

FORMER ARIANA AFGHAN AIRLINES PRESIDENT, DR. NADIR ATASH, DEFENDS HIMSELF AGAINST CORRUPTION IN AFGHAN GOVERNMENT



Former Ariana Airlines President Dr. Mohammed Nadir Atash's campaign against corruption nearly cost him his life. The shocking story of his quest to modernize the airlines and bring transparency exposes a tangled web of deceit, betrayal, and corruption in Afghanistan.

Although attempts were made to destroy Dr. Atash's reputation through false allegations, defamation and physical intimidation, his courage and bravery in standing up for what is right for the Afghan nation and people is a testament to other Afghans seeking to rebuild the country.

THE FULL STORY

In 2005, former Minister of Transportation, Minister Enayat Qasimi, a U.S. resident who had been trained as an attorney and had also returned to Afghanistan, requested Dr. Atash's assistance. Minister Qasimi was in urgent need of help. He urged Dr. Atash to work as a Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Transport. Dr. Atash accepted his offer and served for three months without receiving any compensation.

Seeing that Dr. Atash successfully helped in the proposal process of over 50 projects that were approved by the Afghan government and built a team of experts for him, Minister Qasimi repeatedly asked Dr. Atash to serve as President of Ariana in order to organize the Hajj operation, as he was not able to manage it himself. The year before, the Hajj operations had faced many problems and led to protests by hajjis and criticism of Afghanistan by Saudi authorities. Ariana Airlines had also experienced many problems and was in need of reform.

Dr. Atash initially declined his offer, but Minister Qasimi continued to persuade him that by working together, they could make the operation successful.

Sensing Qasimi's need for assistance as a young Afghan expatriate, seeing the downward spiral of Ariana's reputation from a world class carrier in the 1960's to the world's "most dangerous", experiencing first hand the lack of customer service in the airlines, and especially not wanting the Hajj operation to be a disaster, Dr. Atash felt a responsibility to help the young minister and stated that he would only work for a few months to ensure that the Hajj operation was a success.

As the new President of Ariana, Dr. Atash immediately began with research and analysis of the problems and found that the major issue was corruption in its comprehensive meaning throughout the airlines. There was a dangerous mafia system hidden behind the airlines. Embezzlement, lack of a positive attitude, lack of cooperation, and environment of putting personal interests ahead of Ariana's was not only confined to Ariana but to networks operating outside Ariana with strong support from very high officials including some Ministers and even higher ups than Ministers.



Dr. Nadir Atash working at Ariana Airlines

Within days, **Dr. Anwar Al-Haq Ahadi**, the Minister of Finance, opposed Dr. Atash's appointment to the position complaining in a cabinet meeting that the Minister of Transport had "not followed proper procedures". **Ahadi has personal connections to Pamir Air**, a private airline which had applied for a certificate to operate an airline, but had not been granted permission at the time due to lack of a regulatory framework. Ahadi's wife is a cousin of Jawid Azimi, a former President of Ariana. Azimi and a notorious member of the Afghan drug mafia made private deals with a shady Arab businessmen with ties to airplanes when Azimi was president. The two profited from planes that were sold to Ariana at high prices. Today, Azimi and his mafia friend are major partners of Pamir Air, a direct competitor of Ariana.

As Ariana's new president, Dr. Atash was up against **corruption** in its comprehensive meanings. One of his strategies was to bring in qualified experts from abroad, as well as train and provide incentives for Ariana employees to perform better. In November of 2005, Dr. Atash met with a group of Afghan expatriates who had aviation experience, organized by Ambassador Said Tayeb Jawad.

Even though he recruited qualified individuals and many of Ariana's employees responded positively to the new system, the mafia network that had benefited from Ariana in the past sought to sabotage Dr. Atash's call for an end to corruption in the airlines.

Ariana Airlines brought in cash but is a state-owned institution that did not even have a proper computerized accounting system for over 20 years. Until Dr. Atash instituted a new accounting system, there was no clear picture of Ariana's financial statements. To rid the airline of corruption would mean an end to years of money laundering and smuggling and it took courage and honor to stand up to it.

Even though Dr. Atash instituted many successful reforms, various factors outside of his control led to costs that prevented the airline from making a profit. One of the first problems Dr. Atash faced was the soaring cost of fuel in 2005. Also, Ariana's prices were not always set by business considerations, but by political pressure.

Dr. Atash and his team calculated the price per ticket for Haaj pilgrims would have to increase to approximately **\$1050/person**. Ariana's fuel supply was controlled by **Tryco**, an American company with a tainted reputation, who increased fuel costs to Ariana, but was late in deliveries. One day, a Tryco employee came into Dr. Atash's office and offered him a cut of the deal if Dr. Atash did not bid the fuel supply contract to the open market and continued using Tryco as Ariana's fuel supplier. Tryco had been supplying fuel to Ariana prior to Dr. Atash's post. **Dr. Atash immediately refused his bribe**, and ordered him to leave his office. Angered by Dr. Atash's refusal, the Tryco employee turned to Dr. Atash and said, "You think you know people. Now you will see who I know." Unphased by this threat, Dr. Atash presented his findings regarding the Hajj ticket prices to President Karzai, in the presence of Minister Qasimi and the Minister of Hajj. President Karzai ordered Dr. Atash to charge **\$850/ticket** for each pilgrim. Both Dr. Atash and Minister Qasimi warned that this was below the cost of the service and would lead to losses for Ariana. However, President Karzai did not change his mandate. Dr. Atash complied, and although the Haaj operation was a huge success in terms of operations, the airlines experienced the losses in revenues from the ticket prices that Dr. Atash had warned. Rather than thanking Dr. Atash for the first successful Hajj operation by Afghanistan in many years, he was blamed for the loss in revenues.

The second problem Dr. Atash tried to resolve was an **expensive consulting contract** that had been instituted with the help of the U.S. Embassy and approved by President Karzai. The contract was with **Lufthansa Consulting**, who charged Ariana \$2,000 per day. Lufthansa Consulting was supposed to put together an operation manual for Ariana among its other responsibilities under the contract. After one year, the consultants had failed to produce an operation manual. In order to save Ariana money, Dr. Atash terminated the agreement, even though it led to the German Embassy showing its disagreement. Dr. Atash then instructed Captain Assad Sharza to finish the manual. Captain Sharza agreed and a new manual was produced within 3 months, at no extra cost to Ariana.

The third issue Dr. Atash worked hard to address was the **purchase and lease transaction of Boeing planes**. He and his team worked many hours to implement the contract, which had been recommended by former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad to Minister Qasimi. Mariam Nawabi, an attorney and diplomat who

was the Commercial and Trade Counsel at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington D.C., was part of negotiations with Boeing. She is also Dr. Atash's daughter.

Although the **planes were halted in Europe due to security reasons**, Boeing continued to charge Ariana for the monthly lease payments. Dr. Atash and Captain Sharza negotiated and explained to Boeing that that the halted planes were not the fault of Ariana. Boeing then pardoned the invoices, totaling about \$6,000,000, saving Ariana millions of dollars. Rather than acknowledging the efforts of Dr. Atash and Captain Sharza, they were blamed for actions that needed to be taken by the Afghan government.

Some individuals in the Afghan government wrongly accused Dr. Atash of profiting from the Boeing deal. There is absolutely no evidence that he received any personal benefits and rather, worked as a volunteer for the Afghan government with honesty and integrity. Boeing recognized Dr. Atash's service and regretted that the leadership in Afghanistan could not take the simple steps needed to complete a deal that it had wanted from the beginning and for which Boeing gave major discounts and training concessions.

The final, and most difficult problem Dr. Atash faced was **corruption in Ariana and the Afghan government**. One day during a meeting at the Presidential Palace, President Karzai ordered Dr. Atash to fire all corrupt employees in Ariana. Dr. Atash asked Karzai if he would receive support from the Government if he took these actions, to which Karzai responded, "Yes, I will support you." After conducting an internal investigation in Ariana, Dr. Atash first removed 4 employees who were engaging in illegal conduct within Ariana.

One of these employees was **Timor Shah Stanekzai**. Angered by Dr. Atash's decision to let him go, Stanekzai turned to two of his friends to wage a public smear campaign against Dr. Atash. One of his friends is **Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet** (PICTURE). Abdul Jabar Sabet, a former aid to **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar**, was appointed as Karzai's Attorney General in 2006. He was wildly criticized internationally for regularly breaking the law and his ruthless treatment of General Amarkhel, a respected police chief at Kabul Airport. Sabet targeted Gen. Amarkhel for his campaign against drug trafficking in Kabul Airport and threatened to arrest him. Amarkhel was then forced into exile in Great Britain.



Abdul Jabar Sabet

Then, in April 2007, Sabet unlawfully ordered a surprise raid on Tolo TV studio after a report about him aired that he reportedly did not like. He ordered uniformed police officers to beat journalists in the studio. The incident made international headlines, furthering damaging Sabet's reputation.

Without proper evidence or a fair trial, **Sabet then brought on petty cases and charges against Dr. Atash**. Sabet also enforced a travel ban on Dr. Atash five times. Each time, Dr. Atash returned to Afghanistan and provided all the information and documentation requested by Sabet's staff. The investigations began a few months after Dr. Atash became President and continued until he resigned.

Sabet and others at the Attorney General's office have not presented any evidence of wrongdoing on Dr. Atash's part and used the media to make statements that harmed his reputation. One case states that because Ariana was not able to collect money for one ticket that the passenger refused to pay, that Dr. Atash is charged with "embezzlement" for the cost of that ticket. In no court that has a functioning legal system would such a small administrative issue be used to charge an individual with criminal offenses. It has become apparent to everyone following the case since 2006 that there is no basis for the allegations and the files were created to harass Dr. Atash.

Stanekzai's other friend is **Zabiullah Esmati**. Esmati, a former welfare recipient of California who still depends on medicine for a psychological disorder, was the head of the Anti-Corruption commission in Ariana during the time Dr. Atash was President. Esmati tried to pressure Dr. Atash to re-hire his friend Stanekzai, and if Dr. Atash complied, he would personally see that all the cases that were brought against Dr. Atash by Sabet were "torn up". The head of the anti-corruption commission of Afghanistan was corrupt himself.

Dr. Atash refused to take his bribe. After this incident, the cases against Dr. Atash grew worse, as **Esmati appeared on Afghan television several times falsely accusing Dr. Atash of embezzling money from Ariana**. Ironically, today, Esmati is the new President of Ariana Airlines, and he continues to appear on Afghan media spreading false allegations against Dr. Atash.

Meanwhile, a few employees and advisors who Dr. Atash welcomed to Ariana to work together for the betterment of the agency, **plotted to turn against him and overthrow him** as President. One of these employees was **Abdul Ahad Mansuri**. Mansuri, a former resident of California who had questionable ties to Ariana dating to the 1990's, was VP of Ariana in 2006.

In August 2006, Dr. Atash visited the United States to work on an investment proposal to the Board of Ariana. On August 14, 2006, he attended a signing ceremony at the Embassy of Afghanistan with Ambassador Said Tayeb Jawad. The Memorandum of Understanding involved a proposal by U.S, Canadian and European investors who offered to invest \$300-\$700 million dollars into Ariana, which would turn it into a world

class carrier again. This would have made it one of the largest wholly private finance investment in Afghanistan's history. News of this event made headlines.



Dr. Nadir Atash, center, and Ambassador Said Tayeb Jawad, far right, at the Ariana Investment MOU signing, August 2006, Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C.

While Dr. Atash was in the U.S. signing this important MOU, **Abdul Ahad Mansuri** went to meet with President Karzai and the Economic Committee of the Cabinet. Even though Dr. Atash had allowed him to work as part of his team, Mansuri saw an opportunity to finally become President of Ariana. Mansuri publicly accused Dr. Atash of “mismanaging” and stealing money from the airline. He campaigned Ariana employees to submit their votes for a new president while Dr. Atash was out of the country.

This mechanism for deciding the President of Ariana was against the bylaws of Ariana, but the Board of Ariana allowed it to happen. **The Board included the Minister of Transportation, who was now a former mechanic at Ariana, Jawed, the Minister of Commerce, the Minister of Finance.**

Upon hearing news of this meeting, Nawabi, who now worked in the private sector, contacted President Karzai's Chief of Staff, Jawed Ludin. She questioned why the meetings were allowed to be scheduled when Dr. Atash was not present. She stated that Dr. Atash had worked for the Afghan Government, with integrity, for over a year and it was an insult to hold meetings without allowing him to present the facts.

Ludin assured Nawabi that the meetings held no weight and that President Karzai wanted to meet with Dr. Atash in person to discuss the matter. Although warned by his colleagues and advisors that he should not return to Kabul, Dr. Atash wanted to clear the matter with integrity and submit his formal resignation to President Karzai in person. Dr. Atash left the U.S. three days later, but returned to Kabul only to find out that no appointment with President Karzai had been granted to him and that he was banned from leaving Afghanistan. He also met with the Anti-Corruption Commission, who questioned him for over five hours. He provided explanations for all of the questions that had been raised. Many members of the Commission recommended that no formal action be taken as there was no evidence of wrongdoing. However, it appeared that Esmati was using his position as head of the Commission to promote his personal agenda and used his

friendships with Stanekzai and Sabet to further his interests. He continued to look for a way to undermine Dr. Atash.

Fed up, Dr. Atash resigned from his position a few days later and the Board of Directors, who is compromised of the Minister of Transport Jawed, Minister of Finance, Minister of Commerce, and a few others, Ariana met and reported that a majority had voted Mansuri as the new President of Ariana. Unable to manage the airlines himself, Mansuri resigned a few months later and faces charges of wrongdoing.

In April of 2007, **Mansuri was replaced by Zabiullah Esmati**. Not more than two days after being appointed, Esmati stated to an Afghan newspaper that Ariana needed new planes. He was one of the individuals who questioned the Boeing company, who is one of the U.S.'s most recognized companies, but now wanted to seek another source. Not able to manage the airlines successfully since then, these individuals still go to great lengths to blame any losses in Ariana on Dr. Atash.

A few days later after Dr. Atash's resignation, a corrupt judge threatened to imprison Dr. Atash for 12 years without evidence or trial. Threats were made against Dr. Atash's life. Through the support of the United States of America, Dr. Atash finally left Kabul.

During his tenure, Dr. Atash worked with honesty and integrity and was a member of the Government of Afghanistan who fought corruption. Dr. Atash did not take a salary while he served as President of Ariana for over 18 months. The \$100/month government salary that is usually allocated for his position was either not taken or donated to charities. He had supported himself financially through his businesses in the U.S. since he had moved to Afghanistan and wanted to serve his country and his people.

Dr. Atash worked hard to neutralize the sabotage and fight the cases that the Attorney General's office, led by Sabet, orchestrated. In 2006, Dr. Atash received a letter from Karzai's office supporting the decision that he had made to remove any employees.

The Attorney General's office ignored this letter and continued to try Dr. Atash in the court of public opinion: the media. Today, they still have not been able to produced evidence to back their false claims against Dr. Atash.

Employees who were part of the plan to undermine Dr. Atash later apologized to him. One person, **Yousef Sultani**, an engineer for Continental Airlines who was part of the group that had been invited to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, realized that Dr. Atash had been treated unjustly and later wrote an e-mail apologizing for his involvement in the smear campaign.

From: yousufsultani
To: atashmn
Sent: Sat, 24 Mar 2007 9:11 PM
Subject: Greeting new year.

This information is very important to clear the misunderstanding.

Dr Atash you should know I respect you and I like you. and you are a man with dignity and respect. person. I was trying to find people to be around you to help you. But unfortunately. Mansoori. was sick mind and self centering person. he did very wrong move. bad move unforgettable. He went to see Mr karzai president. I had no idea what he is doing. It was just a day before come from eagal aviation meeting.

After that I cut off completely corruption and come to USA. almost 4 months. I am so sorry what a wrong and shameful things took place. I wish you forgive me for the reason I introduced mansoori and I remember you told me he is not the right man but I insist. and you accept him....and there is a lots to say. Final I hope you forgive me for my wrong person introducing by that time.

best regard.
yousuf sultani

E-mail from Yousuf Sultani to Dr. Nadir Atash apologizing for his wrongdoing

Despite all of the obstacles he faced, Dr. Atash did succeed in bringing positive changes and reform to Ariana Airlines.

Among these major and historic changes were:

- Creation of strategic profit/loss plan for Ariana by instituting first computerized accounting system in over 20 years
- Successful Hajj operations in 2006 and improved relations with Saudi Arabia, including an award from the Saudi government
- Attempting to implementing the lease and purchase of new Boeing planes, which would have improved Ariana's aging fleet
- Re-opening Ariana's training center for Ariana pilots and staff
- Improving maintenance programs
- Implementing a new computerized ticketing system through SabreSonic
- Instituting a cargo deal with a United Arabs Emirates company to increase Afghan exports internationally
- Attracting \$300-\$700 million Canadian & European private investment to Ariana, which would have made it one of the largest wholly private finance investments in Afghanistan's history. The Board of Ariana did not approve the deal
- Switching Ariana's General Sales Agent from Attar (Saudi company who owed Ariana over \$6 million to UNASCO, a reputable company providing handling services in Saudi Arabia)
- Obtaining past due payments from Attar
- Repairing Ariana's guesthouse at a cost of \$30,000, saving the airline the \$1,000 a day that it had been paying to house its advisors
- Instituting a merit based system through the Concours exam to attract young professionals to Ariana.

- Holding forums with Ariana employees to gauge their concerns and ideas for the airlines, which had never been done.

Dr. Atash's accomplishments as Ariana's President was covered by the international press including Boeing Frontiers, Fortune Magazine, AP Frenche Presse, The Economist, and more.

Ariana's financial statements, which are public information, shows that Dr. Atash directed funds to the improvement of Ariana. Although allegations have been made publicly against Dr. Atash, neither the Anti-Corruption Commission nor Attorney General's Office in Afghanistan still have no evidence of illegal conduct on his part in over a year since the matter was first raised.

Even though the case should be tried privately by the Attorney General so that a court can decide the merits, **Sabet, Esmati, Stanekzai, and Minister Jawed have violated the laws of Afghanistan and international law by making false statements against Dr. Atash** in the media. On numerous occasions, Dr. Atash appeared on TV stations and wrote articles to defend himself, but he was up against elements who had hidden agendas.

To this day, numerous people and organizations in Afghanistan and the U.S. defends Dr. Atash , but he has not received support from President Karzai or the Afghan government for the positive changes that were brought to Ariana or to clear him of the false charges. The reactions to hearing how he was treated have been met with shock and anger by many Afghans and has led to closer scrutiny of the legal reform process by U.S. government and other donors.

Dr. Atash's experiences in Afghanistan should be an example to Afghans worldwide that corruption is rampant in the system and it should not be tolerated. If Afghans are to see economic progress in the country, innocent people should not be threatened or afraid to take a stand against corruption and illegal activities.

Afghanistan belongs to the voiceless, innocent people who have been through enough manipulation, control, and deception by their leaders. They are in need of true leaders who will stand of for *their* needs, and not those who seek to fill their own pockets or occupy a high seat at their expense and lives. It has been six years since the Taliban were overthrown, but the legal system has not been reformed. The only hope remains in the Supreme Court, which through the leadership of Chief Justice Rashid Azimi, has ruled on cases based on the law and not personal objectives.

The Afghan government should not prosecute innocent people while those who committed war crimes, have stolen property and abused women and children go unpunished. The Government should should use its resources to rid the injustice that is preventing experienced Afghans from returning to help.

If the media is pressured or threatened to run stories that don't represent the facts and the justice system persecutes, not protects, its people, then Afghanistan is at risk for returning

to instability and conflict. Afghanistan's history has shown that the people react negatively to governments that are seen as oppressors. The threat to the future of democracy and stability is not just return of the Taliban, but the spread of corruption and lack of rule of law.

It is not up to one man or woman to take a stand against corruption. Afghanistan's future lies in the hands of the people who have the power to collectively stand up for what is right –not for themselves – but for the suffering men, women, and children that, to this day, are struggling to survive under the harshest conditions, and whose cries for help are muffled by the corruption that silences them.