

**THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN  
AFGHANISTAN'S RECONSTRUCTION**

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**Policy Options for State-building in Afghanistan**  
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**ABSTRACT:**

**Afghanistan is now at a critical point in its history; it needs to build a strategic path from emergency to long-term reconstruction and development. Education helps to form the very foundations of peace, nation building, poverty reduction, and economic growth. But since 2006, the armed insurgency in Afghanistan has begun to target schools across Afghanistan, and as of this year 670 schools in southern Afghanistan have been closed indefinitely. The central aim of this paper is to explore how grassroots approaches can be mobilized in Afghanistan to achieve education goals. Along the way, it explores how control of the educational system has historically been a mobilizing force for the conservative Islamist movement, the communists, the overthrow of the Soviet government, and the subsequent rise to power of the Taliban. If the new Afghan state is to have a chance at surviving, the people must be permitted to take the education system into their own hands.**

**INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN**

**In the past half-century alone, Afghanistan has seen the collapse of its monarchy, the installation of a Soviet secular state, a successful Mujahideen insurgency to overthrow the Communist government, debilitating factionalization of Mujahideen clans, the precipitous rise and collapse of the Taliban government, and the installation of Hamid Karzai's fledgling government in the wake of the post-9/11 US intervention. After five tumultuous decades, Afghanistan's human capital has been thoroughly and repeatedly decimated.**

**Afghanistan is now at a critical point in its history; it needs to build a strategic path from emergency to long-term reconstruction and development. Education helps to form the very foundations of peace, nation building, the reduction of poverty, and economic growth. Above all, education opens doors to new ways of thinking about Afghanistan, by Afghans, and thus will be necessary to Afghanistan realizing its potential as a nation.**

**The starting point—in late 2001 at the fall of the Taliban—for recent developments in Afghanistan was dire. Protracted conflict in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as drought and other natural disasters, severely damaged the Afghan economy. Exacerbating the country's economic disaster, the conflict depleted and degraded factors of production: less manpower available because of people who had joined the conflict or fled the country, and lower quality of human capital due to lack of education and a "brain drain" as well-educated people left.**

**The education sector is a major participant in both the economic and social development of Afghanistan. Education plays a significant role in providing the productive skills that are necessary for the implementation of development goals in agriculture, industry, and health; training in the maintenance of natural resources and physical infrastructure**

necessary for rural and urban development; knowledge and skills to cope with the demands of development, such as written communication, banking, taxes, bureaucracy and operating machinery; and training for self-reliance in meeting basic needs in health, nutrition, civic participation and communication. This implies a holistic approach to education and development, whereby ultimately all sections of the population can have access to an adequate education to enable them to participate in the development process both as productive workers and as effective citizens.

Quality education is among the most critical investments to be made in Afghanistan. As a long-term investment in Afghanistan's social and economic development, success in education cannot be measured only by the numbers of children enrolled in school. Afghan children must also be equipped with well-developed skills in literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, critical thinking, team-building, and communications to face the needs of an expanding peacetime economy.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been successive waves of both liberal reform and reactive traditionalist movements in Afghanistan. In the main power struggles of the last century, control over the education system was viewed as key to consolidating and enforcing control over a highly fragmented state. In the twentieth century, communists, Mujahideen, and more recently the Taliban, have all tried to dominate the cultural and political terrain of Afghanistan through education policy.

Modern education of the Western style is relatively new in Afghanistan. The first modern school opened under the reign of Amir Habibullah at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the 1980s and 1990s, many of Afghanistan's most educated men and women left the country, as well as several million refugees of diverse backgrounds. In

Pakistan, the anti-communist insurgency among Afghan refugees made use of the classroom to develop an ideology of resistance. During the Taliban regime and its notorious interdiction barring girls from attending school, young women in Afghan cities who had previously attended school were not permitting from continuing. In other cases, girls managed to continue their education in NGO-supported home-based schools. By the time the Taliban were overthrown in November 2001 Afghanistan had witnessed a period of 23 years during which there had been little or no investment in a quality education system that valued scholastic achievement and social responsibility. Over 80% of the population was illiterate and a third of the country's 8,000 schools had been destroyed. The extraordinary return to school in 2002 - a 400% increase in enrollment - exceeded all national and international expectations and gave the war-torn country a sense of hope and stability.

In the first stage of the reestablishment of the education sector in Afghanistan, an emergency response situation existed. International donors swept into action, focusing large-scale efforts on two basic objectives: to expand enrollment in primary education, and to enroll adults in adult literacy programs. With a desire to bring about quick, high-impact results, international donors such as USAID circumvented the Ministry of Education, and implemented projects through expensive, private contractors. The size and scale of these programs have distorted the labor market among Afghanistan's limited pool of experienced professionals.

There is also a role for Parent Teacher Associations and local shuras in supporting local schools. Community sense of ownership has been shown to improve education outcomes while reducing attacks on schools. There are also other important ways to help

**integrate students learning in the classroom with their experiences at home and in their community. Ultimately, long-term development in Afghanistan can only be achieved with a holistic, long-term commitment to building up Afghan capacities.**

**HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN: THE SITUATION BEFORE 1980*****Traditional Education Institutions***

Traditionally, formal education in Afghanistan was the exclusive domain of religious institutions. In pre-modern times, there were many well-known centers of learning in Afghanistan. Madrassas or traditional schools flourished in Herat, Ghazni, Kandahar, Kabul and other places.<sup>1</sup> Attached to a mosque, the madrassa was a private institution supported by the local population, rich or poor. The central figure of the madrassa was the master-teacher, who was provided with a living, and the students, who gathered around him, were also supported by the community. The master-teacher of the madrassa was supposed to have encyclopedic knowledge and to be capable of teaching any branch of the sciences as well as the arts. The students attached themselves to the master as his pupils. Depending on the reputation of the former, young people seeking knowledge might travel from distant regions in order to join the better-known schools.<sup>2</sup> The teaching was carried out on an individual basis. Each student would come with his book and receive his lesson for the day, the students being on different levels of study or following different branches of Islamic knowledge. The traditionally recognized fields of learning were Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Koranic interpretation (*tafsir*) and the traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*); philosophy - including metaphysics, logic and grammar; literary studies covering the Persian classics; natural sciences, which focused on ancient Greek medicine; and theology.<sup>3</sup> The sociological background of the students was usually that of the poor landless family, weakly integrated in the tribal or local communities, which meant that if they

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<sup>1</sup> Majrooh "Education in Afghanistan" *Encyclopedia Iranica* p.239

<sup>2</sup> Shorish, M.M. "Traditional Islamic Education in Central Asia Prior to 1917," p.328

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.331

wished to rise to a respected position in local society there was no other way open to them then to become clerics in mosques or religious scholars. Farmers, tribal chiefs, and local maliks did not send their children to madrassas.<sup>4</sup> Rich or aristocratic urban or rural families had private tutors for their children, both boys and girls. Women were not admitted to the madrassas.

While Afghanistan was an important center of scholarship one millennium ago, academic inquiry had stagnated by the early modern period. During the earlier periods of Islamic civilization, important teaching centers were created in what are today Afghanistan, Iran, and the Central Asia republics. Open to new ideas, they made valuable



contributions in various branches of sciences and the arts. Outstanding scholars such as Al-biruni, Ibn Sina and many others emerged who made the highest contribution to the advancement of human knowledge. Studies of philosophy, astronomy, and other natural sciences were encouraged.<sup>5</sup> However, the central element of teaching in madrassas consisted of law and theology. In the course of time a distinction was made between the religious and rational sciences. But

gradually the ulema or religious scholars adopted an increasingly hostile attitude towards science and philosophy. Attention was mainly paid to the traditional studies which included theology, law and literature.<sup>6</sup> But even in the favored traditional fields of study, genuine

<sup>4</sup> Ghobar, *Afghanistan in the Course of History*, p.701

<sup>5</sup> Shorish "Traditional Islamic Education in Central Asia Prior to 1917," p. 327

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.328

research and creativity declined. Original texts of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, etc, were replaced by commentaries and by commentaries upon commentaries.<sup>7</sup> Time was spent on refutation and counter-refutation and never on basic problems and research. Learning no longer represented a creative effort of the mind but a passive acquisition of already established knowledge.

This hostile attitude towards science eventually culminated with the introduction of the<sup>8</sup> Deobandi approach to Afghanistan. Traditional education in Afghanistan was influenced mainly by the Islamic teaching centers in the Indian sub-continent. Islam was brought to India by and through Afghanistan, but when, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Islamic madrassas were established in India, these became the main centers of learning for scholars from Afghanistan. However, by the time these madrassas were established in India, the creative period of Islamic teaching was already over; second and third-hand commentaries became the basis of teaching.<sup>9</sup> The basic trend of the madrassas was to eliminate the intellectual and rational sciences and to emphasize the purely orthodox religious disciplines. One influential Indian madrassa which trained Afghan religious scholars was in Deoband in northern India, established in the second half of the nineteenth century. The progressively narrowing view of the Deoband school contributed further to the decline of traditional teaching in Afghanistan. When, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the country slowly started opening up to the outside world and modern schools were being established, traditional education was at its lowest intellectual level. Strictly religious subjects, such as *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *hadith*, were retained,

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<sup>7</sup> Ghobar, *Afghanistan in the Course of History*, p. 709

<sup>8</sup> Please disregard the bar appearing at the bottom of this page. It is a word processor glitch and cannot be removed.

<sup>9</sup> Zaman, Muhammad Qasim (1996) "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* p.382

but only studied in second and third-hand commentaries, never in the original texts, while other branches of the sciences and arts were ignored.<sup>10</sup> Among the non-religious subjects, Arabic grammar was favored, but the way it was studied illustrates the inefficiency of the pedagogy at hand. The methods of learning became ossified as the system did not provide opportunities for students to engage in the critical study of texts but often stressed rote memorization of the subject matter.

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The student was not taught any method of discussion or argumentation. All possible questions were listed and the answers given and the student had simply to learn them by heart (if someone objects so and so, you answer so and so...). Opponents would come face to face and people would gather around them enjoying the confrontation as at a cock fight. The defeated party was the one who failed to remember the right answer to the objection or faced an objection not mentioned in his references. The best contest was a disputation between two well-known maulawis (religious scholars). Each one would come with a large following of his students and donkey-loads of commentary books in Arabic. Arguments against arguments, objections against objections, books against books were produced. The disputation, interrupted by prayers, meals, and sleep, was resumed the following morning and could continue for days. [...] The expenses for meals and housing of the disputing parties and their numerous followers were paid by the local population who enjoyed the occasion and were proud of their own maulawi if he was the strongest. However, even if clearly defeated, he was never dismissed; a religious scholar is always a religious scholar even in defeat. In Afghanistan, men of knowledge of any kind had the respect of the common people.<sup>11</sup>

### *Modern Education and the 20<sup>th</sup> C. Afghan State*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, secular education was introduced in Afghanistan with the purpose of building a strong centralized state. The formal education system in Afghanistan was born in 1903 with the establishment of the first official school, Habibia, in Kabul. Prior to that, education was limited to the religious schools in which instruction was provided by religious leaders (mullahs) by methods of memorization and

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<sup>10</sup> Majrooh p. 79

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 129-130

recitation. The authorities broke the traditional religious hold on education so that bureaucrats and technocrats could be trained.

One of the first reformers of the 20th century was Amanullah who ascended to the throne after the assassination of his father, Habibullah in 1919. Habibullah had been remarkably successful at balancing both British and Russian imperial interests and in maintaining Afghanistan's independence. Shortly after taking power, Amanullah declared war on Britain and eventually succeeded in gaining Afghanistan's independence from British intervention through the 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi, which stated that Afghanistan was free to conduct its own foreign affairs.<sup>12</sup> King Amunallah immediately moved to establish diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, the United States and various European countries.

After consolidating power and wrenching away foreign control from the British, King Amanullah embarked upon a sweeping program of reform and modernization. During a seven-month tour of Europe in 1928, King Amunallah was inspired by Europe's progressive societal reforms and technological modernization. Amanullah, developed telephone links between Afghanistan's cities and became convinced that the future of Afghanistan depended upon the modernization of the country's ancient tribal and cultural norms. Universal education, the emancipation of women, and the separation of church and state were the bedrocks of his modernization initiative.<sup>13</sup> In particular, Amunallah insisted that the Ulema's, or religious leaders, control over education through the informal network of religious schools- madrassas- was acting as a barrier to modern technological progress of the sort that was occurring in Europe. Amunallah would be the

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<sup>12</sup> Marsden, Peter, *The Taliban: War and Religion in Afghanistan*, Zed Books, London, 2002, p. 15

<sup>13</sup> M.J. Gohari; *The Taliban Ascent to Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford England, 2000, p. 6

first in a long series of liberal reformers in Afghanistan who would seek to impose reform, especially secular education reform, uniformly throughout Afghanistan's disparate regions.

With international support, the continued expansion of the Afghan education system became a primary development goal of the Royal Afghan government, and came to be associated with the overall development of the country. One key feature was that the system had tremendous outside input and assistance, from Turkey, India, Egypt, Europe, USA and the Soviet Union. Attempts were made to plan the growth of the educational system in harmony with the other sectors of the economy in the course of drawing up four consecutive five-year plans for implementation between 1957/58 and 1976/77. These five-year plans consistently deemphasized primary education and stressed the development of institutes of higher education instead. By the fourth plan, attempts were made to reduce illiteracy by spreading basic education and to halt the overall decline in the quality of education that developed as a result of the over-ambitious expansion of secondary education. But institutions had taken root, and were hard to reform.

In 1974, a UNESCO mission to Afghanistan came to the conclusion that the Ministry of Education had made considerable progress in its fifty years of existence, but that its mission had drifted off course in three ways.<sup>14</sup> First, while there was remarkable expansion of schools and enrollment, the margin was far greater for secondary education than for primary education. Second, they found that the quality of education had "almost certainly" declined. From 1957 to 1967, the Ministry had cut per capita building and equipment investment by 64%, which affected the quality of certain key areas of

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<sup>14</sup> World Bank, *Afghanistan: the Journey to Economic Development* vol1. 1977. p.173

instruction such as science and handicrafts. Third, the order of importance of the types of specialized instruction as revealed by enrollment, with agriculture at the bottom of the list, was “doubtfully in true proportion to the development requirements of the country's largely agricultural economy.”<sup>15</sup>

Born out of the acute awareness of the need for Afghanistan to develop its human capital and come into the modern world, the education system had matured to a point of academic irrelevance. What Afghanistan needed was a broad approach to education in terms of both objectives and base, whereby ultimately all sections of the population would receive, within the constraints of resources, an adequate education to enable them to participate in the development process both as productive workers and as effective citizens. Afghans needed productive skills at different levels and in different sectors, in order to implement development goals in agriculture, industry, health and other areas. They needed training in the maintenance of natural resources and physical infrastructure necessary for rural and urban development; knowledge and skills to cope with the demands of modern society, such as written communication, banking, taxes, bureaucracy and operating machinery; and training for self-reliance in meeting basic needs in health, nutrition, civic participation and communication. But instead, the Afghan education system as it developed in the decades before the Soviet invasion was self-referential and designed from the top down with no flexibility to accommodate different community needs and target populations.

### *Upheaval and collapse*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 174

By 1978 when the Saur Revolution occurred and the country descended into turmoil, there were an estimated one million students in the secular education system.<sup>16</sup> Yet despite years of investment and technical assistance, Afghanistan then as now had some of the lowest education indicators in the world. The underlying problem was that the old education system was top-heavy, elitist and concentrated in Kabul and a few other urban areas. Only the most committed and bright students from the provinces could access the system. When the political situation entered into the period of volatility in the 1970s, the leadership on both sides came from the elitist secular education system.<sup>17</sup> The ruling elite deliberately nurtured the elitist system; they were concerned that their autocratic system would be threatened. In this sense, the ascendance of the Mujahideen and the Taliban represented a violent social upheaval, with leadership again coming from the traditional religious education system.

The country entered into a civil war in which different factions of the Mujahideen fought for power in different parts of the country. The chaos around the country caused many schools to be closed or destroyed. Teachers and other educators fled the country, causing a substantial vacuum in Afghanistan's education system. Girls' education particularly suffered. The emergence of the Taliban aggravated the situation by banning girls from attending school by law. Despite the difficulties, a limited number of home schools for girls emerged and received support from NGOs and UN agencies around the country.

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<sup>16</sup> Bradsher, Henry S. *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention* p.46

<sup>17</sup> Dupree, Nancy. *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism* p.12

## EDUCATION BROADLY DEFINED AND THE AFGHAN REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

### *The Refugee Crisis*

Since the mid-1970s, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees. In the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a flood of refugees began to pour into Pakistan. The exodus continued through the 1980s and by 1990 the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan reached three and one quarter million.<sup>18</sup>

This turn of event had major ramifications for both countries. As millions of Afghan refugees poured into the frontier regions of Pakistan, that country was now at the frontlines of a global conflict, and history there was about to be warped by heavyweight American involvement. By the winter of 1980-1981, some 3.5 million people, mostly women and children, were living in camps set up in Northwest Pakistan.<sup>19</sup>

The exodus escalated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the peak being 1990 when the number of refugees reached over 3.272 million.<sup>20</sup> The end of the conflict with the Soviet Union in 1989 did not bring peace to Afghanistan, and Pakistan's expectation that the majority of the refugees would return to their country after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops was not realized. It was only after the collapse of the Taliban regime in December 2001 and the gradual consolidation of power by President Hamid Karzai that Afghanistan returned to some stability, and the refugees began to go home. Even then, some 1.5 million Afghans were estimated to be living in Pakistan in 2005.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> UNHCR Pakistan, Afghan Refugee Statistics (accessed March 14, 2009); available at <http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> World refugee survey 2002, U.S. Committee for Refugees, p.153

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR website, Afghan Refugee Statistics

<sup>21</sup> Burki, Shahid Javed Historical Dictionary of Pakistan, p.440

***Mujahideen schools***

Upon Afghanistan's Communist coup of 1978, Islamist elements of the Afghan polity immediately sought refuge in Pakistan. In the context of the cold war rivalry between the Soviets and the Americans, the US and their Saudi Arabian allies channeled through the ISI support for the Islamist opposition to the newly established Communist base in Kabul. From the safety of their new bases across the border in Pakistan, the Islamic resistance groups waged a jihad against the Communist 'infidels'. Over time, a state-in-exile developed. The refugee crisis provided a fertile ground for the mujahideen commanders to expand their influence in the relative security of Pakistan-based exile<sup>22</sup>. As Afghan refugees arrived in Pakistan and registered in camps, they provided a captive support base for the jihadi struggle, as party activists enlisted them as party members. The idea of jihad "brought to the forefront feelings of identity of purpose and unity amongst members of the resistance."<sup>23</sup>

In 1978 and 1979, political parties began to establish headquarters in Peshawar. By 1980, over twenty parties were active in Peshawar and Quetta.<sup>24</sup> The fundamentalist parties received the most support, with Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami receiving the most military assistance from Pakistan. Another powerful fundamentalist party was Jamiat-e-Islami led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. The cross-border attacks perpetrated by the refugees led to Afghan government reprisals, which violated Pakistan's sovereignty and killed its citizens.

Out of an Afghan population of approximately 15 million before the Soviet invasion, the best-educated and wealthiest Afghans fled to Europe, the USA, and even Australia, while those

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<sup>22</sup> Lischer, Sarah *Dangerous Sanctuaries* p.51.

<sup>23</sup> Roy, Oliver *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, 1985) p.165

<sup>24</sup> Girardet, Edward *Afghanistan: the Soviet War* (London, 1985), p.104

who fled to Pakistan are predominantly lower middle-class shopkeepers, bazaar craftsmen, as well as the rural population of small farmers and village artisans.<sup>25</sup> Among these groups, the refugees from rural areas end up most frequently in refugee camps, surviving off relief goods, while the middle class refugees are more inclined to face the challenge of surviving on their own in the urban centers of Pakistan.

### *Education for Refugees in Pakistan*

The Pakistan government accommodated the Afghan refugees in a network of camps along the border with Afghanistan in Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier Provinces. In these two provinces, the Afghan refugee population would represent twenty percent of the total population.<sup>26</sup> With the availability of significant US and Saudi financial support, the refugees were provided with tents, basic household tools, and given access to food, water, health services, and schools. The refugees quickly settled into the camps, erecting more permanent housing, establishing marketplaces and mosques, and convening local-level *loya jirgas*, all contributing parts of their adaptation.<sup>27</sup>

In the relatively stable period before the 1978 communist takeover, Afghan city-dwellers had awakened to the importance of providing their children with a proper education. While this trend had even started to carry over to rural communities, Afghans seeking refuge in their traditional ways and became skeptical of secular education. Fleeing the country, they carried this memory with them and sheltered their children out of hostility towards schooling.<sup>28</sup> Centlivres-Demont concluded that: “The negative effects of the campaign were felt

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<sup>25</sup> Boesen, p.219

<sup>26</sup> Said Azhar (1990), “Afghan refugees in Pakistan: the Pakistani view,” in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds. Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 1990. p109

<sup>27</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Boesen, pp.168-169

for a long time within the refugee population; among the traditional elements it bred doubt and rejection of all teaching imposed by the government and caused considerable damage to the project of literacy for girls.”<sup>29</sup>

More recent reports suggest that this perspective has undergone a shift in the refugee camps, with more and more refugees demanding access to education for their children. Peter Marsden’s study of coping strategies among Afghan refugees in Pakistan reports of the refugees’ determination to provide some form of education to their children, no matter how inadequate their financial resources. He documents the case of one young woman who was working to support her brother through medical school.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, one critical characteristic of Pakistan’s handling of the refugees has been a failure to systematically provide access to education. The fee-based schools that do exist in Pakistan’s refugee camps have appeared thanks to initiatives of the UNHCR, UNICEF, and other NGOs, and have a limited reach. In 1986, UNHCR estimated that out of 500,000 to 600,000 school-aged refugees living in Pakistan, it had only been able to enroll 100,000 in schools.<sup>31</sup>

Another source of education for refugee children in Pakistan has been the *madrasas* set up by Afghan political parties, particularly the Hizb-e Islami, which are thought to have been responsible for the education of at least as many children as the UNHCR schools had facilitated.<sup>32</sup> However, in Peter Marsden’s interviews, he uncovered some amount of discontent with the ulterior motives of the education provided in the *madrasa*. As one woman confided in

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<sup>29</sup> Centlivres-Demont, p346

<sup>30</sup> Marsden, Peter. “Living in Exile: Report on a Study of Economic Coping Strategies among Afghan Refugees in Pakistan.” British Agencies Afghanistan Group. 1996. p10.

<sup>31</sup> Centlivres, Pierre, p22.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p22-23.

him, "It is not education in the normal sense. It is military and political indoctrination. I don't want my children to go through this kind of education."<sup>33</sup>

One example of the radicalization of the curriculum of refugee camp madrassas in Pakistan can be seen in the textbooks that USAID issued to many of these schools. Between 1986 and 1992, USAID underwrote the printing of explicitly violent Islamist textbooks for elementary school children in both the camps and Pashto border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The University of Nebraska, Omaha (UNO), oversaw this \$50 million contract with Education Center for Afghanistan (ECA), a group jointly appointed by the seven mujahideen organizations that the ISI and CIA had taken under their wing.<sup>34</sup> A fourth-grade mathematics text noted that "the speed of a Kalashnikov bullet is 800 meters per second," and then asked students, "If a Russian is at a distance of 3,200 meters from a Mujahid, and that Mujahid aims at the Russian's head, calculate how many seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian in the forehead"<sup>35</sup> These textbooks designed by the Centre for Afghanistan Studies and the University of Nebraska-Omaha were published in both Dari and Pashto under a USAID grant in the early 1980's.<sup>36</sup> Over 13 million of these textbooks were distributed between 1984 and 1992.

Thomas Gouttierre, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska since 1970 stated at a Brookings Institution conference in December 2001:

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<sup>33</sup> Marsden, pp 36, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Coulson, Andrew "Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World: Is there a Problem? What Can We Do about It?" March, 2004 p.17

<sup>35</sup> Craig, Davis "A' is for Allah, 'J' is for Jihad," World Policy Journal, Spring 2002, pp. 90-94, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/articles/wpj02-1/Davis.pdf> , p. 90-94

<sup>36</sup> "Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military, International Crisis Group Asia Report N. 36, Islamabad/Brussels, July 2002 (amended July 2005), p. 131

“There was a mandate from Congress that said that the Afghans were going to be in charge of the content of their curriculum. This was passed on to the State Department and to USAID and any of those organizations of the government that were helping various organizations, institutions like the UNO.”<sup>37</sup>

On the ground, this congressional mandate opened the door for a promotion of a mujahideen curriculum with an emphasis on jihad, at the expense of more traditional religious texts and secular textbooks.

### *Education and Refugee Experiences in Iran*

An important element of the education climate as it evolved in Pakistan's camps was the opportunities it provided, particularly for Afghan women, to take initiative in running start-up schools. Several grassroots education organizations sprang up in the refugee communities, including the Peshawar-based organizations Afghan Institute of Learning and the Islamic Organization of Afghan Women. Refugee villages in Pakistan were well covered with NGO schools, but the situation for refugees living in Iranian cities was very different.

To the present day, Afghan refugees in Iran benefit from an entirely different legal status compared to refugees in Pakistan. Unlike Pakistan, Iran has a developed policy with regards to refugees and is a signatory to the relevant international conventions. In 1976, Iran ratified both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.<sup>38</sup> Prior to becoming a signatory to these international

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<sup>37</sup> Coulson, Andrew “Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World: Is there a Problem? What Can We Do about It?” March, 2004, p.17

<sup>38</sup> Refugee Convention; United Nations Treaty Collection

treaties, in 1963 Iran enacted an ordinance relating to refugees that provided a legal and administrative framework to grant asylum to refugees, which remains in force.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1980s, Iran began registering and documenting refugees through the issuance of “blue cards” instead. These blue cards identified the refugees not as *panahandegan* (Persian for “refugee”) but as *mohajereen*, or involuntary migrants.<sup>40</sup> Among the cardholder benefits, Afghan refugees were now entitled to subsidized health care, primary and secondary education, and food subsidies, on par with Iranian citizens. In terms of Iranian institutional capacity for refugee treatment, there exists a dedicated government agency, the Iranian Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA), distinguishing Iran from Pakistan in its handling of refugees. In the 1980s, this agency set up camps to process the influx of refugees, providing them with basic assistance on arrival, and setting up schools for registered refugee children.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to its neighbor Pakistan, Iran never restricted the movement of Afghan refugees, but rather it has always permitted the refugees to integrate into Iranian society. As a result, less than 5% of Afghan refugees in Iran live in refugee camps, a statistic the Iranian government cites with pride saying, “The Islamic Republic of Iran, in line with its humanitarian policies, has never forced refugees to remain in camps.”<sup>42</sup> Instead, Iran’s Afghan refugees are dispersed throughout the Iranian population, living in cities and rural places throughout the country. The biggest concentrations of Afghan refugees were in the provinces of Khorasan, Sistan-Balochistan, Tehran, Ferman, Central Fars, and Semnan.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> USCRI, Iran: World Survey 2003.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p7-8

<sup>41</sup> USCRI *World Refugee Survey, Iran*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

While Pakistan has received significant international assistance for hosting refugees, Iran, due to a combination of factors, has had to shoulder the burden of its refugee influx, almost entirely by itself. Part of the explanation for this contrast is that, while the US had been keen to support Pakistan as an ally against the Soviet advance, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 1980 Tehran Hostage Crisis, the United States has taken an aggressively isolative policy towards Iran. Conversely, in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, Iran's drive for self-sufficiency and disengagement from western powers meant that Iran was unlikely to try to engage foreign powers in what it regarded as inherently an internal issue. In the 1980s, whereas UNHCR support in Pakistan averaged \$69.8 million annually, UNHCR was not permitted to operate in Iran until 1983, and from that point onwards would total on average a mere \$13.7 million annually. In the same decade, total bilateral Official Development Assistance Commitments for Pakistan were on average 19 times greater than bilateral commitments for Iran.<sup>44</sup> During the 1990s, international assistance to Iran increased considerably, but the Iranian government still estimates that they spend on average \$674 per refugee, with the international community sharing only \$6 of this burden.<sup>45</sup>

By the mid-1990s, the Iranian refugee policy shifted away from seeing integration as a lasting solution, to advocating for repatriation, and restricting the influx of refugees. On the heels of the Soviet withdrawal, in 1992, large numbers of Afghans began to be repatriated to Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> The government stopped issuing blue cards to refugees, and began restricting their movement, employment, and educational benefits, and closing the

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<sup>44</sup> OECD, *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Aid Recipients, 1980-1989: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators* (Paris: OECD), p.152

<sup>45</sup> USCRI, *World Survey 2003*

<sup>46</sup> Marsden, p8.

border to refugees. Refugees who have entered Iran subsequently have done so illegally and are without rights, in violation of Iran's commitments under the Refugee Convention. Recently, the government announced in 2004 a new policy requiring that all remaining Afghan refugees return home immediately, yet refugee inflows continue to the present day.<sup>47</sup>

### *Education for Afghan Refugees in Iran*

For Afghan families who have fled to Iran, the refugee experience has had a large impact on their orientation towards education. According to the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran, the number one priority for Afghan women (living in Iran) is educational opportunities for their children. In connection with this, research indicates that one of the main reasons cited by refugees for not returning to Afghanistan is the lack of educational opportunities for their daughters and sons.<sup>48</sup> The Islamic Republic's aggressive literacy campaign, which paints literacy as an integral component of being a "good Muslim", together with the high education level of Iranian women, has had a major impact on the refugee's views on education:

Some of the women told us that living without extended family in a community of non-kin and interacting with Afghan refugees from various ethnic backgrounds as well as Iranians, has exposed them to the different ways that Muslims may understand and practice Islam. Their experience of living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in a country where Islam is preached and practiced in all facets of daily life, has made it easier for them to examine more critically what it is to be a "Muslim woman."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> France Harrison, "Iran's Afghan refugees feel pressure to leave," BBC News, Nov. 1, 2004

<sup>48</sup> Marsden (1996), p.8

<sup>49</sup> Hoodfar, Home, p.159

***Bonn and the Role of Education in Reconstruction***

The millions of Afghan refugees returning to Afghanistan after decades in exile face countless obstacles in their attempt to readjust to a new life in Afghanistan. Among other serious challenges, they often arrive home to find their land and property overrun by squatters. But they return from their migration having a broader view of the world, and possessing useful knowledge of life in neighboring countries. They also may have an increased appreciation for education.

Understanding these experiences, we can seek ways to apply them to the context of Afghanistan's reconstruction. As the 2002 UNHCR Evaluation of the refugee situation in Iran concluded, Afghanistan's refugees must be leveraged as "agents for development".<sup>50</sup>

With the fall of the Taliban government in 2002, the UNHCR has assisted over 3.1 million Afghan refugees repatriate, with an agreement with Pakistan to help it close its decades-old refugee camps by late 2005.<sup>51</sup> This repatriation of Afghan refugees is the largest number of returning refugees in the world since 1972. The civic, political and logistical implications for repatriating millions of refugees in Afghanistan present difficult challenges for the new Afghan government. One of the areas of utmost importance and primary concern is the reintegration of refugee children into Afghan schools and the ability of Afghanistan's educational system to accommodate and educate its population.

Following the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, millions of dollars of aid money flowed into the country and the education system was flagged as the one of the key areas needing support in the post conflict situation. However, after the initial influx of

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<sup>50</sup> UNHCR Evaluation 2002

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/about.htm>

international aid, monies earmarked for education diminished dramatically in 2004 and 2005.<sup>52</sup> In 2002 one of the primary UN agencies working on education in Afghanistan had a budget of over \$90 million, in 2005 its budget was less than \$10 million. Instead of a widespread and coordinated effort to examine the national education curriculum and infrastructure left in shambles after Taliban rule, international aid centered on a “Back-to-School Campaign” which focused on enrolling children in schools, but not on the content or quality of said schooling.<sup>53</sup> This joint UNICEF and USAID initiative did succeed in dramatically increasing school enrollment, especially for primary school-aged children, but at the same time heavily relied on reprinting some of the same textbooks which were in circulation during the 1980’s in the Pakistan refugee camps. These University of Nebraska-Omaha textbooks from the 1980’s were the same that had emphasized violent imagery and holy war against the communists.<sup>54</sup> Thus the large initial influx of aid was used primarily to expand the distribution of outdated and outmoded textbooks from the mujahideen years and expand the enrollment of children, without a systematic review of the national curriculum.

In recognition of this problematic use of textbooks from the 1980’s filled with violent imagery, UNICEF in conjunction with a research team from Columbia University Teachers College worked with Afghanistan’s new Ministry of Education to reform the primary school textbooks. However, the proposed changes to the textbooks removed some of the religious content and were ultimately rejected.

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<sup>52</sup>Spink, Jeaniene “Education and politics in Afghanistan: the importance of an education system in peacebuilding and reconstruction” *Journal of Peace education*, Vol. 2, No 2, Sept 2005 pp. 195-207

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Spink, Jeaniene “Education and politics in Afghanistan: the importance of an education system in peacebuilding and reconstruction” *Journal of Peace education*, Vol. 2, No 2, Sept 2005 pp. 195-207

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM: 2001-2009

### *Enrollment*

The starting point—in late 2001 at the fall of the Taliban—for recent developments in Afghanistan was dire. The education system was in a state of virtual collapse. Gross enrollment rates in education were 38% for boys and 3% for girls.<sup>55</sup> Afghanistan's colleges and universities were barely functioning. After decades of conflict and flight, the country was almost entirely lacking in highly trained people, including teachers, administrators, doctors, engineers, and other professionals.

The existing severe shortage of teachers was exacerbated by the influx of new students.

Afghanistan has had considerable success in increasing student enrollment since 2002. A significant leap, especially in grades 1–2, occurred during the first two years of reconstruction in Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> According to the data collected by the Planning Department of the Ministry of Education, 4.3 million students are enrolled in grades 1–12, of which 3.9 million (91 percent) are in primary schools in 2003. This figure is by far the largest in the history of Afghanistan.

This enrollment leap will distort the student demographics in Afghanistan's school system for many years, as the bulge of new students moves through the system. By 2009 this bulge of students has reached the sixth grade, and is approaching secondary school.

Close scrutiny of the net enrollment in disaggregated form reveals some stark contrasts in regional and gender disparities. In large northern cities like Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat, the ratio of boys to girls is roughly 1:1. For example, net enrollment rate is as high as 87

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<sup>55</sup> Afghanistan Preliminary Needs Assessment for Recovery and Reconstruction. January 2002

<sup>56</sup> Securing Afghanistan's Future: Technical Annex on Education.



values, the economic need to keep girls at home for work, and the direct cost for schooling<sup>58</sup>—a bottleneck for girls education exists on the supply side as well. According to the World Bank's report on gender in Afghanistan, Afghanistan does not have an adequate number of girls' schools or schools accommodating boys and girls, and schools are often far away from home.<sup>59</sup> Many schools do not have latrines and drinking water. The number of female teachers is also inadequate, especially in rural areas.

### *The Tertiary Education System*

As a long-term investment in Afghanistan's social and economic development, success in education cannot be measured only by the numbers of children enrolled in school. Afghan children must also be equipped with well-developed skills in literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, critical thinking, team-building, and communications to face the needs of an expanding peacetime economy. Quality education is among the most critical investments to be made in Afghanistan, but the current quality of education practices is poor, and is in need of major improvements. To provide an example of the difficulties that are already facing the Education system, what follows is an analysis of the condition of Afghanistan's universities.

- *A Lack of Qualified Professors*

Afghanistan has insufficient numbers of qualified professors because so many left the country during the long years of conflict. Those who stayed in the country have been isolated from the outside world and are out of touch with major developments in teaching

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<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch report on schools in Afghanistan

<sup>59</sup> Afghanistan: Role of Women in Afghanistan's Future

and research. Many faculty lack sufficient credentials and expertise. This particularly affects the universities and vocational schools of Afghanistan. More than half (54 percent) of professors in the country's 17 tertiary education institutions have only bachelor's degrees, 39 percent have a master's, and only 7 percent possess doctorates.<sup>60</sup> Curriculums, teaching materials, and pedagogy are grossly outmoded, with a particular lack of up-to-date textbooks and heavy reliance on rote learning.

- *An Over-Abundance of Institutions*

Afghanistan currently has two types of tertiary schools, universities and pedagogical institutes. Universities include Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic School, Kabul Medical School, Al Biruni University, and the universities of Balkh, Herat, Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar, and Takhar. Additional pedagogical institutes (teacher colleges) are located in Badakhshan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Parwan, and Samangan. Most of these universities far fall short of international norms. Among these 16 institutions in the country, six have fewer than 500 students. For example, Kunduz Pedagogic Institute has only 164 students, and Takhar "university" 319 students. Some institutions have very low student-to-professor ratios, e.g. 5 to 1 at Khost University, and 7 to 1 at Kandahar University.<sup>61</sup>

- *Inadequate Infrastructure*

Electricity and water supplies are often not sufficient or even functioning. Classroom, laboratory, and library facilities are rudimentary and often exposed to extremes of heat and cold. Instructors, students and administrators typically lack basic computer facilities.

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<sup>60</sup> Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, cited in

<sup>61</sup> Strategic Development Plan of the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education

Repairs and upkeep are done on an ad hoc basis, and facility planning does not follow any strategic university plan.

- *Inadequate Linkages to The Real Afghan Economy*

Now as in the 1960s and 1970s, the education system in Afghanistan risks devolving into an irrelevant bastion of academia. Then as now, what Afghanistan lacks is a state education system that trains students in agriculture, industry, health and other areas; provides mentorships in the maintenance of natural resources and physical infrastructure necessary for rural and urban development; and knowledge and skills that are relevant to coping with the demands of modern society. Today, Afghanistan's higher education institutions have limited linkages with the productive sectors. Faculties and departments work in isolation from employers who might hire their graduates. Neither the universities nor the polytechnic institutions have a board of trustees with representatives from the world of work and civil society.<sup>62</sup>

- *Limited Autonomy*

The Afghan education system as it was conceived by the Ministry of Education in 2002 and 2003 was self-referential and designed from the top down with no flexibility to accommodate different community needs and target populations.<sup>63</sup> The highly centralized

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<sup>62</sup> Skills Development in Afghanistan. Discussion Paper October 2008 p.29

<sup>63</sup> While the majority of schools in Afghanistan are supported by the Ministry of Education, non state actors are also heavily involved in the Afghan education sector. Since the 1970s, aid agencies have played a central role in providing primary education, literacy classes, vocational training and teacher training programs in Afghanistan. Several agencies are still running schools around the country. These are mainly community or home based classes. Often such classes are mobile, classes are held in rooms of other facilities, in community homes or even out in the open. The main international aid agencies involved in the education sector in the country are Aga Khan

structures and norms of university governance are outdated. Most higher-education institutions have little if any autonomy and are subject to rigid administrative regulations. Professors are civil servants, and their pay scale does not incentivize excellence.

### *Decentralization and Community-centered Education*

The Ministry of Education, as part of its National Education Strategy, has declared that the establishment of Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) will be mandatory for all schools in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> In addition, School Management Committees (SMC) were regularly established through the World Bank's \$76 million Education Quality Improvement Program in Afghanistan. Recently, these two structures (PTAs and SMCs) have merged into School Management Shuras that are to oversee both the regular management of the schools as well as how education grants are spent. These entities are meant to represent the community and involved them in the establishment and running of the education project in their respective communities. In many cases they are already operational. A recent CARE field study on risk to schools carried out across eight Afghan provinces in September and October 2008 found that mechanisms for community involvement in children's education were in place across all the provinces that were assessed.<sup>65,66</sup>

In addition to general mechanisms for community participation in school management, the Ministry of Education has established school security shuras in a large number of schools that have experienced attacks across the country. Their establishment is part of a national

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Development Network (AKDN), BRAC, CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children Alliance, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and UNICEF.

<sup>64</sup> website

<sup>65</sup> CARE report, p.16

<sup>66</sup> 91% of respondents stated that there was a PTA or education shura at their school. Only 6% claimed that there was no such structure.

program initiated by the Ministry of Education in 2006, led by the Department of Protection and Safety of Schools.<sup>67</sup> The shuras are unarmed and use methods of negotiation to engage with elements that are opposing education in their areas. Shura members come from the community itself and can consist of parents or other persons that are interested in the protection of the schools. According to the Ministry of Education, increasing transparency of education projects is one of the purposes of the Parents Teachers Associations/School Management Committees. But equally important, School and community links also can have an impact in improving the quality of education. As the CARE report mentions, “There is increasing awareness of the importance of involving the wider community in all aspects of education in the context of education for Afghans.”<sup>68</sup>

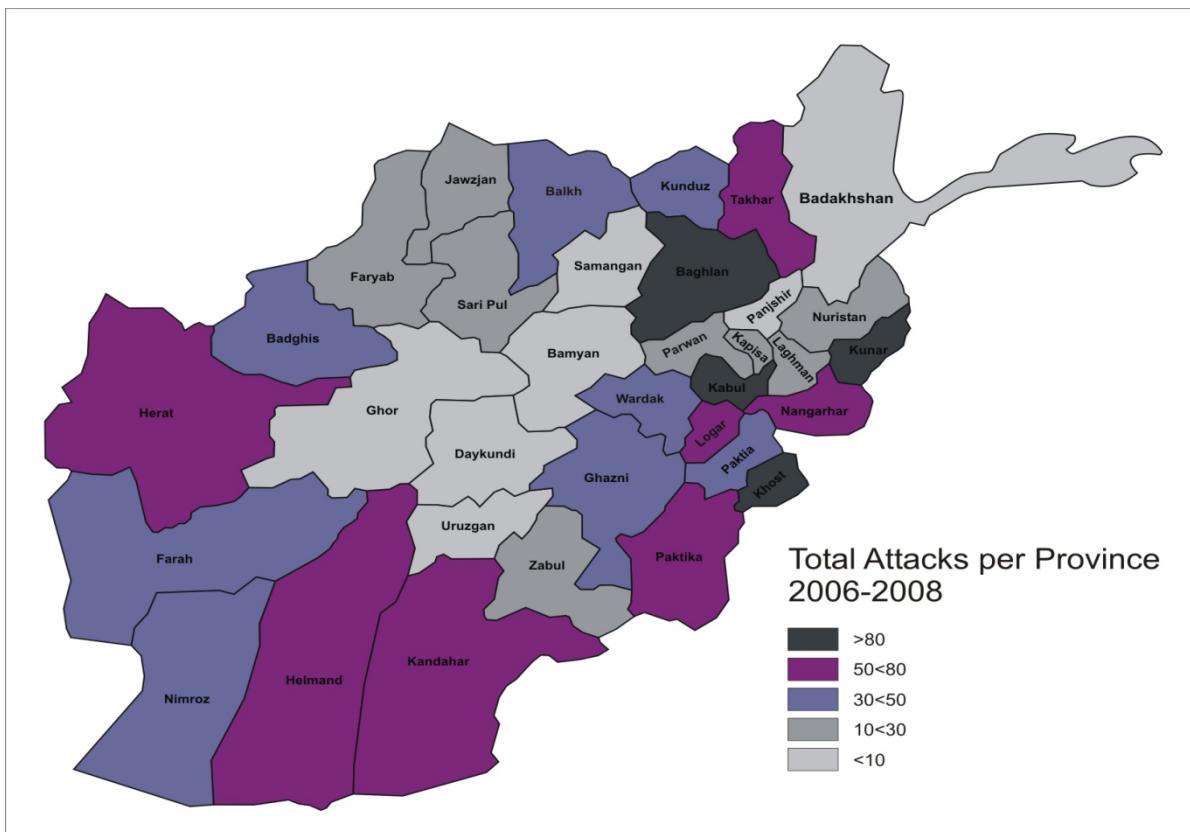
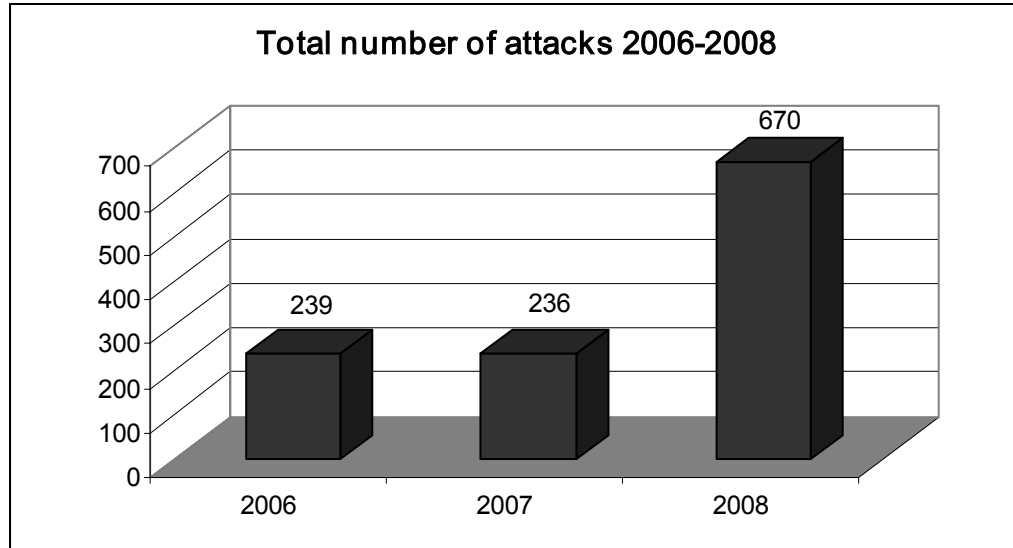
As has been demonstrated through the successive coups and civil discord in Afghanistan over the past century, tension over control of the institutions of education has often been both a precursor and a precipitant for internal conflict. If the international donor community and the fledgling Karzai government move to quickly to reform the institutions of education, without a proper base of legitimacy and the support of the rural populace, the new regime could suffer the fate of King Amanullah's. If they wait too long, the risk of a re-entrenchment of fundamentalist madrassas with an anti-modernist message in the border regions strengthens.

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<sup>67</sup> CARE report, p.45

<sup>68</sup> CARE Report, p.54

**Attacks on Schools in Afghanistan**



source: UNICEF database on reported incidents, cited in the CARE report

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS****1.) Promotion of private financial support for community schools.**

The US government risks using an all too heavy hand in becoming involved in the educational systems of Afghanistan, but it risks infinitely more by doing nothing and letting a system whose decay it is largely responsible for, continue. The lessons of education's turbulent history in Afghanistan can inform the future direction of education for the Afghan government, promoting state stability and mitigating the rise of extremism. The Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund should continue to be utilized to support Ministry of Education budgets. But as far as grants and infrastructure projects targeting specific communities, the U.S. government should emphasize private donors over government streams of money, as private donors might be less politically charged. The high prevalence of Afghan community awareness of donor identity was a critical finding of the CARE report carried out late last year. An incredible 97% of respondents reportedly knew who was responsible for building the school in their village or neighborhood.<sup>69</sup> A recent USAID publication, *Foreign Aid in the National Interest*, effectively conceded this point, stating that private voluntary organizations are more well suited to "operate in politically sensitive situations" than government contractors.<sup>70</sup>

**2.) Decentralization of education system management:**

The ministry of education should consider allowing space for more decision-making at district, community, and school levels. To support this long-term implementation strategy, Afghanistan must strengthen the management and monitoring capacities of the formal education system so that greater authority to be delegated to provinces, districts, communities,

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<sup>69</sup> CARE report, p38

<sup>70</sup> USAID *Foreign Aid in the National Interest*, p. 141

and schools, while maintaining greater accountability at these levels. As a part of this decentralization, all parties should continue to support local communities negotiating with local armed opposition (“Taliban”), in order to provide a better security climate for education and schooling. The CARE report brings attention to the overwhelming public support throughout Afghanistan for negotiating a memorandum of understanding with the armed opposition in terms of schools security.<sup>71</sup> As a final aspect of decentralization, all parties should encourage innovative and flexible approaches at school, district, and provincial levels in order to respond to local needs and create healthy competition for pedagogy techniques and education outcomes among and between schools, districts, and provinces.

#### **5.) Focus on employment generation and balanced national development**

As a complement to decentralized management, an increased focus on schools is vital. In view of the sharp increase in demand, schools need the capacity and authority to respond to local needs. Schools and institutions in all parts of the country should attempt to incorporate curricular and other adaptations to meet the specific needs of their regional/provincial communities and of their potential employers while producing graduates who are employable at national and international levels or ready for higher education.

Afghanistan’s new constitution and government have done much to strive for equal consideration and representation for Afghanistan’s diverse ethnic groups. Historically however, access to education has been limited for two major groups in particular – girls, and rural students – which together represent the vast majority of Afghanistan’s population. In the past, lack of access to social development has been a major grievance, and taking steps now to correct these inequalities will help to lower the risk of long run political instability in

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<sup>71</sup> CARE Report, p22

Afghanistan. Therefore, all parties should bear in mind the implications that policies might have in regard to these sensitive inequalities.

**Strengthening regional and international partnerships:**

Finally, Afghan specialists in research, administration, evaluation, and curriculum must have the necessary resources and support to form strong international networks. The nature of education development is not limited by national boundaries, but each nation must have the capacity to examine the costs and benefits of each new development and decide whether it is appropriate for their own society or culture.<sup>72</sup> Adaptation, more than simple adoption, of international approaches will be the key for the institutes of higher education especially. Similarly, as the education program of rehabilitation and development continues to progress in Afghanistan, Afghan experts should be prepared to share their findings and advances with international colleagues through publications, seminars, workshops, and other forums. Associated strategies will be access to IT-based distance learning, selective introduction of computer awareness programs into upper secondary schools and postsecondary institutions and more frequent use of IT to share management and monitoring information.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>72</sup> “Educational Partnerships: the key to building sustainability and stability in countries of conflict”

**In Afghanistan the effect of decades of conflict was a failure to carry out the expansion of system capacity that neighboring countries undertook in the 1980s and 1990s. The backlog of physical capacity and trained teachers left the country with a legacy that will take decades to address.**

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