

# focus

## Peace rugs



# Afghans weave days of peace

**Pictures of warplanes and tanks** have long been part of Afghanistan's carpet trade, telling of its war-torn history. But a UAE group is getting workers to produce rugs about their hopes, **Mitya Underwood and photographer Satish Kumar report**

Nearly 40 years of conflict in Afghanistan have created a somewhat morbid tourist trade in "war rugs" that depict weapons, tanks and warplanes.

But efforts are being made to give carpet weavers the chance to create a legacy that celebrates everyday life rather than violence and war.

Towards that end, the Fatima bint Mohammed bin Zayed Initiative in the UAE started a trade in "peace rugs" that depict normal life in that country.

"Afghanistan has its own rich history and culture and this is shown in the patterns and designs," says Maywand Jabarkhyl, the initiative's executive director. "We have to give some sort of positive image of Afghanistan."

He says the business has "taken off very well", drawing many customers in Europe, Britain and the United States.

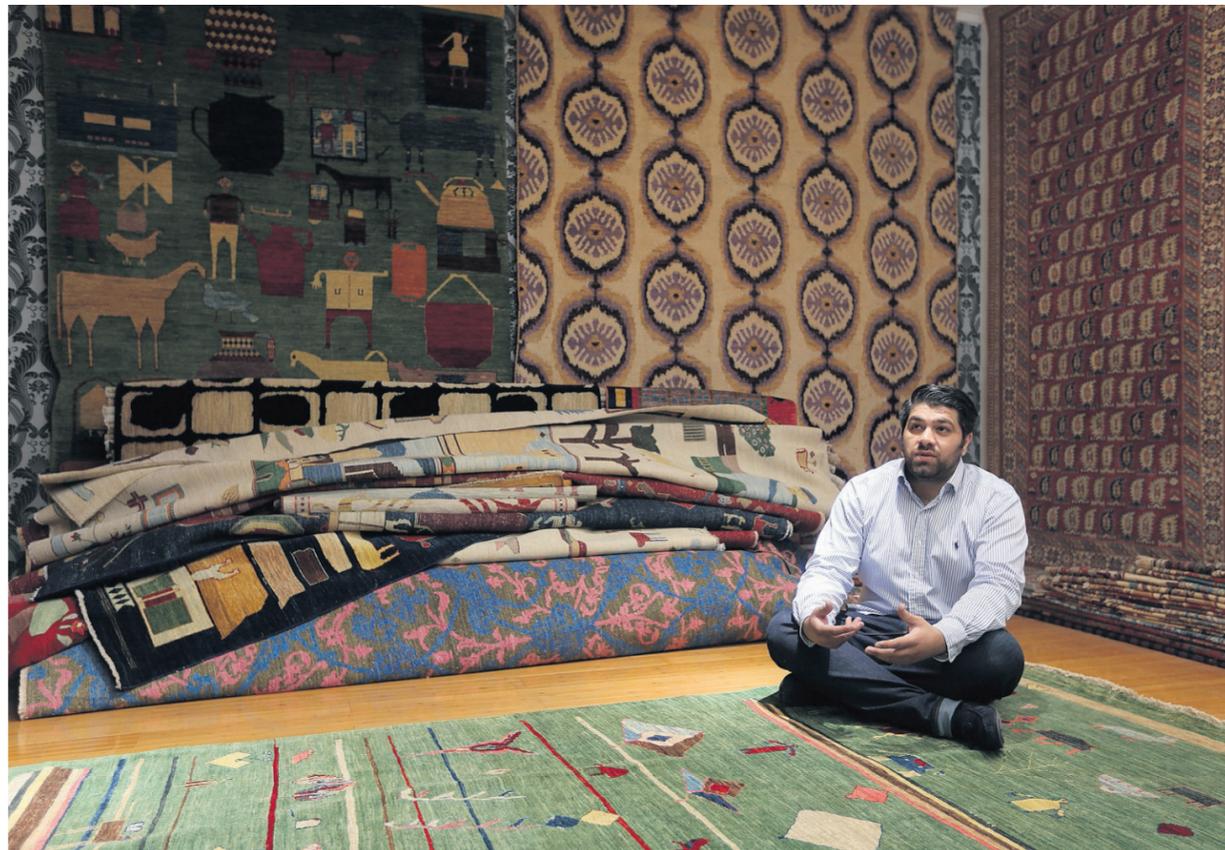
The initiative works with Afghan tribes across the country, providing a livelihood to women who would otherwise have no income.

The carpet weavers, 90 per cent of whom are women, were somewhat apprehensive when the initiative introduced the concept of the peace rugs a few years ago.

To create most of the traditional designs they usually work with graphs. With the peace rugs, they have only their imagination to guide them. This inevitably leads to some eclectic and quirky designs.

Alongside common scenes of agriculture and animal husbandry there is the odd tiger, peacock, smart-looking home, flower, urn, turtle and even a mobile phone.

"With these we just provide the weavers the material, wool and



"Afghanistan has its own rich history and culture ... we have to give some sort of positive image of [it]," says Maywand Jabarkhyl, above, the executive director of the Fatima bint Mohammed bin Zayed Initiative. Top: carpets made by Afghan weavers.

dye," Mr Jabarkhyl says. "The only stipulation is for them to depict what peace means to them."

"They can weave what they feel. Each carpet depicts the weaver as a person."

The initiative's project managers in individual provinces collect carpets from the weav-

ers' homes and bring them to its factory in Kabul, where they are washed, dried and sheared.

"I stand there in awe. Where did they get this idea from? Most don't have electricity so they're not watching television," says Mr Jabarkhyl.

The colours of the peace rugs

are much brighter than the traditional rugs, with many different shades of blue, green, red and yellow.

The prices vary depending on the design's level of complication, the craftsmanship, and the quality and size of the carpet.

They range from less than

Dh1,000 for a small carpet to tens of thousands of dirhams for larger rugs.

All the dyeing and wool spinning is done by hand. "The wool is collected by hand, spun by hand, and dyed by hand in huge clay pots," Mr Jabarkhyl says.

"Everywhere else they do it by

machine because they have the privilege of electricity."

The initiative, which has a branch in Jumeirah and a new shop in Yas Mall in Abu Dhabi, hopes that sales of the peace carpets will eventually overtake those of the war rugs.

"They [the war rugs] were woven to depict what the people were experiencing and witnessing. They look for inspiration from what is around them, and this was it," he says.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s and the following decades of civil war, Afghan carpet weavers have been producing war rugs right up to today, mainly for tourists, says Mr Jabarkhyl.

"They know that they [tourists] buy them. It's sad, but it's what Afghanistan is known for," he says.

It is common for war rugs to feature depictions of tanks, helicopters, B-52 bombers and rifles. Many also feature the words "Pakistan" and "US".

In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the initiative's shops stock just a handful of war rugs but have about 2,000 peace rugs available at any time, with "orders rolling in" consistently.

"We deal with four continents, so we have different designs, qualities, shades and patterns," Mr Jabarkhyl says.

"They really are a testament to the bravery and courage of the people of Afghanistan, particularly the women."

"They have been oppressed for so long but still have that hope, the belief and the faith that one day their children won't have to go through the same things."

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