[Dr Ayesha Razzaque](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ayesha-razzaque)

July 4, 2021

**Education diplomacy**

Foreign troops are pulling out of Afghanistan, putting the country back in the headlines. On Pakistani mainstream media a category of ‘defence analysts’, who had been hiding under rocks for the last decade, are back on air and going so far as to describe the Taliban as ‘more statesmen like than before’ while simultaneously predicting another long civil war.

These developments gave me an opportunity to reflect on some of my experiences of engaging with the education development sector in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2015, over the course of five trips of a few weeks each. This was around the time when Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani had signed a unity government deal. It made me think, in light of the history of Afghanistan of the last few decades, what I would like to see happen (differently this time) that could support a more peaceful Afghanistan, one not spelling danger for our country too.

I had the opportunity to visit and work with the Teacher Education Department at the Afghan Ministry of Education. A lot of Afghan officials I met held degrees from the University of Peshawar. One of the deputy ministers there had spent 30 years in Peshawar, where his children were born and raised before he moved back to Kabul.

Although back then I was still a little green as a consultant, he showed me great respect and made it a point to express his goodwill for the country that sheltered him and his family for so many years. His children, including his daughters were all educated in Pakistan which enabled them to become qualified professionals and go on to have successful careers across Europe. He had a collection of Allama Iqbal’s works in his office, quoted some of his Persian poetry and told me how popular ‘Iqbal Lahori’ (as he is known) is in Afghanistan.

Several women I met working as airport security officers and at the currency exchange had lived in Pakistan and fondly recalled those times in fluent Urdu. The lady at the currency exchange was raised in Chaman and Quetta and longed for the liberated lifestyle she lived there as a woman, which might sound a little strange to Islamabadi ears. I joked she should consider marrying someone from across the border there, to which she good naturedly responded that she would take no time to say yes.

The rental car driver was barely 20 years old. Although he had never been to Pakistan himself, his extended family had lived there. He longed to work as a driver in Islamabad, the way many in Pakistan dream about working in the Middle East to make life a little easier for himself and his family, especially his aged mother. He had never been to Pakistan but was fluent in Urdu from watching Bollywood movies.

One Sunday morning I decided to go to one of the main parks in the city. I accidentally strolled into the singles / men’s section instead of the family section but decided to stay because I saw the famous ‘chharray wali gun and balloons.’ I ended up having a very long chat with Baba Khan (owner of the game) over two cups of kahwa at a tea stall at the park. He talked very fondly about his stay in Pakistan where he worked as a truck driver for 25 years driving between Karachi and the rest of the country. He was doing very well but had to return eventually when the government started sending refugees back. He, too, wished to return one day.

Regardless of statements made by politicians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for the most part, I found an enormous reservoir of goodwill for Pakistan among ordinary Afghan citizens, fueled by positive experiences and opportunities they found living, growing up, working and / or studying here.

But there were also some that took a dim view of Pakistan and were openly critical and vocal about Pakistani involvement, especially on Afghanistan’s south-eastern border. I stayed in Kabul for much of that time, but also visited schools, colleges, some local NGOs and provincial education offices as far away as the Parwan province in the north and Kandahar in the south. On one occasion, a provincial education officer was visiting from the eastern province of Kunar that borders Pakistan. I was scheduled to visit Kunar next and asked him about the best route and the best day of the week to visit. He laughed and said to choose any day and said something like ‘maybe the day you visit the other side will stop cross-border shelling because one of their own will be visiting.’

By and large, people with a positive perception far outnumbered the negative by a wide margin. However, that does not mean that this goodwill should be taken for granted or will last forever. Adolescent Afghans who are far too young to remember or have experienced life in Pakistan during the 80s and 90s have fewer reasons to share the same perspective.

An effective tool to win hearts and minds in countries’ diplomatic arsenals are scholarship and exchange programmes. The UK has the prestigious Rhodes and Chevening programmes. The United States has several Fulbright programmes which, not surprisingly, fall under the US Department of State. These programmes do not merely dole out funds to beneficiaries. Fulbright programmes commence with extensive orientations spanning both home and host countries. Even after these programmes conclude, beneficiaries remain part of an active alumni network.

This should not be characterized as brainwashing, but a broadening of horizons and perspectives and development of genuine goodwill. These scholarship programmes do not necessarily select the academically strongest candidates but also consider other factors, such as the community an applicant belongs to, or his / her prospects of rising to a higher office. More recently, China (host to 250,000 scholarship students) ramped up its Silk Road scholarship programmes which have been heavily favouring students from countries that are part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

To Pakistan’s credit, last year the HEC launched the Allama Muhammad Iqbal Scholarship for Afghan National Students which will cover the cost of living and education for 3,000 bachelors, masters and PhD students. A similar HEC programme for 1,000 Sri Lankan students was announced earlier this year. We are not the only ones in the region taking this approach; Earlier this year, India followed suit by announcing 1,000 scholarships for Afghan students.

Pakistan took these initiatives despite its tough economic circumstances. Another option Pakistan could consider in its education diplomacy, possibly at very little cost, is to expand access for Afghan students to pre-screened, pre-approved Pakistani schools at the students’ own expense in the form of a student visa programme. Among countries in our region, Iran, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh all score higher on educational achievement indicators than we do. The only country scoring lower than Pakistan is Afghanistan. The number of visas could be capped, like for the US’ H-1B visa programme, to make sure that the demand for schools does not exceed supply.

Every analyst on TV is predicting another civil war in Afghanistan. In such a future, allowing Afghan students with the means to sustain themselves to study at schools and colleges in Pakistan is infinitely more desirable than feeding them to madrassahs or letting them become cannon fodder for warlord militias. For Pakistani private schools this will produce more demand, more business. Connected by roads, a familiar culture shared by large segments of populations on both sides of the Durand Line, and a relatively low cost of living, Pakistani (private) schools can become an attractive education destination for the next generation of Afghans and replenish its reservoir of goodwill for Pakistan.

The common thread that runs through all the conversations I had with people I met in Kabul (center-east), Kandahar (south) and Parwan (north) is that ordinary people everywhere want the same things: They want a good life for themselves but even more than that for their children and their families; They want their families to have access to good hospitals, a good education and a real shot at a better life. I am reminded of a line from President Kennedy’s June 10, 1963 commencement address at American University: “Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”

The writer is an independent education researcher and consultant. She has a PhD in Education from Michigan State University.