

# The Plight of Threatened Afghan and Iranian Scholars and Students<sup>1</sup>

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*Human Beings are members of a whole  
In creation of one essence and soul  
If one member is inflicted with pain  
Other members uneasy will remain  
If you have no sympathy for human pain  
The name of human you cannot pertain*

Persian poet Saadi Shirazi (1210-1291)

*Abstract:* In the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan religious ideas and laws seek to control all spheres of private and public life and state-sponsored restrictions hinder access to education and academic freedom for numerous citizens. The prevailing sedimented culture in both countries has resulted in the dismissal of many experienced scholarly personnel and an ensuing “brain drain.” This research project has cataloged some of the conditions that have impinge upon scholarly inquiry in Iran and Afghanistan and have led many scholars to leave their countries of birth. Based on an extensive literature review and personal interviews conducted, the report explores various aspects of the ecosystem that some displaced Iranian and Afghan scholars find themselves in.

## Introduction:

The year 1979 marked two monumental events in the history of the neighboring states of Iran and Afghanistan. The first of which occurred in February 1979, when Iran’s monarchical government was toppled in a popular revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. Ten months later, the Soviet Union intervened in support of the Afghan communist government fighting anti-communist Muslim guerrillas and ended up occupying Afghanistan (with up to 100,000 troops) for a decade. During the last four decades, the citizens of these two countries have experienced a wide range of distressing events which include:

- *Iran:* Massive revolutionary demonstrations against the Shah’s government (1978-1979), Summary execution of former government officials (1979), banning of liberal and leftist newspapers/periodicals and political parties (1979-1981), the seizure of the American embassy and holding US diplomats hostage (1979-1981), closure of universities as part

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of a campaign of “Cultural Revolution” (1980-1983), the beginning of the forced imposition of the hijab (1980), Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), a dissident organization’s campaign of assassinations and bombing against the current regime (1981-1982), mass execution of thousands of political prisoners (1988), the assassination of opposition leaders living overseas (1989-1998) and dissident intellectuals living inside Iran by agents of the Islamic Republic (1998-2000), sanctions imposed by the United Nations, United States, and European Union due to Iran’s nuclear activities, human rights violations, and state sponsorship of terrorism (1979–present), a rigged presidential election leading to massive protests and mass arrest of protesters (2009), and finally the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement that profoundly shocked the country (2022-2023).

- *Afghanistan*: Coup by the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978), execution of President Mohammad Daoud Khan and his family (1978), Soviet invasion and opposition to their occupation by insurgent groups (1979-1989), Osama bin Laden forming al-Qaida and making Afghanistan his base of operations (1988), the newly formed Islamic militia, the Taliban, storming Kabul (1992), Taliban curtailing the education and employment of women (1995), Taliban’s first period of rule (1996-2001), UN imposed sanctions on Afghanistan (2000), the American invasion and presence after the September 11 attacks on U.S. soil (2001-2021), killing of Osama bin Laden (2011), bloody terrorist attacks against hospitals and schools (2020-2021), toppling of the U.S.-aligned government and start of Taliban’s second period of rule (2021–present), botched and bloody exit of American forces and Afghan citizens from Kabul Airport (2021), Taliban’s implementation, once again, of discriminatory policies against their citizens (2021-present).

In addition to the cumulative impact of all the above outlandish experiences, both Iran and Afghanistan have also witnessed years of sectarian fighting between Shiites and Sunnis, mass dislocation of their citizens either as internally displaced or refugees/immigrants, devaluation of their currencies, being placed on the U.S. government’s State Sponsors of Terrorism list, suffering diplomatic isolation, etc. Furthermore, the coming to power of militant Islamists in Iran and Afghanistan has led to the imposition of state-sanctioned moral edicts in these two multi-ethnic societies. In this environment, academic rights have been treated as superfluous, and propitious outcomes for government loyalists are all but guaranteed.

The late Vartan Gregorian, a scholar of both Afghanistan and Iran, believed that the goal of postsecondary education was to provide foundational and analytical liberal arts training to help students “learn to learn.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum believes that the role of universities is “to unsettle and oppose, to test all orthodoxies, to offer routes by which young minds may travel from one culture to another and learn a valuable type of estrangement from their own.”<sup>3</sup> Gregorian’s and Nussbaum’s lofty visions of what postsecondary education is

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Greenberg, “Vartan Gregorian, transformative civic leader and tireless educator, dies at 87,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2021. <https://wapo.st/3HEuux6>.

<sup>3</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Review of Edward Said’s Reflection on Exile,” *NYT Review of Books* (2/18/2001).

supposed to be have not had a chance in Afghanistan and Iran for over four decades. Alas, in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, religious ideas and laws seek to control all spheres of private and public life and state-sponsored restrictions hinder access to education and academic freedom.<sup>4</sup> The sedimented culture that has prevailed has been a culture of intolerance, imposition of thought control, lack of respect for academic freedoms, and keeping academics meekly in line.<sup>5</sup> No wonder that based on the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index 2022, Iran ranks 154 and Afghanistan dead last among 167 countries.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022-2023, I discussed the impact of the above events with a good number of Afghan and Iranian scholars and students in the United States and Europe (Austria, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). I also interviewed staff members at agencies in St. Louis, Los Angeles, and The Hague (Netherlands) that help with the relocation of such displaced scholars or enable them to pursue their education to better understand the nuances of various cases.<sup>7</sup> In what follows I lay out what I learned about each of these countries separately.

### Iran:

The tumultuous political, social, and economic conditions in Iran referenced above and the calamitous policies of the state have led to (a) the dismissal and purging of experienced academic personnel, and (b) a serious case of “brain drain” involving students, artists, professors, and technocrats.

Ever since their foundation under the first Pahlavi king, modern Iranian universities have been arenas of political subjugation and intellectual dissent. Central governments have relied upon universities to train a corps of professionals needed to run a modern society. On the other hand, however, opposition movements have viewed institutions of higher learning as fertile anti-government recruitment centers. This “conflict of needs” and the fact that Iranian universities had traditionally been strongholds of secular thought, made a conflict with the new Islamic state

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<sup>4</sup> The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights [General Comment 13](#) from 1999 defines *academic freedom* as: “the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfill their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor, to participate in professional or representative academic bodies, and to enjoy all the internationally recognized human rights applicable to other individuals in the same jurisdiction.”

<sup>5</sup> A 2012 [statement](#) issued by 17 human rights and education groups concerned with academic freedom in Iran including Human Rights Watch states: “...the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology has instituted a program of “adapting” certain fields of study to Islamic ideology as defined by the government, including law, women’s studies, human rights, management, arts and cultural management, sociology, social sciences, philosophy, psychology, and political science. Such a policy amounts to a violation of academic freedom through direct censorship and ideological control of higher education.”

<sup>6</sup> EIU’s [Democracy Index](#) is based on five categories: “electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.”

<sup>7</sup> [Pars Equality Center](#) (Los Angeles), [International Institute of St. Louis](#), and [Iran Academia](#) in the Hague.

that came to power in February 1979 somewhat inevitable.<sup>8</sup> The government's audacity to silence opponents became apparent less than sixteen months after the revolution when in June 1980 armed gangs of hooligans loyal to the hardline clergy assaulted campuses with the proclaimed goal of evicting the offices of university political groups. These brutal attacks which were carried out with the indifference and tacit approval of the authorities lasted for three days.

On June 13, 1980, the Headquarters for Cultural Revolution (later renamed the High Council of Cultural Revolution) was established and tasked with the "Islamization" of university campuses and the revision of educational curricula.<sup>9</sup> This council had to revamp the academic curricula of all primary and secondary schools as well as universities since the clerical leaders considered much of Western scientific knowledge to be *elhadi* (heresy or deviationist). Regarding the pedagogical method of scientific questioning as inferior to religious certainty, they ordered that all textbooks in law, social sciences, and the humanities be rewritten according to Islamic canons. Names, pictures, conversations, and myths were altered to fit the new ruling ideology.

During the Cultural Revolution campaign,<sup>10</sup> which lasted more than two years, the academic community paid dearly as many of its faculties and students were purged, detained, executed, or forced into exile (voluntary or otherwise).<sup>11</sup> According to the Minister of Culture and Higher Education, the number of university professors and lecturers teaching in Iran's 34 universities and other institutions of higher learning at the time dropped from 12,000 before the revolution to 6,000.<sup>12</sup> Many of these academicians were branded as "lackeys of imperialism," "Shah-lovers," spies, Freemasons, Zionists, Baha'is, leftists, infidels, or cultural sellouts. Their replacements were often less qualified and thus severely undermined the quality of education in Iran.

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful study of the Iranian government using university campuses for its political agenda see: Saber Khani and Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "[Sanctuaries or Battlegrounds? State Penetration in Places of Worship, University Campuses, and State Bureaucracy for Pro-Government Mobilization: Evidence from Iran \(2015–2019\)](#)," *Comparative Political Studies* (Aug. 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Even before the onset of the cultural revolution campaign, Musicology departments within universities were ordered closed.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Cultural Revolution see "[The 1980 Cultural Revolution and Restrictions on Academic Freedom in Iran](#)."

<sup>11</sup> During this period and for years afterwards, students wishing to enter universities had to pass a number of qualifications: (1) They must be believers in Islam or one of the other acceptable religions of the country; (2) they should not have had any affiliation with anti-government or "infidel" groups; (3) male students should have satisfied their army service; and (4) they must pass a neighborhood investigation to determine their "moral and political fitness". The investigators would inquire, among other things, whether the prospective student prays, participates in political rallies, goes to the Friday prayers, and follows the dress code. Candidates who fail any of the above requirements were prevented from admission despite their academic qualifications.

<sup>12</sup> *Washington Post* (November 5, 1989). Other data from Iran's Ministry of Culture and Higher Education shows that because of the Cultural Revolution, "there were 44 percent fewer professors in Iranian higher education institutions in 1982 than in 1980." See Hassan Mahmoudi, "[Iran Loses Highly Educated and Skilled Citizens during Long-Running "Brain Drain"](#)," *Migration Information Source*, April 22, 2021.

This trend has ebbed and flowed throughout the last four decades.<sup>13</sup> On August 24, 2023, *Etemad*, an Iranian newspaper, published a list of 157 university professors who have been expelled from their teaching posts between 2009 and 2023.<sup>14</sup> The expulsion trend particularly gained momentum in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” movement.<sup>15</sup>

Parallel to the purge of university faculty, we see a huge uptick in student migration. The [2022 Iranian Immigration Yearbook](#) provides the following alarming statistics on the migration of students:

- 2000: 17,000 students
- 2010: 44,500 students
- 2020: 66,000 students

A 2020 study by Stanford University researchers concludes: “Based on global publication records, over 100,000 researchers of Iranian descent have worked in foreign universities and research institutions. Based on the headcount, this figure corresponds to one-third of Iran’s human capital in research.”<sup>16</sup>

One aspect of this outward migration pattern that is perceived to be rather troubling is the departure of the truly talented students, the *creme de la creme*. In January 2021, the secretary-general of Iran’s National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents said that “at least 82 out of its 86 young Olympiad medalists -- winners of international contests in such fields as science, literature, computing, and chess -- have since left Iran.”<sup>17</sup> The think tank, [Hatef Center](#), recently stated that 114 of the very top (ranked 1 to 10 in the entire country) math and physics students who graduated between the years 2001 and 2016 have left Iran for such destinations as the United States, Canada, and Switzerland.

According to “Gallup’s Potential Net Migration Index, taken between 2015 and 2017, more than one-quarter of highly educated Iranian residents would leave the country if they could.”<sup>18</sup> These numbers have led some experts to maintain that Iran has moved from student migration to mass migration.<sup>19</sup> A study conducted at Stanford University seems to support this proposition by

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<sup>13</sup> See a [statement](#) protesting these types of dismissals by 105 academics (including the author) issued on 2/10/2022.

<sup>14</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/5xws4z4t> (August 24, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> For an example of the latter see <https://tinyurl.com/2s3ft2a7>.

<sup>16</sup> Stanford Iran 2040 Project, “[Migration and Brain Drain from Iran](#),” April 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “[Education Tsar: 95 Percent of Olympiad Medalists Have Left Iran](#),” Iran Wire, January 4, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> For example, the head of the Medical Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran recently revealed that “around 3,000 doctors, including 160 cardiologists, and some 800 nurses sought work abroad last year.” According to Iranian media report estimates “some 16,000 doctors, including specialists, have left the Islamic Republic since 2020.” <https://tinyurl.com/4ewhfff2> (August 26, 2023).

putting the total number of Iranian expatriates at four million, which is 5% of Iran's current population.<sup>20</sup> According to the Iran Migration Data Portal, the most popular destinations for Iranians are the United States, Canada, UAE, United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Australia, and Sweden.<sup>21</sup>

There are multiple reasons that motivate Iranian students and faculty to leave the country. Those who were interviewed mentioned the following reasons:

- Harassment by the agents of the Islamic Associations or the Student Basij Organization (SBO) of those suspected of harboring anti-Islamic or anti-government convictions<sup>22</sup>
- Summoning, suspending, and expelling students and faculty on political, ideological, or religious grounds
- Depriving students of exams, banning them from entering the university, using violence, intimidation, insults, beatings, and humiliating fines
- Depriving students of the right to stay in university dormitories, and cutting off subsidized food
- Obligatory participation in religious or political ceremonies
- The government's filtering of the internet and restrictions on bandwidth
- Objecting to the dreaded quota system for government sympathizers<sup>23</sup>
- Poor job prospects, plummeting currency, heavily sanctioned economy
- Dismissing, suspending, and demoting teachers
- Non-renewal of teaching contracts on flimsy grounds and lack of job security
- Unfair hiring and promotion practices<sup>24</sup>
- Students spying on professors by reporting what is said in the classroom
- Political/ideological considerations overshadowing scientific work
- Offering low salaries which has caused their diminishing livelihoods<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Stanford Iran 2040 Project, "[Migration and Brain Drain from Iran](#)." Also, see data from the Iranian Foreign Ministry (<https://iranian.mfa.ir/files/mfairanian/Amar.pdf>).

<sup>21</sup> <https://en.imobs.ir/publication/show/9>

<sup>22</sup> SBO, which acts as the enforcer of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) on campuses, was [sanctioned](#) by the European Union on 22 May 2023 for human rights violations.

<sup>23</sup> In an act of infringement upon academic quality and impartiality beginning in the early 1980s, the Iranian state introduced a special quota system for admitting the families of martyr veterans of the revolution and the war with Iraq, as well as released POWs, wounded veterans, members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and the Reconstruction Crusade. These individuals were offered exclusive summer classes, private tutoring, scholarships, extra bonus points, and a specially designed entrance exam to facilitate their acceptance into institutions of higher learning.

<sup>24</sup> Faculty appointments and advancements are not just based on academic merit but also on political and religious considerations and often interventions by officials outside the universities.

<sup>25</sup> As of August 2023, the "official" inflation rate is stated as being around 45%. Many experts, however, put the real number in the 55% to 60% range.

These practices peak after every major protest movement in the country such as the ones in 1999, 2009, and 2022 since the government considers university campuses as the nerve center for many of oppositional activities. It is therefore not surprising that the government's attempt to allure expatriate Iranian professionals back to the country has so far failed in an abysmal fashion.<sup>26</sup>

Another stated reason motivating many Iranian scholars to leave is the diminished academic standards in the country and the desire to work with leading academics outside Iran. Students crave access to a better research and innovation ecosystem that enables them to do cutting-edge work.<sup>27</sup> Many students complained about the mediocre quality of their professors in Iran who were hired based on their pro-regime religious/political beliefs more so than their academic credentials. Restrictions on the internet, inadequate quality or quantity of scientific research equipment, computing power, and poor facilities and laboratories were frequently mentioned.

Furthermore, my interviews revealed that certain segments of the student body faced even more discriminatory practices that persuaded them to leave Iran. Female students are one such prominent constituency. In the academic year 2017-2018, forty-seven percent of all university students in Iran were female.<sup>28</sup>

Female Students as Percentage of All Students in Institutions of Higher Education Based on Degree (2017-18)<sup>29</sup>

Associate Degree	Bachelors	Master	Doctorate
7%	49%	54%	52%

Female Students as Percentage of All Students in Institutions of Higher Education Based on Academic Discipline (2017-18)

Medical	Humanities & Social Sciences	Natural Science	Engineering	Agriculture	Arts
62%	92%	70%	23%	52%	35%

41% of all students attending Iranian universities major in humanities and social sciences. As can be seen from the above table, 92% of these students are female. These students complained that

<sup>26</sup> According to one report "of an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 Iranians studying abroad, only 1,722 returned in 1986-1987." Joe Stork and Steve Niva, *Academic Freedom in the Middle East* (Washington: Middle East Report and Information Project [MERIP], 1989), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> See Sina Mossayeb and Roozbeh Shirazi, "[Education and Emigration: The Case of the Iranian-American Community](#)," *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 9 (1), 2006: 30-45.

<sup>28</sup> Based on [data](#) provided by the Statistical Center of Iran.

<sup>29</sup> Data from Iran Statistical Center. <https://tinyurl.com/yckskunk>

they could not write their thesis about research topics deemed taboo by the political establishment (i.e., prostitution, official corruption, ethnic conflict, sexual orientation/practices, irreligiosity). Dress code restrictions, unwanted sexual advances, limitations on their choice of majors,<sup>30</sup> desire for better living conditions for their kids, and unattractive job prospects were cited as major reasons for wanting to leave Iran. According to the World Bank [data](#), females as a percentage of the total labor force in Iran increased from 10.3% in 1990 to 18.3% in 2022. Once we juxtapose this with the fact that 47% of university students are female, we can see that 29% of university-educated Iranian females are not able to enter the labor force.

Another constituency that has experienced unique academic discrimination has been members of Iran's religious minorities. The most flagrant discrimination has occurred in the case of Baha'is whom the current regime considers members of a non-recognized religious minority and therefore prevents them from pursuing higher education. To remedy this situation, the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) was founded in Tehran in 1987 aiming to provide a sort of alternative underground educational network. BIHE has continued to operate despite the arrest of some of its faculty and students<sup>31</sup> and today "offers 56 university-level programs across five faculties and continues to develop and deliver academic programs in Sciences, Engineering, Business and Management, Humanities, and Social Sciences."<sup>32</sup> In 2004, a change to the [Lautenberg Amendment](#) allowed certain members of religious minority groups in Iran, including Jews, Christians, Baha'is, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians whose family members live in the United States to join them. Anecdotally it seems that thanks to this changed amendment more members of religious minorities were able to leave Iran to pursue education in the United States.

In addition to BIHE, another organization that has tried to enable Iranian students to continue their higher education in an online format is The Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities (ISSH), also known as [Iran Academia](#). Founded in 2012, Iran Academia "is an alternative university that aims to provide accessible and uncensored knowledge in social sciences and humanities. Established in response to violations of the right to education, academic freedom, and university autonomy in Iran, this Netherlands-based institution seeks to overcome censorship and other barriers to impart impartial, high-quality education to Iran's youth."<sup>33</sup> The staff of Iran Academia goes to great lengths to ensure both the quality and security of their curricular offerings.

Furthermore, some graduates of Iranian universities have formed alumni organizations outside the country to facilitate networking among themselves and current students back in Iran. One such example is the Sharif University of Technology Association ([SUTA](#)) established in 2000. Nicknamed Iran's MIT, graduates of this university have gained admission to some of the best

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<sup>30</sup> During the first decade of the revolution women were barred from 91 (54%) of the 169 academic disciplines offered in Iranian institutions of higher learning. See Sahar Ghahreman, "Seyasat-e Hokumat-e Eslami Peyramoun-e Dastrasi Zanan be Amouzesh Alei" [The Islamic Government Policy Towards Women's Access to Higher Education in Iran] *Nimeye-Digar*, no. 7 (Summer 1988), p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> See a documentary [film](#) (in Persian) about the Bahai's and BIHE.

<sup>32</sup> <https://bihe.org/>

<sup>33</sup> On May 25, 2023, I visited the headquarters of Iran Academia in The Hague and learned firsthand about the admirable operation they run.



universities around the world and have gone on to hold important professional positions in industry and academia.

As mentioned before, in the aftermath of major social protests in Iran (i.e., 1999, 2009, 2022), which invariably involve the heavy participation of university students, we quickly see an upsurge in the number of students and faculty deciding to leave the country. Whether they were political activists or innocent bystanders, many leave Iran with serious psychological scars related to their experience with government crackdowns. Alas, the Iranian government's abuse of psychiatric strategies to quell opposition and the societal stigma around mental health has made this condition worse. According to the director of an organization that helps Iranian immigrants in California, this has resulted in a few cases of homelessness, mental breakdown, and even suicide.

Some of the students and scholars who have left Iran illegally or even legally complain of such extra problems as Iranian universities not responding to verification inquiries regarding educational degrees, transcripts, certificates, or work history. This creates all sorts of obstacles for them in demonstrating their credentials in the host country. Another complaint of the newly arrived Iranian students and scholars is that connecting to the established Iranian community in the United States is not that easy. They attribute this to the earlier generations of Iranian immigrants viewing suspiciously newly arrived compatriots as somehow connected to the Islamic state. Another explanation that I heard, ironically, was the anti-immigrant views held by some of the earlier generations of Iranian immigrants holding conservative political views.

Some of the new generation of Iranian students and scholars who come to a country like the United States often have blinders of their own. Unrealistic expectations about how quickly they can find research or teaching opportunities (internships, postdocs, faculty positions) or secure a job in the high-tech sector are some manifestations of such blinders. Some interlocutors mentioned much how easier it was for them to find jobs in places like Dubai compared to the U.S. However, it should be mentioned that if the track record of their predecessors is any indication, their chance of eventual success is very high. According to a [report](#) by the U.S.-based Migration Policy Institute in 2019, “compared to the overall foreign-born population, Iranian immigrants are much more likely to have a college degree, higher household incomes, and greater English proficiency.” The report goes on to mention that 62% of Iranian immigrant workers were in management, business, science, and arts occupations and that they had significantly higher median household incomes (\$79,000) relative to the overall immigrant (\$64,000) and native-born populations (\$66,000).

### **Afghanistan:**

Afghanistan’s modern educational system began in 1904-1904 and the first school for girls was established in 1920. The country’s premier university, Kabul University, was founded in 1932, and it started admitting women in 1950. According to a comprehensive [report](#) by UNESCO, “huge progress has been made in enrolment at all education levels from around 1 million students in 2001 to around 10 million in 2018 with the number of girls in primary school increasing from almost zero in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2018.” Between 2000 and 2018 female

literacy rate in Afghanistan more than doubled and reached 30%.<sup>34</sup> By 2019, 85% attended primary school and 40% attended secondary school.<sup>35</sup> Until the Taliban came back to power in August 2021, Afghanistan had 220,000 teachers (including 80,000 female teachers). Thanks to the above facts, the rate of child mortality, child labor, and child marriage had declined.

Yet, it is hard to imagine the impact of four decades of calamities that have befallen Afghanistan. War, violence, occupation, terrorist attacks, gender segregation, religious and ethnic discrimination, revanchist policies, despotic style of statecraft, and misrule have led to the exodus of skilled workers and ruined the academic infrastructure of a poor country like Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of 1979, the civil war of 1992-96, Taliban's first (1996-2001) and second (2021-present) periods of rule each have caused massive waves of migration.<sup>36</sup> It is as if thanks to the cauldron of change since 1978, uncertainty has become their country and the miasma of violence has become omnipresent. These two factors – uncertainty and insecurity -- discourage many families from investing in the education of their children, especially girls.<sup>37</sup>

After twenty years of haphazard American involvement, the U.S. withdrew its last forces from the country in August 2021 as the Taliban toppled the U.S.-aligned government. The above conditions have led many Afghan academics to seek refuge or emigrate as their educational activities were severely reduced or completely closed. According to a BBC [report](#), just between August 2021 and February 2022 at least 229 professors from the top three universities (Kabul University, Herat University, and Balkh University) -- most of whom held Masters or/and Ph.D. degrees -- left the country.<sup>38</sup> Such majors as cinema, graphics, music, photography, theater, and other arts were abolished. A displaced female Afghan academic succinctly articulated the impact of the Taliban's comeback this way: "The current government has had a completely destructive effect on research... Research is a form of freedom of speech for scholars, but this freedom of speech has been taken by the Taliban."<sup>39</sup>

Thanks to such factors as cost, geographical proximity, cultural and family ties, ease of obtaining a visa, and provision of scholarships many Afghan students have sought higher education in regional universities. For example, some Afghan female scholars ended up at the [Asian](#)

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<sup>34</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/mv48j4tx>

<sup>35</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/yfxcmeh3>

<sup>36</sup> Until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (and then the Ukraine war in 2022), Afghans had constituted the largest refugee population under UNHCR's mandate for more than three decades. According to a July 2023 [report](#) from UNHCR, there are currently 8.2 million Afghan refugees hosted across 103 different countries (1.6 million of them became refugees since 2021).

<sup>37</sup> According to the [CIA Factbook](#), the total population literacy rate in Afghanistan in 2021 was 37%.

<sup>38</sup> Some of the Afghan professors whom I interviewed mentioned that they feared persecution due to such factors as being Western educated, collaborating with American forces, having published books and articles on women's rights, being of Hazara ethnicity, and wanting to continue their research careers, etc.

<sup>39</sup> See Smriti Mallapaty, "Afghanistan's academics despair months after Taliban takeover," *Nature*, December 17, 2021. <https://go.nature.com/3oAxx6X>. Also see Smriti Mallapaty, "Afghanistan's terrified scientists predict huge research losses," *Nature*, August 27, 2021. <https://go.nature.com/3B9j41P>.

[University for Women](#) in Bangladesh which has a special [program](#) for Afghan women. Some 200 female students of the American University of Afghanistan have gone to Doha, Qatar, while others have settled in Pakistan, [The American University of Central Asia](#) in Kyrgyzstan, or [The American University of Iraq-Sulaimani](#) (Iraqi Kurdistan). But such transitions have not always been easy. The Taliban has prevented a group of 100 girls who were planning to go to Dubai thanks to a generous sponsorship provided by an Emirati philanthropist.<sup>40</sup> Some 2,500 Afghan students who had begun their studies in India are now finding themselves in limbo back home since the Indian government annulled thousands of visas after the Taliban returned to power in 2021.<sup>41</sup> For the female students in this group, this can basically mean the end of their education.

A clear example of the Taliban's cantankerous policy-making and deceitfulness came on December 20, 2022, when their higher education minister announced in a decree -- contrary to their prior assurances -- that Afghan women were now banned from studying at universities regardless of how close they were to earning their degrees.<sup>42</sup> Besides gender segregation, this decision has also put many private institutions in Afghanistan on the cusp of closure.<sup>43</sup> The same minister also said that the Taliban's "fighters should be allowed to teach in universities without passing exams or showing teaching credentials."

The day after the Taliban's ban, the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) issued a statement stating "Congress should act immediately by expanding dual intent to Afghan women seeking a student visa to study in the U.S. and by providing Afghan women already here the opportunity to quickly apply for legal permanent residency status. The Biden administration should also quickly announce and implement a program allowing U.S. colleges and universities to sponsor Afghan refugee students."<sup>44</sup> Alas, this did not happen. According to an [article](#) in the *Washington Post*, as of April 2023, "about 152,000 Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants remain trapped in Afghanistan."<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, some American and European academic institutions launched their own programs to help displaced Afghan students and graduates. Among them were [Arizona State University](#), [Bard College](#), [Chapman University](#), [University of the People](#) (online education), [University of Dundee](#), and a [consortium](#) of eight universities involved in the Global Student Haven Initiative. It should also be mentioned that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 somewhat overshadowed the plight of Afghan

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<sup>40</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/5n8rwc7f>

<sup>41</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/b6h4h8wd>

<sup>42</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/n858yh9w>. A number of male Afghan professors resigned in protest of this decision. See <https://tinyurl.com/34ceff93>.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to barring girls from returning to high schools (announced in March 2022) and universities, they have also been banned from gyms, hair salons, and public parks and are required to be accompanied by a male guardian during long-distance travel. Moreover, they have banned women from working in international NGOs and even UN agencies.

<sup>44</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/2bvdaax6>

<sup>45</sup> Many of these people, who served side-by-side with U.S. forces constitute the educated labor force of Afghanistan.

scholars as such institutions as [Brown](#), [Purdue](#), and [Texas A&M](#) universities now tried to accommodate displaced Ukrainian scholars.<sup>46</sup> The same was true in Germany where the government had to displace Afghan refugees to make room for the one million Ukrainian refugees who settled there.<sup>47</sup>

Literature review and interviews conducted with Afghan students, scholars as well as academic institutions and civil agencies that have helped them revealed the following important points about the Afghan community in the U.S at large:

- Some Afghans hold the U.S. government responsible for their plight. They point to the legacy of its invasion, its two decades of military presence, mishaps committed (i.e., corruption),<sup>48</sup> hasty and chaotic departure, and abandonment of many of its Afghan allies<sup>49</sup> as factors that contributed to their current predicament and further deepened the cleavages among Afghans.
- Many stated that the restrictive immigration laws of the United States coupled with the high travel costs of crossing the Atlantic, has put the country out of reach of many Afghan immigrants/refugees and/or their family members.
- Frequent complaints were heard from those who did manage to land in the U.S. about:
  - a. Inadequate provision of social services: They maintain that European countries like Sweden and Germany give much more generous services (i.e., residency permits,<sup>50</sup> housing, job training), to the refugees than the United States. Some pointed out that in America refugees are entitled to nine months of case management service but after that, they are on their own and must then navigate the high cost of real estate.
  - b. Differential treatment: It was mentioned that whereas the \$500 asylum application fee was waived for Ukrainians, it was not waived for them. While this amount might seem modest to some, many Afghans claimed that this posed a major financial hardship for them.
- Many pointed out that the pronounced ethnic (Pashtuns vs Hazaras), linguistic (Dari, Pashtu, Uzbeki, etc.), religious (Sunni vs. Shiite), and gender related (wearing hijab or not) cleavages and sectarian squabbling among Afghans have followed them to

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<sup>46</sup> See <https://tinyurl.com/22ysz6fv>

<sup>47</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/4vben9vx> and <https://tinyurl.com/3n3e46rn>.

<sup>48</sup> See <https://tinyurl.com/yc227fyj>

<sup>49</sup> A 2021 [report](#) from the International Rescue Committee maintains that “At least 263,000 Afghan civilians have been affiliated with the U.S. mission and tens of thousands are eligible for SIVs [Special Immigrant Visa]. Still, only 16,000 Afghan SIVs have been issued since 2014. There are currently more than 18,000 applications in the pipeline, as well as thousands of Afghans ineligible under this program who are in dire need of protection.” Some Afghan interlocutors maintained that there is not really a political will in the U.S. Congress to help them.

<sup>50</sup> It was pointed out that Germany granted three-year residency permits to thousands of Afghans who went there after August 2021, but the American government has not done anything similar.

- their new places of residence and is hard to overcome.<sup>51</sup> It was mentioned that the ethnic factor has led to sympathy for the Taliban among some Afghan expatriates.
- One of the other oft-mentioned comments heard in conversations with Afghan students and scholars was their experience of “cultural shock.” Navigating different norms of trust, communication, parenting and gender identity was clearly a challenge. Some of the husbands were not comfortable with their wives’ attending classes or working outside the home.<sup>52</sup> Some fathers were troubled with their daughters not covering their hair properly or fraternizing with boys, or their teenagers adopting the typical habits and lingo of their American peers. Naturally, many of the children could no longer accept the fierce conservatism of their parents.

As for the more specific predicament of Afghan students and scholars, the following points deserve attention:

- The fact that the Taliban have cut ties with universities abroad means that these universities are not able to contact Afghan universities to verify the educational degrees, transcripts, certificates, or work history of Afghan students and scholars. This situation was most troublesome for those who left in a hurry after the US withdrew without having the chance to secure proper documents.<sup>53</sup>
- Even those students/scholars who may have brought all their proper paperwork with them<sup>54</sup> maintained that they had no prior experience of studying or working at an American-type institution of higher education.<sup>55</sup> As one of them nicely put it finding himself at a West Coast campus was tantamount to having “traveled to another present.” Adjusting to the “stilted” language and regimented rituals of Western academia on the one hand and the cavalier mannerism of socializing on the other made for a confusing transition.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Since the last Afghan census was in 1979 (and it was an incomplete one at best) it is hard to empirically estimate the demographic weight of any community there currently.

<sup>52</sup> The director of a center working with Afghan immigrants informed me that mindful of the difficulties faced by Afghan women attending in-person classes at their center, they decided to move their educational programs online only to find out that enrollment in those courses was not what they expected. Upon investigating the reason, they were told that some Afghan husbands would not allow their wives to have access to computers when they themselves were not at home.

<sup>53</sup> While some universities ask for original academic documents from Afghans others say that they don’t accept academic documents from countries such as Afghanistan or Yemen. As another example of how lack of proper documentation can hurt Afghan scholars consider this: To be eligible for support from the long-established London-based Council for At-Risk Academics ([CARA](#)), applicants must have held a paid post as a lecturer and/or researcher in a higher education institution or equivalent for a minimum of 6 months, have a minimum Master’s degree or can show evidence of at least one publication in an internationally peer-reviewed journal, and are at risk.

<sup>54</sup> Many have used such agencies as the [World Education Services](#) to get their credentials evaluated.

<sup>55</sup> We should remember that the American University of Afghanistan (AUF), the country’s first private, not-for-profit institution of higher education that granted undergraduate and master’s degrees, was only established in 2006 with limited enrollment.

<sup>56</sup> One Afghan professor stated that whereas academics (in particular university professors) enjoyed a high level of social prestige in Afghanistan, the same was not necessarily true in America.

- Unfamiliarity with organizations and institutions that could support them is another handicap for newly arriving academics.
- Afghan students wishing to study in the United States face some formidable challenges. Not being able to demonstrate a command of English<sup>57</sup> (by having passed such tests as the TOEFL or IELTS at the required level) or missing orientation activities or mandatory workshops required for them to serve as graduate teaching assistants due to delayed arrivals caused by visa issuance is another problem.
- Those Afghans who had majored in humanities and social sciences and did not necessarily possess the technical skill sets of their peers majoring in STEM fields found themselves in a major disadvantage when it came to securing internships or jobs.
- The absence of a well-established Afghan community in diaspora<sup>58</sup> and an expansive network of Afghan scholars who could offer professional mentorship and networking further complicates the conditions faced by newly arrived Afghan scholars.<sup>59</sup>
- Many students and faculty maintained that academic work requires a peaceful environment but that they are saddled with (a) responsibility to financially support their big families (either the ones who have accompanied them to the US and/or the ones they left back in Afghanistan, Iran, or Pakistan) and (b) mental scars from the experiences (war, bombings, displacement, poverty, immigration camps) that they and/or their families have experienced.
- As of summer 2023, only eight countries (Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, China, Russia, Turkmenistan, Qatar, UAE) have handed Taliban control of Afghan embassies. This has created all sorts of difficulty for Afghan students and scholars needing consular services.

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<sup>57</sup> Language barriers are a more serious challenge for the older generation of Afghan faculty.

<sup>58</sup> The Afghan community has been busy forming its own platforms and organizations. According to a 2019 [report](#) at least “462 organizations have been established by the Afghan diaspora” in Europe. Other examples include the [Afghan Diaspora Network](#) (an independent platform dedicated to connecting the Afghan diaspora), and the [Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services](#). In the United States, the largest concentration of Afghan citizens is in California, Virginia, Texas, New York, and Pennsylvania. In these places, organizations catering to Afghan immigrants have emerged. For example, in Los Angeles [Pars Equality Center](#) caters to Afghan and Iranian clients by providing various services such as individual and group mentoring, and connections to recruitment agencies or legal clinics such as the [Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles](#). Efforts have also started to give voice to the plight of the Afghan exiled scholarly community. See <https://www.cgm.pitt.edu/afghanistan-project>, <https://bit.ly/3sDsZ9M>, <https://spark.ucla.edu/project/27351>, and <https://bit.ly/3oNQhiF>. IIE and IIE-SRF have played an important role in empowering Afghan students, artists, and scholars.

<sup>59</sup> The Iranian expatriate community is much larger, more established, networked, and wealthier than the Afghan expatriate community. With a few exceptions, there are not too many examples of solid ties between Afghan and Iranian expatriate communities in the U.S. To my knowledge, there is currently no comprehensive study of Afghan students and scholars in the United States.

Conclusion: According to a 2018 [article](#) on the website of National Public Radio, “Around the globe, more scholars are now threatened and displaced than since World War II began.”<sup>60</sup> This paper cataloged some of the factors (climate of political and civil insecurity, discrimination/persecution, unrest/war, speaking truth to power) that have caused the increasing exodus of Afghan and Iranian scholars in distress. The exodus of experienced academics surely has negative repercussions for the educational standards of the home country but also can be very beneficial to the host country. This research has also identified some of the problems these scholars have faced upon arrival in their destination countries. It is hoped that this study can help us more successfully advocate for and nurture the talents of these academics uprooted from their family, country, and language.

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<sup>60</sup> For a study of the earlier generation of refugee scholars see Norman Bentwich, *The Rescue and Achievement of Refugee Scholars* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1953), and Magdalena Kmak and Heta Bjorklund (eds), *Refugees and Knowledge Production: Europe's Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2022).