PeaceRep
Peace and Conflict
Resolution Evidence
Platform

AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH NETWORK

Supporting Afghan Researchers At Risk:
Critical Analysis of Key Lessons

Sahar Halaimzai, Marika Theros,
and Sobia Kapadia

Afghanistan Research Network

This series highlights the work and analysis of the Afghanistan Research Network (ARN), a project convened by LSE / PeaceRep, and the Civic Engagement Project (CEP). The network brings together over 20 Afghan researchers (and several non-Afghans) with diverse expertise and backgrounds investigating a range of issues. This project aims to support Afghan researchers who were recently forced to leave Afghanistan; to ensure expert and analytical provision; inform contextually-appropriate international policies and practices on Afghanistan; and to deepen understanding of evolving political, security, and economic dynamics.

About the authors:

Sahar Halaimzai is a writer, campaigner, and the co-founder and co-director of the LSE/PeaceRep Afghanistan Research Network. At the Conflict and Civicness Research Group within LSE IDEAS, she specializes in the politics of knowledge production, as well as the preservation of research, expertise, and cultural and artistic practices in the context of human rights. Additionally, she serves as the deputy director of the Civic Engagement Project, where her expertise lies in movement building, campaigning, transnational mobilization, and dialogue process design.

Marika Theros is the co-founder and co-director of the LSE/Peacerep Afghanistan Research Network. She is a policy fellow at the Conflict and Civicness Research Group at LSE IDEAS where she specializes on conflict, peace processes, and civic engagement. Over the last 15 years, she has designed multi-stakeholder dialogues, led research processes in conflict-affected countries, and serves on the boards of several humanitarian organizations. She is the director of the Civic Engagement Project.

Sobia Kapadia serves as a Senior Research Manager at the UKRI's Gender, Justice, and Security Hub in the UK. With a background in architecture, she has extensive experience working in South and Western Asia, concentrating on community resilience, gender equality, social justice, and human rights. Currently, she is engaged with the All Parties Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Afghan women and girls, mapping the migration and displacement patterns of Afghans and engages in rights-based advocacy initiatives aimed at improving conditions for the people of Afghanistan.

Contents

Key Takeaways

► The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has significantly impacted the country's educational landscape, inflicting substantial harm on the infrastructure of academia and impeding access to education and research programs.

► The safety and security of scholars and academic researchers have been significantly undermined by the aggressive intimidation tactics employed by the Taliban. This has created an environment permeated by fear and self-censorship, posing a substantial threat to the freedom and integrity of scholarly discourse.

► International cooperation and funding for Afghan research projects have declined significantly since the collapse of the Republic. The scarcity of these resources intensifies the constraints Afghan researchers face, thereby impeding the capacity for knowledge production and scholarly advancement within the country.

► The future of academic research in Afghanistan is uncertain, with three potential scenarios: 1) a continuous decline of the academic climate, 2) a slow improvement with limited access to academia for women and girls, or 3) a complete exclusion of women and girls from academia. Each scenario poses significant implications for societal justice and prosperity. The latter two, in particular, challenge the principles of gender equality and could stifle the nation's intellectual growth and progress, potentially leading to the loss of accumulated knowledge and developed institutions.

Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 has plunged the nation into compounding humanitarian, human rights, and economic crises. The return of the group has ushered in a dark era, characterized by blatant disregard for essential human rights and deliberate dismantling of democratic values. Those who advocate for inclusivity, equity, and diversity find themselves facing imminent danger and persecution. Among the most vulnerable are women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, as well as marginalized groups at the intersections of multiple identities. Thousands have fled Afghanistan or remain in hiding.

The United Kingdom (UK) and the international community have been confronted with the urgent task of evacuating at-risk researchers not only from Afghanistan but also from Ukraine, while also responding to the unfolding crisis in Sudan. In these dire circumstances, academics are being compelled to desert their university campuses, resulting in profound and lasting damage. The consequences of such power transitions – be it the de facto authority taking charge in Afghanistan, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, or the Sudanese coup – extend far beyond immediate political implications. These events severely hinder access to basic human rights and freedoms, perpetuating a cycle of instability and posing long-term challenges for the affected societies.

Following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, a wave of devastating changes swept across Afghanistan. Universities closed their doors, severely limiting educational opportunities for women and girls. Economic challenges were further intensified by international sanctions, leading to an exodus of Afghan citizens. Among those fleeing were researchers who sought refuge in neighboring countries. Many have sought international protection and academic support from charitable organizations and institutions, such as the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), the British Academy, Scholars at Risk, Open Society Foundation, and the University of Sanctuary networks. To shed light on their experiences, we spoke to several at-risk researchers who made the difficult decision to leave their homeland. For the purpose of data protection, we have anonymized their identities and synthesized their stories into a composite character.

We had the privilege of speaking with a doctoral candidate, whom we will refer to as Ziyad, who was awarded a PhD Fellowship from a UK institution in May 2021. Ziyad had been working as an anthropology professor, researching and documenting in remote areas of Afghanistan, and had connections with and an understanding of institutions that assist at-risk researchers. However, the Taliban's takeover presented significant challenges for Ziyad in bringing his family with him to the United Kingdom. Initially, Ziyad escaped the Taliban regime and sought refuge in Pakistan, but the journey was traumatic. Accompanied by his nursing wife, teenage daughter, and one-year-old baby, crossing the border on foot was out of the question, and boarding an evacuation flight posed both danger and unpredictability.

Adding to their distress, Ziyad received a letter from the Taliban's de facto authority, demanding that his teenage daughter be married off. While Ziyad had applied for family visas to the UK and was awaiting a response, the Taliban's takeover left him with no answers from the UK embassies in Karachi or Islamabad. In desperation, he reached out to the institution that had been assisting him with the family visa procedures.

On September 10, 2021, Ziyad managed to secure a charter flight to Islamabad organized by a civilian-led coalition. In October 2021, he and his family arrived in the UK. The entire evacuation process was traumatic, requiring them to uproot their lives and start again in a foreign country. Despite Ziyad's admission to a leading university and the circumstances in Afghanistan, the At-Risk Scholars support program provided him with only student status, which meant that his teenage daughter had to enroll as an international student, and his spouse was limited to working a few hours per week, making it extremely challenging to afford to live in the UK.

Moreover, adapting to a new system and environment while coping with the trauma of the evacuation process and associated stress has taken a toll on Ziyad and his family. He finds himself questioning the relevance of his doctoral thesis in the present-day UK context, adding to his concerns about his future. The scholarship is time-bound, and he is expected to return to Afghanistan in two to three years, despite the ongoing safety risks for him and his family. Considering the circumstances, he is contemplating giving up his doctoral position and seeking asylum in the UK, as he believes this may be a more viable option for ensuring the survival and wellbeing of his family.

Ziyad's story highlights the immense challenges faced by at-risk scholars and their families as they navigate a hostile immigration system, process their traumatic experiences, and make difficult decisions to secure a better future. It underscores the need for continued support and resources for these individuals as they rebuild their lives.

Ziyad has always been driven to continue his research and academic pursuits, even outside Afghanistan. However, like many others, he is uncertain about when the situation in his country will improve. He recognizes the brain drain occurring in Afghanistan, as educated individuals are fleeing, leaving a void of knowledge and expertise behind. While Ziyad acknowledges his privilege in having access to information and his previous qualifications that allowed him to pursue an opportunity in a UK institution, he also acknowledges the challenges faced by many others who may not meet the eligibility criteria or have the means to leave the country.

Ziyad's story is not unique, nor the most extreme, but rather a reflection of the experiences of countless Afghan academics. These accounts emphasize the need for enhanced planning and support mechanisms tailored to safeguard at-risk researchers operating within conflict contexts. Additionally, they underscore the obligations borne by external stakeholders who have invested in and contributed to the academic endeavors of these individuals. By drawing insights from the evacuation initiatives and aid extended to these individuals, this paper aims to contribute to this critical discussion and inform future strategies aimed at protecting and enabling at-risk researchers to sustain their invaluable contributions. It identifies five lessons and provides a set of recommendations for consideration when designing a wider programme of support that can better prepare and respond to future crises. These include lessons around (1) planning, (2) criteria for prioritization, (3) visas and logistics, (iv) fellowship criteria and program support, and (v) coordination.

Inadequate Planning

Plans for the international military withdrawal from Afghanistan had been in development since at least 2019, but the plans did not include evacuations. Insufficient attention and inadequate infrastructure for 'crisis evacuations', combined with narrow criteria for prioritisation, resulted in many high-risk Afghans being left behind.

▶   *Inadequate existing schemes,* including the UK ARAP [1] and United States (US) SIV [2], were not designed for crisis evacuations and already suffered from bureaucratic hurdles and opaque processes before the evacuation.

▶   *Insufficient international coordination* meant that many allies executed evacuations independently, creating logistical confusion at the airport while others put Afghans at risk as they evacuated their non-Afghan staff. The UK only established a dedicated evacuation team or email address days after the fall of Kabul. Even once the official email was established, thousands of urgent email messages from MPs and charities remained unread for days. A UK parliament committee found that a single staff member was responsible for coordination.

▶   *Ad-hoc scholarships and fellowships* were primarily set up as vehicles to support legal pathways for Afghans fleeing. Still, the number of at-risk Afghans greatly exceeded available placements at universities, think tanks, and other institutions. Most supporting initiatives fall into three categories: 1) short-term visiting fellowships at think tanks and universities (six months to two years); 2) scholarships for postgraduate studies; and 3) support for individuals with expertise. However, almost all of these programmes have been tailored for Afghan scholars and experts already settled in Western countries, including the human rights scholarship programme run by the EU's Global Campus of Human Rights and the U.S. programmes funded by Open Society Foundations. CARA's efforts to support UK relocation and affiliation for researchers currently in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries are the exceptions and require resourcing at scale to meet demand.

Criteria for Prioritisation

The agencies responsible for different aspects of evacuations did not have a comprehensive list of at-risk Afghans, and much of the qualifying criteria for evacuation was limited to those directly hired by international forces. The UK ARAP programme set clear criteria but limited the number and scope of who could qualify as at-risk, excluding many female activists, civil servants, and others who had been crucial to supporting the international mission in Afghanistan and widely platformed by international actors in the media over the years. Many civil servants and ANDSF personnel, in particular, failed to meet the criteria for visas and evacuations, despite being in public-facing, visible roles and targeted by the Taliban. While many private evacuations filled the gap, there was a strong undercurrent of opinion that many civil servants didn't deserve evacuation because of the prior government's corruption, or the erroneous perception that the Taliban would only target those who worked directly for foreigners.

Visas and Logistics

Pathway challenges faced by Afghan researchers often centre around visa procurement, with long delays even for those who have been awarded positions. Many of these fellows find themselves stuck in processing centres in intermediate countries awaiting visa appointments, which are slow and cumbersome, often missing start dates for their programmes. Thousands of at-risk Afghans are hiding in Afghanistan or languishing in refugee camps and hostels in the Middle East, Europe, the US, and the UK. Many applicants face significant challenges on their path to relocate to destination countries and access these opportunities, including:

▶ *Missing and incomplete documentation:* Securing new passports, renewing expired passports, and obtaining visas for neighbouring countries present some of the greatest challenges faced by at-risk Afghans trying to leave Afghanistan. Iran and Pakistan – the two main exit route countries for Afghans applying for visas to Europe or the UK – have strict, unpredictable, confusing, and constantly changing visa regimes that are prohibitively costly.

▶ *Immigration issues:* Universities often support visa applications of at-risk Afghan researchers, especially in the United States, which creates obstacles in the immigration process. For example, one female student is left with a difficult choice to make: take the American J1 student visa and risk her status to obtain P2 status[3] once there, or reject the scholarship and remain in Albania for two years waiting on P2 processing.

▶ *Illegal status in third countries and lack of UK priority visa services in the region*: In many cases, Afghans have fallen prey to corrupt officials who confiscate their passports and visas and threaten them with deportation unless they pay large bribes. Most countries, including the UK, do not offer priority visa services in regional countries like Iran and Pakistan, where many at-risk scholars fled and now live illegally, often because their visas have expired. The UK has never had a priority service in Iran, and the UK Home Office's Visa and Immigration (UKVI) division suspended all priority services in Pakistan to deal with visa applications from Ukrainians.

► *Access to information:* There is no centralised database of fellowships available to at-risk Afghans. Many applicants access opportunities through their own private networks and contacts, while others use social media to ask for help identifying and accessing schemes.

► *Accounting for a gender dimension:* The challenges and risks for female Afghan scholars and researchers are particularly acute. Women face more obstacles and risks in obtaining passports, travelling (especially if without a male chaperone), and finding accommodation in neighbouring countries. We have not found any initiatives specifically aimed at addressing the distinctive risks and challenges faced by female Afghan researchers and scholars.

Program Support and Criteria

A lack of comprehensive data on the needs of those evacuated means few schemes provide sufficient support. Most institutions design programs according to their own needs or preferences without sufficient flexibility to improve accessibility.

► *Schemes are not optimally designed with universities:* Fellowships have been created to provide a pathway for at-risk Afghan researchers but with little support or engagement with the broader university community. Many awardees and scholars-at-risk in these programmes are not properly supported, engaged or integrated in their university communities, which means they miss opportunities to benefit from the wider research community. Moreover, most awardees have been in social science subjects rather than natural sciences.

► *Insufficient funding:* The cost of placements at universities or institutions is a key issue, with many placements funded temporarily by philanthropic institutions and individuals. Philanthropic institutions often require a partial investment by the university to cover costs. This presents less of a problem for American universities with large endowments and fundraising drives, but UK university fellowships for at-risk scholars are extremely expensive for donors, as many universities did not adapt to reduce overheads and other costs.

► *Narrow criteria:* Most schemes have stringent selection criteria that ignore the realities of the Afghan research community (as well as other non-Western societies). Many require applicants to hold PhDs or equivalent publication lists, while failing to consider the relevant experience and research outputs of activists and civil servants, many of whom hold critical knowledge that would benefit policy development on Afghanistan.

► *Poorly or insufficiently remunerated:* Most fellowships and academic roles offer insufficient remuneration and do not include accommodation, travel, and other costs required to support newly arrived Afghan refugees and their families. Examples abound of young at-risk Afghan researchers turning down fellowship positions because the low salaries prevent them from supporting themselves. Where students secure university places, costs can be extraordinarily prohibitive.

► *Short-term positions:* Most positions available for Afghan researchers run only between six to twelve months. This does not give sufficient time for an at-risk scholar to fully settle, find continued opportunities, and support themselves and their families.

Coordination

In the absence of international coordination and centralized secure lists, some at-risk Afghans have been given multiple options for evacuations, while many others have been granted none.

▶ *Different countries cherry-picked the at-risk Afghans* whom they wanted to evacuate and grant asylum. France, for example, focused on evacuating artists – and according to initial estimates, now houses over 80%of all Afghan visual artists. Qatar focused largely on athletes, a group they saw as a natural fit due to the upcoming World Cup. The Portuguese focused on young women with backgrounds in athletic sports and music.

▶ *There has been little planning and collaboration* between governments and educational institutions to ensure the medium- to long-term sustainability of existing programs. Scholars, intellectuals, and other at-risk Afghans face an uncertain future even if they manage to navigate the complex pathways to a destination country and to access a fellowship or scholarship. Most programs terminate in less than a year from arrival, before fellows and scholars can acquire the tools to manage life and work challenges in the new country. Most provide little to no support after the termination of the program.

Learning from International Programs

Programs and funding schemes for at-risk researchers in the UK are more limited than in other countries. While the UK only offers programs and funding schemes for the duration of the educational program., other countries offer broader support. In the Netherlands, for instance, at-risk researchers are offered work and residence permits. Canada has broadened their legal immigration processes to include a referral system that allows researchers tomigrate as a family if they have been granted permission to work. a In Norway's case, more opportunities have been provided for at-risk Afghan researchers. Across Europe, schemes are more generous and inclusive than those on offer from the UK government. The Afghan Challenge Funds, set up under the Threatened Scholars Initiative, is working on a referral system in which the researcher is required to be referred by an institution, and then these funds can be availed. The PAUSE program is also providing more open and generous criteria for accepting applications from at-risk Afghan researchers.

Recommendations

While all conflicts have their particularities, a well-resourced institution dedicated to supporting at-risk researchers should have the required infrastructure to address the challenges of crisis evacuations of at-risk researchers identified above. To date, CARA has played an integral role in supporting at-risk researchers despite a limited mandate and resources that prevents them from providing the full scope of support required. This paper recommends the establishment of a focal point institution (or the expansion of an existing organization like CARA). In addition, and based on these research findings, the authors recommend that governments, international organizations, and academic institutions take the following actions to address the challenges faced by at-risk researchers in conflict contexts:

1. **Enhance international collaboration and coordination:** Strengthen collaboration and coordination among international organizations, governments, NGOs, and academic institutions to better support at-risk researchers. This includes sharing information, resources, and best practices to ensure a unified and effective response.

2. **Streamline visa processes and establish safe havens:** Governments should streamline visa application processes, making it easier and faster for at-risk researchers to seek asylum or relocate to safer countries. Clear guidelines and support should be provided to facilitate their visa applications. The international community should work together to establish safe havens and support networks, providing a secure environment for researchers to continue their academic work and rebuild their lives.

3. **Provide financial, logistical, and psychosocial support:** Provide adequate financial and logistical support to assist at-risk researchers with relocation, accommodation, and integration into new academic environments. Offer scholarships, grants, and funding opportunities to help them continue their research and academic pursuits. Additionally, prioritize mental health and psychosocial support services to address traumatic experiences and ensure the well-being of at-risk researchers.

4. **Develop a dedicated institution and digital portal:** Establish a dedicated institution or expand existing organizations like the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) to provide comprehensive support. This institution should focus on preparedness, early crisis identification, database development, and improved coordination with international institutions. A digital portal, such as the E4R platform, can be created to facilitate information sharing, employment opportunities, safety net services, community building, and access to scholarships and learning tools.

5. **Mentorship and capacity-building programs:** Collaborate with universities, think tanks, and interested institutions to develop mentorship programs and capacity-building initiatives for at-risk researchers. This will help them adapt to their new academic environments and enhance their research skills.

6. **Promote academic freedom and human rights:** Continue advocating for academic freedom, human rights, and women's rights to education in conflict-affected regions like Afghanistan. Use diplomatic channels to raise awareness of and seek protection for at-risk researchers and scholars.

7. **Expand eligibility criteria and recognition of regional affiliations:** Expand the eligibility criteria to include non-traditional researchers and recognize regional university and institutional affiliations. This will ensure that a broader range of individuals with diverse expertise can qualify for support and contribute to the academic landscape.

8. **Foster resilience and knowledge sharing:** Encourage the creation of spaces for Afghan researchers to share their experiences and inform policy reforms. Support the establishment of research networks and hubs to facilitate knowledge sharing and cross-fertilization of ideas. Collaborate with regional universities and institutions to provide opportunities for at-risk researchers to continue their academic work.

9. **Monitor and evaluate existing programs:** Continuously monitor and evaluate existing programs, such as the British Council and Warm Welcome, to ensure their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This will help create a more supportive academic environment and strengthen support mechanisms for at-risk researchers.

10. **Conduct further research and international collaboration:** Conduct further research to understand how global and international schemes are functioning and identify additional opportunities for collaboration and support. Engage in cross-country learning and sharing models to enhance the effectiveness of support programs.

By implementing these recommendations, governments, international organizations, and academic institutions can better support at-risk researchers and mitigate the brain drain in conflict-affected regions, allowing the continuation of research and academic work to feed into better policymaking and to preserve expertise for such a time when scholars can return and rebuild, if they so choose.

Endnotes

[1] The UK formally opened the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) in January 2022 as a separate program to ARAP. It offers resettlement to vulnerable Afghans in addition to those who worked with the UK.

[2] SIV is a Special Immigrant Visa for Afghans who were employed by/on behalf of the U.S. Government.

[3] P2 or Priority 2 is a designation created in August 2021, granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their eligible family members: https://www.state.gov/u-s-refugee-admissions-program-priority-2-designation-for-afghan-nationals/

**View Our
Key Findings**

✉ **info@peacerep.org**
f **PeaceRepResearch**
🐦 **@Peace_Rep_**
in **PeaceRep**

www.peacerep.org
www.peaceagreements.org

About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.