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# Limbs of no body

*World's indifference to the Afghan tragedy*

By Mohsen Makhmalbaf  
June 20, 2001

*The Iranian*

*If you read my article in full, It will take about an hour of your time. In this hour, 14 more people will have died in Afghanistan of war and hunger and 60 others will have become refugees in other countries. This article is intended to describe the reasons for this mortality and emigration. If this bitter subject is irrelevant to your sweet life, please don't read it.*

## Afghanistan in the eyes of the world

Last year I attended the Pusan Film Festival in South Korea where I was asked about the subject of my next film. I would respond, Afghanistan. Immediately I would be asked, "What is Afghanistan?" Why is it so? Why should a country be so obsolete that the people of another Asian country such as South Korea have not even heard of it?

Photo by Ali Khaligh



Afghan refugee being deported from Iran

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The reason is clear. Afghanistan does not have a role in today's world. It is neither a country remembered for a certain commodity nor for its scientific advancement or as a nation that has achieved artistic honors. In the United States, Europe and the Middle East, however, the situation is different and Afghanistan is recognized as a peculiar country.

This strangeness, however, does not have a positive connotation. Those who recognize the name Afghanistan immediately associate it with smuggling, the Taliban, Islamic fundamentalism, war with Russia, a long-time civil war, famine and high mortality. In this subjective portrait there is no trace of peace and stability or development. Thus, no desire is created for tourists to travel to or businessmen to invest in Afghanistan.

So why should it not be left to oblivion? The defamation is such that one might soon write in dictionaries that Afghanistan can be described as a drug producing country with rough, aggressive and fundamentalist people who hide their women under veils with no openings.

Add to all of that the destruction of the largest known statue of Buddha that recently spurred the sympathy of the entire world and led all supporters of art and culture to defend the doomed statue. But why didn't anybody except UN High Commissioner Ogata express grief over the pending death of one million Afghans as a result of severe famine? Why doesn't anybody speak of the reasons for this mortality? Why is everyone crying aloud over the demolition of the Buddha statue while nothing is heard about preventing the death of hungry Afghans? Are statues more cherished than humans in the modern-day world?

I have traveled within Afghanistan and witnessed the reality of life in that nation. As a filmmaker I produced two feature films on Afghanistan with a 13-year interval ("The Cyclist", 1988 and "Kandahar", 2001). In doing that I have studied about 10,000 pages of various books and documents to collect data for the films. Consequently I know of a different image of Afghanistan than that of the rest of the world. It is a more complicated, different and tragic picture, yet sharper and more positive. It is an image that needs

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attention rather than forgetfulness and suppression.

But where is Sa'di to see this tragedy -- the Sa'di whose poem "All people are limbs of one body" is above the portal to the United Nations?

## **Afghanistan in the minds of the Iranian people**

The Iranian people's impression of Afghanistan is based on the same image as that of the American, European and Middle Eastern people. The only difference is that the focus is at a closer range. Iranian workers, people of southern Tehran and working class residents of Iranian towns do not look kindly on Afghans and view them as competitors for employment. By pressuring the Ministry of Labor, they demanded the Afghans be returned to their homeland. See [photo essay](#)

The Iranian middle class however, finds Afghans quite trustworthy at care-taking and janitorial jobs. Building contractors believe Afghans are better workers than their Iranian counterparts and command lower wages. Anti-drug authorities recognize them as key elements in drug trafficking and suggest that crushing the smugglers and deporting all Afghans would put an end to drug problems once and for all. Doctors view them as the cause for some epidemic diseases such as the "Afghan flu" that was nonexistent in Iran. They offer immunization from within Afghanistan and in so doing, have born the costs of polio vaccination for the people of Afghanistan as well.

## **The world's view of Afghanistan**

News headlines matching a country's name must always be checked. The image of a country depicted to the world through the media is a combination of facts about that country and an imaginary notion that the people of the world are supposed to have of that place. If some countries of the world are supposed to be covetous of a place, it is necessary that grounds be provided through the news.

What I've perceived is that unfortunately in today's Afghanistan except for poppy seeds, there is almost nothing to spark desire. Thus Afghanistan has

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little or no share in world news, and the resolution of its problems in the near future is far-fetched. If like Kuwait, Afghanistan had oil and surplus oil income, it could also have been taken back in three days by the Americans and the cost of the American army could have been covered by that surplus income.

When the Soviet Union existed, Afghans received Western media attention for fighting against the Eastern Bloc and being witnesses to communist oppression. With the Soviet retreat and later disintegration, why is the United States, who supports human rights, not taking any serious actions for 10 million women deprived of education and social activities or for the eradication of poverty and famine that is taking the lives of so many people?

The answer is because Afghanistan offers nothing to long for. Afghanistan is not a beautiful girl who raises the heartbeat of her thousand lovers. Unfortunately, today she resembles an old woman. Whoever desires to get close to her will only be saddled with the expenses of a moribund and we know that our time is not the time of Sa'di when "All people are limbs of one body".

## **The tragedy of Afghanistan in statistics**

There has been no rigorous collection of statistics in Afghanistan in the past two decades. Hence, all data and numbers are relative and approximate. According to these figures, Afghanistan had a population of 20 million in 1992. During the past 20 years and since the Russian occupation, about 2.5 million Afghans have died as a direct or indirect result of the war -- army assaults, famine or lack of medical attention.

In other words, every year 125,000 or about 340 people a day or 14 people every hour or one in about every five minutes have been either killed or died because of this tragedy. This is a world wherein the crew of that unfortunate Russian submarine was facing death some months ago and satellite news was reporting every minute of the incident. It is a world that reported non-stop the demolition of the Buddha statue.



Yet nobody speaks of the tragic death of Afghans every five minutes for the past 20 years. The number of Afghan refugees is even more tragic. According to more precise statistics the number of Afghan refugees outside of Afghanistan living in Iran and Pakistan is 6.3 million. If this figure is divided by the year, day, hour and minute, in the past 20 years, one person has become a refugee every minute. The number does not include those who run from north to south and vice versa to survive the civil war.

I personally do not recollect any nation whose population was reduced by 10 percent via mortality and 30 percent through migration and yet faced so much indifference from the world. The total number of people killed and refugees in Afghanistan equals the entire Palestinian population but even us Iranians' share of sympathy for Afghanistan does not reach 10 percent of that for Palestine or Bosnia, despite the fact that we have a common language and border.

When crossing the border at the Dogharoon customs to enter Afghanistan, I saw a sign that warned visitors of strange looking items. These were mines. It read: "Every 24 hours seven people step on mines in Afghanistan. Be careful not to be one of them today and tomorrow."

I came across more hard figures in one of the Red Cross camps. The Canadian group that had come to defuse mines found the tragedy simply too vast, lost hope and returned. Based on these same figures, over the next 50 years the people of Afghanistan must step on mines in groups to make their land safe and livable. The reason is because every group or sect has strewn mines against the other without a map or plan for later collection. The mines are not set in military fashion as in war and collected in peace. This means that a nation has placed mines against itself. And when it rains hard, surface waters reposition these devices turning once safe remote roads into dangerous paths.

These statistics reveal the extent of the unsafe living environment in Afghanistan that leads to continuous emigration. Afghans perceive their situation as dangerous. There's constant fear of hunger and death.

Why shouldn't Afghans emigrate? A nation with an emigration rate of 30

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percent certainly feels hopeless about its future. Of the 70 percent remaining, 10 percent have been killed or died and the rest or 60 percent were not able to cross the borders or if they did, they were sent back by the neighboring countries.

This perilous situation has also been an impediment to any foreign presence in Afghanistan. A businessman would never risk investing there unless he is a drug dealer and political experts prefer to fly directly to Western countries. This makes it difficult to resolve the crisis that Afghanistan is faced with. At present, due to UN sanctions and safety concerns, with the exception of only three countries (officially) and two others (unofficially), there are no political experts in Afghanistan. There are only political suppositions offered from a distance.

This adds to the ambiguity of crisis in a country burdened with such an enormous scope of tragedy and ignorance on the part of the world. I witnessed about 20,000 men, women and children around the city of Herat starving to death. They couldn't walk and were scattered on the ground awaiting the inevitable. This was the result of the recent famine. That same day the then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Japan's Sadako Ogata, also visited these same people and promised that the world would help them. Three months later, I heard on Iranian radio that Madame Ogata gave the number of Afghans dying of hunger to be a million nationwide.

I reached the conclusion that the statue of Buddha was not demolished by anybody; it crumbled out of shame. Out of shame for the world's ignorance towards Afghanistan. It broke down knowing its greatness didn't do any good.

In Dushanbeh in Tajikistan I saw a scene where 100,000 Afghans were running from south to north, on foot. It looked like doomsday. These scenes are never shown in the media anywhere in the world. The war-stricken and hungry children had run for miles and miles barefoot. Later on the same fleeing crowd was attacked by internal enemies and was also refused asylum in Tajikistan. In the thousands, they died and died in a no-man's land between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and neither you found out nor anybody else.



As Mrs. Golrokhsar, the renowned Tajik poet put it: "It is not strange if someone in the world dies for so much sorrow that Afghanistan has. What's strange is that why nobody dies of this grief."

## **Afghanistan, a country with no images**

Afghanistan is a country with no images, for various reasons. Afghan women are faceless which means 10 million out of the 20 million population don't get a chance to be seen. A nation, half of which is not even seen by its own women, is a nation without an image.

During the last few years there has been no television broadcasting. There are only a few two-page newspapers by the names of *Shariat*, *Heevad* and *Anise* that have only text and no pictures. This is the sum total of the media in Afghanistan. Painting and photography have also been prohibited in the name of religion. In addition, no journalists are allowed to enter Afghanistan, let alone take pictures.

In the dawn of the 21st century there are no film productions or movie theatres in Afghanistan. Previously there were 14 cinemas that showed Indian movies and film studios had small productions imitating Indian movies but that too has vanished.

In the world of cinema where thousands of films are made every year, nothing is forthcoming from Afghanistan. Hollywood, however, produced "Rambo" about war in Afghanistan. The whole movie was filmed in Hollywood and not one Afghan was included. The only authentic scene was Rambo's presence in Peshawar, Pakistan, thanks to the art of back projection! It was merely employed for action sequences and creating excitement. Is this Hollywood's image of a country where 10 percent of the people have been decimated and 30 percent have become refugees and where currently one million are dying of hunger?

The Russians produced two films concerning the memoirs of Russian soldiers during the occupation of Afghanistan. The Mujahedin made a few films after the Russian retreat, which are essentially propaganda movies and not a real

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image of the situation of the past or present-day Afghanistan. They are basically a heroic picture of a few Afghans fighting in the deserts.

Two feature films have been produced in Iran on the situation of Afghan immigrants, "Friday" and "Rain". I made two films "The Cyclist" and "Kandahar". This is the entire catalogue of images about Afghans in the Iranian and world media. Even in TV productions worldwide there are a limited number of documentaries. Perhaps, it is an external and internal conspiracy or universal ignorance that maintains Afghanistan as a country without an image.

### **The historical image of an imageless country**

Afghanistan emerged when it separated from Iran. It used to be an Iranian province some 250 years ago and part of Greater Khorasan province in the era of Nadir Shah. Returning from India, one midnight, Nadir Shah was murdered in Ghoochan. Ahmad Abdali, an Afghan commander in Nadir Shah's army fled with a regiment of 4,000 soldiers. He declared independence from Iran and thus Afghanistan was created.

In those days it was comprised of farmers and overwhelmingly ruled by tribes. Since Ahmad Abdali belonged to the Pashtoon tribe, naturally, he could not have been accepted as the absolute authority by other tribes such as the Tajik, Hazareh and Uzbek. Thus, it was agreed that each tribe would be governed by its own leaders. The rulers collectively formed a tribal federalism known as the "Loya Jirga".

Since then until the present, a more just and appropriate form of governing has not emerged in Afghanistan. The Loya Jirga system reveals that not only has Afghanistan never evolved economically from an agricultural existence, it has never moved beyond tribal rule and failed to achieve a sense of nationalism.

An Afghan does not regard himself an Afghan until he leaves his homeland. He is regarded with pity or suffers humiliation. In Afghanistan each Afghan is a Pashtoon, Hazareh, Uzbek or Tajik. In Iran, perhaps except in the province



Kurdistan, we are all Iranians first. Nationalism is the first aspect of our perception of a common identity. But in Afghanistan all are primarily members of a tribe. Tribalism is the first aspect of their identity.

This is the most obvious difference between the spirit of an Iranian with that of an Afghan. Even in presidential elections in Iran, the candidate's ethnicity has no national significance and draws no special vote. In Afghanistan since the era of Ahmad Abdali until today as the Taliban rule over 95 percent of the country, the main leaders have always been from the Pashtoon tribe. (Except for the nine months of Habibullah Galehkani's rule known as Bacheh Sagma and the two years of the Tajik Burhannuddin Rabbani respectively, Tajiks have not otherwise held power.) The people of Afghanistan, however, since the time of Ahmad Abdali, have always been content with tribal federalism.

What does this indicate in comparison to the situation in Iran? Under Reza Shah, tribalism was weakened and replaced by nationalism. In Afghanistan that did not happen. Even the Mujahedin of Afghanistan never fought foreign enemies in a unified manner, rather each tribe warred with foreign enemies in their own regions.

During the making of Kanadahaar while I was in the refugee camps at the border of Iran and Afghanistan, I realized that even those Afghan refugees who have lived in difficult camp conditions, did not accept their Afghan national identity. They still had conflicts over being Tajik, Hazareh or Pashtoon. Inter-tribal marriages still do not take place among Afghans neither is there any business conducted between them. And with the most minor conflict, the danger of mass bloodshed prevails. I once witnessed one tribal member killed by someone from another in revenge for cutting in a bread line.

In the Niatak refugee camp (border of Iran-Afghanistan) that accommodates 5,000 residents, it is not easy for Pashtoon and Hazareh children to play with each other. This sometimes leads to mutual aggression. Tajiks and Hazarehs find Pashtoos their greatest enemy on earth and vice versa. None of them are even willing to attend each other's mosques for prayers. We had difficulty seating their children next to each other to watch a movie. They offered a

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compromise wherein Hazareh and Pashtoon children took turns watching.

Many diseases were prevalent in this camp and there were no doctors. When a doctor was brought in from the city, the camp residents didn't give priority to treating those who were most ill. Only a tribal order was accepted. They appointed a day for Hazareh patients and another for Pashtoons. In addition, class distinctions among the Pashtoons prevented them from coming to the clinic on the same day.

In shooting scenes that needed extras, we had to decide to choose from among either Hazarehs or Pashtoons, though all of them were refugees and both suffered the same misery. Yet, tribal disposition came first in any decisions. Of course, the majority were unfamiliar with cinema. Like my grandmother, they thanked God for not having stepped foot inside a movie theatre.

The reason for Afghanistan's perpetual tribalism rests with its agrarian economics. Each Afghan tribe is trapped in a valley with geographical walls and is a natural prisoner of a culture stemming from a mountainous environment and farming economy. Cultural tribalism is the product of farming conditions rooted in the deep valleys of Afghanistan. Belief in tribalism is as deep as those valleys.

The topography of Afghanistan is 75 percent mountainous of which only 7 percent is suitable for farming. It lacks any semblance of industry. The country is solely dependent on farming, as grasslands (in non-drought years) are the only resources for economic continuity. Again, farming is the foundation of this tribalism that in turn is the basis for deep internal conflicts. This not only stops Afghanistan from becoming a modern country it also prevents this would-be nation from achieving a national identity.

There is no intrinsic popular belief in what is called Afghanistan and Afghans. Afghans are not yet ready to be absorbed into a bigger collective identity called the people of Afghanistan. Contrary to the misnomer of religious war, the origin of disputes lies with tribal conflicts. The Tajiks who fight the Taliban today are both Muslim and Sunni -- as are the Taliban. The intelligence of Ahmad Abdali is yet to be appreciated for having creating the

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notion of tribal federalism. He was smarter than those who fancy the ruling of one tribe over all others or one individual over a nation -- when tribalism and the economic infrastructure was still intact.

Pashtoons with a population of about six million make up Afghanistan's largest tribe. Next are Tajiks with about four million people and third and fourth are Hazarehs and Uzbeks with populations of about four million and one to two million respectively. The rest are small tribes such as the Imagh, Fars, Balouch, Turkman and Qezelbash.

The Pashtoons are mostly in the south, the Tajiks in the north and the Hazarehs in the central regions. This geographical concentration in different regions will lead either to complete and final disintegration or the continued connection from the head of the tribe through the Loya Jirga system. The only alternative to these two scenarios necessitates changes in the economic infrastructure and the replacement of a tribal identity with a national one.

If we can elect a president in Iran today, free from issues of ethnicity, it is because of the economic transformation resulting from oil, at least in the last century. The question is not the quality or quantity of oil in the Iranian economy. The point is that when oil enters the economy of a country such as Iran that was basically agricultural, it changes the economic infrastructure and the role of Iran becomes significant in political interactions. It becomes an exporter of a valued raw material and in return receives the surplus productions of industrial countries.

This transformation changes the socio-economic infrastructure that in turn breaks the traditional culture and creates a more modern one, exporting oil and consuming the products of industrialized countries. If we omit money as the symbolic medium, then we have given oil in exchange for consumer products. But Afghanistan has nothing but drugs to exchange in the world market. Therefore, it has turned back on itself and become isolated. Perhaps, if Afghanistan had not separated from Iran 250 years ago, it would have had a different fate based on its share of oil revenues.

The amount of opium that I will elaborate on later is far too insignificant to be

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compared to Iranian oil. In 2000 Iran's surplus income from the oil price windfall went over \$10 billion. Total sales of opium in Afghanistan remained at \$500 million.

We have played our role in the world economy and by consuming the products of others, have understood that we have choices and have thus become somewhat more modern. But for the Afghan farmer his world is his valleys and his profession is farming when drought spares him. Meanwhile a tribal system resolves his social problems. Given that, he cannot have a share in the world economy. How are grounds for his economic and cultural transition to be provided to let him have a share? In addition, \$80 billion in the global drug turnover depends on Afghanistan remaining in its present situation without change because if change prevails, that \$80 billion is the first thing to be threatened. Hence, Afghanistan is not supposed to realize a considerable profit since that itself may yield change for Afghanistan.

Although Iran and Afghanistan shared the same history some 250 years ago due to oil, the history of Iran took a turn that is impossible for Afghanistan to take for a very long time. Opium is the only product that Afghanistan offers to the world. Yet both because of the nature of this product and the insignificant amount of this tainted national wealth, it cannot be compared to oil. If we add the \$500 million income from the sale of opium to the \$300 million from the sale of northern Afghanistan's gas, and divide the total by the 20 million population, the result is \$40 per capita annual income. If we further divide that figure by 365 days each Afghan would earn about 10 cents a day or the equivalent of the price a loaf of bread on normal days.

But, the country's annual earnings belong to the government and the domestic mafia and it doesn't get divided fairly. This revenue, therefore, is both insufficient to meet the needs of people and too low to bring about significant change in the economic, social, political and cultural infrastructure.

### **Why have 30 percent of the population emigrated?**

Livestock breeders habitually move to resolve their living problems. Urban residents and agricultural farmers are less likely to move often. The main

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reason for the Afghan livestock breeders' mobility is related to the farming seasons. They constantly move to green and warm areas to avoid dry lands and cold weather. Movement is a natural reflex for livestock farmers. The second reason is lack of a fixed occupation. Afghans migrate to avoid death from unemployment.

The Afghans' daily earnings depend on working in other countries. Upon waking up each day, an Afghan has four burdens to consider. First is his livestock and this depends on drought not being an obstacle. Fighting for a group or sect is his second concern and generally because of employment he enters the army. Earning a living to support his family is another reason why he moves and if all else fails, he enters the drug business.

The extent of this last option is limited and the labor options of a nation of 20 million people cannot really be measured with a \$500 million account accrued from cultivating poppy seeds. Thus, characterizing the people of Afghanistan as opium smugglers is unreal and applies only to a very limited number.

### **Afghan culture immunized against modernism**

Amanullah Khan who ruled in Afghanistan from 1919-1928, was a contemporary of Reza Shah and Kemal Ataturk. On a personal level he was inclined towards modernism. In 1924, Amanullah traveled to Europe, returned with a Rolls Royce and made known his reform program. The plan included a change in attire. He told his wife to unveil herself and asked men to forego their Afghan costumes for Western suits. Contrary to Afghan male custom, he prohibited polygamy. Traditionalists immediately begin opposing Amanullah's modernising. None of the agrarian tribes submitted to these changes and rioting ensued against him.

Here, clearly modernism without a socio-economic basis, is but a non-homogeneous imposition of culture on a tribal society economically dependent on farming; lacking any industry, agriculture or even preliminary means of exploiting its resources, not to mention prohibition of inter-tribal marriages. This superficial, formalistic and petty modernism served only as an antibody to stimulate traditional Afghan culture, making Afghanistan so

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immune to it that even in the following decades, modernism could not penetrate the culture in a more rational form.

Even today, the premis for modernism that includes exploiting resources and presenting cheap raw materials in exchange for goods, have not been created. The most advanced people in Afghanistan still believe that Afghan society is not yet ready for female suffrage. When the most progressive sect involved in the civil war, finds it too early for women to vote, it is obvious that the most conservative will prohibit schooling and social activities to them. It follows naturally that 10 million women are held captive under their burqas (veil).

This is Afghan society 70 years after Amanullah's modernism that aimed to impose monogamy on a male dominated Afghanistan, whose only perception of family is the harem. In 2001, polygamy is still an accepted fact by women even in refugee camps on the border of Iran/Afghanistan. I attended two weddings among the Pashtoon and Hazareh tribes and heard them wishing for more prosperous weddings for the groom. At first I thought it was a joke. In another case the bride's family said: "If the groom can afford it, up to four wives is indeed very good and it is a religious tradition as well as helping a bunch of hungry people."

When I went to the camp in Saveh to record the wedding music for "Kandahar", I saw a two-year-old girl being wedded to a seven-year-old boy. I never understood the meaning of this. Neither could that boy or that little girl, who was sucking on a pacifier, have made the choice. Given this portrait of traditional society, Amanullah's modernism seemed an overwhelming imitation of another country.

Of course, some people believe if a woman changes her burgha into a less concealing veil, she may be struck by God's wrath and turned into a black stone. Perhaps, someone has to forcibly rid her of the burgha so she'll realize that the assumption is untrue and she can choose for herself.

There is another biased viewpoint to Amanullah's modernism. In traditional societies, the culture of hypocrisy is a form of class camouflage. In Iranian society wealthy traditional families decorate the interior of their home like a

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castle but keep the exterior looking like a shack, out of fear from the poor. In other words, that aristocratic nucleus needs to have a poor rustic shell.

Opposition to modernism is not necessarily expressed by traditional organizations. Sometimes it is a reaction by the poor against the rich. For the poor society in Amanullah's time, while having horses as opposed to mules was a symbol of honor and nobility, a Rolls Royce was an insult to the poor. The war between tradition and modernism is primarily the same as the battle of the Rolls Royce and the mule. It is a war between poverty and wealth.

Today, in Afghanistan the only modern objects are weapons. The ubiquitous civil war that has created jobs in addition to being a political/military action has also become a market for modern weapons. Afghanistan can no longer fight with knives and daggers even though it lags behind the contemporary age. The consumption of weapons is a serious matter. Stinger missiles next to long beards and burghas are still symbols of profound modernism that are proportionate to consumption and modern culture.

For the Afghan Mujahed, weapons have an economic basis that creates jobs. If all weapons are removed from Afghanistan, the war ends and all accept that there will be no more assaults on anyone, given the sub zero economic conditions all of today's mujahedin will join the refugees in other countries. The issue of tradition and modernism, war and peace, tribalism and nationalism in Afghanistan must be analyzed with an eye to the economic situation and employment crisis. It has to be understood that there is no immediate solution for the economic crisis in Afghanistan.

A long-term resolution is contingent on an economic miracle and not on a nationwide military attack from north to south or vice versa. Have these miracles not happened time and again? Was the Soviet retreat not a miracle? Was the sovereignty of the Mujahedin not a miracle on their part? Was the sudden conquest of the Taliban not a miracle of its kind? Then why do problems remain? Modernism under discussion here faces two fundamental problems. One is rooted in economics and the second is immunization of Afghan traditional culture against premature modernism.



## Geographical situation and its consequences

Afghanistan has an area of 700,000 square kilometers. Mountains account for 75 percent of the land. People live in cavernous valleys surrounded by towering mountains. These elevations not only attest to a rough nature, difficult passage and impediments to business, but are also viewed as cultural and spiritual fortresses among Afghan tribes. It is obvious why Afghanistan lacks inter-state routes. The shortage of roads not only creates obstacles for the fighters who seek to occupy Afghanistan, it stops businessmen whose prosperity may become a means of economic growth.

To the same degree that these mountains obstruct foreign intrusion, they block interference of other cultures and commercial activities. A country that is 75 percent mountains has problems creating consumer markets in its potential industrial cities and in exporting agriculture products to the cities. Despite the use of modern weapons, wars take longer and find no conclusion.

In the past Afghanistan was a passageway for caravans on the Silk Road traversing China through Balkh and India through Kandahar. The discovery of waterways and then airways in the last century, changed Afghanistan from being an ancient commercial route into a dead-end. The old Silk Road was a passage of camels and horses and didn't have the characteristics of a modern road. Through the same winding roads Nadir Shah, Alexander, Timur and Mahmmod Ghaznavi went to India. Given the mountainous character of these roads, there used to be primitive wooden bridges that have been badly damaged in the past 20 years of war.

Perhaps today, after two decades of foreign and civil war the people want the strongest party to win and give a single direction to Afghanistan's historical fate, no matter what. These same mountains, however, are a hindrance. Perhaps, the true fighters of Afghanistan are not its hungry people but the high mountains that don't surrender. The Tajik resistance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud owes its survival to the Panjshir valley. Conceivably, if Afghanistan was not mountainous, the Soviets could have easily conquered it; or it could have been prey for the Americans to hunt down like the plains of Kuwait, and bring it closer to the Central Asian markets.

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Being mountainous increases both the cost of war and reconstruction after peace. If Afghanistan was not so rugged it would have had a different economical, military, political and cultural fate. Is this a geographical misfortune? Imagine a fighter who has to constantly climb up and down mountains. Suppose he conquered all of Afghanistan. He then has to constantly conquer the peaks to provide for his army. These mountains have been sufficient to save Afghanistan from foreign enemies and domestic friends.

When you look at the Soviet-Afghan war, you see a nation's resistance but when on the inside, you realize that each tribe has defended the valley it was trapped in. When the enemy left, again, everyone saw their valley as the center of the world. And again, the same mountains have made agriculture very difficult. Only 15 percent of the land is suited for agriculture and practically just half of this is actually cultivated. The reason for livestock farming is that the grasslands are on the mountainsides or its environs.

It can be said that Afghanistan is a victim of her own topography. There are no routes in the mountains and road construction is expensive. The roads if any, are either military or narrow paths for smugglers. The only trunk road passes around the borders. How can a border road function like a primary artery in the body of Afghanistan to resolve problems of social, cultural and economic communications? The few interstate roads that existed were destroyed in the war. To whose advantage is it to pay for the costs of drilling these tough and elevated mountains? For which potential profit should this exorbitant cost be borne?

It is said that Afghanistan is full of unexplored mines. From what route are these possibly exploitable resources supposed to reach their destinations? Who will be the first to invest in mines that will generate profits in an uncertain future? Has the lack of roads been a sufficient disincentive for the Soviets and Afghans not to think of excavating the mines?

On the other hand, Afghanistan is a land of eternal hidden paths that are quite efficient for smuggling drugs. There are as many winding roads as you want for smuggling but for crushing the smugglers, you need straight ones that

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don't exist. You can't know the infinite number of paths and you can't attack a path every day. At the most, you can await a caravan at a junction. A smuggler was arrested around the city of Semnan in Iran who had walked barefoot from Kandahar carrying a sack of drugs. He had no skin on his soles when arrested, but kept on walking.

In the mountains of Afghanistan water is more of a calamity than a blessing. In winter it is freezing. It floods in spring and in the summer its shortage yields drought. This is the property of mountains without dams. Uncontrolled waters and hard soil reduce agricultural possibility. This is the geographical picture of Afghanistan: Arduous to cross, incapable of cultivation and mines impossible to exploit due to transport costs.

The fact that some find Afghanistan as a museum of tribes, races and languages is because of its geography and sheer difficulty. Every tradition in this country has remained intact because of isolation and lack of interference. It is only natural for this rough and dry country (with only 7 percent of its land being used for agriculture of which half is threatened by drought) to turn to cultivation of poppy seeds to support its people. If the conditions are normal and the price of bread does not increase, from all this poppy wealth, a single loaf of bread is what every Afghan receives.

In its present state the economy of Afghanistan can keep its people half full without any economic development. Wealth though, rests with the domestic mafia or gets spent on unstable Afghan regimes and the people don't get a share of it.

The basic question then comes to mind as to how the Afghan people are supported? It is either through construction work in Iran, participation in political wars or becoming theology students in the Taliban schools. According to statistics over 2,500 schools of the Taliban with a capacity between 300 to 1,000 students, attract hungry orphans. In these schools anybody can have a piece of bread and a bowl of soup, read the Quran and memorize prayers and later join the Taliban forces. This is the only remaining option for employment.



It is the result of this geography that emigration, smuggling and war remain as occupations and I'm wondering how Massoud is going to meet the needs of the people after possible victory over the Taliban? Will it be through continued war or development of poppy seeds or prayer for rain?

On the Iranian border the UN pays 20 dollars to any Afghan volunteering to return to Afghanistan. They are taken by bus to the first cities inside Afghanistan or dropped around the borders. Interestingly, due to lack of jobs in Afghanistan, the Afghans quickly come back and if not recognized, go in line again to get another 20 dollars. The jobless Afghans turn every solution into an occupation. And as much as war may be a profession, few Afghan leaders have died pursuing it.

Continued war provides opportunity for the U.S., the Soviets and the six neighboring countries to give aid to forces loyal to them. This largeness is normally aimed at continuing a war or balancing power but in the case of Afghanistan it merely creates jobs. Let's not forget that there's been a two-year drought and livestock have died as a result. The mortality as announced by the UN is predicted at one million within the next few months. The war has nothing to do with this. It is poverty and famine. Whenever farming has been threatened by shortage of water, emigration has increased and wars have worsened.

The average life expectancy of an Afghan has been calculated at 41.5 years and the mortality rate for children under two years of age was between 182 to 200 deaths per 1,000 kids. The average longevity was 34 years in 1960 and in 2000 was pegged at 41. The reality however is that in recent years it has gone down to even lower than what it was in 1960.

I never forget those nights of filming Kanadabar. While our team searched the deserts with flashlights, we would see dying refugees like herds of sheep left in the desert. When we took those that we thought were dying of cholera to hospitals in Zabol, we realized that they were dying of hunger. Since those days and nights of seeing so many people starving to death, I haven't been able to forgive myself for eating any meals.



The Afghans between 1986 to 1989 had about 22 million sheep. That is one sheep per person. This has traditionally been the main wealth of a farming nation such as Afghanistan. This wealth was lost in the recent famine. Imagine the situation of a farming nation without livestock. The original tragedy of Afghanistan today is poverty and the only way to resolve the problems is through economic rehabilitation.

If I had gone to support the mujahedin instead of the true freedom fighters who are ordinary people struggling to stay alive, I would have come back. If I were president of a neighboring country, I would encourage economic relations with Afghanistan in lieu of political-military interventions. God forbid if I was in the place of God, I would bless Afghanistan with something else that would benefit this forgotten nation. And I write this without believing it will have any impact in this era very different than that of Sa'di's time when, "all men are limbs of one body".

Dr. Kamal Hossein, the UN Humanitarian Adviser for Afghanistan affairs from Bangladesh, visited our office in the summer of 2000 and told us that he had been reporting quite futilely to the UN for 10 years. He had come to assist me in making a movie that perhaps would awaken the world. I said: "I'm looking for that which will affect."

It must be added that Afghanistan has not so much suffered from foreign interference as it has from indifference. Again if Afghanistan were Kuwait with a surplus of oil income, the story would have been different. But Afghanistan has no oil and the neighboring countries deport its underpaid laborers. It's only natural when options of occupation fail--as explained earlier in the text--the only remaining choices are smuggling, joining the Taliban or falling down in a corner in Herat, Bamian, Kabul or Kanadahar and dying for the world's ignorance.

Once, I happened to be in a camp around Zabol that was filled with illegal immigrants. I wasn't sure if it was a camp or a prison. The Afghans who had fled home because of famine or Taliban assaults were refused asylum and waiting to be returned to Afghanistan. It all seemed legal and rational to that point. People, who for any reason enter a country illegally and are afterward

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refused, get deported. But these particular people were dying of hunger. We had ended up there to choose extras for my film. I asked the authorities and found out that the camp could not afford to feed so many people and they hadn't eaten for a week. They had only water to drink. We offered to provide meals. They wished we'd go there every day.

We brought food for 400 Afghans ranging from one-month old babies to 80-year old men. Most of them were little kids who had fainted of hunger in their mothers' arms. For an hour, we were crying and distributing bread and fruits. The authorities expressed grief and regret and said that it took a long time for budget approvals and kept saying that the flow of hungry refugees was far greater than what they could manage. This is the story of a country that's been ravaged by its own nature, history, economy, politics and the unkindness of its neighbors.

An Afghan poet who was being deported from Iran back to Afghanistan expressed his feelings in a poem and left:

*I came on foot, I'll leave on foot.  
The stranger who had no piggy bank, will leave.  
And the child who had no dolls, will leave.  
The spell on my exile will be broken tonight.  
And the table that had been empty will be folded.  
In suffering, I wandered around the horizons.  
It is me who everyone has seen in wandering.  
What I do not have I'll lay down and leave.  
I came on foot, I'll leave on foot.*

## **The ratio of drug consumption in the world to its production in Afghanistan**

In modern day economy, every supply is based on a demand. The production of drugs everywhere meets the need for its consumption. This universal market includes both poor and advanced countries such as India, the Netherlands, the U.S., etc. According to UN reporting in 2000, in the late 90's about 180 million people worldwide were using drugs. Based on the same

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report 90% of illegal opium is produced in two countries of which one is Afghanistan as well as 80 % of heroin. Again, 50 % of all narcotic drugs is produced in Afghanistan. You may think if that 50 % equals half a billion dollars then the total value of drugs reaches one billion globally but that's not the case. Why?

Although Afghanistan earns half a billion from drug production the actual turnover is only 80 billion dollars. In transit to the rest of the world, the mark-up stretches 160 times. Who gets the 80 billion dollars?

For example, heroin enters Tajikistan at one price and exits at twice that much. The same goes for Uzbekistan. By the time drugs reach consumers in the Netherlands, they cost 160 to 200 times the original price. The money ends up with the various mafias who also manipulate the politics of those countries en route.

The secret budget of many Central Asian countries is supplied through drug traffic, otherwise, how can smugglers who walk all the way from Kandahar for example, be the prime beneficiaries of this wealth? How can we at all consider them the true smugglers of drugs?

If it weren't for the extremely high drug profits, Iran for example, could have ordered a half a billion-dollars worth of wheat to Afghanistan as an incentive to stop planting poppy seeds. Yet the 79.5 billion-dollar profit is far too valuable for the mob and its allied forces to dispose of poppy seeds. Ironically, the Afghan drug producer is not himself a consumer. Drug use is prohibited but its production is legitimate. Its religious justification is sending deadly poisons to the enemies of Islam in Europe and America. This reasoning is nicely paradoxical given the economic significance of drugs on the governmental budget of Afghanistan.

The total drug turnover in the world is 400 billion dollars and Afghans are the victims of this market. Why is Afghanistan's share only 1/800th? Whatever the answer, the market needs a place with little to contribute civilly but which is a cornucopia of drug production.. If there were roads in Afghanistan instead of obscure paths, or the war ceased and the economy flourished and other

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incentives replaced the half a billion dollars, then what would happen to the 400 billion dollar market?

In September of 2000 when I was returning from Kandahar, I saw the governor of Khorasan on the way to Tehran. He said that when opium cost 50 dollars in Herat, it was 250 dollars in Mashad. And when the fight against smugglers intensified, instead of getting more expensive, opium got cheaper. For example, if in Mashad it reached 500 dollars, it cost 75 dollars in Herat. The reason was due to extreme poverty and famine. The Afghan sheep that used to cost 20 dollars a head is now sold at one dollar at the border but since they are sick, there is no market and the borders are controlled for sheep smuggling into Iran.

Although poppy seed does not have the fundamental importance of oil as a source of Afghanistan's wealth it is somehow the equivalent of oil. More importantly, the secret budget of Central Asian countries is supplied through drugs. That explains the strong incentive for the world to remain indifferent towards Afghanistan's chronic economic condition. Why should Afghanistan become stable? How could it possibly compensate for the 80 billion dollars directly generated from its soil?

Drugs are an interesting business for many. Just a few months ago when I was in Afghanistan, it was said that every day an airplane full of drugs flies directly from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf states. In 1986, when I was doing research for the making of *The Cyclist*, I took a road trip from Mirjaveh in Pakistan to Quetta and Peshawar in Pakistan. It took me a few days. When I entered Mirjaveh, I got on a colorful bus of the same kind that you might have seen in *The Cyclist*. The bus was filled with all kinds of strange people. People with long thin beards, turbans on the head and long dresses.

At first, I wasn't aware that the bus roof was filled with drugs. The bus drove across dirt expanses without roads. Everywhere was filled with dust and the wheels would sink into the soft soil. We arrived at a surreal gate like the ones in Dali's paintings. It was a gate that neither separated nor connected anything from or to anything. It was just an imaginary gate erected in the middle of the

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desert. The bus stopped at the gate. There then appeared a group of bikers who asked our driver to step down. They talked a little and then brought a sack of money and counted it with the driver. Two of the bikers came and took our bus. Our driver and his assistant took the money and left on the bikes. The new driver announced that he was now the owner of the bus and everything in it. We then found out that together with the bus we had been sold.

This transaction was repeated every few hours and we were sold to several smugglers. We found out that a particular party controlled each leg of the route and every time the bus was sold, the price increased. First it was one sack of money then it went up to two and three towards the end. There were also caravans that carried Dushka heavy machineguns on the back of their camels. If you eliminated our bus and the arms on camel back, you were in the primitive depths of history. Again we would arrive in places where they sold arms. Bullets were sold in bags as if they were beans. Kilos of bullets were weighed on scales and exchanged. Well, how would the world's drug trade take place if such premises didn't exist?

I had gone to Khorasan and along the border was looking for a site for filming. By sunset the villages near the border would be evacuated. The villagers would flee to other cities for fear of smugglers. They also encouraged us to take flight. Rumors of insecurity were so widespread that few cars passed after sundown. In the darkness of the night, the roads were ready for the passage of smuggling caravans. The caravans according to witnesses are comprised of groups of five to a 100 people. Their ages range from 12 to 30 years. Each carries a sack of drugs on their backs and some carry hand-held rocket launchers and Kalashnikovs to protect the caravan.

If drugs are not flown by airplane, they go in containers and if otherwise, they are carried by human mules. Imagine the enormity of events these caravans pass through from one country to another until for example, they reach Amsterdam. Again, imagine what fear and horror they create among the people in different regions to maintain that 80 billion-dollar trade.

I asked an official in Taibad about the number of killings committed by the

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smugglers. The figures say 105 were either killed or kidnapped in two years. Over 80 have been returned. I quickly divided 105 by the 104 weeks of the two years. It equals one person per week. I reckoned that if these numbers render a region so unsafe that people prefer not to stay in their own villages and flee to other cities by night, how do we expect the people of Afghanistan to stay put? In the past 20 years, they have had one killing every five minutes. Should they stay in Afghanistan and not migrate to our country? How can we think that if we deport them, the lack of safety in Afghanistan will not bring them back?

I inquired of the officials stationed on the roads about the causes for kidnappings and killings. Apparently, the caravans on the Iranian side of the border deal with the villagers. When an Iranian smuggler does not pay money on time, he or one of his family members is kidnapped and they are returned once the money is exchanged. Again, I realize that this aggression also has an economic basis. Near the Dogharoon border the customs agents were saying that the region had been unsafe for eight years but the papers had been reporting about it for only two years. The reason for the relative wave of openness is related to the new situation of newspapers in Iran.

## **Emigration and its consequences**

Except for seasonal movement with his livestock, the emigrant Afghan farmer never traveled abroad until about two decades ago. For this reason, every trip, even a limited one, has left serious marks on the fate of Afghans. For example, Amanullah Khan and a group of students that had traveled to the West for studying, became the pioneers of Afghanistan's unsuccessful experiment with modernism. The few officers who went to Russia, later provided the grist for a communist coup d'etat. The emigration of 30% of Afghanistan's population in the recent decades however, has not been for academic pursuits. War and poverty forced them to leave and now, their large population has exhausted their hosts. The emigration of 2.5 million Afghans to Iran and 3 million to Pakistan has created grave concerns for both countries. When I objected to officials in charge of deporting Afghans that they were our guests, the reply I heard was that this 20-year party had gone on too long. If it continued in Khorasan and Sistan & Baluchestan provinces, our national

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identity would be threatened in the said regions and we would face even more intense crises such as demands for independence of those areas or even increased insecurity at the borders.

Unlike Pakistan that prepared schools to train Islamic mujaheds (Taliban), Iranian society did not anticipate any schools to train Afghans. During the making of *The Cyclist*, I used to go to Afghan neighborhoods to find actors. At that time, one of the Afghan officials told me that they expected the Iranian universities to accept Afghan students so that if Russia left Afghanistan, they would have ministers with at least bachelor degrees. Otherwise, with a bunch of fighters you can wage war but not govern the country.

Later on, a few Afghans were accepted in Iranian universities but none of them are willing to return home today. They state their reasons as being insecurity and hunger. One of them mentioned that the highest level of living in Afghanistan is lower than the lowest level in Iran. I heard in Herat that the monthly salary of Herat's governor (in 2000) was \$15 per month. That's 50 cents a day or 4,000 Iranian rials. Because of widespread Afghan emigration, human smuggling has become a new occupation for Iranian smugglers. Afghan families that reach the borders have to go a long way to arrive in Tehran and since their arrest is likely in Zabol, Zahedan, Kerman or any other city en route, they leave their fate in the hands of pickup-driving smugglers. The smugglers request 1,000,000 rials for every refugee hauled to Tehran.

Since in 99% of the cases, the Afghan family lacks this much money, a couple of 13-14 year old girls are taken hostage and the rest of the family is secreted into Tehran through back roads. The girls are kept until their family finds jobs and pays the debt. In most cases the money is never provided. A ten-member family with a 10,000,000 rial debt has to pay the interest as well after three months. Consequently, a great many Afghan girls are either kept as hostages around the borders or become the personal belonging of the smugglers. An official in the region related secretly related that the number of girl hostages in just one of those cities has been approximated at 24,000.

A friend of mine who was building a house in Tehran told me about his

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Afghan workers. He had noticed that two Iranian men showed up once in while and got most of their money. When asked, the Afghans said that they were brought for free on the condition that they pay the smugglers later. They also saved a part of their money to take back to their families in Afghanistan in case they were deported. The situation is a bit different for refugees in Pakistan.

Those who come to Iran are Hazarehs. These people are Farsi speaking Shiites. The common language and religion inclines them towards Iran. Their misfortune is their distinctive appearance. Their Mongol features subject them to quick recognition among Iranians. The Pashtoon who goes to Pakistan, however, blends in with Pakistanis because of common language, religion and ethnicity. Although the Shiite Hazarehs find Pakistan more liberal than Iran, job opportunities in Iran are more appealing to them than the freedom in Pakistan. It means that bread has priority over freedom. You must first have food in order to search for freedom. Have the Iranians who are seeking liberty today, passed a hunger crisis?

As a result of not finding a suitable occupation, a hungry Sunni/Pashtoon Afghan is immediately attracted to the theological schools ready to offer food and shelter. In fact, contrary to Iran that never dealt with Afghan refugees in an organized manner, Pakistan promoted, organized and put into play the Taliban government for a variety of reasons. The first is the Durand line.

Before Pakistani independence from India, Afghanistan shared borders with India and serious disputes ensued between the two over the Pashtoonistan region. The British drew the Durand line and divided the region between the two countries, on the condition that after 100 years, Afghanistan regain control over the Indian part of Pashtoonistan as well. Later on, when Pakistan declared independence from India that Indian half of Pashtoonistan became half of Pakistan. Since some six years ago, Pakistan, according to international law was supposed to cede Pashtoonistan back to Afghanistan. How would Pakistan that still has claims over Kashmir agree to give half of its land area to Afghanistan?

The best solution was to raise hungry Afghan mujaheds to control

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Afghanistan. The Pakistan trained Taliban would naturally no longer harbor ambitions of recovering Pashtoonistan from their patron. No wonder the Taliban appeared just as the 100-year deadline drew to a close. From a distance, Taliban appear to be irrational and dangerous fundamentalists. When you look at them closely, you see hungry Pashtoon orphans whose occupation is that of a theology student and whose impetus for attending school is hunger. When you review the appearance of the Taliban you see the national political interests of Pakistan.

If fundamentalism was the reason for the independence of Pakistan from Gandhi's democratic India, the same applies for Pakistan's survival and expansion at the expense of Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan's significance for the world prior to disintegration of the Soviet Union was based on its being the first defensive stronghold of the West against the communist East. With Soviet disintegration, to the same degree that the Afghan fighter lost his heroic position in the western media, Pakistan also lost its strategic importance and came face-to-face with an employment crisis.

According to the rules of sociology, every organization buys and sells something. Given this definition, armies sell their military services to their own or other nations and governments. What was Pakistan's national occupation in the world in relation to the West? Playing the role of an apparently eastern army but being possessed of a western internal conviction and selling military services to the United States. With Soviet disintegration, the demand for Pakistan's military services for the West also diminished.

To which market then was Pakistan to present its military services and maintain this vital national occupation? That is why Pakistan created the Taliban: to have covert control of Afghanistan and stop the Afghans from demanding the cession of Pashtoonistan. The fact that Pakistan, first and foremost, faces an employment crisis, is rooted in this reasoning. If as a filmmaker I cannot make my films in my homeland, I'll go elsewhere for my occupation. Armies are the same way. For any big war effort, enormous reserves of a nation's energy are directed towards forming military organizations that dispense military services. Once the war is over, these units look for other markets to maintain their services. If they can't find a market,

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they become discouraged and either stage a coup d'etat or transform into economic foundations. Examples of the latter are found in countries that have used their military organizations to control traffic or help with agriculture or road construction.

In the broader world, every once in a while, wars are fomented to create demands for military materiel and take government purchase orders. Let's go back to the issue of emigration. Unlike Iran, Pakistan used Afghan refugees as religio-political students and founded the Taliban army.

Before the Soviet invasion, an Afghan was a farmer. With the Soviet attack, each Afghan turned into a mujahed to defend his valley. Organizations and parties were formed. With the Soviet retreat, the Afghans didn't go back to farming. The new occupation seemed more appealing and prosperous. Every sect or group began fighting another. Six neighboring countries, the U.S. and Russia each sought their own mercenaries among the military groups. As a result, a new wave of employment came into existence. The civil war intensified so much that in two years, the damages were greater than in the longer period of the Russian presence. People were fed up with civil war and when Pakistan dispatched the army of the Taliban holding white flags with the motto of public disarmament and peace, people welcomed them. In a short time, the Taliban had control over most of Afghanistan. It was then that the Taliban's Pakistani roots went on display.

The Taliban have always been criticized for their fundamentalism but little has been said about the reasons for their appearance. Although the Herati poet who had come to Iran on foot, returned to Afghanistan on foot, the orphan who had walked to Peshawar in Pakistan, returned to conquer Afghanistan driving Toyotas offered by the Arab countries.

How could Pakistan, who had subsistence problems with its own people, afford to feed, train and equip the Taliban? With the help of Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates--who as Iran's competitors had previously created tensions in Mecca--looked for a religious power compatible with Iran. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates who once felt their modern interests were threatened by the motto of return to Islam, thought that if there is to be



any return to Islam, why not return to a more regressive Islam like that of the Taliban. If there's a contest for returning and the winner is one who regresses the most, why not go back to the most primitive state namely Talibanism! .

In modern times, emigration is a measurable issue in cultural, political and economic planning. For example, Turks migrated to Germany and worked in professions refused by the Germans. Unlike the Germans who had no incentive for reproduction, the Turks went on producing children and now it is predicted that in the next few decades the Turks will make up the majority of Germany's population.

Based on this premise, Germany will soon have a Turkish identity and considering the role of elections, we can imagine that perhaps in 30 years, a Turk will become the German chancellor. This means that the need for Turk workers will gradually change the national identity of Germany. This is history's satire.

The same applies to Asian and African emigration to the United States. At first European emigrants marked the national identity of America. Asian and Africans, however, migrated to America because of revolutions or in pursuit of intellectual and financial achievements. Unlike the European emigrants to America, Asians and Africans increased their population through reproduction. Gradually the semi-European American identity will change to an Asian-African identity. Inter-racial conflicts are then likely to arise as a result.

If the American society welcomes the 'Dialogue of Civilizations' paradigm, it is because of concerns over future racial conflicts in American society. Unlike what Iranians think, in the American context, it is not a proposal for exchange between cultures rather dialogue is a domestic American issue among its own cultures.

But why can't the Iranian intellect that suggests strategic solutions for other continents, find ways to utilize the emigration of Afghans to its own advantage? The reason is that Iranians, unlike the Pakistanis who regard Afghanistan as an opportunity, have always considered it more of a threat than

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an opportunity. Iranians have always perceived Afghans as smugglers or fundamentalists. Iranian investors have never considered the large number of hungry Afghan workers to be potentially profitable in situ. They have never mulled over the sort of investment that would make Afghanistan a consumer of their goods or use cheap Afghan labor and perhaps export the surplus production.

Afghans have been unfortunate both with the geographical situation of their country and in political relations with their neighbors. Years ago, there was a big question about Franco, the Spanish dictator. Although Spain's neighbors had democratic governments, Franco operated a dictatorship. Influenced by its neighbors, Spain later also became more democratic, to the extent that today, it is a vital member of the EEC. The meaning of the fate of Spain is that better living is possible if one is destined to have neighbors.

Afghanistan is stuck with neighbors who see it as a threat or find it an opportunity for resolution of their own political-military problems. If Afghanistan had more democratic neighbors who viewed it as an economical-cultural opportunity it would have been in better shape by now. Fascist Spain became democratic due to the fortunate adjacency to democratic European countries while Afghanistan of the would-be progressive Amanullah Khan, because of unfortunate circumstances of neighborhood, turned into the redoubt of the Taliban. An Arabic proverb well describes the situation: "First the neighbor, then the house".

## **Who are the Taliban?**

According to sociologists, the nations' demand for security from their governments is greater than any other consideration. Welfare, development and freedom come next. After the Soviet retreat, the outbreak of intense civil war created nationwide insecurity and the country was placed in extremely perilous straits. Each group aimed at providing its own security through continuous fighting. None of them however were able to provide safety for the nation. The mocking irony of this period was that every one tried to insure security by making the country unsafe.



The strategy of disarmament and dispatch of the religious Taliban claiming to be harbingers of peace quickly succeeded in winning popular consent. The unsuccessful efforts of other groups were centered on offering war and insecurity. Although the people of Herat speak Farsi and the Taliban speak Pashtoon, when in Herat, I inquired about the Taliban, the reply I heard from the shopkeepers was that prior to the Taliban, their shops were robbed daily by armed and hungry men. Even those who opposed the Taliban were happy with the security they brought.

Security was established for two reasons. One was the disarmament of the public and the other the severe punishments such as cutting the hands of thieves. These punishments are so harsh, intolerable and quick that if the 20,000 hungry Afghans in Herat saw a piece of bread before them, nobody would dare take it.

I saw truck drivers who had traveled to and from Afghanistan for two years and had never locked their vehicles. Nothing was ever stolen from them either. Not only were the Afghans in need of financial security but practical safety and freedom from harassment have always been a concern. I heard different stories about how prior to the Taliban people's lives and chastity were violated by other tribes and sects. Disarmament and execution by stoning, however, have reduced the number of such violations.

So we have 20 million hungry people before us 30% of who have emigrated, 10% of who have died and the remaining 60% who are starving to death. According to UN reports, one million Afghans will die of hunger within the next few months. Today, when you enter Afghanistan, you see people lying around on street corners. Nobody has energy to move and no arms to fight with. Fear of punishment stops them from committing crimes. The only remedy is to stay and die while humanity is overtaken by indifference. This is not Sa'di's time of "all men are limbs of one body".

The only one whose heart had not turned to stone yet, was the Buddha statue of Bamian. With all his grandeur, he felt humiliated by the enormity of this tragedy and broke down. Buddha's state of needlessness and calmness became ashamed before a nation in need of bread and it fell. Buddha shattered to

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inform the world of all this poverty, ignorance, oppression and mortality. But negligent humanity only heard about the demolition of the Buddha statue. A Chinese proverb says: "You point your finger at the moon, the fool stares at your finger."

Nobody saw the dying nation that Buddha was pointing to. Are we supposed to stare at all the different means of communication rather than at what they are intended to convey? Is the ignorance of the Taliban or their fundamentalism deeper than the earth's ignorance towards the ominous fate of a nation such as Afghanistan?

For filming the starving Afghans, I called Dr. Kamal Hussein, the UN representative from Bangladesh. I told him I wanted to get permission to go to north Afghanistan (controlled by Ahmad Shah Massoud) and Kandahar (controlled by the Taliban). It was decided that a small group would go and eventually just two of us (my son and I) received approval to travel with only a small video camera. We were to be permitted to go to Islamabad (Pakistan) and take a small 10-passenger UN airplane that flew once a week to the north and once a week to the south.

It took two weeks for the UN office to call and inquire when it was convenient for us to depart. We were ready but they said that it would take another month. "Since it will get colder in a month and more people will be dying, it would make your film more interesting", they said. They recommended February. I asked, "More interesting?" They replied that perhaps it would provoke the conscience of the world. I didn't know what to say.

We were silent for a while. Then I asked whether or not we could go to both north and south. The Taliban didn't agree. They are not too fond of journalists. I made a promise to only film those dying of hunger. Again the Taliban do not approve. I told them I need another invitation from the UN to re-enter Pakistan. Later, I received a facsimile stating that I had to go to the Embassy of Pakistan in Tehran. I was happy because before I had gotten a visa to Pakistan from the embassy to bring costumes for Kandahar from Peshawar.

I referred to the Embassy of Pakistan. At first, I am not received warmly. A

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little while passes and I'm called. A very respectable lady and a gentleman direct me to a room. Of the 20 minutes that I am in that room, for 15 minutes they talk about my daughter Samira and her international success in cinema. They avoid the main issue and in between words, I am asked why I applied through the UN to get a visa and informed that it would have been better if I referred directly to them. In addition they don't favor a film that misrepresents the Taliban government. They prefer I go to Pakistan not Afghanistan. I feel like I am in the embassy of the Taliban.

I ask if they have seen *The Cyclist* and tell them I made a part of it in Peshawar and that it is not a political film. I tell them that my intentions are humanitarian and I want to help the Afghans especially with regards to hunger. I tell them that my film is about the crisis of employment and hunger. They say that we have 2.5 million Afghans in Iran. Why not film them? It is useless to continue the discussion. They keep my passport and I am kindly asked to leave. A few days later, I receive my passport with a statement saying that if I want to go to Pakistan as a tourist, the visa can be issued but not for filming or going to Afghanistan. When I leave the embassy, all of what I have read or heard about the Taliban passes before my eyes.

I remember a Taliban school in Peshawar where I was escorted out as soon as my Iranian identity became known. And I remember a day when in Peshawar for filming *The Cyclist*, I was arrested and handcuffed. I don't know why every time I intend to make a film about Afghanistan I end up in Pakistan!

People tell me to be careful. There is always the threat of kidnapping or terrorism at the borders. The Taliban are reputed to assassinate suspected opponents en route between Zahedan and Zabol. I keep saying my subject is humanitarian not political. Eventually, one day when we are finished filming near the border, as I am walking around, I come across a group that have come to either kill or kidnap me. They ask me about Makhmalbaf. I am sporting a long thin beard and wearing Afghan dress. A Massoudi hat with a shawl covering it and half of my face makes me look like an Afghan. I send them the other way and begin running while I cannot figure out whether they have been dispatched by a political group or smugglers have sent them to extort money.

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Let me go back to the issue of security. The Taliban, under the auspices of public disarmament and implementation of punishments such as amputation of the hands of thieves, stoning adulterers and execution of opponents have brought an apparent security to Afghanistan. When you listen to Shariat radio (Voice of Taliban) that only has a two-hour program daily, even if there is fighting somewhere, they don't announce it just to maintain a sense of national security. They say for example, that the people of Takhar, welcomed the Taliban and you know it means that the Taliban attacked and conquered Takhar. The rest is just news about Friday prayer or the amputation of the hand of some bandit in Bamian, the stoning to death of a young adulterer in Kandahar or punishment of some barbers who've cut a few teenagers' hair in the western style of infidels. Whatever it is, with all the punishments and propaganda, a sense of national security suffuses Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, however, lacks the economic strength for the Taliban to create public welfare, yet the Taliban are the only government that can bring security to the country. Those who fight the Taliban bring threats to security and those who support them reason that Afghans must rule in Afghanistan. Whoever is to become the ruler of Afghanistan must first bring security to the nation. Any kind of war gives way to insecurity and because Afghanistan is inclined towards tribalism, with the coming of anybody to power, security is again threatened. It is better to first recognize whoever aims to rule Afghanistan, so that he can save Afghanistan from its hunger crisis and then move on. The same group finds criticism of the Taliban irrelevant to the lack of freedom in Afghanistan, because an insecure and famished nation seeks welfare more than freedom and development.

In reply to the question of what the Taliban are, it must be said that politically, the Taliban are an instrument for government supported by Pakistan. Individually, they are starving youth turned students and trained in crusader-breeding schools in Pakistan. They first entered the premises for a loaf of bread and later exited to occupy political-military positions in Afghanistan. The Taliban as viewed by one political group, are protagonists of fundamentalism in the region and from the viewpoint of another political group, are the same Pashtoons who have been the only rulers of Afghanistan

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since the time of Ahmad Abdali.

Today, they have reasserted 250-years of their power after an era of internal chaos. They claim that in the past quarter millennium, except for a 9-month period that the Tajiks ruled and another two-years that the Tajik Rabbani governed, the Pashtoons have always had control and Afghanistan needs their experience in governing.

I hardly understand these issues. My job is to make films and if I have delved into these matters, it is because I want to write my script based on a more precise analysis. The further I go though I find the case more complicated. I keep asking people that when the U.S. found it necessary, it retook Kuwait from Iraq in three days. Why, however, with all its touting of modernism, does it not initiate an action to save the 10 million women who have no schools or social presence and are trapped under the burqa? Why doesn't it stop this primitiveness that has emerged in modern times? Does it not have the power or does it lack the incentive? I have already found the answer.

Afghanistan has no precious resources such as oil and it does not have a surplus oil income like Kuwait. I hear another answer too. If the United States supports the Taliban for a few more years, the ugly image that will be portrayed to the world of an eastern ideology, will make everyone immune to it like modernism in Afghanistan. If the revolutionary and reformative interpretations of Islam are equated with Taliban's regressive interpretation, then the world will become forever immune to the expansion of Islam. Some people find this analysis too shabby a cliché. They tell me to let go and I will.

## **Who is Molla Omar?**

In my seemingly endless trip to Kandahar, everywhere there is talk of Molla Omar. His title is Amir-al-M'omenin (Commander of the Faithful). Some Iranian politicians believe that he was created to compete with the Iranian government but nobody really knows much about his background. Some say he is 40 years old and blind in one eye but there's no photograph of him to prove or disprove this. How does a nation choose a half-blind man overnight to lead them, whereas not even a picture has been seen of him? I get tempted

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to make a film about Molla Omar. For political reasons I avoid it but my curiosity isn't satisfied.

If Pakistan prepares a precise script for the war-stricken people of Afghanistan under the title of disarmament, and receives a positive welcome by what analysis do they plan for a leader called Molla Omar who has no prior image? Someone who's nobody or has not been seen by anybody, becomes the leader of a country in which each tribe or sect has its own leader. Perhaps this is where the secret lies. If a known person were appointed leader to Afghanistan, then every one would have an excuse to oppose him.

I hear a joke near the border about a teahouse. "A teahouse hosted Afghan customers on a regular basis. There was a TV set in this teahouse equipped with a windshield wiper so if necessary, the owner could spray some water on the screen and wipe clean any stains. The owner was asked about this feature and he said that whenever there was a TV program about the mujahedin that was visible in the border areas, their opponents spit on the TV and since the customers used snuff their secretions were colored. After a while the TV screen became unusable so he invented the wiper."

When the image of Afghan leaders is so deeply criticized and satirized, yet they are needed to rule Afghanistan, the best way is to design an imageless leadership that can't be criticized for its form or background and yet be able to free near-the-border television sets from wipers!

If I weren't ashamed of Buddha's shamefulness, I would title this article "Afghanistan, a country without an image". Every one I ask about Molla Omar says he is a representative of God on earth who instead of human laws brought the Qur'an as the country's constitution. He is extremely devout, as are his followers. His wages are as paltry as the Herat's governor's \$15 and he lives like the poor people that are dying in the streets.

I realize that the image of this imageless man is complete and appealing because in the East, nobody expects leaders to be updated and specialized or possess a national and universal insight. If only the leaders seem a little like the ordinary, it's enough to satisfy the people. An Afghan expressed the idea

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that if he was starving, he was happy that Molla Omar was always fasting too and that they were like each other. He thanked God for such a leader.

In Herat I am speaking to a medical student. He is hesitant to be seen talking to me. I ask him if he knows the total number of college students in Afghanistan. While he keeps walking and looking directly ahead, he says: "A thousand". "In what major?" I ask. He says: "Only medicine and engineering." "Which one are you studying", I ask and he says: "Theoretical medicine." I asked what it meant and he said that Molla Omar thinks human dissection is a sin. I asked if he had ever seen Molla Omar's picture. He said no and left.

Among the Pashtoo speaking refugees, I ran across some whom although they hadn't seen Molla Omar knew of people who did. I even met Iranian politicians who believe Molla Omar does really exist and that he is also handsome. A group of Afghans who sleep in Iran at night and cross the border in the day to sell dates in Afghanistan happen to be fascinated by Molla Omar. They tell me that he is an ordinary monk who dreamed of Mohammad, the prophet one night and the prophet commissioned him to save Afghanistan. Since God was with him, he was able to conquer Afghanistan in one month.

## **The role of international organizations in Afghanistan**

It is believed that some 180 international organizations are active in Afghanistan. They too avoid my non-political questions. Finally, I find out that they are in charge of a few tasks. One job is to distribute bread among the starving. A second is the struggle for exchanging of north-south prisoners and a third is to make artificial hands and legs for land mine victims.

Forgetting the insignificant role of the international organizations, I become fascinated by the young people who have come here through the Red Cross. I meet a 19-year old British girl who says the reason she has come "is to be useful". It is in Afghanistan that she can make several artificial hands and legs for people each day. She says that she can't get a job in England that offers so much satisfaction. Since she came, a few hundred people have been able to walk with the artificial limbs she has made.



I have a feeling that the role of international organizations is to remedy the deep and extensive wounds of this nation in a limited way and nothing more. Dr. Kamal Hossein, who is probably embarrassed about the visa to Pakistan, isn't calling me anymore.

I remember his words the day he came to our office expressing how he felt his job and efforts were in vain and he wanted to become my assistant. And even now that I've finished making Kandahar, I feel vain about my profession. I don't believe that the little flame of knowledge kindled by a report or a film can part the deep ocean of human ignorance. And I don't believe that a country whose people in the next 50 years will loose their hands and legs to anti-personnel devices will be saved by a 19-year old British girl. Why does she go to Afghanistan? Why does Dr. Kamal Hossein with all his despair, still report to the UN? Why did I make that film or write this note? I don't know, but as Pascal put it: "The heart has reasons that the mind is unaware of."

## **The Afghan woman, the most imprisoned woman in the world**

Afghan society is a male-dominant society. It can even be claimed that the rights of 10 million Afghan women who make up half of the population in Afghanistan, are less than the weakest unknown Afghan tribe. No tribe is an exception in this regard. The fact that Afghan women even as viewed by the Tajiks, don't have the right to vote in elections is the least that can be said about them.

With the coming of the Taliban girls' schools were closed and for a long time, women were not allowed in the streets. More tragically, even before the Taliban one out of every 20 women were able to read and write. This statistic indicates that the Afghan culture had practically deprived 95% of women from schooling and the Taliban deprived the remaining 5%. Then why shouldn't we more realistically ask whether the culture of Afghanistan is affected by the Taliban or was it the cause for the Taliban's appearance?

When I was in Afghanistan, I saw women with burqas on their head begging in the streets or shopping in second hand stores. What caught my attention were the ladies who brought out their hands from under the burqas and asked

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little peddler boys to polish their nails. For a long time, I wondered why they didn't buy nail polish to use at home? Later I found out it was the cheapest way to do it. Buying nail polish was more expensive than a one-time use. I told myself again that this is a good sign that women under burqas still like living and despite their poverty, care about their beauty to that extent. Later on, however, I reached the conclusion that it is not fair to isolate and imprison a woman in an environment or a certain costume and be content that she still puts on make up.

An Afghan woman has to maintain herself so that she won't be forgotten in the competition with her rivals. Polygamy is quite common among young men too, and has turned many Afghan homes into harems. Although the marriage allowance is so high that getting married means buying a woman, I saw old men, while filming, give away 10-year old girls and with the marriage price that they received, considered marrying other 10-year old girls for themselves. It seems that limited capital is exchanged from one hand to the other to replace girls from one house to the other. Among them there are women who have an age difference of 30 to 50 years with their husbands.

These women mostly live in the same house or even the same room and not only have they surrendered but they have also gotten used to these customs. I had brought a lot of dresses and burqas from Afghanistan and Pakistan for my film. Many of the women who agreed to be in the film as extras after strenuous and lengthy persuasion, requested that we gave them burqas instead of money. One of them wanted a burqa for her daughter's wedding, and I, fearing that burqas may become popular in Iran, didn't give any to anyone.

Once when we had asked some Afghan women to be in the film, their husband told us that he was too chaste to show his women. I told him that we would film his women with their burqas on but he said that the viewers watching the movie know that it is a woman under the burqa and that would contradict chastity.

Time and again I asked myself, did the Taliban bring the burqas or did the burqas bring the Taliban? Do politics affect change in culture or does culture bring politics?



In Niatak camp in Iran, the Aghans themselves closed down the public bathhouse reasoning that anyone who passes along the walls knowing that the opposite sex is naked behind those walls, is engaged in a sin.

At present there are no woman doctors in Afghanistan and if a woman wants to refer to a doctor she has to bring her son or husband or father and through them talk to the doctor. As far as marriage, the father or the brother, not the bride, say yes.

## **Afghan aggression**

According to Freud human aggression stems from human animalism and civilizations only cover this animalism with a thin veneer. This thin skin splits at the snap of a finger. Violence exists in both East and West what is different is the style not the reality of its existence.

What's the difference between death by decapitation using knives, daggers or swords or dying by bullets, grenades, mines and missiles? In most cases, criticism of aggression is really the disapproval of the means of aggression. The death of one million Afghans as a result of injustice in the world is not regarded by the world as aggression. The death of 10% of the Afghan population by civil war and war with Russia is not perceived as aggression but the decapitation of someone with a sword will long be the main headline of satellite TV news.

It is naturally fearsome and horrible to see a person being decapitated but why doesn't the death of people every day by land mines give us the same feeling? Why are knives aggressive but not mines? What's criticized in the modern West of Afghan aggression, is form and not substance. The West can create a tragic story for a statue but for death by millions, it suffices with statistics. As Stalin put it: "The death of one person is tragedy, but the death of one million is only a statistic."

Afghanistan is a country inclined to tribalism and a tribal order dominates it. These tribes aggressively resisted against foreign dominance, yet benefited

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from the conflict of interest among its tribes. Although Afghanistan is called the museum of races and clans, tourists have never visited this museum. If anyone passed through Afghanistan, it was either Nadir Shah intending to conquer India or the Soviets seeking to reach warm waters. Thus, the rough Afghan besides what he has learned from the harshness of nature, has always been faced with foreign aggression as well.

## **The consequences of war in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan became independent from Iran about 250 years ago and about 150 or according to other sources about 82 years ago, its borders were determined by the Durand line. It encountered a premature modernism about 77 years ago. Some 20 years ago it was invaded by the Soviets and it has been involved in a civil war for the past 10 years. About 40% of Afghanistan's population have been tragically killed or become refugees.

Nevertheless, this country and its people have either been neglected or considered as threats or they have been used as a means of threat against others. When I was crossing the border, I saw Iranian cannons pointed towards Afghanistan and when I entered Afghanistan, I saw cannons pointing to Iran. These cannons indicated that both countries regard each other as threats.

On the other side of the border I heard the region's military commander had called the Iranian consul and told him that their homes were made of clay so what did the Iranian cannons aim to target? He had said, "The worst is that you bombard our houses and when it rains we'll take the wet mud and build our homes anew again. Don't you find it a pity if our cannons destroy your beautiful homes? You can't make glass and iron and ceramics with rain. Why don't you come and build the road to Herat for us?"

When I ride to Herat from Dogharoon, I feel like I'm sailing on a turbulent sea. I remember a time when I got trapped in a storm in the Persian Gulf while filming. The waves would take our small boat up for several meters and bang us back on the water's surface. The boatman told us if the craft turned over, it was goodbye. And now I see those waves again, but they are waves of



dirt. At the beginning of the road the car goes downhill and comes back up the hill and in the middle of the trip the car beats against the dirt waves. Although this area is flat and includes the non-mountainous part of Afghanistan, the road is worse than the winding roads of Iran.

Above the height of each wave, shovel-holding men and boys stand for eternity. As far as the eye can see, these shovel-holding men are visible. As soon as our car gets close to them, they start filling up the ditches with dirt and while throwing worthless Afghan paper currency to them, we see them in the dust the same way that we saw the dance of leaves in *Once Upon A Time Cinema*. It is a scene of shovel-holding men who disappear in the dust and have created an occupation for themselves out of nothing. This is the most surreal scene that I see in Afghanistan.

I ask the driver how many cars pass this road every day. He says: "About 30." I ask if these thousands of shovel-holding men gather for only 30 cars, but the driver is paying attention to driving and he is not in the mood to answer me. Slowly, I turn on the radio. It's been years since I quit listening to the radio or watching TV and I haven't read any papers for months. It is September 23rd of 2000, the 2:00 o'clock Iranian news is on. It makes me cry to hear that two million Iranian kids have gone to first grade today. I don't know if it is out of joy for the children who are going to school or out of sorrow for those who don't go to school in Afghanistan.

I look at the road and I feel like I'm watching a movie. The driver tells me that in some of these houses girls schools are established secretly and some girls study at home. I keep thinking here is a subject for a film. I arrive in Herat and see women polishing their nails from under the burqas. I tell myself here is another film subject. I see the 19-year old British girl who has come to dangerous Afghanistan to be useful. I tell myself again, here is another subject. I see loads of lame men who've lost their legs to mines. One of them, instead of an artificial leg, has tied a shovel to the left side of his body and walks with it. I tell myself, here is yet another subject.

I arrive in Herat and see dying people covering the streets like carpets. I no longer see it as another subject. I feel like quitting cinema and seeking another



occupation. When Massoud, Afghanistan's top military chief was asked what he wished for his children to become, he replied, "politicians". It means that war as a solution has reached a dead-end in the mind of the commander. He thinks that the solution to Afghanistan's salvation is more political than military. In my opinion, the only solution for Afghanistan is a rigorous scientific identification of its problems and presentation of a real image of a nation that has remained obscure and imageless both for itself and for others.

## **Resolution of employment crisis**

Once the industrial countries saturated their internal markets with their products, they went after international markets. In paying the price for their consumption, the non-industrial countries each offered a product and others, cheap labor. In this game, Afghanistan, due to mountainous geography and lack of roads was unable to exploit its raw materials cost-effectively.

Due to mismanagement, dispersion of population--arisen from the farming period-- and disunion which is a quality of the tribes, Afghanistan did not have the potential to offer its labor force to the world in exchange for other goods or services. Thus, Afghanistan stayed away from the global game of subsistence and lived on by its insignificant wealth from the grasslands. The entrance of the Soviet Union resulted in a nationwide reaction and the farmers turned to fighters. With the Soviet retreat, these fighters would not consent to going back to farming.

On one hand the civil war spread because of a power struggle. Since then insecurity and emigration increased. The 30% of Afghan emigrants probably experienced better living in other cities and did not want to be dependent on grasslands for a living, especially, since they would be threatened by periodic drought. Afghans desired a more civil share of life. This means that Afghanistan with all its historical tardiness has announced its need to enter world trade.

What is the most immediate wealth, however, that can be offered to enter the world of production-consumption or vice versa? Doubtlessly, the answer is Afghanistan's cheap labor. Labor is more obtainable than exploiting raw

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materials in the roadless mountainous Afghanistan. The dominant outlook on Afghanistan should cast aside its military-political prism. It should be replaced with an economic direction perspective. If employment is taken both as the root and final solution for the present crisis, through national management, Afghanistan can also enter world trade and the circle of international subsistence. It can achieve its real share and pay for its cost which is to offer labor, consumer products and take advantage of present-day civilization and modernism. This was well experienced in Mao's China, Gandhi's India and quite successfully accomplished in diligent Japan.

Viewed from this the point of vantage the illness of Afghans is not a disaster. It is a market for Afghan doctors. The lack of specialist physicians is not a disaster, It is a market to teach medical assistants with a few months of education. Hunger is not a disaster. It is a market for consumption of bread. Lack of bread is not a disaster. It is a market for wheat. Lack of wheat is not a disaster. It is a market for harnessing wasted waters.

Waters harnessed by labor mean dams. Dams built by labor mean wheat. Wheat is bread. Bread is satiation. Beyond satiation, it is surplus. Surplus satiation is development. Development is civilization. Stalin had said, "The death of one person is a tragedy, but the death of one million is a mere statistic."

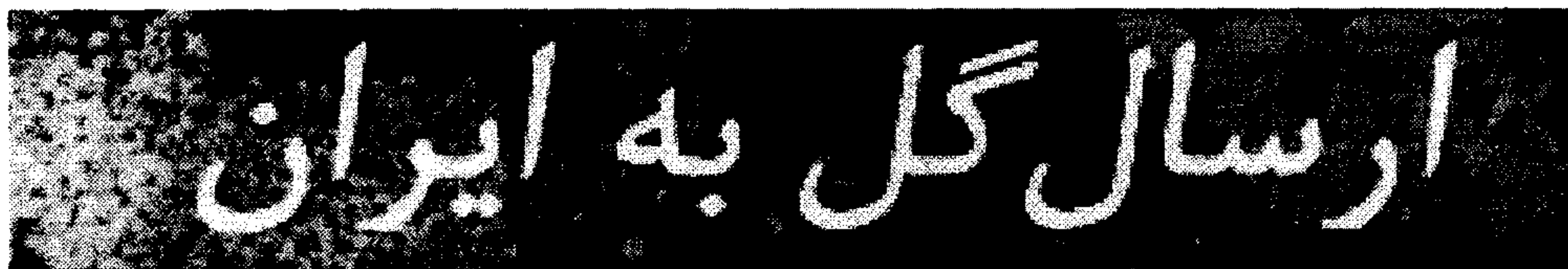
Since the day I saw a little Afghan girl 12 years of age, the same age as my own daughter Hanna--fluttering in my arms of hunger--I've tried to bring forth the tragedy of this hunger, but I always ended up giving statistics. Oh God! Why have I become so powerless, like Afghanistan? I feel like going to that same poem, to that same vagrancy and like that Herati poet, get lost somewhere, or collapse out of shame like the Buddha of Bamian.

*I came on foot, I'll leave on foot  
The same stranger who had no piggy bank, will leave.  
And the child who had no dolls, will leave.  
The spell on my exile will be broken tonight.  
And the table that had been empty, will be folded.  
In suffering, I wandered around the horizons.*

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*It is me, who everyone has seen in wandering.  
what I do not have, I'll lay and leave.  
I came on foot, I'll leave on foot.*

**Comment for *The Iranian* letters section  
Comment for the writer Mohsen Makhmalbaf**



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