

## Province Profile – Balkh (& Mazar e-Sharif)



Map Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)

### Key Issues

#### Stable Prevailing Security Environment – For Now

- Balkh has traditionally enjoyed a relatively **good security environment** accompanied by economic prosperity. Mazar e-Sharif was the first city in Afghanistan that the Taliban lost in November 2001.
- Balkh recorded just **3 IED attacks in each of 2008 and 2009**. However, fears are growing that security in Afghanistan's northern region may be deteriorating following a spike in IED explosions and other armed attacks against NATO and local forces.
- Balkh has been a **poppy-free province** for several years. It has received over \$4 million through the Min. Of Counternarcotics' Good Performance Initiative since 2006.

#### Increasing Strategic Importance

- U.S. forces have been developing a major new transport artery (the **Northern Distribution Network**) for the delivery of military supplies, shipped to Afghanistan via Central Asia that passes through Balkh Province. Analysts believe that the supply line may come under intensifying attacks from insurgents in the coming months. The U.S. plans to send an additional 3000 troops to Balkh Province this year.

#### Regional Balance of Power

- The balance of power in Balkh Province and its immediate region is defined by the influence of two senior figures that continues to divide local loyalties:
- **Governor Atta** is a Tajik former mujahedeen commander who fought against the Soviets in the 1980s and as a commander of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban.
- **Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum** fought as a militia commander on the Soviet side during their invasion. He changed allegiances several times during the Civil War, before allying his forces with the Northern Alliance and retreating to Mazar e-Sharif after the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996.
- **Atta and Dostum have fought as both enemies and allies** in the past 30 years. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, despite both eventually becoming members of Afghanistan's new government, their allegiances have again diverged and tension between them has occasionally resulted in their forces clashing in the region around Balkh.

#### Provincial Self-Determination

- Balkh is run by Governor Atta via a semi-autonomous provincial administration that maintains a **large degree of independence from Kabul central government**. Atta regularly defies the instruction of Kabul and proudly lists the province's stand-alone achievements such as the elimination of opium cultivation and relatively strong local security.
- During the 2009 presidential election **Atta openly opposed President Karzai's candidacy** despite being a presidential appointee to his role. This was interpreted by observers as a measure of his immunity from removal.
- Although some commentators **criticize his dominant role as prolonging the 'warlordism'** that has defined Afghanistan's troubled past, his presence is seen by many as a key factor in whatever happens in the region's future.

#### Historical and Cultural Hub

- Balkh is an **ancient center of religious activity**, and today the Shrine of Hazrat Ali or the Blue Mosque in Mazar e-Sharif attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims and visitors a year.
- During celebrations of the traditional **Persian New Year (Nowruz)** in March this year, an estimated 500,000 people traveled to Mazar e-Sharif for the festivities.

### Key Facts

- **Governor of Panjshir Province:** Ustad Atta Mohammed (known as Governor Atta)
- **Provincial Capital:** Mazar e-Sharif.
- **Size:** 6,660 sq. miles (about the same size as Hawaii).
- **Members of Parliament:** 11, out of 249 total house members.

#### Provincial Geography:

- Population approx.: 1,169,000.
- Bulk of the population is ethnic Tajik, with Pashtun and other minorities.
- Two-thirds live in rural districts, one-third in urban areas.
- The terrain is approximately 50% mountainous and 50% flat plains.

#### Literacy and Education:

- Over half of all men and about one-third of all women are literate – well above the national population average of approx 28%.
- Over 70% of all children attend primary school.
- Balkh University, established in 1986, now has over 5500 students. A \$300 million commitment to expanding its facilities was made by the US and Germany in 2009.

#### Economy of Province:

- Balkh's economy is one of the least agrarian-based in Afghanistan. Approx. two-thirds of urban households derive income from trade and services.
- The agricultural sector successfully cultivates industrial crops such as cotton, sesame and tobacco.

#### Infrastructure:

- Half of all households have access to electricity, rising to 95% in urban areas - Kabul has around 75% access.
- Nearly all households have access to community drinking water.
- Mazar e-Sharif hosts a large public hospital. Access to basic health services is supported by hundreds of local clinics.

#### Possible Questions

- What role will the additional 3000 US troops headed to Balkh be performing in the province this year?
- What is being done to expand Balkh's strong economic activities to benefit neighboring regions?