

First British Afghan Academics' and Professionals' Forum

September 07th, 2023

AISS Report



انستیتوت مطالعات استراتژیک افغانستان

Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS)

 @AISS_Afg

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 @aiss_afg

 contact@aissonline.org

 aisonline.org

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First British Afghan Academics' and Professionals' Forum

Venue: Terrace Room, Level 3, Bramber House

University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton

Programme

Thursday, 7th September 2023

09:30-10:00 | Registration & Coffee

Opening Session

10:00-10.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Welcome speech from the Sussex Centre for Migration Research - Dr Ceri Oeppen.➤ Introductory remarks by Conference Coordinator, Rabia Khan.➤ Keynote speech by Dr. Liza Schuster, City, University of London
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Panel I: Contemporary research by Afghan scholars

10:30-11:45	Moderator	Professor Magnus Marsden (University of Sussex)
	Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Naimat Zafary, University of Sussex➤ Atefa Tayeb, Imperial College London➤ Dr. Sarajuddin Isar, Radboud University Q&A

Panel II: Insights into the professional careers of UK-based Afghans

11:45-13.00	Moderator	Nazifa Haqpal (SOAS University of London)
	Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Ahmad Sabir, Director and CEO of Premium Mortgage Services➤ Shamim Sarabi, Refugee Legal➤ Hamid Haidari, Afghanistan International Q&A

13:00-13:30 | **Lunch**

Book session

13:30-14.30	Moderator	Fahima Zaheen (CEO of Afghan Association Paiwand)
	Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Dr Shakardokht Jafari (University of Surrey)➤ Gulwali Passarlay (Author)

Panel III: Strengthening Afghan Communities in the UK		
14.30-15.30	Moderator	Meetra Qutb (Human Rights Activist)
	Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mais Montazar, British Council ➤ Christ Blackburn, Global Friends of Afghanistan Q&A
15.30-15.45	Tea Break	
Panel IV: Research on Afghans in the UK		
13:45-17:00	Moderator	Dr. Ceri Oeppen (University of Sussex)
	Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Dr. Avesta Panahi, National Health Service ➤ Assiya Amini, Goldsmiths, University of London ➤ Anis Rezaei, University of Oxford Q&A
17:00-17:30	Ways Forward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Benafsha Yacoobi, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine ➤ Khandan Danish, University of East Anglia 	
17:30 onwards	Talk & Music Performance (by John Baily & Veronica Doubleday) followed by a Reception	

It has now been two years since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In the UK, this seismic political shift has seen a new refugee community settling in a new home. However, Afghan migration to the UK is not new, and has been occurring since the 1990s. This has meant that alongside the Afghan refugee community there is also a vibrant young diaspora. Therefore, the UK now has a sizeable and growing Afghan community numbering almost 80,000 people. Accordingly, migrants and refugees contribute to human capital development in their new host countries, and this is also evident among the UK's Afghan community.

On the 7th of September 2023 the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) hosted the 'First British Afghan Academics' and Professionals' Forum' at the University of Sussex. The aim is that this new, and much needed, conference will become an annual event, one that will grow with each coming year. Through this conference AISS hopes to have greater engagement with the new refugee community and Afghan diasporic youth, in order to cultivate a space to enhance skills, knowledge and networks. Going forward, this conference intends to bring together academics and professionals operating in various sectors to discuss their work, as well as provide advice for Afghans in the UK to aid them in navigating both educational settings and the UK workforce, through shared cultural knowledge.

This event was held in collaboration with the Sussex Centre for Migration Research.



Keynote speech - Dr Liza Schuster (City, University of London):



The conference began with welcome remarks from Dr Ceri Oeppen of the University of Sussex and Sussex Centre for Migration. She emphasised the importance and need for such a conference and space. This was followed by a keynote speech by Dr Schuster. During her keynote speech Dr Schuster reflected on her own connection and work with Afghanistan and Afghans. She highlighted that as an outsider she has many misconceptions about the country when she first visited and began conducting research, especially in relation to gender. Furthermore, there was vast heterogeneity within Afghanistan's diverse ethnic communities which was unknown to Dr Schuster before. She highlighted that value of insider knowledge that Afghans have, which a researcher like her took time to learn. She concluded her speech with lessons that the audience should take away from her talk. Dr Schuster underscored the importance and need for networks, especially with established Afghans in the diaspora and British networks in order to understand domestic systems. Lastly, it was stated that academics such as Dr Schuster 'owe' Afghans a debt and therefore people in her position should be helping the next generation of Afghans.

Panel One: Contemporary academic research by Afghan scholars:



In this panel titled 'Contemporary academic research by Afghan scholars' the emphasis was on doctoral research that has been conducted by Afghan PhD students and recent PhD graduates. The panel was moderated by Professor Magnus Marsden of the University of Sussex Research across various fields was discussed from international development, education and taxation. The audience were introduced to both new and completed PhD research undertaken by Afghan researchers and academics in the UK. Naimat chose to focus on governance and public policy for his initial studies in the UK, as development was lacking in Afghanistan. While his PhD topic focused on 'what went wrong in Afghanistan' in the last twenty years, as there was the collapse of the state in 2021. Naimat therefore chose to work with national NGO workers to understand their perceptions of development and foreign aid in Afghanistan for his PhD research. While Atefa's PhD research, which is in its first year, seeks to analyse alternative mechanisms and avenues to accessing quality education, including online education, given the current Taliban ban on women's education. Furthermore, Dr. Isar's insights related to 'state taxation policies [in Afghanistan] and how they have evolved', with a more detailed focus on the Karzai and Ghani presidencies, and their implications. In turn, these presentations helped to highlight the novel and important ways Afghans are contributing to academic research in the UK.

Panel Two: Insights into the professional careers of UK-based Afghans:



Mr Ahmad Sabir, the Director and CEO of Premium Mortgage Services in London, a financial consultancy business, started off this panel titled 'Insights into the professional careers of UK-based Afghans' by mentioning that Britain is a country of opportunities for both students and skilled workers. It is a country that allows for personal and professional growth, as well as economic development. In his own personal capacity Ahmad mentioned how he has used these opportunities in order to set up his own business and further his career. Following on from Ahmad, Ms Shamim Sarabi of Refugee Legal gave a detailed talk about her work with refugees, focusing on the Afghan Pro Bono initiative. The initiative launched in March 2022. The aim of the project is to provide legal advice to Afghans in the UK and those in Afghanistan, looking for assistance about the UK Afghan resettlement schemes. Shamim mentioned that over one-hundred pro bono lawyers are working with the project and Afghan cases. The project also provides online information sessions for Afghans. The panel ended with a talk by Mr Hamid Haidari of Afghanistan International. Hamid noted that the media was a success story of Afghanistan prior to 2021. In the past twenty years there was a free media in Afghanistan and professional journalism in the country. Below the collapse there were twelve-thousand journalists in Afghanistan. It was a thriving industry. But now hundreds of channels have been shut down by the Taliban. Sadly, the Taliban regime is now arresting and torturing journalists. Thus, there is now a silencing of the media in Afghanistan as the Taliban does not want the world to know the true reality of life in Afghanistan at present.

Book session:



After the first two conference panels, the conference had its book session. Ms Fahima Zaheen the CEO of Afghan Association Paiwand moderated this panel. The books discussed in this panel focused on two Afghans who came to the UK as refugees: Dr Shakardokht Jafari and Mr Gulwali Passarlay. This panel underscored the hardships of immigration. It was mentioned that patriarchy was deeply embedded in the local environments of both Shakardokht and Gulwali in their youth, but they both overcame this, in order to gain rights that had been denied or becoming a supporter of women's rights. Both authors then also detailed how they came to decide to write their refugee journeys as books. Following these introductory remarks both authors took questions from the audience. The questions and comments covered a wide range of topics from smugglers, Pashtunwali, and women's education. In this panel there was a strong emphasis on the fact that societal perceptions about women and education have significantly changed in Afghanistan. Therefore, the current Taliban policies do not reflect the widespread perspectives of Afghan society. Thus, this panel was extremely important in showcasing the stories that Afghans write about themselves, and the narratives they want to share and circulate. Through such an endeavour, there is a greater ability for the community to enhance their agency and not to be side-lined by outsiders when it comes to highlighting Afghanistan-related issues and the lived experiences of Afghans.

Panel Three: Strengthening Afghan Communities in the UK:



The third panel was titled ‘Strengthening Afghan Communities in the UK’ and was moderated by Meetra Qutb, a human rights activist. Chris Blackburn, a political analyst, spoke as a representative of the Global Friends of Afghanistan initiative first. Chris mentioned that Afghanistan was one of the first signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Therefore, human rights have been a part of Afghan culture for decades. There is great support for the Afghan people among the British people. This can be seen by the comments from Tobias Ellwood MP which were seen as whitewashing the Taliban was overwhelmingly condemned. Additionally, there are multiple parliamentary groups on Afghanistan within the UK parliament which saw the desire to support Afghanistan and its people. While Ms Mais Montazar of the British Council spoke about the organisation’s ‘warm welcome’ programme. She stated that in late 2021 the programme was launched which includes a scholarship programme. The scholarship was officially launched in April 2022. There have been over three-hundred applications for the scholarship. This is just one way to provide support to new Afghans in the UK. As a result, the expertise brought by Afghans who are resettling in the UK enhance the country and society more broadly.

Panel Four: Research on Afghans in the UK:



In this panel titled 'Research on Afghans in the UK' Dr Avesta Panahi, of the National Health Service, discussed part of her PhD research which focused on 'the process of identity development in young Afghan 1.5 generation refugees in England'. This was a very insightful presentation given the lack of research on Afghan refugees in the UK. Avesta highlighted the need for a community-centred approach and space for Afghan refugees, one which empowers the community. The second and third talks of this panel by Assiya Amini of Goldsmiths, University of London and Anis Rezaei of the University of Oxford which also discussed different communities from Afghanistan living in the UK are not detailed in this report, as these theses have not been submitted at the time of publishing this report.

Ways Forward:



'Ways Forward' was the title of the final panel of the conference. This panel discussed the future of the conference and further engagement with the Afghan community in the UK. One idea that this institute has is to develop an academic and professional association for British Afghans. The specificity of this proposal was discussed among the conference attendees to gain their insights and feedback, to see how this association can be taken forward. One central aim of the association is to provide networking opportunities to this community. Thus, in the coming years this innovative conference aims to grow and engage with an even wider cross-section of Afghan academics and professionals, including through the establishment of an annual award for outstanding community members.

The conference concluded with a lovely musical performance by John Baily and Veronica Doubleday.

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