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Back in Exile: Afghan Stories of a Near Distant Past

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In 20 years of American-backed governments Afghanistan has changed immensely – singers, activists, and journalists showed the country that beyond the bloodshed, a world of culture, music, and beauty existed. Many of them were raised outside the country and returned to the homeland left by their parents in the previous wars. They helped rebuilding the nation, and now they are “back in exile,” joined by many other Afghans who managed to escape after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in mid-August.

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Afghans exiles have been developing various discourses, including recording the memories of their flight, expressing nostalgia of a yearned-for past, and calling for social-political mobilization for the motherland.

A central theme in refugees' memories is their time of escape. Usually recounted after years, escape stories are narrated through gaps, lapses in time and space. Recent testimonies of Afghan refugees provide detailed insights into what their fleeing was like.

Noor, an Afghan tourist guide, recounts his escape first from Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul, where he tried to obtain a visa when the Taliban captured the city. Interviewed by the American vlogger and traveler Drew Binsky, Noor describes the empty streets of the city, whose main roads were only congested by those who sought to escape.¹ Venturing among the checkpoints quickly set up by the Taliban militia, he went to visit Mr. Zebulon Simantov, known as the “last Jew of Afghanistan,” in an attempt to convince him to leave the country.²

The scenes of people climbing on the airport fences in Kabul and desperately clinging onto the wings of planes ready to take off became emblematic of the recent crisis. People with foreign citizenships, visas or even those devoid of documents rushed to the airport in the hope to flee the country.

The desperate crowd plunging onto the gates was captured by several footages, with Taliban militiamen shooting and beating people all around. The chaos of those hours is another moving theme, which Noor describes as a *buzkashi* (the central Asian goat pulling game also known as *uloq ko'pkari*, featuring a tumultuous crowd bestriding around a dead goat).³ The anguished search for the right gate to enter the airport was full of horrible scenes: children lost in the crowd, dead bodies of people trampled over, thirst, and hunger.

The famous singer Aryana Saeed, who bravely appears publicly unveiled, also recounts the hours inside the airport, suffused with the fear of remaining behind.

¹ Drew Binsky, “[How My Friend Escaped Afghanistan \(to Australia\)](#)”, *YouTube*, 8 September 2021; accessed 19 October 2021.

² On the last Jew of Afghanistan see, “[akharin yahudi gorikhte az afghanestan: be israil miguyam be Amrika e'temad nakonad](#)”, *BBC Persian*, 29 September 2021, accessed 24 October 2021.

³ *Ibid.*, 24:52.

Once inside the airport, foreign soldiers were checking papers to let people board onto the planes, while many were just waiting on the runway for their turn. In an interview, she also shared an emotional story of a woman handing her child over to her, wishing to secure him a way out of Afghanistan.⁴

Havoc, savagery, and survival accompanied the days before the exile, to which many Afghans returned after two decades in the homeland. Here, other narratives unfolded, which combine nostalgia for both a distant and recent past with tributes to Afghan heritage.

The Canadian food vlogger Saadia Badiei, daughter to Afghan refugees of the late 1970s, began posting on Afghan food, as a way to mark her heritage⁵ Embracing the nostalgic thought of an almost idealized past, she also posted a tribute to the homeland before the Taliban.⁶

The nostalgia for the distant past, when Afghanistan had been gradually modernizing, before the Soviet invasion and the consequent rise of Jihadism, is a recurring theme among refugees and their descendants.

Mariam Wafa, an Afghan-American singer who became famous through the TV music contest “Setare-ye Afghani” (Afghan Star) expressed her solidarity with the suffering Afghans, promising to voice their pain in a video posted on Facebook.⁷ There, she appears dressed in traditional Afghan outfit, with the colors of the national flag now changed by the Taliban. After praising Dr. Najib, the last President of the pre-Taliban era, and Ahmad Massoud, the anti-Taliban fighter of the Panjshir province, she sings the famous song “Da Zamong Zeba Watan” (This is Our Beautiful Homeland). Composed in the Pashto language by patriot and songwriter Ustad Awalmir (1931-1982), this song glorifies the Afghan splendor

⁴ India Today, “[Afghanistan Pop Star Aryana Sayeed Shares How She Managed To Escape From Taliban | Exclusive](#)”, *YouTube*, 22 August 2001; accessed 25 August 2021.

⁵ Pick Up Limes, “[An AFGHAN feast » what I ate growing up](#)”, *YouTube*, 31 August 2021; accessed 15 September 2021.

⁶ Pick Up Limes, “[My Heart aches for Afghanistan](#)”, *Instagram*, 17 August 2021; accessed 22 October 2021.

⁷ Mariam Wafa, “[A Few Words to Say](#)”, *Facebook*, 3 September 2021 [in Persian]; accessed 20 October 2021.

and articulates now the yearning for a homeland lost in wars – in a recent post, she sings this same song full of pathos.⁸

The choice of singing in Pashto is not anodyne, especially when it comes to non-Pashtun artists. As the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtun are strongly identified with the Taliban, many of whom barely speak Persian, the *lingua franca* of the different ethnicities and of culture. Pashto is perceived by many as the language of the Taliban; therefore, the emphasis on Persian and its culture constitutes a form of opposition to the regime. Aryana Saeed decried the use of the Pashto language solely in the new emblems of the Taliban regime, triggering a meaningful debate on Afghan identity.

On Twitter, Ms. Sayeed denounced the Pashto-only denomination of the Ministry of Defense, which did not comprise the usual bilingual wording with Persian alongside Pashto.⁹ Some responses to this post fiercely defended the Pashto language, perceived to have been marginalized by the previous regime, and defined by some as the only real national language; others condemned the ethnic divide deepened by language politics.

⁸ Mariam Wafa, “[Good old days... I miss Afghanistan](#)”, *Facebook*, 20 October 2021, accessed 24 October 2021.

⁹ Aryana Sayeed, “[Where is the other official language of Afghanistan?](#)”, *Twitter*, 18 October 2021; accessed 22 October 2021.



The Tweet by Aryana Sayeed showing the new emblem of the Ministry of Defense. The text is written in Pashto, but it is intelligible to non-Pashto speakers since it comprises of mainly words borrowed from Arabic.

In reply to a similar post on Facebook,¹⁰ Pashto-speakers clearly showed their resentment against those Persian-speakers who identify Pashtuns with the new regime. In a previous post, Ms. Sayeed emphasized that Afghanistan belongs to Persian culture.¹¹ Critiques stressed the historical identification of the country with the Pashtun ethnic group as well as the specificity of Afghan Persian, called *dari*, considered by some as a language of its own.

Members of non-Muslim minorities hailing from Afghanistan, of which little is known, also contribute to this discourse, by both denouncing the Taliban regime and praising the distant past of what they perceived as cultural and religious pluralism in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Aryana Sayeed, "[Zaban-e rasmi-e digar-e Afghanistan \(Farsi/Dari\) kajast?](#)", *Facebook*, 18 October 2021; accessed 22 October 2021.

¹¹ Aryana Sayeed, "[Daneshgah... farsi!](#)", *Facebook*, 1 October 2021; accessed 22 October 2021.

UK-based Pritpal Singh, known online under the name of “The Dutch Sikh,” posted about the evacuation of Sikh and Hindu Afghans.¹² The ancient and formerly prosperous community has almost entirely left for India, including the former Sikh MP Narender Khalsa Singh, who broke out in tears on Indian TV, saying “everything has come to an end.”¹³

Other political exiles continue denouncing the violation of human rights. Hashtags like #SaveAfghanLives, #afghanlivesmatter, #stopkillingafghan, and #afghanwomen,¹⁴ have been trending on social media over the last couple of months. Many of the posts are in English, written for sensitizing an international community and at times for criticizing it.

Afghan cartoonist Atiq Shaheed published an image showing an Afghan fighter branding a rifle marked “made in Pakistan” floating in the air as a balloon marked European Union props him up. The criticism here of course is directed against Europe and its economic interests.¹⁵

¹² TheDutchSikh, “[An Afghan Muslim brother has kindly filmed this recent video of Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar in Jalalabad, Afghanistan](#)”, *Facebook*, 4 October 2021; accessed 22 October 2021.

¹³ Prateek Kumar, “[bhaarat pahunchate hee aphagaan saansad kee aankhen huee nam, kaha- 20 saalon se chal rahee sarakaar khatm huee](#)”, *Jagran*, 23 August 2021 [in Hindi]; accessed 22 October 2021.

¹⁴ #SaveAfghanLives, #afghanlivesmatter, #stopkillingafghan, and #AfghanWomen, *Twitter*.

¹⁵ Atiq Shahid, “[Europe seeks to strengthen terrorism in Afghanistan](#)”, *Twitter*, 16 October 2021; accessed 24 October 2021.



Atiq Shahid's cartoon on the Taliban and Europe posted on Twitter.

In another cartoon, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the UN, and NATO are caricatured as three monkeys, which do not want to see, hear or speak in front of a corpse embodying Afghanistan.¹⁶ Pakistan is also heavily attacked for supporting the Taliban, portrayed in another cartoon as the actual killer of Afghan women.¹⁷

¹⁶ Atiq Shahid, "[Mowqef-e Jahan](#)", *Twitter*, 13 October 2021; accessed 24 October 2021.

¹⁷ Atiq Shahid, "[Afghan history goes back!](#)", *Twitter*, 31 August 2021.

While the new Taliban regime is seeking to rebrand itself under Pakistani guidance, the Afghan exiles still look at their homeland.

The Afghan diaspora is not just a virtual place where identity transforms, but a fervent promise that, one day, the homeland will return to its past splendor. This promise is echoed in songs, images, and posts by Afghan artists and activists scattered around the world.

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