

# The future of Afghanistan: an Afghan responsibility

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## Abstract

*Bad news about Afghanistan is a daily reality. War has plagued the country for three uninterrupted decades. Afghan women and men face daunting survival struggles. The majority of them have known nothing else but war. Considerable responsibility lies on the shoulders of Afghans themselves, who have caused extensive suffering for their fellow countrywomen and men. This article, however, argues that the future of Afghanistan lies in Afghan hands. The solution to its current problems cannot and will not come from outside. It is time for Afghan men and women to confront their problems, to address their divisions, and to envisage home-grown solutions.*

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Hardly a day goes by without more bad news about my country, Afghanistan. Radio, television, and the Internet tell the same story over and over again – of violence, destruction, division, corruption, and despair.

I was born in the province of Helmand in 1968 and have known peace in Afghanistan only during the first few years of my life. For the last three decades, we have had no respite from war. Afghan men and women struggle grimly for survival, trying to provide their children and relatives with the bare necessities, to obtain health care or employment, and to stay out of harm's way.

Civilians are injured or killed daily – by car bombs and suicide attacks or during air raids and ground fighting. Afghanistan is strewn with mines that cause horrifying injuries years after they were laid and render vast swathes of agricultural land unfit for cultivation. Ordinary Afghans, oppressed by the various armed groups in the land, endure untold indignities and live in constant fear.

Poverty and the protracted armed conflict have created a grim socio-economic situation. For example, life expectancy for women in Afghanistan is 43 years, compared to 82 in Switzerland (Swiss women had a life expectancy of 43 years in 1880). The figures are no better for Afghan men.<sup>1</sup> The maternal mortality rate is estimated to be 1,700 per 100,000 live births in Afghanistan, compared to 5 per 100,000 in Switzerland. The infant mortality rate (the number of children who die before the age of one) is estimated to be between 160 and 180 per 1,000 live births (the rate for Switzerland is 5 per 1,000). The under-five mortality rate is estimated to be 257 per 1,000 live births (the figure for Switzerland is 5 per 1,000). In other words, 25% of all Afghan children never reach the age of five.<sup>2</sup> Indicators in the field of education are no less depressing. Literacy rates are among the lowest in the world. It is estimated that between 72% and 75% of Afghans cannot read or write.<sup>3</sup>

This mix of circumstances has had a catastrophic impact on millions of Afghans, most of whom know no life without war. Nevertheless, it must also be said that Afghans themselves bear a great deal of the responsibility for this state of affairs, as it is they who have caused such widespread suffering among their compatriots.

Over the last few years, I have come to understand that, in addition to its many torments, Afghanistan suffers from an inability to speak for itself and to write or shape its own history. Every day, the opinions and certainties of foreign observers inundate my country and are broadcast throughout the world. And every day, the international media, think tanks, and spokespersons from the international community speak about us and write about us, about who we are, about the reasons for the state we are in, and about what we should do to extricate ourselves from our current predicaments.

The years of war have eroded Afghanistan's ability to formulate its own identity and thus to shape its future. In the following pages, I will argue that the future of Afghanistan lies in Afghan hands. The solution to our current problems cannot come from outside. Solidarity and support from abroad will always be important, but it is time for Afghan men and women to confront their problems, to address their divisions, and to envisage homegrown solutions. I will present a selection of the key challenges that lie ahead and the issues that have to be tackled.

## In search of Afghanistan's soul

The idea of *governance* is given a great deal of attention in conflict analysis and development studies. Whether it is Liberia, Somalia, or Afghanistan that is under

1 See World Health Organization, 'Country profile: Afghanistan', available at: <http://www.who.int/countries/afg/en/> (last visited 21 December 2010).

2 See United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), 'Afghanistan', available at: [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html) (last visited 21 December 2010).

3 *Ibid.*

consideration, one finds numerous references to the importance of such things as a well-organized and clearly structured distribution of power, the rule of law, and transparent and accountable institutions.

Discussions about governance, besides sounding technocratic at times, convey the impression that 'good governance' is a universal remedy, one that will solve all your most pressing problems. In reality, matters are far more complex: taking a close look at governance issues in Afghanistan is like setting out on a trip to discover the soul of the country.

In Afghanistan, authority has traditionally been exercised at the most local level: by clan elders or tribal leaders. This decentralization of power has made it difficult to hold the country together. It was only in the mid-eighteenth century that the kingdom of Afghanistan was unified by its ruler Ahmad Shah Durrani; in 1776, his son Timur transferred the capital from Kandahar to Kabul. Ever since, Afghanistan has endured the mismatch of a decentralized soul and centralized rule from the capital. For more than 250 years, kings, prime ministers, and presidents – and foreign occupiers – have all failed to exercise authority in a manner that binds the whole country together and gives it a common purpose.

It is difficult to escape the impression that whoever has ruled in Kabul has continued to apply the principles of local politics. For Afghans, ruling in Kabul has been simply another way of serving one's own interests and those of one's family and extended clan. There is an old Afghan saying that describes this well: 'Every Afghan dreams of one day taking control of Kabul. Yet, as soon as he does, he loses the rest of country'. Foreigners have suffered the same fate. Though undertaken for different purposes, both the Soviet and the US-led invasions failed because of their insistence on holding and providing support for the capital and a few other urban centres.

I experienced the strength of the love–hate relationship between the capital and the rest of Afghanistan when my family moved from the province of Helmand to Kabul. I was a teenager then and my father was determined to see his sons and daughters go to university. Kabul was thus full of promise at the time for people like us, but one could not fail to feel the gap between the city and its inhabitants and the rest of the country.

Kabul was the place that attracted the investments, where infrastructure was built and where opportunities existed. People from the provinces were regarded as backward and uneducated, and almost as if they were foreigners. While such attitudes exist in other countries also, in Afghanistan this disconnectedness was reinforced by the absence of a manifest will to unify the entire population in all its diversity within a truly national project. A closer look at the country's history shows that some of its rulers would 'discover' the notion of unity only when their authority was being challenged or when they were in danger of being overthrown. Afghans have failed throughout their history to develop a vision for the country as a whole, and have also failed to make the capital look beyond itself and serve the interests of the entire nation.

## Building a common identity

Every nation and every society – in fact, every human being – has an identity, which rests on a set of experiences or myths, values, and aspirations. Let us explore what these may be for Afghanistan. If one were to ask men or women in my country what it is that makes us *Afghan*, I believe that most would first say, the Muslim faith. There are, of course, some Afghans of other faiths, but the core of Afghan identity has been guided and nourished by Islam for centuries. Recent events notwithstanding, the Afghan practice of Islam has been characterized by moderation, modesty, and amiability.

I grew up in a family that was devoted to the tenets of Islam. My father was a deeply religious man, who believed that it was his responsibility to ensure that his children were educated in the national system, even as they lived by the teachings of the Qur'an. The years of war, the weight of traditional tribal codes, and foreign influences have led to a more radical and at times brutal interpretation of Islam. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Islam will remain a strong binding element in the identity of Afghanistan.

When one looks beyond matters of religion and faith, the situation becomes more complicated. Many Afghans are likely to describe the country's identity as having been formed by the numerous instances in which its people rallied to take on and defeat invading foreign armies. Outsiders have called Afghanistan the 'graveyard of empires'<sup>4</sup> and this iron determination to preserve their independence is generally a source of pride for most Afghans. After all, there are not many countries in the world that can say that they have never been colonized. And yet, a closer look suggests that defeating the British and the Soviet forces is far from sufficient to establish a common national identity. Who wants to live in a graveyard?

Afghans have indeed endured numerous attempts by foreigners to invade and rule them. It is true that we have resisted many of those attempts successfully and that we can be proud of wanting to rule ourselves. However, we have never been able to decide how we want to use our hard-earned independence. As soon as we are left to ourselves, we are riven by divisions; we have no shared purpose. If you were to sit down with an average Afghan family or to have tea with a group of village elders, they would answer your questions about Afghan identity by referring to the battles that Afghans have fought rather than to anything connected with the development of the country. No one would mention anything like a national literacy campaign or a major irrigation scheme.

In order for our country to achieve some degree of stability, Afghans must first develop a positive self-image and a national agenda in which every Afghan is included. This entails addressing some demanding issues.

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4 See Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2009.

## Bridging the urban/rural divide

I have already referred to the gap between the capital and the rest of the country, but deeper emotional and social fault lines run between the urban centres and rural areas. Successive generations of national leaders have failed to devise policies that integrate the rural populations into a national plan.

I have often heard comments from abroad about the irrationality of the violence and destruction inflicted by Afghan factions on their towns during this unending war. When Kabul fell to the mujahideen in 1992, who then began fighting among one another for control of the city, much of the destruction was in part the result of fighters from the countryside settling accounts with the capital. There is no justification for the brutality that led to so many civilian casualties. It is, however, necessary to analyse the roots of some of that violence and anger, which lay partly in feelings of humiliation, built up and endured over decades and centuries.

People have asked me why the fighters did not just move into the homes and palaces instead of destroying them. It is important not to overlook the fact that Afghans from rural areas have never been made to feel welcome in the capital of their country. Their contribution to the national economy and to the creation of the nation's wealth was not acknowledged and so they turned their resentment against the cities and their inhabitants. It goes without saying that it would never occur to me to condone their brutality. In fact, my family and I, alongside thousands of other inhabitants of Kabul at the time, were witnesses and victims of that destruction and the impact that it had on people's lives and on Afghanistan's image abroad.

After 2001, things began to change somewhat and the Afghan parliament, as a result of the elections held on 18 December 2005, began to be slightly more representative of the country's regional diversity. Nevertheless, in terms of *governance*, we are still far from finding the right approach. Indeed, much of the emphasis has again been placed on institutions in Kabul. In other words, there is once again a concentration of law-makers and decision-makers in Kabul, where they perpetuate the country's long-standing tendencies towards centralization. No one denies that good people are needed in the capital, but their purpose must be greater than simply generating investment for the capital and bringing progress to it.

Instead, they should be building a new Afghan political consciousness that seeks to transfer aspects of law-making and decision-making authority to the provincial level. Afghanistan needs to develop a countrywide consensus on what constitutes national responsibility and what falls under the authority of the various regions. Investment and development – ambitious rural development schemes, micro-economic initiatives, and education plans, for instance – would then be better distributed throughout the country. The cities of Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Kandahar, and Jalalabad cannot be the only places to which people turn in search of opportunities. Better economic and social opportunities for people in the places where they now live will lead to a safer Afghanistan.

Sadly, an illustration is provided by the Afghan refugees who have come home or been forcibly sent back after years of living abroad, primarily in Pakistan and Iran: most of them are to be found in overcrowded Kabul. This is only partly because their places of origin have become extremely unsafe; there is also, for economic reasons (usually to do with agriculture), nothing for them to return to. Similarly, some of the earliest flaws in the US-led invasion could be seen in the refusal to engage in nation-building and to secure the country beyond Kabul, and, most crucially, in the inability to ensure that rural areas would also enjoy the benefits of the international presence.

A stable Afghanistan cannot be built at or from the centre. A genuine political process must be developed by the government in Kabul but it will be effective and durable only if rural Afghanistan feels, and is, part of the whole.

## **Afghanistan as the sum of all of its ethnic groups**

The Afghan Constitution decrees that:

The nation of Afghanistan is comprised of the following ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pashai, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahui and others.

The word Afghan applies to every citizen of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

The sentiment is to be welcomed, yet few Afghans would claim that this ‘nation of all Afghans’ once existed, or exists today, in any way that is meaningful. For a very long time, many people equated being Afghan with being Pashtun. The Pashtuns were the founders of Afghanistan and provided the country with its ruling families or clans for over two hundred years, until the very early years of the war in the 1980s.

War is destructive and causes immense suffering, but it can also sometimes transform societies in unexpected ways, notably through the maturation of previously marginalized and oppressed constituencies and communities. However, the conditions today do not reflect the sentiments expressed in the Constitution. If the war were to come to an end tomorrow, one of the biggest challenges for Afghanistan would be to learn to think and act beyond ethnic boundaries. There are few political parties that advocate a vision or platform that includes all ethnic communities, Afghanistan’s history and its conflicts having generated a powerful brand of ethnic politics.

The unease between the various communities is widespread, the result of accumulated suffering and an entrenched lack of trust. People do not know how to live together and this is a powerful impediment to building a unified country. The level of trust between the various communities is almost as low as it has ever been.

5 The Constitution of Afghanistan, Chapter 1, Art. 4, available at: [http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current\\_constitution.html](http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current_constitution.html) (last visited 21 December 2010).

In truth, if Afghanistan is to have a stable future, there are few things more important than genuine openness and greater co-operation between the country's ethnic communities in addressing the most pressing socio-economic challenges.

Because it has allowed itself to be dictated to by the differences that divide Afghans, and has failed to define what unifies the various communities, Afghanistan knows almost nothing of what it is to be a nation. Beyond the ideas expressed in the Constitution, the question for Afghans is whether we will be able in the future to develop the shared sense of history, culture, and purpose implicit in the idea of a 'nation'.

## Dignity for women and for men

An issue that generates frequent and substantial international attention is that of the situation of women in Afghanistan. I have written and often spoken about the subject, and it lies very close to my heart.<sup>6</sup>

Afghan society is ruled by tradition and is extremely conservative. Men have exercised immense power in society and in politics from the very beginning. Women, in contrast, are marginalized and oppressed. They endure extreme hardship, especially in rural areas, and war has made matters far worse. Women have been subjected to shocking acts of violence and abuse and have had to cope with even more humiliation, poverty, and exclusion.

Despite the anger and resentment that all this provokes in me, as in many other people in Afghanistan and abroad, I believe deeply in the need for moving away from the persistent depiction of Afghan women as victims. The first step towards preserving their dignity – our dignity – is to identify the strength that exists in Afghan women. We want to be – in fact, *are* – agents of our own development. We are not mere statistics, illustrating well-intentioned articles about our condition. We do not want to be on people's minds or portrayed on the covers of international magazines, to serve as objects of virtuous pity or to provide justification for clinging to unsuccessful military strategies.

We want less to be talked about than to be listened to. For that to happen though, Afghan women must assume responsibility and develop a forward-looking discourse and action. Nothing will be given to us free of charge. We will face a long and demanding struggle, one that we must undertake by ourselves. It should not be forgotten that, although there have been periods of strong international interest and commitment during the last thirty years, there have also been prolonged periods of silence and diminished attention, to say the least.

6 Taiba Rahim, 'An identity of strength: personal thoughts on women in Afghanistan', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 847, September 2002, pp. 627–641.



This realization must lead Afghan women to take the initiative in shaping or establishing the roles and responsibilities of men and women in a way that is more balanced and equitable. Many women are actively doing so, sometimes at great risk to themselves. Several women today are working as politicians, teachers, or nurses in hospitals. Despite the risks involved, they are determined to assume these responsibilities and contribute to change.

While creating appalling amounts of suffering, the war has also led to transformations in Afghan society. Afghanistan is a country with a huge number of widows. While traditional values ensure that some of them are still welcome in their wider families, many have to fend for themselves, finding sustenance for their children and assuming new and more active roles and duties. The number of Afghan women in parliament, while arguably the result of international pressure, is further proof of a changing environment.

Improving prospects for Afghan women must be part of a broader effort, one that also seeks to improve the situation of Afghan men. No one must deny or minimize the terrible oppression and cruelty inflicted on Afghan women both before and during the war, by individual men and by parties to the war. However, any honest review of what men have endured over the past three decades will lead to the same grim conclusion: they have been killed, tortured, mistreated in other ways, and humiliated, in very large numbers.

Today, in towns and villages across the country, honest Afghan men are in search of employment, means of subsistence, and dignity. In most instances, their quest is in vain. To overlook this fact and its adverse impact on the prospects for a better Afghan future would be very problematic. I have said that we must go beyond urban/rural and ethnic divisions. I believe just as firmly that strategies for improving the situation of women in my country must include plans for improving the situation of men as well.

## **A commitment to education**

The war has now lasted so long that increasingly few Afghans have any personal memory of Afghanistan at peace. For many Afghans, peace will seem the remotest of possibilities and beyond reach. During certain of my presentations, on Afghanistan or on the situation of women, audiences react with disbelief when I speak about some of the steps, such as local initiatives to improve educational standards, that I think are necessary – and possible – for securing a better future for the Afghan people.

It is difficult for me to fault foreigners for believing that there is no hope for my country. The news that they hear is unrelentingly bad. The image that they have of Afghans is associated with war, brutality, extremism, and the oppression of women. For many Afghans, the situation – suicide attacks, air raids, kidnappings, extortion, poverty – is indeed very bleak. There is, however, one fundamental fact that will always distinguish the way in which my compatriots and I contemplate our country's future: we live in Afghanistan; it is our land. Therefore, regardless of



how desperate the situation may seem or be, we must look for solutions, and remain hopeful. This is not naivety, just realism.

Every Afghan must understand that he or she has a duty in this regard. Pessimism and despair will achieve nothing. In my own case, I drew strength from my father's vision: he left his village in central Afghanistan because he wanted his children to receive an education. I created an Association<sup>7</sup> in 2007 with the intention of returning to that region and building a school there to honour my father's courage. Since then, I have completed three school-building projects and am now embarking on a health project.

In my view, education is crucial for enabling people to extract themselves from poverty, exclusion, and underdevelopment and write their history. The results of my projects have gone beyond my initial expectations. First, I take great pride in the fact that these are projects by Afghans, with Afghans, and for Afghans. That they were designed and implemented by a daughter of the region has not gone unnoticed. I see this as a contribution to cultural change. Furthermore, when I visited the communities in 2010, I became aware that many families were sending their children to school now that they had been provided with an acceptable environment for studying. In other words, parents saw an alternative to sending their children to the fields. This was true for both their sons and their daughters.

I want to stress this because one of the questions I am most often asked is whether my projects focus on schools for girls. If conditions in my country are to improve, it is vitally important that girls be provided with an education; but it is no less important that boys be educated. Much of the violence directed at women in Afghanistan is the result of tradition and lack of education. It is important to understand that if more girls go to school but boys do not, many of Afghanistan's problems will remain. Therefore, the schools I am building are improving conditions for girls *and* boys.

The approach I have taken is to work with central and provincial authorities. My projects were formally approved by the ministries of education and of health. They did not conceal the fact that the remote communities I was focusing on were not their priority. Therefore, they had allocated no funds for these areas. They nonetheless provided me with the necessary authorization and support. I wanted to make sure that my projects fitted national objectives and agendas. I also made sure that local authorities in the villages concerned contributed their share: they gave the land for the projects and committed themselves to maintenance in the future. I will hold them to their commitments. I wanted to show them that one should not always wait for others to solve one's problems.

Finally, I wanted to make a small contribution to changing the image of Afghanistan abroad. I wanted to show that Afghans had initiative and could make things happen. Most of my fundraising has taken place in Switzerland and a few other countries. To date, over 700 individuals and institutions have helped fund

7 The Nai Qala Association, available at: <http://www.nai-qala.org> (last visited 31 January 2011).

my projects. I find this quite remarkable, considering the many reasons that could be given for not putting money into Afghanistan. I believe that they did so because they have begun to hear a different story about Afghanistan, that it is a country like any other, where men, women, and children are in search of security, respect, and dignity.