Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by M. Ashraf Haidari

Rebuilding Afghanistan: The Diaspora's Debt of Service [1]

Do we Afghans ever think about our debt of service to Afghanistan and actually doing something about it? I think we hardly do so. But let us begin with the basic fact that the land we call home is diversely populated, geographically landlocked, politically and economically least developed, and unfortunately located in a predatory neighborhood where at least one of our neighbors sees its raison d'être partly dependent on instability in Afghanistan. Meantime, we understand that other state and non-state actors -- such as extremists, terrorists, and drug-traffickers -- have exploited our country's vulnerabilities to their advantage, and they will continue to do so alone or together in common self-interest.

If we are keenly aware of who stands to gain the most from our weak state institutions, from polarization of our ethnic diversity, from our abject poverty and dependency on foreign aid. If we actually talk about these vulnerabilities in almost every public forum, in every conference, in every family or friends gathering, then I wonder why Afghans choose the path of self-destructive inaction over the path of united action to help rebuild our homeland and secure the future of our nation.

With five thousand years of glorious history and culture, why can we not identify our individual selves with the collective interests of our nation -- the Afghan nation? Why are we not learning from the decades of exploitation in the hands of outsiders? Why are we falling far behind every newly independent or created nation-state across the world and still allowing our foes to fan ethnic nationalism in Afghanistan, even when we know that it is only through one voice -- the Afghan nationalism -- that can we survive, thrive, and defend our nation and country?

My answer: let us add up the voices -- of the Sikhs and Hindus, of the Sunnis and Shias, of the Aimaqs and Turkmans, of the Uzbeks and Hazaras, and of the Tajiks and Pashtuns -- to form one formidable unified Afghan voice, one unbreakable Afghan front so that our nation is no longer perceived as "dividable" or "expendable" to serve the interests of any foreign ideologies or policies. Let us deny anyone the opportunity to divide and rule us. Let us embrace a religion of peace, tolerance and coexistence, and a culture of diversity, hospitality and freedom that truly define the Afghan freedom and the Afghan national identity.

If we internalize and practice these national ethos, we can be sure of our greatest service to our homeland and to our future generations to come and inhabit a land of unity, a land of peace, and a land of prosperity free from foreign influences and the miseries befalling our people today.

For the Afghan diaspora in the West, let us avoid getting bogged down with the day-to-day problems in Afghanistan but think about how we can help address the greater challenges facing our homeland. Let us avoid the empty question I keep hearing from some Afghans abroad who out of frustration of homelessness ask, "What has Afghanistan done for me to

deserve my service?"

What has any country done for its citizens to deserve their service? It is the citizens that make the republic; not vice versa. Let us build the
republic first before demanding rewards. It was the Japanese who turned a resourceless island into the world's economic powerhouse. Theirs was a much more devastated country in the wake of the World War II. But they recovered from the destructions wrought by the US nuclear bombs and rebuilt their homeland.

So, let us never ask what Afghanistan can do for us but ask what we can do for Afghanistan. We can do for Afghanistan what the Japanese and other post-conflict nations did for their homelands. We should begin right here and right now in the West where we have the resources, the capacity, the know-how, and the wealth to walk our talk about the challenges of securing and rebuilding Afghanistan. Let us do our share and avoid going down in the history books as a diaspora that never made a serious effort to save our homeland but allowed it to be a pawn in the game of others.

I have identified four practical ways on how resourceful Afghans abroad can play a vital role in the overall rebuilding and development of Afghanistan by: 1) Building capacity in Afghanistan, 2) Investing in Afghanistan, 3) Strengthening Afghanistan's civil society, and 4) Advocacy and lobbying for Afghanistan.

I. Building capacity in Afghanistan

The first step to Afghanistan's recovery is to replace its "brain drain" with "brain gain." Lack of human capital is our greatest challenge in
rebuilding Afghanistan. The United Nations Development Program ranked our country 173 out of 178 nations on the 2004 Human Development Index, meaning we have the worst social and economic indicators in a competitive world where if a country cannot catch up with the pace of globalization, it will be "globalized," a new term for "neo-colonization."

In effect, Afghanistan's competitive human capacity lies in the West. Unfortunately, the donor community has so far failed to tap this indigenous
resource outside Afghanistan, despite many calls by the government of Afghanistan to expand the return of qualified Afghans programs. While donor-driven programs may or may not materialize to replace expensive foreign consultants with Afghan expatriates, we should seek independent ways to get involved.

One effective way is through membership in the Afghan civil society organizations and strengthening them to serve as organized mechanisms to utilize the voluntary services of their members towards Afghanistan's reconstruction. We should be able to achieve this objective by reaching out to the various public and private institutions of our professional choice at home and assess their capacity building needs. Then based on their specific requirements, we should arrange placement programs, whereby the resources of Afghan expatriates can be brought to bear on rebuilding Afghanistan. If we volunteer one or two years of our career to help build institutional capacity at home, we will have gone a long way paying our debt of service to Afghanistan.

II. Investing in Afghanistan

We annually send millions of dollars in remittances to our families and relatives in Afghanistan

and in the refuge countries of Pakistan and Iran. While continuing the humanitarian role, wealthy Afghans should take advantage of the very generous investment environment in Afghanistan. By being the first movers, they will not only reap substantial profits but also pave the way for foreign direct investment. Unless we with national ties move in first to help develop our private sector and build confidence in others to invest in Afghanistan, foreign investors would be unlikely to do
so.

Afghanistan is a "virgin market," and the government has declared the private sector to be the driver of economic growth and sustainable development in Afghanistan. In this regard, some of the key achievements in the revitalization of our post-conflict economy are noteworthy. We have implemented a series of reforms that account for fiscal stability and increased investment in Afghanistan. In 2002, we introduced a new currency that replaced the highly devalued old Afghani. At the same time, we have reformed Da Afghanistan Bank, or our central bank, which now effectively regulates the money supply, issues currency, and manages the rate of exchange.

In addition, we have signed a number of bilateral and multilateral trade and transit agreements in the region and beyond to facilitate commerce with and through Afghanistan in an effort to bolster economic growth. With support from the international community, we have also improved the infrastructure, including roads, communications, electricity, and transit -- all of which have facilitated investing in Afghanistan.

Moreover, we have made considerable progress in creating a good business and regulatory environment for domestic and foreign investors. In 2003, we established the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency, or AISA, to serve as a "one-stop shop" for investors. AISA facilitates business registration and licensing and promotes investment in Afghanistan. Through trade missions, economic conferences, and chambers of commerce, we have tried to enhance bilateral and multilateral trade and invited investors to explore business opportunities in Afghanistan's many profitable sectors including agriculture, energy, mining, infrastructure, civil aviation and transportation, telecommunications, and water supply.

III. Strengthening Afghanistan's civil society

Civil society means all civic organizations, associations and networks, which occupy the "social space" between the family and the state except firms and political parties; and who come together to advance their common interests through collective action.

There has emerged a vibrant civil society in Afghanistan and in the Afghan diaspora communities spearheaded by women, intellectuals, and ordinary Afghans opposed to conflict, violence, and factionalism that have ripped apart our country for many years. The Afghan diaspora can and should play a significant role in strengthening and enabling Afghanistan's civil society at home and abroad to be an effective interest group against socio-economic and political ills in Afghanistan.

Meantime, we should organize our efforts through civil society organizations and use them as conduits to channel our resources towards rebuilding Afghanistan. As indicated above, Afghanistan's public and private institutions acutely need capacity which we can help strengthen via training, mentoring, consulting and advising programs to be initiated by professional associations -- such as Society of Afghan Engineers, Society of Afghan Physicians, Society of Afghan Lawyers, Society of Afghan Professionals, American Society of

Afghan Professionals, and others.

These organizations can be most effective when they enjoy broad active membership and when they collaboratively work with one another to serve our common goal of rebuilding Afghanistan.

In addition, membership in the Afghan community associations or participation in their events -- such as those organized by Shaam-e Erfaan and Shaam-e Darweshaan -- is another effective way to serve Afghanistan. We should generously support these associations so they can continue their regular programs that further many Afghan causes. Literary, poetry, Sufi, and cultural gatherings keep our collective memory of Afghanistan alive, introduce our culture and traditions to others, and instill a sense of "Afghanyat," and identity in our young generation.

IV. Advocacy and lobbying for Afghanistan

Advocacy is the process of actively speaking out, writing in favor of supporting, and/or acting on behalf of oneself, another person, or a cause.
Afghans' greatest cause is the rebuilding of our country after its complete destruction during and in the aftermath of the Cold War. Five years ago before 9/11, Afghanistan had been suffering from the consequences of two interconnected tragedies, the tragedy of occupation by the former Soviet Union and then the tragedy of its aftermath. We first became a victim of the most destructive ideological war of the 20th century -- a victim of the Cold War between the Soviets and the West -- and then a victim of the end of the Cold War because we no longer mattered to major powers as Afghanistan suddenly lost her strategic importance.

The negligence by the international community of rebuilding Afghanistan allowed our country to become the battlefield of regional extremist proxies in 1990s. To serve its national interest of securing strategic depth in Afghanistan, Pakistan created and maintained the Taliban movement that together with Al Qaeda terrorists further destroyed our homeland and victimized our people. At the dawn of the 21st century, Afghanistan was a forgotten country with the Taliban's gender apartheid only a concern of few women rights groups.

However, international inaction towards human suffering in Afghanistan ceased on September 11, 2001. The world suddenly discovered Afghanistan, which became the main focus of the global fight against terrorism. That leaving Afghanistan to the Taliban had been a huge mistake by the international community was now accepted wisdom, and it became clear that if the international community had stayed on to help rebuild Afghanistan at the end of the occupation by the Soviet Union, in 1989, our country would not have become Al-Qaeda's base for global terror attacks.

As the tragic events of 9/11 demonstrated, international security is inextricably linked to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Hence Afghan immigrants with citizenship in the West should lobby their governments for continued security and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. Advocating for sustainable resources to build peace in Afghanistan will serve the national security of both the countries of citizenship and that of the homeland.

The Afghan diaspora will soon enter their third generation outside Afghanistan and number over five million. They should begin organizing and
learn from the lessons of other immigrant communities in the West (e.g. Armenians, Indians, Pakistanis, Israelis and others) to utilize their resources -- notably their voting power and

wealth -- to bring the challenges facing Afghanistan to the forefront of national and international agendas.

Conclusion

Serving Afghanistan requires a great deal of self-initiative and collaboration on the part of all Afghans to organize our efforts and pool our scarce resources across the world in support of lifting up our nation at a very critical juncture in the Afghan history. So, let us unite to give back what we can when our homeland needs us the most. Let us be Afghanistan's native and citizen in need and in deed. Let us work from a philosophy of "qatra, qatra, darya mesha (drop, drop, makes a river)" to turn our homeland into a model state in the region and the world over.

Together Afghans have proudly done the impossible in the past, and now we can certainly accomplish what is possible: to rebuild our beautiful home, Afghanistan.

The writer is First Secretary at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C. He was Peace Scholar and Fellow in Foreign Service at Georgetown University from 2002-2005.