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AFGHANISTAN'S HIDDEN RICHES: UNEARTHING GEMOLOGICAL POTENTIAL BEYOND INITIAL SURVEYS

Dr. Faridah S. Rahimi
Senior Geologist and Mineral Exploration Specialist, Department of Earth Sciences, Kabul University, Afghanistan

Dr. Lars J. Petersen
Professor of Mineralogy and Economic Geology, Department of Geological Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan, often associated with geopolitical instability, harbors vast, historically significant, and largely untapped mineral wealth, particularly precious gemstones. This article examines the enduring allure and evolving understanding of Afghanistan's gemological potential, moving beyond the traditional concept of "exploratory geology" as a concluded phase. By synthesizing historical accounts with contemporary geological surveys, we demonstrate that Afghanistan remains a "gemological El Dorado"—a term reflecting the continuous nature of discovery and the complex interplay of natural resources, historical exploitation, and future prospects. We challenge simplistic "resource curse" narratives by highlighting the potential for legitimate, sustainable development, despite significant security, infrastructure, and governance challenges. The article argues that the ongoing exploration and strategic management of these subterranean assets are crucial for the nation's stability and prosperity, underscoring that "after exploratory geology" signifies a transition to a more complex and critical phase of resource actualization.

Keywords: Afghanistan, gemstones, mineral resources, exploratory geology, resource curse, sustainable development, lapis lazuli, emeralds, El Dorado.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has long been a country intricately woven into narratives of conflict, geopolitical maneuverings, and humanitarian crises. Yet, beneath its rugged, war-scarred landscapes lies a profound geological endowment—a wealth of mineral resources, particularly precious gemstones, that has captivated imaginations for millennia and holds immense, albeit complex, potential for its future [1, 2, 21]. This comprehensive article undertakes an exploration of Afghanistan's unique geological tapestry, tracing its rich and often turbulent history of gemstone extraction and the evolving scientific and socio-political understanding of its subterranean wealth. Our central argument challenges the conventional perception of "exploratory geology" as a finite, singular phase of discovery. Instead, we propose that Afghanistan's geological journey is an ongoing, dynamic process of revelation, shaped by intricate interplays of natural potential, historical patterns of exploitation, and contemporary geopolitical and economic prospects. We contend that, despite centuries of sustained extraction and recent, more technologically advanced surveys, Afghanistan remains a veritable "gemological El Dorado," a metaphor that powerfully evokes the enduring allure and, crucially, the still largely untapped potential of its extraordinary mineral resources [56, 91].

The prevailing academic and policy discourse surrounding mineral-rich nations often grapples with the concept of the "resource curse" [4, 88]. This theory posits that an abundance of natural resources can, counterintuitively, impede economic development, exacerbate political instability, and fuel internal conflicts. Afghanistan, tragically, provides ample evidence of the negative manifestations of this phenomenon, particularly through the proliferation of illicit mining activities that have historically served as significant funding streams for various insurgent groups and local powerbrokers [20, 89]. However, a nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's gemological potential necessitates a critical move beyond this often oversimplified narrative. Our focus extends beyond merely identifying what lies beneath the surface; we aim to meticulously unpack how these precious resources have been perceived, how they have been exploited across different historical epochs, and the multifaceted implications for a nation relentlessly striving for stability, reconstruction, and sustainable economic growth [9, 66].

Historical chronicles vividly illustrate a long-standing fascination with Afghanistan's mineral deposits, stretching back to antiquity. Ancient travelers, chroniclers, and early scholars documented the presence of extraordinarily valuable minerals. Foremost among these are the fabled lapis lazuli from the mountainous Badakhshan province, a gemstone whose deep blue hues have been coveted for millennia, and the exquisite emeralds originating from the Panjshir Valley, renowned for their vivid green luminescence [16, 26, 40, 58, 67, 72, 73, 76]. These rudimentary, pre-scientific observations, though lacking the rigor of modern geological inquiry, nonetheless established the foundational understanding and fascination that would propel subsequent, more systematic explorations. The advent of organized geological surveys, notably those initiated during the British colonial era and significantly expanded more recently by international organizations, has provided an increasingly comprehensive and scientifically rigorous portrait of Afghanistan's complex geological makeup [28, 30, 31, 35, 41, 46, 50, 59, 60, 61, 79, 90]. These systematic endeavors have unequivocally confirmed the presence of vast, commercially significant reserves of a diverse array of minerals, encompassing not only precious stones but also crucial industrial metals and strategically important rare earth elements [10, 21, 29, 93]. The recurring narrative of a "trillion-dollar trove" has frequently captivated public attention, powerfully underscoring the sheer, albeit largely unrealized, scale of the country's mineral potential [21, 93].

Despite these comprehensive efforts, the very term "exploratory geology" can be misleading if it implies a fixed or finite process of discovery. Geological understanding is inherently dynamic, continuously evolving in response to the emergence of new technologies, shifts in global economic demands, and the ever-changing geopolitical landscape [24, 32, 69, 70, 97, 98]. The ongoing identification of previously unknown deposits, the re-evaluation of already recognized ones, and the application of innovative extraction techniques collectively demonstrate that the "exploration" of Afghanistan's gemological potential is far from concluded. It is, rather, a perpetual endeavor that promises further revelations. This article, therefore, aims to fundamentally reframe the discourse surrounding Afghanistan's mineral wealth. We emphasize the inherently dynamic and continuous nature of its "discovery" and critically assess its profound potential to serve as a cornerstone for the nation's long-term stability and development [49, 78, 96].

Beyond the purely economic or geological considerations, this article also delves into the socio-cultural dimensions of mineral extraction in Afghanistan. It investigates how circulating narratives about hidden riches, combined with the inherent physical properties of precious stones, have historically compelled and continue to propel a vast, interconnected network of individuals into mining enterprises. This network spans from various state authorities and influential local powerbrokers to foreign geologists, discerning mineral collectors, and even international aid organizations. The result is the constant creation of new narratives of extractable wealth, narratives that intricately weave together cutting-edge scientific practices with the volatile dynamics of global markets. These emergent narratives defy conventional historical periodizations, transcending distinctions such as the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-9/11 eras. Crucially, these narratives have emerged from and simultaneously reinforced asymmetrical relationships, particularly in the realms of labor and expertise, ultimately positioning Afghan participants precariously within global mineral markets, made riskier still in times of persistent conflict.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective on Afghanistan's mineral resources, integrating geological facts with historical analysis and socio-economic insights. By doing so, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Afghanistan's "gemological El Dorado" can transition from a source of conflict and instability to a foundation for genuine and equitable national development.

METHODS

This study adopts a comprehensive and interdisciplinary methodological approach, synthesizing information from an extensive array of academic, historical, and contemporary sources. The primary aim is to construct a robust and nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's intricate gemological landscape, its historical evolution, and its contemporary implications. The methodology is predominantly qualitative, drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives to illuminate the complex interplay between geological realities, socio-economic structures, and political dynamics.

The core components of the methodology include:

1. Historical Documentation and Archival Research:

A meticulous examination of historical travelogues, colonial administrative reports, and early scientific observations forms a crucial foundation for understanding the initial perceptions and documented accounts of Afghanistan's mineral wealth. This includes detailed analysis of seminal works from the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as:

- Alexander Burnes's Travels into Bokhara (1834) [16]: Providing early accounts of trade routes and observable mineral occurrences.
- Mountstuart Elphinstone's Account of the Kingdom of Caubul (2011 [1815]) [35, 30]: Offering invaluable insights into the British colonial gaze on resource potential and early attempts at geographical ordering. This work, alongside others, marks the beginning of a shift from general travel narratives to more systematic descriptions of colonial domains, reflecting a burgeoning "mania for delineating, cataloguing, and controlling colonial

domains".

- Charles Masson's Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and the Panjab (1842) [76, 30]: Detailing observations from his extensive travels in the region.

- William Moorcroft and George Trebeck's Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab (1841) [73, 30]: Documenting mineral resources encountered during their expeditions.

These historical sources are critical for tracing the nascent "exploratory" efforts and the rudimentary, yet foundational, understanding of Afghanistan's geological formations within imperial contexts. They reveal how even "amateur geological explorers" were often embedded within paramilitary units, highlighting the early militarization of geological work. The focus on areas adjacent to main caravan routes illustrates how early geological knowledge was shaped by infrastructural dependency and the physical hardships of movement through Afghan territory.

2. Geological Surveys and Official Reports:

This component constitutes the scientific backbone of the study, involving the analysis of modern geological reports and surveys conducted by both national and international geological bodies. These reports offer precise technical details on mineral types, their geographical distribution, and estimated reserves. Key sources include:

- Reports from the Geological Survey of India [46]: Documenting early systematic investigations, particularly focused on coal deposits, and providing a model for geological professionalization under imperial administration [98, 44, 47].

- Assessments by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (1995) [95]: Providing a foundational international assessment of Afghanistan's diverse mineral occurrences, including "world-class deposits of copper, iron and gemstones".

- Reports from the British Geological Survey (BGS) [79, 77]: Particularly those commissioned to build capacity at the Afghanistan Geological Survey, describing the country's mineral potential in terms of revenue generation for economic revival.

- Assessments from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) [29, 93]: Especially the post-2001 surveys that integrated new aerial imagery, magnetic, gravity, and hyperspectral data with older Soviet-era data to create comprehensive mineral resource assessments. These surveys, conducted from 2004-2009, marked a significant technological leap in mapping Afghanistan's geology "completely from the air".

- World Bank reports [78, 76]: Providing economic analyses and recommendations for the sustainable development of Afghanistan's mining sector.

The collection of Soviet-era reports and maps (1960s-1970s), though largely inaccessible for public viewing, are acknowledged for their historical significance in systematic mineral assessments.

3. Gemological Studies and Expert Accounts:

Specialized literature in gemology and related fields is reviewed to gain in-depth knowledge about the intrinsic characteristics, geographical provenance, and historical trade networks of Afghan gemstones, with a particular focus on emeralds and lapis lazuli. Important contributions include:

- Pierre Bariand and Jean-François Poullen's work on Panjshir's emeralds (1978) [6]: A groundbreaking piece that marked a significant shift in understanding Afghanistan's emerald deposits, positing their discovery by Russian geologists.

- Gary W. Bowersox's "A Status Report on Gemstones from Afghanistan" (1985) [11] and Bowersox et al.'s "Emeralds of the Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan" (1991) [12]: Crucial for detailed gemological descriptions and understanding the unique properties of Panjshir emeralds.

- Jacques Blaise and Fabien Cesbron's "Données Minéralogiques et Pétrographiques Sur Le Gisement de Lapis-Lazuli de Sar-e-Sang" (1966) [10]: Providing detailed mineralogical and petrographic data on the lapis lazuli deposits.

- Michael S. Krzemnicki et al.'s "A New Type of Emerald from Afghanistan’s Panjshir Valley" (2021) [68]: Highlighting ongoing discoveries and refinements in gemological understanding.

This includes insights from historical figures like Abdul Samad Salah, a pivotal Afghan geologist who navigated German and Soviet geological missions, providing a unique perspective on the shifting geological priorities and the relative neglect of gemstones in official programs until later.

4. Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives on Resource Extraction:

This crucial component integrates social science theories and empirical studies to provide a critical lens through which to analyze the profound social, political, and environmental ramifications of mineral extraction in conflict-affected contexts. Relevant theoretical frameworks and studies include:

- Hannah Appel's The Licit Life of Capitalism (2019) [3]: For understanding the complexities of capitalist resource frontiers.

- Anthony and Denise Humphreys Bebbington's work on mining and sustainable development (2018) [9]: Providing concepts for a framework on the challenges of responsible resource management.

- Jerry K. Jacka's studies on the anthropology of mining (2018, 2019) [63, 64]: Exploring social and

environmental impacts and resource conflicts.

- Stuart Kirsch's Mining Capitalism (2014) [65]: Examining the relationship between corporations and their critics.
- Timothy Mitchell's Carbon Democracy (2013) [80]: Providing a framework to understand how resource landscapes are shaped by multilateral forces.
- June Nash's We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us (1993) [84]: Illustrating the dynamics of dependency and exploitation.
- Nancy Lee Peluso's work on entangled territories in small-scale mining (2018) [86]: Highlighting informal institutions and property rights.
- Michael Watts' "Resource Curse?" (2004) [96]: Demonstrating how oil extraction produces particular forms of governmentality and complicates simplistic resource curse narratives.
- Anna Tsing's Friction (2005) [113] and "Inside the Economy of Appearances" (2000) [111]: Illuminating the relationship between geological speculation, financial markets, and value creation.

This interdisciplinary approach allows for an exploration of concepts such as "sacrifice zones", "violent environments", "geopower", and "salvage frontiers", providing a deeper understanding of how geological facts intersect with power, violence, and local livelihoods. The unique materiality of gemstones—their small size, high value, and easy portability—creates distinct social and economic networks that differ from large-scale extractive operations, which is a critical distinction in the Afghan context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Afghanistan's geological richness is undeniable, stemming from its location at the collision point of several tectonic plates, leading to the formation of diverse mineral deposits [95]. While the term "exploratory geology" might suggest a definitive endpoint, the reality in Afghanistan reveals a continuous process of discovery, driven by both traditional knowledge and modern scientific inquiry. The "gemological El Dorado" of Afghanistan is not merely a historical relic but an evolving frontier with significant implications for its future.

The Historical Tapestry of Gemstone Extraction

For centuries, Afghanistan has been renowned for its precious gemstones, particularly lapis lazuli and emeralds. The ancient mines of Sar-e-Sang in Badakhshan are the world's primary source of lapis lazuli, with a history of extraction dating back over 6,000 years [10, 26]. This deep blue metamorphic rock has been traded along the Silk Roads, shaping cultural exchanges and contributing to regional economies [75]. Early European travelers and colonial administrators frequently documented these rich deposits, laying the groundwork for later systematic geological investigations [16, 30, 31, 35, 40, 58, 67, 73, 76]. Mountstuart Elphinstone's 1815 account, for instance, mentioned Afghanistan's mineral wealth, though often with a colonial gaze focused on resource control and mapping for imperial purposes [35, 41, 60, 90].

The Panjshir Valley emeralds gained international prominence in the late 20th century, particularly during the Soviet-Afghan War [12, 13, 20, 47, 85]. These emeralds, known for their vibrant green color and high quality, were often informally mined and traded, with proceeds sometimes funding resistance movements [20]. This period exemplifies the complex interplay between resource wealth and conflict, a phenomenon often termed the "resource curse" [4, 88]. However, it also highlights the ingenuity of local miners and the enduring value of these gemstones even in tumultuous times [5, 14, 15, 57, 85].

Modern Exploratory Geology and the "Trillion-Dollar Trove"

The most significant contemporary understanding of Afghanistan's mineral wealth emerged from extensive geological surveys conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the British Geological Survey (BGS) in the 2000s, building upon Soviet-era data [8, 29, 79, 93]. These surveys confirmed Afghanistan's enormous mineral potential, leading to headlines about a "trillion-dollar trove" of rare earth elements, copper, iron, and other valuable minerals, in addition to its known gemstones [21, 93]. The BBC reported in 2012 that Afghanistan's minerals had been "fully mapped," implying a comprehensive understanding of its subterranean assets [8].

However, this "full mapping" is a continuous process rather than a static conclusion. Geological understanding evolves with new technologies and methodologies [24, 32, 69, 70, 97, 98]. For instance, recent studies continue to refine the understanding of Panjshir emeralds, even identifying new types [68]. The promise of this mineral wealth spurred significant international interest, with countries like China engaging in large-scale mining projects, though often fraught with challenges and delays [2].

Beyond the "Resource Curse": Opportunities and Challenges

While the "resource curse" narrative is pertinent to Afghanistan, particularly regarding illicit mining and corruption [2, 77, 89], focusing solely on this aspect risks overlooking the potential for legitimate, sustainable development [9]. The formalization of the mining sector, improved governance, and responsible resource management are crucial to harnessing this potential for the benefit of the Afghan people [9, 66, 78].

The challenges are considerable. Security concerns, lack of infrastructure, limited technical expertise, and pervasive corruption continue to hamper large-scale, legal mining

operations [1, 2, 49, 78]. The informal and artisanal mining sectors, while providing livelihoods for many, often operate outside regulatory frameworks, leading to environmental degradation and unsafe working conditions [53, 94]. Transforming these fragmented operations into a cohesive, regulated industry is a monumental task.

However, the enduring allure of Afghanistan's gemstones and minerals continues to attract investment and attention. The potential for the mining sector to become a significant driver of economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure development is immense [1, 78]. This requires a long-term vision that transcends immediate geopolitical concerns, focusing on capacity building, transparent governance, and fostering partnerships that benefit Afghanistan equitably [1, 66, 78].

The Unending Exploration

The concept of an "El Dorado" evokes a mythical place of immense wealth, often elusive and continuously sought [37, 87]. In Afghanistan's case, the "gemological El Dorado" is not a fully discovered entity but an ongoing reality. Each new geological survey, each re-evaluation of known deposits, and each development in extraction technology reveal new facets of its potential. The transition from initial exploratory surveys to actual, large-scale extraction is a complex journey, often taking decades, as seen in other resource-rich nations [3, 25, 48, 52, 69, 70, 97, 98]. The "after exploratory geology" phase is therefore not an end, but a transition into a more intensive and complex stage of resource actualization.

El Dorados: Geological and Gemological

The metaphor of "El Dorado" has long been applied to regions of supposed untold wealth, often driven by colonial and imperial mapping endeavors. In the context of Afghanistan, this mythic quality is intricately tied to its geological and gemological endowments. As Gabriel García Márquez aptly described, El Dorado can be an elusive land, shaped by the "whims of cartographers", highlighting how the very act of mapping and classifying natural resources is not a neutral scientific exercise but a powerful tool in state formation and the "domination of nature". This process of quantifying and ordering nature, akin to a "crude magic," parallels the geological surveys and resource mapping efforts undertaken in Afghanistan, transforming perceived wealth into tangible assets.

While historical geological exploration globally has often prioritized industrial minerals for their utility in an accelerating Industrial Revolution, the unique appeal of decorative stones like emeralds and lapis lazuli presents a distinct "El Dorado" narrative. Unlike crude oil or lithium, whose value is primarily industrial, gemstones resonate with desires for luxury, beauty, and abundance. The pursuit of Afghan gems blurs the lines between nature and artifice, science and myth, embodying Michael Taussig's observation that "nature and artifice are mutually constitutive".

Afghan emeralds and lapis lazuli, therefore, function as "fetishized objects" whose cultural significance transcends their empirical properties. William Pietz's concept of the fetish, possessing "untranscended materiality", captures this essence. The inherent uncertainties of mining, the meticulous demands of artisanal cutting, and the subjective nature of color assessment contribute to a valuation process that resists rigid standardization, unlike the weekly published prices of diamonds. The value of emeralds, for instance, is negotiated through countless, ephemeral face-to-face interactions, accruing value through multiple registers beyond mere numerical calculation. This "ritualized exchange process" [18] demonstrates how gems become commodities through human relationships, labor, and cultural rituals, transforming a mundane rock into a luxury good—a new "El Dorado treasure".

This transformation binds Afghanistan's gems to broader histories of colonialism and capitalist extraction, paralleling historical quests for gold and land. The speculative nature of geological prospecting for gems, rooted in commercial hopes, echoes the aspirational mystique of El Dorado. Moreover, the distinctive cultural realm of gems, prioritizing aesthetic appeal and symbolic meaning over utilitarian function, establishes a unique capitalist regime. Yet, the techniques used to locate these aestheticized treasures are fundamentally the same as those employed for all mineral prospecting.

This convergence of imperial science, military intervention, and capital accumulation has positioned Afghanistan as a "salvage frontier" [112], where intense resource extraction coexists with sometimes contradictory environmental protection efforts. As seen in sugar frontiers, this type of resource extraction profoundly transforms landscapes through "frontier industrialization" [82]. Geological knowledge production, in this context, becomes an essential mediator between imperial ambitions and local realities, where land is valued for both its extractive potential and its geopolitical significance in larger conflicts [7].

Prospecting Afghanistan in the Nineteenth Century

Despite its long-standing allure, Afghanistan's mineral wealth remained "puzzlingly under-mapped" for centuries, particularly during the 19th century when geology began to professionalize in other imperial territories. The intermittent appearance of high-caliber Panjshir emeralds on the global market as late as the 1970s, despite their ancient origins, signals a "pattern of recurrent revelation" tied to the region's complex political history and its distinctive status within imperial scientific production. Unlike British India, where systematic geological surveys and mapping (e.g., the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India [29]) were foundational to colonial control, Afghanistan consistently presented limits to such comprehensive work due to persistent Afghan resistance and ongoing Anglo-Afghan Wars.

The early geological explorers in Afghanistan were often "amateur geological explorers", embedded within the paramilitary units of the East India Company and, later, the British Indian Army. As Robert Stafford notes, "geology marched in the van of the Indian Army: officers made observations and collections on behalf of the London Society in Afghanistan, Sind, and Punjab" [106]. This "de facto militarization of geological work" contrasted sharply with other scientific endeavors, like botany, which operated through more established institutional frameworks [60].

The ad-hoc nature of this early exploration is evident in reports such as Captain Drummond's 1841 article in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which described his travels to survey mineral deposits. His observations of copper deposits and mine sites, alongside extensive slag heaps, indicated potential for mining investment. These early investigations were largely constrained by infrastructural dependency, focusing on areas adjacent to main caravan routes, meaning that geological knowledge was shaped as much by the physical hardships of movement through Afghan territory as by abstract political circumstances.

The British maintained a "comprehensive interest" in Afghanistan's resources until their final retreat in 1919 [1]. Figures like Sir Macnaughten envisioned resource development as a means to both enrich the East India Company and "reclaim the wild inhabitants from a life of lawless violence". While they never established a firm enough foothold to develop commercially viable mines, their surveys, particularly those focusing on coal deposits by figures like Griesbach (1887) [43] and Hayden (1911) [47], laid crucial groundwork for later exploration. These relied on the "geological walk"—a meticulous, on-the-ground fieldwork approach [114, Page 11 of PDF]. Crucially, these early assessments, while targeting industrial resources, also indirectly contributed to the knowledge of precious gems, complicating the "capitalocene" narrative by showing how even ornamental minerals were entangled in imperial logic.

Mapping Afghan Gems

The process of "mapping" Afghan gems extends beyond colonial reconnaissance to include more systematic efforts in the 20th century, particularly after the 1970s. Initially, observations by military personnel during the British imperial era rendered Afghanistan's "complex and inscrutable terrain into legible colonial territory" [Page 11 of PDF]. However, these seemingly objective reports often obscured the "intensely interpersonal nature of mineral prospecting," which heavily depended on indigenous expertise and complex negotiations with local power structures.

The 1970s marked a significant period for the study of Afghanistan's emerald deposits, driven by French mineralogists. Pierre Bariand, a renowned French mineralogist, published pioneering work on Iran and Afghanistan's gem deposits, emphasizing field exploration [6]. His collaborative work with Jean-François Poullen on Panjshir's emeralds (1978) [6] notably attributed their discovery to Russian geologists, highlighting an early French-Soviet exchange of geological knowledge.

The Soviet geological expeditions of the 1960s and 1970s left behind volumes of detailed field notes and maps. These documents, once accessible through the Afghan Geological Survey (AGS) Data Center, are now largely hidden or destroyed, with some carefully "cloistered behind institutional walls" and others "reduced to ash when a U.S. B-52 bombed the Afghanistan Geological Survey office in late 2001".

A key figure bridging these eras was Abdul Samad Salah, an Afghan geologist educated in Munich, who worked alongside German and Soviet geological missions [Page 12-13 of PDF]. Salah, who later became Deputy Minister for Mines and Industries, observed a shift in geological priorities after the Soviet invasion in 1979. The pre-invasion period focused on ambitious, systematic mapping and exploration of strategic resources like oil and gas. However, after the invasion, geological work narrowed to specific deposits like copper and rare metals, aiming for mining concessions. Crucially, gemstones, with the exception of lapis lazuli, remained largely outside official geological programs, relegated to a "parallel economy of informal extraction and smuggling". It was French mineralogists like Bariand who initially documented these informal emerald occurrences.

Since then, geologists like Samarin and Akkermantsev (1977) [97], Bowersox (1985) [11], and Kazmi and Snee (1989) [55] have documented the distinctive characteristics of Panjshir emeralds. These crystals typically range from 4 to 5 carats, though specimens as large as 190 carats have been reported [11]. They are known for "color zoning"—darker green exteriors with paler interiors—a prized quality among traders [Page 13 of PDF]. Panjshir emeralds, while chemically similar to Colombian emeralds, possess a unique trace element profile that distinguishes them from those found elsewhere, including neighboring Pakistan.

By the 1990s, non-fuel minerals in Panjshir became vital for local livelihoods and funding the Northern Alliance. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance leader, reportedly controlled emerald and lapis production, taxing mine-holders and traders [96]. His 1997 deal with the Polish firm Inter Commerce aimed to market these gems internationally, with potential annual yields estimated at up to $200 million [19]. This control over subterranean resources exemplifies "geopower" [88], where the challenging terrain and hidden nature of the mines provided strategic spaces for resistance against external forces, while their high value offered sustainable funding for local governance structures.

Today, primary gem sources are concentrated in northeastern Afghanistan: tourmaline, kunzite, and

aquamarine (pegmatite gems) near the Pakistan border in Nuristan and Kunar, and sapphires and rubies (corundum gems) in Laghman and Sorobi district. Emeralds remain unique to the Panjshir Valley, where a DAI- and USAID-sponsored team conducted a geophysical survey in 2009. The rationale for this project was to enable the Afghan government to claim land and production rights, aiming for formalized resource extraction through licensing and stable ownership [Page 14 of PDF]. This intersection of scientific exploration with development narratives highlights how imperial and neo-imperial politics often incentivize surveys in regions like Afghanistan, leading to new fault lines around land rights and wealth distribution.

Narratives of Value: From the Descriptive to the Three-Dimensional

The advent of modern prospecting technologies, particularly aerial imagery and remote sensing, significantly accelerated mineral exploration across Afghanistan after the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. While these techniques proved highly effective for identifying large deposits of iron and hydrocarbons, their reliability for locating gemstones is notably lower. The discovery of pegmatite gemstone pockets, for instance, often requires extensive "tunneling and a great deal of luck", relying more on traditional, ground-based exploration methods and the invaluable knowledge of local communities.

From 2004 to 2007, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) collaborated with the Afghanistan Geological Survey (AGS) to integrate new airborne survey data (magnetic, gravity, hyperspectral) with older Soviet-era datasets. This culminated in a "preliminary assessment of non-fuel mineral resources" . By 2009, further airborne surveys and remote sensing had refined this data, resulting in a high-resolution Geographic Information System that provided "a comprehensive survey of Afghanistan's surface mineralogy" . This marked a significant milestone, being the first time a nation's geology was "mapped completely from the air" [8, .

This comprehensive geological mapping transcends mere physical orientation; it also carries crucial temporal and ethical dimensions. Resource mapping inherently necessitates envisioning how extraction will shape a nation's future development and wealth . The British Geological Survey, in its capacity-building efforts for the AGS, explicitly framed Afghanistan's mineral potential as a means to "generate revenue to help revive the economy and rehabilitate the country" [77, . This underscores how political and economic incentives consistently drive post-invasion mapping efforts within broader rebuilding agendas.

The revelation of Afghanistan's immense underground wealth gained widespread attention in 2010, spurred by a New York Times article proclaiming "Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan" . This sparked intense speculation, with some forecasting that mining would catalyze development and end conflict, while others contended that mineral resources had been a primary motivation for the U.S.-led invasion. Since then, estimates of Afghanistan's deposits—including copper, iron, oil, lithium, and gemstones—have exceeded US$694 billion, building upon a 1995 UN assessment that documented over 1,400 mineral occurrences, including "world-class deposits of copper, iron and gemstones" [95, . Proponents of resource development argue that fully developing major sites like the Aynak copper vein and Hajigak iron ore could generate thousands of jobs and over $1 billion in annual government revenue, potentially financing critical infrastructure projects [2, .

This expansive vision solidified Afghanistan's status as a contemporary "El Dorado." However, its ultimate meaning remains contingent on differing perspectives. While prospectors and capitalists may envision subterranean treasures yielding fabulous profits, local miners often seek fair compensation for their labor in mines frequently owned by others. The same geological phenomenon thus yields profoundly divergent rewards, with the nature of any "El Dorado" emerging from the complex intersections of rumor, aspiration, and exploitation . Geological surveys, therefore, reveal not only material endowments but also complex social negotiations surrounding the anticipated benefits that arise when the Earth's subsurface is exposed.

Despite high-level discussions, small-scale gemstone mining in Afghanistan remains predominantly informal and illicit, yet it constitutes a significant livelihood for many in the Hindu Kush's gem-laden landscapes. Rather than outright boycotting mining projects, local inhabitants strive to participate in, if not govern, these operations, driven by a blend of global and local politics. While often touted as a collective national resource, Afghan gems frequently enrich local strongmen, a scenario that starkly deviates from the free-trade ideals of "reconstructing" Afghanistan .

Anthropologists have extensively examined the promises and pitfalls of extraction-oriented development, studying how future hopes influence social dynamics and "anticipatory actions" [120]. This includes the formation of "economies of expectation" around resources like oil and the re-configuration of land ownership and governance practices [64]. Within development economics, the "resource curse" links mineral wealth to instability rather than prosperity [4, 27, 34]. Yet, the scale of interventions in Afghanistan complicates such simplistic causal links between minerals and violence. Recent scholarship suggests that different resources generate distinct patterns of conflict based on their material properties and modes of extraction [63, 95]. The unique materiality of gemstones—their small size, high value, and easy portability—fosters "sophisticated social and economic networks" that differ significantly from the large-scale extractive operations associated with crude oil. Gems circulate through "interlocking underworlds" built on personal trust and family connections, operating through

horizontal organizational structures [86]. This contrasts with the corporate hierarchies required by hydrocarbon extraction, a critical distinction in Afghanistan where small-scale gem extraction thrives through vastly different social and political networks than proposed hydrocarbon development.

Rather than assuming a universal "resource curse," scholars increasingly analyze how resource materialities interact with specific political economies to produce conflict [15, 96]. The transformation of Afghanistan's gem deposits from geological features to valuable commodities involves multiple forms of violence: not only physical violence over resource control but also the structural violence of dispossession and the epistemic violence arising from privileging certain forms of geological knowledge over local know-how.

Subterranean Lure: A Case Study from Panjshir

The personal narrative of Wahab, an emerald mine-holder in Panjshir, offers a vivid illustration of the "subterranean lure" that draws individuals into the perilous world of gem mining and the complex realities that belie the narratives of vast, easily extractable wealth. Wahab's family history as precious stone dealers provided him with a foundational understanding of the global gem trade, particularly lapis lazuli, which connected him to clients in the United States, Switzerland, China, and Hong Kong. During the turmoil of the late 1970s and 1980s, he skillfully leveraged his networks in the Sar-e-Sang mines of Badakhshan to establish trade networks extending to Bangkok and Hong Kong, eventually setting up a wholesale company in Hong Kong. This allowed him to accumulate significant wealth, sustaining his extended family during the Soviet-Afghan War and his subsequent comfortable exile in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Wahab’s transition from a gem dealer to a mine-holder marked an entry into a world of "heightened stakes", where the promise of greater profits was inextricably linked with graver risks. His emerald mine, nestled in the rugged mountains northeast of Kabul, represents the persistence of extractivism in Afghanistan. Here, amidst peaks soaring from 7,000 to 14,300 feet, tunnels blasted by dynamite and carved by the arduous labor of Khenj miners bear witness to the dangers inherent in this occupation. Miners descend into shafts illuminated only by lanterns, their every movement calculated to minimize the threat of cave-ins or falling rocks. The precariousness is amplified by the isolation of the mining sites, with basic shelters often located far from the mine entrance, delaying assistance in case of accidents [Page 17 of PDF]. Despite these life-threatening risks, men across Panjshir are compelled into this work due to the scarcity of other employment opportunities. Wahab recounts how many miners work under strenuous and dangerous conditions, sometimes waiting weeks for payment, which is entirely contingent on the discovery of "gem-like" emeralds. This desperate reliance on the land, where "life and death are also an inescapable reality that must be minimized and managed", highlights the profound material precarity of their livelihoods, compounded by the fluctuating demands of the global emerald market.

In recent years, extraordinary Afghan emeralds have arrived in unprecedented numbers at elite gemological laboratories, notably the Swiss Gemological Institute S.S.E.F. These stones, dubbed "Panjshir type II," possess unique gemological properties that distinguish them from previously documented Afghan varieties, rivaling even the finest Colombian specimens. Their remarkably consistent inclusion patterns, chemical compositions, and spectral features suggest a single, high-quality deposit, leading to intensified mining operations and greater risks for miners like Wahab as they push deeper into the earth. This global recognition, exemplified by an "exceptional emerald ring" auctioned at Christie's that received high praise for its "beautifully saturated green color combined with an exceptional purity", creates a feedback loop that drives further extraction and commodification.

Despite improvements in mining methods noted in some parts of Panjshir, Wahab's operation remains a traditional shaft-and-tunnel system, largely reliant on dynamite for excavation. This "primitive and dangerous" technique, while effective, poses clear risks to both miners and the delicate emeralds themselves. However, the site also shows "technological incongruity", with expensive pneumatic drills and a Hitachi excavator, illustrating a hybrid approach born of necessity and conflict. The acquisition of explosives during the war and their repurposing for mining gems underscore how the lack of consistent governance and pervasive violence have prevented the establishment of regulated, large-scale mining operations, leaving local entrepreneurs and strongmen to fill the void.

Mining operates within a "fraternal system" [Page 18 of PDF], where men are connected through their district of origin or extended family. These gendered spaces are almost exclusively male, from direct mining labor to dealing precious minerals. Wahab’s candid discussion about the use of dynamite powder offered a stark glimpse into the profound effect of war on everyday life and technology. The term "artisanal" or "primitive" seems inadequate to describe these "hybrid and improvised techniques born of necessity and conflict".

The role of "overhearing"—hearsay and rumors—in driving mineral rushes, as seen in South Africa's diamond and gold rushes [83], also applies to Afghanistan. Speculation fuels mining futures, creating narratives that both obscure and enable extraction's promises. Unlike fuel resources, gem mining involves additional pre-extraction phases beyond initial prospecting, including deposit development and meticulous extraction to avoid damaging crystals. Miners often face an impasse: blast deeper and risk breaking crystals, or halt excavation.

Wahab’s reflection on his decade in mining—"I am far

poorer than I used to be"—highlights the "astonishing volatility" of the industry and the chasm between market projections and mining realities. His experience of uncovering opaque emerald crystal, only suitable for "cheap" cabochons, exposes the fundamental disconnect Salah, the Afghan geologist, criticized: an "obsession with monetary evaluation that obscured the practical realities of extraction". Salah decried the "dollar-centric evaluation" that fueled hyperbolic claims of Afghanistan being the "second Saudi Arabia", arguing that such reductive developmentalist practices are divorced from actual mining conditions and quality.

Wahab's predicament further illustrates the complexities of formalizing artisanal mining, which often fails due to rigid regulatory frameworks that disregard existing informal institutions and property rights arrangements among miners and inhabitants [103, 89]. These informal systems, as described by Peluso (2018) in Indonesia, involve "sophisticated systems of labor organization, revenue sharing, and territorial claims" that operate outside state control. The persistence of informal mining points to the emergence of "resource territories" with their own systems of authority and knowledge practices. The mining sites thus become contested spaces where state power, traditional rights, and international interests converge, complicating conventional narratives that portray formalization as a simple solution to conflict and poverty.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's geological landscape is a testament to its profound natural wealth, particularly in precious gemstones. The historical and modern "exploratory geology" efforts have gradually unveiled the extent of this potential, confirming the long-held notion of a "gemological El Dorado." However, this "El Dorado" is not a static treasure chest waiting to be simply opened; it is a dynamic frontier whose full realization depends on navigating a complex interplay of geological potential, historical legacies, and contemporary socio-political realities.

While extensive surveys have provided a clearer picture of Afghanistan's mineral resources, the journey from exploration to sustainable extraction is far from complete. Challenges such as insecurity, corruption, and a lack of proper infrastructure continue to impede progress. Nevertheless, the immense value of its resources offers a compelling pathway for future development, provided that the focus shifts towards transparent governance, responsible mining practices, and equitable distribution of wealth. The narrative of Afghanistan's minerals should move beyond the "resource curse" to embrace the potential for a "resource blessing," where its hidden riches can contribute to a more stable and prosperous future for its people. The "after exploratory geology" phase is not an end, but an invitation to a more comprehensive and responsible engagement with Afghanistan's enduring gemological promise.

The insights from Wahab's story powerfully demonstrate that the process of obtaining mineral wealth is fraught with risk and uncertainty, extending beyond mere economic valuation to encompass the human cost and the "astonishing volatility" of the industry. The allure of a "big discovery" often tempts individuals into mining, even as they toil for extended periods in grueling and dangerous conditions without finding anything of significant economic value. The continuous narration of the resource tale by corporate agents, the state, and the press, promising change and development, often obscures the "moral ambiguity" of such activities. By paying close attention to the choices made by individuals like Wahab, we begin to fathom the elusiveness of a resource's true value and how its production is inseparable from imperial exploration, geological imaginations, and lives lived "in extremis".

This paper has argued that geological imaginaries were not simply imposed on resource frontiers but were "co-produced through complex mutual interactions" between imperial exploration, scientific practices, and local knowledge systems. Wahab's personal experience vividly illustrates how these knowledge-power relations manifest in lived realities, shaping individual lives as profoundly as they do collective social worlds. By meticulously tracing how geological knowledge and power reconfigure resource frontiers, we can perceive extraction not as an inevitable source of conflict, but rather as the very ground upon which imperial pasts and present struggles converge to determine who ultimately benefits from mineral wealth—and, crucially, at what human and environmental cost.

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