Intercultural challenges and conflicts in Afghanistan: Suggestions for a gradual transition from a historical situation

Saeid Reza Ameli[1]✻ iD, Milad Mousavi Haghshenas[2],
Kefayatullah Wahidi[2]

1. Prof. of Communications and Global Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.
2. Department of Communications, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info	Abstract
	Afghanistan, with its forty-six identified ethnicities, two official languages, and over thirty native languages, is a culturally diverse and pluralistic country. If we multiply the above elements by factors such as religion, race, and sect, a matrix of multiple states emerges. By placing these equations side by side, the pieces of a thousand-piece puzzle are completed, and the picture of Afghanistan is drawn on the geographical map. This study, from the perspective of intercultural communication, using a qualitative approach and the interview technique, has examined both sides of this plurality in two sections: "describing the situation" and "recommendations to the governance". It has attempted to explain and interpret its findings using Gleiz's communication accommodation theory. According to this theory, actors—at both micro and macro levels—adopt strategies of convergence, divergence, and maintenance in their communicative behavior toward one another. The research findings indicate that the existing conflicts, from the interviewees' perspective, fall into two broad categories: schematic challenges (inter-ethnic mentalities) and political challenges (intercultural conflict). These challenges are primarily explained under four categories: "ethnic diversity", "linguistic diversity", "religious diversity", and "unilateralism and cultural authoritarianism". Furthermore, the proposed solutions, from the interviewees' perspective, to overcome this historical situation are categorized into four areas: "improving the level of literacy and education", "redesigning the media system", "developing domestic tourism", and "strengthening civil society organizations". Research indicates that cultural diversity and its manifestations, while historically posing a threat to Afghanistan's territorial integrity, national identity, and political unity under unilateral and ethnocentric approaches, can be transformed into a comparative advantage for the country. By shifting from a threat-based perspective to one that focuses on developing and promoting intercultural dialogue, it can foster national unity, cultural strength, national pride, political participation, and social security. In other words, intercultural communication in Afghanistan's current situation is both a crisis and a solution.

✻ Corresponding author: ✉ ssameli@ut.ac.ir, iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3724-4362

Extended Abstract
Background
Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic nation characterized by a rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and languages. Throughout its history, the country has been dominated by various ethnic groups with diverse religious and cultural orientations. Nationalism, a powerful force shaping nations, can manifest in both positive and negative ways. Countries like France, where nationalism has been instrumental in achieving independence and unity, exemplify its positive potential. Conversely, nations that exploit nationalism as a guise for racism and ethnic supremacy demonstrate its destructive nature. Afghanistan, both in its past and contemporary history, has primarily experienced a negative form of nationalism. Throughout the country's political history, every ethnic group that has ascended to power and assumed governance has not been able to shed its views based on race and tribalism, subjecting other ethnicities to political, social, and cultural pressures.

Aims
The primary objective of this study is to answer two fundamental questions. Firs, what are the challenges hindering intercultural adaptation among individuals, ethnicities, and social groups within the diverse cultural landscape of Afghanistan? Secondly, what strategies can be implemented to mitigate cultural conflicts, enhance inter-ethnic communication, foster greater cultural adaptation, and, overall, facilitate a gradual transition from Afghanistan's current historical context?

Methods
This research, classified as qualitative, employed interviews as its primary method of data collection. A non-probability sampling technique was utilized, and researchers endeavored to connect with individuals from various Afghan ethnic groups possessing university-level education, within the constraints of accessibility and resources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these individuals, resulting in a total of fourteen interviews with representatives from four major Afghan ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek. Additionally, the research incorporated a documentary analysis method, including library-based data extraction and the utilization of credible information and documents archived by government agencies and made publicly available.

Results
The research findings indicate that the existing conflicts, from the interviewees' perspective, fall into two broad categories: schematic challenges (inter-ethnic mentalities) and political challenges (intercultural conflict). These challenges are primarily explained under

four categories: "ethnic diversity", "linguistic diversity", "religious diversity", and "unilateralism and cultural authoritarianism". This research indicates that cultural diversity and its manifestations, while historically posing a threat to Afghanistan's territorial integrity, national identity, and political unity under unilateral and ethnocentric approaches, can be transformed into a comparative advantage for the country. By shifting from a threat-based perspective to one that focuses on developing and promoting intercultural dialogue, it can foster national unity, cultural strength, national pride, political participation, and social security.

Conclusion

The findings of the field research and data from related documents and studies further confirm that a gradual transition from this historical situation passes through the highway of intercultural communication and its branching paths, by stepping onto these paths and expanding the possibilities of adaptation and compatibility, it is possible to significantly reduce cultural stereotypes and political and intercultural conflicts. This would safeguard the country from transforming ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions into social, political, and security crises.

Expanding education and increasing access to educational resources and facilities in disadvantaged areas, focusing on the quantitative and qualitative growth of civil society organizations and increasing their authority and scope of responsibilities; government agencies' commitment to designing and implementing national policies and programs aimed at recognizing cultural diversity, promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding within society, creating legal and supportive frameworks for the protection of the rights of cultural and religious minorities, paying attention to the role of public education and raising awareness to reform historical stereotypes and deep-rooted intercultural beliefs; transforming the current monopolistic and ethnocentric media system and redesigning it towards nationalistic and pluralistic media; supporting the development of local and regional languages and creating an environment for the emergence of manifestations of cultural diversity; and focusing on the development of the tourism industry at both the domestic and international levels, including corridors that strengthen and develop intercultural communication. Taking steps in these areas can guide Afghanistan away from fragmentation and division in the cultural sphere towards integration and intercultural adaptation amidst diversity, and towards enjoying social unity and national identity within diversity. In other words, intercultural communication in Afghanistan's current situation is both a crisis and a solution.

Conflict of interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions
All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

References

Ameli SR. (2013). *Methods of Research in Media and Cultural Studies*. Tehran: University of Tehran Press. [in Persian]

---------------. (2006). "Popular culture & popular city, Tehran: Local – Global city". *Cultural Studies and Communication*. 2(5): 50-13. [in Persian]

---------------. (2003). "Glocal space: Power and Powerlessness of cultures". *Social Sciences Letter*. 22: 81-99. [in Persian]

Ameli SR, Molaei H. (2009). "Dual globalization and intercultural sensitivities: A case study of intercultural relations between Sunnis and Shias in Golestan Province". *Journal of Iranian Cultural Research*. 2(6): 29-1. [in Persian]

Arzagani M. (2011). *Afghanistan: The Rainbow of Nations*. Kabul: Sobhe Omid. [in Persian]

Bashiri A, Kazemi P. (2019). "Mechanisms for ensuring fundamental human rights in the public legal system of Iran". *Islamic Human Rights Studies Quarterly*. 8(16): 140-119. https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.23225637.1398.8.1.6.2. [in Persian]

Deheshyar H. (2011). *U.S. Foreign Policy in Afghanistan*. Tehran: Mizan Publishing. [in Persian]

Ellington L. (2012). "Geographical facts about Afghanistan". *Afghanistan: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*.17(2): 5.

Etilaatroz. (2024, March 12). "Taliban's Statistics and Information Administration announces Afghanistan's population as approximately 35 million". [in Persian]

---------------. (2021, August 31). "UNESCO: Literacy rate in Afghanistan has increased by 9 percent in the last two decades". [in Persian]

Firoozi SM, Yousofi F, Afzali NA, Basharat Rahmani MB. (2023). "Social and cultural contexts of order and security in Afghanistan". *Fundamental and Applied Studies of the Islamic World*. 5(15): 128-105. https://doi.org/10.2203/FASIW.2023.344251.1159. [in Persian]

Flick U. (2020). *Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Translated by Jalili H. Tehran: Ney Publishing. [in Persian]

Ghafari Nasab E, Pouya MSh, Qasemi Nejad MA, Masaavat SI. (2018). "Ethnic identity and national identity in Afghanistan: A case study of Kabul teacher training students". *Journal of Political Sociology of Islam*. 6(2): 59-86. https://doi.org/10.22070/iws.2019.2952.1520. [in Persian]

Griffin EA. (2000). *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Boston, Massachusetts: McGraw Hill Publishers.

Gudykunst W. (2005). Theorizing about Intercultural Communication. Sage Publications.

---------------. (2003). *Intercultural Communication Theories*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Hasanifar AR, Zarabi Qala Hamami Sh. (2023). "Grounded theory of barriers to transition to a democratic and participatory political culture in Afghanistan". *Central Eurasian Studies*. 16(32): 71-53. https://doi.org/10.22059/jcep.2023.352419.450119. [in Persian]

Hettne B. (2010). "Development and security: Origins and Future". *Journal of Security Dialogue*. 41(1): 34. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010609357040.

Khosrowshahi SH. (1991). *Islamic Movements in Afghanistan*. Tehran: Political and International Studies Office. [in Persian]

Kim YY. (2007). "Ideology, identity, and intercultural communication: An analysis of differing academic conceptions of cultural identity". *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*. 36(3): 237-253. https://doi.org/10.1080/17475750701737181.

Littlejohn SW, Foss KA. (editors) (2009). *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. Sage Publications.

Mossalanejad A. (2009). "Social culture and geopolitics of power in Afghanistan". *International Journal of Geopolitics*. 5(14): 197-168. [in Persian]

Mowlana H. (1992). *The Passing of Modernity*. Translated by Shakouh Y. Tehran: Bureau of Mediastudies and Planning. [in Persian]

Najafi A. (2010). "Ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in Afghanistan". *Regional Studies*. Autumn and Winter, 5: 39-79. [in Persian]

Noorbakhsh Y. (2008). "Culture and Ethnicity: A model for cultural communication in Iran". *Journal of Iranian Cultural Research*. 1(4): 67-78. [in Persian]

Pyo DS, Alam M, Gupta MD. (2005). *Report and recommendation of the president to the board of directors: A proposed loan to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the Qaisar-Bala Murghab road project.* Asian Development Bank.

Qaderi S, Ahmad Qasim T. (2021). "Social and cultural consequences of religious fundamentalism in Afghanistan: From reaction to secularism to reactive secularism". *Iranian Social Issues*. 12(1): 380-355. http://dx.doi.org/10.52547/jspi.12.1.355 [in Persian]

Rasuly-Paleczek G. (2001). "The struggle for the Afghan State: Centralization, Nationalism and the Discontent" (pp 149-188). in *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World: Nationalism, Ethnicity and labour in the Twentieth Century*. van Schendel W, Zurcher EJ. (eds.). London & New York: I.B. Tauris.

Razi H. (1998). "Intercultural communication (history, concepts, and position)". *Imam Sadiq University Research Quarterly*. 6-7. 135-166. [in Persian]

Sabahani M. (2009). "New American strategy in Afghanistan". *Foreign Policy Quarterly*. 23(3): 729-750. [in Persian]

Sajadi AQ. (2016). *Sociology of Afghanistan*. 2nd ed. Kabul: Vajeh. [in Persian]

Sattari A, Qasemi M. Fallah M. (2017). "The Impact of Ethnic and Religious Gap on Political Instability in Afghanistan". *Middle Eastern Studies Quarterly*. 25(1-2): 116-146. [in Persian]

Shahghasemi E. (2015). *Journey to Kandahar: Society and Media in Afghanistan*. Paris: Nakoja Press.

Shahrani MN, Canfield RL. (eds.). (2022). *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*. Indiana University Press.

Vorajavand P. (1990). "Preserving cultural identity to move away from 'Culture of Submission'". *Political Economic Information*. 37: 54-69. [in Persian]

Yeghiazaryan L. (2018). "Which of the three main ethnic conflict theories best explains ethnic violence in the post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova?". *Undergraduate Journal of Political Science*. 3(1): 46–64.

Zahdi MA. (2010). "Ethnic divide and the dissolution of the Khalq Party in Afghanistan". *Sokhan Tarikh*. 8: 100-115. [in Persian]