

# The Afghan Diaspora and Post-Conflict State Building in Afghanistan

Written by Kouser Fatima

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The project of reconstruction in a post-conflict state involves a variety of actors, both within the homeland and beyond. Transnational linkages and diasporic connections exercise substantial influence on the reconstruction process. This aspect has not been explored in much detail regarding the case of the state-building process in Afghanistan. The focus of extant literature on state-building and reconstruction process in Afghanistan is confined to the role of the Afghan government and international actors. This article attempts to broaden the focus by undertaking a brief exploration of the role of the returned Afghan diaspora (henceforth referred to as the “diaspora”) in the post-conflict state building process. Afghan society is a microcosm of diverse cultures and identities. This plurality is an outcome of a history of a series of migrations of people of different cultures and ethnicities. Diversity has made Afghan society a complex and complicated entity for the state-building process. The success of state building is contingent on the capacity of the process to accommodate the divergences rooted in this diversity. Among the various groups involved in the post-conflict dynamics, the Afghan diaspora is an important participant. In relation to the size of the state, Afghanistan has a large and diverse diaspora. It is estimated that there are some 300,000 settled in the United States, at least 150,000 in UAE, 125,000 in Germany, and smaller numbers in Canada, Australia, and across Europe (Koser, 2014).

Behaviour of the diaspora is determined by a range of goals and motivations, which are defined by their earlier position in the country and their present position in the host country (Vertovec, 2005). The diversity of Afghan society is reflected in the Afghan diaspora, which is also not homogeneous and is often divided on ethnic, tribal, and sectarian lines. The complexity of the Afghan diaspora was highlighted in 2001 at the talks in Bonn over a transitional government for post-conflict Afghanistan. Four factions or groupings were represented at the talks: i) the Northern Alliance or United Front; ii) a Rome based delegation of the former King Zahir Shah; iii) a Cyprus grouping of exiled intellectuals, supported by Iran; iv) a Peshawar grouping, with its base among the Peshawar Pashtun refugees (Oeppen, 2010). These talks led to the formation of a transitional government in Kabul under what became known as the Bonn Agreement and, as a result, diaspora groups assumed an important role in the post-conflict government. The diaspora played a significant role in the formation of constitution and policy formulation, and further assumed several responsibilities, such as working for reconciliation of ethnic differences, institutional capacity building, and finally in addressing economic issues.

In the reconciliation process, the diaspora has played the role of mediator between the international actors and Afghans from within the homeland. One of the reasons they were selected for this role was their strong ethnic and kinship relations, and networks with the people living in the homeland (Monsutti, 2008). In the development of human resources, skilled diaspora have been instrumental in the transfer of knowledge and technologies to the homeland. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has had considerable success in mobilizing the Afghan diaspora to support development and reconstruction. Under IOM’s initiative, around 1,000 Afghan experts have returned, either temporarily or permanently, to Afghanistan. In a similar vein, through their participation in range of NGO initiatives, the Afghan diaspora have helped in skill development and knowledge transfer. The Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) programme, which was initiated by UNDP, made an important contribution in this regard. TOKTEN is a special volunteer programme that calls on expatriate nationals to volunteer in their country of origin for a short period of time. The programme has allowed the Afghan diaspora to participate in the

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exercise of knowledge transfer and skill development on tenure basis, without the need of permanent return to the homeland. Among the specific sectors, perhaps the most influential role the diaspora played was in health and education. Dr. Anwar ul-Haq Ahady and Dr. Sayed Asker Mousavi came to serve as TOTKEN volunteers. Anwar ul-Haq Ahady played an important role as the governor of *Da Afghanistan Bank* and eventually became Finance Minister between 2004 and 2009. He helped in implementing a new banking system in the country, which included the computerization of the banking system and reforms in monetary policy. Dr. Mousavi was the Education Advisor to the Ministry of Higher Education under the TOKTEN program, and several projects, like the establishment of Bamiyan University and the development of a new Department of Computer Science at Herat University, were undertaken while he was the Education Advisor (UNDP, 2005). In addition, current presidential candidate Dr. Ashraf Ghani Amahdzai should also be seen as one of the most influential of the returned diaspora. Regardless of the outcome of the election recount, he will continue to play an important role in Afghan politics.

The diaspora community has also made a substantial contribution to economic reconstruction. Other than international aid, diaspora channels have been an important source of investments and capital. The Afghan diaspora has made numerous business investments in sectors such as telecommunications, banking, civil aviation, and real estate. The best example is in the mobile communication sector, where the three leading companies are owned or governed by diaspora members—Ehsan Bayat, Amirzai Sangin, and Karim Khoja. Ehsan Bayat runs Afghan Wireless Communication. Similarly, Sangin and Khoja are heads of Afghan Telecom and Roshan (telco) (Oeppen, 2010). The contribution of the diaspora in economic and social welfare sectors also highlights their participation. However, the political narrative of the involvement of Afghan diaspora is not complete without consideration of the political implications. In terms of power structure, highly educated diaspora members have risen as a new power group. It is estimated that around 80% of the present Afghan government Ministers and officials are members of different diaspora groups (Jazayery, 2002). The political elites inside the country view the occupation of important positions by diaspora as a challenge to their own authority (Pirkkalainen *et al.*, 2009: 31-32). This has added a new dimension to the already existing 'contestation' of power in Afghanistan. The diaspora has emerged as a new power group which is challenging the traditional tribal leaders along with traditional urban elites. The central-provincial relationship shows clearly the exact nature of Afghan politics. In theory, there is a strong *de jure* political centralization, with all sub-national political positions appointed by the national government, and no mandatory regional representation in national government. But in practice, politically, there is a major *de facto* decentralization, with regional warlords or local commanders setting policy (World Bank, 2005: 47).

Diaspora participation has failed to produce significant positive impacts, due to the individualistic attitude of the diaspora leaders. It is important to note that it is the nature of constitution that has allowed the pursuit of individualistic agendas by these individuals. The presence of leaders who are often driven by personal agendas of business interests and profit from short-term projects, at the cost of larger or broader community concern, is an expected feature of most political systems. However, in the case of Afghanistan, the constitution encouraged an over-centralised government run from Kabul, depriving the country's provincial and district-level governments from receiving aid and development packages. This led to an increased sense of resentment amongst them in regards to central government. The constitution also facilitated corruption: whilst the international community's attention shifted to central government at large, a small number of elite members of the Afghan central government machinery became ever richer, leaving very little for their constituents, government departments, and other areas of the country (World Bank, 2005: 55-59).

It is possible to conclude that the participation of the returned diaspora in homeland politics and state-building in post-conflict situations depends upon the social structure of the society. The policy/academic characterisation of diaspora participation in post-conflict situations as either peace-maker or peace-breaker is an over-simplification, with the outcome being related to existing and new structural realities. This is evident in the case of Afghanistan, where diaspora members have become peace-makers at the regional and international level in those social sectors where they work jointly with other incumbent groups. On the other hand, it can be argued that the diaspora, who have actively participated in Afghan politics and become members of the government, could not be successful in the state-building process on a regional or provincial level. This was as a result of traditional political groups and the diaspora contesting for power and resources, which have created the conditions for internal divisions that could further widen the ethnic and tribal gap.

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