

GHOSTS OF AFGHANISTAN

Official Transcript – International Version (revised) – 89 minutes

24 fps

00:00:12

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I'm heartbroken about the way things went in Afghanistan. Powerful armies invaded this country with slogans about peace, democracy, women's rights. It was a disaster. Now the foreign troops are withdrawing. Whatever they leave behind, it is nothing like what we promised.

My name is Graeme Smith. I came to Afghanistan as a young Canadian war correspondent more than 15 years ago. I followed troops into battle. I took thousands of photographs. Spent years smelling the death. The charred flesh of suicide bombers got stuck in the treads of my shoes.

I returned more time before the Taliban swept back into power. I needed to find out how it all went wrong. I was looking for a way to reconcile myself with the terrible things that we, the foreigners, inflicted on this beautiful country. Maybe a personal kind of peace.

00:01:30

TITLE

GHOSTS OF AFGHANISTAN

00:01:44

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I've just come back to Kabul and one of my first evenings out, I looked at my phone and I heard that an analyst that I knew a little bit, he'd been gunned down in the streets. Probably because of the things he was saying on television. That was a good reminder about the dangers these days that I guess face everyone who dips their toe into politics in Afghanistan.

00:02:23

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I first came to Afghanistan in 2005 and I stayed for many years after that as analyst for NGOs and the United Nations.

00:02:38

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

It was exciting for a kid in his twenties to go to a dusty faraway place, what felt like the edges of civilization. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. When I first arrived it felt like a cowboy frontier town.

00:02:58

GRAEME SMITH

It wasn't unusual to hear people saying, "Oh this is like the opening scene in Star Wars, you know with all of the crazy characters walking around."

00:03:07

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Spies, mercenaries, journalists, everyone you can possibly imagine was crowding into Kabul in the early years of the war.

00:03:22

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

So much has changed. I have never seen this city so on edge. The Taliban – once defeated -- can now strike at any time.

00:03:46

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

People try to go about their daily lives, but there is always the danger of a truck bomb or a suicide attack... And when we venture outside to talk to local people and do some filming, we time ourselves to make sure we don't linger. There's a lot of kidnappings by criminals, the Taliban and other armed groups.

00:04:16

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Kabul used to be crowded with foreigners. Now the diplomats and aid workers mostly stay behind the blast walls and the barbed wire that you see everywhere.

00:04:32

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In the sky, surveillance blimps float powerful cameras to watch for trouble... In the street, posters urge citizens to dial a hotline to stop terror attacks.

00:04:52

GRAEME SMITH

You know it's the first time coming to Kabul that I have hired a B6 armoured vehicle. We've got the bullet-proof glass, the armour-plated doors. You can spray the tires with bullets and it will keep driving. In some ways it feels like overkill, but that's the reality now.

00:05:15

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I happen to know the man in charge of all this security. I met Hamdullah Mohib years ago when he was an aide to a presidential candidate. Now, only 37 years old, he is the national security advisor to the president.

00:05:33

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

Attacks here have caused massive casualties. People feel fearful. It has a psychological impact when you live like this. Every day my heart is pumping, worried about my children until they come back from school.

00:05:54

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Like many young Afghans in positions of power today, Mohib fled his homeland as a child. He lived in a refugee camp in Pakistan but was one of the lucky ones who got an education in the West. Then he returned home, to try to rebuild his country.

00:06:10

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

The Afghan people have been desiring stability ever since I was born. My generation grew up in this war, and all we want to see is to be able to do the normal things that everyone else takes for granted.

00:06:28

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Mohib gets daily briefings from his generals who tell him that they are winning the war.

00:06:37

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

This is a different kind of warfare. We have the conventional warfare that most militaries are prepared to fight. And they're trying to do that. And then... then there is this guerilla type of warfare, mixed with terrorism and tactics used by the Taliban.

00:06:58

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

These tactics are bringing the war right into Mohib's backyard. Twenty years of fighting has settled nothing.

00:07:11

GRAEME SMITH

When I first started coming to Afghanistan the Taliban were just ghosts. You would never see them, I mean, even on the battlefield just the occasional muzzle flash or a bit of movement in the foliage.

00:07:23

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

They were very good at removing their dead from the battlefield so you didn't see the corpses. They were a myth more than anything else.

00:07:36

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The Taliban started as conservative religious students, based in the southern province of Kandahar.

00:07:43

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Many had taken up arms against the Soviet troops that occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s. But once the Soviets were driven out, a vicious civil war erupted among rival political factions in the 1990s. The Taliban emerged as the dominant force in this chaos, sweeping the country and capturing Kabul in 1996.

00:08:14

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Once in power, they closed girls' schools, banned music and television. They forced women to wear the burqa and executed people for minor transgressions.

00:08:28

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But they offered an alternative to the rampant unrest of earlier years. That made the Taliban popular in some places, especially in the southern villages, but a lot of educated people fled the country.

00:08:49

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Then in October 2001, the Americans invaded.

00:08:56

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The Taliban had been harbouring Al-Qaida leaders who plotted the 9-11 attacks in New York City.

00:09:02

GEORGE W. BUSH

On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against Al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The name of today's military operation is Enduring Freedom.

00:09:22

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I don't know now if there is such a thing as "a good war". But definitely at the time, there was a feeling that the war in Afghanistan was noble somehow. Not just the foreign troops but everybody who came with the foreign troops, the aid workers, the journalists.

00:09:42

GRAEME SMITH

Almost all of them felt as though they were pushing back the forces of darkness in Afghanistan. They were pushing back the forces of evil and barbarism.

00:09:57

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I was swept up in this fantasy that gripped everyone in Afghanistan, all the foreigners and frankly the entire Western world at that time. It was a kind of romantic notion, a flawed romantic notion.

00:10:18

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Dozens of countries eagerly supported America's war in Afghanistan and the U.S.-led coalition expanded to more than a hundred thousand troops.

00:10:31

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

One of the soldiers I came to know was Ayesha Wolasmal. Born in Norway, she often visited family in Afghanistan. She joined the Norwegian army in 2006. We arranged to meet one morning in the garden of a heavily protected compound in Kabul.

00:10:46

GRAEME SMITH

What was that like putting on the uniform?

AYESHA WOLASMAL

Fantastic. It was very emotional. Even though I was very young, I immediately I had this feeling that I can, you know, be a bridge-maker somehow, because I grew up in a very conservative traditional Pashtun family and I picked up on a lot of cultural kind of nuances, that whole kind of tribal thinking. I have to

admit I wasn't that intellectually invested in the whole peace and democracy aspect of it. It was more the immediate, you know, relief for the population, as I saw it.

GRAEME SMITH

As you're saving the people from the Taliban.

AYESHA WOLASMAL

Yeah exactly. So that was a very kind of strong sentiment.

00:11:34

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

At first it all seemed easy. In a little more than two months, the Western armies drove the Taliban from power.

00:11:49

AYESHA WOLASMAL

And I remember music playing, Afghans love music. As soon as the regime was toppled I felt that, ok now the world has access to Afghanistan and Afghanistan has access to the world, to all the impulses that help a country move in the right direction. Practically that meant you know development projects coming in. Girls going to school, as something as basic as that.

00:12:24

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Much has changed, especially for the lucky few that live in cities. Foreign troops and foreign aid brought new freedoms and new opportunities.

00:12:41

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But when you leave Kabul, things get more complicated. Especially here in the south, in Kandahar, where I spent most of my time as a reporter.

00:12:55

GRAEME SMITH

For me, it was really important to cover all sides of the conflict, so spending time with Afghan security forces, trying to hear what the Taliban had to say. To go as they say "outside the wire" beyond the razor wire fence that surrounds the military camps and just listen to ordinary people.

00:13:22

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Kandahar is where the Taliban first emerged and it remains very conservative. Women in public pretty much always wear the traditional burqa. And yet here is where – with Western aid money – a friend of mine tried something bold.

00:13:49

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In a quiet corner of the city, these girls escape behind the high walls of this private school. They take off their burqas to attend classes in English and learn computer skills.

00:14:02

GRAEME SMITH: Salam Aleykoun Ehsan...

EHSANULLAH EHSAN: Brother Graeme. Life is good. Life is good, and we see you again. Welcome! It's so nice to see you.

00:14:17

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I have known the school's director, Ehsanullah Ehsan, for years.

GRAEME SMITH

You seem younger than before...

EHSANULLAH EHSAN

Oh! Yeah... Ah! Ah! Ah!

GRAEME SMITH

We wanted to give you a little surprise.

EHSANULLAH EHSAN

So good, it's so good. It is a surprise.

00:14:27

GRAEME SMITH

You're still here.

00:14:29

EHSANULLAH EHSAN

I'm still here. I'm still surviving. It's definitely hard. It's very risky here to help all these women get education, especially modern education, to go out and work, to be self-sustained, to be independent. This is something unacceptable for extremists.

00:14:52

EHSANULLAH EHSAN

For example, you're developing a magazine. Right? Writing a magazine. So in the magazine you need to put some photos. Or you are doing a report...

00:15:01

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But foreign money has dried up for his school as Canada and other Western donors lost interest in Afghanistan. His school has gone from more than 2,000 female students a year to 200. And he struggles to give the young girls hope.

00:15:18

SORAYA

There is violence against women in some countries and Afghanistan is one of them.

00:15:22

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

These girls are here because their families want them to get a broad education. In today's English class, Soraya and her classmates have an assignment on violence against women. A radical topic here in the traditional south. Now it's the turn of 12-year old Shabnam.

00:15:41

SHABNAM

Islam has given women the right to work, study and get education. I wish every family... to let women to study, work and get education. To shine one day and achieve their dreams. Let them fly like a bird and be honoured one day. Thanks a lot.

00:16:04

SHABNAM [Captions]

I come here to learn English because English can improve our life.

00:16:09

SORAYA [Captions]

I'm safe in the school, but not outside.

00:16:16

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

It's not safe outside for women or anyone else really. International troops fought and died to protect this city. And yet now it's under siege once again by the Taliban.

00:16:35

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Police are constantly on the lookout for insurgents and suicide bombers. They guard the city but they can barely protect themselves. Three police officers are assassinated here in Kandahar every week and across the country, in some weeks, hundreds of security personnel are killed.

00:17:05

GRAEME SMITH

So just now 20 minutes ago, another targeted killing. Yet again, some gunmen on a motorcycle shot and killed an off-duty police officer. It's amazing the pace of these things.

00:17:23

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Even if the police are targets, we have no choice. We still need to rely on them for our safety.

00:17:32

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

With two truckloads of armed men, we drive less than 30 minutes to the frontlines in the Panjwai valley. This is where I first started to understand that there would be no military solution to this war. International forces under NATO command surged into the south back in 2006 and started digging in for what would be the war's bloodiest battles.

00:18:03

GRAEME SMITH

I think I slept in that shelter over there. This used to be a Canadian base. It's called Masum Ghar. And now there's hardly anything left. It's like a ghost town.

00:18:15

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This landscape haunts me. I almost died in this valley. I remember the bone-jarring intensity of the explosions.

00:18:28

GRAEME SMITH

Just over there in the hazy distance, you can see Taliban territory. The Canadians, the British, the Germans, the Americans, they all fought to defeat the Taliban, and they failed essentially.

00:18:53

GRAEME SMITH

I was just over there listening on the radio as Canadians on this hillside were trying to move north at Taliban positions.

00:19:08

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Year after year, battle after battle, I witnessed the same pattern: foreign troops hammering away with modern firepower; the Taliban coming back again and again and again, with nothing more sophisticated than stubbornness.

00:19:24

NEWS REPORTER #1: NATO's top commander had great words of praise today for Canadian forces in Southern Afghanistan...

NEWS REPORTER #2: Canadian troops here have been very successful... defeating a significant Taliban presence....

NEWS REPORTER #1: ...in the recent operations there, a clear military victory.

00:19:37

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Politicians and generals kept hailing the Afghan mission as a spectacular success, but looking back, it was really a string of failures.

00:19:49

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The Taliban were never defeated. They just retreated and then launched a renewed insurgency that grew and engulfed the whole country.

00:20:05

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In my reports back then, I tried to sound a note of caution, but I often felt like a lonely voice in a crowd of media cheerleaders.

00:20:06

HEADLINE

Triumph over Taliban is not all it seems

Graeme Smith - Kandahar, Afghanistan - September 23, 2006

00:20:10 **HEADLINE** Conquering Canadians take stock
Graeme Smith - Panjwai District, Afghanistan - September 13, 2006

00:20:20

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I really questioned my own sanity sometimes in Afghanistan. I could see things were happening in front of me and I was trying to write them down, put them in the newspaper and then military officers and government PR people, would sort of tell me, "No, no, that's not what you saw." It was a head spinning experience.

00:20:43

GRAEME SMITH

And I think that's what happens in a war where countries get swept up in this fervour -- and they don't care what's true. They only want to know, how great are our boys, how true is our cause. And I think that's the madness of war.

00:21:07

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

For my country, Canada, the madness would go on for five more years. We withdrew from Afghanistan in 2011, with 158 soldiers dead and at least 1,800 injured. I began to question whether those sacrifices were worth it.

00:21:29

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I also began to realize that while fighting what we saw as "evil", that we ourselves had sometimes crossed the line into darkness. I had to go back to where I first saw that darkness.

00:21:55

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Maybe more than any other single place where I really started to lose faith in the war in Afghanistan was inside the crumbling jail cells of Sarpoza prison in the west side of Kandahar City.

00:22:10

GRAEME SMITH

Some of the stories I heard inside these walls, I can't forget. They are still with me.

00:22:24

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The prison has always housed common criminals, but also plenty of political prisoners.

00:22:33

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

You can hear the murmuring of men here inside the political section of the prison, that's where they keep the Taliban.

00:22:41

GRAEME SMITH

We are not allowed to film inside there right now, but the last time I was here, I spent a number of visits inside the political section here and they told me terrible stories about torture and abuse at the hands of the security forces and it really started to change the way that I thought about the war. This was a kind of a turning point for me in my whole thinking about the conflict.

00:23:14

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

When I first came here in 2007, I interviewed 30 detainees -- the majority of them suspected Taliban, many of them captured by Canadian soldiers and transferred over to the Afghan authorities.

00:23:33

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I spoke to men who showed me the scars on their bodies. They told me that they were beaten, choked, frozen, whipped. There was one guy who had been beaten so badly that he had forgotten who he was. There was one young man who had a very vivid memory of being electrocuted and he showed me how he was flopping around on the ground like a fish. Terrible things happened to these prisoners when they were being interrogated.

00:24:10

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This shook me because it wasn't an accident of war. It was deliberate. It was a part of the design of the war. On a daily basis, prisoners transferred from Canadian custody into cruel hands.

00:24:25

HOUSE OF COMMONS #1: We have no evidence of the specific allegations in The Globe and Mail.

HOUSE OF COMMONS #2: Why was this information not brought up in this House before?

00:24:26

HEADLINE

Personal Account: A Story of Torture
Graeme Smith - Kandahar, Afghanistan - April 24, 2007

00:24:31

HEADLINE

The saddest story in Sarpoza prison
Graeme Smith - Kandahar, Afghanistan - August 18, 2007

00:24:33

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

My stories caused uproar, debate and investigations. The Afghan and Canadian governments tried to deny that torture was happening.

00:24:43

HOUSE OF COMMONS #3: ...any evidence that there is accessed blocked...

HOUSE OF COMMONS #4: Pourquoi n'avez-vous pas eu les mêmes exigences?

00:24:43

HEADLINE

How Sarpoza became Canada's project
Graeme Smith - Quetta, Pakistan - April 25, 2011

00:24:49

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But this man helped me to confirm the truth: Ansari Baloch, an investigator for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. He wasn't afraid to call out abuses by both the government and the Taliban, angering the Taliban all the more because he worked with people like me, Western journalists.

00:24:58 **HEADLINE** Watchdog: 'We can't monitor these people'
Graeme Smith - Kandahar, Afghanistan - April 24, 2007

00:25:09
GRAEME SMITH

Working with foreigners can taint you. Everyone in your community thinks that you are a spy for the Americans.

00:25:20
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

So I was worried about the fallout and how that was going to affect Ansari. Several months after my stories appeared, Ansari disappeared. I found out later that the Taliban had kidnapped and beheaded him... I always felt bad about dragging Ansari into the spotlight because he was trying to do his human rights work quietly behind the scenes and I was trying to make a headline.

00:25:52 **HEADLINE** From Canadian custody into cruel hands
Graeme Smith - Kandahar, Afghanistan - April 23, 2007

00:26:02
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

We are all haunted by ghosts here in Afghanistan. Everybody here has lost somebody. But I think that how you feel about that depends on whether you feel responsible. And that's why today's meeting is going to be tough.

00:26:19
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I've tracked down Ansari's family.

00:26:32
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Muhktar is his nephew. Anargol is his daughter. They say that the human rights advocate wouldn't listen to the family's concerns about his safety.

00:26:43
MUHKOTAR ANSARI [Subtitles]

He always strived to be with the people

especially the ordinary and poor people.

00:26:52
ANARGOL ANSARI [Subtitles]

We would often ask him to stop,
but he would say:

“That’s not possible. The people need me.”

00:27:03

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

When the Taliban snatched Ansari and asked for a ransom, his nephew made a dangerous trip to meet the kidnappers.

00:27:11

MUKHTAR ANSARI [Captions]

There were about a dozen Taliban
on motorcycles.

They had guns, they had everything...

but they covered their faces,
except for their eyes and mouths.

Their mouths were showing.

When we arrived, the Taliban said:
“Ansari is dead.”

There was a hole.

They had put earth over him.

00:27:44

GRAEME SMITH

You started digging in the earth?

MUKHTAR ANSARI

Yeah. Yeah, digging.

00:27:47

MUKHTAR ANSARI [Captions]

But we could see Ansari’s clothes.

00:27:50

GRAEME SMITH

Ah, the clothes... the shalwar kameez...

00:27:53

MUKHTAR ANSARI [Subtitles]

Yes, Ansari’s clothes...

00:27:58

MUKHTAR ANSARI [Captions]

and other things, but they...

00:28:07

GRAEME SMITH

I'm sorry my friend... It must have been incredibly hard.

00:28:29

MUKHTAR ANSARI [Captions]

They had cut his neck.

00:28:33

GRAEME SMITH

And his hands... I'm sorry my friend.

00:28:45

GRAEME SMITH

And "shahid" in red is a "martyr".

00:29:11

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I think what happened to my friend Ansari Baloch is symbolic of the ways that we as foreign journalists put our friends into danger.

00:29:24

GRAEME SMITH

It's something that we really have to grapple with about whether the things that we ask people to do are worth it.

00:29:45

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Ansari was just one of the many people I have known killed in this endless war. A journalist who worked with Canadian reporters.

00:29:53

SUPER

Jawad "Jojo" Ahmad

00:29:56

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

A tribal leader who helped me understand local politics.

00:29:56

SUPER

Mullah Naqid Alokozai

00:30:01

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

A Canadian soldier who protected me in battle.

00:30:01

SUPER

Josh Klukie

00:30:06

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Like so many others who died, they wanted a better Afghanistan.

00:30:13

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

One of the things that still angers me to this day is how much of that striving was wasted - in part because of the abuses and the corruption of our supposed allies.

00:30:27

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

A lot of the Western aid money for schools and hospitals never really reached the people. In recent years, poverty has gotten worse. More than half the population now lives below the national poverty line. These days, what separates squalor from splendour are guards and gates.

00:30:54

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Inside wealthy enclaves, the elites enjoy their parks and fountains.

00:31:03

GRAEME SMITH

None of this existed when I first came here to Kandahar and certainly not this fountain. I mean this is a dry country. It's one of the poorest countries in the world. And so, to see this, it's pretty stunning, and it really gives you a sense that some people are doing pretty well for themselves in this war, and it's actually you know, this is part of the reason why the war goes on because it's good business.

00:31:35

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Not all of the wealth here is from corruption, but this is not the kind of neighbourhood where it's safe to ask people how they made their fortunes. The drug trade, stolen aid money, all kinds of schemes, have made Afghanistan one of the world's most corrupt countries — a problem so big, so obvious that government leaders don't really try to deny it, as national security advisor Hamdullah Mohib told me.

00:32:05

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

To get quick fixes we empowered some of the very warlords that people were fed up with. We put them in positions of ministries and governors. As businesses they were given lucrative contracts.

00:32:26

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Police chiefs... Vice Presidents... Governors... Men who have been accused by international human rights organizations of gross violations -- many of them warlords of the past -- still have a grip on Afghanistan.

00:32:26

HEADLINE

Human Rights Watch - May 17, 2017
Will Afghanistan Prosecute Kandahar's Torturer-in-Chief?

00:32:28

HEADLINE

Human Rights Watch - May 17, 2017
UN Committee calls for Action against Gen. Abdul Raziq

00:32:33

HEADLINE

Voice of America - July 15, 2020

Afghan Warlord Accused of Rights Abuses Gets Highest Military Rank

00:32:35 **HEADLINE** Human Rights Watch - July 31, 2016
Forces Linked to Vice President Terrorize Villagers

00:32:39 **HEADLINE** International Crisis Group - January 17, 2010
Dealing with brutal Afghan warlords is a mistake

00:32:43 **HEADLINE** Just Security - February 16, 2018
Impunity for U.S.-Funded Warlords

00:32:48 **HEADLINE** Wedded to the warlords: NATO's unholy Afghan alliance
Graeme Smith - June 3, 2011

00:32:55
HAMDULLAH MOHIB

I think there has been a lot of injustices in the last eighteen years conducted by our government or people, and I think whether willingly or unwillingly, however it has happened, but I think it has led to people joining the Taliban. There has been a lot of corruption in the government, and I think we should not free ourselves from that. Own it and fix it.

00:33:28
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Widespread corruption has not been the only thing driving people to the Taliban. There have also been mounting civilian casualties in the U.S.-led war.

00:33:46
GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This is where they count the numbers and track the abuses: the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. It says a lot about the situation that any sort of official building looks like a fortress -- with intense security checks.

00:34:01
GRAEME SMITH

It's so tight they took my chocolate away from me. They think I am going to kill someone with my chocolate bar.

FIXER
They took the pills too.

GRAEME SMITH
Yeah, the cough drops.

00:34:11
GRAEME SMITH (VO)
My good friend Shaharзад Akbar heads the commission.

00:34:15

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

People have these ideas about human rights
being a Western concept.

I grew up in a family with parents that
really believed in human rights

striving to create a universe where all humans
are treated with respect and dignity.

This was very, very central to the values
that I was taught since I was very little.

So for me

it was very important to work for human rights
because I believe

that this value is really deep-rooted in Afghanistan,
in our religion and in our culture.

00:34:47

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Akbar's family spent the Taliban years in a refugee camp. Her parents firmly believed in education for women and she went on to become the first Afghan woman to study at Oxford University. At 33 years old, she is probably the leading human rights advocate in Afghanistan.

00:35:10

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

What bothers Akbar is the sheer level of carnage, inflicted by both sides.

00:35:19

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

What is of course very disturbing
is that Afghanistan

continues to be a site of gross human rights violations
for civilian casualties caused by all sides

involved in the conflict, including
international forces and the Afghan government

having far-reaching consequences for
how we are as a society

and how we will be in the future.

On a whole range of human rights issues,
the footprint of the war is there.

00:35:51

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

You can really see that “footprint of war” on the most vulnerable: the children... Over the years I have seen far too many of the war’s youngest victims... This generation has grown up in a world shaped by violence. Recent years have been among the deadliest for children, because of increased fighting on all sides.

00:36:28

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

One of my friends is trying to do something to help the children who survive, here at an orphanage just outside of Kabul, home to 150 children from toddlers to teens.

00:36:42

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Mariam Wardak takes in as many orphans as she can.

00:36:46

MARIAM WARDAK

We have people coming to our door every day saying that we have another orphan. We can’t accept it because we have exceeded our capacity. Everybody has become numb to the children of war. How can you become numb to something like that?

00:37:06

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Wardak comes from a prominent family. Her father was a famous rebel against the Soviet invaders. She recently worked as a senior security official for the Afghan government and now she is dealing with the human consequences of rising insecurity. The children at Wardak’s orphanage have suffered at the hands of all sides of the war – the Taliban as well as the Americans and the Afghan government. Ferozan lost both of her of parents in the fighting.

00:37:38

FEROZAN [Subtitles]

I have two sisters and a brother.

They live with me.

My mother was a policewoman.
She was killed in a fight.

My father was already missing
when she died.

There was a fire. She was shot
and taken to the hospital.

But they could not treat her and she died.

00:38:00

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Hamidah saw her mother gunned down by the Taliban.

00:38:04

HAMIDAH [Subtitles]

I was upstairs helping my mother.

My two sisters were downstairs cooking.

The Taliban came into our home.

They were enemies of my father
and wanted to kill him.

They shot my mother
and then shot me in the leg.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital
and my mother was dead.

00:38:30

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In Saifurahman's case, his family was killed in crossfire.

00:38:35

SAIFURAHMAN [Subtitles]

The Taliban had captured 8 members
of the Afghan police forces

and brought them to our village.

Because that is where the main
Taliban prison was.

There was a fight to free the prisoners
between the government and the Taliban.

All my family were killed
in that battle.

00:39:05

GRAEME SMITH

Do you know who fired against your family?

00:39:10

SAIFURAHMAN [Captions]

No, the war was between
the government and the Taliban.

I don't know who fired at my family.

00:39:24

MARIAM WARDAK

War is blind. They don't know who to be angry with. They don't know who to look forward to. They just understand that there is violence and that they're afraid that they can get in the crossfire between the Taliban or the Afghan National Defense Security Forces that could cost them their life like it has cost their parents' life. They know that they need to fear both. But they don't understand who's the good guy and who's the bad guy.

00:39:51

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

It can be hard at times to tell the difference between the supposed good guys and the bad guys. That's what Ayesha Wolasmal discovered once she took off her soldier's uniform.

00:40:07

AYESHA WOLASMAL

When I was in a uniform my entire understanding of the situation was a very kind of security-based understanding. It was only when I actually came back to Afghanistan as a civilian you know, as Ayesha, Masuma's daughter, that I got a reality check and I think the strongest symbol of that was when we took a taxi like a Corolla between Kabul and Kandahar. And I'd say it's like 45 degrees and it's really, really hot and we are both in our burqas and there's an American convoy passing, and I'm sitting there for the first time not in a convoy, but like just a normal civilian and I sat there and I felt... Suddenly what everyone... Suddenly I felt that I witnessed the occupation in action. Even though I had been part of these convoys myself but we ended up waiting 3 and a half hours for this convoy to do whatever they were supposed to do. And me and my mom were fine, but like there were tons and tons, long lines of cars with women, small children. For them it was a full-blown occupation. For them it was seeing people that don't look like them control their cities, control their check post, control their movement.

00:41:41

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In the villages, people told her about being terrified of foreign troops or Afghan government forces as they hunted for the Taliban.

00:41:51

AYESHA WOLASMAL

I remember so many stories about like my relatives telling me about how their sons were just like taken out in the middle of the nights, you know, in front of their mothers, where black like paper bags were placed on their heads and they disappeared... Even, two weeks ago I met with people not fearing night raids by the Americans, but the Americans have trained the Afghans that well that now the Afghans are doing it. Sadly that's everyday life – the bloodshed... I mean the sons, the husbands, the fathers but also like the young children. I mean it's absolutely devastating.

00:42:38

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The numbers are staggering. Since the war began in 2001, hundreds of thousands have been killed. No one knows the exact count. A cemetery for bodies that are unclaimed, unidentified, unknown. It was a sad enough place when I visited a dozen years ago. And today it is unbelievably bigger. More people are killed in this war every year than in any other conflict in the world.

00:43:24**GRAEME SMITH (VO)**

Sometimes memories drift back to you in unexpected ways. I remember one night I was attending a play and I started crying. And I wept and I wept. I hadn't cried like that in years... I really, really want this war to end.

00:43:56**GRAEME SMITH (VO)**

NATO is the most powerful alliance in human history, by some measures. But military efforts to bring peace and stability have failed. The Taliban have only grown stronger. In propaganda videos posted on their website, the Taliban claim they are well-armed, well-trained. They can strike anywhere, and they do.

00:44:33**GRAEME SMITH (VO)**

To find out how the Taliban are pulling it off, I went to see my good friend Rahmatullah Amiri, one of the country's most respected political analysts.

00:44:43**RAHMATULLAH AMIRI**

The Taliban are not just getting stronger, they are getting organized. They are becoming some sort of a conventional kind of army. If you compare the Taliban of today versus the Taliban of 2014, you see a much different group.

00:45:01**GRAEME SMITH (VO)**

Amiri barely survived a Taliban attack on the American University in Kabul in 2016. Thirteen people were killed and more than 40 injured, including Amiri.

00:45:12**RAHMATULLAH AMIRI**

Four bullets hit me, two in the abdomen, one in the leg and one in the arm. I was pushing myself against the ground to get to the police, because the police was like probably 10 meters away from me. They could hear my voice, but they could not come because the attackers were pretty close by. Then I thought like, let's try a little bit more. Because my mom lost four sons that I knew that if she loses me I don't think that she would have survived because I am the solo breadwinner of the family. And she's very close to me. So I didn't give up.

00:45:56**GRAEME SMITH (VO)**

Amiri slowly recovered, rebuilt his strength – and he believes the Taliban were doing the same. By 2019, from safe havens in Pakistan, expanding their control across Afghanistan.

00:46:10

RAHMATULLAH AMIRI

From experience travelling across the country, I would say, in terms of terrain, Taliban control between 50 to 60% of the country under their full control. That's what I would say, their full control. If you add the contested area -- I would say it's 60 to 70%.

00:46:31

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

That is not what National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib told me. He seems confident of victory.

00:46:40

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

We have broken the back of the Taliban. They will lose their capacity to take and hold territory. We have a military path to victory in this conflict.

00:46:55

RAHMATULLAH AMIRI

That's not true at all. If the back of the Taliban could be broken that would be from 2009 to 2014, where hundreds of thousands of international troops were there and billions of dollars were poured into the construction and nation building and everything. That was the only times where the Taliban were on their back foot. When the government talk about that, you know breaking their back, I am telling them they haven't reached their peak yet.

GRAEME SMITH

Wow...

00:47:28

RAHMATULLAH AMIRI

The government needs to accept Taliban as a very strong powerful force. They cannot treat them as a bunch of, you know, insurgents who are outside there. No. They have a very strong system - both civilian and military system - that is right now running almost half of the country.

00:47:54

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

It's hard to get a sense of the Taliban's real power, because it's dangerous for an outsider like me to travel into the vast territory they control. One night in Kandahar we arrange to meet "Abdullah", a former Taliban commander who grew weary of fighting but who still stays in touch with his former comrades. For his own safety we are concealing his identity. We hire him to take a cellphone camera into a Taliban region not far from Kandahar city.

00:48:26

JULIAN SHER

You have to keep everything on this little chip here.

00:48:34

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Local fighters allowed him to film these images. They want to show the outside world how secure they feel in their strongholds.

00:48:44

COMMANDER [Subtitles]

See, when you do this, you can take out this one like this.

00:48:58

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

These days, the Taliban allow girls to join the boys and study at the local religious school. But many families pull their girls out of classes when they reach puberty. And these students are just memorizing verses from the Koran, not really getting a broad education.

00:49:17

COMMANDER & BOY [Subtitles]

Why do you study?

- I study to become a Mullah.

Why not a doctor or an engineer?

No, I study only to become a Mullah.

00:49:34

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Farmers don't seem to mind being filmed as they finish harvesting the hashish crop. Drug cultivation is the biggest source of cash income for these people. Other farmers plant poppy seeds for the next season's opium. Both sides of the war earn tens of millions of dollars a year from illegal drugs. The profits allow them to buy more weapons, seize more territory. The drugs fuel the war.

00:50:00

COMMANDER & POPPY FARMER [Subtitles]

What are you planting?

- Poppy.

Why don't you grow wheat or corn?

- It's not profitable.

People say it's not good to grow poppy.

Why do you do it?

Because it takes 10 months to harvest

and there is not enough water for wheat.

Poppy takes 4 or 5 months.

So then who buys it from you?

- Smugglers.

00:50:20

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This Taliban commander wants to hide his face, but he has a message to broadcast on television.

00:50:25

MASKED TALIBAN

People give us poppy seeds, wheat, food.

They give us all of it willingly.

Local people, even government employees, call us.

They give us information and reports.

Without their support,
we wouldn't be able to fight.

We are making progress with their help.

Soon, God willing...
we will take more territory.

00:51:02

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This is not an empty boast. Intelligence estimates say that by early 2021, the Taliban already dominated much of the countryside, with only major cities under government control and under constant threat.

00:51:17

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The Taliban have shown their strength with spectacular attacks – like this car bomb in 2018 that killed at least 14 children in the south-western province of Helmand... But this attack was different. Instead of suffering quietly, ordinary citizens decided to speak up. In all my years in Afghanistan, people usually debated how to win the war. Now they started to argue about how to make peace. I came to this neighbourhood in Kandahar to find one of the organizers of a new grassroots peace movement.

00:52:02

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

A young father of five children, Bismillah Watandost makes his living as a freelance journalist and full-time activist.

00:52:09

BISMILLAH WATANDOST [Subtitles]

In Afghanistan, just living is taking a chance.

Nobody feels safe here.

Not from the Taliban, not from the U.S.,
not from the government.

When you leave home in the morning,
you're never sure if you'll return alive.

From the start, this war
was given two names:

“Jihad” and “fighting terrorism”.

On both sides, Afghan Muslims
are killed.

Taliban kill Afghans in the name of Jihad,
the government does so to fight terrorism.

Foreigners carry out air strikes
to fight terrorism

and hundreds of civilians die.

Taliban carry out suicide attacks and
dozens of Afghan Muslims are killed.

In reality it is one single plan
to kill Afghans

under two different names.

00:53:08

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The Helmand blast inspired Bismillah and others to launch a People's Peace March. They started with just a handful of people but grew into a few hundred, trekking more than 700 kilometers, across deserts, through villages, for almost two months.

00:53:29

BISMILLAH WATANDOST [Captions]

Everywhere we talked about peace.

We told the Taliban and the Afghan government
they had to stop the war.

00:53:39

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Bismillah even took the risk of arranging to meet with local Taliban leaders face-to-face.

00:53:45

BISMILLAH WATANDOST [Captions]

We went to the Taliban area.

We met with them and we talked
about ceasefire and peace.

We said to them:

“This is not fair. This war is not our war.

You have to stop this war. You have
to tell your leaders to stop this war.”

When we talked about peace and ceasefire,
one of the Taliban there cried.

He was crying and then he hit his gun
to the ground and said:

“The Afghans are my brothers.

I’m killing my brothers and
my brothers are killing me.”

00:54:37

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

As the peace marchers were making their way to Kabul in June 2018, the government and the Taliban declared an unexpected ceasefire. For three days, Afghans got a glimpse of what peace could look like.

00:55:01

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Mujib Mashal covered this story for the New York Times. Born in Kabul, he is one of best journalists in Afghanistan.

00:55:09

MUJIB MASHAL

The miraculous thing about those three days was, it was completely peaceful. To me, that was a sign that everybody is really tired. I remember, we reported an episode from Kunduz where some of these Taliban fighters have come in and so we, kind of, chronicled their day, you know, where they have kabobs, where they have their ice creams, at the kabob shop, you know, where they listen to music. And as they were riding back on their motorcycles, right, it was dusk time and, sort of, the cease-fire was ending and they were crossing a bridge, and they were actually, like, hugging good-bye with the people, including the soldiers on this side of the line.

00:55:49

GRAEME SMITH

They were hugging the same guys they were going to be shooting.

00:55:51

MUJIB MASHAL

They're going to be shooting at, they shot at three days before, they're gonna go back to shooting them and probably a bunch of those guys are dead by now. There was something about that moment, I think we, we have lost even the power to imagine that there could be a moment where everybody feels like they can breathe, and they don't have to shoot. And as short as that period was, and as insignificant in the larger loss of the war, it kicked a sense of possibility into people, you know. And no matter how it came about, it was for the first time, in a long time, not just in this conflict, in the spectrum of 40-year conflicts, you know, at least for my generation, to think that the two sides can say, "OK, we'll stop." And then it actually stops.

00:56:57

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But even as that dream of peace took shape, Afghans started asking questions. What kind of peace should it be – and at what cost? Resistance to any compromise with the Taliban has always been especially strong within the urban middle class. Many women are fearful of losing their hard-fought freedoms. And I was curious about the young generation of people who grew up surrounded by foreign troops and foreign aid. So I came here to Kabul University.

00:57:32

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Mariam and her friend Adiba study photography in a country where the Taliban had once banned cameras and they have no intention of letting anyone turn back the clock.

00:57:42

MARIAM [Subtitles]

It creates a big conflict in my family
that I have to deal with.

Because I am the only one
who thinks this way.

My family is very religious.
My brothers, even my sisters,

they all tell me to wear the hijab.

I don't care what they say.

For me, it's not that important.

I try not to get into an argument
about these things.

00:58:12

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Despite these struggles, this generation dreams big. And also small, with personal goals that are breathtakingly modest.

00:58:22

ADIBA [Subtitles]

There are a dozen things
that I can't do.

I'd start by wearing the clothes
that I always wanted to wear.

00:58:29

GRAEME SMITH

What clothes would you want to wear?

ADIBA

I myself - I like men's clothes.

GRAEME SMITH

Mini skirts?

ADIBA

Men's clothes, suits.

GRAEME SMITH

Men's clothes. Aaah... Drishy.

00:58:45

MARIAM [Subtitles]

When it comes to clothing,
I'd like to wear bright colours.

Different colours.

Colours like orange, yellow,
red and green.

Believe me, when I wear orange,
I have a really good day!

00:59:08

MARIAM

Something like this.

00:59:10

GRAEME SMITH

You want to wear colourful clothes. Why can't you wear colourful clothes now?

00:59:17

MARIAM [Subtitles]

The problem is that when
I wear orange socks

too many people stare at them.

00:59:26

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I want to go meet someone who is a role model for many of these young women. She is the most famous feminist in the country.

00:59:35

GRAEME SMITH

Khwaga, your phone just pinged, something happened? Another explosion?

FIXER

Yeah, in PD 12. There was a blast and we still don't know if it has harmed anyone or not.

00:59:46

GRAEME SMITH

This kind of security used to be only embassies that did this. We are in what is known as an airlock. Heavy steel doors that are closed on both sides of the driveway and they are never open at the same time. And so you are in a little metal box basically, just in case the car explodes while it's being checked.

01:00:14

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Farahnaz Forotan is only 28 but she is one of Afghanistan's best-known television journalists.

01:00:21

GRAEME SMITH

I notice that you have Frida Kahlo everywhere. Here, here, here...

01:00:24

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Forotan revels in provocation. She decorates her office with the work of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, selecting images that would shock most people in this conservative society.

01:00:35

GRAEME SMITH

There's another Frida Kahlo.

01:00:36

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

I like Frida Kahlo.

I love her lifestyle, her works.

She's a superwoman for me.

01:00:43

GRAEME SMITH [Subtitles]

She's a very powerful woman.

- Yes.

01:00:45

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

Despite living with pain all her life

she also lived with hope

and she lived with love.

I think she conquers life.

01:01:04

GRAEME SMITH

That's like you.

01:01:06

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

I don't know about that.

01:01:09

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

She used her fame to launch a social media campaign called "My Red Line".

01:01:17

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

I would like to exercise my right
to choose in any part of this country.

Peace must enhance opportunities

not limitations.

01:01:25

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

... asking people to talk about the lines they are not willing to cross for the sake of peace.

01:01:30

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

What is your Red Line?

01:01:35

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

Our goal is not to have our Red Lines
accepted by the Taliban.

Our Red Line is about our rights.

It's things like individual rights
women's rights and civil rights
that have to be accepted by everyone.

We want the Taliban to know
that these exist in our society.

And to know that today's Afghanistan
isn't the same as it was under their regime.

01:02:06

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

She has travelled across the country, collecting videos with messages of defiance.

01:02:12

GRANDMOTHER [Subtitles]

If the Taliban say that women can't work
or go to school and they can't be soldiers

then it is all destruction.

No one accepts that.

01:02:26

YOUNG TEXTILE WORKER [Subtitles]

If the Taliban come
and women must stay home

and not go to school or anywhere,
it's not right.

I want a long-lasting peace.

01:02:37

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

Some people think
that when I talk of peace

my only concern is about the freedom
to wear a head scarf or not

or my red boots.

But these are small, individual choices
within a much wider framework.

Our argument is not only
about the head scarf.

It is about the respect for
human rights and lives.

You live in a very developed country.

Would you allow a group,
whose beliefs you oppose

to govern here without respecting

women's rights, human rights,
minority rights?

And to corrode all the accomplishments
of the Afghan people and of your country?

01:03:36

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

MyRedLine has generated dozens of videos with tens of thousands of followers on social media, but it is mostly an urban phenomenon, in a country that is mainly rural.

01:03:48

AYESHA WOLASMAL

Obviously there's a lot more at stake for women here. You know they have come a really long way. And they're right to be really scared of what a Taliban government would look like. I would struggle to sleep at night if I was one of them.

01:04:06

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Raised in the Western world, Ayesha Wolasmal understands the fears of urban women. She is no longer a soldier. She now works with rural women in the villages. That gives her a different perspective.

01:04:20

AYESHA WOLASMAL

That fear is, I mean, very different from the fear that women in the rural areas have. It's... because they haven't had the same level of progress there. They haven't gone from like their mud house to become like parliamentarians. They're still in the same mud house. Illiteracy rates are extremely high. There are still girls that are being married off at age 14. So life hasn't changed. And I always notice this throughout my travels. The more remote places you visit, the more it becomes evident that the discussion at central level is very removed from the realities of rural Afghanistan.

01:05:22

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I wanted to meet women like that but local traditions make it very hard for a foreigner, let alone a man. So I asked Wolasmal to introduce me to her friend Dr. Aziza Watawall Azizi and I went to see her in Kandahar.

01:05:40

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Azizi was part of an older generation of women who came of age in the 1970s, before Afghanistan plunged into war. She studied and practiced medicine in Europe, and then she came back to care of the poorest families at a clinic in Kandahar. Women from all over the province walk through her doors.

01:06:04

DR. AZIZI [Subtitles]

Peace has to be the ultimate
outcome of this war.

Peace negotiations should begin.

We must catch the bird of peace

that has flown away from us
and hold on to it.

01:06:25

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Dr. Azizi invited a group of women she knows to a tea party at her home, a rare occasion for these women to talk to a foreign man – and an even rarer opportunity for me to hear their point of view.

01:06:42

GRAEME SMITH

In Kabul, we interviewed some women who don't wear burqa and they don't wear hijab even. They say this war is about freedom against peace. If peace comes and the Taliban come back to Kabul, they will lose their freedom. And I want to know if the women here feel the same way.

01:07:03

PINK BURQA [Subtitles]

The end to war is the wish of
the whole world and of all of Islam.

We will do whatever Allah has ordered.

01:07:13

BLUE BURQA [Subtitles]

Many young people have lost their lives.

Everyone wants peace. If it comes,
everyone should live as they wish.

Whether your face is covered or not,

the point is to live happily.

01:07:29

PEACH BURQA [Subtitles]

We agree with that.

We are happy with our faces covered.

We will not uncover our faces.

01:07:38

DR. AZIZI & LIGHT BLUE BURQA [Subtitles]

Do you want to wear this burqa?

- Yes, I like this burqa.

01:07:42

DR. AZIZI [Subtitles]

Freedom is not only about
wearing the burqa or not.

Freedom is economic freedom,
educational freedom

and attaining fundamental human rights.
That is real freedom.

Freedom is not only uncovering
one's face or wearing trousers.

Freedom is when everyone can live freely.

01:08:06

GRAEME SMITH

I think in foreign countries people think that if the Taliban come back to take a share of power that it will be bad for women, that women are afraid of the Taliban coming back. But these women are not afraid, I think. Can we ask why?

01:08:25

PINK BURQA [Subtitles]

This is an old fear. We are not afraid
of their return.

The Taliban have their practices
that have nothing to do with us.

Here in Kandahar, we have
our own traditions.

We want peace, for our country
to be prosperous

for the faithful to be prosperous

for our homes, families
and country to be rebuilt.

01:08:52

GRAY BURQA [Subtitles]

We are all Muslims.

There is no reason for bombing

for shooting and fighting one another.

Many people have died
or have been forced to flee.

If peace comes, it would be better.

The leaders should sit together
and make peace. That is their job.

01:09:10

PINK BURQA [Subtitles]

I respect our culture and its rules,
but right now, I am tired of this burqa.

I have a headache when I wear it.

If I was in government, I would walk
alongside my brothers as equals.

If I was a leader, that's what I would do.

I am tired of this burqa.

01:09:34

FIXER [Subtitles]

What if they ask you to wear the burqa?

01:09:36

PINK BURQA [Subtitles]

By then I will be very old and
nobody will ask me to wear the burqa.

01:09:57

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Even here under anonymous burqas, behind high walls, everyone has their own ideas about the key to peace.

01:10:17

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Over the mountains, more than a thousand kilometers away, those divergent ideas about peace in Afghanistan were being debated in a city that feels like a different world - Doha, the capital of Qatar.

01:10:35

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I have been shot at by the Taliban, nearly kidnapped a couple of times, so it feels strange to come here and arrange interviews with them.

01:10:47

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

On the corner of a quiet street, you can find something remarkable. A kind of unofficial embassy and headquarters for the Taliban, with the support of the Qatari government. They have been here since 2013, a sign of how far they have come diplomatically... The Taliban meet openly with visiting delegations, plan their political strategy, and educate the next generation.

01:11:27

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

I was curious to meet the younger Taliban thinkers. Ammar Zmarak is 35 years old. Like a lot of new leaders who work in the Taliban's political office, he's well-educated and worldly. He works diligently to spread the movement's message. The Taliban once banned television, but now they have a sophisticated web presence, active on social media in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic.

01:11:57

AMMAR ZMARAK

We are in the age of technology. In our older time even on with the world, there were not as much technology as we have now. So due to technology there is more knowledge, there is more education. There is more progress in any field. So we are more progressive than the past generation. When the world give an opportunity to us to prove ourselves to the world what we are and what we want, they will be surprised and they will find us...very...

GRAEME SMITH:

...different than we expect...

ZAMRAK:

...different.

01:12:47

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Zmarak dreams of returning to a homeland that he has never seen.

01:12:52

AMMAR ZMARAK

I was born in exile. My children are now living in exile. So, exile is now such a kind of life for us. Every day and every night even in the sleep we have the dreams. Every night, we are in Afghanistan in our dream.

01:13:13

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

He and his fellow Taliban comrades in Doha now sense they have a chance of getting back home.

01:13:23

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

The United States waged war against the Taliban for almost two decades. And now the Americans also wanted to go home. More than 2,400 dead U.S. soldiers. Young men sent to fight and die. Some not even born when the war started in 2001. A desperate America needed to change strategy. After decades of refusing to talk openly with the Taliban, the U.S. began to do just that.

01:14:04

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In 2018, the Americans came to Doha to start official negotiations with the Taliban – without the Afghan government. Mujib Mashal of the New York Times says the stunning reversal came about because the Americans felt trapped.

01:14:21

MUJIB MASHAL

The noose had tightened too much.

GRAEME SMITH

The military noose?

MUJIB MASHAL

The military noose, the Taliban, sort of, gain of territory, the Taliban's confidence. There's an acknowledgement of the fact, internationally, that they're a power to reckon with.

01:14:34

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

So the Americans were forced to reckon with Taliban stalwarts like this leader, Khairullah Khairkhwa, who was the Taliban's Interior Minister and a provincial governor.

01:14:44

KHAIRULLAH KHAIRKHWA [Subtitles]

Aren't the Americans ashamed
that they used to call us terrorists?

Now they're sitting at a table
to talk with us.

We have always said that
we are not terrorists.

Like those who fight in the trenches

to bring peace

and Islamic rule to our homeland

we are pursuing the same important
goal through negotiations.

01:15:10

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Captured shortly after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, Khaikhwa spent 12 years in the American military prison at Guantanamo. His detention file describes him as a “trusted and respected” Taliban official. A “HIGH RISK” to U.S. interests. But he was set free by the Americans in a prisoner exchange. Khaikhwa went from wearing a prison jumpsuit to more dignified clothing at five-star hotels.

01:15:44

KHAIRULLAH KHAIRKHWA [Subtitles]

That’s the way of the world.

No one ever stays in the same position.

A person’s circumstances change over time.

At the moment, we are negotiating
with the Americans.

We should remain willing
to explore any means

to bring well-being
and comfort to our nation.

01:16:15

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Khaikhwa became a key player in the Taliban’s talks with the Americans. Surrounded by lush gardens and palm trees, the Taliban negotiators, many of whom had been imprisoned and tortured, found themselves face to face with U.S. military commanders.

01:16:33

MUJIB MASHAL

It’s a really, really odd, bizarre image around the table. You have people in uniform at the table. People who’ve been involved in, you know, special operations, people who were very well known for the kind of, you know, kill/capture missions and things like that. On the other side you have, pretty much half of the Taliban delegation, some of the key negotiators who’ve spent you know a decade in orange jumpsuits in Guantanamo. Now the two of them sitting across, as equals.

01:17:08

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Not quite equals maybe – but by negotiating directly with the Taliban, the Americans outraged many of their allies in the Afghan government.

01:17:21

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Not surprisingly, back in Kabul, National Security advisor Hamdullah Mohib -- who spent his life fighting the Taliban -- felt betrayed.

01:17:30

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

I think what the Taliban would achieve out of this was legitimacy. That's goal number one: establish yourself as the legitimate saviour of Afghanistan who has defeated a superpower and freed the country from their invasion. Once you have legitimized yourself and delegitimized everybody else, then you want to negotiate. That is not negotiations: that is a surrender.

01:17:54

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

The Afghan government – the Afghan people – stand no chance, no fighting chance, once that deal is struck because, like I said, morale is gone. Perception is reality. The perception there would be is the Taliban defeated the United States and all its allies, NATO allies. Who in their right mind in Afghanistan would stand in their way?

01:18:25

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Activist Farahnaz Forotan is doing her best to stand in their way. Her #MyRedLine campaign has mustered a lot of opinion against compromise with the Taliban.

01:18:37

FARAHNAZ FOROTAN [Subtitles]

I don't like to see even a single person killed on any day.

What is the guarantee
that we will not have another war

even if we compromise everything?

I can't trust the Taliban.

01:19:06

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

This poses a dilemma for Shaharзад Akbar. As the head of the Afghanistan's Human Rights Commission, she has always advocated for women's rights – but she is also in favour of peace talks.

01:19:19

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

There are friends of mine who tell me:
"How can you say this?"

Talking with the Taliban is giving legitimacy
to a terrorist group.

How can you say this? Don't you understand
the human rights record of the Taliban?

They're against everything that you stand for."

01:19:36

GRAEME SMITH

And what did you say?

01:19:37

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

And I say, I also see what this war is doing to us.

We also have a message for the Taliban.

It's not that we or anyone are in a position
to forgive their human rights record

or the government's human rights record.
That's not what we are saying.

We are saying if we want to create
opportunities for more Afghans

to benefit from their basic human rights,
we should try to reduce violence.

And the best way to reduce violence

without causing more damage
is to initiate talks.

01:20:13

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

In the summer of 2019, Akbar went to Doha along with other prominent Afghans to meet the Taliban. She pushed Khairkhwa and his comrades on where they stood on women's rights but his answers were too opaque to reassure her.

01:20:31

KHAIRULLAH KHAIRKHWA [Subtitles]

If we say that we allow women to study

they will say the Taliban
have completely changed.

They want to cause disagreement
among us.

If we say: “No education for women”,
they will claim that we ban it.

They will misinterpret the situation.

Discussing those issues prematurely
has no benefit

except to allow the enemy to exploit it
for propaganda.

01:20:58

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

I felt like there was a lot of
rehearsed statements.

01:21:01

GRAEME SMITH

Right, sort of standard line. So when the Taliban say they’re committed to protecting the rights of women that have been given to them by the sacred religion of Islam, what does that mean?

01:21:13

SHAHARZAD AKBAR [Captions]

I asked them this in Doha.

For Taliban to claim that
they have monopoly over Islam

is absolutely outrageous
and not acceptable to anyone.

01:21:25

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Despite the tensions and mistrust, by February 2020 the Americans and the Taliban managed to pull off a deal. The Taliban paraded to the signing ceremony, triumphant. Maybe they didn’t win the war -- but the Americans had failed to defeat them -- and the United States was finally admitting it.

01:21:47

CROWD [Subtitles]

Long live the Islamic Emirate
of Afghanistan!

01:21:55

AMMAR ZMARAK

It doesn't show our victory, but definitely it shows the loss and the weakness of the Americans and all other foreign troops, foreign countries who have troops in Afghanistan.

01:22:08

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Inside a Doha hotel ballroom packed with dignitaries from around the world, an historic handshake between the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and a Taliban leader, something hard to imagine in previous years.

01:22:15

SUPER

Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Special Envoy

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Taliban Co-founder

01:22:32

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But this was not a peace deal. There was no ceasefire on the horizon, no vision for the future Afghan state. The Taliban promised to prevent Al-Qaeda or other groups from using Afghan soil for terrorism. The Americans promised to pull out of the country if the Taliban started talking with the Afghan government. The U.S. hoped that somehow the two sides could reach a compromise across the battle lines.

02:23:12

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

But that hope vanished once the Americans withdrew the last of their troops.

A corrupt government and its demoralized forces collapsed in a matter of weeks. By August 2021, the victorious Taliban had swept back to power.

Hamdullah Mohib remained as the National Security advisor to the President until the very end.

01:23:44

HAMDULLAH MOHIB

I think the word "peace" gives warmth to everyone's heart. People immediately assume that we will have stability. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. If you strong-arm us into accepting whatever deal you strike, you're going to banish us from our own country. We would be seen as traitors. There would be no space. There would be no room for us. The Taliban are extremists, so you may see a bloodbath on the streets of Kabul. So, you know, this was not a simple matter of negotiation and a difference of opinion over policy. This is about the future of my country, my people, quite literally our lives.

01:24:41

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Those left behind will live under Taliban rule, something they could not ever have imagined.

01:24:54

ADIBA [Subtitles]

I don't think these two worlds
will ever come together.

The contradictions are very deep.

We hope we are not forced

to tolerate the Taliban again one day.

01:25:06

MARIAM [Subtitles]

They will not accept us...

and we will not accept them.

01:25:14

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Already threats to her life had forced Farahnaz Forotan to flee the country.

Shaharзад Akbar chose to stay until the last minute – even as she saw her dreams for the future vanish.

01:25:37

RAHMATULLAH AMIRI

People want peace, that's one thing. How they want it is subject to different interpretations, different groups, different ethnicities, different areas. Most of the people in Afghanistan want international troops to withdraw from this country. Having said that, they want also the Taliban to compromise with the other Afghans, that's the two things. Nobody wants to go to the Taliban rule of 1994 to 2001. And nobody wants the current corrupt government officials either. So there must be some sort of in-between.

01:26:15

That dream of an "in-between", of a compromise at the peace table that would include all Afghans, crumbled with the Taliban victory.

At the time, this journey inspired me, because I felt – however briefly – that there was a chance for some kind of negotiated end to the war.

Now very little remains of the foreigners' plans for Afghanistan... and the dreams we inspired, except for painted slogans on fortified walls. Soon even those will disappear.

01:27:07 **SUBTITLE** I love Afghanistan

01:27:13 **SUBTITLE** Afghan women are brave
and will not be silenced

01:27:25

GRAEME SMITH (VO)

Now girls are putting their burqas back on... and venturing out – like so many others - into an uncertain future, once again under Taliban rule...

01:27:59 **SLATE** Hamdullah Mohib fled the country
on the day the Taliban entered Kabul.

Shaharзад Akbar had to evacuate.

Dr. Aziza Watanwall Azizi is determined
to keep her health clinic open.

The school for girls in Kandahar is closed.
It's not known if it will reopen.

01:28:11

CREDITS