

Some Personal Observations on the Western *Échec* in Afghanistan

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“We give them schools, hospitals, democracy: Why don’t they love us?” I don’t remember where I read or heard this quotation. I may have picked it up when listening to an exasperated Western observer in Kabul. But it does express exactly what I want to discuss in this brief article, namely the difficulties and challenges of communication between the Afghans and non-Afghans in the mountains, deserts, and cities of Afghanistan between 2001-2021.



Fig. 1: A happy young boy in Pul-i Khumri, North Afghanistan, offers a mock salute to a Dutch officer a few years after the defeat of the Taliban (Photograph by the author, 2005).

In May 2002 I returned to Afghanistan after an absence of almost twenty years. The first time I visited the country was in mid-1978, when I worked at an archaeological dig at Old Kandahar in the south of the country. Following the campaign, I had the chance to travel up north and see more of the land. Looking back, it was a weird time, and little did I – and, more importantly, the Afghans themselves – know what tragedies still lay in store for them. A coup in April 1978 had inaugurated a regime led by local communists, who quickly embarked upon wide-ranging modernist policies aimed at transforming the country: a redistribution of land, a cap to the bride price, a new national flag, subtle and not-so-subtle sneers towards the mullahs and Islam in general, and a realignment of foreign policy towards the Soviet Union.

The relative peace in Afghanistan following the Saur-Revolution, as the communists that came to power in 1978 called their bloody coup, soon came to an end. When in the spring of 1979, I wanted to return from Kabul to Europe, I was stopped halfway through Afghanistan at Kandahar when the first massive uprising erupted against the communist regime, in the western Afghan city of Herat. This revolt marked the start of a civil war that would continue for more than 40 years. At first a local conflict, it soon turned Afghanistan, to quote one of my Afghan friends, into the cesspit of international relations and tensions – the land of dogs and stones, as the Persians used to call this unfortunate country along their eastern marches.

But when I finally left the country in early 1979, via a roundabout way across southern Pakistan and southern Iran, I had no idea what would happen. The Soviet invasion of Christmas 1979, in support of the communist regime in Kabul, changed it all, and Afghanistan became the hotbed of the Cold War. I returned in 1982 as a freelance journalist to report on the ongoing war between the Soviet-backed communist regime in Kabul and an ever-spreading uprising in the countryside by groups that called themselves the Mujahedin (“those fighting a jihad”). I spent some three months in their midst, my otherwise blond hair dyed black with Polycolor to distinguish me from a Russian, wandering from near Kabul some 500 km to the south, towards Kandahar, until I found myself back in Pakistan in the border town of Quetta. It was the first time I was in the middle of an actual, physical shooting war. I experienced the strong comradeship among the fighters. They took me with them in sometimes utterly amateurish attacks on military outposts of the government and the Soviets. I also remember how easy it is to be sucked into the black-and-white thinking of “we are good, they are bad” – a feeling of absolute freedom, no nuances, but so dangerous. I also recall the villagers, some of whom were actively assisting the Mujahedin, others being forced to do so. And I sometimes vividly recall some of the horrors I came across. Many of my experiences from those days would colour my interpretation of recent Afghan history. I think I can understand a bit of the mentality of the Taliban fighters, of the local villagers caught between opposing forces, of the vicissitudes of war, and of the importance for any armed group to have a clearly defined enemy.

Watching Afghanistan from Holland

I returned to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1982. Many years followed: I got married and wrote a PhD. I had children, a mortgage, hamsters, and all the rigmarole of a ‘settled’ life in Leiden. In the meantime, the Soviet forces left Afghanistan in 1989. No one knows how many Afghans had died in those ten years; figures range from 500,000 to two million. Some six million people had fled the country. But the Soviet withdrawal was not the end of the Afghan nightmare. One of the main strengths of the Afghan resistance against the Red Army had been, paradoxically, its fragmentation and division. The regime in Kabul and the Soviets could not talk with, or bribe, any organization that could speak on behalf of most of the resistance groups. The lamentable result was that by 1989, the country rapidly descended into chaos when the many Mujahedin organizations, by lack of a common enemy and following the destruction of anything resembling a central state, turned against each other and started to fight a bitter war with ever-changing alliances between warlords, ethnic groups, followers of particular Islamic movements, and proxies of neighbouring states. Some 20,000 people were killed in Kabul alone, as a result of endless mortar attacks.

The carnage only came to a temporary and partial end when a conservative Islamic group from the south of the country, under the general heading of the *Talib-an* (“religious students”) under Mullah Mohammad Omar, rose to power with the assistance of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence. Basically, the Taliban constituted the epitome of the

anti-modernist movement that had turned against the communist-led government in Kabul. The countryside had won against the city. The Taliban, led by village mullahs who for decades had been pushed aside by the successive regimes in Kabul, stepped to the fore and tried to unite the country under the umbrella of Islam.

The Taliban were mostly Pashtun, the main ethnic group in Afghanistan. The organization quickly moved across much of the country, at first especially in the south and southeast, where the Pashtuns constitute the dominant population. Kabul, with its mixed ethnic composition, fell to the Taliban in 1996. Soon after, they dominated much of the country. By the middle of 2001, only a few pockets of resistance in the northeast of the country remained. When on 9 September the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massud was killed by followers of Osama bin Laden, at that time the guest of the Taliban, the future of the anti-Taliban resistance was in serious doubt. The Taliban seemed fortified. Two days later, however, the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington changed it all, and by the end of the year the Taliban leaders had been bombed out of Afghanistan, and the survivors found refuge in Pakistan. Osama bin Laden was only discovered in his Pakistani hide-out in early 2011, and Mullah Omar died in Pakistan in 2013, although his death was not revealed until two years later.

Back to Afghanistan in the 21st century

In early 2002, having crossed the Khyber Pass, I spent some days in Jalalabad, an Afghan border town between the Khyber and Kabul. I walked around in the bazaar; only a few months previously, some foreign journalists had been shot and killed by fleeing Taliban somewhere west of the town. Stories still circulate that this killing was carried out on the orders of Mullah Baradar, who is now the acting first Deputy Prime Minister of the Taliban regime, often regarded as a moderate leader. People were all staring at me. I don’t remember meeting any other Westerner in town. But in a tea house I spoke, in my rudimentary Dari, with a group of young men, and they were full of the optimism that I would observe all across the country in the months that followed. They were outspoken about the Taliban, whom they were very glad to be rid of. They were also convinced that life was going to be much better, and that America would rebuild the country, pour in lots of money, and make sure that they could binge watch lots of Bollywood films. I don’t remember them talking about schools, hospitals, or even democracy.

Mind, I was keenly aware that these young people, as everyone else I would meet in Afghanistan, were the ones who wanted to talk with me, and vice versa: when I was looking for a taxi, I tended to watch what the driver and any other occupant of the car were wearing. Dress is everything, as the reader may know. But what impressed me that first afternoon in Jalalabad was the fact that these youngsters were openly expressing their animosity towards the Taliban, who, as they told me, for many years had stopped them from listening to

music, watching films, flying kites, or doing anything that would bring some fun into their lives. Their existence had been as bleak as the utterly boring Taliban dress.

In the weeks that followed, I went to Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i Sharif. Everywhere there was the same feeling of optimism and confidence in the future. So, what happened in the years that followed? How could a country, apparently full of hope and optimism, supported by some 130,000 foreign military (around 2010) and an endless shower of foreign aid, succumb to the same Taliban that ruled the country to such disastrous effect prior to 9/11?

This is a question that has recently been discussed at length in the media, and will be discussed for years to come in academic and military circles. After all, hardly a year passes without yet another publication about the (in)famous “Retreat from Kabul” in January 1842, when a British-Indian army of some 16,000 soldiers and camp followers was annihilated in the mountain passes between Kabul and Jalalabad. How could it happen that on 15 August 2021 the Taliban simply walked into Kabul, after having pushed aside – all over the country, and within a month or so – the Afghan army, which comprised some 300,000 men with Western training and weaponry. How could this happen? How could the USA, with all its military potential, be defeated by a bunch of teenagers on their motorbikes?

Much has been written recently about the reasons behind the Taliban advance and the defeat of the elected Afghan government and its foreign sponsors. Yes, the latter were demoralized after the American surrender to the Taliban on 29 February 2020. But what about the Afghan army itself? One argument says that the government forces were Western trained, meaning there was an emphasis on complicated and integrated warfare, as well as a focus on preservation (protection) of the forces. Such an army then had to confront an ill-assorted but fanatical Taliban guerrilla movement that was not hampered by any Rules of Engagement. This is the theme of what has become known as “asymmetric warfare.” Others point at the role of Pakistan and its hidden (and not-so-hidden) assistance to the Taliban. And in many recent articles, attention is drawn to the Western emphasis on democracy that was parachuted into the country. Was Afghanistan ever ready for our ‘religion’ of democracy? We also read about the enormous corruption in Afghanistan, promoted, it is often suggested (not without foundation), by Western politicians who think that money can solve any problem.

We furthermore read about the Western presence from the outset being limited in time; the foreigners could not stay forever, while the Taliban had the time.

I am sure that all of the above observations make sense, and that all of these factors, and there are many more, contributed to the defeat of the democratically elected government in Kabul. The effects of this defeat, first of all for the Afghans, but also for this part of Asia and for the rest of the world, are still unknown. I can only wish that the almost 40 million people of Afghanistan can one time live in relative peace with their human rights upheld.

Intercultural encounters, mutual misunderstandings

What I want to present below, however, is my own interpretation of the defeat of the mainly Western, foreign presence in Afghanistan. Please bear in mind that my ideas are based on my own, subjective observations made particularly between 2001 and 2011, when I was last in the country. In those ten years, I worked in various capacities (i.e., military, diplomatic, and otherwise) in various parts of Afghanistan. Between 2008 and 2011, I served as cultural advisor for the Dutch forces in Uruzgan, in the (Pashtun) south of the country. My main point, as I will try to outline below, is that the massive encounter between the Afghans on one side, and the enormous influx of foreign forces, advisors, and NGOs on the other, was hampered by a lack of understanding, on both sides, of each other’s position and frames of mind. In the case of Afghanistan, geopolitics of course played an important role, and so did many of the other arguments listed above, but it was the failed interaction between Afghans and non-Afghans, in my opinion, that led to the fall of Kabul on 15 August of this year.

But to return to my story. In those ten years (2001-2011), I witnessed enormous progress being made in Afghanistan – in health care, in education, and even in the now much-maligned state building initiatives and the introduction of democracy. At the same time, I noticed, as said before, a huge gap between, on the one hand, the Afghans – and please bear in mind that not every Afghan, man or woman, is the same – and, on the other hand, the amalgam of foreigners that descended upon the country, sometimes with the best of intentions, sometimes just doing their job. While for most Afghans any foreigner, especially when in military uniform, was the same, for many foreigners any man in a *shalwar kamiz*



Fig. 3: Author with his interpreter and two bodyguards in autumn 2008, Uruzgan (Photograph courtesy of the author).

was likewise identical. Stereotypes abounded: the foreigners were rich, the Afghans were wild and badly in need of (Western) civilization.

Against such a background, and in the context of a seemingly endless war, communication was extremely difficult. Yes, interpreters can translate words, but what do these words really mean? What is their connotation? I was often reminded of the famous, although rather slanted words of Rudyard Kipling: “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” I know, times have changed, and after all, what is East, and what is West? But certainly in a world where almost everyone thinks they speak some sort of English, efficient and correct communication remains key, and miscommunication is rife. When my Dutch friends told their Afghan counterparts that they were in Afghanistan to help build up democracy, I could almost hear some of the elderly Afghans cringing and thinking: we lost our friends and family in the 1980s fighting some People’s Democratic Republic from wherever. Are you Dutch trying to turn the tide back? And where is Holland anyhow? Do you mean Poland?

Communication is also more than trying to interpret the words of your partner. It is also about knowing your own background, preconceptions, and prejudices in the context of trying to understand the other. Know yourself, *gnothi seauton*, is, I think, a basic principle in any form of communication. You can only truly understand the other if you know yourself. And in Afghanistan, did we know ourselves? Did we know what we were doing? To be frank, I was never sure why we were there in the first place. And were other

(Western) foreigners equally confused? I am sure that they were. And if many of us did not know, how could we instill confidence in our Afghan partners? How could we formulate policies that were of such importance for the future of their country? In Uruzgan we were frequently confronted with a dilemma: whether we should support the Afghan state and its institutions, or whether we should focus more on security and stability. Would we in all cases support the governor, appointed by the central government, or would we in some cases support local leaders, who were not elected but had a traditional, armed, and staunchly anti-Taliban following? Instructions from The Hague would emphasise the importance of state (and democracy) building, while us poor guys doing the actual work and trudging through the dust of Uruzgan¹ were inclined to support an approach that would focus on good relations with local leaders. But how to frame this dilemma in any discussions with the Afghans? How could we have a meaningful discussion without being clear ourselves of what we wanted?

On the other hand, our Afghan partners were hampered with very much the same problem. Did they always fully realize and comprehend what they wanted from the foreigners? Did they really understand these foreigners from far-away countries? What were their own ideas, preconceptions, and prejudices? How could a young man from Uruzgan, who had never known anything but war, and who had been made district chief after his father had been accidentally shot by Australian forces, start to understand this blond bloke from the small town of Medemblik in the north of the Netherlands, which does not even have a regular railway connection?

Communication is always a hazardous undertaking, and misunderstanding is always a risk lurking around the corner. But when a large number of foreigners from many different countries and backgrounds descend upon a country with a completely different set of norms and values, with an almost alien history, an ancient and deeply-rooted religious foundation, and with so many people traumatized by years of war, then effective communication becomes extremely difficult. The outcome was not determined in the Presidential Palace in Kabul, in the White House in Washington, or the Binnenhof in The Hague, but in the plains and deserts of Afghanistan. Perhaps the Taliban won not because of their courage, determination, common objectives, or shared *kaffir* (“nonbeliever”) enemy, but mainly because they could communicate more efficiently with many of the other Afghans.

But however difficult, we have to keep trying to communicate, even with those we came to regard as our enemies. Perhaps the Afghan war has told us something about ourselves. At some point, we will have to sit together, drink tea, and try again.

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Notes

- ¹ “The Dust of Uruzgan” is the title of a song by the Australian Fred Smith. The lyrics and melody still haunt me.



Fig. 2: A meeting of village elders in the district of Derawud in southwestern Uruzgan, southern Afghanistan. Two of the founders of the Taliban movement, Mullah Omar and Mullah Baradar, both lived and worked in this district before moving to Kandahar and setting up their organization (Photograph by the author, 2009).