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NEVER ENDING WAR

REPORTS FROM AFGHANISTAN

(Pages 3 and 4)

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Foreword

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Some of the reports in this book have been published before in Scandinavian newspapers, but others are now being published for the first time.

Our travels through Afghanistan in 2013 took us to the provinces of Kabul, Panjshir, Nangarhar, Kunar, Kunduz and Kandahar and gave us material for the first and second parts of the book. These texts had previously been published in the book *Alt dette kunne vært unngått* ('All this could have been avoided'), but we have taken the opportunity to update some of them.

The third part of the book consists of the reports of our journeys in 2016 to the provinces of Helmand, Balkh, Herat and Kabul.

While gathering together all the reports from our tour into one book for publication in Norway, we wanted to take stock of the state of the war in Afghanistan. So the fourth part of the book is a more analytical assessment of the war.

Putting the book together in this way, our aim was to make our combined reports readily available to the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish public for whom we had been covering the course of the war. Most of the reports are the result of combined efforts and therefore carry

both our names. Others do not. Anders travelled alone in Faryab Province and in Hellas and the reports from there therefore stand in his name. The same applies to Carsten's more personal reflections.

The reader will note that from time to time we refer to a 'fixer.' This was our indispensable travelling companion, driver, interpreter and guide in one and the same person. Without the fixers with their local knowledge and good judgement it would not have been possible to visit many of the dangerous places we have reported from. Our lives were frequently in their hands, and our gratitude to them is enormous.

The fixers are particularly deserving of mention in despatches just now. Not only do they expose themselves to danger, but they are now also under the searchlight of the authorities in a country that doesn't exactly value freedom of speech. In a conference at the United States Institute of Peace on 13th May 2016, Rula Ghani the First Lady of Afghanistan claimed that sensationalist doomsday journalists were systematically spreading misinformation about conditions in Afghanistan. She went on to say that when the journalists' freedom of movement is restricted, the fixers are to blame for feeding them false information. 'I would like to know who these fixers are,' she said, 'because then they really need to be talked to.'

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Rula Ghani maintained at the same time that the fight against the Taliban 'is not a battle that really counts.' If you choose to deny the reality of a message, as she apparently does, you will inevitably blame the messenger.

The extent of your freedom of movement as a journalist in Afghanistan is up to yourself and the risk you are willing to take. Without a close co-operation with the fixers, it would be even more difficult. We have chosen to write only about what we ourselves learned at first hand.

Now, three months later, it would not be possible for us to visit the districts we visited at the end of May 2016. It has become too dangerous. The war goes on, and the withdrawal of most of the NATO forces doesn't take away from us our responsibility for the situation and our duty of self-

examination. It is still our war, and we are keeping it going.

That is why we decided to report from Afghanistan and to write *The War that Never Ends*.

Carsten Jensen and Anders Hammer
18th August 2016

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Welcome to Afghanistan

Carsten Jensen

My first meeting with an Afghan was in row 6 on flight number 714 from Istanbul to Kabul. We took off from Istanbul at 3 a.m. Turkish time and now, four hours and very little sleep later, the Afghan man sitting next to me is starting a conversation.

'Where are you from?' he asks. When I reply that I am from Denmark, he looks straight at me and says: 'You're from the land that doesn't like Muslims.'

I try to parry the accusation with a list of denials, but he breaks off my reply. 'I have an uncle in Landskrona, and I know what I'm talking about. Don't try to explain it away.'

My courage sinks. We'll be landing in Kabul in half an hour. I've got off to a bad start.

To my relief, my fellow-traveller turns his anger against Istanbul Airport, where we had both waited several hours for our departure. What particularly angered him were the shop-girls, who shamelessly used make-up and wore short skirts reaching only to above the knee.

'But Turkey is a Muslim country,' I suggest, hardly concealing my pleasure at having found a counter-argument.

'Turkey isn't a Muslim country at all.' He immediately silences me with a fixed gaze. 'Turkey is a westernised country.'

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He starts on a lecture about the Prophet, which goes on until our landing wheels touch the runway in Kabul.

Fourteen hundred years ago, Mohammed prophesied that Islam would capture Constantinople, which at that time was the capital of the remnant of the Roman Empire and a bastion of Christendom. It came to pass. He also prophesied that Islam would later lose the city. That also came to pass, as shown by the knees of the shop-girls in Terminal 1 at Istanbul Airport.

He points a warning finger at me and his angry gaze seeks mine. I feel as if I am looking into a hundred watt bulb without a lampshade.

'But the Prophet made another prophesy, that will come to pass just like the earlier ones, because it doesn't really come from him, an ordinary man, but from God, who had chosen him to be His spokesman. And according to this further prophecy, Istanbul will return to Islam. The lost city is going to be recaptured.'

'What do you think of the Taliban?' I ask him. I am assuming that this militant opponent of women's bare knees supports Afghanistan's fundamentalist armed rebels who not only want to hide the knees, but expect not a single square centimetre of female anatomy to be visible.

'The Taliban are a disaster for Afghanistan,' he replies. Their followers are ignorant and barbaric. That's my country's curse. We don't have enough educated people. Afghanistan is a Muslim country, but not really Muslim, because we don't have proper Sharia law.'

'So what country in the World has proper Sharia law?'

'None. No country in the World.'

I don't know what to make of the fall in his tone. Is he desperate, depressed by powerlessness, or does his voice conceal latent hope of a coming change? I suddenly realise how lonely he feels. He is one of those unfortunate people who are haunted by a dream of perfection.

The next moment, a hard bump indicates that our journey has ended. My travelling companion and I struggle up from our seats and walk stiffly towards the exit. We haven't even said goodbye to each other.

I have arrived in Kabul.

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Anders Hammer is waiting for me at the entrance to the airport. A Norwegian journalist, he has been based in Kabul since 2007 and has

travelled fearlessly around the country throughout that time. He has published several books and made several documentary films. Although we have been in contact by e-mail for several years, this is the first time I have met him.

I came across his book *Drømmekrigen* ('The Dream War') in a Norwegian bookshop, and since then I have followed his activities with growing respect. He has never gone along with the simple stories of the NATO countries' success and progress in Afghanistan. Instead, he has taken on the difficult and risky task of investigating situations closely himself. Now he has invited me to accompany him on a journey through Afghanistan. We shall write reports both together and separately.

I spot him from a distance standing at the entrance to the civilian section of the airport; a tall man wearing a red lumberjack shirt. He has a smoothly shaved head and a trimmed black whole beard. The model of a camouflaged warplane behind him is a clear signal that we are in a country that identifies itself more with war than with peace.

We greet each other. Our journey has started.

I am back in Kabul after eleven years. My previous visit was in January 2002, just six weeks after the fall of the Taliban. I have never forgotten the sight that met me as I came into the city from Kandahar in the South. A town shot to pieces after deadly close-quarter fighting between opposing Mujahedin factions, street after street, house after house. What had once been habitable buildings were now reduced to unrecognisable patterns of bullet- and shell-holes. The ruthless and systematic destruction that had ruined the buildings seemed able to enter one's own body and erode any instinct for survival. I felt tempted to lie down despairingly and abandon my own life and any hopes for humanity.

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Now, our route from the airport takes us through different parts of the city. So I cannot make direct comparisons, but what I see this time is not destruction, just chaos. Primitive shacks, in which a grown man couldn't stand up, thrown together from the city's driftwood, odd scraps of timber, cardboard cartons, tent canvas, tarpaulins and sheets of metal hammered flat. Families huddle together here in winter temperatures that can fall to minus twenty degrees. Expensive blocks of flats stand half-

empty. The opium barons' 'poppy palaces,' profits of the narcotics trade, are cast in coloured concrete; a building style of level upon floor slabs upon level that reminds me of iced layer cakes. No less ostentatious are the 'wedding palaces,' with narrow emerald green and azure blue glass facades, where parents who have been so unlucky as to have a daughter marry her off with a dowry that will impoverish them for many years to come.

One and a half million people lived here the last time I visited. The population has now at least trebled to four and a half million. About three million of them live illegally in ruins, makeshift shacks or mud houses they have built themselves among the cliffs. The water and sewage systems were designed at a time long forgotten, when only 150,000 people lived in Kabul. Despite the billions of dollars the country receives in aid, the overcrowded town is teetering on the verge of breakdown.

Taimani, where we are living in a guesthouse, is a middle-class district. Even here, very few of the roads are surfaced. Instead, there are mounds of dry gravel that would make the landscape of the moon look like a bowling green. Holes have been dug everywhere, as if the town had been the target of a bombardment aimed not at the houses but at the streets and pavements. In some places it looks as if a cement mixer has overturned, leaving crags of hardened cement whose irregular shapes have no resemblance to any intended design, unless as monuments to an unrealistic and already abandoned city development plan. Whether you travel on foot or in a vehicle, the journey consists of dangerous navigation round holes a metre deep where the remains of construction steel stick up so that if you fall you will not only be bruised, but skewered.

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We are on our way to a meeting with several of Anders' colleagues, all veteran reporters from covering the war in Afghanistan. One of them stands out from the others, a man with a full beard and large glasses. Despite his unusual appearance, a shyness he is unable to hide and constant gaze at his own hands, he soon becomes the centre of attention. It is his story that draws the company's attention towards the corner of the sofa where he is trying to hide.

Felix Kuehn is a young German academic. Several years ago, he came with his Dutch cameraman and colleague, Alex Strick van

Linschoten, to Afghanistan's most war-torn town, Kandahar. At that time the town was in the iron grip of the Taliban, who repeatedly carried out attacks on the town's most prominent people. The two young men decided to settle there. They shared a little room for four years. Felix stretches his arms to demonstrate that the room would barely have had space for the sofa and low table from the room where we were meeting. They succeeded in building up a network among the Talibans of Kandahar, which led to a biography of one of the movement's central characters and then a book of war poems written by Taliban rebels. But their greatest achievement is *An Enemy We Created*, which surely is the most insightful and comprehensive analysis of the Taliban movement that has ever been written.

I ask Felix what he thinks will happen after the NATO forces leave Afghanistan in 2014. He doesn't think that the first two years will see dramatic changes, other than a gradual worsening of the situation. The Taliban don't see the Afghan Army as an enemy to be feared. Their real enemies are the powerful warlords.

The Taliban and the warlords have met on the battlefield before. The Taliban defeated the warlords' 'Northern Alliance' in the 1990s, but the warlords now have much greater resources available, and a trial of strength between the Taliban and the warlords could push Afghanistan into a spiral of violence worse than the bloody chaos of the 1990s. That is what the Taliban old guard really worries about.

This is of special interest to me, because we are due to leave early next morning for Kunduz in North-east Afghanistan, a province where the warlords are still powerful and where a swarm of militias is hatching out of control. The American Army is actively supporting the warlords with weapons, money and training. This is the Americans' exit strategy, their last desperate attempt to weaken the Taliban, though it will inevitably open Pandora's box and set a whirlwind of misfortunes loose in Afghanistan.

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The road to Kunduz penetrates the snow-clad Hindu Kush Mountains through the Salang Tunnel 3,400 metres above sea level. The tunnel is a magnificent feat of engineering, built by the Soviets in 1964, an iconic sign that a new era was coming in Pakistan. It was indeed: Soviet tanks rolled through the tunnel into Afghanistan fifteen years later.

In the past 35 years, neither the tunnel nor the snowy mountain roads leading up to it have been maintained. The ventilation system has long since been shot to pieces in internal disputes about this strategically important passage through the otherwise impenetrable mountain range. The asphalt has crumbled away, leaving a shiny black surface of mud.

The Salang Tunnel was built to accommodate one thousand vehicles per day. Nowadays, ten thousand pass through it. I feel as if I have already seen all ten thousand on the way up the mountain. Ten or fifteen kilometres before the entrance to the tunnel, queues of mud-spattered heavy lorries are already beginning to form. They bear the names and addresses of their original owners in Europe.
Hamburg, Bremerhaven, Eisenberg. I can see Morten H. Henriksen from Tuse Næs and Højmark Turistfart alongside Bruno Bjørnskov Jensen.

Afghanistan has been called the burial ground of empires because of the many invading nations that have suffered their downfall here, but it is also a graveyard for Europe's lorries and tourist buses. They stand in queues for days at the foot of the mountain range or up on the side of the mountain, waiting for the signal that they can proceed through the narrow, two and a half kilometre long tunnel where traffic jams can last a whole day as the oxygen level diminishes.

At several places before the start of the real tunnel, the mountain road becomes a series of moulded concrete galleries that cling to the mountainside. As we drive through them, mud spurts up the sides of the car. Occasional rays of light squint in through the concrete on one side, where the engineers have left narrow openings out towards the sky heavy with snow-clouds. It's like being in a kilometre long Gothic nave.

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There are no such glimmers of light in the tunnel itself, where almost total darkness rules. Our headlights are covered in mud and the windscreen wipers struggle to push aside a thick, yellowish brown soup. At first I feel as if I am sitting in a ghost train in a sadistic fairground, and then the claustrophobia grips my throat and I think I am on my way to the bowels of the earth. Finally, there is light at the end of the tunnel and I understand the truth of the cliché as never before.

The mountains north of the Hindu Kush are fearsomely barren. The scattered villages with gravel-coloured houses look like out-buddings of the stony terrain, as if the occupants had looked at the mountains and

created an extension of them in a slightly more complex pattern. The houses themselves appear like little more than thickened walls, as if the door openings and the roofs had only been added as a carefully considered afterthought, the need for protection against enemies being greater than the need for protection against the harsh mountain weather.

In the green valleys, where the trees have been nurtured with the care and compassion required by an infant, the architecture is no different. It is just as harsh everywhere.

Approaching Kunduz, we see a hole in the road where a German military vehicle was struck by a roadside bomb. This is the German NATO soldiers' sector. Their camp is on a hilltop nearby, its presence indicated by an enormous white observation balloon several hundred metres up in the air. Like a Zeppelin.

We drive into the town. It is a leap of many centuries between the villages in the hinterland and the provincial capital city of Kunduz, but it's difficult to know what century we are landing in. The many weapons all around, on the shoulders of uniformed soldiers and mounted on the blue/grey pick-up trucks of the police, are tragic evidence that we are in the 21st century. Women in burkas and men in robes suggest a more distant age.

Kunduz is not a place where foreigners can wander round in the streets, even though each of us has a tailor-made 'shalwar kameez,' the Afghans' traditional robe with matching wide trousers. There is a single training arena in the outskirts of the town where we can come out of the car and walk around for a short time.

Here, I bump into Harun, who works as an interpreter for the German police. His whole family's income is dependent on the presence of the foreign forces and agencies. His father is a chauffeur for a development organisation and his older brother works for the American army. The family never tell the neighbours how they make their living, for nobody knows who might have Taliban connections. Nearly all the men of the family are at risk of losing their jobs when the foreign forces return home.

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From bitter experience, Harun has no confidence in the Afghan authorities. Time and again he has been passed over when stipends were being paid out, not because he has failed to qualify for it but because a

powerful man and his son always blocked it. ‘We are a generation of well educated young people,’ he says, ‘but we are ruled by uneducated and ignorant men and we have no influence.’

Heavy clouds have gathered, and a sandstorm suddenly blows up as a warning of the bad weather which is on the way. As we drive through the streets on the way back to our hotel, everything disappears in a dust storm. When we pass the roundabout at the heart of the town, a line of glum, bearded men stare down on us from big placards. It is a series of portraits of the police chiefs in the town and surrounding province who have been murdered in the last two or three years, even though some of them were powerful warlords who had paid to be appointed to these lucrative positions.

‘Kunduz is a happy town,’ proclaims an old travel guide from the 1960s. It is no longer so.

A uniformed guard with a Kalshnikov over his shoulder opens the wrought-iron gate for us. We have arrived at our hotel.

The Taliban can also be Scared

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Mehman Shah is a bear of a man, small but powerfully built, with a large beard framing his round face. His thin, straggly hair is partly hidden under a pakol, a round woollen hat typical of Northern Afghanistan.

Even though he has never been to school, 30 year old Mehman Shah has crossed many boundaries in his life. The first was when, illiterate and with no work experience other than out in the fields, he got his first Kalashnikov. He was fourteen years old. The second was when, with weapon in hand, he joined the Taliban. The third milestone was when he surrendered his rifle to the new Afghan government in an arms amnesty and reconciliation process.

And the fourth time? That was when he picked up his Kalasnikov again and went back to the Taliban.

Are there any more boundaries to cross? Yes. In a country embattled by constantly shifting fronts, there is always another boundary to cross. Now Mehman Shah is leader of a village militia, an ‘arbaki,’ which has been given a week’s training and a handful of automatic pistols by American special forces. Mehman Shah has turned his back on the

Taliban a second time.

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Which side is he on now? His own side, as he is not slow to emphasise. Or more precisely: his village's side. His grandfather was the village chief, a position that is passed on to the grandchild. An inherited responsibility. Mehman Shah has to protect his village. Manoeuvring amidst a power struggle more dangerous than a minefield, he has become a master of tactical about-turns.

He looks straight at his foreign guests. We shouldn't think that this will be the last position he will take upon himself. His alliance with the Americans and the Afghan government is only temporary. It all depends on the situation, and that can change.

We are in North-east Afghanistan, in the village of Sabsali in the district of Alibad, a few kilometres away from the town of Kunduz, principal town of the province of the same name. As we turn off the main highway, Mehman Shah's men are waiting to lead us along tracks across the lush, green landscape. They are leading the way on trail motorbikes, with Kalashnikovs slung across their chests and magazines slung from leather holster belts decorated with shiny steel nails.

Crossing a suspension bridge, we come into Sabsali. Mehman Shah has thirty men under him; 'my faithfuls', as he calls them. Most of them have followed him through all his changes of allegiance. We are shown into a room with bare, whitewashed walls and rugs on the floor. A gilded curtain-rod without curtains and a flowery wallpaper stuck fast to the ceiling show that the room has once seen better days. The room is now used as a store for mortar-throwers and Kalashnikovs.

There is a single, simple reason for Mehman Shah's many shifts of allegiance. He always joins the strongest side. He explains succinctly why he turned to the Taliban a second time: 'The government was weak. The Taliban were strong.'

Among the Taliban who moved into Kunduz Province seven or eight years ago there were many Pakistanis and Pashtuns from Kandahar in South Afghanistan. Mehman Shah feared for the fate of his village under the domination of the unruly foreigners. So it was better to join them. That way, the village was still in his hands. He had control, not the foreigners.

Life was hard in the Taliban. He recalls that he never slept. He would lie awake for whole nights, listening for the sound of American helicopter gunships. He was never home in his own village, but always on the move and sleeping every night in a different place. He spent several months fighting against the Americans in the neighbouring district of Chahrdara where the Taliban were very active. 'I was never scared in battle,' he says, 'because my blood was boiling.' However, this evidence of courage appears to be only the preliminary to a confession, something unusual for a commander with many men under him. Mehman Shah also knows fear. He is scared of helicopter gunships with their rapid-fire machine-guns that fire off many projectiles per second. 'Once they set eye on you, you won't escape. I've seen many of my friends die.'

Then he had had enough.

'It became too much,' he says in front of his men. The fact that he can make such a confession without losing face or weakening his authority as commander can only be because he is echoing their own feelings.

Mehman Shah wanted to go home to the village that it was his job to protect. So he had to change sides again.

This time it was the offer of reconciliation from Afghan's President Hamid Karzai that he took up. He left the Taliban, but didn't give up his Kalashnikov. He just promised to point his rifle in the opposite direction. In exchange, he received promises, many promises. Promises of asphalt roads instead of rough tracks; pumps instead of wells; health clinics instead of women dying in childbirth and children dying before the age of five; better tools than spades and ox-drawn ploughs to till the soil.

'And what did the government give me?' he asks angrily. 'Nothing! Absolutely nothing! They haven't kept a single promise!'

The government which was swimming in foreign aid money gave him nothing more than a Russian PK machine-gun which one of his men displays on the middle of the floor. Seven of the men, including himself, have received 15 days training and an instruction not to press the local population for money. The same seven were paid a monthly salary of 9,700 afghans, about 170 dollars. But Mehman Shah has thirty men under him. How is he to pay them?

So there he stands, alone in the midst of Taliban country, with

thirty underpaid, armed men.

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That is why his loyalty to the government is only relative. That is why he is in a holding position. Or right in the middle, as he describes it. He doesn't say it out loud, but he could just as well have said it: Don't count on me.

Mehman Shah stands up. He is restless, and there are two things he wants to show us. One is his three year old daughter, who has flaming red hair with a side parting. The other is the village school.

The school was built by German troops five years ago. With a sloping roof and a big, newly painted gable, it looks surprisingly modern in a village where walls and houses are built of mud and straw as they have been for a thousand years. The school has had a chequered history.

In head teacher Mulla Gul's room there is a glass cabinet with a miniature skeleton and an anatomical human torso showing the internal organs. On his desk there is a vase of artificial lilies and a Kalashnikov. The rifle doesn't belong to Mulla Gul. It is Mehman Shah's. He is the school's armed guard, and he sits beside Mulla Gul throughout the whole interview.

The 560 pupils come from the five villages that Shah is responsible for. The combined population of the villages is about 3,500. The school roll is less than it should be for this population, but some families keep their children at home to work in the fields. The classes are mixed, with boys and girls together. The children go to school for six years, with between two and three hours teaching per day. There are not enough classrooms for everybody to have a full school day. So the school works in two shifts, one starting at seven in the morning and the other at ten.

'It isn't easy to serve two rulers who have different aims,' sighs Mulla Gul, referring to the Taliban and the government in Kabul.

The German troops had only just managed to hand over the new school building before the Taliban took power in the district and the Germans hastily disappeared. The Taliban approved the school curriculum. They had no objections to the pupils being taught mathematics, physics or English. They just didn't want girls to be allowed in the classroom. Of necessity, Mulla Gul adapted to this. Now the Taliban have lost power, and he is glad that the girls can attend school

again. The girls are glad, too.

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Coming away from the school, we remembered that Mehman Shah had been one of the Taliban. They hadn't really disappeared. It was just that Mehman Shah had changed his mind. No matter who rules over the village, the Taliban or the government in Kabul, Mehman Shah is the embodiment of the ruling power. His Kalashnikov is always on Mulla Gul's desk as a reminder that the rifle is stronger than the edict of the ruling power.

'When you were with the Taliban, why didn't you burn the school and shoot the pupils as the Taliban has often done?'

'I joined the Taliban to protect my village. Therefore I also protect our school.'

Mehman Shah looks out over the fields to the mountains not very far away. 'The Taliban are out there. You can't stay any longer. You need to go now.'

There is a hierarchy among the militias. On the lowest level are the 'arbakis,' such as Mehman Shah's. They are considered to be too undisciplined and unreliable to receive anything other than symbolic support from the government in Kabul. A step higher up are the militia groups that are allowed to use the official designation of 'Afghan Local Police.' Here, all the members receive a wage, a weapon, three weeks training and a lecture on human rights.

A critical official in the Afghan Internal Affairs Department used an Afghan proverb when describing the Local Police in a report for Human Rights Watch: 'A sick child is not made healthy just by being given a new name.' Afghanistan's sickness is the multitude of weapons in the hands of militias beyond any control. The new arrangement of Local Police doesn't reduce the number of weapons, but increases it.

The Human Rights Watch report also cites a WikiLeaks document from the American Embassy which describes support to the village militias as a high-risk strategy that the worst tendencies in Afghan society could turn into 'a quick cure with dangerous consequences.' The report advises that developing and arming the militias is a short-sighted policy. In the short term, quick victories by the militias over the Taliban can be seen as tactical gains. But in the long term they will result in a further destabilisation of the chaotic Afghan situation.

Gul Ahmad is the commandant of the Local Police in the neighbouring district of Chahrdara, where Mehman Shah had been fleeing from American helicopters gunships. Gul Ahmad is a tall, slightly plump man with a moustache and day old stubble instead of the traditional whole beard. Like Mehman Shah, he has never been to school. A year ago there were 300 – 400 active Taliban in the district. Now, according to Gul Ahmad, there are not more than 50 remaining. Many have been killed, and others have gone over to the side of the authorities. Gul Ahmad fully understands that the promises that induce members of the Taliban to change sides will never be fulfilled. 'There is a risk of them going straight back to the Taliban. That can lead to a very dangerous situation.'

He proudly points to fields of wheat and to grey-black earth where the melons are waiting to sprout forth. 'When the Taliban were here, there were opium poppies growing everywhere.'

To reach Gul Ahmad's headquarters we have to follow a tortuous route, avoiding the high road where bombs are often laid. And as we leave the district, with armed men on the back seat and a motorbike leading the way, we drive back by a different route because an ambush might have been set up in the meantime.

We pass a plain with rows of small, coloured banners. This is a burial ground for members of the Taliban who have fallen in the war around Chahrdara. 'It will be even bigger if they go on fighting,' says one of the militiamen in the back seat with a smile. We can only stop here for a couple of minutes to take photos. The militiamen climb out of the car with us and look around anxiously. The village across the road is often occupied by the Taliban.

The night always belongs to the rebels. Sometimes the day does too. In Kunduz only one thing is certain: the guns rule.

The World's Bravest Women Live in Kandahar

Anders Hammer & Carsten Jensen

Wherever you go in Kandahar, you are under a blanket of noise. It's like the background music in a thriller where a pervasive, subdued bass

rhythm announces that hell is about to break loose.

When we arrive in Kandahar in 2013 it has persisted for eleven and a half years.

Kandahar, Afghanistan's most southerly and second biggest city, with half a million inhabitants, was once the fortress and unofficial capital city of the Taliban movement. In 2001 it fell into the hands of the American invading forces, who built one of the world's biggest military airbases just outside the city.

The noise that you hear is the buzz of the swirling rotors of the battle helicopters flying low over the rooftops; the deep rumble of heavily laden Hercules transport planes flying soldiers and materials in and out of Afghanistan; the sudden roar of bombers taking off towards new targets. It's the sound of the American Special Forces' dress rehearsal for Doomsday a few kilometres west of the city as they carry out their military operations with bombers that rumble across the horizon, with a noise like scrap metal tumbling down a chute. It's the bangs from the Taliban's daily bomb attacks, or the dry clatter of a Kalashnikov announcing the liquidation of yet another enemy of fundamentalism's blessed warriors.

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This is the war's theme tune, with no fixed broadcasting times. It plays day and night, all the time. It is as if the Taliban are controlling the inhabitants' cardiac rhythm with drum-beats to make their hearts beat in fright, day and night.

There are wars going on in Kandahar that have not yet reached an outcome. But one war came to a conclusion long ago. In the men's war against the women, there is no doubt that it is the women who have lost.

Maryam Durani, a young twenty-eight year old woman, was among *Time* magazine's list of the World's 100 most influential people in 2012. On the wall of her office there is a picture of her between the USA's then Foreign Minister, Hillary Clinton, and the First Lady, Michelle Obama. A big, framed document explains why a young, unknown woman from Kandahar suddenly appears in such celebrated company in the unofficial capital of the Western World, Washington DC. She has been awarded the American Foreign Minister's International Women of Courage Award for

her attempt to give Afghan women a voice despite 'enormous risks and social challenges.'

Maryam Durani obviously has courage. She has had close encounters with death twice when the Taliban attacked the provincial council, where she holds one of the four seats that are reserved for women, among a total of fifteen. The first time was when a car bomb exploded just outside the building where she works and a shower of glass splinters hailed down on her. Six people were killed. Maryam escaped with wounds on her hands and forearms, from which the scars are still visible.

The second time was when the same building was stormed by suicide bombers. They were defeated by the security guards, but not until thirteen people had been killed. Again, Maryam escaped with her life.

The third attack was not directed against her, but it is the one that has affected her most. She had just taken leave of Sitara Achikzai a few minutes before. Like Maryam, fifty year old Sitara was a member of the provincial council. With her experience and commitment, she was a mentor and role model for Maryam, who was much younger. Sitara was shot down in the open street. Now, three years later, Maryam still has to stop and take a deep breath before she can continue the story.

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Maryam has no bodyguards. She says plainly: 'When I leave the house in the morning, I don't know if I'll ever come home again.' Her only defence is her apple-green burka. She hates wearing it, but under it she is anonymous.

Yes, Maryam Durani is courageous. But is she also one of the World's most influential women?

She runs the radio station *Merman*, which means 'woman.' The output alternates between music and information campaigns on women's rights. She also runs a beauty salon and a sewing room where women make handcrafted goods that are sold on the American military bases.

She has many enemies. The Taliban are not alone in wishing her dead. She has lost fellow-workers and colleagues. It's not only the Taliban who murder women. It can also be members of the women's own families who think that a woman who works outside the home is bringing shame upon the family.

Maryam needs to find finance for her many activities. The

American Embassy covers half of *Radio Merman's* expenses. Broadcasting of advertisements for items such as mobile phones and computers also produces revenue, but she does need support from more donors. In this, she meets opposition from unexpected quarters. The Afghan authorities have a declared policy to support women's liberation, but they systematically work against her. Aid from national and international development organisations is distributed through the authorities, and by the time it reaches her 80 per cent of the money has disappeared.

Frustration takes the upper hand when Maryam comes to talking about her projects, and she gets caught up in an endless list of examples of how her work is being sabotaged. It's obvious that Afghan's 'most influential woman' feels herself powerless.

'The government isn't interested in supporting women. They're just out to fill their own pockets,' she says angrily.

Maryam grew up in Iran. Though it sounds strange to western ears, it was under the theocratic regime there that she got the idea that women's lives could be much more free. The women don't wear burkas there. She was able to walk alone in the street, go to the cinema, sit on a park bench – normal activities that she was prevented from doing when she came to Kandahar with her family in 2002, the same year that Hamid Karzai was formally installed as Afghanistan's President.

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'At that time, people had hope and faith in the authorities. They promised an end to corruption and they promised to respect human rights, but they didn't keep their promises. The men in power have weapons - and they use them.'

'When the foreign forces withdraw in 2014, the last chance to put pressure on the Afghan government also disappears,' she says. The situation of women will only get worse. Most of the foreign donors have already left Kandahar. But the radio station still exists. She continues to leave the house every morning, not knowing if she will ever see it again. She still takes her place in the radio studio and indefatigably reminds women of their rights.

In Kandahar we also meet fifty-four year old Sha Kheda Hussain. She has

one simple message: Afghanistan is tired of war. That's what she tells the women she visits at their homes. Hussain is an activist for Afghan Women's Network, a UN-sponsored organisation set up in 1995. 'I tell the women: "Don't let your sons take part in the war, don't let them plant roadside bombs, don't let them learn to use a Kalashnikov. The young people want peace. Give them an education." '

Hussain has eight children. She also has a husband twelve years older than her, whom she was forced to marry when she was fourteen. She has managed to insist that she would not share the house with another woman. Her husband is now old and weak, and she scarcely talks about him. 'Men will never give up their power over the family,' she says. She doesn't go on to say, but it is clear from the tone of her voice, that when the wife is much younger, age in itself gives power to the husband.

Her nineteen year old son, Faisel, is sitting in a corner of the room. In just a month, he will have completed twelve years schooling. His face is soft and immature, and his fringe hangs down over his forehead. Faisel has a dream that brings him onto a collision course with his mother, whom otherwise he respects. It's her philosophy of life that he challenges. He wants to join the special forces and fight, weapon in hand.

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He nods when his mother says that she is against arranged marriage and supports marriages based on love, even though that doesn't altogether mean the same as it would in the West. The parents would still find an acceptable partner, but the two young people would have time to get to know each other and to give their approval or not. Faisel nods again. Just to be consulted about life-long marriage and be able to choose happiness or sorrow appears to be an unexpected freedom.

But Faisel still dreams of being able to use a Kalashnikov. He believes what his mother does not; that weapons can build peace. Maybe he is just young and feels the need to test his strength by playing his part in the gloomy background music that hangs over Kandahar. It is a big disappointment to Sha Hussain that her own son rejects her hope of peace.

She has often faced death threats because of her activism. She admits that she is frightened when they appear on her mobile phone. But Afghanistan is her homeland and she doesn't want to move abroad. If she had had the money she would have sent her children away, to come home

again only when there was peace. She has a recurrent nightmare of a man approaching her with a Kalashnikov in hand, ready to shoot.

It's superfluous to say that when Sha Kheda Hussain goes out, she wears a burka. 'A woman would be killed if she appeared without it,' she asserts.

Elsewhere in the city, Rangina Hamidi sits surrounded by hand-embroidered shawls and wedding dresses. She grew up in two very different parts of the World. As a child she lived in Quetta, the capital of Kandahar's neighbouring Pakistani province of Baluchistan. In her teens she moved to Virginia, USA. When we meet her she is on a visit to Kandahar, where her family has its origins. She speaks Pashto and English with equal fluency.

Hamidi came to Kandahar in 2003 and built up the business, *Kandahar Treasure*, which employs 350 seamstresses, 22 of them working in a sewing room and the rest working at home. They make shirts, shawls and wedding dresses with hand-embroidered patterns based on ancient Islamic tradition. The painstakingly made goods are sold on American bases, but she has also begun to export them.

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Kandahar Treasure is self-financing. Rangina Hamid doesn't take any salary, and except for short periods she hasn't received any economic support. She works for the sake of the women in her sewing room. For eight years, she thought of Kandahar as her home.

Then came the turning point in her life, 27th July 2011. After that she would never again think of Kandahar as a place where she had a future.

Her father, Ghulam Halder Hamidi, worked as an accountant in a travel bureau in Virginia for 25 years. Back in Kandahar, in 2007 he became mayor of the World's most terror-riven city. During his years in exile he had often visited Kandahar and taken part in local politics. He had close connections with the family of Hamid Karzai, which probably led to his appointment as mayor.

Contrary to everybody's expectations, he proved to be an uncompromising opponent of the town's shameless corruption. He was determined to have the same good order in Kandahar as he had always

had in his accounts. On 27th July 2011 he welcomed guests in the garden in front of his office, a delegation come to protest against his plans for rebuilding the city. One of them took him by the arm and detonated a bomb hidden in his turban.

Throughout the following year, Rangina Hamid almost gave up. She went back to the USA and only came to Kandahar on short visits. 'You mustn't abandon us,' her seamstresses begged her. Hearing their pleas, she realised that she couldn't abandon her vocation, no matter how incapacitating her grief at the murder of her father. So she resumed her visits to Kandahar, but she has become cynical and pessimistic about the prospects for Afghanistan.

Rangina Hamidi is in no doubt that her father was killed by what she calls 'elements within the regime.' 'It was them he was fighting against and it was they who threatened him,' she asserts: ' the criminal warlords, the drug barons, the thieves who have been ruining the country for 35 years and who are still in power.'

According to the official version, the Taliban were behind the killing, but Rangina doesn't believe that. Her father never received a single threat from the Taliban. On the contrary, he received many threats from high-ranking officials in the government offices and the local administration. The first attempt to assassinate him had been in 2009, when a remotely detonated bomb reduced his car to a wreck. Miraculously, he escaped from that unscathed. That same evening, threats streamed in to his mobile phone. Finally that evening there was a call from the neighbouring town of Chaman in Pakistan, not far from Kandahar. The caller introduced himself as a commander in the Taliban. 'I don't want you to think that we are behind the attack,' he said. 'We want you to know that we value the work you are doing as mayor.'

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Rangina's father is buried in Quetta where she spent her childhood. The town later became home to the Taliban's exiled leadership, known as the *Quetta Shura* and led by Mulla Omar. Several men from Mulla's group took part in the burial and gave her their condolences personally. 'Why on Earth would they do that if they had killed him?' she asks.

Her conclusion is bitter. After the first assassination attempt she begged her father to resign as mayor. 'I didn't think he felt at home in these corrupt surroundings. I couldn't see that it was doing him any good.

“ I would rather die in the course of achieving something,” he replied to me.’

‘Was the sacrifice worthwhile? No, I don’t think so. He gave up his life for a government made up of criminals,’ she tells me.

The World’s bravest women live in Kandahar, but they don’t have influence. Their mouths are filled every day with the bitter taste of powerlessness.

Welcome to Europe

Anders Hammer

11,200 people dwell in the tented camp outside the town of Idomeni on the border between Greece and Macedonia. It’s Sunday 10th April 2016. This morning some of the refugees stood beside the railway tracks that run right through the camp, holding placards and shouting slogans asking for justice and solidarity. It seems hopeless. Four and a half weeks after the border was closed, nobody else appears to care that they are stuck here. The Greek policemen who have taken up position in the camp with their buses and cars are calmly smoking and chatting, trying not to be provocative. They are in close contact with representatives from the refugees, who are also trying to prevent frustration from leading to disturbance.

Even though it has been peaceful here for a while, there are few reporters to be seen. They came on short visits during the first weeks, but there are limits to how many reports the news editors at home want from neatly prepared journalists looking sympathetically into the camera with a few refugees in the background.

After the demonstration, some of the refugees make their way back to their tents to wait for the hours to creep tediously through the day. In April, it is already so warm in the forenoon that your neck will soon become sunburned if you don’t use lotion.

But some of the men and women have had enough. They decide to open the border themselves. It’s hopeless, but the situation is desperate anyway.

This refugee camp shouldn't exist; it isn't properly built for people to live in. The tents began to spring up when the Macedonian authorities decided to block what had been the main route into Europe for people fleeing from the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other southern lands. The Macedonians were simply repeating what Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia had done further along the route. That winter, Western Europe's governing politicians had vied with each other in trying to stand out as the most severe in dealing with people in need. They carried out opinion polls in their homelands as they tried to persuade Southern European countries to close the frontiers to people fleeing from wars in which the Western European countries were taking part.

The Greek authorities are concerned that the appalling hygiene in the camp at Idomeni will cause epidemics and they have announced that the camp is to be forcibly shut down. The refugees have repeatedly been advised to travel south to the official refugee camps in Greece, with promises of beds and warm showers. But the people in the camp here don't want to turn back south; they want to continue their northward journey.

Every day brings new arrivals who have already been hardened on the long road. Aid organisations and volunteers from throughout Europe work in the camp at Idomeni to provide food and simple medical care. The residents themselves have set up services such as hairdressing on plastic chairs in the open air and charging points for mobile phones.

This Sunday morning men, women and children have packed their bags with their few belongings. Children stand ready with their little backpacks. Macedonia is four hundred metres away. Before that, there is an almost three metre high fence with coils of barbed wire along the top and the far side. About four hundred people march forward, but they are being watched from the other side of the fence. As the mass of people streams quickly and purposefully through the expanse of long grass which has frequently been used as a latrine, shots are heard. 'Go on, Go on,' people shout. Children howl. Then eyes begin to burn.

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Twenty-four year old Shakrullah from Afghanistan stops. Despite his young age he has already been fleeing for ten years. He has become a master of the arts of survival, and he sees the Macedonian policemen on the other side of the fence.

There are already about fifty of them in full riot gear: camouflaged uniforms, black arm and leg protectors, gloves, knee-pads, helmets with visors, big shields and protective jackets to resist sharp weapons. And they are carrying rifles. Now they are firing teargas towards the refugees. The metal canisters fly up in an arc high above the fence and down at full speed towards the people. Wisps of gas hang in the air. The canisters hit the ground and release the gas, to be spread by the wind. Tears run, people cough and retch. It feels as if you are being strangled and your face is being burnt at the same time. The vanguard have given up and are running back to their tents as fast as they can when almost blinded. The canisters are raining down so thick and fast that several people are struck on the head and beginning to bleed. I am standing in the middle of the grass, where I have just trodden on a patch of excrement.

Earlier in 2016 before the border closed, Shakrullah was in Macedonia for about fifty days. He was arrested and learned by painful experience that the police he is now facing don't hesitate to use force. He tells me that when he was driven back across the border into Greece he lost his few possessions.

Some men of Shakrullah's age have fetched rugs from the tents. They run forward with these as soon as the tear-gas canisters touch the ground, trying to smother them to hinder the gas from spreading. Volunteers from various European countries have lined up with bottles of water and cola to help people to rinse their faces. Other volunteers in high-visibility vests run around lifting people who have fallen and leading them away from the cloud of gas hanging over the ground. Some of the refugees have smeared sun cream on their faces to try to form a barrier against the gas, which burns more when you sweat. But the gas is unstoppable, and now there is panic. Adults shout hysterically. Children yell and are carried away.

I have been exposed to tear gas several times before. The worst was in Cairo in 2013 when I was following members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were demonstrating in support of President Mohamed Morsi who had been deposed by the army. On that occasion, the security forces shot off large quantities of teargas prior to shooting live bullets and killing over 1,000 people in the streets.

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The Macedonian police don't use live bullets in addition to teargas.

Instead, they fire rubber bullets of various sizes. If one of these hits you in the eye, it can blind you. They also throw shock grenades that explode high in the air with a bright flash. A helicopter has arrived and is flying low, back and forwards above the crowd. A Syrian woman panics, thinking that it is going to drop barrel bombs at any moment. Young men roll forward big green rubbish containers to shelter behind as they take it in turns to throw stones at the policemen. Two of them are using slings, obviously not for the first time. This is like the warzones from which they have fled.

Shakrullah from Afghanistan stays some distance away. It is pointless to try to fight with Macedonian policemen. He stands watching, and even though he has had close contact with the same police earlier he is surprised and frightened by the many injuries.

As I withdraw, I see another young Afghan man lying unconscious on the ground. His name is Abdul, and his comrades have dragged him across to a British volunteer doctor who tries to rouse him. 'Abdul, Abdul, Abdul, Abdul.' He doesn't react. But it is nothing more serious than that he has fainted from shock. While his comrades shield him from the strong sun, the doctor asks another volunteer to fetch a defibrillator.

Three refugees died that day when they were caught by the current as they tried to cross the river between Greece and Macedonia.

After a pause in the afternoon the trouble flares up again. The police fire the teargas canisters so far into the camp that they hit one of the big tents where *Médecins sans Frontières* are treating patients. Infants and children have to be evacuated when teargas seeps into the tent. A woman comes running toward me carrying a boy about one year old and a bottle of cola. She is screaming hysterically in Arabic, and I realise that she wants me to open the bottle and pour the cola over the boy's face to wash away the gas. I spread the cola over the boy's face and then over hers.

Médecins sans Frontières reported that 260 people were injured in Idomeni camp that day.

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A couple of days later I meet Shakrullah again beside his two-man tent. He has been at a meeting that morning with some other young Afghan men. A Swedish-Afghan volunteer has explained to them what to expect

now that Europe has closed its borders. Everything has become more difficult than what they had been told by friends and relatives who had travelled the same way earlier.

Shakrullah is wearing jeans, a white T-shirt and a dark blue jacket. He has had a shave a couple of days ago. He tells me that he is from Wardak Province outside Kabul. The Taliban control large parts of the province both day and night, and it is not a peaceful place. I tell him that I have been there. More precisely, I was in the provincial capital town, Maidan Shar, on the day of the second round of voting in the 2014 presidential election. I heard rifle fire and frequent explosions from rocket-propelled grenades. The rebels were trying to frighten people off voting, and many did stay at home.

'It's so dangerous in Afhghanistan,' says Shakrullah. 'There are exchanges of fire and bomb attacks every day, now that ISIS has set up there in addition to the Taliban.'

Shakrullah was fourteen when he first set out on the long journey from Afghanistan to Iran and onwards to Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Germany and France until at last he reached Great Britain. As an under-age asylum seeker he was allowed to stay and attend education there for four years, but when he turned 18 he was forcibly repatriated to Afghanistan.

'I had applied for permanent residence in Great Britain, but I don't know why they didn't give me it.'

Back in Afghanistan, he was frightened.

'When you go out of your house there, you never know if you'll come home again.'

His father used to work as a farmer, but he now stays at home with mother.

'Everybody loves their country, and everybody wants to be where their mother and father are, but if you can't get a job, you have to leave.'

The first time he tried to flee back to Europe, he only got as far as Iran. He had been scared the frontier guards might shoot him, but instead he was arrested by the police and sent back to Afghanistan.

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The second time, he managed to get to Turkey and onwards by boat to Greece. Now, at the Macedonian border, he tells me that his journey has taken almost three months and that he has spent about 10,000

dollars on it. He is financing it with a little money saved from when he worked in Britain and by borrowing the rest of it, mostly from an uncle who lives in London.

'It's horrible in the camp,' he says, 'even though all the refugees try to help each other.'

He is sharing his tent with another Afghan whom he met on the way. He doesn't sleep well at night, he has not been able to wash for four days and he has to stand in a queue for two hours for food.

'It's very sad when we who have come from nasty situations in Syria and Afghanistan are shut out and shot at. People need education to have a decent life. I don't know why the frontier has been closed. People are just stuck here, waiting and worrying. Nobody knows what's happening.'

He tells me he no longer has a future.

'I've been on the move for ten years without any progress. Everything is on hold.'

His aim has been to find his way back to Britain where some of his relatives live. He wants to get education and start a shop there. He already speaks English well.

Then when peace comes to Afghanistan he will travel back, he tells me.

'President Ashraf Ghani proclaims that it is safe in Afghanistan now, but he has sent his own children abroad. And he drives round in Kabul with lines of vehicles protecting him front and back. He doesn't go out and about himself.'

The statements Shakrullah is referring to are from an interview President Ashraf Ghani gave to the BBC in March 2016, when he was asked what he thought about the many thousands who were fleeing from country he led.

'I have no sympathy for them,' replied the president. He thought that Afghans should stay to help build the country up instead.

'We have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on people who want to leave when they are faced by the least pressure, ' said Ghani who himself has lived abroad for ten years and among other things taken a Ph.D. and been a professor at Johns Hopkins University in the USA. He only went back to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. His daughter and his son both live in the USA and have American citizenship. His daughter is an artist in New York.

‘Ghani is lying when he says that it’s safe, and that we should come back,’ says Shakrullah. He thinks that the president is hypocritical when he encourages others to return while himself behaving as if the country was in a full state of war.

At the end of May 2016 the Greek authorities closed the camp at Idomeni and transferred the occupants to an official camp outside the city of Thessalonica.

Shakrullah has not given up hope of starting a new life in Europe. Giving up and going back to Afghanistan is not an option for him.