“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.

I returned to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1982. Many years followed: I got married and we had a child, the first of many. The children went to schools, hospitals, or even democracy. It was the first time I was in the middle of an actual, physical shooting war. I experienced the strange comradeship among the fighters. They took me with them in sometimes utterly amoralish 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 could colour my interpretation of recent Afghan history. I think I can understand the difficulties and challenges of communication between the Afghans and non-Afghans in the mountains, deserts, and cities of Afghanistan between 2001-2021.

Watching Afghanistan from Holland

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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 MazariSharif. Everywhere there was the same feeling of optimism and confidence in the future. So, what happened to all of this? How could a country, apparently full of hope and optimism, supported by some 130,000 foreign (military) (Pashtu) 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 15,000 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 her existence had been as bleak as the utterly boring Taliban dress.

Much has been written recently about the reasons behind the Taliban advance and the defeat of the elected Afghan government and its foreign sponsors. No, the latter were not defeated; rather, the Afghans were defeated by a bunch of teenagers on their motorbikes. Afghanistan was Afghanistan every 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 foreigner 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 facts, and there are many more, contributed to the defeat of the democratically elected government in Kabul. The ethics of this defeat. First of all, the Afghans, but also for this part of Asia and for the rest of the world, are still unknown. I can only warn that the above, or a million people in 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 try to outline below, is that the massive encounter between the Afghans on one side, and the enormous influence of foreign forces, advisors, and NGOs on the other, was hampered by a lack of understanding, on both sides, of each other’s point of view. As a result, all of the many obstacles that were hampered by a lack of understanding, on both sides, of each other’s point of view, were hampered by a lack of understanding, on both sides, of each other’s point of view, 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 crying 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 Polonai? 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 Afghans? How could we have meaningful 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 emphasize the importance of state (and democracy) building, while our own goals may have been different. We 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 of ourselves of what we wanted?

On the other hand, our Afghan partners had to deal with very much the same problem. Did they always fully realize and comprehend what they wanted from the foreigners? Did they really understand these foreign ‘enemies’? How could we have a meaningful discussion with them? In Uruzgan, who had never known anything but war, and who had been made district chief after her husband had been killed by Australian forces, start to understand this blinde blakke 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 backdrops descend upon a country with a completely different set of norms and values, with an almost alien language, alien history and culture, a different religion and culture, 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 koffir ("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 come 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. Meeting of village elders in the district of Gneshem in southeastern 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).

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