

An American University in Afghanistan

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An interview with Dr. Athanasios Moulakis, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer of the American University of Afghanistan (based in Kabul) by Peter Baehr (Lingnan University, Hong Kong), who was a visiting professor in political science at AUAF in the summer of 2008.

PB: Why has this university been established?

AM: The fundamental idea is introducing best educational practices and standards to Afghanistan without creating brain-drain. Our models are the great institutions of American inspiration in the Middle East, such as the American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo. The profound effect that these institutions have had in the formation of the elites of their respective country and of the broader region is well known. These institutions have been beacons of learning, but have also proved decisive in introducing and strengthening habits of free enquiry and reasoned argument, which underpin responsible citizenship as well as economic development. Such qualities are especially valuable in a war-ravaged country such as Afghanistan. The prosperity and stability of Afghanistan, which is served by our educational endeavors, matters above all to the Afghan people, who deserve to take their rightful place in the international community and the world economy, but it is also pivotal to the security and prosperity of the rest of the world.

PB: What is distinctive about AUAF relative to other Afghan institutions of higher learning?

AM: AUAF is the only independent, private, not-for-profit, non-sectarian institution of higher learning in

Afghanistan. Outside of the large state Universities, such as the University of Kabul, there are only colleges of marked religious character, madrassas, and various private outfits that operate for profit, which can be fairly described as diploma mills.

Unlike all Afghan state Universities AUAF does not enroll students into discrete “Faculties” each with a highly specialized course of study that leads from beginning to end to a predetermined professional degree. It aims, rather, to provide a broad liberal education as the base of both personal development and professional aptitude. It organizes concentrations and degree programs around the earning of credits. It allows students choices and it provides individual counseling.

Our courses do not so much aim to “cover” this or that circumscribed field, but offer opportunities to understand different modes of disciplined, reasoned, and imaginative thinking, to provide access to different fields of human experience, and to fashion versatile tools with which to engage a rapidly changing world. The curriculum combines disciplinary rigor of enquiry with breadth of thought.

AUAF’s pedagogical outlook is student-centered, aiming at real transformative outcomes, empowering students to think for themselves, think on their feet rather than treat them as mere recipients of information to be memorized and played back. The academic programs are delivered by faculty recruited internationally, most of whom are American, several of whom have Afghan origins, but all of whom have first rate American educations and degrees or their equivalents.

PB: What are the distinctive characteristics of the Afghan students who study at AUAF? And, intellectually, how would you compare them with their American counterparts?

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AM: Resilience, pride and a great eagerness to learn and get ahead. They have to struggle against difficult odds. Afghan students are marked by the many years of violence and dislocation that has afflicted this country and is not really yet at an end. Many, if not most of our students have troubled personal histories involving exile, persecution, and all kinds of suffering. The primary and secondary education they have received is often patchy and poor. Most of them work full time and not a few are the only earner in a numerous family. This poses serious pedagogical challenges and it discourages extracurricular community-building activities. Fortunately several employers sponsor the university education of their employees and the University and its friends are working to secure scholarship funds.

In Afghanistan an entire generation is missing. If most universities in the world aim to prepare the leaders of tomorrow, we are already training the leaders of today. Our students are bound to assume responsibilities beyond their years. This adds to our responsibility as educators and to the difficulty of our task.

Unlike American students, Afghans have not been encouraged by their schools to express their own views and offer opinions. They have been taught by rote and they need to be carefully led to recognize that what is authoritative need not be delivered in an authoritarian manner. The teacher who tries to be their “buddy”, however, will be seen as weak. For, if, on the one hand, they fear that their opinions may be held against them, they do not hesitate to advance pragmatic claims, on grading for instance, or on what they consider matters of principle with great force.

PB: How does the current security situation affect the day-to-day functioning of AUAF?

AM: It affects our lives in many ways. Most visibly and immediately it limits our contact with our surroundings. The campus is surrounded by a high wall, with razor wire and guarded gates. Although we don't look any less inviting than any other institutional building in Kabul, this is not the decorous or even smiling face a university should display. The kind of life of bookstores and cafes that normally springs up around a campus, the give and take with the city in whatever Afghan form it may have taken, is impossible. It is almost impossible to have spontaneous events and difficult to have scheduled special events because security prevents us from making early and public announcements. We had to turn back the delegations from the Italian and British Embassy, who wanted to attend the lecture of a distinguished Afghan public figure, because they had not announced themselves and they in turn are not allowed by their security rules from announcing where they are going ahead of time.

Security gives rise to tensions with the students who experience the need to go through security controls and to

wear badges as an indignity. Security concerns affect recruitment of faculty, limiting the pool of potential applicants. People willing to brave what risks there are in living in Kabul, are understandably reluctant to come if they have school-age children. We must therefore limit our recruitment to scholars at the beginning or towards the end of their careers, which is not necessarily the best choice.

The difficulty of moving about freely, living together in guarded guest houses with the same people that one works with, are further sources of tension and are bad for morale. We hope this will be alleviated when new, purpose built faculty housing, providing more space and privacy, becomes available. Last, not least, security is expensive. The necessary equipment but above all the men, guards, drivers, escorts etc. are a big drain on university resources that one would have preferred to see spent on education.

PB: What has the university achieved so far?

AM: Since we opened our doors two years ago enrollment has risen steadily. We now have close to four hundred students and expect to reach five hundred in the course of the next academic year. About a third of our students are women, a remarkable proportion in Afghanistan. We offer a range of thirty courses delivered by competent faculty. The numbers and quality of faculty is rising in step with the growth of the University. A rigorous Foundation Studies Program provides coaching in English and quantitative reasoning, preparing students to enter the undergraduate program. An active outreach program serves the needs of Afghan businesses and public institutions. The University has entered into fruitful partnerships with institutions such as the Stanford Law School and the Thunderbird School of International Management. Three office and classroom buildings and a gym have been renovated on our interim campus and a major donation will allow us to start construction on the “new” Campus—a plot of more than forty acres in the heart of what will be the center of Afghanistan's political and administrative life.

The information technology available to students, faculty and staff is much better than might be expected in a fledgling institution in a troubled country. Employing Afghan staff wherever possible means transfers of revenue and skills to the community we serve. A competent senior team is in place. Our financial and administrative affairs are in excellent hands—we passed an audit by Price Waterhouse with flying colors. A major cooperative agreement with USAID guarantees financial stability over the next five years. The University leadership, the board of trustees and the University's friends are actively engaged in a major fundraising campaign.

PB: What do you hope to achieve in the next decade?

AM: A fully accredited academic program equivalent to that of a good, small Liberal Arts college in the United States; enrollment of ca. 3,000 undergraduates with well

articulated recruitment policies to achieve it; a number of focused professional programs alongside the BA in fields such as public health and food technology, possibly a few graduate programs, ample scholarship funds; a stable, well qualified faculty; a well functioning campus with adequate classrooms, computing, sports and housing facilities, supporting a lively and enriching community life; a number of well placed and loyal alumni; ample and secure sources of revenue outside of the US Government; wide recognition among young Afghans, their parents, and the general public that we are the best institution of higher learning in the country.

PB: What are the most significant things you have learned from living and working in Kabul?

AM: That danger seems less dangerous when it is close than it does at a distance, amplified by the selective projections of the media; that a population with an average per capita income of \$2 a day is nonetheless extraordinarily vibrant, enterprising, and, well, attractive; that Afghan society is extraordinarily complex in ways I do not yet fully understand.

PB: What would you say to encourage people to come to work for the university?

AM: Many people would consider Afghanistan a hardship post, even if security were not a major concern. This excludes many routine applicants. For the sake of the institution but also for the candidates' own sake we need to

filter out two sorts from this almost automatic self-selection: The desperate and the do-gooders. AUAF is not a place to escape from past failures, embarrassments, and misfortunes. Unlike the French Foreign Legion, it does not provide the stiffening of military discipline nor scope for compensatory "manly" prowess. It is a liberal arts college which requires virtues of inner control which go with collegiality. It is no less out of place to come in a spirit of condescending benevolence. Afghans quite rightly resent being told that one is here because "one wants to help". The presence of foreigners in this country has been anything but universally beneficial. Though Afghans may still lack many things, they are a spirited people who will be, as they must be, in charge of their own destiny.

So I would say, if, like me, you believe in the unique efficacy and pedagogical value of American style, student-centered undergraduate education, if you wish to promote the idea and the practice of free, rational enquiry, if you want to see the aspirations of the young of one of the world's most troubled nations take flight, come to this starkly beautiful country and help us build a model college.

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