Seven years ago, America sent an army to Afghanistan to pursue those who had attacked her in New York and Washington. With the help of a confederation of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara tribesmen united under the banner of the Northern Alliance, American forces ended five years of Taliban rule and set the stage for the creation of a new Afghanistan. Under the wing of collective responsibility enshrined in a multinational mandate for Afghan security, leaders from across Afghanistan convened to codify a vision for a government of, by and for the Afghan people. It was hoped that this new government would work to repair an Afghanistan mangled by thirty years of incessant war. To this end, the framers of Afghanistan’s new constitution charged the state with establishing free, universal education in the country. Article 43 of the new constitution states in unequivocal terms that

Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be provided up to the level of the B.A., free of charge by the state.

The state is obliged to devise and implement effective programs for a balanced expansion of education all over Afghanistan, and to provide compulsory intermediate level education.

The state is also required to provide the opportunity to teach native languages in the areas where they are spoken.\(^1\)

This was a uniquely challenging assignment in light of the many problems facing Afghanistan. Successive administrations had tried and failed to extend a program of government-funded education into the Afghan countryside. Despite the challenge, Afghanistan is currently well placed to meet the educational needs of its people and is, given a persistence and expansion of basic security, on the right track. This success is mostly attributable to the fact that a new leadership in Kabul is determined to craft an education policy based on the long term needs of Afghans themselves with an ear to their cultural sensitivities. This paper argues

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that while the remnants of a Taliban movement threaten short-term security in the country, the international community has established an atmosphere in secure areas where long-term education gains can take root.

Education in the country is no longer dominated by ideology but is concerned with practicality and sustainable advancement. Thus, the most important goal for the international community must be to allow Afghan civil society, NGOs and the Ministry of Education to operate in a safe environment.

Lessons from History

Various approaches dominated the Afghan struggle for education throughout the previous century. Analyzing the successes and failures of three distinct approaches under the Monarchy, Communist, and Taliban regimes can help guide education policy moving forward. Education policy in the Afghan Monarchy during Muhammad Zahir Shah’s thirty year reign was one of options and freedoms rather than aggressive policies and programs. Gradually lifting the restrictions on female dress education, Zahir Shah left it up to Afghan society to determine its own course in the context of new freedoms. Many Afghans, and among them women, took slow advantage of these opportunities in Kabul and Herat. The countryside remained as it had been for a thousand years, where a deeply traditional ethos persisted that severely limited a woman’s options.

After the Monarchy was expelled, Afghanistan was ruled by a series of Communist rentier regimes that were dependent on the grace of Moscow apparatchiks. Unhindered by the need for local legitimacy, Afghan communists sought to drag the tribal society beneath them kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. The government in Kabul decreed an end to the age-old Afghan custom of bride price (mehr), eliminated compulsory marriages, and banned the marriage of girls under sixteen years old. Unilateral decrees of this kind gave many Afghan men and women the chance to better their lives and to pursue successful careers as bureaucrats, judges, teachers, and nurses. At its height, Communist regimes employed women in large numbers in every field of administration, from police forces to judgeships of family law courts. At one point, nearly half of Afghanistan’s doctors, civil servants and teachers were women.

Most of these gains did not extend to rural Afghanistan, where opposition to the decrees grew increasingly audible, often from unexpected sectors. Women despised the elimination of mehr as a cheapening of their value as they were now “given away for free” and men feared for their honor as their thousand-year-old guardianship over female relatives was abruptly outlawed. Marxists responded to charges of widespread cultural disruption with the contention that some cultural norms were “better off being disrupted.” Afghans largely ignored these
decrees in a manner that parallels the American response to prohibition or the Roman response to Augustus’ family planning. It is of little surprise given the Marxist’s cavalier approach to social engineering that Afghan perceptions of a leadership hostile to their way of life would color popular views of government education. During this period,

there was a drastic reduction in the number of schools and enrollment in rural areas. Some sources estimated that more than 80 percent of primary schools were destroyed or closed; teaching staff decreased by 50 percent, and student enrollment fell by 30 percent. Average class size increased from 31-40 students to 60-90 students per class.7

As opposition to communist policies mounted, the Soviet Union decided to intervene to save a fellow communist government. The Soviet invasion and factional and tribal wars that followed devastated Afghan society, destroyed its infrastructure, and sent millions of refugees into camps in Pakistan and Iran. This experience significantly affected the Afghan consciousness. As refugees, Afghans experienced a variety of educational opportunities that ranged from NGOs to host nations; this exposure inspired “a growing demand for education amongst returnees whose education experience in refugee camps had inspired their belief in the potential for a brighter future.”8 The Afghan experience in Iran and Pakistan diverged widely. While most Afghan refugees in Pakistan lived in camps scattered in the tribal zone, those in Iran were concentrated in urban areas and lived in densely populated urban housing.9 A common Shia culture among the overwhelmingly Hazara refugees allowed for a speedier assimilation. Iranian-Afghan children, including girls, attended Iranian schools and universities and experienced a greater degree of social mobility and personal development than their counterparts in Pakistan. This may have also resulted from the fact that the majority of Afghan refugees in Iran were widows and single mothers due to the loss of husbands and sons during the Soviet invasion and civil war. This meant Afghan women had to work outside the home alongside Iranian men and women to survive.10 When Afghans were forced to repatriate from Iran in 2001, they took their education and work experiences with them. As refugees, Afghans experienced two separate models of education: the Iranian model of a modernist fundamentalist, and the madrassah-centered Taliban-style of tribal Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, the anarchy that followed the Soviet withdrawal enhanced the appeal of the Taliban, a group of madrassah-educated Pashtun fundamentalists armed and funded by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban pledged to restore the “honor and dignity” of Afghan women, enforce Islamic
laws, and eliminate corruption. Upon their accession, the Taliban dismissed all of the country’s female doctors and civil servants, forced Afghan women to wear burqas, and closed girls’ schools in all major cities. Despite these moves, Taliban spokesmen always insisted that female education was not illegal in Afghanistan. As ostensible practitioners of an austere form of Saudi Wahhabism, the Taliban could hardly justify the banning of women’s education on purely Islamic grounds given the presence of a robust female education program in Saudi Arabia itself, where over half of all college graduates were women.

Indeed, in attempting to eradicate female education, the Taliban had to contend with such Islamic narrations as, “every Muslim, male and female, is required to seek knowledge.” Thus, in official pronouncements, Taliban officials would explicitly deny any attempts to eradicate female literacy, claiming they were “determined to provide educational opportunities for all Afghans irrespective of gender, race, tribe, language, or regional affiliations.” The Taliban attempted to argue that a ban of female education was really just part of the government’s inability to provide many services, because of the state of the economy, the mistrust of communist curricula and the brain drain of Afghans resulting from years of war. This was all patently untrue. Upon rising to power, the Taliban closed down schools for girls and fired all female instructors. Afghans responded by moving female education into their private homes, teaching women literacy and trade skills like sewing and weaving. This, too, was pursued and eliminated by the Taliban, which shut down more than one-hundred private girls’ schools. The Taliban punished any offenders and mandated that female instruction be limited to Quranic memorization and then only until the age of eight. While Taliban policies caused a serious decline in female school attendance, they were not able to eliminate education for women entirely, particularly in rural areas where Taliban policies saw more limited enforcement. Afghans began their own community schools to educate both boys and girls. These schools were financed and constructed by locals themselves and would often be located in mosques, the open air, or even private homes. In the post-Taliban era, these community-based models serve as a vehicle for the promotion of an Afghan civil society, a model that is in tune with local culture and a security paradigm where locals are personally invested in the stability of the government and defeat of the insurgency.

The lessons of Afghan history are informative. History shows that education is a two way street in Afghanistan between the public and the government. During the Zahir Shah era, Afghan society was unprepared to take advantage of or was unaware of the benefits of modern education. Thus, Zahir Shah’s opening up of public freedoms and establishment of schools met with little success. During the Communist era, the government had become ossified and unwilling to compromise its ideology, refusing
to acknowledge the reality of Afghan culture and tradition. Finally, the Taliban, in violently attempting to enforce a purist rendition of Afghan traditions, failed to account for the evolution of Afghan culture and the experiences of many returning refugees, the desires of a people that had become more willing to embrace elements of modernity like education. The lesson to be learned is that actively providing Afghans with the kind of education they want has been successful, but forcing them to endure ideological social engineering projects only engenders resistance and resentment.

Education Strategies Moving Forward

Today Afghanistan is at a vital crossroads. A sustained presence from the international community has created an open public space in Afghanistan for NGOs to operate. In the same breath, the Taliban insurgency has committed itself to defeating the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and return the country to theocracy. The more the Taliban allows the country to progress, the more liberal social norms will pervade, as men and women interact and participate with the reconstruction effort. Just as the Taliban came to power out of the ashes of Afghan anarchy, so will it wither away with the march of order and progress.

The Taliban thus targets schools across the country, particularly those educating girls. According the Afghan Ministry of Education, six percent of the country’s schools were terrorized into closure in the eighteen months preceding the filing of its 2007 strategic planning report. Education Minister Muhammad Haneef Atmar attributed a slight decline in the number of school attacks to community defense initiatives, which he has long advocated as an alternative to increased NATO presence. Yet there is only so much Afghans can do for themselves. The Taliban, according to Atmar, deliberately seeks to sabotage the country’s schools by any means necessary, knowing that educated Afghans are far less likely to join their movement. The attacks are meant to be as dramatic and terrorizing as possible, with the apparent intention of frightening Afghan families into keeping their children home. Brazen attacks on Afghan schoolteachers and children, like the February 2006 attack on the Kartilaya School in the Helmand provincial capital, create the image of a coalition military presence unable to defend Afghans from the Taliban. The Kartilaya attack occurred fifteen minutes from an American base and five hundred meters from an Afghan police station. British forces took half an hour to arrive at the scene. Though security has improved for many Afghan schools since the Kartilaya incident, a recent attack in Kandahar on fifteen Afghan schoolgirls by unidentified motorists using corrosive acid has reignited old fears. Afraid for their safety, students have yet to return to the Mirwais Mena girls school where the attack took place.

Taliban attacks create a vicious cycle: a loss of trust in the government causes Afghans to fear reporting suspicious activities, thereby increasing the likelihood of more attacks. By using suicide bombers and attacking soft targets,
the Taliban can operate in areas that are not their traditional strongholds. Also, unlike NATO governments, the Taliban does not have a commitment to civilian safety and is not bound by benchmarks and deadlines. The sheer number of school destructions and attacks suggests a strong and growing presence, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar. A June 2007 BBC report mentioned that 110 teachers had been assassinated and 226 schools burned down in the 13 months running up to the report. NGOs often build schools next to military bases to reduce the likelihood of attack. This means schools are often built far away from the homes of pupils, making students’ commutes, usually by foot, both inconvenient and dangerous. Local Afghan communities attempted to protect schools from attack by placing guards in front of buildings. A government program trained and armed local community members for school defense, but the presence of armed guards near schools has meant that now Taliban attack children on their way to school where they are not under armed protection.

In the face of such security challenges, there are a number of viable Afghan solutions. The first is to employ a tactic used during the Taliban era to secretly educate girls. Clusters of Afghan families, with the help of parents and former teachers, conducted small classes inside their own homes. The schools maintained a low profile, had heavy parental supervision, and were free to tailor their learning to the specific needs of their community. While this type of decentralized learning is durable and safer than sending children to school, it has its drawbacks. The lack of state coordination means Afghan children may not be trained in the fields necessary to participate in the reconstruction of the new government. Unplugged from government oversight, there is no way to guarantee that the education quality remains high, or that parents in a country with daunting illiteracy have the skills to effectively educate their children. The central government can overcome this difficulty by working with local communities and education specialists to produce cheaply available home schooling curricula that can be used by anyone with basic literacy. The government can neutralize the Taliban tactic of targeting teachers by instantly turning any Afghan with basic literacy and an instruction manual into a teacher. This means that while literacy training remains vital to the success of the process of mass education, specified teacher-training need to occur in the short term. The Ministry of Education’s K-12 textbooks already incorporate some elements of this strategy, interspersing reading and writing exercises with instructions for the teacher (meaning that one teacher, with one textbook, can teach an entire class with little outside help). In this way, the government can standardize education without centralizing it, and it can keep Afghan children in the relative safety of their homes, and teachers, if needed, at home-stays with local residents.
Another viable option is to house students in dormitories on school grounds. Staffed with twenty-four hour security all in one place end any dangerous treks to and from school. Dormitory life would foster a sense of community and common purpose as school officials work to create a new generation of Afghan leaders. Some clear caveats must be in place in a system like this. Afghans must be confident that the schools are not indoctrinating their children and detaching them for their traditional values. A promising candidate for this type of system is a network of Turkish schools that has been operating in Pakistan, Russia and Nigeria for decades. These schools have recently come into the spotlight because of their work in tribal Pakistan’s impoverished Pashtun zones.

The schools are affiliated with the ideas of Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim traditionalist leader in Turkey who calls for coexistence with non-Muslims, interfaith understanding and secular government. Heavily funded by the moderate Islam of Turkey’s middle class businessmen, the schools bring an advanced, professional, multilingual curriculum to impoverished areas. The schools teach limited courses on Islam and focus primarily on math, science and literature. The schools are single-gender and seek to provide a traditional socially conservative Muslim environment for pupils. If these “PakTurk” academies, as they are known in Pakistan, can provide a comprehensive, modern education that trains students in Urdu, Turkish and English, then they can adapt to conditions in Afghanistan, introducing Dari or Pashto. The schools are popular because they appeal to what traditionalist Muslims want for their children: a modern education in an environment where faith and values will not be compromised. Gulen’s schools are not tied to any government entity are funded by self-made Turkish Muslim capitalists, and staffed by volunteers willing to work in conflict-ridden areas. Their emphasis on building personal character, a vision of tolerance, and instilling a strong identity in students make them uniquely suited to the Afghan context. Turkey’s Gulen movement presents the means to achieve what Afghan Education Minister Atmar calls “a new curriculum for Islamic education built on modern principles of inclusion and tolerance.” In a government strategic plan, Atmar consistently insists that the country’s education system, even at the public level, will remain Islamic. The precise nature and role of that expression of Islam is not made clear. The fact that the report mandates training of 3,500 mullahs is perhaps a sign that the state intends to co-opt the religious establishment and retrain in a way amenable to the goals of the ministry. The report also calls for the Madrassahs to be granted official status, subject to official oversight and modernized to fit into a secular education system. The PakTurk program provides a model the education minister could emulate and adapt. However, a number of donor nations, most vocally Canada, committed to secular government, have
expressed concern over the state’s involvement with Islamic schooling, where even moderate madrassahs devote nearly forty percent of classroom time to religious instruction. While the donor objections are justified, they should be willing to compromise in favor of systems that will contribute to the long term stability and progress of Afghanistan.

Education cannot prove viable in a vacuum in Afghanistan. Education must be part and parcel of a holistic reconstruction effort that takes into account issues of security and prospects for employment within the country. The developing world is littered with examples of emerging economies, like Poland and Malawi, where state subsidies provide quality education to a population that later leaves the country in search of employment. The investment in the education of an individual in these cases rarely returns to the community in the short run. Even relatively robust economies, like Israel, lament that only ideological conviction can return émigrés who leave the country for better pay abroad. This is why education in Afghanistan must be coordinated with the employment sector in order to prevent education dollars from being wasted. Youth empowerment programs often create a demographic that is motivated, intelligent and literate—yet unemployed. Afghans will not make the time and resource investment in education if there are no tangible gains associated with the process. Furthermore, it is well documented that one of the most important reasons for Afghan youth’s joining the Taliban is unemployment; young Afghan men are lured into the insurgency with promises of pocket money, food, and sometimes help for their families. As Atmar laments, “some 30,000-50,000 students graduate from high school every year; only one-third of them are admitted to universities, the rest join the pool of unemployed.”

The current context in Afghanistan presents a number of challenges to expanding employment, but there are also unique opportunities. The presence of a vast array of international and local NGOs with foreign educated staff means the prospects for training a generation of Afghan youth capable of running effective development programs are high. One project with tremendous potential is the Literacy and Community Empowerment Project, a project started by the Afghan government in 2003 and sustained partly through the assistance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project integrates numerical and functional literacy with training in local governance, microfinance initiatives where participants can directly experience the fruits of their educational labors. In addition, the project encourages the development of youth groups, extracurricular programs at local schools, community banks, and business development programs for micro-entrepreneurs; it also calls on villagers to establish village schools for girls and boys. This last element relies on a common Afghan tradition of village-based
education and gives local residents a feeling of ownership over an institution of their own making. The most important element of the project involves the tracking of learners, measuring the percentages of participants who applied their skills to employment opportunities, and in which fields they participated. A pervasive term in LCEP reports is sustainability. The program trains teachers, tracks their progress and develops curricula they can use to train others. The program is comprehensive and cooperates with the Ministry of Education to certify teachers. This gives official authority to the process, and extends the authority of the central government.33 One potential problem with the LCEP system is that it contains too many elements which could create an overreliance on the entire system. This could hurt the prospects of for the sustainability of the program. While the program does train local Afghans to carry out important functions in the community, the pace of “Afghanization” at the highest level of the organization will ultimately determine whether the initiative and others like it will survive the departure of the international donor community.

Further, a viable Youth Employment Summit (YES) network for Afghanistan would give young Afghans both an incentive to sustain their education through the university level and a direct, tangible means of putting that education to use in the service of their country’s development goals. A similar network in neighboring Pakistan pledges to view the country’s youth as “part of the solution and not part of the problem.” The organization’s employment centered approach to youth participation could serve as a powerful model for the Afghan context. The YES program involves a network of youth groups that cooperate with government bodies and NGOs to further the opportunities for the country’s youth, including those with few marketable skills. Many young Afghan men join the Taliban, not out of religious or ideological zeal, but because the Taliban is their only source of income. By providing a career path for young Afghans who complete a given number of academic years, the Afghan government can both thin the ranks of the Taliban and establish a pool of human capital it can rely on to lead the country in the future. Through a system of international conferences, the YES network brings representatives of country teams together to discuss their ideas and experiences. The priorities of the Iranian YES team, for example, are of particular interest to the Afghan context. Iranian members were able to work effectively under a restrictive government and in a politically sensitive environment. Also, the Iranian team focused on developing the resources in rural villages so young citizens remain in rural areas, thus preventing a brain drain and resulting overpopulation in urban centers. This is of particular concern to Afghanistan, as Kabul has seen a rush of refugees into the city seeking better access to education and healthcare. This has precipitated a sharp rise in housing prices and a strain on social services.34 Inducing Afghans to return to their provincial homes by providing rural areas with better facilities would improve the overall quality of life and education in Kabul.
Where attacks can be largely prevented, a rich and sophisticated network of NGOs has shown itself to emerge. NGOs have a long history in Afghanistan, operating under communist governments and all through the years of Taliban rule. In more anarchic but insurgent-free areas, they can form quasi-governments that provide social services like healthcare and education. Given a secure environment, NGOs can provide a source of employment to Afghan youth and build a strong civil society. Many are extremely well suited to the Afghan environment, having matured in similar environments across the developing world. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), for example, is an NGO with years of experience in a predominantly Muslim and low income country. Now operating in Afghanistan, the BRAC staff is employing the same methodologies of community mobilization, teacher training and health awareness it tested in Bangladesh.

Given an opportunity to try their hand in Afghanistan, these types of organizations will succeed where aggressive communist education plans failed. These new NGOs are committed, like Afghans, to the education of the country’s children. Yet, they are also prepared to acknowledge the complexities of culture and tradition in Afghanistan. One successful example of this practice involves education of women in spheres that are traditionally associated with women in Afghan culture to begin with, such as midwifery. Through an education focused on midwifery, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is also teaching women vital skills in literacy and family planning. The programs are carried out in conjunction with the Afghan Institute of Learning, a non-profit founded and run by an Afghan women, Ms. Sakena Yacoobi, who lives and works in the country. She attributes the success of her approach to the fact that her organization first works to build trust with the families in the communities she works with, and secondly that the organization only starts a program when the community has requested it. These measures mitigate the conservative backlash that has marred female education efforts elsewhere. Thus, the Afghan field has become a kind of free market for NGOs, where those who are best suited to the Afghan context thrive and expand and those who are unresponsive to Afghan traditions are limited in their activities. In this way, Afghanistan has emerged as a testing ground for hundreds of education and aid organizations. This is a positive paradigm, given that the minute one successful model emerges, its approach could be adopted by others.

There are further reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for Afghan education in the coming years. The selection by Hamed Karzai of Muhammad Haneef Atmar to lead the Afghan ministry of education has endowed the ministry, stagnant under the Taliban, with a new professionalism. As an aid worker himself, Atmar decried the politicization of humanitarian assistance at the expense of ordinary Afghans. He describes his approach in an article written on September 10,
2001, when the Taliban appeared an unalterable reality in Afghanistan: “[What] is needed is an acceptance from donors that it is possible to negotiate for principled goals with ‘unprincipled people’...and that it is possible to work with the state structures in Taliban-controlled areas in a principled way.” In a Strategic Plan for the education of the country, Atmar is remarkably direct and specific, outlining the problems facing the country moving forward. Among the most important of these problems is the low knowledge base of Afghan teachers, the dearth of adequate school administrators and the unemployed pool of educated Afghans.

Yet positive in all of Atmar’s criticisms and delineations of exiting problems is that these problems are, for the most part, logistical. Apart from the potentially controversial issue surrounding the nature of Islam in the Afghan education system, history appears to have effectively ended at the ministry. That Atmar includes detailed accounts of the problems facing students with disabilities and education among Afghan kuchi nomads is a telling sign. Afghan education reform has reached a point where the more nuanced problems in the system can be given a priority. What remains to be seen is if the international community will stay engaged in Afghanistan long enough to allow implementation to take place at its own pace. There is no reason to doubt that given enough time and the freedom to experiment with a range of systems, Afghanistan can emerge as a successful, viable and stable society. All Afghan NGOs need is space to operate in safe environments where they can succeed or fail on their own merits. If the ISAF presence is exists for ideological or political reasons, then the defeat of the parties that support the war effort back home will signal a change in policy and potential withdraw of assistance. But if international donors are committed Afghanistan because a clear-headed understanding that Afghan development is part and parcel of their deep seated perception of national interest, then the presence can be sustained.

**Conclusion**

Despite all of the challenges facing the issues of education and literacy in Afghanistan, the country’s main and only truly significant obstacle to progress remains the lack of basic security and the threat of Taliban return on the wings of unemployed youth. Afghans have proven, both during the reign of the Taliban and currently that they will prioritize the education of their children and that they are ready to cooperate with international and government actors to achieve this end. While a chronic lack of funds from prospective donors restricts the ability of the Ministry of Education to pursue a comprehensive policy, this can be mitigated with further coordination between NGO and government organizations. The existence of culturally similar models in Iran, Pakistan,
Bangladesh and Turkey mean that Afghans do not have to confront all aspects of traditional culture or Islam before beginning the path of modernization or female education. An expansion of youth employment programs, a greater commitment from international donors, a persistence of strong leadership at the MoE and a sustained ISAF presence all suggest that the prospect for steady progress on Afghan education is indeed bright.

**Notes**

20. Noor Khan and Heidi Vogt, “Afghan school empty after acid attack on girls,”


25 Tavernise Sabrina; Published: May 4, 2008; Turkish Schools Offer Pakistan a Gentler Vision of Islam.

26 Atmar, 2007, 73.


31 Atmar, 2007, 11.


33 Ibid, 14.


35 Mushtaque Chowdhury, Aminul Alam,& Jalaluddin Ahmed, Development knowledge and experience — from Bangladesh to Afghanistan and beyond.

36 Yacoobi Sakena, “Teaching Women To Care for Themselves in Afghanistan,” UN Chronicle Online.

37 Ibid.