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HEARTS TURNED AWAY FROM MUSIC: Afghan musicians' paths of exile



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A year and a half after the Taleban takeover, music has completely disappeared from Afghan streets, TV channels, radios, cars and wedding halls. It barely survives in more personal and subdued forms and volumes – inside a house with tightly closed windows or shutters, inside headphones on one's smartphone. The world, and Afghanistan more so, has graver problems to cope with, so it is not surprising that the silence on the Afghan streets has been matched by a comparative lack of reporting on music censorship. But what of the musicians, those Afghan men and women, made of flesh and blood like all others, who in August 2021 suddenly discovered that there was no more a place for them in Afghan society, nor a living to be earned in their home country? AAN's Fabrizio Foschini has been hearing from five musicians from different walks of life, and different paths of exile. Here he makes their tales, if not their music, heard.

THE PRECIOUS THREADS OF AFGHANISTAN'S MUSIC WORLD

2023 is turning out as yet another year without music in Afghanistan. Despite the lack of further clarification from the Taleban authorities about their official legal stance on music or the status of musical performances in the country, the unofficial ban on music is now taken for granted by all those involved – music performers, music lovers and music censors. Instances of Taleban crackdowns on performers and listeners of music across the country have continued to be [reported sporadically](#) in the international and Afghan press. The low volume of reporting of such cases does not bear proof of a more relaxed attitude by the Taleban or of a passive acceptance of the ban by the public; rather, such cases rarely make it to the front page because they get pushed back by more dramatic events.

Since [AAN's last report](#) on music censorship at the end of 2021, Afghanistan's economic and political woes have increased in number and gravity, absorbing most of the residual media focus on Afghanistan. The uncompromising attitude adopted by the Taleban on major issues such as female education has eclipsed other human rights, such as those protecting people's right to participate in the community's cultural life in the media and among Afghan activists and international rights watchdogs.¹

At the political level, any debate on the lawfulness of music may be considered to have stalled. In the absence of strong pressure, either internal or external, for a change, the Taleban hardly need to clarify their stance or make it official. As in the repression of other activities or behaviour considered reproachable

¹ Defence of music and musicians is not explicitly mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nevertheless, Article 27 (Right to participate in the cultural life of community) says everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to share scientific advances and its benefits, and to get credit for their own work. This article firmly incorporates cultural rights as human rights for all.

Article 27

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

from a religiously ultra-conservative point-of-view, Taleban authorities do not have to engage in systematic ad hoc persecution. To make sure that music is repressed, and the de facto ban implemented, they can also count on religiously conservative networks in society and mechanisms of self-censorship activated by the population as a survival strategy. This can amount even to participating in the denouncing of musicians. As for the forms of this repression, despite [hints by the Taleban](#) that they would seek to enjoin people engaging in sinful acts to cease doing so with reasoning, it seems clear that the punishment for playing music can take extremely violent and disturbing shapes.

A look at [one of the videos](#) documenting the Taleban's active targeting of musicians reveals several 'culprits' being publically punished, disgraced and humiliated, as they are forced to undergo haircutting, clothes-rending and self-shaming, and see their beloved instruments destroyed. The scene looks closer to a mob lynching than organised state violence. This, and the remote border location, Zazai Aryub district of Paktia province, where the footage originates, should not suggest that such a punishment is to be considered an outlier with respect to Taleban official procedures. Rather, it represents a form of state repression made more effective by the memory of old-time punishments, such as those meted out to individuals who 'had gone astray' by tribal or religious institutions invested by local elites with normative authority. Such types of community violence have usually been more effective and to-be-feared than forms of government repression in Afghanistan. The fact that these punishments are not inflicted regularly but seem to depend on the whim of local Taleban commanders and Amr bil Ma'ruf officials² does not leave the musicians in a better situation.

As detailed in the previous [AAN report](#), one of the major yet most underrated problems of the Taleban ban on music is how it has undermined the social status of musicians and others connected to music making. Afghan musicians were traditionally classed as members of a clearly defined – and typically, looked down upon – social group. Until the 1970s, the great majority of musicians were associated with low-class, largely endogamous communities (ie they formed their own clan or 'tribe'). Being a musician was hereditary and bore an economic and

² Also referred to as the 'religious police', the Dawat wa Ershad Amr bil-Maruf wa Nahi al-Munkar (Invitation and Guidance on Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice) was re-established as a ministry in the Taleban government on 12 September 2021. For further information on its activities, [read this 2022 AAN report](#).

cultural stigma. Exceptions were made for some of the greatest names of Afghan music, who featured on radio programmes and were endowed the status of stars by the public, and for a few connoisseurs of music who belonged to the educated elites and were not dependent on performance for their income. The decades of war and religious radicalisation after 1978 saw a further erosion of musicians' status inside Afghanistan; meanwhile, prominent musicians fled the country and settled abroad. This elite diaspora, also thanks to its connections with the modern 'world music' scene, was able to retain its stardom status in the eyes of the Afghan people, especially after 2001. For the traditional musicians who had remained in the country or emigrated to nearby Pakistan or Iran and then returned, the process of emancipation from the old stereotypes proved much slower and harder.



Musicians playing the harmonium and a local version of the Balochi benju, popularly called 'japani', in Kandahar.

Photo: AFP, 8 June 2021.

However, in the years following the 2001 change of regime, change came, slowly but surely. Pursuing a career in music was no longer only an option for the scions of musician families, who had put up with social stigma forever. Earning one's

bread through music, even traditional music played on ‘old’ instruments, began to be considered not a low-class and low-income occupation but potentially a respectable, professional career choice. It also became connected with national heritage and pride in being Afghan. Musicians were becoming a more composite group, with young talent from different walks of life adding to the wealth of knowledge and experience stashed in traditional musical preserves like Kabul’s Kharabat neighbourhood.³ The Emirate’s de facto ban on music has eroded musicians’ hard-earned respect, throwing them back, once again, to the moral margins of society and destroying their ability to earn money and support a family. As a group, musicians have effectively been criminalised.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that so many musicians left the country shortly after the Taleban takeover, and that almost all those remaining are trying to follow suit. However, despite the widespread interest that the return of musicians to Afghanistan after the first Emirate triggered, the disaster befalling this social group now has not been fully appreciated internationally.

Some media reports have thrown light on the economic plight of musicians [forced into joblessness](#) in Afghanistan and the problems faced by those [still trying to leave](#) the country. The Emirate’s attack on Afghans’ cultural rights and the abuse of musicians also featured in the first report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Afghanistan to the UN Human Rights Council, published on 9 September 2022. There have also been some brief mentioning of the music ban by human rights groups.⁴ However, as with so many other issues facing Afghans, the persecution of the nation’s musicians has so far failed to trigger a coherent or comprehensive response by international players. In fact, after the early sound and fury of the evacuation in the second half of 2021, the organisations⁵ dedicated to facilitating the relocation of musicians or supporting economically those

³ Kuche-ye Kharabat, the area around the namesake alley in the Old City of Kabul, has been the abode of the city’s traditional musicians since at least the 1860s, when a number of Indian musicians were settled there by the Afghan amir, Sher Ali. Despite witnessing much destruction during the civil war of the 1990s and remaining relatively poor and dilapidated, the neighbourhood had returned to its full musical prominence during the last two decades. For a glimpse of its past cultural life, [read this previous AAN report](#).

⁴ For example, Human Rights Watch mentioned music or musicians in these statements and reports: [30 March 2022](#); [7 March 2022](#); [1 March 2022](#); [29 October 2021](#) ; [16 August 2021](#); [1 April 2021](#).

⁵ Among others, a prominent role in this has been played by [International Campaign For Afghan Musicians](#) and [Sound Central](#).

remaining in Afghanistan have actually started facing problems in gathering the needed attention and funding from donors.

Whatever attention the dire situation of Afghan musicians receives often originates from the [musical events](#) periodically organised in the countries hosting refugee musicians in relevant numbers and within the framework of organised relocation programmes. These events, which serve the purpose of raising both awareness about the ban on music in Afghanistan and funding for the support of musician exiles and those who stayed back in Afghanistan, certainly provide a rare occasion for advocacy and a vital form of support ([see here](#) a brief list of events organised by the International Campaign For Afghan Musicians - ICFAM).

Some more consistent media coverage has been received by the once Kabul-based, but now exiled [Afghan National Institute of Music \(ANIM\)](#) by virtue of its unique relevance to the Afghan musical scene and its extraordinary tale of survival, which entailed the relocation of a great number of students and teachers first to Qatar and finally to Portugal, where they strive to resume the institute's previous activities fully (see [here](#); [here](#) and [here](#). ANIM musicians are also trying to make the best of their misfortune by eagerly joining every chance to perform music and exploring collaborations with other musical traditions and instruments, as the author was delighted to discover when attending an evening of mixed Fado-Afghan musical entertainment in Lisbon in April 2023 (pictures of the event feature in this report).⁶

However, the fates of the many individual musicians, both inside the country and abroad, constitute precious threads of Afghanistan's music world, which is under threat and at risk of being lost for good. In order to highlight the very diverse situations in which members of this special class of Afghans find themselves, AAN sought to give voice to some of them who are, more or less, now on their own.

AAN interviewed five Afghan musicians of different ages and backgrounds. Four are Kabulis (though one of them hails originally from Ghazni), and the fifth is Herati. Three were evacuated through international programmes and are currently in Europe – in Germany, Albania and Portugal. Another has fled Afghanistan on

⁶ Fado is the most celebrated form of Portuguese music, typically sung by a male or female singer accompanied by a small ensemble composed of Portuguese guitar, classical guitar and additional stringed instruments. Beyond any similarities in terms of musical features (or lack thereof), a major point of contact exists between fadistas and Afghan musicians in their Portuguese exile: Fado's defining character, captured by the word, *saudade*, is the feeling of nostalgia for an irreparable loss.

his own and is currently living as an undocumented refugee in Pakistan, while just one, the most senior, has remained in Kabul. Among those who relocated to Europe, two were students of ANIM, while the third had cooperated with the institute on various occasions. The other two musicians were active in the traditional musicians' community centred in Kharabat in the Afghan capital.



An aerial view of Kharabat, the musician quarter in Kabul's old city.
Photo: Fabrizio Foschini, 9 June 2012.

The interviews took place in February 2023, and each began with the musician recalling what happened to them immediately after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. They are presented below, with interviewees grouped by age and clustered around specific events and aspects of their lives after that fateful turning point.

The new generation of musicians: fresh enthusiasm, and an iron determination

The first two interviewees belong to the newest generation of musicians: born after the fall of the Taliban's first Emirate, they grew up in an environment which, however harsh and uncertain, offered at least the dream of a bright future in music,

and some key opportunities to cultivate it. 18-old viola player, Rohullah, currently living in Germany, recalled studying at ANIM in Kabul:

I was 10 when I first went to study at ANIM. It was amazing: ANIM was trying to teach us music in the way a real academy would do: Western, Indian, Afghan music, theory and practice.

The other, Shokria, is only slightly older at 19. Originally from Ghazni, she lived in an orphanage in Kabul, where she also attended classes at ANIM. There, she studied classical guitar and the qashqarcha, a stringed instrument from northern Afghanistan, and played with the Zohra Orchestra (Afghanistan's first all-female musical ensemble). She currently lives in a refugee camp in Albania, waiting to be relocated to the United States.

Both recalled vividly the moment they had to stop going to the institute and start making emergency plans for their future, as in Rohullah's words:

Before the Taleban arrived, none of us had entertained the slightest idea they could take the city. The day they got into Kabul, I was at school. We were rehearsing for the music we'd perform for a national festivity; also because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we hadn't been able to go to school for a long time in the previous months, and we needed to rehearse together hard.

Then suddenly, the police came to the school and told us the Taleban were in Kot-e Sangi [an area of PD6 not far from the ANIM premises, also located in west Kabul], and they were raising their flags there. It was sudden. It came as a shock: I rushed out, took a taxi, went home and started to pack my things, realising I had to leave the country immediately. Then Dr Sarmast [the director of ANIM] called and told me there was a plan to bring us students abroad with the support of foreign countries.

Or in Shokria's recollections:

After the 15th of August [when the capital fell to the Taleban], the situation in Kabul was very bad. The stories we were hearing and the videos we were receiving from all sides were very scary. Also, we knew who the Taleban were. Because of their previous record when they'd been in power, because of the war they'd been waging in the provinces for years, they were known to us. We could never have believed they'd come to power and conquer Kabul. When this

happened, a majority of the people living in Kabul tried to leave the city out of shock and fear.



Dambura player at a New Year festival in Bamiyan.

Photo: Fabrizio Foschini, 21 March 2011.

The wait that followed was fraught with fear and anxiety for both of these young musicians: evacuation seemed a mirage scarcely to be grasped and, if available to ANIM students themselves, then not to most members of their families – as Rohullah recalled:

While I was waiting, I stayed mostly at home. I was so afraid of the Taleban, I didn't go out to see how they were at close quarters. My family was pushing me to leave, saying, "You have toiled so much for the past few years, you even managed to travel abroad and give concerts, all this can't end in nothing, you have to leave here and finish what you started." After some weeks, I received the call and was taken to the airport: we students stayed [outside the airport] for one whole night, but, that time, it didn't work. The flight was postponed, and we came home. And then the airport was bombed, so we had to remain in Kabul much longer.

For Shokria, the frustration was made more acute by the additional obstacles she had already had to overcome as a girl:

I [finally] left two months after the arrival of the Taleban. Two months I spent shut in my room. I was always in fear they'd come searching for me. A few days after their takeover, the BBC announced that music had been forbidden in Afghanistan. [The Taleban] had barely had the time to come to power and already they'd banned music!

Music is my profession, and in Afghanistan, it's very hard to carry on with your life, to make a living for yourself and your family with music, especially as a girl. As if this was not enough, the Taleban arrived and ruined everything.

Finally, ANIM students were airlifted to Qatar in October 2021 and from there to Europe. Most went to Portugal, where the school was eventually re-established. Some, including Rohullah, did not stay:

Once in Europe, I asked to be reunited with my father. I was still a minor and this helped speed up the procedure. My father had been living in Germany for several years and I hadn't seen him for a while. So, it's eight months now since I moved to a small town in Bayern. I study in the local high school and I'm also learning German: English is useful here, but only up to a certain point. Once I get a diploma, I'll continue my music studies. Luckily, I didn't have to stop learning and practising my instrument. For three years, I've been a student of an American professor of viola who came to Afghanistan to teach, and luckily even now, I'm able to receive his online classes.

Others, like Shokria, are still in limbo:

I arrived in Albania at the end of October 2021. My family has remained in Afghanistan. There are many Afghans living here, waiting for visas to get to Canada or the US. Our life here is comfortable compared to other refugee camps: the place has good facilities, we don't face food shortages and the refugees are free to move around; it's not a closed camp. We're taught various classes, but mostly English. Kids go to school and adults are active too, so they don't get too depressed. I'm waiting for a US visa, but nobody knows how long it'll take. I want to go to the US, go to college and continue my education. I want to pursue a career in music because I wish to remain a musician, but I also want to study another subject besides music.

According to their rather different current circumstances, Rohullah and Shokria both keep looking for ways to connect with other musicians and put their musical skills to play:

I was a member of the South Asian Orchestra between 2018 and 2020 when its activities were suspended because of the Covid-19 pandemic. They gave a concert in September last year [2022], but I'd just arrived in Germany and was still waiting for my documents, and I couldn't travel abroad to perform with them. I hope this year to be able to do so. More recently, I managed to get in touch with the Passau University Orchestra and they offered me to join them, so I hope that in a few months I'll start playing with them.

Rohullah

When I arrived here in the camp, in less than a month, I managed to find a guitar. But I couldn't find any other Afghan who played music. So I'm alone, but I have started teaching Afghan kids. UNICEF manages a school here and I arranged to teach those who are interested in music.

Shokria



Members of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music Sitar and Sarod Ensemble, perform in the Dean Acheson Auditorium in Washington, DC.

Photo: Mandel Ngan/AFP, 4 February 2013.

This determination to pursue their musical careers arguably stems from an inner certainty that their travel into the world of music is just beginning. Even highly traumatic events such as the Taleban takeover and their subsequent exile have come to represent the start, potentially, of a new phase in their personal path of learning and performing. These words, respectively by Rohullah and Shokria, show that the Taleban takeover and de facto ban on music has not robbed them of their identity as musicians:

The life of a musician is different from all other professions, but I hope that despite all the difficulties, I will manage to remain essentially a musician and bring back the meaning of music, its message of peace, of culture, of hope, to the people of my country. At any rate, until now, there were no professional viola players in Afghanistan. If nothing else, I hope at least to be able, when Afghanistan gets well again, to bring back this specific skill and learning to my people.

Rohullah

Now musicians like me are scattered abroad. It's a very hard situation for them. They're always concerned about their families, left wondering what's happening inside their country and whether they'll ever be able to return. But we are in touch, we former students of ANIM, and other Afghan musicians as well, keeping in touch even if we're spread far and wide, in order to get together whenever possible and keep bearing testimony to the world of the continuing existence of Afghan music.

Shokria

A generation caught in the middle: a grim awakening for musicians in their prime

When I was a child, the Taleban took power for the first time. Back then, my father was in the army and he had to flee to Iran, while I had to stay back in Herat. I gave up my childhood because of the Taleban: I had no father, I couldn't study, I couldn't play. I grew up with my uncle's family until I was eleven. Only when the US toppled the Taleban and the Karzai government came into being could my parents return from Iran.

Fazel, now exiled in Portugal, comes from Herat. He is 32 years old and has spent all his life “studying, researching and teaching music.” He plays different

stringed instruments such as the rubab, dotar, tambur and sitar;⁷ and has also studied singing. His approach to music is grounded in the rich traditional world of Herati musicians, but he sought avidly to expand his horizons and deepen his understanding of music, and managed to do so, thanks to the opportunities offered by post-2001 Afghanistan:

My uncle was a veteran rubab player who used to work for RTA [Radio Television Afghanistan, the state broadcaster], after having been a shagerd [disciple] of the Khushnawaz family of Herati rubab maestros. I started learning music as his student. After 2001, I also strived to study music more formally, but unfortunately, there was no adequate musical institution in Herat, so I got a diploma in Persian Literature instead.

From 2010, I started taking part in the winter academy organised by ANIM in Kabul, where they invited music students from other provinces. There, Afghan and foreign teachers would also give lectures on the theory of music. In Herat, there were many famous musicians and great performers, but they had no theoretical depth. In Kabul, I could finally learn the theory of Western and Indian musical systems.

Another musician, Faruq, had believed music to be his lifelong profession and destiny. 43 years old and a virtuoso of the rubab, he was also a member of the music ensembles of various TV channels. He is now living in Quetta, Pakistan, though he originally hails from Kharabat, the musical heart of Kabul:

Music plays a huge role in my life. It's my daily bread. In my family, there has always been music and I have continued this tradition from my childhood until now. And it's because of music that now I had to flee Afghanistan and come live in Pakistan. The Taleban threatened us, saying we musicians put Islam in danger. During the past two decades, we have toiled to rebuild and enrich Afghan music. That is what we did. Every day, I would exert myself for 10 to 12

⁷ The list includes stringed instruments of both Afghan and foreign origin: the rubab, a short-necked lute, is the most famous Afghan autochthonous instrument; dotar can refer both to the Herati dotar, a long-necked lute derived in modern times from the original dotar, a simpler, traditional instrument found also in Iran and Central Asia; the tambur is a long-necked lute, typical of central and northern parts of Afghanistan and resembling similar instruments found from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and; the sitar, a large, long-necked lute with movable frets, played with a wire pick, that is, of course, one of the best-known Indian instruments.

hours on the rubab, the sarod, the guitar. And, if I can't be a musician, there is no other job I can do in Afghanistan.

Faruq and Fazel's generation of musicians witnessed the destruction brought to Afghan culture and society in the 1990s by the, by then, already decades-long conflict before participating in the reconstruction and rejuvenation of Afghanistan's musical traditions, facing many obstacles and oppositions in the process. Now, the Taleban takeover has caught them, and scores of other musicians and music teachers who are in the prime of their professional and creative lives, as an unforeseen doom, forcing their projects and careers to an abrupt end, as Fazel recounted:

Back in Herat, I contributed to the founding of the Honarestan-e Tarana Academy and became the director of musical programmes there. With the help of ANIM, I also tried to expand the teaching of music curricula to other schools. Unfortunately, I faced many problems: on the one hand, there was a lack of professional music teachers and, in state schools, also of available budgets. Only in the last few years, some private schools had started to develop their own music groups to perform at festivals such as Nawruz. Moreover, Herat is a religiously conservative place and the influence of some religious leaders against our activities was very strong. They even managed to get some concerts by famous Afghan music stars cancelled.

When Herat fell, my problems were not with the incoming Taleban, but with certain circles – those around Mujib al-Rahman and his people.⁸ They were the ones who came after me when the Taleban conquered the city: they came to the academy and destroyed our musical instruments. I didn't have sufficient contacts with foreigners to gather support, as I'd never travelled abroad. I managed to reach Kabul and get in touch with the French embassy who said they could help me, but not my students or the school. Then the Taleban took Kabul as well. I managed to flee to Qatar where I stayed for three or four months, and in December 2021, I was able to reach Portugal together with the ANIM students who were being relocated there.

⁸ Mujib al-Rahman Ansari was an influential radical Sunni preacher active in Herat from the times of the Republic. After the Taleban takeover, he officially joined the movement and became a prominent member of it until he was [killed in a suicide bombing](#) in September 2022.

Faruq also recalled difficult experiences:

Before coming here, to Quetta, we lived in Kabul under the Taleban for a while, but my face was too well known because I'd often performed on TV during the Republic. After the Taleban came to power, I stayed at home in PD8 for four months, barely going out at all. Then somebody – well, actually it was the wakil-e gozar [the representative] of my neighbourhood – who informed the Taleban about me, telling them that “this guy used to play music on TV and so on.” The Taleban came to my house, I owned a lot of instruments, also sarods and guitars, besides the rubabs. They scolded me and they destroyed some of [my collection]. After that, I decided to quit my home and I went to live in hiding in a rented house in Khushal Khan (in PD5 of West Kabul, the other side of the city) for another four to five months, until we managed to leave the country.

In those days, to bring you to Pakistan, smugglers would normally ask for 50,000 Pakistani rupees [around USD 270 at the time, in May 2022]. I had to pay triple the amount, 150,000 PKRs [around USD 810], because the smugglers could tell I was some sort of fugitive. They thought I must have been someone in the military or a government official, or anyway somebody with something to hide from the Taleban, so they raised the price as they pleased.

For men of Faruq and Fazel's age, to suddenly lose the social status and economic stability achieved after great efforts in difficult environments – respectively a social background considered a ghetto, albeit a musical ghetto, like Kharabat, and a conservative, though learned, provincial city such as Herat, was a particularly heavy blow. Added to that, covering even the basic economic needs of a family was suddenly a nightmare, especially for Faruq, a refugee in Pakistan, shorn of rights and, unlike Fazel, with no international support:

It's now ten months since my family and I arrived here in Quetta. Life is very hard – from an economic point of view, to understanding the language, to having access to public services. I'm very concerned because my kids can't go to school – my daughter should be in class 11, and my sons in classes 7 and 4. Government schools won't accept them as we're undocumented here, and private schools are too expensive.

I opened a vegetable stall to earn money for my family. However, all I earn goes on expenses: 20,000 rupees (around USD 78 at today's exchange) for the monthly rent, other house expenses and bills – here they bring water in tanks

and you have to buy even that. Out of ten months, I managed to make ends meet maybe two or three times. For the rest of the time, we've been using the last of our savings. I registered with UNHCR, but we haven't received any help so far.



A typical music workshop with students and amateur musicians in Kabul's Kharabat.
Photo: Fabrizio Foschini, 9 July 2010.

Whereas younger students see in the learning of music both an existential goal and a set of skills that qualify them and allow them to progress in life, older musicians in exile now struggle to be allowed to employ their musical skills to make a living:

Here in Portugal, I've had only a few occasions to play at concerts; once with Orquestra Todos, a very big ensemble from Lisbon, when their sitar player was absent. Thanks to friends and acquaintances, I obtained a pair of old tablas and repaired them; I also acquired a harmonium in order to give some concerts. I went to many restaurants to propose an evening performance, but very few accepted and then they paid little money, around 50 euros per night. With this sum I need to pay somebody who plays percussions with me and

cover transportation as well. Even if I played every night, I couldn't earn a living this way! And, I have no place to perform or teach. I live in a room in a refugee centre and there's no spare room to practice, so I have to do it outside. I tried to give music classes. I once found some students, some master students of a music faculty from Slovenia that were researching the music of Afghanistan and had come all the way to Portugal to meet the Afghan musicians exiled here. I ended up teaching them in a park outside the refugee centre.

Fazel

In Quetta, there is music. Local people like music, but their music is different; it has different characteristics, I cannot play it. Of course, I play Pashtun folk music, but Afghan Pashtun music. Pakistani Pashtuns and Baluchis have different musical tastes and patterns. Afghan refugees, especially the newly arrived like me, but even those who have lived here for long have a lot of problems and cannot afford the luxury of organising musical events. Since I arrived, I've played only once for a gathering. With time, I could learn the characteristics of the local music and start to play it, but for the moment, I have not even tried.

Our biggest problem here is that we're living illegally, without documents. As long as we stick to our neighbourhood, Gawalmandi, where many Afghan refugees live, the police won't disturb us, but as soon as we leave it, we risk being arrested, held in jail for some months, or brought to Spin Boldak and pushed back to the Afghan side of the border. The Pakistani government doesn't want Afghan refugees to become too many or travel to other parts of Pakistan. I've received several proposals to go and play in Peshawar or Islamabad, but I had to turn them down for fear of being arrested or deported because that would leave my family unprotected.

Faruq

Their situations may be very different, but the words of both interviewees featured something they share with many Afghan refugees – uncertainty about the future. At this stage, with both the future of music in Afghanistan and their own fate on hold, they are stuck in a slowly deteriorating situation. Uncertainty over the future has grown so strong that they question even their lifelong pursuit of music, or it provokes dreams of, for now, an impossible return to their homeland:

Initially, I didn't plan to remain in Portugal, I wanted to go to France, but eventually, they convinced me to stay in Lisbon and be hosted by a local NGO together with some other single men.⁹ Unfortunately, the support they've provided us isn't adequate and, anyway, it is due to be terminated next July. Now I like Portugal very much, I have spent more than one year in this country and its people have been nice to me, but it doesn't seem to be the right place to get a job, and finding a house to rent is also difficult. When I came here, I entertained hopes that I could continue my studies, complete a PhD, and one day return to Afghanistan as somebody able to carry forward the music traditions in my country. I've now realised that in this world, music is an extra, something for people who are in love with it, like me. There's no chance for me to live on music here.

Many Afghan musicians in exile have been forced to change their lives: they work as cooks, waiters, mechanics. I'm afraid I will also be forced to leave the musical profession and search for other livelihoods. I was recently in touch with a French music scholar in Nice. I'll go there in the next weeks for a concert. It's a benefit concert for refugees and I'll sing there. But he already warned me that, even in France, there'd be hardly any chances for long-term cooperation or funding on musical projects. I've also developed some health problems, as of late, so I really need to find a place and an income anywhere as soon as possible.

Fazel

I don't have long-term plans, my long-term plan is to go back to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the best place for us, Afghan artists should belong there, and Afghanistan is a country that all people in the world are friends with.

If there is a chance, I will go back to Afghanistan. I played with different Afghan TV stations and I know all the people of the trade there. For Afghan artists, there's no place as good as Afghanistan.

Faruq

⁹ This would be a different reception programme from that offered to ANIM students, who are now mainly hosted in the northern city of Braga and neighbouring Guimaraes.

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC IN AFGHANISTAN: FULL CIRCLE WITH THE 1990S?

The return to an Afghanistan where music is again allowed may seem an idle dream born out of desperation and disbelief about what has happened, but some of the younger interviewees, such as Rohullah, hold it as a likely outcome:

All in all, I don't think the Taleban can manage to silence music in Afghanistan this time. It's an impossible task. They can try and take music away from the people with all their means, but people will nonetheless listen to it. Music is in the blood of the people, and, the same as blood, they need it to live. And our people have progressed; the new generations won't let this happen again. A few people in power cannot stop major trends in society: the Afghan people won't give up their music.

His optimism was balanced by a more cautious appraisal by his age-peer, Shokria:

I don't think the Taleban will ever relent on their ban on music. They have a lot of problems with music, especially with the teaching of music and the idea that people can be professional musicians. They'll never allow people to study music. You see, they don't allow girls to study at all.

In my opinion, the situation in Afghanistan is so bad now, especially economy-wise – we see people forced to sell their daughters to feed their other kids – that there's no chance at all, there's nothing that the international community can do for Afghan music. That has to come a long way, the defence of Afghan music, of all parts of Afghan culture, that is still very far away.

Older musicians such as Fazel from Herat compare the present situation with previous times of crisis, and the defence of music with that of other human rights:

This is not the first time of the Taleban. The previous one was even worse: every musician was in danger. The very existence of Afghan music was in danger. The quality of the musical tradition got affected very badly. Much was lost. [After the fall of the first Emirate and, previously, in the diaspora], all sorts of people started to call themselves musicians and make a business out of music. But what we see today is also worrying: Afghan music is at risk of going down the same path as it did twenty [sic] years ago.



Afghan musician Mohammad Kabir plays a rubab in Kabul after removing it from a hiding place beneath his house where it was hidden along with several other instruments since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996.

Photo: Weda/AFP, 3 December 2001.

Music is the human right of everybody. We see in Afghanistan nowadays that not only music but also many other human rights are forsaken: the Taliban don't even let the girls study. As for all other human rights, pressure must be brought onto the Taliban to change their policies on music so that the rights of the Afghan people aren't trodden upon. Even the Taliban make use of music for their own purposes: when I was in Kabul after their takeover, I saw them riding around in big government cars, playing loud music. And in the Islamic world, there's not a single Muslim country where music is forbidden. Haven't the Afghans the same right as all other Muslims to live their lives with music?

His words were echoed by Faruq from his Pakistani exile:

Every country has its culture, and music is a part of it. Even the Arab countries, which represent Islam to the world, have it. The world must not forget that the youth, that all people need music, when they are tired from work, when they are sad because of some problem they face.

However, another musician, our last interviewee and the only one who has so far remained in Afghanistan believes the problems of the Afghan people have grown way beyond the need for music. He asked not to be named. Here we refer to him as 'Bismillah'.

An older musician's perspective: poverty is stronger than even the decree of the Taleban

A rubab ustad (maestro) in his seventies, Bismillah has lived through all the different phases of conflict and misery that Afghanistan has endured since 1978. He now sees the social plight of his compatriots as beyond recovery and their ability to stand up for music as mortally compromised:

You know me, I've grown old with my music, spent all my life living inside it. Only now, in these days, do I find myself not surrounded by music. This is for a number of reasons. Yes, the Taleban banned music; bravo to them. But poverty is stronger than even the decree of the Taleban. People don't have money, don't have a place in their lives for music now. In the past two years, almost all classes of people have been reduced to begging; everybody is trying to sell what he has and leave this place. The people already have more than enough problems, so they think, "Why should I get in trouble with these Taleban over music?" So there are no concerts, not even people inviting a few friends to their homes to enjoy an evening of music.

So, nowadays, I only play during the day, at rush hour, when there is traffic, when people move to and fro there is noise in the streets and my music cannot be heard from without. I don't play in the evening or at night, nor on Fridays. Life is the opposite of what it used to be.

Kharabat is empty. The Kharabatis who could afford it have left the country. All the others are busy pulling carts across the city to scratch some money to eat and stay alive, or they have turned their music workshops into food stalls. What else could they do? Music is food for the soul for those who listen, but what's the use of it if the performer himself starves?

I keep imparting lessons to my students, secretly. Sometimes they can visit me with some excuse or another. Other times, if needed, I send them recordings of lessons on video via the phone. But many of the younger ones are giving

up their passion for the rubab. They don't see a future for it. The hearts of the people have turned black to music. They have no place for it in their anguished hearts.



Badakhshi musician playing the dotar in Kabul.
Photo: Fabrizio Foschini, 8 June 2010.

One and half years ago, I applied for family reunion – part of my family has lived in Germany for many years. Now they've asked me to send documents proving my achievements as a musician. We will see if they accept what I have done in seventy years. The last time the Taleban took power, I had to go to Pakistan and spend a few years there in order to survive as a musician. I did not believe I would have to go through this again in my life. Anyway, this world goes, this life also goes, everything passes very quickly. Soon, we will see.

WHAT THE MUSICIANS' STORIES TELL US

The first thing apparent from these very diverse interviews is that all but one of the interviewees are still, after more than one and a half years of Taleban rule, in transit, or limbo, and currently unable to tell where they will be and what life will bring them. Another constant is that the trauma of the fall of a social and political order which guaranteed them incomes and rights and of the total takeover by the Taleban endures. It could not be otherwise for a social group that was specifically targeted by the new victors and was hurt so conclusively by the changed situation. Indeed, one of the first details to come out from many of the interviews was the recollection of their sense of bewilderment, of disbelief at the Taleban conquest of Kabul, followed by the fear and uncertainty of having become, all of a sudden, possible targets.



Music students playing delruba, dotar and tamburs in Herat.

Photo: Aref Karimi/AFP, 21 August 2013.

Despite this, a sense of hope, enthusiasm and strong individual motivations are quite apparent in the words of the youngest interviewees. They are young, in their

late teens, people for whom music has already often meant finding their way, getting social recognition and self-affirmation in an otherwise harsh and uncertain life: even the present dire situation cannot prove bleak enough to cause them to despair about their future as musicians and their ability to contribute to the preservation and furthering of Afghanistan's musical scene.



Afghan music students practice the tablas in Herat.

Photo: Aref Karimi/AFP, 21 August 2013.

Their undaunted determination is balanced by their seniors' more pessimistic attitudes. For musicians in their mid-thirties and forties, their formative and active professional lives coincided with the difficult, gradual re-establishment of music in Afghanistan and its transformation from a marginal and disreputable activity to a socially acceptable profession and even a cherished form of art and an expression of national pride. They naturally thought the worst was over for Afghanistan's musicians, and the achievements to which they had contributed were long-lasting: things could only get better. Consequently, they now feel the reversal of the nation's fortunes, full force.

Their passion for music and consciousness of their own artistic and professional worth are still very much alive in their words, but there is also a bitter realisation of the fragility of their status, when torn away from the society where it had been gained, with so much effort. That has taken its toll. Pressing economic woes and uncertainty are forcing many like Fazel and Faruq, not only those in Pakistan or Iran, but many also who made it to Europe or America, to seek alternative livelihoods, despite the fact that they still cling to the idea of a return to their previous profession and to their country.

The oldest generation of musicians is now experiencing a second, double exile, from their country and from music, in less than three decades. Pessimism among them is even more pronounced: the elderly ustad interviewed sees Afghan society as having lost all care for or interest in music amid the maelstrom of its economic and political woes.

SOME (BITTER) CONCLUSIONS

The lack of options and the economic constraints encountered by many musicians who ‘made it’ out of the country represent more than a mere call for humanitarian action and renewed economic support. They trigger some necessary reflections.

Afghan music is thriving in the diaspora was the headline of one [report in The Economist](#). As we mentioned in our [previous report](#), the fact that in the past, musicians joined the mass of other Afghan refugees in diaspora communities abroad was not solely detrimental. Musicians who ended up being physically absent from their country for one or even two decades did not lose their connection to Afghanistan and, when it was again possible, returned, or at least visited to help restore the presence of music in society or enhance its quality. Meanwhile, they had been able to establish a place for ‘traditional’ Afghan music on the international stage and to secure useful liaisons with foreign institutions and scholars. However, a full appreciation of the usefulness of this diaspora experience could be made only after their return, and because, in their case, a return was eventually possible.

In 2023, two elements advise pessimism when making comparisons with the earlier period of exile. Firstly, the hostile attitude towards music by the Taliban and other religiously conservative elements, and the political and economic crisis that has forced society into a mode of survival strategy risk being long-term features of Afghanistan. In 2001, the reversal came about only because of a completely unlooked for international intervention, which it is difficult to imagine being repeated. Secondly, in the absence of Afghanistan again becoming a home to Afghan musicians, the avenues of dialogue and interaction between the Afghan musicians now in the West, those who managed to relocate only to the neighbouring countries and those remaining inside Afghanistan would need to increase and solidify in the future – and that is not a given. Moreover, even if that interaction did strengthen, would it ever be enough?



Traditional Afghan musicians Salar Nader and Homayoun Sakhi perform on the rubab and tablas at the 2016 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Photo: [watts_photos/Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/watts_photos/), 3 July 2016.

A ‘national music’, however it is conceived, can hardly fail to include the role of the human environment in shaping musical forms, whether urban pop trends or regional folk revivals. In the past, Afghan music production had already shown trends towards fragmentation, depending on the target audience, with very different records being made for foreign listeners and for the home public (as

noted by Professor John Baily in [this essay](#)). In the future, the risk is of an even more confused and fragmented musical landscape emerging.

Ultimately, the continued existence of an Afghan music scene will depend to a large extent on the variety of sources contributing to it and on fair levels of accessibility by the Afghan public, at home and abroad. The inability of Afghan musicians to visit, perform and reside in Afghanistan for any prolonged period puts this very possibility at stake.

The emptying of the musicians' neighbourhood, Kharabat, can be taken as a symbol of the risk of losing, if not Afghan music altogether, some specific interactions, networks and practices which together formed the backbone of the knowledge and performance of music in Afghanistan.

The remarkable achievements of a number of musicians who continue to keep up, and even refine, the country's musical traditions from abroad will not be sufficient by themselves. Without a foothold inside the country, they cannot prevent a smaller-scale repetition of what happened in the 1990s. Then, many original folk repertoires, patterns, techniques, if not whole instruments, were lost forever, and the void filled with the music of the diaspora, and the first years after 2001, with imported replacements that were often of questionable musical value. To avoid this, the contribution of every Afghan musician, with his or her approach to an instrument or a type of music, formal or informal education, and performance-driven experience, will be vital. Thus, every musician's voice that goes unheard in the critical days we are living in will inevitably impoverish the Afghan music of the future.

Cover photo:

Students of the Afghan National Institute of Music in exile perform at a mixed musical evening of Portuguese Fado and Afghan songs in Lisbon.

Photo by Fabrizio Foschini, 5 April 2023.

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