

The Basis of the Book

This is a book about the Afghans – by way of three of them – and how their country shaped them, but also how they themselves have tried to pull their country in the direction they want it to go.

It is a portrait of three people, at a moment in time.

The Afghans is first and foremost the stories of Jamila, Bashir and Ariana.

They appear in the book in the order they were born, each into a specific period of the country's history. Jamila came into the world in 1976, a few years prior to the Soviet invasion. Bashir was born in 1987, when the war was nearing an end, while Ariana was born at the turn of the millennium, the year before the terror attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001.

My first meeting with Jamila Afghani took place via a computer screen. In early September 2021 the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee held an open meeting with Afghan women's rights activists. Jamila, with her sharp analyses and courageous assertions, cut an impressive figure. After several meetings over Zoom, that were frequently disconnected due to the poor coverage at the reception centre for asylum seekers where they were staying, I went to meet her in person.

I asked Jamila if she would consider appearing in a book about Afghanistan, which at the time I had scarcely begun, and explained

what that would entail with regards to interviews and research. She readily agreed. As did her husband Kakar.

Several meetings took place with Jamila, Kakar and their children, both in Alta, where they were sent later that autumn, and in Oslo.

Jamila is the principal source for the chapters pertaining to her. She is also the one who related her parents' story. Her mother had passed away and her father was too ill to be interviewed. The accounts of their childhoods and early lives in Ghazni, and later in Kabul, are therefore based on what Jamila recounted. Thus the thoughts and actions of her parents are Jamila's words, and part of her family history as she sees it. I have also interviewed one of her brothers.

Jamila has previously given accounts of her family, in *Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders* by Sally L. Kitch, from 2014, and *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles in Religious Peacebuilding* edited by Joyce S. Dubensky and published in 2016. Some of the depictions of her childhood have therefore appeared before. Sometimes the stories are strikingly similar, at other times the details differ slightly. I asked Jamila for clarification when there were discrepancies.

Jamila also sent me drafts of speeches she has made, as well as other written material from her life. The speech she delivered in Doha was reported by Al Jazeera and can be found online.

I have also visited locations in Kabul related to Jamila. In the building she owns, the organisations NECDO and WILPF have a floor each, and the library she and Kakar built up is to be found there, along with their own apartment. I have also met several of the female Islamic scholars she worked with.

Between January and July 2022, I undertook three extended trips to Afghanistan. My goal was to try to understand more about the Taliban and their rule. What has changed and what has remained the same? What do they wish to achieve?

On my first day in the country, I was required to have my press accreditation approved by the new authorities. In regard to this I

was granted an audience with the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, who told me I could just forget about the personal stories of the Taliban: they wouldn't talk.

All the more reason to try.

I travelled from police districts to provincial centres, visited people at home and set my sights on those midway up the hierarchy; the foot soldiers didn't have enough experience, while those in the upper echelons were inaccessible.

I found several interesting individuals. To take part in a book, above all the person must want to tell their story. They also need to be stable enough to stay the course.

I immediately sensed I had discovered such a character upon meeting Bashir. He was the first person to ask me questions before saying anything himself.

Why did I want to write a book about Afghanistan? Why was I interested in the Taliban? What sort of stories was I after? Why were all the wars I had covered in Muslim countries?

Much had been written about the Taliban as a group but more seldom as individuals. I was looking for someone who would tell their own story, I explained. I wanted to understand what motivated them and what kind of people the movement consisted of.

'The reason these accounts are lacking is obvious,' I added. 'If I had come here last year then you probably would have kidnapped me, wouldn't you?'

He had a good laugh at that. Yes, of course he would have.

All the interviews with people in the book were recorded and transcribed afterwards. The interviews in English were transcribed by me, sometimes with the assistance of transcription programs. In order to arrive at the correct meaning in Pashto, which Bashir and his family spoke, the interviews were sent to professional translators, to render them as verbatim as possible.

Regarding Bashir's childhood, adolescence and how he rose through the ranks of the Taliban, this is based on his own accounts and what members of his family told me. Only on rare occasions

did I speak with people on the other side; that is, Bashir's enemies. But I did find one person who had worked as an interpreter for the American forces during Qalam's attack on Forward Operating Base Tillman. He recalled the mood on the base when the commander was killed and how they took him to cold storage.

The battles I chose to include in the book contain many details. How could Bashir remember so much in such a chaotic and confusing situation?

I used the following method: when I had decided which battles or reminiscences I wished to use in the book, I went back to Bashir and asked him to go through these stories in more detail. Bashir and his men were often exasperated by my nitpicking over points they viewed as inconsequential, but in my experience it's often in what is seen as unimportant that you find what is central. Many of Bashir's men also thought I asked stupid and repetitive questions. Others believed I had to be an intelligence agent, working for the West.

The sports reporter's refrain of ' . . . and what was going through your mind then?' is the best question in the world. I must constantly remind an interviewee to not only recount an event, but also say what they were thinking at the time it was occurring.

In this manner it's possible to construct scenes with factual content and at the same time breathe life into them. I attempt to find out what people are thinking and feeling in different situations, and what motivates them, so we can get to know them.

When Bashir and his men thought I was unduly fixated on details, it might have been around questions concerning what something looked like, smelled like, felt like or simply how they were sitting – were they sitting on cushions, on rugs, on mattresses? Ah, right, directly on the concrete, then?

Another method is to ask the same thing many times, in different circumstances. It may be to elicit more nuance, but it can also serve to check if the answers are consistent. Being in possession of the recordings, I can have what someone said many months previously fresh in my mind and ask them exactly the same thing to see if their

version has changed. Bashir had an excellent memory and was always quick to mention that he had told me about this or that before. Had I not been listening?

My impression of Bashir was that he was guarded in his frankness, it was restrained.

He knew what he wanted to talk about and what he did not. The Taliban are a collective movement, and the identity of those behind specific kidnappings, killings, massacres, torture or attacks on civilian targets like hospitals and educational institutions is not something they want to come out. The collective are responsible for what is achieved and what you can be punished for, under different regimes, not the individual commander.

Acts of war – unadulterated warfare, in its pure sense – were on the other hand something it was safe to talk about.

The luckiest you can be in today's Afghanistan is a visiting female reporter. Then you have access to both men and women. At the same time as you can – for the time being – travel around, you also know that you can leave, and thereby avoid the intimidation that local journalists are subject to.

Most people associate the Taliban with men. Little has been written about those in the movement who hardly leave the house. The stories of Taliban wives and close family members have, in more than one sense, been concealed. There are many reasons for that, of which the most important is the ideal of a secluded life. I told Bashir at an early stage that I wished to meet his family, his mother, his wives and children. To my surprise he replied, 'Of course – when would suit you?'

But first he had to ask them.

They met me with friendly scepticism. Why did I want to hear their stories? What was behind it? And eventually: how had I managed to make it to Afghanistan *all alone*?

On these visits I had a female interpreter. She was cautious but dauntless, and through her gentle manner established a rapport with all the members of the family. Much of what the women told was as

unfamiliar to her as it was to me, such as, for example, that you are not supposed to mourn the death of a child.

The main characters among the Taliban women are Hala, Galai and Yasamin – Bashir’s mother and his two wives. I quickly discovered that the best way to interview them was to focus on one at a time, although most of our conversations ended up part of the chaos of their pink house, as toddlers came in and out, food was served and eaten, babies were breastfed, tea was drunk, garments repaired. Expectant mothers lay down to sleep beside me, others decorated my hands with henna or wanted to teach me how to bake bread. Like Bashir, they attempted to convert me. I spent many hours with the children at the Quran school, where Hasibullah walked around correcting pronunciation.

Women as active participants and facilitators in the war is a story that has barely been told. Bashir’s wives told me about the making of the Taliban’s most lethal weapon – roadside bombs – in the same matter-of-fact manner they talked about preparing dough for bread.

I also met Bashir’s fiancée, Mariam, and her parents. Then I needed two interpreters, one female to translate her story, before I went into the adjacent room, where a male interpreter translated for her father. Only I could go freely between the rooms.

The book is built upon what the people in it have told me. The dialogue is reproduced based on what they have said about their lives. Just as Jamila told me about her parents, so Hala related the story of her late husband, the events around his death and the life they shared prior to it.

At other scenes I was present. Bashir took the task of having a biographer in tow seriously, informing everyone we met that ‘what you tell me now, you’re also telling her’. That was the case with the runaway, the shadow governor and the families of the martyrs.

The controlled frankness I found with Bashir, I also encountered with the women. They were surprisingly open about family and everyday life, including reactions to Bashir’s polygamy. What I found

no hint of was the wish for a more independent life. I cannot know if that was a desire that burned deep within, or if the truth was as they said, that a life like that did not interest them.

After spending some time in the house my impression is that the will of the girls is bent so early and gradually that resistance softens step by step. Four-year-old Hoda, for example, was similar to any other child of that age, playful and inventive. The eight-year-olds in the house were already covered up; they spoke with heads lowered, afraid of saying anything wrong. All they wanted, they said, was to learn the Quran by heart. When I asked if there was anything else they might wish for, they just shook their heads.

It was important to Bashir's women that their names weren't disclosed. I asked if they wanted to choose their own names for the book, but they didn't care and asked me to come up with some myself.

It was important to me to strictly define my role as a journalist, to make it clear the interviews were being recorded. My recording device was always placed in the middle of the room, or close to whoever was speaking. Furthermore, I took notes of what the interpreter translated and of what I observed. There was never any doubt that I was there to work.

Like Bashir, the women were also puzzled about my search for details, and at times it was hard to have to ask about the specifics needed to build up a scene, such as when Yasamin lost her first child, and I asked about details like:

Did you look at Bashir? Was he looking at you? Were you sitting down? Was he standing? Why were you looking down? How did that make you feel?

But that is how a book comes about.

For a long time, I thought this book would have two main characters. Then I met Ariana.

My first impression was of a nervous, pale young woman. She seemed wound up, her eyes flickering about as she attended a stress management course at Jamila's office in Kabul. Most of the women

in the room were older than her. She talked about a life consisting of nothing.

I met her again, and realised she was what the main changes centred around – the young women who thought they could achieve anything, if only they were smart and worked hard enough, and then everything was taken from them. She is who the main struggle between people like Bashir and Jamila is all about. When I told Bashir about Ariana graduating at the top of her class in law, he replied, ‘Sorry, but there’s no place for educated women in Afghanistan. Her parents should find her a husband.’

When I asked Ariana if she would be willing to be in the book, she asked me to pick a name to conceal her identity. I told her I would, and I did.

I told her she could, and she is.

Like Jamila, Ariana speaks fluent English, making the interviews easy to conduct. We had several face-to-face meetings, both at her home, where I was put up, at cafés in Kabul, or at my place. For long periods we had daily contact online.

Ariana is herself a person who writes. She kept two diaries, one in Dari and one in English. Over the last few years, she kept her diary on her computer and sent sections of it to me. Towards the end of our time working together, it was important for her to convey her thoughts around the marriage her parents wanted her to enter.

Her parents were also interviewed on several occasions, but primarily in the period before the conflict with their daughter came to a head. As she acted as the interpreter in her parents’ interviews, and they would never allow an outside interpreter to gain insight into recent events, I do not have their version of what happened after the engagement.

What they said to Ariana in different situations, and how they acted, is based solely on what she has told me. The same applies to her translations of text messages from her fiancé, whom I have named Mahmoud. I have never met nor interviewed him.

Except for Jamila Afghani and the politicians in the book, all the Afghan women have had their names changed.

Both Jamila and Ariana have read the chapters about themselves in English translation and been given the opportunity to provide input and make corrections. They have both approved the chapters as they are printed in this book.

Bashir declined the offer to read an English translation and communicated via the interpreter that he would like to read through his chapters prior to the book being published in Pashto.

The historical sections in the book are drawn mostly from *Afghanistan – A New History* by Martin Ewans, which I bought at Shah M Book in Kabul in 2001. I have used specific quotations and dialogue from the following books:

The conversations between Osama bin Laden and Suleiman Abu Ghaith on 11 September 2001 are taken from *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* by Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy.

The quotation ‘I asked forgiveness from God Almighty, feeling that I had sinned because I listened to those who advised me not to go’ is taken from *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda’s Road to 9/11* by Lawrence Wright. Facts concerning life in Peshawar during the Soviet occupation are from the same source. In addition, for that chapter, I also used Thomas Hegghammer’s *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*.

Communication between George W. Bush and God is taken from a 2005 article in the *Guardian*, where he referred to God telling him, ‘George, go and fight these terrorists.’

Quotations from Lyse Doucet’s phone call with Hamid Karzai are taken from ‘The Karzai Years: From Hope to Recrimination’, which she wrote for BBC News in July 2014.

The quotations from the Doha negotiations are taken from the *New Yorker* article ‘The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan’ by Steve Coll and Adam Entous. Details around Ashraf Ghani’s security advisor Hamdullah Mohib are taken from ‘Inside the Fall of Kabul’ in the *New York Times Magazine*, written by Matthieu Aikins. The same journalist also wrote ‘The Taliban’s

Dangerous Collision Course with the West', where some of the background for the school closures was uncovered. The main source for the meeting in Kandahar, where it was decided that the schools would not be opened to teenage girls, is the report by Ashley Jackson in 'The Ban on Older Girls' Education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray', a report for Afghanistan Analysts Network.

With regard to the Haqqani Network, the book *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus 1973–2012* by Vahid Brown and Don Rassler is central. The description of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and a quote delivered to Osama bin Laden, is taken from *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban–Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.

The depiction of the use of drones in Afghanistan is taken primarily from the article 'Drone Warfare in Waziristan and the New Military Humanism' by Hugh Guterson, published in *Current Anthropology*. How the grieving parents of soldiers in the Soviet Union were disciplined is taken from 'Dedovshchina: From Military to Society', issue 1 of the *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*.

Other books I have based my work on are *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* by Craig Whitlock, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021* by Antonio Giustozzi, *No Good Men Among the Living* by Anand Gopal and *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women* by Benedicte Grima. A book that inspired me, and which I gave to Ariana when I left, is a collection of short poems, orally passed down by Afghan women: *I am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan*, collected and translated by Eliza Griswold.

In working on this book, I have received help from several experts.

Arne Strand, senior researcher at the Christian Michelsen Institute, with Afghanistan as his specialist field, has read through the manuscript along the way and offered useful feedback and

comments. He also read through the finished manuscript and imparted his knowledge when we discussed the different themes in the book.

Amund Bjorsnes, a specialist in classical and oriental philology, helped me to understand the principles behind the recital of the Quran and has reviewed religious references. Bjorsnes went through the words in Dari, Pashto and Arabic, to render the spelling as consistent as possible. We prioritised readability rather than scientific methods of transcription. Extracts from the Quran are from *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* by Ahmed Ali.

Arabist and lecturer in Arabic at the University of Bergen Pernille Myrvold looked through the transcription of Arabic words, and was one of several valued early readers. She requested a map, which was beautifully drawn by Audun Skjervøy for the Norwegian edition.

Abdul Sayed at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace went through Bashir's stories from Waziristan. He listened to recordings in Pashto and helped me better understand Bashir's role in the Haqqani Network and in particular his relationship with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. I also discussed Bashir with the author Anand Gopal, who has written extensively on the Haqqani Network and the Taliban.

Humanitarian consultant in Afghanistan Ayesha Wolasmal helped me understand aspects of both traditional and modern Afghan life. She explained several of the terms the main characters used and commented extensively during the writing process.

In Kabul I took pleasure in and benefited greatly from conversations with Terje Watterdal, Country Director at the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, and I would also like to thank General Secretary Liv Kjølsest from the same organisation for the first introduction to Jamila.

Former commanding officer of Norway's Special Operations Command, with experience in Afghanistan, Frode Kristoffersen tidied up some military terms, while diplomat Andreas Løvold, who has served for both Norway and the UN in Afghanistan, helped me understand the period under Ashraf Ghani. Historian Tore Marius

Løiten provided great help in researching the various themes of the book. Two readers who made invaluable suggestions regarding form and content are poet Ingrid Olava Brænd Eriksen and historian Marte Heian-Engdal.

My parents Frøydis Guldahl and Dag Seierstad have as always been my most loyal readers, and commented upon several different versions during the writing process. The youngest person to read the manuscript, Katja Sira Myhre, offered important correctives about what young people know about the history and the politics of Afghanistan. Thus the manuscript has had test readers ranging from seventeen-year-old Katja to eighty-six-year-old Dag.

Publishers have provided a fine bunch of readers, like author, traveller and publisher Erling Kagge, and editors Tuva Ørbeck Sørheim and Ivar Iversen, who all offered important observations and comments, while Charlotte Sabella provided technical assistance.

My editor Cathrine Sandnes has been a phenomenal sparring partner from the start to the finish line. I have been in the best of hands.

This book would not have been possible without my translators and fixers, all of whom have preferred to remain unnamed. I am forever grateful for helping me to find, to connect and to understand the complexity of the Afghan society and to guide me from place to place, and from person to person.

Finding an appropriate title was difficult, when the main characters were so clearly pulling in different directions and the only thing uniting them was a strong will – and a country.

Thus, the working title *The Afghans* has remained.

I am grateful that Jamila, Bashir, Ariana and the people around them agreed to share their stories with me – and with you.

Åsne Seierstad
Oslo, 25 January 2024