The story of Afghanistan has become a hidden tragedy. While the people living there suffer on a daily basis from almost unimaginable adversity – the cruelties of incessant conflict, extreme poverty, massive levels of displacement – we turn away, largely unaware of the consequences of our own foreign policy in that heart-breaking place. This small book seeks to bring the light back on to the realities of existence where every day is fraught with peril.

The account given here provides an overview of the current state of affairs in Afghanistan, with a particular focus upon the situation of women. The pertinence of this is ironic; women overall bear the brunt of everything, but it was the cry for their liberation which was used to help legitimate the invasion by the US and the UK of their country.

The unique ‘insider’ perspective offered here by Maya Evans and her co-authors informs this ‘snapshot’ of how things are in Afghanistan nearly two decades on from the initial invasion in 2001.

Felicity Laurence, Editor
Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country bordering six other countries, namely Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. It is of significant geopolitical importance for its location along the Silk Road which connects it to the cultures of the Middle East and other parts of Asia.

It has a diverse geological foundation with huge reserves of lithium – essential for smartphones and other such devices – as well as gold, copper, uranium, iron ore, cobalt, chromium, lead, zinc, marble, natural gas and oil. High-quality gemstones include emerald, lapis lazuli, red garnet and ruby. Afghanistan’s resources make it potentially one of the richest mining regions in the world. A joint study by The Pentagon and the United States Geological Survey in 2011 estimated US$1 trillion of untapped minerals.

In their knitting circle, women engage in grassroots activity for economic independence while building solidarity and networks of resilience.
Maya Evans is the UK Co-ordinator of Voices for Creative Non-Violence (VCNV). VCNV is a small, independent peace group whose members visit places affected by wars arising from US and UK foreign policy, there to bear witness, document reality on the ground, and offer support.

VCNV UK is the only British peace group whose members constantly visit Afghanistan as eyewitnesses to an ongoing war which has lasted close to two decades – a war which started when many of the current fighters from both sides were not even born. Together with Kathy Kelly, her counterpart in the US branch of VCNV, Maya travelled to Afghanistan in 2011, and has visited every year since then. She writes: “Over the past 8 years, we have offered solidarity and support to young Afghan peace activists who have known nothing but conflict, and who have all been greatly impacted by the extremes of violence which they have experienced. As a voluntary peace group, we travel without security while in Kabul, preferring to entrust our safety to our Afghan activist friends. We gain therefore a unique and privileged insider view, which informs the following snapshot of Afghanistan in 2019.”

Maya Evans is also a councillor on Hastings Borough Council, East Sussex, and is the council’s cabinet member for Climate Change, Sustainable Development and Biodiversity.
Fahima’s story

It was winter when Fahima came to Kabul for her daughter Zainab’s university graduation. Zainab is the first woman in her village to have attended university, and Fahima’s pride was immeasurable – she herself is illiterate, having barely attended school due to war.

I was lucky enough to share a room with them both. Their deep bond was very apparent, and Zainab would do absolutely anything for her mother. One evening, while Fahima piled wood into the stove heater, I asked her if she would tell me about her life. She agreed.

What follows is the story of an ordinary Afghan woman who has lived through 40 years of war. Zainab translated it for me, adding her own reflections to the parts she had lived through herself.

As the warmth of the fire filled the room I was transported to another place and time, through the eyes of two incredible Afghan women who know no other path than to be brave.

Maya Evans, Voices of Creative Non-Violence (VCNV) UK

‘I was six when the Russians came’

When I was six life was good. I didn’t know anything outside my mother and father’s world. In the village where I lived it was possible to see the mud houses from far away. The Baba Mountains stretched forever into the distance. In spring everything was lush green, the water flowed from the mountains feeding the stream in front of our house, and all the time you could hear water flowing. People worked hard every day, herding sheep and goats on the land, or working in the shops at the bazaar. Women made bread in tandoors. Life in our village was hard, but people were happy.

I had started school maybe just a month before the war started. The Russians had come to Bamiyan and it was the beginning of war for Afghanistan. When the helicopters started to drop bombs on our village, the people fled to...
the mountains to live in caves. Sometimes two families would live in a cave for two or three months. We loaded food and blankets onto a donkey and crossed the rocky mountain paths to the safety of the caves. During the day the men would go out to cut alfalfa and the women sometimes travelled back to the farms to collect vegetables. I stayed in the cave and played with my dolls and my siblings, an older sister and two big brothers.

It took a long time for the Russian war to end. It was hard growing up under constant pressure. People were always afraid and they couldn’t travel freely. When I was twelve I travelled with my grandmother to Kabul when it was under the control of the Russian ‘iron fist’. Although Kabul was full of Russians then, and ‘bad men’ who would beat people, Afghan women wore short skirts and sometimes didn’t wear head scarves. I remember once being on a bus and a woman admired my handmade scarf from Bamiyan. The woman stroked it and said she had never seen a scarf like mine and asked me to bring one back from Bamiyan for her.

Kabul was clean then, not like today. The rivers, which now contain more rubbish than water, were a source of life and leisure for Afghans, with people fishing on the banks and even swimming. The streets weren’t crowded and the air was clean. I remember seeing the Russian tanks leaving to fight in the Panjshir valley. When the soldiers left they were happy but when they returned they were beaten, carrying their dead and wounded from a battle. This victory made Tajik Commander Ahmed Sheer Mahsood’s name forever glorified in Afghan history as ‘The Lion of the Panjshir’.

By the time that war ended I was thirteen, and it was decided that I should marry. It was autumn when I married. It was an exciting day and although it wasn’t my decision, I realised I had to accept it. My husband Rahmony was around nineteen years old and was handsome and kind. We had grown up in the same village so I already knew him.

Abandoned Russian tanks opposite Ahmed Sheer Mahsood’s tomb in the Panjshir Valley.
if the alfalfa grew. The men were all farmers and would spend the day working on the land. Then the fighting started again and many of the men joined the Mujahuddin, but not Rahmony. He stayed to work on the land as he didn’t like the violence. The men would mainly fight each other in the mountains but sometimes violence came to the village. I often saw flame throwers – canisters of gas propelled through the air by a flame. The fighting was between five groups and they would fire at anyone who was walking around. The different groups were drawn up along ethnic lines and were supported by different countries. ‘Nasar’ were helped by the Americans, ‘Harakat’ and ‘Scepor’ were backed by Iran, ‘Jamyat’ were Tajik and Pashtoon and there was also ‘Shora’. They all fought in the ‘Jang-e-dohkhely’ – the ‘war inside’. I heard from the people in my village that America was a country far away but I didn’t know where. I heard the names of other countries like Iran, Russia and Pakistan, but only when people in the village talked about where the weapons came from.

I was fifteen when my first child Khaled was born. Life was hard because of the Mujahuddin, but because of my husband Rahmony I was happy. A year later my second son Lolla was born, then four years later my first daughter Zainab was our third blessing.

After the Mujahuddin things weren’t clear. Najibullah became President and I thought he was good for the people. I remember listening to the radio at home, being warmed by the flames of our stove. I heard Najibullah’s voice crackling through the radio, with his message urging peace and asking the fighters in the mountains to come down, to have peace and life. But they did not listen. I didn’t understand why they continued to fight; maybe it had something to do with the business of weapons, but I don’t know.

By this stage my second daughter Karima had arrived, and then my younger sons Abdul and Arif, making six. Life for me was the same. I still went out to collect alfalfa for the cows, washed clothes and looked after my family. My elder daughter Zainab adored her father and never liked to be separated from him. Sometimes he liked to sleep outside under the stars and although she was afraid of the worms in the ground, she would insist on sleeping next to him, lulled to sleep by the sound of the stream running past our home. Rahmony was keen for our daughters to attend school. It was he who enrolled Zainab when she was six and it was he who often fetched her from school.

And then the Talib came to Kabul. I had heard from others in the village that the Talib killed everyone, especially the Hazaras, but I did not believe these stories. But one day men from the Mujahuddin returned to the village and said that the Talib were coming, and that even they were afraid. At first the Talibs arrived by car and then on horseback. They carried guns and long knives. I realised then that the stories I had heard were true.

There was no time, it was chaos. Rahmony and I grabbed all our children, except for Khaled and Abdul whom we couldn’t find in that moment. But we had to flee for our lives – immediately. During the day we crossed mountains, and that night we saw the smoke of burning houses which the Talib had set alight. We thought we had escaped to the safety of the mountain tops where the Talib would not find us.

We were not the only family who were fleeing. In our group were Rahmony’s brother and his family, plus two other men. We had been walking for nearly all the next day when we became aware of Talib voices close by, so we...
crouched in the shadows under an overhanging cliff. Everyone was frozen to their hiding space. Karima said that she was thirsty but still we didn’t move as we could sense danger was near. The women were praying that the Taliban would not see them; we needed to stay hidden for just a few more hours and then dusk would hide our escape into the mountains where we would not be found.

A man we didn’t know happened to wander past. He wasn’t a Talib and he did not sense the imminent danger. He could see the group sheltering under the rock and called them to come out. His voice sliced the silence of the mountains.

I had dressed my young son Lolla in my own clothing so that he looked like a girl, but there was no disguising Rahmony, his brother and the two other men. Zainab clung to her father as the Talibs ordered the men out of our hiding place. Rahmony took his scarf and wrapped it around seven-year-old Zainab, his daughter who never liked to be away from him. He told her not to be afraid and that he would always be with her.

Five minutes later we heard the sound of gunfire. The Taliban told the women and children to return home. The shock left me unable to talk and my legs stopped working. I had to go down the mountain by dragging myself along the ground. The next day we decided to try and find Rahmony but it was snowing and very cold. We searched but did not find him.

Rahmony’s mother realised that the men had been killed so she went out to find the bodies. She discovered them not far from where we had been separated. Graves were dug, and the men were buried at the spot where they had been killed.

Rahmony, my kind and handsome husband was gone.

Now I had to think about the lives of my six children. At first I didn’t want to tell Arif and Karima that the Taliban had killed their father, and I still had no news about my eldest son Khamed and four year old Abdul. We asked the people returning from the mountains if they had seen them, but they had not. After twenty days the people in the village said that they must have been killed by the Taliban, but finally after forty long days a cousin came to say that they were safe at an aunt’s house.

Life was nearly impossible without Rahmony. Two of his brothers and his father had also been killed. I asked his remaining family if I could have his share of the land. One of the brothers agreed, but the other did not. But I was now the head of a family and like an Afghan man I claimed my piece of land.

Security was still bad, and the threat of the Taliban still loomed heavily, so we sold our remaining livestock and planned our departure. We bought two sacks of flour for bread and loaded up our donkey. I led my young family as we travelled for weeks, sleeping on hilltops and under the stars, dodging Talibs. Abdul was still a slow walker and Arif had to be carried, but I kept my family together and safe.

Finally we reached the outskirts of Kabul and found a kind woman who wanted to share her large house with a family which did not have any men. Her husband and father had both left for Pakistan, leaving her with three children and the house to look after. The room which we were given was beautiful as the kind woman’s father was rich. Lolla, now eleven, managed to get a job in a local shop and also went to the mountains with Khamed to collect bushes to fuel the tandoor and sell to other families.

We stayed in that house for six months until relatives in Bamiyan told us it was safe to return, and that the Taliban had gone. We made the long journey back to our village, though by now it was winter so the journey was extra arduous. We collected wood and bushes during the day to burn at night.

When we returned to our house we found that someone else had been there. The pictures on the wall had been burnt, a box of clothes which we left in the corner had been thrown outside, and on the floor were bullets. My grandmother told stories of becoming a cook for the Taliban. They would call her ‘mother’ and bring chicken for her to cook or flour to make bread. The Talibs who occupied the village were different from the Talibs who first came and beat and killed women for not wearing socks. These Talibs accepted my grandmother and even gave her a new scarf because the one she wore was threadbare.
When the Americans came the Taliban left in cars with camouflage netting stretched across the roofs.

I remember food parcels being dropped from the sky and one of my neighbours running out into the field, unaware of a land mine which someone had planted during one of the many wars. Then foreign soldiers came but the village people did not ask questions. It was a time of peace even though everyone was poor and many people had been killed or had left.

Things were expensive. Khamed worked on the land and Lolla sold things on the street, like bubblegum, socks, matches and walnuts – a walnut in its shell was 2 Afghanis (around 2p). Karima and Zainab worked at home washing clothes and collecting water from the spring. They also returned to school.

After so much travel and being hungry and scared, we found hope to be alive.

This interview took place when Fahima travelled from Bamiyan to Kabul for Zainab’s graduation ceremony. Today the roads from Bamiyan are extremely unsafe as they’re patrolled by the Taliban, ISIS and criminals.

If a bus is stopped people say they are travelling to see family or for hospital. If students or government workers are found they are likely to be executed. If foreigners are discovered they will be kidnapped or killed. A white flag on a house signals the Taliban.

Zainab is one of the members of the Afghan Peace Volunteers, and the first person in her family to become a college graduate.

Women in Afghanistan – then and now

An overview

In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, enforcing their extreme version of Islamic Sharia law, much of which effectively criminalised women. Women were henceforth:

- **BANNED** from going to school or studying
- **BANNED** from working, and not allowed to leave the house unless accompanied by a male member of the family
- **BANNED** from showing their skin in public; those who did not wear the full ‘burqa’ would be publicly stoned
- **BANNED** from wearing nail polish, punishable by having fingers cut off
- **BANNED** from accessing healthcare delivered by a man
- **BANNED** from being involved in politics or speaking publicly

“We need to be brave”
Suffrage and equality

One hundred years ago, in 1919, all Afghan women gained the right to vote, only one year after some (wealthy) British women gained suffrage, and a year before American women were allowed at the polling stations. In terms of women’s equality, Afghanistan was once a world leader.

But the following 100 years proved to be fraught with gains and losses. King Amir Amanullah Khan’s extensive progressive legislation in the 1920s, such as equal secular education for both men and women, survived only for a short time before its swift reversal after King Nadir Shah’s assumption of power in 1929.

Nadir Shah’s abolition of Khan’s reforms returned the country to Sharia law with the removal of all voting rights for anyone. In the ensuing five decades, there was a period of relative calm and stability, in which women, particularly in the cities, enjoyed a certain amount of freedom.

Under the Soviets, during their occupation in the 1980s, some women, mainly in the cities, saw further gains; the regime was keen to encourage women into education and high-level jobs. However, that did not come without a price. The Communist regime did not hesitate to throw men and women who opposed the regime into prison, and to use torture, kidnap and execution.

Violence towards women

During this decade Afghanistan become a major Cold War pawn between the US and the Soviet Union, with the CIA pouring millions of dollars into training and arming the Mujaheddin, who were, broadly speaking, rural guerrilla fighters ruled by fundamentalist and misogynistic warlords. Once the Russians had fled from a decade of unwinnable war, Afghanistan erupted into civil war in which the Mujaheddin freely used the widespread rape and murder of women as a weapon.

These warlords were defeated by the Taliban, but when the US-led coalition invaded in 2001, they were quickly reinstated, being desperately needed as non-Taliban local leaders to work alongside the invaders. It is hardly surprising that with such people back in power, women remain vulnerable, their rights uncertain and the rules passed post-Taliban continuing to restrict women’s lives. For example, the “code of conduct”, endorsed by President Karzai in 2012, proclaims that “women should not travel without a male guardian and should not mingle with strange men in places such as schools, markets and offices.”

In 2013, the UN published a statistic showing a 28% increase in reported cases of violence towards women in Afghanistan. In 2014 the Afghan Government passed a law which allows only family members to testify as witnesses of domestic violence. In 2015 Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old Afghan woman, was publicly beaten and slain by a mob in Kabul under false accusations of Quran desecration.

Mental health is a serious issue; around 3,000 people commit suicide every year, of whom 80% are women.

After 18 years of the US and NATO fighting the Taliban, with women’s liberation a key mantra, Afghan women are now left feeling fearful for their futures. Some women express an acceptance that their lives will be lost in the struggle to gain rights for future women. In a population in which 63% are under the age of 25, maybe the best hope for Afghanistan lies in the younger generation who say “we need to be brave”.

Women in Afghanistan – then and now

A brief history of women’s rights in Afghanistan in the past 100 years.

1  Update on Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women in Afghanistan, UNAMA, 2013

2  Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, AIHRC, 2017
What young women in Afghanistan think about voting

“I will vote because it is my right”
Ghaydah, 17

There are many problems for women who want to vote. Firstly, many do not have permission from the men in the family. Secondly, women themselves don’t know their rights, they think it’s only men who have this right. Also, they don’t think it is important, and many don’t know who to vote for.

I think for women in Parliament there are a lot of problems. Women are very scared in Afghanistan because all the power is taken, and it’s very hard to struggle with men to get power. Parliament is where all the powerful men get together to make decisions, and this is a very difficult area for women. Also, people probably won’t vote for women because they believe they cannot be in Parliament.
“I intend to vote because it is my natural right. Everyone should vote”

Noor, 17

In Kabul it’s better because there are more literate women and they can decide who they want to vote for, but in the provinces it is a very different situation as women can’t read names, and so there are pictures or symbols to represent people. I have heard that representatives at the voting stations tell women who to vote for, and in the house the men also tell women who they should vote for.

The problem for women in politics is that it is still very male-dominated, so even if a woman gets voted in, the men still make the decisions, and the opinions of women are overlooked.

It’s very dangerous for women who speak out. A woman who is a politician must wear a Burqa when travelling so people don’t recognise her. Security is bad for all politicians, but for women it is particularly difficult.

“I will not vote, because I am not sure who will be the good one, who is a good person”

Nila, 18

The people don’t believe that women can do anything, think that they are weak, and so they will not choose to vote for a woman.

We believe politics in Afghanistan are not good, whereas women always want to do kind and good things, and to bring peace.

“I didn’t vote in the last election because it doesn’t make a difference”

Nahzi, 25

In Kabul it is easy for women to vote, but in the provinces it is hard because families don’t let them go, and security is hard for women. Sometimes even in Kabul, families don’t let women vote. I don’t know about the problems for women in politics.
“It seems a poor system when there is barely any difference between those who are being elected”
Zainab, 25

When women vote, they face many problems. Firstly they don’t choose for themselves: someone – for example their husbands – tells them who to vote for. Also the woman is not free to go to places – her husband has to let her go. And the Taliban don’t want women to vote. There are a few women in politics but not at the top. The problem is that they cannot be with the people in society, because security is not good. Now the men have the power in the Government and women can’t decide what they want to do. Instead, they have to listen to the men, and the men decide what the women should do because they think they know best. Also, if women want to talk about certain things, they are afraid they will lose their jobs. I don’t vote because I understand that it is America who will choose our president.

“I will vote in future because I want to choose someone to become President”
Badia, 18

In Kabul it is easy to vote, but in the provinces they kill women or cut their thumbs off so they can’t vote. Families don’t like the women to go into the area of politics. It’s not good for women in Afghanistan as men have all the power.
Bearing the sorrows of war

by Kathy Kelly, Voices for Creative Non-Violence US

“I think I am losing my mind.”
“I feel emotionally disturbed.”
“I fear I can’t go on.”

I first heard these laments in Kabul, when Afghan mothers came to the Afghan Peace Volunteers’ home in 2011. The APV welcomed children for tutoring, and sometimes their mothers would visit. When asked “What’s wrong?” the women responded with the same answer: “I can’t feed my children.” “Please,” our friend and interpreter Dr. Hakim asked, “tell us what you are giving them.” “Stale bread,” one mother replied, “and tea without sugar.”

Since 2011, in dozens of visits to Kabul, Voices for Creative Nonviolence members have met numerous women, mostly mothers, who simply can’t make ends meet.

I remember meeting Khoreb, a single mother of three, living high up a mountainside, where the rents are lower because access to water is so difficult. She shelled almonds constantly during our conversation and then bundled the nuts in small bags for her child to sell in the marketplace. The shells were used for fuel in the small oven which inadequately heated her mud hut. Khoreb said she wants her children to attend school, to escape poverty. But she needs to send them into the marketplace instead. How else will she pay rent? And sometimes the children bring back scraps of turnips and potatoes found on the market grounds.

Afghan women living below the poverty level fight against hunger, thirst, harsh weather and disease. And even though the United States has earmarked 133 billion dollars for reconstruction in Afghanistan, the plight of women and children has not improved.

In more recent visits to Kabul, I’ve seen panic in the eyes of women lined up to fetch water at a refugee camp, when they learned the well had gone dry. “We can’t live without water!” said one of the women. Twenty-one of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces are drought-stricken. In rural areas, when families watch their livestock thirst to death and crops fail, they flee to already overcrowded cities. In Kabul, the refugee camp populations are soaring.

Afghans need livelihoods to survive. Realistically, a durable peace in the country requires jobs with dignity and just wages. But many women worriedly watch their sons and husbands take jobs as soldiers or policemen because other work isn’t available.

An Afghan soldier’s income, about $200 USD per month, isn’t enough to feed a family. In fact, in 2016 and 2017, there were reports of Afghan soldiers aimlessly firing their weapons into the air and then collecting the copper casings for sale to the local scrap metal dealer, enabling them to then put food on the table.

Reading this, I could imagine an Afghan woman feeling relief if her husband’s or son’s sale of “wasted” bullets provided income for food.

Or, consider this. At the height of the US “retrograde mission” to withdraw troops and equipment from Afghanistan, costs to maintain a US soldier in Afghanistan rose to 2 million dollars per soldier per year. During that same time, the expense to add iodized salt to the diet of an Afghan child suffering from severe acute malnutrition would have been 5 cents per child. The iodized salt can help a malnourished child overcome future brain deficiency. What would an Afghan woman opt for if given a choice? Aiding the child or maintaining the soldier?

Over the past 18 years, the US military has tried to justify (or market) war in Afghanistan as a necessary protection for women and children. Some militarists even called it a “humanitarian war.” This is a cruel and outlandish oxymoron.

The war in Afghanistan fuelled corruption and lined the pockets of war profiteers in the US and Afghanistan. Afghan women and children continue to bear the sorrows of war. They suffer...
attacks, displacement, bereavement, hunger and fear. I believe the US should acknowledge the futile insanity and disgrace inherent in all wars, end this war, and find ways to pay reparations for the suffering caused.

If our media would help us hear from Afghan people menaced by our militarism, especially women and children, perhaps we would long to meet their human needs rather than continually bankroll US evolution into a permanent warfare state.

Kathy Kelly takes notes in a refugee camp.

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US timeline in Afghanistan

1979
4,500 Soviet soldiers enter Afghanistan. CIA funds the Mujahedeen to fight a proxy war. US annual funding varies from $30 million to $630 million. Over the next 10 years the US provide weapons and training to jihad fighters.

2001
September 11
The US World Trade Center and Pentagon are attacked by hijacked planes. None of the hijackers are Afghan. Shortly after, the US coalition starts to bomb Afghanistan with the aim of liberating women and capturing Saudi-born Osama bin Laden.

2008
September
US President George Bush sends an extra 4,500 US troops to Afghanistan for a “quiet surge.”

2009
December
US President Barack Obama decides to boost US troop numbers by 30,000, bringing total to 100,000.

2012
August
The US military disciplines six soldiers for burning copies of the Koran; they do not face criminal prosecution. Three US Marines are also disciplined for a video in which the bodies of dead Taliban fighters were unmarked.

2014
December
The US and Britain end their combat operations, “mission accomplished” is declared, as well as the intention to draw down combat troops.

2015
October
President Obama announces that 9,800 US troops will remain in Afghanistan until the end of 2016.

2017
April
US President Donald Trump drops “Mother of all bombs”, the largest conventional bomb in the US arsenal, targeted at ISIS fighters in Nangarhar.

August
US President Donald Trump says he is sending 4,000 troops to fight a resurgent Taliban who have now taken control of over half the country.

2019
February
US engage in peace talks with the Taliban in Doha. Neither Afghan women nor the Afghan Government are invited.

June
9,000 US Marines are currently in the country. This is now the longest war in US history. Afghanistan is declared “least peaceful country in the world” by the Institute for Economics and Peace.
Britain and Afghanistan: The Great Game 1839-2019

On the 4th October 2001, the British Parliament decided to go to war with Afghanistan. There was unanimous cross-party Parliamentary support, and Prime Minister Tony Blair proclaimed: “We will act because we need to. We act for justice.”

Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith followed Tony Blair’s speech with an expression of unqualified support. He also placed the spotlight on Iraq, for many perceived as the long-intended treasure in the war on terror for which the Afghan ‘blitzkrieg’ was merely supposed to set the stage, a stepping stone for the main spoils of war in Iraq.

The Conservative leader consolidated the path to Iraq, blurring the difference between the Taliban and al Qaeda, and between Afghanistan and Iraq.

One month after the invasion, when the Taliban had retreated, a narrative emerged on both sides of the Atlantic of the liberation of Afghan women as the noble justification for the war. The wives of US President George W Bush and Tony Blair respectively were prominent in this: Laura Bush took to the

UK timeline in Afghanistan

1839-1842
First Anglo-Afghan War: Afghanistan ridicules the British who were trying to secure the country as a ‘buffer zone’ as part of the so-called ‘Great Game’ – a phrase from 19th century British military discourse popularised by Rudyard Kipling in his 1901 novel Kim – namely, the competition for power and influence in Central Asia between Britain and Russia.

1878-1880
Second Anglo-Afghan War: Britain is victorious. Afghanistan cedes control of the area’s foreign relations, becoming a buffer protecting the interests of British Raj from the Russian Empire.

1919
Third Anglo-Afghan War: Afghanistan win back control of foreign relations. The Durand Line is reaffirmed as a political boundary between Afghanistan and the British Raj.

2001
September 11
World Trade Center is attacked. Prime Minister Tony Blair makes a public statement to “stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends in this hour of tragedy and we like them will not rest until this evil is driven from our world.”

November
The UK joins the US-led coalition in its invasion of Afghanistan, deploying ground forces.

2002
The UK becomes part of Nato-led operations – the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

2006
British troops move to Helmand Province
Camp Bastion – the size of Reading – is built in the desert, housing up to 40,000 people. At peak deployment, Helmand alone has 137 UK bases, and about 9,500 troops stationed there.

2009
British Government confirms that a total of 71,560 members of Britain’s armed forces have served in Afghanistan since 2001.

2010
Maya Evans takes out Judicial Review into British complicity in the torture of Afghan detainees. High Court judges rule to continue the ban on transfers to NDS facilities in Kabul because of “a real risk” that detainees would be “subjected to torture or serious mistreatment.” Judges add: “Transfers would therefore be in breach of the secretary of state’s policy and unlawful.”

2014
Camp Bastion is handed over to Afghan security forces. The last UK combat troops leave. About 450 troops remain to assist local Afghan forces. The conflict is calculated to have cost the UK £40bn.

2018
Taliban have regained control of over 70% of the country, and Theresa May redeployed troops totalling 1,000 to be stationed in Afghanistan.

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British Army Air Corp ground crew, Helmand Province, Afghanistan.
Women and the peace process

In August 2018, peace talks were initiated between the Taliban and the US Government, resulting from President Trump’s desire to extricate the US from Afghanistan, thus ending the longest war in US history. Much optimism surrounded the talks, which began shortly after the Eid al-Fitr ceasefire in June 2018, ordered as a unilateral 8-day ceasefire by the Afghan Government and joined a few days later by the Taliban. It was the first ceasefire in 18 years, but in the event, was broken only three days later by the Taliban’s next attack.

Representing the US was Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American diplomat, previously United States Ambassador to the United Nations under President George W. Bush. He is also a former consultant for the RAND Corporation, a US-funded think tank advising the US army, where among other roles, he advised on a proposed trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline.

The Taliban’s representative, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, has made assurances that the Taliban would respect all the rights of women which Islam has granted them. However, he does not have a mandate for all factions of the Taliban, and these assurances are in any case vague and unspecific.

The main focus of the talks has been the Taliban’s guarantee that it will not allow fighters to use Afghanistan to launch attacks outside the country, in return for the withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

In October 2014 Defence Secretary David Fallon said “Mistakes were made militarily, mistakes were made by the politicians at the time and this goes back 10, 13 years... We’re not going to send combat troops back into Afghanistan, under any circumstances.”

Four years later Prime Minister Theresa May redeployed British troops back to Afghanistan, while UK ambassador for Afghanistan Sir Nicholas Kay, speaking recently on how to resolve conflict in Afghanistan, said: “I don’t have the answer.”

Retired Army Generals are now frank about their time in Afghanistan. Lieutenant General “Jim” Dutton, speaking in January 2019 at an event entitled ‘The Afghan War – A Perspective from UK’, described how: “Britain’s role in Afghanistan was never entirely clear to me. We were trying to impose a concept of Western democracy on a country which it didn’t necessarily fit. The country lacked central direction, people in Sangin Province felt as close to the Government in Kabul as they do to a man on the moon”.

Lt Gen Dutton pointed out many more mistakes made by the British, from deploying too many British soldiers to creating an aid dependency culture, while Western charities provided education without local direction: “the schools they built are now nothing more than animal shelters”.

Retired British Air Marshall Sean Bell also spoke from his personal perspective: “The Taliban had no answer to air power, which from our perspective provided the least risk of being shot down. But it was expensive, and from 2003 we had to share our air asset with Iraq... We thought the air force could act with impunity. We were wrong to assume that as we failed to win hearts and minds.”

The Great Game has played out so far for 180 years, shows no sign of coming to an end, and leaves Afghanistan mired in conflict and misery.
and again in May 2019. Women were invited to a round which took place in April 2019; it was reported that of the 150 delegates, “dozens were women”. However, the women who attended described their role as merely “symbolic”. They were offered a limited time only to express their concerns that their hard-won gains over the last 18 years will be lost.

During the May talks in Moscow – with Russia, a former invader of Afghanistan, stating their desire to help bring peace – there were two women of the 47 people sat round the table. All of the others were men, who – personally or as representatives of whatever warring group – have been trying to kill one another for the last 40 years. In June a letter was signed by a large group of US Congress members asking for women to be present at talks.

The Afghan Government has also been excluded from the talks, with the Taliban maintaining that it is an illegitimate “puppet” government installed by the US in 2001. And therein lies the sticking point; for the full withdrawal of foreign forces, the Taliban must also agree to a ceasefire and start negotiations with the government, and potentially come to some sort of power sharing arrangement – something the insurgent group has so far staunchly opposed.

In early July, a third specifically intra-Afghan meeting was held in Doha, organised by Qatar and Germany. For the first time, two Afghan Government officials joined the circa 50 delegates, although they were attending only in a personal capacity. In response to being left out of talks, and possibly also to win favour among women in the next elections (at the time of writing, planned for September 2019), President Ashraf Ghani held a Loya Jirga (Grand Council) in Kabul in May 2019, in which 30% of the participants were women. However, female delegates said they felt ignored, marginalised and patronised. One woman was even publicly told that she “should be in the kitchen”.

Despite some expressions of optimism, it seems likely that if peace talks succeed, the Taliban will effectively formalize and expand their control over vast swathes of the country. There is, nevertheless, a strong likelihood of US bases remaining in Afghanistan, and of mining rights being opened up to US corporations, as discussed by Presidents Trump and Ghani in September 2017; at that point, Trump described US mining contracts as payment for the ongoing propping up of Ghani’s Government. If the peace talks fail, the probable outcome will be renewed fighting and an increasingly fragile government in Kabul. In either case, the position of women remains precarious.
“Young Afghans should make their opinions known”
Naima, 21

The negotiations are just a show. Afghans know those people have been involved in war for decades, and that they are now just making deals to give Afghanistan away. What the US says officially and what it does is different. If they want to wage war then they will, they are in control and they are not in the business of bringing peace.

People of Afghanistan want to be independent. For many years even before the Taliban we weren’t independent, and now we’re under the rule of the US. We can build our own futures, others shouldn’t interfere.

“I don’t think the peace talks will have any results, as the Taliban are made up of many groups, and the group of Talibs in Doha do not represent all the Taliban”
Ifaz, 16

While the talks take place in Moscow there is still fighting everywhere, they fight while they talk – there needs to be a ceasefire while they negotiate – actually there needs to be a ceasefire even before negotiations begin.

Up to now the negotiations haven’t involved young people, that’s the tradition – it’s the elders who meet. However, unfortunately it’s the elders who have been waging war, so I think the Jirga will be about how to wage war; it will include members of the Mujahideen and the Taliban – and both are warmongers.

Young people need to make their wishes known. If necessary, they should protest, though that is dangerous as in the past there have been bomb attacks on such protests and people have been hurt. Young people are also disinclined, especially along ethnic lines. Social media aren’t being used well, 90% of news posted is fake, and the Facebook network in Afghanistan is corrupt.
“It is essential for women to be involved in negotiations”

Omera, 20

I think they just want to use these talks for their own advantage in creating policy in Afghanistan. They use the problems of the Afghan people to further themselves – it’s not good work they are doing. They should be asking their own people, not the foreigners.

Young people should participate, but when we say we want to participate they say no – they just want to talk with the elders and nothing else. If we say something, they will not accept it. I think involvement in the governmental structure is important, but young people are not taken seriously – there was one young parliamentarian who gave his views and was told “ask your elders to come and see us.”

I don’t think Britain is here to bring peace, although they claim they want to bring peace. Their main principle is to benefit from their presence in this country, and this involves keeping war going in order to fulfil their interests which are political power and control, and they are misusing Afghans to achieve their ends.

“The older generation does not represent us”

Sana, 21

Young people should be considered in the process. They should be able to send representatives to the Loya Jirga [Grand Council] so they can talk about their problems directly. In the last 18 years there is a new generation of Afghan; our conditions have totally changed, and we have a different mindset and identity.

The treatment of women is concerning if the Taliban return, but women attending the Jirga may help these concerns.
“Those in power are not interested in peace building”

Imsha, 20

I don’t think the negotiations are for peace. We’ve had them in the past and they didn’t lead to peace. One sign is that when negotiations are going on people are still being killed. If they’re serious about peace, then they should stop the killings.

People in the UK may think from their newspapers and media that Afghans are violent and not interested in peace, or even that we are not human beings, but we are human.

My hope is that the British people see us as human and that we are the same as you and that we want peace.

Between a rock and a hard place

I first started visiting Kabul in 2011, and since then I’ve seen considerable change. New buildings seem to pop up overnight and the city appears increasingly busier; there’s a strong feeling that it’s bursting at the seams.

When the US and NATO invaded in October 2001, the population of Kabul was 1.5 million, but today that figure stands closer to 6 million, with so many war-displaced people having flocked to the city for safety, as it was once a location with no direct
Aerial view of Kabul. Often the mountains are obscured due to intense air pollution. Kabul is the most polluted city in the world. Fighting between the military forces. However, since 2014 there’s been a dramatic reverse of that trend; Kabul has now become one of the most dangerous locations in the country, with weekly suicide bomb attacks, sporadic street violence, and a small industry of abductions for ransom. Once it was relatively fine for me to walk the streets as a foreigner, but today my teenage friends earnestly advise all visitors against walking anywhere, urging the hire of taxis even for 5-minute walks.

The biggest danger for a foreigner is kidnap, while the biggest worry for everyone is being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Taking a short walk to the local bazaar gives you a snapshot of some of the many problems gripping Afghanistan. The opportunity to venture out is rare and very exciting, the bustle of Kabul street life intensely stimulating on the senses, with the echo of recorded announcements from tannoyos which are strapped to carts selling juicy oranges from Jalalabad, towers of pomegranates from Kandahar, and cauliflowers bigger than your head.

The sky is cloudless blue and the bright sunlight blinding, and the spectacular Hindu Kush mountains in the background look unreal, as though someone had cut out a picture of the National Geographic and stuck it behind a very busy city scene.

The district Karte Seh’s ‘Red Bridge’, from which much of the red paint has now been chipped away (it’s generally caked in dirt), is a hive of activity, a market where people compete for spaces, and labourers sit with their shovels waiting for work; they represent an estimated 40% of the male population who are currently unemployed. A woman under a burka clutches a small baby bundled in rags, head bent and a begging hand extended. I am told prostitution is a thriving industry. Under the bridge is a vision of hell. The bridge once crossed a lush river where in the 1970s, children swam and people fished for their suppers. Today the riverbed is a dumping ground for uncollected rubbish, where a grey slug stream snakes around discarded water bottles, plastic bags, general detritus, and the people who have become addicted to opium. This is a popular congregation point for them; they openly consume heroin, their hands and gaunt faces black with dirt, and their eyes vacant, for their souls have been robbed.

Afghanistan now has approximately 3 million people addicted to some form of opium, a staggering 10% of the population, due mainly to the massive surge of the lucrative poppy cultivation industry after the start of the war. Today many of the warlords dominating Afghanistan (despite copious blood on their hands from unspeakable massacres over decades) are directing an opium industry which accounts for 90% of the world’s supply, hugely increased from the 27% before the 2001 invasion. This has caught Afghanistan with little-to-no infrastructure ready to cope with it, the rehabilitation clinics being few and far between, and the reasons for wanting to forget all too obvious. It has also been reported that, due to the sharing of needles, there is a sharp increase in the incidence of HIV. People go about their normal lives above the bridge. Underneath is another world from where few return.
There are now over 50 refugee camps in and around Kabul. For several consecutive years I have visited the Charman-e-Babrak camp which sits near a row of private health clinics, across a mud road with no laid surfaces so that cars often get stuck in deep potholes, and cyclists ride in zigzags. In the last seven years I’ve seen no improvements in that camp; the same children walk around in the mud and snow with either no shoes or just sandals. The heavy stench of raw sewage immediately smacks you in the face upon entering the camp via a rickety makeshift corrugated iron bridge over the camp’s roadside moat, a torrent of raw flowing sewage. The houses are made of mud bricks and of scavenged bits of scrap iron and wood, with old bits of canvas stretched over to make a roof.

Afghanistan currently has 2.6 million internally displaced people, a staggering figure which increases steadily as more refugees are deported en-masse from Pakistan, Iran and Europe. With little or no aid, Afghan camps are a nowhere land full of nowhere people, and generally a ‘no go’ zone for visitors. It seems that once you land there it’s more or less impossible to get out, and the camp becomes your long-term-to-permanent future. There are, of course, also a calculated 2 million Afghans seeking refuge outside the country, making up the second biggest nationality of refugees in Europe. For most, their futures lie in the desperate camps around Kabul, as most European countries have judged Kabul a ‘safe’ location for deportation, despite the fact that many refugees have no family or friends in the city.

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For a foreigner to venture outside Kabul is extremely perilous. Even for an Afghan it’s deadly dangerous.

My friends describe it as the ‘Wild West’, with vehicles regularly stopped by the Taliban, people asked for ID and sometimes executed if found to have connections with foreigners. One of my young Afghan friends Zahra watched her friends’ execution after their bus was stopped by the Taliban in Kandahar. Four of her friends, all aged eighteen, had made the mistake of travelling with their student ID cards. Today Zahra struggles with depression, trying desperately to erase the memory of witnessing the roadside murder of her classmates. Last year I visited her small house perched on a Kabul hillside. Now married and with a new baby, she was dressed in black, mourning for her police officer brother who had just been killed by the Taliban in Kandahar.

Sometimes my friends in Kabul call me for random chats so as to practice their English. Currently 13-year-old street kid Inam is strongly being encouraged to attend lessons. He normally polishes shoes for a living but, like many teenagers, he is addicted to video games. Unfortunately, his favourite arcade, where he goes to escape from the world of street work, is in a shop which also sells opium and sex. Inam’s teacher knows that his father is now a drug addict and lives under a bridge. He wants to stop the same thing from happening to Inam. After we finish talking about our favourite fruits and vegetables, and what we had for breakfast, his teacher explains that Inam was late for his lesson as his landlord was drilling an even deeper water well in their yard which they share with other families. The water wells in Kabul are being dug an extra 40 meters due to the drastically dropping water table, mainly caused by climate change and newly emerging corporate industries, such as mining, taking priority of demand for this now precious resource.

Today in Afghanistan only 27% of the population have access to clean water. In Kabul, 80% of the people lack access to safe drinking water, and 95% lack access to improved sanitation facilities.

All of my Afghan friends exhibit some sort of behaviour ‘issue’, whether that’s throwing things at walls, or ripping up clothing, or falling prey to fits of rage, depression, detachment. Pretty much everyone in Afghanistan has directly lost a family member during the last 39 years of war. Researchers calculate that for every direct casualty of war, another four Afghans die due to indirect war causes such as hunger, disease and injury, and the second-highest infant mortality rate in the world, 61 deaths per 1,000 live births. In Britain, in the same year, there were 4 deaths for every 1,000 live births. And in one unpublished study, the Afghan Government found between 800 and 1,200 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births.
Everyone in Afghanistan has experienced loss, everyone lives close to death, the feeling of deep depression is evident in the faces of all people, and mental health statistics are staggering. 68% of the population suffer from depression, 72% from anxiety and 42% from post-traumatic stress disorders.11.

Women’s lives remain precarious. At the time of writing, the US and NATO have been engaged in 18 years of war which was legitimised by the mission to ‘liberate’ Afghan women from the Taliban. I was very struck by my friend Latifa’s description of the current state of the country as “worse than living under the Taliban.” She went on to say “living under the Taliban was awful and oppressive for women – but at least there was security, you could travel on the roads and it was relatively safe. Today travelling by road is very unpredictable.”

Very small gains have been made for women in the last 18 years. Those whose lives have been greatly improved since the removal of the Taliban are largely middle-class professionals now, post-Taliban, able to work in academia and the NGO world. There have been gains for girls in Kabul who, with the consent of family, are generally able to access schools (unless they’re street kids or refugees). However, very few girls living in the rural provinces attend school, with an estimated 1,100 Afghan children dropping out of school every day.12 The country’s instability means that it’s unsafe for many children to attend school, or else they must work to support the family.

At least a quarter of Afghan children are engaged in child labour. 13

The 2003 “Elimination of Violence Against Women Act” is still struggling to be passed, although in 2015 the Supreme Court banned the imprisonment of women for running away from their husbands, with the caveat that if a woman does leave her husband she must go to a medical provider, the police, or the house of a close male relative. None of those locations are ideal for a woman trying to escape domestic violence.14

Afghan women’s rights activists share the opinion that war makes it difficult-to-impossible for women to organise and promote equality, as priority must be given to keeping themselves and their families alive.

To be an Afghan today is to be stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one side you have the Taliban, and now IS, using IEDs, suicide bombs and pressure plate devices; and on the other side you have government forces and illegal militias who employ rockets and mortars. More often than not, civilians are caught up in the fighting. On top of this is the continued aerial bombing carried out by US and allied forces.

Fighting and brutal violence in Afghanistan has claimed 3,804 civilian lives in 2018 – including 927 children – hitting yet another “deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable” record.15

Conservative estimates calculate that 147,000 Afghans have been killed as a direct result of war since 2001.16

All of this is devastating for civilians, and now, with so much of Europe closing its borders, there is simply nowhere for them to go.

Today, most Afghans are deprived of their most basic human rights. The future for Afghanistan looks even grimmer than the present, with many predicting all-out civil war. The discovery of abundant natural resources will almost certainly result in the dominance and intrusion of foreign interests, while mining-exacerbated ‘water wars’ loom visible on the not-too-distant horizon.

When I speak to Afghans about what foreigners can do to help, their most common response is: “foreign fighters have so far not helped this country. They haven’t beaten the Taliban, and thousands of civilians have been killed. If you want to help Afghans then support our schools and healthcare, support civil society groups, but please, stop killing us.”

1 Central Statistics Organisation, 2015
2 Washington Post, June 2016
3 Business Insider, November 2016
4 The World Bank, July 2012
5 International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2018
6 Amnesty International, October 2017
7 HyrateLife Project, 2012
8 Brown University, 2016
9 World Data Atlas, 2015
10 The Guardian, 30th January 2017
11 European Commission Report, 2004
12 Save the Children, March 2017
13 Human Rights Watch Report, July 2016
14 Human Rights Watch
15 UNAMA Report, February 2019
16 The Cost of War Project, Watson Institute, November 2018
Women and mining

by Henrietta Cullinan, writer and researcher

Primitive accumulation, says Silvia Federici, writing about the move from feudal to capitalist society, coincides with the deterioration of the status of women. Something similar has happened and continues in Afghanistan: outside private companies and internal armed groups appropriate the country’s resources for their own gain. Meanwhile violent conflict and drought have forced rural communities off their land and into destitution. The resulting displacement directly impacts women’s reproductive labour, meaning capacity to provide for their families.

The dominant narrative has blamed the worsening treatment of women on Afghan patriarchal culture reinforced by Taliban rule. But it is vital to look at the role of wealth accumulation, the very obvious lining of individual pockets, that goes on the world over, not just Afghanistan, in exploiting and ignoring women and reproductive labour.

Afghanistan is the second most dangerous country, after India, in which to be a woman. Female literacy rates remain at 17% overall, and women lack access to education, healthcare and economic resources. Unemployment, estimated at 30%-40%, is swollen by hundreds of thousands of young people entering the labour market each year with a lack of technical and professional training.

Despite the efforts of the UN and the Afghan Government to improve conditions for women, forced marriage, slavery or domestic violence are still the reality. Sexual harassment forces many women to give up their jobs, even at ministerial level.

Currently 39% of the population lives in poverty, most women and often children have to work to feed their families. When I visited Kabul in 2016, I spoke to seamstresses, carpet weavers, teachers, domestic workers and street sellers. They laughed bitterly at the high price of basic foods, such as potatoes, which would have been easy to grow when they had their own land.

In rural areas, women’s reproductive work, what we think of as having babies and doing housework, extends to subsistence farming and relies on natural resources. When families lose their relationship with the land, women are hardest hit.

Now there is a new threat. And that is the mining of Afghanistan’s extensive mineral resources – copper, gold, lithium and precious and semi-precious stones. Geological surveys put the possible value of mineral resources at US$1trillion. The Afghan Unity Government has started to encourage deals with foreign mining consortiums. The Taliban take advantage of the chaotic security situation and weak government to profit from illegal mining of lapis lazuli, t alc and gold. Illegal mining revenues give power to warlords and political strongmen who directly abuse women and undermine their position.

Contracts between national governments and foreign mining companies generally include obligations to provide benefits for the workers and local population, such as housing, schools and healthcare facilities, as well as larger scale facilities such as power plants and transport links. However, in practice these often remain unfulfilled. For example, at the vast open cast copper mining project at Mes Aynak, near Kabul, Chinese company MJAM has failed to deliver on its promises of relocations, new housing and is now trying to rewrite its contract with the Afghan Government.

Furthermore, corruption decimates the revenues intended for education and healthcare, the public services that benefit women most. A report published by the World Bank states: ‘women and the families they care for are more vulnerable to the risks created already finances its existence through illegal mining revenues and taxes. Armed groups and the Taliban take advantage of the chaotic security situation and weak government to profit from illegal mining of lapis lazuli, t alc and gold. Illegal mining revenues give power to warlords and political strongmen who directly abuse women and undermine their position. On a global scale, extractivism, the capitalist system of extracting wealth from under the ground, operates at huge social, environmental and cultural costs.
A large mining enclave can result in male migration and a family having to run two households. In rural areas a farming family could lose a whole pair of hands, resulting in all the work of providing falling on the woman, leaving her undermined and exposed. Poor labour conditions, both in legal and illegal mining operations, can result in death or injury, and the consequent effects upon women and families. For instance, in January 2019, 30 miners lost their lives when a gold mine collapsed in northeastern Afghanistan and a further seven were injured. Where there are forced relocations, families end up far from their networks of friends and relatives, vitally important for women in a dangerous country. At Mes Aynak, the Chinese open cast copper mine, local farmers were relocated to inferior land, where they experienced a reduction in income. Mining projects result in changes to the agricultural land and water supplies that women depend on. Contamination, from mining run-off, makes providing for the family even more difficult and time consuming; women must travel further to find clean water or risk the health of their children.

Global Witness, a campaigning organization that examines the abuses resulting from exploitation of natural resources, works with Afghan civil society organisations such as Integrity Watch Afghanistan. In a recent policy briefing it recommends that communities should be involved in the running of mines and benefit from the revenues. In each village, existing Community Development Councils (CDCs), which are gender balanced in principle, already influence decisions on how aid money is spent, and this could be extended to handling mining revenues. If local communities have a legal stake in mining they are less likely to rely on the Taliban for income or protection.

While mining might be an attractive option for outside investors, the real value of a country is in its population. An industry that doesn’t benefit local people and instead threatens the livelihoods of women and children with danger, conflict, destitution and further exploitation cannot be a priority over supporting sustainable livelihoods and the environment.

1  https://culturalpropertynews.org/mes-aynak-corruption-copper-and-a-nation’s-heritage/

Deportations

The view from the UK

Diplomats and deportees

by Felicity Laurence, Chair, Hastings Community of Sanctuary

The UK continues to deport people to the most dangerous country in the world. While diplomats and officials are met by helicopter on the runway and ferried safely to their meetings, those people arriving as returnees, often after forcible removal from the UK and the rest of Europe, must immediately confront and navigate a landscape fraught with danger and hostility.

In June 2019, Afghanistan was officially designated by the Institute for Economics and Peace as the most dangerous country in the world, with the highest death count from war and terrorism, and replacing Syria as the least peaceful country. The Taliban now controls more than 60% of the country, and with the continued involvement of the US, there is no end in sight to the war and violence.

In their advice as at July 1st 2019, unchanged from March 2019, the Foreign Office advises against all travel to most of Afghanistan, and against all but essential travel to the rest of the country, with flights among planes on Kabul runway.
The highest number of refugees globally came from Afghanistan until the recent refugee crisis unfolded, when Syrian refugees edged those from Afghanistan into second place.

While the numbers of Afghans seeking asylum in Europe has fluctuated over the years, there has been an ongoing constant flight from the country. Constantly deteriorating security, and the lack of opportunity and high unemployment caused by this insecurity, are the main reasons for so many mainly young Afghans to flee the country and seek refuge in Europe.

But for very many, refuge in Europe is either not forthcoming or granted only temporarily, and even before the refugee ‘crisis’, hundreds of Afghans were forcibly being deported back to Afghanistan every month, from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, UK, Finland and Netherlands, using their specific bilateral agreements with Afghanistan. Other countries, including Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria, joined in this deportation process after an agreement was signed between the EU and the Afghan Government on 2nd of October 2016. This was known as the Joint Way Forward (JWF), and it blackmailed the Afghan Government into accepting Afghan asylum seekers back into Afghanistan under the threat of cuts in aid to Afghanistan.

They can claim asylum then, but the well-known “culture of disbelief” prevails: their stories are taken apart. There is no interest in the fact that they so often have settled well, are contributing to UK society, and have no one to return to in Afghanistan. And there is a complete dissonance with the Foreign Office clear warning of the deadly danger in Afghanistan for anyone perceived as Western.

The Home Office letter revealing that a young person arriving as a child “was refused because he did not know the names and ethnic origin of the three Taliban men who came to his home the night his father was killed […] if he did not know this then he could not know they were Taliban” — characterises a well-documented narrative of scepticism.1 People are routinely grabbed from their beds in the night, without explanation or their belongings, even their clothes and shoes. Manhandled into a van, they are taken into detention or straight to a cargo terminal away from public view, and from there despatched on a chartered flight. Secrecy always accompanies these acts by our Government.

The Home Office does not track what happens to those they send back. The Red Cross tries to find the families of the returnees, succeeding only rarely. The following, Abdul Ghafoor sketches a wider view of removal from Europe, and takes us into the reality of what happens when their flight reaches Kabul Airport.


The view from Afghanistan

When the deported arrive in Afghanistan

by Abdul Ghafoor, Co-ordinator, Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organisation

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Once this deal was finally signed, the number of returnees started growing dramatically. One of the plans was to deport 50 Afghan asylum seekers from Germany to Afghanistan on a monthly basis. On May 31, 2017 a truck laden with explosives targeted the Germany Embassy in the green zone in Kabul, killing dozens of civilians and leaving many others injured. This had an immediate effect upon the deportation process from Germany, which was temporarily suspended at that point, but many other countries including Sweden, Austria and Norway persisted with their deportations policy and hundreds of young Afghans were deported.

Most of those arriving from the Scandinavian countries (and some others) are entering Afghanistan for the first time. They have been born and raised in Iran or Pakistan, and from those countries have gone to Europe and applied for asylum. Others have left Afghanistan as children, and lost all touch with their original culture and families. Thus they find themselves in a very difficult situation when they arrive in a place they may only have heard about from their parents and grandparents, or of which they have simply lost all memory. It is a profound struggle for them to survive in a society they have never experienced.

They also face huge danger: on several occasions, returnees have been killed and injured in explosions in Kabul, or were badly affected because they were close to the site of those attacks. In June 2017, an Afghan asylum seeker deported from Sweden was killed in an explosion when he was participating in a demonstration.2 Another returnee was injured in the February 2017 explosion in Kabul when he was hit by shrapnel and sustained injuries in his face and hand.

Integration or re-integration are often simply impossible for those who have never witnessed violence, explosions and killings in their lives. During my meetings with recent returnees, I find that this insecurity is their biggest concern. They are deeply afraid to go outside their homes, or of becoming involved in day to day activities. When they do leave their homes, it is often to try to organize their documents – ID, passport, visa to Iran – in order to get out of Afghanistan as soon as they can.

There is little sustained support for returnees, and no services encouraging them to stay if they wish to make a future in the country. On arrival in Afghanistan, they receive only 12,500 Afghanis (about $US150) for accommodation, from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which is responsible for providing post-arrival support to returnees. Returnees are also given leaflets with some basic information, and the names of several hotels, where prices range from 300 to 2500 Afghanis per night.

There is also some support from various European countries that deport Afghans, via the European Reintegration Network (ERIN). The Europe-based organization responsible for this project, the International Returns and Reintegration Assistance (IRARA), has partnered with a local Afghan organization, the Afghanistan Centre of Excellence (ACE). ACE is responsible for meeting the returnees at their office in Kabul and guiding them on the process of applying for the support package. Most European countries (including the UK) are ERIN partner countries; each offer a specific amount to be allocated for returnees. To access the support package, returnees must come up with ideas and a business plan, and also to submit a work permit, 3 bills that shows the list of items purchased for the intended business, and some other necessary documents.

The whole process takes a long time, often many months, until it is first approved by ACE, and subsequently by the country concerned. Only then can the returnees access the support.

When nothing goes right for the returnees and they receive no support either from the Afghan Government or international organizations, the only option they feel they have left is to re-migrate and attempt to find another solution in one of the countries outside Afghanistan – Iran, Turkey, Greece and perhaps then back to one of the European countries. There are no statistics kept, but from my own experience of working with close to 1000 returnees in the past two years, I estimate that more than half of them are out of the country right now. I am confident about this claim as I remain in touch with most of them, doing my best to stay connected in order to have updates about their situations.

2 https://www.thenational.ae/world/afghan-teen-killed-in-kabul-days-after-deportation-from-sweden-1.89166
Glimmers of light

In this place of so much sorrow and extreme adversity, there are nevertheless glimmers of light.

Children still dream of a bright future, and there can be moments of joy and creativity.

Here are some of these moments and dreams.

**Street kids of Kabul**

A Kabul street kid will earn less than $2 a day begging and hawking sundries. For some families it is their main source of income. Currently there are 60,000 street kids in Kabul, and a quarter of all Afghan children are engaged in labour.

Although some of these children will live in refugee camps, homelessness is culturally abnormal in Afghanistan; an orphaned child will always be taken in by family or neighbours.

These are some of the 225 children who have graduated from a Kabul street kids’ school, run by teenage peace activists of the Afghan Peace Volunteers. The school has existed on shoe-string funding from the UK and US peace movements. It has changed lives and given hope and meaning to hundreds of young Afghans.

**Naji, 10**

“I worked on the street for a year selling bubble gum but really I like to study. When I grow up I want to be a doctor because I want to treat the illness of people.”

**Jamal, 11**

“I’m still working on the streets doing ‘Isfundi’ (burning incense in cars), I’ve been doing that for three years. I’ve been at school for nearly a year. I want to be a doctor so I can help treat the drug addicts.”

**Nabil, 16**

“I used to sell bubblegum and work as a bus conductor, now I work in a bakery. I want to become a doctor so I can help treat the drug addicts.”

**Laila, 13**

“I used to sell Bolani (pancakes) on the streets but I didn’t like it, I wanted to study. In the future I want to be a judge so I can help bring regulations to this country.”
The Afghan Peace Volunteers in Kabul are a non-violent youth group who have run approximately 20 projects over the past 10 years.

While there are many organisations running programmes to help small groups of people, the Afghan Peace Volunteers are unique in their global outlook and the range and imagination of their activities.

They have helped to improve the lives of thousands of ordinary Afghans, challenging conservative boundaries while also giving support and hope to one another.

**Glimmers of hope**

**Duvet project**

The Duvet project started in 2012 when it was being reported that children in Afghan refugee camps were freezing to death because of the cold. Women were also arriving at the group’s ‘Borderfree Centre’ saying that they desperately needed work so that they could afford to feed their children. And so the project was launched.

Materials were bought from the local bazaar, and local women were paid to make simple duvets which were given to those who were most in need. The project was entirely run by the teenage peace activists. The project ran during the winter months, and over that period employed 300 women and distributed 18,000 duvets.

**Permaculture**

In response to the devastating effect 40 years of war has had on the land, and the resulting dependency on foreign aid and imports for food, the Afghan Peace Volunteers wanted to learn how to sustainable grow food in collaboration with nature. They invited famous permaculture teacher Rosemary Morrow to Kabul. She came and delivered an 18-day Permaculture Design Course with 70 teenagers. Today many of these young activists now go into Kabul refugee camps and teach what they have learnt, and many refugees in Kabul are now able to use permaculture.

**Mixed gender bike ride**

It is generally unheard of for Afghan women to drive cars, let alone ride bikes. In order to gently challenge the status quo, the Afghan Peace Volunteers decided to undertake a mixed gender bike ride flash mob through Kabul. The young women had to learn and practise their bike riding in the confines of the Peace Centre. On the assigned day, 70 young men and women took to the streets with their emblem blue scarves – which symbolize the concept that ‘we all live under the same blue sky’ – and their bicycles which they borrowed, bought and hired. The event was fun, but also very daring.
Epilogue

Afghanistan’s youth dream of a better world

by Basir Bita, activist in Kabul

Around nine centuries ago the world-renowned Persian poet Rumi coined a proverb that changed the history of Persian Empire. The proverb literally says, “A war at first is better than a peace at the end”. The history of my country is filled with war, and this is maybe the only proverb in Afghanistan in which the word “peace” is used to show that people of this country would rather settle and embrace peace. What this proverb implies is that it’s better to clarify everything at the beginning so that the possibilities of conflict in later stages might be mitigated.

The picture of Afghanistan currently known to the world is one where women have no space to raise their voices, drug cultivation and drug addiction melts the country down, corruption has peaked, ethnic conflicts never cease, the country is the least secure place in the world and from inside the country. We argue that if our multi-dimensional ideas are implemented in the real world, the potential consequences will reshape the way the world looks at economy, politics, social development, education and basic life values.

We want to see Afghanistan as a country where the values of nonviolence are prevalent, and where there are special banks through which citizens of Afghanistan receive free payment to cover their healthcare, education and living costs.

We argue that Afghanistan should substitute industrial agriculture with organic farming and permaculture as tools to achieve reunion with Mother Earth, that a Ministry for Renewable Energy should be established in the Afghanistan administrative system, and that Afghanistan (as the most corrupt country in the world) should promote basic human rights as part of an anti-corruption constitution.

Furthermore, Afghanistan should propose to the UN that the right to a corruption-free society should be included within the International Human Rights Declaration.

We believe that Afghanistan should pioneer the concept of an election-free country where the representatives would not be elected, but instead selected by an inclusive consensus: that the Afghan Constitution should be amended to a Pacifist constitution where there is no national army: and that we should call upon all other nations of the world to adapt a pacifist constitution. Afghanistan should be the forerunner of the sharing/gift economic system in which people globally come together and share their resources with other members of the human family.

Afghanistan, as the least secure country of the world, should lead the quest to keep our world a safer place; as the worst place for women, should apply laws and promote cultural values governed by women; and if the current president is a man, the next president should be a woman, and if the next one after the woman is another man, the one after this man should be a woman, and thus a fair sharing of power between women and men.

We believe, and we are trying to show to the world in practice, that dreams come true if we listen to each other and share our stories. In this way, the story of young Afghan women and men might be shared to let other members of the human family learn that “yes, we can”.

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Climbing a mountain: young Afghan women and men walking along a dirt track through a hillside cemetery, en route to the summit.