

Mixed Reception for Returning Professionals

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Some who remained in the country through the years of turmoil are suspicious of those who have come back from the West to help their homeland develop.

For 30 years, Najibullah Mujadidi lived in the United States, where he earned a master's degree in accounting. Two-and-a-half years ago, he decided to return to Afghanistan, where he now works as director of auditing at the ministry of finance.

"Although I was far away from my country, I always thought of Afghanistan, and I have never forgotten my country," he said. "This is our home, and we have come back to rebuild."

Abdul Hadi Azimi went to the United States in 1986. He returned in February this year and said his current position, as a consultant to the ministry of finance is the fulfilment of a lifelong desire to serve his country.

"For me, that wish is now becoming reality," he said.

For nearly three decades, during the years of war followed by harsh Taleban rule, millions of Afghans – especially many of the country's best and brightest – fled their homeland, seeking a more secure and prosperous life overseas.

But since 2003, the International Organisation for Migration, IOM, a European-based intergovernmental organisation that works in cooperation with the United Nations, has been trying to reverse the process by encouraging Afghan professionals living in European Union countries to return to homeland and help rebuild their nation.

IOM'S Return for Qualified Afghans programme, EU-RQA, which is co-funded by the European Commission, focuses on the development of critical sectors in Afghanistan, including private businesses providing goods and services for the domestic market, civil and social services, public infrastructure, and rural development as well as government agencies.

Hamid Hamdard, deputy head of the IOM project in Kabul, said that in addition to matching returnees to positions in Afghanistan, his organisation provides 300 euros a month in assistance for successful applicants.

Since 2003, 652 Afghan professionals from European countries have come to work through the IOM programme.

But only about half that number decide to remain in the country after their contract expires, Hamdard noted.

"For, some living here presents some problems," he said. "And many say they cannot continue living in Afghanistan."

Among the problems returning professionals face, especially those who maintain dual citizenship, is the frequently cool reception they receive from their countrymen who stayed behind throughout the years of turmoil.

Many Afghans are sceptical about the loyalties of returnees, and some even consider them foreign spies.

"People don't like Afghans with dual citizenship," said Shafiqullah, a Kabul shopkeeper. "They cannot trust them, because they are working for their second homeland, where they have an easy life. Their families are still living there, not in Afghanistan."

Qamar Wakili Atsekzai, who holds Afghan-German citizenship, decided to return to her homeland following the ouster of the Taliban. For the past two and a half years, she has worked as deputy minister for labour and social affairs.

Atsekzai said people who return from Europe or the United States are motivated by a strong desire to serve Afghanistan.

"An ordinary employee of a restaurant [in Europe] has a salary of 600 to 1,200 US dollars per month, but here a deputy minister has a 50 dollar monthly salary," she said.

Atsekzai said her own decision to return came at great personal sacrifice.

"I am far away from my family, and have left behind an easy life, peace and stability," she said. "I make 50 dollars a month, and live in a house under construction without power and water."

Still, many Afghans suspect that returnees who hold dual citizenship will eventually leave as they did before.

Gul Rahman Qazi, a professor and lecturer of law in the social sciences department of Kabul University, said he thinks it's a good idea for Afghan professionals to return to their native land but added that they should give up their second citizenship.

"If I love my country, and am a real patriot of my homeland, I should give up my second citizenship" he said.

"How can you live with your compatriots in peacetime, and [when conflict breaks out], disregard everyone, buy a ticket, leave and go to a peaceful place?" Qazi said. "This is not right, and scholars and professionals should keep in mind their obligation to their homeland".

Shukria Barakzai, a political analyst, disagreed. She said the return of Afghan professionals was essential to reconstruction of Afghanistan. But she added that some Afghans mistrust western-educated Afghans because they fear the returnees will take the most coveted jobs and government positions.

Some argue that returnees can never truly be part of the national fabric again.

Enayatullah, a government employee, put it bluntly: "Do they know how our people spent their lives during 25 years of war?", he said.

"They [émigrés] left, they had comfortable lives, how could they possibly understand our conditions?" he said. "Ignorance is bliss."

But for Mujadidi, who has lived most of his life in the United States, a passport means little when it comes to determining his national identity.

"Thirty years or a hundred years of living in United States can not make us American," he said. "I will be an Afghan until I am buried"

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