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The Watson Institute for International Studies at  
Brown University  
Working Paper No. 2014-21

## **What War Has Wrought in Afghan Women's Lives**

Jennifer Heath

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August 14, 2011

### **Abstract**

*The “liberation” of Afghan women became a justification of the George W. Bush administration for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Good intentions notwithstanding, Western feminists often painted a distorted portrait of absolutely helpless Afghan women buried alive in their burqas. One sad result of this black-and-white thinking, which overlooks the nuances and diversity of Afghan life and society, has been a severe curtailing of the quality, quantity, and endurance of whatever help Western women try to offer their Afghan sisters. This paper gives a historical overview of the realities of Afghan women's lives, contrasting these with common perceptions about Afghan women held by those outside Afghanistan – often misperceptions upon which millions of dollars of foreign aid have been spent. A description of Afghan women's social context touches on their views of the Taliban, women's political rights and empowerment throughout history, and women's access to healthcare and education. This paper argues that unless every step is taken with consideration for Afghan women's concerns, within the diverse contexts of their real lives, there can be no lasting peace. Any peace agreements must include clear commitments from all sides to respect and protect women's rights.*

On October 7, 2001, the United States and its allies launched an assault against Afghanistan in retaliation for the attacks of 9/11 and removed the Taliban from power. The Sunni Islamist and Pashtun nationalist movement, calling itself “students” or “seekers,” had tyrannized most of the country, especially its women, since 1994. The U.S.-led attack began another chapter in the three decades – and counting – of relentless fighting endured by the Afghan people, beginning in 1979 with the Soviet invasion.<sup>2</sup> The “liberation” of Afghan women became a justification of the George W. Bush administration for the 2001 invasion, a fire fueled by American and European women's rights groups, encouraged partly by Afghan women's organizations, such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).<sup>3</sup> Good intentions notwithstanding, Western feminists often painted a distorted portrait of absolutely helpless Afghan women buried alive in their *burqas*, brutalized by unquenchably savage Afghan men. One sad result of this black-and-white thinking, which overlooks the nuances and diversity of Afghan life and society, has been a severe curtailing of the quality, quantity, and endurance of whatever help Western women try to offer their Afghan sisters.

In shaping foreign policy, Western governments also blunder righteously along, disregarding cultural subtleties. As British academic and Member of Parliament Rory Stewart notes, Western leaders rely on a hypnotizing policy language which can—and perhaps will—be applied as easily to Somalia or Yemen as Afghanistan. It misleads us in several respects simultaneously: minimizing differences between cultures, exaggerating

our fears, aggrandizing our ambitions, inflating a sense of moral obligations and power, and confusing our goals. *All these attitudes are aspects of a single worldview* and create an almost irresistible illusion.<sup>4</sup>

It was ever thus: from the 1893 British-imposed Durand Line, which split the lands of the Pashtun and Balouch peoples, eventually creating deep territorial disputes between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It continued through the Cold War, when Afghanistan was considered by Soviets and Americans alike to be “a perfect listening post,” and aid amounted to little more than popularity contests and bribery for the best positioning. It goes on into the second decade of the twenty-first century, when the country remains, as Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould put it, “a victim of the simple-minded Manichean approach to foreign policy forged by America’s national security managers.”<sup>5</sup>

## ***Perceptions and Realities***

There are Afghan women who say that the Taliban era was an improvement over the post-Soviet civil war period (1989-1996), for at least there was peace of a sort. Many Afghan women report that the civil war rivaled, and often outdid, the Taliban years for barbarism and oppression, with rapes, kidnappings, and forced marriages, along with relentless street fighting, looting and the launching of rockets into quiet neighborhoods, blowing up buildings and maiming and killing innocent bystanders. Even as women were barred from education and employment, their health care severely restricted, and Draconian laws applied (to everyone), the Taliban brought comparative quiet and order, a respite from Mujahedin guns, rockets, and chaos. In 2008, Jason Burke of *The Guardian* interviewed Roshanak Wardak, a gynecologist and member of the Afghan parliament, who has challenging views about life under the last Taliban government. “As a doctor, as a woman, as an Afghan, the last regime was not bad,” she says. “They were well-disciplined people. In their time there was security. At midnight, at 2 a.m., I could go to my hospital when I was on call for an urgent operation and come back without any bodyguards. This is a major difference and I will never deny it.”

As a woman, however, Wardak says she could never accept the Taliban’s restrictions on girls’ education. And worse, the new Taliban are very different: “They are criminals. They are thieves and they are not acceptable.”<sup>6</sup>

Today in some quarters—principally the conservative south and around Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold, but elsewhere as well—women claim they would again prefer the “old” despotism to the current anarchy, mounting deaths, and bloodshed as the United States has escalated its tangled, unfocused war against al Qaeda, the ghostly bin Laden (killed by U.S. Navy Seals on May 1, 2011, at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan), and the “new” Taliban, now a catchall for drug traffickers, warlords, bandits, ideologues, the impoverished, and the unemployed.

Other women fear that withdrawal or a reduction of the U.S. and allied troops from Afghan soil will present an even greater threat to security and women’s rights and open the

door to another civil war.<sup>7</sup> After a decade of misguided U.S. and international policy, the need for security is undeniable, but there is widespread agreement that substantial increases in troops continue to radicalize insurgents—as is inevitable in a war of occupation—and generate far more severe problems than ever before. Occasional victories (and it would be wise to question the definition of “victory”) by the United States, NATO, and the ill-trained, unenthusiastic, corrupt Afghan army have been brief and carry no promises for a stable future, the safe return of displaced citizens, a clear understanding of appropriate governance, or negotiations that include women.<sup>8</sup>

In December 2001, with the Taliban defeat, there was a brief period of hope. Governmental and non-governmental organizations stampeded into Afghanistan, primarily to Kabul, more or less the country’s only safe zone. Hundreds of facilities – schools, clinics, literacy and vocational training programs – were created, most for women. Indeed, funding was more likely when a project was for women, often leaving ordinary men and boys to flounder unaided, under- or unemployed, with nowhere to go.<sup>9</sup> There is no word in Dari or Pashto for gender, let alone for “gender mainstreaming,” a development policy approach for advancing women’s causes endorsed at the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing and adopted and implemented throughout the world.<sup>10</sup> Dominant in the culture, men are likely to become even more lost than women when the underpinnings of that culture come undone. As Kristen Lewis and Nadia Hijab write, “In no area of international development is the gap between stated intentions and operational reality as wide as it is in the promotion of equality between [Afghan] men and women.”<sup>11</sup> In refugee camps, skills can disappear within one generation: the essential knowledge of farming, for example, disappears. Men are emasculated, shamed, dependent on the kindness of strangers. Boys—once apprenticed to their fathers and other male relatives—must add to the family income or provide for their widowed mothers or orphaned siblings by whatever means necessary. Many have never known peace. Unprotected, Afghan boys have been conscripted as soldiers, recruited for Taliban militia, and/or exploited for the sexual gratification of Mujahedin, Taliban commanders, and other men. Veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, drug addiction, and alcoholism. Thirty years of war corrupts the soul; violence breeds violence.

The capital city Kabul is a gold-rush town—filthy, noisy, and polluted, traffic jammed with white UN Land Cruisers and yellow taxis, children picking through rubbish and licking plastic bags for remaining crumbs, old folk groveling in the streets, while the pockets of corrupt government officials, warlords, military contractors, carpetbaggers, and war profiteers are heavily lined. Isolated from the rest of the country, all dolled up, celebrating consumerism for the few while the poor go hungry, and with extortion deeply pervasive, the city is sometimes now called “Little Dubai” and “Fortress Kabul.” It is ranked as one of the most expensive places to live in the world. Administrative costs for organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, USAID, or Asia Foundation are spent on sky-high rentals for buildings constructed with laundered drug money. The poor, meanwhile, continue to live in squalid circumstances; the city is overcrowded with people unable to return to their homes throughout the country, thanks to continued fighting, farms dotted with landmines, and other obstacles.<sup>12</sup>

In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and once again turned its back on Afghanistan. The promised funding for reconstruction dwindled; the profiteers expanded operations into Baghdad. Across the years, particularly in the desperate countryside, many programs and much hope have vanished for lack of money and security. The bloodshed, displacement, starvation, disease, exposure, lack of medical treatment, environmental degradation, and other injustices roll on. Corruption has expanded, within the government and outside it. In 2010, there were 70,000 private contractors in Kabul, outnumbering uniformed troops.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of it all, there are humanitarians doing their best to keep Afghanistan afloat, although most have been driven out of the rural areas as the Taliban have resurged and war has intensified. Small NGOs persist valiantly, often coordinated by returned Afghan expatriates (many of them women) and their non-Afghan supporters. The gratitude that 83 percent of Afghans said they felt for the United States in 2005 had reduced by half and was plunging in 2009, when there were more than 1,000 known casualties in the first six months. Rather than schools or clinics, the United States and NATO have established 700 military bases of varying sizes throughout the country.<sup>14</sup>

With the Taliban defeat, writers and photographers also flooded Afghanistan, each apparently with a book contract and a new angle on ways to describe the ever-intriguing, ever-photogenic burqa, or *chadarias* Afghans commonly call it.<sup>15</sup> The chadari is a dramatic symbol to the West, an obsession that essentializes women, denies their agency, and effectively adds to their oppression. It overpowers urgent issues of poverty, hunger, non-literacy,<sup>16</sup> maternal and infant deaths, acute emotional instability, and war, conditions far more threatening than a piece of cloth.

Events, headlines and the mind spin when it comes to events in Afghanistan. But things also change slowly, so that the collision of Western impatience, the honest urgency to right wrongs, and the need to honor ancient traditions can be – have been – catastrophic. There is no female mold, no single reality: for contemporary Afghan women (including those repatriated from countries where they may have had more advantages), glancing toward the West, usually living in cities, where their circumstances are more readily observed, or for rural Afghan women and those cleaving to custom, from whom we can learn much, yet who are mislabeled as “backward” or deficient. There are and always have been multiple Afghanistans: Kabul, modern, multicultural, and Western-mediated; Herat, Kandahar, Bamiyan, Mazar-i-Sharif, and other cities with quite dissimilar attitudes and populations; and villages and towns isolated in mountains and valleys populated by people—Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek, and others—whose ways of life stretch back long before Islam entered Afghanistan in the seventh century CE. And there are the displaced, refugees comprising still another Afghanistan, many of whom may never be able to return to their ancestral homes.<sup>17</sup> The fetishizing and imposition of a one-size-fits-all Western style democracy and Western ideals and ideas are not necessarily appropriate for a tribal, dynastic society and have resulted in backlash.

There are ways of understanding the Afghan people other than through a Western filter, to examine how Afghans perceive events or approach a social moment. The decision-making roles of Afghan women within their communities have largely been ignored. Learning to know Afghans and Afghan society might improve how development and aid are delivered and boost success. As educator Wahid Omar says, “Let’s send ethnographers, not guns.”<sup>18</sup>

## *A Woman’s Place*

...is in parliament...in the home...and for too many, an Afghan women’s place is in the streets or prison.

Amir Amanullah (r. 1919 to 1929), sometimes called the Jazz-Age King, first gave women the vote in 1923, but by 1929, they were again disenfranchised, until 1964, when King Muhammad Zahir Shah (r. 1933-1973) established a new constitution, even allowing women to enter politics. In 1958, Afghanistan had already sent a woman delegate to the UN, so “no one was startled,” anthropologist Louis Dupree wrote, when four were elected to the *Wolesi Jirga* (Lower House), “two from Kabul, one from Herat and one from Kandahar.”<sup>19</sup> During the Soviet, civil war and the Taliban eras, all bets were off again.

Afghanistan now ranks in the world’s top twenty countries for numbers of women in parliament. In the *Wolesi Jirga* alone, women hold sixty-eight seats, comprising 27 percent of the plenary – partly due to a reserved seat system established during the Bonn Agreement process, at which, incidentally, only two out of twenty-three Afghan participants were women.<sup>20</sup> Researcher Anna Larson writes that a critical mass of 30 percent of women in parliament is needed in order for women’s political influence to be effective. However, although this idea implies that influence can be quantitatively determined, it does not allow for factors that obscure the link between women’s access to politics and their capacity to influence decision making, let alone the link between women’s presence and their ability or willingness to promote gender interests.<sup>21</sup>

While MPs such as Roshanak Wardak (Wardak Province) or Fawzia Koofi (Badakhshan Province) represent outlying regions, by and large in rural areas, women’s participation in political and civil life is hindered by customs and traditions as they face grave security risks on all sides. Seclusion, while anathema to Westerners, can actually mean safety. Nevertheless, within their families and clans, through the enactment of ancient rituals and in female *shuras* (councils), rural women have more decision-making power than is usually understood by *ferengi* (foreigners).<sup>22</sup>

Habiba Sarobi is the well-respected governor of Bamiyan Province. During the 2009 presidential elections, when turnout was low throughout the country, but lowest among females, Bamiyan’s women voted in droves. Its population is made up primarily of Hazara—Shi’a Muslims—who were known to be more open than other groups to women’s public presence. Thus the 2009 Shi’a Family Law sent hundreds of women into the streets protesting this rerun of Taliban-style constraints, including forced conjugal relations,

sanctioned wife beating and more.<sup>23</sup> President Hamid Karzai—mistrusted, corrupted, manipulated by fundamentalists, warlords, and family interests—has betrayed women repeatedly, not only endorsing the Shi’a law, but also, for example, pardoning convicted gang rapists.<sup>24</sup>

The Shi’a Family Law formalizes many injustices to which women are persistently subjected and for which they are sometimes imprisoned. There are few female judges and defense attorneys in Kabul, let alone in rural areas, where Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites found that “the formal, traditional and customary justice systems...purportedly in place to uphold the rights of rural Afghan women often undermine their rights....The lack of complete absence of women in leadership positions within formal and traditional justice systems undermines access to justice.”<sup>25</sup>

Afghanistan has been called Land of the Unconquerable, but today it is Land of Widows, where there are an estimated 1.5 million (and more in the making), whose average age is thirty- five. These are Afghanistan’s most vulnerable and neglected women. Fifty thousand are in Kabul, often living in abandoned buildings. Most are non-literate and unskilled, and in any case, there are few jobs. Men are reluctant to marry widows with children. Many women survive by begging in the streets and/or soliciting sex, some with their children in tow. They and the children are frequently drug addicted. In 2008, the Afghan government banned begging on streets and called on authorizes to send beggars to care homes and orphanages. This rarely happens, not least because there are few hostels for the needy.<sup>26</sup> Poverty also drives unmarried girls and boys into sex work, a primary underground source of income. Sometimes, whole families are involved.<sup>27</sup>

There are no concrete figures for the numbers of orphans in Afghanistan, though estimates put them in the thousands. Child labor is a huge concern. Not all poor families send their children to work, but schooling, where it is available, even with minimal fees can be expensive for a family with little to eat. Nevertheless, some families weigh school costs against future benefits and choose, if they can, to sacrifice for it. And some families see no reason to educate girls, who will one day marry and leave.<sup>28</sup> Researcher Alexandra Reihing writes:

In Afghanistan, twenty-one percent of child workers are employed in shops; thirteen percent work as street vendors. Others work in vehicle repair, metal workshops, tailoring, and farming. In Kabul and other cities there are street children who shine shoes, beg and collect and sell scrap metal, paper and firewood. The economic pressure to work means that over three million children are being denied an education.<sup>29</sup>

All this is hardly the “liberation” for which thousands have suffered since 2001.

*To be Whole in Body and Mind*

Without sufficient food (tea and *naan*—flatbread—hardly make a vitamin-rich

meal), education, shelter, work, or decent health care, there can be no real security. Afghanistan has among the world's worst health indicators—often cited as the worst place on Earth for a child to be born. Women's life expectancy is between forty-two and forty-four. A woman dies every twenty-nine minutes in childbirth, the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world. One out of four children dies before the age of five.<sup>30</sup> Malaria, cholera, polio, and dysentery account for many deaths. Malnutrition is rampant, particularly as agricultural fields are strafed and sophisticated irrigation systems constructed across millennia have been ruined. Thousands of women and children, as well as men, are drug-addicted. Unsafe drinking water, lack of sanitary facilities, and fertilizers from untreated human and animal waste all contribute to Afghanistan's grim statistics.

Increasing combat constrains the ability of professionals to reach rural areas (where 85 percent of the population lives) and has delayed international assistance. Additionally, lack of transportation to the few hospitals or clinics, coupled with restrictions on travel, make it almost impossible for rural women to receive medical attention, particularly prenatal care. Some hospitals have been rebuilt in Kabul and other urban areas, but in the country, there are no facilities, save an under-equipped clinic here or there, usually run by male nurses who are forbidden to see women without their *chadaris*. Nojumi, Mazurana and Stites remind us that “the fact that the majority of rural health clinics have no female care providers means that rural women do not have access to reproductive health care.”<sup>31</sup>

The Taliban are well-known to have severely curtailed women's access to health care, but continuing war, when physicians and midwives cannot reach patients, amounts to the same thing. Large development agencies have been reluctant to support or train Traditional Birth Attendants, determined instead that assistance will have to wait indefinitely until hospitals are built in rural areas. Even supplies of soap and lessons in soap-making, for example, would help reduce illness and deaths.<sup>32</sup>

In 1954, the Shiwaki Project was established as a public health pilot program. Within a year, it had expanded from two to eighty-one villages. Traveling Afghan doctors and nurses provided health services, including sanitation programs.<sup>33</sup> The opportunity offered when the Taliban fell was never really seized, yet to have provided this kind of care and attention would have helped shape a lasting peace.

Farm and grazing lands are littered with leftover mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). It is estimated that there is one mine per Afghan. Hundreds are killed or maimed every year. In Kabul, roughly 85 percent of UXO victims are children. In 2003, 62 percent of Kabulis were living among land mines and UXOs. The process of dismantling them is expensive and painfully slow.<sup>34</sup> Widespread field studies have been conducted to determine radiation in soil, plants, and human urine from depleted uranium used in precision weapons. In 2002, the Uranium Medical Research Center found Afghans with “acute symptoms of internal uranium contamination, including congenital problems.” Some subjects had concentrations of 400-2,000 percent above that for normal populations.<sup>35</sup> In May 2009, there were reports of severe chemical burns possibly attributable to white phosphorus, a flammable material used by combatants to illuminate targets or create



smoke.<sup>36</sup>

Afghanistan's environmental damage is incalculable, with observable climate changes such as earthquakes, sandstorms, and unusually harsh winters during the last decade. In 2009, the worst drought in living memory affected all traditional crops. Afghanistan was rich in biodiversity, but its fertile lands, its breadbaskets, and its wilderness are now devastated by persistent violence and the weather patterns that follow. Natural resources have been, to say the least, badly mismanaged or simply not managed at all. In 2002, the United Nations Environmental Programme conducted a basic research project and found that "Afghanistan's natural resources—forests, waters, soil, or wildlife—were clearly in decline or on the brink of irreparable damage, and resulting environmental degradation was endangering human health and compounding poverty."<sup>37</sup>

Afghanistan's mineral wealth, as yet untapped, but identified as worth upwards of \$3 trillion, will likely only fuel more fighting, corruption, exploitation, and poverty. And, as in other resource-rich lands, unearthing the minerals might well unbalance what remains of the country's ecosystems.<sup>38</sup> Only 12 percent of the land is now arable. In writings about Afghan women, these tragedies are rarely mentioned and yet, if environmental and agricultural degradation are not halted, no other efforts will ultimately count for much.

### *Repairing the Rubble*

As of 2009, Afghanistan received only about \$57 per capita from international aid, as opposed, for example, to Bosnia at \$679 and East Timor at \$333 per capita. On average, Matt Waldman, former head of policy for Oxfam International in Afghanistan, reported in 2008, donors that year were spending a mere \$7 million per day, while the U.S. military was spending nearly \$100 million per day in the country. Moreover, forty percent of aid money funnels back into the donor countries as corporate profits and extremely high consultants' salaries. Although outside expertise is needed on numerous fronts, little money is actually spent on the Afghan workforce, where it can do the most good for the country.<sup>39</sup>

"It is almost impossible to determine where government policies begin and [international financial institutions] end," Bank Information Center consultant Anne Carlin writes, noting how donors can appear to *be* the government. "When significant [United States Agency for International Development] influence is added to the mix, the lines overlap everywhere."<sup>40</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon reported in the *New York Times* that

An estimated \$16 billion in reconstruction and development funds has entered Afghanistan since 2002, though international donors have yet to distribute billions more in pledged assistance. Exactly how much of this money has gone to empowerment projects for women is hard to know, since two-thirds of the development money has been spent outside the government's budget and much of the aid has never been reported.

# COSTS OF WAR

Since 2002, the United States, Afghanistan's largest donor, has directed \$570 million to programs benefiting Afghan women and girls, with \$175 million more likely to be approved for the coming fiscal year [2009-2010]. Women's health programs have received the largest share; \$20 million has gone to economic initiatives.<sup>41</sup>

Projects also overlap or compete, despite some attempts by the Afghan government to glean and register the hundreds of NGOs that followed the U.S. invasion. There is still almost no oversight and donors continue to bypass the government, which has little enough credibility as it is. For example, in January 2010, the UN reported that across 2009, Afghans paid \$2.5 billion in bribes to public officials.<sup>42</sup>

Needless to say, waste is endemic—so-called “administrative costs” for international organizations alone are breathtaking—and the global financial crisis, as well as the cost of war, are certain to affect future funding for civilian assistance. In addition, overprescriptive policies and procedures only frustrate potentially constructive activities. Development is hamstrung by many factors, not least a patronizing dedication to saving and empowering women without profound consideration of the steps and stages that might realistically require. Afghan women must not be “othered” nor can they be separated from Afghanistan.

Building or rebuilding obsolete infrastructures will take billions of dollars and decades to accomplish. In an era when Western countries are aiming for sustainability, aid agencies apply old technology to Afghanistan, where wind and sun are plentiful and indigenous domestic architectural techniques, farming, and irrigation practices could be progressive, “back to the future” models for the rest of the world. Hunter Lovins, president and founder of Natural Capitalism, Inc., writes:

Official proposals for reconstruction make little effort to use state-of-the-art sustainability technologies, despite the fact that they work better and are better suited to poor, widely distributed populations. Instead, most of the reconstruction projects wind up using cast-off equipment and approaches from Pakistan or the West simply because they have a lower upfront cost or vendors are familiar with them. Existing reconstruction efforts approach each problem in isolation, missing opportunities to use whole-systems design to solve multiple problems with the same resources.<sup>43</sup>

As is often noted, change is slow for isolated rural Afghans. But what do we mean by change? And why is “slow” unacceptable if it includes “steady” and means that changes can be sustainable? It is up to Afghans to reconstruct and develop their country based on its cultural and geographic diversity and the desires of each community. What is good for Bamiyan may not be good for Kabul or Nuristan or Jalalabad or Badakhshan or Wardak. Women of all classes must and will be at the forefront of gradual change, although – and it cannot be emphasized often enough: without peace, no change can be maintained.

*“Don't Eclipse My Happy New Moon”<sup>44</sup>*

Throughout Afghanistan, where two-thirds of the population over the age of fifteen—and 85 percent of women—are non-literate, people are demanding education. After the fall of Taliban, more than 4 million children returned to school, with girls making up about 35 percent.<sup>45</sup> Yet in 2008, 265 schools came under violent attack, up from 236 in 2007. In November 2008, fifteen female students were assaulted in Kandahar. Two were blinded and two injured. In the first six months of 2009, sixteen bomb attacks took place on school premises and by fall, 80 percent of schools in southern Afghanistan were closed.<sup>46</sup> As Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites tell us,

Countrywide, percentages of ...boys and girls attending school are highest in the north and northeast, with the lowest rates in south and south central regions. There are few school-aged rural girls attending school in the south and south central parts of the country; the primary reasons for rural boys and girls not attending school are lack of facilities and distance to facilities...; insecurity is preventing boys and girls from attending schools in rural districts in nine provinces; girls are more likely than boys to be held out of school when areas are affected by physical insecurity.<sup>47</sup>

Traveling distances presents dangers. Coeducation has been frowned upon (as in many countries) since Afghan girls first began attending school in the 1920s. Unfortunately, the rush to create girls' schools after the Taliban defeat often neglected boys' educational needs, a mistake considering that a nation of men ignorant of history, literature, mathematics, sciences, languages, arts, political science, and so on, will continue to oppress women, even educated ones, and be unable to participate fully in the creation of a strong and peaceful civil society.

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The history of Afghanistan and the lives of Afghan women, their suffering, agency and empowerment, is complex and too often reduced to one media-convenient dimension. This essay can only touch on a some of issues affecting women in Afghanistan today, but volumes such as Nancy Hatch Dupree's still-relevant *The Women of Afghanistan* (Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1996), Hafizullah Emadi's *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Praeger, 2002), Anne E. Brodsky's *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (Routledge, 2003), Ann Jones's *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan* (Metropolitan Books, 2006), and Lina Abirafeh's *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan* (McFarland, 2009), as well as a range of essays from the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit<sup>48</sup> and in my anthology, co-edited with Ashraf Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (University of California Press, 2011) provide a fuller account.

The liberation of Afghanistan's women was hardly advanced by attacking the country with massive firepower, robbing it of donor funds, endorsing a corrupt, fundamentalist government. The long legacy of war in Afghanistan means humanitarian aid is desperately needed and will be for a long time to come. Thirty years of physical, cultural, and psychological damage cannot be repaired overnight. Aid costs less and returns more

than fighting, especially if most of the money were to go directly to help the Afghan people rather than into the hands of corrupt politicians and greedy contractors. Conservatives and progressives alike have described the amplified war in Afghanistan as unwinnable, and no one is quite sure of its goals, that is, what would be won if by chance there were a U.S. and NATO “victory.”

Rather than a troop surge, what’s required are surges of teachers, engineers, medical professionals, environmentalists, organic farmers, social workers, and others—a new and progressive “peace corps”—to facilitate healing with carefully thought-out programs and support for Afghans to rebuild, led by Afghans themselves, and made to succeed without increased military intervention. But it takes honesty. And patience. And listening. And imagination.

Bombs and guns beget bombs and guns. Myriad ideas have been proposed for how to pull out of the quagmire we have created in Afghanistan to at last achieve peace.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the only sure paths are through dialogue and compromise. Afghan women (and countless men) rightly fear reconciliation with the Taliban. Yet between corrupt government, powerful warlords, and unyielding conflict, women are still shut out of political decisions -- despite constitutional guarantees -- and are still desperate for the most fundamental human rights: among them healthcare, safe drinking water, sufficient food, warmth, roofs over their heads, safety, sovereignty, and simple dignity.

If anyone understands that war is not the answer, it is Afghan women. Each one is the bravest woman in Afghanistan. Unless every step is taken with consideration for their concerns, within the diverse contexts of their real lives, there can be no lasting peace, for just as war is fought on the backs of women, peace rests on women’s well-being and strength, as well as on justice, good governance, and the rule of law. Any peace agreements, if they are to be durable, must include clear commitments from all sides to respect and protect women’s rights.<sup>50</sup> To accomplish this, women must sit, fully empowered, in equal numbers, with their brothers at the head of the table.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Heath is an independent scholar, curator, award-winning activist and cultural journalist, author/editor of twelve books, including *Children of Afghanistan: The Path to Peace* (co-edited with Ashraf Zahedi, UTexas Press, 2014), *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (with Zahedi, UCalifornia Press, 2011), and others.

<sup>2</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to recount in detail the modern history of the wars in Afghanistan, but here is a brief recap: In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, sparking a ten-year war in which more than 1 million Afghans were killed; 1.2 million Mujahedin, government soldiers and noncombatants were disabled; and 3 million (mostly noncombatants) were maimed or wounded. Five million Afghans, one-third of the prewar population, fled to Pakistan and Iran. Another 2 million Afghans were displaced within

the country. In 1989, the Soviets left Afghanistan, signaling the first phase of a long civil war, with fighting between the USSR-supported regime in Kabul and the Mujahedin (holy warriors, or as U.S. President Ronald Reagan called them, “freedom fighters”). In 1992, with the end of Cold War and a complete pullout of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the Afghan civil war accelerated, bringing fresh horrors as Mujahedin vied to fill the power vacuum. Instead of seizing the opportunity to rebuild Afghanistan, the United States walked away. In 1996, the Taliban took Kabul after conquering Kandahar and Herat in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> RAWA was established in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1977 as an independent political/social organization of Afghan women. For more information, see Anne E. Brodsky, *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Rory Stewart, “The Irresistible Illusion,” *London Review of Books*, July 9, 2009, [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n13/stew01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n13/stew01_.html) [Emphasis mine.]

<sup>5</sup> Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, *Invisible History: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 50-52, 104. “A perfect listening post” is from a personal conversation in 1990 with a former CIA agent stationed in Afghanistan during the 1970s, who asked to remain anonymous. Of interest: Marshall I. Goldman, *Soviet Foreign Aid* (New York: Praeger, 1967) and Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970). In 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan from the northern border with Tajikistan by tank and truck on the roads it had built, and by plane, landing at the airport the United States had constructed in Kandahar.

<sup>6</sup> Jason Burke, “I Would Never Swap My Country for All the World,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/11/afghanistan.gender>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Greenwald, “Rethink Afghanistan: Part Five” (Culver City, Calif.: Brave New Foundation, 2009), <http://rethinkafghanistan.com/blog/?p=604>; Jessica Leeder and Paula Lerner, “Behind the Veil: An Intimate Journey into the Lives of Kandahar’s Women” (Toronto: The Globe and Mail, CTVglobemedia Publishing, 2009), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/behind-the-veil/>. See also Gayle Tzemach, “Afghan Women Fear a Retreat to Dark Days,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 18, 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2008/1218/p07s03-wogn.html>.

<sup>8</sup> In late 2009, NATO declared a major victory against the Taliban in the town of Marja in Helmand Province, a brief, “unpredictable” triumph that British Lt. General Nick Parker told the Associated Press had been exaggerated. In the future, he said, “the military will be more restrained in forecasting success....The idea was to develop Marja as a model for counterinsurgency techniques in the hope that other communities would turn against the Taliban. Instead, the Taliban have fought back.” “General Says Foresight on Marja Was Flawed,” *Associated Press*, September 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/world/asia/05nato.html>

<sup>9</sup> Security in the provinces has been tenuous from the first and the United States and NATO have not been able to maintain stability much outside the capital city, which has, by this writing been experiencing escalating suicide bombings and gun battles. Of interest: Jon Boone and Julian Borger, “Kabul’s Day of Terror,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/18/kabul-attacks-taliban-afghanistan>. The

now- regular forays of suicide bombers into Kabul kill mostly Afghans, not expats.

<sup>10</sup> Ashraf Zahedi, "When the Pictures Does Not Fit the Frame: Engaging Afghan Men in Women's Empowerment," Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 293-307.

<sup>11</sup> Kristen Lewis and Nadia Hijab, *Transforming the Mainstream: Gender in UNDP* (2003), 3. For further information, see Shirin Rai, ed., *Mainstreaming gender, democratizing the state? Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, Gerald Steehouwer, and Franz Wong, *Politics of the Possible: Gender Mainstreaming and Organizational Changes Experience from the Field* (Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> A common joke among Afghans was that President Hamid Karzai, handpicked by the United States to lead the country, was merely president of Kabul. This recalls an old Afghan saying that the king controls Kabul, but the tribes control the rest of Afghanistan. For costs of living, see Xpatulator.com, <http://www.xpatulator.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Many of the groups with interests in Afghanistan are also in Iraq: Halliburton, Bechtel Group, Inc., BearingPoint Group, Inc., Creative Associates International, Inc., Blackwater Security Consulting, LLC, and more. Some are the same companies operating under different names. See The Center for Public Integrity, "Windfalls of War," <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/wow/bio.asox?act=pro>. For more about corruption in Afghanistan, see Stephanie Debere and Michael Sidwell, eds., *Transparency International Global Coalition Against Corruption: Annual Report 2009* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2009), 25, 30, 53. Available at <http://transparency.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Langan, "Frustration with War, Problems in Daily Life Send Afghans' Support of U.S. Efforts Tumbling," ABC News, February 9, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/story?id=6787686&page=1?> and "Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan Keep Rising, Finds UN Report," UN News Centre, UN News Service, July 31, 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31636&Cr=afghan&Cr1=civilian>. Ruth Rennie, Suhindra Sharma, and Pawan Sen, "Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People," The Asia Foundation, 2009, <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2009/10/27/afghanistan-in-2009-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>. Nick Turse, "Totally Occupied: 700 Military Bases Spread Across Afghanistan," Tomdispatch.com, February 11, 2010, [http://www.alternet.org/world/145631/totally\\_occupied%3A\\_700\\_military\\_bases\\_spread\\_across\\_afghanistan](http://www.alternet.org/world/145631/totally_occupied%3A_700_military_bases_spread_across_afghanistan).

<sup>15</sup> For two refreshing points of view regarding the burqa, see: Dinah Zeiger, "That [Afghan] Girl! Ideology Unveiled in National Geographic," in *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, ed., Jennifer Heath (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 266-280, and Ellen McLarney, "The Burqa in Vogue: Fashioning Afghanistan," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1-23.

<sup>16</sup> I choose to use the term non-literate, rather than illiterate, which has pejorative overtones. Although Afghans have a magnificent history of literature, the majority of its population cannot read or write. Nevertheless, there is a vibrant, essential oral tradition.

<sup>17</sup> About 5 million Afghans have returned since the fall of the Taliban. Some 3 million remain abroad. In 2009, 28,000 Afghan returnees were unable to return to their homes due to insecurity, tribal issues, landlessness, and lack of work opportunities. See UNHCR: The United Nations Refugee Agency, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=&comid=4A5DCEAB6&&SCID=49AEA93A61&keywords=statistics>.

<sup>18</sup> Personal conversation, 2008. See also, Wahid Omar, "Don't Say What, Who, and When, Say How: Community Development and Women," in Heath and Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*, 90-102.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 590. The Upper House is called Meshrano Jirga or House of Elders and is comprised of 102 members of which, as of 2009, 22 were women. The Loya Jirga, or "grand assembly," traditionally gathers for major events such as choosing a new king, adopting a constitution, or discussing important national political or emergency matters.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Reynolds, Lucy Jones, and Andrew Wilder, *A Guide to Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan*. (AREU: Kabul. 2005), 10, available at [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af), and Pippa Norris, *Opening the Door: Women Leaders and Constitution Building in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government: Cambridge, MA. 2006). Officially the Agreement on Provisional Arrangement in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, the Bonn Agreement was shaped at a December 2001 meeting in Germany, in order to recreate the State of Afghanistan following the United States- led invasions.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Larson, "Women's Political Presence: A Path to Promoting Gender Interests?" in Heath and Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable*, 119-120

<sup>22</sup> For a description of rural women's participation in political and civil life and female shuras, see Neamatollah Nojumi, Dyan Mazurana, and Elizabeth Stites, *After the Taliban: Life and Security in Rural Afghanistan* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 35-38 and 83-95. For a description of female shuras and jirgas, as well as the Nazr-e Samanak, an annual religious festival performed by women to, among other things, make vital clan decisions, see Omar, "Don't Say What, Who, and When, Say How: Community Development and Women," in Heath and Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable*, 93-97.

<sup>23</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Afghan Women Protest New Law on Home Life," *New York Times*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/16/world/asia/16afghan.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Family ties and hierarchies are vital among Afghans and explain a great deal about Hamid Karzai's entanglements with his brothers, cousins, and various kin, whose involvement, not to say interference, contributes to government and other corruption. Clan obligations and tribal loyalties should come as no surprise to anyone with the least knowledge of Afghan society and should have been taken into consideration when Karzai was selected to run the country. Ten years later, in a delayed "ah-hah moment," *New York Times* reporter James Risen wrote, "Karzai's Kin Use Ties to Gain Power in Afghanistan," October 6, 2010, describing some of the Karzai government's widespread nepotism, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/06/world/asia/06karzai.html?emc+tnt&tntemail=y>. Also see Kate Clark, "Afghan President Pardons Men Convicted of Bayonet Gang Rape," *The Independent*, August 24, 2008,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/afghan-president-pardons-men-convicted-of-bayonet-gang-rape-907663.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, *After the Taliban*, 92. See also, Ann Jones, *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 91-203.

<sup>26</sup> See Martin Vennard, "Afghanistan Bans Street Begging," BBC News, November 7, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7714735.stm>.

<sup>27</sup> See Alisa Tang, "Selling Sex in Afghanistan: Portraits of Sex Workers in Kabul," Heath and Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable*, 154-161. "Bleak Prospects for Estimated 1.5 Million Widows in Afghanistan," RAWA News, <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2008/01/30/bleak-prospects-for-estimated-1-5-million-widows-in-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>28</sup> UNICEF, "Afghanistan," United Nations Children's Fund, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html). Amanda Sim, "Confronting Child Labour in Afghanistan" (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Briefing Paper Series, May 2009), <http://www.areu.org.af>.

<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Reihing, "Child Labor in Afghanistan" (Policy Innovations, June 20, 2007), [http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/briefings/data/afghan\\_child\\_labor](http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/briefings/data/afghan_child_labor).

<sup>30</sup> For further information, see UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2009* (New York: United Nations Children's Fund, December 2008). Available at <http://www.unicef.org/sowc09/docs/SOWC09-FullReport-EN.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, *After the Taliban*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Personal interviews with male nurses at the Emergency Clinic, Farza District, Afghanistan and with physicians, midwives, and with USAID administrators in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif between 2003 and 2010.

<sup>33</sup> S. Sultan Ahmadi, ed., *Kabul International Exhibition Catalogue* (Kabul: Exhibition Directorate, Ministry of Commerce, 1961).

<sup>34</sup> *Fragile Footsteps: Children and Landmines*, Save the Children, undated, [http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6115947/k.8D6E/Official\\_Site.htm](http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6115947/k.8D6E/Official_Site.htm); Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, *After the Taliban*, 38-40.

<sup>35</sup> Doug Westerman, "Depleted Uranium—Far Worse than 9/11: Depleted Uranium Dust—Public Health Disaster for the People of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Global Research*, May 3, 2005, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=20060503&articleId=237>

<sup>36</sup> Jason Straziuso and Rahim Faiez, "Concerns White Phosphorus Used in Afghan Battle," ABC News, May 20, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=7549697>.

<sup>37</sup> "UNEP in Afghanistan: Laying the Foundations for Sustainable Development," United Nations Environmental Programme, January 2009, [http://www.unep.org/pdf/UNEP\\_in\\_Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.unep.org/pdf/UNEP_in_Afghanistan.pdf) Unfortunately, not enough has been written about environmental destruction in Afghanistan and promises of sustainable reconstruction have gone by the wayside, in part because there is little access to areas that



may be insecure.

<sup>38</sup> A.J. Benham, "Minerals in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Geological Survey, 2006, [http://www.bgs.ac.uk/afghanminerals/docs/copper\\_A4.pdf](http://www.bgs.ac.uk/afghanminerals/docs/copper_A4.pdf); United States Geological Survey, "Preliminary Assessment of Non-Fuel Mineral Resources of Afghanistan, 2007," <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2007/3063/>; James Risen, "U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Wealth in Afghanistan," New York Times, June 13, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Waldman, "Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, March 2008), 1, 3. See also "Afghan War Costs to Overtake Iraq: Pentagon," Defense Talk: Global Defense and Military Portal, May 8, 2009, <http://www.defencetalk.com/afghan-war-costs-to-overtake-iraq-in-2010-pentagon-18679/>

<sup>40</sup> Anne Carlin, "Rush to Re-engagement in Afghanistan" (Washington, D.C., Bank Information Center, December 2003), 10. Available at <http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.1007.aspx>. Also of interest, Susanne Koelbl, "The Aid Swindle," Der Spiegel Online International, April 5, 2005, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/o,1518,348597,oo.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "Extending the Horizon for Women's Aid Projects in Afghanistan," New York Times, August 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/15/business/global/15mall.html?sq+Extending%20the%20Horizon%20for%20Women's%20Aid%20Projects%20in%20Afghanistan&st=cse&adxnln=1&adxnlnx=1256054785-LwF9EWzc8ctA5aNuHeTP8A>.

<sup>42</sup> "Corruption, Not Insecurity, Bigger Concern for Afghans—UN Report," UN News Centre, January 19, 2010, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID+33519>, and "NGOs Form 'Parallel' Government in Afghanistan: Minister," Afghan News, April 20, 2005, <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2005/april/apr202005.html>

<sup>43</sup> Hunter Lovins, "A Vision for a Green Afghanistan: Brief Proposal for a Comprehensive Strategy to Develop a Competitive and Sustainable Afghanistan" (Boulder, Colo.: Natural Capitalism Solutions, 2004). Available at [http://www.natcapsolutions.org/projects/Afghanistan/GreenAfghanistan\\_PROPOSAL\\_Sept06.pdf](http://www.natcapsolutions.org/projects/Afghanistan/GreenAfghanistan_PROPOSAL_Sept06.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> "I let my moon appear at the top of a tower/Beware, O Hakim, don't eclipse my happy new moon!" A poem by Mehri, 15th-century, Herat, Timurid Era, as quoted in Zuzanna Olszewska, "A Hidden Discourse: Afghanistan's Women Poets," in Heath and Zahedi, *Land of the Unconquerable*, 344.

<sup>45</sup> See "List of Schools in Afghanistan," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_schools\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_schools_in_Afghanistan); "List of Universities in Afghanistan," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_universities\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_universities_in_Afghanistan); and "Education in Afghanistan," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Afghanistan).

<sup>46</sup> See UNICEF, "UNICEF Condemns Attacks on Schools in Afghanistan," United Nations Children's Fund, November 14, 2008, [http://www.unicef.org/emerg/afghanistan\\_46387.html](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/afghanistan_46387.html), and "Lessons in Terror: Attacks

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<sup>47</sup> Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, *After the Taliban*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af)

<sup>49</sup> New World Strategies Coalition, a political and economic think tank founded by Afghans, offers twenty-four non-military solutions to the war in Afghanistan that are well worth taking seriously. See “24 NonMilitary Solutions,” New World Strategies Coalition, Inc., [http://newworldstrategiescoalition.org/24\\_NonMilitary\\_Solutions.html](http://newworldstrategiescoalition.org/24_NonMilitary_Solutions.html) and [http://newworldstrategiescoalition.org/uploads/NWSC\\_ANR\\_12.13.2010v1.4.pdf](http://newworldstrategiescoalition.org/uploads/NWSC_ANR_12.13.2010v1.4.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> At the July 2010 Kabul Conference, hosted by the government of Afghanistan and co-chaired by the UN, and earlier at a Peace Jirga, the Women’s 50% Campaign presented statements emphasizing the needs of Afghan women and demanding equal participation in peace negotiations. Those statements can be found at the International Federation for Human Rights Web site at <http://www.fidh.org/Recommendations-of-the-Afghanistan-women-s-50> and <http://fidh.org/Women-s-50-Campaign-Statement-to-Kabul-Conference>. For Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Web site at <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=4482>. For more about the June 2010 Peace Jirga, see “Afghan Peace Jirga 2010,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghan\\_Peace\\_Jirga\\_2010](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghan_Peace_Jirga_2010)