Long road home: a story of war and revelation in Afghanistan

Article and photography by

Lois Raimondo

National Geographic Society

New York

2002
Long Road Home

A story of war and revelation in Afghanistan
SHEPHERD BOYS GUIDE THEIR FLOCK THROUGH A REFUGEE CAMP IN KHODJA BAHUDDIN, AFGHANISTAN.
Camera in hand, I set out to document the “collateral” consequences of the war, to find Afghan people and their stories.
Late at night I sit in my apartment in Washington, D.C., watching U.S. leaders talk on television about the war on terrorism. Afghanistan moves in and out of these conversations, as it does with the headlines. One day there’s a lethal flare-up in a mountain stronghold. Later the situation is “controlled,” and newsroom pundits move on to other hot spots like Iran, Kashmir, or Somalia. Then my phone rings. The call is from Afghanistan.

It’s my former translator, Ahmad Zia Masud, now a negotiator for Afghanistan’s hastily formed Ministry of Defense. He calls me often by satellite phone from mountaintops, villages, and caves where he is meeting with resisters to reform—Taliban fighters, independent warlords—who, after decades of war, are reluctant or unwilling to lay down their guns. Sometimes Masud and other negotiators are threatened and forced to retreat. Soldiers then move in, and the hills resound once more with war.

“This is a very dangerous time for my country,” Masud tells me. “Every day I see disaster. The young boys, they know only war, nothing else. What will happen to them? I believe food will come, factories will come, but now the people are suffering. Even if peace comes, so much has died.”

From last October into December, Masud and I worked together day and night in the parched hills and plains of northern Afghanistan, where I was on assignment as a photojournalist for The Washington Post. Masud was in his eighth year of forced exile from his home in Taliban-controlled Kabul, working mostly for Northern Alliance leadership. When hundreds of foreign journalists began descending into Khodja Bahauddin, site of the Northern Alliance’s government headquarters, the foreign ministry assembled an army of translators. Masud, with halting English but well connected, wound up with me. He is a devout Muslim and father of three; I an unveiled, single Western woman. Neither of us imagined how our minds and lives would mingle—and be forever changed.

From the start we covered frontline stories, which required a steady diet of Russian military maps, bareback rides on mountain-bred horses across frigid rivers, a phone book filled with satellite numbers for field commanders, and a stomach for black tea. Some days mortar fire thundered constantly. Other days were still. The United States had announced that it would launch air strikes on Taliban positions, but the Northern Alliance frontline commanders we were meeting with weren’t being told when. So they held their men in check, awaiting the U.S. campaign that would allow them to take the offensive against weakened Taliban territory. This lull created space to report beyond the front lines, to provide social and historical background for the conflict. Camera in hand, I set out to document the “collateral”

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, JUNE 2002
consequences of the war. From dawn to dark Masud and I bounced around in a Russian jeep to find Afghan people and their stories. Along the way, sharing hundreds of miles, our own stories unfolded.

Educated at Kabul University, Masud was still a consummate student at age 32. He carried a small, lined notebook in his chest pocket, which he filled each working day with new English words. (Once when we were under fire he yelled, “Make yourself small!” “You mean scrunch down?” I shouted back. “Scrunch” made its way into his book.) He has immense curiosity. Yet Masud had chosen to avoid all contact with Western cultures abroad and instead became a religious-political activist, nurturing strict devotion to Islam among his people. My own curiosity had led me to spend more than a decade living in remote corners of China, India, and Tibet—none so ravaged as Afghanistan.

Day after day Masud interpreted his war-torn world for me. I photographed young students, hungry for knowledge, whose schools had been commandeered by Taliban troops and turned into garbage-strewn military barracks. We met families, three generations deep, displaced to bare-bones refugee camps. We found fragmented lives—scattered to hospitals, cemeteries, and prisons.

The prison at Khodja Bahauddin was made of clay. Small, dank cells had one tiny hole cut high on the wall. While I was waiting to interview some Taliban inmates, guards and low-risk prisoners circled me, muttering ominously. I looked to Masud, my vigilant protector. He spoke sharply, and everyone backed off. The prison director opened a cell, offering me “any” Talib. I peered in and discerned, barely, six hunched figures. We entered the cell. As I began to sit, Masud warned me of “small friends:” our code words for lice, fleas, and other creatures that had invaded our sleeping bags in a bunker near the front lines. I squatted to talk with the prisoners, who ranged in age from 17 to 43. Every one of them claimed they had been drafted, under threat of death, to fight for the Taliban. They talked of their crops and families, wives and children left behind. Later the prison director said, “Maybe they are farmers. But they killed our soldiers. They should die.” Shortly afterward one prisoner did die, of illness, right before our eyes. “Have you seen many people die?” I asked Masud. He exploded in anger: “This is new for you. War, death, and dying is our way of life.”

By foot and by rumbling Russian tank, Northern Alliance soldiers made their way over rugged hills toward Kunduz during last fall’s Ramadan offensive, a bid to overtake Taliban-controlled territory.
"Are you a Muslim or a heathen?" a 14-year-old boy shouted at me. I thought hard before answering. How should the "heathen" reply to keep the young Islamic student engaged in conversation?
Engineer Ibrahim Shakir, his mother at his side, convulses in the delirium of gangrene after being riddled with the bullets of a retreating Taliban fighter. Shakir was rushed to Taloqan Public Hospital but found no medicine, electricity, or blood bank. Taliban troops had emptied the hospital of all supplies. Bibi Lala (right, seated) and her two young children fled Taloqan when the Taliban burned their home to the ground. For more than a year the displaced family has been living with 3,000 others in the Dasht-e Qaleh refugee camp.

Such suffering failed to dim Masud’s sense of hope. That hope was rooted in a deep devotion to God, which I learned through his long, joyful renditions of Koranic stories. Our trips by jeep or horseback were punctuated each day by sunset prayer, even when shells were flying. Despite the constant threat of danger and death, Masud and other Afghans I met strove for normalcy in their lives. Imposing the rhythms of religion, they transformed one more day of war into one more night of peace. We’d break Ramadan fast at sunset with still-warm bread made with prayerful hands in an outdoor clay oven—soldiers, civilians, and one foreigner seated on the ground, a complex human circle bound by simple bread. The teachings of Islam seemed to temper potential violence in a poor and desperate people. Yet taken to fundamentalist extremes, that same faith was also motivating Taliban fighters just over the next hill, who wanted to kill, certainly me, but also their Muslim brothers. Masud was more of a brother than most. He, like most Taliban, is ethnically Pashtun, one of the few working with the Northern Alliance.

Once, when we were deep in the desert, Masud announced that if he were governor of an Afghan state, he would rule by Koranic law, ordering immediate execution for adulterous men and women. (This he offered as proof that Islam held women in high esteem.) Muslims who converted to Christianity would also die. I had seen this man comfort despairing widows, disarm deranged soldiers, play with childlike abandon, and respond with patience to foreigners who knew nothing of his culture. Such compassion, playfulness, and respect seemed at odds with his fundamentalist fervor. I wondered where he housed such rigid rules—and didn’t yet realize that my landing in his world was causing those walls to tremble.

One day we visited Lalaguzar, a sprawling refugee camp near Khodja. Weeks earlier I had watched a boy there toss a tiny ball made of plastic wrapped with twine. The sand-colored ball was constantly disappearing or unwinding. Later, in a far-off town, I bought a soccer ball. Masud and I returned to Lalaguzar and wandered through miles of indistinguishable tents, looking for the boy. Giggling children, all hungry for play, crowded around. As I offered a kicking lesson, some women peeked at us from behind a tent. Masud kicked the ball,
In this barren place on Aikhanom Hill, overlooking fields peppered with land mines, soldiers come to lay a stone or say a prayer for friends lost in years of war.
STONES AND STRIPS OF TATTERED CLOTHING FORM A SACRED MEMORIAL FOR FALLEN COMRADES NEAR KWAJEH GHAR.
Adorned with the artwork of war, a house in Taloqan serves as a stage for historic transformation the day after the city's liberation from Taliban occupiers. Northern Alliance spies (left), who had worked undercover in the ranks of the enemy, symbolically joined their brothers by tearing off their distinctly Taliban turbans. Translator Ahmad Zia Masud (above, standing), helped to defuse distrust between his fellow soldiers and local men. The Northern Alliance had gained vital ground, but after years of surviving only by the sword, many wondered whether they would ever be able to lay down their arms.

and one of the women kicked it back. “Oh, no,” said Masud, only half-joking. “Maybe her husband will kill me. I played soccer with his wife.”

That afternoon we returned to Khodja and sat with tea on the concrete stoop outside my room. Masud poured the tea, then abruptly confessed that he felt conflicted in my presence. “It is a sin to be with you, talking friendly in this way,” he said. “I must pray very hard every night after leaving you.”

I wasn’t ready for this. We had been working together, almost every day, for weeks. “You are saying I am a sin?”

“Yes. A man must not speak friendly with a woman who is not his wife. I love my wife very much. We have rules. You are not Muslim. But this is not the main thing. It is dangerous. You should be covered.” I instinctively tightened my scarf around my head. “The people of Afghanistan do not want you here.”

“I see.” I stayed calm but was inwardly stunned because, until then, I had thought we understood each other and communicated in ways that were, at times, extraordinary. Now I was a sin.

He went on. “Nobody wants foreigners here. I hate America. In too many ways, I hate America.”

His words sank into silence. We had already discussed what we both viewed as the rampant materialism of U.S. culture. Masud believed that American peacetime society, rife with crime, was the inevitable consequence of spiritual bankruptcy. He feared that Americans in Afghanistan—soldiers, journalists, businessmen, even peacekeepers—would carry with them these same cultural values. I could see, and agree with, some of what he said. Now my Afghan translator, who was becoming my friend, seemed to equate me with an enemy. I was a sin from a nation he loathed.

Tears welling up, I surrendered. “Okay, I understand.” Then I looked up and saw tears coursing down his face. “Masud, why are you crying?” “I cry because I have hurt you,” he said. “Speaking with you is a small sin; this is a big sin. The heart is a holy place, and we must always take care to never hurt one another. I am sorry. Now I must leave.” He rose to his feet, planning to resign as my translator. We were both off balance, but I wanted him to stay. “Wait. Please. You will be part of Afghanistan’s new
Men sat with guns on the table, eating and silently staring. Others kneeled in prayer. At any moment this restaurant, the exclusive domain of men, might erupt in armed brawls.
An intense game of chess in an underground bunker allows the practice of patience—and the relief of escape—during the downtime of war. Northern Alliance soldiers, outnumbered and outgunned by the Taliban, waged a mostly defensive war from the hills of northern Afghanistan, controlling less than 10 percent of the country. Most fighting took place at night under cover of darkness. Soldiers on Kapahasan Hill (right) watch the glow of U.S. bombs exploding on their enemy’s positions at Taloqan. The mood was mixed: Battle-weary soldiers sensed the war’s end, but foreigners were killing their countrymen.

government. Contact with the West is now inevitable. You will have to deal with foreigners, if for no other reason than to protect what you feel is precious about Islam and Afghan culture. You can be both bridge and gatekeeper for your people.”

The optimist and the fundamentalist were tangled in a web. In the end Masud chose to stay. He was beginning to trust me, and that troubled him. Because I was not Muslim, he had assumed I would never understand his world. Yet my work had taken us together into the raw lives of strangers, giving us common ground where we could challenge each other’s thinking. He entered new words in his notebook that night—“flexibility” and “cultural relativity,” ideas we discussed at length. We then retired to our separate quarters for exhausted sleep.

When the war heated up, Masud made it his business each day to get us to the front line for battle and back to safe haven by night. He had friends in both places who helped when they could. One position we returned to often was the post at Kapahasan Hill, a series of underground bunkers built into hills facing Taliban strongholds in nearby Taloqan. Masud and I always went first to Commander Zuhoor’s bunker. Welcomed by him and protected by Masud, I felt safe. This evening in a small underground chamber Abdul Rozaq, chief radio operator, worked the ancient wireless—a crackling lifeline powered by a car battery—checking on men posted along the mountainous 28-mile Northern Alliance front.

Commander Zuhoor, age 30, a strong, soft-spoken man who read himself to sleep each night, was issuing orders to his men. As his charges—very young and awfully old—departed for the dark unknown, he urged each one to be careful. The U.S. bombing campaign had finally begun. Taloqan was next, and the Taliban were desperate. Someone would certainly die before this night was over.

The young commander, who started soldiering at 15, turned to us and asked if we wanted sugar in our tea. He apologized for not having any food, and then said he must leave. But if we needed anything at all, Rozaq could find him by
Next, a soldier strapped the commander with supplies so he could lead an advance minesweeping team down into the valley, into the heart of Taliban territory. Rozaq, who never left his post, spoke as his leader headed out. "That man, my brother, my father, he is worth a thousand ordinary soldiers."

We all fell silent, feeling the long reach of the gentle commander, imagining his footsteps moving in darkness, knowing that battle was near. Masud and I went out for air. The mountains were magnified in moonlight and unearthly still. There is no electricity, no air pollution, to disrupt the night sky. It is alive with stars, brilliant bits of dust floating in a giant cup of jet-black tea. You breathe deep on top of Afghan mountains and inhale the universe.

Later that night the silence was shattered by the relentless, suffocating thud of Taliban rockets. Inside the bunker I asked Masud to explain how both the Northern Alliance and Taliban soldiers could use the broad Islamic concept of jihad, or "struggle," to sanction killing fellow Muslims. "It is complicated," he said, suddenly smiling. "You like, I use my new word 'complicated'?" He paused. "We believe there is only one God, Allah, and our life on Earth is to serve him only. Unfortunately, the human is weak, and unwise mullahs, with wrong thinking, disobey the law of the Koran and lead the people in a dangerous direction. This war is about power, not God."

"But how does a good and gracious God, as you describe yours, justify killing in his name?"

"Oh, Lois, I am a weak teacher for you," he said. "Our God does not want the people to be killing. Long ago the Muslim world was under attack by Christians who wanted to make all of Islam disappear from Earth. Jihad was about survival. For us jihad with weapons is a last resort. It is a very desperate thing. The greatest jihad, our God teaches us, is jihad of the heart."

The next morning I was blasted awake before dawn by thunderous explosions. U.S. B-52s had found their mark at Taloqan. Oddly, I felt secure lying against the bunker's earthen wall. I found I had become so deeply immersed in the assignment that my attitude matched the Muslim belief that you cannot save yourself from death—when your time comes, you will go. This calmed me as I worked.
A young girl, sent by her mother just after sunrise to buy the family's daily bread at a Taloqan market, returns along a route transformed. Uniformed soldiers of the Northern Alliance, who had captured Taloqan the night before, filled the streets for days, celebrating their victory.

Despite the constant threat of danger and death, Afghans strive for normalcy in their lives.

I thought of the Northern Alliance soldiers, who, outnumbered and outgunned, had been fighting a war far from home for more than six years. With every bomb that fell from the sky, each man was closer to going home. But home to what? Loved ones dead. Towns and cities destroyed. Farmlands riddled with land mines. I would soon return to the U.S., whose planes were flying overhead. Masud would spend the rest of his life cleaning up the mess from this war and others before it.

Still in my sleeping bag, I turned toward the bunker's blanketed doorway. In the dim light of dawn I saw a silhouette. With eyes closed, palms up, lips moving in silent prayer, and cheeks wet with tears, Masud was talking with his God. I closed my eyes, allowing him privacy, and turned back to the wall, knowing I could offer nothing that would help him. My own tears fell silently, separate from his, but into the same earth. I was learning, in this paradoxical world of rigid rules and barely controlled chaos, that there is a certain beauty in boundaries. The discovery did not come without pain.
This bunker had been a place of great intimacy, where hardened warriors huddled around dim kerosene lanterns late at night, listening to their commander read aloud from tattered pages of Persian poetry, delicate stories about brave young men riding off on horseback to fight the good war, leaving behind trails of flower petals that their unrequited loves could never follow. Now they were on the move, a restless river of men flowing along a dusty dirt road leading to Taloqan.

Five thousand advancing Northern Alliance troops halted at sundown in a narrow valley stretched between foothills of the Hindu Kush. Their general, Dawood Khan, with advisers and bodyguards, climbed an adjoining hill overlooking the city. They laid their scarves on the rocky ground and, kneeling close together, prepared to pray.

The surrounding hills abruptly exploded in fire. Mortars, tanks, rockets, and machine guns hammered the soldiers, who scattered for cover. The commanders continued to pray. I moved in what seemed like slow motion,
"I want to make my daughters ready for school. I want," pausing to control his hope and emotion, "I want for them everything," said Masud, going home after 15 months at war.
A GIRLS' SCHOOL IN CHAH-E AB BECAME A HAVEN FOR MANY REFUGEES.
"Let me try again!" said Masud, challenged by a children's game at the Lalaguzar refugee camp near Khodja Bahauddin. "He was as comfortable with a frontline general as with an orphaned child," says Raimondo. "Masud's method of work and play assured us hospitality wherever we went. Together we could engage with the Afghan people from morning to night. When it came time for me to leave, it was snowing, much needed moisture that hinted at promise for future harvests. Yet as I drove away in a battered jeep (right), everything I saw through the muddy windshield spoke of both promise and loss."

making pictures. The bloody bodies of land mine victims were being rushed back through the ranks. Soldiers began to run in panicked retreat. Suddenly a voice stopped me in my tracks. "Allah akbar! (God is great!) Forward! Allah akbar!" Looking over my shoulder I saw Masud standing firm in the midst of a massive retreat. Blocked by the passion of his war cry, the fighters slowed, stopped, then returned to battle. Masud's voice rang through the valley.

In that moment he was a stranger to me. But in his voice I heard his history: The young boy of seven who watched wide-eyed as Russian tanks rolled into Kabul; the idealistic student who saw two of his closest friends die at his side defending their city from the Taliban; the dedicated husband and father willing to die that day to make a better future for his people.

When the sun came up the next morning, Masud and I walked the streets of newly liberated Taloqan. Friends whom he had not seen for years rushed at him from the celebratory crowd. They toppled over, laughing and hugging. I watched his joy expand with every acquaintance found alive. Meanwhile his wireless radio crackled with a call for work to be done. It fell to Masud to set up the new headquarters in Taloqan and to negotiate with remaining Taliban. He spoke on the radio while looking out for me, trying to keep men from crowding too close. I shouted that I was okay, that he should move ahead. We both knew that with the liberation of Taloqan, our separation was imminent.

Masud called to me: "I do not want to leave you." Then suddenly I found before me a young schoolteacher, Nasir Sabawoon, who spoke nearly perfect English. Masud interrogated the teacher, then I hired him as my new translator. A few hours later I moved into Nasir's mother's house, into the "ladies quarters," one room that housed his mother, six sisters, several nieces, three granddaughters, and now me. Fresh bread was baking in the family's clay oven. A tree with giant lemons grew in the courtyard. Children chased each other in circles while two beautiful women, diaphanous scarves draped around their heads, laughed and swept a Persian carpet, gesturing for me to join them. I had come out from the desert, and landed in a fairy tale—which always must end.

A month later, the time had come for me to leave. It was snowing. Masud
had come to say good-bye. “How do I say good-bye to you?” I said. He struggled to reply. “You have been my closest friend. You have taught me ‘flexible’ and ‘complicated.’ I am a different man because of you.” He paused. “I can no longer hate America, because you are there.” He gave me gifts for my nephews, three small vests of leather and fur. Then he put his hand over his heart, and we parted.

Masud worked his way south over snowy mountains to Kabul, where he was reunited with his family, briefly, before being called upon to help secure remote hostile regions of the country. When he phones me now, he tells me of the “total devastation of buildings, land, and people’s minds.” He worries that aid from the U.S. and other foreign powers will degrade his culture. He cringes when new Afghan leaders who have lived most of their lives abroad talk of a “new Afghanistan” and “globalization.” I’ve never heard him sound so tired, or so sad.

“These people do not know my country. What must we call this? ‘Cultural relativity?’ Remember our time with that word?” he laughs quietly. “We are a very religious people. Our ideas are very different. I am afraid for Afghanistan. These are the things you must write about. Otherwise, your words will have no soul.” I ask if I can also tell our story. “If it can help the world know there is beauty and peace in Islam, then you must tell it,” he said.

Before I left for Afghanistan, an American friend gave me a gift, six simple words of encouragement. As Masud and I moved with the war across northern Afghanistan, we shared these same six words between us. When I was face-to-face with the wrathful fury of an American-hating Talib, Masud spoke them softly to steady me. When he went undercover deep in the mountains trying to turn Pashtun Taliban into Northern Alliance soldiers, I did the same for him. I, now comfortable in the United States, he, wrestling with an increasingly splintered “coalition” in Afghanistan, end our long-distance phone conversation with six simple words: “Be smart. Be brave. Be afraid.”
ACROSS THE ANDES

BY A.D. 600—EIGHT CENTURIES
BEFORE THE RISE OF THE INCA EMPIRE—
TWO KINGDOMS DOMINATED THE
ANDEAN WORLD. TO THE NORTH WERE THE
WARI, SKILLED ROAD BUILDERS AND PottERS.
TO THE SOUTH LIVED THE TIWANAKU, THE
GREAT TEMPLE MASONs
OF LAKE TITICACA.