

Weapons of knowledge construction: the Afghan-American diaspora and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

By *Morwari Zafar*

Beneath the billowing drapes of red, green, and black, Marilyn Monroe and a woman in a blue headscarf lean against the wall on the ground. A man peers closely at their painted faces. 'I don't think *she* was Afghan,' he chuckles to his female companion, his shadow darkening the canvas of the actress's unaffected gaze. It seems an apt assessment of belonging at the 5th Annual Afghan Culture and Arts Festival in Rosslyn, Virginia – one mile from Washington, D.C., 8,000 miles from Afghanistan, and a long-standing hub of the Afghan-American diaspora.

The Afghan-American population in the US numbers close to 300,000 (Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C.), with its greatest concentrations in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, and Northern Virginia. Although a few Afghans immigrated to the US in the early twentieth century, the migration *en masse* did not occur until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. Although Afghan migration trajectories resonated with other immigrants, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, cast a penetrating spotlight on the Afghan diaspora.

For many members of the Afghan diaspora, leaving Afghanistan not only meant leaving behind family, but also hard-earned education credentials, skills, and material resources. While some families were able to secure employment transfers to skilled positions in US organisations, many began life anew in America, starting from scratch in minimum wage positions that belied their status in Afghanistan. As the war progressed and the US military's strategic paradigm shifted to winning hearts and minds, Afghan-Americans rose to sudden relevance as a

transnational reflection of their counterparts in Afghanistan.

At the core of the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, the definitive feature of the US military strategy after 2006 was to gain the Afghan population's support rather than emphasise conventional warfare (Nagl 2007). To do so, the US military needed to learn how to interface with Afghans in sociocultural contexts that presumably varied from their own. Afghan-Americans became *de facto* experts on Afghanistan – a critical assumption that coincided with a massive effort to recruit members of the diaspora as proxies and interlocutors. Effectively, the diaspora's social memory, history, norms, values, and religious expertise collectively became a highly sought-after commodity. While the knowledge supply chain reinforced the military-industrial complex, the context within which such highly prized cultural information was developed often received less than a secondary consideration. S.M. Hanifi (2006), an Afghan-American historian, argues that:

Knowledge transfer from the Afghan-American diaspora may be hampered by the replication of social patterns of division and enclaving. Domestic divisions based upon location/region, ethnicity, class, gender, and ideology continue to pervade Afghan communities and structure intra- and intercommunity relations in diaspora settings.

The context of the diaspora's cultural knowledge is therefore significant because it situates their narratives across a spectrum of transnational experiences and social memories, challenging the perception that the diaspora constitutes a culturally and ethnically homogenous group. Afghan identity – or *Afghaniyat* – varies particularly among the cohort of Afghan-Americans who were either born or grew up in America. As that segment began to redefine 'Afghan' and 'Muslim', the global War on Terror struggled to make sense of the very same categories in Afghanistan. An American army officer, who had undergone two pre-deployment cultural training programmes offered by separate defense contractors, noted that some of the materials presented by Afghan-American experts either varied or were actually contradictory:

Overall, it was great to get some kind of familiarization. But there wasn't much consistency. Some of the instructors seemed to have a certain bias or maybe even a dislike for certain ethnic groups and tribes... The story you got depended on who was talking.

To elucidate 'Afghanistan,' Afghan-Americans filled roles as cultural advisers, interpreters, translators, and subject matter experts. At Fort Polk, Louisiana, and Fort Irwin, California, Afghan-Americans also served as role players in training centres composed of replica Afghan villages for a 25-day programme to simulate an environment similar to what soldiers could expect in Afghanistan. The role players helped soldiers negotiate Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) and navigate social and tribal dynamics; interactions the military deemed vital to COIN. Fara, a 33-year-old role player, who moved to America prior to her third birthday, recounted:

It's fun to do the role-playing. I didn't know much about Afghanistan, but I learned a lot from the older Afghans with more experience... I learned about the culture as I was teaching it and acting it out.

The reconstructions were staged to reflect the reality of Afghanistan, as observed by military servicemen and women. Afghan-Americans acted according to the scripts provided, although they were invited to offer feedback on the scenarios. The scripts defined their performance of Afghan heritage and identity. Thus corruption, as an issue, became explicable within the framework of Afghan social structure, patronage networks, and tribal and ethnic politics – despite the country's track record of relevant government efficiency and oversight prior to the civil war. In fieldwork interviews with military personnel who took the trainings and were deployed to Afghanistan, many echoed the inconsistencies apparent in the presentation of what was supposed to be a culturally authentic experience. As a US navy officer reflected in an interview:

At [Fort] Polk, there were two guys that were old-timers. They had worked in Afghanistan and they knew what they were doing. I found out later that a couple of the other folks had no clue and they were

learning about their own culture on the fly... Some of the stuff they told us about, like not using your left hand, I found it confusing when I deployed because the Afghans used both hands... It felt like they would tell you what they thought you expected to hear.

Through such iterations, 'Afghanistan' as a concept could be revised and reproduced. For the US military, Afghanistan became something one could know, classify and experience by performing accordingly. 'Cultural intelligence' as an element of COIN therefore conformed to what soldiers had been trained to expect. Some scholars have cautioned against diasporic engagement since 'diasporas opportunistically find common ground with the host country's foreign policy goals' (Kapur 2010). The fundamental issue seems to lie in the commodification of cultural knowledge by the US government. America's military-industrial complex created a pressurised commercial environment in which expertise was treated as a product. As such, expertise had to be profitable, differentiated, and meet the demands of the market. In the process of repackaging cultural knowledge, the community itself has experienced the fluctuations of what it means to be Afghan, and reconstituted its identity and position in America.

At the festival in Rosslyn, Afghan culture is represented in a scattering of booths furnished with clothing, jewellery, and a few paintings, along a horseshoe loop. Traditional food and music accompany the experience, and as the band breaks into a staccato rendering of an Afghan dance song, a young girl hops on the grass in a mirrored Afghan dress and pink cowboy boots. The *tabla* picks up and the MC bellows in English over the percussive pulse:

*Tell me, friends, do you want fast Afghan songs or slow songs today?
We're here for you. We can play whatever you want.'* □

Endnotes

1. This article stems from the author's dissertation research on the narratives of 'Afghanistan' and 'Islam' in the Afghan-American diaspora that shaped the accounts underpinning US military counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Through a broader lens, it examines the development and commodification of cultural knowledge by the US military through private-sector enterprises, and compels a reassessment of diasporic engagement.

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