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Histories

November 1996: Women, drugs and Taliban in Kabul

On 27 September 1996, the Taliban – a movement that had started in the southern province of Kandahar two years earlier – also captured Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

At the time, I was carrying out a project for German Technical Cooperation (GTZ, now GIZ) on “drugs and development in Asia”. The purpose was to prepare proposals on how the international community could support a human development-oriented approach to drug control. With Afghanistan being by far the world’s largest producer of opium, the main ingredient of heroin, figuring out the intentions of whoever was in charge of Afghanistan was highly relevant.

And so in November 1996, a few weeks after the [first] fall of Kabul, I travelled there to assess the situation.

In Peshawar, local GTZ staff linked me up with an NGO (the International Rescue Committee) that was ready to take me along to Kabul on the flatbed of a Toyota Hilux. To my amazement another daring passenger had been one of my professors at the South Asia Institute (SAI) of Heidelberg University 15 years previously: Bernt Glatzer was determined to



find out whether anything of the SAI branch in Kabul had survived Russian occupation (1979 – 1989) and the subsequent civil war among Mujaheddin factions.

After crossing the Khyber Pass and entering Afghanistan via the Torkham border we drove towards Jalalabad but then turned north to visit a GIZ carpentry workshop in Kunar province. The Taliban were still fighting Mujaheddin forces in that region, but we were told that travel was safe during daytime. The workshop offering vocational training to young Afghans (men, obviously) was still operating in spite of ongoing fighting in its neighbourhood.



In Kunar, I took a picture of a group of girls that I later on used for the cover of a GTZ publication on [“Drugs and Development in Asia”](#) with the annotation “Drug control is about development opportunities for these girls in Afghanistan”.



As we were about to return to Jalalabad, one of the tyres of the Hilux went flat. I studied a herd of camels in the sunset while it was being replaced with the spare tyre. Two hours later, by now it was dark, a second tyre gave up just as we were entering the hotel compound in Jalalabad.

The next morning we continued from Jalalabad to Kabul for about 150 km along what many consider the most dangerous road in the world with its steep gorges, high cliffs, narrow lanes and sharp turns. Spectacular landscapes were decorated by skeletons of Russian tanks. There was hardly any traffic due to the uncertain security situation following the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul. Surprisingly, there was not a single check point even as we entered Kabul.



In Kabul it was cold with occasional snow flakes. And we were strongly advised not to take any photos to avoid trouble with the new rulers.



Our intention had been to stay at a German embassy guest house where the only personnel left was local guard. While waiting for clearance from the new masters of the city we decided to have lunch. The restaurant was rather dark in a damaged one-storey building. It had no windows and candles were the only source of light. Customers were few and all male. The lunch consisted of rice, bread and lots of meat. As a vegetarian I removed the meat and put it on a separate plate.

Then a group of three Afghan women entered fully covered in burqas begging for money. The owner of the restaurant wanted to chase them away for fear of the Taliban's reaction to women mixing with men in his establishment.

We had no local money yet to give them and there were rumours of Taliban cutting off fingers of persons carrying Pakistani rupees.

When I moved my plate with meat closer to the women, the food rapidly disappeared under their clothes – they ate it standing there. They seemed to be close to starving under their burqas. So I asked the manager of the restaurant to send the women to the back of the room where nobody could see them and serve them all the food they wanted.



These women were not the exception. The streets of Kabul were full of women erring around under burqas to find food or money to survive. Those that had jobs before – including in health and education sectors – were not allowed to work and were now without any source of income. Many others were war widows or internally displaced women who had fled to Kabul. With the Taliban now in power also here, their situation had become desperate.

The first night, we stayed in the Hotel Inter-Continental Kabul. Sleep was disrupted by the noise of almost permanent gunfire with Taliban defences shooting at the sky at real or imaginary Mujaheddin planes.

The following day I had a meeting with the Taliban’s “deputy minister of foreign affairs”, a young man in his early thirties who spoke excellent English named Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai. He insisted that Germany should recognize the Taliban government given that Afghanistan’s defeat of the Soviet Union had led to the collapse of the USSR and paved the way for German reunification (an argument I had heard from them before). The Taliban were against opium production, but Afghanistan needed international support to provide alternative sources of income to communities growing opium-poppies. I replied that without the Taliban permitting education for girls and women to work and earn a living, international support would not be forthcoming and alternatives to the narcotics economy would not be feasible.

That night, the Taliban's "Radio Shariat" broadcasted a summary of my meeting with the deputy minister, but only of what he had told me and nothing of what I had said to him.

The next morning, I went to see the Secretary of the State High Commission for Drug Control that had been established in the early 1990s. I knew him from my previous work at the United Nations, and for now the Taliban kept him in place. Former UN colleagues had asked me to check whether his office had issued a license for the import of a controlled dual-use substance from Poland that served medical purposes but could also be used as a pre-cursor for heroin.

After our friendly chat he asked me whether he could submit a short report of our meeting to Radio Shariat. I agreed under the condition that I could write up the news item myself. And indeed, that night Radio Shariat reported that there was this German guy visiting Kabul saying that narcotics control would not be possible without girl's education.

With Bernt Glatzer we also visited what was left of Kabul University – mostly ruins – and then walked to the dilapidated zoo of Kabul. One of the few animals left was a lion with a badly mutilated face. Marjan, the lion, was gifted to Kabul Zoo by Germany in 1976. In March 1995, a Mujaheddin soldier went into the lion's den to demonstrate his bravery but Marjan killed him instantly. In revenge, the brother of the dead soldier then threw a grenade at Marjan, permanently blinding and deafening the lion. But Marjan survived as a celebrity until he died of old age in early 2002.

As we set out to leave Kabul we passed Ariana Square. Someone pointed at the traffic light pole and said that the dead body of former president Najibullah had been hanging there just a few weeks earlier. Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai was the Soviet-supported president of Afghanistan from 1987 until his resignation in April 1992 following the takeover of Kabul by the Mujaheddin. He found refuge at the United Nations compound in Kabul and lived there until the Taliban dragged him out and assassinated him and his brother on 27 September 1996. Najibullah's dead body was then hanged at the pole of the traffic light for public display. A chair used to lift him up was still lying on the ground under the light pole.

At the exit of Kabul we were stopped at a check point. A Taliban officer dressed in white looked first at us and then towards heaven while muttering a litany of something we didn't understand. Another, more "worldly" officer in ragged uniform, urgently ushered us on before the Talib would develop ideas.

Eventually we made it back to Jalalabad and Peshawar without further incidents.

Postscript 1:

Since the Taliban retook power in August 2021, the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is more dire than ever. Abandoned by the world, it has deteriorated into what UN agencies now call the world's most severe women's rights crisis. Over the five years since, the Taliban have issued more than 100 decrees further restricting the lives and rights of women. Afghanistan is now the only country in the world that formally bars girls and women from education beyond the primary level. Roughly 2.4 million girls remain shut out of secondary school, reversing two decades of progress. Women are largely excluded from paid employment and public life more broadly. The August 2024 "Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" formally entrenches restrictions on their dress, speech, and movement. Roughly half of Afghan women report leaving their homes only once or twice a month.

Healthcare has become a particular flashpoint: women can only be treated by female staff, yet the Taliban have also barred women from medical education, threatening to eliminate the female healthcare workforce entirely over time. This has contributed to a mental-health crisis, rising rates of child marriage and gender-based violence, and worsening maternal health.

Decrees no. 12 and 18 of January and May 2026 further eroded the standing of women before the law (the latter setting no minimum marriage age) so that "men and women are no longer equal before the law in Afghanistan" (UN Women).

Despite the risks, Afghan women have continued to protest under slogans like "education, work, freedom," often facing beatings, arbitrary detention, and surveillance in response. The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in July 2025 for senior Taliban leaders specifically citing gender persecution as a crime against humanity. This is a notable step, though it hasn't changed conditions on the ground. Humanitarian funding for women-led organisations has also been shrinking sharply in 2025, further straining services for vulnerable Afghans.

The tragedy of women and girls in Afghanistan is well documented. See for example:

- [Five years after Taliban takeover, Afghan women 'erased from public life' – UN News](#)
- [UN Women Afghanistan statement on Decree No. 18](#)
- [Afghanistan: 5 Years Under Taliban Rule – Human Rights Watch](#)
- [Afghanistan: New code enabling child marriage compounds dismal situation – Amnesty International](#)
- <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-protest-crackdown-dress-hijab-17ca4f9cf803a7d83f021203d309637a>
- <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/faqs-afghanistan>
- https://www.lemonde.fr/en/summer-reads/article/2026/08/20/the-taliban-preach-purity-and-morality-but-rush-to-strip-women-in-prison-a-land-of-terror-for-afghan-women_6756711_183.html?srsId=AfmBOoppoleh66GP8cqOlnuFvsRv7dgCpzDTjij2LcqBQdd635tWQAJC#

Postscript 2:

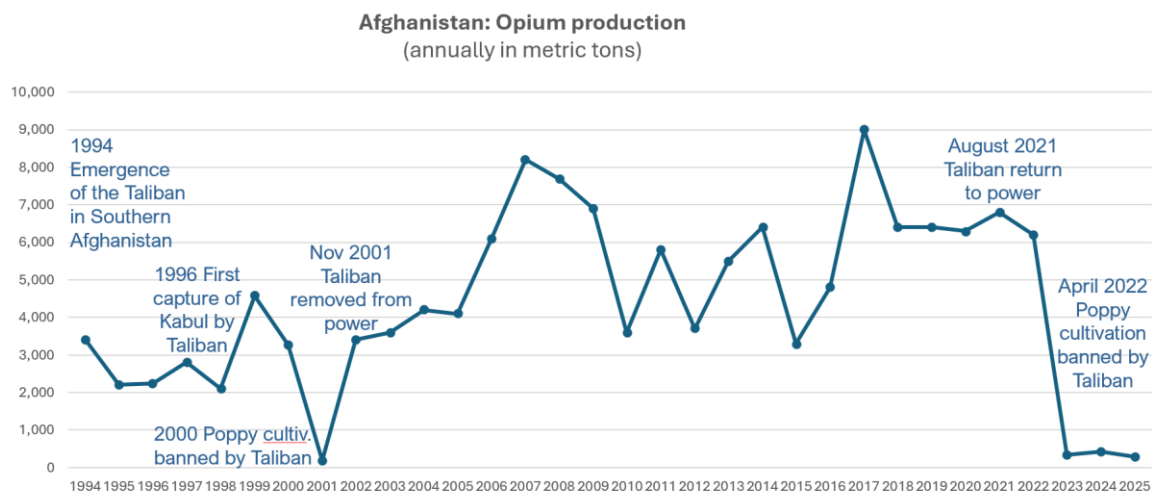
[Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai](#) – the “vice-minister of foreign affairs” whom I met in 1996, remained an influential figure of the Taliban in various functions for almost 30 years, including as political representative from 2001 to 2021. Following the return to power of the Taliban in 2021, he again became deputy minister of foreign affairs until 2025. But after repeatedly calling for the reopening of schools for girls and opportunities for women to work and after criticising the leader of the Taliban for banning girl’s education, he was removed and left the country to avoid arrest.

Postscript 3:

Bernt Glazer passed away in 2009. His passion for and contribution to Afghanistan is well explained in this [obituary](#).

Postscript 4:

In 1994, while I was deputy head of the Regional Office for Southwest Asia of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (a precursor of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC) in Islamabad, we published the first comprehensive survey on opium production in Afghanistan, concluding that Afghanistan produced four times more opium (over 3400 metric tons) than anyone had assumed.



Sources: UNDCP and UNODC reports

In 2000, the Taliban issued and enforced a ban on opium-poppy cultivation. In 2001, ironically the same year that they were removed from power by a US-led coalition following “9/11”, opium production had therefore collapsed to some 185 mt.

In January 2002, at a conference in Germany, I made a [suggestion for a “conditionality policy” for the \(re-\)construction of Afghanistan](#). Of course, it never got anywhere. The requirement that “[T]he political, military and development agenda of the international community ... be linked up to reinforce – rather than (as happened in the past) counteract – each other” was a killer assumption. While development organisations negotiated conditions with local

communities, the C.I.A. reportedly distributed briefcases full of money to buy the loyalty of local leaders.

Between 2002 and 2021, absent a coherent strategy, opium production surged again – poppy diseases affecting output in some years – with a record high of about 9000 mt in 2017. Another failure of the international community in Afghanistan.

In April 2022, less than a year of their return to power, the Taliban again banned poppy cultivation resulting in a decrease to some 300-450 mt per year between 2023 and 2025.

Isn't it ironic?

