The land where history repeats itself as tragedy

As Nato forces leave and Isis gains ground, Afghanistan continues to fascinate, inspire and dismay the West. We ignore it at our peril

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

Afghanistan may have slipped off the daily-news radar recently, displaced by Syria, Iraq and other hotspots, yet every day my inbox fills with news from the country. The emails' subject line generally relates either to a new atrocity, corruption, or the lack of American supervision over enormous amounts of money misspent on ludicrous development schemes. It seems it was ever thus.

I first went to Kabul as a journalist in 2007, the year of the "tipping point". The post-2001 invasion optimism had evaporated. People were beginning to question what Nato's mission was really achieving. Was it reforming the miserable state of Afghan women's lives? Was it state-building? Was it finally on track to defeat the Taliban? Through all this we watched as the poppy crop grew exponentially while the US spent $7 billion to combat opium production.

All those questions remain unanswered today. Fourteen years and more than $1 trillion later, it is still unclear whether the situation is getting better or worse.

Saad Mohseni, dubbed the Rupert Murdoch of Afghanistan, launched his empire after the fall of the Taliban when he returned from Australia and invested the family fortune in a new media venture. Last November, he gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* in which discussed the many gains that had been made in his troubled country. It is true that there are more children in school, a lively and liberal media landscape, more women in the workforce and in parliament, more paved roads and more electricity. But that is only part of the picture. Often women MPs are just mouthpieces for male relatives, and most girls leave school when they reach puberty; 87.4 per cent of women are illiterate. Even among those aged 15-20 the figure is 80 per cent, and only 2 per cent of women are economically independent.

In January, two months after Mohseni's interview, a suicide bomber targeted a bus taking 40 of his employees home. Seven were killed and 24 injured. It brings home the reality of Afghanistan: one step forward, several steps back.

Gloom is the overwhelming sentiment. Lieutenant General John W. "Mick" Nicholson Jr, the next US commander in Afghanistan, believes the security situation is worsening. It is difficult to find anyone who is positive. But it would also be a mistake to write the country off.

A generation of young Kabulis feel there is hope. The internet and social media have connected them to a world that the Taliban shut out. These men and women invest in their country with their hard work, but I sense a part of their optimism is a by-product of the fact that they have nowhere else to go. Afghanistan is their future. On the other hand, I remember an interview I did with a young liberal in 2009 shortly before the presidential elections. I asked him how likely he thought real reform was in his country. "Oh, yes," he said, "it's possible. You just have to wait 200 years."

All the issues that existed in 2007 remain today, and the list is long. Corruption and warlordism eat away at this beautiful place like cancer. Despite laws enshrined in the constitution that grant equal rights to all citizens, women have virtually no protection. The controversial Elimination of Violence Against Women law (EVAW) that came into force in 2009 is rarely invoked. Judges either don't know about the law or don't believe in it, and many lawyers have no legal training. Barely a week passes without some crime perpetrated against a wife or mother, a sister or daughter, making headlines.

It doesn't stop there. Isis are gaining ground and infighting in the Taliban ranks after the death of Mullah Omar has left a deadly vacuum at the top of the organisation. .

None of that detracts from the spell Afghanistan has cast over people for centuries. I was enticed back on and off until 2012, when I left for the last time, hardened and more cynical. We foreigners lived an exhilarating parallel existence in the "Kabubble". The restaurants, the parties—those were heady days when the work was exciting and full of possibility. As aid money has dried up, and Nato troops have been withdrawn, that world has largely disappeared.

Afghanistan may have fallen off the front page, but the fascination continues. It's like an addiction to heroin; we can't seem to get enough of the "exotic" land, and the "barbarity" of its customs. Two recent non-fiction books, a new play and a new film all deal with Afghanistan. *Pink Mist*, at the Bush Theatre in Shepherd's Bush, London, tackles the aftershocks of life in the military for three British soldiers who were deployed to Afghanistan. In the Danish film, *A War*, we follow the complexities of command in the theatre of war. The books, Rod Nordland's *The Lovers* (Ecco Press, £16.99), and Robert D. Crews's *Afghan Modern* (Harvard, £22.95), relate two very different stories about the country. Both touched on my own experiences, which I tried to capture in my *Dispatches from the Kabul Café* (Advance Editions, 10.99), about life in a war zone. Women and war—always intoxicating.

Nordland, a former *New York Times* Kabul bureau chief, writes about a young couple known as Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet. They are poor and illiterate and from a remote part of the country, and they defied their family, social custom and punishment by death by marrying for love. The story gripped the nation as well as international audiences and has given many young Afghans hope. Nordland crafts the romance of Ali and Zakia into a bleak parable on the status of women. He spells out in no uncertain terms the dire landscape of misogynistic

Past the tipping point? Coalition forces in Uruzgan province as part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team

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laws and a culture that treats girls and women as commodities to be bought and sold, married off, given away to settle debts, enslaved and murdered. They are rarely cherished, loved or respected. He believes that the mujahideen fought against the Soviet invaders with such fierceness because the Russians wanted to educate and liberate women. Reform has always been a thorny and contentious subject throughout Afghan history and has brought down many a leader.

In his stark and detailed portrait of Afghanistan's incomprehensible inhumanity, Nordland, a Pulitzer Prize winner, highlights the Sisyphean task of changing things while men possess all the power.

That brutality and absurdity affected me when I worked there. I could never comprehend that an Afghan could want to kill their daughter, sister or niece and not suffer any guilt or sense of loss, because blood washes shame away. It's not only men who kill their relatives. Women are also part of this, and in Zakia's case her mother was the more voracious in wanting her daughter's death. As Nordland writes about Zakia and Ali, "It was a love story as well as a look into the dark heart of a deeply disturbed society and the social and cultural obstacles that had prevented much meaningful progress on women's rights in Afghanistan."

One of the women I met while I was there (who is called Hasina in my book), struggled with these issues herself. She had overheard her parents talking about her un-Islamic behaviour, which they felt threatened the family honour now that her sisters were engaged. Once she had been carefree, willing to take on society and fight for the rights of women, but her formerly Communist-leaning family slowly strangled her spirit. She was no longer able to meet me at the Flower Street Café, where we would drink coffee and chat about everything, including sex. Instead of going out after her classes at the University of Kabul, she had to go straight home. And when she did go out, it was under the watchful eye of her American-university-educated chaperone.

Nordland's story brought back all the conflicting feelings that I faced when I lived in Afghanistan and re-examined the eternal and ongoing question of whether life would ever get better for women, especially without Western pressure. That the situation has not improved is a sad testament to all the Afghan women, and some men, who risked—and continue to risk—their lives. Nordland spells out in unstinting detail the impossible situations women find themselves in. If they want to go to the police to report abuse, they can't lest they are raped by the police themselves. If they are raped, they will be regarded not as the victims but as the perpetrators, and be accused of adultery. Nordland retells the infamous story of Breshna, a 10-year-old girl who was raped by a mullah whom she was forced to marry. Even she knew this was insane. Her fate is unknown.

Robert D. Crews, a Stanford University historian, takes a different tack in *Afghan Modern*, a comprehensive history of the country. He looks at Afghanistan not as an isolated "hermit kingdom" but as an ancient land that has always seen itself as a global player and not a pawn in the Great Game of superpowers. He depicts it as a country that has always been "engaged and connected with a wider world". He dispels the clichés that have attached themselves to our language and imagery of the country—that Afghans are "barbarous" and "war-like", "wild" and "treacherous", stereotypes from centuries ago.

Reading Crews's description of Afghanistan between the 1940s and the '70s almost made me weep. It was as if history was repeating itself. He writes about how landlines enabled young Afghans to be in touch with each other, which was exactly what mobile phones did after 2001, and how cinema, Indian movies in particular, brought the outside world in. Afghans love Bollywood. They developed a dependence on foreign aid in the 1950s when the country was awash with technocrats and foreign advisers, and rivalries broke out among donors which led to "delay, duplication and confusion".

These are the same issues that have dogged the country in recent years, making *Afghan Modern* required reading for generals, policy-makers, NGOs and journalists. It reminded me of one of the most bizarre schemes that US aid has funded, and that Nordland writes about: a lovely French woman got a grant to teach yoga to Afghan politicians and prisoners, including Taliban militants, in the hope of bringing inner harmony and world peace.

As Nato exits as fast as it can, desperate to leave the débâcle of Afghanistan behind, Crews cautions that we ignore the country's wider role at our peril: "Indeed, the world would be well advised to listen to this strand of Afghan globalism and to recognise the many ways global processes have made Afghanistan what it is today, a place that occupies a pivotal position in the highly interconnected world we all share." S