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Dittmann, Andreas (ed.): National Atlas of Afghanistan. – Bonn et al.: Scientia Bonnensis 2014. – IV + 114 S., Tab., Abb., Karten, Photos. – ISBN 978-3-940766-73-1. – € 198,-

It is surely a daring enterprise to produce and publish a "National Atlas" of any country. It is even more so when it is done for a country that has suffered from more than 30 years of warfare and that is still in the phase of overcoming the consequences of external interferences and internal conflicts. The very fact that ethnicity is still a lingering problem and the cause of unsolved rivalries between different ethnic and ethno-linguistic groups increases the challenges to the production and publication of a "national atlas". And finally: the fact that such a project has been developed and realized by an academic institution outside the country under consideration does not make such an attempt easier. Adding to these unfavourable preconditions are aggravating factors such as the lack of and/or the difficult access to reliable and up-to-date statistical data over longer time periods. Neither demographic developments nor social or economic variabilities can be measured and analysed without sound statistics. And what about the availability of reliable topographic maps, of historical air-photos, of town

and city plans – all these prerequisites for critical assessments between then and now and helpful indicators for the directions of change on local, regional and national levels? The list of strategic lacunae could be continued for a great number of aspects ...

It is against this background and many other hampering features that this "National Atlas of Afghanistan" has to be seen and to be assessed! And to anticipate an overall critical assessment of this atlas beforehand: It is an impressive piece of compiled regional information, covering a broad range of themes and topics, and presented in an elaborate cartography!

The atlas is divided into 6 major sections of differing length and details. After 4 introductory maps on Afghanistan's location in the global and regional context, the country's topography and its administrative divisions, the first major section is devoted to Afghanistan's "Natural Conditions and Resources". It is, at the same time, the largest section with altogether 15 maps and their explanatory texts: geology in the broader sense incl. tectonics, earthquakes and minerals; soils; 4 maps on temperature and precipitation (spring – summer – fall – winter), based on an almost 50-year observation period; hydrography; natural vegetation; landcover and natural landscapes (2 maps); Afghanistan's eco-regions and – finally and surprisingly – 3 sheets with rather crude distribution patterns of 70 animal species of the country.

Section 2 (Economy and Agriculture) summarises the country's import and export trade (2 maps) based on statistical data up to 2011; a series of altogether 6 maps on different aspects of agricultural production covering spatial distributions and statistical percentages on province basis as well as 2 maps on Afghanistan's livestock and rangelands, both in absolute figures and relative shares of the country's 34 provinces/administrative districts. These surveys representing statistical analyses of partly estimated data of 2008 show trends of regional distribution patterns of crop production, animal husbandry and the like, confirming the findings of earlier studies and demonstrating the persistence of traditional patterns of agriculture, in spite of decades of warfare.

Sections 3 (Public and Private Services) and 4 (Culture and History) are comparatively small with 3 resp. 5 maps. Nevertheless, the surveys on energy production and supply, on the road network and, divided into 4 aspects (post offices, telephone distribution, TV and radio

stations, newspaper publications) on a provincial basis, are highly illustrative and informative. – the same holds true for all information covered under the heading “Culture and History” – a surely crucial topic for a country like Afghanistan and its extremely diversified ethnicity. The maps on languages and on ethno-linguistic groups are, of course, highly political and, from the point of view of tribal leaderships, highly controversial. Therefore, it is more than understandable that only 2 maps are devoted to this specific aspect in an atlas that understands itself as a national atlas and as a contribution to Afghanistan’s emerging statehood. Nevertheless, a map on the distribution and diversity of nomadic tribes and their migrational patterns could have been a welcome addition to the included maps, even if it would have to be based on historical sources of 30 or 40 years ago. National sites (1 map) are, of course, powerful icons of regional identities. Finally, the 2 maps on Afghanistan’s development of borders and its often changing administrative divisions, especially in the second half of the 20th century until today, are impressive indicators for the country’s search to adapt to historical, linguistic and ethnic diversities and demands.

Section 5 (Human dimension) is a highly welcome and informative compilation of altogether 9 maps. The data and statistical analyses, mostly on provincial basis, on population distribution and densities, on the distribution of rural and urban populations, even more those on the actual existence of health institutions (hospitals and health centres and number of beds/10,000 inhabitants), distribution of doctors, nurses and/or pharmacies as well as medical specialisations (altogether 3 maps) are innovative and instructive and offer a great wealth of so far unknown facts. The same holds true for the 3 maps on educational aspects. Again: a wealth of up-to-date data covering the time span from 2001 to 2009 is presented in impressive maps and informative texts with additional maps and diagrams: public schools with corresponding number of students and teachers, private schools, public schools and their differentiation into primary, secondary and high schools as well as Islamic schools. Universities and their attendance, and finally number and distribution of government employees finish this highly commendable survey of the recent human development situation in Afghanistan. It will surely prove to be a rich source also for the further build-up of the country’s infrastructure, for rural and urban planning purposes and for all endeavours to overcome disparities in the future economic and social development of Afghanistan! As indicated and as in other sections, too,

a great number of additional diagrams, statistics and other forms of background information enrich text and maps. They are highly welcome because of their additional information that they contain on pressing issues of the country’s development.

Last but by no means least this atlas is completed by Section 6, a series of altogether seven city plans. They demonstrate the present situation of Kabul (2 maps), Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz and the tremendous urbanisation process in and around these major cities. Much more than in other contexts, almost all maps of the present-day situation are contrasted with earlier stages of their specific historical development, based on the comparatively extensive existence of urban studies in the second half of the 20th century.

The preceding summary of the contents can only be one aspect of this review. It must be complemented by necessary additional remarks on the overall structure and layout of this magnificent piece of academic and cartographic work. First: as indicated on several occasions many of the altogether 43 large-scale map pages are subdivided into mostly 4 maps on a correspondingly smaller scale. This holds true especially for those themes and topics which focus on statistical information on a provincial basis, i.e. for 16 out of the total of 43 map pages. Second: the overall design of the “National Atlas of Afghanistan” is in such a way that every map page is juxtaposed by a text page vis-à-vis the map, very often accompanied by additional maps, diagrams and statistical data. Most of the comments and explanations are helpful additions to the contents of the maps and provide valuable bibliographical notes, enabling the critical and/or interested user of the atlas to dive deeper into specific contexts. However – and this critical remark may be allowed – not all texts are on the same informative level. While it is fully understandable that due to the political and military situation in the country research has been impossible in the last three decades, in many cases authors could have referred to a much broader scientific literature than quoted. Especially references to French and francophone research, but also to an impressive bulk of anthropological studies of the pre-war period would have added further value to this atlas. But these are, admittedly, only smaller problems and do by no means devalue the excellence and importance of this “National Atlas of Afghanistan”.

What is a national atlas? What is its purpose and function? And what are its ultimate aims and goals?

The introduction to this in all respects commendable academic performance indicates already some of the main purposes. National atlases are, first of all, indispensable works of reference, of information and also documents of the overall natural, cultural, economic and social conditions of a country at a given time. As such they are a multidisciplinary vademecum summarising our knowledge and representing it in form of maps of comparable scale and in an easily readable form. It goes without saying that, secondly, the atlas content can and should be a reliable source for decision-making processes, be it in the field of regional planning, be it in the fields of administration and national welfare, be it in the fields of academic teaching or as a tool of education in the broadest sense of the word. But a national atlas is also, thirdly, an invaluable document of national pride, of Afghan uniqueness, and thus – and maybe above all – a contribution to state-building and to the creation of Afghan identities.

In summarising all these considerations, constraints, contents and conceptions a final evaluation of this atlas cannot be but extremely positive. The close cooperation with *Sardar Kohistani* from Kabul University (himself an alumnus from Giessen University) is an additional positive asset of this national atlas: it provided access to and cooperation with the Afghan Geodesy and Cartography Head Office (AGCHO) in Kabul, and with other providers of data and information, including geographers from the Geography Department of Kabul University. Generous support by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) and the embeddedness of this project in the German "Stability Pact Afghanistan" enabled authors, editors and cartographers to produce this remarkable "National Atlas of Afghanistan" in an attractive format (40 x 30 cm) and hardcover design. With other words: the exterior of this atlas corresponds with its high quality (interior) contents.

To edit a national atlas is a hardly imaginable task: to compile the great mass of data, of scrutinising them critically, of analysing and transferring them into cartographically appealing and meaningful information – all this is hard and enduring work combined with enthusiasm and never-ending perseverance. All this would be in vain if the final outcome did not correspond to the intellectual input. As a matter of fact: also the cartography of this "National Atlas of Afghanistan" comes up to its contents. The maps are superb, choice and combination of colours are attractive, the types used ensure an easy legibility of names and of the map legends.

To sum up: the "National Atlas of Afghanistan" is an impressive document for a number of reasons. It updates our knowledge of this fascinating yet war-stricken country at a time when reconciliation and reconstruction are the foremost challenges. "A National Atlas manifests the linkage between the national identity, the population and geographical information of a country" (*Sardar Kohistani*, p. I). And *Andreas Dittmann*, chief editor, adds: "National atlases belong to the distinctive symbol of states as well as national flags and national anthems. This holds true especially for young states..." (p. II). The "National Atlas of Afghanistan" is an impressive academic achievement. It is an important and timely contribution to Afghanistan's difficult and painful search of a national identity. It is a major milestone in the country's endeavours of nation-building – and thus it is also a highly political publication! It is to be hoped that the "National Atlas of Afghanistan" will find wide distribution among political decision-makers on all levels, among regional planners, in universities and in schools.

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