

# **The Reverse Brain Drain: Afghan-American Diaspora in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and Reconstruction**

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The loss of human resources that Afghanistan experienced following the Soviet invasion of 1979 is often referred to as the ‘brain drain’. This paper postulates that a similar but ‘reverse brain drain’ is currently in progress as former Afghan nationals return to the country in droves to assist in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. While remaining aware of risks and challenges, the potential for building the capacity of civil society and the private sector is at its peak. This thesis is examined within the context of Afghan culture, opportunities for personal and professional growth in the United States for the diaspora, and how these positive externalities can be harnessed to bring the maximal value added to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Individual and group behavior are as important an element of peacebuilding as is education or skills level, and by behaving professionally and collectively, the Afghan-American diaspora can best influence policy planning and implementation of reconstruction in Afghanistan.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Farhad Ahad<sup>1</sup>, a committed and energetic activist and professional, a true role model for the Afghan-American diaspora who gave his life for the economic development of his country.

## **I. Introduction**

### *Background*

Twenty-three years of war have left Afghanistan devastated. Following the brutal Soviet invasion, the country was further ravaged by fundamentalist warring parties supported by neighboring countries and international interests. The physical destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods is undeniably one of the worst in the history of recent conflicts, however, the complete annihilation of social capital and human capacity in Afghanistan has left gaping wounds that are the deepest shock to the nation. The assassination of intellectual leadership by the fundamentalists, the loss of traditional kinship and trade relationships, the exodus of educated Afghans, and the degradation of the education system, have accomplished far more harm than bombs or tanks ever could. It is from this ground-zero that Afghanistan now emerges to stake a claim for its survival.

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<sup>1</sup> Fariba Nawa, ‘Bombed and betrayed’, The Nation 03/18/2003  
By Fariba Nawa

Although the influx of international aid and support to rebuild infrastructure and livelihoods since 9/11 has been swift and welcome, the damage to the nation's human resource base will take more than money or training programs can supply. Social capital can only be built from within, and only the Afghans themselves can heal and rebuild the relationships that were fractured by war and atrocities in the name of religion.

### *Definition*

In defining the Afghan diaspora, this paper distinguishes between regional refugees from countries neighboring Afghanistan such as Pakistan, India, and Iran, versus those members of the diaspora with more resources who were able to settle in the west. The focus of this paper will be the latter, although the former are also instrumental in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. As a phenomenon in itself, the voluntary repatriation of a total of 2 million Afghan refugees over a period of six months from Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan cannot be matched in terms of quantity and speed<sup>2</sup>. This is the largest voluntary return in the history of recorded refugee repatriations, and several papers have already been produced on this incredible event. This paper seeks to add value to the literature by providing an account of the post-9/11 western-based diaspora's return to Afghanistan. Hence, the brain drain that began with the exodus of the educated Afghans immediately following the Soviet invasion of 1979 is being reversed today. This definition of the diaspora is further narrowed by focusing on the Afghan-American diaspora in particular, whereas Afghans in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia have also made substantial contributions to peacebuilding and reconstruction in Afghanistan. A treatise on the entire Afghan diaspora is beyond the scope of this paper.

Any discussion of the Afghan diaspora cannot be complete without including the component of social class in Afghan society, particularly the complex multiple layers of the former oligarchy, which comprises a large proportion of the Afghans settled in the United States. Indeed, this author postulates that class is more of a barrier and cause for conflict among Afghans than is ethnicity. Among other factors, the rigid hierarchical nature of the Afghan oligarchy is significant in that it has been a disincentive to activism and lobbying in the United States. One of the key elements of Afghan society, one's perception by others, or 'what will people say?' has limited unity and action in the Afghan diaspora in more ways than one. The fact that one's behavior and actions reflect directly on one's family, clan, and tribe is a central component of this behavior, as is the indoctrinated tendency in Afghan society to take the course of least resistance. The latter is more interesting to explore as it has roots in the historically severe reactions to questioning authority or resisting the status quo. One has only to see the 'wall of bodies', where dissenters were buried alive by an ancient king on a central mountain in the capital city of Kabul to understand the nature of this behavior.

Fundamental to the issue of reputation and image, is also the world view that resources are scarce and life is a zero-sum game. This is common in many developing countries, because of the simple fact that poverty is the status quo for most of the population, and

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<sup>2</sup> Turton and Marsden, Taking Refugees for a Ride? The politics of refugee return to Afghanistan, Issue Paper Series Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, December 2002, p. 21.

those with resources attempt to keep them. An interesting Afghan adage illustrates this concept:

*When someone finds a huge pile of honey, they climb up to the top, start eating it, and reach down to help their countrymen get up and get a share also. When Afghans find a huge pile of honey, they climb up to the top and kick other Afghans down as they try to reach up to get a share.<sup>3</sup>*

The significance of this world view for unifying the Afghan diaspora as transnational actors is paramount, as it clearly discourages sharing knowledge, power, or resources. Class comes into this equation as a strong factor that has kept Afghans in the United States apart socially, politically, and economically. The emphasis on social class overrides ethnicity since many of the urbanized upper classes had intermarried among themselves whether they were Tajik, Pashtun, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, Nooristani, etc., and this diversity is reflected in the composition of the diaspora in the United States.

The fact that many members of what would be considered the lower classes in Afghan society have had access to education and opportunities in the United States, previously unavailable to them, means that we have a rich base of human resources to draw from, however this is exactly where the barriers arise in Afghan society. There has been some flexibility in recent years, but the overriding question of “Who was your father?” and “What family are you from?” will continue to plague Afghan society and hinder development unless clear public messages are communicated regarding advancement by merit and achievement. Unyielding class structures that are still promoted by the older guard inhibits further diversity, which is one of the best assets that the diaspora could bring back with them.

A valuable opportunity is for us to turn this perception of scarce public goods on its head by demonstrating that there is actually enough for everyone, particularly in America today. The fact that most of us have succeeded based on merit, hard work and opportunity that the United States has made available to us, should be enough evidence to disprove the old belief systems necessitating nepotism and backstabbing. Only when we can see that by helping each other, we are actually helping ourselves, can we truly make a difference towards peace and stability in Afghanistan. There is plenty to go around – we just have to help each other get it.

Some caveats are also in order when weighing the contributions of the diaspora. These will be explored in further detail in the section on challenges and constraints, but the key caution to be heeded in is a lesson that was learned in the earliest record of a reconstruction effort – that of the South in the American Civil War. Carpetbaggers and scalawags, or those who would take advantage of opportunities for purely personal gain, were the scourge of the reconstruction effort in the ‘New South’, and as always, basic human interests range widely, so in spite of the contributions the diaspora has to offer, it should not be seen as a panacea or replacement for the participatory development of Afghanistan by the people who stayed and suffered through the last twenty-three years.

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<sup>3</sup> Abdul Wali, security guard at the World Bank, personal communication 1994.

The latter should receive the bulk of the benefits and advantages that will come with reconstruction.

## II. Mechanisms to engage the diaspora

Mechanisms to engage the Afghan diaspora in policy planning and implementation extend beyond the actual employment of Afghan-Americans in the transitional government of Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>, or in the multilateral<sup>5</sup>, bilateral, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are involved in reconstruction<sup>6</sup>. There are a number of contributions that members of the diaspora have made in influencing policy planning and implementation outside of formal structures of employment, but the focus should be on crucial *behaviors* that benefit the community as a whole, such as:

- 1) Advocacy – changing behaviors in the community, teaching by example, letting others take credit for work, pushing the concept that there is plenty of money available for all of our work, inspiring by example (e.g., Seema Ghani)
- 2) Building tolerance – organizing informal dinners and social events, creation of civic groups brought together disparate members of the Afghan diaspora (ethnically and religiously), via community work that has a common goal that no one can argue with, e.g., clothing drives, fundraisers.
- 3) Sharing knowledge and networking, particularly by email.
- 4) Professionalism in all communications and activities.

These behaviors lead to the kind of lasting change in Afghan society that can overcome the darkness and nepotism of the past that has kept us behind the rest of the world for so long. One example is the article written by Dr. Ashraf Ghani, then Lead Anthropologist at the World Bank, in October, 2001 in the Wall Street Journal decrying the plans to ‘bomb Afghanistan back to the stone age’. Dr. Ghani risked a valuable and high level position at the World Bank when he chose to make this personal statement, and he did indeed have to resign from the World Bank, but his courage and personal conviction were inspiring to a generation of Afghan-Americans who saw that it is worth it to speak out and stand up for what you believe in. Dr. Ghani is currently Minister of Finance for the transitional government of Afghanistan.

A healthy and vibrant civil society is essential to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and this is where the diaspora can make the most sustained contribution. Since the majority of Afghans living inside the country have spent the last 24 years in a climate of war, natural disasters, and lawlessness, the very institutions that are necessary for civil society to evolve, a free media, a democratically elected government, and rule of law, have not existed. For Afghan-Americans, who take those foundations as their God-given rights,

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<sup>4</sup> “Afghan Americans Hold Levers of Power: U.S. Citizens Appointed to Senior Posts in Kabul Draw Praise, Scrutiny”, The Washington Post, Monday, February 10, 2003, pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Of the hundreds of UN international staff in Afghanistan, only four are Afghan-Americans, although many of the returning members of the diaspora have the degrees, training, and qualifications to be hired by the international organizations. The reason given is that the local staff will be alienated, but the reality is the reverse. Personal communication, Rina Amiri, January 2003 and author’s own experience in interviews.

<sup>6</sup> See Annex 2.

nurturing the establishment of civil society can take many forms<sup>7</sup>. How do you define civil society? For the purposes of this paper, civil society consists of any group of people or organization that does not belong to the state, civil service, or public sector. A few of the most visible manifestations of civil society in Afghan-American circles are discussed below.

*Professional bodies* - The growth of Afghan-American professional bodies has been relatively slow up until the recent events commencing reconstruction in Afghanistan, and even those that did exist were relatively weak and conflicted, e.g., the two versions of the Afghan Physician's Association of America: the one on the east coast and the one on the west coast simply could not reconcile differences. This older generation of organizations includes the Afghan Society of Engineers, Afghan Coalition, the Afghan-American Foundation (formerly The Afghanistan Foundation). Politics and personalities often hindered the ability of these groups to collaborate and progress. Significant capacity building is still necessary to bring these groups to a position where they can make a contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

The exception has been the younger generation of professional Afghans, who with conflict resolution skills and a great deal of patience, have been able to overcome the discord that seems to be endemic to Afghans. These professionals have been able to reach across these boundaries of ethnicity, class, and religion to at least engage in dialogue, if not actually come to accord on policy issues. Chief among these groups has been the Afghan Society of American Professionals (ASAP) of Fairfax, Virginia, whose founding body was the Society of Afghan Professionals (SAP) in San Francisco, California. The two organizations are still closely linked, but ASAP has branched out by developing links and franchises with other young Afghan professional groups in Chicago, Atlanta, and New York to broaden their network. The energy and coalition-building skills that these young groups bring add unique value towards the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Other similar groups that work in cohesion with the above are the Institute for Afghan Studies, Afghans 4 Tomorrow, Humanity in Crisis, and Help the Afghan Children. The fact that these groups are able to come to consensus on widely disparate issues is worth studying further for scaling up the model to build institutions among Afghans.

Optimally, these professional bodies would bring the most value added in supporting the growth of civil society by establishing counterpart groups in Afghanistan to augment the work of the government ministries that work in these sectors. The key priorities such professional counterparts should be decided by the stakeholders themselves, but from the perspective of this author are to develop:

- a) a regulatory framework,
- b) quality assurance,
- c) professional accountability standards, and
- d) knowledge of external opportunities

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<sup>7</sup> Afghan Civil Society: Strong constitutional guarantee for freedom of expression needed  
[http://www.developmentgateway.org/afghanistan/dg-contribute/item-detail?item\\_id=279705&version\\_id=163098](http://www.developmentgateway.org/afghanistan/dg-contribute/item-detail?item_id=279705&version_id=163098)

for each respective sector inside Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the existing trend for many of these groups has been to initiate individual ear-marked projects, mirroring the tendency among donors also to go for quick impact projects that reflect well upon the group, e.g., build schools, orphanages, donate drugs, etc. These groups would do best to remain in their own areas of professional competencies, and develop that expertise further inside Afghanistan, rather than trying to do relief or development work.

Another example of professional groups is the World Bank and International Monetary Fund Afghan Staff Club. The Afghan staff of these institutions have attempted to leverage their positions and influence into a coordinated group for Afghan advocacy. In November of 2000, this group drafted its by-laws and began a series of fundraising events for the drought in Afghanistan. While successful on a small-scale level (\$30,000 for FY2001), this group also suffered from many of the communication problems and conflicts as other bodies described above. However, this group still exists and is in the process of seeking professional facilitation to develop its conflict resolution skills. It has also grown further via the fact that both the World Bank and the IMF have opened up resident missions in Kabul and have hired a substantial number of highly qualified local staff from inside Afghanistan, which adds a different flavor to the composition of the group. These new members of the WB/IMF Staff Club bring their own vigor and talents into the existing organization, and it will be interesting to watch the evolution of this group. This group can also serve as a model for building Afghan coalitions in other international organizations such as the United Nations Organizations, the International Labor Organization, the World Economic Forum, and the International Red Cross.

*Students and youth* Student and youth organizations have always been the backbone of any advocacy movement, as they bring energy and idealism, but they generally have a high turnover rate due to their temporal nature. It is difficult to maintain a consistent strategy or mission with members joining and leaving in cycles of 3-4 years. The groups that have been successful in this arena are ones that have joined up with their counterparts inside Afghanistan. One outstanding example is the Afghan Youth Organization, based in Europe, which was able to liaise with the Youth and Children Development Program (YCDP) in Kabul and Mazar-I-Sharif via a youth forum that was sponsored by the Swiss Peace Foundation. Indeed, the Swiss Peace Foundation has made other solid contributions towards building peace in Afghanistan by bringing members of the diaspora and Afghans from inside the country together to build civil society by sponsoring conferences and meetings inside Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>. Athletic and sports organizations also fall within this category. Most recently, ASAP and the Afghan Sports Federation hosted an Afghan bicyclist from Jalalabad as he rode his bike from Afghanistan across Europe to Washington, D.C. and then to New York City as a symbolic action to keep the urgency of the Afghan humanitarian situation in people's minds. The entire route from Washington, D.C. to New York City was mapped with pitstops where the bicyclist could stop for rest and refreshments at Afghan-American homes.

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<sup>8</sup> Workshop for Consultation and Dialogue on Business and Industrial Investment in Afghanistan 19 – 22 July 2002 Kabul, Afghanistan

*Business community* Foreign direct investment will be a critical spur to economic development in Afghanistan, and the transitional government has recognized this by creating a very enabling environment for foreign investors. However, the country's own entrepreneurial prowess should not be ignored. Throughout history, Afghans have been renowned as for their acumen as traders and capitalists. Even following the 2001 U.S. bombings and subsequent air drops of yellow 'humanitarian aid packages', Afghans managed to profit by selling the contents of the aid packages (peanut butter, sleeping bags, etc.) to the local expatriate aid communities. The diaspora can add more value to this innate skill for selling by bringing the organizational and strategic elements of business management inside the country. The development of an Afghan chamber of commerce, independent trade organizations, and joint public-private partnerships, are all examples of the business community coming together to bring external private sector expertise on skills, know-how, business development, micro-credit and micro-finance, marketing, etc. to develop the commercial sectors in Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the diaspora has the advantage of knowing what the market for exports is and how local products should be marketed and packaged for best results. The return of the diaspora's business community to Afghanistan has several advantages towards accelerating domestic production and exports beyond the obvious stimulation of the local economy. Creating alternative occupations to belonging to militias, building self-esteem of former businessmen, and strengthening local capacities are among a few of these advantages. Simple steps that can be taken towards these goals in the absence of major capital investment immediately are:

- 1) Create a contact office, persons and processes for following up on the suggestions
- 2) Prioritize timing of industries and businesses for short-term, medium-term, and long-term.
- 3) Develop rules of conduct and acceptable practices for each level of practice (e.g., urban, provincial, regional, etc.).
- 4) Create available credit for micro-entrepreneurs along the lines of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

Particularly when it comes to gender, in the absence of the usual institutional vehicles, reaching out to include Afghan women both in diaspora and inside the country will be critical to avoiding the phenomenon of 'ghetto-izing' Afghan women's handicrafts into unmarketable tourist trinkets. Even more importantly, harnessing the enabling environment to facilitate access for women-owned businesses to infrastructure, energy, and other reconstruction projects – beyond the traditional female roles in the social sectors – will be a tremendous contribution. The challenging task of designing and implementing appropriate mechanisms to fund and manage private sector contributions to reconstruction belongs to the Afghan-American entrepreneurs and business leaders. For example, one potential product that the author has in mind is to create a product line based on Afghanistan's natural herbal, cosmetic, and hygienic products, such as the clay used by women to wash their hair, the henna dyes, soaps, rocks used as pumice stones,

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<sup>9</sup> The Afghan Chamber of Commerce is a non-governmental, public-interest, self-sufficient organization, meant to promote Afghan trade and industries both at home and abroad, and to defend the interests of Afghan traders before the domestic authorities and in their relations with foreign organizations. <http://www.afghanchamberofcommerce.com>

and the exfoliating agents commonly used on skin. The marketing of these products to high-end spas and salons (e.g., Bodyshop, Crabtree and Evelyn, Mercury, Bliss, etc.) and spas in the west as products of Afghan women's labor, with a percentage of the profits going directly to the producers could be extremely profitable if conducted strategically.

*Kinship ties* can often extend into reconstruction activities as demonstrated by one of the projects of the Afghanistan Development Organization, which has worked tirelessly through the war years to connect Afghan-Americans to projects that are in their area of origin (e.g., sponsoring a hydropower project in Logar if you are from Logar). This is not a unique model, but it does build on one of the strongest indigenous institutions in Afghan culture, that of the family, clan and tribe.

*Non-afghan mentors and relationship-builders* that have assisted members of the Afghan diaspora in learning about ourselves, each other, and our past, include Barney Rubin, Pam Hunte, Nancy Hatch Dupree, Bernt Glazer, and Mary McMakin. Each of these individuals have nurtured our personal development and guided our consciousness in being able to approach difficult issues with equanimity and wisdom, rather than anger and pain. This contribution cannot be overlooked, as fractured psyches cannot build peace. In addition, they have unstintingly given of their own time and energies to answer our questions, point us in the right direction, and inspire us by their own commitment to Afghanistan.

*The internet* Examples of diasporas that have bonded and built bridges via the internet abound. The Afghan diaspora has been a relative latecomer to this resource, but nonetheless, has made great progress, particularly after 9/11 in establishing bonds between divergent members of the diaspora. One model to emulate of a diaspora building bridges during a conflict situation is that of Burundi and Burundinet, which is a virtual community that has created a multiethnic Burundian diasporic community under conditions of great stress<sup>10</sup>.

The first of the unmoderated Afghan listservs that developed were operated by individuals with strong political bents and unprofessional conduct as demonstrated by the vitriolic name-calling content of their emails. Since 9/11, the quality of Afghan listservs has rapidly improved (Virtual Nation, Afghaniyaat, Afghan Solidarity, etc.) as they are now moderated and clearly prohibit political and ethnic misbehavior thereby serving the community as a knowledge-sharing device rather than a platform to vent<sup>11</sup>. Some of the most successful of these lists are actually run by individuals (e.g., Barney Rubin<sup>12</sup>, Bernt Glazer, the author herself) who have gradually gathered interested parties on their personal distribution lists. These lists operate by word of mouth primarily, and have limited scope and coverage. However, by copying the larger Afghan and donor listservs on the email, they have the potential to amplify their impact. The next challenge is to create thematic groups of interest, or communities of practice for people with specific

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<sup>10</sup> Kadende-Kaiser, Rose, "Interpreting Language and Cultural Discourse Among Burundians in the Diaspora: The Case of Burundinet", presented at American Anthropological Association Meetings, November 1999, Chicago, IL.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix \_\_\_ for list of Afghan listservs.

<sup>12</sup> See Barney Rubin's and Bernt Glazer's listservs.

interests in Afghan issues, such as gender or information technology. The demand clearly exists for these groups, but such development needs resources and dedicated staff. For example, several of the topic areas that are in demand by the development community are medical donations, mental health/psychosocial well-being of Afghans, and gender.

The World Bank's Development Gateway<sup>13</sup> Afghanistan Reconstruction page has attempted to meet this need to some degree, but it is also hampered by lack of resources. The key challenge for all of these groups will be maintaining consistent quality of content and maintenance after the current flame of interest in Afghanistan dies down.

Mechanisms that have assisted Afghan-Americans to return to Afghanistan for reconstruction and peacebuilding include:

- 1) Providing money for their salaries – WB trust fund allocated US\$1.5 million specifically for hiring professional expatriate trainers and experts, delay in use has been Government of Afghanistan not coming to agreement on use.
- 2) World Bank Database of Expertise
- 3) IOM RQA
- 4) Discussion fora by the Swiss Peace Foundation as mentioned earlier

The number one objection that is heard when policymakers and project implementers are requested to include Afghans in their programs is that there are no such qualified Afghans willing or available to perform the jobs. This has been refuted by the creation of the World Bank Afghanistan Directory of Expertise (DOB), which facilitates the identification of Afghan professionals, as well as non-Afghan professionals with significant experience in Afghanistan, to be employed in the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan<sup>14</sup>. Given the increasing need for experts on Afghanistan and reconstruction expertise more broadly, this directory lists voluntary information of individuals who are interested in contributing their skills and talents towards rebuilding Afghanistan. The directory is not all inclusive, but is intended to provide basic contact information with which organizations and individuals can identify persons with relevant expertise. The ultimate goal is to match needs and capabilities as reconstruction initiatives progress. Although marketing and dissemination have been minimal, this database has successfully matched numerous Afghans with firms that have hired them. The major difference between this database and the International Organization of Migration's (IOM) Return of Qualified Afghans<sup>15</sup> (RQA) program is that the latter hides the resume/CV and contact information and does the 'matching' itself, whereas the World Bank's DOB puts it all out there in the public domain for the parties themselves to contact each other.

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<sup>13</sup> The Development Gateway is a portal website on development issues, from which users can access information, resources, and tools, and into which they can contribute their own knowledge and experience.

<http://www.developgateway@worldbank.org>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/afghandirectory>.

<sup>15</sup> International Organization for Migration has launched a pilot stage of the Return Of Qualified Afghans Program with a view to boost rehabilitation efforts in the post-conflict Afghanistan through the progressive transfer of know-how of Afghan expatriate professionals to the socio-economic sector and administrative functions in their home country.

<http://www.iom-rqa.org>

#### IV. Challenges and constraints

What are the risks to the Afghan diaspora as well as to the country itself in this endeavor? The most costly risk thus far has been the loss of life. Three ministers are now dead, and several dynamic young community leaders also dead. Afghanistan cannot afford to lose precious human capital like this. Farhad Ahad, one of the most vibrant of young Afghan-Americans, with an MBA from the University of North Carolina, and founder of AfghanSolidarity.com left the United States to work for free as economic advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was one of three Afghans to perish on February 24, 2003, in a mysterious plane crash off the coast of Karachi, Pakistan. The team was to have observed Chinese mining operations in Pakistan to capture 'lessons learned' and implement them in Afghanistan. In addition, they were the central advisors in the \$US3.2 billion gas pipeline deal involving Pakistan and Turkmenistan.

The Afghan-American private sector is developed and has resources to share, however observations of their leadership at fora over the last few years have been disappointing. Rather than leveraging their influence and resources to gain access to more private sector funds, or to introduce the concept of public/private partnerships to the community, these captains of industry have whined about not having access to public monies (donor grants, including 'soft loans' from the World Bank and IMF) to kick-start the private sector inside Afghanistan. This behavior is closer to the crony capitalism that engulfed the privatized industries and public monies of the former Soviet Union, rather than true entrepreneurship and capital creation. President Karzai's speech at the Reconstruction Forum of January, 2002, said it well when he welcomed Afghan-Americans back home to their country, but requested that they please bring their own money, rather than trying to gain access to the money meant for the poor of Afghanistan.

Political advocacy is one area where the Afghan diaspora has been less successful than other diasporas in influencing and assisting political decision-making that affects Afghanistan. With the exception of the Northern Alliance, which hired professional lobbyists to assist it in securing U.S. support during the Taliban years, most Afghan lobbying has been limited to business interests<sup>16</sup> seeking to profit from the tentative gas pipeline deal that was floated in the mid-nineties, to individuals with strong personalities and agendas that have tried to build coalitions.

We cannot discount the negative externalities that also have contributed by the diaspora to the Afghan conflict as documented in Paul Collier's work on remittances from diasporas to warring parties during conflicts, however in the case of Afghanistan, this is smaller in scale simply due to the two facts that most Afghans abroad are not that wealthy and the majority of the funding for the conflict has come from other country governments<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Afghanistan-America Foundation, formerly the Afghanistan Foundation, personal participation and observation...for more info, see website...??

<sup>17</sup> INSERT REFERENCE Paul Collier, WB.

Another cautionary note is sounded by Sultan Barakat of York University: “In recent months much has been written about the importance of harnessing the expertise and energies of the diaspora. However, it needs to be recognized that the Afghan diaspora, particularly its most educated and articulate members settled largely in Western countries, is a reflection of the political, philosophical and religious debates/tensions that led to their migration. There is a risk that significant tensions will emerge if those who escaped the worst excesses of the war, many of whom have not lived in Afghanistan for decades, are now seen to dominate the debates and decisions about reconstruction. Again, the importance of ensuring that the ruling urban elite remains culturally connected to the rural mass, and that the benefits of reconstruction accrue to both rural and urban society, cannot be emphasized enough<sup>18</sup>.”

#### V. Sustaining momentum

Youth conferences are continuing. The Afghan Women’s film festival had its debut in New York City. Zohra Saed is composing an anthology of Afghan women’s voices through the war to exile and back again. The Afghan International School of Kabul (AISK) Alumni Association, who are by virtue of growing up in Afghanistan and maintaining a manic passion for it, also a type of diaspora, are also working on an anthology project, as well as a documentary film to keep attention focused on the funding crisis for reconstruction. To sustain momentum and to accelerate, the Afghan-American diaspora now needs to work on getting corporate sponsors, tapping private foundations, and establishing enough of a presence in political and academic circles to be considered a major actor in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

One excellent model is Indicorps, a new US-based non-profit organization that offers one-year service fellowships for Indian-Americans to work specific developmental projects in India. IndiCorps is aiming to set a new model for working on development projects. The overall objective is to find and work with local organizations in order to work with them on long-term institutional growth and goals as well as professionalism and at the same time helping the fellows understand the development challenges. The fellowships are designed to be one-of-a-kind transformational experiences, emphasizing both personal growth and international development. Fellows must have a college degree, apply specifically to projects of their interest and are selected on from a rigorous selection process that includes interviews, references, and exhaustive essays. Current projects vary from helping local organizations with administrative processes, collecting data to catalog program progress and build transparency, piloting small-scale agricultural experiments, training local artisans with business acumen, implementing sanitation initiatives, educating children with basic computer skills, designing public health education programs, etc to assisting the local NGOs with administrative processes, cataloging program progress, and building transparency. Zohra Saed plans on conducting a very similar activity via the Afghan Peace Corps, which she is directing.

Incentives – property - the fact that the current transitional government of Afghanistan is allowing expatriates to regain their pre-war properties cannot be ignored as an impetus

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<sup>18</sup> Barakat, S; Wardell, G , “Exploited by whom? An alternative perspective on humanitarian assistance to Afghan women”, Third World Quarterly, Vol. 23, no. 5 (2002) Pages: 909-930.

for their return. Indeed, the majority of the older generation of the Afghan diaspora has returned for this specific reason – to reclaim property that was seized by the Soviet-backed communist regime. If we look at examples of other diasporas, such as the newly independent Baltic states, the relationship between returning expatriates and the new government was enhanced by liberal granting of pre-conflict properties, whereas in Ukraine, only a small portion of the former-Soviet assets were regained, and thus few members of the diaspora returned to work with the new authorities<sup>19</sup>. Compare this with the Baltic states, where a large proportion of young professionals returned to work in the public and private sectors. Afghanistan is experiencing a similar renaissance of returnees, particularly among the youth who have given up lucrative careers in the west to work for pittance in government and NGO offices in Afghanistan<sup>20</sup>.

What is most needed now is direction. The Afghan-American diaspora needs to rationalize our strategy and direction. The academic and donor communities could most help us by providing us with the facilitation to shape common goals in a safe environment with the guidance of experienced conflict resolution specialists.

#### Key lessons learned and model behaviors for the Afghan-American diaspora

1. Do your homework before jumping in, use the advantage of the internet that you have, read and educate yourself before attending donor meetings or making public statements.
2. Share knowledge and information – the dividends will come back to you in time, like karma.
3. Stay in your area of expertise and share it with those inside the country.
4. Do not be a diva. Focus on common objectives, keep your eye on the big picture – what is best for Afghanistan? Not yourself.
5. Avoid personalizing issues, insanity is not contagious<sup>21</sup>
6. Keep talking, even if you agree to disagree.
7. Mentor others, youth listens and has power.
8. Focus on the positive<sup>22</sup>.
9. Do not create another NGO. In addition to augmenting competition for resources, the creation of individual NGOs leads to personality cults, inefficiency, and a plethora of websites with minimal content or substance.

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<sup>19</sup> Oxford Analytica Brief “UKRAINE: Diaspora Issues (E)”, August 30, 1999:1.

<sup>20</sup> Seema Ghani, Farhad Ahad, Abdullah Sherzai, etc. see Annex II.

<sup>21</sup> Barney Rubin.

<sup>22</sup> Nasreen Gross’ one email on families and Eid in Kabul generated more positive responses than any number of complaining or negative emails that told about what *wasn't* working in Kabul.

Annex 1 Bibliography (limited)

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Kauffman, Mark “Afghan Americans Hold Levers of Power: U.S. Citizens Appointed to Senior Posts in Kabul Draw Praise, Scrutiny”, The Washington Post, Monday, February 10, 2003, pp. 12-13.

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Workshop for Consultation and Dialogue on Business and Industrial Investment in Afghanistan 19 – 22 July 2002 Kabul, Afghanistan

Annex 2 Members of Afghan diaspora in Key Positions (this list is not all-inclusive by any means, only the ones that come to my head immediately).

Ali Ahmed Jalali, formerly broadcaster and director at Voice of America (VOA), now Interior Minister

Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi, formerly professor at Providence College, Governor of Central Bank

Nasreen Gross, formerly management consultant in Virginia, currently women's activist, faculty and journalist at the University of Kabul

Hedayat Amin-Arsalla, former WB official, currently Vice President and Chair of Civil Service Commission

Ashraf Ghani, former Lead Anthropologist at the World Bank, currently Minister of Finance

Homira Nassery, former Health Specialist at the World Bank, currently Health Manager at Save the Children/U.S. based in Mazar-I-sharif.

Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, formerly resident of Virginia, Minister of Information and Culture

Sherief Fayeze, formerly professor, currently Minister of Higher Education

Abdullah Mojadidi, formerly Phd candidate at Univ. of Montreal, currently Aid Officer at Afghanistan Authority for Coordination of Aid.

Homira Hanif, Health Specialist, Population Services, Intl. (PSI), Kabul

Hawa Meskinyar, formerly urban planning engineer in Chicago, currently with Afghan Civil Service Commission in Kabul

Yusuf Nooristani, Minister of Environment and Irrigation

Amin Farhang, Minister for Reconstruction

Omar Samad, formerly journalist in Washington, D.C., currently Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Abdullah Sherzai, formerly research physician at National Institutes of Health (NIH), currently Director of Planning, Ministry of Health

Farhad Ahad, formerly management consultant, then Economic Advisor to the Foreign Ministry, currently deceased

Joma Mohamedi, formerly World Bank irrigation specialist, then Minister of Mines and Industry, currently deceased.

Rina Amiri, formerly Senior Researcher at Harvard University's Center for Gender Equity, currently Political Officer at UNAMA.

Seema Ghani, formerly investment officer in London, currently operating own business in Kabul after adopting 8 children that were abandoned at *Marastoon*, the insane asylum in Kabul.

Gulghotai Ghazialam, formerly health officer with American Red Cross, currently managing International Organization of Migration's programs in northern Afghanistan.

Asiyah Sarwari, formerly project officer at the International Rescue Committee in Atlanta, GA, currently teaching English to orphans in Kabul.

Najib Mojadidi, formerly senior financial officer at Nextel, currently working for Government of Afghanistan as accountant.

Annex 3 Contact information for Listserv Networks and Organizations (again, not all inclusive, but indicative)

Afghan Youth Organization [info@afghanx.org](mailto:info@afghanx.org), <http://www.AfghanX.org>

Coalition for Justice in Afghanistan <http://www.AfghanX.org/coalition>  
[afghandatabase@yahoo.com](mailto:afghandatabase@yahoo.com)

Afghan Society of Engineers [sshekib@bowmancg.com](mailto:sshekib@bowmancg.com)  
[afghanamericans-owner@yahoogroups.com](mailto:afghanamericans-owner@yahoogroups.com)

Afghan Democracy Institute [www.afghandemocracy.org](http://www.afghandemocracy.org)

Afghaniyat Moderator [afghaniyat-owner@yahoogroups.com](mailto:afghaniyat-owner@yahoogroups.com)

Afghans for Civil Society Eve Lyman at 617-576-7104

Afghans 4 Tomorrow [Afghans4Tomorrow@aol.com](mailto:Afghans4Tomorrow@aol.com)  
<http://www.Afghans4Tomorrow.com>

Afghanistan-America Foundation  
<http://burningbush.netfirms.com/afghan/foundation.htm>

Help the Afghan Children, HTACI [Info@HelpTheAfghanChildren.org](mailto:Info@HelpTheAfghanChildren.org)

Institute for Afghan Studies [Info@Institute-For-Afghan-Studies.Org](mailto:Info@Institute-For-Afghan-Studies.Org)

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**Afghanistan Development Organization** Contact Hafzal Rashid 916-482-1019

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## Radio

### SBS Dari Radio

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AfghanWaves (Afghan Youth Radio - Sydney)

Contact Name: Homaira Razi

Email: afghanwaves@yahoo.com.au or h\_razi@hotmail.com

Young Afghan Association of Sydney University (YAASU)

Contact Name: Homaira Razi

Email: usydafghansociety@hotmail.com or h\_razi@hotmail.com

Macquarie University Afghan Students Association (MASA)

Email: m\_a\_s\_a2001@hotmail.com

Afghanvoice (Australia): www.afghanvoice.com and AfghanVoice@yahoogroups.com

Afghaniyat Yahoo Group: afghaniyat@yahoogroups.com

Afghans of Australasia: afghans@powerup.com.au

Afghan Events (Sydney): afghan\_events@yahoogroups.com

Islamic Sydney Group: islam-info@islamicsydney.com

Australian Muslim Media Watch: [MuslimMediaWatch@yahoogroups.com](mailto:MuslimMediaWatch@yahoogroups.com)

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