

Afghanistan: A Country, Not a War

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN — In honor of April 4, 1967, and April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke out against war and when he was killed, I spent my first full day in Afghanistan on April 4, 2011, avoiding violence and discussing nonviolent activism with those practicing it here.

The previous night I had spoken with a number of foreign aid and development workers here in Kabul, all of whom were upset, both at Afghans who in recent days had killed workers like themselves and at a preacher in Florida whose burning of a Koran had enraged Taliban types from a safe distance. Attacks in multiple cities on April 1st and 2nd looked planned and coordinated. April 3rd saw a nonviolent protest in Jalalabad, where Badshah Khan, the great nonviolence leader of the past century, is buried.

They haven't heard over here about U.S. bigots' fantasy of President Obama's secret Muslim identity. He bombs them and permits the burning of Korans, so they burn him and the Floridian preacher in effigy.

April 4th saw the murder of two U.S. soldiers by an Afghan policeman in the north, and smaller protests in other cities. But the United Nations decided not to evacuate, as had been quietly under consideration. And in Kabul, where President Karzai had ordered the use of force against any demonstration with the "potential for violence," nothing was reported in the news or observed by me on the 4th.

People had been warning on the 3rd that Kabul had been "too quiet" for months, this being a sign of likely danger. But the line between informed speculation and superstition is thin. Nobody knows what to expect. Rage at the recent photos of American soldiers posing with the corpses of civilians they've killed for sport never materialized. Instead fury at the burning of a book caught foreigners by surprise.

Kabul is a city of millions stuck between huge, jagged mountains, some with snow atop them. The roads are jammed with cars, but the cars are old and many of the roads are dirt and extremely rough. The air is filled with dust, not to mention the highest content of fecal matter in the world. Open drainage ditches line the roads. The buildings, mostly three or four stories high, look like they've all seen better days, even the new ones that are under construction.

Also — of relevance to posting this story — there is no internet faster than molasses for anybody outside the U.S. military.

This place could be a beautiful city unlike any other. And making it such, or restoring it to

such, could employ tens of thousands of unemployed and hungry people. The money to make that happen could easily be found in the world, and wouldn't top one percent of what the United States has spent on this war. But to whom exactly would the money go?

U.S. "reconstruction" efforts and Afghan government efforts are notoriously corrupt. Much of the money never reconstructs anything other than fabulous vacation homes for officials on the take. NGOs providing services in Afghanistan are also famous for their high overheads, not to mention their arrogant imposition of outside visions on the local people. The only way to invest in credible development here seems to be on a small scale through Afghan groups carefully identified and monitored but permitted to pursue their own goals. One place to learn more is <http://jobsforafghans.org>

I'm here with a group of international advocates of nonviolence assembled by Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and a group of young Afghan artists — photographers and film makers — at the Open Society (an Afghan organization not related in any way to George Soros' operation). We're also meeting with young members of Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers, and Hakim, one of their organizers, is providing his wonderful interpreting services at meetings in Dari for those of us whose Dari is badly limited.

We've been navigating streets and traffic that make any other country I've been to seem tame. An Afghan is driving, of course, and driving here is probably a skill requiring more training than anywhere else. The horn must be used frequently, and sometimes the voice. An old man kneels, head-down, in the traffic and everyone drives around him. Eight very angry men approach our van on foot. It turns out we've just banged our side-mirror into theirs. After five or ten minutes of conversation with our driver, they go on their way. Afghan soldiers are everywhere too, and in some neighborhoods there are checkpoints, but they have tended to be friendly.

Below are accounts of some of the people we spoke with on April 4th. Of course, this is only one day, but I'm already beginning to draw some tentative conclusions, such as these:

1. War propaganda for the inhabitants of the war zone is as big an industry as war propaganda in the far off imperial "homeland." The United States pushes the message of its good intentions and the threat of the Taliban here, as at home, through the media, and through the funding of colleges and NGOs, not to mention the Pentagon's fake FaceBook members, etc.
2. Almost nobody wants the Taliban back in power; almost everybody remembers its horrors. But only a minority recognizes the power of this huge anti-Taliban majority to resist the Taliban.
3. Almost everybody wants the U.S. occupation to end, but many do not want it to end right away. The latter group is slanted toward but by no means entirely made up of those better off, those financially dependent on the occupation, and those in Kabul as compared to some rural areas.
4. Almost everyone who is worried about what will come after this occupation views the United States as duplicitous and self-interested, but just not as evil as the Taliban. At best, they believe the United States is doing some good for its own unrelated reasons. This does not mean that many necessarily know of former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's pride in having armed the mujahedeen and provoked the Soviet Union into "its Vietnam War," or his dismissal of the Taliban as of minor significance compared to the fate of the Soviet Union — despite the horrific civil war that came after the Soviet withdrawal, or of the amount of funding the United States currently pays the Taliban for safe passage

around the country.

5. Nobody I've heard of has a good word to say for Karzai's government. People recognize their ability to overturn that government should the occupation end.

6. The majority of Afghans are young, and the young are best able to envision change.

7. Afghans are extremely friendly and want the same basic things in their lives that Americans want.

8. Those who are advancing a deep understanding of nonviolence in this nation whose living population has not known peace, those who are teaching the possibility of alternatives to both the Taliban and the United States military, and of multi-ethnic unity, are courageously offending powerful interests on all sides and are onto the only real solution.

THE JOURNALIST

We met first with a prominent citizen of Kabul, a newspaper editor whom some of the Afghans in our group had known only from seeing him on television. Qasim Afhgar is the editor of "8 in the Morning," a newspaper with circulation in the thousands in several cities in this extremely illiterate land. His paper routinely reports on everyone killed, regardless of what side killed them. A video of Afhgar speaking at a rally is [here](#).

We met in his home, in a room with Afghan carpets and cushions all over the floor, shoes left outside, the windows and walls curtained, a shelf in the corner holding a television and a few toys, including a Barbie and a GI Joe. Outside a goose and a rooster could sometimes be heard. Afhgar sat down with difficulty and blamed his experience of being tortured by the Soviets.

Kathy Kelly, of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, began by telling Afhgar of our interest in nonviolence. He spoke very fatalistically of a society that is tribal and has always known violence — a view that erases episodes like Badshah Khan's nonviolent resistance to the British. Afhgar spoke against any efforts by Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban and against Karzai's entire government, which he viewed as dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group, unfriendly to women's rights, and repressive of civil society. Asked about a youth movement in Afghanistan, Afhgar spoke as if both government opposition and ethnic division rendered such a thing impossible. Afhgar himself is Hazara. Other ethnic groups in Afghanistan include the Tajik, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, and Baloch.

Afhgar maintained that if the United States/NATO were to leave, the Taliban would likely return. Detty, a German man in our group, asked if the Taliban in the Southern provinces made up more than 5 or 10 percent of the population. Afhgar admitted the small numbers but said the Taliban's way of thinking was widespread beyond its membership.

Afhgar also maintained that the U.S. project of nation building during the past decade had been deceitful and wrong-headed, that nation-building should belong to the Afghan people, and that the United States is here for its own strategic reasons and does not actually care about nation building. The United States, he argued, has misled the entire world by claiming that Pakistan is an ally against terrorism. Of course, the U.S. government has been misleading itself about Pakistan for decades.

A free and fair election would be easy to hold if the government wanted to hold one, Afhgar said, but no presidential candidate would unite ethnic groups. Moreover, ethnic groups cannot unite until the government permits them to — according to Afhgar's fatalistic view.

People do not want violence, but they cannot learn a culture of nonviolence because the government will not allow it, etc.

Afhgar did offer one guide toward a solution: an amended or rewritten Constitution that would provide more power to a legislature and less to a president. We can see the need for this back in the United States, but the need seems all the greater in such an ethnically divided society — at least unless a multi-ethnic presidential candidate can be found.

Afhgar does not favor separation of the nation into parts, believes federalism has always been present, and has no interest in confederation with neighboring countries. He wants a united Afghanistan without interference from Pakistan, Iran, or the United States.

THE PEACE ACTIVIST

This video speaks for itself and is the most important part of this post. This is Hakim, who comes from Singapore, describing the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. One message from this video is something like this: “Those saying it can’t be done should stay out of the way of those doing it.”

Part 1:

Part 2:

Part 3:

Part 4:

[Hakim discusses female activists, among other things. I’ll post it when I can. The above videos took several hours to post to the internet with the slow connection here.]

THE ARTISTS

At the Open Society we met extremely talented photographers, as well as film-makers whose conversation suggested their films must be absolutely amazing (and we hope to see some of them this week). A couple have made it into the Cannes Film Festival.

We are tentatively planning an Afghan film festival for the United States for this fall when the occupation hits the decade mark. We’ll try to make a package of DVDs available to groups and theaters that want to screen them; watch <http://warisacrime.org> for updates.

To see some startling photographs, click on this one:



THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Next we met with Ramazan Bashardost, who I think of as the Dennis Kucinich of Afghanistan. He finished third in an extremely fraudulent presidential election. The top three candidates represented the top three ethnic groups in order of their population size, Bashardost being Hazara. But Bashardost says he got more votes from other ethnic groups than from his own. After serving as Minister of Planning, Bashardost now serves as a Member of Parliament in a government dominated by the President and the partisan

majority. Bashardost was educated in France, speaks fairly good English, and is often brilliant. He is not an activist, not a movement leader. He is simply a decent politician who wants to represent everyone honestly, justly, and peacefully. Sadly, that is an extremely rare thing to find, here or back home. I interviewed Dr. Bashardost for a couple of hours. Here are highlights:

On the fraudulent presidential election:

On the powers of a Member of Parliament:

On having the right opinions not being enough; the need to get active:

A message to President Barack Obama:
[too large to post yet, coming soon]

On the need for peacekeepers from small countries far away from Afghanistan:
[too large to post yet, coming soon]

On the need for truth and reconciliation:

On the need for international judges:
[too large to post yet, coming soon]

How political parties have killed the separation of powers in all of our national governments:
[too large to post yet, coming soon]

Here I am with Bashardost:



THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON, D.C.

The Congressional Research Service has just released a report on the war: ([PDF](#)). Here's a key bit:

"A refined Administration statement about the desired 'endstate' in Afghanistan might include:

- The set of minimum conditions in Afghanistan that would allow Afghanistan to sustain stability with relatively limited support from the international community.
- The rough timeframe in which those conditions are likely to be achieved."

Which I translate to read:

"It might be appropriate for Congress to demand to know what the goal is and when if ever it might be reached."

APRIL 5th



We'll be meeting some more people today, including hopefully representatives of the

International Committee of the Red Cross, which has concluded that human life in Afghanistan is “untenable,” that too much of the country faces extreme poverty, poor access to healthcare and clean water, etc.

I also expect to meet with some of the astonishingly upbeat boys in Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. One of them had his father killed by the Taliban and was recently in a discussion with a supporter of the U.S. occupation. This young man advocated the abandonment of violence on all sides, including the removal of U.S. troops. The reply from his fellow Afghan was that the Taliban ought to have taken him out too for saying such a thing, and that he was too young to know real suffering.

But the younger was the wiser, responding without anger or hatred, and understanding very real suffering as a path toward bettering the world not the maintenance of a vicious cycle of violent force and vengeance.

Meeting these kids and learning from them would alone justify this trip to me were I not already very glad I came.

UPDATE:

Kabul University students demonstrating this morning! I take that to be a good thing, but it is universally understood as a reason for foreigners to stay indoors; so: very mixed emotions. I don't know how to encourage Afghan students to protest my government when I can't go near the demonstrations.

AFGHAN YOUTH PEACE VOLUNTEERS

Four of the peace volunteers drove down from Bamian, 10 hours, to meet us, and we managed to get together this afternoon, April 5th. Faiz is 20, Abdullah 15, Ali 16, and Gulenai 14.



Left to right: Abdullah, Ali, Gulenai.

They had assembled a big group in Kabul for a march for peace recently, and the news media covered it as something new and different.

This morning, they told us, they went with Hakim, Kathy, Kate, Detty, Mary, etc., to a college class to speak about nonviolence and peace. Apparently the professor with the loudest voice argued that the United States and NATO were here for the good of all people. Faiz was among those who spoke up in response. Speaking to elders is not part of the tradition these young men have grown up in, but they believe it's necessary. They think they may have opened some eyes. About half the class seemed to believe peace might be possible.

Abdullah, the young man I mentioned above whose father was killed by the Taliban, said that the experience of the Taliban cripples people with fear. By one estimate, 60% of Afghans suffer PTSD or another form of psychological damage. Faiz said that in fact the government works very hard to make people believe they are powerless. If the Taliban is 5 percent, I asked, how can the other 95 percent not believe they can defeat it? Ali said that as soon as people are able to all stand together, it will be that easy. Gulenai added that extreme distrust must first be overcome through relationships and friendships.

I apologized to these young men for what the U.S. military has done to their country for over 30 years, but Ali said there was no need, that only the politicians need apologize.

Then I proposed something, and Abdullah's response made me want to apologize all over again. I proposed that they visit the United States. It turns out that last year Abdullah, Faiz, and Hakim went to the U.S. Embassy here bearing an invitation letter from the Fellowship on Reconciliation. The waiting room aired military propaganda interspersed in a movie about women in bikinis. There were a lot of doors and guards to go past before speaking with someone. And the officials were rude and insulting.

Before they could obtain visas, the young men had to explain what message they had for the American people. Faiz replied "the truth," and Abdullah replied "the voice of peace." This resulted in their questioner laughing and making fun of them. Their visas were rejected on the grounds that they did not have strong ties to Afghanistan. "They did not treat us like human beings," says Abdullah. "If it's going to be like that, I don't want to visit the United States."

Things were better, but not ideal, at the guest house where two of us are staying. While some of us went to a meeting at the Red Cross, the Afghan manager of the place apparently allowed well-dress white people, but not poorly dressed Afghans who had traveled great distances, to drink tea.



Left to right: Faiz, Kate, Abdullah, David, Ali, Gulenai.

RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been here for almost 30 years and maintains a staff of 140 foreigners and 1,600 Afghans. The ICRC runs seven orthopedic centers for victims of land mines and anyone else with any disability. Former patients in those centers make up 98 percent of the employees.

The ICRC back on the Ides of March released a short report concluding that the current situation for civilians in Afghanistan is "untenable." Increased violence has meant less access to healthcare, or the need for the Red Cross to work through its partner the Red Crescent or through other local facilities to reach people.

The problems range from direct war injuries to burned or closed health clinics, dead livestock, or the lack of transportation to get to a clinic. The ICRC provides not only medical care, but also urban and rural water projects in cooperation with local water boards. They install pumps or plumbing. The ICRC is not exactly the easy answer to "Where do you give money to actually reconstruct Afghanistan?" Its projects are small and it prefers to receive donations into its general global fund without earmarks. But the ICRC seems like a far more likely way to see your money put to good use than, say, paying your U.S. taxes.

I spoke with Bart De Poorter, the ICRC's Health Coordinator for Afghanistan. He said the situation is better than it was in the 1990s but worsening in recent years — the years in fact (my words, not his) since the United States elected a Nobel Peace Prize winner president. In 2007 there were 1,000 cases of measles, for example, and in 2010 there were 6,000. This could mean that vaccination coverage is decreasing. Deliveries of babies in a hospital in Kandahar have doubled in the last six months, possibly because delivery facilities are not available elsewhere. At this point, some 60 percent have access to healthcare within 2 hours

of them, but that could drop and more epidemics arise.

War injuries go up in the warm months and down in the cold, but the injuries in the warm months of 2010 were double those in 2009. The worst areas for war casualties are in a line along the southern part of the country, and in a line running straight north from Kabul. The south has the worst of it, the result of the escalations ordered by Obama.

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