

# Afghanistan: The Taliban and Post-Taliban Era,

by Robert Jack

After the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country in 1988-89 there was no real functioning central government in Afghanistan. The "Government" nominally ran the country, but its writ ran little beyond Kabul and it had rather more pressing concerns than worrying about new stamp issues. It may be without precedent in modern times but between 1990 and 2001 there were no new stamps. Four stamps were surcharged in the mid-1990s, and it is possible that four others were prepared for use in 1996 but not issued (these are described below), but other than that: *nothing*.

When the Taliban came to power in late 1996 things did not change. Their priorities too lay elsewhere. The postal system continued to operate, at least in the major population centres, but post offices had to make do with whatever stocks of stamps on which they could lay their hands. They also had to contend with an economy in tatters and where inflation had rocketed. At the height of Taliban power, in 1999, 10,000 Afghanis were worth about 10 pence... or to put it another way, 1 afghani was worth 1/1000 of a penny. The last stamps listed by Stanley Gibbons, issued in 1989, had face values of 1, 2, 3 and 4 afghani (SG 1283-1286).

From a philatelist's point of view these events make life both interesting and problematic and this article seeks to outline a few of the intriguing avenues for exploration that this relatively recent period affords the collector.

- There were no new issues of stamps between 1990 and 2001 so the postal system had to make do with whatever stamps could be found.

A quick glance at any online auction site and this statement might seem a little odd. There appear to be hundreds if not thousands of Afghan "stamps" for sale from the 1990s. However, I use the inverted commas deliberately. Many issues appeared in the period from 1990-2001 purporting to be legitimate Afghan stamps. It is believed that some of these may have been prepared under a contract between the Rabbani Government (1992-1996) and a German firm, the rest are totally spurious. Apart from the four issues detailed below however, there is no evidence that any of these "stamps" were available for or saw legitimate postal use – or indeed even reached Afghanistan.

They seem to have been no more than a fund-raising exercise and are perhaps best classed as cinderella labels. In a letter to the UPU in August 2000 the Ministry of Communications of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (i.e. the by then Taliban-led Government) declared that "because of certain problems, it has not been able to print or issue any new postage stamps since 1989. Consequently, any postage stamps issued since 1989 are illegal issues." Many of these issues often have very un-Afghan themes. One cannot imagine then Taliban-controlled Afghanistan issuing stamps commemorating Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe in 2000 for example. But you can find and buy them online.

So what stamps actually were being used? Various issues



Fig. 1

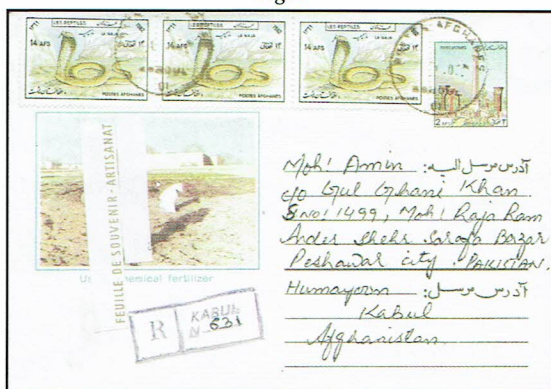


Fig. 2

are known to have been pressed into use during this period the oldest of which, dating back to 1931, are imperfect proof examples of the 40 poul National Assembly issue (SG 215) several examples of which are known used during May 1999 (see Fig. 1). Many of the low value definitives from 1932 and 1934 can also be found and all are considerably scarcer used on cover during the 1990's than they are used during the 1930's. There do seem to be patterns of usage whereby a particular stamp is brought into use, used for a few months until the stock is presumably exhausted, then replaced by another issue.

From the Taliban period, issues from 1985 and 1987 featuring flowers, mushrooms and plants are also regularly found. This brings us to the next point–

- The Taliban banned the representation of the human form – so no old stamps featuring people could be used

The stamps used during the Taliban period show buildings, flora and fauna but not people. The enforcement of this Taliban decree meant that even a pre-Taliban postal stationery envelope with a picture of a farmer spreading fertiliser had to have the farmer covered over (Fig. 2). The surprising exception is the 1951 20 poul Buddha at Bamian stamp (SG 324). What is not surprising is that there were large quantities of that particular stamp available for use: it had been withdrawn shortly after issue in 1951 after complaints from neighbouring Pakistan which objected to receiving mail from an Islamic country franked with an image of the Buddha. So, there would have been large remainder stocks available for use, but the fact that it was used is still surprising given that the Taliban's dislike of the Buddha at Bamian was such that one of their infamous last acts was to dynamite it.

- Because of the high inflation, stamps were obviously not being used at their face value, but at what rate were they being used?

This is the most complex area and is still being researched by the author. The 1989 Tourism stamps seem to have been used firstly without surcharge, then from about February 1997 to February 1998 with surcharge, then again without surcharge. This is the only issue to have been surcharged and it has to be assumed that when surcharged these particular stamps were actually used at their surcharged values. Then inflation outstripped the surcharge and they were again used without surcharge.

The surcharge takes the form of a handstamp from a hand-held numbering machine and comes with either four or five digits which give a 300 x uplift to the face value, thus the 1 afghani is surcharged 0300 (or 00300), the 2 afghani 0600 (or 00600), the 3 afghani 00900 (but presumably 0900 might exist as well), and the 4 afghani 01200 (again, 1200 might also exist) (Fig 3). For the other stamps being used, the face values are meaningless.

Many, including the 1930's stamps, are denominated in poul (100 poul = 1 afghani) and by the 1990's were to all intents



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

worthless. A cover from Kabul to London dated 22nd May 1999 franked with 3 x 2 poul Newspaper stamp of 1961 illustrates the problem. Two internal covers within Kabul around the same date are franked with a single 2 poul stamp. At that time 2 poul was about 1/50,000 of a penny. The "real" value of the 2 poul stamp has yet to be determined, but one stamp whose "real" value has been "cracked" is the 20 poul Bamian Buddha stamp mentioned previously. Usage of this stamp in combination with surcharged stamps and alone means that it has been possible to determine that it was used at a value of 50 afghani – at least it was during the period February to July 1997 (Fig. 4).

## The post-Taliban era

The Taliban-led Government was ousted from power during November 2001 and in December 2001 a new Afghan government under Hamid Karzai was formed. The same month UN Security Council Resolution 1386 established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help assist the new administration and provide basic security for the country. The first stamp issue of the new Afghanistan was issued on the 8th May 2002 commemorating Ahmed Shah Massoud and had a face value of 14,000 afghani. He was assassinated, probably at the instigation of al-Qaeda, in a suicide bombing on the 9th September 2001, just two days before the attacks in the United States which led to the intervention of foreign forces in Afghanistan. Massoud was posthumously named "National Hero" by President Karzai and the date of his death is observed as a national holiday known as Massoud Day. (See front cover for illustrations.)

This was followed on the 18th July 2002 by an 11,000 afghani stamp in support of National Understanding and a 25,000 afghani stamp mourning the destruction of the Bamian Buddha. By now a degree of economic stability had been achieved and between 7th October 2002 and 2nd January 2003, a new Afghani was introduced to replace the old currency. Two replacement rates of exchange were used, depending on whether the "old" afghani banknote had been issued by the Rabbani administration (1 new afghani = 1,000 old afghani), or that of General Dostum (the Northern Alliance) (1 new afghani = 2,000 old afghani). At its introduction, the new Afghani was valued at 43 afghani = \$1 US. As at October 2014, the rate was 55.5 afghani = \$1 US so it is bearing up quite well.

The introduction of the new currency also had a philatelic effect. In 2003, following the currency revaluation, the Afghan Post Office legitimised the continued use of the 2002 issues discounting all zeros in the value (Fig. 5). In addition, four other stamps were also legitimised: whether these four issues saw use



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Rabbani/Northern Alliance Government which might indicate that they were prepared by that administration, but not brought into use before it fell and was replaced by the Taliban. In quality, design and subject matter these four stamps are very different to the other so-called issues of this period. Since the resumption of stamp issues in 2002 Afghanistan's output has been commendably modest, although whether this is by design or because of circumstances on the ground is not clear. There was a blip in 2003 when a spate of thematic commemoratives appeared, but the totals are still low–

2002	4 stamps	As detailed above + Human Rights
2003	39 + 7 Miniature Sheets	Farmer's Day, Orchids, Mohammed's Birthday, Anti-TB Day, Loya Jurga, Anti-narcotics Day, Dogs, Lighthouses (Afghanistan is landlocked!), Independence Day, Literacy Day, Post Day, Archaeology, The Koran, Native Animals, Tourism
2004	10 + 1 Miniature Sheet	Anti-TB Day, 1st Presidential Elections, Inauguration of President, Women's Day
2005	1 + 1 Miniature Sheet	Diplomatic Relations with China
2006	14 + 1 Miniature Sheet	Mine Clearance, Independence Day, Literacy Day, Post Day, Tourism, Elimination of Violence Against Women, 800th Birth Anniversary of Balkhi Roomi (poet)
2007	9	Anniversary of Parliamentary Elections, Balkhi Roomi (2nd Issue), National Dance, Fine Arts Day, Meeting Of ECO Postal Authorities, National Unity
2008	2	1150th Anniversary of Birth of Rodaki (poet), Red Crescent
2009	1	Khawaja Abdullah Ansari Peer Herat (poet)
2010	1	World Environment Protection Day
2011	1	World Literacy Day
2012	2	World Peace Day, SAARC (Regional Co-operation)
2013	None known so far.	

If you're looking to collect a new country with a modest output, look no further! (Robert Jack's article on early issues appeared in the October issue)

before their re-valuation, or were previously "prepared for use but not issued" is still unclear but none has been seen used prior to 2003. All four stamps are dated 1996 and they commemorate Farmer's Day, the Birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, the 77th Anniversary of Independence, and the Fourth Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution (Fig. 6).

This latter seems to be a reference to the advent of the