



## Failing and Forgetting Afghanistan

### Afghanistan



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Fieldwork image: Hand embroidered traditional clothing and dress, Kabul.

*This is not political analysis – I will not claim to have the expertise. Yet, the need to speak the truth, to the vacuum of power here, is essential. Since the fall of Kabul – which apparently was a surprise, but wasn't, I have been working, alongside a few individuals to help colleagues in Afghanistan. Some of them are at risk because of who they were – women, activists, peacebuilders. Some of them are at risk because of the donor aid they received, and others by just being present and visible in a space, created and led by various nations as part of their development strategy and foreign policy for Afghanistan.*

For the last two years I have been a co-investigator on a UKRI GCRF funded project in which we work in South Asia including Afghanistan. The promise of a new beginning, of working on exquisite Afghan hand-embroidered textiles, of Khammakdozi and Charmadozi, two ancient skills, passed on by women to girls. Skills developed through lovingly made textiles, practices and knowledge that are embodied in myriad ways. [The project](#) was going to connect these craftswomen to markets within and outside their reach. The aim, to support the ambition of earning from their homes, of keeping their culture, tradition, and indigenous knowledge alive, documented, and thriving, for the next generation to learn from and be proud of who they are – Afghans.

And yet, twenty years after 9/11, where are we? No one won this war. And in accepting defeat, no one should be able to discard responsibility. This twenty-year war, with [trillions of tax dollars](#), Pounds, and Euros poured into it, was won by no one. The price – high, the loss – high and yet we arrive at a space with zero peace, safety, or security for those who live in Afghanistan. But what we have also lost is any faith, trust, respect of the 'systems' in place that have failed us. Diplomacy, foreign policy, leadership, dialogues, summits, peace weeks, gender driven agendas, general assemblies, refugee compacts, human rights declarations, development policies and humanitarian leadership – they have all failed. And not secretly – we can all see this, quite easily. The American emperor, and his new clothes – are quite evidently missing. But along with him are others, in a similar position, you will meet them shortly.

As the country crumbles, with rising inflation and food shortages – we find Afghanistan to be, yet again a country that foreign nations use as their playground, leave, other actors move in, leave, swings and roundabouts. Afghanistan

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remains known but misunderstood, interfered with, not supported, but tricked, duped, left out, and failed. And then again a cycle of ambition, of women and girls being important and the carousel of international aid and obligations shall begin. Yet, for now Afghanistan is left in the hands of those who were twenty years ago, argued to be global enemy number one. All the talk of democracy and equality, liberty and freedom, it is very clear, it was all talk. It meant nothing. No promises made by any of these high-level actors, ever meant anything. They only meant well.

As the window of 31st August drew close – each nation did what it thought was best – to get their own people out. Foreign nationals, with foreign passports, some Afghans, and quite a few dogs I understand. They then chest thumped about getting a lion's share of people out. What did they do next? They closed their own doors, built higher walls, and - mostly- refused to help anyone apart from their own.

At Abbey Gate in Kabul, my colleagues sat and stood for over 18 hours each day, hoping to get out with their families. Standing in the sun, standing in dirt, in sewage canals, watching the heaving crowds, being molested by others in the crush, holding hard onto their kids, and raising their hands, with the alphabet of the nation who promised to get them out written on their palms. They got emails asking them to come to hotels and camps from where they were promised safety, but only them, not their families. And in a city beeping red with alerts of an impending bomb, these people got no advice or support in getting to or into an airport.

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Pleading, begging for help, being hit by the back of guns by the Taliban and yet coming back to the gate. Some managed to get away to safer places, others returned day after day. Each day, they knew of the growing threat of a bomb in the crowd, each day, they read about security alerts at the airport, and yet they went.

I was on the phone with one of them when I heard gunfire, my panicked voice told him, run. Get away! He told me, I am going to lie down, the Taliban will stop firing, but I am not going home, I can see the gate, and he then cut me off. 2am in London, and I flipped between extreme anxiety, second-hand despair, absolute vicarious trauma, and a huge quantity of anger. It did not need to be like this. I repeat – it did not need to be like this.

My colleagues and I sent over 2000 emails, calls, WhatsApp messages and twitter DMs to people we knew well, vaguely, and not even remotely. We reached out to ambassadors, ministers, bureaucrats, UN agencies, private security companies, cowboy security outfits, bus providers, armed guards, soldiers, troops inside the airport, military command units, philanthropic donors (and this is not an exhaustive list) with the aim of getting help for our colleagues. Any help.

Our list of people at risk grew rapidly as others joined in – Hazaras, LGBTQI activists, doctors, film makers, researchers, health workers, teachers, ministers in the previous government. The phone has rung endlessly, and I have experienced a roller coaster of emotions. High hopes, when someone important, with far more power than me, responded and I immediately replied irrespective of the hour, hoping for a solution – flights, evacuation lists, secure rides into the airport, laissez passer or humanitarian visas, access to emergency travel documents, acceptance of refugees, transit visas to third countries, anything. I was looking for anything, anyone, with any power to help.

The Polish Ambassador for Afghanistan in Delhi, stepped in to help get some people to Warsaw. My colleague sent him a DM on twitter, he asked for lists, flight manifests were made, people were sent emails. I was given numbers of people at the command unit at Abbey Gate, it worked. I called, the soldiers came, shouted names of my colleagues, hauled them in, drove them to the hangars, put them on planes and got them out. And we did this over and over till the last Polish plane flew out of Kabul. This, exception to the rule, I will never forget, and will always be thankful for.

From all others, obfuscations, apologies, and conditions. One country said it would host only if another country will take double of what they offer – Spain and Canada. One said we cannot absorb any more refugees but will allow those with visas for onwards journeys to enter and leave – Pakistan. One said, our land borders are closed, but if you fly people in, we shall help them – Uzbekistan. One country said we need to prove that you know us, and we know your people, and get official stamped letters for everyone on my – trigger word warning – list, to prove this, and we shall meet you on the other side of the bridge – Tajikistan. Iran said, it would take people but aren't sure if the UNHCR will accept them, but then we heard about biometrics being taken at the border, and we stopped asking. Some said come to Mazar, some said walk to Jalalabad, some said come to Torkham, others said we aren't sure, some said stay put, many others, did not reply. The airport closed, the land borders sealed, and the people traffickers came out to play.

But what of the larger, richer, western nations? Those who publicly fought the war, and publicly drew out of it, signing over the nation to the Taliban, citing all manner of (unquestioned) reasons to get out. I got zero replies from Germany, France, Denmark, Albania. I got, let's see what we can do from Italy and no further replies. Sweden asked me to send my 'top 10' at risk people. Sophie's choice – on steroids. Am I at risk because I am female? Or how about Hazara? How about a Hazara trans woman, what about Hazara trans woman with a limb missing? Is that risky enough? Would that be an acceptable top ten?

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Canada announced it would take 20,000 people, nay, 40,000. The condition – you need to be registered as a refugee in another country to apply for this golden opportunity to be safe. But also, the offer is only valid now, and might change, they were having a very democratic election last month you see. Norway, the country I admired most in crisis settings, said nothing.

The UK, and its migrant boat turning, international humanitarian law ignoring, policy was a wait and watch approach. Their shiny new Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), at the time led by a man who couldn't care enough to read his own security briefs or answer phone calls, or come off his holiday. A gender blind ARAP form, that offers only to rescue one person, and not their families, which has processed nothing much since its launch, which is deliberately vague and is supported by a helpline number on which my colleague waited in queue for six hours, could be awarded a medal for virtue signalling.

The UK announced the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) on 18th August, to provide protection for people at risk identified as in need. The magic number of 5,000, that goes up each year, that was announced with great aplomb, is a joke. Who will the 5001st person be? And what coalition to them? I have over 250 people on my list and over 1200 on the list of the [coalition](#) we have set up to do the job of multiple governments and international actors.

There is no indication of when ACRS it will open, how it will work, who will be able to apply, timelines, decisions, appeals. Nothing. It has been hailed as the "bespoke resettlement route for Afghan refugees", but this is yet again, another force. An open, white lie, and empty promise. This scheme relies on UNHCR to help, and is potentially going to operate on a referral system. – no clarity on who can refer, how and when. Nothing. Meanwhile UNHCR Pakistan [announces on their website](#) that they will be referring any Afghans to UNHCR. UNHCR is not designed to help people move, that is not within their mandate. The resources and commitment needed by UNHCR who are overwhelmed has not come forward from anywhere yet. UNHCR in Afghanistan got funding from private donors, but for those Afghans who wish to get out or have escaped to neighbouring countries it's a job of hiding, waiting, running out of money, food, data on their sim, staying safe from violence and Covid.

Each door I have knocked on has the power and mandate to open and save those who wish to leave, with dignity and humanity, a power I don't have. And yet this small group of individuals of whom I am part have been driven to be the humanitarian actors no one else wants to be. We are not powerful, we don't have budget lines. We cannot charter flights, cannot get visas, cannot get people across borders, we cannot help them be safe. Yet we are in daily communication with these colleagues and friends, in Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar, Herat, trying not to raise expectations. They answer calls with panicked voices, afraid that they won't live to see another day. People ask me should they try to cross borders by foot? What should I say – yes go, Kabul is not safe, or should I plead them to stay home and be patient, someone will help, soon? Or should I scream the truth – I don't know. I don't want you dead or unsafe, but I have no power to help you make these Russian roulette decisions. And no one, with any power, wishes to help.

The war machinery shall find another land, another people, another game, this news will become boring and annoying. Yet in 2021, we should note, that the developed nations, the men in suits who shake hands, the international agencies, the world, failed Afghanistan, again. It is crystal clear, I don't want the future of our planet, and its politics to be represented by these men, and their hollow institutions, with halls that echo with lies. I am done.

*We continue to work to get our Afghan colleagues and families, who are under direct threat from the Taliban, to safety. They have worked to bring peace to Afghanistan over the last 20 years, have fought for the rights of all Afghans, and especially women, girls and minority groups in direct opposition to the Taliban. Please help us by donating and sharing our funding call.*

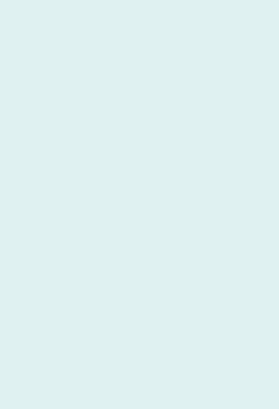
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