

SCHOOLS for CONFLICT  
or for PEACE  
in AFGHANISTAN

Dana Burde



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*Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan*





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DANA BURDE



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*To my husband, Jehanzaib Khan,  
and my parents, Ed and Emily Burde*



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## Time Line

### *Education in Modern Afghan History*

1747	Ahmad Shah Durrani founds the Durrani Empire, marking the birth of the modern Afghan state.
1839–42	First Anglo-Afghan War is fought, strengthening the local clergy and tribal leaders.
1878–80	Second Anglo-Afghan War is fought.
1880–1901	Abdur Rahman Khan rules Afghanistan. His reign is characterized by attempts to modernize the country and exert central control over the religious education system.
1893	Durand Line is surveyed, dividing large populations of Pashtuns, as well as other groups, and delineating the frontier between Afghanistan and the British Empire.
1901	Habibullah assumes the throne.
1904	Habibia College, Afghanistan's first modern secondary school, is founded.
1913	The first department of education in Afghanistan established, though it would be another nine years before a minister of education is appointed.
1919–29	Amanullah Khan rules Afghanistan. He institutes many reforms to education, including compulsory and free primary education for certain groups;

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*Time Line*

- ending the clergy's control over mosque schools; and expanding curricula to include nonreligious classes.
- 1929 Civil war breaks out, in part over opposition to Amanullah's attempts to wrest power from the clergy and intervene in rural family life, but also as a response to financial crises. Amanullah is deposed by Habibullah Kalakani.
- 1931 Nadir Shah, who seized power from Habibullah Kalakani, enacts a new constitution that undoes most of Amanullah's reforms, defining the state of education in Afghanistan for the next two decades.
- 1937 Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, assumes the throne.
- 1953 Mohammad Daoud Khan becomes prime minister. He expands support to education, enlisting aid from the US.
- 1956 Teachers College, Columbia University (TC) begins its education development work in Afghanistan by training English teachers for secondary schools. School enrollment climbs considerably.
- 1966 TC, funded by USAID, expands its education work in Afghanistan to supporting curricula reform and providing textbooks, which it continues to do for the next ten years.
- 1973 Mohammad Daoud Khan, the former prime minister, seizes power from his cousin Zahir Shah in a coup.
- 1973 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto becomes prime minister of Pakistan after previously serving as president for two years.
- 1977 Zia ul-Haq deposes Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a coup in Pakistan and declares martial law. General Zia governs Pakistan for the next eleven years, overseeing the Islamization of Pakistan's education system; ex-

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*Time Line*

	panding madrassas on the border with Afghanistan; and managing US and Saudi funding for the Afghan mujahideen living in exile in Peshawar.
April 1978	The Afghan communist party seizes power in the Saur Revolution and attempts to secularize education across Afghanistan.
December 24, 1979	USSR invades Afghanistan. During its occupation, the USSR launches aggressive literacy campaigns throughout rural Afghanistan and revises the Afghan curricula to reduce the focus on religious studies.
January 1980	US President Jimmy Carter authorizes additional covert aid to support the Afghan resistance.
1984	Saudi aid to the mujahideen increases, especially for the building and funding of madrassas.
1984	Afghan mujahideen leaders request support from the US government to provide a culturally relevant, religious curriculum to the Afghan refugees.
1986	University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), funded by USAID, begins to provide jihadist textbooks to Afghan refugees.
February 1989	USSR completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan.
1992	President Najibullah falls. Eventually Burhanuddin Rabbani becomes president, but civil war is raging.
1992	US/UNO revises jihadist textbooks. However, revisions are minimal and originals remain widely available throughout the Taliban's rule (with images removed).
1994	A group of mujahideen called the Taliban emerges from villages in Kandahar Province and joins in the civil war in Afghanistan.
1996	The Taliban take Kabul, eventually consolidating their control over most of Afghanistan and ending the civil war.



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*Time Line*

October 7, 2001	US and several allies invade Afghanistan in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States.
2002	At USAID's urging, Afghanistan redistributes redacted versions of the UNO jihadist textbooks rather than the better-quality "Basic Competency" materials. UNO is awarded an additional education contract to distribute these books.
2006	US military institutes a new field manual outlining operations to support counterinsurgency in Iraq, later used in Afghanistan.
2006	In partnership with the Ministry of Education, USAID supports a dramatically successful community-based schools program across Afghanistan, which runs until 2011.
2008	US-government support grows for US-funded stabilization programs.
2013	USAID releases millions of US dollars to support community-based education through the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Kabul ("on-budget").

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# 1

## Introduction

ON MY FIRST TRIP TO PAKISTAN, in spring 2005, I visited several Afghan refugee camps in Balochistan, close to the Afghan border. I was working as a consultant for Save the Children, a US-based international nongovernmental organization that for a decade had been supporting schools for Afghan refugees living in these camps. Save the Children had hired me to assess their education programs, as their work was coming to a close. The camps had been there for many years—most of them since the early 1980s, when the Soviet invasion prompted a mass exodus of refugees from Afghanistan. “Camp” was a misnomer: each was really its own village, with clusters of mud-brick houses that seemed to have grown from the beige sand and earth that surrounded them. In each, I met with students, teachers, administrators, and members of the school management committee to discuss the schools and the interviewees’ educational aspirations. One of the boys in Girdi Jungle, the largest camp I visited, spoke clearly and articulately about the importance of education in his life: “It’s so important,” he said, “that I will go all the way to China to get educated if I have to.”

It was my first foray into a highly observant Muslim society, and I knew little about the relationship between Islam and education. The comment struck me as unusually sophisticated for a twelve-year-old boy in

FIGURE 1.1 Map of Afghanistan Provinces

the fourth grade. Yet I heard the same sentiment, expressed repeatedly and in virtually identical language, the following year when I was collecting survey data from illiterate Afghan villagers living in remote areas of the Panjshir Valley. It was then that I learned that this commitment to education was drawn from a famous hadith, widely known among Muslims around the world.\* Afghans of all ethnicities—Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks—regardless of their level of literacy, learn and recite phrases from the Qur'an and the hadiths.† Most Afghans are deeply committed to educating their boys and girls, both because they believe it is a religious obligation and because they understand that success in the modern world hinges on education. They refer to “education for the soul” and “education for the world” to distinguish these two roles for schooling. Education for the soul refers to religious education and acquisition of knowledge for spiritual development that is intended to ensure an active and fulfilling afterlife. Education for the world—sometimes also called “worldly education”—refers to the study of subjects such as mathematics and science that leads to the acquisition of skills necessary to work and prosper in this world (Burde 2008; Khan 2012).

Many Americans are surprised to learn of the role of education in Islam and the importance Afghans place on learning. They often assume that Afghans find it threatening, preferring to keep their children away from modernizing influences such as schools. The Taliban's notorious refusal to allow girls to attend school during their reign in the 1990s received broad media attention and reinforced this impression. Despite the publicity accorded the many women and girls who flouted the prohibition, at the risk of grave danger to themselves, the Taliban's mandates were thought to reflect a widespread conservatism dominant in rural Afghanistan, particularly among the Pashtun population from which the Taliban emerged.

This perspective was encapsulated in a conversation I had with a US military officer in New York in 2010 about our respective experiences

\* The hadiths are the collected sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that are studied along with the Qur'an, the main religious text for Muslims.

† Although *Afghan* has been and occasionally is still used to refer specifically to Pashtuns, in keeping with current conventions, I use the term to refer to all citizens of Afghanistan regardless of ethnicity.

working in Afghanistan. He had seldom encountered educators or thought about local schooling during his time there, and was surprised to hear of my research on community-based schools. I noted that many Afghans consider education essential to improving their lives. After reflecting for a moment, he recalled a military meeting he had attended in Kandahar—a predominately Pashtun province—with a group of local Afghan elders. He described how they had been sitting around a table in the thick of intense negotiations when a delivery arrived. The men broke up the meeting and rushed to receive the package. The officer thought it contained something instrumental to their meeting or critically important to their lives. “They were yelling and carrying on with so much excitement, I couldn’t imagine what it could be,” he told me. “It turned out that in this package there was a delivery of new textbooks for primary school children. One of these old guys explained to me, ‘I’ve been waiting for a textbook to give to my grandson. I wasn’t able to go to school. He is now enrolled.’ It was funny to see these tough old guys with turbans and big beards jumping up and down, giggling with excitement over children’s textbooks.”

The enormously popular book *Three Cups of Tea* and its successor *Stones into Schools* went to some lengths to dispel the notion that Afghans—even in conservative rural regions—undervalue education, particularly education for girls. These best sellers recount a US mountaineer’s re-dedication of his life to building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Trekking down from a high peak in northern Pakistan, he loses his way. When he stumbles sick and exhausted into a village, the inhabitants take care of him, nursing him back to health. Upon recovery, the climber promises to return to the village to build a school, since the village children desperately need one. He encounters many setbacks, but keeps his promise and builds not one but many schools in the impoverished region, returning many times over a number of years.

The first book casts the adventurer, Greg Mortenson, in a postcolonial redemption narrative; he brings the gift of modern education to the needy but dignified natives, in return for the gifts they have bestowed upon him—health and native wisdom. In this story, education, particularly for girls, is the promoter of peace that arrives in an act of beneficence. Although the success of these books went far toward countering conventional ideas among Americans as to the status of girls’ education among

rural Afghans, at the same time they fostered a simplistic narrative of US-Afghan relations—an uplifting account of the role of Americans in the region, who with a few pennies can build schools, educate Afghans, prevent conflict, and foster peace.

Mortenson and his books have been roundly criticized in the media, most notably in a *60 Minutes* broadcast of April 2011, an exposé mainly of financial malfeasance and fictionalization of segments of a story that had been billed as nonfiction. To those living and working in the region, however, the books were equally jarring for their geopolitical inaccuracies and lack of serious attention to education. In particular, there is scant discussion of the schools' curriculum, of teacher training, or of specifics regarding a key issue that the program claims to address—"sustainability," that is, enduring support to education given weak governmental administration. Moreover, the reader is left with the impression that Mortenson is the first—and only—person to promote girls' education in these remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, local and international NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) have been supporting girls' education in the region for decades, often successfully, and braving all kinds of dangers to do so.<sup>1</sup>

However, neither the conventional wisdom articulated in journalism and stories like Mortenson's nor the more nuanced view promulgated within international humanitarian circles captures correctly the way education is related to conflict or peace. Conventional wisdom, on the one hand, assumes a simple, unidirectional relationship: "more education equals less conflict," as articulated clearly in Mortenson's books. The dominant humanitarian paradigm, on the other hand, favors ostensibly more urgent or less controversial forms of aid, downplaying education aid as only effective once peace has been restored.

Despite this attention to education in the popular press and among practitioners, the vast majority of political scientists and scholars of peace and conflict studies neglect education in their analyses of conflict. Indeed, from 1994 to 2010, only 1 percent of articles in peace and conflict-studies journals and 0.5 percent of articles in international-studies journals addressed educational practice outside North America and Europe (King 2014).<sup>2</sup> Scholarship that explores state-building and peace-building would appear to have a strong motivation to understand education, since the establishment of an educational system that provides equal access to citi-

zens is a key ingredient of democratic state formation. However, education has received limited attention even within these specialized subfields. Scholars studying state-building focus on the way external interventions can stabilize a state after conflict, but education makes only an incidental appearance in their analyses, which emphasize instead institutions related to justice, security, and the economy (Paris 2004; Hehir and Robinson 2007; Paris and Sisk 2009). Typically, conflict-studies and civil-war literature have assumed material interests as drivers of state or individual behavior. Education has been included in this model only occasionally (Mundy and Dryden-Peterson 2011a; King 2014).

There is a small but burgeoning literature within international and comparative education studies that focuses on countries affected by conflict, but most of this examines theoretical links between education and conflict (e.g., Davies 2004; Nelles 2004). While practitioners focus on how education may contribute to peace-building, this work often lacks theoretical analysis or empirical backing. Empirical data on which research on the relationship between education and conflict might be based is especially limited (Mundy and Dryden-Peterson 2011b).

At the same time, the US government has never fully understood the role that education plays in Afghanistan or the importance it holds for most Afghans. US education policy in Afghanistan shifted from promoting “jihad literacy” in the 1980s to “education for stabilization” in the 2000s, and most official support for education was withdrawn in the intervening years. The use of education as a strategic tool—first to inculcate habits of war among the mujahideen in the 1980s and then to support the pacification of communities considered hostile to the US-backed Afghan government—has likely contributed to underlying conditions for conflict.

Historically, in fact, outside actors have taken three flawed approaches to providing aid to education in countries at war, each of which can be counterproductive to efforts to build a sustainable peace. First, education has been neglected. Humanitarians have frequently overlooked the importance education holds for populations affected by conflict, not considering it a basic need that warrants a humanitarian response or perceiving it as political activity in the context of work that is meant to be apolitical. When support to education is included as part of humanitarian aid packages, it is often as an afterthought or in a way that does not consider how



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