless coup by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan, who established Afghanistan as a republic. Daoud attempted to modernize the country but faced resistance from various factions, notably the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), an emerging communist organization at the time. (Rubin, 2002).

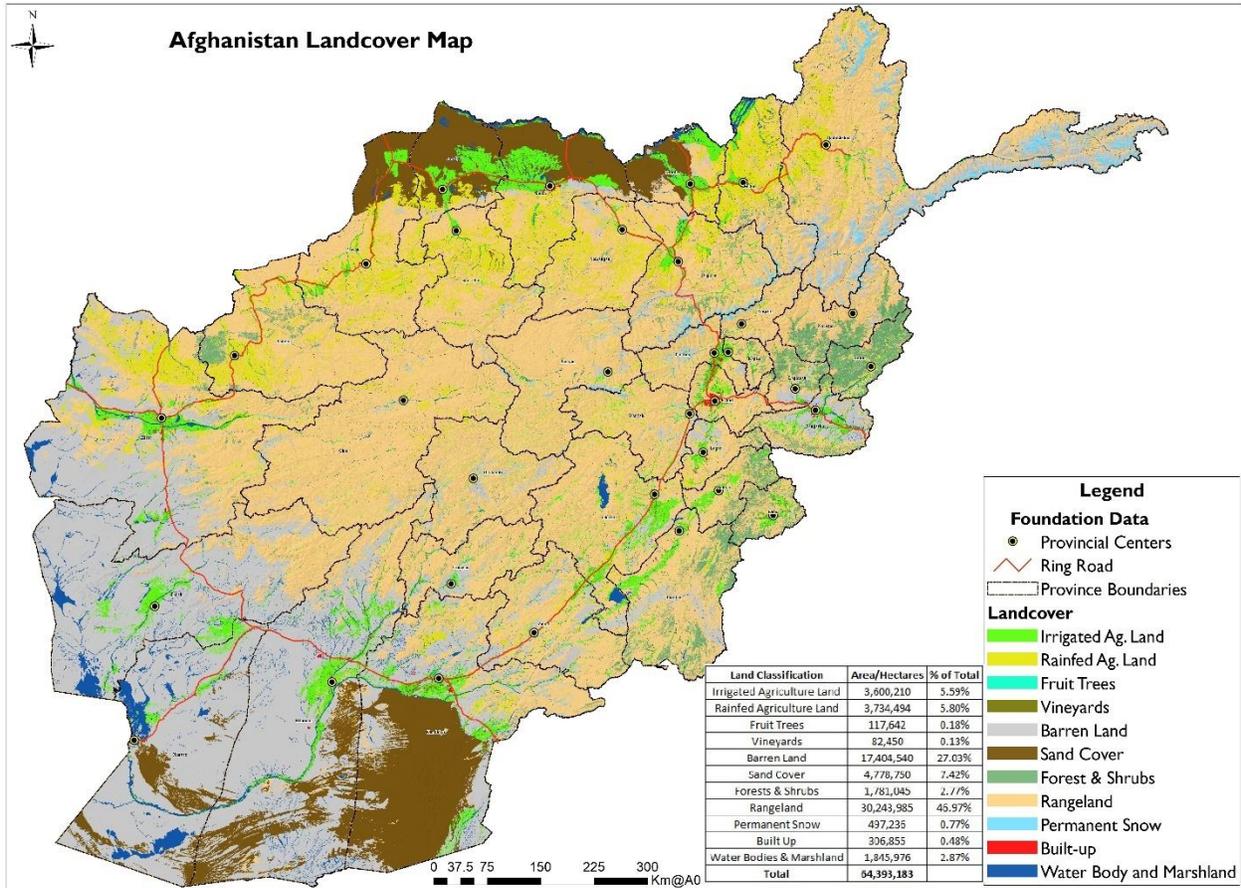


Fig. 2 Land cover of Afghanistan (Source: MULD)

The saur revolution and soviet invasion (1978–1989) In April 1978, Daoud Khan's government was overthrown during the Saur Revolution, which the PDPA led Nur Mohammad Taraki becoming the new leader and the PDPA initiated socialist reforms, including land redistribution and secular education. These policies were highly unpopular among conservative rural populations, leading to widespread rebellion. By 1979, fearing that the PDPA regime would collapse, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, sending thousands of soldiers to support the government (Saikal, 2012).

The subsequent war lasted a decade as the Mujahideen-groups opposing the Soviet invasion—received aid from the United States, Pakistan and other regional powers. This conflict caused immense destruction and loss of life, devastating much of the nation’s infrastructure. The war finally concluded in 1989 with the Soviet withdrawal, which resulted from heavy losses and international pressure (Coll, 2004).

However, this led to a power vacuum, propelling the country into civil war.

Civil war and the rise of the Taliban (1989–1996) Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into civil war as various Mujahideen factions vied for control. The provisional government established by President Mohammad Najibullah, supported by the Soviets, collapsed in 1992 due to its inability to maintain authority. Warlords like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud emerged, turning Kabul into a battleground and causing immense destruction of the city (Giustozzi, 2009).

In this chaotic environment, the Taliban emerged in 1994, promising to restore order and gain popular support. By 1996, they captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Their regime enforced strict interpretations of Islamic law and severely limited the rights and freedoms of Afghan women. Additionally, the Taliban harbored terrorist

groups, including Al-Qaeda, further isolating Afghanistan internationally (Rashid, 2000).

The US-led invasion and post-2001 war (2001–2021)
 The invasion of Afghanistan by the United States was directly triggered by the September 11, 2001 attacks. The U.S., along with its allies, aimed to remove the Taliban government and dismantle Al-Qaeda. Operation Enduring Freedom began on October 7, 2001 and within a few weeks, the Taliban regime was overthrown. A new democratic government was established, headed by Hamid Karzai, under the support of the U.S. and its allies. However, the Taliban regrouped and by 2005, a full-scale insurgency was underway, leading to years of intense conflict. Despite international efforts to rebuild Afghanistan’s institutions and infrastructure, the Taliban gradually regained control over territories. As U.S. President Obama began to withdraw forces, the insurgency persisted. In 2021, the U.S. completely withdrew from Afghanistan in accordance with an agreement made with the Taliban. This led to a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the restoration of Taliban power in August 2021 (Crawford, 2021).

The post-Taliban period and current challenges
 Since the Taliban regained control in 2021, Afghanistan has faced significant socio-economic challenges. International aid, which was critically needed, has dwindled. Infrastructure in urban areas like Kabul has suffered greatly, leading to limited access to essential services, inadequate housing and a struggling economy (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013). The

decades of conflict and changes in governance have continued to affect the spatial structure and growth patterns of Kabul.

Effects of armed conflict on spatial morphology in Kabul city

Spatial morphology, which refers to the form and structure of urban areas, has been significantly impacted by armed conflict in Afghanistan. It is influenced by both natural landscapes and human intervention. In Kabul, the effects of war, displacement, reconstruction and population growth has drastically altered the city’s spatial structure. The cycle of destruction, migration and reconstruction has resulted in a diffused of urban landscape characterized by unplanned growth, loss of heritage sites and inadequate infrastructure. The key impacts of armed conflicts are on follows. The key impact of armed conflicts are as follows:

1. Unplanned urban growth and informal settlements

The longstanding impact of war on the spatial morphology of Kabul especially Takhnikum and district 13, are evident in its informal settlements and unplanned urban growth. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, waves of displacement have driven rural populations into the city. The civil war of the 1990s and the Taliban regime further exacerbated this trend, causing thousands from rural conflict areas to move to urban centers. Between 1992 and 2001, Kabul experienced a dramatic population increase that exceeded the capacity of urban planning.

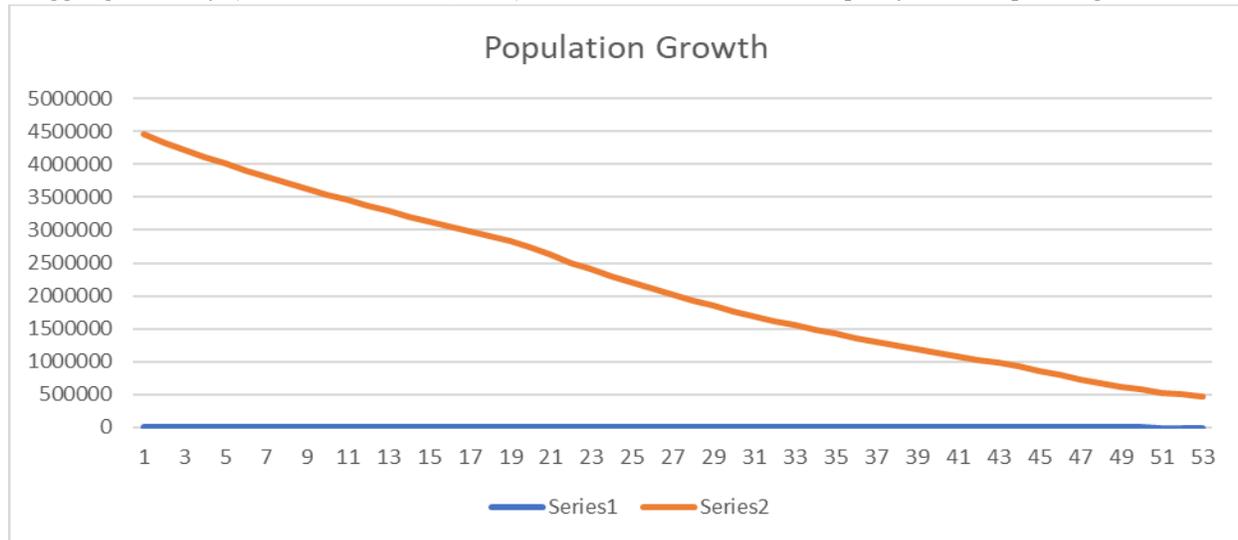


Fig.3 Population growth (Source: WPR)



Fig. 4 Population growth

As of 2020, satellite imagery and GIS analysis indicate that over 70% of housing in Kabul is classified as informal. Previously barren land and agricultural fields have been converted into sprawling informal settlements (Nawabi et al., 2020). This haphazard

development creates significant challenges for the proper growth of urban infrastructure, including access to water, sanitation, electricity and transportation.

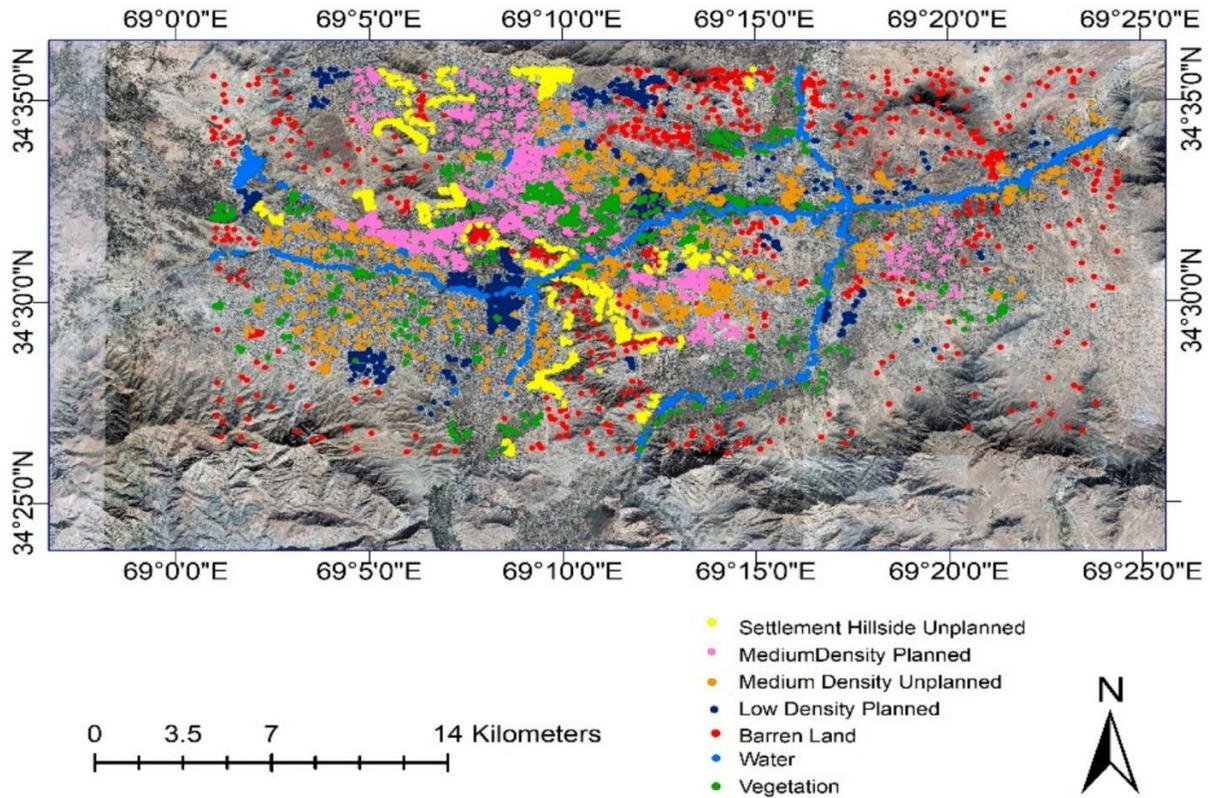


Fig. 3 Informal settlements (Source: MDPI)

2. Destruction and reconfiguration of urban spaces
 During the civil war in the 1990s, Kabul experienced heavy bombardment, particularly during battles between rival factions of the Mujahideen. As a result, large areas of the city's historic core were destroyed, including its most important cultural institutions, residential areas and commercial centers. These devastations altered the city's traditional urban structure, leaving behind vast rubble and vacant land. However, signs of revival started to appear as new developments emerged. Following the 2001 intervention by the United States, new urban forms were introduced in parts of the city such as the Sasaki Kabul Urban Design Framework and New Kabul City project though these initiatives were often limited to wealthier areas or zones targeted by government and international organizations. The war caused an uneven distribution of post-war reconstruction efforts in Kabul, leading to stark contrasts between neighborhoods. For instance, the inner business districts and government zones feature modern

buildings and better infrastructure, while peripheral areas and informal settlements remain underdeveloped (Mumtaz, 2008).

3. Spread of built-up areas and loss of open spaces
 One significant change in Kabul's spatial morphology is the dramatic spread of built-up areas. Analysis of satellite imagery from Landsat and Sentinel, covering the years 1973 to 2020, reveals that built-up areas in Kabul expanded by more than 500% (Nawabi et al., 2020). This expansion often encroached upon natural landscapes, including agricultural land and barren rocky terrain, which were converted into urban spaces. Consequently, the city lost open spaces, parks and green belts, resulting in diminished environmental quality and increased pollution. The unplanned nature of this conflict-driven urbanization was chaotic, unlike cities that expanded with a deliberate plan. Rather, Kabul grew irregularly, with neighborhoods sprouting in isolation from one another and lacking adequate infrastructure to support such growth (Beall & Schütte, 2010).

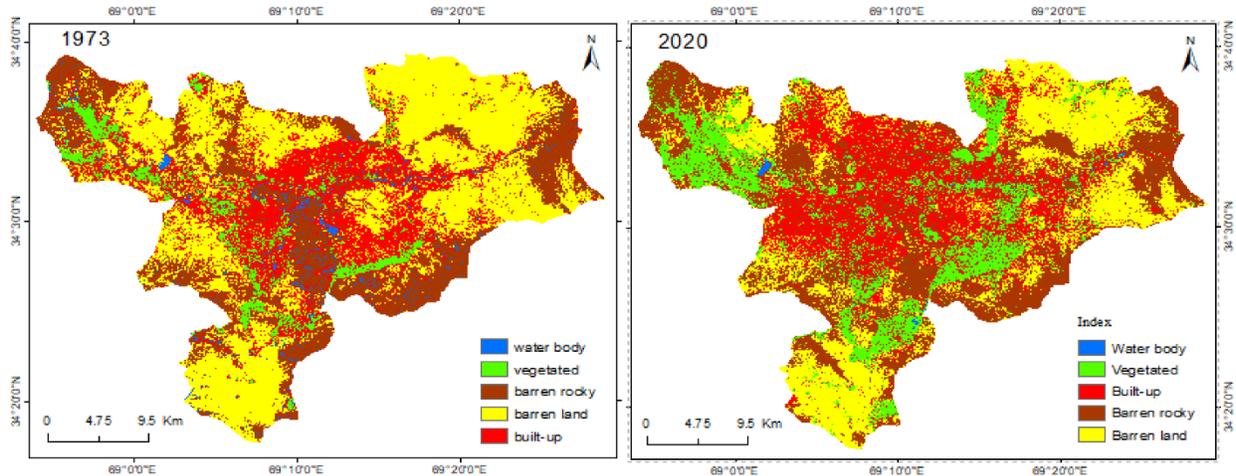


Fig. 4 Urban sprawl (Source: MDPI)

4. Challenges in infrastructure and service provision
 The wars in Afghanistan severely damaged Kabul's infrastructure. Bombing campaigns and street battles took a toll on the roadways, power lines, water systems and sewage networks. Post-conflict, Kabul faces significant challenges in rebuilding infrastructure to meet the needs of its rapidly growing urban population. While some core infrastructures have been reconstructed, primarily in central Kabul, many parts of the city still lack basic services. Informal settlements, which house the majority of the population, face shortages of water, electricity and adequate sewage systems (Mumtaz, 2008). This creates a disparity in infrastructure across the city, where affluent reconstructed areas receive better services, while poorer, war-affected neighborhoods remain marginalized.

5. Transformation of cultural and historical landscape

The armed conflicts have dramatically altered Kabul's cultural and historical landscape. Much of the city's heritage, including iconic sites like Babur's Gardens and the Darul Aman Palace, suffered severe damage during the wars. Although some of these sites have been restored during the post-war reconstruction phase It was carried out by the German Archaeological Institute and the National Institute of Archaeology in Afghanistan (DAI, with shared funding from the German Foreign Office and AKTC) within the framework of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) rehabilitation project which started in 2003 many remain neglected (Dupree, 2014). The destruction of cultural landmarks has not only transformed Kabul's identity but has also replaced historical and cultural areas with modern developments that often do not fit the existing context. The loss of cultural heritage is not just an aesthetic concern; it has also undermined communal identity and memory, particularly among the war-displaced population of Kabul (Ruttig, 2012).



Fig.7 Darul Aman Palace before and after (Source: AKDN)



Fig.8 Babur's Gardens before and after (Source: AKDN)

6. Socio-economic inequality and urban segregation
 The spatial morphology of post-conflict Kabul illustrates extreme socio-economic divisions. War and displacement have created distinct zones within the city, wherein wealthier areas receive better infrastructure and security compared to poorer neighborhoods, especially informal settlements that lack basic services. This division stems from unequal access to resources and opportunities provided through post-war reconstruction, international aid and government initiatives that favor central districts and commercial zones (Beall & Schütte, 2010). Decades of war and instability have not only reshaped the city's physical layout but have also led to demographic shifts and changes in the socio-economic fabric of Kabul. The rapid urbanization, growth of informal settlements and shifting land usage reflect the complex and often chaotic morphology of the city.

7. Land use changes

Kabul's land use has undergone significant transformation over recent decades, largely due to conflict, displacement and population growth. Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Kabul was a relatively small city with designated residential areas, commercial districts and green spaces. However, the situation has dramatically changed due to induced migration, destruction and shifts in land use patterns.

From 1970 to 2020, analysis of satellite imagery reveals that the built-up area in Kabul increased more than fourfold, marking a transition from largely barren and agricultural land to a densely populated urban area (Nawabi et al., 2020). Prior to the wars, Kabul was surrounded by significant green belts and agricultural zones, particularly on its northern and eastern sides. The influx of people to Kabul during the civil wars and the Taliban regime led to the conversion of much of this land into residential areas. Many previously barren lands evolved into makeshift informal settlements (Esser, 2013).

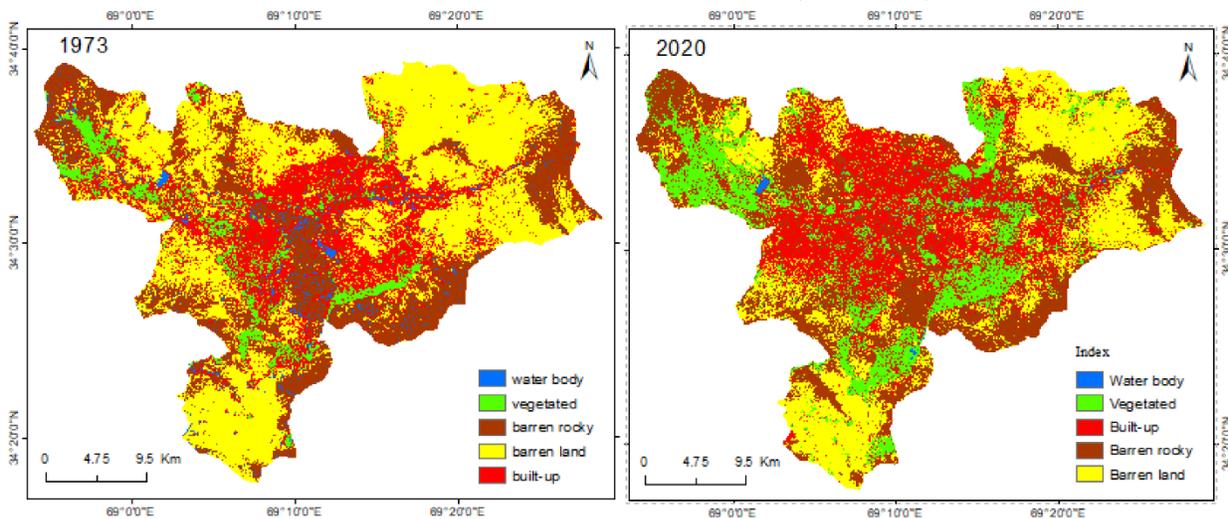


Fig. 5 Land use changes (Source: MDPI)

The war has also severely damaged the city's infrastructure, especially in the historic city center, resulting in changes in land use from dense urban centers to unplanned peripheral expansions. Consequently, agricultural land has drastically decreased, while the city center has transformed into commercial hubs, housing government offices, businesses and international organizations.

8. Changes in buildings

The war and subsequent reconstruction efforts have scarred Kabul's infrastructure. The civil war from 1992 to 1996 and confrontations among various Mujahideen factions damaged large parts of the city, leaving many neighborhoods and historical sites in

ruins. Areas such as Karte Parwan and Shahr-e-Naw experienced severe destruction, necessitating significant reconstruction even after the fall of the Taliban regime (Pain & Goodhand, 2002). Since 2001, with the influx of foreign aid, there has been a significant building boom, particularly in commercial and governmental districts. High-rise buildings, modern office complexes and shopping malls have emerged in relatively affluent areas like Wazir Akbar Khan and Shahr-e-Naw. However, this reconstruction has led to pronounced inequality, as modern infrastructure primarily benefits wealthier neighborhoods, while many battle-scarred or informal areas remain underdeveloped.

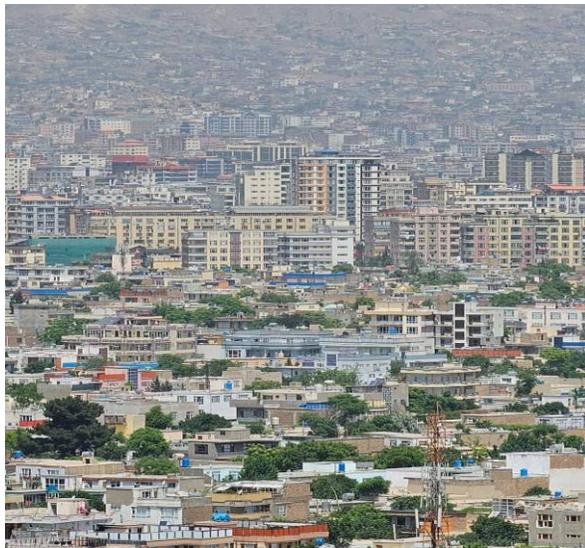


Fig. 6 High-rise and modern buildings

Informal settlements often exhibit chaotic building practices, with most homes constructed from inferior materials such as mud bricks. These areas typically lack formal zoning and adequate building regulations, resulting in overcrowded neighborhoods that struggle with limited access to electricity, water and sanitation. Internal migration driven by conflict has been a primary factor in the expansion of informal housing, leading to substantial growth in urban perimeters where once-open land or farmland exists.

9. Subdivision of land

Land subdivision in Kabul is almost entirely influenced by the housing needs of rapidly growing and displaced populations. Land fragmentation has become a prevailing trend, particularly in peri-urban and fringe rural-urban areas. Initially, Kabul's property

ownership system was relatively clear, with expansive tracts of farmland on the outskirts and smaller residential districts in the city center. However, with the influx of refugees and internally displaced persons, informal subdivisions became commonplace. Many large agricultural tracts have been informally subdivided and sold to new settlers, resulting in a proliferation of informal settlements (Beall & Schütte, 2010). These subdivisions are frequently executed without any formal planning or government regulation, leading to irregularly shaped plots with poor road access and inadequate infrastructure. Consequently, informal titling has resulted in fragmented and often chaotic land ownership in these areas, creating numerous land disputes and complicating the enforcement of judicially guaranteed property rights.

Land subdivision formalization efforts remain sluggish and their reach is very limited. Land-grabbing by powerful warlords and corrupt officials complicates the implementation of an organized land distribution system, leaving large parts of the city's new urban areas unregulated and difficult to manage (Mumtaz, 2008).

Demographic changes

Due to conflict, displacement and migration, the demographics of Kabul have undergone drastic changes since the 1970s. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans were internally and internationally displaced during the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war. Fearing attacks, many rural villagers fled to the

relatively safer environment of Kabul, causing the city's population to increase significantly. According to UN estimates, Kabul's population grew from about 500,000 in the early 1970s to 4.5 million by 2020 (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013).

This rapid population growth has had a significant impact on the city's infrastructure, housing and services. Many migrants and displaced persons contributed to Kabul's expansion, resulting in informal settlements on the city's outskirts. A considerable number of returnees from refugee camps around the world added pressure to the already strained housing and land resources. Most refugees returned to Kabul, further intensifying the existing challenges.

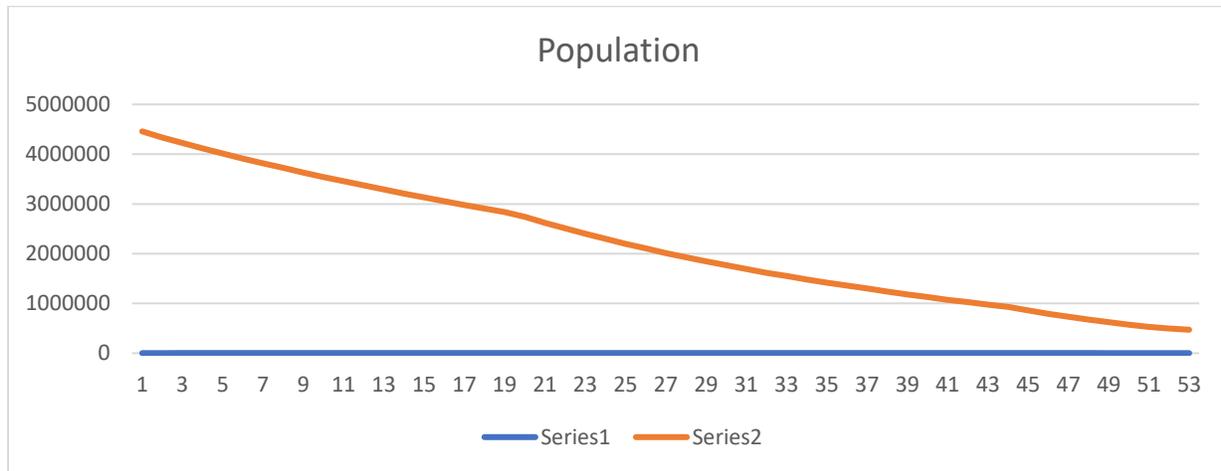


Fig. 7 Population changes (Source: WPR)

These demographic changes have also affected the city's socioeconomic balance. The middle class in Kabul has sharply declined, while the gap between the elites and the poor has widened significantly. Wealthier families and foreign agencies tend to occupy the best-protected areas with good infrastructure, leaving many residents in overcrowded and underdeveloped slums.

Reconstruction dynamics in Kabul, Afghanistan

After decades of conflict, the reconstruction of Kabul has been inconsistent and disordered. The city suffered catastrophic destruction during the Soviet-Afghan War, the civil war and even during the Taliban regime. However, the U.S.-led intervention in 2001 marked the beginning of a massive rebuilding effort. Several factors shape the reconstruction dynamics, including the inflow of international aid, government policies,

informal rebuilding by residents and the broader socio-political landscape. As a result, the city reflects a mosaic of development, with advanced urbanization existing alongside vast slums and underdeveloped infrastructure.

1. International support and aid-conditioned reconstruction

Most of the prominent reconstruction activities in Kabul have been donor-conditioned and aid-led. Following the overthrow of the Taliban, billions of dollars in foreign aid were allocated to rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure, including roads, government buildings, hospitals and schools (Chard & Weber, 2017). This aid was primarily focused on Kabul, which was seen as a visible symbol of Afghanistan's resurgence and a hub for economic and political activity. Consequently, greater attention was

given to rebuilding governmental and diplomatic areas, such as Wazir Akbar Khan, Shahr-e-Naw and Darulaman. These areas have seen the construction of modern office blocks, embassies and luxury hotels, mainly funded by foreign governments and institutions (Alizada et al., 2016). However, this donor-led reconstruction has created pockets of modern infrastructure mainly benefiting elites, expatriates and government officials, while leaving much of the city underdeveloped. However, international aid has been attacked as not coordinated and less effective. The majority of projects were implemented without proper deliberation and involvement of the local community, in addition to a lack of coordination with the overall strategy of the long-run development of Afghanistan. Furthermore, reconstruction by foreign firms and the presence of various organizations coming from other countries often made the priorities of the donors away from the priorities of the average Afghan citizen, particularly in the informal settlements (Harrison & Naim, 2021).

2. Government reconstruction and planning efforts
In line with international initiatives, the Afghan government has promulgated several plans for Kabul's development, guiding Kabul's reconstruction and attempting to address rapid urbanization challenges. Among the most important documents outlining spatial development and infrastructural needs for the city is the Kabul City Master Plan. This master plan, with several amendments, has sought to develop the infrastructure of Kabul, increase roads, public transport development and new residential areas in the city due to the growing population (Sazegara & Bahl, 2014).

While the master plan envisions a rational, modern city, its implementation has faced significant challenges. Factors such as corruption, weak governance and inadequate financial resources have hindered the government's ability to effectively execute large-scale urban development. Additionally, land ownership disputes particularly concerning informal settlements—along with a lack of formal land titles, have complicated the realization of government plans in areas where informal housing has already taken root (Torkashvand et al., 2020).

Some redevelopment efforts focusing on historical monuments like Babur's Gardens and Darul Aman Palace have succeeded in restoring aspects of Kabul's

cultural legacy. However, most of these projects have centered only on significant landmarks, neglecting the housing and essential services needed in poorer regions (Khan et al., 2019).

3. Community led reconstruction

Currently, most reconstruction efforts in Kabul are spearheaded by ordinary residents, particularly those in slum areas. Due to internal displacement and the repatriation of refugees, many people have been forced to rebuild their homes without proper planning or regulation. Estimates suggest that nearly 70% of the housing in Kabul is informal, with a large proportion of the population engaged in self-built initiatives (Akkas et al., 2018).

This informal reconstruction presents both solutions and challenges for the city's recovery. On one hand, it provides housing for people who might otherwise be homeless; on the other hand, these areas often lack basic services like clean water, sewage systems and reliable electricity. Furthermore, unpaved roads and limited access to healthcare and education exacerbate the hardships faced by residents.

To formalize these settlements, the Afghan government has pursued land titling programs and infrastructure development, but progress has been slow. Many residents are hesitant to engage in these formalization processes due to fears of eviction or high costs associated with legalizing their properties (Torkashvand et al., 2020).

4. Uneven development and socio-economic disparities

Uneven development arguably represents the most significant dynamic in Kabul's reconstruction. Some areas have received substantial investment through international aid or government-sponsored projects, while many others remain plagued by poverty and underdevelopment. For instance, affluent neighborhoods like Wazir Akbar Khan and Shahr-e-Naw enjoy modern amenities and good infrastructure, while poorer areas, including informal settlements, face numerous challenges (Chard & Weber, 2017).

This disparity has led to socio-economic segregation within the city. Residents in wealthier neighborhoods have access to clean water, electricity and well-maintained roads, whereas informal settlements often struggle to provide even the most basic services. This economic divide not only affects physical living

conditions but also limits opportunities in employment, education and healthcare for lower-income citizens. Thus, the uneven distribution of resources has created a fragmented urban landscape, where modern buildings coexist with rampant poverty and neglect. This fragmentation can exacerbate social tensions, as those in poorer communities feel excluded from the post-war reconstruction efforts.

Security also plays a crucial role in the pace and effectiveness of rebuilding in Kabul. Ongoing attacks by insurgent groups, political instability and violence have not only stalled reconstruction efforts but also diminished public confidence in the government's ability to provide protection and services. This insecurity has deterred foreign investment and complicated the delivery of aid, further delaying recovery (Harrison & Naim, 2021). Infrastructure projects are often targeted, resulting in delays and cost overruns. Additionally, many reconstruction initiatives are pursued under constant security concerns, diverting crucial resources from development needs (Khan et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Kabul has undergone significant changes in its structure over several decades due to ongoing conflicts. Armed struggles, particularly the Soviet invasion, civil war and Taliban rule, have led to rapid and unplanned urbanization, resulting in increased informal settlements and the deterioration of much of the city's infrastructure. As a consequence, Kabul displays stark disparities between affluent areas, that benefit from modern infrastructure and poorer regions that lack basic services. These issues are exacerbated by land disputes, socio-economic inequality and the erosion of cultural heritage. While reconstruction efforts in the post-conflict period including international aid and local initiatives have seen some success, they have been inconsistent. Most of these efforts have focused on rebuilding government and diplomatic areas, leaving many neighborhoods neglected. This has led to a fragmented city where wealthier areas enjoy better living conditions, while poorer settlements face significant challenges. However, the rebuilding of Kabul demonstrates the potential for positive change, provided that there is a more concerted, inclusive and long-term approach.

Way Forward to tackle the challenges facing Kabul, important steps must be taken to improve infrastructure and service provisions in informal settlements. Enhancing these services would ensure that residents have access to basic necessities such as water, sanitation and electricity. Another crucial step is formalizing land ownership, which would help resolve land disputes and create a more organized urban environment. Reconstruction efforts should focus not only on physical infrastructure but also on social recovery, addressing education, healthcare and employment opportunities, particularly for displaced populations. Cultural restoration must also be a key element of Kabul's reconstruction process to preserve the city's heritage while meeting the holistic development needs of marginalized areas. Additionally, expanding public spaces and green areas will improve environmental quality. Finally, achieving political stability and security is vital for the city's recovery. A secure environment would attract investment, support reconstruction efforts and promote social cohesion. Ultimately, the future of Kabul depends on a holistic approach that addresses both physical and socio-economic challenges in sustainable and equitable ways.

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