



“Name of the Night”

**A Few Days in Kabul, Afghanistan
Three months after the fall of the Taliban
Schools are the front line now**

By S. Edwards





The children and schools of Kabul, their amazing teachers and other outstanding adults are involved in an incredible speed-of-light rescue of an ancient society from sustained abuse.



I traveled to Afghanistan with the group Global Exchange to create a video document of a group of Afghan-Americans returning to assist a nation attempting to restore itself to civil life. Two decades of brutal, senseless war have cost the Afghan population. Almost two million are dead, and many millions more are refugees.

We have an image in the West of a depressed population belied by the reality of the energy, vitality and even the joy of the people we met who, in just a few months of freedom, have begun turning their devastated land into a new dynamic reality.

—S. Edwards



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Dubai

We arrived in the United Arab Emirates city of Dubai at 2:30 a.m. The airport itself is a complete town in a desert. We went to a facility with showers, a sauna and full-sized palm trees inside.

My group left for Ariana Airlines, the international Afghan airline. It has one flight a week from Dubai to Kabul on its one airplane. Left over from the 1970s, the plane is the same one hijacked to Heathrow two years ago. I tried to take an escalator in the airport and became lost in the stupendous building. I caught up to the Global Exchange group by running through security with every piece of metal still in my pockets. If I set off alarms, it wasn't enough to rouse the snoozing soldier. As long as it was confined to Ariana Airlines, it's as though terrorism isn't a big issue.

We were driven in a bus towards the undeveloped part of the airport almost in the dunes. There, 150 Afghans in whites and vests, who had just been repatriated as field workers from Kuwait, were waiting to board the Ariana flight.

Afghan Time

Our Afghan travel agent traveling with us showed up with our passports and tickets halfway through the boarding. We discovered that six of us didn't have return tickets to Dubai but agreed we'd work it out on Afghan time.

We walked out to the airplane where one of the Afghan-American women, Holima, who is returning as a journalist, had the crew line up for photographs. One of the remarkable things about this trip has been Afghan men's response to the Afghan-American women, some of whom have never been to Afghanistan. They call them 'mother' and 'sister.' When one of them kissed the ground, nearby soldiers – who not long before might have been involved in the increased ethnic

violence that came with the Taliban – broke into tears.

Many things unique about Afghanistan came into play during the flight. We flew with what could have been a company of dissident Mujhadeen, and the pilots' compartment door remained wide open. It took a 30,000-foot elevation to dissipate the 110-degree heat, nature surpassing what the ancient air conditioning system couldn't handle.

I sat next to a character who was either what he said he was – an expatriate Afghan working with an international relief agency in Pakistan, visiting Afghanistan monthly throughout the Taliban era – or the glint in his eye was of a Taliban sympathizer welcomed during their regime. During the two-hour flight the crew gathered and smoked in the rear of the plane while a group of European and American "businessmen," or agents of various international interests seemingly stationed in Kuwait and Yemen, made rough jokes, appearing to be extras from a "Casablanca" remake.

Warrior Consciousness

This community of warriors of Afghan consciousness meant the crew gently suggested changes of behavior to the men excitedly returning home. With these guys, it's not acceptable to yell.

Professional journalists trolled the aisles for photographs suffered by the endlessly patient crew, who occasionally posed in the rhythm of the moment.

For a good part of the trip extra bags were piled up in front of the emergency exit door while the possible agent-provocateur seated next to me repaired my arm rest. It had come apart during take-off. The issue of shifting alliances was in evidence. When my seatmate said to me, after asking who was in my group and I answered – Afghan-Americans returning to help – unlike our previous, suspicious repartee, he replied: "Great. Afghanistan needs everybody, now."



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Kabul Airport Thrills

After talking the returnees into taking their seats for landing, we dived onto the runway so hard the ceiling panels popped loose. Evidently there is a 2000-pound live bomb buried at the end of the runway. They don't yet have in-country equipment to be able to remove it, just as they don't have the heavy equipment to repair bombed-out roads. We careened through a line of destroyed military aircraft to the bombed-out terminal and past an airport ceremony conducted by interim-President Karzai dedicating a somewhat newer 727 just purchased for Ariana. President Karzai was there flanked by warlords – now generals – in high-peaked Soviet-style caps.

We disembarked the airplane among a sea of Mujhadeen with their ancient Kalashnikovs. We milled around in the general melee of passport control, finally miraculously reconnecting with our bags that I had vowed never to allow in the belly of a plane.

I hadn't really taken to heart the Afghan code to never yield to bureaucracy. Even the most American Afghan-American girl blissfully ignored directions by loudspeaker and carried bags four times the newest regulation size, pushing them into the boarding area with her feet. We got outside with only our travel agent who was coming as pathfinder for future tours by Pamir Travel in Fremont, Calif. He had ridiculed us for our fear of separation and lost every single piece of his luggage.

Afghan-American Women Rock

The women in the airport exit were surrounded by waves of soldiers supposedly on security posing for photo opportunities. We were taken by car to the guesthouse where we were staying, and the returnees told of how unbearably moving it was to see home for the first time or to return after endless absence.

Even Kabul International Airport is still being de-mined (by the Danish de-mining team), and it will take decades for even the major

cities to be rid of all mines. Since 1979, 400,000 Afghans have been killed by mines, and 400,000 injured.

We traveled through Kabul with the young American-Afghan women ecstatically yelling “Salaam Aleikum!” to the primarily male population. The men almost invariably yelled it back with delight. Amazing!

Kabul is enormous and intense in the manner of New Delhi or Mexico City, which, as far as I know, never had to endure years of shelling and rocketing.

Afghans More Than Ready

As the special focus of the group was education, we began by visiting a school for the deaf, the Hearing Impaired Foundation of Afghanistan (HIFA), run by a genius who has figured it all out. This school is a model for the new Afghanistan, epitomizing as it does traditional Afghan tolerance with the principal being an ethnic Hazara and his assistant an ethnic Pashtun. The Taliban, along with religious extremism, had escalated ethnic cleansing of everyone but Pashtuns, so that when they drove the government bureaucracy out, they only had village mullahs to run state agencies.

The school principal's range extends from overcoming parental shame of the stigma of deaf children, teaching skills to the kids, providing an equivalent education, to finding equipment donations to support the families when they graduated. He went as far as securing legislation to give the disabled equal rights. They even sponsor a sign-language news program on Kabul TV. I don't think there's even one in New York.

We then visited a school for street children, which will lose its lease shortly to a high paying NGO. We visited Kabul University, in a district bombarded by warlords attacking each other from the surrounding hills in the early 1990s. This was prior to the Taliban so we realized then why their regime had originally been welcomed.

The Kabul U. students debated the young Afghans from the States about only being here after the toughest times were over. But the stu-

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dents were won over by the humility and deference of the kids from the States and were also moved by their commitment to organize support and continue returning, something a lot of us non-Afghans intend to do. It is a great place, for instance, to be an enthusiastic American.

Much of that part of Kabul that people on the trip remembered, most either from being here as children or from their parents' stories, had been completely destroyed. What is left of Kabul, though, is so dynamic that in its few months of freedom it is as if they started from the place of a successful third world city. It's impossible to imagine how sophisticated this ancient place once was.

We visited the National Gallery, which had been trashed by the Taliban with every single human image ripped out of the paintings. The Taliban spent most of their administration restricting the movement of women and the length of men's beards. While the infrastructure fell apart, at least the ancient art of carpet weaving, which is so expressive of the soul and history of Afghanistan, continued.

Throughout the city are check points run by armed troops some of whom looked into the car with eyes that seemed as though they could pull the trigger in a heartbeat if in a previous era. We went later to the gravesite of the step-father of one of the women on the tour, Zolaykha. Zolaykha's step-father was the most famous Afghan singer. His gravesite, along with the women mourning there, was destroyed by the Taliban.

Another Intercontinental Hotel

We stopped by another Intercontinental Hotel a long way from Managua or the other hotspots the Intercontinental chain claims pre-eminence in. No Contra or Taliban were hanging out there. I drank my first cup of coffee on the trip sitting in a window overlooking Kabul below. As in Managua, the hotel is filled with journalists

uniformed in grubby photographers' vests.

The hotel halls were patrolled by excess doormen – in Soviet-era officers' caps that their generals favor – stepping around buckets for the numerous roof leaks.

On returning to where we were staying, the proprietors of Pamir Travel, who had escorted us halfway around the world for this initial tour, complained that we did not appreciate all the attempted extortion of the group that they had deflected, such as bogus traveling surcharges. Matt from Pamir said he had traveled here to learn what was involved in order to move future trips hassle-free. He had done this only three months after his brother, the original owner of Pamir Travel, had been killed by a fellow Afghan expatriate for obscure political reasons while in the line of duty behind his desk. His cousin, who worked with him, pulled up his shirt to show his own healing bullet wound in the abdomen.

We traveled to Al Fatha school, located in an old Soviet-occupation-era building, with thousands of students attending in two shifts. It's principal, a woman, had only been on duty for the few months since President Karzai – whose brothers have restaurants in San Francisco, Boston, etc. – authorized the education of girls. Wafi, a successful entrepreneur from Northern California, said that is what overseas Afghans are returning with: the knowledge that you don't have to do something wrong to prosper.

The New Front Line: Schools

Whereas the Mujhadeen commanders used to complain about lack of arms to fight the Soviets, Afghan teachers now complain about lack of books, desks, windows, pencils and money for teachers' salaries since the social onslaught of the Taliban. In an eleventh grade classroom, several beautiful girls stepped up to tell the world that Afghan girls would have to be bold and demand equal rights with males. Their principal explained that some of her first-grade girls were teenagers who had been denied education during the Taliban regime.



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Overseas Afghans got to do It

There is not one window left in the least destroyed of Kabul schools. My daughter says, “We complain about going to school, and they mourn not going.” Most of these schools try to give the kids at least one meal a day but have had their food rations cut back by relief agencies. The schools have only the educated Afghans – that the school’s training allowed to emigrate – to appeal to.

Individuals, Not NGOs

One of the schools we visited with thousands of students attending in shifts was in the bombed out shell of an adobe-type building complex. There, a teacher wept in shame at what we were seeing. All the schools say the NGOs come by, take pictures, sympathize and have not yet returned with tangible aid. Perhaps, they said, after the *loya jurga* or ‘grand assembly’ decide the future course of Afghanistan, aid will come.

And that is the remarkable thing: how much a small gift can provide. One principal said that \$1,000 would carpet every classroom of a school with 5000 students attending, and most of the returning Afghans had brought at least that much.

Rebuilding the physical structure of almost all the schools could be done for the cost of one day of bombing.

At several of the schools we saw, classes were given to warn the kids about the location and recognition of mines.

Mines in the Curriculum

One afternoon, a returned, overseas Afghan from New York, who was accompanied by the grandson of the previous king and his three bodyguards, came to tell the group about a program to encourage the return and employment of overseas Afghans.

After dinner that night, the smokers went outside as usual. This time someone cranked up the CD player in one of the parked vans. Soon everyone was dancing in traditional Afghan style. The visit of a turbaned officer from one of the militias conscripted into the Kabul security force caused a momentary stop. He banged on the gate with his Kalashnikov. The guesthouse proprietor tried to head him off, but he strode by mumbling about “infidels.” As soon as he had been talked back into the street, the impromptu party continued with the Afghans saying it was Afghan tradition to celebrate till dawn.

This is “Our Country”

Similarly, when one of our party had been detained and her video removed for filming a member of the International Security Force, they demanded the papers of her Afghan driver. The driver refused to give them, saying this was his country.

Ashmad, our driver and guide, told of living in Kabul prior to the Taliban when a warlord took his father’s car and his belongings. His mistake: giving the warlord a ride. Nevertheless, he said the Taliban tried to take their souls, which was far worse.

We went to the Shamali Plains, which had been the bread basket of Afghanistan, mentioned by Herodotus for its fertility and amazing beauty and where there had been a residence established by Alexander the Great. It had been destroyed tree-by-tree, vine-by-vine, house-by-house – not for the first time – and the population repatriated to the old Russian Embassy by the Taliban, creating a concentration camp with over 20,000 people jammed into the grounds. Greek soldiers of the International Security Force, in effect securing the right of return of these farmers, are incredibly proud of their mission and that “We are the first Greeks in this amazing country since Alexander the Great!”

We toured down the main paved road which had been periodically ripped up to create road blocks at check points. The road is lined with blown up tanks and centuries old trees pushed



down by Soviet Forces to deny ambushes. The highway itself is complete with shell and rocket holes, not to mention ordinary enormous New-York-style potholes.

The Taliban Cut Every Ancient Vine

After awhile we turned off on a dirt road toward the Hindu Kush mountains. We passed mile after mile of chopped up vineyards and burned down houses gradually climbing towards the mountain. Finally we rounded a curve, and there, framed against the mountains on the far side of a river was a large town climbing the slopes with the perfection that only centuries could achieve.

Our group stood for photos against this amazing background. Only when you zoomed in close could you see that the picture was of only the shells of houses.

After a flat tire from the fierce road rocks, we stopped at a small oasis around an enormous tree. It was a spring coming up from between several boulders. A young man we gave a ride to had been walking for hours to wash in this spring for skin problems Western medicine hadn't been able to help. The story is that the Prophet had granted a supplicant's request to be saved from the attack of some demonic form under the condition that he remain there as a rock for pilgrims to sit on. I quickly downed a quart of that water.

We drove into the foreground of the village that had been so picturesque from a distance. No longer did our group see the shattered houses as a scenic backdrop for group photos. The homes were being worked on by usually no more than a man and a child. These returned residents waved in what seemed disproportionate gratitude for our visit. Often a child ran out with a flower, or the adult, a possible descendant of Alexander's troops living in a tent on his own devastated property, would invite us in for tea or send out green cherries with salt.



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The Taliban Brought the Darkest Times

A farmer told us that water would restore the vineyard, that this was not the first pogrom the ancient vines had survived. We could see in fact they were already sprouting green from their sawed off remnants. The farmer echoed Ashmad's story about the Taliban: They had brought the darkest of times.

Kids Get Lots of Hugs

One day we went to the central orphanage of Kabul with perhaps 500 kids, from toddlers to 12-year-olds. Most had lost both parents in the wars and, of the largest percentage of the remainder, their parents were too disabled to care for them. Once again, the staff had a passion to teach and to nurture. Every single child was hugged regularly. The teachers work there for a few dollars a month out of their passion to rescue children and to make Afghanistan a thriving society.

That is the remarkable thing: In a very few months of freedom they have most of the infrastructure in place needing only material aid. Even though the sanitation of the buildings required obvious major restoration, everything was orderly. The staff hoped for the gift of such simple things: a change of clothes appropriate to the season, like sandals for summer. The Afghans have reorganized themselves out of chaos. As Nilufar from Global Exchange said with a hand gesture, "Give them this little and they'll turn it into that much."

In Afghanistan, taking the extremely subjective poll of whom we encountered, there seems to be this overwhelming desire for peace and reconciliation.

An Afghan-American doctor working for a small Afghan-American NGO said that, unlike the United Nations, they drive no Landrovers that

cost enough to fund two medical clinics. There is a mandate to help directly the people who are already helping themselves. He said further that the large aid institutions, even the UN, seem to be driven by a necessity to spend their grants in order to be refunded, thus leading to the proclivity toward high overhead. He said that outside of Kabul 40 to 60 percent of the kids are suffering from fly-borne skin disease, but the relief agencies are reluctant to take the risk to go outside the city to discover that in fact there is no risk.

Everyone we met encouraged small, particularized aid, such as that which the individuals in our group could offer.

Historical Afghan Tolerance

Global Exchange had a party one night at one of the two guesthouses we had booked for the trip. Before all the guests had arrived we witnessed an example of the inherent Afghan tolerance: On one side of the room a band warmed up, while in the other people were eating while others said their prayers.

nam-e-shab

Afghans holding the power positions in the interim government (including members of the old royal family and their bullet-proof-vested guards) passed up CBS and NBC parties to be where the returning Afghan-Americans were assembled. (Even President Karzai visited with the group later.) Unlike the traditional Afghan party, these days parties have to end by curfew at 10 p.m., or in the case of government officials, they will be phoned shortly before 10 p.m. with the nam-e-shab – the name of the night password.

This is serious business. Some members of our group were out late one night at the Kabul Intercontinental but were given the 'name of the night' by a government official. They were stopped eight times on the way home by automatic weapons locked, loaded and aimed.

One of the cultural expressions of traditional societies is in the transfer of money. I got

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to see this first hand when one of the women on the trip – a Ph.D. candidate at UC Berkeley – casually counted out \$5,000 in cash from a friend of her father in New York to the proprietor, in a business transaction at a Kabul-style convenience store. Simultaneously, he was selling a bottle of water for 10,000 Afghanis (or 35 cents).

Individuals Can Make a Difference

We went one morning to a school in a converted house – run under Muslim auspices – that Diana and Kathleen from Santa Barbara, Calif., were helping sponsor. They had a dozen bags of supplies, medicine and toys that had been raised in yard and door-to-door sales of various home-made stuffs.

The school was small enough that they could hand out individual items to each of the 140 children who had come in on their day off – Friday – to receive the American visitors. This was a wonderful example of the scale on which American donors could see that they made a difference.

After that I traveled with Zolaykha, who is a New York City architect, to assess the traditional mountainside building on the mountain-size rock outcropping of old Kabul. We conversed with a group of men who had just transported a truckload of bricks from Pakistan, mourning the factories they used to have. They said without the international presence, ethnic conflict created by 24 years of war and escalated by the Taliban's radical and ethnic interpretation of the Koran, would flare up again.

We then met the relatives/government officials for a ride out to Lake Quarza where the commander of that region, Mullah Azatullah, hosted a picnic at a few hours notice for the expatriate Afghan-Americans. The picnic was at the drought-ravaged remains of what was the Lake Tahoe of Kabul; finally, though, this year there was some rain.

Picnic with a Commander

When we arrived, instead of remaining at what had been the former prime minister's house, our group started walking down the lakeshore to a former hotel and resort behind an extensive promenade. The lake, which has dropped millions of acre-feet, was now a quarter-mile away over exposed flats.

As we approached we found ourselves in the middle of a small army of militia obviously having R&R. They began to fall in behind the quite beautiful delegation of young Afghan-American women with us. Almost all these women wore their hair exposed. In Kabul this was greeted at worst with bemusement, but more commonly with affection. Often this is a welcomed political statement – women in adjacent cars would remove their hair covering. However, among five or six hundred young men who have grown up with the only way to support their families being by means of a weapon, this was more than their almost total lack of contact with the opposite sex could bear. They began to crowd in, pressing us toward the sea wall. Those of us



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with cameras raised them over our head to hopefully trigger a CNN moment. There were narrow stairs down from the promenade to the dry lake, and Nilufar led our small group of émigrés. We were finding that life after the Taliban in the countryside is not the same as Kabul life.

Parting of the Seas

We retreated with only occasional stops for picture posing to the receded water's edge. Even Americanized Afghans are irresistibly stubborn. Looking back, it was like seeing a flock of birds on a telephone line. Peering men were pressed together shoulder-to-shoulder for hundreds of yards. They then began to descend the narrow steps to the lakebed below. We found the better part of prudence to head across the flats toward the residence, a place where perhaps we should have remained. It was an amazing sight to see this group of very Western women with a few men struggling on inappropriate shoes – including one of our singers with his white golf shoes – to reach the other shore ahead of a gradually spreading stream of bearded men filling the lakebed in the distance. I was kind of hoping our cars would be waiting there for us, not knowing that a festive event had been planned in the middle of all this.

A surreal moment in a Felini manner, for sure.

It turns out we had even brought our own musicians. As we're struggling up the bank, a young militiaman with his AK-47 stepped between us slowing down the convergence of scarily curious countrymen.

We hoped to keep his interest by interviewing him but he deferred to a tribal "elder," who with a few abrupt words, stopped the advancing river of militia. He told us that since he stopped fighting the Soviets, he had moved to whatever part of Afghanistan that wasn't in conflict. He walked us to the site of our picnic. A traditional band was playing. And several men were dancing.

"We're All Just Afghans"

Wafi quotes the great 13th century poet, Rumi, to the Mullah. This rural warrior, who understood the reference, said that though overseas Afghans and those who remained seem different, in reality "we're all just Afghans."

Later, one of the Mullah's sub-commanders, who had just returned from fighting al-Queda with U.S. Special Forces, said Taliban leadership would use propaganda to upset the assembly and elections. This seems to be the time for overseas Afghans to return to help during this fragile transition to democracy.

Just as the Western government had forgotten their friends in Afghanistan, who had routed the Russians, refusing once again to be colonized, this time the Afghans want their overseas family and friends to make that individual effort to help in the time-honored Afghan way. I for one hope to be part of this effort by putting something together to take back in the next six months.

Just as we're all New Yorkers, so too are we all Afghans. ■





To receive some clues on making an individual difference for this society where there seems to be special connection to the west contact:

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The video documentary of this trip may be ordered online for \$25
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