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# The Structure of Afghan Names

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## **Abstract**

This report provides a description of the structure of Afghan names. Person names in Afghanistan often consist of a compound first name. Most people lack a last name and are generally referred to by their tribal affiliation, place of birth, profession, or honorific titles. However, last names are more prevalent in urban and more educated families.

The report discusses the various components of person names such as titles, honorifics, the internal structure of the name, and various forms of address. It also describes some of the issues that arise in the transcription of Afghan names into English due to a lack of standardization and dialectal differences in the pronunciation.

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# 1 Introduction

The structure of person names in Afghanistan is very different from those found in a Western society. This raises certain issues in the transcription of Afghan names in the United States.



Figure 1 – National map of Afghanistan (source: www.afghan-network.net)

Afghans traditionally use only a first name and generally lack a last name. People are often distinguished by their tribal affiliation, place of birth, profession or honorific titles. First names, in particular male names, are often compound or double names such as *Ahmad Navid*, *Bashir Bijan*, or *Ahmad Khan*. This is in a way similar to English names such as *Mary Ellen* or *Billy Bob*. The first names in Afghanistan often include an Islamic or Arabic component such as *Ahmad*, *Mohammad*, and *Ali*. Although first names for women may also be of Arabic origin, in general women are given Persian or Pashto names.

Many Afghans that have contact with the Western world adopt a surname. In general, the educated or prosperous families living in urban areas use last names. In these instances, they generally select a last name that represents their tribal affiliation as in the case of *Hamed Karzai*. According to Goering (2002), even if an Afghan possesses a last name, the official name generally remains the first name: "An Afghan may change his last name at a whim, but

altering the first one requires an application to the government and official permission". (Goering 2002, p.2).

Oftentimes, specific forms of address or honorific titles are used in addressing people and behave as part of the proper name. These honorifics generally refer to religious terms (e.g., Mullah) or occupation (e.g., Doctor).

In addition, there is no standard orthography in Afghanistan and people often write their names as they are pronounced in their respective dialects. Hence, the same name may be pronounced differently based on the geographic region within the country. The many ways available in transcribing a certain sound into English can also add further variance: the name محمد can be transcribed in many ways including *Mohammad*, *Mohamed*, *Muhammad*, or *Mohamad*. The lack of orthographic standardization, combined with a high level of illiteracy, gives rise to many discrepancies in the transcription of Afghan names into English.

## 2 The Basic Structure of Names

### 2.1 First Names

#### 2.1.1 Structure of male names

Male first names generally consist of two parts. Oftentimes, at least one of the parts includes a common name that is usually referred to as a "subordinate name", such as *Mohammad*, *Abdul*, *Gholam*, *Ali*, *Khan*, *Jan*, *Shah*, *Din*, and *-ullah*. Some examples are given below where the subordinate name has been underlined:

**Examples:** *Mohamad* Nabi, Abdul *Ghafoor*, *Jangi* Shah, Ali *Madad*, *Ahmad* Khan, Mohammad *Nasim*, *Akhtar* Mohammad, Mohammad *Sharif*, Gholam *Sakhi*, *Khairullah*, Habibullah, Mohammad *Zaman*, Abdul *Qadir*, Abdul *Waleed*, *Ghulam* Hazrat

Although the subordinate name is considered as part of the full name, the main name or "proper name" of the person is in general the non-subordinate component. Hence, a person with the name *Mohamad Nabi* would probably consider his proper name to be *Nabi*.

Sometimes, both parts of the name may be a common name. In these cases, the less frequent name is generally treated as the proper name of the person.

**Examples:** *Abdul* *Ali*, *Mohammad* *Ali*, *Din* *Mohammad*, *Jan* *Mohamad*, *Khan* *Mohammad*, *Abdul* *Mohammad*, *Ali* *Mohammad*, *Ghulam* *Mohammad*

There are also cases where neither component of the name is a common name. Again, the less frequent name is considered to be the "proper name" of the person.

**Example:** *Ahmad* *Zubair* (where *Zubair* is the proper name)

Even though in certain instances the name may include the father's name, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, the Afghan researcher *Mohammad Alam* gives the following examples from his own family:

A boy's given name is usually composed of two parts or morphemes. These parts may or may not be part of the father's name. For example, my name and my younger brother's name each shares with our father's name, shown in the following:

My father's name is Sayd Alam.

My name is Mohammad Alam.

My brother's name is Sayd Agha.

My youngest brother's name, however, is Habibullah, which has nothing to do with any of the above names.

[Alam 1975, p. 7]

In rare instances, the male may have a single part name. According to Alam (1975, p. 8), this is due to the fact that there is no longer a requirement to include an ancestor's name in the person's name.

*Examples: Bashir, Farid, Hodayun, Khalil, Raheem, Asad, Dawoud*

### 2.1.2 Structure of female names

Female names mostly consist of a single component.

*Examples: Homa, Zeyba, Fereyba, Laila, Nasrin, Nura, Roya, Zaralasht, Marzia, Meena, Fattema, Shirin, Nazria, Ayesha, Qamar*

Female names are sometimes of Arabic origin. Oftentimes these are derived from the male name by adding the /æ/ sound as shown:

*Examples: Jamil → Jamila, Najib → Najiba, Hamid → Hamida, Halim → Halima*

However, most female names come from Pashto or Persian origin and often refer to beauty and nature terms.

*Examples: Wazjmakay 'breeze', Nurani 'shiny', Zarghun/Zarghoona 'green', Torpekay 'brunette', Nasrin 'jonquil', Freshta 'angel', Kawtara 'pigeon', Spogmay/Spozhamay 'moon'*

There are also female names that refer to a legendary personality such as the name of the Afghan politician Malalai Joya, which refers to Malalai – the Afghan heroine that played an important role in the battle of Maiwand against the British in 1880.

In rare instance, female names may consist of two parts.

*Examples: Khan Begom, Begom Jan, Gol Khanom*



## 2.2 Honorifics and Titles

In Afghan Persian or Dari, honorifics are often used by both women and men as part of the name as shown in the examples below. *Khan* can only be used with men's names while *Jan* can appear with both female and male names.

**Examples:**

**Male names.** *Sharif Khan, Latif Khan, Khalil Khan, Gul Khan, Khalil Jan, Gholam Jan*

**Female names.** *Sharifa Jan, Latifa Jan, Homa Jan*

Honorific names can be inherited from the tribe and then be added to the two-part name. Other honorifics signify a religious position (e.g., *Mullah Mohamed Omar* also known as *Mullah Omar*), military rank (e.g., *Jangran Shamshir Khan*), or nobility or government rank (e.g., *Sardar Mohamad Dawoud Khan*). Some common honorifics are listed below:

- **Religious:** *Agha, Hazrat, Khoja/Khwajah, Mir, Saybzada, Sheykh, Hajji, Akhwand, Mullah, Alim/Olim, Hafiz, Maulvi/Malawai/Mulawai, Mudari*
- **Military:** *Ghazi, Amir, Komandon, Dagerwal, Jenral, Jagran*
- **Nobility/Chief:** *Malik, Padishah/Padshah, Ustaz/Ustad, Safi, Sardar*

In addition, the inherited honorific may be used in conjunction with *sayb* 'sir'.

**Examples:** *Mir-sayb, Hazrat-sayb, Khoja-sayb, Sardar-sayb*

Recently, some new titles have been developed that are closer to the Western-style titles such as the Pashto terms *Shaghelay* 'Mr.', *Mermon* 'Mrs.', *Peghal* 'Miss', as well as occupation-related titles such as Doctor or Engineer.

## 2.3 Last Names

Most Afghans do not have a last name but may choose one if they are in contact with other cultures. In general, families living in urban areas, middle class families, and those with higher education tend to have last names. In any case, the last name is selected by the individual and can represent a father's name, a tribal affiliation, or an adjective describing the person. This may result in people within the same family having different last names, as in the case of *Dr. Abdul Zahir* (a former Afghan parliament head) and *Dr. Abdul Kayeum* (a former second deputy prime minister), who were actually brothers. Goering (2002) provides the example of Ghulam Farouq:

Farouq's father, for instance, is Ghulam Sakhi and by rights his son should be Ghulam Farouq Sakhi. But Farouq's older brother decided to take for himself the last name Samim, which means "very friendly" or "well-decided." When the brother died in a plane crash, Farouq assumed the name in his brother's honor.

[...] To complicate matters, nearly all Afghans, while they may not have a last name, do have a tribal name, which they add at the end when they feel like it. Technically, Farouq is Ghulam Farouq Samim Omarkhil, though he often drops the Pashtun suffix.

[Goering 2002, p. 2]



Figure 2 - Ethnolinguistic groups in Afghanistan (source: University of Texas, 1997)

Last names often refer to the name of the tribe that the person belongs to or is affiliated with. The following are the common forms often encountered:

- End in *-ai* or *-i*, usually added to the place or area of origin

**Examples:** *Karzai* (from *Karz* in Kandahar), *Sipai*, *Marghai*, *Panipai*, *Durani*, *Kohistani*, *Sanjari*, *Rahimi*, *Sabari*, *Khajuri*, *Hussaini* (generally of Hazar origin), *Turtughi* (of Uzbek origin)

- End in *-zai*, which represents the inflected form of *zoy* 'son'

**Examples:** *Ghilzai*, *Yousafzai*, *Mamadzai/Muhammadzai*, *Qalzai*, *Isupzai*, *Popalzai*, *Noorzai*, *Sinzai*, *Usmanzai*

- End in *-khel/khil*, meaning 'branch'

*Examples: Suleiman Khel, Jalal Khel, Kabul Khel, Umarkhil*

- Contains *-gul*

*Examples: Gulmamad, Gulbodeen, Gulzar, Gulbaz*

- Other tribal names

*Examples: Kizilbash, Hotaki, Turan, Marwat, Mohmand, Burhan*

Women tend to adopt the last names of the husbands or of the fathers.

Note that the basic honorifics generally cannot be dropped and are treated as an integral part of the name. These honorifics are underlined in the following examples:

*Examples: Khan Mohammad, Jan Mohamad, Sayd Alam*

## 2.4 Name Structure

As already discussed, Afghan names include a "proper name", which refers to the main name one would call someone by, and a "subordinate name".

- (1)  $(\text{SubordinateName}) + \text{ProperName} = \text{FirstName}$   
 $\text{ProperName} + (\text{SubordinateName}) = \text{FirstName}$

In cases where the person has only one subordinate name, the proper name is considered to be the main first name. In the case of *Ahmad Shah*, for instance, *Ahmad* would be considered the main first name.

If there are two subordinate names, then the less frequent name is treated as the main first name. For example, both parts of the name *Gholam Mohammad* are common or subordinate names; in this case the less frequent name, namely *Gholam*, would be used as the main first name.

## 3 Issues in Transcription

### 3.1 Segmentation Differences

The fact that most Afghan names do not contain a last name results in various segmentations of the names.

In general, the second component of male names (e.g., *Gul, Khan, Hassan, Gholam, Mohammad*) is often treated as a last name when transcribed into English. A person with the name *Jan Mohammad* would therefore be treated as having the first name *Jan* and the last name *Mohammad*. And *Abdul Haq*, the Pashtun leader who was executed by the Taliban in October 2001, was quoted in the Western press as *Haq* or *Mr. Haq*. Similarly, the honorifics *Khan* and *Jan* (mentioned in Section 2.2) are often used as a last name in the West. Hence, a

person named *Gul Khan* may be treated as having the first name *Gul* and the last name *Khan* in the United States.

If the person's name contains only a single component as in *Abdulshukr* or *Habibullah*, he may be asked to come up with a last name. This has been the case of several Afghans who have chosen the name of their father as their last names (e.g., *Habibullah Abdulghaffar*) or have selected the geographic location (e.g. village) of an ancestor as the last name (e.g., *Mohamad Zaman Naderi*).

In some cases, Afghans whose second name is considered to be the proper name choose to keep the proper name as their main first name in other cultures and to abbreviate the first component. For example, *Ahmad Zubair Kuhestani* may decide to go by his proper name *Zubair* and transcribe his full name as *A. Zubair Kuhestani* in English.

### 3.2 Dialectal Differences

There exist two main dialects of Pashto:

- The Western dialect spoken in Kandahar, Helmand, Farah, among other locations
- The Eastern dialect spoken mainly in Jalalabad, Nangarhar, Paktia, Khost, and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan

Western Dialect	Eastern Dialect	Meaning
<i>Shayesteh</i>	<i>Khayesteh</i>	beautiful
<i>Breshna</i>	<i>Brekhnna</i>	lightning
<i>Spozhmey</i>	<i>Spogmey</i>	moon
<i>Wazhma</i>	<i>Wagma</i>	breeze
<i>Shkulai</i>	<i>Khekulai</i>	beautiful
<i>Shaperai</i>	<i>Khaperai</i>	fairy
<i>Khwezha</i>	<i>Khwaga</i>	sweet

Table 1 – Dialectal differences in the pronunciation of names

These two dialects have distinct pronunciations, even of the same words. For instance, the speakers of the Western dialect pronounce the name of the language as *Pashto* while the speakers of the Eastern dialect would pronounce it as *Pukhto*. This is due to the fact that the written letter پ (used in writing the word Pashto پښتو) is pronounced as a 'sh' in the Western dialect and as a 'kh' in the Eastern dialect. Similarly, the written letter ز is pronounced as a 'zh' in the Western dialect and as a 'g' in the Eastern. These distinct pronunciations give rise to different transcriptions of names. Some examples are given in Table 1.

A similar variance may occur with honorifics. For instance, the different pronunciations of the letter و in the dialects provides the alternate spellings of آخوند as *Akhund/Akhoond* and *Akhwand* (a Muslim cleric), and the honorific خواجه or خوجه may be transcribed as either *Khoja* or *Khwajah*.

### 3.3 Issues in Name Transcription

There are no existing standards in Pashto orthography. Dari speakers generally follow the standards developed for Iranian Persian, although some minor differences may exist. In addition, the transcription of Afghan names into English has not really been standardized. Dialectal differences may also cause different pronunciations for the same name. These elements, in addition to the segmentation issues discussed in Section 3.1, give rise to a high level of variance in transcribing Afghan names.

There are also variants in the English rendering, not unlike the issues encountered in transcribing Arabic names. For instance, the name مسعود can be transcribed as *Massoud*, *Masoud*, *Ma'sud*, or *Massood*; and فاروق may be represented as *Farouq*, *Farough*, *Farooq*, or *Farook*. Spacing between two parts of a name may not always be present. Hence, both forms *Miakhel* or *Mia Khel* may be common and the name *Shah Mahmood* may also be transcribed as *Shahmahmood*.

An additional issue arises from the fact that some people in Afghanistan go by different names based on the situation or context. For instance, they may be referred to by their honorific name in certain situations and with their first name at other times.

## 4 Forms of Address

In Afghanistan, as in many Middle Eastern countries, the first name is often not used to refer to a person. This indicates politeness and respect. There are several forms of address that can be used instead to address someone, as described in this section.

### 4.1 Patronymic Names

Children may be addressed by their father's name instead of using their first name.

*Examples: Bache Sharif* 'son of Sharif', *doxtare Karim* 'daughter of Karim', *doxtare Golbibi* 'Golbibi's daughter'

It is also possible to use the father's title or position in referring to the child:

*Examples: Bache rayis* 'son of the President', *doxtare wazir* 'daughter of the Minister'

### 4.2 Teknonymous Names

When addressing an older person, one may use the combination of a kinship name and a relative's first name .

**Examples:** *Pedare Layla* 'Layla's father'

Married couples generally refer to each other by the name of the eldest child (boy or girl) or in some occasions by the name of the second eldest, rather than addressing each other with the first name .

**Examples:** *Madare/Boboye Gholam* 'mother of Gholam', *Aghaye/Babe Gholam* 'father of Gholam'

### 4.3 Kinship Names

Young people address the older person in the family with a kinship name. The first name of the older person is almost never used in the family. Some kinship names are provided in Table 2 .

<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Translation</b>
<i>madar, bobo, nana</i>	mother
<i>baba, agha</i>	father
<i>beradar</i>	brother
<i>amshira, xwar</i>	sister
<i>zan, xanom</i>	wife
<i>shawar, shuy</i>	husband
<i>lala, kaka</i>	elder brother
<i>apa, xowar, amshira</i>	elder sister
<i>mama, xalu</i>	uncle (maternal)
<i>kaka, amu</i>	uncle (paternal)
<i>xala</i>	aunt (maternal)
<i>ama</i>	aunt (paternal)

Table 2 – Kinship terms

### 4.4 Nicknames

In some instances, people may be given a nickname used to refer to them. In these cases, people may simply be addressed by their nickname and the first name is not used.

**Ox-Name.** One of the common nickname categories, the "ox-name", is a nickname that refers to a brave animal or to beauty and nature.

**Examples:** *Ezmaray* 'lion', *Toryalay* 'brave', *Gorg* 'wolf', *Sheragha* 'master of the lion', *Golagha* 'master of the flower', *Gol* 'flower', *Ghotay* 'plant', *espozhmay* 'moon', *Qamar* 'moon', *Setara* 'star', *Storay* 'star'

**Abbreviations.** Names can be abbreviated by dropping the subordinate name, or by eliminating syllables to create a new form as in the second set of examples below:

**Examples:** *Najibullah* → *Najib*, *Qodratullah* → *Qodrat*, *Mohammad Zaher* → *Zaher*

**Examples:** *Mohammad Ullah* → *Madulah*, *Khan Mohammad* → *Khanmad*, *Jan Mohamad* → *Janmad*

**Diminutives.** "Diminutives" are often used for children and close friends. They can be the shortened form of the name combined with the *-o* suffix.

**Examples:** *Najmudin* → *Najo*, *Qodbedin* → *Qodo*, *Khalil* → *Khalo*

They may also be formed by adding the diminutive suffix *-ak* or *-gak*. However, in these cases, the newly formed word will be used as a form of address but not as the proper name of the person.

**Examples:** *Bachagak* 'little boy', *Dokhtarak* 'little girl'

## 4.5 Titles

Titles such as 'Mrs' or 'Mr' may be used in addressing people. However, even if a person possesses a last name, the latter is not generally used to refer to him or her as one might do in the West. Hence, one may refer to the woman named *Shafiqqa Zeyaiy* as *Mermon Shafiqqa* 'Mrs. Shafiqqa', *Mermon Shafiqqa Zeyaiy* 'Mrs. Shafiqqa Zeyaiy', but not with only a title and a last name as in *Mermon Zeyaiy* 'Mrs. Zeyaiy'.

In addition, the occupation or position of a person is often used in addressing them. It should be noted that these should not necessarily be transcribed as the name of the person as they are forms of address referring to the occupation as in the case of *Rayisayb* 'Mr. President'.

**Examples:** *Engineer Gholam*, *Dr. Gholam Nabi Jawad*, *Rayisayb* 'Mr. President', *Merzasayb* 'Mr. Clerk', *Modirsayb* 'Mr. Principal', *Khalifasayb* 'Mr. Serviceman'

## 5 Interpreting Afghan Names

There exist differences between ethnic groups in naming and one might be able to infer the tribal affiliation or ethnic origin of a person based on the name alone. For instance, Pashtuns will have more Pashto names (e.g., *Turyalai Muhammadzai* for a male, *Shaperai Isupzai* for a female), while Dari speakers will have more Persian first or last names (e.g., *Bashir Bijan* for a male, *Shirin Kuhestani* for a female). Hazara names may contain more Shiite-related names, such as *Ali* or *Hossain* (e.g., *Sadiq Ali*, *Hassan Ghulam*, *Ghulam Hussain*).

In addition, nicknames and honorifics can provide information with respect to the person. For example, the name *Yusufzai sayb* indicates that the person is a male, worthy of respect (*sayb* means 'sir'), and from the Yusufzai tribe.

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