

Afghanistan: Key Bases & Figures of the Mujahedin



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Lor Koh and Islam Dara Canyon

Key Terrain and Leadership Data

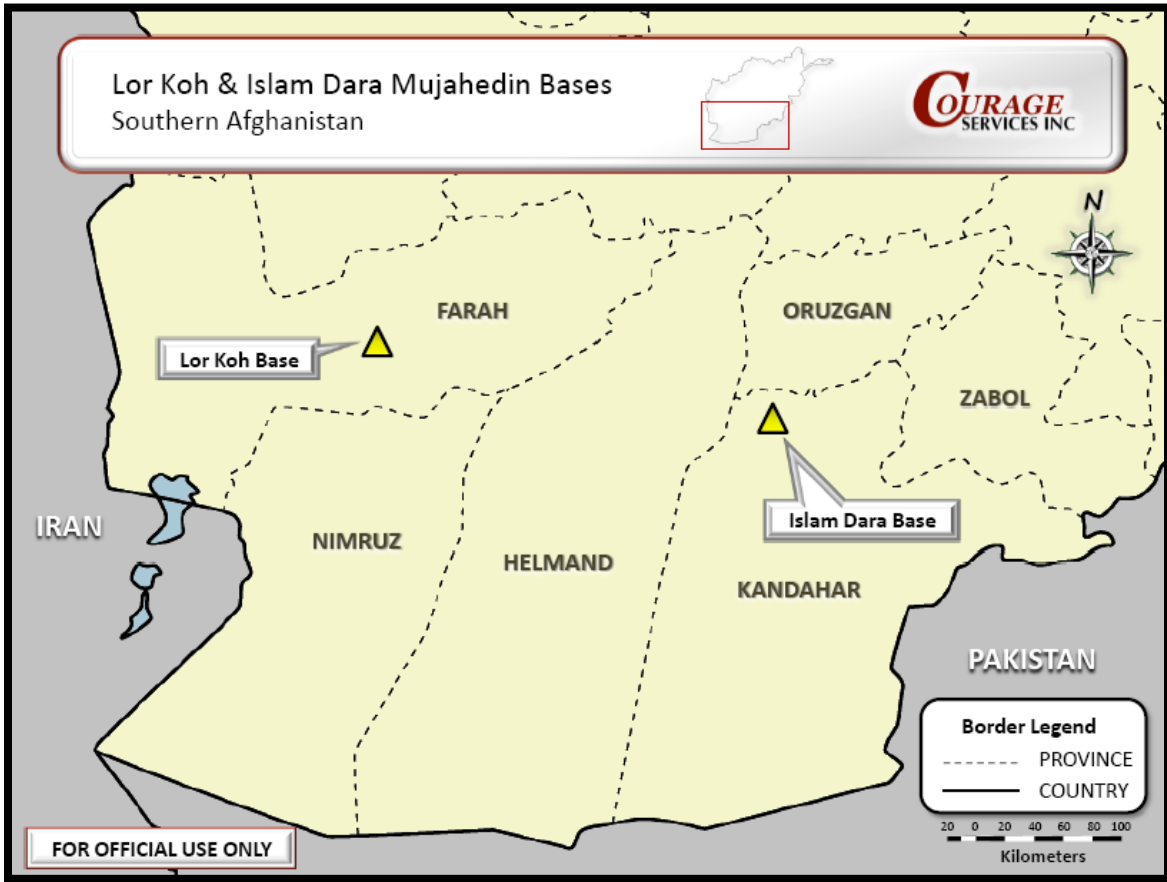
Afghanistan's Pashtun rural population has been the source of manpower, funds, shelter, support, and intelligence for the repeated insurgencies that have plagued that unfortunate county since their monarch, Zahir Shah, was overthrown in 1973. In the general unrest that followed, insurgents opposed Mohammad Daoud's army until he was overthrown by the communists who served in succession – Taraki, Amin, Karmal, and Najibullah. The communist leadership figures, in turn, were deposed by the anti-communist "Seven Party Alliance" that was soon battling among itself for control of Kabul until the Taliban Movement emerged. The Taliban was also faced with resisting insurgent forces, primarily from the non-Pashtun ethnic groups inhabiting Afghanistan's northern provinces. Afghanistan's rural insurgents are generally poorly educated, if literate at all, and succeeding generations of insurgents rely upon story-telling from earlier generations of fighters to gain knowledge of tactics that are applicable to their particular culture and terrain. There are no military schools available to them where leadership training can be taught and absorbed, and as a result the lessons learned from far away battlefields are seldom applied in Afghanistan. They commonly use the same tactics, terrain, and base areas that were used successfully by their fathers and grandfathers. Their general tendency to utilize memorization – as they did while studying Islam in madrassas – reinforces their tendency toward repetition.

Consequently, a careful study of the history of insurgent operations in specific regions of Afghanistan may be especially valuable. Base areas, infiltration routes, river fords, hide sites, and ambush locations used successfully against the Soviet Union's forces and their communist allies may be used by later insurgent generations who learned of these locations' significance from storytelling by their mujahedin fathers.

Many of Helmand Province's mujahedin who fought the Soviets are now affiliated with the current insurgents. They have the tendency to use base areas, infiltration routes, safe areas, and even the same ambush sites that were utilized in the past. In the case of the multiple bases they developed in Lor Koh¹, they are strategically positioned near Bakwa and Golestan districts, the key roads in

¹ This key terrain feature was called Sharafat Koh (Honor Mountain) by the mujahedin and "Mordar Mountain" (Filthy Mountain) by the communists after the mujahedin established bases there. Source: Jalali and Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pg. 285. Lor Koh is found on map sheets 1581 and 1582 of edition 2-DMA series U611 1:100,000 maps.

the area, and the mountain canyons may now be used as base areas by the Taliban forces. The same is highly probable of a base called Islam Dara, situated in the Khakrez District in northern Kandahar Province. Together these two historical mujahedin bases form a historical operational precedent for Afghanistan's insurgents in the south that cuts across the volatile region of Helmand Province.



Key leaders involved in the anti-Soviet jihad, or their sons and other family members, are probably still living in the region. Individuals currently involved with the Taliban are likely to be utilizing their same base areas, and those former mujahedin leaders now allied with the Government of Afghanistan probably know the locations used by their former colleagues.

Lor Koh in Farah Province

A Key Mujahedin Base Area

Lor Koh is a large mountain located approximately 30 kilometers southeast of Farah city at 32° 31' 29" N/62° 41' 22" E² [see map and satellite image on pages 5 and 6]. It was renamed Sharafat Koh, or *Honor Mountain*, by the mujahedin once they established bases in the mountain's canyons. The mountain is roughly shaped with a plateau top rising approximately 1,500 meters above the desert floor. Lor Koh has steep slopes and its top is often covered with snow. There are many large and small canyons (*kals*) cutting into the mountain. Sheikh Razi Baba Canyon penetrates into the mountain's north side. Kale-e Amani Canyon is located on the mountain's northwestern side and is adjacent to Sheikh Razi Baba. On the west is Kale-e Kaneske Canyon, and continuing counterclockwise around the mountain, there is Jar-e Ab Canyon on the southwest end of the mountain that connects with the Kale-e Kaneske Canyon. The Tangira Canyon is found in the south and is the widest of the mountain's canyons. It has the most water but the mujahedin avoided it because it was the only valley wide enough to allow the entry of armored vehicles. To the east and also opening south is the Khwaja Morad Canyon where the Khwaja Morad Shrine is located. All of the canyons are accessible from the mountain's plateau.³ Lor Koh is about 12 kilometers from Highway 1 and 20 kilometers from Highway 517. The mujahedin attacked convoys near Karvangah, Charah, and Shivan and the Soviets maintained posts at Karvangah, Charah, and Velamekh to protect the convoys.⁴

The mujahedin established their first base in Lor Koh in Tangira Canyon in 1979, but the organizing tribal groups, consisting of Achakzai, Noorzai, Barakzai, and Alizai tribes, moved to a new base in Jare-e Ab Canyon until the Soviets attacked them in 1980. Following this attack, the mujahedin moved to Kale-e Kaneske Canyon, the strongest base in the mountain.

The opening into Kale-e Kaneske Canyon is only two to three meters wide and is in solid rock. It is deep and requires 35 to 40 minutes to walk from the entrance to its end and the opening section is shielded from observation from above. It contains a stream, a waterfall, and trees and the canyon widens into a three or four hectare opening at the end of the canyon.

² http://www.traveljournals.net/explore/afghanistan/map/p6226821/lor_koh.html, accessed 16 November 2008.

³ Jalali and Grau, pg. 285.

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 286.

In 1985, tribal disputes over leadership and the disposition of spoils resulted in the mujahedin splitting. New insurgent bases occupied by members from various tribes were established in different valleys⁵:

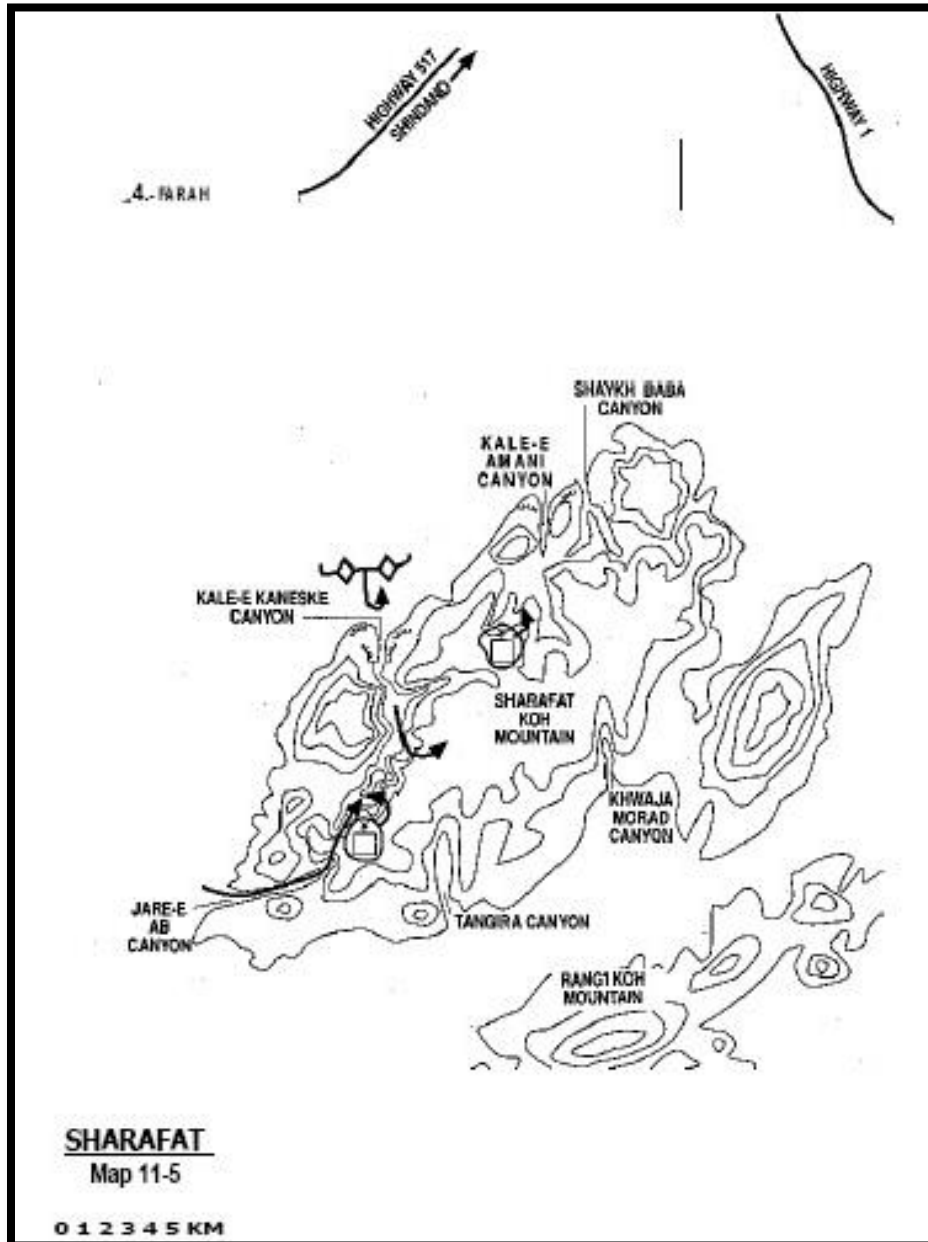
- The Noorzai tribe's mujahedin under Haji Abdul Kheleq moved into Sheikh Razi Baba Canyon.
- The Mujahedin from the Alizai and Barakzai tribes under the leadership of Haji Ghulan Rasul Shiwani Rasul Akhundzada relocated to the Kale-e Amani Canyon.
- Mawlawi Mohammad Shah⁶ and the mujahedin from the Achakzai tribe remained in the Kale-e Kaneske Canyon. Mohammad Shah's deputy was Haji Nur Ahmad Khairkhaw⁷.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 293.

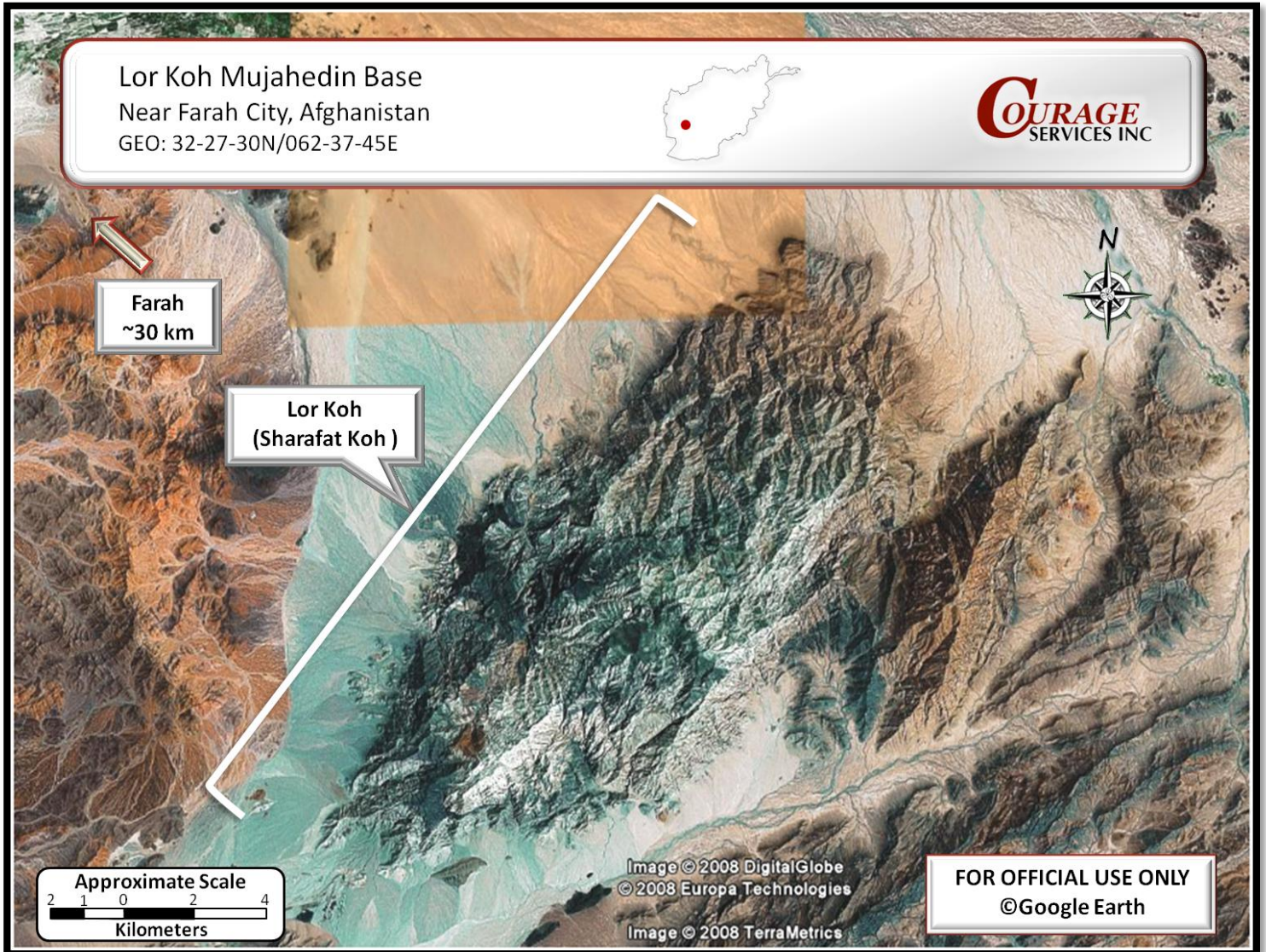
⁶ Mawlawi Mohammad Shah was a key mujahedin leader during the anti-Soviet jihad and he was affiliated with Mohammad Nabi Mohammedi's Harakat organization. Source: Jalali and Grau, pg. 286; Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami-yi Afghanistan, HAR, or "Movement of the Islamic Revolution," under Maulavi Mohammad Nabi Mohammedi who was an Islamic traditionalist and ran a madrassa before the communist period. This was the dominant Jihadist party in Helmand Province during the Soviet period.

⁷ Jalali and Grau, pg. 289.

MAP OF LOR KOH



Source: **The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahedin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War**, (pg. 284)



Islam Dara Canyon near Shawadan Mountain

A Second Key Mujahedin Base Area

The mujahedin of Hezb-e Islam – under Yunus Khalis (HIK) – developed a support and training base to the east of Helmand Province at Islam Dara.⁸ According to the Guardian newspaper, Usama Bin Laden once sought refuge in the abandoned base. One of the villagers in Khakrez explained the following in the article:

“Some say he is in Khagrez, and some say he is in Islam Dara” - an abandoned mujahedin base deep in the mountains. Officially the Taliban have disclaimed any knowledge of Mr. Bin Laden's whereabouts since announcing his disappearance on February 13. “We have no information about him; we have no information whether he is alive. Also, we did not order him to leave the territory of Afghan,” said Mullah Omar.

“Despite the Taliban professions of surprise, the Saudi's renegade's disappearance was carefully planned. Late one night, about two weeks earlier, a convoy of 20 land cruisers and other heavy vehicles had sped over the dirt tracks leading to the base. Local people say the cars carried Arab passengers, construction materials and other provisions to prepare the base for Mr. Bin Laden's arrival.

“During the early 1980s, Khagrez was of strategic importance to the mujahedin, who were fighting against the Soviet occupation. Four months ago Mullah Ghulam Dastagir⁹, a local commander with the Hizbe Islami faction which Mr. Bin Laden fought alongside from 1983, was placed in charge of the village by the Taliban.

“When the Russians destroyed the Hizbe base during their occupation they dropped hundreds of mines from helicopters over the mountains, and it would take a man with a good knowledge of the mountains - an opium smuggler or a seasoned fighter - to lead any fugitive through such hostile terrain.”¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, pg. 301.

⁹ Dastagir was not located in the available literature, but is mentioned in Yusuf Bodansky's book on Bin Laden. This book was not available at the time the research was completed. Bodansky's book was published in 2001 and the Guardian article mentioning Dastagir was published in 1999. Given the uniqueness of Mullah Ghulam Dastagir, Bodansky probably mentioned the Guardian's reference to Bin Laden moving into Islam Dara and mentioned Dastagir.

¹⁰ “Suzanne Goldenberg in Khagrez finds the trail of the world's most wanted man still fresh, despite Taliban denials,” Guardian (Internet version), 1 March 1999. Accessed 18 November 2008.

The Soviet attack occurred on 18 November 1985 and a participant provided the following information:

“There was a particularly unpleasant situation along the southern border of the country in Kandahar province. One of the largest guerrilla bases was located 150 kilometers south of Kandahar. This base trained guerrilla forces and provided weapons and ammunition for combat deep inside Afghanistan. The base was located at Islam Dara Canyon and consisted of several camps, a hospital, a large bakery, and weapons and ammunition stores.”¹¹

The above report’s locational information was provided by the chief of staff of the Soviet airborne battalion that conducted the raid into Islam Dara. His estimated distance and direction to Islam Dara varies from that provided by the mujahedin leader who is quoted in *The Other Side of the Mountain* that Islam Dara was “seven hours on foot from Khakrez which is some 60 kilometers north of Kandahar.”

Islam Dara was used as a staging area by both HI and HIK to harass convoys and block Highway 1 near Kandahar. Forces operating from there are also in a position to attack in northeastern Helmand and southern Oruzgan provinces. While HIK operated from Islam Dara, HI was based about a half kilometer from the Sarpooza ridge.¹² (Note: We have not been able to locate Sarpooza).

The US did attack the area by air during the initial invasion in October 2001. There was enough enemy activity in the fall of 2001 to warrant US air attacks which Taliban propaganda tried to exploit for weeks citing that the US hit the Khakrez and Asmanzai villages, close to the Agha shrine where “villagers” said 122 died and the shrine was destroyed – it was not.¹³

During a March 2008 Shura meeting in Khakrez District participants stated that many get a visit from the Taliban at night after dealing with ISAF or government forces. They claim that if they don't support the government, then the Taliban

¹¹ Grau, Lester, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*, National Defense University, 1996, pg. 98.

¹² Vignette 7. Defending the Suburbs of Kandahar, by Sultan Mohammad of Topkhana, [The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahedin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War](#)

¹³ Source: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwhero1d/AfghanDailyCount.xls>. Other reports varied from 12-24 civilian deaths.

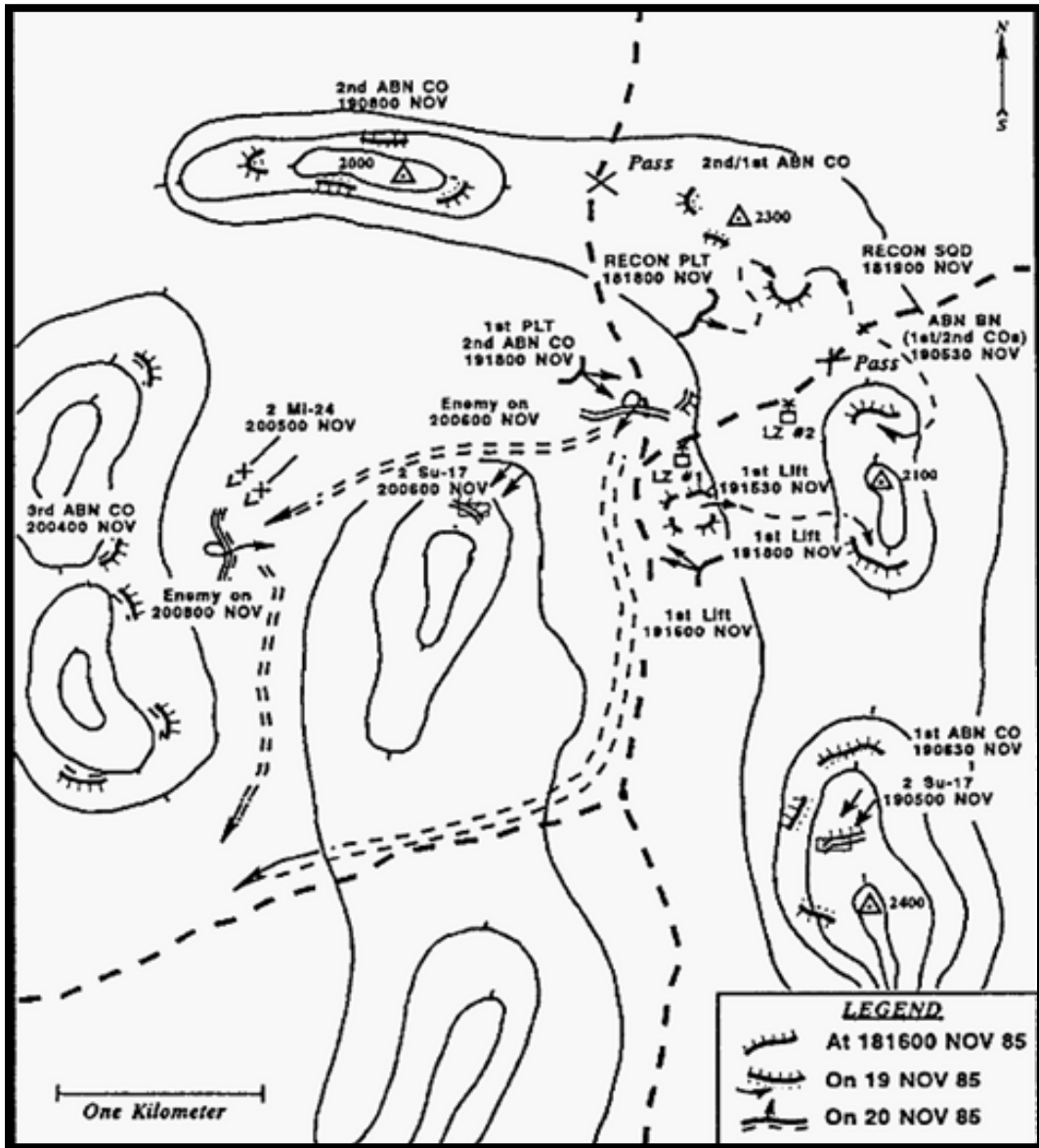
won't hurt them. There is an 80-man police force, but it is limited in operations after being attacked by the Taliban. In the summer of 2007, 40 police officers were ambushed and killed bringing weapons from Kandahar city.¹⁴ District Commissioner Haji Abdul Wahab states that he does not have enough forces to defeat and defend the area.

According to Wahab, “[the Taliban] *live in the mountains at night and they come to the villages during the day...people claim they have to provide shelter and let the Taliban offer prayers in the mosque before they head west to fight the British in Helmand Province, north to harass the Dutch in Uruzgan or east through the US and Romanian zone in Zabul to reputed safe havens in Pakistan.*”¹⁵

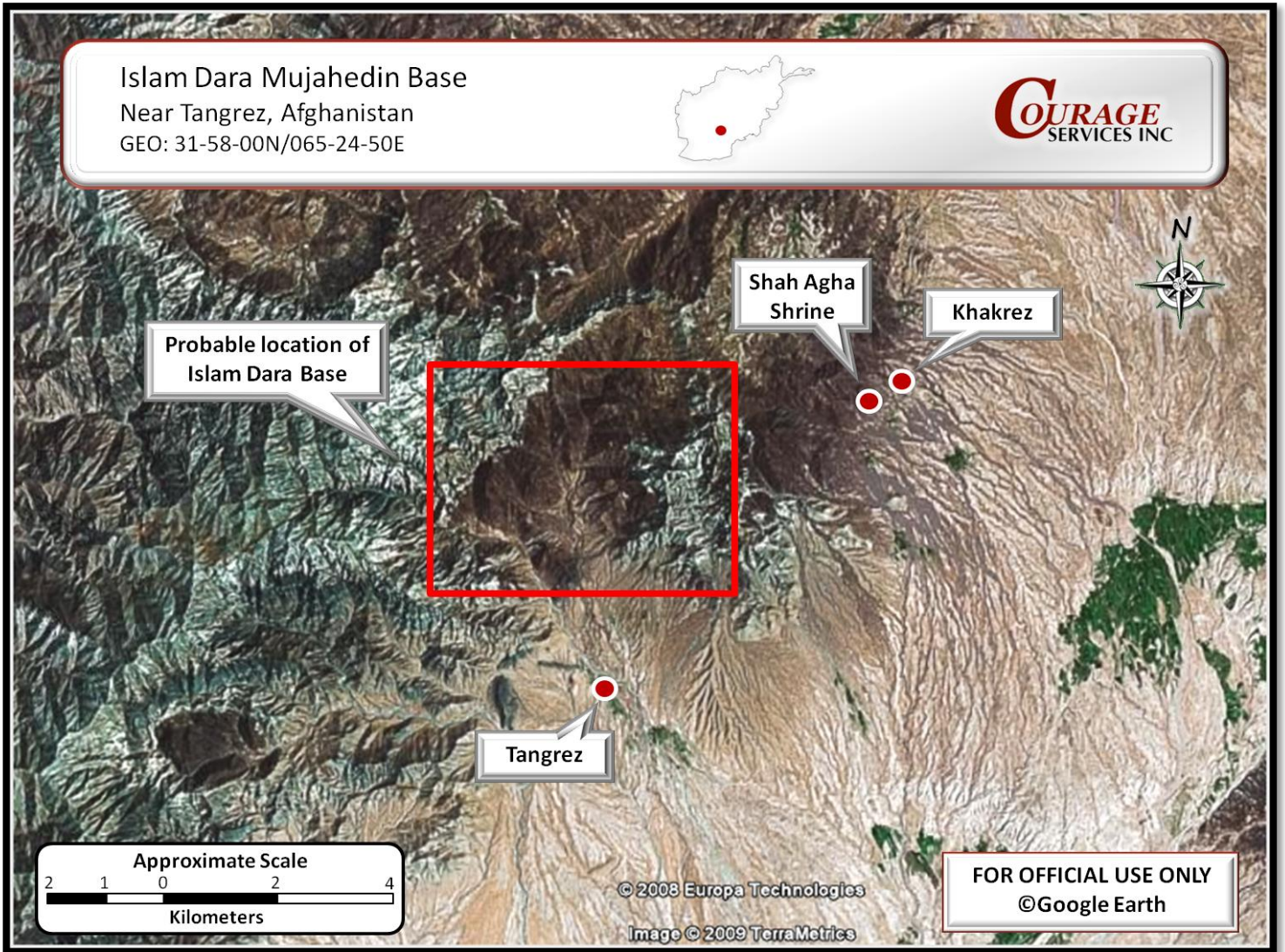
¹⁴ Tajikistan News on 11 Mar 2008. Afghan villages struggle in Taliban's orbit.
<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2008/march/mar102008.html>

¹⁵ Ibid #2

MAP OF ISLAM DARA CANYON



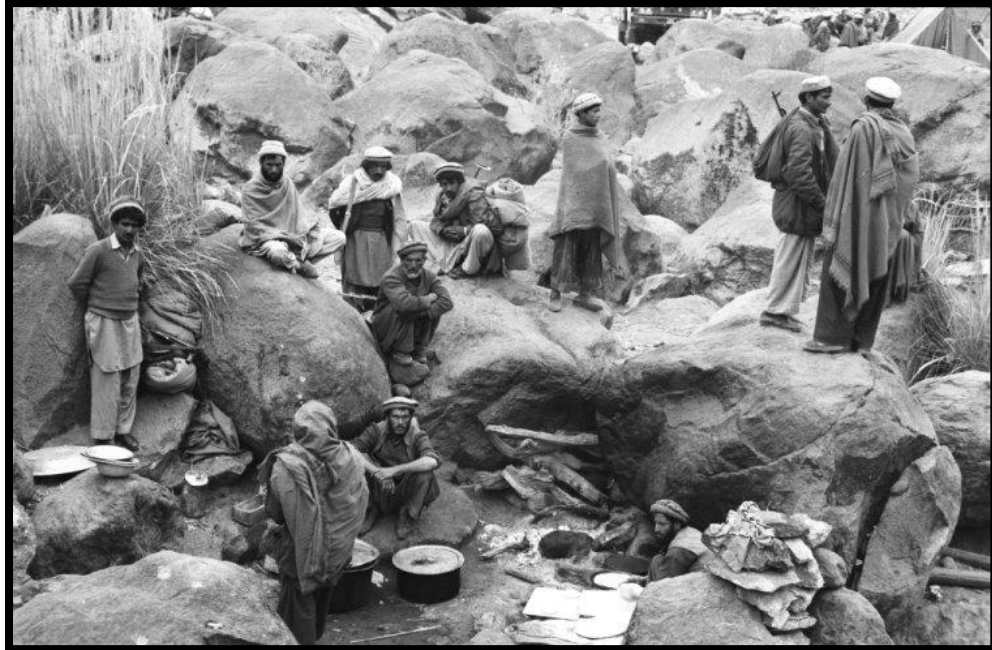
Source: *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahedin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Map 25)



Islam Dara's probable location is approximately 5 kilometers west-southwest of the town of Khakrez and 2 kilometers north of Tangrez.

Ground Photos of Islam Dara Camp during the Soviet-Afghan War

(Source: <http://www.immohorn.org.uk/afghanistan.htm>, 1989)







Appendix 1 - Mujahedin Groups and Leadership Figures

The following section highlights Helmand Province's key mujahedin entities and leadership personalities during the decade when rural insurgents fought against the Soviet Union's troops and the Afghanistan communist army. To the rural population, most of the individual leaders are regarded as heroic figures and the survivors retain much of this admiration. These leaders – and there were many more who were not located in the reference study – belonged to the following six mujahedin organizations:

- **Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami-yi Afghanistan (HAR)**, or “Movement of the Islamic Revolution,” under the leadership of Maulavi Mohammad Nabi Mohammedi, who was an Islamic traditionalist and ran a madrassa before the communist period. Most of the members of HAR were Pashtuns, and they received support from only one weak Islamic party in Pakistan. Mullah Omar and a majority of the Taliban political leadership were affiliated with this party. This was the dominant party in Helmand Province during the Soviet period.
- **Hizb-i Islam-yi Afghanistan–Hekmatyar (HIH)**, or “Islamic Party of Afghanistan–Hekmatyar, was and remains a radical, revolutionary Islamist political party led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former engineering student at Kabul University. They were mainly Pashtuns from Sunni groups and were supported by Pakistan's ISI and radical Arab Islamists.
- **Harakati-inqilab/Mansor (HIM)**, or “Revolutionary Movement,” was apparently an Islamist group in Helmand Province, possibly others. Little was available in the available literature on this group.
- **Jamiat-i Islam-yi Afghanistan (JIA)**, or “Islamic Society of Afghanistan,” was a moderate Islamist party composed mainly of non-Pashtuns. Its leader was Burhanuddin Rabbani, a professor at Kabul University. JIA had some considerable support from the Alikozai tribe in Kandahar Province.

- **Sazman-i Nasr-i Islami-yi Afghanistan (NASR)**, or “The Islamic Victory Organization of Afghanistan,” was a Shi’a group organized with assistance from revolutionary Iran.
- **Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islam-yi Afghanistan (NIFA)**, or “National Islamic Front of Afghanistan,” was led by Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, the head of the Qadiriyya Sufi order in Afghansitan. This party was traditionalist, royalist, and pro-western in outlook. Gailani was married into the royal family.¹⁶

Individual Mujahedin Commanders:

- **Maulavi Nassim Akhundzada**- HAR; Alizai tribe; operated in the Helmand valley. He was Sher Mohammad Akhundzada’s uncle.
- **Baz Mohammad Akhund**- HAR; Shi’a; operated in the Nad Ali region.
- **Abdul Rauf**- HAR commander; operated in the Shirin Tagao area.
- **Mirza Ahmad**- HAR sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada.
- **Abdul Rahman**- HAR; no further information was available.
- **Maulavi Mohammad Rasoul**- HAR; a sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada and an uncle of Sher Mohammad Akhundzada.
- **Obaidullah**- HAR; a former Afghan communist militiaman and sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada; operated in the Kajaki area.
- **Haji Abdul Latif**- HAR; a former Afghan communist militiaman and sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada; operated in the Kajaki area.

¹⁶ Rubin, Barnett R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, pp. 201-225.

- **Ghulam Haidar**- HAR; a former Afghan communist militiaman and sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada; operated in the Kajaki area.
- **Bismallah**- HAR; a former Afghan communist militiaman and sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada; operated in the Kajaki area.
- **Malim Lal Mohammad**- HAR; a former Afghan communist militiaman and sub-commander of Nassim Akhundzada; operated in the Kajaki area.
- **Maulavi Ata Mohammad**- HAR; operated in Sangin District.
- **Amanullah**- HIH; referred to as an effective commander.
- **Haji Abdur Rashid**- HIH; operated near Gereshk.
- **Mohammad Mussa Alukat**- HIH.
- **Abdur Rahman Khan**- HIH; Alizai tribe; operated near Musa Qala.
- **Hafizullah**- HIM; Barakzai tribe; operated near Lashkargah.
- **Yahya Khan**- HIM; Shi'a; operated near Nawa.
- **Shah Mohammad**- HIM; operated near Nawa.
- **Maulavi Zia ul Haq**- HIM; operated in Washer District.
- **Abdul Wahid Akhundzada**¹⁷- JIA; Alizai tribe; operated near Ainak. Friction was reported between him and Nassim Akhundzada.

¹⁷ This may be a reference to Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghrani. He fought the "Akhundzadas."

- **Daoud Mohammad Khan**- JIA; Alizai tribe; operated in Sangin district. He may have fought under Ismail Khan, a Tajik.
- **Ajab Gul**- JIA; Ludi tribe; operated near Nad Ali.
- **Ghulam Reza Rahimi**- NASR; Shi'a; operated in Helmand valley.
- **Ahmad Akbar**- NIFA; reported to cooperate with HIM commander Alukat.¹⁸

¹⁸ This data was part of a Mujahedin Order of Battle study done by Orkand Corporation in 1987.

Appendix 2 - The Hazrat Shah Agha Shrine

[Also called the Shamaqsud Agha Shrine, a potential target during the Iranian New year – Nowrūz]

Nowrūz is the traditional Iranian new year holiday celebrated by Iranian, Turkic and many other peoples in West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Northwestern China, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and the Balkans. It usually occurs on March 21 or the previous/following day depending on where it is observed.

Though it is predominantly a Shiite festival, Nowrūz also marks the New Year in Afghanistan and is celebrated by Sunnis, generally for 2 weeks. Nowrūz starts several days beforehand, at least after *Chaharshanbe Suri*, the last Wednesday before the New Year. Among various Afghan traditions and customs, some of the more noted are:

- *Mēla-e Gul-e Surkh*: The Guli Surkh festival which literally means *Red Flower Festival* (referring to the red tulip flowers) is an old festival celebrated only in Mazari Sharif during the first 40 days of the year. People travel from different parts of the country to Mazar in order to attend the festival. It is celebrated along with the *Jahenda Bālā* ceremony which is a specific religious ritual performed in the holy Blue Mosque of Mazar that is believed (mostly by Sunni Afghans) to be the site of the tomb of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam. The ceremony is performed by raising a special banner in the Blue Mosque in the first day of year (i.e. Nowrūz).
- *Sightseeing to Cercis Fields*: The citizens of Kabul go to Istalif, Charikar, or other green places around where the Cercis flowers grow. They go for picnic with their families during the first two weeks of New Year.
- *Jashni Dehqān*: Jashni Dehqan means *The Festival of Farmers*. It is celebrated in the first day of year, in which the farmers walk in the cities as a sign of encouragement for the agricultural productions. In recent years, this activity is being performed only in Kabul and other major cities, in which the mayor and other high governmental personalities participate for watching and observing.

Security Risk

In Kandahar the festival culminates a month-long process of cleansing, restoring balance in the community. Most of Kandahar will close for three days and the

population of Kandahar city that can afford to goes to the Khakrez District for the festival. Provincial government officials will gather for speeches and other major PR events. The Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and Canadian forces participated in 2008 by distributing as per custom more than 255 gifts of gratitude. Together with local Afghan leaders, the gifts were distributed to the poorest in the community surrounding Camp Nathan Smith, and also to local employees working on camp. The gift included flour, rice, oil, blankets, sugar and other essential items.¹⁹

The prominence of the Sufi shrine Hazrat Shah Agha²⁰ in the Nowrūz festival and its proximity to the historic mujahedin camps near Islam Dara make it an attractive target to the Taliban. Despite the apparent use of the shrine by local Afghan Taliban, the hostility of Al Qaida to Sufism in general and Shrines in particular, combined with the Persian/Iranian history of Nowrūz, makes the gathering in Khakrez a potential target each year. In March of 2006 other Sufi shrines were targeted. Afghan police received a tip and Canadian engineers disarmed two bombs, which were stuffed into the seats of the motorcycles in the nearby village of Hajiwan. In Kabul police defused two bombs Tuesday near a Shia shrine where tens of thousands of people had gathered for a religious festival. The bombs were discovered hidden near the Sakhi shrine, the second most important Shiite place of worship in Afghanistan.²¹ In 2007 and 2008 security was tight at Shiite shrines across Afghanistan amid fears of violence that could spark sectarian clashes.

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¹⁹ Source: http://www.dnd.ca/site/community/MapleLeaf/article_e.asp?id=2537

²⁰ On the Afghanistan Information Management Services (AIMS) maps {<http://www.aims.org.af> } this translates to *Ziarat* Shamaqsud. The India Survey Map 34E-1935 places the village of Ziarat Shah Maksud at 315706N 652800E. NGA has the village of Shah Maksud (same place) at 315848N 652812E. The village of Shah Maksud is also known as Khakriz/Khakrez per the early 1900s British Gazetteer of Afghanistan, later compiled into Ludwig Adamec's Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan, 1979.)

²¹ <http://www.connect2canada.com/resources/newsletters.jhtml?id=20849#1990>