Research Report

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The Social Institutions of the United Kingdom's "Afghan" Communities[1]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The report explores the lives and experiences of people from Afghanistan living in the UK. Rather than addressing the extent to which it is helpful to think of people from Afghanistan forming, or not, a shared "community" or "diaspora", the report focuses on the energies that people from diverse backgrounds have invested in establishing various types of institutions in the UK. A wide range of "formal" and "informal" institutions created by Afghans play an important role in the organisation of their social and economic lives, and interactions with local and national institutions, as well as multiple communities in the UK. Focusing on institutions rather than probing the dynamics of collective "identity" is analytically helpful because it brings to attention the types of projects in which people from Afghanistan in the UK invest their individual and collective energies, resources, and time.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

People from Afghanistan identifying with a wide range of political persuasions, religious positions, regional as well as ethno-linguistic backgrounds and straddling the country's much commented upon rural-urban divide have established themselves in the UK over the past half a century and more. Against this backdrop, representations of Afghanistan's "diaspora" in the UK (and elsewhere) as "fragmented" and "divided" are analytically unhelpful. Discourses of fragmentation and division reveal assumptions about the ways in which "diasporas" should function (i.e. as a singular and bounded culture with a shared political aim project). Such models of diaspora overlook the degree to which diversity and complexity are features of many diasporic groups.

GEOGRAPHY

People from Afghanistan live in a wide range of regions across the UK. UK government asylum policy has played an important role in determining this distribution, yet individuals, families and communities themselves also make calculations and pursue strategies concerning residency in the UK. Recognising the agency of actors themselves reveals that there is no singular geography of Afghans living in the UK. Varying communities and networks, rather, regard different parts of the country as more and less significant to their collective activities, ambitions, and attempts to lead meaningful lives. A better understanding of the processes informing the choices that families and individuals make about where to live can enrich policy debates about refugee resettlement.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

(1) INSTITUTIONS OF WORK AND COMMERCE

Profession and work are central to individual and collective selfhood in Afghanistan. This aspect of the identities of people from Afghanistan living outside of the country is often over-looked in work which focuses on the importance of religion, ethnicity and language. Afghans in the UK are engaged in a wide range of activities and professions and regard these as important avenues to social respect and value. The working activities of people from Afghanistan living in the UK also shape the social, cultural and political dynamics of the communities they have established.

(2) RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Religion plays an important part in the institutions established by people from Afghanistan living in the UK. Institutions established in relation to religion play a wide range of roles. Various forms of cultural, ethnic, and social diversity impact the nature of the religious institutions established by

people from Afghanistan in the UK. Afghans in the UK hold a wide range of views regarding the role that religion should play in their everyday lives. Against simplified depictions of Islam's centrality to Afghan identities, it is also important to emphasise that all people from Afghanistan living in the UK do not automatically identify or adhere to one or other religious traditions or consider religion as a central aspect of their self-understanding.

(3) CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Afghans of a wide range of backgrounds living in the UK have played a dynamic and varied role in establishing institutions that seek to contribute to cultural life in the UK, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This section of the report explores themes of significance to the institutional-building activities of Afghans in the field of cultural identity and heritage preservation. These are especially important issues for many of the UK's Afghans in the context of the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Many, though by no means all communities in the UK regard Taliban rule in Afghanistan as posing an existential threat to their cultural, ethno-linguistic, regional, and, in some cases, civilizational identities. As such, maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge in diasporic contexts has been invested with added political, personal and familial relevance and significance.

(4) POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

Playing an active role in the political life of Afghan communities in the UK and of Afghanistan is an important aspect of the day-to-day lives of many people from the country in the UK. There have been major shifts in the nature of the forms of political activism important to the diaspora in the UK, especially in the context of the 2021 return to power of the Taliban. Afghans in the UK are engaged in an increasingly diverse range of political activities, many of which are framed in the language of ethnicity. Ethnic politics and identity are not, however, necessarily the only driving force behind the range of political projects important to people in the country. While the language of political action is often framed in relationship to concepts of ethno-linguistic identity and cultural civilisation, the concerns this language addresses often revolve around Afghanistan's peoples' experience of fraught and regularly violated sovereignty. Viewed from this perspective, the proponents of contrasting projects of ethno-linguistic political activism share an over-arching desire for greater recognition and political voice.

(5) TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Given globalisation and the role of electronic communication in the digital age, there is now not always a strong reliance on physical institutions such as community spaces or places of religious

worship. In the context of diaspora, advocacy and academia are increasingly intertwined. There are now ample examples of seminars and conferences held at academic institutions in which human rights violations against particular groups and communities are discussed with researchers who work on the community. A particularly interesting trend in the transnational activities of diaspora associations is the growing importance of connections between activists and academics.

CONCLUSION

Across a range of different fields of life, people from Afghanistan living in the UK have sought to present knowledge, images, and understandings of the country that better reflect their perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints. They have done so by constructing religious organisations and cultural associations, engaging with politicians, local media, and academics, and establishing a thriving and active business community. Investing their individual and collective energies in such projects has enabled people from a wide range of backgrounds to challenge the simplistic and negative images of Afghanistan that continue to pass as knowledge about the country in media and government in the UK. Doing so has also enabled those involved in such activities to gain 'recognition and political legibility' and gain a sense of control over their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes a number of recommendations for national and local government and for diaspora organisations, calling in particular for collaborative work to be invested in ensuring the sustainability and durability of institutions established by people from Afghanistan living in the UK.

THE SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S "AFGHAN" COMMUNITIES[2]

This report explores the lives and experiences of people from Afghanistan living in the UK. Rather than addressing the extent to which it is helpful to think of people from Afghanistan forming, or not, a shared "community" or "diaspora", the report focuses on the energies that people from diverse backgrounds have

[2] Following Massoumi (2022), we use "Afghan" in this report to "describe a geographic and civic identity, not an ethnic one." Citizens of Afghanistan "speak multiple languages" and identify with "a variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious, geographic and other terms of self-identification". See Massoumi, M. 2022. 'Soundwaves of dissent: resistance through Persianate cultural production in Afghanistan'. *Iranian Studies* 55(3): 697-718.

invested in establishing various types of institutions in the UK. A wide range of "formal" and "informal" institutions created by people from Afghanistan play an important role in the organisation of their social and economic lives, and interactions with local and national institutions, as well as multiple communities in the UK. Focusing on institutions rather than probing the dynamics of collective "identity" is analytically helpful because it brings to attention the types of projects in which people from Afghanistan in the UK invest their individual and collective energies, resources, and time. Recent scholarship on diaspora has also questioned the analytical helpfulness of "identity" and "community" to understanding complex social formations forged through mobility. Instead, scholars have developed the notion of "diaspora assemblage" to illuminate the ways in which complex social formations "forge relations with an array of social actors such as the state, intergovernmental or supranational organizations, civic organizations, the market, and other diaspora actors".[3] A better understanding of the priorities of people identifying themselves as being from Afghanistan and living in the UK holds the prospect of assisting policymakers working on issues relating to their "integration". Most specifically, we suggest that going beyond the language of ethnicity illuminates commonalities in the type of projects in which people from Afghanistan living in the UK are engaged. Recognising the shared aspirations and concerns that inform the collective activities of diverse communities from Afghanistan in the UK can enable the development of coherent and over-arching modes of supporting the vibrant and diverse range of activities in which they are engaged.

The term "institution" inevitably brings to mind images of clearly defined economic, cultural, political and legal entities. Yet this definition is too narrow to encompass the institution-building powers of the individuals and communities explored in this report. In the strictest sense of the term, an institution is 'an organization or other formal social structure that governs a field of action'.[4] More recently, economists have invested attention to the importance of "social institutions" to the functioning of markets. Douglass North developed the term "rules of the game" to identify social institutions comprising "formal rules, informal constraints, and the characteristic of enforcing those constraints"[5]. Social institutions, according to North, including formations such as ethnic trading communities, play a critical role in setting norms of accepted social behaviour. More broadly, anthropologists have brought attention to the need to identify the specific social contexts in which "rules are implemented" and the "beliefs and values" of actors maintained and sustained. In doing so, anthropological scholarship builds on literature that brought widespread attention to the

[3] Ho and McConnell 2019: 244. 2
[4] Oxford Bibliographies, 2017, 'Institutions'; http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo9780199756384-0132.xml (accessed 28 March 2019).
[5] North, Douglass, 1992, 'Institutions, Ideology, and Economic Performance', Cato Journal 3 (Winter): 477–96.

importance of durable social structures in societies in Asia and Africa. This report contributes to this approach by emphasising the capacity of people from Afghanistan living in the UK to fashion social institutions that they regard as being significant to their lives and activities, and, often, to Afghanistan itself. In the sections that follow, we document and explore a wide range of social institutions, across the domains of religion, culture, and economic life, some being more formal, others informal and many occupying the space between these poles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

People from Afghanistan have been travelling to the UK since the post-war period and before. Merchants involved in the sale of the country's most lucrative exports (fur and carpets) often forged early connections between Afghanistan and the UK. Approximately 18 Jewish families from Afghanistan established firms in the 1930s and 1940s in London that mediated this trade until the 1970s. The families had close relations with Jewish families who had migrated to London from the Emirate of Bukhara, both communities worshiping in a synagogue in North London and being active in an association (The Boukhrian Jews' Association) which represented their interests in the country and internationally.[6] The closure of the Hudson Bay Company's auction house in London in the early 1970s resulted in the trade's decline. In the 1970s and the 1980s, a limited number of students came to the UK from Afghanistan, mostly, given the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, continuing to live in London after they had finished their studies. In the 1980s, several families affected by the Soviet invasion of the country also migrated to the UK, establishing initial communities in the Greater London area.

The 1990s saw the first of several larger waves of migration from Afghanistan to the UK, mostly comprising families and individuals fleeing conflict in the country, notably officials who had served in the pro-Soviet government of the 1980s. Such families often moved to the UK from Russia and other post-Soviet countries that were enduring a period of crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Families of Muslim background who moved to the UK during this period identified with a wide range of ethno-linguistic communities in Afghanistan and included individuals who had been affiliated to both of the major wings of the communist government (Parcham and Khalq). Yet ethno-religious communities affected by the rise to power of the mujahidin government (notably Sikhs), whose primary activities had been in the field of commerce rather than politics, also began to establish communities in the UK in the 1990s. They mostly moved to the country after periods of sojourning in India, the newly created Central Asian republics and

[6] See, Koplik, Sara, 2015, A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan, Leiden: Brill and Marsden, M. (forthcoming). 'Adjusting Scales: Jewish Trading Networks in and beyond Afghanistan, 1950-present-day', *History and Anthropology*.

Russia. These waves of migration also focused mostly on the Greater London area.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a different type of migration from Afghanistan, often initially comprising younger men from areas that had resisted Taliban rule. In later years, their families joined them in the UK. Whereas earlier waves of migrants had largely comprised urban and often highly educated families, this wave saw an increase in families from provincial backgrounds (especially from the country's Central and Northern provinces). During this phase, a shift in UK migration policy also resulted in people from Afghanistan establishing homes and communities beyond the Greater London area, notably in cities and smaller urban conurbations in the North East, North West, West and East Midlands, and the South Coast. In Scotland, Glasgow was the central destination point for refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan.

During the 2000s, migration also often took the form of people of provincial origins, often from regions of Afghanistan affected by the Taliban insurgency. People coming to the UK from this background had often lived for much of their lives in refugee camps in Pakistan, and some in Iran. As the Taliban insurgency increased in intensity, government and military officials as well as employees in NGOs also increasingly sought to seek asylum in the country; others arranged for their families to travel to the UK. The collapse of the government of the Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 mostly resulted in the move to the UK of people with ties to the UK presence in Afghanistan in the period after 2001, though others fleeing the Taliban government and the political and economic crisis in which this had resulted also sought to seek asylum.

People from Afghanistan living in the UK have not only moved directly to the country from Afghanistan, however. In the 2000s and 2010s, the UK's population of people from Afghanistan increased due to families moving to the country from countries in the European Union, especially the Netherlands. Afghans perceived the UK as being more culturally open than the Netherlands and often moved in the anticipation doing so would result in positive outcomes for their children. Individuals involved in business in the Netherlands but also Denmark also saw greater opportunities for trade and commerce in the UK, given the size of its immigrant population. Individuals moving from these settings often brought their families, established businesses, and started life afresh in the UK, not infrequently leaving behind stable lives established over several years. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several families based in the country also moved to the UK. A scheme that enabled UK cities to invite Ukrainians to the country saw the relatives and friends of Afghan background living in Ukraine acting as the conduits for this migration. People from Afghanistan living in the UK had largely been involved in wholesale trade in Ukraine and as a result, were relatively wealthy; they considered the move to the UK temporary, and, indeed, within months of arriving men often returned to Ukraine to resume their business activities while leaving their families in safety in the UK.

This schematic and brief overview of the presence of people from Afghanistan in the UK illuminates the

diversity of the "community" and the complex trends that have brought people to the country. People from Afghanistan from a wide range of political persuasions, religious positions, regional backgrounds and straddling the country's much commented upon rural-urban divide have established themselves in the UK over the past half a century and more. Against this backdrop, representations of Afghanistan's "diaspora" in the UK (and elsewhere) as "fragmented" and "divided" are one-sided.[7] Discourses of fragmentation and division reveal assumptions about the ways in which "diasporas" *should* function (i.e. as mono-cultural and bounded and oriented towards a single political project). This model of diaspora overlooks the diversity and complexity of the societies from which people migrate, their prior histories of mobility, connections with multiple settings outside of Afghanistan, and their diverse motivations for moving.[8] In this report, rather than treating conflicts and differences of position in relation to culture, politics and ideology as reflecting an absence or lack of unity, we approach them as a reflection of the complexity of Afghanistan's dynamics and of the inevitably internally differentiated nature of Afghans living outside of the country. We suggest that looking beyond reified categories of ethnicity and religion that are undoubtedly important to people from Afghanistan living in the UK, brings to light commonalities in the types of concerns that animate the range of political and cultural projects in which they are engaged. Before turning to these, however, we first explore in more detail the geographical distribution of people from Afghanistan living in the UK.

GEOGRAPHY

As discussed above, people from Afghanistan live in a wide range of regions across the UK. UK government asylum policy has played an important role in determining this distribution, yet the calculations and strategies of individuals and families are also important to consider. Recognising the agency of actors themselves also reveals that there is no singular geography of Afghans living in the UK. Varying communities and networks, rather, regard different parts of the country as more and less significant to their collective activities, ambitions, and attempts to lead the good life. A better understanding of the processes informing the choices that families and individuals make about where to live has the prospect of enriching policy debates about refugee resettlement.

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[7] E.g. Meshkovska et. al. 2019. 'Afghan Diaspora in Europe: Mapping Engagement in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom'. Maastricht: Maastricht University; Baser B and Swain A (2008). 'Diasporas as peacemakers: Third party mediation in homeland conflicts'. *International Journal on World Peace* 25(3): 7–28. Cf. Khosravi, S. (2018). 'A Fragmented Diaspora', *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 8(2), 73-81; Rytter, M. & Nielsen, A. G. (2020). 'Marriage in the ruins of war: Intergenerational hauntings in the Afghan diaspora'. *Ethnicities* 20(5), 983-1002.

[8] For an approach to the study of "complex" diasporas, see, for example, Werbner, Pnina. 2005. 'Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere in Britain'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30(5): 895–911. See also Ho, E. 2017. 'Inter-Asian concepts for mobile societies'. The Journal of Asian Studies 76(4): 907-928.

For several decades, the Greater London area has been of considerable importance to the collective life of people from Afghanistan living in the UK. As noted above, the first waves of migration from Afghanistan to the UK resulted in new arrivals establishing family homes and communities in London. In subsequent years, new arrivals also sought to live in the city due to the presence of established communities there. The preference for newly arrived families to settle in certain areas of the UK, London in particular, with established communities reflects obvious concerns facing new arrivals. Living in areas with established communities enabled families to mitigate a sense of loneliness and cultural dislocation. It also supported individuals to find suitable work (often in small and medium-sized businesses run by their compatriots) in a setting in which their qualifications and language skills were not largely recognised and this assisted in the re-composition of multiple networks (familial, commercial and political). At the same time, however, centrifugal dynamics have also affected the distribution of people from Afghanistan living in the UK. Individuals regularly note the benefits of living in regions of the country that are home to smaller communities. Avoiding living in all-enveloping communities, gives individuals and families opportunities for personal freedom (especially for women and children). There is also said to be greater scope for new arrivals to establish business activities outside of Greater London, given lower basic costs (especially commercial property rents and family housing). One man involved in the construction business who lives in Birmingham remarked, for example, 'I avoid London because the expense of the city mean it is impossible to do anything legal there. Any business activity in London is inevitable fraudulent on one way or another'.

Life outside of London is also said by some to have important implications for the nature of community dynamics. Individuals running community associations outside of London argue that cities with smaller populations of compatriots afford better opportunities for the forging of multi-ethnic communities, the building of relations with different immigrant and refugee communities, and a greater willingness to work with local government and non-government institutions. The population of people from Afghanistan in London, however, is said to be sizeable enough that associations organised on the basis of narrower ethnic, regional or religious identity markers are able to attract a significant enough following to remain viable.

Different regions of the UK have also become important for particular subgroups of people from Afghanistan. Peterborough and Southampton, for example, have come to play an important role in the UK's Hazara populations, Birmingham and Coventry for families from North East Afghanistan (especially Takhar and Badakhshan), and Cambridge for Uzbeks; since the early 2000s, Manchester has been home to a significant population of Pashto-speaking families from South Eastern Afghanistan. Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan living in London have increasingly concentrated their family and work lives in the West and South West of the city, especially Southall, Hounslow, and Kingston-upon-Thames. The community has focused on creating a central hub for social, cultural and commercial life in Southall, a neighbourhood to which Afghan

Sikhs living both in the UK and beyond (especially in Europe and Canada) also aspire to relocate, mostly through marriage to members of the communities who are now UK citizens. As a result, Southall is now home to the most concentrated population of Sikhs from Afghanistan anywhere in the world, and the institutions established by the community exert influence on individuals and families living across Europe, North America and South Asia. The dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees that arose in the context of changes in UK government policy have therefore had significant implications not only for the geographical distribution of Afghans but also the varying types of communities and institutions they form.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The following sections explore the various social institutions of significance to Afghan collective life in the UK.

INSTITUTIONS OF WORK AND COMMERCE

Literature on Afghanistan documents the importance of profession and work to the individual and collective selfhood in the country.[9] This aspect of the identities of people from Afghanistan living outside of the country is often overlooked in discussions focusing on the importance of religion, ethnicity and language to collective "identity". We now explore the wide range of activities and professions in which people from Afghanistan in the UK are engaged and explore the significance of these to the social, cultural and political dynamics of communities in the country more generally.

Trade and commerce play an important role in the livelihood strategies of many people identifying themselves as being from Afghanistan in the UK. The importance of independent business activities to the economic profiles of Afghans in the UK reflects several interlinked processes relating to livelihood strategies both in Afghanistan but also in the various countries in which Afghans spent time before settling in the UK.[10] To a small degree, the historic importance of trade to Afghanistan's economy plays a role in encouraging people from the country living in the UK to earn a living through the movement of commodities. A number of families who were active in trade in Afghanistan (especially the sale of carpets) have maintained their historic commercial activities in the UK, though mostly by way of shifting from trading in handwoven to machine-made carpets. More significantly, however, the particular pressures facing Afghans in the context

[9] Baldauf, Ingebord. 2007. "The Dāyı ~ Kārgıl of Andkhoy: Language, History and Typical Professions. Discourses on Local Identity". Sonderheft Asien 104: 135–52.
[10] See Marsden, M. 2016. *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press and Marsden, M. 2021. *Beyond the Silk Roads: Trade, Mobility and Geopolitics across Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

of war and conflict resulted in many people turning to commodity trading as a mode of making a living. Before moving to the UK, many families and individuals had spent prolonged periods of time in intermediate countries, including but not limited to Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian republics, Russia and Ukraine. Not having access to welfare support resulted in most people from Afghanistan living in such contexts turning to trade as a mode of making a livelihood.[11] In the course of doing so, families and individuals both learned critical skills but also developed commercial contacts and relationships. In the UK itself, linguistic barriers have also meant that for many new arrivals exposure to the labour market in the UK has been mediated first by participation in small businesses, often owned by people from Afghanistan. A further important factor that has led people in the UK to develop businesses rather than seek professional employment has been problems in converting qualifications awarded in Afghanistan and overseas to UK requirements. Medical professionals, for example, often argue that the time and expenses required to convert certificates to UK standards have meant that it has been impossible for them to provide for their families and maintain their professional careers. For example, a man who had served in a high position in the Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health before moving to the UK in 2020, told Magnus that he was unable to devote time to having his qualifications recognised in the UK given his familial commitments.

The role of cultural preferences in influencing Afghans to engage in small business activities rather than to embark on professional careers can also not be discounted. Private business is seen by some people living in the UK, at least, as a medium for leading an autonomous life which is regarded as morally superior to being an "employee", but also something that enables individuals (especially men) to balance competing commitments to family, community and work. An especially important avenue for participation in small business activities by people from Afghanistan living in the UK is the import of commodities, often from settings with which Afghan traders and merchants have prior connections. Five national settings are of special importance to the forms of import trade in which people in the UK are engaged: Afghanistan, China, India and Pakistan, and Turkey.

Finally, people in the community also argue that they prefer private business to paid employment because racism, exclusion and Islamophobia in the UK prevent them from securing mainstream jobs. Some argue that even having a Muslim surname reduces the possibility of a job applicant being called for interview. Others have had personal experience of family members facing racist and Islamophobic violence and abuse, resulting in them losing hope in becoming fully part of local society. Having seen one of their son's be the victim of a racist attack, one family told Magnus they had sought to relocate to Canada, until realising

[11] Marsden, M. 2016. *Trading Words: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

how difficult this would be in practical terms. As we shall see in a later section, such experiences also inform the importance many in the community place in teaching their children about the cultures and traditions of Afghanistan – "our children will never become properly British", it is often argued, "so it is up to us to put them in contact with their identity otherwise they will grow up lost and not knowing who they are".

Over the past two decades and in particular the past two years, traders have imported various products to the UK from Afghanistan, mostly dried fruit and nuts and other foodstuffs (raisins, almonds, spices and medicinal herbs) and carpets, but also, in increasing quantities, cooking utensils. Several traders reported that easier transport routes between Afghanistan and the UK (in particular an overland route which involves goods moving to Uzbekistan and from there via Turkey and the EU) have also seen an increase in trade between the two countries. Afghan products sold in the UK are largely consumed by customers from Afghanistan in the country. Importers run several successful wholesale companies in London, Birmingham and Manchester, which distribute products to retail shops across the country. While relatively small scale in purely economic terms, this trade plays a very important role in the forging of various expressions of community identity in the UK.

Traders from Afghanistan living in the UK are also active in the import of Chinese-made products. The activities of traders in this field often predate their move to the UK. Traders from Afghanistan played a major role in the import of Chinese-made commodities to Afghanistan and Pakistan from the early 1990s onwards. During this period, traders established export businesses and service facilities in Chinese cities (notably Urumqi, Yiwu and Guangzhou) in which many products are procured. Trade infrastructures fashioned by merchants were increasingly used by people from Afghanistan living in the former Soviet countries, especially in connection with the import of commodities sold in the wholesale markets in which they had established businesses. In later years, traders also established themselves as wholesalers of Chinese commodities in various European cities (notably Amsterdam and Hamburg). Merchants from Afghanistan have been involved in the wholesale of Chinese-made commodities since the early 2000s, establishing a collective presence in the wholesale districts of several British cities (notably in West and East London, Manchester's Cheetham Hill, and central Birmingham's jewellery quarter). Afghans of a wide range of ethno-linguistic backgrounds are engaged in such activities, but they are of special community-wide significance for Sikhs and Hindus. The import of commodities made in China has been an important source of income to importers but also to those owning retail shops and market stalls, who purchase goods (often on a credit basis) from the wholesalers.

Two further settings are important contexts with which Afghan traders based in the UK conduct trade, though in relation to a narrower range of commodities. One of the most significant products imported to the UK

by Afghan merchants is Sella rice, a type of rice consumed most regularly in Afghan homes and widely used by Arabs and Iranians living in the country. While often marketed as 'Afghan', most of the Sella rice imported to the UK by Afghan merchants is procured in India and Pakistan. Given the increasing number of Afghans living in the country as well as its popularity amongst other immigrant communities, the rice business is substantial in size and requires considerable capital investment. Turkey also features prominently in the business activities of Afghans, largely due to it being a hub of textile production. From the 1990s onwards, families (especially those of Uzbek and Turkmen background) involved in the manufacture of handmade carpets in Afghanistan and Pakistan have established factories producing machine-made carpets in Turkey; these manufacturers now supply businesses run by Afghan merchants in the UK. Afghan traders living in the UK involved in the import trade travel regularly in connection with their businesses; sometimes sojourning for longer periods of time in particular trading nodes where they establish trading offices that supply traders from Afghanistan located in the UK and globally.

A small proportion of people identifying themselves as being from Afghanistan who live in the UK earn a living in the import trade. However, those active in the import trade are of wider significance for community dynamics and activities. First, wholesalers play a pivotal role in the economic activities of the larger number of Afghans who run retail shops and market stalls. Second, the wealth of wholesale traders contributes to their holding positions of authority and respect in the institutional manifestations of Afghan community life, including mosques and cultural associations (see below). Thirdly, the regular travel of merchants outside of the UK and the requirement for businesses to cultivate relations with persons of influence and authority in the settings in which they work ensures they maintain close contact with Afghans living in other contexts, including Afghanistan itself.

Besides those involved in the wholesale and retail of imported products and commodities, people from Afghanistan living in the UK are involved in a wide range of independent business activities at a wide range of sizes and scales. Taxi driving is an especially popular way of making a living for men.[12] Afghans also often choose to invest in fast food takeaways (especially those specialising in pizzas) and the driving of the delivery vehicles for these establishments. In London, people from Afghanistan often own fishmongers and grocery shops, jobs previously occupied by other immigrant communities who then turned to less physically difficult forms of business. Individuals with access to capital often forge partnerships with their co-nationals that are active in the real estate sector, buying properties in auctions for development, sometimes engaging

[12] See, for instance, Khan, Nichola. 2020. *Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

construction companies they or members of the community known to them have established. Another business activity regarded as being a good way of making a living is the restaurant sector: while restaurants serving dishes from Afghanistan were both few in number and only found in London twenty years ago, many UK cities now host such eateries. The connected business in banqueting halls and catering that are widely used by people from Afghanistan for the organisation of major lifecycle events (notably engagements, weddings, circumcisions, and memorial gatherings) as well as cultural and political gatherings is also a field that has expanded as the community's size has increased. Services related to the holding of community events (notably photo studios and film companies, beauty parlours, and shops selling bridal clothes) have also expanded in size and variety over the past decade and more. After the return to power of the Taliban in 2021, individuals who were active in Afghanistan's thriving media environment have also moved to the UK bringing expertise to such activities and also seeking to launch and establish TV stations and radio channels. Businesses established by Afghans living in the UK, then, provide a broader 'social infrastructure' that plays an important role in the cultural reproduction of communities and identities.

The participation of women from Afghanistan in the UK labour market has also noticeably increased in the past twenty years. This change has arisen partly as women brought up in the UK have been educated to secondary school and university levels and joined professions such as the medical and legal sectors. Yet women who migrated to the UK from Afghanistan are also playing an increasingly public role in business activities, including, for example, restaurants and tailor shops. In some cases, women work side-by-side with their husbands in restaurants serving the cuisine of Afghanistan; in other areas women play a leading role in such institutions, often being supported by sons, regularly and widely advertising their services on social media channels.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Religion plays an important part in the institutions established by people from Afghanistan living in the UK. These institutions, however, often play a wider range of roles than the provision of religious rituals and services alone. Various forms of cultural and social diversity important to those who attend such institutions also often shape the form taken by religious institutions established by Afghans in the UK. Afghans in the UK hold a wide range of views regarding the role that religion should play in their everyday lives and debates concerning the relative importance of establishing religious as compared to other types of institutes specifically for the community are both intense and widespread. Popular and even scholarly understandings of Afghanistan and its people continue to revolve around simplistic representations of the place of Islam in the country's political, cultural and social dynamics. Against this backdrop, it is also important to emphasise that all people from Afghanistan living in the UK do not automatically identify or adhere to one or other religious tradition or even consider religion as a central aspect of their self-understanding. We return

to this issue in the section of the report focusing on cultural institutions.

Over the past thirty years, Muslims from Afghanistan living in the UK have established mosques in various cities. The first mosque established by UK-based Afghans was in North London. At the time, the neighbourhood in which the mosque is located was a central hub for refugees from Afghanistan living in London: establishing a mosque provided people living in the area access to a place of worship and a space in which to hold important communal events, notably Eid festivals and prayers of condolence (*fateha*). While the mosque in North London continues to serve as a hub for the ritual lives of Muslims from Afghanistan, the changing character of the neighbourhood in which it is located has also meant its congregation is broadening and diversifying. The mosque committee emphasises that its leadership is diverse - including Yemenis and Somalis - and the congregation is similarly plural in cultural and linguistic terms. In the context of the centre of gravity of the community moving elsewhere in London, new mosques have been established in parts of Greater London home to sizeable populations of people from Afghanistan, including in West and South London. Individuals connected with the UK's first mosque designed to meet the needs of people from Afghanistan have also been involved in establishing institutions in Birmingham and Manchester; amongst other cities and smaller towns, Stoke-on-Trent and Preston are also home to mosques established by Afghans.

Besides playing a role in offering religious guidance, the leadership of mosques attended by Afghan Muslims in the UK also play a wider role in community life. Mosques established by people from Afghanistan in the UK also play an active role in charitable activities, mostly by sending funds to organisations supporting poor families in Afghanistan, but also, in the context of the return to power of the Taliban in 2021, providing food, clothing, and translation services to newly arrived refugees. One man who founded a mosque in the UK emphasised to Magnus his entrepreneurial skills. He talked about his operating a funeral parlour, acting as a guide to Muslims from Afghanistan traveling to Mecca and Medina (*Umrah*), organising a market on days of public celebration such as the two Eid festivals, running a construction business, and even establishing small eateries on the mosque premises during community events such as Eid. Such wide-ranging activities underscore the importance of economic success in establishing authority and influence in the community; congregants also regard participation in the wider life of the community as evidence of a mosque leader's flexibility and adaptability to life in the UK.

Of all the functions performed by mosques, the provision of facilities for holding Fateha gatherings has the most widespread implications for people from Afghanistan living in the UK. Fateha gatherings (mostly held on Sundays, the day of the week during which most people have free time) draw large congregations of men and often women who offer condolences to bereaved families and individuals. Attendance at such

gatherings is regarded as an important obligation amongst the kin and friendship circles of those affected by bereavement. In cases of the death of figures of political, religious and cultural authority in Afghanistan, attendance at such gatherings is often widened beyond ties of kin and friendship to include mourners on the basis of shared ethno-linguistic and political affiliation. Muslim Afghans living across the UK attended two Fateha gatherings held at a London mosque attended by one of the authors of this report, Magnus, for instance. An event marking the death of a young man who died in Taliban custody was attended by a broad cross-section of people living in Greater London, including many known for their opposition to Taliban rule. Members of several cultural organisations attended an event marking the death of several women and children who died on a boat that capsized in the Aegean during the course of seeking to relocate from Afghanistan to Europe. While the former gathering was confined to the recitation of prayers at the mosque, the latter event was organised by families who are well-established in London: they organised a feast for those who had come to pay their respects at a nearby Afghan restaurant and banqueting hall. The gathering at the banqueting hall offered an important opportunity for the families in attendance to discuss community-related activities in which they were involved.

Fateha gatherings, while religious, also fulfil broader cultural functions of the constitution and reconstitution of social relationships and extended networks. As a result, not only religiously observant Muslims attend them from Afghanistan but also by men and women in the community for whom the observance of key Islamic rituals is not a key aspect of their daily lives. Fateha gatherings thus play a critical role in the social and cultural reproduction of distinct types of community identification amongst people from Afghanistan living in the UK.[13]

Over the past decade, there has been a tendency for the Afghan congregations of mosques to be formed in relation to identification with the markers of particular ethno-linguistic groups. In London, disputes over mosque leadership, for example, resulted in a religious institution being established in West London which soon became established as a centre for the city's Dari/Farsi and Uzbek-speaking Muslims, although the management committee are keen to emphasise that the mosque is open for worship to all Muslims – Sunni and Shia – regardless of the ethno-linguistic backgrounds all attendees. Similarly, the appointment of a Pashto-speaking Imam in a newly established mosque in the Midlands has resulted in calls amongst the large Farsi-speaking community in the city for an Imam able to deliver sermons in their language. The extent to which conflicts over mosque leadership are not simply about ethno-linguistic differences but also the

[13] Compare Beatty, Charles. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese religion: An anthropological account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

expression of Islamic thought espoused by Imams and committees is unclear. Some of the mosque committees we have spoken to emphasise their commitment to the traditional forms of Hanafi Sunni Islam practice in Afghanistan. In the following section, we explore how cultural associations established by people from Afghanistan do often espouse the importance of Sufic forms of Islam to cultural heritage and identity in the country and the wider region. Yet tangible manifestations of such expressions of Islam (for example, in the form of gatherings at which God's name are recited (*zikr*)) are not publicly spoken about as being an aspect of the activities of mosques. Individual Afghan Muslims do participate in events organised by transnational movements of Sufi Islam. For example, a trader living in Birmingham originally from Kandahartold Magnus how he has attended in the city speeches given by Shaykh Nāẓim al-Qubrus, the Cyprus-based Shaykh of the al-Ḥaqqānī al-Naqshbandī Sufi order. The trader also regularly posts messages on social media that underscore his commitment to the teachings of men of knowledge and piety associated with Sufic forms of faith and worship.

Alongside Hanafi Sunni Islam, the diaspora community in the UK also comprises of Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims from Afghanistan living in the UK identify with a range of ethno-linguistic groups, but most often as either Qizilbash or Hazara. Hazaras either self-identify as Shia Muslims or are perceived as such by other Afghan ethnic communities.

A central community ritual of importance to the understanding of the religious worlds of Shia Afghans living in the UK is Muharram. This event marks the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram which is deeply significant for Shia Muslims. Muharram was the month in which the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussain, was killed (referred to within the community as his martyrdom). These days of deep religious observation consist of sermons and the remembrance of the life and legacy of Imam Hussain. They culminate in the tenth day of the month known as Ashura, which is the actual day of Imam Hussain's martyrdom. In Muslim-majority countries with substantial Shia populations, the month of Muharram is marked by religious processes and collective events. In the UK, it has become part of the visual landscape of a diverse London. Some Hazaras choose to part-take in the London Ashura event as a mark of their devotion to and reverence of Imam Hussain. However, some community members regard such overt commemorations in a secular European country as being unnecessary and potentially divisive. There are also Hazara-specific Muharram events that are held in community centres where sermons are delivered in Persian, the community's native language. Rabia has been informed that these sermons are usually delivered by Iranian scholars who are invited by local Hazara communities who collect money to cover the visitors' airfare and lodging costs. However, this practice is not supported by all community members. Rabia has spoken to individuals and groups who argue that community resources can be better utilised elsewhere given that there is an adequate supply of community intellectuals who can lead these sermons, including

Hazaras who have undertaken their religious education in Iran. In turn, Muharram marks a divergence within the UK Afghan Muslim population given the unique rituals of the Shia community, most notably among Hazaras within the Afghan context.

The relationship between religious and ethno-linguistic identity markers is important amongst the Hazara community in the UK. In one interview with a young Hazara community activist in the autumn of 2023, it was noted that there is a Hazara-run religious institution in East Anglia. It was mentioned that this organisation uses the term "Shia" in their organisation's name and does not refer to their institution with reference to the Hazara community. For this activist this was seen as problematic. Their view was that given the systemic violence against Hazaras in Afghanistan it is vital for different community organisations to engage in advocacy and raise awareness about the human rights violations against the Hazara community. However, the organisation was depicted as "abandoning" its Hazara identity and of those who run and support it, thereby neglecting issues of specific importance to Hazaras. According to this community activist, if this specific religious organisation had closer ties with the wider Hazara community and its activists, then they could have played a more positive role in the political mobilisation of Hazaras in the UK.

There are mosques run and established by Hazaras in the UK, although these are limited. According to information obtained by Rabia on social media, there are Hazara-run mosques in the towns and cities of Burton-upon-Trent, Milton Keynes, Rochester and London. However, many of her interlocutors say that because the Hazaras are a small migrant community in the UK (most estimate the size of the community being approximately 10-15,000), it is more common for Hazaras in the UK to worship at Shia mosques run by Iranians, Pakistanis and Iraqis. Furthermore, in discussing religiosity among UK Hazaras it is also important to acknowledge smaller numbers of Sunni and Ismaili Hazaras in the UK. The exact numbers of these (as other) communities are not known. In the case of Ismaili Hazaras, Rabia was informed that their number is around 2,000 in the UK, with much of the community based in London.[14] Ismaili Hazaras (like Shia Hazaras) consider Imam Hussain to be an important religious figure and do not partake in celebratory events during the first ten days of Muharram.[15] They differ, however, in regarding the Aga Khan as being a spiritual

[14] In addition to those identifying as ethnically Hazara, Afghanistan is also home to Ismaili populations in several districts of Badakhshan (notably Shughnan, Wakhan and Kuran wa Munjan), as well as in Nuristan and Kunar. Calgary is home to the largest community of Ismailis from Afghanistan outside of the country as a result of the resettlement programmes overseen by the Aga Khan Foundation.

[15] A central Ismaili space in the UK is the Ismaili Centre in London. The Ismaili Centre functions as both a religious and cultural institution for Ismailis living in the UK. The management of the Centre largely comprises Ismailis from South Asia – often identified as ethnically Khoja – whose ritual practice of the religion was historically significantly different from communities of Ismailis in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and northern Pakistan. In recent decades, however, the religious institutions of the Aga Khan have increasingly sought to homogenise the thinking and practice of the world's Ismailis. This process has resulted in tensions within the worldwide population of Ismailis. See, for example, Steinberg, Jonah. 2011. *Ismaili Modern: Globalization and Modernity in a Muslim Community*. North Carolina University Press.

leader endowed by virtue of his descent from the family of the Prophet with a unique ability to interpret Islamic texts and therefore to enable the adaptation of these to the changing contexts in which Muslims live.

Religious institutions run by Afghans in the UK are not confined to mosques, however. The UK is also home to a substantial 'Afghan Sikh' community and a smaller population of Hindus from the country. London is home to at least three gurdwaras established by Sikhs from Afghanistan, and a temple run by "Afghan Hindus". These institutions are further sub-divided on the basis of the region of origin in Afghanistan of their core congregation (Marsden 2024). gurdwaras play a central role in the community dynamics of Afghan Sikhs, both in terms of religion but also in enforcing the forms of discipline necessary to the maintenance of their collective economic activities (the vast majority of Afghan Sikhs living in the UK and beyond are engaged in wholesale and retail trade of goods imported from China and India). There is relatively little contact on a day-to-day basis between mosques and gurdwaras but Muslims and Sikhs do attend the Fatehas of people known to them from different religious backgrounds. In organisational terms, the gurdwara has been involved in organising events in collaboration with associations run by Muslims (notably celebrations marking the independence of Afghanistan from British rule). London's main gurdwara established by Afghans is also in close contact with the Embassy of Afghanistan in London, largely in relation to helping its congregants gain access to official documents required for asylum cases and other personal matters.

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Afghans of a wide range of backgrounds living in the UK have played a dynamic and varied role in establishing institutions that seek to contribute to cultural life in the UK and Afghanistan. Rather than seeking to give an overview of the whole range of cultural associations established by Afghans in the UK, this section of the report explores themes of significance to the institutional-building activities of Afghans in the field of cultural identity and preservation. These are especially important issues for many of the UK's Afghans in the context of the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Many, though not all, communities in the UK regard Taliban rule in Afghanistan as posing an existential threat to their cultural, ethno-linguistic, regional, and, in some cases, civilizational identities. As such, maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge in diasporic contexts such as the UK has been invested in with added relevance and significance.

Cultural associations established by Afghans in the UK have often demonstrated themselves to be resilient. During the course of research, Magnus interviewed the leadership of associations initially established in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example. People involved in establishing associations in that period emphasised that the needs of Afghans living in the UK were very different than is the case today. The small numbers of people living in the country and the fact that few were fluent in English upon their arrival meant

that there was a major need for associations to assist in people's day-to-day lives, for example by providing access to translators, knowledge about social services, and other forms of more general practical support. As a result, associations told us that their activities had not only changed over the years but also that there had been periods during which they were very active and others in which they were dormant. A key figure in one association, for example, told Magnus that after the death of one of the organisation's founding figures, it had seen a gradual decline over the past seven to eight years. However, the current crises in Afghanistan and the increasing numbers of people from the country living in the UK have encouraged the leadership committee to seek to relaunch the centre and ensure its relevance to contemporary issues faced by people from the country in the UK. Another woman described in similar terms the ways in which the association she had played a major role in founding had been especially active in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After she had returned to Afghanistan in order to take up a position in the government of the country, the association's activities had diminished. Upon returning to the UK after the return to power of the Taliban, the woman told Magnus that the bitter politics of Afghans in the UK had put her off relaunching her association. As a result, her organisation only played a role when there was an urgent need for it do so, for example in the context of the arrival in the UK of substantial numbers of refugees in 2021. The flexible and shifting nature of such associations plays an important role in ensuring their resilience over time.

The durability of cultural associations established in the UK also contributes to their ideological diversity and complexity. As noted above, early refugees from Afghanistan included relatively high-status and elite men and women allied to the state until the communist takeover in 1979, and, in the 1990s, former officials of the government during the years of pro-Soviet rule. Against this backdrop, people who had participated in these waves of migration established several associations in the UK, and especially in London. While occupying very different and often confrontational positions in the political landscape of Afghanistan from one another, they had nevertheless sought to co-operate, for example by working together to hold joint events and interact with local government authorities. Such associations, moreover, had also recognised the importance of their aims and goals in supporting and interacting with different waves of Afghan refugees arriving in the UK in the 2000s and after.

One of the implications of the durability of such associations is the social and political complexity of their memberships and users. For example, Magnus attended several gatherings organised by an association established by men and women who had been active members in one of the two wings of Afghanistan's communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The history of the association's entwinement with this stand of leftist politics in Afghanistan was evident in the nature of the events they organised and the speeches made at these. At the same time, however, those attending such gatherings did

not share the same ideological or political trajectories, and both older and newer arrivals in the UK were present. The political and ideological complexity of the memberships of such associations is important: besides illuminating the convening power of social institutions established in the UK, they also enable the interaction of multiple political perspectives on the country and its dynamics.

An important change in the nature of associations that have been established by Afghans living in the UK more recently has been the tendency for these to focus on particular social and cultural groups rather than the "Afghan community" per se. Sikhs from Afghanistan, for example, have established a central association specifically devoted to addressing the needs of "Afghan Sikhs". The UK's Hazara community now also have strong politically-orientated groups and connections aimed at lobbying in relation to Hazara human rights issues, which is discussed in greater detail in the 'political activism and community associations' section of this report. More broadly, however, associations increasingly embrace the agendas of particular ethno-linguistic "communities", and address in their activities particular aspects of the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, cultural and linguistic heritage is an area that is a focus of political debate and conflict. In the UK, cultural events are often inflected with political dynamics and such dynamics occupy an important role in the planning and organisation of them. Magnus attended several events organised by an association comprising largely Farsi-speaking families in the West Midlands. The association seeks to play an active role in transmitting knowledge about Persian language but also the history and tradition of northern Afghanistan to younger generations of the community. Its organisers regard such activities as being especially important in the context of a limited number of young men from northern Afghanistan living in the West Midlands, having travelled to Syria in order to join ISIS. Leading figures of the association argue the embrace of Islamist militancy by members of the community brought to their attention the need to teach younger generations about the moderate forms of Islam which are of historic importance to northern Afghanistan. One event organised by the association celebrated the Persian New Year. It was attended by at least two hundred men, women and children, many of whom were excited to see a performance by the invited guest: a renowned figure of Pashto literature and music. During his performance, the singer asked a Farsi-speaking singer to join him on stage and perform in Pashto, while he sang in Farsi. The decision to invite a singer of Pashtun ethnicity by an association largely comprising Farsi-speakers illustrates the ways in which associations seek to present themselves as being tolerant to those from the country who speak languages other than their own. At the same time, the singer's mode of performance at the events points towards the important role that cultural performers and intellectuals play in shaping debates about identity in an increasingly complex and variegated diaspora.

One association, for example, whose formal and informal events Magnus attended explicitly seeks to promote Afghanistan's Persian-language heritage. The association organises events at which speakers

address themes relating to the history of Persian in Afghanistan, have classes at which younger members of the community are taught Persian, and provides Persian texts and teaching material to communities in Afghanistan. There are several organisations and associations across the UK that provide such services to the wider community. Such associations focus their activities on the preservation of cultural identity, rather than the transmission of religious knowledge. Several, however, actively emphasise the centrality of Sufic or "mystical" forms of Islam to Afghanistan's cultural heritage, something they mark in the centres by arranging gatherings at which the Persian-language poetry of Sufic masters is recited, and naming events and rooms in the honour of such figures of their region's past.

An interesting aspect of this particular organisation's activities is the degree to which they focus not only on people from Afghanistan living in the UK but also on Farsi-speaking communities from neighbouring countries, especially Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This association and other comparable organisations, seek to emphasise their identity as Persian-speakers from a wide transregional arena not confined by the modern national boundaries of Afghanistan. Indeed, members of the association often identify themselves as being Khorasani rather than Afghan – a category they regard as an ethnonym historically used in Afghanistan to refer to Pashto-speakers. Dating to Iran's Sassanian dynasty (224-651), the term Khorasan (often translated as meaning "there where the sun rises") refers to a regional entity connecting Central and West Asia. The organisation is also informed by the political background of its founding members, many of whom were affiliated with a particular wing of the PDPA. This ideological aspect of the association is its distancing itself in events from debates relating to the role played by Islam in the cultural history of Afghanistan. Whilst this organisation focuses on the domain of culture, other associations emphasising Afghanistan's ties to Central Asia have also sought to leverage their focus on transregional culture and position themselves within the UK as being able to bridge the country's relationships with countries in Central Asia.

A cultural event of importance to the identity formations of many Afghans, but also a source of debate in Afghanistan, is that of Nawroz. Nawroz marks the Persian New Year (or spring equinox) and takes place in mid-March. While celebrated widely in Afghanistan, the Taliban government no longer sponsor events marking Nowruz in Afghanistan as they regard these as contrary to Islamic teaching and principles. In this context, Nowruz has assumed an especially important cultural and political function in Afghanistan's diaspora, especially for communities of Persian- and Uzbek-speakers. The significance of Nowruz for individuals and groups identifying with these ethno-linguistic markers is complex but reflects the festival's history in the Persianate and Turkic worlds, and the pivotal significance that sites in northern Afghanistan (especially the shrine of Ali in Mazar-e Sharif) have played in marking the spring equinox in Afghanistan.

Magnus attended an event organised by people identifying themselves as "Turkic Afghans" (*afghan-e turktabarhaa*) in London in March 2021, for example. At the event, attendees made speeches about the celebration of Nowruz in northern Afghanistan, listened to live music played on instruments important in Uzbek culture, and elected from amongst the community a woman to represent the association in the coming year. The event enabled Turkic-speaking Afghans in the UK to perform identities they regard as being distinct from those of Persian- and Pashto-speaking communities living in the country. Equally importantly, however, it also facilitated the presentation of a different image of Afghanistan from that dominant in the media, especially in the period after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, and those attending regarded this as being especially important for younger members of the audience.

In the case of diaspora Hazaras, this cultural event functions as in increasingly significant marker of identity. At a 2018 Hazara Nawroz event in Burton-Upon-Trent, in the Midlands, Rabia noted many Hazara cultural items on display, from traditional hats and dresses to damboras and paintings of Bamiyan. Most of the women in attendance at this event were wearing traditional Hazaragi outfits at the event, which consisted of mostly green or blue dresses with loose trousers and intricate silver diamond shape embroidery around the neck and chest area. A guest at the event told Rabia that historically it was common for Hazara women to wear *kuchi* (non-Hazara) dresses to formal gatherings but in recent years there has been a shift to wearing Hazaragi (an encompassing word referring to various aspects of Hazara culture) clothes. Furthermore, a Hazara folk musician performed in the Hazaragi dialect of Persian at the event while playing the dambora. The dambora, a stringed, wooden instrument, is now seen as a symbol of Hazara culture and identity. "Hazara culture" was on full display at the event and it mirrors the wider shift that has taken place in the community with regard to community consciousness and visibility. The historic marginality Hazaras have suffered in Afghanistan is not the only way the community is choosing to frame its identity and heritage in modern times. Although this is present in the political domain, from a cultural perspective the gains of Hazaras in Afghanistan in post-2001 Afghanistan have transnational value and this can be seen in the burgeoning community confidence and shift from Hazara culture not being so visibly celebrated to it being the focus of a community event centred on a transregional cultural celebration, such as Nawroz. Various ethno-linguistic communities of Afghan background in London deploy the celebration of Nowruz as offering a vehicle that enables them to challenge simplifying images of Afghanistan and instead mark identity in a manner that reflects their own histories and cultures.

Another notable community event to unpack in this discussion of the cultural associations of Afghans in the UK is the annual British Hazara Awards. This event was inaugurated in 2022. On the event's website, it is stated that:

> [The] Majority of the British Hazara community members are first- or second-generation immigrants and are quite isolated as a community. New initiatives are required for the Hazara communities to engage the members with the wider society and help with the integration of these communities. The British-Hazara youth and professional community are doing exceptionally well, and it has never been so important to appreciate their hard work and to encourage the future generation to continue to do well and to contribute to the society in a positive manner.[16]

The event has been well-received by Hazaras as it seeks to spotlight the many achievements within the diaspora over the last few years. This event is particular given its focus on the Hazara community rather than the community achievements of Afghans in the diaspora more generally. Intentional or otherwise, the events highlights the importance of ethnicity to collective forms of identity in the diaspora. Many people from within and beyond the Hazara community have told Rabia that the 'Afghan' community in the UK is deeply fragmented on ethnic lines, more so than in many other European countries. Against this backdrop, it is intriguing to witness the establishment of a diaspora event that explicitly seeks to promote the achievements of a particular segment of the 'Afghan' community in the country.

Rabia attended the second British Hazara Awards in 2023. She was informed that the interest and turnout for the 2023 award ceremony was higher than in 2022, the year in which the initiative was established. In the opening speech of the ceremony, one of the event hosts, Dr. Homira Rezai, mentioned the resilience, capability and achievements of the Hazara community. The event honoured outstanding Hazaras, and non-Hazaras who have worked with the community, across various fields from Sports, Journalism, Education, Art and Human Rights. One striking aspect of this event was the visibility of the 'Hazaristan' flag. This flag was created in the diaspora by Hazara poet and activist Kamran Mir Hazar. It consists of horizontal stripes, which are blue, white and yellow in colour. The majority of attendees were traditional Hazaragi outfits. Similar to the 2018 Nawroz event mentioned earlier, the women's outfits consisted of long dresses and trousers in bright colours with silver embroidery or paisley patterns. Some women also wore ornate metal headdresses and necklaces, while some men wore patterned waistcoats with intricate thread detail and Hazara embroidered hats. The Hazara dambora and Hazaragi music was also a distinctive feature of the event with performances by Rauf Sarkhosh, Elaha Soroor and Asif Karimi. The Hazara Committee UK released an article after the event where it was stated that '[The musical] performances served as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage that the Hazara community has cherished and passed down through generations'.[17] Thus highlighting the importance of maintaining the community's distinct culture in the

[16] See: www.hazaracommittee.co.uk/events-1/british-hazara-awards.
[17] See: www.hazaracommittee.co.uk/post/the-prestigious-hazara-awards-recognise-outstanding-achievements-in-the-united-kingdom.

diaspora.

Another type of community event of importance to many cultural associations founded by Afghans in the UK that has both cultural and political dimensions are gatherings organised to commemorate the death anniversaries of figures regarded as being of importance to the political and cultural life of particular communities. In the final section of the report, we discuss the ways in which groups identifying themselves as 'Tajik' organise themselves to mark the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a commander who was killed by the Taliban in 2001. We now explore the importance of the annual Baba Mazari commemoration for Hazaras living in the UK.

This event commemorates the death anniversary, usually referred to as the martyrdom, of Abdul Ali Mazari in March of each year. Mazari was a religious cleric who later became a political activist. His political movement the *Hezb-e Wahdat* (Unity Party) was established in the 1980s and he was involved in Hazara politics until his death in 1995. Mazari is an important political figure within the community as he sought to promote equality and justice for Hazaras in Afghanistan. He is noted for having said that 'being Hazara should not be a crime'. This quote exemplifies the fact that for most of their history in modern Afghanistan, Hazaras were subjugated and were at the bottom of the country's social hierarchy. Hazaras were perceived negatively by other ethnic communities and seen as the slave or labourer class. Mazari sought to change this perception and the discrimination Hazaras faced. However, his advocacy was cut short as he was killed by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, his message has still been preserved almost three decades after his death.

In recent years, the annual Mazari commemorations have taken on a greater significance given the return of the Taliban. These annual events are held world-over including in the UK. Diaspora Hazaras organise commemorative events to not only remember Mazari's legacy but to educate attendees about the community, their history and Mazari's political ideology. Speakers at these events include both community activists and researchers. In the past, these were one-off events, but through online social media activism, Mazari is remembered beyond March. It is now easy to locate videos about Mazari on YouTube. Rabia was also informed that there is a Persian-language book compilation of Mazari's speeches. Multiple acquaintances have stated that they hope the book will eventually be published in English so it can reach a wider audience.[18] Although Mazari was a political figure, he has had a profound cultural impact within the

[18] Similar dynamics are evident in the engagement by diasporic Afghans with other figures from the country, including past presidents (notably Najibullah Ahmadzai, Babrak Karmal, and Buranhuddin Rabbani) and figures celebrated by particular ethnic communities such as Ahmad Shah Massoud.

Hazara community. In many conversations with Hazara research participants, acquaintances and friends it has been relayed to Rabia that Mazari's advocacy had a deep impact on community consciousness. He was the first major political figure, they say, who proudly asserted that he was Hazara. This was a significant gesture given the historic marginalisation of Hazaras and the internal self-loathing that permeated within certain segments of the community with regard to their ethnic identity. However, the reverence of Mazari comes at a cost. Afghans of other ethnic communities are critical of Mazari given that he led an armed faction during Afghanistan's civil war in the country. This is an issue of contention between Hazaras and non-Hazaras. A common response to this criticism is that Mazari was one of many political leaders who fought during the civil war and he did so to protect his community. Some other prominent armed groups at the time were also exclusively mono-ethnic but it is claimed that Mazari never sought for *Hezb-e Wahdat* to be exclusive and was open to other ethnicities. The criticism of Mazari during the civil war is seen as a ploy to undermine Hazara struggles and disproportionately blame their community for a political event that had actors from all communities involved. Diaspora associations representing a range of "groups" defined in relation to their ethno-linguistic identity are engaged in comparable debates about the role played by figures venerated in the community in violent conflict in Afghanistan.

By no means do all social and cultural associations established by Afghans in the UK seek to promote or engage with ethnic agendas or promote one such agenda to the exclusion of others. An influential leader of one association told Magnus, for example, that he actively sought to promote the inclusion of people from across Afghanistan's "mosaic" society in the activities he organised. According to this leader, the openness of the association with which he was involved reflected the personal histories of its founding members, men and women who had moved to a city in the UK during the same period. While they all came from different backgrounds in Afghanistan, they formed informal friendships and social institutions with one another in the particular context to which they had moved. The leader explained the durability of these social relationships in terms of the overall aims and ambitions of the association: to promote the building of relationships with different migrant and refugee communities in the city in which it was based, as well as with national and local politicians and associations residing there. The external orientation of the association, he argued, meant that it focused as much on building relationships with those outside of the community as much as emphasising distinctions within it. Importantly, the association did pursue agendas that held a powerful ethno-linguistic component, yet in a manner that enabled individuals and groups to include or exclude themselves in a manner that reflected their own political and cultural orientations.

Other associations reject ethnic agendas on political and ideological grounds. For instance, an association in Greater London initially established by figures who were active in one wing of the PDPA in the 1980s comprises a membership that is cut across ethnic, regional and religious identity markers. The events

organised by this association also seek to be inclusive in terms of language, ensuring that speeches are made in both of Afghanistan's official languages, Dari/Farsi and Pashto. Magnus attended events organised by this association that emphasised the dual linguistic emphasises of its membership base.

The role played by so-called "ethnic identity" is a critical aspect of the way in which many newer associations present themselves and in the ways in which they are perceived by people in the community more broadly. At first sight, it is easy to assume that cultural associations established by people from Afghanistan in the UK are organised above all else in relation to "ethnic" identity. Across the UK, cultural associations expend their efforts into raising issues affecting particular ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Such events take a variety of forms, from the holding of cultural gatherings to events that commemorate the lives of political figures in Afghanistan who are associated with various ethno-linguistic groups to organising conferences that promote the importance of one or other of the country's languages. Intellectual activists associated with associations often also publish books and articles that focus on the achievements of particular ethnic groups as well as the injustices they have faced as a result of the policies of successive governments in Afghanistan. The names of associations involved in such activities often reflect the ethno-linguistic base of their memberships.

There are, however, reasons to be cautious in assuming that the basis upon which such groups adhere and organise is shared "ethnic identity". Most importantly, the assumption that "ethnic" identity determines such associations overlooks the significance of regional background in the social, political and cultural dynamics of people living in the UK. The memberships of associations promoting one or another ethno-linguistic agenda for example often largely comprise people identifying themselves as being from particular regions of Afghanistan. An association active in the West Midlands for example often organises social gatherings related to the cultural history of Farsi-speakers in Afghanistan. Yet the association predominantly identifies itself in relation to two provinces in the north of the country with relatively little participation by Farsi-speaking individuals and families from other parts of Afghanistan. The dangers of assuming that ethnic identity is the inevitable foundation of the cultural associations established by people from Afghanistan in the UK is also revealed in the competition between associations promoting comparable ethnic and cultural agendas. The degree of competition reveals the power and significance of the career ambitions of particular individuals, families and friendship groups. Finally, what is also evident from this discussion of the cultural activities of associations established by Afghans in the UK is the broad commonalities evident in their concerns and activities. Many of the associations are driven to organised events as a result of a concern of the lack of visibility and political recognition of their community in discussions of Afghanistan. Associations actively seek to address this lack of visibility by way of events marking key events, figures, and cultural forms.

While associations promote divergent forms of "ethno-linguistic" identity, they converge in terms of their broader goals of increasing the visibility and recognition of their communities in the UK, amongst diverse diasporic communities of Afghans, and in political debate in Afghanistan itself.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

Playing an active role in the political life of Afghan communities in the UK and Afghanistan itself are important aspects of the day-to-day lives of people from the country in the UK. Over the past decade, Afghans living in the country have become actively involved in the local and national politics of the UK, joining major parties and standing for election in local council elections. This section goes beyond the participation of individuals in UK politics and explores, instead, a range of issues of importance for the political activities of the UK's Afghans, as well as the role played by social institutions forged by people from the country. Building on the previous section, it extends on the points made above about the need to question the extent to which it is always helpful to consider ethnic politics as inevitably central to the range of projects important to people in the country. We suggest that if the language of political action is framed in relationship to concepts of ethno-linguistic identity and cultural civilisations, the concerns this language addresses is Afghanistan's fraught and regularly violated sovereignty.

The period following the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021 saw an unprecedented increase in the public mobilisation of individuals, communities, and organisations identifying themselves as being from Afghanistan in the UK. In the immediate aftermath of August 2021, a series of protest marches were organised by groups and individuals in London to oppose Taliban rule. Hundreds of people attended these protests, often from areas of Afghanistan involved in the historic resistance to the Taliban. The focus of such gatherings included not only denouncing the Taliban but also the government of Pakistan, widely assumed by many attending such gatherings as having supported the Taliban. Attendees at the marches used a range of symbols, including the flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but also the flag used by the anti-Taliban resistance movement during the 1990s. Alongside the ubiquity of images of the ethnically Tajik and Farsi-speaking Mujahedin commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud (d. 2001), and the loud playing of songs written to commemorate this and other leaders' role in the resistance against the Taliban, the widespread use of this flag signalled the degree to which those attending such marches identified with the 1990 anti-Taliban resistance struggle. In the months following the return to power of the Taliban, protests have been regularly organised by people and associations connected to Afghanistan.

Such protests have increasingly focused on issues relating to the rights of women in Afghanistan. Activists have sought to shift debates about the restrictions placed on women in Afghanistan by the Taliban rule from

a focus on the extent to which these are or are not a reflection of Afghanistan's cultural norms to an international human rights framework.[19] After 2021, activists have increasingly referred to the Taliban's policies about women as representing a form of 'gender apartheid'. Protests have also increasingly been organised by women from Afghanistan associated with the previous government who sought refuge in the UK in 2021. A protest march organised in 2022, for instance, marked the launch of an association established by female politicians from Afghanistan living in the UK. The politicians displayed their relationships with parliamentarians in the UK by inviting several prominent women to speak at the protest. In addition, human's rights activist Malala Yusufzai also addressed the gathering. The nature of such gatherings and the range of people involved in them illustrate the increasingly diverse nature of the activist networks and the efforts they are making to increase public awareness about the situation facing women in Afghanistan.

These protest marches reveal several aspects of the dynamics of the political mobilisation of people from Afghanistan in the UK. First, there are intense debates amongst communities in the UK about the country's identity, indexed in such protests by choices over which flag to use. The use of the resistance flag by protestors at such events signalled not merely historic opposition to the Taliban, but also to dominant narratives concerning the country's history and culture. The flag of Afghanistan's resistance movement is widely regarded as signalling opposition to what is perceived as the domination of the state structure by the country's Pashtun elite. For such protests and the associations that support them, such domination is embedded in the country's modern history. Men and women active in the development of this politics argue that the very term "Afghanistan" and the national identity category 'Afghan' illustrate the political domination of Pashtuns, arguing the term "Afghan" is an ethnonym used in the country to refer to Pashto speakers. For proponents of these ideas, standardised narratives of "Afghan" history and culture have side-lined the place of the country's non-Pashtuns citizens. As a result, many such activists vocally call for people from the country to be identified as 'Afghanistani' rather than "Afghan", arguing the former term identifies a shared form of citizenship, not a narrow ethnic, linguistic or cultural identity. As we have seen, some people argue furthermore that the very term Afghanistan should be replaced in favour of a geographical category that better reflects the country's plural society and culture, Khorasan. Various associations in the UK play an active role in discussing and disseminating such ideas, often in the form of events, but also by way of social media activities. One activist, for instance, has established an entity he refers to as the "United States of Khorasan", which he promotes through recorded and live speeches delivered on multiple social media pages.

[19] Compare Abu-Lughod, L. 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The most simplistic way of framing such ideas, activities and the institutions with which they are associated is as an extension of the ethnic politics of Afghanistan. Support for such ideas are, indeed, most commonplace amongst Farsi-speaking ethnic "Tajiks" as well as Hazaras and Uzbek-speaking communities. The problem, however, of analysing such activities solely in relation to the category of ethnicity is that doing so diverts attention from the common features of such movements and organisations. Movements connected with different ethno-linguistic groups and leaderships have raised similar arguments, be they in relationship to older territorial concepts (such as Pashtunistan) or newer ones (including the notions of Hazaristan and Khorasan discussed above). This thematic continuity points to issues shared across the political spectrum that are not helpfully analysed solely as arising out of ethno-linguistic differentiation. We suggest that all these movements are helpfully conceptualised as attempts by people in the diaspora to address their experiences of Afghanistan's contested sovereignty, carve out spaces of cultural recognition and political legibility, and create a space in the world for Afghanistan and its citizens. While divergent in terms of the "identities" they seek to construct and inculcate, the forms of activism important within Afghanistan's diverse diaspora are informed by a broad desire by individuals and communities to gain a sense over control over their lives.[20]

Having presented the political ideologies important to various diasporic communities, it is important to note that the events of August 2021 had a profound impact on the nature of political activism in the diaspora. Such change is especially evident in the language used by diaspora activists and the forms of connections they have sought to establish in relation to their activities. Since 2021, the Hazara diaspora in the UK has established stronger ties with British parliamentarians who have spoken about the issue of the violations of the human rights of Hazaras in Afghanistan since the Taliban return, including Paul Bristow and Andrew Mitchell. A new defining factor of this diaspora activism is the language utilised to describe violations against Hazaras. In the early 2010s when Rabia was getting acquainted with Hazara activists in London it was very common for targeted attacks against the community both in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan to be referred to as "massacres". However, in the last couple of years, especially since 2021, crimes against Hazaras are routinely referred to as acts of "genocide".[21] In many community events and webinars, alongside online campaigns, it is common for targeted attacks against the community to be referred to as genocide. This is mostly in reference to ISIS attacks against Hazaras in west Kabul, especially the Hazara majority area of Dasht-e Barchi. Although, it should be noted that some community members believe these

[20] See, Reeves, M., & Bryant, R. (2021). *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

[21] The term genocide is also widely used by activists who identify themselves as Tajik and regard the Taliban as having targeted people of this background in Afghanistan.

attacks are in fact carried out by the Taliban and not ISIS. Since 2016, Hazara tuition centres, sports facilities and religious gatherings have been targeted in west Kabul. Since the return of the Taliban there have been two major attacks in Barchi, one against a boy's school in April 2022 killing several students and one against a female tuition centre which killed around sixty Hazara girls. The common feature of these attacks is that they seek to target Hazara civilians in every aspect of their daily lives. Hence it is now common to see these attacks being referred to as a genocide. In relation to online activism, there is now a #StopHazaraGenocide hashtag on Twitter which is very often used when raising awareness of human rights violations against Hazaras, especially recent targeted attacks. But this is not an online phenomenon only.

In the last few years, Rabia has noticed this language used in conferences about the precarity of Hazaras. Hazara friends and acquaintances who previously referred to Hazara targeted attacks as "massacres" now refer to these same attacks as a "genocide". Public demonstrations also utilise this language through their posters. However, it should be noted that the focus on Hazara targeted attacks and the use of the term genocide is perceived as contentious by some people. Even prior to 2021, it was common online for non-Hazara Afghans to challenge what they regarded as being the particularism of Hazara activists' focus on violations of their community's human rights. A common criticism of diaspora Hazara activism was that, in focusing solely on Hazaras, violence against other communities in Afghanistan is ignored or not acknowledged. Furthermore, such activism was also seen as an attack on "Afghan unity". However, these retorts were not welcome by Hazara activists who highlighted that attacks against Hazaras are purely on the basis of the community's ethnic identity, and also religion, which, they argued, is not a feature of attacks on other communities in Afghanistan. As a result, the urgency and need to campaign to raise awareness about the human rights of Hazaras. In the UK, a very active community political organisation is the Hazara Committee UK, formerly the Hazara Council of Great Britain. The organisation was established in 2013. On its 'about us' page it is stated that the "Hazara Committee in UK represent Hazaras in Great Britain and are advocate of Hazara rights around the world. HCUK aims to address the real challenges Hazaras are facing in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to provide clarity on the situation of Hazara people in these countries"[22] In recent years the organisation has organised demonstrations and seminars, as well as parliamentary events. More broadly, in 2022 through the advocacy of many British Hazaras, the 'Afghanistan inquiry' was launched at the UK parliament. The inquiry team includes Lord Alton of Liverpool, Baroness Helena Kennedy QC and Chris Law MP. Given its origin as a community mobilisation in the wake of a series of attacks against Hazaras, this is a major initiative. The initiative has brought together members of the diaspora, politicians and lawyers and resulted in several events in Parliament concerning the persecution of Hazaras in

[22] See: www.hazaracommittee.co.uk/about-us.

Afghanistan and Pakistan.[23]

An interesting feature of Hazara political activism in the diaspora is the sense of unity that is both perceived within and externally. Hazara political mobilisation is generally seen to be a success or more effective from the outside, even if observers disagree with the framing or political orientation of this activism. Over several years, both Rabia and Magnus have encountered the idea that Hazaras are especially effective in the field of community mobilisation in comparison to the activities of other ethno-linguistic communities. At an event organised by Tajik activists in London that Magnus attended, an activist lamented that while Hazaras travel as far as Belgium to attend events, it was hard to even persuade members of the Tajik community to visit central London. Such perceptions arise as a result of the transnational connections, lobbying and persuasive social media engagement and campaigns of diaspora Hazaras. Diaspora Hazaras have also stated that although there is internal fragmentation within the community in relation to secular and religious Hazaras and the means of political mobilisation, the community is resolutely united when it comes to raising awareness of the Hazara genocide. It has been mentioned that local political issues in the diaspora cannot and should not hamper diaspora support for Hazaras in Afghanistan given the urgency of this issue. Hence the unified front which is presented in relation to the continued human rights violations of Hazaras. Since 2021, there are many discussions within the Hazara community as to how to engage in pragmatic activism and what the outcomes of such activism should be. For some activists, there is a genuine belief that the Taliban will be in power for the foreseeable future, so the most pressing issue is financial aid and assistance for Hazaras in Afghanistan. There are currently multiple campaigns in Europe and North America set up by diaspora Hazaras where funds are raised to help poor Hazara families in Afghanistan. Photos are shared on social media to show how the funds have been spent in terms of items purchased for the families. These appeals are more pressing in the winter when the weather also has a severe impact on poorer community members.

Other diaspora activism has been in the form of lobbying and engaging with politicians in the West to see what the governments in diaspora communities can effectively do to assist Hazaras in Afghanistan. As noted earlier, this has resulted in events in parliament but also interventions at parliamentary hearings and meetings during which senior ministers have been questioned as to what they will or are doing to assist Hazaras. However, apart from these engagements raising awareness about the plight of Hazaras in Afghanistan, there have been no tangible outcomes from these interactions yet. Another area that has also

[23] Other ethno-linguistic groups have also organised such events in the Houses of Commons, suggesting, perhaps that Hazara modes of activism have increasingly become a model regarded of emulation in the wider community.

not led to fruitful outcomes is the advocacy to have Hazaras recognised as a vulnerable group for refugee resettlement in the West since 2021. There have been sessions at the international level with Hazara activists, mostly notably in the UK context with Dr. Homira Rezai, the Chairperson of the Hazara Committee UK at the UN in Geneva. So even though, since the return of the Taliban there are no concrete pledges from the international community to assist Hazaras in Afghanistan, there is now diaspora engagement with important institutions and greater visibility of the "Hazara cause" in the international arena.

The international engagement of the Hazara diaspora seems to be the most effective new advocacy mechanism that the community is engaged in at present. This has been growing in momentum since the events of 2021. Alongside the aforementioned engagement with British parliamentarians and the UN, contact has been established with both the Canadian and Australian parliaments as well. Transnational solidarity is a key aspect of Hazara political mobilisation. Local organisations and activists utilise tactics and skills which appear to be effective in different national contexts and work to apply them in their own. The UK political engagement which has seen politicians discuss the Hazara cause in parliament and organise events with diaspora activists is seen as an important first step in raising more awareness about attacks and human rights violations against Hazaras. A central aspect of this advocacy is to gain support for the recognition of the "Hazara genocide" referring to both historic massacres against Hazaras in the late 19th Century and targeted attacks against the community in Kabul, most notably since 2015. This is seen as an issue of great significance and urgency given the multiple attacks that have taken place against Hazaras in Afghanistan in the past several years and since the Taliban's return to power. However, it is acknowledged that this is a long-term aim that will not be achieved quickly. But the momentum built since 2021 should continue regardless of the time it will take for Hazara advocacy efforts to gain wider support, given the continued marginalisation of Hazaras in Afghanistan.

The political activities of the UK's Afghan diaspora have become increasing visible and organised over the past decade and more. A key feature of activist organisation is their increasing tendency to mobilise support in relation to the causes of particular ethno-linguistic causes. At the same time, however, political organisations involved in activism often share similar overall aims and goals. Many of these revolve around what they perceive as being the need to challenge past and present injustice and gain recognition and legibility for particular communities and groups. More broadly, through their activities, activists from Afghanistan in the UK seek to gain a recognised place in the world for their country and its citizens.

TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Transnational institutions are now plentiful among the Afghan diaspora. Given globalisation and communication in the digital age there is now not always a strong reliance on physical institutions such as

community spaces or places of religious worship. Diaspora associations in the UK have forged close relationships with organisations established by Afghans living in the diaspora elsewhere, especially in Germany and the Netherlands. Events organised by associations regularly invite people to speak at the events they organise in the UK. Associations have also established ties with international advocacy organisations. London's Afghan Sikh community has collaborated closely in campaigns with the worldwide Sikh advocacy movement, Global Sikhs.

In what follows, however, we focus on the increasingly intertwined relationship between diaspora advocacy, academia, and the UK's national political institutions. A complaint made by many diasporic people from Afghanistan living in the UK is that their communities have been unable to "lobby" for the causes that matter to them in the UK parliament. A way in which many are seeking to address this perceived lacunae is by forging relationships with academics and established politicians. There are now ample examples of seminars and conferences in which human rights violations against particular groups and communities are discussed at academic institutions with researchers who work on the community both in Afghanistan and the diaspora. A particularly interesting trend in the transnational activities of diaspora associations is growing connections between activists and academics.

Magnus has attended a series of conferences organised in British universities that have sought to bring attention to the human rights issues facing Tajiks in Afghanistan. Panels organised at conferences such as these often combine an emphasis on regional history, the role of figures of power and authority, and forms of political exclusion argued as being an aspect of Afghanistan's modern history. One such event is the Ahmad Shah Massoud conference that was held in 2021 and 2022 in Cambridge. It was organised by activist-intellectuals from Afghanistan who collaborated with academics in the UK and beyond. The conference was supported by diaspora organisations and universities, and attended by international speakers from across the realms of academia, policy and diplomacy, and diaspora activism.

International connections between academia and diaspora activists are also evident in the Hazara diaspora. Rabia has encountered online posters advertising academic events about Hazara massacres and the 'genocide' with scholars and academics who have conducted research with the community such as Niamatullah Ibrahimi, Farkhondeh Akbari and Melissa Chiovenda. In many instances, these are hybrid events which allow for virtual attendance for those who cannot be present at the event venue. For example, it is now very common to see multiple seminars take place to mark "Hazara Black Day" which is annually commemorated on the 25th of September. Rabia was invited to speak at one of these events virtually in September 2023 for an audience at a university in India, which comprised of both Hazara and Indian students. Thus, the aim of such an event is not only to remember and commemorate past injustices against

Hazaras but also to educate and inform non-Hazaras about the historic and current violence inflicted on the community.

Another significant event which also took place in September 2023 was the "Afghanistan International Annual Human Rights Conference" which was held at the University of Turin in Italy. This academic conference focused on the "Hazara genocide" and had speakers who were involved in politics, academia and advocacy, both Hazara and non-Hazara. It was announced this would be the first of an annual Hazara-related conference to be held every year. At the time of writing this report, Rabia has been informed that the 2024 conference will most likely be held in Paris, France. Since the return of the Taliban to power it is more common to see the Hazara diaspora widen their engagement with regard to their advocacy. Not only are demonstrations and political activities held to raise awareness about the community precarity in Afghanistan, but as the aforementioned conference shows there is now growing engagement with academics and policymakers with the aim to widen the reach of community activism and broaden solidarity for the Hazara cause in both Europe and elsewhere.

Transnational institutions are also evident among the Hazara diaspora. Some of these organisations include the World Hazara Council, the Bamyan Foundation and the Hazara Resource Platform. These institutions have multiple functions. These functions vary but also include advocacy and activism alongside raising funds for vulnerable and poverty-stricken Hazaras in Afghanistan. The World Hazara Council was established in 2013. On the organisation's website it is stated that "The World Hazara Council is a civil, social, cultural and non-profit organization working for the rights and development of Hazara society around the world".[24] It has hosted multiple conferences across Europe, alongside community events in North America. The organisation has a very active website where regular information about the community and issues pertaining to human rights are shared, such as the "Stop Hazara Genocide" campaign, the humanitarian crisis in the northern Balkhab district in Afghanistan and targeted attacks against the community. Additionally, the World Hazara Council passed a resolution in support of the "Stop Hazara Genocide" campaign in 2022 which was shared on their website. The Bamyan Foundation is a "registered non-profit" in Washington DC and is primarily focused on aid programmes to help Hazaras in Afghanistan. On their homepage, a number of campaigns are listed including one titled "Support Victims of Terrorist Attacks, IDPs and Refugees" and another titled "Support Afghan Refugees in the United States".[25] The organisation's website mentions that Hazaras are an ethnic and religious group from Afghanistan who are at an "increased risk of genocide in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan". The organisation has an active social media presence. As a result, their aid campaigns have a wide reach and are routinely shared outside the US.

[24] See: www.worldhazaracouncil.org/.
[25] See: www.bamyanfoundation.org/.

The Hazara Resource Platform is a new initiative within the community. The Hazara Resource Platform is also a non-profit organisation that is registered in the US. Volunteers based in numerous countries run the organisation. Its main function is to be a "centralized reliable resource" site.[26] Rabia has attended a number of meetings with the co-founders of the organisation. During the meetings, she was informed that documentation is a core issue for the Hazara community and there is an urgent need to document authentic sources about targeted attacks against the community. This will in turn assist with advocacy campaigns for Hazara human rights causes worldwide. In recent years there have been discussions about the need for trusted sources of information regarding targeted attacks against Hazaras. A widespread critique that has been relayed to Rabia and is also present on Hazara social media is the issue of accurate reporting. As previously mentioned, since 2015 there has been an increase in targeted attacks on Hazaras in west Kabul. However, many of the English-language reports about these attacks refer to the victims as "Shia" and not "Hazara". This means that these sources of information routinely omit the ethnic identity of the victims. Therefore, Hazaras in the diaspora feel that this omission means that awareness of Hazara vulnerability is diminished and that international audiences are left uninformed about the community's situation in Afghanistan. Hence the need for reliable documentation initiatives initiated by the Hazara community. Domestically, in the UK, the most active community institution is the aforementioned Hazara Committee UK.

Online advocacy plays an important role in the activities of multiple diaspora communities from Afghanistan. In the Hazara context, the internet and social media have been used for political mobilisation for several years. Although online activism is not unique to the Hazara community, it has been an extremely effective tool for transnational political mobilisation. As noted earlier, the #StopHazaraGenocide hashtag is now a popular hashtag on Twitter, which is used in the aftermath of targeted attacks on Hazaras in Afghanistan. It has become a means to raise awareness about the Hazara community and their vulnerability in Afghanistan. Articles have even been written about the hashtag and its reach. In October 2022 Khaama Press stated that the hashtag had been used ten million times after an attack on a Hazara girls' education centre in Dasht-e Barchi, Kabul.[27] Similarly, social media has seen coordinated Twitter campaigns after targeted attacks. For example, one common aspect of online Hazara activism is what is known as a "Twitter storm". This is when a particular issue is regularly tweeted about in order to garner greater attention for a given cause. These Twitter storms are very common in online Hazara activism. A specific date is chosen and corresponding time zones globally so an exclusively Hazara issue can be tweeted about continually. Twitter is also a transnational space where information about Hazara protests and seminars are routinely shared. It creates a transnational solidarity network as people can either physically join these demonstrations, share

[26] See: https://hazararp.org/.
[27] See: www.khaama.com/afghan-twitter-campaign-stophazaragenocide-reaches-10-million-tweets-78767/.

the information within their personal networks or use the platform to share Hazara-related resources. So not only is the online domain important for advocacy and activism, but it is also an important tool in preserving community history and memory.

It is now common to see English-language websites and social media pages about Hazara history, culture and politics. These are considered to be important sites of knowledge and complement diasporic activism as they allow for a marginalised history to be preserved. Hazara websites document transnational community activism but they also share information about the community's past, which centres around persecution. The content of these websites, such as Hazara.net and Hazara International, help in explaining why the Hazara community perceives its current marginalisation as continued oppression, which no Afghan regime has sought to sincerely denounce or end. Therefore, in online Hazara advocacy, it is common to see references to historic violence when highlighting current massacres and the community's vulnerability since the return of the Taliban. However, attempts to raise awareness about this violence are not always met with sympathy and support. Some responses to Hazara grievances online can be very vicious and toxic. This further exacerbates tensions with the Afghan diaspora, including in the UK. As a result, not only does diasporic Hazara advocacy work to educate and inform non-Afghans about the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan, but for some community members it is also important for other ethnic communities to understand the vulnerability of Hazaras. The activists consider raising awareness amongst Afghans within and outside of the country about their experiences as crucial to attempts to forge a lasting and sustainable peace.

CONCLUSION

This report has sought to bring attention to the forms of institution building important to people from Afghanistan living in the UK. We have illuminated some aspects of the vast range of formal and informal institutions that play a role in the lives of Afghans living in the UK, across the domains of economy, religion, cultural and political activism. By focusing on the institutions established by Afghans in the UK rather than dwelling on identity or the "fragmented" nature of the "community", we hope to have illustrated the complexity, vibrancy, and agentive nature of their presence in the UK.

More broadly, while recognising the degree to which ethnic identity and consciousness occupies a powerful and important aspect of the identity formations of Afghans in the UK, we have also sought to go beyond the lens of ethnicity in our analyses of these complex phenomena. Above all, we have suggested that underlying the emphasis placed by many community associations and activities on ethnic identity reflects an underlying desire to address what many Afghans living in the UK regard as being their lack of voice in representations of their country. Across a range of different fields of life, people from Afghanistan living in

the UK have sought to present knowledge, images, and understandings of the country that reflect their own perspectives, experiences, political positions and viewpoints. They have done so, for example, in constructing particular types of religious organisations and cultural associations, by engaging with politicians, local media, and academics, and by establishing a thriving and active business community that plays a role in supporting cultural activities and charitable giving. Investing their individual and collective energies in projects seeking to transform dominant images of Afghanistan has enabled people from a wide range of backgrounds to actively challenge the simplistic and negative images of Afghanistan that continue to pass as knowledge about the country in media, academia and government in the UK. Playing a role in such activities has also enabled those involved to attempt to gain "recognition and political legibility" and by doing so "gain a sense of control over their lives".[28]

RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNITY COHESION: Attempts made by UK government departments (such as the FCDO) to promote interactions between diversely positioned community associations established by people from Afghanistan in the UK should be enhanced. Activities with the aim of promoting cohesion should more clearly identify over-arching themes of importance to a multiplicity of diaspora organisations. More emphasis should also be placed on ensuring the participation of organisations who are active outside of the Greater London area.

CULTURAL AWARENESS: Councils and other relevant bodies should improve cultural awareness training in cooperation with inputs by people from Afghanistan. Cultural awareness training should focus in particular on the forms of diversity inherent within Afghanistan and the country's diaspora. Cultural training awareness should directly address and challenge simplistic portrayals of Afghanistan, its people and culture in the media, government departments, academia, and elsewhere. Councils should pay attention to the ways in which particular communities have clustered in specific neighbourhoods and areas with the aim of understanding the long-term ramifications of this in terms of preferences for residency and access to housing.

REVIEWS: National and local governments should review the settlement of refugees from Afghanistan post-2021. Reviews should assess the ongoing implications of hotel residency for families from Afghanistan, the degree of disturbance caused to the education of children by abrupt movements between hotels and temporary and longer-term accommodation, and the types of support networks in place for families in the settings to which they have moved. The review should also assess the ongoing needs of new arrivals to the UK, including but not limited to the provision of English language training.

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[28] Reeves, M., & Bryant, R. (2021). *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

LABOUR MARKET: Provisions should be made for career advice, mentoring, and work placements, especially for recently arrived refugees from Afghanistan. Afghan associations in collaboration with local government should make such provisions.

REPRESENTATIONS OF AFGHANISTAN: The state of public knowledge about Afghanistan in the UK remains limited. After August 2021, representations of the country and the diaspora in the UK have become increasingly narrow. Against this backdrop, there should be a redoubling of efforts by cultural and academic institutions at the local and national levels to promote nuanced images of and knowledge about Afghanistan, its people, history and cultures. Such efforts should involve relevant Afghan individuals and organisations. There should also be more discussion of the positive contributions of Afghans to life in the UK.

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS: Training sessions offering guidance about UK labour laws, expectations about behaviour in the workplace, and policies related to discrimination and harassment on the basis of protected characteristics should be advertised to community associations who should be actively encouraged to attend such sessions. In order to promote inter-community cohesion and best practice, relationships between Afghan and non-Afghan community organisations should be encouraged and where possible facilitated by local government departments. Organisations identify the need for training in proposal writing and project management - local governments should organise more sessions on these skills and proactively encourage attendance. Local governments in partnership with universities and colleges could also develop schemes to enable graduate students to support these aspects of the activities of associations.

INCLUSIVITY: Community associations established by people from Afghanistan should be as inclusive as possible in terms of their events and activities. The emphasis associations placed upon preserving and maintaining heritage should be balanced with a renewed focus on issues including but not limited to access to health, education, and employment.

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