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Mira Menzfeld

Editorial: The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects,
Resonance: A Special Issue (not only) for the Interested Public

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Abstract

In the late summer of 2021, after decades of instability, Afghanistan was rocked by yet another tragically familiar upheaval when the Taliban assumed power. It seemed to take them only days, but in actual fact there had been signs long before that the fall of Kabul was imminent. To understand more clearly how this was possible, we need detailed and reliable insights. How do people from Afghanistan – both inside the country and abroad – perceive the situation? What are the real-life conditions for the latest developments? What underlying religious and social factors motivate the Taliban? This special issue addresses questions such as these. It brings together articles that describe and contextualise the background, effects, and resonance of the fall of Kabul in 2021. The articles help, for example, to develop a more nuanced understanding of 'the' Taliban; they tell about everyday life in small Afghan towns, about deployment as a soldier in Afghanistan, and about families who have been refugees for generations. On the one hand, the issue contributes to an understanding of one of the most important events in global politics in the early 2020s. On the other, it shows that anthropological studies on Afghanistan offer a vivid impression of the current state of anthropology as a discipline (Monsutti 2013). This special issue is aimed not only at colleagues within the discipline who appreciate relevant yet reader-friendly articles, but also – and especially – at non-anthropologists with an interest in Afghanistan. The main section contains the centrepiece of this issue: eight texts by various Afghanistan experts. The editorial and the afterword frame the issue and suggest various main and cross-cutting themes for which the articles can be read. The appendix offers a short outline of important historical events in Afghanistan, to provide background and context for the articles.

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Universität Hamburg
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D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
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Editorial

The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance A Special Issue (not only) for the Interested Public

Mira Menzfeld

Prologue

‘My life has a lot to do with planes,’ says Atal.¹ ‘Maybe that’s why I like them so much.’ Atal is in his early twenties and works as baggage handler at Zurich airport. He laughs often and melodiously; his T-shirt shows a picture of Muhammad Ali. Shortly after his birth, attackers flew two planes into the World Trade Centre in the United States of America (US). Not long after, another set of planes flew over his mother’s house in Afghanistan, loaded with bombs. At some point, an airfield was built near a piece of land that his family cultivated. Big transport planes landed there; Atal marvelled at them from a distance. Acquaintances of his family helped the soldiers with the big planes so that these could move around the country without loss of life. Other neighbours were angry because these soldiers wanted to move around a country that was not theirs without risk to their lives. That went on for many years. Then one day the transport planes stopped coming. Instead, planes departed from Kabul, with people clinging on to them, then falling off and dying: ‘That was shortly after I left.’ Atal knew someone in Iran; he’d gone to him and received help buying a ticket to Zurich. Now Atal lives in Kloten and works at the airport. He volunteers for the hard early shifts and the long late shifts because they are better paid. And he likes working near planes. ‘Sometimes I think I might become a pilot one day.’ When he’s not working, Atal does sport. He gets a discount at the gym if he helps a bit with tidying up and cleaning. Some of the people there have become a substitute family for him. But whenever a plane from Central Asia lands during one of his shifts at the airport, he hopes, just a little bit, that someone from his real family will be on it – for example, the second cousin he grew up with, whom he loves like a brother, and whose family is poorer than his own. What he would really like to do is get his cousin out of Afghanistan; he has even talked to other Afghans in Zurich to see whether it would be possible. But unfortunately, it is not that simple: ‘My cousin is involved with the Taliban.’ The cousin wants to obtain security and food for his family, because it is becoming more and more tricky for those who do not want to get involved. ‘But here no one understands what it’s like when you have to choose between hunger and the Taliban.’

1 Atal is a pseudonym, used for data protection purposes.

Clearly, even people who live or have grown up in similar contexts do not necessarily think and act in similar ways: this should be understandable even to those who do not have a brother or sister or, like Atal, a close cousin. So there is no such thing as *the* Afghan response to the Taliban. There are men who are prepared to risk their lives in the losing battle for the ideal of religious freedom, and there are women who would rather die than give up their dream of becoming a doctor. But there are also people who do none of these things, and instead flee the country – like Atal.

If we want to know how Afghans are currently faring, in Afghanistan and abroad, we must be aware of as many of these perspectives as possible. Describing and understanding emic² internal logics, local contexts, and ambiguities is a core component of anthropological study. This special issue, therefore, presents contextualising knowledge on Afghanistan, most of which has been produced by anthropologists who have studied Afghans and Afghanistan closely. The field of anthropology includes, amongst other things:

- getting to know the perspective of the people on the ground,
- not just paying attention to what is immediately comprehensible to the researchers but also understanding things that initially seem incomprehensible, and
- identifying and describing ambiguities and simultaneities in perceptions and modes of action.

About this issue

I would like to dedicate this special issue to Atal. I met him when a mutual acquaintance – we happen to do the same sport – introduced us and asked whether I could produce a kind of official ‘clearance certificate’ for Atal’s cousin: the thinking was that an academic like me who was studying jihadi groups might be able to do that sort of thing. I could not; but Atal and I went out for a meal, and since then we have met several times and talked. Atal has often said that he feels many people in Europe completely misunderstand Afghanistan: ‘In their minds, there are only helpless girls there, and some sort of monsters who want to torment them. But it’s not so simple.’ Gradually, our conversations inspired the idea for this issue. The intention was to produce a resource written by people who know Afghanistan well and are skilled in making this knowledge available to non-experts; the authors were asked to apply plain language principles so that non-academics could also understand what they meant.³ This has resulted in a wide variety of texts: some read

2 ‘Emic’ is a technical term meaning ‘considered from an internal viewpoint, from the perspective of a context-competent group member’. The opposite is ‘etic’ – considered from an external perspective.

3 Unfortunately Atal did not want to be involved in the compilation, but he welcomed the idea. I am curious to see what he will say about the finished product.

like lavish long-term reports, some like comprehensive overviews, some like magazine articles – but all of them allow people in and from Afghanistan to speak for themselves.

The texts complement the many analyses that have appeared in numerous media outlets during August 2022 to mark the anniversary of the fall of Kabul. Based on long-term research, the articles offered here contribute new nuances and perspectives to the overall picture. They take a closer look, for example, at places in Afghanistan that fall between the extremes of ‘city’ and ‘village’, and explain how local opinions about the Taliban change in such places. They help us not to think of Afghanistan in isolation but to understand Central Asia as a region of cross-border networks of relationships and trade. They analyse how conflicts affect biographies over multiple generations and across national borders. They examine various literal and metaphorical meanings of ‘ground’ in Afghanistan, to understand what has happened in past decades and what is happening today with this country and its people. They raise the famous and difficult question of whether Muslim women really need to be rescued (Abu-Lughod 2002). They characterise locally significant forms of masculinity and social organisation, and identify the contexts that change and shape these forms. They advocate a more complex conception of the Taliban, revising the orientalisising⁴ view that this is a stable, religiously unified group. And they offer a nuanced understanding of European deportation practices to which Afghans have been and still are subjected. The appendix contains a brief timeline of important events, to give readers – if they wish – a preliminary overview of the history of Afghanistan and provide background and context for the articles.

The cover photo “Shrine for the Martyred” by Gregory Thielker captures what this special issue tries to offer:

insights into a country so undeniably marked by war that – just like in the improvised gravesite in the photo – it is not even clear in which wave of conflict those being mourned died and on which side they had fought;

but also insights into a country in which even the omnipresence of graves and danger cannot cloud the view of an open, bright landscape that makes up the background of this picture and, in a way, of Afghanistan itself. Afghanistan, despite all the hardships it faces, also harbours an openness and perhaps a subtle hope that co-shapes it before and in and after all the conflicts.

This special issue can be read in different ways: depending on the order or combination in which the individual articles are read, different aspects emerge, which may expand the reader’s understanding of recent events in Afghanistan. The next four sections give a brief overview of the content of the

4 ‘Orientalism’ was Edward Said’s (1981) term for a simplistic, European-influenced view of different regions, cultures, and people, particularly in Arabic- and Persian-speaking countries and of Muslim-majority societies. Typical of this view is the opposition between the motifs of the ‘enlightened West’ and the ‘mysterious Orient’.

individual articles in the order of their appearance in the issue and divided into three principal themes: background, effects, and resonance.

Background

The first part of this special issue is concerned with people who have had to deal, directly or indirectly, with the fall of Kabul, and the underlying factors that explain their attitudes and actions. The texts cover the Taliban, the inhabitants of a small Afghan town, and soldiers deployed on the ground. The aim is to create the prerequisites for at least a general understanding of key actors and people affected.

Noah Coburn and Arsalan Noori present a vivid report of how a small town in Afghanistan reacted to the changing political conditions of the last few years, and how it is faring at present, after the fall of Kabul. Istalif is situated in an attractive valley and used to be a popular tourist destination. This town – too big for a village but too small for a city – is a regional trade centre, where people sell carpets, pottery, and agricultural produce, as they have done for decades, perhaps even centuries. In recent years, however, much has changed. The gap between rich and poor has grown wider; and people and groups who were once close no longer trust each other. And although the Taliban never had much support in Istalif, few residents sincerely regret the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Coburn and Noori help us understand why this is so. Their portrait of the town highlights tendencies that can be found in similar or even equal form in many other Afghan market towns and show Afghan perspectives on the latest political upheavals. Both authors have worked in Afghanistan for decades. Coburn is a professor of cultural anthropology who, in 2011, published the first comprehensive ethnography of Afghanistan since the 1970s; Noori is a local researcher and has worked on several projects with Coburn.

In the next article, Conrad Schetter contextualises ‘the’ Taliban and the preconditions for their latest advance. His article begins with an observation that preoccupied him during one of his many visits to Afghanistan: young middle-class men setting out to fight for the Taliban, motivated not so much by religious fervour as by their desire to drive a real tank. Starting from this impression, Schetter explains how interactions between Pashtun and jihadi ideas and tendencies came about historically, creating a foundation for the Taliban who are active today. The article argues, finally, that ‘the’ Taliban are not a regrettable Afghan exception forming a homogeneous military movement. Instead, we are facing a phenomenon that is simultaneously very global, very local, and thoroughly heterogeneous – a phenomenon that we now know a fair amount about, but far from everything. Schetter is a professor of peace and conflict studies and a director of a centre for conflict studies; he also advises various non-governmental organisations and government de-

partments. He works on intervention policy, fragile states, and ethnic and religious aspects of violence, particularly in Asia.

In the third article, a captain of the Germany army (the Bundeswehr), here referred to as 'X.' for the sake of anonymity, reports on his experiences in the context of the latest international military operation in Afghanistan. He notes how unsurprised he and his comrades are by the failure of the intervention, and explains why, even during their time in Afghanistan, they felt more than once that the mission was neither well planned nor well executed. He writes about highly isolated areas of deployment in regions that were entirely controlled by the Taliban, difficult divergencies and interlinkages between German and US mission objectives, the often far-from-ideal working conditions in Mazar i-Sharif, and the ambiguities of supposedly clear orders and information flows. He also casts light on the collaboration with Afghans on the ground, for example the advisory missions that were one of the tasks of the Bundeswehr and were often more of a hindrance to Afghanistan than a help. X. spent seven months in Afghanistan as head of a German operational unit towards the end of the 'Resolute Support' mission.

These three articles present concise reports by people who are very familiar with the perspectives they describe. They will be of interest to anyone who wants to understand the internal logic and the underlying conditions for the actions of the Taliban, of ordinary small-town Afghans, and of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan.

Effects

The second part of this special issue concentrates on what current and past conflicts mean for Afghans themselves and their view of the world; in other words, this is about the effects of the fall of Kabul. Here anthropologists Fatima Mojaddedi and Parin Dossa and the peace and conflict researcher Heela Najibullah investigate what concrete effects decades of war and insecurity, including the latest upheavals, have on Afghans.

Parin Dossa reports in words and images on how families and in particular women in Afghanistan are faring, what they are thinking, and what their daily life is like. During research visits to Afghanistan, Dossa built up long-term relationships with Afghan women, who were and still are severely affected by violent conflict, along with their families. Using photographs (some of which she presents in her article) as a starting point and methodological tool, she questioned the people she met about their experiences and survival strategies – and asked them to talk about the things that were important to them. In her article, she repeatedly allows Afghan women to speak for themselves. They talk about how – amidst hunger, the loss of their jobs, and the empty chairs of the children who have fled the country – they still get up every morning, find bread and water, and, despite all the shortages and the

past and present horrors, make a life for themselves and their families. Dossa is a professor of cultural and social anthropology; her research is focused on Muslim women in the contexts of migration and displacement, and on structural violence, in Central and South Asia, amongst other areas.

Heela Najibullah uses key elements of biographies to show how Afghan refugees, in exile, view the conflicts and hostilities that lie behind them – and how experiences of war shape many life stories and family histories over generations, even in the diaspora. Starting from her research contacts with Afghans in Switzerland and Germany, she provides insight into refugee narratives and interpretations of war, and describes how unspoken experiences of war also mark the children of those directly affected. The refugees and arrivals she portrays in her article offer various perspectives on why different parties to the conflicts believed they were serving a just cause; and they draw attention to what can and cannot be said. The author herself has personal knowledge of the way experiences of violence, passed down between generations, can become deeply inscribed in individual biographies. As she makes clear in her essay, her own life has been inextricably linked with war and political change in Afghanistan. As a doctoral candidate in religious studies, Najibullah is currently studying Afghan refugees and is particularly interested in the intergenerational transmission of stories of conflict and strategies for coping with trauma.

In an academic essay, Fatima Mojaddedi analyses how local land, which might once have been just a place for grazing farm animals, a vegetable field, or simply a homeland, has acquired new qualities and unaccustomed meanings in Afghanistan over the last few decades. This applies very concretely to people who tread on a land mine whilst walking across a field to perform an everyday task and must continue life as amputees. For many, the land that has been irreversibly transformed by war and state interventions of various kinds will never again simply represent their livelihood; it will simultaneously be a minefield. In its quality as minefield, it sometimes serves as a new economic factor for locals, who use it as source for scrap metal and sell what they find at bazaars. Since land is less usable because of the mines, the fields that can still be accessed (fairly) safely are more heavily fertilised. However, fertiliser not only serves to make the land more productive, it is also used (especially when it is so readily available) to make bombs. So a substance that is intended to bring more life to the fields is used by some to take lives instead. In her article, the author gives an emphatic reminder that war is inscribed into local environments at an elemental level and over long periods, even in places where bombs did not fall in large numbers nor was there regular house-to-house fighting. Mojaddedi is an assistant professor with a research focus on psychological cultural anthropology. She has worked on armed conflicts and jurisprudence in Afghanistan for several years.

Resonance

The third part of this special issue clarifies the context of regional and global resonances in which regime changes in Afghanistan take place – and what effects they can have beyond the Afghan borders. Here two authors show what was and is important before and during the fall of Kabul, both in the Central Asian region as a whole and in one of the destination countries for Afghan refugees – and what we need to know if we are to better understand the current situation.

In an academic commentary, Martin Sökefeld asks what potential the regime change in Kabul has to change German refugee policy. He begins by outlining what this policy has been so far. Whilst Afghans arriving in Germany used to be deported to Afghanistan, because the situation there was supposedly safe enough (though in reality this was often not true), the fall of Kabul in 2021 markedly altered the assessment and the approach of the German state. It was only after the Taliban took power that the situation seemed so indisputably bad that Germany stopped sending people back. The author explains the mechanisms and motivations behind the German practice of deportation and what it stands for: a very concrete negotiation – sometimes paid for with human lives – of the abstract question of what and who is permitted to belong to a central European order of being, and who and what must be excluded from it at all costs. Sökefeld is a professor of social and cultural anthropology and his research areas include disaster management, displacement, migration, and Islam, with a focus on Central and South Asia.

The last article is a scholarly overview by Magnus Marsden in which he contextualises how Afghan political dynamics, and indeed many people in Afghanistan, are linked to the whole Central Asian region. One example used to illustrate this is the surprising connection between an Afghan businessman with links to China and a fascination for Eckhard Tolle, a self-appointed spiritual teacher from Lünen in Germany. Marsden shows how it is unrealistic to view Afghanistan as separated from other regions of the world: this would contradict the self-image of many Afghan people, the real-life flows of goods and ideas, and the impossibility of defining distinct boundaries between cultures and identities. Instead, he argues, we need to see Afghanistan not as an isolated and – regrettably – inherently unstable outlier in the middle of Asia but recognise that it has always played an important role as an economic, political, and cultural crossroads in the middle of Central Asia – and beyond. Dynamics and mobility, says the author, are key to understanding the region and not the often-repeated and simplistic idea of a solitary and immobile Afghanistan. Marsden, a professor of social and cultural anthropology with many years of field research experience in Afghanistan, heads several centres of research on Afghanistan and advises governments and non-governmental organisations on Central Asian issues.

Final remarks

The texts in this special issue do not have to be read in the order they are arranged. The brief historical overview in the appendix can be consulted at any time. And when the articles are read in an individually chosen combination, different from their order of presentation, this will give rise to further links, ideas and questions – about Afghanistan itself and about the wider world. In the afterword to this issue, I therefore invite readers to consider the articles as clusters of thoughts on the themes of *(Un)heimlichkeit* (un/canniness or un/homeliness), border crossings, and action in crises. This conceptual re-grouping is likely to be of particular interest to anthropologists but may also appeal to people who are interested in classic and contemporary topics of anthropological research. I close the afterword by returning to Atal.

Each article is available in both German and English. English is the most widespread language of scholarship but the wider public in the German-speaking area (where the journal *Ethnoscripts* is based) prefers to read in German. The bilingual nature of the issue is thus intended to make the content of the articles accessible to as many people as possible.

For now I wish you all – both colleagues and keen readers – an interesting and informative read.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go, first of all, to Atal: it was my conversations with you that sparked the idea for this special issue. I hope you will be able to see your family again and create a life that you see as successful.

I would like to thank the authors of this special issue and the academic reviewers, who all showed great commitment to realising this idea of a generally accessible academic resource on the recent events in Afghanistan. I am grateful to the editorial team of *Ethnoscripts*, who enthusiastically supported this issue and did everything to make it possible. Thank you to Caroline Jeannerat, who was responsible for the careful English-language copy-editing; to Textworks for the accurate and stylistically dextrous translations; and to the master of style, Sebastian Bröder, for his insightful comments and constructive ideas on my texts in this issue. Last but not least, a big thank-you to the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Zurich, especially to Dorothea Lüddeckens: without their substantial financial support, the translations into German would not have been possible.

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Mira Menzfeld is a cultural and social anthropologist and works as an advanced postdoctoral fellow in the University Research Priority Programme 'Digital Religion(s)', the Department of Religious Studies, University of Zurich. Her areas of specialisation include the anthropology of dying, the anthropology of religion with a focus on Islam and religious 'digitability', and the anthropology of emotions, especially in couple relationships. She has carried out fieldwork in Switzerland, Finland, South China, and Germany with terminally ill people, European Salafis, and transmigrants. As a former journalist, Mira is particularly concerned with the transfer of anthropological knowledge into public contexts.

University of Zurich
Email: mira.menzfeld@uzh.ch