

Chris Johnson & Jolyon Leslie



Afghanistan

THE MIRAGE OF PEACE

'The most powerful book on post-9/11 Afghanistan that you will be likely to read'

AHMED RASHID

Advance praise for this book

A vivid, intelligent journey through post 9/11 Afghanistan and the wider region. Thoughtful, astute and deeply moving – this account of the post-war crisis in Afghanistan addresses all the major issues of our disturbed world today. The clarity and intellectual forthrightness of this book will help us to understand the violent and confused world we all live in now. This is a deeply sincere book in which the voices of ordinary Afghans describe their past and their future. The most powerful book on post 9/11 Afghanistan that you will be likely to read. *Ahmed Rashid, author*

This book provides a devastating critique of US and UN post-conflict policies in Afghanistan. Writing out of more than fifteen years' experience in the country and a deep empathy for the Afghan people, the authors dissect the flawed assumptions, misunderstanding, errors and – in some cases – lack of good faith that have stalled progress in rebuilding this shattered country. It should be required reading for all those interested in why post-conflict peace operations can fail – despite good intentions. *Andrew Mack, The Liu Centre, University of British Columbia in Vancouver*

Amidst a burgeoning literature on Afghanistan, two seasoned observers treat readers to a trenchant review of decades of international toying with the Afghan people and state. Their outrage is palpable – and contagious. *Larry Minear, Director, Humanitarianism and War Project, Tufts University*

This is a refreshing new look at the layers of complexity that characterize assistance to Afghanistan. The style is blessedly free of academic jargon and bureaucratic rhetoric – and enlivened by occasional wry asides. The often blunt analyses of realities on the ground gain credibility from the many years Johnson and Leslie worked within the aid delivery system, heightened by their sustained engagement with Afghans in cities and villages. The difficulties the international community and government have in trying to understand one another are interwoven with unusual insights into the nuances of attitudes rooted in social customs. The recommended operational changes will benefit all who care about the well-being of Afghanistan. *Nancy Hatch Dupree, The ACBAR Resource and Information Centre*

Johnson and Leslie have brought together a wealth of first-hand understanding of Afghan society and its changing conditions to produce a very rich and moving book. It is informative, thoughtful and unsettling. It makes for very valuable reading. *Amin Saikal, Professor of Political Science, the Australian National University*

About this book

The West has never understood Afghanistan. It has been portrayed as both an exotic and remote land of turbaned warriors and as a 'failed' state requiring our humanitarian assistance. Politically marginal after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, Afghanistan's strategic importance re-emerged after 11 September 2001, when the 'war on terror' was launched as part of a new generation of international interventions through which those 'against us' were to be transformed into those who are 'for us'. Yet the events of 2001 did not come out of the blue. The turbulent history of the last few decades set processes in motion that not only led to the confrontation, but will also shape the possibilities of transformation in the future.

Drawing on the experience of a decade and a half of living and working in Afghanistan, Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie examine what the changes of recent years have meant in terms of Afghans' sense of their own identity, their social relations and their relationship to the state. It sets their understandings against the often very different perceptions of the West and explores what this has meant in terms of policies towards the country. Finally, the authors critically examine the international engagement in Afghanistan that followed the defeat of the Taliban. They argue that if there is to be a hope of peace and stability, there needs to be a new form of engagement with the country, which respects the rights of Afghans to determine their own political future and recognizes the responsibilities that must follow an intervention in someone else's land.

About the authors

Chris Johnson lived in Afghanistan from 1996 to April 2004. She worked first for Oxfam, then set up a joint UN/donors/NGO research unit, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, where she worked until early 2002. She then undertook a wide range of consultancy work for different organisations concerned with the transition. She is now the Head of Office for UNDP in South Sudan.

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CHRIS JOHNSON &
JOLYON LESLIE

Afghanistan

The mirage of peace



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Abbreviations

AIA	Afghan Interim Authority
ATA	Afghan Transitional Authority / Administration
ATTA	Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement
CLJ	Constitutional Loya Jirga
ELJ	Emergency Loya Jirga
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan intelligence service)
KhAD	State Intelligence Service (the Afghan equivalent of the Soviet KGB)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
SFA	Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary General
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan
UNDCP	United Nations Drugs Control Programme (superseded by UNODCCP–UN Office of Drugs Control and Crime Prevention)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan
UNSMA	United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan
UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Glossary

<i>arbab</i>	local chief
<i>burqa</i>	loose garment with gauze patch over eyes, completely covering woman's body
<i>charahi</i>	road junction
<i>haj</i>	Muslim pilgrimage
<i>hawala</i>	customary system of money transfers
<i>jerib</i>	a measurement of land (about 0.195 hectares)
<i>jihad</i>	holy war
<i>jirga</i>	a tribal council (Pashtun) – see also <i>shura</i>
<i>jui</i>	water channel
<i>karachi</i>	handcart
<i>karez</i>	hand-dug underground water channel
<i>khan</i>	originally a title, customarily used for landed elite
<i>kuchi</i>	nomad
<i>loya jirga</i>	grand assembly or council
<i>madrassa</i>	Koranic school
<i>mahram</i>	male relative, as a companion to females
<i>malik</i>	local leader
<i>muezzin</i>	one who calls the faithful to prayer
<i>mujahid</i>	(pl. <i>mujahideen</i>) one who leads the faithful in holy war, or takes part in holy war
<i>mullah</i>	Islamic religious leader
<i>pashtunwali</i>	Pashtun tribal code
<i>qawm</i>	a kinship group, can be used at level of family, extended family, tribe, sub-tribe, etc.
<i>sayyid</i>	descendant of the Prophet
<i>shabnama</i>	night letter
<i>shari'a</i>	Islamic law
<i>shura</i>	village council (similar, though often not as formal in its constitution, to the <i>jirga</i>)
Shura e Nazar	Supervisory Council of the North
<i>talib</i>	(pl. <i>taliban</i>) a religious student
<i>ulema</i>	religious scholars or leaders
<i>uluswal</i>	district administrator
<i>uluswali</i>	district, as subdivision of province
<i>usher</i>	Islamic tax, one-tenth of crop

Preface

The idea for this book first emerged in August 2001 when we realized that between us we had lived in Afghanistan and witnessed the history of international engagement here since 1989 – an experience that seemed worth reflecting upon. Events since September 2001 have served to make the subject matter even more important, and of more global relevance.

During the fifteen years that we have known the country, Afghanistan has gone from being an occupied state to one ripped apart by factional fighting, and variously seen by the outside world as ‘fragmented’ or ‘failed’. Then, under the Taliban, it was characterized as a ‘rogue’ state, a country beyond the pale. Finally, it became the state that the outside world wished to recast as the first success of American interventionism and the ‘war on terror’.

The way in which both diplomacy was conducted and assistance given shifted with each stage of these changing characterizations of the country. The lives of Afghans changed dramatically during this period. Those who had always been poor, war pushed them to the edge of survival. Many of the urban middle classes were reduced to poverty, while others went into exile. There were also, of course, those who got rich on the spoils of war. This book tries to track some of these changes and what they have meant to people.

The West has often seen Afghans as a war-like and exotic people, sifting their perceptions through the lens of its own world-view. At times this bears little relation to how Afghans see themselves and their country. Historically this has always been so, but over the last quarter of a century global politics has further shaped the way in which Afghanistan has been seen, and how in turn assistance has been given and people’s rights defended, or not. This book does not, however, set out to provide a detailed social and political history of the country, for others have already done that very ably. Instead, we have sketched enough of the historical outlines for the reader to make sense of the story, and provided references in the text and a select bibliography at the end for those who wish to explore further.

The book is not the result of any research project. Some of the ideas are certainly informed by research one or the other of us has done for

other purposes, but mainly these come out of a reflection on our experience of living here as managers of aid projects, sometimes as analysts and policy advisers, but most of all as direct observers of history; of working with and watching the UN, donors and other agencies struggle with issues. Our ideas also come from having many Afghan friends, from endless journeys and of evenings discussing, debating and sharing the experience of war and the struggle for peace. We've tried to deepen that understanding by reading; about Afghanistan but also about other parts of the world with experiences different, and yet similar. If the book raises for the reader more questions than answers we will not be unhappy.

This book is the result of a shared process of writing in the course of which it has become impossible in many places to say which of us wrote what. Yet latterly there were periods when we worked together, most of our earlier experiences were separate, in time and place. Most of our first-hand experiences recounted, therefore, are those of one or the other of us, not both. Often it will be obvious to the reader which of us it was; for the rest we decided it didn't much matter.

The book would never have come into being without the many Afghan friends who have so generously shared their lives and their wisdom with us. Too many of them are no longer alive. We shall not even try to name them, not only because the list would be too long – and even then we would fear missing someone out – but also because the future of the country is still far from certain, and we do not wish to endanger anyone as a result of confidences and opinions that they have shared. For the same reason we have changed some names in the text. We will, however, remain for ever grateful for the way in which they have continued to enrich our lives. The failures of understanding, the omissions and the mistakes are, of course, entirely ours.

Kabul, 2004

Foreword

Afghanistan is not a well-understood country. This is something of a paradox, for a great deal of impressive scholarly work has been devoted to the analysis of its politics, economy and society, and events such as the Soviet invasion of December 1979 and the US overthrow of the Taliban in October–November 2001 earned it a prominent place in the headlines. Yet, all too often, Afghanistan is popularly depicted in terms of crude stereotypes – hirsute warriors, wild-eyed religious extremists, women consigned to the margins of social life. The complex realities of this exceptionally diverse territory have somehow not connected with its wider image. The course of events since September 11, 2001 has not greatly improved the situation. Now a different set of misleading images has been injected into the public realm, images which paint Afghanistan as an American success story, a threshold democracy, and a model of what the Bush administration's approach to 'nation-building' can achieve. Ordinary people comparing these images have every reason to feel thoroughly confused.

There are, of course, good reasons that help to explain the prevalence of simplistic impressions of Afghanistan. Fathoming the politics of remote countries is always a challenge. Many commentaries have been authored by transient media visitors whose brief has been to capture a little local colour rather than shed light on complexity. And some Afghan political leaders in their own interests have sought to exploit stereotypical images to win support. But perhaps the most important is that the course of events in Afghanistan over the last quarter of a century has given rise to a situation that cannot readily be analysed through the casual deployment of concepts or categories appropriate to less disrupted lands.

The most salient feature of this situation is the break-up of the state. After the communist coup of April 1978, the Afghan authorities lost much of their capacity to raise revenues from domestic sources; and after the Soviet invasion, the Afghan state was substantially dependent on resources supplied by the USSR, amounting to an artificial life-support system. With the disintegration of the Soviet state, this aid-flow ceased, and the Afghan communist regime collapsed less than four months later. Its successors inherited only the shadow of a state, with compromised

legitimacy and limited administrative capacity. Thus, Afghanistan's challenge has been far greater than that of shaping a government. It is that of rebuilding the state, and establishing its position as the dominant power within Afghanistan's boundaries. There are few precedents on which one can draw to map out a path that Afghanistan should take, and certainly no magic solutions to its problems.

When the state breaks up, other authority centres typically emerge to discharge some of the functions that the state would normally perform. Some win significant local support; others claim symbolic legitimacy on the basis of the roles they undertake, defending communities and interests from external threats. To posit 'democracy' as the only conceivable source of legitimacy in such circumstances is to overlook the intensification of local bonds and the erosion of the willingness to trust strangers, both features of social interaction that one can expect to find when confidence in the state has been severely weakened. But as well as legitimate local authority centres, state break-up also fosters the entrenchment of a range of distinctly unappetising forces: predatory, extractive 'warlords'; drug traffickers; even terrorists. All have some interest in acting as 'spoilers', in blocking the re-establishment of an effective state, and some may flourish with support from state and non-state actors in neighbouring countries, highlighting the transnational character of the problems with which disrupted states can be confronted.

Afghanistan also runs the risk of being forgotten. The sad tale of its efforts to secure reconstruction assistance highlights the problem. In Tokyo in January 2002, it received substantial pledges of assistance, but as of November 2003, only US\$112 million of reconstruction projects had actually been completed. It was in the light of this failure that a further meeting took place in Berlin on 31 March and 1 April 2004. In preparation, the Afghan government provided a detailed programme entitled *Securing Afghanistan's Future* which pointed to some key areas of need. The central conclusion of the report was that 'Afghanistan will require total external assistance in the range of US\$27.6 billion over 7 years on commitment basis. A minimum of US\$6.3 billion of external financing will be required in the form of direct support to the national budget – preferably more, since budget support helps build the State and its legitimacy.' At the conclusion of the meeting, a 'Berlin Declaration' was published, welcoming the commitments made at the conference. Unfortunately, these amounted to only \$8.2 billion for the period March 2004–March 2007, and \$4.4 billion for March 2004–March 2005. The Afghan government had little option but to welcome this result, but given the compelling case it had constructed for greater assistance, the

outcome was deeply disappointing. In the light of Iraq, Afghanistan is yesterday's conflict. As I wrote in early 2002, the 'War on Terrorism and the hunt for Bin Laden put Afghanistan on the front pages. It will soon be off them.' Yet a powerful lesson of September 11 is that it rarely pays to neglect Afghanistan. If we do, we should not send to know for whom the bell tolls.

These issues are vital to the future of Afghanistan. They are also the central concern of this book.

Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie are superbly placed to reflect on these issues. I first met Jolyon Leslie at Bagram airbase, north of Kabul, in the mid-1990s. Khwaja Rawash airport in Kabul was closed for security reasons, and he had driven the then head of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan, Mahmoud Mestiri, to Bagram so that he could leave the country. I managed to hitch a ride back to Kabul with him, and that hour's conversation established just how effectively he had managed to develop a sense of Afghanistan's complexities. Subsequent encounters in Afghanistan, and in cities as remote as Amman and Paris, confirmed this original impression. Chris Johnson was working for Oxfam when I first met her, and her experience with numerous aid projects in Afghanistan has made her one of the best-informed and most informative observers of Afghan reconstruction. The power of their analysis, however, derives from a shared characteristic which social scientists can easily overlook, namely an ability to grasp what one might call the 'smell and feel' of a situation. This book is a brilliant example of the illumination that such an ability can offer. Weaving instructive and moving anecdotes together with the fruits of scholarly research, they convey to their readers a sense of daily life in Afghanistan with a vividness that few observers in the past have ever managed to achieve. Some will find their analysis pessimistic, while for others it may appear unduly optimistic. But no one can fail to benefit from reading their thoughtful and moving book.

*William Maley
Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy,
Australian National University*



1 *Members of pro-government volunteer youth brigade poised to 'defend the homeland', 1980. (Afghanistan Today)*

I | The mirage of peace

‘Kaka, what are they afraid of?’ (Small boy watching heavily armed US soldiers in Kabul, 2003)

The nights in Kabul during the war were eerily quiet. Curfew ensured that the streets became largely the preserve of the city’s dogs after 11 p.m. unless you had the official password or could bribe your way past the soldiers with a packet of cigarettes. You could hear a child crying blocks away. The days, however, were punctured by random rocket attacks, launched by the *mujahideen* from the outskirts of the government-controlled city. The crude rockets supplied by the West for use against the Soviets and their allies usually missed their intended targets and smashed into the simple mud homes dotting the low hills of the city.

In the lulls between the rockets or the occasional skirmishes along the distant frontlines, life went on. But not as normal, for the inhabitants of the city lived in fear of the senseless, random attacks, and did what little they could to protect themselves. The doors of our nearby shop served as something of a barometer of what to expect of the day’s conflict. The back doors of a powder-blue Citroën van, they were set into a traditional mud wall as though a parked vehicle had simply been assimilated into the street-front. Doors wide open for business, and piles of dusty fruit and vegetables laid out under the shade of the mulberry trees, signified an ‘all clear’. When these goods were packed up inside the shop, with doors partly open, there was a need for caution, and passers-by quickened their step while mothers shepherded children inside the walled compounds. When the shop doors were drawn shut but not locked, the signal was one of high alert, and only the intrepid – or desperate – ventured out into the streets. Doors padlocked in the hours of daylight were a sure sign of trouble, and you stayed on the streets at your peril. Then came the eerie silence before an attack, when those lucky enough to have any glass left ensured that no one was near the windows.

Word of which areas were under attack and should be avoided spread like wildfire along the dusty alleys, as did the imminent threats to targets identified by the resistance in *shabnama*, notes pushed under the doors of homes during cover of darkness. Young children knew the ‘song’ that presaged the impact of a rocket which, if you could clearly hear it, meant

that you were almost certainly too close for safety. Then came the crack of impact, the dust thrown up by the explosion, out of which rose the screams of the injured and shocked. Lined up for launching in clusters on the barren slopes outside the city, the US-supplied Sakr rockets would usually wreak a pattern of havoc, so people learned not to emerge until the salvo seemed to be over. Survivors would scramble through the dust to dig victims out of the rubble, while passers-by would commandeered taxis, or even bring wheelbarrows, to get the injured to hospital.

Illusions of peace

This was just another day in the life of Afghans caught in a sideshow of the Cold War that, with the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, had slipped out of sight for much of the rest of the world. It was, as Felix Ermacora, UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, put it in his report to the General Assembly in October 1990, a 'forgotten war' (Ermacora 1990). Talk of peace continued to screen acts of war, as *matériel* continued to be supplied to both sides. The few UN observers deployed to monitor the Peshawar Accords could do little but bear witness to violations such as rocket attacks on Kabul and occasional government forays against the resistance. The Kabul government lodged hundreds of complaints about alleged violations, but the UN seemed unwilling to draw attention to continued US support to the resistance (Gossman 1990). Ordinary Kabulis could no more comprehend this form of international 'engagement' in their country than they could the motivation for their countrymen to fire rockets at them.

While the West caricatures Afghans as a war-loving people, recent conflict has been largely fuelled by others. Just as the Russian and British empires during the nineteenth century had described their competition for influence in primarily defensive terms, so too did those who embarked on the twentieth-century Cold War arms race that cost at least a million Afghan lives. On the one hand, the Soviets provided on average \$5 billion per year in economic and military support after 1979, while, on the other, the annual military aid allocations of the US administration for the *mujahideen* between 1980 and 1989 were of the order of \$2.8 billion (Asia Watch 1991). The deadly symmetry of arms supplies was maintained beyond the withdrawal of Soviet troops, who handed over the bulk of their military supplies to the Kabul government, while the USA – which agreed to exercise 'restraint' only if the Soviets were seen to do the same – Saudi Arabia and Iran continued military support to their respective clients within the resistance. For Afghans, this offered a guarantee of further conflict rather than a hope of peace.