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In Kabul, happiness flies in the sky

Every evening, thousands of colourful kites soar above the streets of Kabul, a pastime in which Afghans have indulged for centuries. That the endless battles are a metaphor for the nation below does not diminish the pleasure.



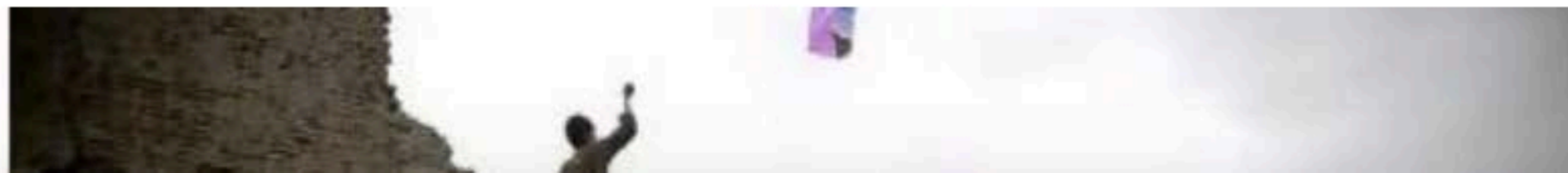
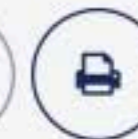
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Kite flying in Afghanistan is a form of sport that many have taken to the level of art. Above, a boy flies a kite from the remains of a building in the capital.

KABUL // While New York, London and Hong Kong may have their iconic, indelible skylines - chiselled out of stone and glass - Kabul's is a little more free-flowing. It is made of paper.

On any given evening in the Afghan capital, especially at the weekend, hundreds of thousands of colourful paper kites soar above the unexceptional streets below. It is a pastime in which Afghans of all ages have been indulging, intermittently, for centuries.

There are very few playgrounds in Kabul. Decades of war and foreign interventions have reduced



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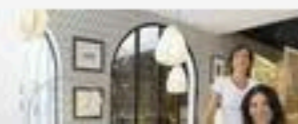
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this city's recreational infrastructure to paper, bamboo and string. It is in hundreds of workshops across the capital that these meagre components are put together into kites ranging across 20 sizes and using up to 40 bright colours.

Much of the world beyond the borders of this harsh and wildly beautiful country learnt of the Afghan fondness for kites through the best-selling 2003 novel, *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, as well as a movie of the same name four years later. Still, it is difficult to underestimate how deeply this simple, string-and-paper toy is woven through the culture here.

"Sometimes we sell up to 20,000 kites a day," says Tamim, 35, who goes only by one name, and who has been selling kites for 20 years on Kabul's busy market street, Strand Bazaar.

Such peak sales days invariably fall on or before major holidays, when sellers such as Tamim become de facto wholesalers to the kite sellers of the provinces who come to Kabul to stock up on thousands of kites. On a normal day's trading, Tamim says, he sells about 200 kites to local Kabulis. Kites range from about 20 US cents for the smallest models to US\$100 (Dh367) for a large hand-painted one.

On a recent afternoon, Ahmad Hassani, 13, traipsed around the market with 25 cents in his pocket in search of the best kite his money could buy. He had to settle for one of the smaller sizes and with his kite-flying sidekick Zabi Rahime, 15, he headed to a rubbish and rubble-strewn wasteland adjacent to the market to fly it.



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"When I see my kite climb into the sky, I feel happy," says Hassani. "I enjoy it."



The classic kite flying formation is as a pair. One pilots the kite and the other feeds or reigns in the string. Kites soar high, sometimes hundreds of feet above the city. The wind and air currents up there lend themselves to dynamic, dramatic manoeuvring. Using paper is crucial to flying successfully at such altitude, says the historian and writer Abdul Rahman Oman Niazi, 40. "It enables you to fly the kite up high but also paper allows you to make kites large enough that can still be seen from the ground. You can't do this with plastic."



It is small enclosures like the one Hassani and Rahime fly their kite in, as well as on the private rooftops of Kabul houses, where young Afghans cut their teeth at kite flying, before venturing to the heavily trafficked skies above Kabul's hills. These discreet spaces are also where kite flying typically retreats to, during periods of heavy conflict, when leaving home is perilous.

Sometimes the kites disappeared altogether. In 1996, when the Taliban seized power in Kabul, they banned kite flying as an un-Islamic activity - saying it represented time stolen from prayer. By the time kites began to creep back into the Kabul skies, after the Taliban were toppled in 2001, some things had changed.

"The colour is more beautiful, more vibrant than before," says Tamin, referring to new, brighter inks that came on the market during Afghanistan's kite curfew and made the kites' comeback an acidic-bright one. The string was also improved, replacing traditional fibres with tougher nylon, imported from Pakistan. Tamin brings these innovations together when he makes kites. He thumbs brown

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lumpy glue in a bowl and spreads it along the perimeter of the paper, quickly bending and fixing in the bamboo frame. Finally he runs thread along the perimeter of the kite and turns a hem on it with glue. This reinforces the kite from attack, he says.

What, from the ground, looks like a graceful aerial ballet of colour, is in fact the fiercest of kite-on-kite carnage, hundreds of feet above the city. Kite flying in Afghanistan is, more often than not, kite fighting, and the key is in the kinds of string used - strong acrylic fibres laced with crushed glass which tear into the kites, snap kite string and often leave bloody tracks on the fingers of the impassioned kite pilots down below.

"It's sharp like blades," says Ajmal Hoshmand, 25, who is flying his kite up into the melee above Kabul's Nadar Khan Tapa hill, his fingertips wrapped individually in Sellotape. "We have to put on tape to protect our fingers."

The kite fighting - and the occasional illicit gambling it brings - may well be what keeps Afghans flying kites well into adulthood. As the sun begins to set, Nadar Khan Tapa hill is thronged with flocks of grown men jumping up and down in excitement looking at a far off battle in the sky, or with stolid father-and-son duos, eyes trained skyward, working wordlessly in tandem to fell another kite

Down below are herds of kite runners who, at the first sign of a vanquished kite, trample around in clots, raising clouds of dust, jumping and scrambling for the prize - a defeated and often damaged kite.

"I don't want to catch kites, I only want to fly them but I have to catch them because my money's finished," says Imran Khan Dodkhail, 15, a dusty kite runner who has just emerged victorious from the latest windfall, kite in hand. Within minutes, after some Sellotape-aided reconstructive surgery, the kite is back up in the hostile skies.

Battles are won and lost, repeatedly, every evening in the sky above Kabul and kite flyers become kite runners and kite flyers once again with a simple flick of a wrist. Metaphors for Afghanistan's recurrent woes play out aplenty up above but nothing could be further from the kite flyers on the hillsides and rooftops below.

"I came here to have fun, to catch some kites and simply have fun," says Tahir Shah, 27. "It's been a very dangerous time in Afghanistan. Now we want a good time in Kabul. Now the time is coming for people to have enjoyment."

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