

**Western History**  
**MA, Semester –II,**  
**Paper IV-A: South Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (1858-1900)**

**ABDUR RAHMAN KHAN (AFGANISTAN)**

**By**

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**Abdur Rahman Khan** (between 1844 – October 1, 1901) was Emir of Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901. He is known for uniting the country after years of internal fighting and negotiation of the Durand Line Agreement with British Raj.

Abdur Rahman Khan was the first child and only son of Mohammad Afzal Khan, and grandson of Dost Mohammad Khan. Abdur Rahman Khan re-established the writ of the Afghan government after the disarray that followed the second Anglo-Afghan war.

He became known as *The Iron Amir* because his government was a military despotism resting upon a well-appointed army administered through officials absolutely subservient to an inflexible will and controlled by a widespread system of espionage, and for his crushing of a number of rebellions by various tribes who were led by his relatives.

Before his death in Herat, in 1863, Abdur Rahman's grandfather, Dost Mohammad Khan, nominated his third son, Sher Ali Khan, as his successor, passing over the two elder brothers, Afzal Khan and Azam Khan. Abdur Rahman Khan played a prominent role in the fierce and long-drawn struggle for power waged by his father and his uncle, A'zam Khān, against his cousin Shīr 'Alī. Shīr 'Alī's victory in 1869 drove 'Abd al-Raḥmān into exile in Russian Turkistan, where he lived at Samarkand until Shīr 'Alī's death in 1879, a year after the outbreak of the war between the British and the Afghans. 'Abd al-Raḥmān returned to Afghanistan in 1880, was heartily welcomed by his people, and remained in northern Afghanistan until the British negotiated a settlement recognizing 'Abd al-Raḥmān as *amīr* in return for his acknowledgment of the British right to control his foreign relations. 'Abd al-Raḥmān pacified the country and consolidated his authority. During the years 1880–87, he crushed a revolt by the powerful Ghilzai tribe and an unexpected

rebellion led by his cousin Ishāq Khān; he also decisively defeated Shīr ‘Alī’s son Ayūb, who raided intermittently from his base in Herāt.

### **Durand Line**

‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s reign is notable for the agreement reached on the demarcation of Afghanistan’s northwestern border with Russia, the result of talks held near Kabul in 1893 with a British delegation led by Sir Mortimer Durand, under which ‘Abd al-Raḥmān accepted the **Durand line** as his frontier and thereby relinquished some hereditary rights over the tribes on the eastern border.

Abd al-Raḥmān also reorganized the administrative system of the country and initiated internal reforms. He brought in foreign experts, imported machinery for making munitions, introduced manufacture of consumer goods and new agricultural tools, and established Afghanistan’s first modern hospital. He imposed an organized government upon a divided population and maintained the balance in dealing with the British in India and with the Russian Empire. His interest lay in keeping powerful neighbours, whether friends or foes, outside his kingdom. He knew this to be the only policy that would be supported by the Afghan nation. His adventurous life, his forcible character, the position of his state as a barrier between the Indian and the Russian empires, and the skill with which he held the balance in dealing with them, combined to make him a prominent figure in contemporary Asian politics and will mark his reign as an epoch in the history of Afghanistan. The Amir received an annual subsidy from the British government of 1,850,000 rupees. He was allowed to import munitions of war.<sup>[3]</sup> He succeeded in imposing an organized government upon the fiercest and most unruly population in Asia; he availed himself of European inventions for strengthening his armament, while he sternly set his face

against all innovations which, like railways and telegraphs, might give Europeans a foothold within his country.

### **Dictatorship and the "Iron Amir"**

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Abdur Rahman Khan's government was a military despotism resting upon a well-appointed army; it was administered through officials absolutely subservient to an inflexible will and controlled by a widespread system of espionage; while the exercise of his personal authority was too often stained by acts of unnecessary cruelty.<sup>[3]</sup> He held open courts for the receipt of petitioners and the dispensation of justice; and in the disposal of business he was indefatigable.



*Abdur Rahman Khan in 1897*

In the 1880s, the "Iron Emir" decided to strategically displace some members of different ethnic groups in order to bring better security. For example, he "uprooted troublesome Durrani and Ghilzai Pashtun tribes and transported them to Uzbek and Tajik populated areas in the north, where they could spy on local

Dari-speaking, non-Pashtun ethnic groups and act as a screen against further Russian encroachments on Afghan territory." From the end of 1888, the Amir spent eighteen months in his northern provinces bordering upon the Oxus, where he was engaged in pacifying the country that had been disturbed by revolts, and in punishing with a heavy hand all who were known or suspected to have taken any part in rebellion.

### **Legacy**

Afghan society has mixed feelings about his rule. Some remember him as a ruler who initiated many programs for modernization and effectively prevented the country from being occupied by Russia and Britain during the Great Game. On the other hand, some sectors of Afghanistan remember him as a domestically violent and geopolitically weak ruler in that he was brought to power by the British and declared war on Afghan minorities instead of fighting the British who were deciding Afghanistan's foreign policy for him.

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