

# AFGHAN LESSONS

*Culture, Diplomacy, and Counterinsurgency*



FERNANDO GENTILINI

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# AFGHAN LESSONS

*Culture, Diplomacy, and Counterinsurgency*

**FERNANDO GENTILINI**

Translated by Angela Arnone

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## TO MY FATHER

WHENEVER HUMANITY SEEMS condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future.

Italo Calvino

*From Six Memos for the Next Millennium:  
The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985–86*

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# FOREWORD

THIS IS A book about different worlds, different realities. The reality of everyday life in an unreal world. People that need to be looked after, jobs that need to be done, a country that needs to be restored, all from within the necessary confines of an armed camp. And this in the middle of another reality, which we do not understand, full of things forgotten under decades of war. The keys to this reality lie in the past, perhaps lost.

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose garden.

And then there is the reality of policy, and of the massive foreign military resources behind political and civilian objectives. But politics is immune to foreign influence. And foreign armies are not good at dealing with local civilians. And the reality of noble aims—on both sides: this is why they fight—meeting the lives of ordinary people whose aims in their own way are also noble, though much less grand. Mostly these realities exist in parallel, side by side, meeting only in mutual deception, or when bodies are torn apart by bombs.

On the author's bedside table lie the U.S. army counterinsurgency manual and the poems of Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystic, the two best guides to the realities of Afghanistan.

As one of the Afghans in the book says: the wildflower has the luxury of blooming for no reason. This book too is written for no reason but also for its own reasons. That makes it honest. It also means you do not need to read it. But why not?

ROBERT COOPER

*Member of the European Council on Foreign  
Relations and former colleague of the author*

# PREFACE

I THINK THE colors I saw in my two years in Afghanistan don't exist anywhere else in the world. I saw sunsets that could have come from Photoshop, suns that weren't red, moons that weren't yellow, skies of the clearest blue. But, above all, I saw stars so close they could have been part of the landscape.

I inhaled a scent of apricots like that of my childhood memories, but the balsam, poplar, and sulfur sand were new to me.

I saw men dressed like figures in a Nativity tableau, and women in chadors chatting on cell phones, and a three-year-old girl who seemed content to be barefoot in the snow.

I ate at a tavern where the cold froze the water in our glasses. In another, the waiters spun into trances to the sound of Sufi music on the radio.

I watched convoys of international forces terrorize the city's streets, heedless of old men on their bicycles and the children popping out of every nook and cranny.

I saw a fighting dog with a human foot between its jaws and a gang of screaming kids trying to drag the foot from the dog as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I flew on all sorts of military aircraft, some as high as four-story buildings, and on combat helicopters where I discovered that motion sickness is worse than seasickness.

I found the highest concentration of white Toyota Corollas per square mile. A golf course without a single blade of grass. The world's only art school without paints or brushes.

I understood why the Afghans always defeated the British and why even the Russians, in the end, were forced to retreat, and over time I became pessimistic.

I saw military commanders at work who were so ballsy that I immediately agreed with those who write that war is too serious a business to leave it entirely in their hands.

I met international operators who thought they knew everything, when they knew nothing, and diplomats I wouldn't trust to run a restaurant, let alone the foreign policy of a nation.

I understood that wars can be random, unavoidable, necessary, that they can drag on for reasons other than those for which they began, but that they're never right even when it seems that they are.

I met the world's most elegant head of state, and I watched warlords rubbing their feet and scratching their ears with ballpoint pens as they sat on parliamentary benches.

Now I can tell the sound of a rocket-propelled grenade from a mortar; I can figure out if an explosion occurred less than half a mile away; and watching how the smoke rises, I can tell if it was a car bomb or a landmine.

I watched just how much human beings can endure, like trained animals. For example, I once saw a father sitting in a bunker in the middle of the night, dressed in a helmet and flowery boxers, sipping cardamom tea as he spoke on a cell phone to someone on the other side of the world, studying his tapered hands from time to time, as if he were checking out a manicure—but for the rest, it seemed nothing was up.

In a mountain village, I met a nomad swathed in a blanket, crouched on a kind of column capital, just as I'd read in a book.

I thought that if someone like Robert Byron came here now, he'd certainly have written some caustic comments on the international community's "counterinsurgency" and "comprehensive approach."

Now I know the meaning of "clear, hold, and build," and why the military just doesn't get along with humanitarian workers.

I know the difference between tribal and global, planetary jihad and minor local conflicts, Taliban and all other insurgents. I learned that postmodern wars are no longer won or lost.

I came to appreciate that for Afghans the fact that a woman wears a burqa is irrelevant, because they recognize her by her ankles.

I learned what it means when two men walk hand in hand, and that the sexual revolution reached into the heart of Asia long before it arrived in the West.

I read the ancient poems of Rumi and the modern verses of Sayd Bahodine Majrouh; I visited the Herat Ansari tomb and listened to stories about the worship of fire and of goats. I discovered that the East is more mysterious than we might think, and that cultural globalization doesn't exist, which reassures me deeply. I spoke with many Afghans who mistrust Westerners and many of the latter who nevertheless trust Afghans.

With my own ears I heard a U.S. officer ask a superior what time he had to be at the 8:30 briefing, and I argued endlessly, usually to no avail, with the international military at the gate who insisted on searching Afghan government officials whenever they came to the base for meetings.

At times I could have screamed, but I never lost my patience or showed exasperation in front of colleagues and staff, even when I saw things I found absolutely unbearable. Only when suicide bombers blew themselves up at the gate of our base, one hundred yards from my home, killing seven people and injuring my press officer, did I tremble imperceptibly.

I met people I'll never forget, with whom I shared incredible moments. I cared deeply for the colleagues, staff, civilians, and soldiers I came to know, particularly Hamid and Jawid, the Afghan boys who kept house and cooked for me. From the very beginning I developed total admiration for the carabinieri of the Tuscania Regiment, who kept me safe: their manner of construing service and sacrifice would be worthy of a book in itself.



# **HOW I ENDED UP IN AFGHANISTAN**

## **FEBRUARY–JULY 2008**

I WAS APPOINTED NATO's senior civilian representative for Afghanistan in early May 2008. It was sheer chance really, a combination of events. With the fall of the Prodi administration in February, I had to look for another job after two years as deputy diplomatic adviser to the prime minister. At the same time, NATO's secretary general was looking for a new personal representative in Kabul, and the Italian Foreign Ministry had decided to put forward one of its diplomats for the position, so that secured me a place on the list of candidates. I was keen; I was looking for a new challenge to sink my teeth into, and I looked forward to the interview.

Afghanistan had always fascinated me and, more than ever, it was now at the center of the international stage. Moreover, the role of civilian representative of the leading organization (even if it was military in nature) present in the country promised to be interesting, especially since the international community was relentlessly demanding a political solution to the crisis.

My father encouraged me and this was of fundamental importance; in the past we had never discussed my choice of overseas postings, and I had simply informed him when it was all decided. This time, however, leaving Italy would be different because he had just been diagnosed with a form of stomach cancer and had been given a very poor prognosis.

In some aspects, my father was like my grandfather, and in turn my grandfather was like all those who had experienced a

war and its aftermath. Work for my father and generations before was virtually the be-all and end-all, and when a big opportunity came your way, you grabbed it with both hands without giving it too much thought. My father made me understand this while we were having dinner together, the evening after he'd started his chemotherapy. We were talking about skiing, as we always did, when out of the blue he told me he was sure they'd offer me the job, and that I'd be doing the right thing if I accepted it.

IN EARLY APRIL I was selected for an interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, secretary general of NATO. We spoke for half an hour; I was very frank and to the point, mainly because I felt the "right chemistry" was there. I told him I knew very little about Afghanistan, but I did have good multilateral experience and I knew the mechanisms used by the international community in crisis situations. I also told him that a few years earlier, in the Balkans, I'd already met Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat who had begun to coordinate international civilian activities on behalf of the United Nations and with which NATO would be working in Kabul.

De Hoop Scheffer knew that I'd had a similar assignment in the Balkans a few years before, working for Javier Solana, high representative for European Union common foreign and security policy. He was also hopeful that an Italian diplomat would have more of a chance of winning Afghan trust, since—as I later discovered—NATO was struggling in that respect, to say the least.

A couple of weeks later I got a call from Ambassador Giampiero Massolo, the Italian Foreign Ministry's secretary general; he confirmed that I'd been given the assignment and it was time to start packing.

That afternoon I went to browse the bookshops in the center of Rome. In the evening I had dinner with my mother, and then I went to the cinema with my partner, Francesca, to see *The Kite Runner*, a movie based on Khaled Hosseini's bestseller. Francesca had hoped for a different decision and wasn't at all happy about a relationship that in a few days' time would be conducted on Skype.

Before we went into the cinema, I texted Kai Eide in Kabul to tell him I'd got the job and how happy I was that we'd be working together. When the movie was over, I turned the cell back on and found his reply, "We'll make a good team!" which sounded encouraging and was an incentive to prepare myself as best I could.

IN THE WEEKS before my departure, just like anyone else given an international assignment of any importance, I embarked on the crucial "tour of the capitals," visiting the key countries of the Atlantic Alliance to gather suggestions on how to proceed once I got to Kabul and to seek the required political support.

I went to Washington, Ottawa, Paris, London, and Berlin. I also went to Ankara, to meet the former Turkish foreign minister, Hikmet Çetin, who had held the position I was about to take over a few years earlier and had maintained a close relationship with President Hamid Karzai and many other Afghan leaders.

In Paris I made my first appearance at the side of NATO's secretary general during the international Afghanistan donor conference of June 12, 2008. Immediately afterward I spent a week at NATO headquarters in Brussels, meeting my new co-workers. It was a frenetic time, during which I tried to absorb as much information as possible, establish contacts, and make an inventory of important issues: how I was going to get International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military to co-exist with United Nations and European Union civilian staff; how to achieve the gradual empowerment of Afghans for the management of reconstruction projects; how to support the political process for the upcoming 2009 presidential elections that were supposed to confirm the country's democratic consolidation, and so on.

Despite the crazy schedule, I was as euphoric as I always am when I'm getting ready to leave. I didn't feel responsible for anything. I was in a kind of limbo, and suddenly it was as if everything else in life was no longer my concern. The mere prospect of crossing a border and settling in a distant country had swiftly erased the duties and concerns of everyday life. Not that I'd be lacking for responsibilities in Afghanistan. If

anything, there would probably be more. Yet there was a sense of lightness that floated over the preparations for my departure, as if the venture wasn't really directly related to me, or perhaps it was too immense for me to relate it directly to myself. I suspect my face betrayed my satisfaction, because in the days leading up to the trip, my colleagues at Palazzo Chigi kept repeating that I looked like the cat that had lapped up all of the cream. I have to be honest. I was pleased with this opportunity, although perhaps those around me did not feel the same.

My mother had begun to focus and was concerned by the alarming news she was hearing about Kabul. She said I was reckless, that I needed to grow up and lacked any inkling of what it feels like to be a parent.

Francesca observed it all from her own perspective, but said more or less the same. She too thought I was being totally selfish, and said it was as if I didn't care about the two of us at all.

My father saw it differently. Every day he got weaker from the cancer and the chemo, but the evening before I left, he insisted on inviting friends and family to Casina Valadier, a well-known venue for parties and receptions in downtown Rome, so I could say goodbye. He'd lost a lot of weight and it was clear he wasn't well, yet his face seemed strangely youthful, looking as he had in our summers together of thirty years back. Would he recover? Would I see him back on his feet? Or was this to be our last time together?

## TWO

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# SIGNALS

**1968, 1979, 2001,  
2007**

FOR YEARS I'd been sure that sooner or later I'd end up in Afghanistan. Traveling as a tourist, on business, or just by chance. I don't remember the exact moment when this conviction took shape or why it did, but I felt it was there and that I wouldn't have to do very much to make it happen. At some point, fate would pack me off to Kabul.

I'd heard the name *Afghanistan* for the first time when I was six, in the kitchen of my paternal grandparents. Uncle Roberto, my father's younger brother, was back from a trip to Persia and was showing my grandmother some photographs. He'd gone there with Mara, his girlfriend, who was soon to become my aunt, and they were saying that they'd wanted to go to Kabul, but there was a cholera epidemic and the closed borders forced them to rethink their plans.

My uncle was sorry he'd missed out because he'd heard from other travelers that Afghanistan was stunning and had to be seen before mass tourism got there. So they'd already decided to go back the following year, on the "magic bus" that started off in London and reached Kabul in a couple of weeks. During this second trip they were going to cross the Persian Desert, heading for the Hindu Kush, confronting raiders, eating whatever they could find, and drinking water from streams at high altitudes.

I listened open-mouthed, and that place at the top of the world already seemed different from all the others I'd heard about before then. To tell the truth, I didn't even understand where Afghanistan was, and when we finished looking at the photos, I dashed to my room to check in the atlas.

ON DECEMBER 19, 1979, I was skiing on Monna dell'Orso, on the Apennine range where I was born. It was a beautiful

morning. It had been snowing until just a few hours before and the slopes were iced with the sort of sugary flakes that are as close as you get to bliss when you feel the skis sink in.

I remember it like it was yesterday, although years have passed. I was going up on the ski lifts with one of my friends on the seat behind me, and at one point he asked me if I'd heard the news on the radio. When I said no, he replied that World War III was about to start: the Russians had just invaded Afghanistan and the Americans certainly wouldn't stand on the sidelines.

I've always been impressionable: as a child I was terrified of infectious diseases; when I was eleven or twelve I worried I would stop growing; in my teens I dreaded that a nuclear war would put an end to the wonderful life I was lucky enough to lead, in which skiing was a central feature for at least six months of the year. So that chat did worry me a tad, even if my concern lasted just the time it took to get to the top of the slope and ski back down off-track.

The rest of the day was as carefree as any that a seventeen-year-old spends with friends on snow-covered slopes, and not even the news of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was going to spoil that.

ON THE EVENING of October 15, 2001, I was in Skopje. After 9/11, everyone was expecting news of a U.S. attack on Afghanistan, but when CNN began broadcasting the first images of the bombing of the northern front, I got goose bumps, as if this was something that would soon involve me personally.

At that time I was working for Javier Solana, "Europe's Foreign Minister," and I'd been in Macedonia for six months. During the summer we'd defined a peace agreement that had avoided a civil war, and I was involved in the subsequent parliamentary ratification process, working with a couple of colleagues. Then we were to uproot ourselves and get back to Brussels.

The EU staff stayed in a South Korean-owned hotel and we shared an entire floor with the NATO folks we'd worked with

all summer to manage the crisis. Usually we had breakfast together in the morning, and I remember that in the aftermath of the attack there was heated discussion among us about what would happen next in Afghanistan. Some thought the country was a trap, mainly because of its terrain, and the only chance of success was a lightning campaign to oust the Taliban, put in place a decent government, and get out without getting bogged down like the Russians had. Others said that this time the international community in Afghanistan would be there a while, to avoid making the same mistakes of the early 1990s, when the Taliban had free rein precisely because of the West's indifference toward the civil war that broke out after Soviet withdrawal.

The call from Christoph Heusgen, the German director of Solana's policy unit, came a few weeks later, just as I was about to return to Brussels. He asked if I'd like to go to Kabul once I was done in Macedonia, since they needed someone who could back up the European envoy about to open up an office there. I was tempted to accept and I nearly said yes, as usual without too much thought. But then Solana intervened—he wanted me for other actions in the Balkans—and after a few weeks I was moved to Belgrade, and the Afghanistan trail petered out.

I DID MANAGE to see Kabul just once before NATO deployed me there. It was Christmas Eve 2007 and I accompanied the Italian prime minister on a flying visit to the Italian military contingent that was part of the International Security Assistance Force. I remember it was snowing. An icy wind was blowing and the presidential palace, where we went to meet Hamid Karzai, seemed like another planet, away from the city and everything else that was happening (which in itself explained a lot of things). Recently, security had deteriorated and suicide bombers and rocket attacks were frequent. We traveled from the airport to the NATO base by helicopter, and from there by convoy to the presidential palace. An aerial view of the city showed a mass of houses scattered haphazardly and gave everyone a bad impression. Everyone except me. I was as excited as a child. We only stayed in Kabul a few hours, and after our meeting with Karzai

we moved to Herat, where the bulk of the Italian contingent was stationed. Finally we left for Abu Dhabi on an Italian Air Force C130 and, from there, took a flight back to Rome. At home I spent the Christmas holidays mulling over Afghanistan, because it had been so cold there I'd come down with bronchitis. Never could I have imagined that I'd be back so soon, but the Italian government fell a few months later, I went for that interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, and in the blink of an eye I was packing to leave.

### THREE

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## DUBAI, TERMINAL 2

**JULY 13, 2008**

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT'S Terminal 2 is a remote outpost. A waiting room for the hopeless, the final frontier before the journey into the ailing heart of Asia. Post-9/11 Afghanistan starts here, in this gloomy pavilion without signage or billboards, just a few miles from Terminal 3's marble and crystal at the service of the Emirates airline. Covering the short distance between the two buildings is like a journey from day into night, from sterile organization to pollution and disease.

I left behind spas, sushi bars, jewelry stores, Ferraris displayed in front of Gucci or Hermes boutiques, and entered a strange chaos zone, without signage, where it was suddenly impossible to understand anything except that in order to succeed in boarding a flight, I had only myself to fall back on. In this respect, Terminal 2's departures hall is a perfect metaphor not only of the contemporary world, but also of the place where I was headed. A world, in other words, where everything depends on chaos control, and if the chaos escapes control, then order and civilization vanish.

Even Dubai taxi drivers know this. They're almost all Pakistanis and have plenty of experience in hellish places. So when you get in one of their cars and tell the driver to take you to Terminal 2, he asks you first what your job is and where you left your family; then, when you pay the fare, he wishes you good luck. Which is precisely what you're going to need.

I GOT IN the security line behind seven bruisers, all dressed alike—as if they were part of the same football or rugby team—in tight T-shirts, military pants, sandals, and with shaved heads and tattooed arms. Seven would-be John Rambos aged somewhere between thirty and sixty, with muscles pumped by

hours of gym workouts, their expressions so stiff I couldn't help but think of deep-sea fish. One was sipping beer from a can, and after each sip he massaged his neck with it. Another had a bottle of mineral water, which he splashed over his feet every now and again, in an attempt to cool down. A third was texting and rolling his eyes heavenward at every reply, muttering "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" like Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

At one point the bruiser standing next to me pulled a magazine from his backpack and began to browse through it. I saw it was the latest issue of *Soldier of Fortune*, the mercenary monthly published in the United States, a shopping cart of guns, rifles, daggers, helmets, uniforms, and anything else required by those who choose this second oldest profession in the world. I shifted, without being too obvious, so I could get a better look. You could buy everything online if you had a credit card, and there were even sales and special offers. You earned points with every purchase and there were prize draws.

These third-millennium soldiers of fortune are called "contractors" and work for private security companies. They're part of a huge business that revolves around wars in central Asia. International soldiers are a rare commodity: there are never enough to go round. Thus, especially in times of state cutbacks, there is little alternative but to call in private enterprise to meet security demands in the planet's hot spots.

I knew that the Afghan government, international organizations, and multinationals were using contractors to control roads, warehouses, and offices, and that meant thousands of men. What I didn't expect was that they'd appear out of the blue, before I'd even reached Afghanistan and, above all, that they'd look so unprofessional, with nothing of the soldier about them. A lack of style, I thought, that would have the mercenaries of the past—like Bob Denard—turning in their graves. (Denard had been the legendary French mercenary who fought in several African civil wars during the 1960s and was involved in four coups in the Comoro Islands between the 1970s and the 1990s.) If this was the human material, I mused, it was no surprise that in Iraq some of them

had gone on trial charged with panicking and opening fire on a crowd.

Luckily I hadn't heard anything like that about Afghanistan, but it wasn't enough to comfort me. The more I looked at the faces of those strange traveling companions of mine, the more I couldn't help but think how foolish it was, in a stabilization mission, to use people who had everything to gain from hoping a situation was permanently unstable.

Lost in thought, I failed to notice that the mercenary with the magazine had started to look me up and down. Maybe he was wondering who I was and what I had to stare at, or he was simply pondering how the hell I was coping in a jacket and tie.

It was actually three o'clock in the morning and the blistering heat was smothering all of us. At the back of the room, a small man at the top of a tall staircase was gesturing unmistakably that the airport's ventilators were pumping out hot air!

THE GOONS WEREN'T the only ones in front of me in the line. In front of them was a small crowd of at least twenty Arab merchants, also all dressed alike. They didn't look like they were feeling the heat in their full white robes, turbans, sunglasses, and pointed Aladdin-style slippers. Some of them were holding walking sticks, others colored prayer beads. Two more talked feverishly with a policeman by the metal detector and it was clear that something was amiss. After a few minutes things started to get heated and one of them was shouting so loud that the situation seemed to be getting out of hand. Meanwhile, the rest of the group smacked their foreheads, gave disapproving grunts and, from the lines parallel with ours, other merchants—also in white robes, turbans, and slippers—crowded over. They obviously wanted to get involved even though I couldn't figure out where they found the energy in that heat.

These merchants were holding up the line for at least half an hour, their merchandise crammed into cartons so large that it was impossible to get them onto the conveyor belt and past the metal detectors. Airport security staff were trying to force them to empty the boxes, but they weren't having it, so the

security officers had begun to empty the cartons themselves to a chorus of general protest. The conveyor belts were covered in shoes, flip-flops, sunglasses, watches, mobile phones, lighters, and costume jewelry. All cheap stuff, but once sold in the remote towns of Central Asia, it would obviously bring in a healthy profit.

The guards inspected the merchandise piece by piece, and the merchants seemed to restrain themselves once a security guard with a face only a mother could love emerged from the border police office and glared at them until they cooled off.

Gradually the line started to crawl forward, and when it got to the turn of the gorilla in front of me, he decided to show off his abs and the Celtic cross tattooed on his chest, peeling off his T-shirt and tossing it into the plastic tray that ferried items into the scanner, to the amusement of security staff.

Once beyond the security checks, we entered a long, narrow corridor and shuffled along it, pushing and shoving to get through, like a flock desperate to get back to the fold. At the end we found the big departure lounge, where we all tried to get comfortable as we waited for the flight to be called. Here I saw dozens of Rambo types, hanging in groups, chewing gum, gulping down cans of beer, smoking cigarettes. They stared into thin air and never spoke to each other.

A few of them had stretched out on the seats in front of the gate, trying to sleep; others camped out on the floor. Small groups of two or three were wandering around the duty-free store, with its shelves of cameras, iPods, and new-generation mobile phones. Crouched in the corner, next to the prayer room, another one was reading the usual magazine. The Arab merchants, with their boxes packed with merchandise, were all leading to the departure gates, waiting to embark for their dead-end destinations: Baghdad, Kabul, Kunduz, Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore....

The speakers crackled endlessly and I didn't understand a word, but I supposed they were announcing flight cancellations because, after each one, there was a sort of mutiny at the gate, even by those who had spread their mats toward Mecca.

The flights were listed on flat screens hanging on the walls, flashing on and off endlessly as the number of those canceled grew. Of course, these were airlines I'd never heard of, probably blacklisted by international civil aviation and which had no truck with the latter's rules. Kabul was more or less always shown, but a time of departure never was.

In the hours before dawn, five daily flights leave for the Afghan capital and my business-class ticket allowed me to choose whichever I preferred (or so I'd been told). Two were flights with Ariana, the national airline; the others were with Safi, Kam Air, and Pamir. In actual fact, I should have been flying with Kam Air, because the others couldn't guarantee minimum safety standards and NATO advised its employees against using them. But that morning, as happened on other occasions, the Kam Air flight had been canceled and I was left to try pot luck.

To kill some time I decided to eat something. There was a sort of diner serving rice, kebabs, and curries of all colors, but the smell wasn't very inviting and it just seemed a bit too much for four in the morning. So I got in line at a stall selling fresh fruit in the middle of the lounge. Lined up in plain view were pomegranate juices with a label of origin, bottled in Kandahar, the Taliban capital in southern Afghanistan, one of the areas where fighting was most fierce. Just a few days before, insurgents had blown up the outer walls of the city jail and enabled the escape of four hundred prisoners.

## FOUR

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# KABUL

THE LANDING IN KABUL was just as I had imagined. First the descent over barren ocher mountains, their true scale emerging as the aircraft went down to sea level. Then the wretched mud huts of the suburbs and chaotic containers around the airport. In the distance, in a valley of yellowish sand, a helicopter cemetery, rusted tanks, and remnants of war that might have been an open-air museum illustrating the last thirty years of Afghan history.

An American diplomat, Ken, who had worked with my Dutch predecessor, Maurits Jochems, was waiting on the tarmac. He was escorted by eight members of the Dutch special forces, who had also worked with the previous team and were going to be my “close protection” for several days. Meanwhile, the Tuscania Regiment team assigned to me would complete formalities for its arrival and become fully operational. We settled into the VIP room where we were offered tea by staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but there wasn’t time to drink because we were told my suitcase had arrived and we could leave.

The convoy of three cars I was traveling in slid into city traffic and immediately I felt the tension rise. The atmosphere was unfathomable: I couldn’t understand if this signaled a sense that something might happen or a truce. The driver of my armored Toyota and the head of the escort sitting next to him were in constant radio contact with the other two cars, one in front of us and the other behind. Over the past six months, suicide bombers had reached the heart of the city three times. In January they had blown themselves up inside Hotel Serena, killing a number of Westerners; in April they’d attempted to assassinate Karzai during a military parade; in early July they’d managed to slaughter nearly a hundred people in front of the Indian embassy, close to the Ministry of the Interior.

The Afghan security guards at the checkpoints were extremely edgy, and it showed in their jerky movements and

scrupulous checking of our documents and access permits as we approached the city center. The airport road was considered at risk because it was so busy and because it was accessed by countless side roads connecting areas outside the security limits. I'd been given a helmet and a bulletproof vest but I hadn't put them on. At best they'd only protect me from light gunshots, shrapnel, or shards of glass from a shattered car window. On the other hand, if I got in the way of a remote-controlled car bomb packed with explosives or had a close encounter with a suicide bomber on a motorbike—exactly the kind of risk we were running—there wasn't a jacket or helmet that would save my life.

Along the way I tried to look around and understand, but Kabul was different from any other city. Indeed, it didn't even seem like a city; I had no way of getting my bearings. Traffic was a merry-go-round without rhyme or reason, and we often drove in fast lanes against the flow of vehicles, with long stretches in tracks enclosed by huge blocks of concrete that closed off all views except for the sky and the satellite dishes on the roofs of the buildings lining the road.

The road was shrouded in clouds of dust. In among the cars, trucks, Afghan and international military convoys, taxis, motorcycles and bicycles, there was an overwhelming bustle of old folks and children who meandered just for the sake of it, in no particular hurry and with no particular place to go.

At one point, after passing yet another roadblock, Ken pointed to the mighty outer walls of the American embassy on the right and said we were almost at the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force, where my office and residence were located. I glanced around before we entered the gate and nothing gave the impression of a city center or anything resembling one. The only thing I could see were the sides of the tree-lined street and, behind the boundary walls, pure Soviet-style dull whitish or pale blue buildings, the legacy of previous occupying forces.

It took me several days to find my bearings in the maze of urban trenches and fortifications. It's not easy when you don't drive and, above all, when you can't walk around. Sometimes,

even the map of Kabul that I'd been given by the Carabinieri escort was of little help. Then I began to realize that the neighborhood where I lived was the most beleaguered by checkpoints and concrete protection barriers.

In addition to the ISAF base, that same part of the city hosted the Afghan and international nerve centers: the president's palace; the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Transport; U.S., British, French, Italian, Spanish, Indian, German, and Turkish diplomatic missions; the United Nations offices. The real city wasn't far away and had no checkpoints or level crossings, and its streets were packed with people. As I gradually ventured further afield, I learned to recognize the riverside district, the great mosque, market, shopping center, small restaurants, fruit vendors, bus stations, and the densely populated neighborhoods that reached as far as parliament, the national museum, and the ruins of the Queen's Palace.

It didn't exactly make a good impression, especially for someone like me, thinking I'd find at least a hint of the atmosphere described in the travel books I'd packed. Nothing remained of the great mountain village or trapper outpost that had attracted restless travelers from across the globe just forty years earlier. A few glimpses survived in several old buildings: traces of inlays, a courtyard or a secret garden, the legendary Bala Hissar fort in the Shahr-e Kohne district, the old royal palace now converted into the presidential building, with a vaguely surreal atmosphere all its own. They were few and far between, however, and you either had to seek them out or happen upon them by accident or stroke of luck.

IN THE EVENINGS I read *Baburnama*, the autobiography of Emperor Zahir al-Din Muhammad. Known as Babur, he was a descendant of Tamerlane, the mercenary captain who had conquered Kabul in 1504, tying his name to the city ever since. The reading was tough going, like all medieval writings, and sometimes it was hard to make progress, but I was smitten with the graceful descriptions and the joy with which Babur celebrated every small occasion: a feast-day banquet, the harvest, a ride on horseback as far as Istalif. Everything was recorded in full, even the most minute details, and the

accuracy of certain passages had the same effect as a Persian miniature.

Of course, when I hit the city traffic each morning, I couldn't figure out what had become of all those lemon, orange, and pomegranate groves, the crystal-clear river water, the fountains, the cool air that blew down from hillside villages, the vines, flowers, bright gardens, and all the other beautiful things I had read about in *Baburnama*. Before my eyes I continued to find hazy images of a city in tatters, its colors dulled, wrapped in a cloud of yellow dust that made it look like an oasis on the verge of being swallowed by the desert.

Colleagues who had arrived recently got the same impression and they were equally disappointed by the initial impact of Kabul. Then, one morning, one of our military advisers came to the nine o'clock staff meeting with a series of black and white photographs. No one knew who had taken these aerial views, which had emerged from who knew which archive. Looking at them I realized that there was no need to go back to Babur's time to find Kabul's more human face. Thirty years before the city had still been green, welcoming, with a real market. It still expressed the idea of air, space, and even what looked like a layout, if not actually an urban plan.

When I began to meet my first Afghans, I asked them what had happened to the old Kabul. Dejectedly, they all answered in the same way;...it was gone, as simple as that, crushed by overcrowding and destroyed by warfare. One of the national museum guides told me that in the 1960s the city was so lovely that Indian and Russian businessmen with a passion for hunting came to retire here. He was of the opinion that the misfortunes had all begun with the end of the monarchy in 1973, as if the coup had not only condemned King Zahir to exile, but had also opened the floodgates to a dark time of malediction.

A number of architects from the Agha Khan Foundation were restoring the old city's dwellings. They told me that until a few decades before, the population of Kabul would have been no more than four hundred thousand people. Now, the

number of residents had grown tenfold, leading to the collapse of the sewerage system, almost complete desertification, and pollution of aquifers.

By all accounts, however, the 1990s had been fatal for Kabul, with whole neighborhoods razed, first by Gulbuddin Hikmetyar's bombings (1993–95) in the attempt to unite the Pashtuns against Ahmad Shah Massoud's Tajiks and Dostum's Uzbeks, who had occupied the city after the fall of Najibullah. Then, in 1996, the Taliban bombed continuously with missiles and heavy artillery prior to their occupation. At that point there was little left to destroy and—as I discovered later—that was a truth the Afghans were struggling to admit. They, not the Russians in the 1980s or the American or NATO presence of more recent times, had destroyed what survived of Kabul after the nineteenth-century Anglo-Afghan wars. And it was a systematic, merciless, extravagant destruction. Like everything else in this country.

## A SMALL TRAVEL LIBRARY, I

BOOKS ARE ESSENTIAL to understanding a country, learning its history, discovering the thoughts of those who came before us. In modern Afghanistan, books are even more indispensable because the conflict is a barrier to many places, and the destruction of the last thirty years has left little of what was once there.

I arranged my little travel library in the bedroom of my new home, a dozen or so volumes, all I'd been able to fit into my suitcase and carry-on bag. But I was in no doubt that this would be another of those occasions when I would see the number grow rapidly, as it had everywhere else I'd lived and worked. I'd heard about a downtown bookstore, which went by the name of the "Bookseller of Kabul" and sold books in English and French, but it was mainly the city's proximity to India that sowed a seed in my bookworm mind. New Delhi bookstores were little more than an hour away by air, and if I could find a way to get there, I would discover every imaginable book about this part of the world. Maybe I could give it a try in November, during the All Saints holiday, or in December, for the Christmas break. For the time being, I'd have to make do with what I'd brought from Rome. Geopolitics and anthropology essays were a necessary part of my job; the others, especially the travel books, were for my own pleasure.

Along with the *Baburnama*, I started reading *The Light Garden of the Angel King* by Peter Levi, one of the best books I've ever come across about Afghanistan. Levi describes his research of ancient Greece among the secluded valleys of the Hindu Kush and his pilgrimage to the ruins of the ancient city of Ai-Khanoum on the banks of the Amu Darya, in northern Afghanistan. It was 1969 when Peter Levi, a Jesuit priest with

a passion for archaeology, traveled with Bruce and Elizabeth Chatwin to a country that had not yet become a theater of war. It was untouched, hospitable, a gold mine of marvels. The book's title comes from an inscription on the tomb of Emperor Babur, which can still be seen in the garden dedicated to him, in one of the city's rare green nooks.

Chris Alexander, the UN's deputy special representative, walked there every Friday morning and suggested I do the same. The trail started from the Bala Hissar fort and climbed a ridge that hugged the old city walls. The forty-minute hike reached the top of one of the mountains overlooking Kabul, and from there it took another half hour to get to the garden, lying on the southern slopes.

The Agha Khan Foundation had completely refurbished the garden, in an attempt to restore it to its former glory, and people had started going back in recent months, taking picnics on holidays, bringing melons and watermelons from home. After a security officer had checked the route, the hike from Bala Hissar to Babur's gardens became one of my few regular habits, whenever I decided to take some free time on a Friday morning. For the Tuscania Regiment boys it was an added task, and sometimes I felt guilty when I asked the escort chief to come with me. But I realized that they enjoyed some outdoor exercise as much as I did, and, climbing higher along the route, the city appeared as it did from a plane, so we were finally able to understand something of its layout.

The area where we were stationed was the only one with a shred of surviving greenery, along with the Shar-e Naw district. The city center, on the other hand, a couple of miles from the ISAF headquarter, was a palette of grays, enveloped in foul-smelling clouds of exhaust and heating gases, while the district out toward parliament was a parched wasteland with the destruction of the 1990s still clearly visible.

OF COURSE MY miniature library included a copy of Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana*, the legendary book on Central Asia that generations of travelers had used to plan their itineraries. I'd already come across it some fifteen years before, although at the time I hadn't realized what cultured and

stimulating reading it might be. I re-read it in a flash, enjoying every word, noting moreover that while many of Byron's anecdotes date back to his travels in the 1930s, they still fit contemporary Afghanistan very well (starting with the semi-dictatorial attitude of the municipal police and anyone wearing what passes for a uniform).

The book had an endless index of cities with wonderful names that rang like a magic formula if you recited them one after the other. Conversely, the description of the routes he took from one town to the next always caused me some regret, especially as Byron was traveling on horseback. I'd arrived quite comfortably in Kabul by plane, but apparently you only really acquire true awareness of a place if you travel overland, eating dust and observing how the people and landscapes change along the way. The most striking thing was the author's motivation; the idea that he'd come this far in search of the inspirational genius that created Persian architecture automatically placed that book in the category of things unattainable. As I read of Ulugh Beg and his observatory, or Baysonghor and his court poets and musicians, I felt very small indeed. There were times when, rather than be a diplomat, I would have preferred to be a scholar of Herat's Timurid renaissance, an explorer of the tunnels of Bamiyan, or a passenger on a bus to Mazar-e Sharif, the city that owed its existence to a dream. Building peace is undoubtedly a noble task, I told myself every morning as soon as I woke up. Yet it seemed not to bear comparison with what had driven Byron, as if concrete, useful tasks could not be equally prodigious.

*The Great Game* by Peter Hopkirk, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* by Eric Newby, and *The Places in Between* by Rory Stewart were other travel and exploration classics that I'd brought from Rome. I might also add *Afghanistan, A Companion and Guide*, written by Bijan Omrani and Matthew Leeming, which includes various extracts of literary works on Central Asia and an introduction by Elizabeth Chatwin.

Hopkirk's work is the chronicle of almost a century of military expeditions and rivalry between the secret services of Tsarist Russia and Victorian England. The book's chief merit—at least for me—is that it describes geopolitics in a readable

style (because we all know how boring geopolitics can be if there isn't something to spice it up). Hopkirk seems to know that a good novel is worth more than a hundred essays, so his reconstruction of nineteenth-century disputes between Russia and England keeps the same pace as a Kipling or a Conrad. Another undisputed merit of this book, published in 1990, is that it reminded everyone of how the fate of the world now, more than ever, depends on this vast area of Central Asia, and Afghanistan represents its epicenter. In short, the book and the "Great Game" metaphor are still germane. The only significant difference compared to two centuries ago is that now the players on the Asian chessboard are not only more numerous and but also more aggressive.

Newby's travel diary classic, published in 1958, pays homage to the mountains of Afghanistan and their extreme nature. In doing so he chooses the eastern part of the country, Nuristan, the province formerly known as Kafiristan ("the land of infidels"), where Rudyard Kipling had set *The Man Who Would Be King*. I so wanted to see those mountains with my own eyes, to reassure myself that they were still as tall and flawless as they had been, but, apart from the risks and logistical difficulties, I conceded that putting on hiking boots and setting off on foot was not particularly sensible, given the situation.

Rory Stewart, a former British diplomat with a passion for Central Asia, had done it though. After the fall of the Taliban he walked from Herat to Kabul and then he wrote up the journey in a book that is already a classic: *The Places in Between*. The way things are now, however, even he probably wouldn't have gone ahead, given the waning security in recent years. More important, Rory Stewart used the proceeds of the book to set up the Turquoise Mountain Foundation that undertakes to train young Afghans in traditional arts and restoration skills—an intelligent project that was badly needed and was implemented with great expertise by a handful of volunteers barricaded inside a historic building on the outskirts of Kabul.

Omrani and Leeming also talk about the cultural revival of Afghanistan and their guide is a practical tool for those who

want to explore all these marvels. This is a passionate, well-written volume with infinite quotations and bibliographical notes. Sadly it was based on the erroneous assumption that after the end of the Taliban regime the country and its treasures would once more be accessible to everyone.

So, these books kept me company during my first few weeks in Kabul. All, to a greater or lesser extent, describing a country that no longer existed, or perhaps had never existed, but in any case was out of reach to me. Full of places I couldn't get to and people I couldn't meet because of the war. Perhaps that was why my reading was a flawed pleasure, something I couldn't define, somewhere between regret and remorse. The Afghanistan of Byron, Newby, and Levi, the country where travelers could immerse themselves in the tracks of the first Greek colonizers or of a snow leopard, was one I would never see. Because the Afghanistan of our times, the one I had before my eyes, was one that seemed to have been chewed up and spat out as a mushy mess.

Sometimes I glimpsed fragments, a miniscule iridescence in the colorless mass: a forgotten inscription, an old photo, the work of a potter in the Turquoise Mountain workshop. But it was always a spark, a will-o-the-wisp, minute digressions in days that had nothing epic or amazing about them: waking up to the BBC news, a military briefing at 8:30, the daily victim count, the whirlwind of meetings around the city, coordination updates, traveling under escort, checkpoints, sirens, traffic jams, cell phones beeping at every security warning.

## THE FIRST STEPS

EVEN IN MY early days in Kabul I realized how urgent it was to find answers to a series of basic questions. What was the purpose of this international mission? How long would it take to complete? Was it right to stay in Afghanistan? And for how long?

Clearly, this was also why I'd accepted the assignment: to be involved in one of the major international policy issues of our time, and perhaps even to contribute to the general discussion on how to resolve it. I already knew it would be no mean feat to find answers to these questions.

And I also knew that if I was to succeed, I really would have to think outside the box and get around the "national positions" rampant in foreign ministries around the globe.

In Italy, it's not easy to get a clear idea of what's happening in Afghanistan, despite our country's having one of the largest military contingents there, or the considerable energy we invest in the field of cooperation, and the vast legacy of relationships with Afghan leaders since the country's independence. Because, as with all other major international issues, we hardly ever talk about Afghanistan, except when someone gets killed. Even then it's only because what we read in the newspapers or hear on television, with rare exceptions, is the result of far-fetched or superficial reconstructions that are intended to be sensationalist rather than arouse interest.

As soon as I started looking around I realized how sketchy my knowledge of Afghan issues was and how the enormous mass of information I'd gathered in two months of preparation was largely useless. So being there was an extraordinary opportunity that I had to exploit to the full.

It seemed logical to start with Washington to try and figure out how I could be useful for the international mission. Not

because I believed in America's ability to achieve an effective synthesis of complex phenomena, but because the United States, with the resources it had fielded, was the international coalition's natural reference point and an indispensable sounding board for the Afghans. So, during one of the first mornings at the office, I shared with ISAF mission co-workers and leaders the impressions I had formed of my recent meetings with colleagues from the U.S. State Department and heads of various think tanks in the U.S. capital city. The American diplomats had been clear, partly because the 2008 presidential election campaigns required both Democrats and Republicans to shed light on what was a key international political issue alongside the Iraqi question.

After underestimating the resurgence of the Taliban and siphoning resources for the Afghan campaign into Iraq, and with just a few months to go before the vote, the United States seemed well aware of the Afghan problem and was preparing to start over on the right foot. It, too, had espoused the cause of the comprehensive approach: a recipe for resolving conflict that was based on politics, diplomacy, economic aid, and reconstruction rather than on just the use of force. It, too, was willing to give the United Nations mission in Kabul a chance to coordinate international civilian activities on the ground.

Talks with think-tank analysts had been even more forthright. Many thought that the situation was getting worse. The insurgents had reinforced the south and east and now dangerously overlooked parts of Kabul. The Karzai government, perceived by the Afghan population as corrupt and inefficient, continued to lose supporters in and out of the capital. The reorientation of international politics that was in progress was viewed positively by all: finally it had been understood that it was necessary to focus on the civil dimension of the Afghan problem.

But the real question, the question that no one could answer, was whether this new strategy could straighten things out after following the wrong path for years. In other words, that pursuit of a conventional military campaign had been an error, and the plan should have been to restore support from the population by promoting good governance and reconstruction.

In short, nobody doubted that there should be a focus on politics and economic aid rather than solely on weapons. The question remained as to whether it was too late, if too much valuable time had been lost, because we all know that if problems aren't addressed promptly, they degenerate and everything becomes more difficult. In a sense this was the premise for the most popular book on Afghanistan at the time: *Descent into Chaos*, by Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani journalist who became world famous after 9/11 with his bestseller, *Taliban*.

Once again Rashid had written a book you couldn't put down and whose conclusion is perfectly summed up in the subtitle: *The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. Everyone in Washington was talking about it, so I'd rushed to buy it myself from the Georgetown branch of Barnes & Noble. I'd devoured it in a few days, reading between meetings.

Undeniably, Rashid's analysis left little hope. He was convinced there was a risk that the situation in the area would deteriorate further if resolute action with adequate resources was not implemented immediately. Rashid didn't let the United States off the hook, saying it was guilty of subcontracting the Afghan dossier to NATO so the country could devote its resources to Iraq, and that it had taken too long to understand the real role of the Pakistani security apparatus in support of the insurgents. Nor was he sympathetic to NATO, which he thought had come to Afghanistan unprepared, without adequate means, with little understanding of the reasons for the conflict, and divided on the objectives of the mission.

The Americans, British, and Canadians sustained the weight of military operations in the south and east of the country, along the Pakistan border. Nationals from other NATO countries, in their respective areas, had developed their own rules of engagement, the so-called caveats, which the insurgents perceived as clear signs of weakness and lack of Western support for military involvement that was not purely humanitarian.

As for the insurgents, over the past few years they had reorganized themselves and, in a sense, were upholding the initiative. Now they avoided head-on confrontations and preferred to sap Western morale through suicide bombings and explosive devices that materialized almost anywhere: on roads, in markets, railway stations, police stations, mosques. Last, to make matters worse, there was also the inaction of the Karzai government to consider, as well as the problems of managing international aid and international donors, each acting independently and no one available to ensure a minimum of coordination.

THERE WAS NO arguing with some of Rashid's analysis, and now that I'd arrived in Kabul, I could check it out for myself. Certainly, the finger he pointed at shortcomings in the international coordination worried me. It was enough to attend a few meetings with the donor community to realize the extent to which no one knew much or anything of what others were doing. The truth is that when it comes down to coordination, everyone wants to coordinate and nobody wants to be coordinated, as if simply being part of a collective effort led by those who have more resources and capabilities was demeaning.

I tend to think that it's not just the fault of the organizations, in other words, the politics of the capitals or of the headquarters. It is also a question of people and personal attitudes, of small-minded individuals sent out into the field, who may well be good at what they do, but are never willing to listen to the reasons of others or to place themselves at the service of a more general interest than their own. From this perspective, as NATO's civilian representative, I had an advantage over other heads of mission. Not because my ego was more manageable than theirs (even though it was, actually!), but because it seemed obvious that, first of all, NATO should look after security issues, which cost the military dearly, and on the civilian front it should limit itself to supporting the United Nations.

Before my departure, I'd gone to talk to the secretary general of the Atlantic Alliance in Brussels. He'd told me three important things: the solution could not be just military;

for the civilian aspects of its international mission NATO had to be coordinated by the United Nations; the military forces of the ISAF mission were supposed to sustain governance and development activities being carried out by the Afghans and the rest of the international community.

It seemed to me that these directives indicated my range of action very well, especially since they came from the top of an organization with a military vocation. In essence, since weapons alone would not be sufficient to restore peace, it was necessary to invest in all the rest of the tools too, and act to achieve a balance of the military and civilian components of the international effort as soon as possible. Naturally, all this was easier said than done—and I was soon made aware of it—since the military and civilian resources that the international community had managed to put in place were disproportionate.

THERE ARE TWO military missions in Afghanistan. One is American and the other is international. The first (operation Enduring Freedom) focuses on seeking out terrorists and has approximately 25,000 staff; the other (the International Security Assistance Force) supports Afghan security forces and acts pursuant to a mandate issued by the United Nations Security Council.

At the time of writing (2011) there are over forty countries (including twenty-six NATO members) in the international mission, fielding about a 100,000 staff currently deployed in five regional commands: Kabul (center), Mazar (north), Jalalabad (east), Kandahar (south), and Herat (west). When I reached Kabul in August 2008, the ISAF mission comprised approximately 60,000 military, while on the civilian front there were no precise numbers accounting for international staff throughout Afghanistan. From my own math, I figured there must be at least 3,000—mostly in the United Nations mission and American diplomatic and cooperation structures—but they were mainly low- to mid-level management, especially on the ground in the provinces. These were people with little experience and short-term contracts, which meant completely reliable staff were few and far between. My biggest concern, aside from the numerical disparity, was that

while we knew who and where the military were, and what they were doing, we still knew far too little about the civilians.

Civilians worked for their own organizations or countries, with no efforts from the Afghan or international community to appraise and align their activities. That was why the United Nations had appointed a new representative in Kabul in March 2008. Kai Eide's mandate included coordination of the international community's civilian involvement, and assisting him was evidently the key task of anyone who cared about the success of the international mission. As far as I was concerned, that was where I was going to start, trying to make myself useful and relying on the resources I had available in the matters where NATO could offer something.

There's also a significant imbalance between military and civilians within NATO, but all in all that is physiological, given the nature of the organization. There is a political figure at its head, a secretary general who chairs the Atlantic Council of ambassadors of member states. The military structures, on the other hand, operate under the direction of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe or SACEUR, an American military figure. The basic rule is "civilian control over the military"—based on the assumption that not even military operations should be left entirely in the hands of the uniforms. Nevertheless, and herein lies the point, the military enjoy a range of means and resources that are infinitely greater than those available to civilians. In the case of Afghanistan, my own office comprised a dozen or so civilians in all and couldn't compete with ISAF's military organization. Admittedly, there were embassies and other international bodies, starting with the United Nations and the European Union, that could have—and should have—redressed the balance, but even their means and their staffs couldn't compare to those of the military. So, theoretically, we were all agreed that a comprehensive strategy would include not only a military component, but also good governance activities, economic aid, development, and reconstruction. In practice, however, for its implementation we had 60,000 soldiers on the ground, on the one hand, and several poorly organized civilians on the other. And, the cherry on the cake, as far as the

Afghan front was concerned, was a weak national government with few fringe institutions.

IN MY OPINION, these numbers already go a long way toward explaining a good many things, including the real balance of power within the international mission. Nonetheless, what struck me most during those early days at ISAF headquarters was the specific anthropological fallout caused by the divide between civilians and military.

The military had imposed its own language on the civilian minority. There were few soldiers who worried about making themselves generally understood when they spoke. Most used a jargon of acronyms, symbols, and truncated words, so if you wanted to interact with the military, first you had to learn the language—because they pretended not to know yours or to have forgotten it.

General David McKiernan had assumed command of ISAF just a few months before my arrival. One of the old school, with great integrity, sensitivity, and intelligence, yet unable to conceal his lack of faith in those members of the human race who had chosen not to make their lives one of ranks and uniforms. During our first one-on-one, the day after my arrival, as I was referring to the coordinating role of Kai Eide and the United Nations, I saw the flash of impatience in his eyes—the same flash I later noticed in many other soldiers who believed they could sort the country out on their own, without civilian intervention, if only they were left to it. Nevertheless, McKiernan must have liked me because that same day he invited me to attend his 8:30 morning briefing in a small basement room in the command building.

Well, getting back to the question of language, it took me at least a month to figure out exactly what was being said during those briefings, even though I do speak English. A ritual language was spoken, known only to the initiated, almost totally devoid of verbs with the odd noun thrown in, but packed with acronyms, numbers, and signs. For example, to indicate two civilian casualties in Kandahar, the duty officer would say something like: “RC South, two CIVCAS,” in other words “[We had] two Civilian Casualties at Regional

Command South [capital of Kandahar].” A reference to KIA meant someone had been killed in action, while WIA meant wounded in action. CAT A meant serious injury, CAT B or C less serious. If there had been a Medevac (medical evacuation), people had been evacuated, while SIGACTS (significant activities) meant that the insurgents were particularly busy. IEDs were improvised explosive devices, UXOs were unexploded ordnances, and so on.

Sometimes my exasperation at the avalanche of acronyms would be obvious from my face. On the other hand, it seemed simple enough to me: if I couldn’t understand the military (and I have a military background), how could the Afghans, who worked side by side with them daily, understand what they were saying? Moreover, if the strategy was to intensify the civilian effort, why did everything, including the language, have to be defined in a military manner?

Clearly I was the only one in the room to nurture such doubts and I thought about it for a few days before sharing them with someone else, which—incidentally—did not go down well.

A colonel in my own office, before I told him to go to the devil (jokingly, of course), took a stopwatch and tried to prove that if we spoke normally instead of using the acronyms, the morning briefing would last at least an hour and a half instead of its usual thirty minutes.

Anyway, I think I adapt pretty quickly to the needs of others (at least professionally), and in just a few weeks, I started talking in acronyms too.

# **“WHAT? THEY’VE SURROUNDED KABUL?”**

WHEN YOU’RE WORKING in crisis situations you need to understand intuitively and quickly who’s telling the truth. Better still, you need to figure out which people around you know what they’re talking about.

That may sound a little over the top, I know, but it’s precisely in the most serious situations that you need to weigh your words. Yet you hear all kinds of nonsense, even from those who are supposedly paid to think carefully before opening their mouths: local ministers and politicians, ambassadors and generals, international officials, spies, journalists, humanitarian workers.

In August 2008, not long after I’d arrived in Kabul, the international grapevine was rife with rumors that the Afghan capital was surrounded by the Taliban and the city was about to fall. Several foreign correspondents hinted at this in their stories, passing freelance journalists said it explicitly, and a number of international officials had certainly mentioned the rumors in their reports. So the issue became a topic of conversation in the city: not because it corresponded to any truth, but because instead of studying, analyzing, and verifying the situation, the real aim of these gossipmongers was to see who could spread the biggest rumor.

Of course, Italian journalists were not immune to this contagion.

One evening I happened to be watching Italian state TV channel Rai Tre, which was running an outrageous documentary about an illusory Kabul situation. It was well made, with good narrative pace and some nice shots. The

problem was, however, that it was a piece of fiction, not of journalism. Anyone watching it, especially if they didn't know Afghanistan, came away with the impression of a city besieged by insurgents, with just a few days left, and where the local population was stocking up on food and the international community was preparing to flee to avoid a bloodbath.

The only accurate news being broadcast was that in recent months suicide bombers had struck in the center of Kabul several times, causing many casualties. Above all, the attack on the Hotel Serena, a rendezvous for the international community, had made it clear how vulnerable security methods were. Western embassies had tightened their own measures and lists circulated among staff of public venues to be avoided because they were at risk of attack. Most diplomats had barricaded themselves in their own fortified areas and didn't venture into town unless it was absolutely necessary.

I had my own bunker at my residence. It was actually a basement strengthened by reinforced concrete structures. In the event of danger, office personnel were to join me at home and we would all take refuge down there, each wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest, waiting quietly until the alarm ceased.

In a radius of several kilometers around the capital there were obvious insurgent infiltrations, and the French contingent had just borne the brunt of one in the Surobi district with a dozen soldiers killed in an ambush that was nothing if not bloody.

Even those of us staying on the ISAF base had experienced night-time alarms in August. Twice, just days apart, the base megaphones had begun crackling at around three in the morning, urging everyone to leave their lodgings and take refuge in bunkers, with a metallic voice repeating "Bunker, bunker, this is a bunker call...."

On those two August nights, rockets fired had fallen not far from the base and this was the cause for the alarms. "As long as they're firing rockets we don't need to worry; it means they aren't in control of the territory," I explained to my co-workers

as we gathered in the bunker. Going by my previous Balkan experiences, I continued, “The problems start when you hear mortar or artillery shots. That’s a whole other ballgame and then we’ll need to worry, but not at the moment.”

So, there was tension in Kabul during those weeks and there was no lack of troubling signs, but that hardly meant we could say the Taliban had surrounded the city.

Unfortunately, people believe journalists and always think that it’s the others who have something to hide. Even my mother, who usually doesn’t fall into this sort of trap, was concerned enough by that misinformed Rai Tre documentary to telephone me. To reassure her, recalling vivid images of Saigon falling to the Vietcong, I invented a helicopter on the roof of the house ready to take me to safety if things went wrong.

“Listen, the reporter interviewed Afghan soldiers and police officers, and showed truckloads of Taliban heading to the city,” she insisted. “Look, I’m the highest NATO civil authority in Afghanistan,” I replied, trying to reassure her, “Do you think I’d be sitting here quietly if the situation was really as bad as they said?”

Nor was it just an Italian problem, or one that involved only journalists. The phobia of this phantom Taliban cordon was rampant even in the embassies, especially those of countries most critical of the international mission. Now, it’s clear that you can read things in many different ways and that anyone can get taken for a ride, but in this case there was evident bad faith, because if these petty-minded diplomats had simply talked to the right people instead of listening to the opinions of passersby or Afghan policemen ready to say anything, they could have learned something.

All they needed to do was take a taxi to the district around the bus station to see that connections to the provinces were still running and that people were still traveling around the country despite the danger. They could even have walked past a school and seen children entering and leaving normally, or gone over to the market where the prices of commodities

hadn't wavered, and no one was stocking up with emergency rations as they usually do when a city is going to fall.

The bottom line was that insurgent groups operating a few miles from the Afghan capital were a fact of life, for example, in Wardak Province and in the Surobi district. It was also clear that their outposts were able to organize suicide attacks and to fire rockets as far as the city. But that we were surrounded was just too much and didn't hold water.

## EIGHT

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# WINNING

I WAS HAVING trouble forming an objective opinion on how the military campaign was proceeding generally, and not just because any military command in the world tends to issue the most reassuring reading possible of how things are on the ground. In this case, military operations also were taking place hundreds of kilometers from Kabul, in the south and east of the country. The news or reports coming from American, British, and Canadian outposts didn't always lend themselves to unequivocal readings. For instance, if no international forces were in a remote district, no clashes or incidents would be reported, but did that mean things had calmed down or that it was under Taliban control? Or if the insurgents had chosen the path of suicide bombings and explosive devices planted almost everywhere rather than head-on confrontation with international forces, was this a sign of strength or weakness? Was the fact that the Taliban withdrew quickly after village raids, even at night, a tactical choice or did it mean that they weren't able to hold the position?

The ISAF commander sounded like a stuck record as he continued to repeat at the end of each press briefing, "We don't doubt the final victory will be ours for the simple fact that the enemy can't compete with our forces." Less optimistic statements occasionally came in from commands in the area of operations, which spoke of "stalemate" or "initiative driven by insurgents," but these were found to be irritating and tended to be ignored.

On the one hand, this was understandable, because asserting confidence in victory can be one of the rules of strategic communication. The main thing, however, was not to confuse the messages intended for public communication with the internal analyses and assessments on which decisions were based.

An example of what I mean might be the winter of 2005–06, when a correct diagnosis of how dangerous insurgents

were might have prevented the withdrawal of several thousand U.S. soldiers just before a Taliban offensive was launched in spring 2006. Afterward, there was no lack of literature on how much the threat of a Taliban resurgence in recent years had been underestimated. Equally, a number of statements issued by various commanders, from 2006 onward, admitted to having taken certain signals too lightly. There was nothing new in the cautious attitude shown by ISAF leadership or in its intolerance toward anyone who tried to insinuate doubt, especially if that anyone wasn't wearing a uniform.

AT MORNING BRIEFINGS the military insisted that 90 percent of incidents occurred in a limited area in the south and east of the country along the border with Pakistan, the equivalent of roughly 10 percent of national districts. General David McKiernan, ISAF commander, was also persuaded that the fact that the insurgents were using suicide attacks and bombings proved they were weak, and, indeed, in the medium term this strategy would turn increasingly large segments of the population against them.

It was probably true that the insurgents sought to avoid head-on conflict, given the superiority of international forces; however, this new strategy of theirs was drastically reducing the population's freedom of movement and was creating the view that everything was falling apart.

As I've already mentioned, it simply wasn't true that in August 2008 Kabul was surrounded or ready to fall. Indeed, nothing could have been further from the truth. Nonetheless, attacks and sabotage actions along the ring road, the country's main highway, linking the capital with the south (Kandahar) and west (Herat), had increased considerably in recent months, and before setting off people thought twice about the risk of routes being mined, bridges being blown up, and checkpoints where bribes were demanded. I asked around, trying to get some idea on whether ordinary people felt secure or not, because another characteristic of the vast majority of military staff was that they just didn't talk to people. The most illuminating answer I got came from an Afghan doctor working for an NGO: "It's easy to tell people not to worry, that security hasn't deteriorated...because reality is one thing and

perceptions are another.... When I wake up in the morning, I have to decide whether to go out to buy something to eat, go to the mosque or to my village to visit relatives. If I decide not to do anything and sit at home, then it means that I'm scared, and if I'm scared it means the situation is getting worse, even though you people might think differently."

Another issue we civilians argued over was the assessments made by military commands about areas where there were no reports of incidents coming in. They said that the lack of incidents, by definition, meant there were no insurgents. Many of us objected that, at least in theory, the no incidents might mean that the areas in question were in the hands of the insurgents or otherwise under their control (a belief that was actually rather widespread among international analysts and Afghans).

Similarly, ISAF tended to underestimate the episodes of instability flaring up in some northern and western districts, for example around Kunduz or near Herat, which were areas that until a couple of years before were considered to have reached a more or less definitive state of peace. There was a tendency to blame organized crime and gangsters rather than insurgents, pretending not to know that there was often a very blurred boundary between the two.

From various sources of information, however, we were hearing about an increase in long beards and black turbans (the Taliban type) in areas where before there had been none. And although it was said they'd arrived in haste, perhaps to avoid being rounded up into the strongholds of the international coalition, the fact was still a cause for some concern. Yet in August 2008 the ISAF mission continued to play this down and find plausible explanations for everything. It took a year to obtain a more realistic assessment of what was happening: "The situation is serious and many indicators suggest that overall it is deteriorating," General Stanley McChrystal admitted in August 2009, a few weeks after taking command of the international forces.

# THE NEO-TALIBAN

FOR THOSE OF us in Kabul, the Taliban were virtual. We talked about them incessantly: we wondered about their motives and speculated on their organization and command structures. But because we couldn't see them, the only proof of their existence was represented by stylized flames on the morning briefing slides, indicating the location of firefights.

For the rest, we knew little or at least we had no certainties. The impression was that the Taliban were a kind of secret society—a sort of Khmer Rouge, someone had said—and that's why it was difficult to learn more about the leaders and middle “management,” or the size and aims of the various groups. Certainly, even a cursory examination of their *modus operandi* showed they weren't a uniform structure. Actions were decreed by different networks, entities without systematic coordination, which did not share a chain of command. There may have been times when they worked together, but as a rule they each operated according to their own strategy and objectives.

International diplomats and military resorted to two terms borrowed from astronomy to describe the situation, and they called the Taliban a galaxy or a nebula. A galaxy is defined as a large system of stars held together by mutual gravitation and isolated from similar systems by vast regions of space. A nebula is defined as a densification of interstellar matter that appears as a small, faint cloud when seen with a telescope. I preferred to use the second term, in part because nebulae may be “obscure,” in other words, they can hide more distant stars that lie in the same direction—a variant that seems perfect for describing our case. More precisely, in the Taliban universe there were three chief nebulae and, in my opinion, each was more “obscure” than the next. Observing them with a telescope they appeared to be made up of dissimilar, irregular

matter, a mixture of nationalists, Islamists, bandits, and social outcasts who concentrated not only on the Jihad, but also—mainly—on making money by trafficking weapons and drugs, collecting transport payoffs, and carrying out various other criminal activities.

The first nebula cloaked the south of the country, the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul. To take the astronomy metaphor even further, I'd have said that it emitted a fluorescent light, thanks simply to a neighboring star, which was Quetta, in Pakistan, where the Taliban planned their southern Afghanistan actions. They had grouped there in 2002, around Mullah Omar, taking advantage of the fact that the Americans were worrying more about Iraq.

The Quetta *shura*—a true Islamic council—was a revamped version of the Kandahar *shura* that had existed during the emirate of Afghanistan. It had branches in the southern provinces and its influence had grown in recent times. Besides issuing directives to insurgents, it appointed shadow governors in various districts, administered justice through sharia-style courts, and collected taxes and tributes. At strategic level the *shura* was the point of contact for foreign allies, undertaking fundraising for the purchase of weapons, food, and ammunition. It sought new recruits in mosques, madrassas, or schools, and refugee camps in Balochistan.

The second nebula cloaked the eastern region, where the task of reorganizing the insurgent ranks had been entrusted to Mullah Mansoor and to Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin. Their network had precise territorial objectives that aimed to control the provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika. Recently it had intensified pressure on Kabul and some of the central provinces. It was active in recruiting and training suicide bombers and was able to organize suicide attacks even in the capital.

The third nebula was the most mysterious of all because it continually changed profile and position. The core group consisted of the disciples of Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, the nationalist enemy of the Taliban, but since he'd returned from exile in Iran, he had married their cause to some extent. Unlike

other insurgent leaders, Hikmetyar had no clear territorial goals: his only ambition, at least judging from the events of the last three decades, had always been to take power and he aspired to be part of a future Afghan government open to the Taliban and their allies.

VARIOUS INTERNATIONAL ANALYSTS are involved in the study of the Taliban phenomenon and for their research they come to Afghanistan regularly. It was crucial for me to meet them for some off-the-record discussions, particularly because the top analysts might help me get a concise overview—to “zoom out,” as they say in the States.

The military and intelligence data I had were worth little alone. They might have been useful on the tactical side, for getting a better perspective of a Taliban leader or preventing some actions and planning others, but in a political and strategic outlook, they had little meaning. Unless they were amplified to try and construct some general principle, they risked intensifying confusion rather than casting light on the shadowy subject of insurgency.

Antonio Giustozzi, a scholar who was quite at home in Kabul, was a good source. I’d first met him in London when I was about to leave for Kabul, shortly after the publication of his new book, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002–2007*.

His theories on the transformation under way in the Taliban movement were not only innovative under an academic profile, but were accurately confirmed by reality. According to Giustozzi, the Taliban changed profoundly during the 1990s. Now they’ve become a social network, with fewer prejudices against technology. They’ve discovered the Internet and DVDs, they record and broadcast jihadi songs, their commanders have laptops and satellite phones and have themselves filmed on the battlefield. Unlike 1994, they’re all for the free market now. Indeed, some have become entrepreneurs, especially in producing, refining, and selling heroin. And they’ve specialized in propaganda and recruiting followers.

The Neo-Taliban, as the second-generation fighters were now called, had mastered postmodern gadgetry and come to terms with progress. Seeing how they handled strategic communication was enough to prove Giustozzi right. With amazing regularity—and often by hand—they sent out press releases, created disinformation about international presence, exploited the numbers of civilian victims to their advantage, circulated pamphlets, and issued video messages, proclamations, and threats. They were equally skilled in using a wide range of tools—radio, video, texts, threatening letters—for their intensive propaganda, recruitment, and intimidation actions.

In short: I couldn't see the Taliban and I still knew very little about them, but from what I could understand, the cliché of the bearded, bloodthirsty troglodyte in a black turban was decidedly out of date.

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was of the nebula metaphor—both because it evoked the idea of something shifting, in continuous evolution, and because a nebula is mixed by definition, containing a wide variety of materials: star clusters, interstellar voids, opaque cosmic dust. American counterinsurgency experts were most insistent on the latter point: the Taliban were not to be considered in the same light as other insurgents.

While the Taliban had an ideological scope and were pursuing global jihad, the vast majority of insurgents were fighting for entirely different reasons. If we could understand those reasons exactly, it might bring big changes to how international forces were operating.

In the summer and fall of 2008, these theories were expressed by a school of thought in the ISAF that in some ways was a minority voice, given that McKiernan was regarded as a rather conventional general. Nonetheless, in just a few months this thinking became predominant when the Democrats took over in Washington and several key figures were replaced.

According to these theories, the Afghan conflict was to be regarded as a set of many small, low-intensity conflicts, each

with its own cause and motivation. Ideology and religion weren't that important and at most they had been the spark that triggered the initial blast. More often than not the insurgents decided to take up arms for contingent reasons that had nothing to do with al Qaeda and religious fanaticism.

Different causes led to the rebellion, ranging from unemployment and need for money through action against corrupt administrators to providing security for the families of the rebels. They were all corroborated by a common denominator—suspicion about the American and Western presence on tribal territory, which was perceived essentially as an existential threat.

Those enlisted in what was soon to be christened “the accidental guerrilla” (see [chapter 30](#)) were from every walk of life, from shepherds to wheat farmers, opium farmers to the destitute, people who had simply had enough of U.S. raids and night searches by special forces seeking imaginary terrorists. Examples were practically endless: one special forces officer told me of an old rebel who handed over his weapon and then confessed to having used it against Americans just for the hell of being on the front line. In the semi-deserted valley where he lived, the war was the most exciting thing that had ever happened during his lifetime. How could he stand back and let it pass without having a go at pulling the trigger?

EXAMINING THESE THEORIES in depth would have meant acknowledging several errors of analysis of and approach to the Afghan conflict, like believing that only al Qaeda and its terrorist network were the problem, or ignoring the complexity of the conflict and the many reasons behind it. It would also mean having failed to understand that this was not a single ailment to treat with military-type intensive care, but actually various diseases to be kept under control by administering medication other than the use of force, including dissuasion, economic aid, good governance, rebuilding, and reintegration of insurgents.

Yet it would have been enough to recall the Somali experiences of the 1990s to realize that conventional methods based on the use of force are quite useless and may even be

counterproductive against asymmetric threats made by someone who isn't in uniform.

In his book *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (a must-read for anyone attempting to understand this day and age), Robert Cooper writes that total victories and unconditional surrender are part of twentieth-century logic, but today, in most cases they are no longer plausible objectives. So it seemed to me that we needed to start here if we were going to make sense of the Afghan puzzle: that postmodern wars should simply be managed with a variety of different methods, and the objective of the military victory should be set aside.

## A WORD OF ADVICE FROM A PRINCESS

SORAYA GAVE ME lots of advice before I left Rome. Her mother, Princess India, was the daughter of King Amanullah of Afghanistan, who had wrested independence from the British in 1919 but was forced into exile in Italy in 1929, following a fundamentalist revolt.

Soraya was born in Rome, still lives there, and is more Italian than Afghan, but her relationship with Afghanistan had again intensified after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

She's a lovely, loquacious lady, and as sparkling as her eyes suggest, but she doesn't mince words. When she heard the news that I was leaving for Kabul, the first thing she made me promise was that I'd keep my eyes open at all times and that I wouldn't trust a soul.

"You can listen to one Afghan; with two you have to be careful; with three you're better off running away," she warned, recalling an old family motto.

I still remember that summer night at my mother's restaurant, sitting at a table overlooking Piazza Montevécchio. Soraya with her lasagna and me with my salad. She was talking more than usual, excited by the fact that NATO was sending me to her country. She told me stories about the royal family, dispensed advice, describing her imaginary Afghanistan. I listened intently, trying to filter and store as much as possible.

"Always bear in mind," she recommended, "that in the East it's difficult to find someone who says 'no.' For we Afghans, 'no' is an ugly, stupid word, almost unspeakable. Instead of 'no,' you'll hear silence, a sigh or a 'yes' that really means 'no' .... Depends on the intonation, the expression, the context, it's up to you—and only you—to understand."

Soraya was right; she was right to say that nobody can explain Afghans to you, and you won't even find them explained in books.

Another faux pas was to be too direct; going straight to the heart of things might be considered discourteous because it could mean a meeting wouldn't last very long, and there wouldn't even be time for tea.

"We like to work our way slowly to the crux of the matter, little by little.... if you take off in top gear and say what you want to say immediately, without any preamble, at the very least you'll make the other person suspicious. If they decide to get to the bottom of things, they'll do it in their own time, when it's convenient, after weighing all the implications."

Soraya had also mentioned Rangin Spanta, the Afghan foreign minister, saying he was open minded, friendly, and intelligent. This democrat and intellectual was a university professor enamored of Aachen, Germany, and with many acquaintances in Europe. She believed he was the contact I should start with to weave my web of relationships.

BY A STRANGE coincidence Soraya came to Kabul a few weeks after my own arrival. She had accompanied Princess India on one of the trips organized to bring some little relief to her people. When I saw her in front of me, wearing her inevitable Pashtun *pakol*, a hat she also wore in Rome, I couldn't quite believe my eyes. We were at a lunch offered by the foreign minister, in the beautiful garden that separates the new ministry from the old building, where the treaty granting Afghanistan independence from Great Britain was signed in 1919.

It was an evening bathed in quiet and the scent of roses, plenty of guests with whom to converse and the best of Afghan cuisine. In those oriental gardens, the summer breeze wafted away thoughts of conflict, or so it seemed. Soraya had introduced me to some of her cousins and a few of the Afghan ambassadors assigned to European capitals. Then we went to sit at a more secluded table. She ate the plate of Kabuli rice she'd ordered and we chatted about how she found her country now. Compared to five or six years before, she noticed the

atmosphere of insecurity and fear that weighed oppressively over the city.

After dinner my security detail and I gave her a ride to the house of the friends where she was staying, not far from the ISAF base. The drive through Kabul's darkened streets, rife with uniforms and checkpoints, fast broke the spell of the evening and we slipped back into reality. The security detail couldn't find the address and was getting nervous because we were in a part of town that wasn't safe. At one point the detail chief, Benjamin, told us to get our heads down as he thought we were being followed by a suspicious car. Crouched in the back seat, Soraya and I held our breaths and shut up; then we felt the car stop suddenly. Benjamin grabbed his machine gun and radioed an alert to the other detail car.

"Alert for what?" I wondered as I looked into Soraya's eyes, certain that she too was thinking of the Roman evenings spent at my mother's or with mutual friends. Luckily nothing happened: the mysterious car overtook us and went on its way. Thus we continued our nocturnal wanderings in search of Soraya's friends, whom we suddenly saw in the middle of a narrow street, waving flashlights.

It was the only time I saw Soraya in Afghanistan, but from that evening onward, Foreign Minister Rangin Spanta and his closest staff became my reference points within the Afghan administration.

## “THE INSUBSTANTIAL STATE”

IN MY FIRST two months I went to meet as many Afghans as I could, and I also tried to establish contacts outside official spheres. I’d realized that if I relied on formal relationships I wouldn’t get very far, but also that the Pashtun saying that you need to pay seven visits to someone before you can start talking seriously to them is more than just a saying: it’s a fundamental social rule without exceptions. So I subjected my detail to a veritable tour de force as I went on lightning visits to members of the government and other institutional leaders, representatives of civil society, ambassadors of NATO members, and representatives of those countries and international organizations most deeply engaged in Afghanistan. We’d leave ISAF headquarters even five or six times a day, and for the Tuscania carabinieri regiment, that meant ten or twelve trips because they had to make a reconnaissance of each location before an appointment.

I was trying to sketch out a map—my own personal map—of Afghan power. In other words, I wanted a face, a voice, and a perception of each of the names that had been whirling around my head for weeks. My biggest help in getting my bearings and prioritizing was my colleague and dear friend Ettore Sequi. In the four previous years he’d been the Italian ambassador to Kabul, and a few weeks earlier Javier Solana had chosen him as the European Union’s special representative for Afghanistan. His appointment, like that of Kai Eide and my own, was part of the regular turnover of top figures in Kabul’s international community, considering that no one can stand the stress and hardships for too long. It’s unlikely that an ambassador will be in office for more than a couple of years. Ettore, on the other hand, had been there five, so he had the right connections in Afghan society, and there was no one

better at interpreting the humor of the country and its ruling class.

Usually we met at the residence of Ambassador Claudio Glaentzer, who had also just arrived. As time passed it was great to see that our weekly meeting of three, originally for professional reasons, had turned into a sort of get-together of old friends.

Claudio's residence was a small haven, an escape from the chaotic city and the frenetic ISAF operations base. As soon as I was through the gate, I relaxed and almost felt as if I was on vacation. A perfectly restored vintage Lince biplane (one of the sixteen reconnaissance aircraft sold by the Italian royal air force to King Zaher in June 1937) had pride of place in the garden; our military had found it a couple of years earlier on the outskirts of Kabul, in what is probably one of the world's largest deposits of war relics.

NOW...WHERE WAS I? Ah, yes, my map of power. From my first meetings with the Afghans I understood that it would be a tortuous exercise, with endless overlapping levels extraneous to politics and institutions.

Innumerable factors contribute to making an Afghan powerful. It's not enough to have a political role or be in public office to be influential and respected. Before I left Rome, my friend, the anthropologist Antonio Palmisano, had given me a book by Olivier Roy on the relationship between state and society in Afghanistan. The volume had been written in 1985, at the height of Soviet occupation, and it had recently been republished in Italy with the title *Afghanistan, l'Islam afghano*, edited by Carlo degli Abbatì.

According to Roy, Afghan power is neither a place nor a person, but constitutes "an elusive network which needs constant maintenance and reconstruction." Basically it is woven from the number of relationships the person has, and consensus is the underlying prerequisite to wielding power. It is precisely this need to maintain and renew consensus that can never be taken for granted, and this forces those in power to show constantly that only they are worthy of this consensus and the power it bestows. For Roy, the Afghan state is

insubstantial and has a purely bureaucratic consistency. The power of state institutions exists only if traditional matrices such as solidarity, tribal and family ties, the clergy, and the religious brotherhoods are available.

KARZAI WAS ALWAYS vigilant about which government members he appointed to work with the international community. My regular contacts included Foreign Minister Spanta but also Zalmay Rassoul, the national security adviser. Everyone called him “Doctor Rassoul,” because he had studied medicine and was considered a great friend of the Italians, having spent many years in Rome at the side of the exiled King Zahir.

Since NATO was tasked with training the Afghan army and was destined to play an increasingly important role in the police force, I also had regular contact with the minister of defense, Abdul Rahim Wardak, and the minister of the interior, Hanif Atmar.

Wardak was a general with good contacts in the United States and an excellent grasp of the international community, especially of NATO; Atmar had been appointed after a reshuffle in the fall of 2008 and was reputed to be a determined technocrat. Backed by solid government experience having served as minister of education and deputy minister for development, many international fans called him the “fixer.”

My relationships with all of them were based on complete cooperation, just like contacts with other figures in the executive whom I met regularly in the various coordination venues: the ministers of finance, transport, and fight against drugs. They were dignitaries who knew Western culture and spoke English, who had spent relatively long periods in our countries and were very familiar with our decisionmaking mechanisms. Working with them was not too difficult in the sense that we understood one another—or at least we tried to.

Behind this multicultural internationalist façade lay the true, dark Afghanistan, impenetrable to any stranger, with a depoliticized and meaningless state ruling class that acted in the name of interests and logic that were impossible to understand. My office regularly followed parliamentary

debates and had contact with parliamentarians of different backgrounds and origins.

The president of the lower house was a refined Tajik politician, the articulate, competent Yunus Qanuni. I often stopped to chat with him to get the lowdown on parliament and the opposition, led by the Northern Alliance, of which Qanuni was a frontline member.

Despite his best efforts, however, discussions in parliament were sterile and the results so confusing that it was difficult to sum them up. Speakers took the floor fast and furious, spouting far-fetched, theatrical speeches often characterized by disarming naivety. In many cases they betrayed a conception of the state that resembled a court of bygone times, to be approached for favors or subsidies and privileges for “their” provinces. It couldn’t even be said that the government had a common political project, or at least I never found anyone who could describe any guideline.

Policies appeared to be personal or clannish, defined by family aspects or, at most, pre-election tactics. Some of the most influential institutional figures, who had the ear of the president, were of a radical persuasion, with suspicious pasts, and very much against an international presence.

In the winter of 2008–09, as we tried to deal with a looming food emergency, I happened to meet Vice President Karim Khalili several times, as he was coordinating an interministerial committee tasked with administering aid to the population. His reputation as a warlord was known to all, and several international publications didn’t mince words describing the atrocities of the 1990s for which he was held responsible. But what struck me most was his very particularistic political agenda, dominated by the interests of his people, the Hazara, on the domestic front, and by Iranian leanings on the international front.

The other vice president wasn’t much better; the brother of the legendary commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the hero of the resistance against both the Russians and the Taliban, he seemed interested only in getting rid of Karzai politically and

showed not the slightest interest in the economic and social issues that he was supposed to handle.

Many other members of the Afghan administration were renowned for being impossible to find. They ruled decrepit, half-empty buildings where you might walk up five flights of stairs or down long corridors without meeting a soul. Their desks were bereft of even a piece of paper, and, once past formalisms and ceremonial, most of them had little to offer. At best, a visit was an opportunity to drink a cup of tea, munch on pistachios and almonds, have a desultory chat if they spoke English or if there was a decent interpreter. Nonetheless, they were always the ones asking the questions: what was going on in the government? Or in relations between the latter and the opposition? I never heard them make a comment or say something interesting. Every time I tried to ask a question or steer the subject in a specific direction, I was faced with interminable silences or, if I was lucky, digressions, evasions, and procrastinations.

“The person who is responsible is always somewhere else; the horses are in the mountains and the truth is in the depths of the well,” wrote Olivier Roy in 1985, and it didn’t look as if things had changed much since. Sometimes I had the impression that these people were inexperienced, put in place for mysterious reasons and whose only concern was to mark time, and do and say as little as possible. At other times, however, it was clear that they didn’t speak to us for fear that anything they said might backfire. Then, in my case, there was an aggravating circumstance and I realized it quite early on: I represented NATO, whose “majority shareholder” was persona non grata in certain circles.

## TWELVE

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# ARG

ARG WAS THE presidential palace. It was orderly, quiet, graced with gardens and flower beds, located just a few hundred meters from the city center: yet it seemed light years away.

It looked like heaven and had an esoteric atmosphere that had nothing to do with the capital's jumble of crooked buildings and dusty streets. The palace stood in the diplomatic district, close to ISAF headquarters and the American, Italian, Indian, and Spanish embassies. Seen from the outside it gave the impression of a timeless place, unchanging and immune to conflict.

Ample, perfectly paved avenues, lined with red rose bushes and trees, led to the large front door, with dozens of plainclothes agents standing guard. On special occasions, like the national holiday or the arrival of guests, colored flags and pickets of honor would appear.

Peter Levi, who visited Arg when King Zaher lived there, described it as a sort of comic Wagnerian palace, recalling that during World War II it was protected by Afghan guards with Hitler-style mustaches and a kind of German military helmet.

An accurate recollection: Afghans are Aryans and they had sympathized with European totalitarianism in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps this was why these grey stone pavilions always emanated something tragic and incommunicable, not only for the conspiracies, coups, and settling of scores they had witnessed.

"Where there's a beautiful garden, there will soon be a tragedy," Francesca told me on Skype when I described my first visit to the palace. When I asked her—the thriller aficionado—what she meant, she shrugged and replied with words that explained everything clearly: "I'm just saying that you should never trust the beauty of a garden. It always precedes something terrible and painful. The shinier and

fresher the grass, the stronger the scent of the flowers, the more we'll have to suffer. Basically, evil is on its way, it's just a matter of time."

Then she laughed, as if she was joking, but I'd taken her words seriously.

I VISITED THE palace frequently, each time with the trepidation of not knowing what might happen. In addition to meetings with the president, I also went to talk with his national security adviser, Doctor Rassoul, one of Karzai's closest aides.

When I accompanied NATO's secretary general or Atlantic Alliance Parliamentary Assembly delegations to see the president, the meetings took place in a large hall on the first floor; if a working breakfast or lunch was scheduled, we would go down to the ground floor to a rectangular room, furnished with a long, narrow table.

During the meetings, the president sat on an easy chair next to the guest, with the fireplace behind him. He often wore the Uzbek cloak called a *chapan*, and held a *karakul*, the woolen hat used by dignitaries. When this happened, I told myself every time that there was no doubt he was the world's most elegant political leader.

The other delegation members would be seated on sofas facing each other. A waiter served black or green tea, or coffee, and placed small plates of almonds and pistachios on side tables. Other people usually attended the meetings, including the foreign affairs and defense ministers, as well as the homeland security adviser, who would sit next to the president, opposite the guest delegation. The others would be accommodated at the bottom end of the room, about fifteen meters from the area of the main conversation. Of course, the level of discussion was inversely proportional to the number of those present: the larger the number of people in the room, the more difficult it was to go into depth.

There may have been a number of reasons inducing Karzai to surround himself with all that staff. Sometimes it was clear he wanted as many witnesses as possible for his anti-Western barbs; at other times it was a way of avoiding face-to-face

contact with the other party, for fear of being put under pressure. So, if any plain speaking was to be done, it was preferable to move to the president's small study for a talk in private, or to wait until the end of the meeting and take advantage of the walk to the press conference room that Karzai would make on foot with his guest.

At the end of any talks, meetings with journalists always took place at the palace. In summer, rugs, chairs, and microphones were arranged under the big tree in the main garden; in winter, however, a room was fitted out in another wing of the building. Karzai was a master at giving his best in front of the cameras, especially when it came to turning desperate situations to his advantage, or when he decided to put the other party on the defensive—two skills in which I found him to be in a class of his own. For example, whatever he said when speaking of NATO, he was very aware of domestic fallout.

Since the coalition government was also made up of figures who could hardly be called pro-Western, the president couldn't praise the work of the international forces too often and, in any case, only indirectly and never beyond a certain point. It was in his best interests to ignore the allies or corner them and blame them for anything that went wrong.

In the event of civilian casualties, the president's public messages revealed how ruthless he was, with a notion of the world in which he could happily manipulate even the death of a human being. Karzai was well aware that it was insurgents, through suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, and the use of human shields, who were responsible for the vast majority of civilian casualties. Yet in almost two years I don't remember a single occasion in which the president condemned the Taliban or their allies for causing the death of innocent Afghan citizens. Karzai didn't think twice, however, about pointing the finger at U.S. air strikes or NATO, and he never hesitated to take a harsh position against the international coalition, even before ascertaining the facts.

Of course, he was often right, in the sense that he couldn't be silent when the innocent people being killed were his

fellow Afghans, but there was always the suspicion that he wasn't really interested in establishing facts and responsibilities so much as in the immediate political advantage he could reap from the circumstances.

In terms of domestic politics, Karzai had no room to maneuver and we all understood that, but to equate those (the Taliban) who deliberately slaughtered civilians with those (international forces) who killed them by mistake was an unacceptable distortion of facts. So, every time the president attacked the coalition in the media, the issue questioning the solidity of his alliance with the West recurred, and doubts increased in the minds of those who felt he was no longer a reliable partner.

WHAT LITTLE I knew about Karzai's life I'd read in books: his birth in Kandahar, one of eight siblings, his exile in Quetta, an initial infatuation with the Taliban, his break with them after a few months, his father's murder by order of Mullah Omar, and—finally—the dream of guiding the Pashtun revolt and bringing freedom back to the Afghans.

For the rest, I tried to judge by the facts, observing his work, putting myself in his shoes as much as possible, talking to allies and opponents. In his *Descent into Chaos*, Ahmed Rashid paints a noble portrait, and the [first chapter](#) of the book is entitled “A Man with a Mission.” But this image didn't correspond at all to what I was hearing on the grapevine.

Kabul was rife with stories of corruption, of how his family had become seriously wealthy since 2001, and fingers pointed mainly at his brother Hamid Wali Karzai, whom the international press described as being the drug lord of the province of Kandahar.

Political opponents spoke of how the president was drifting to despotism, his constant depression, palace intrigues in favor of this person or that, and his total lack of interest in specific projects. Yet there were those who continued to defend him, to see things differently, and, lastly, those who believed there were no alternatives.

One day an old parliamentarian told me not to listen to all the stories going around. According to him, Karzai had nothing to reproach himself for and if anything was wrong, it was the fault of the Arg curse: “Once you’re stuck in the palace, you lose touch with people...you suffer loneliness, you become detached from reality...you have bad dreams, strange nocturnal encounters...you become convinced that the whole city is conspiring against you, and eventually you become cruel, vindictive...you behave like a tyrant...”

## CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, I

I STARTED TO get an idea of how things really stood one morning in late August.

I was with Kai Eide, the UN representative, and General David McKiernan. Every other Thursday, the three of us had breakfast together, each taking turns to host. That day we were in Palace 7, Kai's residence, which was a house once owned by the royal family, located near the British and Canadian embassies.

These breakfasts for three were a time when we could talk freely about anything and try to agree on what to do before starting wider consultations. If Kai and the general agreed, I was the happiest of the trio, because most of my work was really all about helping to create the right climate for getting the ISAF mission and the United Nations to work together. Kai was quiet that morning and he had a strange look on his face. Moreover, the house felt all wrong, and as soon as he came in, I suspected something unpleasant was in the cards. Then Kai called in one of his staff who arrived with a DVD. Kai told us to sit on the sofa in front of the TV and nodded to his aide.

The DVD was slotted into the player and images started to scroll of a large room with white walls, a hospital maybe, or a school, empty of furniture. A number of men were laid out on the floor: some were wounded, parts of their bodies bandaged, and we could see them stirring; the others must have already died because they were covered with blood-stained sheets, and, in some cases, we could feet sticking out. Around them, people were praying, crying, some were screaming; others were smeared with blood; perhaps they too were injured. There weren't any weapons or uniforms to be seen, just chaos.

"It was filmed in Shindand," said Kai, "the day after the operation." His face was livid, he was tense, and his tone of voice told us there'd be little to discuss that morning.

McKiernan and I stayed to watch the images for a while longer and when the video was over, we stood up, said our goodbyes and returned to base.

Shindand, in the west of the country, had been the theatre of a U.S. Special Forces operation a few days earlier. What had happened wasn't perfectly clear, but presumably, during the usual manhunt, something had gone wrong and fighting had exploded in residential areas. According to the Afghans, dozens of civilians had been killed, and Karzai attacked the United States and its allies even harder than usual.

For its part, the United Nations mission had confirmed a considerable number of victims and issued a critical press release. The U.S. embassy had said that an investigation was in progress, and, pending results, no one should draw conclusions about the incident or place responsibility at any door. NATO, in theory, was not connected to America's Enduring Freedom mission or with special forces operations, but no one was being too fussy about making distinctions: indeed, it would have been foolish to expect it.

So Jaap de Hoop Scheffer was, as usual, in the eye of the storm and in the aftermath of the incident received a furious phone call from Karzai. The Afghan press was raging against the international forces. Western capitals, in addition to the usual questions about the point of these kinds of operations, were wondering how it was possible that we were still serving such tidbits on a silver platter to the insurgent media machine after all these years.

As is always the case at times like this, everyone had their own version of the facts. Kai Eide said he had direct evidence his people had collected on the spot; McKiernan replied that investigations were still under way and he couldn't confirm anything, because, in any case, there were too many odd aspects to the incident. The Afghans didn't hesitate to attach responsibility to the coalition forces but, quite honestly, it wasn't clear where they were getting their information.

The Shindand incident, in August 2008, was one of the bloodiest during my time in Afghanistan. It may also have

been a watershed as it became clear soon after that the issue of civilian casualties needed to be addressed differently.

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2008 Human Rights Watch published one of its intermittent reports on civilian casualties in Afghanistan. It was a delicate moment. In the last two months, apart from Shindand, Afghan policemen had been killed by friendly fire in Farah, and there had been the infamous American bombing of a wedding in Nangarhar. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of civilian casualties in 2007 had tripled compared to the previous year, but the report also recognized a decrease in victims in the second half of the year, tying this to a series of measures taken by ISAF. These included use of lighter ammunition; postponement of operations where there was a risk to civilians; and making greater use of the Afghan army in searches of private homes and other operations in densely populated areas.

We all knew that civilian casualties were due primarily to air support fire, but in this case the report came to significant conclusions, stating that civilian casualties were rare in the course of planned air operations, whereas large numbers of civilian casualties were generated by “Troops in Contact” situations (air operations authorized at the last moment, to bail out ground forces that had encountered enemy troops).

The Human Rights Watch report also indicated that the largest number of civilian casualties could be attributed to the insurgents, who used the population as a shield and deliberately placed its men in heavily populated areas. For example, in the Arghandab and Zhare districts in the south of the country, the Taliban had fired on the Americans from inside village houses, and because they had prevented the inhabitants from leaving, the latter were killed by reaction fire. In another case, in the district of Chora, eyewitnesses reported that before opening fire on the Americans, the Taliban had shot thirty civilians who had refused to fight in their ranks.

One morning Rachel Reid, the British representative of Human Rights Watch, got straight to the point.

I’d met Rachel in Kabul, at the home of a Kosovar reporter I’d known in the Balkans a few years before. That evening we

hadn't been able to talk the way I wanted, and I invited her to breakfast at my house the next morning. She was a good journalist, so her aim was to talk about the way the United States and NATO usually handled the public communication of civilian casualties. She said that denying the facts or simply accusing the Taliban was insufficient and counterproductive. It was even more counterproductive to drag out the investigation of incidents and allow them to be carried out unilaterally by the international forces, in other words those who, strictly speaking, should have been under investigation.

“We want transparency, rigor and intellectual honesty... investigations should be conducted with the Afghans and the results should be made public, so that people know,” she repeated as she ate her bacon and eggs.

For Rachel, if you made a mistake you had to own up immediately and shoulder responsibility, apologize to the families of the victims, and take necessary corrective actions. I thought that you couldn't put a price on human life, and there was no possible compensation for the loss of loved ones. She said she knew Afghans well enough to be able to say that even in these cases, the general rule of proper compensation for damages was the way to go.

In fact, she was right: others, including the military, confirmed what she'd told me. An apology of some kind, accompanied by tangible aid, was not only generally accepted by affected families and members of the communities, but could also be a means for restoring a modicum of confidence in the international forces.

A FEW DAYS LATER I was still thinking about the Shindand DVD Kai had shown us and racking my brains to figure out how I could be useful, considering the military thought this issue to be their exclusive preserve. Foreign Minister Rangin Spanta offered me an answer during a meeting, when he asked if there was any chance of setting up an international fund to compensate the families affected by the conflict.

NATO's North Atlantic Council met in Brussels on Wednesdays and I was often invited to speak from Kabul by videoconference. So at the first opportunity, and knowing it

was a thorny issue from a legal perspective too, I raised the issue of a fund for civilian casualties.

It wasn't something that was going to happen quickly: there were too many issues to be considered carefully, but I thought it was a good idea to get the ball rolling, start asking questions, and come up with solutions. Meanwhile, ISAF military were still getting upset if someone in my office asked questions or tried to poke their nose into this business. And when I spoke to General McKiernan about it, I'd see the usual spark of impatience in his eyes.

However, things were moving at headquarters, given that the international outcry for the Shindand dead showed no sign of abating. This time it was clear that it wasn't going to be enough just to give the usual tactical directives to the commanders on how to reduce risks to civilians.

At this point, ISAF command took the decision to establish a permanent cell tasked with investigating all incidents, real or presumed. The cell was to work in close cooperation with the United Nations and the Afghan authorities, informing the public at regular intervals of how investigations were proceeding, until they were completed.

# WHAT THERE WAS, WHAT THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN

DEFENSE MINISTER Abdul Rahim Wardak was always very professional. Not only was he always willing to meet whenever I asked (his ministry was in a district near the president's palace, just five minutes from my office), but I also had the pleasure of receiving frequent invitations to his home for lunch. Wardak's cook prepared dishes that couldn't be had in any other place.

Afghan cuisine isn't as sophisticated as that of Iran, nor is it as varied as that of India, but most people enjoy it because the dishes are simple, relying on quality ingredients like pulses, vegetables, spices, and fruit. Mrs. Wardak explained the problem to me one evening as she illustrated the various dishes on the menu. She said that not even culinary traditions had survived the ravages of the last thirty years.

Certain types of rice, certain ways of preparing stew, certain vegetables cooked in a specific way had simply disappeared from the Afghan kitchen because no one knew how to cook them now. According to Mrs. Wardak, the recipes had been killed in action, like the Afghans who had invented them and handed them down over time, victims of a war that had spared nothing, even wiping out skills, and the most ancient had been the first to go.

In Afghanistan there were no longer carpenters who could produce inlay, blacksmiths who could forge, makers of bird cages, dog breeders, hunters, furriers, butchers who could slaughter, weavers who knew how to use looms, potters, ceramists, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. And in the kitchens

there were no cooks who knew how to prepare traditional recipes. At first, I took it to be the ramblings of a society lady, maybe even a bit of a snob. But I was wrong and she was right, and the proof came from two of the most renowned restaurants in the Afghan capital—the Sufi and the Rumi—where diners were always offered the same four dishes and one meal was enough to sample everything on the menu.

Then I asked Hamid and Jawid, the two houseboys who cooked for me. Like others I'd asked, they too waxed lyrical about the succulent dishes they'd eaten as children, but over the years these aromas had become but a distant dream.

MINISTER WARDAK WAS a general, and when he wasn't wearing one of his elegant pinstripes, he could be seen in uniform, but however he was dressed, and whatever the occasion, he always spoke in the same direct way.

He had ambitious ideas for the Afghan army and they weren't always on the same page as those of the Atlantic Alliance. He would have liked aircraft, helicopters, and tanks; he wanted to make Afghanistan a country that would be able to compete militarily with its neighbors, and he wasn't satisfied with means and equipment suited for low-intensity domestic conflict. I kept telling him the same things he heard every time from Brussels, where the problem wasn't viewed only in military terms. Then I'd add that, if anything, there were already far too many weapons in circulation, not too few. Wardak wasn't a man to give up easily, however, and indeed he always repeated his opinions.

So, on certain evenings, he might get started talking about the war against the Soviets, how he'd conducted various operations, and always he came to the conclusion that two decades earlier he'd had a better military force at his command than the one he had now.

Sometimes, Wardak's frustration with the scant resources of the Afghan army was justified and had nothing to do with his delusions of grandeur. He was right, for instance, when he said that not all the coalition nations cooperated in training the Afghan army with the means and the type of personnel that were needed. He was referring mainly to the international

instructors and mentors, of whom there were far too few. These figures are highly specialized personnel, and the countries that send them think twice before sending them on overseas missions because they play valuable roles back home. The best come from special units like the Italian carabinieri, whose training center near Herat was seen as an example for all others to follow.

The instructors are used to train Afghan recruits; mentors are tasked with going into combat with them and continue training in the field. These are complex roles, involving risks and performed in extreme situations, but instructors and mentors are fundamental for the formation of an Afghan army that is capable of safeguarding homeland security.

Wardak was certain the shortage of instructors and mentors would prolong Afghan dependence on international troops and delay the establishment of a self-sufficient national defense system. On this point he was right, and at NATO we thought exactly the same thing, but our repeated appeals to coalition states often went unheard or didn't always produce the desired results.

THERE WERE ALSO other sectors where finding badly needed resources proved to be a daunting task.

"This is a very special conflict," explained the commander of the American mission coordinating support and training of the Afghan army. "A conflict that requires sophisticated resources and most NATO countries don't even have them. We don't need soldiers or policemen here. We need people who know how to train army officers and local police: we don't need any old plane or helicopter; we need vehicles that can take off even when it's 50 degrees centigrade. Here we don't need just conventional weapons, we need the technology to locate the laboratories where they're refining heroin a hundred meters underground.... Instead, the supplies we're getting from the nations aren't always what we need."

The system for supplying a military mission reflects that of any multilateral initiative: NATO, which doesn't have its own resources, describes what it needs to member countries, and each of these contributes to meeting the needs as best it can,

providing forces and resources. The problem starts when individual supplies are checked, because that's when NATO can assess whether supplies match the demand. Let's suppose that three troop aircraft carriers are required and member nations send three reconnaissance aircraft instead. In this case, the increase in means is only on paper and doesn't improve the effectiveness of the mission's operational capacity or the Afghan army.

In the beginning, I didn't understand, because I only looked at the number of supplies, not at the technical specifications. Then I learned to check more closely: some coalition countries gave what they had and not what was needed, so in the name of Atlantic solidarity, unnecessary equipment was being sent to Afghanistan. In a word, some countries gave for the sake of it, regardless of the type of need, as long as they could say they were among the contributors to an international mission as important as this. The result, contrary to appearances, was that the international military was forced to make do with insufficient resources, just like the civilians. Of course, all the Afghans could do was make the best of a bad lot. They are wise and they know their proverbs. I'm sure they have one that sounds something like "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

# TO COORDINATE —OR TO BE COORDINATED

IN SEPTEMBER AND October I ventured out of Kabul so I could get an idea of how things were going in the provinces. By November winter would have set in, and once the weather turned bad, it would be difficult to travel.

To tempt me to explore their country, the Afghans kept repeating that there were three different Afghanistans: “The first is the one you Westerners imagine; another coincides with the city of Kabul; the third is the country of remote provinces, far away from the cities, and of the three, this is the only real Afghanistan.”

Meanwhile I went on reading Olivier Roy, who made a distinction between the Afghan town as a “place of innovation” and the far-flung provinces as the “home of religion, tradition..., and values that stand the test of time.”

Before the season of heavy snow began, I visited the provinces of Kandahar, Herat, Farah, Ghor, Khost, Kunar, Ghazni, Paktia, Paktika, and Uruzgan. What I’d been told was true. Indeed, I felt as if I was visiting ten countries instead of the provinces of one single nation.

I soon learned not to trust the military aircraft and helicopters that cluttered the skies of Afghanistan. They can make you feel that anything is possible: that you can take off here, go there, take off again for another destination or reach such-and-such a mountain village at the drop of a hat. In reality, the worst thing you can do is let yourself get drawn into this frenzy of technological omnipotence and the illusion that Afghanistan has suddenly become an easy place to visit thanks to the powerful means of transport offered by the

international coalition. Actually, my travels around the country almost never went according to plan or schedule: sometimes the plane broke down, or the weather turned nasty, or there was a military or humanitarian operation that rightly took precedence. Not to mention getting to one airport and finding out you had to leave from another, or all the times the plane or helicopter that should have been coming to pick you up didn't turn up, or all the other times the flight plan was changed when you were in the air and you landed somewhere else.

For me, this rampant uncertainty created problems when the Brussels delegations were visiting, because they often included individuals who hadn't the faintest idea of where they were landing and for some reason thought that everything would be running with the precision of a Swiss watch. When I managed to get out on my own, however, I was happy to encounter that timeless Afghanistan, the land of the unexpected, where generations of travelers had lost their patience.

Sometimes friendships, small adventures, discoveries you wouldn't otherwise have made came about precisely due to a delay or a change of schedule. Once, when I was with General Alberto Primicerj of the Alpino Regiment, who was tasked with ISAF reconstruction activities, I was stuck for two days at the U.S. base in Farah, out in the desert, waiting in vain for a plane or a helicopter to take us back to Kabul. It was 45 degrees centigrade in the shade, and during the day we couldn't stay outside for more than ten minutes.

The camp had only the most basic facilities, so I shared a small room where I found a scorpion under the bed. For security reasons, lights had to be turned off when it got dark, and in the morning we couldn't even have a proper shower as water was scarce. On the other hand, I learned so much about what life is like on the front line and how important even small things are in those circumstances.

Food is essential for keeping morale high, and the canteen served an excellent evening meal of hot Mexican bean chili with the world's best guacamole. Or maybe, under such straitened circumstances, it just seemed that way.

MEETINGS WITH PROVINCIAL governors were another and constant source of surprise. Once, the governor of Farah asked if he could catch a ride on the plane and turned up with two guns and a few rounds of ammunition. I saw them under his jacket and I just managed to get him to hand them over so I could hide them in the backpack of one of my detail before the military police saw what he was carrying. We were boarding a U.S. Special Forces flight and they weren't about to turn a blind eye. If they'd found him armed, at the very least they wouldn't have let us board and they'd probably have blacklisted us both: him for failing to comply with regulations that prohibited Afghans traveling armed on international forces flights, and me because I was minding his back.

Nevertheless, the governor of Farah was a character worthy of the highest respect. Not only did he know what he wanted, he was also willing to risk his hide to get it. His plan to build a library in a small town like Farah, in an area with strong Taliban infiltration, wasn't exactly child's play, and the fact that he was walking around armed to the teeth was more than understandable.

Like other governors, he'd come home after studying and working in the West, in his case in the United States. It was easy to communicate with him as he spoke English. Our conversations evolved in Western style, with Aristotelian logic, sharing our opinions and, if possible, coming to a mutual conclusion.

Such easy banter with Afghan administrators was not always the case, of course, because many local officials had never been outside Afghanistan and, in any case, knew little about the West. It was a struggle to tune into their mindset or handle the conversation. You really had to explore every avenue and, with a lot of patience, to try and establish some common ground on anything.

One evening the governor of Herat decided to lecture me on the Taliban who, he said, were more efficient in administering justice than the government: "They're quick off the mark to see where there's good and evil; they don't need lots of

paperwork, hearings, lawyers, and that sort of stuff to decide.... They kill wrongdoers and everyone else is happy!”

I was a tad embarrassed as I listened, but I didn’t want to interrupt or be disrespectful. When it was finally my turn to speak, I pointed out that this wasn’t precisely the concept of the rule of law that the international community had in mind, and I tried to change the subject. Later, over dinner, I asked the commander of the Herat provincial reconstruction team, an Italian officer, what to make of the governor, and he replied that I shouldn’t worry about him, because the governor was basically a good egg and was one of the ones on our side.

My meeting with the governor of Ghor wasn’t exactly a stroll either, thanks to a blunder made by whoever had organized the visit and evidently knew very little of local traditions and customs. To keep to my tight schedule, the meeting with the governor was organized directly at the site of a reconstruction project, even though we knew he wanted to see me in his office as soon as I arrived in town. When I reached the site and saw the governor wasn’t there, I quickly realized there’d been a misunderstanding and I rushed to meet him. The result was that we spent the morning at the palace drinking tea, eating, and meeting members of the provincial council, district authorities, and an unspecified number of local notables—the only thing that interested him, because he’d just recently been appointed and wanted to show that he had the international community on his side. I left in the afternoon, exhausted, having seen virtually nothing of what I wanted to see, and my only consolation was that I hadn’t ruined a relationship before it even began.

ALL MY TRIPS to the provinces had to include a visit to the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (the notorious PRTs), the civilian-military structures through which individual NATO countries could support rebuilding efforts at the local level. There were twenty-six across the country, but in Kabul the general impression was that each one went its own way, so that there was some discrepancy between what was happening locally and the national development strategy. I tried to see as many projects as possible to get some idea of what was being accomplished, and I came to the conclusion that the strong

internal imbalance between military and civilians would impact operational choices, which, in many cases, were tactical rather than strategic, penalizing the development objective.

Some PRTs were close to the war zone, so security was often a problem. Sometimes I was forced to argue strenuously with the military, which used safety as an excuse to show me photographs instead of allowing me to visit the sites.

Every Afghan I met would have liked more reconstruction: water mains, roads, electricity. But most of all they asked to be allowed to work with civilian experts in defining provincial development plans, and not with the military—with people they could trust, who knew how to sink wells, build schools and hospitals, in a development logic.

One day the governor of a district in the east told me, “I come from the world of NGOs. I know how some things work and I’m not always comfortable talking about them with a colonel. Send us engineers, doctors, agronomists...because these are the people we need.”

I soon realized how difficult it was to meet such demands. Experts were a rare commodity and most decided to stay in Afghanistan only for a few months. It seemed unbelievable, but it was much easier to get a battalion of marines to the country than a handful of motivated, willing civilian experts.

ON MY VISITS to the PRTs, I realized how complicated it was to draw up a balance of what was being done to rebuild, or “build,” as everyone was at pains to point out, because in Afghanistan it was often a matter of starting from scratch. I did see some impressive finished projects, like the new road network that cost millions of dollars, built by the Americans in the provinces of Khost and Kunar. Or in Herat, where the Italians were building schools, roads, and sewage systems.

I happened to visit villages where a modest input—a seed bank, a small bridge, a stretch of road—was enough to improve the lives of hundreds of families, and I met people who were truly grateful for what they’d received, trembling at the mere thought that one day the international forces would

be on their way. There was, however, also plenty of waste and schemes that had neither rhyme nor reason.

Military commanders of PRTs, given how short their term of office was (usually six months), were mainly concerned with spending quickly, and this, in many cases, explained why there were schools built in villages without teachers and without even informing the Ministry of Education in Kabul. Indeed, the ministry informed me that it knew the whereabouts of about 40 percent of the country's schools.

“An unused school building, in 90 percent of cases, becomes a Koranic school for potential fundamentalists,” warned international NGOs, and they were right, although they couldn't believe they were being allowed to criticize the actions of the military.

In a mountain area I saw a fully equipped hospital that couldn't open because there was no qualified personnel; elsewhere I saw a training center overflowing with useless brand-new PCs but without electricity, nor fuel to generate any. I saw an open-air market built in the middle of nowhere, out in the desert, and my only hope was that it would be of use to the nomads.

International PRT experts came in all shapes and sizes: some were in Afghanistan because they hadn't been accepted for another place, others were simply enthusiastic and commendable professionals with a spirit of sacrifice.

A young Dutch volunteer I met from the Tarin Kow PRT, in Uruzgan, provided me with a lucid analysis of the situation and how to try to improve things: “First of all, any PRT answers to its country and each country knows what it can manage. If we want to try to improve coordination of the various projects and ensure a better balance between national and local needs, the first step should be to tell each country clearly what is expected of it, the kind of project and in which areas. But it will definitely have to be Afghans doing the telling, because if you at NATO or the folks at the United Nations tell them, the people back in the capitals aren't going to be listening.”

The volunteer was right: it was exactly like that and this was where we had to start if PRT potential was to be exploited fully. Another key aspect was to make sure that slowly but surely the Afghans took over command of the PRTs, because as things were—from what I was seeing—they were almost completely cut out.

JALALI POPAL WAS the president's right-hand man. He had been appointed to run the Independent Directorate for Local Government (IDLG), the Kabul-based institution that was intended to coordinate activities at the provincial level. His office was right by the ISAF base and became one of the most frequented by myself and my co-workers.

Working with Popal it took us a few months to set up a committee with the ambassadors of the countries funding the PRTs and the main international cooperation agencies. Popal was chairman and McKiernan, Kai Eide, and I were co-chairs. The thinking was that if Popal, on behalf of the government, were to ask these countries for what was needed, they wouldn't really be able to ignore the requests. Meanwhile, thanks to the work of Admiral Matthieu Borsboom, ISAF began to review more than 20,000 projects and upgrade the database storing information on what each PRT had achieved.

We decided to train a local engineer to run it, and to share the data we had with the Afghan authorities concerned. The Afghans could thus gradually form an idea of what was happening in their country and prepare to take the initiative when the time was ripe. It was a late—incomplete—first step but it was a step in the right direction. And even though we calculated that the PRTs managed less than 10 percent of the international resources coming to Afghanistan, it was still a significant portion of the total contribution. The problem was to persuade the representatives of all the countries to work together because without their help we could do very little, and even the most basic things like sharing information could become an insurmountable issue.

The ambassador of one NATO country kept saying he didn't have to tell any international partner what his country was doing. The director of a famous development agency refused

to tell us the location of the schools where he was working in case the Taliban found out and blew them up. Other colleagues were more cooperative, or at least they promised to be, even if they ultimately didn't keep their word. Last, there were those who would have liked to come aboard, but had no idea what was going on in their own PRT, because some were being managed directly by the capitals.

We joked about it with Popal, even if frustration was sometimes enormous. "Everyone is agreeable to coordination today," was our refrain at the close of each committee meeting, "although today, as usual, everyone wants to coordinate and nobody wants to be coordinated."

## A SMALL TRAVEL LIBRARY, II

IN A COUPLE of months I'd finished reading everything I'd brought from Italy. I read at night because it was so noisy I couldn't get much sleep. My residence was at the center of the base, opposite the command building, and not a night passed without clattering convoys coming and going through the gate, with helicopters overhead, and soldiers who stayed up late in the Milano canteen garden, just under my bedroom window.

In August we'd also had a couple of night alarms because of insurgent rocket attacks. Not to mention the pestiferous cats who began their own wars at three every morning...again under my window.

However, my main night-time dilemma continued to be the total dissociation between the real Afghanistan and the book version—a dichotomy I had to resolve urgently if I was to understand anything of the country and how to interact with it. To be able to work I had to grasp the context, get my bearings, find a polestar to guide me through a night deeper than the sea. That was why I put the Afghan classics of Levi, Byron, Hopkirk, and Newby behind a nightstand, where they stayed for the rest of my time in the country. They had nothing else to say to me and, in any case, didn't have answers for my daily questions.

It may have been during one of those nights that I thought I might write a book on Afghanistan so I could describe what I was seeing. I just had to find the right narrative seed, water it, grow and reinforce it.

But that was hardly urgent. What was urgent for me was to move around the country as much as possible, listen to people, see things with my own eyes, or get the Afghans to tell me.

Ah, the Afghans.... The books I'd brought with me didn't mention them much and surely they were the ones who should have had plenty to say.

One evening I chanced on a novella, *Earth and Ashes*, by Atiq Rahimi, an Afghan filmmaker who'd emigrated to France. After the fall of the Taliban he had decided to set up a "Writer's House" in Kabul. My friend Marta recommended the book in one of the occasional emails we exchanged. So when a journalist coming to Kabul asked me if I needed anything from Italy, I asked for that. It read like a poem, like prose in verse, and I realized from the very first lines that the story of Dastghir and his grandson Yassin represented the Afghanistan I had before my eyes on a daily basis.

A demented, tragic country, seemingly without hope, where the stench of diesel fuel had replaced the fragrance of balsamic poplar and Australian oranges had taken the place of those of Jalalabad. Where more and more people preferred to carry their shopping in plastic bags rather than in the traditional red bundles decorated with white apple blossom.

That evening I decided to read only Afghan books.

First, I obtained for myself another book by Atiq Rahimi, *The Imaginary Return*, again from Italy, and this time it was brought over by one of the detail coming back from home leave.

In this volume Rahimi describes Kabul after his return from exile, after almost twenty years. It was 2002, following the ousting of the Taliban. The city destroyed by wars was as invisible as one of Calvino's. Rahimi meets characters who tell their stories of pain, but because words are not enough to describe the wounds, he gets himself an old camera, a rudimentary device to capture images that seem to come from another century, and he begins to photograph the feeling that resurges every time we look at a wound.

The metaphysical Kabul of this book is still populated by horsemen, merchants, engravers, musicians, mystics, scribes, and bird vendors. People with noble, timeless faces stand in front of the camera, performing a dress rehearsal of death.

This was a Kabul unknown to me, of which nobody spoke, where foreigners could not enter. Without cars, uniforms, with no noise or trappings. A city hidden in the ruins of a tower or in a caravansary, where you could still meet men with “spiraling turbans and roses between their lips.”

An honest book, I thought, by someone who has something important to say. So, as I read and looked at Rahimi’s ageless images, I felt as if I’d learned a little more, that I was starting to grasp something.

EVERY NOW AND again, on a Friday morning I’d go over to Shah M. Books, the Bookseller of Kabul—a store in the city center a stone’s throw from the Ministry of the Interior and the Indian embassy, whose perfectly photocopied books cost an arm and a leg.

The owner was charming, and spoke English, so after the first few times, when he got used to the presence of armed bodyguards, he let me into the back part of the bookshop. I asked if he had an Afghan narrative section; he smiled and was briefly silent; then he replied that Afghanistan is the land of poets and pulled a few collections of poetry down from the shelf next to the counter.

“Rumi is the greatest poet, from whom all others derive inspiration,” he said solemnly. Then he showed me an English translation of a collection of odes (*ghazals*) and quatrains (*rubaiyat*): *The Works of Shams of Tabriz*.

Finding Afghan novels translated into English or French wasn’t easy, so moving on to poetry was almost a logical choice, not least because, for Afghans, poetry is something essential and part of everyday life. Afghan literature is produced largely in verse and written in Persian, although over the last century a Pashtun literature has developed, but it remains essentially unknown in the West.

On one of those Friday mornings, as I was browsing the shelves, the owner showed me cuttings he had on the counter from the *Herald Kabul*, one of three English-language newspapers published in the Afghan capital. There was a series of articles on the commemorations of the seventh

anniversary of the death of Commander Massoud, the legendary Northern Alliance leader murdered by the Taliban just before 9/11. The calendar of celebrations lasted a whole week, and poetry played an absolutely predominant role. There were to be public readings, discussions, and presentations of the debut works of aspiring poets. So I learned that the events of the country's public and political life are always somehow accompanied by poets and poetry. And this says a lot—and more than many other things—about the Afghan soul and sensitivity.

## SEVENTEEN

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# ISAF

ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) headquarters were located in an old military club belonging to the Ministry of Defense. It was home to about 2,000 soldiers, and it was so packed that I sometimes thought it resembled those weird Japanese day hotels where guests can rest in cells that form a sort of hive and are so small you can't even lie down flat.

There were times, especially in winter, when a strange influenza bug went around, causing high fever and fits of vomiting. The fact that it spread so quickly was certainly due to the overcrowded dormitories and canteens, although signs everywhere urged that hands be washed often and the premises aired.

The American medics were fanatical about medication: I once went over to the infirmary to get an aspirin and came away with two bags of pills; if I hadn't taken off quickly they'd have had me on a drip. The pills were white, of various sizes, and in transparent plastic sachets, with no writing or prescription, and although I asked several times what they were, I never found out.

Lots of people, especially among the American military, were obsessed with malaria and took large doses of quinine, although Kabul was at too high an altitude for mosquitoes and it was rare to see any. Maybe I'd got the wrong impression, but it seemed to me that soldiers tended to hypochondria, or at the very least to take a morbid interest in their health.

Rumors coming in from combat zones talked of soldiers suffering from strange diseases: fevers, infections, festering insect bites. I'd heard one story at least a dozen times about a soldier who'd died after being bitten by a species of tarantula found only in the desert. The real problem, however, was scorpions, which are more common than ants in Afghanistan. Benjamin, my security detail chief, told me about a night when

one of his men had been stung on a testicle, which swelled up like a balloon in a few seconds. Luckily it was all sorted out and the only consequences were some pain and a fright. This had happened a few years before, before the base had been refurbished, but accommodation was now cleaner and there were far fewer scorpions to be seen.

Nevertheless, after I saw one on my bedroom balcony, I always checked inside my shoes before I put them on in the morning.

THE CAMP WAS organized as a kind of citadel with every basic amenity; there were even three or four small restaurants that might have seemed quite run-of-the-mill if they hadn't always been packed with people wearing fatigues. Then we had a barber, hairdresser, an ATM where you could withdraw up to \$50 at a time, plus a couple of stores selling military clothing and sportswear. A local market appeared every Friday morning, near the camp gate, for the joy of those who couldn't manage without souvenirs to take home, even in a situation like this.

I could usually be found in one of two places: a rotisserie near the Danish contingent's quarters, where they served roast chicken, and the Ciano coffee bar. This was part of the Italian chain that has become quite well known among the Balkan military missions and was run by a Tajik waitress who spoke Neapolitan dialect. I went there for at least three coffees every day. The Ciano's walls were decorated not only with photographs of Afghanistan, but also an aerial view of the center of Rome from the 1970s. This lovely print, taken with a wide-angle lens, had a slightly curved horizon, and every time I was in the coffee bar I checked out my home in Trastevere, my eyes seeking the windows of my study and my bedroom.

Every now and again, I'd have dinner there, too, usually *focaccia* and *prosciutto*, often with Andrea Angeli, a Balkan peace-keeping veteran who was now the EU Police Mission spokesperson in Kabul.

ONE THING EVERYONE in town envied about ISAF headquarters was the gym. It was open 24/7 and you'd even find people there at three or four in the morning, but usually I saw the

same faces because we went at the same times. I did get the impression that a few might be there to see the female contingent in shorts and T-shirts, reminding us what women looked like.

It was a huge space, on two floors. The ground floor had a lot of running machines and a basketball court, while the upper floor was equipped with machines for body building and had a big room for spinning.

IT WAS A REAL challenge to play any sport in the tiny open-air space available. At night, soldiers jogged in small groups along the camp's paved paths. Even during the day, despite boiling or freezing temperatures, depending on the season, there was always someone dodging back and forth among jeeps and trucks. On Friday mornings we had volleyball games on a pitch opposite Ciano, and in summer many soldiers lay in the sun, using the basketball court inside the gym as a solarium.

The soldiers assigned to the base spent all their time there; they weren't allowed out except for service reasons. In the evening, they had the choice of going over to one of the meeting places, a bar or one of the little restaurants at the camp, or getting an early night. This might last six, nine, or twelve months, depending on the length of the tour.

Superior officers went out occasionally, in civvies, but very few others got the chance to see an Afghan face (except for local staff working at the base) during their period of duty. These "prisoners" had only one way of seeing the city and that was to go up to one of the terraces of buildings each contingent used as national meeting place. Or they could climb onto any of the taller containers with which the base was built. The only sounds they heard from the outside world, apart from the roar of suicide bombings, was the echo of chanting muezzins at prayer time.

So the camp was home to an alien population that lived in a kind of bubble and had only a virtual relationship with Afghanistan and the Afghans. Anthropologically this could be an interesting phenomenon, which might be why journalists, aid workers, and various diplomats took advantage of each

Friday holiday to pay a morning visit to the base. What better place for thinking about the distance separating the barely real world of the international forces from the very real world of the Afghans on the other side of the wall?

Those of us who made up the civilian staff also lived on the base, but unlike the military, we were free to go out after work. Military restrictions didn't apply to us as civilians and as far as I was concerned, given the role we played, I thought the best thing was for us to spend as much time as possible with the population.

Unfortunately, I was under 24/7 protection and I had no choice in the matter, while my less-protected co-workers could go out in the evening using taxis and didn't draw attention to themselves. The only thing I asked was that they be sure to tell our security officer how to get in touch with them and take the precautions required by the respective embassies. Of course, if I'd wanted to play safe, I could have stopped them from leaving the camp, but it didn't seem right. And frankly, I knew that they were actually much safer traveling by taxi than I was with my escort and two Toyotas, which were very identifiable even if they didn't have number plates.

I WAS THE only one on the base to have a house—with a beautiful garden—all to myself, just a short walk from the command building.

The two-story house had been built five years earlier for my Turkish predecessor, the former foreign minister, Hikmet Çetin. On the ground floor there was a kitchen, a room used as an office by Afghan staff, and three reception rooms. On the first floor there were three bedrooms, each with a small bathroom. I used one and the others were guest quarters. Hamid and Jawid were the Afghan houseboys who kept everything clean and tidy and cooked for me. They both lived in town with their families, but often they stayed overnight, especially during the winter.

The house, in a sense, was more theirs than mine, because they'd been working there from the start, and it would have been very difficult to get them to change their habits. For instance, they didn't shop for fruit and vegetables at the

market, preferring to use the army stores, so I ended up consuming Australian or New Zealand imports when there were delicious melons, pomegranates, apricots, spinach, and eggplant on sale only a few hundred meters away. Whenever I complained about it, they just told me some complete nonsense about people who'd died of poisoning because they'd trusted what was sold at market stalls.

Apart from this strange mania, they were both very friendly and helpful. They'd filled the house and garden with mousetraps and were very proud every time they caught a rodent.

WHEN YOU ATTEND the courses to prepare for missions of high stress, you are told that it's essential to find seemingly normal things to do and create a daily routine. As I had a small budget available, I decided to refurnish the reception rooms and make them a little more comfortable. I often had delegations over from Brussels or alliance countries, and I also got together the local group of NATO ambassadors regularly, and I invited Afghans on various occasions. The furniture I had found when I arrived was simply awful and in poor condition: it was solid and of a dark, vaguely funereal eggplant shade. The sight of it depressed me to the point that I carefully avoided the ground-floor rooms in the evening, preferring to go straight to my bedroom.

I "recruited" Ayscha Hamdani and Megan Minnion, who worked in my political office, and we set off to scour Kabul for furniture that would do as a replacement, thereby creating a huge headache for my detail although they proved to be enthusiastic and well disposed to this endeavor. Ayscha was a German citizen of Afghan origin and on this occasion she acted as my interpreter; Megan was a Canadian and the only one with experience in NATO disbursement procedures, as well as knowledge of what we actually had in the way of funds.

Afghans don't do understatement—at least not the ones who ran Kabul's few furniture stores. Moreover, in post-9/11 Kabul, there were none of the true artisans you might find in other Asian countries, who would have no trouble producing a

perfect replica of the furniture of your dreams using a drawing or a photo.

Any available furniture was generally an ugly imitation of what was on sale in the United Arab Emirates, but probably even tackier. Ridiculous designs in blinding colors, with gilt and silver trim, and simply enormous pieces, completely out of proportion to any home that was not a palace. It was no easy feat to find something minimal, because when the sellers realized who I was, they seemed dead set on suggesting the most preposterous items they had. I remember how insistent one of them was about a fifteen-seat sofa (“you’re just going to love it”) he had in a nearby warehouse, and the trouble we had refusing his invitation.

We considered a number of options and finally chose red and blue sofas that had matching easy chairs in the same colors. If you didn’t look too closely, they bore a vague resemblance to 1970s’ designs with psychedelic patterns. We also found some coffee tables and mirrors, and we solved the lighting problem with spotlights, which meant we could get rid of all the chandeliers. To add a hint of local color, we went to a Chicken Street store and bought an Afghan dresser with peeling red and yellow paintwork, as ugly as sin, but not without a certain charm. An artisan recommended by some German friends was able to construct for me a side table like ones I’d seen in a number of Afghan houses: an old wooden door covered with plate glass.

All that was left now was to find something decent to hang on the walls and add a touch of color overall. What I really wanted was to buy paintings. Turquoise Mountains, the organization founded by Rory Stewart, had just organized an exhibition of emerging artists. There were some beautiful abstracts, but apart from being prohibitively expensive, they were mainly by Iranian and Pakistani artists, and I wanted Afghan works.

Ayscha came with me to a women’s school of painting located near the parliament building. A dilapidated, anonymous place, verging on a state of total neglect, that we were only able to identify after we’d walked past it countless

times. It didn't look like an atelier but more like a shelter, a place where these young female artists could meet and talk. There wasn't much material and only a few paintings on the walls, none of which caught our eye. Above all, we were surprised by the lack of anything that a school of painting should have had: canvases, paints, brushes. At one point, after looking around a couple of first-floor rooms, we began chatting with one of the young artists, a scrap of a girl with a tiny voice, and the only one who spoke English. She was a photographer and when we saw her work we were very impressed. There were images of Kabul in the rain—close-ups, reflecting water, dripping wet views of a flickering city, a stunning, refined mirage.

Sheenkai Alam took her snapshots with a simple camera, nothing fancy, but her minuscule masterpieces had already been shown in Germany, France, and Italy.

I bought ten photos, after bargaining at length on the price. Sheenkai emailed them to Ayscha, who then had them printed by an advertising agency owned by Afghan friends of hers who had returned from Germany. The prints were enlarged and mounted on wooden supports; the biggest—a detail of an Afghan kitchen—measured one meter by two. Then there were groups of drops of water, and cityscapes reflecting on wet car windows. I was exceedingly proud of the photos hanging on the walls of the house, not so much because everyone who came in stopped to look at them, but because it was as if through them I'd suddenly found my key to this city.

## KHYBER

1842, 1878, 1919,  
1928

THE NAME OF the Khyber is as legendary as those of the River Oxus, Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat, Chitral. The word alone evokes centuries of Afghan history and the epic feats that have taken place in this part of the world. I still remember the excitement of that late November morning, unbelievably hot for the season, when I first saw the Khyber Pass from the helicopter as I accompanied the secretary general of NATO.

He wanted to visit the border post at the foot of the pass, where the Afghan and Pakistani military had begun their joint control of respective sides of the border in the previous weeks. Attacks coming from Pakistan enclaves had intensified against international coalition forces and the Afghan army, but counterattacks were complicated since the NATO mandate was limited to Afghanistan, and any encroachment was an absolute no-go. It was surprising to note how Afghan and Pakistani military had settled down to work together and coordinate responses to these attacks. This was perhaps one of the most tangible signs of some détente between the two countries, after the September 2008 presidential elections in Pakistan, and now visits were being exchanged, with attempts to work together in the turbulent border areas. A *jirga* (a council of elders) of Pashtuns living on both sides of the Durand Line (the historical border between Afghanistan and former British India) was also committed to resolving trade and free goods circulation issues.

The center we'd come to visit was a small, hands-on example of this new era of bilateral cooperation between countries whose history was fraught, to say the least. Not that we were nurturing any illusions about how long it might take before relations normalized: Kabul would still complain about

Taliban bases in Pakistan; Islamabad would still be wary of any Afghan government that was too friendly with India. So it was even more remarkable to see Afghan and Pakistani soldiers monitoring events on the same computer screen, drinking tea, and sharing cigarettes.

THE THRILL OF being at the Khyber overshadowed everything else: another of my traveling pipedreams had come true. As I gazed down on the Jalalabad Valley from the helicopter, it wasn't difficult to think back to the Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century and the tragic events that took place here. The road is now surfaced, but it follows the same route as the old trail that connected Kabul to the Khyber Pass and then continued to the Indo-Pakistani plateau, where the British made a dramatic retreat in 1842.

The British invaded Afghanistan twice during the nineteenth century, in 1842 and 1878, to stop the Russian advance southward and control their empire in India through these valleys. On both occasions they won easily, but then failed to acquire control of the territory, and the invasions ended with disastrous withdrawals. The 1842 offensive was a debacle, failing not only to establish a monarch in Afghanistan capable of curbing Russia's ambitions, but also stumbling into the most serious military defeat ever suffered by a British army.

A horde of "pagan savages" with primitive weapons had routed the world's greatest power. A painting of the outcome of this defeat, Lady Butler's *Remnants of an Army*, hangs in the Tate Gallery, but a copy can also be found in the National Gallery of Art in Kabul. The famous Victorian work depicts Dr. William Brydon clinging to the mane of an exhausted horse as he advanced, slowly and alone, down the valley, dubbed the "Messenger of Death" by the sentinels who spotted him from the walls of Jalalabad fort. Brydon was the only survivor of the 16,000 men and women who had set off for India from Kabul a week before, slaughtered by the Afghans who had been engaged to protect them on their march.

This retreat is masterfully described in Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game*, brought to life with chilling details of snow stained red with blood, frostbite, deprivation, hundreds of men

and women freezing to death, night attacks, massacres, looting, snipers, betrayal by the Afghans, and many heroic deeds.

During my flight back to Kabul, a British officer pointed out the top of a hill he told us was Gandamak, site of one of the bloodiest episodes of the retreat. Here twenty officers and forty-one NCOs and soldiers formed a square, with nothing more than twenty muskets and two cartridges each in a last-gasp resistance. Four were captured; the others were killed. Hopkirk describes how the hill continued to be a place of pilgrimage for those leaving from British India for many years and how, in 1979, a British anthropologist found the bones of those poor men, perfectly preserved under rocks and stones at the top of the hill.

A few evenings after the visit to Khyber, I was invited to dinner by Matthieu Borsboom, the Dutch admiral with whom I was working on the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The meal was in a guesthouse, not far from the city center and no more than a kilometer from the base: its name was Gandamak. There was a certain neocolonial charm about it, and in pride of place at the entrance was a display of muskets used by the proud Army of the Indus and the 44th Regiment of Foot who had fought the Anglo-Afghan wars. A few of these muskets still turn up in the city market.

THE BRITISH TROOPS of the second invasion, in 1878, then crossed the Khyber Pass, and again, the country's decision to set up a permanent garrison in Kabul was underpinned by the fear that the ruler, Sher Ali, might approach the Russians. Again, the outcome of the operation was similar to that of 1842—an eventual British withdrawal.

The military victory was followed by the inability to control the country and after yet another massacre of British troops, this time at the fort of Bala Hissar, London was persuaded to change strategy. Instead of occupying the territory as far as the Hindu Kush, the British were going to “purchase” the support of the Afghan rulers through subsidies and arms supplies. One aspect of depending on Kabul was the acceptance of the Durand Line, imposed by the British and Russians and drawn

along the southeast border in 1893. It went from the Chitral and Gilgit valleys to the Baloch desert and acted as the border with British India. It also divided the Pashtun tribes between Afghanistan and what was then British India, leaving them a large part of the territories controlled by the British. Today the Durand Line marks the border with Pakistan.

The Afghans regularly raise the question of reviewing the border, but always to no avail. There might have been some hope after World War II, when British withdrawal from the subcontinent was on the table. Then Pakistan, created in 1947 in the northwestern areas of the British vice royalty, inherited the 1893 border. This decision was ratified by popular referendum in North-West Frontier Province territories, a referendum that had offered only two options: annexation to Pakistan or to India.

THE THIRD ANGLO-AFGHAN war occurred under the reign of King Amanullah, a sovereign of modernist, pan-Islamic ideas, a member of the Young Afghans. The war broke out in 1919, in response to the king's declaration of independence from Britain, and, at least in part, resembled the previous pattern with a military defeat of Afghans that soon became a partial victory for them. At that time Russia was still in the throes of the revolution, and its expansionist ambitions in the east were less of a threat to European powers. So London, victor of World War I, finally decided to acknowledge the independence of Afghanistan.

Amanullah went from strength to strength and in the next decade introduced a series of reforms that were unprecedented in Afghan history, with women allowed to choose their husbands and remove their veils; polygamy banned among state officials; the citizens of Kabul allowed to wear Western garb; state law gradually replacing traditional Pashtun regulations and sharia law. Nevertheless, religious figures and tribal groups were determined to resist modernism and a king who invited his people to arm themselves with pens rather than guns. The revolt came in December 1928 and Amanullah was forced to abdicate, seeking asylum in Italy where he remained until his death in 1960.

It all started yet again in the Khyber Pass and again the British were involved. The popular protests that spread rapidly from the pass to Jalalabad and then to Koh-i-Daman, north of Kabul, were led by Habibullah, a Tajik known as Baccà-ye Saqqao (the son of the water carrier). He represented the religious revivalism of the *ulema*, or the clerical class, who saw the reforms as proof of the moral corruption that reigned in Kabul. An outright jihad, one of many, broke out, a standard occurrence every time Afghanistan tries to change.

## INDIAN HOLIDAY

WITHOUT REALIZING IT, people get used to everything, even the most absurd situations. It wasn't until I went to India that I grasped what kind of life I was leading in Kabul and how little personal freedom I had left. NATO is very generous with its civilian staff in Kabul and schedules rest periods out of the country every three months. Unlike my co-workers, however, for one reason or another I hadn't been able to pull the plug for six months. Seemingly out of the blue, I found myself walking around Connaught Circus in New Delhi, where Francesca and I had decided to spend Christmas in 2008. It felt so unreal.

Time and space seemed to vanish, as they do in dreams. It was as if it was all happening only in my imagination: the lights, the music coming from the shops, chaotic sidewalks packed with people.

Francesca had arrived in Delhi from Italy a day before me and I'd met up with her in front of the airport. Just hugging and talking face to face seemed like a dream, and it took me a moment to get used to it. The first night we wandered around the old city. Kabul seemed so far away, with its dust, sirens, suicide bombers, and uniforms, even though India was still in shock itself over the Mumbai terrorist attack, and there were a lot more police around than usual.

I remember at one point during that strange evening I got a call from my deputy, Nick Williams, whom I had left holding the fort in Kabul. Francesca and I were having dinner in a restaurant, a strange place with a vintage Balilla car parked right in the lobby and lots of Asian tourists. I don't remember exactly what Nick said during that call, office stuff without a doubt. But I do remember exactly what I told him: that for the first time in my life, I'd stopped working and been able to forget everything in a few hours. This was exactly what had

happened—I'd left Kabul just that morning and it felt as though days, even weeks, had passed.

The strangest thing about the entire holiday in India was not having bodyguards and being completely free to move about. At times I looked around to see where my Tuscania guardian angels might be lurking, and not seeing them nearby left me dumbfounded. I was free to go out, walk around, do as I pleased for as long as I pleased, but I needed to accustom myself to this new freedom.

We did everything we'd talked about, Francesca and I, when we'd planned our trip on Skype. We went to the colorful cities of Rajasthan, we walked up and down the ghats of Benares for three days, slept in old Maharajah palaces, spent a night on a rat-infested train to reach the fort of Jaisalmer (OK, we hadn't planned that, but it was fine just the same); we visited the monkey temple, ate as many chapatis and lentils as we wanted, and re-read Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* straight through.

Our days in India passed without mishap, each one the same as the day before, but there were times when I didn't feel completely at ease. I was apprehensive, restless, I got annoyed for silly reasons (mainly with tuk-tuk drivers who tried to rip us off).

Sometimes my reaction to a hitch, even something very minor, was absolutely over the top. Indeed, we were no longer in the realm of "reactions." At some point, Francesca must have thought something wasn't working between us, or that I was losing the plot, but it had nothing to do with her. In a sense, it had nothing to do with me either. It was simply the fault of Afghanistan, which was reproaching me for leaving and trying to erase it from my mind. The evening I'd arrived, when I told Nick that I'd just put Kabul and the rest out of my mind, I'd been kidding myself. Indeed, exactly the opposite was true, because when I arrived in India, although I didn't realize it, I spent my whole time comparing anything I saw with the things I was used to in Afghanistan: landscapes, people, food, hotel rooms.

We were in a Benares bookstore, and the holiday was drawing to a close, when it finally hit me. I took an English edition of *Baburnama* from a shelf and I began to read Salman Rushdie's preface. I was overwhelmed with the desire to be back in Kabul, there and then. Francesca watched and said nothing, she came up to me, glanced at the book, and she understood it all too. She asked if I wanted to go back to Afghanistan and I said no, I didn't, but it seemed like the best thing to do.

## SNOW

TOWARD THE END of January, on an evening like any other, I'd promised I'd go out to dinner with Isabella, the friend of mutual friends in Brussels. She was an Italian cooperation volunteer who'd arrived in Kabul a few weeks before. I arranged to pick her up at nine o'clock in the evening, outside the Italian embassy gates, but when I arrived there was no sign of her.

This annoyed me: I didn't want to be hanging around the street with the escort detail. We'd been hearing all sorts of things for days now, and I didn't want the guys taking any unnecessary risks. I hung on for a few minutes; then I called her cell phone. When she replied, she said she was still at home—she meant in the container accommodation—so I told her to stay there, and I motioned for the detail to go back to base.

In the time it took to turn the cars around she called me back to apologize: "I'm sorry I misunderstood, I thought you'd ring before getting here...."

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "You're right, I should have called first...forgive me, but it's better if we meet some other time. I've told the detail to take me back."

"Are you annoyed?" she asked, hearing my tone of voice. "No, of course not," I lied. "Come on, don't be cross...it's starting to snow...it's lovely."

True enough, it was starting to snow and I'd hardly noticed. And to think that when I was a boy, and the first snow fell at the start of winter, I would perform an impromptu ritual dance of thanks with my other skiing friends. When I got home, I went straight to the living room and out into the back garden. The silence was absolute, that silence of snow falling the same all over the world.

BY NEXT MORNING, the city was transformed into a lily, a freshly laundered sheet, a sinless place. The snow had covered

all of the mud, the dirt, the ugliness. There was even something beautiful about the clay and straw houses perched on the mountainside, with their columns of gray smoke wafting from the chimneys.

Snow makes everything more beautiful and it's a miracle every single time. Before my eyes I could see images of the other snow-covered cities of my life: Rome, London, Brussels, Belgrade, Pristina.

The roads toward the river, where the market is held, began to fill with people. Slender, hesitant figures, wrapped in thin blankets, wearing turbans and sandals. Even a bluish burqa appeared in this special winter tableau, emerging from a narrow alley between two ramshackle buildings; the woman must have been very young because she crossed the street with a dancer's grace, as if she were walking on points. The amazing thing was that nobody's clothes had changed one iota and everyone wore the same as in summer: suiting, cotton, lightweight fabrics, nothing heavy or wintery.

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed a little girl, her rosy pink legs sinking into the snow as she played alone, numb with cold but smiling, and I was at a loss at how that could be. When we drove past her, she waved "hi" with her tiny hand, like any other child in any other snow-kissed place in the world.

That morning the detail guys were in high spirits; they loved the snow too. We all became children again in the snow, even the two characters riding a motorbike the wrong way up our street, skidding every which way and apparently just having a good time, both the one driving and the one standing on the pillion.

On a normal day, two fellows on a motorcycle heading the wrong way along a one-way street would have startled us. The snow made it all different: maybe we could let our guard down and forget suicide bombers for a second.

That morning, I felt as if I'd known Kabul all my life. I thought the snow made the city similar to my childhood landscape, but then it came to me that the snow had little to do

with it. What made it look so familiar was the simple fact that I now recognized the avenues, the houses, the route to the fort, or the street skirting the gardens and the mosque.

Like all cities that have been destroyed and reconstructed too quickly, Kabul is a precarious heap of hasty architecture. Nonsensical colonnades, buildings folding over on themselves, crooked balconies, towers, and terraces overlooking emptiness.

The most absurd were the houses of the nouveau riche, those who'd made piles of money thanks to the wars: commanders, drug traffickers, and warlords. These domiciles sprang from nowhere, in the midst of garbage heaps or on top of the rubble of the buildings razed to the ground by missiles and artillery in the 1990s. In most cases, they were painted garish colors that made them even more bizarre. As well as these oddities, every now and again, scattered around the urban landscape, the rusting remnants of war came into sight: tank turrets, the shell of an armored vehicle, the chassis of an old Soviet UAZ. As the days passed, I had become so used to seeing them that they had the same effect as a fountain or a statue.

The poor lived in mud houses with domed roofs made of an insubstantial material. I'd never been inside one of these residences, but I'd observed them from the outside carefully. They were small, with straight or sloping walls, huddled at the top of the mountain that cuts the city in two. From a distance, they looked like rock outcrops rather than something manmade.

The fort of Bala Hissar was surrounded by an ancient poor suburb, and when I walked through it on a Friday to reach the fortifications on foot, I sometimes caught a peek inside at the clutches of children huddling together, or a pot boiling on burning braziers.

The houses of the old aristocracy and the early twentieth-century merchant bourgeoisie were in the central districts. They weren't even visible from the road because of their tall boundary walls, but once you got past the small, anonymous iron or steel doors, you found unimaginable courtyards full of

flowers and fruit trees. These were big houses, built for several families, with a communal garden where women could spend most of their time with their children. Now that the owners had left, perhaps to move to Dubai or Peshawar, they were rented by expatriates who used the outdoor area for summer barbecues.

Most of my visits to Afghan homes were for work so I remember few details. The home of Yanuf Quanooni, president of the lower house, was protected by armed guards. He lived outside the city center, along the road leading to the Panjshir mountains, a safe place where any of the Northern Alliance Tajik could take refuge in times of danger. The furniture consisted of carpets and a disproportionate number of wooden armchairs arranged around all four sides of the enormous reception room.

Abdullah Abdullah, the presidential challenger, once received me in his family home, in a well-tended, airy garden. In pride of place in the living room was a large photo of Commander Massoud, under whom Abdullah had served as chief of staff; the study was clad in magnificent one-hundred-year-old paneling, made by skilled artisans of a bygone time.

Ashraf Ghani, another presidential candidate, lived outside the city center, near the old Queen's Palace, in a house built in a traditional manner. The reddish wood ceilings were in Kandahar style, while doors and windows were in a darker, skillfully carved wood, made by the craft workers of Nuristan.

The house of one of the Gailani brothers exuded the atmosphere of the family's power, which for centuries had underpinned Afghanistan's political and religious life. The reception rooms were below street level, set underground and the legacy of a more recent time when people needed shelter from artillery and missiles. A collection of hunting rifles filled an entire room, while another was lined with magnificent books.

The house of General Wardak, the minister of defense, felt more like a home on the Tyrrhenian coast. Built in the 1970s, it was clad in exposed concrete and had Pontine-style shutters. The heir to the throne, Prince Mustafa Zahir, lived in a place

surrounded by a flowering garden. The prince was a courteous, affable man who spoke good Italian. Shortly after I arrived in Kabul, he extended an invitation to dinner that was one of my first encounters with Afghan cuisine. As I went into the house, a peacock with a fanned tail—just like the one in Fellini's *Amarcord*—strutted out from behind a rose bush.

## CLEAR, HOLD, AND BUILD

EVERY OTHER THURSDAY I'd have breakfast with Chris Alexander, UN representative Kai Eide's deputy, and Admiral Matthieu Borsboom, head of the ISAF mission reconstruction project. Each time we'd get together with a group of experts who differed depending on their fields of expertise, with the intention of getting civilians and military to work together.

At every meeting we repeated the phrase "There can be no development without security and no security without development" with the precise therapeutic function of reconciling what was irreconcilable. Everyone said it over and over again, both the civilians and the military, but depending on whether it was said by the former or the latter, the emphasis was placed on the first or second part of the slogan. In all honesty this seemingly obvious concept concealed two contrasting ways of seeing things, of alleviating the conflict and choosing priority areas for reconstruction. More generally, they were two visions of the world, at least the world of postwar crisis management.

"If the safety of a district is not ensured first, we can't send our experts in to risk their lives," was the position of the United Nations, influenced by the "humanitarian lobby."

"But if you don't bring aid, electricity, and water immediately, if you don't build roads and hospitals immediately, in the place just cleared of insurgents, it will never be safe, and will eventually fall back into the hands of the insurgents," responded the military.

I've simplified things a little to try to make them easier to understand, but at the root of many coordination problems between the civilian and military worlds in Afghanistan lie these two perspectives of how to do things in the right order.

And I challenge anyone to draw a clear line, to say who is truly right, because it's obvious that in a sense each is right.

It's easy to say that military and reconstruction activities should proceed hand in hand, in what we could call an integrated manner. Nevertheless, translating this principle into something tangible requires people on both sides who will understand the reasoning of the other side: soldiers who know how to work with civilian workers and vice versa. People like this are an extremely rare commodity in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, many of the military have never worked with civilians and, deep down, are impatient with them, while too many civilians will not even remotely consider working with the military, for "ideological" reasons. In the end it was difficult to reconcile the United Nations, the Afghans, and the ISAF military mission on which areas and districts the reconstruction effort should be concentrated: those in the north or the west that were already safe, which were in danger of being destabilized soon by the insurgents if there wasn't some immediate investment, or those yet to be secured in the south or east of the country, which would never become safe unless essential services were taken to the population.

ISAF MILITARY OPERATIONS were all based on the sequence "clear, hold, and build."

"Clear" means to separate the civilian population from the insurgents; "hold" means to install police and institutions of good governance to oversee the area; "build" means to get donors there so that they can immediately start rebuilding.

In fact, areas had been cleared of insurgents many times, but no Afghan police had arrived to oversee, or international donors to restore essential services to, the people. The result was a quick relapse into the sphere of insurgent influence, with accusations on the international front flying back and forth between the military and the civilians—the former blaming the latter for being unreliable and failing to back them up, with the latter accusing the former of acting unilaterally, without first coordinating with others. As if that weren't enough, the military tended to think that the impasse authorized them to do everything themselves, tackling governance and reconstruction

in place of the Afghans and the rest of the international community. And, in my opinion, there's nothing worse than someone trying to stand in for others and do their jobs for them.

## CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, II

WITH EACH YEAR'S first snowfall, the insurgents would head back toward Pakistan and the conflict became less intense. In the winter of 2008–09, however, things weren't going that way, and many doubted that the old concept of seasonal conflict could be applied.

Despite the bad weather, there continued to be numerous insurgent actions, especially with explosives, and the same was true for international forces operations, above all near the ring road. Following Shindand, there were no further high-profile civilian casualty cases attributable to international troops.

ISAF and the coalition countries were doing everything they possibly could to reduce risks, but since it was impossible to eliminate them completely, we all knew that sooner or later there would be a recurrence.

I had begun to raise awareness inside and outside the Atlantic Alliance on the issue of civilian casualties because the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that NATO had nothing to lose by speaking out and explaining what was going on. Everywhere I went, I raised the topic because others were going to bring it up anyway. At the University of Kabul, Afghan foreign ministry conferences, in international forums and NATO Parliamentary Assembly meetings, before the North Atlantic Council, with the Italian parliamentary commission, at press briefings. And every time, after speaking up, I felt people would think twice about a complicated issue like this and not jump to conclusions.

THE VAST MAJORITY of civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict are due to insurgents: we must never forget that. Obviously, their deliberate acts aiming to kill civilians are one thing;

errors made by the international forces are another. Of course this is no excuse, nor is it an alibi. It's just an incontrovertible fact that the Afghans know better than anyone else because, unfortunately, they're the ones paying the price on a daily basis.

Each day, suicide bombing strategies and indiscriminate use of explosive devices continue to slaughter many innocent people who have nothing to do with the war: men and women going to work in the fields, waiting for a bus, just walking along the street, shopping at the market, or praying in the mosque. The Taliban typically make use of human shields and there are numerous witnesses to this: they just need to fire a mortar against an international military patrol from inside a house full of people and wait for a reaction, which will cause a massacre. Taliban propaganda was highly effective in blaming the international coalition and using every incident to discredit the Afghan government that tolerated this presence on its territory. Of course, facts were never ascertained because the insurgents were not bound to tell the truth, and all they had to do was speak in the first few minutes after an incident, then wait for the media grapevine to do the rest.

I told anyone who rightly complained about the lack of information on incidents and their causes that it's difficult to reconstruct the truth—mainly because the locations are often inaccessible or can be reached only hours after the occurrence. Moreover, to reach incontrovertible conclusions the investigations should be undertaken jointly by the international forces, the Afghans, and the United Nations, and unfortunately this rarely happens, and never with a real common objective. Every so often, the international forces and the Afghans performed joint inspections on the spot where civilian casualties were reported, and after ISAF was given an internal unit in the summer of 2008, it became an increasingly common practice.

Nevertheless, it was practically impossible to get the UN involved in this type of activity. UN personnel preferred to operate alone, making use of their own sources of information and methods. This is one area where civilian and military worlds don't communicate as they should, and my impression

is that this is mainly due to ideological preconceptions. ISAF would have preferred joint investigations, but the United Nations always replied zilch, saying that it would be untenable (even dangerous) for a civilian worker from the international agencies to be seen around international military, whom the Afghans inevitably tend to blame for any incident.

And maybe they had a point.

Another thing nobody knew, and which I repeated constantly, was that in a situation like Afghanistan, as opposed to a war between states, only one faction wears a uniform. A dead man in uniform is definitely a soldier; a corpse in civilian clothes is only an insurgent if a weapon is found nearby; otherwise the deceased is considered a civilian victim. In short, insurgents are easily transformed into civilian casualties: all you have to do is get rid of any hand weapons left after a firefight, which can't be that difficult.

Another factor that can drive up the death toll is the system of paying compensation to the head of the family when he declares the loss of a relative, so you always must be very cautious when relying on witness statements. Above all, in some areas it is a religious tradition to bury victims immediately, which makes accurate verifications impossible.

I'm not trying to say that the international forces were blameless, but I do want to explain that it's only human for anyone with command responsibility to think first and foremost of getting the troops home safe and sound. That's why a ground commander will be reluctant to refuse air support when soldiers are in trouble. Air support fire was still the primary cause of civilian casualties attributable to international forces when I was in Afghanistan, and it is now widely recognized that it had been relied upon too heavily in order to protect forces.

The experience gained from ground operations (in which it is increasingly common for Afghan troops to be in the forward line) shows little room for error, especially if the operation is properly planned. It is when air support is called that the risks of collateral damage become higher. So this is the necessary starting point for addressing the problem: minimize use of air

strikes and make sure ground troops have enough time to retreat before it's too late.

It's easy for an air strike to go wrong. It doesn't take much, and many such errors are caused by misinformation. It's essential to weigh information carefully, although in cases like this, time is of the essence. It has often been suspected that the international air forces relied on deliberately misleading information provided by local sources and were therefore drawn unwittingly into the settling of old domestic scores, for instance, of one clan against another. After thirty years of civil wars, it's easy to see how long the chain of hate might be, and how strong the desire for revenge. It was no coincidence that incidents causing civilian casualties often recurred in the same places after a few years or months.

# **OBAMA AND AF-PAK**

**MARCH 29, 2009**

THROUGHOUT THAT WINTER there were many comings and goings involving Washington: Pentagon military, academics, think tank experts, State Department officials. ISAF mission headquarters were literally besieged, and the logistics people had to jump through hoops to find accommodation and make appointments for everyone.

The reason was that once Obama had been elected, he immediately got to work to define his own strategy for Afghanistan, so the powerful American machine was immediately activated to provide him and his staff all the information they needed. This is the great thing about Americans: they have infinite means. Their system works frantically and, once it gets going, will churn out a full-scale analysis in which everything, even the most insignificant detail, is atomized and put through a sieve.

Decisions are another matter altogether and may depend on several factors. Nonetheless, I've always thought Americans have a strong vocation for pragmatism and are generally free of preconceptions. Before they decide anything, they ask everyone, they listen, and if you do manage to persuade them, they will even change their plans and do exactly what you suggest. Kabul had great expectations for what the new occupant of the White House would decide. The same could be said for the capitals of NATO countries, as Obama would certainly want them to carry on doing their bit.

We waited as the winter passed. And of course lack of news from Washington stirred the imagination of the Afghans. In Arg and the other corridors of power all sorts of predictions were bandied about, excluding no scenario.

Rumor had it that when Vice President Biden returned from Kabul after a short visit in January, he remarked that if you asked ten Americans working on the ground what the U.S. objectives were in Afghanistan, you'd probably get ten different answers. He was trying to convince Obama that it was necessary first of all to clarify the objective of American involvement in the country. In fact, when Obama announced his plan on March 29, 2009, he couldn't have stated it more clearly: "We must dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan," he said to reporters thronging the White House press room. The objective—to stop the organization from doing further harm in the future—marked the first time that Washington had defined the purpose of its presence in the region with such precision. It was also the first time the American scope had widened to encompass Pakistan, whose no-man's-land of tribal areas had been used by al Qaeda and its allies to rebuild their bases after leaving Afghanistan in 2001. This was what the United States was thinking about when it spoke of increasing resources in support of the Islamabad government to help stabilize the country and combat radicalism.

The other new aspect of Obama's plan was to send several hundred diplomats and experts to strengthen the international mission's civilian sector and support reconstruction. He also spoke of dispatching four thousand more soldiers to train the Afghan army. Overall, these were indications of a break from the previous administration that Democratic voters had been expecting. America's commitment in Afghanistan would continue and in some areas it would even be increased, but from now on it would be selective and favor areas hitherto neglected. So for the first time there was talk of a "civilian surge" rather than a "military surge," which reassured everyone to some extent. It remained to be seen whether it was still possible to rectify the situation after eight years of conflict and, above all, if the civilian resources Obama promised could be found as quickly as the military contingent.

My American sources told me that Biden's caution had played an important part in this delicate juncture, where a compromise had evidently been reached between the

president's political and military advisers. Above all, however, Obama was motivated by the need to distance himself from his predecessor's declarations. No one in the White House was going to be talking about building nations in the Islamic world based on a democratic model, as Bush had done. Indeed, from that moment on, all objectives would have to be redefined in line with ownership and sustainability criteria, avoiding excessive neocolonial ambitions and approaches.

A FEW DAYS LATER, in the salon of the residence of the U.S. ambassador to Kabul, the terms of the mission were explained to representatives of the international community by Admiral Mike Mullen and envoy Richard Holbrooke. They'd just met Karzai and received his approval of the new White House strategy. It was now clear that U.S. focus would progressively shift to Islamabad, which was where the pair was going the next day. Of course this couldn't fail to please the Afghans, who saw that somehow their argument of an "imported conflict" had been heard. Nonetheless, the risk that Pakistan could attract important financial resources away from Afghanistan was a source of concern.

However, it was the first time that the U.S. administration acknowledged the danger of the Pakistani situation and seemed determined to remedy it. It was also the first time there was talk of the regional nature of the Afghan conflict—now filed under the name Af-Pak—and the importance of solutions based on civilian as well as military engagement.

"Obama must have read George Kennan and got scared," one of the journalists following the Washington delegation whispered in my ear as Mullen and Holbrooke summed up yet again the points of the Obama strategy. I nodded to shut him up as I was listening to the briefing, and without really knowing what he meant.

Later, as we consumed a delicious Lebanese buffet on the terrace, I strolled over to him and introduced myself, then asked him what he meant by the reference to Kennan. He put his plate on a side table and asked me to wait a moment, then came back with a notebook dense with writing in different colors of ink. But he immediately found the famous American

diplomat's words. "I found this quote by Kennan in Rashid's book," he told me, "and it seems to fit our bill."

Anyone who has ever studied the history of American diplomacy, especially military diplomacy, knows that you might start in a war with certain things on your mind as a purpose of what you are doing, but in the end, you found yourself fighting for entirely different things that you had never thought of before. In other words, war has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it.

A few weeks after this, the new Democratic administration changed its key players in Kabul. A new ambassador, former general Karl Eikenberry, was appointed (although we couldn't help but notice that appointing a soldier in what was typically a civilian role was in contrast with the emphasis on a civilian surge), and a couple of months later General Stanley McChrystal took over from General David McKiernan as head of the ISAF mission. Meanwhile, several countries followed the example of the United States by appointing their own Af-Pak envoys to assist Holbrooke. These envoys then began to meet regularly in various world capitals, often on the sidelines of multilateral events: Munich, Tokyo, Istanbul, Trieste, Paris, and New York.

I was also part of this group, as a representative of NATO, as was Ettore Sequi, the European Union envoy. The stated purpose of the "Support Group," as it was dubbed, was to sustain the UN mission in Afghanistan (in other words, Kai Eide) and contribute to the coordination of international assistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was soon clear, however, that it wasn't going to be easy for the group to work in close collaboration with representatives of three major multilateral institutions in Kabul: not just the United Nations, but also NATO and the European Union.

This was not so much for the egos, rivalries, and jealousies that drove many, but because the "concert of powers" nature of the group led some of its members to antagonize those who were on the ground trying to operate on the basis of common denominators. However, the Support Group doubled and then

tripled the number of envoys in a few months and became the chief international consultation forum on Afghanistan and Pakistan. When I attended it for the last time in Abu Dhabi, in January 2010, more than thirty countries were represented, including China, Russia, India, and the United Arab Emirates.

## AWKWARD NEIGHBORS

I WAS IN Gazar Gah, on the outskirts of Herat, visiting the tomb of the eleventh-century Sufi poet Khoja Abdullah Ansari when I saw the gatekeeper approach, dragging a boy behind him to interpret.

He wanted to know who I was and what I was doing in one of Afghanistan's most sacred places. He listened to my replies; then he informed me that when Ansari was alive, he would come to compose his verses in this very place, every day as the sun set. "He'd always arrive from there," he said, pointing to a mound of sun-parched earth, "because his home was back there, in the district of the flower growers."

Such is the soul of Asia, this ability to penetrate time and refer to centuries-old events as if they'd happened the day before. In Afghanistan this is a common phenomenon for any situation or social class.

In Peter Levi's book *The Light Garden of the Angel King*, I'd already read about his encounter with an old inhabitant of Nuristan Province who remembered by heart the names of the fifty generations who'd preceded him (which means a thousand years). It was also happening to me, time and again. I'd meet Afghans who preferred to explain the present by bringing up their country's ancient history. When they put their minds to it, the Afghans did it with some elegance, nothing to do with the desire to seem educated or erudite, and the simple result was that they abolished time, removing the distance between past and present.

"The greatest dangers for our people have always come from outside, like the time we were vanquished by hordes of Genghis Khan," an Afghan diplomat told me one day, speaking of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. "Since then, things haven't changed a bit," he went on with a sigh. "Geography is part of the problem and we can't change

that...unfortunately our neighbors are who they are and we can't change that either." He shook his head in an almost theatrical gesture and concluded, saying that apart from Tajikistan, none of Afghanistan's neighbors had any interest in seeing the country stand on its own two feet.

IT WAS CLEAR that Afghanistan was still the "battleground of Asia," as Lord Curzon had commented a century earlier. That was why, from the time of the international Paris conference of 2008, the international community had begun to promote the idea of a regional approach. Neighboring countries would have to stop being part of the problem and become part of the solution. In this sense, Richard Holbrooke's attempt to sit them all around the Af-Pak table was intuitively a good idea. There wasn't a single Afghan problem that didn't have a cross-border element: insurgence, drug trafficking, energy issues, major infrastructure projects. It was truly short-sighted to think they might be solved unilaterally.

In Kabul I regularly saw the ambassadors of neighboring countries, chiefly those of Pakistan and India, who were not only both very affable but also very knowledgeable about what was going on in Afghanistan. When we discussed a regional approach, we were, in fact, all looking past the southern border: it doesn't take an expert in international policy to know that the Afghan problem is just the tip of the iceberg. What is below the surface includes the rivalry between India and Pakistan that has existed since 1947, of which Kashmir is the main theater of conflict. Then there's Iran, of course, another significant variable in this new version of the "Great Game," as are Russia and China, while the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan are used primarily as alternatives to Pakistan for communication and supply routes.

THE PAKISTANI DIPLOMATS were witty and talkative, but you had to have at least three cups of tea before you got anything serious out of them. Islamabad's policy was no secret, nor had it changed much in recent times, except for some superficial developments. The military hierarchies that traditionally control the country have always believed that an Afghan regime favorable to their interests is crucial to national

security. They were obsessed by a fear that Kabul would end up under Indian influence, thereby leaving Pakistan in the unfortunate situation of being caught between two allied hostile neighbors, one to the west and the other to the east. It was hence an existential rebound that over the years had led some Pakistani leaders to interfere in Afghan politics, first supporting the more radical fringes of anti-Soviet jihad, and then the Taliban. Everyone in Kabul knew that even after the deployment of the international mission, the Islamabad people in Afghanistan had kept in touch with everyone. That was why it was a good idea to ask them to deal with the emergencies arising in areas under Taliban influence (for instance in the kidnappings of international personnel).

Afghan-Pakistani relations were hardly fully normalized, although things had improved when a civilian government was returned to power in Islamabad in September 2008. Nonetheless, since Asif Ali Zardari was ineffective for a dossier that was traditionally a military and intelligence preserve, the Afghans continued to mistrust the Pakistanis, considering them protectors of the Taliban and their enclaves on that side of the border.

THE INDIAN AMBASSADOR'S residence was a short walk from NATO headquarters, and I was a willing visitor because he was a mine of information, knowledgeable about the Afghans, and an infinite source of authentic Indian culinary delights.

After the fall of Mullah Omar's regime, India had once again reinforced its presence in Kabul, and the ambassador was not only a staunch supporter of the ties between the two nations, but also one of the foreign diplomats in Kabul to whom Karzai listened most. I remember the speech he gave during a tragic anniversary, that of the July 2008 suicide bombings against the Indian embassy, when the ambassador focused on the shared heritage and the historical and cultural affinities of the two countries. For New Delhi the Taliban period was a historical anomaly, a parenthesis to be closed for good. In fact, since 2002 it had given strenuous support to international efforts to strengthen the Karzai government. Apart from being one of the leading donors and implementers of civil works, India had opened consulates in Mazar-e Sharif,

Jalalabad, Herat, and Kandahar. Pakistan was visibly concerned by this activism and believed India had a single goal: to use its diplomatic and consular bases in Afghanistan to destabilize Pakistani Baluchistan.

I TENDED TO be wary of the Iranian ambassador, first of all because he was tough on NATO and the West, and then because he had a dangerous habit of exploiting his contacts and using the media badly.

I trusted the Iranian consul in Herat far more, although I couldn't say why. Once I spent a morning in the flourishing garden of his residence, under a magnificent pergola. He was courteous, probably because of my nationality and the fact that Italy had always been an advocate of dialogue among all the countries of the region. The garden's dreamlike quiet, the sweet grapes we were continually offered, and the gentle murmur of a nearby fountain led my mind to wander and did nothing to help concentration. From a cultural standpoint, Herat is certainly Iranian: you can see it in the houses, the black veils worn by the women, the kind of order that reigns over the city. Iran's influence, however, goes much farther east, as far as the Hindu Kush, where a Shiite Hazara community lives and for centuries has been Tehran's way of maintaining a foot in the Afghanistan door.

Tehran keeps a low profile with regard to the insurgents, in the sense that it has never openly supported them. For Iran, a fundamentalist Sunni regime like that of the Taliban taking hold on its eastern borders would be one of the worst things that could happen. On the other hand, the Afghan conflict is too good an opportunity for Tehran to pass up for niggling the Americans, and their allies, and obviously difficult to avoid entirely. Consequently, it offers direct support to Karzai and indirect aid to the opposition and other parties to the conflict in what appears to be an excellent system for reconciling the various interests at stake. That morning in Herat, the consul regaled me on various topics, but all related to the conflict: drug-trafficking problems, the penetrability of the eastern borders, the instability that Afghan refugees had caused in eastern Iran for decades. They were all legitimate concerns

and perhaps they might be an incentive for getting Tehran to lend a hand.

PAKISTAN, INDIA, AND IRAN did have a point in common, even though none of them declared it openly—a substantial skepticism about prospects for an international coalition. Only the Russian ambassador in Kabul openly expressed this skepticism. This charismatic figure was the doyen of the diplomatic community and one whose professional destiny was carved in his name: Zamir Kabulov.

We didn't enjoy an easy relationship, despite the fact that a mutual friend, the Spanish ambassador, had managed to get us both at a table for a reconciliatory dinner. The fact was that when I'd arrived in Kabul in the summer of 2008, the Georgia crisis was at its height. Given Kabulov's ongoing public criticisms of NATO, I had decided not to visit his embassy as I had the others.

Zamir Kabulov intensely resented NATO and the West in general, and he used my presumed rudeness as a pretext for barbed comments every time we met. However, Kabulov was a straight talker, there was no doubt about that, and he was of the opinion that the international coalition, with the Americans in the lead, was repeating the exact same mistakes that had forced the Red Army to withdraw twenty years earlier. Through him I learned some interesting facts about the Russians during their invasion of Afghanistan, including the care with which Moscow had monitored the civilian component of the operation. According to Kabulov, it was the Russians who had, in a sense, invented the comprehensive approach that the international community was now trying to implement—in other words, a complete strategy in which the military component was only part of the whole.

In fact, judging from what I could observe in Kabul and in various parts of the country, during its occupation the Soviet Union had invested heavily in infrastructure and economic aid, but apparently that wasn't enough to win over the people.

MANY THINK THAT the “Stans” are destined to become one of the great geopolitical problems of the twenty-first century, and judging from what is happening behind their borders, it's hard

not to agree. It's always been a mystery—at least to me—what these heirs of the USSR (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) really think of Afghanistan. For NATO, the three countries were important partners, especially as they were alternative supply routes to Pakistan for the military contingents. That is why I met regularly with their ambassadors, who were generally suspicious folk with little to say and barely shared an idea with you. Of course, the Uzbeks and Turkmens played important bilateral roles, for example, in the field of electricity supply, but it was obvious that their countries could have done much more. If they were sitting on the fence rather than engaging seriously, it meant that they weren't convinced of what the Afghan government was doing or of the medium- to long-term prospects.

Their embassies were cold, stupidly enormous, and with an aroma of school meals that filled your nostrils as soon as the front door swung open. In my imagination those endless salons quickly became the metaphor for a geographical vacuum, and every time I saw them, I felt the same disorientation as I did when I perused a post-Soviet Asian atlas, full of new, unknown countries.

## A SMALL TRAVEL LIBRARY, III

THE FIRST TIME I heard Majrouh mentioned, I didn't know who he was. It happened one evening when I was having dinner in the garden of some of the Italian volunteers. They represented the usual free-for-all of expats working with NGOs, journalists, diplomats, and people just passing through. We were in the Shahr-e Naw district, in the center of Kabul, but we could have been anywhere in the world—Africa, Latin America, South East Asia—because on these occasions you always eat the same things, do the same things, and everyone's dressed and behaving in much the same way.

Cliques form, there's not much mingling, diplomats with diplomats, journalists with journalists, aid workers with aid workers, and so on. I knew hardly anyone and after a quick look around I was deciding on how to slip away as I meandered with my plate of rice, eavesdropping on a conversation I could slide into, so I didn't look completely antisocial. In one corner I checked out a group of journalists, where one of them, a freckled blonde Frenchwoman, was speaking quite animatedly to someone. At first I thought it must be about the usual things journalists look for when they've catapulted into Kabul and don't know where to start their first "exotic" piece. I'd already been there and it was excruciating: "Ambassador, do you happen to know anyone with a burqa who'd be willing to be photographed?" Or "You don't happen to have the number of a Taliban in town we could talk to?" Or "Can you help us contact someone in the royal family, maybe that grandson of the king who's decided to try his hand at politics?"

The French journalist wasn't looking for any of the usual items, however; instead, she was asking about a place where a

congregation of Sufi poets met, because she was hoping to meet someone who could tell her about Majrouh, “an Afghan writer that everyone’s talking about in France these days.” But no one could give her directions, and the conversation petered out and soon moved on to another topic. A few minutes later, I found myself next to the woman as she poured herself a drink and I asked her about Majrouh, a name that meant nothing to me. I asked her who he was exactly, and how she’d found out about him, and what else she might be looking for. Seeing her hesitant look, I knew what she was worried about, and I was quick to tell her I was a diplomat and reassured her that I wouldn’t be stealing her story.

She was from Montpellier, where Majrouh had graduated in philosophy in the 1950s. She’d come to Afghanistan to gather information about him and see if she could get enough material for a publication. She’d begun her research in Peshawar and had then come to Kabul to talk with professors from Kabul University’s Faculty of Letters, and they had told her of this congregation of poets, who appeared to be made up of Majrouh’s students. She’d spent two days trying to find them and going back to the address she’d been given, but there was never anyone there. The journalist, whose name I never found out, pulled a book from her backpack and said that these were some of the best poems she’d ever read about women—that this was what had driven her to start the project with such passion.

Majrouh’s collection of folk poetry about Pashtun women had been published in France as *Le suicide et le chant*. “They should be studied at school,” she said, then opened it at random and read a few verses:

“Pose ta bouche sur la mienne, mais laisse libre ma langue pour te parler d’amour.”

Or,

“Demain les affamés de mes amours seront satisfaits, car je veux traverser le village à visage découvert et chevelure au vent.”

As soon as I got home I typed the name into my computer and waited patiently, because the connection was what it was, and it always took five to ten minutes to open a page. I found a lot of information about Majrouh, including a good piece, as always, by Atiq Rahimi. Majrouh was born in Kunar in the east of the country and in the early 1950s had gone to France to research the literature of Diderot and Montaigne.

On his return home, he had become dean of the Faculty of Letters at Kabul University, then governor of Kapisa, but he wasn't interested in power, so he went to serve as the cultural attaché in Germany, and from there continued his dalliance with France as much as he could.

After the Soviet invasion, he went into exile and like many others settled in Peshawar, in Pakistan. Through the Afghan Information Center he helped as best he could with anti-Soviet resistance.

On February 11, 1988, there was a knock at the door of his home in Peshawar, and the burst of machine gunfire that killed him may also have been because he had broken the Pashtunwali code of honor, the customs that govern the life of the Pashtuns, including relations between men and women in the home. Majrouh died for writing clearly, in every language, for giving a body and a name to those who had none. Since the Pashtunwali also embraces the concept of *badal*, or a right to revenge, he knew the risks he was running.

The Afghanistan described by Majrouh was a country martyred by tyranny, in which a Midnight Traveler walks tirelessly amid deserts and mountains, from village to village, stirring consciences and encouraging citizens to rise up against the Monster.

A few months later I managed to get my hands on a French version of *Ego-Monster*: a difficult story in verse, which one reviewer called the “mirror of a country and the story of its history.” Majrouh's book was strange, unique.

I was struck by the fact that in Afghanistan no one ever mentioned Majrouh. When not even the bookstore I frequented, Shah M. Books, was able to help me, I had to find

a way to procure his works from Paris. The writing was oriental and complicated. It felt as if Majrouh were a modern descendant of Rumi and Khayyam, steeped in Western culture, but firmly anchored to his origins. I didn't understand the words, which were those of nomads, shepherds, peasants, Malangs, and God fanatics. But I did feel that each word was chosen and defined carefully for a shock effect.

WHENEVER I COULD, I continued my Friday jaunts to the Bookseller of Kabul. Because I hated offering my guests the tasteless gifts left by my predecessor—lighters, cufflinks, pens, watches, cigarette cases, cups, and other vaguely useless items with a NATO logo—I persuaded my accountant to give me money from the entertainment budget so I could buy photography books of Afghanistan. There weren't that many in the bookshop and some were used, definitely in very poor condition, but I asked the owner to put them aside for me, and thus I was able to solve the dilemma of how to reciprocate when visiting dignitaries decided to bring me a gift.

I'd become a good customer for the bookstore because I bought books for personal pleasure and now books for the office too. The checkout boys all knew me and every now and again they told me they'd put aside a rare text for me, or that something had arrived that I should see. In reality, they were books that weren't worth anything and they cost a fortune. I remember haggling for a month to buy a copy of *Kim* dated 1920, which was clearly a fake (it was a photocopy), but I'd have bought it anyway if they'd accepted less than two hundred dollars. But knowing they thought about me made me happy just the same, and made me feel at home. Not quite like I did in the Rome or Brussels bookshops, but we were getting there.

## A DREAM

ONE EVENING, DURING a reception hosted by the Canadian ambassador, I was introduced to a young Afghan actress. She was a very beautiful girl, with black eyes and hair, and Indian features, dressed in jeans, sandals, and a silk blouse. I hadn't understood if she worked in movies or television, but I heard her talking about a film festival to be held in Kabul in the near future.

"That's nice," I said, pleased. "So can I hope for an invitation?"

"Of course," said the man with her, a young director dressed like a rapper.

We started talking about European movies and directors, and they were well informed. They reeled off the names of all of Wim Wenders's movies, and when they discovered that I was Italian, those of Antonioni, Fellini, and Visconti as well. She said she loved Claudia Cardinale, and the ballroom scene in *The Leopard* was one of her favorites.

"She's saying that because she knows she looks like her," said the director, pouring her more fruit juice. I looked more closely, and I realized she did indeed.

The conversation had come right out of the blue: anywhere else in the world it would have been all in a day's work, but there it seemed totally out of place. We were in a treeless garden surrounded by reinforced concrete walls fitted with CCTV cameras; numerous bodyguards and men in fatigues mingled with the guests. At one point, I asked the director what he thought of *Osama*, Siddik Barmak's award-winning 2003 movie, the story of a little Afghan girl, under the Taliban regime, who pretends to be a boy so she can work and help her widowed mother.

I don't know why I did it, no reason really, but the director wasn't happy. I saw it from his face as he muttered something about Barmak, whom he clearly didn't like. The result was

that the spell was broken, and suddenly there was nothing to talk about. It had been a brief exchange, just a few minutes, a chat among strangers who meet by chance and talk about the first thing that comes into their heads. But, as Freud or Jung would have said, the chat was long enough to mean something.

As we took the car back, the carabinieri who was my driver put on a CD of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*. As usual, we entered the house through the kitchen door.

"Ambassador..." said one of the detail as he put his machine gun down on a chair, "...seeing that garden full of people tonight was like being in another world."

"You're right," I replied. "An evening out of the seventies, when stylish Kabul women dressed in European fashions, just like in the shah's Persia, and you'd meet girls in short skirts and bare legs out on the street."

Then I added something about the Afghan actress and our brief conversation, and I told them that she looked like a young Claudia Cardinale. One of the guys said, "Okey dokey, ambassador...fair enough...now it's time for bed."

And we all laughed.

THAT NIGHT I dreamed I was walking the streets of Kabul, something I'd never been able to do by myself. It was early morning and children with their backpacks were going to school hand in hand. The air stank of open sewers, but occasionally the scent of Marseille soap drifted down from the terraces where young women flapped laundered clothes as if they were flags.

At one point I reached a large square, filled with colorful Pakistani trucks covered with illustrations. They were parked neatly, side by side, and the drivers gathered in small groups around the bonfires they had lighted. The aroma of mutton mingled with that of rotting garbage.

The square was overrun with plastic bags, and the children who crossed it were holding posies of fragrant flowers. I crossed the square too and suddenly found myself in the heart

of the old town, where dozens of carpenters perched on tall wooden scaffolding were erecting a glass and steel building that was meant to be a palace, but on that site of red sand it was decidedly out of place.

Next to it was a garrison of combatants, perhaps Taliban or warlord militia. Some were typing on computers, others were using Play Stations, yet others were squatting on the ground and seemed to be making toy bombs. Their guns were lined up against the wall. Two jeeps parked with their doors open were blaring notes of *Comfortably Numb*. It all gave the impression of calm chaos, a sea where you could drown in perfect peace.

Then an ugly mug standing lookout on a jeep saw me pass and yelled something I couldn't make out, but he scared me enough to make me walk faster. I was almost running by the time I slipped into an alley, across a garden, and clambered over a dry stone wall, looking over my shoulder to make sure no one was after me. I found myself on the patio of a house full of colorful balloons. There was a party going on with a four-piece band on a wooden dais playing a slow dance. There were lots of guests and they were all dancing.

The beautiful Afghan actress I'd met at the Canadian ambassador's reception was dancing and holding Marina Golbahari, the little girl who was the lead in the *Osama* movie. In one corner I recognized Claudia Cardinale and Burt Lancaster dancing in *The Leopard* costumes. The others danced alone: women swathed in blue burqas, international coalition soldiers in fatigues, warlords in colorful turbans and ammunition belts full of bullets.

I woke up happy, almost blissful, more than I had been for quite a while. And with the party music still ringing in my ears, I realized that when I left Kabul it would be a very sad day for me. It was still dark as I dragged myself out of bed, and without changing out of the tracksuit I wore in bed, I put on my tennis shoes and went down to the kitchen. I borrowed the detail's moka pot and gas ring to make coffee, then sat down on a stool to wait for the first light of dawn to unveil the horizon of snow-capped mountains beyond the boundary walls. As I glimpsed their silvery silhouette, I thought that

Kabul was what it was and nothing more than that. A city I could only dream. My eyes filled with tears but I didn't know why.

## KARZAI

HAMID KARZAI is an extraordinary politician in the literal sense. His manner, his dialectic skill, his wit, his command of the English language had no equal on the Afghan scene and it made him a unique character. He had an answer to everything and you couldn't catch him off guard. Even when he wasn't telling the whole truth, his aplomb was impeccable as he tried to make you believe some total nonsense.

At the time when the international press was accusing his brother, Wali Karzai, of trafficking, a member of parliament from an EU state asked him how the corruption phenomenon could be stemmed, and for twenty minutes Karzai regaled him with a story of an Afghan policeman who earned one hundred U.S. dollars a month, had six children to feed, and didn't know how to keep the wolf from the door. The president concluded his story saying, "I'd like to see you manage on a hundred dollars a month with a family to support...preaching to those who earn one hundred dollars a month is easy, but it's not right...." And before the parliamentarian could react, Karzai had deftly moved the conversation on to the need for the international community to invest more resources in training the Afghan police force.

Clearly, the parliamentarian had meant another kind of corruption, and Karzai had understood him perfectly, but with his policeman story he'd managed to change the subject. When we left the presidential palace, the European MP asked what could be done to increase pay for Afghan policemen, and I told him that the Japanese had taken care of it, earmarking several million dollars to increase police salaries. The MP was of the opinion that Karzai was not fit to govern and incapable of creating an efficient administrative machine, yet there was no one else like him in Afghanistan—the same conclusion everyone else always came to when they met him for the first time.

By now I'd gotten to know Karzai pretty well, and even though I hadn't developed an outright personal relationship with him, I participated in many meetings. I had talked with him, eaten at his table and, most of all, I'd listened carefully. It was a known fact that he knew how to keep his ship afloat better than many others, otherwise he wouldn't have stayed at its helm for so long. But it wasn't just a matter of political instinct; there was something more, a special talent for converting his weakness into strength.

On several occasions he'd been considered a goner, politically isolated on both the domestic and the international fronts, yet he came up trumps every time, calling his opponent's bluff or pulling out of his sleeve an alliance judged impossible just the day before.

Through spring and summer 2009 this had happened at least three times. He had literally split the enemy camp in two by offering the vice presidency to Fahim, one of the Northern Front's most iconic figures; then he managed to stay in office until the elections despite various interpretations of the constitution that required he resign from the presidency three months before; and on the eve of the vote he was able to patch up an alliance with General Dostum by the skin of his teeth, crucial for ensuring the Uzbek vote in the north.

"He's a tactical genius," I heard some diplomats commenting, as if they were talking about Metternich. "Yes, but his actions seem more like those of someone living hand to mouth than someone who has a real strategy in mind for the country," answered those whose brains weren't quite melted by the heat of the Afghan summer.

Karzai had a complicated relationship with NATO and in particular with the United States: the issue of civilian casualties was just the tip of the iceberg, while under the surface there was the problem of failing mutual trust. Karzai had begun to lose confidence in the West soon after 2001, when George Bush denied the reinforcements needed to wield a death blow to the Taliban and was insufficiently decisive with Pervez Musharraf when Mullah Omar and his faction were regrouping in enclaves on Pakistani territory.

The West lost confidence in Karzai a little later, when it began to realize that corruption was endemic and that his government hadn't even attempted to give the country the institutions it needed.

All this merely increased the frustration of the Afghan president and strengthened his personal conviction, and that of his inner circle, that the Western community was scheming how to get rid of him. Karzai's insecurity reached a crescendo in the spring of 2009, after Obama announced Washington's new Afghan strategy. But mixed signals still kept arriving, depending on whether it was the State Department, the Pentagon, or the White House talking.

A few months later, this insecurity evolved into something verging on paranoia during the campaign for the Afghan presidential election, when Karzai had the distinct feeling that his overseas allies weren't giving him the support he'd enjoyed in the past.

DURING THE SUMMER OF 2009, palace conspiracy theories began to gather over the city like the brooding clouds of an Indian monsoon. Karzai had made up his mind that the American envoy, Richard Holbrooke, had persuaded many of the other forty-three presidential candidates to stand against him with the intention of preventing his victory in the first round, forcing him to a runoff with the Tajik challenger, Abdullah Abdullah. Karzai's only option, therefore, was to win the elections by any means and prepare for any subsequent eventuality, consolidating on the domestic front.

Tension in the halls of the presidential palace was palpable. The entire international community proclaimed it was neutral as far as the various presidential candidates were concerned, but in the meantime U.S. ambassador Eikenberry had appeared at the side of challengers Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani during their pre-election press conference.

This scenario led to musings by Karzai's loyal supporters. "An ally is an ally," they reasoned out loud. "They have to be supported all the way, even if you're not happy with everything they do.... However, if Karzai is no longer the ally

of the West, then things are different and obviously he too will feel free to act as he sees fit.”

Voting would take place in a few weeks’ time in August; then everything would stop for three months, waiting for the results to come in. There were huge frauds and many irregularities, and, according to election observers, all major candidates were involved directly or indirectly to some extent. At the end of the count, Karzai was forced to accept the invalidation of about a million votes in his favor and resign himself to a second ballot, although, as we’ll see, this never took place.

ON AUGUST 19, 2009, the anniversary of the declaration of independence and one day ahead of the elections, I was sitting in a large tent in the presidential palace. We were in the oldest wing, which King Zaher had occupied until his death, set in a garden graced with a massive age-old, gleaming oak tree. Although it was the eve of the election, Karzai had invited the political and international communities to lunch, as he did every year. Elegantly turned out, he sat with his government team and the two vice presidents—the Tajik, Muhammad Fahim, and the Hazara, Karim Khalili—with whom he would face the polls the next day.

Khalili was a man with an awkward past whose presence in the government we, in the international community, were all nonetheless used to. On the other hand, we were all having trouble swallowing the return of Fahim to the political scene; indeed, many Westerners choked on the news. This was the very warlord Karzai had dismissed as vice president four years before, under international pressure, at a time when the country finally seemed destined to turn over a new leaf and change leadership once and for all. Therefore, in a sense, that slippery guest was a return to the past, a clear sign of Karzai’s distrust of the West and his need to cover his domestic back.

While we were waiting to take our seats, after shaking hands with the president, I was approached by a prominent figure whom I knew well and who didn’t mince words.

“Do you know what Karzai’s up to?” he asked at one point. “Do you know, for example, if he wants to be a great national

leader or if his goal is to be first and foremost the leader of his own people, the Pashtuns? Or shall we say the Pashtun Popalzai group?”

It was a question that I couldn't answer but, as they say, it struck a chord. I mulled it over all through lunch, watching the colorful presidential table a few feet from me and thinking that the East was far more mysterious than we might imagine. What if Karzai could care less about a united, democratic Afghanistan? What if he had only particularist aspirations? And what if we had overlooked what his real design might be?

## BIRD'S-EYE VIEWS

THE THING I liked best of all was being up in a helicopter. Not for the actual flight, which often was “tactical” and thus turned my stomach, but because the best way to observe Afghanistan was by flying over it.

There was no lack of opportunities, especially in the summer. As the census of projects implemented by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams was ongoing, I visited some of the provinces at least two or three times a month, and the helicopter was quicker and safer than overland travel. And often, given the distance, there was no other choice.

Flying in helicopters always made me nervous, at least during takeoff and landing, which is when the aircraft is most vulnerable. It had taken just a few videos to prove to me that the tide of the war with Russia had turned when the mujahedin began to shoot down helicopters with Stinger missiles. And I was concerned that there might be no end of these missiles in Afghanistan, despite disarmament and war arsenal recovery programs. Where were they now? Who had them? Were we quite sure that they were in safe hands or had all been destroyed? And why had the Taliban, who certainly didn't lack for resources, not yet managed to get hold of portable arms that could hit a helicopter far better than the classic RPG? Could we rule out this possibility or was it just a matter of time?

These were the questions I fired at my military adviser before each flight, and his partial responses were never quite reassuring. So the helicopter always worried me a tad, even though once we were airborne, the enchantment of the landscape scattered all fears.

When you're over Afghanistan you're able to understand that the desert is shifting: it is not static, the same all the time. I already knew having seen the phenomenon many years

before in the Sahara, but in this case, perhaps because the morphology here is so dramatic, it was as if the changes were even more poignant and unsettling.

There's always something unexpected, something to stir the imagination: a broken line, a sudden turn in the horizon, an unexpected element that creates a disturbance. Yet the landscape always seems to be ruled by harmony, by a law that always affords due importance to matter, form, and color.

The Uruzgan desert has pink sand, as soft as talcum powder, and even the slightest breeze conjures up countless eddies that whirl as far as the clouds. The Kandahar desert, on the other hand, is white, its sand dotted with clumps of yellowish vegetation to show that in this desert work is still in progress.

Around Ghor, the sand is heavier than anywhere else, a sort of saffron-colored earth that covers roofs, mountains, and roads, muddying the waters of the rivers. And in Helmand Province, the desert is iridescent, glowing with rocks rich in minerals that appear to be a metal surface.

The mountains are never the same either, changing constantly with the time of day and the season. The ice-capped peaks of the Hindu Kush have a sugary texture and reverberate with endless blues and violets. Lower down, especially as the day draws to a close, the rock faces reflect mainly yellows, reds, and other primary colors. Along the Pakistan border the mountains are open fields and are tinged with copper and lapis lazuli.

Even the sight of lakes at high altitude is stunning. One morning, at the first light of dawn, those around Bamyan were the color of caramel, and when we dropped our altitude over the surface of one, it began to ripple in thousands of golden prisms.

The Afghan landscape is made up of immense spaces, of unbelievable proportions, and it always has everything. The Afghans say that when God had finished making the world, He had lots of materials left over that He couldn't use anywhere else, and after giving it some thought, He put them in a sack

and scattered them randomly over a corner of the planet. This became Afghanistan.

The landscapes I saw from the air made me think of paintings by Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri, because everywhere there was a sense of tragedy and glory, as in their works of art. The high deserts were dotted with square or rectangular stone walls that were like spatial concepts; the cracks in the earth's crust were cuts in the canvas; lava flows resembled the "blacks"; the color that bloomed at the tops of the mountains seemed like immense bacterial cultures; the rocks melted by the sun were open-air "combustions"; the round hills bare of vegetation were the muscles of the earth, its raw flesh; and the smuggler mule tracks were the slashes in its veins.

To friends who emailed to ask if the landscape of Afghanistan was as extraordinary as they'd heard, I was able to answer yes. It was unlike any I'd ever seen. I told them to go and look at Fontana's canvases or Burri's collages to get an idea of what it really looked like, but to try to imagine them in infinitely greater dimensions.

## KANDAHAR

A STRONGHOLD OF SORTS, set in sands...a kind of oasis...an expanse of clay houses scorched by the sun and surrounded by high walls. The origins of this unique town, unavoidable for anyone traveling from Iran to the Indian subcontinent, are lost in the mists of time. There are so many theories about its foundation that you're free to believe whichever you like best. Books will tell you it is over three thousand years old and that its name derives from the Indian "Gandhara," but I preferred to believe that Alexander the Great had built it and given his own name—Iskander. And this notion alone was enough to give a special meaning to my being there.

In the past thirty years the urban landscape has changed considerably and there are no traces of the gardens that had made the city famous. Once upon a time dozens of different types of grapes, tulips, and melons grew here, but now the land around the city has been invaded by expanses of sand that look like abandoned cemeteries. The only green to be seen is in the pomegranate groves, but the old folk say that they will soon be gone too, standing as close as they do to the new line of fire.

I've been to Kandahar on a number of occasions: to meet Afghan ministers, the governor, provincial authorities, and civilian and military representatives of the southern region. Each time just the approach by helicopter at low altitudes was a huge thrill.

"If you want to control Afghanistan, you need to watch over Kandahar," says Afghan wisdom, and there wasn't an ISAF commander who hadn't wracked their brains over this. It wasn't an easy task because the city was targeted by insurgents controlled by the Quetta *shura*, as well as being a hive of infiltrators, spies, collaborators, and people ready to blow themselves up.

Twice I'd come from Kabul with a group of ministers from the Afghan government. Jalali Popal, tasked with local governance, had brought them to the capital of the south in an attempt to prove to the administrators of the provinces most affected by the insurgents that the Kabul government was standing by them.

We met in the governor's palace, which was in the urban center and for this occasion had been isolated from the rest of the city by the security forces. Most of the international contingent wore flak jackets (some went as far as donning helmets) for the entire duration of the meetings. ISAF helicopters set us down in an inner courtyard, patrolled by special forces, then came to pick us up again at a prearranged time. They were on the ground only long enough to board us—they didn't even shut down their engines—and that was ample proof of how precarious government control of the area was.

IF I STOPPED OVER, I slept at the airport military base in one of the containers reserved for officers in transit. They said it wouldn't be safe to stay in the city, which was true enough as the base was hit by insurgent rocket fire now and again.

There was an alarm system that gave an eight-second warning that one of these rockets was on its way. When you heard the siren, wherever you were in the base, you had to grab a helmet and body armor, then fall to the ground.

It was odd sleeping there, so close yet so far from this legendary city, but by now I was used to this Afghanistan that was more fiction than fact and just out of reach, which enhanced its appeal even more. On the other hand, I wasn't alone. Indeed, I got the impression that many Afghans had the same problem, namely that they couldn't identify with their country or understand what it had become.

The airport itself had grown by leaps and bounds and was a town of about ten thousand people, mostly military. There were eateries, cafes, gyms, and even a Thai massage parlor.

The first time I went to Kandahar I met with the governor. It was rumored that he was governor in his palace, but not

outside of it. And in the city's turbulent history this was almost a constant.

I felt that even he didn't know exactly what was happening in the province and couldn't come to terms with a population that sided with the government by day, then fed the insurgents by night. I remember asking him some trivial things like how many schools and hospitals there were, and what people survived on now that the ring road was under constant attack by insurgents so it was no longer possible to export almonds, grapes, and pomegranates. His answers were vague, as if he didn't know or they were issues that didn't interest him.

He said the only thing he needed were militia, people to recruit among the population that could assist the meager government security forces in their control of the territory. When I asked him if I could be useful in some way, he answered that I could persuade the Kabul government to send more troops and police.

IN THE RECENT PAST Sarah Chayes, a former journalist, had lived in Kandahar as the head of an NGO, managing a company that produced cosmetics with local raw materials. She had now moved to Kabul with a consulting contract for the commander of ISAF. Her book, *The Punishment of Virtue*, is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand post-2001 Afghanistan and its myriad lost opportunities. The book's premise is that the insurgents were able to re-infiltrate the social fabric of Kandahar thanks to corrupt local potentates and politicians appointed by Kabul, and that it all started very early, precisely when the city was "liberated" from the Taliban in December 2001. It was especially the contrast between Gul Shirzai, the governor of Kandahar province after the Taliban until 2003, and Hamid Karzai, who represented, respectively, the old and the new Afghanistan, that had effectively brought chaos to the city.

She once told me, "In Kandahar you can still live life as if it were a novel," full of admiration for those lives so different from ours. "Down there, more than in other parts of the country, you can see the true spirit of the Afghans and their contradictions. The Pashtuns are generous, hospitable, and

noble, but they can also be evil, devious, power crazed. That's why their stories are always in chiaroscuro, virtuous and cruel, a mix of chivalry and pure dishonor."

WHEN THE TALIBAN began their conquest of Afghanistan in 1994, starting from Kandahar, they weren't interested in exercising power. An Afghan once told me: "The Taliban were good." Their only goal was to purify a corrupt society that was in the hands of the unscrupulous. "Talib" means student: he who seeks the truth, not he who offers it. For this reason many began to trust them.

Magnificent—and partly unknown—things have always happened in Afghanistan. One of the most disconcerting was the birth of the Greek-Buddhist civilization, which is the only historically documented example of a fusion between European and Asian cultures. Thus, Mullah Omar's original project was just another visionary project conceived in this extreme part of the world. Mullah Omar must also have been a visionary, because I can't think of how else to describe someone who dreamed, along with his students or "Taliban," of returning Afghan society to the imaginary model of seventh-century Arabia.

When I read his story in Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, it was impossible not to think back to all the times I'd been in Kandahar. Mullah Omar was born nearby to a modest family. He took three wives, had five children, and taught theology in the village of Singesar, in a small mud madrassa with mattresses on the floor. In the spring of 1994, when his neighbors told him that a commander had abducted two young girls, shaved them, and made his men rape them repeatedly, Omar armed his students, attacked the base, freed the girls, then hanged the commander. This was how his legend began, in the middle of an apparent desert, becoming an epic in less than two years.

# COIN—THE COUNTERINSU RGENCY MANUAL

GENERAL STANLEY McCHRYSTAL'S arrival in Kabul was preceded by his reputation.

Once again I'd been brought up to speed by Sarah Chayes, the American writer enamored of Kandahar, a woman who could get anyone in Washington to listen to her, from the Pentagon to the State Department and even Congress.

"You see, Fernando," she told me one day, when she'd just got back from the States, "if you walk into a room and McChrystal's in there, you know it immediately, even if he isn't speaking. He's a born leader, one who can move mountains and make lots of things happen. I don't doubt that in a few weeks this HQ will be turned right around. The whole mission will."

Sarah was right.

I've rarely met a person with the drive and capacity for work of McChrystal. His daily agenda was a legend within days of his arrival: up at four in the morning, a run in the gym, then he worked without a break or food until seven in the evening, then he had a quick supper in the office, worked some more, and then to bed for his well-deserved five hours of rest (not sleep, his cohorts were eager to stress).

His day was intense, without breaks, and there was something manic in the way he filled every tiny gap in his diary. I once heard him with my own ears ordering one of his aides to find him a fifteen-minute slot for a haircut "within the next six days!"

Stan, as he liked to be called, took command of the ISAF mission in June 2009, two months prior to Afghanistan's

presidential election, at a time when the crisis management required for the voting absorbed most of the international community's energy. His most urgent task, however, was to draft an assessment of the military campaign and draw up a plan for the strategy announced by Obama. Both U.S. defense secretary Robert Gates and NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had asked him to take care of it and so he did, in just over two months. The result was a document hailed immediately as one of the clearest things ever written for the international mission in Afghanistan.

Everyone at HQ contributed to the evaluation, but McChrystal in person supervised the writing during endless sessions with a drafting group that also included civilians. The basis was provided by counterinsurgency doctrine and inevitably given an acronym (COIN). It was based on the same concept used by General David Petraeus to resolve the Iraqi crisis.

In addition to being a military leader, Stan was blessed with political insight. He knew he had to speak up now, at the beginning of his term, describing things as they were, and without fear of scaring anyone off.

“The situation in Afghanistan is serious...many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating” was the opening statement of his paper, which should have remained confidential but was quickly leaked to the *Washington Post*. Continuing, “there is a crisis of confidence among Afghans—in both their government and the international community—that undermines our credibility and emboldens insurgents.”

It was August 2009, a year after my arrival. By now ISAF wasn't about to proclaim victory. The king was naked and it had to be acknowledged if the situation was to be rectified.

FOR McCHRYSTAL IT was paramount to place protection of the local population—not occupation of the territory or destruction of the enemy—at the center of any military action. This wasn't an innovative perspective; indeed, it was well established and dated back to the Algerian War, when David Galula had developed the concept in a counterinsurgency theory and

practice manual that came back into fashion thanks to the war in Iraq.

More recently David Kilcullen, a former Australian officer, scholar, and adviser to General Petraeus, had recovered these population-centric theories for his latest book, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, which had been published a few months before and was well known to McChrystal and his team.

The thesis behind Kilcullen's book (subtitled *Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*) was that we shouldn't confuse al Qaeda with various other insurgent groups that revolved in its sphere in various ways. These groups were somehow diseased, infected with extremism, yet they were fighting for different, essentially local reasons, and at most might share a contingent or particular terrorist objective.

It was an anthropological approach to the problems of the war in Afghanistan, which made a distinction between tribal and global, the local network and the global jihad. According to Kilcullen, these fighters weren't attacking because they hated the West, but because the West had invaded their space to deal with an extremist minority that basically manipulated and exploited them. In other words, they weren't fighting to destroy us, but because they thought we wanted to destroy them.

Accordingly, McChrystal believed it was essential to ensure that protection of the population was at the heart of the matter, and to consider the problem of which reasons led a society to choose either to resist insurgents or to support and be influenced by them. As a consequence, this Copernican-style revolution required that the military open up to the outside world, even if it would increase risks.

"Want some advice? Take off your sunglasses when you're on patrol," McChrystal repeated to his troops. "They create a barrier, they make people uncomfortable as they can't look you in the eye and establish the contact necessary for working together."

This was why the ISAF mission was in urgent need of more Dari and Pashtun speakers who knew Afghan culture and

traditions and would be able to interact with locals in the villages. McChrystal disapproved of the uncreative conventional method that had thus far been in operation and his paper read: “Preoccupied with protection of our own forces, we have operated in a manner that distances us—physically and psychologically—from the people we seek to protect. In addition, we run the risk of strategic defeat by pursuing tactical wins that cause civilian casualties or unnecessary collateral damage.” While the insurgents could not win militarily, the international contingent might defeat itself.

All this generated a set of priorities for the military mission. Not only was a change needed in mindset, but also in the way operations were conducted, and different skills were required if Afghans were to be persuaded to take more initiatives. The training of the Afghan police force and army thus became more important than the actual combat activities. Henceforth success would no longer be measured by the number of enemies killed, but how many were converted to the government cause and thus to abandon the insurgency.

So if the enemy was to be defeated politically, not militarily, it was a case of deciding who should lead the international community in this endeavor. The Afghan government was entitled to take natural leadership, but it was clear that it wasn’t sufficiently strong. McChrystal thought the international community should be led by ISAF and American military, even in aspects that were not strictly military: good governance, the fight against drug trafficking and corruption, and reconstruction. So after taking command of the mission, he had entrusted the control of field operations to his deputy, and he was concentrating on strategic and political contacts.

This was the crux of the issue. Should the military stand in for an international community that fails to put in place the required civilian resources? Can a platoon of marines replace engineers, physicians, and agronomists? Is it right to downplay the role of civilians and place them under military leadership in sectors other than security?

I've always thought not. What I mean is that I've always thought that everyone should do their bit and that the military doesn't know how to do certain things. Of course, if the one hundred thousand soldiers deployed in Afghanistan had all been like McChrystal, maybe there wouldn't be any problems. But that was not the case, and if it were true that the United Nations and other organizations lacked quality resources, so did the military, and it generally understood little of governance or reconstruction.

The Afghans, especially governors and local administrators, told me this over and over again: "We need civilians, people who can advise us, help us, support the reconstruction of the country. It can't be the military telling me where to build a school or a well, or install a road."

They were right and this was key in resolving the Afghan conundrum: international action, the entire international machine, despite claims of a comprehensive approach and the importance of the civilian effort, was totally biased toward the military.

It only took one phone call to get more than ten thousand soldiers over to Afghanistan, but finding a handful of qualified civilians willing to work in the Afghan provinces took months and only if you were lucky. In two years I never met an expert in the rule of law who wasn't in uniform and, by definition, couldn't be much of an expert. At the biannual conferences we held in Kabul with the civilian personnel of the twenty-six Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the sheer rate of turnover meant I never saw the same person twice.

The Americans, who had more resources than anyone else, knew this perfectly well, but they, too, were forced to jump through hoops to find the civilians Obama had promised in March.

That was the main lesson I learned in Afghanistan, the mother of all problems: the international community doesn't have a rapid and effective mechanism for deploying civilian resources. The United Nations, the European Union, and NATO don't have their own resources and can't do anything unless they're given what they need by their own constituent

member states. The Afghan result was that international presence was heavily weighted in favor of the military component, both in terms of financial and human resources. I think anyone who is committing to build a more effective international crisis management system should start over from here.

## CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, III

I WAS HALFWAY through my second summer in Afghanistan, and controversy over civilian casualties had calmed down over recent months. There were a number of reasons for this. The first was because President Karzai seemed to be thinking twice before lobbing criticism at the Americans and their international allies in the pre-election climate. And second, because the issue was more than ever a top priority for the international mission, as McChrystal's report had made abundantly clear. Although most civilian casualties continued to be caused by the insurgents, the concept that the highest possible standards were to be expected from ISAF had made inroads at all levels, as had the idea of a military mission that would be required to take all possible measures to protect civilians and their property while going after insurgents.

Outlying command units were issued directives on when to make use of lethal weapons. International and Afghan soldiers were called to account for their actions, making a distinction between strategic intent and tactical necessity. The fallout of an operation on the population had to be considered at every stage of that operation. So everything had to be done to avoid harming the innocent. If necessary, international military personnel were allowed to retreat and break off enemy contact. Air forces were to review their ammunition in order to minimize the impact on the civilian population, and ground commanders were expected to do the same for indirect fire.

Now the difficulty was to make sure everything filtered down from high command right to the last soldier. This was the biggest problem, because writing tactical directives is straightforward, while rendering general principles into

specific rules of conduct for the troops is trickier. Above all, you had to be sure the rules were then going to be applied.

I always asked questions whenever I visited the outposts of Helmand and Kandahar. Once, in August 2009, I asked the platoon commander if and how all this emphasis on civilian casualties had changed the way he was operating. He replied that he'd changed a lot of things, first by making international troops take more risks. When I asked for an example, he told me that until a short time before, if his patrol was hit by enemy fire coming from a house, he would order his men to target a mortar at it.

“But now?”

“Now, I think that there may be civilians in that house, so I let them keep shooting at us and I tell my troops to turn their vehicle and break contact with the enemy,” he replied, although his expression told me he wasn't entirely convinced of his reply.

OBVIOUSLY, EVEN NOW there are civilian casualties in Afghanistan, and as long as there's fighting there, that isn't going to change. There's not much to be done about it and we all know it. As long as you're shooting, all you can do is decrease the problem, but you can't eradicate it completely.

I always think of a sentence, one that echoed through my mind the entire time I was in Afghanistan, something I'd heard on television during one of my first nights in Kabul, watching an old episode of Giovanni Minoli's Italian documentary series *La storia siamo noi*. The program was dedicated to Giuseppe Ungaretti, an anti-war poet, and at one point a voiceover read this sentence—a simple, almost trivial line. I've done nothing but think about it ever since: “We can't stop one war by starting another one, and if we could understand this, we could understand everything.”

When the words come buzzing back into my mind, I think of Ungaretti, and perhaps I delude myself thinking he is wrong, that his words don't capture the reality. At the end of the day, I say to myself, the poet's truth is always abstract, universal, and never corresponds to the hard truth of daily life.

The poet's truth is limpid, as light as literature; that of the ordinary mortal, however, is clouded, and it is as heavy as life. Yes, that was what I thought, almost every night in Afghanistan.

IN EARLY 2010 the United Nations registered a decrease in civilian casualties thanks to the actions of the international coalition. It wasn't a lot, not enough to salve our consciences, and I'm well aware of that, but it was something.

## SHIA FAMILY LAW

ON THE MORNING of August 20, 2009, while everyone was following how the elections were going, I visited Sima Samar in her office.

Sima Samar is a prominent figure in Afghan civil society. In 2002, during the Taliban rule of Afghanistan, she took refuge in Pakistan and then returned to take up office as deputy chair and minister of women's affairs in the interim administration led by Karzai. Sima was considered a sort of Afghan Salman Rushdie by the more conservative circles because of her positions on defense of human rights and of women's rights in particular. In this respect, her office was not so different from mine, guarded by security staff with machine guns and flak jackets.

We'd met before, to talk of Afghan civil society, but that day I had something specific to discuss with her: the Shia Family Law, being enacted by Karzai and raising a real hornet's nest in the international community.

In actual fact, very few people in the West had read and studied the act, not least of all because several versions were circulating, all loosely translated, but the part relating to the husband and wife relationship was too similar to sharia law not to attract the attention of the international media.

The law governed relationships within Shia families, which account for six million of the Afghan population of thirty-five million. It regulated divorce, inheritance, and minimum marriageable age, all issues that had been dealt with by customs until that time. However, a law that decreed that a woman could not leave the house without her husband's permission, guaranteed child custody rights to a father or grandfather in the event of a separation, or contemplated marriage for very young women risked alienating Western

public opinion, and citizens from the West already unhappy about how long their troops had been in the country.

Many Western politicians and government officials were asking what kind of country could this be, in which a woman's right to equality, ratified by the constitution, was trampled on in this way. Above all, we wondered what on earth our soldiers were doing in a country issuing such laws. So the question was of direct interest to NATO, because it was likely to have a negative impact on the willingness of its members to deploy troops to the ISAF mission.

The newly appointed Danish secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, requested clarification from Karzai and instructed me to investigate further the scope of this hazy legislation and its applicability.

I'd spoken previously to the foreign and justice ministers. The former had already been very critical of the law's earlier draft, a few months before, while the latter had been tasked by the president to revise the content and make it compatible with the Afghan constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other international conventions that Afghanistan had signed. Nevertheless, the fact was that Karzai had conceived the law back in February, in the run-up to the elections, as a form of barter with Shiite clergy, which would bring him the Hazara vote. So the possibility of seeing the act withdrawn was almost nonexistent. At the end of March global protests broke out on the sidelines of the international conference on Afghanistan at The Hague, followed by a protest organized by two hundred women in the streets of Kabul, which made Karzai promise a revision of the text, in close consultation with the international community. As usual, however, things went downhill, the law was enacted quietly, and now it remained to be seen if any amendments had been passed and how far they went.

According to Sima, the law would be incomprehensible to a Westerner, but in reality the current text had been improved with respect to the previous year's version, so that was a small step forward. She told me that the successful sanctioning of a law of this nature was already a step forward compared to the

past, when things were decided by custom, and perhaps the current text was the best we could hope for at the moment. She felt some Western interpretations were based on flawed translations and the lack of an official version of the law in English. Some clauses, moreover, had to be taken in context, read in the light of the constitution's general principles, the body of law, and especially of another pending law that legislated the elimination of violence against women.

If the latter, as a general law, were to prevail over the Shia Family Law, which was specific legislation, things would be different. The United Nations in Kabul was of the same opinion and, before taking any action, wanted to hear what Afghan women had to say.

I agreed with Sima; I thought that everything required a context and, in any case, the right way to proceed would have to be indicated precisely by the female members of Afghan civil society.

Foreign Minister Spanta was on the same wavelength and that was why he'd opposed the first draft of the law three months earlier. Along with other representatives of civil society, he'd taken a stand against the government, but now things were different, the minimum age for marriage was raised to sixteen and the clause regulating temporary marriages had been removed.

In any case, if this was the view of the government's most progressive minister and the most representative of Afghan women, we needed to tread cautiously. "Perhaps there was no need to be more royalist than the king," was roughly what I said to the North Atlantic Council a few days later, when I was invited to report on the situation.

# WOMEN

IN KABUL, FEMALE figures are just starting to populate the urban landscape. It's early days yet, so the streets, market, airport, stores, ministries, bus stops, or taxi ranks are still predominantly male places, but every now and then you'll see women walking in pairs on the sidewalks, often a mother and daughter, or women going to work, or carrying their shopping home.

Women employees in the ministries dress in a Western style with skirts, high-heeled shoes, and a veil that is little more than symbolic as it doesn't even cover all their hair. Teachers and nurses prefer to wear traditional garb with white or black veils over their heads and a chador over their shoulders.

There are fewer and fewer burqas to be seen, but they haven't gone completely, especially in the old quarter, near the river, or among the market stalls. They are grayish or light blue in various shades, with a glimpse of flat sandals or rag slippers under the fraying embroidery. My detail officers and I count them up each time we go out, to see how many women are appearing on that crowded urban landscape. There can't be more than two or three percent and it's quite unsettling. The only exception is in the streets around the girls' schools, when classes finish, and it's like a miracle to see them swarm out with their book bags and white veils.

Yes, indeed. If it's true that you'll understand a people's destiny by observing its youth, then there is hope for Afghanistan. One day when I went with NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to visit a girls' school, he asked some twelve-year-olds what they wanted to do when they grew up.

The first ones all said teacher or doctor. Then a girl sitting in the front row replied that she wanted to be a judge, and then specified "but a fair judge." We looked at each other and some of the Afghan members of the group blinked back tears. Some

must have thought how weak our pleas against corruption sounded in comparison to what we'd just heard. I thought of the answers we might have heard from girls of the same age in a Rome or Milan school. Showgirl? Fashion model? Pole dancer? Escort? A competitor on Big Brother. I was happier to be where I was.

FOR AN AFGHAN woman the veil is a piece of her home and has nothing to do with her clothing. I was told this by my Iranian friend Ariane Baghai, who had researched the topic in Kabul on behalf of the World Health Organization, writing an illuminating essay ("The Language of the Veil in Afghanistan, How Much of the Past in the New Future") on the basis of her findings. What the veil expresses transcends the mere fact of being Muslim, for it is mentioned in the Old Testament and in Byzantine and Persian literature, which means its origins are more ancient than those of Islam.

*Burqa* is an imported word, unknown to Afghan women. During her many interviews in Kabul and surrounding villages, Ariane had always heard the word *chadri* used to refer to the traditional pale blue veil with a grille over the face, and the word *chador* to indicate the veil or the garment that covers the shoulders but not the face. *Chador* means a tent, a curtain that protects, as the home would, and allows the woman to go out in public without having to fear meeting "forbidden" men.

So it seems the word *burqa* was introduced by Western media, in what Ariane considered yet another revival of a colonial cliché: "Veiled women equals Islam equals oppression of women."

Ariane told me to look carefully during lunches or receptions, and I'd also noticed that in Afghanistan women wear their veils in certain circumstances and not in others, or when not everyone wears one, or in front of some men and not others. I'd also seen that men covered their mouths with a veil if they had to talk to some women. In short, the veil was a variable, not a constant: part of a language that allows and regulates social interaction between men and women.

IN AFGHAN SOCIETY the interaction between sexes must be mediated, otherwise it isn't tolerated. At eight or nine, a boy enters the world of adult men, and from that moment on—apart from his mother and sisters—probably the only woman's face he will see is that of his future wife, and she is chosen by his father.

For women it's even worse: the father enters into a marriage contract with a family and receives a sum of money; the daughter, who has never left her home, will be sent to live with an unknown—sometimes old—man, in a family that makes huge sacrifices to meet the cost of the union. So, aged only about seventeen, this wife will be at the mercy of her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who decide everything for her. She will be allowed to visit her family only in exceptional circumstances—deaths or marriages—and even then, only if she is given permission.

Let's forget the veil for a second and realize that this kind of life is the true despair of the Afghan. Women interviewed by Ariane confirmed the idea that the *chadri* is used to enforce the concept of segregation outside the home, and that they don't see the veil as clothing but as a domestic item, like a pot, a glass, or a rug. The veil, therefore, is to circumvent the strict rules of segregation, to hide beauty and avoid envy, disguise poverty and illness, and maintain intact dignity and honor. It is probably the least of an Afghan woman's problems.

WE IN THE West almost always discuss Afghan women at a theoretical level since few of us have had a chance to establish contact and approach them. Few of us are really able to get to know them and talk to them. In diplomatic circles you'll always meet the same upper class Afghan ladies, who grew up in the United States or Europe, who speak English or French and aren't at all representative of traditional society.

In my first weeks in Kabul I'd visited several women's organizations run by hard-working women who needed support and contacts in the West. At the first meeting, they'd seemed eager to invite us to their offices to illustrate their activities in defense of women's rights, especially their right to work. At the second appointment, however, we realized that

our turning up in armored cars, with an armed escort, with guns and bulletproof vests, created problems from them. They were very nice when they explained it was a matter of staying on good terms with the neighbors, and they were concerned that our presence might cause trouble. They added that they'd prefer to come to us, even though they'd have to be searched before entering the base.

I was more fortunate with Afghan women parliamentarians since they saw NATO as an important sounding-board and were keen for us to get to know them. Moreover, having contacts in the international community reassured them enormously and somehow reinforced their status in parliament. Twenty-seven percent of seats in the Wolesi Jirga (lower chamber) and seventeen percent of seats in the Meshrano Jirga (upper chamber) are reserved for women. The Afghan parliament thus has one of the highest female representations.

I met with them as often as I could, usually in small groups, and I was often able to invite them to lunch at my residence when Western parliamentarians came to visit. I organized meetings on various themes, trying to understand how they worked and which issues were of concern to them. Some parliamentarians were very active, spoke perfect English, and appeared to have been educated abroad. A., for example, was the first to mobilize other women in a protest before parliament against the Shia Family Law. F. and Y. were thinking of legislation, based on that of other countries, that would support working women. W. wanted to help small businesses run by women obtain microcredit. Then there were those who were there thanks to clan or family contacts and didn't seem to have much to say. One of them found an excuse to come and visit me twice, and then, at the third appointment, decided to ask me to give her husband a job.

Every now and then I managed to send small groups to visit Brussels because NATO headquarters was interested in meeting them. These visits were a huge success—in a system that doesn't allow for vacations, it was one of the few opportunities to spend time abroad. But each time it was a nightmare; so many of them wanted to go and we couldn't

send more than ten at a time. Ethnic distribution was crucial and there had to be a balance of Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek women in each delegation. More important still was the balance between those for and those against the government.

The funny thing was that no one in parliament was willing to help us define these delegations: obviously the risk of triggering a protest was far greater than the possibility of making them all happy. Every time, the secretary general of the lower chamber reassured me that he'd take care of it, but then he didn't. The bottom line was that this business of the women's delegations made us more enemies than anything else. My co-workers and I decided on a set of criteria, and we gave priority to those who'd never been abroad, those who'd been elected in the most unstable, inaccessible provinces, and, of course, those who had something to say—ideas, programs, and initiatives. Obviously those who didn't get into the delegation always complained in the hope they'd increase their chances of getting chosen the next time.

OUTSIDE OF KABUL—Kandahar, Mazar, Jalalabad, Ghazni, Chagcharan—other urban landscapes were also slowly repopulating with women. Most were as swaddled up as ever, and it was impossible to tell how old they were, what they looked like, what sort of life they led, and what thoughts went through their minds.

The strangest thing of all was that they always moved faster than men; at least, I got that impression. Maybe they just had more to do or didn't like being away from home for too long, or being seen around strangers. The only place where they seemed to move at a normal pace was in Herat, which was the most cosmopolitan of all and had a more electric atmosphere even than Kabul. That's the only city where I saw women in groups, covered in long black shawls. One day I'd even seen three of them laughing together as they had a drink outside a café, but they may have been Iranian tourists.

As noted earlier, it wasn't easy to converse with Afghan women, partly because I needed an interpreter and partly because women were hesitant to confide in the first person who came along. International organizations usually made use

of local staff for their contacts, and one day I received a visit from an Afghan consultant to an NGO. She worked in the south, near the Pakistan border, and I was keen to know if women down there were registering for the elections and if they intended to vote. When I asked her, she looked at me in embarrassment and I guessed immediately I'd asked the wrong question. So I told her it wasn't important and asked her to tell me why she'd come to see me. She said that in some villages, women couldn't work and couldn't even leave the house, and that the girls weren't allowed to go to school, so how could they even dream of going to vote? She said that during the day you did not see any Taliban as they hid in mosques or madrassas. But at night they terrorized women on the phone or sent threatening letters to their homes. One woman was ordered to leave her teaching job or they'd cut off her children's heads. Others had been forbidden to go out alone. The result had been that there were villages where all women stopped working for many months and spent the whole day at home.

Not long after that encounter, news resounded worldwide of girls being burned with muriatic acid as they came out of a school in Kandahar, but it was now clear that the violence we learned of was a tiny percentage of what was going on. It felt as if nothing had really changed since the days of the Taliban "religious police" edicts and the infamous "Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice," which committed infinite violence against women from 1996 to 2001.

"We can't even begin to imagine it, but in southern villages the girls are beaten every day on the way to school, mothers are whipped because they're caught shopping without their veils, women are forced to leave their jobs as a result of threats," I was told one evening at dinner by another local consultant. And the Afghan representative of the election commission, who was sitting next to her, immediately went even further, telling us of the misadventures of a group of Afghan women who'd decided to help organize the elections. Not only were they viewed with suspicion in their villages, but they were often harassed by men who claimed to be speaking

on behalf of the insurgents, accusing them of “working for the infidels.”

THERE ISN'T A Western writer, journalist, or reporter who has visited Afghanistan without devoting a few pages to its women. Most of these writings need to be taken with a pinch of salt because contact is always mediated and few Westerners are able to establish direct interaction. But some have captured portraits of Afghan women that are especially perceptive and still relevant today. This is true of the memoir by Annemarie Schwarzenbach (*All the Roads Are Open: An Afghan Journey, 1939-1940*), who traveled to Afghanistan with her friend, the writer Ella Maillart, more than seventy years ago. And reading the pages of *The Beautiful Girls of Qaisar*, I imagine the country must still be full of girls like those Schwarzenbach described:

They had never traveled. They could not imagine even more than a day's journey away from Mazar-e Sharif, the capital of Afghan Turkestan. But did they want to know the world or have another life? Or would they stay forever in that shady garden, surrounded by Qaisar's tall clay walls, under the strict matriarchal custody of their mother and lady?... We cannot imagine such an existence. But were these women really unhappy? You desire only that which is known to you. Was it good and necessary to educate them, instruct them, and have the thorn of dissatisfaction grow in them?

Like the writer, I soon learned that such questions make no sense, because Afghanistan will continue to grow, “according to the fateful laws called progress, whose course is unstoppable.”

Nevertheless, the questions were inevitable and had to be asked, though they were destined to remain unanswered.

## THIRTY-FOUR

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# A SMALL TRAVEL LIBRARY, IV

NO OTHER COUNTRY honors its poets like Afghanistan: they are respected, esteemed, venerated, and their graves often become holy places.

In a country where illiteracy is the norm, especially outside the big cities, knowledge is passed down through the verses of poets. Every adult male must learn as many as he can by heart and keep them stored in his mental library, using them to explain life's small mysteries to himself and to others. This would be impossible with prose because it is harder to remember; the rhyme and cadence of the poem makes memorization a much easier exercise.

Sufi tradition is an almost infinite reservoir, although the work of its poets, mystics, and philosophers, on the whole, has not yet been translated in the West and remains inaccessible to those unfamiliar with Persian. In India, however, there are several collections of Afghan poetry translated into English, so with a little luck, a copy of these works may be found in Kabul. One day my usual bookseller sold me *An Assembly of Moths*, a collection of verses by Khalilullah Khalili that had been put together a few years earlier by his son, Masood. The preface states that the Afghans, regardless of social background, use the phrase *Sha'er mega* (the poet says) to support their ideas every time they argue about something. If someone in a village intones "two plus two equals five," listeners will certainly not believe it, the author writes, but by inserting "the poet says," it will be possible to convince people that "two plus two equals five," and the statement will immediately be cherished by all.

Some time before I'd bought *The Essential Rumi*, a collection of the great mystic poet's works translated by

Coleman Barks, and every night before going to sleep, I was in the habit of reading a few verses.

Jalal al-Din Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh, in northern Afghanistan, and died in 1273 in Konya, now in Turkey. He is considered the greatest mystical poet of the Persian language and was the founder of the Sufi fraternity of whirling dervishes. I was amazed by how much those verses, written eight hundred years before, resembled the way in which the Afghans continue to express themselves. The Afghan choice of words, intonation, pauses, and cadence recalled the language of the mystic poets and their tendency to the symbolic representation of reality.

To venture a comparison, it would be akin to Italians still speaking like Saint Francis of Assisi, using his verses and metaphors in everyday life. But perhaps Coleman Barks was right when he wrote that instead of placing mystical poetry in a particular historical and cultural context, it should be unrestricted and allowed to express its essence in complete freedom.

One day, a minister of state, opening a conference in the capital of Uruzgan, addressed its governor saying that he was delighted to accept the invitation because it was the time of year when the province's pomegranates were reddest and sweetest. On another occasion, in a Kabul ministry, a deputy minister said that the meeting we were about to start had a specific purpose, and it was not like the wild flower that has the luxury of being able to bloom for no reason. Or the time a top officer in the police force referred to a gang of criminals and said that trying to stop their nefarious schemes was more difficult than persuading a bee to avoid flowers.

The passion for poetry among Afghanistan's men of power has always been widespread. Indeed, reading about the lives of poets such as Khalili, I'd discovered that many of these poets had played leading public roles as ministers or royal counselors.

Commander Massoud, the Tajik hero of the resistance against the Russians and Taliban, was also a poet. One of his most famous quotes is "You Westerners have clocks, but we

Afghans have time,” thus inviting all Afghans to be patient and deterring allies from hasty actions.

In many cases, I found I remembered Afghans for their gentle, charming voices that bore no connection to their looks or their professions. In one case, a general who ranked high in the Defense General Staff always spoke quietly, as if he were telling a story, even when others seemed to be on the verge of losing their tempers. When he addressed a group, the room fell into absolute silence, as if his voice were hypnotic. Someone told me that he had been a mullah who had ended up in the army by chance. I don't know if that were true, but every time he opened his mouth, his fatigues suddenly seemed incongruous. I once heard him address his troops during a memorial ceremony and he sounded even more delicate and affectionate, as if the soldiers were his students or disciples.

BY THE END of my second summer in Kabul I'd almost stopped reading. The books I'd finished were stacked in a corner and I had only the poems of Rumi and an American counterinsurgency manual next to the bed. They were strange to see, side by side, two genres and light years apart. Yet, by dint of thinking about it, I gradually convinced myself that these were the only writings on Afghanistan that could represent the reality of that moment in time.

Although dating back to the thirteenth century, the verses of Rumi mirrored the language and thoughts of contemporary Afghans who, at least in my imagination, lived immersed in a lyrical, poetic universe. The counterinsurgency manual was obviously as far away from local tradition and culture—including military—as you could get, but it had become an indispensable tool of knowledge for anyone trying to understand what was happening to the country and the direction of the international coalition that would be largely responsible for its fate.

## DEATH IN AUGUST

AFTER A GROUP of insurgents had occupied the Ministry of Finance for a few hours, in February 2009, blowing themselves up when government staff arrived, we knew for sure that the threat of suicide bombers in Kabul was now a reality. Intelligence services and embassies flooded our mobile phones daily with security warnings, indicating movements of Toyotas full of explosives, suspicious trucks, and shady characters in reconnaissance near sensitive targets.

The ISAF headquarters district was at especially high risk, because it was just a stone's throw from the presidential palace and the U.S. embassy. A while earlier we'd embarked on further protection work for the weakest points in the compound fence. As far as my house was concerned, we'd reinforced the wall on the garden side—adding a few cubic meters of reinforced concrete—because it backed onto an outside road that was easy to access. At one point, my detail had also suggested that I give up my bedroom, which faced outward, so I was sleeping in the study, which faced into the base.

When moving around town, I tried to stick to precautions that are taken in these cases, which aren't written down anywhere, of course; you just need to use common sense. First of all, with the exception of my assistant, Danielle, and my bodyguards, no one had access to my daily schedule, which listed meetings and engagements outside the base. Anyone in the office who had to know about a specific event was informed at the last moment. Then, if I were eating out at a restaurant for the evening, I'd have several reservations made and never in my name. I'd decide with my detail where to go when I was leaving the base, advising any guest by phone.

I checked all invitations personally with the detail chief, and I accepted only those where my presence was absolutely

necessary. In any case, my life was erratic in the sense that I didn't have a routine with specific times. Not finding myself in the wrong place at the wrong time was essentially a matter of luck, but one precaution I did take: I usually avoided leaving the base before ten in the morning unless it was really necessary.

Suicide bombers prefer to die at dawn, or early in the morning, after praying and first ablutions, so we all knew that if we hadn't heard explosions by eleven or midday, there was a good chance we'd get through the day without too much harm.

THERE'S NOTHING NOBLE about blowing yourself up. It's so obvious there probably isn't even any point in writing it, but I'd like to say it loud and clear because I have to admit that when I was young, I'd also been fascinated with stories of dying a beautiful death.

As a child, I was awed by the sacrifice of Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II or the words of a German officer who said he wanted to fight at Stalingrad because the finest names in Prussia were dying there—words that kept going through my head for weeks after I read them somewhere. But there's nothing of this in a suicide bomber, just an enormous void and deep despair, proved by the fact that for this type of work, terrorists were now forced to recruit the mentally ill, disturbed minors, or those with terminal illnesses, giving this extreme gesture, in a sense, an even more terrible perspective.

Not infrequently, suicide bombers would have second thoughts; indeed, they quite often tried to back out at the last moment. To overcome these “problems,” in many cases the terrorists fitted them with remote controls so they could blow them up at a distance if a checkpoint prevented the bomber from reaching the objective or if something untoward was noted in their behavior.

THE MORNING OF August 15, 2009, was quiet. Until eight thirty-six.

At seven I'd had breakfast with Kai Eide and Stan McChrystal at my house, as we usually did. At eight thirty,

like every other morning, I was sitting in the operations room for the briefing with the military commander.

The briefing had been going for five minutes when a massive explosion shook the walls and work tables, and was followed by a split-second blackout. Since we were in a large basement room, I got the idea the explosion had taken place over our heads and imagined a rocket fired at the command building. Stan told everyone to freeze, to stay right where they were, and a few seconds later his assistant joined him to whisper something in his ear. There'd been an explosion near the base entrance gate and I immediately thought of Kai, as he'd just left from there. I texted his office and they replied that as luck would have it, he'd just come back in.

Nonetheless, I thought the worst, because at that time of day the entrance to the base was very busy, especially for the Afghan staff who worked with us. I went straight up to my office with Nick, my deputy, and counted heads for our group. Everyone was there, thank goodness, and the only person missing was our Afghan spokesman, who no one could find and wasn't answering his cell phone. When we did find him, a few minutes later, he was in front of the infirmary, covered in blood, in a state of shock and with a wound near his eye. He couldn't hear well so perhaps he had a perforated eardrum. I began to tremble with rage, in a way that had never happened to me before. He'd been lucky although he was going to need surgery to remove the shards of glass from his eye. When the explosion occurred he was driving in through the gate in his car, which had been completely destroyed.

After an hour, since there weren't any other bombers ready for action, Stan and I left the base to see personally what had happened.

The suicide bombers had detonated themselves from inside a van in front of the driveway, killing about ten people, all Afghans, some of them members of security staff. There were countless injured and we could see the point of the explosion because there was a meter-deep crater. A preliminary estimate suggested they'd used three or four hundred kilograms of explosive. It was shocking to see that part of an engine, from a

van that had been blown to pieces, had landed a hundred meters away. Around us we saw only destruction.

The huge concrete fortifications had limited casualties and damage to the side of the base (although we never used the driveway again); in reality, most victims and damage were on the opposite side of the road. The Ministry of Transport's boundary walls seemed to have crumbled and the entire facade was destroyed yet again, less than a month after its rebuilding.

Calls claiming responsibility for the attack weren't long in coming, and halfway through the day, the Afghan foreign minister, Rangin Spanta, arrived to express government solidarity. It was less than a week until the presidential elections and the climate couldn't have been hotter. Meanwhile we'd all called our families to set their minds at rest, but the entire day passed in a haze. We didn't know what to do and were probably shocked by the close call with death.

There was minimal damage to my home, which was only a hundred meters, as the crow flies, from the blast site: a few door frames were crooked, a window and a mirror broken by the blast. At midday, the guys from my escort cooked spaghetti with garlic, olive oil, and chili dressing.

Now that we were sure our spokesman and his eye were safe, we could relax a little. As I was digging into my first forkful of pasta, my partner, Francesca, called, concerned about what was starting to appear on the Internet. In the overall chaos I hadn't telephoned her, and when I saw the headline on *La Repubblica's* website, it did indeed look as if the whole base had been blown to smithereens.

# THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

I WAS TALKING to a visibly embarrassed official of the central elections committee, who was telling me that at that point he wasn't able to prepare the material I'd asked for and which I needed for my briefing with Western journalists scheduled for the next day. The electoral commission was just outside the residential area, toward the airport, and comprised offices and hangar-type pavilions where the registration process was scrutinized and preparations for counting ballots were under way. The Afghan staff was young and skilled, thanks to the experience gained during the presidential election in 2004 and the parliamentary election in 2005.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador," said Barakzai, one of the electoral machine's key figures, as he tidied up his desk, "but I've not had a minute since yesterday. There's a new problem here every day."

I told him not to worry, and if he had a couple of minutes of patience I'd ask him directly what I needed to know about election preparations. Then I couldn't stop myself from inquiring as to what the latest problem was for the committee, with less than two weeks to voting day. He looked at me, blinked, and with a hint of a smile replied: "Donkeys. We have to find three thousand donkeys asap, so we can somehow distribute the electoral materials to the mountain villages we can't access any other way!"

THE STORY OF the three thousand donkeys made the rounds on the international grapevine. All of us mentioned it, in one way or another, in our pre-election briefing because it summed up the extent of the difficulties and bizarre conditions surrounding the August 20, 2009, elections and their organization. As if choosing a president from among forty-

four presidential candidates, and four hundred and twenty provincial councilors from among three thousand one hundred and ninety-seven candidates wasn't complicated enough as it was....

There are villages in Afghanistan, located one or two days' walk from the nearest polling station, whose inhabitants have never seen a pen and don't know how to read or write, where women will not uncover their faces, so it will be impossible to verify identities during voting, where notions of ballot secrecy and personal preference mean nothing, because important decisions are all made within the family or the community (this is something Karzai himself had been saying for a while—that everything in Afghanistan is based on the community, as opposed to Western society where the individual and individualism reign). Add to this an electoral process dependent on logistical support of the ISAF mission, many areas of the south and east not controlled by Afghan government and military, the Taliban calling for a boycott of the “Crusaders” electoral program, expectation of an escalation of attacks and intimidation during the days immediately prior to the vote, and it isn't difficult to understand how dramatic things were on the eve of polling day.

There were even more political wild cards and each presidential contender harbored serious concerns. Karzai and his supporters feared that people would be too scared to go and vote in the Pashtun areas, where the president would need to obtain a full majority, and he would be damaged by a low turnout. In point of fact, it was precisely in the south, in the provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, Helmand, and Farah, that insurgent activity would cause major problems in opening polling stations and guaranteeing the security of the voting process. ISAF and the Afghan army were aware of this and planned a series of operations to secure as many districts as possible before August 20. But it was clear that in some areas it just wouldn't be possible to vote, so the low turnout was likely to impact the validity of the election.

The other presidential candidates had even bigger worries, especially the better known ones, who had had their work cut

out for them when they accepted a political campaign in which Karzai was the outright favorite.

Abdullah Abdullah, the Northern Alliance candidate who led the main opposition to Karzai, and Ashraf Ghani, a famous international economist and the former finance minister, weren't mincing words. Even during the election campaign they'd been competing with an incumbent president who enjoyed a far superior mobilization capacity, and it had been difficult for them to garner airtime, hold rallies in the various provinces, post bills, and recruit their own list observers. Now, with the vote just around the corner, concerns were even greater because they feared gerrymandering and massive fraud on the part of the president's loyalists. The concern was that the Pashtun areas would send in electoral commission ballot boxes filled with thousands of pro-Karzai cards, and at that point it would be difficult for an electoral commission that, in reality, was barely independent (all the members had been appointed by Karzai, including the chair) to invalidate them. In short, the security system set up with the assistance of the United Nations (which also included a complaints commission led by an international expert and thousands of Afghan observers, not to mention the European Union's observation mission) didn't really reassure the challengers, because there was nothing reassuring for them about the government's barely veiled intentions to use locally recruited militia to guarantee the safety and control of certain areas.

FOR ALL THESE and other reasons, we knew that the elections would be a tall order. And if we looked back at the various statements in support of the elections we'd all made in previous months, we saw that initial hopes for a "free and fair vote" had been downscaled to a "credible vote." Then, as election day loomed, we were down to "credible enough." In any case, we all knew the facts, because from August to November 2009 the international press spoke of nothing but the Afghan presidential elections. The day of the vote was marked by various incidents, more or less all over the country, and the fact that millions of people were able to vote, and that they decided to leave their homes to go and express their preference, was nothing short of miraculous. The turnout was

estimated at thirty percent and there were frauds and irregularities all over the place. Following the invalidation of nearly a million votes, Karzai failed to win the election in the first round, as he had done five years earlier. At the end of October, the electoral commission announced a runoff between Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah for November 7.

On November 1, however, Abdullah Abdullah withdrew, convinced that there was no hope of a transparent and legitimate election. On November 9, 2009, Karzai was declared president for another term of five years.

AT THE NOVEMBER 19 inauguration ceremony we were all crowded into a large room in the presidential palace. Inside, the atmosphere was almost festive, at least on the Afghan side. Outside, the city was deserted, manned by Afghan and international patrols.

Karzai's speech was what everyone wanted to hear. Priorities included a reconciliation with the Taliban, the fight against corruption, and the creation of an efficient governance structure. A conference in London in early 2010, and another in Kabul before the summer, would establish procedures and timeframes for gradually turning over responsibility to the Afghans, starting with the security sector. It wasn't long before Obama spoke of an initial withdrawal of troops, beginning in July 2011, and the new byword became "transition," which actually meant increasingly turning over responsibility to the Afghans who, incidentally, were immensely worried about what all this might mean.

Karzai seemed to be in good form, however, as dapper as ever, and he had every reason to be satisfied. It was quite startling—after all the gerrymandering controversy of the previous weeks—to see that he was once again squaring both the international and domestic circles. Front-row seats were filled not only by Hillary Clinton, David Miliband, Bernard Kouchner, Sergueï Lavrov, Franco Frattini, and Guido Westerwelle, but also the two vice presidents, Muhammad Fahim and Karim Khalili, who had respectively secured the Tajik and Hazara vote. And with due respect to all those who thought that the time of the warlords was forever gone from

Afghanistan—there was General Dostum, who had brought in the Uzbek vote, and also Ismail Khan, who had guaranteed votes in Herat and the west.

Karzai, however, is an adroit hand in these situations, so he made sure there were also some losers at the ceremony. One was Ashraf Ghani, his former rival in the presidential race, who “court” gossip suggested would be given an important government post despite the fact he’d been profuse in his personal attacks of Karzai during the preceding months.

DURING THE LUNCH hosted at the Foreign Ministry, we discussed with colleagues the events of recent months that had confirmed most of our fears. We wondered if there might have been alternatives, and some actually cast doubt on the concept of elections in a society like that of Afghanistan, where important decisions are made by village *shuras* and the great *jirgas*. Although at this juncture this was a philosophical debate, because the election had taken place and its outcome had been a foregone conclusion.

After the Taliban emirate parenthesis, the international conference held in Bonn at the end of 2001 redesigned the Afghan state. It had been decided to build a “modern” Afghanistan. The new Afghan constitution that resulted was from a period in which America had mistakenly believed that Iraq and Afghanistan might have become models of democracy for the entire Islamic world.

I remember telling my colleagues how I attended a village *shura* a few weeks before the elections, near Kandahar. With the interpreter by my side, it wasn’t too difficult to understand the various speeches. Those in attendance were discussing the safety of the population and how to escape Taliban reprisals if the villagers decided to vote. Some pointed out the risks of having your index finger stained with indelible ink for a few days, since that was the method devised by the electoral commission to prevent people from voting more than once. Well, the discussion was logical and civilized.

The village chief presided and gave the floor to those who asked to speak. After a number of interventions, he would

recapitulate, summarizing the main points, and then he continued to solicit “different” points of view.

The referendum is a well-rooted concept in Afghan society. The induction of a leader is always from the grass roots, decided by the village in a meeting in which everyone talks and, where possible, decisions are by consensus. So as far as I was concerned, the concept of elections wasn't as alien to Afghan society as some might have thought. The Afghans love to participate, and they always want to have their say on the important decisions that affect them.

## A WAY TO RECONCILIATI ON

THE SOVIETS HAD replaced President Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah in 1986 and he'd stayed in place, even after the retreat of the Red Army, for as long as Moscow had given him the money needed to sustain the regime. When it became clear that there was nothing further to be done and the mujahedin were about to take power, the Russians abandoned him to his fate. When Massoud and Dostum captured Kabul, in April 1992, Najibullah took refuge in the United Nations offices after he'd tried unsuccessfully to leave the city. There he stayed until the arrival of the Taliban, four years later, and as soon as they entered Kabul they took him away to the presidential palace. Here he was castrated, dragged several times around the building tied to the back of a jeep, then finished off with a bullet. He was left hanging, together with his brother, on the sentry box in front of the palace, and the next morning his bloated, bloodied body appeared to the inhabitants of Kabul with an unlit cigarette between his fingers and his jacket pockets stuffed with Afghan banknotes, signifying debauchery and corruption. This was the first barbaric act by the Taliban in Kabul, a symbolic gesture to close with the past and terrorize the population.

In the fall of 2009, after being sworn in as president yet again, it seems that Karzai confessed to one of his cohorts that he was terrified he'd end up like Najibullah. The ghost of the former president probably appeared to him in a dream, among the flowering bushes of the presidential palace.

Karzai continued to be disoriented by the West. He'd emerged miraculously victorious from the elections, despite the jungle of gerrymandering and media chaos that had generated the most fraudulent elections of all time. Moreover, he still perceived signals from his American allies as

contradictory: on one hand giving McChrystal an additional thirty thousand troops for the military campaign; on the other, announcing they would start to withdraw from July 2011, which must have seemed like manna from heaven for Taliban propaganda. NATO, according to Karzai, was just as bad, because he still saw this transition, which should have led to increasing responsibility on the Afghan side, as a disengagement. It may have been gradual, progressive, incremental, but it was nonetheless a disengagement. And our assurances that progress would be dictated by what happened on the ground and not by a predefined schedule were obviously not convincing enough.

The alliances with Fahim and Dostum, the new pact with Ismail Khan and other local potentates, not to mention a rapprochement with Hizb-i-Islami, were all clear signals: a united front was to be salvaged to cover his back when the West was gone, otherwise he risked ending up like Najibullah. Reconciliation with the Taliban, addressed by Karzai as “Taliban” —literally “Dear Taliban”—just a few months later, was another piece in this strategy, and in theory, it would be impossible to reconstruct the Afghan mosaic without it.

AS EARLY AS the end of 2008, Karzai had written to the crown prince of Saudi Arabia asking for help in a reconciliation with the Taliban. But after this initiative, we’d seen no signs that the Afghan government was systematically endeavoring to reconcile with the insurgents. In 2009, however, a few minor things were set in motion.

An Afghan delegation had reached Mecca to establish contacts and Kabul had plenty of intermediaries who claimed to be close to the Taliban, even to speak on their behalf. Moreover, the preparations for the elections had shown that there were contacts, especially at the local level. In some cases it had been possible to reach agreements with insurgent groups that allowed the registration and voting processes to run more or less smoothly. Naturally, the start of a reconciliation process with the Taliban would raise anxieties, fears, and memories of ghosts past. The non-Pashtun leadership worried about consequences in terms of power sharing; Afghan women feared losing the social acquisitions of recent years, like

political rights or entitlement to education. My impression was nonetheless that there was far more talk than there was action, and that the government had no intention of initiating contacts as an underdog. In essence that meant first relaunching the initiative on the territory that was currently in the hands of the insurgents.

Over and above any negotiations the Afghan government might have with Taliban leadership, there were still countless uncertainties. Many thought that it was now time to find common ground with those who wished to leave the insurgents and reintegrate with society. Here it wasn't a case of negotiating a national reconciliation but of recovering all the insurgents who decided to lay down their arms. In short, a bottom-up rather than a top-down process.

My last briefing to the permanent representatives of the North Atlantic Council was by video conference, in late 2009, and I remember that my backing the cause for the reintegration of insurgents garnered widespread support. Holbrooke had made it one of the recurring themes in "his" group of Af-Pak envoys; General McChrystal also had been pushing in the same direction since his arrival in Kabul.

A cell was formed in ISAF by those who'd already worked in Iraq on a similar theme, under the leadership of General Graeme Lamb. Together we began to make contact with potential donors. The process was mainly a civilian one, since it was to provide the insurgents with precise guarantees for economic and social reintegration. Basically it wouldn't be enough to convince rebels to hand over their weapons; they would need jobs and a place in their community of origin. In this case the important thing was that the rules would be written by the Afghans, based on compliance with their constitution.

In Karzai's keynote speech at the beginning of his new mandate, reintegration was high up on the government agenda. The Americans were sure that aside from a hard core of terrorists close to al Qaeda, estimated at five percent, the rest of the insurgents—what author David Kilcullen called "accidental guerillas"—were just waiting to lay down their

weapons, go home, and return to work in the fields with their families. News coming from the territory confirmed that several small groups of insurgents had already taken the bait and were ready to cease hostilities. It was now up to us to give them tangible incentives, opportunities for rehabilitation, jobs that would make their choice sustainable. This was the precise point on which previous attempts to reintegrate had essentially failed, including those initiated a few years before by President Mujaddidi of the upper chamber.

## THE FUTURE OF AF-PAK

REASONING ABOUT A reconciliation with the Taliban meant imagining a future Afghanistan, thinking of scenarios somewhat less unflinching than those I'd witnessed directly. Now it was almost time for me to be on my way and that is usually a time for taking stock, but in a situation as engrossing as Afghanistan, with its continuing evolution, it was going to be a time for making predictions.

What would happen? What events would mark the coming years? Would fighting continue or would common sense eventually prevail? If so, how long would it take?

There were many—endless—questions, because each one always led to another half dozen. In Kabul, we were grappling with the end of the electoral process and formation of a new Karzai government, but we all knew that the pivotal game, the one on which the fate of Afghanistan and the entire region would depend, was going to be played out in the territories over the Durand Line, in northern Pakistan's labyrinth of mountains and high-altitude passes where the Taliban had established their enclaves. I'd never been there, just as I'd never been to Islamabad, yet there was endless talk of Pakistan, with any Afghan or international party, and I almost felt as if I knew the country.

THE AFGHANS SAID that the insurgency was like malaria and that it wouldn't be enough to eliminate the mosquitoes—the Taliban—to defeat it. The swamp that generated the disease—the tribal areas of Pakistan—would have to be disinfested. They were talking about the infamous seven territorial provinces or Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA): Khyber, Kurram, Orakzai, Mohmand, Bajaur, North and South Waziristan.

Their names mean nothing to most people, but for those who've worked in these parts since 9/11, they've become

almost legendary. Together they form a lawless, unstable region, which is part of the Pakistani state only on paper, and are inhabited by three million Pashtuns who apply the Pashtunwali, a code of honor that includes revenge (*badal*) and an obligation to provide hospitality to fugitives (*nanawati*). This may be why, in the wake of 9/11, the Taliban fleeing Afghanistan and Islamic militants from Central Asia, Chechnya, Africa, Kashmir, and Arab countries have found refuge there.

In recent years, FATA has earned a reputation as the “global terrorist power station.” An area ruled by chaos, where terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, and Bali are believed to have been planned; where al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban can maintain bases more or less undisturbed. The Pakistani authorities have never dealt firmly with the phenomenon, trying to contain rather than fight it. In this way they nurture suspicion in those who accuse them of using Islamic extremism as an anti-Indian foreign policy tool and a means to increase their influence in Afghanistan.

Will Pakistani politics ever change? Will Islamabad ever take decisive action against the Taliban and Islamic militants in FATA? And how will the Kashmir issue—underpinning the Indo-Pakistani dispute and the many problems that plague the region—be resolved?

THE DOUBTS THAT were raised in the winter of 2009-10 are still without answer, and the fact that we’re still wondering means that Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan, should be at the top of the international agenda in this part of the world. The Af-Pak strategy coined by Obama in March 2009 recognized that the fortunes of the two countries were inextricably linked, and it was remarkable that even then, we professionals renamed it Pak-Af, to show where we thought the real priorities lay. Keeping track of American visits to Islamabad, in the fall of 2009, was enough to show we were right. Not a week went by without an envoy setting foot in the Pakistani capital with a message from the White House, the State Department, or the Pentagon, in the hope that Pakistan would deal the Taliban a decisive blow, thereby contributing to a solution of the Afghan conflict. Washington basically thought the time had come for

Pakistan to deal with the militants in the tribal areas of Waziristan, starting from the south. So much so that in the preceding months—for the first time in several years—the hunt for extremists in FATA had begun to produce significant results.

The death of Baitullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban commander, had caused some commotion in Kabul. It had happened in August, when a drone strike felled him as he relaxed on the roof of his father's house in South Waziristan. It was said that the explosion had cut him in half, and killed his second wife, some of her family, and several bodyguards. Mehsud commanded thousands of men, a real army, and was said to be responsible for training suicide bombers and manufacturing large-scale mines and explosive devices used daily in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It seems that he financed himself by abducting wealthy Pakistanis and that in 2009 alone his criminal network had notched up seventy successful kidnappings. His Taliban henchmen held the local population in thrall by intimidation and murder, seeking to recreate in FATA the same regime that had existed in Afghanistan before 9/11: television, the Internet, and music were banned, and followers practiced sharia and forced men to pray in the madrassas and grow beards.

Consequently, pushing its army into tribal areas was a difficult way to go for Pakistan and it continued to hesitate in response to the appeals made by the Western countries engaged in southeastern Afghanistan. The fact is that few populations in the world nurture anti-Western sentiment as much as the Pakistanis, so any Islamabad government that doesn't take this into account will struggle to survive.

A FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE between Pakistan and Afghanistan lies in the institutions, which are solid, organized—efficient in their own way—in the former, but in the latter are so weak that calling them institutions sounds inappropriate. The way the presidential elections panned out showed this once more and revived in no uncertain terms the issue of sustainability for the international effort.

On the one hand, it was clear that the country wouldn't be able to take care of itself for the foreseeable future; on the other, the international community, still struggling with a difficult economic scenario that showed no signs of recovery, was certainly not in favor of maintaining such a weighty financial commitment in the long term.

Before coming to Afghanistan I'd had no idea of the extent of the problem, what it means to take over a country whose total revenue is more or less one-third of its costs and for the remaining two-thirds relies on the international community. The debate over the duration of the Afghan mission had started a while back in the United States and was only just warming up. Nor was it just American citizens who were wondering if the Af-Pak effort put forward by President Obama and supported by the allies was going to be compatible with the budgetary constraints imposed by the economic and financial recession gripping the West.

Kai Eide repeated until he was blue in the face that at the end of the day, the fate of Afghanistan would be decided by the taxpayers, because they would establish the scope and duration of the international military and civilian effort in this part of the world. The risk was that at some point they'd say "Enough" and, in that case, Western parliaments and governments would have to accept the consequences.

Of course, the risk would be even greater if the impression became widespread that the international mission wouldn't affect issues in Afghanistan and that the country was failing to emerge from its abyss despite the international resources it received.

It's no secret that Afghan costs are high for governments sustaining the international mission. Just as it's not a mystery that military disengagement (when we get to that) will not be enough to balance the books. The risk that a situation of dependence becomes infinite is obvious: just think of how much it's going to cost to maintain the Afghan armed forces once they're on their own in protecting their country.

At the end of my mission in Afghanistan (early 2010), the head counts for the Afghan army and police forces were

171,000 and 134,000, respectively, with maintenance costs estimated at about six billion dollars each year, which is a considerable sum, although it's far less than it costs to keep the international contingents there. For the time being the United States is still paying the lion's share of these costs, but there is no doubt that in the near future citizens will demand assurances that these international commitments are compatible with review of national public spending and employment needs.

IN KABUL MANY believed that the Americans were artfully blowing on the flames of the sustainability debate surrounding the international effort to make everyone believe they wanted out as quickly as possible, when the truth was they were in Afghanistan to stay.

There is no lack of literature regarding the financial interest that fuels the new "Great Game" in Asia. Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban, Islam, Oil, and the New Great Game in Central Asia* could be considered the forerunner, because even before 9/11 the author had revealed the close-knit web of interests behind the engineering of oil and gas pipelines that start in the Caspian reservoir and should have brought oil and gas to the Persian Gulf via Afghanistan.

The conflict of the last ten and more years obviously froze these schemes, but speculation about the real reasons for the 2001 invasion have never completely subsided. The results of geological research and exploration in Afghan territory seem to suggest that the country has massive mineral wealth and enormous energy potential. While there are many aspects still to verify for lithium and oil, the huge Chinese investment in exploitation of copper deposits is already a reality.

When we talked among colleagues, the Americans swore there was no interest of this kind and that they'd be happy to leave Afghanistan as soon as it could take care of itself. It may just be me, and maybe I'm wrong, but now, thinking back to those conversations, I have the feeling that many of my American colleagues didn't have a pristine conscience: after all, they too must have realized that thinking they could eliminate international terrorism by invading Afghanistan was

as crazy as thinking they could rid the world of the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction by invading Iraq.

In any case, most diplomats and international observers were sure the United States would never leave. That included the Russians but they preferred to be philosophical. There were quite a few in Kabul, especially in the ranks of the UNAMA mission, and often these were people who had never lost contact with Afghanistan from the time of the Soviet invasion. One of them told me that if anyone thought they could cut ties with Kabul and its surroundings after spending so many years there, then it meant they hadn't understood a thing. And that, he said, was equally true for the Americans. Red Army soldiers had even composed a song that says you can leave Afghanistan, but it will never leave you.

# LEAVING KABUL

**February 2010**

I WAS GLAD to be leaving, but equally, I would have stayed. All in all, twenty months had been too long and not long enough. While the presidential elections and the stalemate that followed had highlighted the limits of the Afghan institutions, they had also made it clear that new energies were needed, even on the international front. “New phase, new faces,” say the English in these cases.

In just a matter of weeks, in February and March 2010, Kai Eide, Ettore Sequi, and I were replaced by Staffan de Mistura, Vygaudas Ušackas, and Mark Sedwill, respectively heading the United Nations, European Union, and NATO missions. Moreover, as had become clear in recent months, the United States was playing an increasingly prominent role in Afghanistan, and Americans were the only ones to have a super embassy with five diplomats assigned ambassadorial rank, not to mention more than a thousand staff.

General Stanley McChrystal was staying on as head of ISAF, and everyone thought that he was going to be the real key man in Kabul. Except that Stan didn’t last long either, following an unfortunate interview published by *Rolling Stone* in June 2010, which was very critical of American political leadership, forcing President Obama to replace him with General Petraeus.

MY LAST DAYS in Kabul were as busy as usual. Preparations were in progress for the London conference at the end of January 2010, an international meeting that was supposed to relaunch the partnership with the Afghans, agree on a transition concept, and make some progress with a number of the most critical dossiers (like the reintegration of insurgents). At the January meeting of the Joint Coordination Monitoring

Board (the decisionmaking forum made up of the Afghan government and major international donors) we were able to approve staff increases both for the Afghan police and army, overcoming the resistance of those worrying about the costs and the sustainability of these forces. Once again it was going to be the Americans providing most of the resources, and everyone thought it was a crucial decision if we wanted the Afghans gradually to take charge of their own security.

In my last meeting with Karzai, during a pre-Christmas visit from Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who had replaced Jaap de Hoop Scheffer as NATO secretary general five months earlier, I got a few things off my chest.

As usual Karzai was complaining about how the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs, acted independently of one another, applying neocolonial logic that gave the Afghans no responsibility. The secretary general asked me to bring the president up to speed on the activities of recent months. While there were still a number of problems, I told Karzai that thanks to the work with Jalali Popal, minister for local governance, the Afghan government now knew much more about how the reconstruction was proceeding at the provincial level.

We had a good map of the projects, with more than twenty thousand surveyed and added to a database. Above all, over the last few months, the Afghans had been offered the possibility of giving “national” directives to the various PRTs, showing them in which areas to focus resources and attention. Karzai was skeptical. He didn’t believe me and called Jalali Popal, who joined us at the working lunch so the president could ask him directly. All he could do was confirm what I’d just said.

It was all very sad and yet another example of how little attention Karzai paid to important things. Popal had been trying to get a meeting with him for six months to try and tell him about these developments, but the PRTs—like everything else—had also suffered due to the electoral impasse that had paralyzed the country.

THERE ARE ALWAYS so many things to be done before you leave a place: end-of-mission reports, packing everything up,

handing over to your successor, saying goodbye to those who are staying on.

I had so few days left and I couldn't get much done. I gave the only furniture that was mine, the Afghan dresser and the coffee table I'd had made from the old door, to Claudio Glaentzer, the Italian ambassador. I knew he liked them and it seemed like the least I could do to thank him for making working together such a pleasure, and for the infinite kindness I'd enjoyed from him and his wife, Vidula, during our shared time in Kabul.

The only things I kept for myself were the photos of Kabul in the rain that I'd bought from Sheenkai. I packed them up and shipped them on a NATO cargo plane for Brussels. I left most of my clothes in the closet and told the houseboys to take what they wanted and to give the rest to those in need. So my cases were half empty and I had no trouble packing the heaps of books and paperwork.

Goodbyes make me miserable, but fortunately there wasn't time to organize a proper farewell dinner, and on my last evening I just invited everyone from the office to come over for a final Afghan banquet. As usual, we recruited the Sufi restaurant cooks to do the honors. The night before, however, Stan McChrystal had organized a "family" dinner, inviting my successor Mark Sedwill and the higher-ranking ISAF generals. Stan was kind enough to give me a military map of Kabul, drawn during the first Anglo-Afghan war, as well as an 1885 book on the Russian advance as far as the gates of Herat.

On my last morning in Kabul, I went to say goodbye to the minister of defense, General Wardak, who had just been re-elected, and the new foreign minister, Zalmay Rassoul. Then my bodyguards drove me to the airport, taking a very circuitous route because of a bomb threat on the main street. When I got to the VIP lounge, a call came through from my friend Alexandros Yannis, at the cabinet of the new High Representative for the European Union, Catherine Ashton. Perhaps this was a sign of a new destination coming my way.

The last text message on my Afghan cell phone came immediately after that and it was like a slap in the face: "Why

did you promise to help me and then let me down?”

There was no name and I didn't recognize the number, but I did have an idea who might have sent it.

The fact of the matter is that you should never promise anything, especially in a place like Kabul, where nothing depends just on you. Nevertheless, a promise is sometimes the easiest way out. I didn't have the guts to reply or call back. I just prayed the flight would be called on time and that it would be over as quickly as possible.

# EPILOGUE

I'VE JUST FINISHED rereading everything and I'm happy. I wrote with passion and honesty. I wrote for myself, but also in the hope that some small lessons might be drawn from this unique personal experience. I would have liked to dedicate more space to the Afghans and their country and culture, but it was inevitable, in the end, that I would also write about the international mission. Post-9/11 Afghanistan has been occupied by a formidable foreign legion, and it would have been hypocritical to ignore that fact.

When I first returned to Europe, I'd become upset by news from Kabul, but that doesn't happen now. I suppose writing this book must have been good for me; it has helped make this experience complete, to feel I lived it to the full. The book was also a good excuse to be in touch with some of my fellow missionaries, who are now back to a "normal life," just as I am. It is when I chat with them that I realize that eventually I was able to step back from Kabul at just the right distance.

We hear less and less about Afghanistan now, with newspapers and newscasts interested only in Syria, Mali, and new potential crises such as Iran or North Korea. Even the fact that less than two years ago NATO was involved in another conflict, the one in Libya, has already been forgotten. The TV images of the Tripoli raids in 2011 have bothered me. At first I got angry because I thought we had learned nothing from Afghanistan, but then I told myself that in extreme cases, military actions that are part of a whole, and begin with some awareness of their consequences, may even have some noble purpose. Of course, there is the problem of what comes afterward, of how to rebuild what was destroyed. In the final analysis, as far as I'm concerned, this means not leaving everything in the hands of an international community that may be more skilled at mobilizing military than civilian resources.

The most sensational news since my time in Kabul was the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, but even that didn't get

Afghanistan back into the headlines for long. It was a topic of discussion for a couple of weeks, mainly because this death would speed up the withdrawal of international forces. But then we were done, and Afghanistan returned to the back burner, as if this conflict were too far away for us. In any event, the future of Afghanistan will be more and more in the hands of the Afghans. It will depend on how the “transition” plays out—in other words, how the Afghans gradually assume responsibility, how the West will prepare its military disengagement, and what type of arrangements the United States and other international players will make to leave more and more political space to the leadership in Kabul.

The start of serious negotiations with Taliban leaders continues to be the crucial unknown in the Afghan equation, not least of all because the bottom-up reintegration of insurgents doesn’t appear to be giving the results we’d hoped for. Every now and then we hear that some sort of secret negotiations are in progress with the Taliban. But as I write, it is difficult to foresee how things will go, because, by definition, any negotiation with and among the Afghans will be governed by the slow-moving hands of their clock. I’m keeping my fingers crossed on this, because I still have faith in a political solution based on the logic of the “facts on the ground.”

If I ever get the chance to go back to Afghanistan, I’ll do all the things I couldn’t do this time. I’ll go and see the walls of Balkh, ride in the Badakhshan valleys, explore the mountains of Nuristan as I reread Eric Newby...more than anything, I want to walk around Kabul, stroll its streets early in the morning, when the air is still clear, and stop to buy fruit from the market stalls.

Meanwhile, I’ll stick close to home. There’s plenty to do in Europe, too. For the last three years I have been working for the European Union, in Brussels, dealing with the Serbia-Kosovo mediated dialogue. It was a fascinating experience to work again on that part of the world, although, having been in Afghanistan, the Balkans seem far less infinite now than when I first began going there.

One last thing I must write before I send this off to the publisher. It's on a personal note but was just as vital an aspect of my mission in Afghanistan as many others. My father, Achille, died of cancer on October 3, 2008. He'd taken a turn for the worse two days before, and even last-minute surgery was hopeless. My uncle Roberto had called me in the middle of the night, telling me I should hurry back from Kabul. So I flew to Dubai at dawn, taking a flight to London and flying from there to Rome. I was able to see my father in intensive care for a few minutes the next morning, but he was fading fast and I'm not sure he even knew I was there. He gave up his own battle later that day, leaving this life as gently as he had always lived it. This book is dedicated to him.

F.G.

Brussels

June 2013

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Fernando Gentilini served nearly two years as the civilian representative of NATO in Afghanistan, running a counterinsurgency campaign in the war-torn nation. *Afghan Lessons* is the fascinating story of his mission, a firsthand view of Afghanistan through a kaleidoscope. He explores Afghan history, literature, tradition, and culture to understand some of the most basic questions of Western involvement: What is the purpose? What does an international presence mean, and how can it help?

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**Fernando Gentilini** is an Italian diplomat with twenty years of experience in European and multilateral affairs. He currently works in Brussels for the European External Action Service. *Afghan Lessons* was published in Italy as *Libero a Kabul* (Editori Internazionali Riuniti, 2011). **Robert Cooper** is a British diplomat who served at the top of EU foreign policy institutions. He is also the author of numerous essays, articles, and publications on foreign policy, including *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

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