

A view from the Afghan diaspora

Tabasum Akseer

Although I have lived most of my life in Canada, Afghanistan is my family's homeland and, along with other Canadians, we are committed to supporting its restoration.

During the Soviet war in Afghanistan from 1979 until 1989, over five million Afghans – including my immediate family – fled abroad. My parents settled in Canada in 1989 but, like many others, our family returns as regularly as possible to maintain our ties with our community and family back in Afghanistan.

We are thankful for our status as Canadian citizens and for the opportunities and freedoms we are afforded, yet we desire our homeland to return to peace so that we may eventually repatriate and continue living out our interrupted dreams. While the current volatile situation makes it impractical to repatriate, there are smaller measures that many within the diaspora participate in – measures that show a collective commitment to the maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity of Afghanistan. For us, with our memories and our allegiances, Afghanistan is not as a barren, war-torn society but rather one that has been neglected and is in need of repair.

For example, our family makes annual trips, often for months at a time, to Afghanistan. For my father, Mir Ahmad Akseer Shinwari, a doctor specialising in communicable diseases who used to work in the refugee camps in Pakistan, his focus has been the health and well-being of those in our ancestral village and nearby, providing free medical consultations from a small clinic he built years ago. My mother Ambara also plays an important role, enabling rural women access to medical care; she either accompanies my father on house calls or sits alongside him in the clinic, providing a female presence to reassure conservative women who are uncomfortable in such close proximity to a non-related male. The type of health care provided in this clinic is very basic, yet for locals it is significant and for some it is the first time they have been seen

by a doctor. The passion with which the clinic is operated by two expatriates is a constant reminder of the desires and hopes that many Afghans abroad have for Afghanistan.

Many Afghans I have known in the West express their desire to return to their ancestral homeland – but only once they have something to 'give back' or 'contribute'. Remittances, along with repatriation for the purposes of capacity building and international advocacy, are some of the more obvious ways in which Afghans in the West 'give back'. It is difficult to make an accurate assessment of remittances because of the informal nature of such systems but the World Bank estimates that remittances from abroad provide support for 15% of rural Afghan households, covering roughly 20% of a family's daily expenditure. A report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development in 2007 estimated remittances to Afghanistan to contribute 29.6% of Afghanistan's total GDP.¹

Dreams versus reality

My siblings and I had spent most of our lives in Canada and knew little about the country we had escaped decades previously. Thus, the concept of 'giving back' by contributing to a special project during our Afghan vacations was, admittedly, romanticised. The first time I visited Afghanistan, in 2003, my siblings and I took with us teaching supplies to support Afghan girls' education. Soon after we reached the village, however, it became clear that many of the problems preventing rural girls' access to education were logistical: unsafe school routes, hidden landmines, unsafe classrooms without walls or fences (hindering *purdah* for females) and even local hooligans. Though a deeply conservative culture also deterred some from attending school, many had support from their parents and would be

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able to attend school if the aforementioned risks could be mitigated. The lack of *purdah* was addressed initially by erecting a steel fence for one of the local schools and later, with the consent of our parents, by donating some ancestral land for a new all-girls school. While our stationery and second-hand laptops were a practical idea, realistically the problems are more intrinsically connected to infrastructure and safety.

In retrospect, that first trip was an interesting experience. As members of the Afghan diaspora, we had assumed we knew all the answers. We assumed a position of the (mis)informed (though well-intentioned) outsider with our desire to bring change and offer strength. It is important that Afghans within the diaspora – and non-Afghans with the passion and zeal for humanitarian goals – look beyond the immediate, quick-fix solutions and rather use an approach that is more nuanced and focused on long-term solutions.

And beyond 2014?

The current transition, with all the political, security and international funding implications, has not to date had an impact on my own family's plans or expectations. The area which we are mostly involved with (Rodat district in Nangarhar) has maintained a degree of neutrality over the past ten years and though there are reminders of war throughout the district and province, for our family it has not posed any hindrance or

threats. Depending on the political climate within their respective home areas, other families within the Afghan diaspora may feel differently.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted with young Afghan women in Canada,² my opinion is that their return is not contingent on peace but rather on having 'something to offer'. These active, vocal and motivated young women in the diaspora have a zeal and passion for aiding the reconstruction efforts but are a resource not yet tapped by international humanitarian and development agencies.

Tabasum Akseer t.akseer@queensu.ca is currently a doctoral candidate in the Cultural Studies Program at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. www.queensu.ca/

1. Siegel M (2013) 'Understanding Afghan migration', Debating Development blog <http://blog.qeh.ox.ac.uk/?p=147>

2. Akseer T (2011) *Identity Formation and Negotiation of Afghan Female Youth in Ontario* (Unpublished Masters of Education thesis), Brock University, St Catharines, Canada.



Returnee refugee girls doing homework. Maymana, Faryab Province, Afghanistan.

Afghan diaspora

Pakistan and Iran together host some 2.5 million Afghan registered refugees, with equivalent numbers of unregistered refugees also expected to be present in both host countries. In addition, it is estimated that there are some 300,000 settled in the United States, at least 150,000 in the United Arab Emirates, perhaps 125,000 in Germany, and smaller numbers in Canada, Australia and across Europe. While many of those in the UAE are temporary labour migrants, the majority elsewhere are settled permanently and often educated and skilled. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 Afghan refugees in India, mostly settled in Delhi, including many Hindus and Sikhs. The economic and political significance of

the diaspora outweighs its numerical significance. It sends home remittances on a significant scale that support households and communities in Afghanistan (and in refugee camps), it invests in Afghanistan, and has contributed significantly to political processes over the past 12 years.

Extracted from: Tyler D 'Reframing solutions for Afghan refugees: the role of humanitarian NGOs' on p18-21; and Koser K (2014) *Transition, Crisis and Mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality*, International Organization for Migration. www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/Country/docs/Transition-Crisis-and-Mobility-in-Afghanistan-2014.pdf