

Revisiting Afghanistan

an interview with Dr. Zaher Wahab



Following is the transcript of a second interview with Dr. Zaher Wahab, conducted by OPEN SPACES board member David Savage and editor Penny Harrison upon Dr. Wahab's return to the United States from Afghanistan. Our original interview with Dr. Wahab was published in 2002 in Volume 5, Issue 1 of OPEN SPACES. Dr. Wahab is a Professor of Education in the Graduate School at Lewis & Clark College. He was invited by the Minister of Higher Education in the Afghan administration, Dr. Sharif Fayeze, to serve as senior advisor. Dr. Fayeze is a Tajik from Herat with a Ph.D. from the University of Arizona. Dr. Wahab is a Pashtoon from Ghazni with a Ph.D. from Stanford University. Dr. Wahab's visit was sponsored by the Asian Development Bank. He was in Afghanistan from August 2002 through June 2003.

What was the nature of your work in Afghanistan this time?

There were about 400 people working in the Ministry of Higher Education and the Minister, Dr. Sharif Fayeze, and I were the only ones who spoke English. The Minister, of course, was always going places, attending meetings or being called into the palace. He couldn't be bothered answering inquiries about help or getting a piece of information. There were a lot of internationals coming to the Ministry almost on a daily basis either asking for information or clarification or offering help or trying to establish affiliation. So one of my jobs was to be the liaison between the Ministry of Higher Education and all internationals, aid agencies, academics, and non-governmental organizations.

I built on the work, responsibilities and the contributions that I made early last year. It's a very difficult place to work in. It's also very dangerous, and becoming more so. But I wanted to do this. I felt an obligation, a challenge, a responsibility. And there's also a sense of adventure, testing your mettle. So you take these risks...to prevent becoming complaisant.

There must also be some positive feedback. What are a few of those things that make it worthwhile going back?

Well, there are things you can see. You make a building more secure, pleasant, orderly and cleaner. Or you have water – at least for an hour a day – or electricity. Or start English and computer courses for the employees. Or you obtain funding to send faculty and students abroad to study. Or you help the presidents of universities to complete applications for a World Bank loan and they receive a million dollars. Or you help foreigners to deliver assistance – money, material or expertise to the system; arrange seminars for people, work on curricular reform, write a strategic plan, work on reorganization. You establish a library some place, or repair and paint classrooms. Many examples like that on a daily basis are very gratifying. It's an interesting culture, you know. You walk into an office full of people, and people who are even older than you stand up because you have a doctorate; you come from the United States; you're helping, and they respect you for that.

That must mean you're important.

Yes, of course. You talk to individuals, and you help them with an application and a bunch of women faculty have an opportunity to go to Germany, Canada or the United States and some of them say "The U.S. embassy says we need your picture without the veil."

They say "What do I do because my family doesn't want me to have this picture and what if somebody sees it?" And you convince them and say "Look the picture is just between you and the U.S. counselor. It will just sit someplace, and no one will see it. So take your picture; then wear your scarf or your chador." You convince her, and this woman comes to New Jersey and learns computers. Or you convince the Islamic Development Bank to open a new dormitory for women or you convince UNESCO to conduct a seminar on planning and policy for higher learning. There are many, many examples of accomplishment and satisfaction.



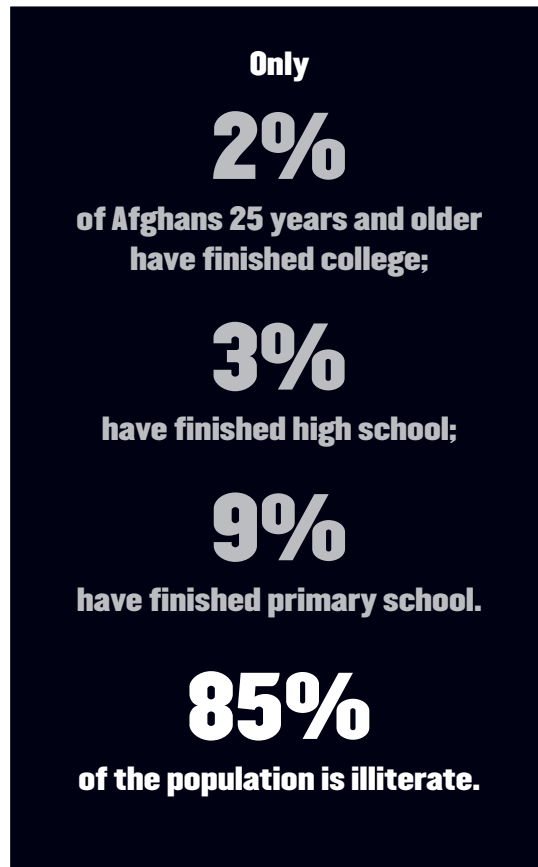
PHOTOGRAPHY: DR. ZAHER WAHAB

What would you say has changed the most in the field of education since you left?

The functioning of educational institutions at all levels. A year ago there were very few institutions actually open where people go to learn and to teach. This year, there are 21 institutions in the country enrolling about 34,000 students in higher education. There are some four million students in first through twelfth grade. Last year there were about three million. More girls and women are going to schools or working for schools – in the cities at least. You might see libraries. There were no libraries a year ago even at the university level. You see a few computers here and there. You see some faculty learn what it means to be operating an educational system in the 21st century. The reopening of educational institutions is a major accomplishment. Quality is something else because education is still 100 years behind. Everyone knows and will admit that. The curriculum, resources, pedagogy, the knowledge base, ideas, assumptions about knowledge, teaching and learning, the facilities, etc. And there's a great struggle to modernize it. But the figures are really incredible. Only 2% of Afghans 25 years and older have finished college; 3% have finished high school; 9% have finished primary school. So you can see the challenge.

Eighty-five percent of the population is illiterate. And this is the 21st century! Expenditure on education is one of the lowest in the world. So just to see formal and informal education attempts is a hopeful sign. And internationals whether it's the French government, UNICEF, Korea, Japan, UNESCO, the World Bank, USAID are trying to help with the textbooks, teacher education, laboratories, libraries, dormitories,

classrooms and facilities. Some buildings – especially schools for girls – have been burned and vandalized. This happened just a week ago actually, very near Kabul. And at the higher education level we have virtual institutions without a campus. There are many schools under trees in the open, with no books, taught by unqualified teachers. Education itself is a disaster zone.



Are you training teachers?

Yes, there is effort underway and there is a tremendous need for teacher training at all levels. At the higher education level for example, there are 1700 people teaching and at best 7% have doctorates and another 40% have masters' degrees. The rest only have bachelors' degrees and all of these degrees of course were obtained at least 25 years ago. So the knowledge base of these instructors is at least 25 years old, whatever they're teaching. At the pre-collegiate level it's the same story. There are an estimated 85,000 teaching now. But the country needs at least 100,000 additional teachers today. Only about 5,000 school teachers have bachelors' degrees. There is effort to train teachers.

There are nine pedagogic institutes, what we would call teacher training colleges managed by the Ministry of Higher Education. Then there are 14 two-year teacher training institutions run by the Ministry of Education. But these efforts are not enough. And to train university instructors you have to send people abroad because there's no graduate education in the country yet. And there are not very many scholarships. It's very difficult to get a visa for the U.S. It's a challenge. Salaries range from \$37 for teachers to about \$80 for full professors per month, and it is irregular. Working conditions are hard and fraught with risks. The best teachers have been killed, maimed or exiled.

If you could have whatever you wanted, what would you have happen?

Well, I wrote a strategic development plan for the higher education system and tried to get the two ministries to cooperate. There is the Higher Education Ministry and then there's the Ministry of Education for first through twelfth grade. One of the byproducts of the war and turmoil unfortunately has been turf possessiveness and polarization. Institutions, ministries, organizations, individuals find it very difficult to cooperate and to work together for the common good. They're very insecure, secretive, and competitive. And there are of course other things involved – ineptness, corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, political and ideologic interference, lack of money. What needs to be done is a massive plan for education development. Major curricular reform at all levels; massive teacher and professor education and training programs; building infrastructure – especially dormitories for women all over the country – classrooms, laboratories, libraries, experimental farms

and offices; training the support staff and administration, books, learning resources, computer network throughout the country, connecting the institutions with the ministry via the telephone and internet. And then you go into the more exotic, luxurious things like athletics, entertainment, healthcare, class size, faculty development, in-service teacher training, counseling, transportation, good food, insurance, higher wages, nice offices and classrooms, allowance for students, scholarships and so on. This is a country where the whole population has been traumatized...especially children. Almost everyone has seen or experienced savagery, brutality, death and destruction and people blown

apart. There isn't a single counselor in the education system. And there's no special education in the country. These are things that must be done – soon to save money and develop the country.

But the immediate need again is classrooms, dormitories, office buildings, laboratories, libraries, books, curricular reform, safe drinking water, electricity, telephones, information technology and faculty/teacher training.

That's mostly infrastructure. What about people? How many people are coming out of these institutions with some updated sense of their profession?

Higher education enrollment went from about 8,000 in 2001 to about 34,000 currently. The system will simply be overwhelmed when pre-collegiate enrollment reaches 10,000,000 soon. Currently teaching is done by Afghans who are getting old and obsolete. They don't want to relinquish their jobs. They're paid at least a dollar a day now. There's no pension or retirement plan. The government is broke. It's also a status thing. If you are a

dean, a teacher or a professor you are somebody. But once you lose your job you are nobody. And yet the teacher trainers themselves need to be trained. At the same time it's very difficult for people to undergo even in-service training at any level. Everyone moonlights because a dollar or three dollars per day is not much if you have a family of seven, twelve or twenty.

One of the things that bothered me the most was that every hour some of my values were assaulted: fairness, due process, competence, merit, rationality, honesty, transparency, justice, accountability, the common good, civility, cooperation, care, humility, dignity, kindness, respect for women, concern for the environment,



At Mullah Mushki Alam boy's school in Kunsaf, Ghazni province, children in grades 1-12 have no books, stationery, desks, laboratory, maps, windows, doors or qualified teachers.

patriotism. These are the things that were violated all the time and it was troubling. It wasn't like this before. The protracted wars, invasions and civil strife have done unbelievable damage to the people, culture and society. I don't know how you reconstitute a way of life.

The big question, Zaher, is – is the time going to be available to reconstitute a way of life? Presumably if all those things are to occur it will require a modicum of stability, and one of the questions on many of our minds is whether the center will hold. What do you think?

It's open ended. When Washington launched Operation Enduring Freedom, the President promised safety, security and happiness, peace, prosperity and democracy for Afghanistan. It would stabilize central Asia, and it would eliminate the drug culture. Those were the justifications. Everything, including the *New York Times*, the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Crisis Group and the

Christian Science Monitor, tells us that today the situation has gotten much worse two years after October of 2001. Terrorism and the Taliban have not been eliminated. In fact they have made a serious comeback. Bin Laden and Mullah Omar are alive and well and functioning. Afghanistan is producing 85% of the world's opium according to UN figures. There's no safety, or security, or peace anywhere in the country, including Kabul where a 5,000 international security assistance force operates. Eleven thousand U.S. and allied forces are in the country, but they are just chasing Taliban and Al Qaeda. In the last two weeks at least 200 people have been killed in fighting.

Government troops, all internationals, Afghan expatriates, moderate clerics who are pro government and against the jihad, aid workers, UN workers: everyone is a target now. So donors, aid agencies and the UN have declared two-thirds of the country as unsafe, and they have either suspended or curtailed their operations. There has been little or no economic

development. The government is limited to Kabul. Two million refugees have returned to nothing. People feel betrayed and are angry.

Everyone has been saying for two years now to increase the international security assistance force throughout the country. Kofe Annan, his special representative, the White House special representative to Afghanistan, Karzai, all of these aid agencies have written to the UN saying "the security situation is getting out of hand. We might lose the whole country. Please expand the security assistance force and implement a massive economic development program."

There are several explanations for Afghanistan's agony.

Nation-building is clearly not a priority for Washington. That's why it spends about one billion dollars a month on the military operation and has spent only about \$700 million on reconstruction in the last two years. Little of the \$4.5 billion promised at the Tokyo meeting in January 2002 has been delivered. There is a lack of coordination and cooperation between State, Defense, CIA and the U.S. Agency for International Development on the ground in Afghanistan. And the relationship between the U.S. and aid agencies is not very good.

There is very little private investment due to lack of security, labor, corruption and red tape. Two million refugees have returned. And as the German ambassador



Due to 24 years of war and neglect, the Afghan Education University in Kabul lacks a modern kitchen, dining room, running water, power and other necessities.

to Washington said, since the Iraq invasion Afghanistan has almost disappeared from the international radar.

Peacekeeping is a necessary function for all the things you listed to occur. Yet direct disruption of that is coming from those elements in the society that don't want education, computers and women in positions of authority. Isn't that contradiction inherent in the situation?

Not necessarily. Here is what the U.S., the UN and the international community must do if they are serious. Expand the International Security Assistance Force to the entire country. Spend three billion dollars per year for the next ten years on development. Focus on education, healthcare, housing, agriculture, roads, communication, water, small labor intensive industry. Pay farmers enough to switch from poppies to other crops. Disarm, demobilize and reintegrate to civil society all the warlords and militias. Build a professional government at all levels. Build an effective national army, police and intelligence service. Purge the political system of all the strongmen, warlords, jihadees, criminals, thieves, drug and land mafia and contract killers. The U.S. must stop paying, working with or tolerating the above elements.

Expedite the constitutional and election processes. Ensure and enforce human rights for all. Pressure other nations to end meddling in Afghan affairs. Implement ethnic reconciliation. Detribalize all state and other organs. Build the civil society and civic organizations. Expand and accelerate de-mining. Pay compensation to victims of the U.S.-allied invasion. Tackle AIDS, prostitution, environmental degradation and exposure to depleted uranium and other war-related toxic elements.

Care for the orphans, widows and the maimed. Let the UN manage all of the above agenda. End the U.S. military involvement in the country in about fifteen months. These aren't just my ideas. Many thoughtful and concerned agencies and individuals have been saying this – such as the UN special representative to Afghanistan, the World Bank, the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Crisis Group, the Human Rights Watch, CARE, and all of the major newspapers like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Independent* even *The Economist*. Karzai's government has been pleading for these measures every week. Either we follow this prescription or the country will revert to a failed state and endless terrorism or a narco-mafia state. There will be no normal country.

As you describe the situation, the dilemma for American policy sounds identical to the situation in Iraq.

Indeed, there are parallels.

Initially great hope is attached to the overthrow of

an oppressive regime. Then the task of putting some kind of security – law and order – in place begins to look very much like an occupation. Anti-foreign sentiment of all kinds comes forward and the occupying force gets blamed for everything whether it's responsible or not.

Yes, exactly.

So how in the world can there be an exit strategy?

Well, there was poor planning in both Afghanistan and Iraq. They didn't think about nation building or even maintenance. Everyone can see from Karzai all the way down to the doorman in the Ministry of Higher Education that in fact nothing has improved.



In fact, everything has gotten worse. You can't just rebuild a ravaged country with a billion dollars; and you can't bring peace, progress, democracy and freedom through bombing, violence, humiliation and occupation. Much more must be done, differently and by Afghans with help from international organizations.

But you were earlier describing some of the accomplishments in higher education and the nation in general.

Yes. But people need work, and there's no work. About 1.8 billion dollars have been given to the country so far since the Tokyo conference in January of 2002, but 600 million of that went to the UN system so they could spend it on UNESCO, UNICEF, World Food Program, etc. Six hundred million went to the NGOs – nongovernmental organizations – to give people tents, cooking oil – relief work. Only 100 million was given to the Afghan government. The government has little or no income. That's why the government can't pay civil servants on time.

There is quite a bit of small scale economic activity in Kabul and some in the provinces. People are building stores, shops and homes, but that's all private and it's done in spite of not because of the government. There's hardly a major project that has provided work, employment, income about which the government can say "This is what we did."

Who is really doing a good job helping?

There are more than 200 NGOs in Afghanistan like MercyCorps, CARE, the World Food Program, UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Bank, the USAID and private universities like the University of Washington, Loma Linda,

the University of Massachusetts and Purdue. The Indians, Iranians, Germans, Japanese and the French governments are helping. But this is a big country and nothing has been left untouched – from buildings, roads, irrigation canals, schools, clinics, people, institutions to the government. You need a 15-year program with 3 billion dollars per year and with massive training. So that in 10 years the foreigners can go home. But you can't do that unless you have a genuine international commitment. And there is no such commitment.

Here are some figures from CARE International. The world now spends \$480 per person on development in Bosnia, \$431 in Kosovo, \$292 in East Timor and \$63 in Afghanistan. In terms of peacekeepers, in Bosnia there's one peacekeeper for every 113 people, in Kosovo one for every 48 people. In Afghanistan one for 5,380 people. So that's the level of commitment to peace and development in Afghanistan, which is not much.

But this is supposed to be the center of terrorism and all of the worst things in the world. If this were indeed the case, you would expect the international community to commit resources to build and change it. But two years later there is still not a single traffic light in Kabul.

You don't paint a very optimistic picture.

There are many internationals who really have committed their lives to rebuild, to reconstruct. The challenges are just too great and the resources are too few. But the country can't be allowed to revert to 1992. Otherwise this neglect and betrayal are certain to haunt the world for years to come. ☞

