# EthnoScripts

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Fractured Bonds, Dithering Identities: Afghan-Swiss
Diaspora Conflict Narratives

## Abstract

This article documents how decades of conflict in Afghanistan have uprooted local families and how multiple layers of different-yet-similar war experiences are interpreted by, and continuously have impact on, Afghans in diasporic contexts. It draws on biographic narratives of Afghan refugees who arrived in Switzerland between 1978 and 2015, spotlighting three persons and their particular entanglements with war and war stories. The article reflects on the reasons for their departure, including the fault lines or the active involvement in conflict that triggered their journey to Europe. The narratives shed light on how ordinary Afghans understand the concept of jihad, what they regard as reasons worth fighting for, how they experience ethnoscape- and foreign country-related dimensions of Afghan conflicts, and how unspoken conflict memories affect the younger diaspora generation.

## Fractured Bonds, Dithering Identities: Afghan-Swiss Diaspora Conflict Narratives

Heela Najibullah

## Introduction

Armed conflicts in Afghanistan have repeatedly led to disruptive displacements of families, forcing them to seek refuge away from their homes, both within the country and abroad. Different waves of displacement have correlated with the various phases of conflict, such as the Cold War (1947–1991), the civil war (1992–1996), the first Taliban rule (1996–2001) and the War on Terror (2001–2021). One thread that seems to be woven through the protracted conflict is the way the concept of jihad (an Arabic word that translates to 'struggle')[1] has been used to justify violence, speak about political rivalries, and veil simple power grabs. Asta Olesen (1995) suggests that, despite its religious origins, the concept has been one of the most forceful to motivate people uninterested in politics to become part of politically motivated warfare. Indeed, throughout the prolonged Afghan conflict, a religious meaning of jihad that connects it to establishing peace and freedom based on justice (Bonney 2004: 57) has been evoked and mainstreamed by regional and global conflict stakeholders (Bonosky 2001: 15–17). The outward or lesser jihad, which aims to purify the social order of disbelief, is the understanding of jihad that dominates messages of political groupings and the struggle for power until today. As a response to the ubiquitous (and often not very differentiated) references to 'jihad' in relation to Afghanistan in Western media, this article traces how Afghans in the diaspora – both ex-fighters and non-fighters – look back at the warfare in Afghanistan. It shows that jihad plays an important role in the motivational dynamics that play out in Afghan conflicts, but it is by far neither understood in the same way by everyone nor the dominant topic when Afghans in exile discuss the past and present conflicts in their homeland. This contribution allows the biographical particularities of how individuals experienced war in Afghanistan to stand out, experiences that have so many more dimensions than allowed for by the dominant narrative in European public opinion that is centred around jihad.

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1   In the Quran, the word *jihad* is used 35 times. Four of those have warlike intentions, eleven verses are pacifistic (Bonney 2004: 28). When Afghans speak of jihad in everyday life, they usually think of *jihad-al-nafs* (the struggle within) or *jihad al-akbar* (the greater struggle), thus the struggle to purify the soul from lust, regret, and guilt in an endeavour to achieve serenity and peace. This understanding of jihad is not related to violence or warfare. The understanding of jihad as *jihad-al-asghar* (lesser struggle or outward struggle), one that is fought with weapons, has influenced the political sphere of Afghanistan significantly since the nineteenth century.

On 30 August 2021, when the withdrawal of the American troops was complete, the Taliban declared victory. Anas Haqqani, member of the Haqqani network[2] (Brown and Rassler 2013: 21–83), asserted that the country's sovereignty was now restored after twenty years of jihad, sacrifice, and hardship (Haqqani 2021). The concurrent collapse of the Afghan government caused an unprecedented evacuation and departure of Afghans who had worked for the United States, its western allies, or the previous government and felt their lives were now at risk under the Taliban. Such cycles of displacement for Afghans have come with changes in governments and political systems since 1973. They are the reason why so many Afghans live abroad today.

Currently, an estimated 25,540 Afghans who sought refuge outside of their home country live in Switzerland.[3] My current research centres around the question how these Afghans experience the protracted conflict personally and as part of their family biographies. I spent extensive time in the Afghan diaspora in Switzerland and some in Germany capturing the narratives of two generations of Afghans who fled the four decades of war at different stages.[4] In this text, I zone in on the lives and stories of three Afghans: Wahid,[5] who left Afghanistan for his higher education in 1975; Kabir, who escaped the Taliban in early 2001, making his way to Switzerland; and Wahida, who arrived in Switzerland with her father, Kabir, when she was only four years old. Getting to know their perspectives helps to better understand the nature of war and the decisions of Afghans who active served in the conflict that has engulfed their country over the past four decades. Their stories allow insight into the socio-ethnic, political, and jihad-related dimensions of the conflict.

2    The Haqqani network is a militant group that started taking shape in 1970s during the Cold War and has continued to establish itself as a resourceful conflict actor in southern Afghanistan and north-west Pakistan in the past forty years. They have ties with the Taliban, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, and Al-Qaida. Members are taught in Haqqania madrasas in Pakistan, which are ideologically shaped by the Deobandi school of thought.

3    The data obtained from the statistics service of the State Secretariat for Migration in Bern include Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in Switzerland from 1973 till 2019. The information does not include new arrivals from August 2021.

4    I draw on Safran's (2018: 83) definition of diaspora as an 'expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics': dispersion from a specific original centre to different regions; retention of a collective memory about the homeland, its physical location, history, and achievements; belief that the community cannot be accepted by the host country; belief in a future return to the home country and the duty to serve in its restoration; necessity to remain in a continued relationship with the homeland. Cohen (2018) refined this definition of diaspora identity by differentiating between victims, laborers, imperialists, traders, and the deterritorialised. I adopt this conceptual refinement.

5    The names of the interviewees have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

## Methodology

My research was guided by biographical-narrative (Rosenthal 2018; Miller 2000) and interpretive approaches (Wertz et al. 2011). All interlocutors mentioned in this article, and most of those in the research, are Afghans living in Switzerland. I selected them according to three criteria: their year of arrival in Switzerland; agreement by all involved family members to interviews on intergenerational aspects of their history with Afghanistan's conflicts; diversity as to place of origin in Afghanistan, ethnicity, and native language; and living in Switzerland under different statuses (for example, as permanent residents, refugees, or Swiss citizens). The families that I interviewed came from southern and central-northern Afghanistan and the capital and labelled themselves as Uzbeks, Pashtuns, and Tajiks. I sought this diversity in my sample of interviewees to counter the ethnic lines along which socio-political narratives have run in Afghanistan since the civil war (1992–1996).

In Switzerland, people who were not yet born or were children when their families migrated are often referred to as 'secondos' or as 'second generation' migrants. Yet it is difficult to apply generations to people from the Afghan diaspora because entry into Europe did not necessarily occur through an older member of the family. It is not uncommon that a younger person migrated first and was followed later by their parents. Hence, the terms 'first generation' or 'second generation' are imprecise in the context of recent migration trends from Afghanistan to Switzerland, or to Europe more widely. I rather use the terms 'older generation' and 'younger generation' to refer to parents and children respectively.

So far, I have worked closely with 3 families in Switzerland (6 persons in total) and one family in Germany (2 persons involved in total). The participants belonging to the older generation are mostly men and they left their home country in 1980, 1995, and 2001. They all chose to be interviewed in Dari. Some are retired, one is a translator at a migration office, and others work for private companies (for example, in the logistics sector). The interviewees from the younger generation were men and women in their twenties. They all chose to speak to me in English.[6] Most of those older than twenty-five – be it male or female – were married and had lived in Switzerland since they were only three or four years old. This generation was educated and worked in hospitals, companies, or government institutions or owned their own businesses.

Most of the interviewed Afghans that were accepted as refugees in Switzerland went through varied documentation and asylum-related application procedures. Some waited for more than five years to get their refugee status, living in uncertain circumstances for long periods. At the time of the interviews, all in the older generation had been granted refugee status and all

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6    All interviewees were given the choice to speak in English, Dari, or Pashto.

in the younger generation held Swiss citizenship. The interviews were an-onymised before transcription.

## The gaze within

The 'gaze inward' (Dietrich 2012: 265–267), or self-reflexivity, is critical for me as researcher when investigating the Afghan diaspora as my thoughts, actions, and words can significantly impact the context I am working in. I belong to a well-known political Afghan family so that interlocutors I ap-proach are often as interested in me as I am in them. I grew up in war-torn Afghanistan until I was 14 years old. My childhood is marked by the loss of family members, friends, teachers, and classmates. My memory of the time is marked by unanswered riddles and unspoken words that have led me to explore not only my own life and experiences of conflict but also those of other Afghans. At I am the eldest child of a family now only comprised of women members who live out of the country, and by the age of 14, I had to stand on my own feet. However, the self-sufficiency and independence that I had to adopt to survive in the migrant situation conflicted with the tradition-al Afghan values my family and diaspora community upheld. In the Afghan context, it is the family that determines a person's identity and defines their character, allegiance, status, social position, political opinions, and even fu-ture. That this was also true for my interlocutors, which highlights the pos-sibilities and limits of my research: my interviewees and I were never mere-ly participants and researcher, but each interaction was co-framed by our family backgrounds. It was often difficult for them and me to differentiate when I was in my role as researcher or when I was simply a member of the Afghan diaspora — in Bourke's (2014) terms, whether I was an insider or an outsider in the field. But even if it was complex, this position had advantages, though certainly also disadvantages. One advantage was that, as Afghan, I speak several local languages and know the cultural norms, which enabled me to access and understand nuances in the communication. Yet, having lived outside of Afghanistan since my teenage years, I have amalgamated ex-ternal influences and can feel irritated by situations and Afghan conventions that seem inappropriate in Switzerland. A situation can provide an example. Many research participants insisted that I interview them in their homes so that we could spend some time together, an invitation which expressed hon-our and mutual trust. But when I explained I would be arriving by public transport, uncomfortable moments ensued and my interlocuters insisted on giving me a ride. In Afghanistan, the car is a symbol of financial wealth and a politician's daughter (like me) should certainly never use public transport. Hence providing me with transport was a sign of ensuring that I, as their guest, was being looked after properly. But for me, more accustomed to the Swiss systems, regarded using public transport as the quickest means to get

to my destination. Thus, as an Afghan insider, I understood the insider concepts, but by not acting accordingly in my role as researcher in Switzerland, situations of irritation developed for both sides.

## A nation displaced: short overview

This section provides background on the waves of conflict that shaped the lives of my interlocutors of the older generation, necessary to understand when and why two of them fought as soldiers in the war.

Afghanistan has been embroiled in a protracted multidimensional conflict for more than forty years now. According to the UNHCR, 'there are 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan and comprise the largest protracted refugee population in Asia and second-largest refugee population in the world' (UN Refugee Agency 2001–2021). As mentioned earlier, different waves of displacement correlate with varying phases of conflict and changes in regime in the country. The first occurred during the Cold War. A significant exoduses of Afghans occurred after communists took power in 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion of the country on 24 December 1979. This led political-religious groups such as Hizb-e-Islami in Pakistan to declare a jihad (Sands and Qazizai 2019: 154). The exodus continued throughout the period of government by the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.[7] Millions of Afghans took refuge in Pakistan and Iran, whilst the Afghan elite sought asylum in the US or in European countries. The conflict of the Cold War merged into the Afghan Civil War (1992–1996), which led to a wave of displacement to neighbouring countries and to Europe mainly by people affiliated with the Afghan government and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. This was met by a counter-movement when about one million Afghans from the first wave returned from Pakistan, amongst others Afghan refugees affiliated with jihad in refugee camps. A third exodus of Afghans, to Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan's northern parts, occurred during the first Taliban rule (1996–2001). Interviews with Afghans in Switzerland indicate that those escaping at this point often first sought refuge elsewhere within the country, then went to neighbouring Pakistan, and only then moved further afield – in this case to Switzerland. The fourth phase of war, the occupation by the United States (US) and its allies (2001–2021), led to an exodus that started in 2011 when the US began negotiating with the Taliban for peace. A large migration inflow to Europe with millions of refugees from war-torn countries in 2015 included a significant number from Afghanistan. This was compounded by many more in reaction to excessive violence in the country in August of the same year.

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7    The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was a leftist party established on 1 January 1965. It comprised two main factions, the Parcham and the Khalq.

The three narratives that follow trace the life stories of people who had to leave Afghanistan due to external forces. They allow us to understand the subjectivities of the Afghan diaspora, shaped mainly by external forces (Stierstorfer and Wilson 2018: 106), and how they transform their experiences of the past and even assume new, sometimes multiple, identities. Yet, even 'new' diaspora identities are not disconnected from past war experiences nor detached from former pain. As Lily Cho (2018: 107) maintains, and as we see below, trauma and its structures are passed on from one generation to the next through internal forces, and how this happens is key in connecting the past to the present.
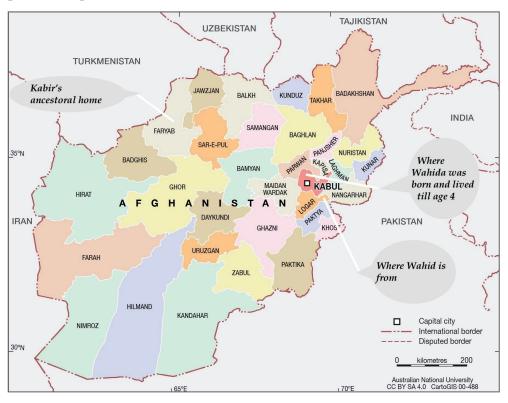


Fig. 1. Map of Afghanistan showing the places of origin of the three interlocutors. Map: Australian National University, used with kind permission under CC license.

## Safar-e Wahid, the gardener

Safar-e Wahid[8] was a retired Afghan widower living on the outskirts of a Swiss town. He was originally from Logar (see Figure 1). 'I grew up in Babus, my mother was from Kalangar. She was a Dari speaker, and in Babus people

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8    *Safar* is a Dari word that means travel, trip, or journey. I use it to introduce the life narratives of Afghans whom I interviewed in Switzerland, as they would often use it to describe their journey of life or the journey that brought them to Switzerland.

spoke in Pashto. I grew up with both languages', he explained. Until Grade Three he attended school in Babus; from Grade Four, he walked an hour to Kalangar for his schooling (in later years he cycled). He was a top student and in 1975 was awarded a scholarship to study forestry in Hungary.

> *When I finished my studies and got my diploma, I wanted to return to Afghanistan, but the situation had deteriorated. People rose against the Russians and fought. When I got in touch with my parents, they said: 'Bachem,[9] wait only four to six months for things to become calmer and then you can return.' [And now] I have been waiting for 45 years when there will be peace, alas!*

The years when Wahid was studying in Hungary were politically tumultuous for Afghanistan. In 1974 the governing system changed from monarchy to republic when King Zahir Shah's cousin Daoud Khan replaced him with a white coup d'état to become became the first president of Afghanistan (Rubin 1995: 26). Four years later, in April 1978, Khan and his family were killed in yet another coup d'état, due to a worsening relationship with the Soviet Union and his arrest of key leftist members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Coll 2005: 39). In December 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. They ensured a leadership change in the newly established government under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Giustozzi 2000: 6), giving rise to nationalist feelings among many urban middle- and upper-class Afghans.

Wahid largely supported jihad against the Soviet invasion: 'When the Soviets invaded, people rose, and it was a real, [justified] jihad', he still says today. At the time, however, he doubted whether he would serve his country well if he quit his doctorate and became a soldier, to be shot at by people who might very well be fellow Afghans. He decided not to return to Afghanistan and to seek asylum in Switzerland when the Afghan embassy in Hungary called up all Afghans and stipulated that they were required to return home. This coincided with him requiring new papers from the embassy that would approve his continued pursuit of his doctorate; now he feared that if he were to approach the embassy, he would be forced to return home. He feared he would be forced to fight in a war that was not only against invaders but also against Afghans. This had happened to many of his friends who had returned and were conscripted as a soldier: 'I did not mind being a soldier [in general]. But as a soldier, who was I supposed to fight, my brothers? That is not serving the nation or being a soldier.'

Wahid's understanding of jihad in this context is not a religious one but rather refers to the duty to defend one's land. With the Soviets invasion, he claimed, it became the duty of every Afghan to fight for their country. How-

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9    *Bachem* is a Dari word used by adults in a family to address or call a child (irrespective of gender). It shows close relationship, affection, and love.

ever, his definition of jihad varies when it comes to different eras of conflict. He also involves considerations of the intensity and relentlessness of warfare by the party that calls for jihad when he evaluates whether a particular jihad is justified or non-justified. For example, he rejected the Taliban's jihad (who themselves claim to fight invaders), calling it 'unreal [not right]' because he found their acts of killing innocent people barbaric and un-Islamic – in line with the Quran that forbids such killings. In contrast, he found the mujahideen jihad legitimate despite destruction and death because it happened in reaction to the Soviets invasion. In his eyes, jihad is a duty when a foreign country attacks Afghanistan – no matter whether that country is Islamic or not.

Wahid's understanding of (lesser) jihad does not come out of nowhere. It reflects the concept's religious and historical roots in the region. As early as Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled from 1880 to 1901, legal Islamisation was attempted in Afghanistan (Olesen 1995: 75–82). Amir opened a madrasa[10] in Kabul that taught Islamic law, including political and warfare-related interpretations of the concept of jihad. This is reflected in one of the most consequential handbooks written in this period, entitled *Taquim-ud-Din* (The essence of religion) (Dihlavi and Azim Khan 1888/1889). The handbook is a manifesto for the kingdom's future cadres. It emphasises jihad, describing the concept as defence of one's territory. Olesen suggests that this instrumentalisation of jihad served to centralise Amir's rule (Olesen 1995: 88) and, when needed, mobilise people against kaffir, the non-believer or infidel. Whether 'kaffir' referred to Tzarist Russia to the north or British India to the south depended on the political endeavour current in Afghanistan at the time. In a situation where the rival empires to the north and the south had reduced the status of Afghanistan, which lay between them, to a buffer state, the idea of violent jihad provided a crucial political tool to exercise power at that time. In what way Afghan ideas of jihad have changed from the nineteenth century up to today is far beyond the scope of this article; but it is important to know that Wahid's understanding of the concept has roots that reach back further than the Soviet invasion.

In Switzerland, Wahid was granted asylum status within one year. It took him five years to learn the local language, when he decided to study for a diploma in gardening. He was proud to have worked for the cantonal authorities and being financially self-sufficient. But he also explained that he felt he could not succeed on his own, away from his country and family. Thus, when his asylum was granted, he asked his family in Peshawar[11] to find him a wife: 'My marriage was done in my absence, so I always joked with my wife that we are not married.' In the course of family reunification laws, the

10   *Madrasa* is an Arabic word that means 'school', but in this context refers to an educational institution teaching Islamic subjects to religious scholars.

11   The city of Peshawar, in Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, hosted many Afghan refugees during the Cold War and beyond.

young woman who was married to him while he was not present in person was then able to follow him to Switzerland. Their children were all born in Switzerland. Wahid visited Afghanistan for a short time shortly after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2006 but was unable to fulfil his greatest wish, to visit his parents' graves, because of security threats in the Logar province.

## Safar-e Kabir, the survivor

Kabir was in his sixties and had lived in Switzerland since 2001. He was granted refugee status only after four years, but this then allowed his family to join him in Switzerland. Kabir's father was a doctor, and his parents and ancestors had lived in Faryab province, where he was born and completed his primary and secondary school education. As a young man, he wanted to become an army officer:

> *I loved the uniform, so when I was sixteen years old, I told my father I wanted to join the army. When[ever] I see people in police uniforms or military uniforms, I salute them and respect them immensely. You see, without an army, you cannot have a country. A country is defenceless without an army. As a military person, you defend the sovereignty and interest of your country.*

Kabir described his career path: 'I came to Kabul at age seventeen or eighteen to join the army'. He studied in the last year of Daoud Khan's republic and served in the military during the rule of the People's Democratic Party. At the peak of the Cold War, he fought against the mujahideen in Ghazni and Khost[12] and was injured:

> *I was injured in March of 1985; the situation was critical. Three hundred soldiers from our unit in Khost lost their lives or got injured. I was one of them. There were many units from the Centre corps, Kandahar corps, Jalalabad corps, and a Russian unit supporting us logistically.*

Kabir also had a clear perspective on the hotly debated question (at least amongst Afghans) of how decisively the Afghan military was influenced and dictated by the Soviets at that time. Of course, he did not deny the continuous presence of Soviet advisors and logistical support, but he also rejected the opinion that the Russians had a free hand in making the decisions. He explained his position with this anecdote:

> *I remember well that, for example, our Commander of the Guard, Afzal Ludin, had a sign behind his door that said, 'Knock before you enter'. He asked a Russian advisor who entered with-*

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12 Provinces located in south-eastern and eastern Afghanistan, respectively.

*out knocking to leave again. I saw this with my own eyes. He did not like Russians too much.*

Kabir believes that his service in the war was his duty towards his nation: he (and not the mujahideen, as Walid claimed) was defending his land and his people from the enemy. According to him, the different mujahideen *tanzims*[13] were funded by Pakistan and the US (see also Coll 2005: 211) – that is, by foreign powers that had to be fought against. 'When I got injured, it was because of the Pakistanis. Believe me when I say that Pakistan fired thousands of artillery shells daily on us, non-stop. Without Pakistan, our mujahideen brothers would not have been able to fight.' When I then asked him whether he fought against Pakistan and the US or against the mujahideen who had waged jihad, he answered:

> *Wage jihad against who? Your Muslim brother? Both sides were Muslims, and we prayed, did our* namaz *[Muslim prayers], fasted. Our great-grandfathers were Muslims. To be honest, this was the war between Russians, the US, and Pakistanis. They brainwashed brothers to fight each other.*

In 1990, the last year of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's government, Kabir worked in the presidential palace. When the mujahideen took power in April 1992, he was asked to return to this post, which he accepted after speaking to Ahmad Shah Massoud[14] and being assured that he would not be killed for his affiliations with the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. He thus continued to work in this position but was later imprisoned by Hizb-e-Islami[15] members during the Civil War. Fortunately, an old associate from his early years of military service who was with the group recognised him and saved his life. With the fall of the government in 1992, the army dissolved and a vacuum of leadership and institutions enabled the members of the army to join different mujahideen factions based on earlier personal relationships or ethnic or tribal affiliations.

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13   Different factions of the mujahideen based out of Pakistan and Iran that fought the Leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government during the Cold War.

14   Ahmad Shah Massoud was a guerrilla fighter in one of the mujahideen groups stationed in Pakistan. He was a leading figure in the uprising against the Soviets in Afghanistan. He was a part of the coup against the Najibullah government that brought different mujahideen factions to Kabul and started the Civil War. In September 1996, when the Taliban took power in Kabul, he and his followers retreated in his hometown of Panjshir and started their alliance of warlords to fight against the Taliban. He was killed in September 2001 by Arab suicide bombers that are believed to have been affiliated with Al-Qaida.

15   Hizb-e-Islami is a Islamic right-wing party from Afghanistan that was led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. It was one of seven mujahideen groups that resided in and were supported by Pakistan.

Kabir is from the Uzbek minority group. His experiences during the Civil War illustrate the importance of ethnic tensions and rivalries for Afghanistan's conflicts, which were also played out between different mujahideen factions. For example, by accepting to work under Ahmad Shah Massoud, Kabir was a target of Hizb-e-Islami Hekmatyar – the reason why he was imprisoned (see also Schetter 2003). The ethnic-political rivalries were also part of the post-9/11 era in Afghanistan: indeed, the country's conflicts cannot be understood without also making sense of Afghanistan's ethnoscapes. The term *ethnoscape* examines the linkage between ethnic perceptions and space, or the territorialisation of ethnic memory: that is, the belief shared by ethnic groups in a common spatial frame of origin (Schetter 2005). Like the temporal dimension of ethnic origin, ethnoscapes are social constructions which can be and are modified in keeping with given endeavours and interests (Schetter 2005). Kabir's narrative supports an ethnoscape-related understanding of Afghan conflicts when he tells that, after 1992, sentiments of majority and minority were created along with references to ethnicity, religion, language, tribal, and even geographical associations within the country. This fuelled the conflict further. Kabir's statements, however, demonstrate yet another dimension of ethnicity in Afghan conflicts: that ethnicity is not always and not necessarily perceived as a dividing factor for Afghans at the individual, grassroots level. At this level, ethnic issues are sometimes 'outsourced' by interpreting these conflict lines as being the result of external aggression and manipulation.

Kabir decided that it was time to leave the country when his family was seriously threatened and harmed:

> *When the Taliban regime came to power, life got more complicated. They imprisoned me twice, and they even took my child, threatening him that they would take him [for good] if he did not disclose my whereabouts. That is when my wife cried out loud and came down to our apartment in Mekreroyan[16] to get our child freed. You see, one's child is very dear, therefore she bit the hand of the Talib to release our son. So the Talib hit her neck with the barrel of his gun. She still suffers from neck pain. I then clandestinely made my way to Pakistan. I paid a smuggler from Pakistan who organised my flight to Holland, but I got off at the transit in Zurich.*

Kabir lived in limbo for four years until the Swiss authorities granted him asylum. His family travelled to Islamabad, Pakistan, to access a Swiss embassy where it submitted its visa applications. In 2005, Kabir was reunited with his family, his wife and six of their children, the youngest four and the

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16　Mekreroyan is a Soviet-funded housing development that was built as a form of aid during the reign of King Zahir Shah in the 1960s and 1970s.

eldest eighteen years old at the time. The family has not entered Afghanistan ever since.

## Wahida – Afghanistan is home, but so is Switzerland

'The only memory I have of childhood in Afghanistan is when my grand-mother died,' Wahida said. 'And the [main] reason I remember it is because my mother was crying a lot.' Wahida is Kabir's daughter. She was born in Kabul and, as a small child, lived there under the first Taliban regime (1996–2001). When the family fled to Switzerland when she was four, she could not understand the drastic change. She remembered the start in the new country as having been tough, as everything was so different – be it how the streets looked, or the way people dressed, or how they spoke. Though she initially found it hard to adapt, she recalled that her age soon played in her favour: attending kindergarten helped her find her way into Swiss society. By the time of our interview she had successfully finished her studies and was working at a hospital. It was much harder for her eighteen-year-old sister to make Switzerland her home. Where her sister was troubled whether she should cover her head, with what, and why her parents no longer required this, these questions never played a role for Wahida.

Even though Wahida experienced her arrival in Switzerland as comparatively smooth, she still feels confronted with choices that are not as easy for an Afghan Muslim woman in Switzerland. Though her parents gave her the freedom to choose her career path and how to dress, there were times when she felt that she had to decide between different layers of expectations – some being rather Swiss, others rather Afghan, and the two being in tension with each other. It was hard for her to give concrete examples, but she certainly felt ill at ease.

Wahida has friends from different countries but does not interact with Afghans or established Afghan networks in Switzerland. Even though she claimed to be conscious of her Afghan roots, she did not want to entangle herself in the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan:

> *I do not watch Afghan television; my parents do that. When I hear the news from Afghanistan – that there is war and children are dying because of hunger – it makes me sad, but I am not emotionally connected with Afghanistan. I know about the conflict and groups such as the Taliban, but I am not interested in Afghan politics.*

Wahida did not communicate with her parents about their war experiences or the things they had gone through when still living in Afghanistan. In fact, her father refused to speak about that, even when Wahida took interest and inquired. She reasoned: 'I think it is tough for my father to express his emo-

tions. He does not want to appear weak, so he does not want to talk about his pain.' There were also difficulties to talk about her mother's past. Although Wahida spoke of her mother as her 'soul-mate', any questions she posed her mother about her past in Afghanistan were met with the same response as she had received from her father: refusal. Her mother claimed that she could no longer remember, something Wahida did not believe: 'My queries are met with silence. I think this is because the memories are painful.' It was only with her elder siblings that Wahida freely communicated about life back in Afghanistan.

Dilyara Müller-Suleymanova (2021: 14) posits that for the younger diaspora generation to construct its identity, they have to deal with 'fragmented knowledge, contested discourses, and conflicting narratives on identity and the past'. In Wahida's case, this means, amongst other things, living with silently transmitted, rather obscure histories of the conflict, and feeling torn between norms she perceived as either 'rather Afghan' or 'rather Swiss'. Wahida was not interested in Afghan politics because she felt it was too far from her everyday life, and yet she understood the complexity of conflicting actors in Afghanistan that in the past have caused pain to her parents – and that still reflect on the communication style of the family as a whole. For many of the younger generation in a new country, several aspects play a central role in their experiences: holding a hybrid identity, such as Swiss-Afghan; dealing with their parents' hidden histories; and distancing themselves from the cruel fate of their homeland to focus on a future they are building for themselves in a peaceful country.

## Closing remarks

Stories like those of Wahid, Kabir, and Wahida are glimpses into ongoing, and often intergenerationally transmitted, narratives and experiences of conflict within the Afghan diaspora. Both older interviewees held foreign countries responsible for the wars and conflict in Afghanistan. The common denominator in both narratives is the duty to defend one's country. However, Wahid's argument is rooted in jihad, which in his opinion allows one as a Muslim to protect one's territory from invaders, especially if they are non-believers. Kabir's argument relates to the core beliefs of an army officer who takes the oath to defend the sovereignty, territory, and interest of his nation and people.

What is visible in both men's stories of the Afghan conflict is that, irrespective of which conflicting group someone came from, every Afghan became consciously or unconsciously a more or less active part of the conflict and the violence – despite both emphasising that the wars had been waged mainly by foreigners. Even though Wahid and Kabir belong to different ethnic backgrounds, none of them used derogatory, judgmental vocabulary or slurs along ethnic lines in the interviews or, for that matter, blamed different

ethnicities for the conflict. And yet Kabir noted policies and actions amongst the groups ruling Kabul after 1992 that led to the ethnicisation of the country; and he himself was subjected to ethnicised forms of conflict when he was accepted by one mujahideen group but arrested by another.

Nowadays, the multiplicity of identities amongst Afghans has become more and more complex, because the country's institutional structure changed from a (at least formally) centrally governed nation to divided localities ruled by warring factions along ethnic lines, economic, and political loyalties (Schetter 2005) – ranging from being 'primarily' an Afghan to cultivating other (or substitute) political, religious, and ethnic, lingual, geographical sub-identities simultaneously or independent of it. Multiplications of identities do also take place in the diaspora. Wahida's story reminds us that contemporary Afghan sub- and substitute identities do not only draw on aspects of an individual's Afghan past or ethnic belonging (both of them may, for diaspora teens and tweens, even remain more or less wrapped in silence in families who suffered from conflicts, and thus become hardly accessible), but in exile contexts are also heavily influenced by conditions, norms, social role offers, and experiences that are rooted in the country that offered refuge.

As the Afghan war gets protracted, new generations are born and brought up in second or third countries. And yet they live with stories and silences that link them back to Afghanistan. Ceri Oeppen (2010: 141) argues that refugees often do not break ties with the land of their origin even if they are physically in a different space. This is also true for many of my interlocutors. But this condition does often not result in a longing for return: although the interlocutors view Afghanistan as their ancestral home and/or as the place of their own past, the younger generation (and also many members of the older generation) rarely express the desire to return when conditions are appropriate (see also Safran 2018: 5). The older generation is often quite nostalgic when they think of pre-war Afghanistan; however, they find it hard to commit themselves to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland, and rarely encourage the younger generation to do so. The often embodied experiences of violence, plus the emic understanding of Afghan geopolitics and the continued proxy wars, leads many of the Afghan diaspora to view themselves as powerless in terms of actively reshaping Afghanistan. It rather leads them to encourage the younger generation to focus on their new lives in their host country. As an Afghan in a diaspora context and a researcher, I see a lack of trust among diaspora Afghans in Afghanistan's capacity to become a place of prosperity.

## Acknowledgements

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