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Afghanistan: Situation of Afghan exchange students who study in the United States; whether they face difficulties from Afghan authorities or society when they return to Afghanistan (2004 - 2010)

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The United States (US) offers government-sponsored exchange programs through which Afghan students are able to study at American high schools (US n.d.; *Chicago Tribune* 8 Aug. 2004; *Denver Post* 2 May 2008) and universities (*Seattle Times* 15 Oct. 2008; Purdue University n.d.). One such program is the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program, which is funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State (US n.d.; American Councils n.d.). The YES program brings Afghan students to the US to live with American families and attend American high schools for one year (US n.d.).

According to the American Councils for International Education, the organization that administers the YES program (US n.d.; *The Star* 3 May 2008), each year students aged 15 to 17 years old are recruited from different provinces of Afghanistan (American Councils n.d.). Students who apply "are tested and screened in an elaborate open, merit-based competition" (US n.d.). Successful candidates receive assistance in obtaining passports and visas, and undergo a month-long orientation program in Kyrgyzstan prior to their departure to the US (ibid.). The American Councils' Program Manager for Secondary School Programs explained, during a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, that between 30 and 40 students have participated in the program annually since its first year in 2004-2005 (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010). He described the program as "very competitive," saying that between 1,800 and 4,000 Afghan students apply annually (ibid.).

The Program Manager also pointed out that participation in the program requires parental consent (ibid.). Regardless of the program's popularity, a lot of discussion occurs in families before they accept the scholarship; some families that do not have the support of extended family members withdraw from the program (ibid.). The *Chicago Tribune* reports that in 2004, Afghan officials allegedly cautioned the families of several female students chosen for the program not to participate (8 Aug. 2004). The Program Manager indicated that some families that accept the scholarship do not tell others that their son or daughter is studying in the US, making up a different story to explain their child's year-long absence (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010). He explained that this is because becoming "Americanized" is not always viewed positively in Afghanistan (ibid.).

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) also offers programs for Afghan students to study at American universities (*Seattle Times* 15 Oct. 2008; Purdue University n.d.). For example, in 2008, the *Seattle Times* reported that a group of 38 scholars from Kabul University participated in a three-month USAID program at the University of Washington (UW) to work on their Masters degrees (15 Oct. 2008). In another example, Purdue University offers the Afghan Merit Scholarship (AMS) Program in partnership with USAID (n.d.). The AMS Program provides master-level education in agriculture to faculty members from Afghan universities (Purdue University n.d.).

Difficulties faced by returning students in Afghanistan

Information about the difficulties faced by Afghan exchange students upon their return to Afghanistan after studying in the US was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. The American Councils Program Manager reported that he was not aware of any cases in which former students were subjected to violence after returning to Afghanistan because of their participation in the US exchange program (8 Dec. 2010). However, he said he knew of at least one case in which a female student was given a "warning" when she returned to Afghanistan three or four years ago, although he was not sure of the details of the case (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010). He also shared that some alumni of the program have been active in successful community service projects in Afghanistan, such as helping orphanages, teaching English, planting trees, and cleaning public streets or parks (ibid.; ibid. 9 Dec. 2010).

Returning students reportedly face other difficulties, such as challenges from Afghan officials in getting credit for their year in the US (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010; *Chicago Tribune* 18 Oct. 2005). According to the *Chicago Tribune*, students who returned from the US in 2005 faced "hostile government officials and teachers who mock[ed] them" (18 Oct. 2005). Specifically, Afghan officials criticized the students for having become "'Americanized'" and being "'proud'" (*Chicago Tribune* 18 Oct. 2005). In the opinion of the Program Manager, the attitude of Afghan officials towards returning students is mixed; some officials value the program while others "resent" the students (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010).

Media sources also report on specific difficulties faced by female Afghan students who studied in the US (*Chicago Tribune* 18 Oct. 2005; ibid. 17 June 2005; ibid. 8 Aug. 2004; McClatchy Newspapers 17 Sept. 2010). According to the *Chicago Tribune*, a number of families were criticized for allowing their daughters to study in the US (17 June 2005). Similarly, another media source reports that when a female Afghan exchange student studied in the US, it caused problems in her family because some members did not think females should be allowed such freedom (McClatchy Newspapers 17 Sept. 2010).

The American Councils Program Manager expressed the opinion that readjusting to Afghan culture, although challenging for all students, is particularly so for female students, who typically require a male escort to go outside (American Councils 8 Dec. 2010). Reporting on the first group of exchange students a few months after they returned to Afghanistan, the *Chicago Tribune* states that the female students were "constantly watched and judged by distant relatives and high school principals" to determine whether they were still "good girls"; some of the girls claimed to be depressed and said they regretted participating in the program (18 Oct. 2005).

Students not returning to Afghanistan

The American Councils Program Manager noted that in the last three years, approximately one third of the Afghan students in the YES program have fled to Canada instead of returning to Afghanistan, while approximately five students have made asylum claims in the US (8 Dec. 2010). He stated that some of the students who did not return to Afghanistan at the end of the year claimed that, while they were in the US, their families received warnings or threats because of their participation in the US exchange program (ibid.). However, he noted that when program staff tried to clarify the details of those situations, they were not able to get "clear information" (ibid.). In fact, in one case a student claimed that his family had to move for security reasons, but when staff in Afghanistan checked on the situation, they found that the family was still living in the same place, was held in high esteem among neighbours, and the family claimed that there were no problems or threats (ibid. 9 Dec. 2010). This information could not be corroborated among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Media sources provide reasons why some Afghan students have been reluctant to return to Afghanistan (*The Star* 3 May 2008; *Seattle Times* 15 Oct. 2008; *Chicago Tribune* 17 June 2005). In a 2008 article published by *The Star*, in Toronto, an Afghan exchange student said that another student fled to Canada because he was scared of the dangers awaiting him in his hometown of Herat, in western Afghanistan (3 May 2008). Similarly, the *Chicago Tribune* reports that the first students in the YES program "grew up amid war and oppression" and expressed apprehension at returning to Afghanistan after the killing of a female Afghan TV host (17 June 2005). According to a University of Washington (UW) professor who led the first group of Afghan students in the USAID program at UW, Afghan students described conditions in Afghanistan prior to living in the US - "how they had to put on bulletproof vests every day and faced constant danger" and regularly dealt with "violence, corruption and dysfunctional infrastructure" (*Seattle Times* 15 Oct. 2008).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), World Link.

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