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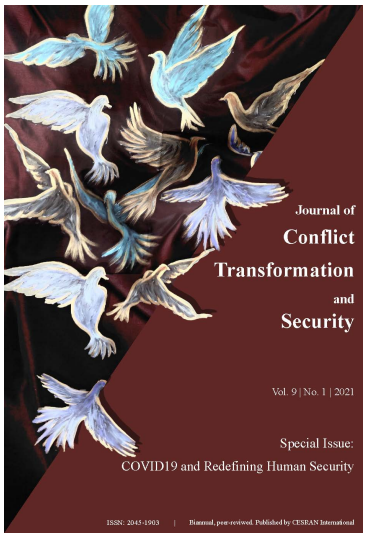
INDEXING & ABSTRACTING



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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume 10, Number 1, 2023*

Beyond *Watan*: Valency of Place among a Fragmented Afghanistan Diaspora

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Western Sydney University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the factors that have contributed to lack of a cohesive national identity in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulation of identity. Drawing on findings from qualitative interviews among Afghanistan heritage communities in Australia, I argue that 'Afghan' identity is better understood through the notion of 'place' rather than the more contested construct of 'nationality'. My research found that emotional and nostalgic attachment to Afghanistan 'the place' was shared by and informed identity for a diverse sample of participants, representing what is now considered a fragmented diaspora, from different regions and ethnic groups, and with different dates of departure from Afghanistan.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Afghan identity, Place Identity, Ethnicity, Diaspora, Transnationalism, Migration*[1]

Biographical Note: *Zarlasht Sarwari is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University (WSU). She is research assistant for the Challenging Racism Project and a member of The Australian Sociology Association of Australia. Her work examines the history and experience of the Afghanistan diaspora in Australia, including construction and reformulation of Afghan identity. Her work also considers Australian multiculturalism, belonging, racism, immigration, nationalism and transnationalism.*

[1] I would like to acknowledge the Dharug people as the traditional custodians on whose unceded lands I live, work and raise my family. I would like to thank the two co-editors of this special issue; (soon to be Dr) Mujib Abid, whose enthusiasm convinced me to become part of this project, and Dr Susanne Schmeidl, whose attentive guidance and thoughtful feedback encouraged me in my thinking and writing in ways that I could not have achieved on my own. I would also like to thank Dr Mejgan Massoumi, Dr Zohra Saed, Dr Alanna Kamp and Prof Kevin Dunn for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments.

Introduction

Diasporic identity and belonging, despite distance and exile, are still largely understood by the relationship to the original national homeland[2]. The concepts of nationalism and long- distance nationalism are often used to explain how members of diaspora communities engage with their homeland and construct their sense of self. This paper argues that the example of Afghanistan and its diaspora, demonstrates that not all members maintain politically constructed notions of a cohesive 'national identity' or engage in 'nation building'. Rather, research participants expressed their strong emotional and nostalgic attachment to Afghanistan 'the place' as a source that informs their identity. The concept of place identity allows individuals to memorialise and connect with their place of birth or heritage beyond the divergent and conflicting political and nationalist narratives that have resulted in a fragmented diaspora.

Conceptions of Afghan identity have been largely unexplored in the diasporic context, where multiple and competing narratives of nationhood have emerged in the absence of a cohesive homeland nationalist discourse. In this paper, I will examine identity in the diaspora from Afghanistan, specifically, how national identity has been constructed in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulations. This paper outlines the factors that contributed to an incoherent nationalist discourse, conceptual frameworks for understanding diasporic identity, and the findings from my research which demonstrate the significance of place identity as an alternative construct to national identity among Afghanistan diaspora communities in Australia.

The dataset informing this paper is drawn from qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with 20 participants between September 2018 and October 2019. The interviews formed a subset of data from a larger mixed methods project (n=251) with Australian residents (aged 18 years or older) who self-identify as having heritage from Afghanistan[3]. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways through community groups and mosques, self-reported interest, and snowball sampling. Interview participants were half male and half female and included the main ethnic (Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun) and religious (Sunni and Shia Muslim) groups in Afghanistan. They also represent a range of perspectives, including age, migration history, place of birth[4], rural-urban experiences, and different levels of education.

I use the term 'Afghan' in the context of labels operationalised within the national world order, and/or where study participants self-identify as such. 'Afghanistan diaspora' or 'Afghanistan heritage communities' are terms used in this paper to reflect the diversity of those who share territorial connections and/or cultural heritage with the nation of Afghanistan. The research has been conducted reflexively, from my position as a female, Australian born scholar with heritage from Afghanistan, who grapples with the notion of 'Afghan-ness' in a personal and sociological capacity.

Identity in Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Diaspora

Identity represents a deeply held personal attachment to how we see ourselves, how we feel and how we locate ourselves in relation to others and the wider world[5]. Identification is operationalised through the grouping of categories in a context of power relations and constantly evolving discourses - the most hegemonic of which are nationalist discourses. A nation is conceived not only in terms of sovereignty and borders but also as a site of national and cultural production that propagates a collective sense of identity linked to an 'imagined community'[6]. In contexts of diverse ethnic composition within a state, the question of national inclusion becomes particularly salient, as structural tensions

[2] Knott, Nationalism and belonging.
[3] The in-depth interviews were conducted in English or Dari in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney.
[4] Participants come from six different provinces within Afghanistan: Kabul, Ghazni, Nangahar, Baghlan, Balkh and Panjshir. Those born outside of Afghanistan cited Australia and Canada as place of birth, with family heritage from Kabul and areas outside of Kabul.
[5] Jackson & Penrose, Constructions of Race, Place and Nation.
[6] Anderson, Imagined Communities.

between 'ethnic' and 'national' identity persist[7]. States have been described as "irrevocably ethnically diverse spaces" that must always "contain within them the frictions between sameness and difference, unity and diversity"[8]. National identity can be reconstructed through multiple acts and can vary over time and space, making it highly elusive, contested and exclusionary.

People who form diaspora communities, are often emotionally, economically and physically bound to more than one country and culture[9]. This creates a range of networks and sites marking patterns of communication, exchange of resources and information, and participation in socio-cultural and political activities[10]. Simultaneous connections contribute to transnational networks and activities that formulate identities beyond a single location and shape ways of being and ways of belonging among people within diaspora communities[11].

Even before the recent collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021, which saw the return of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, the fragmented nature of the Afghanistan diaspora demonstrates the contentious and complex politics surrounding constructions of Afghan national identity[12]. Past research identifies several 'intellectual fault lines'[13] which have (mis)informed ideations of the country and its people and contributed to the high levels of fragmentation that can be observed within Afghanistan and its global diaspora. These fault lines can be largely attributed to (1) British colonial entanglements, (2) the internalisation of racial or ethnic hierarchies by Afghan political elites, (3) conflict and ethnicization of politics, and (4) the lack of coherent population data.

First, the formation of the geographical and political entity known today as Afghanistan, was shaped by the interests of imperial Russia and Britain in the late 1800s[14]. This, in addition to British colonial relations and writings, influenced how the country, identities and social groups in Afghanistan were conceived[15]. In particular, it influenced political and social hierarchies, in which the hegemonic position of the Pashtun royalty meant the subordination of other ethnic identities and classes.

Second, Afghan political elites reproduced and internalised the colonial 'master narrative' of Pashtun royal hegemony, laying the foundation for recurring ethnic tensions[16]. Successive Pashtun kings sought to establish their central authority and consolidate nation-building. These goals were achieved through the violent conquest of rival ethnic groups and tribes in the nineteenth century[17], and later through constitutional reform and state building measures in the twentieth century[18]. The term 'Afghan' was first codified in the 1964 Constitution[19] as a collective term for all citizens of Afghanistan with the intention of promoting nationhood and national identity, ignoring the fact that 'Afghan' had commonly been used to refer to ethnic Pashtuns. This shift signalled the modernising national aspirations of the state. Such a collective sense of national identity was felt most strongly by urbanised and educated constituents of different ethnicities in the larger cities, especially as the new constitution eased restrictions on freedom

[7] Ang, Chinese Australians between assimilation, multiculturalism and diaspora
[8] Ibid: 1185
[9] Cerwonka, Native to the Nation.
[10] Vertovec Transnationalism and identity; Erdal & Oeppen, Migrant Balancing Acts
[11] Levitt and Glick Schiller, Conceptualizing Simultaneity.
[12] Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora; Khan, Hazara History Writing; Abrahams & Busbridge, Afghan-Australians: Diasporic Tensions.
[13] Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation: 83.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Manchanda, Imagining Afghanistan; Hopkins, The Making of Modern Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan; Sungur, Early Modern State Formation in Afghanistan.
[16] Manchanda, Imagining Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Saikal, Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan.
[17] Hopkins, The Making of Modern Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan; Ibrahimi, The Hazaras and the Afghan State.
[18] Ahmed, Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft.
[19] Govt. of Afghanistan, Constitution of Afghanistan, 1964, accessed 20 August 2022, available from https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=afghanenglish.

of speech and expanded mass media communication (print and broadcast), education and the arts[20]. It was far less relevant to conservatives and minorities in rural areas, who had little to do with the state and benefitted less from its modernisation and nation-building efforts. Despite the dominance of Dari as the administrative language underpinning state institutions (schools, courts, and the bureaucracy), political and military power rested with the elite Pashtun classes of the royal family and the intelligentsia supporting their rule[21].

Third, notions of a collective Afghan identity were further complicated by the prolonged war since 1979, as different Mujahideen factions recruited fighters along ethnic and tribal lines. Manipulation by external powers meant that financial support was channelled to different groups to further their own geopolitical interests[22]. This intensified when the Soviet-backed government was defeated, power-sharing between the various Mujahideen factions failed and civil war broke out along ethnic lines[23]. A continued ethnic focus on Afghan identity was reinforced after 2001, when ministries were distributed among different Mujahideen factions and power-sharing became very much a matter of ethnic balance[24]. These dynamics led to increasing tensions over the term 'Afghan'. The issue of national and ethnic identification on Afghan national identity cards is one example of how tensions over ethnic and national identities have generated emotional and political debates in more recent social and political discourse[25]. The rise in digital nationalism[26] in the post 2021 period has also seen conflicting narratives of the nation and its historiography disseminated by individuals and groups in online spaces.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the absence of a complete national census since 1979, the lack of accurate cultural, historical and demographic data prevents a holistic understanding of the Afghan people. This opens the door to the creation of different ideas and political constructs of contemporary Afghanistan, including political manipulation[27].

Taken together, these four factors have not only led to significant gaps in our knowledge of Afghanistan and its people, but also explain why there has long been an incoherent national discourse and why national identity is understood and experienced differently by different groups. This inconsistency of what constitutes national identity for the citizens of Afghanistan has been further complicated by the rupture of displacement.

Since 1979, millions of Afghan refugees have had to come to terms with their 'otherness' and sense of self in new environments, sometimes with and often without family networks. Cultural reproduction through music, food, language and everyday practices became important lynchpins in maintaining identity and *Afghaniyat* (Afghan-ness) in exile[28]. As Afghan diaspora communities grew, family ties, ethnicity, region or village, class and politics influenced social identities and community [29]. While Afghan refugees initially formed social clusters based on a shared experience of exile and opposition to the Soviet invasion, they were not immune to the growing divisions in their homeland. The traumas associated with different phases of the conflict in Afghanistan were carried over to new places of settlement and influenced how different Afghan communities interacted with each other. As noted above, these differences have increased rather than diminished over the past two decades of a Western-led state building project in Afghanistan (2002-2021) and have been further exacerbated by social media.

Considering the above, the Afghanistan diaspora, like other diaspora communities[30], is

[20] Massoumi, Soundwaves of Dissent.
[21] Saikal, Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority.
[22] Saikal, Afghanistan's ethnic conflict; Emadi, The Radicalisation of the Shiite Movement.
[23] Simonsen, Ethnicising Afghanistan, 710
[24] Sharan & Heathershaw, Identity Politics and Statebuilding.
[25] Mobasher, Identity Cards and Identity Conflicts.
[26] Skey, Nationalism and Media.
[27] Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Ibrahimi, The Hazaras and the Afghan State.
[28] Haboucha, Transmission of food as heritage in the Afghan diaspora; Baily, War, Exile and the Music of Afghanistan; Sadat, Hyphenating Afghaniyat in the Afghan Diaspora.
[29] Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora.
[30] McAuliffe, Transnationalism Within; Khosravi, A Fragmented Diaspora; Baldassar, et al., The

fragmented along lines of ideology, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, local identification, cause of migration, period of displacement and migration trajectory, all of which undermine a coherent collective national identity. The terms 'Afghanistani' or 'Afghani' or 'Hazara-Afghan' or 'Hazara-Australian' over 'Afghan' or 'Afghan-Australian,' have been documented in recent academic literature, demonstrating irregularities in how national constructs are experienced and expressed among diverse groups[31]. This latter, more nuanced identity marker has become more prevalent with the rise of diasporic Hazara consciousness over the last twenty years[32] in response to historical and contemporary marginalisation and violence against Hazara communities[33]. The following sections present research findings that shed further light on these issues.

Conceptualising Afghan identity: Findings from the Australian diasporic context

This section of the paper presents qualitative interview findings that highlight aspects of fragmentation and divergent views of what it means to be 'Afghan' in the Australian Afghanistan diaspora. Interview findings show how national constructions are overridden by conceptualising the significance of Afghanistan as 'place' over other forms of identity markers. Place identity articulates connection to a place, be it a city, region or country, without being encumbered by complex nationalist political discourses and power dynamics. Furthermore, place identity becomes more pronounced when sense of place is threatened[34] thus, it is an ideal construct to apply in the context of diasporic identity. The concept of place identity is best defined by Proshanky as:

> "those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills and behavioural tendencies relevant to a specific environment"[35].

Disagreements of what it means to be an "Afghan"

As discussed earlier, underlying the different perspectives and constructions of what it means to be 'Afghan', are the internal tensions and misconceptions between different ideological and ethnic groups. Among the interview participants, it appeared that those who had been marginalised because of their ethnicity were more likely to see ethnic background as an important aspect of their identity, for example by identifying as Hazara-Australian or Hazara-Afghan. A Hazara male participant tries to explain how identifying as 'Afghan' can mean losing a sense of self:

> "Because people have such a historically traumatic memory, they are not interested in accepting this term of Afghan for themselves, they want to assert their identity and their histories. Because they say when you accept this term of Afghan, then they will force you to accept other things as well. It means that, if you are Afghan then this country is ours, the power is ours, the economy is ours, everything should be ours. You're a stranger, this isn't yours. Other ethnicities say no, we are not strangers**,** we are part of this land. This is the trouble. It isn't just about a word; it has a history. Because of the terrible history, people are not drawn to it"[36].

The participant spoke of these debates as a product of a heightened awareness emerging from increased education and access to information which was otherwise denied to large sections of the population due to underdevelopment and war. The emergence of a Hazara consciousness has led to a concerted effort to reshape Hazara narratives and history in the diaspora, in ways that redress the subaltern position that Hazara communities

Vietnamese in Australia; Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora.

[31] Bezhan, A Contemporary Writer from Afghanistan, 21; Abraham & Busbridge, Afghan-Australians: Diasporic Tensions; Radford & Heitzl, Hazara refugees and migrants.

[32] Ibrahimi, Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness; Latif Khan, Hazara History Writing.

[33] Phillips, Wounded Memory of Hazara Refugees.

[34] Proshanky et al., Place identity.

[35] Proshanky, The city and self identity.

[36] Interview participant, 24 March 2019 (male, Hazara, aged early 50s, born in Kabul).

historically held in Afghanistan[37]. It critiques the political and cultural hierarchies and power dynamics that have subordinated the positions of Hazara communities in Afghanistan. These debates suggest that the nation needs to be reimagined to acknowledge the diverse origins of its people[38]. For younger Afghans in the diaspora, identifying as a 'Hazara Afghan' acknowledges Hazara history and celebrates the diversity that makes up the Afghan identity:

> "We should appreciate everyone, a Tajik Afghan, a Hazara Afghan, an Uzbek Afghan, a Pashtun Afghan. We've got to appreciate them. As much as I appreciate myself as a Hazara Afghan, and we should accept their difference and their identity… it's a beautiful thing to accept diversity, so we've got to accept that"[39].

In contrast, participants with other experiences of marginalisation (e.g., gender, class, political opinion) still subscribed to a national Afghan identity. For example, one female participant who worked as a judge, described her upbringing within a poor, conservative family from Baghlan[40]. She had to overcome numerous obstacles including opposition within her own family to access and complete her education. She displayed a strong and impassioned attachment to Afghan national identity. She voiced the fear that ethnic identity politics would ultimately lead to separatism in Afghanistan. She felt this to be true among the Australian diaspora as among those living in Afghanistan.

Another participant downplayed both ethnicity and nationality as a circumstance of birth, focusing more on religious identity, noting: "I am a Muslim. … I don't emphasise much on my being Afghan…"[41]. He commented on ethnic politics in Afghanistan, which he felt has rendered the label of 'Afghan' as meaningless:

> "In Afghanistan, being Afghan has no meaning. They say I am not Afghan, I am Tajik. No I am Pashtun. No I'm Hazara. Well then what does this mean, who is Afghan then? Then it's just the map that is referred to as Afghanistan. In that regard, the sense of being Afghan doesn't really mean much…"[42].

These examples illustrate that different groups struggle with a common 'Afghan' national identity based on their experiences. This was especially so, when ethnic persecution led to forced displacement. A young Hazara woman who was forced to leave Afghanistan as a child during the Taliban era in the 1990s described her perspective where ethnicity is a primary aspect of her identity:

> "Being Afghan… has evolved… growing up you were forced out of your country, your home because they keep saying you're Hazara. That's why you get killed and things like that. So you develop this really ethnic identity because you only grow up with your own kind…"[43].

Following a return visit to her place of birth in Afghanistan in 2017, she experienced a shift in her perspective:

> "I saw every type of people, like I saw everyone in one country, one city living the same wonderful lives… you do develop a deeper, maybe more meaningful definition of an Afghan identity. [As a result] I identify myself as both Afghan and Hazara. Hazara is the reality of my existence. I would not hide from it"[44].

This experience suggests two things. First the importance of return visits for second generation youth to experience positively valued versions of their origins[45]. And second, the significance of 'place' for identity, which I argue in this paper.

This reimagining of what it means to be 'Afghan' and what it means to be from

[37] Ibrahimi, Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness; Latif Khan, Hazara History Writing.
[38] Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation, 87.
[39] Interview participant, 4 October 2019 (male, Hazara, aged mid 20s, born in Ghazni).
[40] Interview participant, 21 April 2019 (female, Afghan, aged mid 60s, born in Baghlan).
[41] Interview participant, 22 September 2019 (male, Afghan, aged early 60s, born in Kabul).
[42] Ibid.
[43] Interview participant, 14 September 2019 (female, Hazara, aged late 20s, born in Ghazni).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Wessendorf, Second generation transnationalism.

Afghanistan was most strongly conveyed by younger participants. Born both in and outside of Afghanistan, and raised in multicultural Australia, younger participants demonstrated a generational shift, as the following quote illustrates:

> "We [younger generation] feel ready to move on. Because it feels like a burden sometimes. There are all these prejudices and like, not just from you know, our side of the community, but throughout Afghanistan. It's not doing the country any good, it's not doing the people any good. And we've come here [Australia] and we have an opportunity to create dialogue and change… we have to acknowledge the mistakes that have been done"[46].

Characterised by upward educational mobility, strong community ties and exposure to range of media, the experiences and words of the young participants demonstrate the importance of recognising and respecting cultural and ethnic multiplicity in both the Afghan and Australian contexts. Other participants cautiously laid claim to the term 'Afghan', acknowledging that it can be used positively for the sake of unity. They demonstrated the importance of recognising ethnic origin within the national context of Afghanistan and also their new connection to Australia,

> "Afghan as a term has become, like an inclusive term, you know, internationally. Now everyone, all ethnicities in Afghanistan like Hazaras, Tajiks they're all known as Afghans. But then I think more personally, I would identify myself as a Hazara Afghan, or Hazara Afghan Australian"[47].

Afghan identity as 'Place' rather than nationality or ethnicity

Participants who were born in Afghanistan conveyed a physical and/ or psychological attachment to the homeland, regardless of when they left, where in the country they came from, and to what ethnic or political group they belonged to. Several participants who experienced different political conditions and regimes in Afghanistan, all spoke about the importance of Afghanistan, the country and their homeland, to their sense of self, as the following quote by a Tajik woman illustrates: "I feel like my *watan*, Afghanistan, it's in me, [it] is just me. It's like my honour … when someone says Afghanistan, I think they're talking about me"[48]. Attachment, then, is to 'place' and the memories it evokes, as this quote from an older Afghan woman from Kabul emphasises:

> "I was raised on that *khaak* (soil), I was raised in that *watan*... My blood, skin and body are from that country. This is why I am proud. Not in terms of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara - not these things. I am Afghan. I am from Afghanistan and I am very proud of it"[49].

This intense connection to place (soil and blood) was echoed by another older male participant from Nangarhar province, who describes it as important for physical and mental well-being, like a mother's embrace:

> "It is in the blood, you can't help it… Previously when I went to Afghanistan, in the seven months I spent there, I didn't need to take all the serious medications prescribed to me… I have a strong physical connection (*reshta*) with Afghanistan. Just like when a baby cries a lot, it goes into its mother's arms, it becomes quiet and calm. It's like that kind of feeling"[50].

A younger female participant born in Kabul explains Afghanistan as "paradise", a place in her heart (*dil*), which made her feel reborn during a return visit[51]. Others describe it as filling a void for them and wanting to be buried in the soil on which they were born[52]. These sentiments demonstrate the importance of place as expressed through the concept of

[46] Interview participant, 4 October 2019 (female, Hazara, aged mid 20s, born Jaghori).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Interview participant, 12 September 2019 (female, Tajik, aged early 40s, from Mazar-e-Sharif).
[49] Interview participant, 5 May 2019 (female, Afghan, aged mid 70s, born in Kabul).
[50] Interview participant, 19 April 2019 (male, Pashtun, aged late 60s, born in Nangarhar).
[51] Interview participant, 22 March 2019 (female, Afghan, aged late 30s, born in Kabul).
[52] Interview participant, 24 March 2019 (male, Hazara, aged late 40s, born in Kabul).

watan (homeland) for the interview participants. For some participants, the sense of connection with their *watan* or place of birth is a lasting one. This affected not only their sense of identity, but also the nature of their interactions, such as sending remittances to their family and village, and following news and events affecting their area.

Anthropological research in Afghanistan has already identified the importance of place (or spatial belonging) for identity and how *watan* represents an emotional quality of belonging, security and social connection[53]. The literature also emphasises a dual meaning of *watan,* depending on distance or proximity, and this was also reflected in the interviews. For example, when a person is in Afghanistan, *watan* refers to their local area, but when a person is outside of Afghanistan, *watan* represents the country[54]. Thus, a person's place of residence (*manteqa*) can be synonymous with notions of homeland *(watan*) and, along with *qawm* (extended family or ethnic/tribal social network) and religion (*mazhab*) figured prominently as important aspects of identity in Afghanistan[55]. These multiple and interchangeable meanings of *watan* are also reflected in the words of a male respondent born in Panjshir province:

> "*Watan* means everything to me. I was born and raised there. I have family there. *Watan* has obligation on every single Afghan to help… If I am in Afghanistan, I am connected to Panjshir. But if I'm in Australia, I'm connected to Afghanistan"[56].

This importance of 'place' to identity could also be seen in how the majority of research participants think about belonging in Australia. Attachment to *manteqa* (local area) or *watan* (homeland) in Afghanistan thus translates into attachment to the local community in which they live, work and raise their children as expressed by a man born in Kabul:

> "I am proud of my Afghan identity, because I was born and raised in that country and the community work I pursue, is part of that country. I am proud of my Australian identity too because it is a country that has offered us a safe place on this land… people are embraced and welcomed by Australia so they can pursue a good life to the extent they don't feel that sense of distance from their own country"[57].

Thus, Australia, the new country of residence and/ or citizenship, also forms the locus for identity and thus becomes a second *watan* or place of security, social connection and belonging. Despite the memories created by an original homeland, the host culture and society shapes identity more significantly than the term 'diaspora' suggests[58]. This points to the formation of an integrated identity that acknowledges attachment to the original home as well as the new home.

Imagined Watan among second generation diaspora youth from Afghanistan

While research participants who were born in Afghanistan spoke of their identity to a physical place, those born outside of Afghanistan had to develop an 'imagined' place identity, translated through family practice and storytelling, social networks, transnational contact, and engagement in online spaces. For example, family stories and practices shaped young people's perceptions of what it meant to be 'Afghan', and even benign domestic practices were imbued with cultural meaning as a young female second generation Afghan woman explains: "As a kid I thought waking up on Saturday and cleaning the house while listening to Afghan music, is like an Afghan tradition. Like a cultural thing that we all do"[59]. Afghanistan is thus reproduced in a range of domestic, transnational and online spaces as highlighted by a young Qizilbash woman, whose immediate family arrived in Australia in the 1980s and who remains connected to a transnational family network:

[53] Glatzer, War and boundaries, 381, Schetter & Mielke, Where is the Village?
[54] Glatzer, War and boundaries.
[55] Monsutti, War and Migration; Sungur, Early Modern State Formation in Afghanistan; Tapper, Ethnicity, Order and Meaning.
[56] Interview participant, 27 September 2019 (male, aged mid 40s, born in Panjshir).
[57] Interview participant, 22 March 2019 (male, Afghan, aged late 30s, born in Kabul).
[58] Khosravi, A Fragmented Diaspora.
[59] Interview participant, 17 September 2019 (female, Afghan, late 20s, born in Canada).

> "That sense of being Afghan and relating to another Afghan, you see those Afghan memes and you send it to each other. It's just this sense of connection and belonging to Afghan identity… the values, the food, the traditions…"[60].

Imagined *watan*, then becomes the familiar, the shared diasporic experience, narratives and identities born of multiple traumatic displacements from Afghanistan. The same female participant explains:

> "When I visit my family in Holland, US, or the UK, there are things that are the same no matter which part of the world you're in. As long as you're Afghan it's kind of there... it might not be significant, just all those little and big things unique to being Afghan that make you feel connected"[61].

Conclusion

My research has provided a nuanced insight into how 'identity' is constructed around place (either physical or imagined) among the Afghan diaspora in Australia. I found that nationalist causes, had limited uptake and appeal among most research participants. The issue of ethnicity was most salient for those who belonged to oppressed minorities (particularly Hazara). By and large, however, *watan* (home or homeland), or the soil (or dirt - *khaak*) on which participants were born and raised, became the most important identity marker among first-generation Afghanistan diaspora respondents. Given Afghanistan's chequered history of ethnicised conflict and a politicisation of ethnicity and identity, an emphasis on place separates identity from the politics, which has undermined the idea of a cohesive nation. A connection to place, or a sense of place identity, thus depoliticises place, focusing on the natural characteristics of and emotional attachment to the land, valuing it as the container of all the social relationships, positive memories and place of cultural value that a person may idealise about Afghanistan. This suggests that 'place identity' as *watan* can play a symbolic, unifying role for diasporas in the face of political fragmentation at home.

Although the second-generation diaspora born outside of Afghanistan, are more detached from politics at home, they still emphasise place over other forms of identity, the only difference being that the place is imagined and constructed through a set of symbols that encompass a range of social categories and meanings, allowing identity to be maintained at different levels and dimensions[62]. The construct of place identity allows people from Afghanistan of diverse ethnic groups and all levels of the social and political hierarchy, regardless of their history in relation to the state, to maintain a connection to the place (*watan*), *khaak* or soil of Afghanistan, rather than to the contested political construct of the nation of Afghanistan. In this way, despite fragmentation, 'place identity' allows for a common collective bond among a diverse diaspora from a war-torn country.

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[60] Interview participant, 29 September 2019 (female, Qizilbash, late 20s, born in Australia).
[61] Ibid.
[62] Hauge, Identity and place.

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