



**Afghans  
For Progressive  
Thinking (APT)**

# Narrative Report

October 26, 2019

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## I. General Information

Name of the Organization: Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT)

Website: [www.apr.org.af](http://www.apr.org.af)

Country: Afghanistan

Address: Red Cross Lane, Pul-e Surkh, Kabul

Reporting Period (Dates): 1 July, 2019 – 30 Sep, 2019

## II. Executive Summary

From July to September 2019, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) was able to organize not only all of its planned activities efficiently and effectively, but work on some extra initiatives as well. APT successfully held a number of debate trainings and tournaments in Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Samangan, Faizabad, Nangarhar and Kandahar, conducted the fifth National Debating Championship in Balkh province, and recruited twenty university students for its 2019 fall leadership course. In addition, APT successfully aired six live radio talk show programs covering the life stories of mothers and children, which was the last activity of the one-year-long program focusing on violent extremism and its prevention. APT carried out eight site visits in Kabul, Kandahar, Balkh, Paktia, Laghman, Nangarhar, Herat and Wardak provinces to evaluate the impact of its radio program. In our Mehrabanon School, the students completed the first semester of their first grade and successfully passed their semester exams.

In this quarter, APT organized a debate round on the topic of “Women and Potential Peace Talks with the Taliban”, hosted by the Canadian Embassy and NATO. In addition, our staff also conducted a session at Mehrabanon School on traffic safety. We also held numerous meetings with students’ parents where we encouraged them to partner with us in supporting their children and their education, so that the children can one day play positive roles in the society.

The following report contains a detailed explanation of the implemented activities and their impact on an individual as well as group level.

### III. Main Activities

#### Debate

During the past quarter, APT successfully held five debate tournaments and a number of trainings and practice session in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Samangan and Kandahar. We also conducted monthly networking events for debate club leaders and judge's community in Kabul and the surrounding provinces. In addition, APT also organized the 'Women, Youth & Peace Debating Championship' in Kabul, and the '2019 National Debating Championship' in Balkh.

The debaters discussed a wide range of social, economic and political topics in a clam and peaceful environment with passion and respect toward one another.

#### Debate Round on Women and Potential Peace Talks with the Taliban

On 17<sup>th</sup> September 2019, APT organized a debate round on "Women and Potential Peace Talks with the Taliban" which was hosted by the Canadian Embassy with the collaboration of NATO. The event was opened with the speech of ambassador Metcalf, after which the students debated the above-mentioned topic. The participants talked about the importance of peace, security and women's rights in particular. Moreover, APT had the honor of welcoming various representatives of the embassies and different university officials.

#### 2019 National Debating Championship in Balkh

From 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> September 2019, APT organized the 2019 National Debating Championship in Balkh. The event started with a small opening at Baran Amparatory Hotel in Mazar, followed by two full days of debate rounds at Nokhbagan University on September 12 and 13. The NDC 2019 ended with a closing ceremony on September 14. Students debated around different topics such as women's participation in Afghan elections, youth inclusion, sports and the importance of youth civic engagement. The students learned a great deal of information about the topical issues of Afghanistan and the world while interacting with other young debaters from other provinces, sharing their knowledge and culture.

Furthermore, the students learned from the experiences and keynote speech of our guest speaker - Mr. Yaseen Qarizadah, President of Nokhbagan University. "Critical Thinking is a very important skill to develop. If young people today want to be informed citizens and become great leaders, they need to improve their critical thinking and debating skills. Such programs as those promoted by APT are among

the very few venues which allow for that. I see our students are improving each year and I never miss a chance to help them in terms of providing a space for their practice sessions or any debate-related events at Nokhbagan University. I see that our students have greatly improved their public speaking and communication skills whenever I get a chance to interact with them. I know some of the Nokhbagan University students who are taking part in the debates and I am so impressed by the way they express their thoughts. I am immensely thankful to APT for their hard work to promote this culture among youth.”

#### Girls Debate Club Training Sessions

APT created a female debate club in several of the provinces where we conducted projects in the past quarters. To strengthen the functioning of these debate clubs, we organized multiple follow up ad training sessions. For example, the Samangan Female debate club had a practice session on the topic “Women Are More Effective than Men in Leadership Positions in Making a Positive Impact on the Society” on 25th August, 2019, at Mawlana University. Thirteen debaters and a number of participants in the audience attended the session. Similarly, on 28th August 2019, APT conducted a session for girls in Kabul and one session in the Mazar debate club on August 24, 2019.

#### **Leadership**

During the last quarter, we opened the application call for the Fall Leadership Development Course 2019. After receiving 120 applications from different universities and interviewing 50 people, 20 students were selected to participate. The students were from Karwan, Kateb, Gharjistan, Kabul Polytechnic and Hadia. The course will last two months - from October to November - and will be taught by both national and international instructors. In contrast to previous leadership courses, most of these sessions will be hosted and facilitated by different embassies in Kabul, where students will have the chance to learn from embassy staff about their experiences serving as leaders in the Afghan society.

#### **APT Exposure Trip to India**

From 27th September to 5th October 2019, APT sponsored a group of seven students to visit India and attend the 14th Global Youth Peace Fest-2019. These students were given the chance to visit the historical places of India and attended The Global Youth Peace Fest where participants from 20 different countries came together and spent 3 days discussing and sharing their ideas on the most important topics of the world. In this trip, we had invited participants from Herat, Balkh, Faizabad and Kabul provinces.

## **Second Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations Program**

This year, APT, with the support of the German Embassy in Kabul, elected the second Afghan Youth Representative to the UN. Ms. Aisha Khuram, a twenty-one-year-old Afghan woman who was born in Peshawar, Pakistan, and raised in a middle-class family and in Kabul, was selected as the second youth delegate on October 7th, 2019, by a panel of four jury members: H.E Tadamichi Yamamoto, the SecretaryGeneral's Special Representative for Afghanistan, H.E Peter Prugel, Germany's Ambassador to Afghanistan; H.E Idrees Zaman, Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ms. Sofia Ramyar, Executive Director of APT, in an open competition among three finalists in Kabul. We received over 100 applications and after a rigorous process, Ms. Khuram become the winner. APT started this annual program last year with the support of the Dutch Embassy in Kabul. This year, the program attracted the attention of Afghan government representatives, the international community and local and international media. Over 50 media and embassy outlets retweeted this news and provided media coverage to the final round of the event. Ms. Aisha Khuram, prior to her trip to the UN and Berlin, will meet with Afghan youth across the country to hear their concerns and opinions and send their message to the international community. Ms. Khuram will travel to Berlin to meet the German Youth Representative and then to New York to deliver a short speech in front of the UN Security Council.

More details of the program can be found here: <https://apt.af/afghan-youth-representative-2019/>

## **Media**

During the past quarter, APT, through the Ariana Radio Network (ARN), aired six live radio talk shows, covering the life stories of five mother/child storyteller and giving them the chance to share how our programs have helped them strengthen their families and learn more about the causes and prevention of violent extremism. Furthermore, we conducted eight site visits in eight provinces of Afghanistan to learn about the impact of our one- year program. In the past quarter, we also aired a trailer which told the story a mother advising her son on the risks of getting involved with violent extremism and on alternatives way of coping with frustration and despair.

### **Site Visits:**

APT conducted eight site visits in Kabul, Kandahar, Balkh, Paktia, Laghman, Nengarhar, Herat and Wardak provinces to evaluate the impact of its radio program across Afghanistan. APT staff prepared questionnaires and sent out surveys to mothers which aimed at assessing the attachment of children, particularly adolescent sons, to their families and communities. APT also assessed the extent to which the radio program has managed to open channels of communication among family members, particularly between mothers and children, and measured the awareness of mothers about their role in preventing the spread of violent extremism. In each site visit, 5 to 10 women participated in the evaluation discussions and shared that Hosa Zhouwand's radio program had impacted them positively. An evaluation report would be generated from these site visits and will be shared with donors with the next quarterly report.

### **APT's Elementary School – Mehrabanon**

In our Mehrabanon School, the students passed their midterm exams, enjoyed their summer break for ten days and returned back to school and started their second semester. During the holidays our staff worked to prepare a curriculum and started a program on traffic safety. For this semester we will also prepare different discussion topics on the importance of drinking clean water and hygiene. Furthermore, our project manager attended the private school managerial meeting where they discussed the new rules and requirements for schools in Afghanistan. In addition, we had a meeting with students' parents where we encouraged them to partner with us in building up the morale of the students in order to strengthen their education experience and actively participate in classes.

### **Research papers of students**

During the past quarter, students in six provinces wrote research papers on different social topics. From 60 papers, 10 research papers will be selected and published in a special booklet during the month of November. The papers will be edited and proofread by skilled writers who will provide the students with feedback on how to improve their research and writing skills.

## **National Youth Jirga**

APT is organizing the National Youth Jirga in Kabul in the first week of November. During the past quarter, we announced the call for applications in three languages: Pashto, Dari and English, and received a big number of applications from 31 provinces of Afghanistan. After processing the applications, around 80 youth representatives from each province got selected to the program.

The National Youth Jirga will serve as a great opportunity for Afghan youth to exchange their ideas and share their perspectives on how they see the role of young people in the context of Afghanistan, once peace is established. In addition, it will provide a platform for youth from across the country to build supportive networks and lobby for themselves.

Furthermore, this Jirga aims to gather youth from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, as well as different government officials, Afghan media, civil society activists, and representatives of our international partners in Kabul. The expected outcome of this Jirga is to create a policy paper/statement on the role of young people in shaping the future of the country and will be shared with the government and the international community.

### **I. Qualitative Impact**

#### **QUALITATIVE IMPACT OF DEBATE**

The last quarter was an exceptional period for us at Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT). We were able to impact the life of dozens of individuals and help them develop their skills and broaden their perspective on various topics. Through APT's programs, students managed to build friendships with people whom they met for the first time and who come from a different ethnic and religious background. In addition, students also developed their critical thinking and inter-personal skills. Students who were provided with opportunities to learn how to debate and communicate in a peaceful manner, have reported that these platforms have totally changed their perspective on life and about other human beings. In the debating competitions, students practiced a structured and sound method of critiquing and disagreeing by adapting assigned roles, encouraging them to see through others' perspectives. After the competitions, the students reported improved critical thinking and reasoning skills, self-confidence, and improved public speaking abilities.

Mr. Mahbob Wafae, a senior student of Economics at Kabul University, said, “Since joining the program, I have developed critical thinking abilities and I can see multiple perspectives on given topics. That helps me to stay calm when I encounter objections and disagreements. I used to be known as a hot-headed individual in my family; I am so glad I can tolerate differences now.” Ms. Rozita Sekandary, an adjudicator from Herat, participated in the 2019 Herat Debating Championship and the 2019 National Debating Championship, told the project staff the following: “Debating has helped me to succeed in my life. Now I see students making mistakes in their thought process during debates and I get to help them to fix them as an adjudicator. It feels very good to help new students learn what we have learned from debating. The respect being shown for dissenting opinions at APT debate rounds is extraordinary by any standards in our country.” Our exposure trip team who returned back to Afghanistan with a lot of excitement, shared how the program changed everything in their life. Now they enjoy their life more than before: Farida Razaqi, one of our participants from Herat province shared, “This trip empowered me to deepen my understanding of the world and opened my eyes to a world more diverse than I had previously imagined. And I love who I have become after this trip.”

In Afghanistan where war is ongoing and intolerance prevails, the skills young leaders learn from this project are invaluable for the society writ-large. University students are at a strategic stage of their lives because soon they will join government, businesses, and become family heads. These skills will be useful in running organizations and institutions, as many of APT’s previous debaters are making change in the governmental and non-governmental sectors.

In Mehrabanon School, we noticed that students have developed greater confidence in themselves and demonstrate greater eagerness to come to school and to learn. The students have improved their abilities in many areas, such as writing and reading the Persian and English alphabet and numbers. They are writing and reading simple sentences and constructing words by using the letters of the alphabet. Students are also able to memorize and read and recite poems during school ceremony days.

APT, as the largest youth organization in Afghanistan, has been receiving recognition for the efforts we are putting forward from the government. After the final selection round of the Afghan Youth Representative to the UN, where the media, government and UNAMA representatives were present, the government representatives thanked APT staff for the work we are doing in Afghanistan and retweeted

news of the event. We have also received a lot of requests from different embassy representatives who are willing to work with us in the next year and support our vision for a peaceful Afghanistan.

## II. Challenges and Lessons Learned

### Public Holidays (Mahram and Election)

Several public holidays, elections days and the Mahram holiday during the last quarter made us postpone and reschedule some of our programs and events. For instance, we rescheduled all our activities which were planned from September 2<sup>nd</sup> to September 11<sup>th</sup>, because of Mohram and all of APT's staff worked from home. There was also a high security threat during these days and people were encouraged to limit their movement. Similar challenges are beyond the control of APT and we usually overcome them by rescheduling our events to dates that are convenient for most students to attend.

### Security Situation in Provinces

This year, we couldn't secure the participation of our Badakhshan teams in the National Debating Championship in Balkh because of high security threats on the road between Badakhshan and Mazar. APT did not have the budget to bring the participants by air and even though they were willing to take the risky journey and travel, a last minute turbulent security situation forced them to remain at home.

## I. Impact Stories

### **II. Ms. Guzal Hedayat, Member of APT from Mazar Province, shared her impact story after attending APT's exposure trip to India:**

"I graduated from school in 2013, and I graduated from the Economics faculty of Balkh province at August 2017. During university I participated in different conferences and social events, and work as a volunteer in different organizations. In 2014, I joined the APT debate club as a debater and worked as volunteer and a judge. I am also a certified trainer of SIYB (Start & Improve your Business), GET Ahead. Since May 2018, I have been teaching in the economics faculty in Balkh province. Since I was a kid I have been dreaming about visiting the Taj Mahal. The trip with APT made my dream come true. This trip had a great impact on my personal and academic life that I cannot forget. As I realized my trip to India and participated in the 14th GYPF (Global Youth Peace Fest), I realized that it had three main impacts on me.

Firstly, I was exposed to friendly and warm behavior from people from another culture. I saw how people can respect and listen to each other even if they disagree on an issue. Many of the people I met there were so warm and caring and they always made sure I was not alone and had company. Secondly, visiting the Taj Mahal is not only about seeing the mausoleum in white marble, but also its surroundings, especially the Taj Mahal- Charbagh. In the Islamic style of architecture, the garden symbolizes spirituality. According to the Holy Quran, a garden is a symbol of paradise. The second historical place that we visited – the Red Fort - was great and absolutely beautiful. The third place we visited - Qutub Minar - is one of the world's Heritage Sites and has survived the ravages of time impressively. The Minar of Delhi is surrounded by a lush green garden, which is an ideal leisurely place for visitors. Qutub Minar is the favorite destination of tourists.

In conclusion, I believe that diversity is not just in different people or cultures, but within our own countries and homes. It is also within our heart and we should always respect it and learn to live in peace with it. This trip had an important impact and it taught me to respect others' beliefs, and to try to save the world for future generations and live in a peaceful country."

***Ms. Ziba Rezayi, a student of English Literature at Kahkashan-e-Sharq University, shares her debating experience with us:***

“I was born in the Urozgan province. I am a third-year student studying English language literature at Kahkashane Sharq University and one of the APT participants from Herat.

Everyone has a reason for doing something in her/his life. Therefore, I also had some reasons to take part in debate with different people from different ages and levels of education. I was a girl who was away from her family for about seven years and had lived with my grandparents from my mother’s side. My father was a merchant doing his business and my mother was working for her in-laws. While my father was traveling to Pakistan and Iran carrying green manure, the Taliban kidnapped him. After he was released, he couldn’t continue doing his business and we moved to Herat. At the beginning, I was a very strict and tough girl. I was always ready to answer someone directly however I wished. I was so impatient and thinking that having to debate means to fight and argue with opponents and to prove yourself. I had a picture in my mind that debaters were fighter. But then things changed after I went to a debate training and experienced everything. The reason was that I hadn’t participate in any official debates before and didn’t know about debating rules and regulations. It was almost eight months ago that I was asked to participate in a debate program in Herat and I could only continue up to the 3rd round of the tournament. The experience taught me many things about life and changed my way of thinking. It helped me to practice my critical thinking skills. I continue to develop my critical thinking with critical thinkers in my group while having discussions. As a language learner and a successful person, I could surely improve my critical thinking skills. This experience taught me to be respectful and learn more about people and their great ideas. During the debate, I was faced with complicated topics and learnt how to discuss them calmly, clearly and competently in groups. I learned how to say more with fewer words and enhanced my ability to communicate clearly and quickly. As a literature student, I really needed to enhance my communication, listening and note taking skills. In addition, this experience increased my knowledge about the world as we were discussing different issues and motions. If I compare myself with the person before debate and now, I must say that I’m a completely different person and I picture the world really differently.

Right now, debate doesn’t mean arguing, winning or losing. It is just being able to learn from others and being successful in every step of life.

I also learned a lot about research, leadership, listening and communication skills. All these important changes made me to dream about a bright future and achieve my goals for a better lifestyle. APT helped me to tackle arguments patiently and professionally. Also, I would like to continue my higher education. I plan to get a master's degree from a foreign country through passing the TOEFL test and getting Fulbright scholarship."

**Mr. Zia Rahimi, a senior student of Law faculty at Balkh University shares his story of debating career with us:**

"I started going to the debate trainings which were being set up by APT (Afghans for Progressive Thinking) while I was studying in the 4th semester of college. At this time, I was also thinking about how I can become useful to society and achieve all my goals. Tamana Farewar, my classmate, asked me to join APT's debate trainings. As she is very active in taking part in such kind of events, I trusted her recommendation and went ahead. Now I am almost the person I wanted to become.

Debating improved my public speaking skills and taught me to examine different ideas. It also improved my communication skills and helped me learn how to open a channel of communication with a person from a different background. Every word we express can have a positive or a negative impact on others. In addition, standing against people or by the people to reject or accept an idea requires courage. Debating has definitely made me braver in communication!

I confess that debating did bring lots of changes in my social life and personal life as well. I learned to deliver good speeches, communicate useful information, accept others and respect all our needs and differences. I hope that everyone will have the chance to experience debate as I did."

**Ms. Zakia Yaqubi, Student of Kabul University shared her impact story after joining our research program:**

"I am Zakia Yaqubi, a sophomore student of Journalism at Kabul University. I am also an active debater of the Kabul University Debate Club. I would like to share my thoughts and opinions regarding Afghans for Progressive Thinking.

It was back in the winter when I came to know about Afghans for Progressive Thinking through a friend. I got the membership of the club and got a week of training on research. Since I came to know about research and its importance, I learned a lot more about the topics we discussed in the class. I realized that research is very important for my personal and professional life. During our weekly sessions, we

researched about different controversial issues. Besides, the research we had about extremism and its impact on social intolerance was very interesting. In addition, I came to know more about my society and the roots of many controversial issues going on nowadays.

The first time when we submitted our research papers to Afghans for Progressive Thinking we received very useful feedback. We carefully went through the feedback and rectified our mistakes. This motivated me even more, because I thought I could do more research and build my journalistic career through it.

Research takes much time and needs tolerance. You need to be patient and persistently work hard. Besides, I study journalism and it needs more research than any other career, so I am thankful to Afghans for Progressive Thinking for their fruitful trainings and useful feedback. They helped me learn important skills through which I can build my career.”

**Niazi Anwar, a mother of two sons, lives in the Alingar, Laghman province. She shared her impact story after listening to our radio program:**

“Scolding is a bad phenomenon in the society which affects people’s lives, especially those of adolescent sons. I used to scold my son for every individual mistake of his. After a long time, I realized that my son got isolated and he didn’t take part in family matters. It made me so sad that my son was not taking part in family matters and was getting more and isolated. After listening to the “Examples of adolescents as the perpetrators of violent extremism” talk show, I stopped scolding him and started to build a different relationship with him. Nowadays, I can feel that he trusts and loves me more and I am happy for it.”

**Ms. Farida Razaqi, Member of APT from Herat Province shared her impact story after the exposure trip to India:**

“Since 2015, I have been involved in different programs of APT. Recently, through the sponsorship of this organization; I attended an exposure trip to India which also provided me with a great opportunity to participate in the Global Youth Festival- 2019 on behalf of Afghanistan, along with a team of 6 members. This trip empowered me to deepen my understanding of the world and opened my eyes to a world more diverse than I had previously imagined.

During the trip, we visited some historical places in India and I had the chance to converse and socialize with local people, which broadened my perspective greatly. Travelling to a new place for the first time

helped me to begin drawing connections between the different issues that I have been learning regarding Indian culture. Moreover, it helps me to analyze how environmental, socioeconomic, political and other issues are all interrelated in a more concrete way. Especially in Lotus Temple, I found India as a country with interfaith and inter cultural dialogues. They are practicing religious harmony and cultural diversity in order to promote national integrity. Visiting the Red fort opened for me a new perspective about the evolution of history in India and how it is reflected in the opinions of the present generation and the society. Qutub Minar was the other amazing place that impressed me by its magnificence. Its wonderful architectural art, along with the natural beauty of the place, create an amazing picturesque landscape in the eyes of the observer. Furthermore, we participated in the Global Youth Peace fest- 2019. In this program, we met with the delegates from more than 20 countries and discussed the most critical world problems in much deeper level than we ever could before. This festival provided me invaluable global learning and experience of knowing different cultures through new eyes. I learned that people of any culture have many different views, values and world perspectives. The most interesting thing about the fest was that participants, despite all differences, were strongly committed to the quest for peace by getting motivation from a sense of justice and humanity by brightening the prospects for genuine peace.

Consequently, this trip was a great opportunity for me to capitalize on my potential and broaden my worldview. I would like to thank APT for equipping youth with skills and tools to communicate and reflect, to be active and responsible citizens of the society by providing the platforms to discuss national challenges towards peace, religious harmony, equality and sustainable development. We need a platform to voice our concerns, issues and recommendations and APT is that platform.”