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## A city divided: the ethnic tensions splitting Kabul

By Lianne Gutcher

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**Formerly mixed areas of the Afghan capital are becoming segregated as fears of civil war loom. Lianne Gutcher reports.**

The Afghan capital, Kabul, is becoming increasingly divided along ethnic lines as residents relocate to neighbourhoods that would allow them a speedy getaway to their home provinces and ancestral villages in the event that the country descends back into civil war. Property dealers visited by The Independent last week in three areas of Kabul all said they had noticed a shift in population as residents packed up and left formerly mixed neighbourhoods for more ethnically homogenous areas. They said Kabul residents fear a further decline in political stability and a return to the civil war that ravaged the city in the 1990s.

Until 1992, people of different ethnic backgrounds lived in relative harmony in Kabul, the property dealers said. It was only after rival mujahedin factions, who had united to fight the Soviets, splintered and wrestled for political power that ethnic tensions were ignited. Commanders bombarded the city with rockets, killing and injuring tens of thousands of civilians. The memories of those days linger on in the minds of many of the city's residents.

Today, property dealers in Ahmad Shah Baba Maina, a predominantly Pashtun area named after the founder of modern Afghanistan that lies to the north-east of Kabul, said they had seen an influx of Pashtuns who had previously settled in other areas in Kabul such as Khair Khana in the north-west and Darulaman in the west.

One property dealer, who asked for anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject, said: "Nowadays, we see Pashtuns going to one side [of town] and non-Pashtuns going to the other side. There is a strong perception amongst Pashtuns that if the security situation gets worse in Kabul city, they [need to] have safe ways to get back to where they came from in the villages and in the provinces. Pashtuns also do not believe in – or do not trust – the current security system."

Ahmad Shah Baba Maina is the gateway to the east, and the predominantly Pashtun provinces of Nangarhar, Paktia and Paktika.

A recent spate of attacks in Kabul – including the 20-hour assault on the US Embassy and Isaf's headquarters on 13 September – have exacerbated fears that the Afghan government will not be able to adequately handle security after international combat troops withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and that the Taliban is not willing to participate in a negotiated settlement to end the insurgency. The assassination on 20 September of peace council chief Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was also the head of the Northern Alliance, also incensed northern leaders and their supports. Rumours are swirling around Kabul that the Northern Alliance is in the process of rearming so as to be prepared should there be an outbreak of ethnic violence.

A British Government review ordered by David Cameron to be published in mid-November is likely to warn that there are "significant risks" of civil war or a Taliban takeover of the south and east of Afghanistan after 2014.

The Mayor of Kabul declined to comment on the situation and the Central Statistics Organisation of Afghanistan refused to provide figures of the ethnic make-up of Kabul. Countrywide though, Pashtuns make up 42 per cent of the population, Tajiks 27 per cent, and Hazaras and Uzbeks 9 per cent, according to the CIA World Factbook.

Another property dealer in Ahmad Shah Baba Maina, Haji Izat Shah Mangal, offered to show The Independent his property register, saying: "You can check that. The people who are selling the houses [here] are Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks. All the buyers are Pashtuns. If anyone says that all ethnic groups are equal and do not hate each other and can live together, they would be totally wrong."

In the area of Darulaman – blessed with a good water and power system – residents insist that Uzbeks, Tajiks and Pashtuns continue to live in harmony, even though it is a predominately Hazara area. Haji Mohammad Reza, who has run a property agency in Darulaman for eight years, qualified this, however, by saying that people "are worried that the civil war era will come back".

At the only property dealer owned by Pashtuns in Darulaman, co-owner Gul Mohammad said: "People are not satisfied. They believe once again that the same thing [civil war] will happen. This is the reason Hazara people are coming here and the Pashtuns are going to the other side. Every ethnic group is trying to live with its own people."

In the predominantly Tajik enclave of Khair Khana, property agent Haji Azam said that while many Pashtuns still run businesses in the area, they are no longer prepared to live there and had

started renting out their houses to members of other ethnic groups. Another property dealer, Tamin, said that many Pashtuns were selling up and moving out. "The tendency is Pashtuns leaving the area and going to other parts of Kabul because their friends and fellows are there," he said.

All the people The Independent spoke to felt that the ethnic tensions were fuelled by continued interference of foreigners in Afghanistan's affairs.

Haji Reza, the property dealer in Darulaman, summed it up by saying: "We don't have patriotism and nationalism in Afghanistan. Here, we see everyone working in the best interests of other countries. We have a lot of agents and spies working for [the best interests of] Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan."

### Afghan tribes

#### Pashtun

Around 45 per cent of the Afghan population belongs to the dominant Pashtun ethnic group. Many believe the government favours the Pashtuns (President Karzai hails from a Pashtun tribe), causing resentment between ethnic groups.

#### Hazara

Unlike the majority of Afghans, the Hazaras are mostly Shia. Some feel victimised by Pashtun expansion.

#### Tajik

A key part of the governing elite, about a quarter of the population is Tajik. Dominant among Northern Alliance forces, Tajiks have sporadically battled the Hizb-e Wahdat political group, popular among Hazaras, since the 1990s.

#### Uzbek

Some ethnic groups tend to regard Uzbeks as former communists, partly because an Uzbek leader fought for Afghanistan's Soviet occupiers before switching sides in 1992.