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THE MINING SECTOR IN AFGHANISTAN: A picture in black and gold

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The mining sector has become one of the foremost drivers of Afghanistan's beleaguered national economy in recent years. It offers the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) revenue from taxes, royalties and fees, but also the potential to boost the country's scant diplomatic relations. The IEA is keen to facilitate the involvement of international companies, in particular from China. However, while waiting for foreign actors to tap the fabled underground riches of metal ores, fossil fuels or rare earths, less glamorous types of mining are already thriving. Local companies are seizing the opportunity of the end of the conflict to exploit mineral resources such as coal and gold. Better security and improvements in contracting and taxation have helped production grow, but under the surface, prospects for the mining sector are not all rosy. The IEA seems unable to resist the temptation to extract quick profits, rather than properly manage the national mineral wealth for the long term. Moreover, recent accusations of favouritism, land grabbing and violent suppression of resistance by locals in some areas remind one of bad practices seen under the previous government.

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INTRODUCTION

Mining is an industry of contrasts. There is the potential for elites in areas endowed with valuable minerals or metals to build up their wealth and power, and if they fail to capitalise on the bounty of the earth, there will always be neighbouring entrepreneurs ready to step in. However, for those working the mines, life is hard and often dangerous, making it attractive only to those in the lower strata for whom the only alternative is subsistence farming. They might be local residents or migrants coming from economically marginal areas.

The hype about Afghanistan's untapped underground riches masks its actual long history of mining. Its mountainous topography, which has often hampered attempts at unifying and strengthening political entities, is the source of its mineral wealth. The mountainous belt that crosses it from east to west – the main Hindu Kush range and its lesser-known offshoots – effectively splits its best settlement-suited areas, low-lying and fertile, into two badly-connected halves. However, the rugged highlands that separate them offer compensation in the form of minerals. Ideally, this wealth should provide the basis for building the nation's economic independence in a place famous for having been reliant on external sources of revenue, from historical campaigns of conquest to the more contemporary experience of foreign subsidies.

Historically, one can see how important mining has been politically and economically. It was behind the emergence of one of the first political entities to develop in the core of the territory that was to make up Afghanistan, during the early Islamic Era. In all likelihood, it was thanks to the control of some iron ore mines in central Afghanistan that the Ghurids were able to rise from petty local chieftains of the marginal highlands of central Afghanistan to the rulers of a vast empire encompassing most of northern India.[1] Mining has also caused environmental problems in the past: intensive metal mining and processing through the centuries may have driven deforestation already in ancient times – huge amounts of wood were used as fuel

[1] Even after their dynasty (11th-13th centuries) came to rule over richer lands, the Ghurids showed a remarkable attachment to their ancestral birthplace – a village not by chance called Ahangaran, 'Blacksmiths'. They kept their main capital at nearby Firuzkuh, in today's Ghor province, ruling their vast dominions also through two subsidiary capitals in Bamyan and Ghazni, instead of relocating altogether to their richer Indian territories, as would become common practice for subsequent invaders of South Asia proceeding from Central Asia.

for smelting the ore in areas of Afghanistan previously covered in trees, like the Panjshir Valley.[2]

The embryonic industrial mining that appeared in 1950s Afghanistan all but disappeared during the troubled decades of recent Afghan history or at least failed to reach levels comparable to – or competitive with – those of neighbouring countries. However, the extraction of products special to the country, gems like lapis lazuli in Badakhshan and emeralds in Panjshir, has steadfastly continued. Even during the worst of the Afghan wars, these represented a rare export for the country since they hardly ever lost their value and offered a secure source of income for at least some of its inhabitants. Conversely, mines became the bones of contention among local strongmen and thus drove conflict at times of internal fragmentation (Global Witness).

In the context of a country beset with conflict and faltering development, mining infrastructure and practices have hardly improved or modernised in a way comparable to other countries, with the result that Afghan miners are exposed to the same risks and unhealthy conditions of many decades ago. Moreover, mining is carried out in sub-standard ways that often jeopardise the ideal exploitation of mineral deposits, the local environment and water resources. Finally, the minerals are often exported raw and illegally, and while attempts to curb smuggling have strengthened, the in-country processing of minerals is still very limited, thus denying additional benefits for the national economy.

The IEA has, since its capture of power in 2021, earnestly sought to expand Afghanistan's mining sector in order to attract foreign investments and count on a reliable source of funds. Mining is arguably its most promising source of revenue, following the loss of external on-budget support and the suspension of funding for many development programmes since 2021 and with sanctions imposed by the United States and United Nations Security Council, despite widespread waivers,

[2] At least this is what Louis Dupree assumed. Based on information passed on by many ancient chroniclers, Panjshir hosted major silver mines and as many as 10,000 miners before Genghiz Khan's onslaught in the 13th century. It is reasonable to concur with Dupree and think of ancient Panjshir as hosting patches of open forest similar to that of the nearby Andarab valley. Deforestation in this part of Afghanistan can easily become irreversible: once the thin stratum of loess (sediment) deposited on the mountain slopes is, in the absence of trees retaining it, washed away, the rocky outcrop underneath will not allow for a comparable regrowth. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton, 1980, p19; Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1905, p350.

hampering trade.[3] The drive to increase mining production has seemed to be further accelerating as of late, with IEA policies arguably aimed at radically changing the world of Afghan mining.

Chinese engineers and IEA officials at a ribbon-cutting ceremony to inaugurate a Mes Aynak copper mining project in the Shast Bandari area of Muhammad Agha district, Logar province. Minister of Mines Hedayatullah Badri and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar are at the centre.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 24 July 2024

The following report is based on over a dozen interviews carried out in December 2024 with miners or traders of mined products in Kabul, Sar-e Pul, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces. It will look in detail at several different mining areas with their varying methods of extraction, namely coal mining in Baghlan and Sar-e Pul, and gold mining in Takhar and Badakhshan. With respect to the different sites, the current trends in the issuing of contracts, mining production and trade of the minerals will be outlined, as well as assessing what changes are occurring and how they are being experienced by the contractors, the miners and the local communities.

[3] See this dossier of AAN reports on Afghanistan's international relations, sanctions and the impact on the economy since 2021. The US instituted widespread waivers to its sanctions, but correspondent banks, fearing future prosecution, have not eased up on international transactions.

The following are some of the points explored in the report:

- Mining has found more favourable conditions under the IEA, as the end of conflict has meant improved security and accessibility to mining sites. The IEA has standardised procedures and fees regarding mining concessions.
- The economic crisis and the disappearance of many job opportunities have led many Afghans to look for employment in the mining sector, despite the high risk and low salaries involved.
- The extraction of coal has become increasingly important under the IEA, especially as global prices rose and taxes raised on coal exports to Pakistan turned into a major source of revenue for the Afghan government.
- The coal trade with Pakistan, however, remains prone to instability and great fluctuations in prices, which can negatively affect internal consumption, while the current push for increased extraction risks depleting Afghanistan's coal deposits.
- Northeastern Afghanistan's comparatively rich gold deposits have recently attracted the increasing interest of national and international mining companies and the IEA has been trying to facilitate their involvement.
- The arrival of external actors can cause backlash as smaller, local concessioners are pushed away and communities – in an economically fragile area already fraught with political and ethnic fault lines – feel disenfranchised.

THE EMERGING IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBTERRANEAN RICHES

Afghanistan sits on – name your figure – according to NBC, one trillion US dollars' worth of mineral wealth. This type of sensational announcement was so often repeated during the decades of the Islamic Republic that it elicited an eye-rolling response among informed readers. It is not that anybody researching Afghanistan's political economy would deny the general truth of the statement, but rather the implication that this could easily become the game-changing solution for the country's many problems sounded hollow.

Yet mining under the Republic never garnered enough attention and importance among the country's policies to become a central component of the Afghan economy, partly because there were plenty of other economic resources to tap into. The scarcity of up-to-date and comprehensive prospecting of the country's mineral riches is notable. The last real survey was done by Soviet geologists in 1977 and is still widely referenced to this day. This, plus the lack of often even the most basic infrastructure to access the sites and the security and transparency concerns that soon came to surround mining enterprises, contributed to an air of propaganda around the publicity for the claims of mineral riches made by the Republican authorities.[4] Meanwhile, mining allowed a number of usually politically well-connected actors to make huge profits, thereby exposing the chronic flaws and corruption of the Republican institutions. Research has documented the abusive practices that undermined the development of this sector under the Republic.[5] This body of research proves especially helpful, as a bench for comparison, now that mining has truly become one of the single most important factors at play in Afghanistan's economy.

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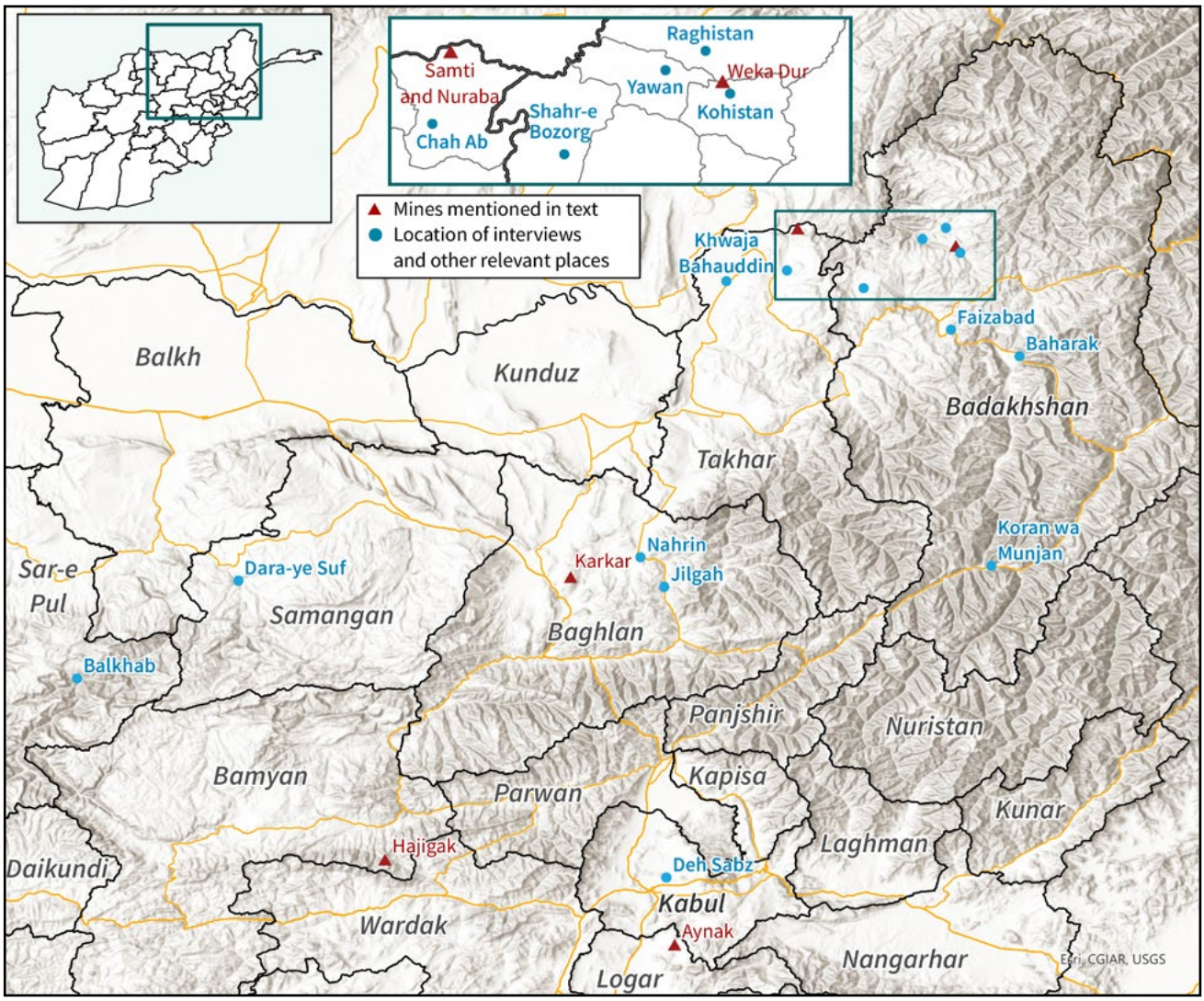
[4] The author remembers that, at some point in 2009-10, then president Hamid Karzai seemed to be literally flying from one world capital to another with the map of Afghanistan's mineral resources in his briefcase, drawing it out every time he needed to smooth his way through some foreign partner's complaints about the shortcomings of his government.

[5] On mining under the Republic, see for example: Jawed Noorani, Afghanistan's Emerging Mining Oligarchy, United States Institute for Peace (USIP), January 2015; and William Byrd and Jawed Noorani, Industrial-Scale Looting of Afghanistan's Mineral Resources, USIP, June 2017.

Under the Republic, although contracts were publicly tendered and arguably awarded to the best bidders, decisions were in many instances based on political or familial background, exchange of favours or outright bribes. In many cases, the companies that promised to pay the highest royalties to the state were preferred to the detriment of other considerations. Moreover, subsequent backdoor negotiations often changed the contract terms without the public being made aware and, despite attempts by watchdog organisations, without much scope for advocacy or action by civil society.



Map showing the interview locations and mining sites mentioned in the report.
Map by Roger Helms for AAN, 2025.

Companies such as those exploiting Qara Zaghan's gold mine in Baghlan province or the Garmak coal mine in Samangan, both linked to powerful families with a foothold in political institutions, were often given a three or four-year period for

prospecting, during which they did not have to pay the hefty royalties as promised.[6] However, companies would regularly start extracting produce at once. In some cases, they cancelled the contract just as the royalty-free prospecting period was about to expire, claiming scarcity of deposits. Generally speaking, companies have chosen the path of quick profits to the detriment of long-term revenue potential, by savagely exploiting the mines and then leaving them, and/or by selling the raw minerals without any attempt at in-country processing, which could have been more beneficial to the Afghan economy.

As the Taliban insurgency gained strength, increasing insecurity contributed to a further deterioration of the mining sector, leading to a situation in which foreign investors and professional companies were scared away by the risk of violence and the multiple taxation and bribery schemes forced on them by the various armed factions. In some cases, this led to mining sites falling completely under the grasp of local armed actors, not only the Taliban but also pro-government paramilitary groups who claimed to control them on behalf of the state. The famed lapis mines in Koran wa Munjan district of Badakhshan have been aptly described by Global Witness as an example of a situation which became increasingly common across the country in the last years of the Republic. According to data released by the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum in May 2021, a few months before the downfall of the Republic, control of Afghan mines had been for the past three years split between the Republican government, the Taliban and armed local actors (Pajhwok), with the latter two controlling most of them. Moreover, according to the Ministry of Mines, in many of the mines in officially government-controlled areas, extraction had stopped because of security concerns or lack of investors.

After the establishment of the IEA, the importance of the mining sector was boosted by a number of factors. The end of the conflict brought back security to the often remote and mountainous areas where most sites are located, creating a more permissive environment for both small, local companies and international actors to operate. On the other hand, the IEA, eager to generate revenues in the face of the reduction of international aid, made tapping into Afghanistan's mineral resources a priority.

This has resulted in frequent announcements by the government about the contracts awarded and their value. For example, the Ministry of Mines announced

[6] As discussed in Noorani, Afghanistan's Emerging, pp5-6.

in November 2024 that the three major contracts signed with domestic and foreign investors since the start of the Afghan year, on 21 March 2024, had an estimated value of USD 1.2 billion (Tolo). Only a couple of months later, in January 2025, the ministry announced that nine such contracts had been signed, with an estimated value that amounted now to 213 billion afghanis, nearly USD 2.9 billion, dwarfing the value of the eighteen small-scale contracts signed with Afghan companies in the same year, together worth only 1.8 billion afghanis, or just over USD 24 million (Tolo).[7]

A worker sorts raw lapis lazuli at a workshop in Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 27 January 2025

The value of these major contracts awarded to foreign investors, which seems to be impressive in economic terms, must also be seen in another context. The mining sector holds an additional value for the IEA leadership in that it allows it to engage in

[7] In 2023, the IEA announced that seven contracts had been signed with domestic companies, "many of whom" had foreign investors (including China, Turkey and Iran) for the staggering value of USD 6.5 billion. That would have amounted to over one-third of the country's whole GDP for that year, if only the claimed value of the contracts had translated into hard cash (Associated Press). The real impact of such contracts on the Afghan economy and the timeline of the promised investments are however difficult to ascertain.

talks and agreements with foreign investors and companies often closely connected with their countries' political establishments. This offers the IEA a viable route to circumvent its status of quasi-pariah at the diplomatic level and establish and strengthen channels of communication and common interests with other countries in the region and beyond.

While this policy is likely to bear fruit with respect to some neighbouring countries, it is not clear if the IEA's high expectations overall can be met. The easier deals are with Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, keen to normalise relations with their southern neighbour in order to expand the logistic networks for their own fossil fuel production.[8] In addition, several mining contracts have been awarded to Iranian and Pakistani companies, generally focusing on existing or already active mines. Thanks to these regional investors' proximity and easy access along with the modest nature of their investments, some projects have successfully started operations. However, it is doubtful that actors from these countries, considering their limited economic potential and their history of fraught political relations with Afghanistan, will ever play a major role in the Afghan mining economy. For that, the IEA needs China.

China's interest in Afghanistan's mineral resources – and the reciprocation of this interest by successive Afghan governments – has been a constant since the Republic. In the new context, China has proven a rare willing international partner for the IEA, renewing commercial links and resuming mining projects previously explored under the Republic and planning new ones, notably for the extraction of oil and lithium. China also stepped up its political connections to the government in Kabul by formally recognising its envoy to Beijing in January 2024 (Al Jazeera). However, despite the grandiose nature of another project – connecting the two countries by road through the Wakhan Corridor (Khaama) – it has been argued that China might prefer to slow the pace of its involvement in Afghanistan (see this AAN report on Chinese investments). Its traditional prudent disbursement of aid or development funds, compounded by its cautious approach towards having a heavy footprint in unstable countries, may mean that major projects could fail to materialise, or that their implementation would still be vulnerable to changes in the situation on the ground (read also this Wilson Center analysis).

[8] For example, work on the TAPI pipeline, long projected to link Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India, has recently started inside Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation). The official recognition of the IEA by Russia in July 2025 (BBC) opens new scenarios for the strengthening of economic and political links between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, whose economies are still closely linked to Russia.

For all the flurry of contract announcements, in terms of active mines, the current situation bears similarities to that under the Republic, when, despite sensational billion-dollar contracts for the exploitation of huge metal ore deposits, such as the copper of Aynak or the iron of Hajigak after 2001, major mining operations failed to materialise. Work lagged behind and ultimately stopped in the face of stifling corruption and growing insecurity.[9] Rather, it was the mining of lower-bulk, higher-value elements such as gold, lapis, emeralds and rubies, profitable even when carried out on a smaller scale, or that of goods of primary necessity and local consumption such as salt and coal, that has continued during both war and peace, sustaining the livelihoods of many Afghan communities.

Such areas have developed over time into typical mining districts where a great part of the local population depends on activities or services connected to mining for at least part of their livelihoods. As a coal miner-turned-contractor from Baghlan province put it to AAN:

> *In our area, the mines are the primary source of livelihoods, providing for our needs and sustaining our community. This work has been our foundation for decades and it remains the backbone of how we care for our families and keep our lives running. … We consider ourselves fortunate to have this, as it sustains not just individuals but entire households.*

People willing to go underground and risk their lives for a wage have always been available, all the more so in a war-torn country where economic survival has continuously been put to the test. Now, although war is over, the absence of alternative livelihoods is pushing more and more people to engage in mining, and the IEA's efforts to expand this sector are furthering this trend.

It is in these mines, that have resumed or increased extraction since 2021, where, nowadays, things are changing fast. Therefore, this report will focus in some more detail on two long-established types of mining, extensively carried out across the country throughout the past few decades – coal and gold.

[9] Mohsin Amin, The Story Behind China's Long-Stalled Mine in Afghanistan, The Diplomat, 7 January 2017. The Aynak mining complex would furthermore require massive consumption of water diverted from the Kabul river basin, a highly-populated area already facing a looming crisis of water resources (The Guardian).

COAL MINING

Afghanistan hosts fairly large Jurassic-era coal fields, spanning from the northeastern provinces of Takhar and Baghlan to the central provinces of Samangan and Sar-e Pul and further west to Herat. Coal has been mined in Afghanistan for a long time, though it was only in the 1950s that its exploitation for industrial use, including to supply the cement factories that were then being established, began. At the end of that decade, Afghanistan still had only two operating underground coal mines, at Ishpushta in Bamyan province and at Karkar near Pul-e Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan, alongside a number of small-scale surface mines.[10]

Miners load coal onto a truck at the Chinarak mines in Baghlan province.
Photo: Stringer/Xinhua via AFP, 8 February 2022

[10] See, Aloys Arthur Michel, The Kabul, Kunduz, and Helmand Valleys and the National Economy of Afghanistan, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, 1959, p353.

Coal has long been considered among the most promising mining sectors for the Afghan economy. During the 1960s, the exploitation of the richer Dara-ye Suf deposits in Samangan province began with US technical assistance. Between 1965 and 1979, the Soviet company Technoexport conducted the most comprehensive (though still reconnaissance-level) field surveys of Afghanistan's coal fields to date.[11] Extraction, which had taken off before the start of the conflict in 1978, quickly returned to significant levels under the Islamic Republic. In the past few years, not only has coal mining grown into a critical component of the Afghan economy, but taxes levied on coal exports may have become the single largest source of income for the IEA (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi and Mashaal).

The concentration of coal mining in a specific area, has given some places in the centre and northeast of the country the feel of mining towns, where a big share of the local population is involved in mining or activities related to it. One immediate impact of coal mines on local livelihoods is that, in a country where woodland is scarce, it provides a local source of relatively cheap fuel for household heating.

Balkhab

Balkhab district in the southeasternmost corner of Sar-e Pul province has been a typical mining district for the past two decades, with tens of thousands of miners working there. Given its remote location and rugged environment with limited road infrastructure, most of the mining sites originally developed as small enterprises run by local, family-sized companies. Many of the locals have been employed in mining or transporting the mines' produce, with a fairly large population of miners joining also from outside the district. The coal extracted in Balkhab is among the highest quality in Afghanistan, considered superior for heating even to that of Dara-ye Suf.

Extraction in Balkhab stopped abruptly in the summer of 2022 when a conflict broke out between the Taliban government and its erstwhile member, Hazara commander Mehdi Mujahed.[12] Originally from Balkhab and with economic interests in the mines, Mehdi had retreated there after leaving his position in the IEA ranks over accusations

[11] See, Christopher Wnuk, The Status of Artisanal Coal Mining in Afghanistan, *The Journal of Asian Earth Sciences* X, 12, 2024, p3.

[12] Ali Yawar Adili, The Politics of Survival in the Face of Exclusion (2): The Emirate's accommodation and suppression of Hazara commanders, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8 April 2025. For Mehdi's background and his joining the Taliban read also: Thomas Ruttig, The Case of Mawlawi Mehdi and Balkhab District: Are the Taleban attracting Hazaras?, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 23 May 2020.

of discrimination against Hazaras (New York Times). His rebellion against the IEA was crushed after some weeks of fighting, which led to civilian losses as well, while Mehdi was killed shortly afterwards in unclear circumstances. The IEA subsequently reorganised work at the mines and it is now under the control of the state-owned National Development Corporation (The Diplomat).

Nahrin

Nahrin is a district in Baghlan, one of the provinces that hosted the first industrial-scale coal mines in the country. Although separated from the central valley of the province hosting Baghlan city and the provincial capital of Pul-e Khumri, together with the main industrial areas which require coal, Nahrin is relatively well-connected in terms of road infrastructure. Coal mining has been going on there for several decades now and offers the inhabitants of this otherwise relatively poor district a welcome form of employment. One interviewee stated that as much as eighty per cent of the district's population relies on coal mining for their income.

Many small contractors are active in the four main mining areas of this district, Shengara, Chinarak, Shorabak and Yakhpaj, that span over two valleys. They are mostly local, but recently, entrepreneurs from outside (mainly from the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar) have arrived. The workforce is also largely, but not entirely, local.

Work organisation

According to one specialist study, all coal mines in Afghanistan can be considered artisanal, ie not or only lightly mechanised, with extraction confined to areas where coal beds are exposed or near the surface.[13] Drifts, dug into the hillside, are rarely greater than a kilometre deep and usually only around 300 metres. This is because the load-bearing capacity of coal pillars limits the depth that mines can reach before the weight of the land above risks collapse. Tunnels are dug more narrowly as the depth increases to mitigate the risk of collapse. As a rule, engineering support is limited and miners themselves are given significant autonomy to implement the layout of mines. Coal mines, apart from some older mines in Karkar

[13] Wnuk, The Status of Artisanal Coal Mining in Afghanistan, Journal of Asian Earth Sciences, vol 12, 1 December 2024, p2.

near Pul-e Khumri which initially benefited from a more formal engineering design, are neither mechanised nor electrified.

Coal mines are often operated year-round. “Inside the mine, winter is mild,” one interviewee from Balkhab said. “Only the roads are blocked by snow and trucks cannot come to pick up the coal. So, we [cannot sell to the traders and] work less. And we earn less, right when we actually need to get additional money to get through to spring.” An interviewee from Nahrin described how the mines there are also worked continuously:

> *Once the coal seam is reached, operations continue year-round, in every season, without breaks … day and night to extract and sell coal. Work shifts are organised into specific time shifts. For example, one group may be assigned to work until 10, another group from 10 until the evening prayer, a third group from the evening until 2 and the final group from 2 until morning. These shifts are managed to ensure continuous extraction, with workers operating around the clock. Initially, when the work begins, about ten to fifteen workers are required for tasks like timber cutting. However, once the coal seam is accessed, the number of workers needed depends on the quality of the coal. If there are no significant challenges, such as gas leaks or fires, operations can expand, with up to hundreds of workers engaged in the mining.*

In Nahrin, he said, many companies are small-sized family businesses, hiring fluctuating numbers of workers, depending on the productivity of the mines and the phase of the work:

> *I was working in one mine myself, but unfortunately, it collapsed … Such risks are part of mining and you have to face them as they arise. Currently, I’m in partnership with one of my brothers and many of my relatives and family members also own mines. Once we secure a concession, we hire workers to handle the mining and extraction of coal. …The number of people working in a mine depends largely on its location and quality. If the mine is stable and gives high-quality coal, around 100 people might be employed there. However, at smaller or weaker mining locations – those with less coal or limited tunnel access – only 10 to 20 people may work.*

The workforce is drawn mostly from around Nahrin district. The arrival of outsiders represents, as usual, both an opportunity for locals, who can earn a living by providing them with transport, accommodation and food, and problems.

In Balkhab, for example, although the non-local miners usually come from neighbouring areas and share the same Shia Hazara background as the majority of locals, their presence hampers the freedom of local women to easily move and work. They are also perceived as robbing locals of jobs.

Men emerge from a mineshaft in the Chinarak area of Nahrin district, Baghlan province, where just days before, ten coalminers had been killed and three others injured when a mine shaft collapsed.
Photo: Stringer/Xinhua via AFP, 8 February 2022

Many residents of Balkhab have previously worked in the nearby Dara-ye Suf coal mines in Samangan, including two of the men interviewed by AAN. One was forced to change his job after having been left partially disabled by the collapse of a tunnel shaft: he went back to his home district of Balkhab and started working as a contractor. The other had quit mining after nine years in Dara-ye Suf and started a grocery and bakery, with miners as his target customers, in his home village in Balkhab. However, the economic crisis had forced him to shut down these activities and return to the mines around six years ago. Now approaching his 50s, he busied himself more with tasks such as cooking and checking the security of the mine shafts, based on his previous experience.

In Nahrin, those coming from outside the district are mostly skilled workers from relatively nearby areas where mines are (or were) also active, such as Jilgah and Tala wa Barfak districts of Baghlan or, at most, Ghorband of Parwan province. They may be drawn to Nahrin by better salaries, especially when the mines located in their home areas are harder to access due to the challenging mountainous terrain or have poor road links. They sometimes bring their families along and set up huts in the mountains, getting a small extra family allowance from the contractors.

Miners' earnings can vary considerably depending on the time of year, the output of the mine and the type of agreement made with the contractors. Interviewees from Balkhab reported earnings of between AFN 8,000-25,000 (USD 113 to USD 355): winter wages are typically very low because of the reduced workload in the cold season, while those in summer are usually above AFN 15,000 (USD 214), Some workers receive a monthly salary by the owner of the concession, but others participate directly in the sale of the produce and get their share according to its amount and price, as reported by the shopkeeper who returned to work in the mines:

> *We were dividing the miners into around twenty groups and each group had up to five members. Every group was extracting coal and selling it to the merchants. Then they were giving the owner of the mine his share and distributing the remaining money among themselves. Some workers were paid monthly by the owner of the mine and weren't involved in selling the coal.*

The same range of arrangements was reported by a contractor in Nahrin, who said workers could be paid either monthly or weekly, depending on which of two types of contracts they were on:

> *One arrangement is the three-one system. The miners extract the coal, which we then sell to merchants or transport to places like Pakistan, Kabul, Takhar, Badakhshan, Kunduz and other provinces. Merchants and companies often come directly to buy the coal, or we handle the transport and sell it ourselves. Under this contract, miners extract the coal and then get two-thirds of the earnings, while we keep one-third. The other arrangement is a per metre payment. That's a type of contract based on the distance mined. For example, miners are paid around 6,000 afghanis [around USD 85] per metre of work, which can vary depending on the depth, quality and complexity of the mine. Some mines take longer to work through than others.*

The profits made by contractors are often greater in the per metre system, but can also vary considerably. The contractor from Nahrin put it thus:

> *If the coal is of high quality, people are more likely to recommend working at that mine because the output and profitability are better. For instance, if 100 workers operate in a good mine, they can produce two truckloads of coal a day. Over a month, this could amount to 60 truckloads. With the current rate of 50,000 afghanis [USD 710] per truckload, selling 60 truckloads in a month would generate an income of 3 million afghanis [USD 42,600].*

Another interviewee from Nahrin argued that a single mine, if expanded and of great quality, could even produce four or five truckloads of coal daily, operating around the clock. The miner-turned-contractor from Balkhab instead estimated that the monthly income of an average mine was just AFN one million (USD 14,200). However, some expenses must be taken into account, as well, such as timber for tunnel support and other operational costs, including food. Assuming that the around 100 workers of an average good-quality mine all opt for the three-to-one system, noted by the contractor above, they would receive around USD 284 monthly in the first scenario given, as much as USD 710 in the best case scenario (five truckloads/day) and only around USD 95 in the worst (the average given by the Balkhab contractor).

The money is not necessarily worth the risks, which are high.[14] Afghanistan's coal mines are known to be gassy and the ever-present dangers range from exposure to toxic gas and asphyxiation to underground combustion and explosions (the natural gas fields of northern Afghanistan have been produced by the same Jurassic coal deposits). Lack of engineering, insufficient ventilation and poor tunnel support contribute to high injury and fatality rates, as well as slowing the pace of extraction. Media outlets have consistently reported a long list of casualties in coal mines over the past decades (see Tolo and Hasht-e Sobh for incidents in Nahrin; Pajhwok for Dara-ye Suf).

[14] A report in late 2022 by NPR found the number of under-age workers in the mines of Nahrin had been steadily growing, together with the amount of coal extracted. Despite the IEA's public commitment to fight child labour, like the Republic before it, the economic crisis in Afghanistan is spurring an increasing number of families to send their children to the mines. On working conditions in the Chinarak mine in Nahrin, read also this reportage: Desperate for Cash, Afghans Toil in Mines that are Deadlier than Ever, The New York Times, 29 March 2022.

Interviewees confirmed this trend: according to a contractor from Nahrin, a survey conducted last year in the Shengara and Chinarak mines revealed that in 2024, around 72 miners had been 'martyred'. However, the contractors bear no liability for these incidents and in privately-run mines, the safety measures are largely left to the workers themselves. All local contractors told AAN that, before starting work, miners have to sign a document to the effect that, in case of an accident, responsibility lies with them and not the owner of the concession, even though, as one contractor blithely acknowledged, "there hasn't been a year without fatalities."

> *When we obtain a license and hire workers, we make it clear to them that the mountain they're working on is dangerous. We tell them they may need to go 100, 200, or even 300 metres deep into the mountain, but we're not responsible for any accidents. They sign a letter acknowledging that they're working voluntarily to support their families, and if anything happens – whether it's a collapse, a fire, or any other accident – they accept that no one else is liable.*

Those working in private mines also have to buy their own individual protective gear, such as oxygen masks, gloves and hard hats, while, in the words of another private contractor:

> *Government mines provide much better safety equipment and facilities for their workers. Ours don't often have these facilities or equipment. The government operates its own mines with its own workers and equipment, including machines called wagons for coal extraction.*

Changes under the IEA: Taxes and permits

In the summer of 2022, reports about the so-called Balkhab uprising noted above highlighted how Commander Mehdi was making big money from the taxes he levied on mining. Wresting control of this source of revenue, or at least denying it to an actor whose loyalties were unclear, was likely a major cause for the IEA's harsh reaction against its former member. Mehdi was reportedly getting 1,500 afghani (USD 17 at the 2022 exchange rate) for each metric ton of coal exported from the district (Foreign Policy). On top of this, traders had to pay AFN 3,600 (USD 40 in 2022) as the official tax to the IEA's Ministry of Mines, as confirmed by one of AAN's interviewees.

After the military campaign that brought about the removal of Mehdi and the takeover of Balkhab mines, which were then given to the National Development Corporation (NDC), the 'extra' tax was abolished.[15] However, other developments were not to the satisfaction of local residents.

The IEA frames its direct management of the Balkhab mines as a crackdown on illegal mining and unsanctioned taxation by a strongman; moreover, it announced that the revenue from the coal mines in Balkhab would be spent to finance projects of national importance, such as the Qosh Tepe Canal (Tolo). However, the change has been experienced by many locals as unjustly barring them from access to one of the few local sources of livelihood. Since 2022, full-scale mining in the district has started anew and NDC officials announced that new coal seams have been identified (Tolo); many locals have nonetheless lost their jobs. As the disabled miner-turned-contractor put it:

> *The National [Development] Corporation signs contracts with private companies and they bring their human resources from wherever they want. Yet, locals are unemployed and face economic problems. People don't have ten afghanis to rub together. Some of the miners have left Balkhab and they're the better-off ones, those who could spend some money to leave their country.*

According to another interviewee from Balkhab, the emigration of local workers to Iran and Pakistan has been massive: he estimated as many as three-quarters of the miners had gone.[16] He added that the number of miners had also fallen because of the use of machines by the National Development Corporation, which meant less manpower was required, but also, he said, had reduced the quality of the extracted coal. Given the traumatic set of events that occurred in Balkhab, it is not a surprise

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[15] The NDC was created during the presidency of Ashraf Ghani to integrate a number of state enterprises. It has come to play an increasing role in the development projects of the IEA. Its head, Abdulrahman Attash, a veteran of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development with links to Hezb-e Islami, survived the political transition unscathed. For further reading, see Patrick Yeager, The State-Owned Company at the Center of Taliban Plans for Self-Sufficiency, The Diplomat, 26 October 2024.

[16] Tough and risky jobs like mining are often done by migrants and Afghans do indeed work as miners outside of their homeland as well, particularly in Pakistan and Iran. As mostly undocumented workers, they are particularly insecure, in terms of salaries but also exposure to danger. Deadly incidents involving Afghan miners have been reported in the coal mines of Pakistani Baluchistan (Pajhwok). Moreover, they can also be casualties in the political tensions which often surround a sensitive field like mining, such as in the attack last autumn against a coal mine in Pakistani Baluchistan, where among the twenty miners killed, seven were Afghan migrants (Pajhwok).

that locals interviewed did not report positive changes in terms of taxation or the procedure for obtaining mining permits.

The situation is different in Nahrin. Although Kandahari and Helmandi businessmen have moved in, getting contracts to exploit the district's mines alongside local contractors, this seems not to have caused major friction. Locals interviewed there, currently working as mine contractors or dealers for the export of coal, had mostly positive comments about the situation. Despite lamenting the decreased volume of work compared to the Republic times, one of the interviewees said:

> *Obtaining rights from the government to operate a mine isn't very expensive. It costs from USD 100 to 300, depending on the quality of the mine. … In the past, there were commanders and powerful individuals who would demand money or form partnerships, often taking a share of the profits. This created a lot of corruption and made it difficult for miners to operate freely. However, now things have changed. The government issues licenses for mining, and taxes are collected from the merchants who transport the coal. There are no longer commanders or individuals involved in extracting money from the mining operations.*

He continued detailing the relatively light hand of the IEA on mining enterprises in his district:

> *… As miners, we don't pay taxes directly. Instead, the government taxes the merchants who transport and sell coal. For instance, when merchants transfer coal to Pakistan or other provinces, they pay a tax of 1,600 afghanis (USD 23) per ton. If we choose to handle the transportation and act as merchants ourselves, we're responsible for paying this tax.*

Another contractor from Nahrin also spoke about a single tax to be paid, known as the ta'rafa:

> *For example, when a truck is filled with 22 tons of coal, it's taken to a village in the district, Nawabad Burjak, where there's a government department. It charges 1,600 afghanis [USD 23] per ton, but this fee is paid by the merchants who buy the coal from us, not by us, the miners. There are no additional fees such as khums [the one-fifth tax on certain mining produce, especially metals] or payments to commanders or any other parties.*

Labourers shovel coal onto a truck at a coal yard on the outskirts of Kabul.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 3 October 2023

One major expense for contractors is a cut of the profits given to the landowner where the mine is located, or where roads need to be built to access it. The contractor from Balkhab said he had a contract for a mining site "with the owner of the land because [mines are always located] on somebody's agricultural land … and we were paying them." The same arrangements were made in Nahrin, an interviewee from there said:

> *The land in this area is privately owned, with individuals claiming portions of the mountain as their own. In such cases, we approach them and propose a partnership, offering them a 10 per cent, 15 per cent or 20 per cent share or similar terms through an agreement. Once the agreement is finalised, we begin operations.*

Despite the low level of IEA's interference with the mining operations in Nahrin, at least in this district, the interviewee said, the government has taken some initiatives on safety:

There are government engineers from the Ministry of Mines in the provinces who visit the mines regularly. They bring their own skilled workers to conduct inspections and surveys. These engineers provide advice on safety measures, such as where to place timber for support or which areas to avoid for extraction. They offer suggestions to help improve safety and efficiency. They don't receive payment from us as they're government employees.

Trade and export of coal

Coal in Afghanistan is heavily used for domestic heating. Experts estimate that in Kabul alone, residents used around 400,000 tonnes of coal in the winter of 2023-24. The main market for Afghan coal, though, are small brick kiln businesses. During the past decade, the demand for coal for brick kilns has been in the range of between 320,000 tonnes and 2 million tonnes annually.[17]

The majority of kilns are in eastern Kabul, towards Deh Sabz, where the main coal market for the Kabul region is also located. Coal from the mines in the north is unloaded there and retailers buy what they will then sell in the city. It is also where a large amount of the coal is loaded on trucks bound for Pakistan.

For the past few years, in fact, coal has become one of Afghanistan's rare export commodities, with Pakistan importing large quantities of it. Although official data on the export of coal is not reliable, experts estimate that since the establishment of the IEA, nearly four million tonnes a year have been exported to Pakistan (read this ALCIS report on cross-border trade).

Pakistan was already importing coal from its neighbour, but since early 2022, because of high global prices, it has increasingly turned to Afghan coal for its industrial fuel requirements. Initially, it benefited from a disorganised market after the fall of the Republic and from very low prices (read also this AAN paper on the Afghan economy). In June 2022, for example, Afghan coal was sold to Pakistani buyers at USD 90 a tonne even though world prices averaged USD 345 a tonne. This much-needed source of revenue was seized upon by the IEA, which moved to tightly control exports and raise the royalties on coal (Open Democracy).

[17] See Wnuk, *Artisanal Coal Mining*, p14.

The demand for coal from Pakistan increased throughout 2022-23 and the links between Afghan miners and Pakistani traders became well-established, as the coal dealer from Nahrin told AAN:

> *If you have the capacity and ability to secure contracts with the Pakistanis and establish a base in Kabul, you can directly engage with buyers and handle sales yourself. This approach allows you to benefit from both mining and selling, thereby maximising revenue. The mines remain under our control, as does the selling process. … Merchants from Pakistan typically have representatives in Kabul in Deh Sabz. The actual business owners operate from Pakistan, while their representatives in Deh Sabz manage local dealings. These representatives often collaborate with intermediaries, who take commissions to facilitate coal acquisition. Then, the delivery of 10 to 40 truckloads of coal per day is made through such arrangements. If we establish direct contact with these Pakistani buyers, we can make [more advantageous] offers, selling 1,000 afghanis [USD 14] less per ton and selling to them directly [without intermediaries]. To streamline this process, we could place one of our representatives in the city to manage negotiations and logistics on our behalf.*

However, the increase in coal exports drove a hike in the domestic price, right at a time when economic collapse and loss of income following the international withdrawal were putting increasing pressure on many Afghan households going into the winter (Tolo). Many brick kilns, already damaged by the stagnating economy, also found it difficult to stay in business (Amu TV). A trader of coal in Deh Sabz, interviewed by AAN, related how prices nearly doubled between 2021 and 2022 and have since fluctuated, depending on the customs policies devised by the two neighbours:

> *For example, a ton of Sheikha [high-quality coal from Dara-ye Suf] costs around 8,200 afghanis [USD 116] in 2021, but in 2022 its price suddenly shot up to 15,000 afghanis. Then, the following year, in 2023, its price reached around 10,500 afghanis [USD 149] because the Pakistani government increased the tax on coal imports. This caused the price to soar and also coal exports to fall. [In November 2024], the Pakistani government reduced the tax per ton and this caused the export of coal to increase. That's also affected the markets in Kabul and the price here saw an increase of around 500 afghanis [USD 7] per ton.*

Coal exports to Pakistan started to slow down in mid-2024 *(*Dawn), as global prices reduced somewhat and increased taxes made the price of Afghan coal less attractive to Pakistani industrialists. The World Bank estimated that coal exports plunged by 17 per cent from January to August 2024 as Pakistan also moved towards using local coal for its power plants. The removal of concessions from importers and the addition of new bureaucratic requirements also made importing Afghan coal less straightforward.

Trade with Pakistan still significantly affects the price of coal inside Afghanistan. A slight decrease in Pakistani import duties on coal at the onset of winter 2024-25, reported to AAN by Afghan coal traders, drove up the price of coal in Afghanistan at a critical moment. This might have been a motivation, as well, behind a government project to distribute coal at a lower-than-market price in Kabul and some neighbouring provinces (Tolo). In December 2024, the Northern Coal Enterprise, a state-owned company that is part of the NDC, allocated 160,000 tons of coal to be sold at the fixed price of AFN 6,500 (USD 92) per tonne.

GOLD MINING

Gold has been extracted in Afghanistan from ancient times, with small-scale artisanal mining consistently carried out until today in the northeastern provinces, particularly Takhar and Badakhshan, but also Baghlan. One local method traditionally involved dipping sheepskins into the mountain streams and rivers that flow down the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush, particularly in the Panj and Kokcha river basins. They served as fleece sieves capable of catching gold dust. This is a method used in other areas, such as the Caucasus, from ancient times and is considered to have given birth to the myth of the Golden Fleece.[18] Nowadays, however, sheepskins have been replaced with synthetic materials, such as material pulled from the interiors of car seats. In Badakhshan, in the Ragh area as well as in Faizabad, Baharak and some other neighbouring districts, there are a number of known occurrences of metamorphic lode gold. Most deposits in northwestern Badakhshan and neighbouring Takhar, however, are made up of 'placer gold', ie eroded from the original lodes.[19]

As with coal, no comprehensive exploration has been carried out in Badakhshan since the 1960s and 1970s, apart from some prospect evaluation by the Afghan Geological Survey in 2010. Prospecting was done through wet-washing by the Soviets, while dry-washing prospecting, which separates the particles of placer gold from sediments without the need for water, became available only through the more recent introduction of machinery by United States development assistance in 2014.

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[18] Najibi, Rasouli and Basharpal, The Occurrence of Gold and Its Potential in Afghanistan, *Addaiyan Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4, 2022, p16.

[19] Placer gold is a concentration of the precious metal formed by the erosion of the gold vein present in the rocks, the so-called lode gold. Placer gold deposits are usually closer to the surface of the rock and easier to extract than lode gold; when they end being transported by waterways they are called alluvial placer. According to a brochure published in 2021 by the Ministry of Mines, then under the Republic, the vein of metamorphic lode gold present in Takhar and Badakhshan could extend southwest as far as Parwan province. More gold deposits of magmatic origin have been found in the Tirin-Arghandab area in the provinces of Ghazni and Zabul of south-central Afghanistan.

Men pan for gold at a mining site on the banks of the Kokcha River in Yaftal-e Sufla district, Badakhshan province.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 24 February 2024

Chah Ab and Shahr-e Bozorg

The most important placer gold deposit, established by Soviet prospectors, is that of Samti in Chah Ab district of Takhar province, on the banks of the river Amu. The United States Geological Survey of 2009-10 simply confirmed Soviet estimates of a resource of 30 tonnes there, which is large by current world standards. The Ministry of Mines, however, believes that the actual magnitude of the Samti deposit, together with the adjacent Nuraba and Khasar, could be much bigger. In a Ministry of Mines publication from early 2021, the then minister claimed, applying a correction to the old Soviet prospects, that it could amount to as much as 100 tonnes, "with an in-the-ground value of about 4 billion USD, which would rank Samti among the largest gold dredge [machine-operated gold-washing] projects in the world."

The Samti-Nuraba deposits bordering Tajikistan form, together with those in the westernmost district of Badakhshan, Shahr-e Bozorg, a larger area of interest,

labelled a “permissive gold-bearing area” by Soviet and American geologists. Gold-washing and mining in the region has been reported from ancient times and has attracted the interest of successive Afghan governments since the 1940s.

However, the Samti gold has not proven easy pickings. Under the Republic, a contract for the site’s exploitation was awarded to Westland General Trading, a company owned by an Uzbek businessman, Abdul Kabir Bedil, through his association with then Minister of Mines Wahidullah Shahrani. The contract was later reviewed to offer more favourable terms to the company and eventually, only the easier-to-access Nuraba site was exploited, while Samti, at that time, remained undeveloped (USIP).

Raghistan

Raghistan district, together with other districts making up the broader Ragh area, such as Yawan, is another major gold-mining area in Badakhshan province. The district also contains the largest gold ore lode, that of Weka Dur.

Political power in the Ragh area has traditionally been held by local elites separated from and at times rival to those in the provincial capital of Faizabad. The area also saw an early presence of local Taliban compared to most of Badakhshan. These insurgents had managed to wrest control of many gold mining sites from the government by 2017 (Tolo). Although Weka Dur remained nominally under government control, a contract tendered to the Turkish Afghan Mining company was twice signed and revoked between 2013 and 2021 because the company did not act on the contract and also because of a conflict of interest of former Minister for Urban Affairs, Sayed Mansur Naderi, who was a shareholder (Pajhwok).

Work organisation

The way gold is extracted varies depending on the type of deposit. Placer gold in Raghistan is obtained by washing material extracted on the floodplains of the River Amu and its tributaries or from tunnel shafts dug into the sides of nearby hills. Many concessions in Chah Ab and Shahr-e Bozorg include a mixture of both river dredging and excavation. Gold-washers scoop water over batches of the sandy soil or gravel that they extract, and sift it as it runs through a sluice, which is often covered in fabric to retain the gold particles. A veteran miner from Samangan, now working in Chah Ab, described work there:

> *The mine we're working on is in the hills, at the foot of the mountains. We drill holes into the mountains for about 100 to 200 metres and dig tunnels. In an area of 120 square metres, ten mines and tunnels have been dug. Each tunnel is 5 to 6 metres away from the next one and has 6 to 20 people working it. The working place is different for everybody: when the location is good, around 50 to 60 metres of sand, earth and stone are pulled out and get washed in order to extract the gold by other workers who are outside. Workers who enter the tunnels are those who have experience and can operate drilling and auger machines. There are wagons that take out the gravel and soil from inside the tunnel and the sand is washed outside, and this way, the gold is separated from the gravel. … The tunnels are dug obliquely and the wagons go back and forth.*

Lode gold present in the higher altitude districts of Badakhshan can be extracted from the rockier mountain slopes either from relatively open pit structures, as in the Weka Dur mine, or from wells dug vertically into the ground. These underground tunnels have an average depth of between 20 and 100 metres and the number of workers depends on their length and depth: up to 30 miners can work inside a tunnel 80 metres deep. Even here, it is the more experienced workers who operate the boring machines inside the tunnels, while the others carry out the extracted material and debris by hand.

Time is a major factor in gold-mining enterprises. Would-be contractors willing to search for gold in the Kokcha River basin and its tributaries get only a one-year license from the government at a cost of AFN 120,000 (USD 1,690) a year for each acre of land, which they pay whether they find gold or not. The cost of the one-acre concession is AFN 80,000 (USD 1,127), but the state charges an extra AFN 40,000 (USD 563) to cover the cost of backfilling and smoothing the riverbanks, which is its responsibility.

A contractor from Takhar holding a concession in Shahr-e Bozorg district of Badakhshan told AAN about the tight line his family firm must walk to make sure profits cover costs during the search for gold:

> *In the places you pick, sometimes you work a lot and no gold comes into your hands, because it's the river basin and the way the water carries the gold is not known. You have to track it [the course of gold in the river stream]. Sometimes, many months pass without anything coming to you. … We buy the license and it's for a brief period of time and whether the work is done or not, the time is soon over.*

He described just how much it costs to work a mine, not just the price for the licence for each acre, but also additional fixed fees, salaries and so on:

> *Part of the cost of the license is … paid per acre of land, [but], for example, if a license is purchased for three acres, then an additional 270,000 afghanis [USD 3,805] should also be paid. … The search for gold and the work to get it amounts to an expense of between 300,000 and 400,000 Afs [USD 4,227-5,637] every five to six months. [That means] what we get, [the revenue], over and above expenses – the monthly salaries of the workers and what is due to those who established the mine – has to, at least, break even.*

A miner carrying buckets of rocks, soil and other debris walks out of a mineshaft at a gold mine in the mountains of Yaftal-e Sufla district, Badakhshan province.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 24 February 2024

Given the time constraints and that a lot of research may be required before finding sizeable amounts of gold, miners are typically divided into shifts in order to work around the clock, as was the case with this Samangani miner working in Chah Ab:

> *There are 13 of us at each mining site and we work 24 hours a day, 12 during the day – one of us is a cook, so he's busy during the day – and 12 to 13 at night. We have a place to sleep and live there, at the mine, so we don't leave it for two to three months at a time.*

Gold is often sold at the site of extraction to traders who travel to buy it. Miners from Raghistan confirmed that this was the case for their concessions, because of the remote location of the mines and the district's distance from the provincial capital. The Takhari contractor gave another reason for the urgency to sell: proceeds from the sale of the first findings of gold are often sorely needed to fund the running costs of the mining operations.

> *If there's no urgent need for money, we bring the product to the markets in the provincial centres or even to Kabul. But most of those who obtain produce here sell 70 per cent of that at the mine itself because they have to pay for fuel for the machinery and the workers.*

Indeed, gold traders often also work as financiers for contractors, anticipating their need for money and expecting to recover the debt at a later stage:

> *People who buy gold from other provinces come to the miners who've worked for two months, three months and even six months, but did not get anything, and these people know that and provide money and goods to those miners and when the gold's finally obtained, these people buy that gold from the miners. In the past [under the Republic], it was the local commanders who lent money to the miners and then bought the gold. But there are also those who have their own machines and capital to invest. They don't sell here. They take their produce to Kabul or to the provincial centres and sell it there at a higher price.*

Not all that glitters is gold

Extracting gold might sound more glamorous than mining coal, but it can be no less dangerous. If those working in the river, mostly with excavators and machinery, run fewer risks besides the fatigue and patience that this hard work requires, those going underground are gambling with their lives. The mines of Takhar and especially Badakhshan have recorded a long list of casualties in the past few years (Xinhua, Amu TV, Khaama), with the single most lethal incident, in 2019, costing the lives of at least 30 miners when a tunnel in Kohistan district of Badakhshan

collapsed (BBC). Even digging tunnels in the sandy riverine terrain of the Kokcha basin is tricky. Collapses are frequent, as recounted by a miner there:

> *When somebody who's just started as a miner and is inexperienced finds himself inside a tunnel, he risks suffocation: at a depth of 150 to 200 metres underground, there's almost no air. It's very difficult work because the soil is wet… There's water everywhere and when a person works for two hours in a row, when he comes out, he cannot stand on his feet. … And it's very dangerous because at any moment there's a risk that the walls will fall in. Many tunnels' ceilings have collapsed and many workers have remained trapped inside and it was impossible even to extract their bodies. Several times, we dug a tunnel only to see it crumble after we'd gone out and once or twice, we were eating outside when the mine collapsed.*

In these mining sites, he added, very few infrastructural precautions can be taken against collapse:

> *People can't do anything to reduce the risk, like digging tunnels more properly, like they try to do in the coal mines. Here, the tunnel walls cannot be reinforced and roofed because the soil is loose and sandy. However, the government could provide advanced machines and tools to work the mines in order to prevent the loss of lives. There are some places where mountains have been tunnelled, where the working system's different from these mines by the riverside. There, the tunnels are made and worked by drill machines, which is less dangerous.*

Miners are aware that incidents can only be reduced by replacing as much manpower as possible with modern machinery, especially in the highest-risk areas. However, they also point to the paradox that it is precisely in those areas that concessions are awarded to smaller companies that cannot afford the costs of such advanced technology, as our contractor lamented:

> *The places where the [ordinary] people work aren't the major mining sites. At those places, the government has given more contracts to foreign companies, such as the Chinese, and doesn't allow Afghan companies or local people. So, the places where local people and small Afghan companies dig tunnels and work aren't the main mines and there are many problems in these areas. But due to unemployment and poverty in the region, people busy themselves and work in these places, hoping to extract some produce.*

Despite the risks, the mining sector is not likely to be short of a workforce. In the absence of other options, Afghan men from all walks of life are ready to join mining operations. Besides a few contractors making decent profits, they all, when asked, profess that they were forced to become miners due to necessity and they never meant to remain in the job for long. Most interviewees working in Raghistan, for example, had become miners only recently, some after being forced to drop out of higher studies due to the lack of prospects for graduates, while others had lost their previous jobs. Several had either been construction workers or soldiers under the Republic, as one pointed out:

> *Many people work here in the mines and yet the income we get isn't good enough to carry on with our lives and in the end, many people work here out of necessity, poverty and unemployment. For example, it's mostly the soldiers and government employees of the previous regime and other jobless people who've come here to earn a little bit of money.*

Salaries vary considerably across the gold-mining region. The Takhari contractor reported that his workers get:

> *A monthly salary, but not the same for everybody. It's calculated according to the activities and skills of each. Besides the monthly salary, if a worker is deserving of something more, prizes and rewards are also given. The lowest salary we give is to somebody who works as a cook or assistant cook – that starts from 12,000 afghanis (USD 169) a month and the highest that we give to skilled and experienced workers amounts to 27,000 afghanis (USD 380).*

These still seem decent wages compared to what a simple labourer in the same area, Shahr-e Bozorg, reported:

> *We're daily wage workers, that is, our salaries are calculated according to the days we work, but workers receive their salary once a month, and on average their monthly earnings can amount to 5,000-6,000 Afs [USD 71-85]. During the Republic government, we did not pay taxes, but now, when we get the total monthly salary from our daily wages, we pay our taxes to the local officials of the Islamic Emirate.*

Wages for miners can be in the form of a salary from the contractors or a share of the sale of the minerals extracted. Miners from Ragh reported average monthly earnings of 5,000-6,000 afghanis (USD 71-85) when they were dividing profits among themselves, or a fixed monthly salary of slightly less than 5,000, paid by the

contractors. Apart from the more experienced workers operating drilling machines, most interviewees from Ragh seemed to be simple salaried workers and to consider their wages insufficient to meet their expenses:

> *We workers only receive a monthly salary and have no share or role in the sale of the gold. From the salary we get from the mine owner, we pay one share, that is due to the government of the Islamic Emirate every month. … There have been no serious and significant changes from the past. The only thing that can be seen is the growing number of workers, for example, in the past, if 100 to 200 people worked in the mines in the Raghistan region, now, this number has reached 1,000 and even 1,500 people, and the reason is that poverty and unemployment are increasing.*

A miner digs inside a Yaftal-e Sufla district gold mine tunnel in the mountains that dominate Badakhshan province.
Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 24 February 2024

However, the workforce in Ragh is still made up of locals and people from other districts of Badakhshan, while the situation has grown much more complex in the gold-washing districts of Shahr-e Bozorg and Chah Ab downstream. Among the

thousands of miners concentrated in those mining areas, there is a significant number coming from other parts of Afghanistan. They can be from other northern provinces, such as Kunduz and Samangan, but also from distant provinces like Paktia or, especially those who work with modern machinery, from Kabul. There are also increasing numbers of contactors from further afield, mostly from southern Afghanistan. Speaking of the Nuraba mine of Chah Ab, the veteran miner from Samangan said:

> *The majority of the people who work here and those who've got the mining permit are from other provinces of Afghanistan. Very few are from here. Under the Islamic Emirate, most of the people who came to work here are from the south – it's mostly businessmen from the southern provinces of Afghanistan, who've invested their capital, and the majority of contractors and employees are also from the south of the country. But they hire people from the northern region and locals as daily workers and pay them monthly salaries, which go from AFN 15,000 to 20,000 [USD 211-281] or they give them a share of 20 per cent on the produce of the mines.*

The presence of outsider companies with more money to invest creates a hierarchy among contractors:

> *There's a part of the mine in the middle of the river which is worked by excavators and machines. It's occupied and worked mostly by those who have money to invest: they have advanced gold-washing machinery and the costs in that part are very high.*

Moreover, as is often in Afghanistan, company owners tend to bring a lot of kin and countrymen to work with them. Providing work opportunities to one's community at home represents a central part of the contractors' role. By this, they contribute to its economic welfare, see their profiles rise and can establish a patronage network. This was clear, for example, from the words of the Takhari contractor working in Badakhshan:

> *I thought that if I worked in the mining sector with my brother, I'd be able to earn money for a number of other people as well and also prepare the ground for more work and create job opportunities for other people from our area. That was the objective for me and my brother, not only for ourselves but to create fair chances to work for our compatriots. Thirty to forty of them are now busy working here. Even if we hadn't increased our presence and profits*

> *from this job, besides that, a number of our people have found employment opportunities and that was precisely the objective for me and my brother.*

However, the presence of outsiders and what looks like a government privileging them has costs.

Inroads and unrest

The arrival of companies from outside the region on a mass scale and even of foreign investors is a comparatively new phenomenon in the Kokcha basin gold mining area. After the fall of the Republic, Nuraba mine fell for some time under the control of a local Taliban commander named Ghulam Hussain. As detailed in a 2024 report by AAN, in the unregulated set-up of the early days of the IEA, Ghulam Hussain was able to manage the taxation of mining operations rather personally: he would receive the *khums* (one-fifth share of the produce) from concessioners and share it with certain officials at the central IEA level, namely his patrons among the Haqqani family.

A ban on gold mining was proclaimed by the Takhar governor in late 2022, officially to prevent incidents caused by sub-standard artisanal mining.[20] However, it was widely seen as an attempt by the IEA leadership to get rid of uncontrolled mining, resulting in Ghulam Hussain – by then a major actor in the gold trade – eventually being forced to abandon the field.

This allowed the mining ministry to proceed with the project of exploiting the even richer Samti deposits as well – until then, untouched because they are more difficult to exploit for artisanal mining. This was pursued by Afghan companies in partnership with Chinese investors (Tolo), a project that had until then been frustrated by Ghulam Hussain and other local actors. By June 2024, a Financial Times article using Alcis satellite imagery showed that considerable mining was underway, indicative of corporate mining activity, rather than smaller-scale artisanal development.

As is often the case in Afghanistan, renewed economic interest by the state and external actors created a backlash in the form of local political agitation. It started

[20] Read more details on the situation of gold mining in Takhar in 2022 in this paper, Lost in Transition - Gold Mining and the Political Economy of Takhar, Afghanistan, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, November 2024.

towards the end of December 2024, with protests from the residents of Shahr-e Bozorg about neglect and lack of service provision by the central government (Tolo) – complaints justified by the reality on the ground in this, as in many other remote districts of Badakhshan – and soon became connected to the exploitation of the local mines.

Men work at a gold mine in the mountains of Yaftal-e Sufla district, Badakhshan province.
Photo: Omer Abrar, AFP, 21 July 2025

Tensions escalated in January 2025, when Hasht-e Sobh and Afghanistan International both reported that in Daung area of Shahr-e Bozorg, local residents complained that the provincial authorities had forcibly taken lands belonging to them. These were areas where gold had been successfully extracted and the concessions on the confiscated lands were allegedly distributed among the relatives and associates of local authorities, pushing local prospectors to other, less productive sites and only allowing them to engage in mining there after charging them high fees for permits. Protesters claimed that local residents should instead be given priority for exploiting the resources available on their land. After a failed mediation attempt by a delegation of IEA officials from Kabul, violence

erupted. At the head of the protest was a former jihadi commander and the violent reaction of the Taliban provincial authorities on 3 February resulted in casualties among his family members and supporters (Centre for Information Resilience). Another report said that on 7 February 2025, four miners were detained and executed in Shahr-e Bozorg by IEA security forces (Rudabe). Demonstrations also sprang up in neighbouring Chah Ab district of Takhar where locals protested what they called the plundering of gold resources by outsiders (Amu TV).

Meanwhile, on 21 January, a Chinese national was killed in neighbouring Khwaja Bahauddin district in a murder reportedly claimed by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). (Global Times). However, the attack may have been more opportunistic (the target was a lone traveller) and indicative of a more general opposition to the activities of foreign mining companies by locals than an ideological campaign against Chinese interests waged by a transnational jihadi organisation like ISKP. Previously, on 18 November 2024, a group of Chinese gold miners had been victims of an attack in Tajikistan just over the border with Shahr-e Bozorg district of Badakhshan, when armed men who had crossed from the Afghan side killed or injured five people (Centre for Information Resilience). On that occasion, ISKP did not claim the attack.[21]

The IEA central leadership reacted to the unrest with a reshuffle of the local authorities, appointing Samiullah Hezbullah, former chief of police for Kandahar and a trusted supporter of Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada as governor of Takhar and Mullah Nik Muhammad Malang as the new police chief of Badakhshan (Amu TV). If these were intended as measures to calm the disquiet in the region, the appointment of two Pashtuns from Kandahar in two provinces where Tajiks and Uzbeks are the largest ethnic groups, coming right after protests where a

[21] The targeting of Chinese nationals and economic interests by ISKP in the region is well-known. However, the coincidence between some ISKP-claimed attacks and the specific agendas and priorities of local groups in northeastern Afghanistan raises some questions. For example, in May 2024, at the height of the local protests against the poppy eradication campaign in Badakhshan, which saw the use of lethal force by the IEA against the protesters, a convoy of security forces travelling to the poppy fields was ambushed near the provincial capital of Faizabad, resulting in several casualties among the Taliban troops. Though the attack was claimed by ISKP, its timing and target matched more closely the reasons of local protests rather than the ISKP nation-wide struggle against the IEA. Read this AAN report for further details on Badakhshan's opium production and eradication in 2024: Jelena Bjelica and Fabrizio Foschini, Opium Cultivation in Badakhshan: The new national leader, according to UNODC, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 13 November 2024.

major source of complaint was that most of the current local officials are Pashtuns providing income to fellow Pashtuns, could hardly soothe local sensitivities.[22]

There is a trend of appointing outsiders connected to the central leadership in order to enable a more hands-on approach, particularly in areas which, like Badakhshan, had previously been left in the hands of local officials. On the one hand, it allows the IEA to implement more proactive policies, such as the exploitation of mineral resources and the ban on opium, but it also undermines the legitimacy of local authorities and has often stirred anger and opposition among local residents.[23]

Although less sudden and traumatic than the military occupation of the mines in Balkhab, centralising government control of the gold mines of Takhar and neighbouring Shahr-e Bozorg has created the same ill-feeling among at least some of the locals and also precipitated a backlash of protests and violence.[24]

This process is not happening at the same speed across the vast and mine-rich Badakhshan province, at least, not yet. In Raghistan, most of the mines still seem to be managed by local elites following older patterns of contracting and taxation, according to a contractor working in the Kokcha basin:

> *Currently, in the high-altitude areas, where there are mines in the mountains, the local leaders don't issue work permits to just anyone. Rather, they hire their own people and then take their share of the profits, because they have a close relationship with the Taliban and the Islamic Emirate and have been appointed to key positions and received the right to control those regions from the Islamic Emirate. But then, in some other areas, things are different and permission to work the mines is not in the hands of the local elites, but in the hands of the officials of the national government of the Islamic Emirate.*

In this seemingly innocuous quote, one can also read a subtext to the role of some of the major Taliban commanders and current IEA officials acting as powerbrokers

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[22] Of the replaced officials Obaidullah Aminzadeh, the former governor of Takhar, is a Badakhshi Tajik, while Azizullah Omar, former chief police of Badakhshan, is a Pashtun.

[23] See this recent AAN report on the opium ban in Badakhshan. For a general discussion of the IEA policies in the northeast, see this AAN themed report from 2024.

[24] Another example of the concentration of central control of local resources followed the military conquest of Panjshir in 2021, where the emerald mines have been subjected to massive exploitation and the IEA is constantly announcing that the mining sector is expanding (New York Times, Tolo).

for the government in this region. Among them is Mawlawi Najib Raghi; although formally chief of police in faraway Laghman province, he still has a major say over mining in the broader Ragh area. According to AAN's sources, he has so far been able to avoid completely relinquishing control of this source of income to other IEA officials at the provincial or national levels, thanks partly to his deep links with the Haqqanis. On the other hand, the main Badakhshi figure in the IEA leadership is Qari Fasihiddin Fitrat, currently Chief of Staff of the IEA security forces and also the government's main advisor – and occasional troubleshooter – on Badakhshan. Contrary to many northeastern non-Pashtun insurgent commanders, who were first induced into the Taliban through the Haqqanis and have often remained connected to them, he is considered a stalwart supporter of the Kandahari leadership.

The central government's interest in expanding direct control over Ragh and other mining areas of Badakhshan is apparent. In this context, developments at the local and national level are easily understood to be part of a broader competition between factions inside the IEA, revolving around the control of the mines' revenue. The appointment in the summer of 2024 (Middle East Institute) to Minister of Mines and Petroleum of one of the main Kandahari leaders, Hedayatullah Badri, aka Gul Agha Ishaqzai, who is also considered one of the main sponsors of the ascent of Badakhshi Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat to the highest echelons of the Taliban movement in the past decade, was seen in this context. Speculations were further fuelled by the post-protest reshuffle of security positions which saw the deployment of Kandahari officials to the north, arguably at the behest of Badri. Especially, as the appointments came at a time when the two most senior Haqqani figures had disappeared from the scene – one, the Minister of Refugees Khalil Rahman Haqqani, killed in December 2024 in an attack claimed by ISKP (BBC), the other, Minister of Interior Serajuddin Haqqani, inexplicably absent for months from his office (Amu TV).

Competition over local resources among political actors has been a constant of Afghan politics for the past four decades. However, the factors fuelling this competition and deciding the outcomes, shifting between local political power games and central government making inroads, have regularly proven subtler and less definitive than the many simplistic interpretations on offer to explain current events: these include an all-out match between Kandaharis and Haqqanis, and the resistance of local residents to IEA policies imposed on them from the centre.

The ideal of local control over local resources is laudable, but many remember a long history of venality, including by local leaders. This was evident in the civil war of

the 1990s and also under the Republic, when mines, among other resources, were predated upon by local armed strongmen. They were hardly focused on granting fairer conditions for those working there: all that could be praised about their role is that they usually kept access to local mining resources restricted to their, usually local, associates. Nowadays, some contractors and workers recognise the faults and abuses of the past, as the Takhari contractor working in Shahr-e Bozorg recounted:

> *Those who worked in the mines in the past had many complaints and weren't happy with the previous government due to the fact that there was a lot of coercion and demands for bribes from the miners. Every commander and soldier got bribes in turn, local police and others were also entitled to ask for them. But with the coming of the Islamic Emirate, there's no bribery and they only have to buy work permits from the government and no one else is paid any longer. In this sense, the situation is better than in the past. Although the mines aren't extracted in a standard and correct way, opportunities to work have been provided and more people are able to make their living out of it.*

While in some areas, the government has caused problems to local people by issuing licenses to outsiders, not having a government hand in the mining administration can also have its costs. All interviewees from Ragh, for example, a district where the penetration of outside companies has so far been limited, highlighted the sub-standard modes of extraction based on human labour alone and the lack of machinery, which put their lives at risk unnecessarily. They also complained about the absence of a national contract guaranteeing the same salaries to workers wherever they mined, or at least within the same mine. This, they said, led to arbitrary wages based on the agreement between the owner of the concessions and individual workers, as one explained:

> *The system of work in the Raghistan gold mines is diverse. Workers mostly work for a monthly salary so, for example, in two months, a worker can earn from 8,000 to almost 10,000 afghanis [USD 115 to 144] because working in these mines is not according to the law and the miners don't work under an official, government-certified contract. Some individuals from among the local people have taken over the mines and hired the labourers and that's why they give a different monthly salary to different people.*

A central government that was willing and able to bring about much-needed regulation and guarantee improvements to the working conditions of miners, instead of moving into the most lucrative mining sites and replacing local contractors with its associates, would reduce local concerns caused by opening up mineral resources to national and international companies – although, perhaps, not completely eliminate them.

TECHNICAL CONCERNS

Alongside these political concerns, there are more technical questions being asked about the manner in which the mining sector is growing. Mining sector expert Jawed Noorani (writing for ThinkChina) criticised both the functioning of the joint venture with Chinese investors in the Samti-Nuraba mines as showing corruption and flawed practices in the choice of the Afghan partner in the contract, Haji Bashir, convicted of narcotics smuggling in the US. More broadly, Noorani has written for the Afghanistan Research Network on the IEA's inexperience in managing the mining sector and its opaque contracting practices. Extraction of resources by foreign companies in underdeveloped countries is often marked by unbalanced power relations, especially when the former are backed by the political weight of their governments. The IEA seems confident that China does not have a political agenda that it will try to impose on Afghanistan, but the economic expectations of the two sides may still be unbalanced. China may well be more eager to secure additional future resources for its supply chain than to start major investments and extraction in the near term and create the resources that the Emirate is counting on in the near future. From the Afghan diaspora, the former 'technician' governor of Herat, Daud Saba, has also questioned the legitimacy of contracts awarded by an unrecognised government, saying that foreign companies could in the future be sued for usurpation of public property (Hasht-e Sobh).

Another specialist study, this time raising the risk of depleting mineral reserves such as coal over the span of a few decades, has criticised the reliance on rudimentary machinery and sub-standard extraction practices in the hurry to exploit this rare and finite source of revenue. The fear is that this can damage existing deposits and jeopardise future extraction.[25] As a rule, it also means that human lives, and in particular those of some of the most vulnerable segments of the Afghan workforce, are daily exposed to risks that could be avoided.

Another critical aspect of managing a mining sector for balanced development is the ability to retain the wealth created inside the country, by introducing alongside it, processing facilities for the produce. This is going to prove particularly challenging in Afghanistan, with its chronic constraints in terms of infrastructure

[25] Wnuk, Artisanal Coal Mining, pp15-16.

and energy costs, but, if the game seems lost from the start for major metal processing or sophisticated technology, a lot could be done for smaller industrial set-ups meant for the processing of gold, gems and semi-precious stones.

Acting in a hurry and under the pressure of dire economic necessity is typically not helpful to achieve a degree of success. The partial setback of the initially promising exports of coal to Pakistan is such an example. Other international joint ventures that Afghanistan rushed into, such as the sale of the pinenut harvest from Khost and Paktia to China, already a major controller of this international market – has resulted in complaints of economic loss from local producers (Salam Watandar).[26]

[26] Pinenuts constituted close to 90 per cent of Afghanistan's USD 63.9 million worth of exports to China in 2023 (OEC). Given that, at the same time, China was posed to become Afghanistan's second largest trade partner after Pakistan in 2023 (Ariana News), one could well say that the rest is peanuts!

CONCLUSIONS

Afghanistan can be described as a country divided into areas where the central government has imposed its regulations and control over mining concessions, including collecting taxes, and residual areas where these prerogatives are still held by local elites. These elites are made up of both old and new networks affiliated to the regime which have so far managed to evade the full application of standardised mining policies.

Many of the changes brought by the takeover of the IEA have arguably favoured the development of the mining sector. The single most important development probably remains the changed security context in which mining companies now operate. That is, the IEA is reaping the benefits of not having to deal with the armed threat that it, itself, posed to the previous government, which frustrated attempts to boost and fix the mining sector.

As the testimony from contractors from Nahrin or Shahr-e Bozorg proved, some economic actors are undoubtedly benefiting from the standardisation of taxation and removal of unpredictable local powerbrokers. On the other hand, as evidenced by the complaints from the disabled contractor in Balkhab, and even more, the protests in Shahr-e Bozorg and Chah Ab, locals tend to view a national or international company getting a concession in their area as pillaging their resources, especially if they bring in outsiders to work the mines.

As the IEA moves to exploit mineral resources on a larger scale – or regulate the exploitation of resources located in the country's peripheries, it risks encountering more frequent and more violent reactions by residents who already feel imperilled by economic crisis and who hold on to those resources as their sole means for survival. What increases the uneasiness of locals is that for many, at least in the provinces mentioned in this report, the new authorities are more distant and more powerful – and thus less accessible and less easy to negotiate with – than the old ones, the local petty strongmen and commanders. Irrespective of the relevance of the internal tensions among the IEA leadership or the activities of political groups who oppose the IEA, such episodes are more likely to happen in areas where the feelings of disenfranchisement of local residents may find their rationale in

historical-political explanations and even in their ethnolinguistic identity, such as in Badakhshan and Takhar.

The IEA should be aware that conflicting interests among rival groups of its clients and supporters at the margins may be patronised by different leaders at the centre and, in turn, create more tensions and conflict inside the IEA's inner circles. In addition to these political risks, the IEA may, in its haste to garner some quick investment, squander what might be Afghanistan's most realistic hope of long-term economic stability.

From afar, Afghanistan's hidden mineral wealth can sound like a fabulous alchemic quest to create gold and solve all the country's problems. But as in magic lore, when you look closely, the divide between a boon and a curse is often revealed to be a narrow one.

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Cover: A child works in a coal mine in the Chinarak area of Nahrin district, Baghlan province.
Photo: Oliver Weiken/AFP, 12 November 2022