

**WIDE ANGLE**

# FROM KABUL WITH HOPE: THE JOURNEY OF AN AFGHAN REFUGEE TO GERMANY



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Authors: **James Weir** (Independent Researcher) and **Rohullah Amin** (Director / Senior Research Fellow – American Institute of Afghanistan Studies – Kabul)

Editing: **Sally Deffor** (UN online volunteer)

Photo Editor: **Cyril Groué** (UN online volunteer)

Graphic design: **Vilmar Luiz** and **Danilo Coelho Nogueira** (UN online volunteers)

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L'Osservatorio – Research centre on civilian victims of conflicts

Via Marche, 54

00187 Rome – Italy

For further information and feedback, please contact:

 [@OsservatorioOrg](https://twitter.com/OsservatorioOrg)

 [losservatorio.org](https://www.facebook.com/losservatorio.org)

 [info@losservatorio.org](mailto:info@losservatorio.org)

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Names have been changed to preserve anonymity of Akbar and his family. Multiple Skype interviews conducted with Akbar between February and May, 2016 while he was in a refugee hostel in Germany inform this article. Each family member was interviewed in-person in Kabul in late December, 2015. Interviews conducted with Akbar's parents by James Weir in Kabul in 2005 provide life historical background. Interviews were recorded and translated from Dari into English.

The decision to leave Afghanistan on foot, and cross Iran and Turkey into Europe – with 250 US dollars (USD), a knapsack, and a dream of better future – warrants close ethnographic scrutiny. Over a million people, nearly a quarter of whom are Afghan, left their homelands seeking asylum on European soil in 2015 alone.<sup>1</sup> Among these is Akbar, a young Afghan man who left Kabul in early June 2015 and, three months, 7,000 km and 7,000 USD later, arrived in Frankfurt, Germany. In early May 2016, he anxiously awaits news of his asylum application in a refugee hostel. This article traces his family's history as refugees beginning with the Soviet-Afghan war nearly four decades ago, and details the costs and the abuses Akbar experienced enroute to Europe. We conclude: first, four decades of conflict shape how Afghans evaluate current circumstances and possible futures; and second, after the devastating toll – emotional, physical and financial – of the journey itself, the forced repatriation of asylum seekers would add yet one more vulnerable group into the country's instability.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Asylum; European Refugee Crisis; Conflict; Human Smuggling; Migration.

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## First Encounters: “the Strange Extravagance of Foreigners”

Akbar was nine when we met in 2004. His parents were live-in caretakers at an American NGO in Kabul where I often stayed while conducting fieldwork for a dissertation in cultural anthropology. Many afternoons, I joined Akbar and other local kids in soccer matches we organized at the NGO. He was the youngest boy, and as I was the most senior player on the tiny pitch, we were often paired.

In November 2015, I returned to the NGO compound. Akbar’s father, Ghahreman (a nickname which means champion), graciously greeted me at the door, and after friendly inquiries over pastries and green tea, asked if I wanted to arm wrestle. A decade older and half a foot shorter, he won handily. He soon informed me that Akbar had made his way from Kabul to Frankfurt.

My memory of Akbar is of a handsome, brooding boy; intense, respectful, with a distant look in his eyes.<sup>2</sup> Even at a young age, he appeared more perplexed than his peers by the strange extravagance of foreigners passing through the compound. Akbar was born a third generation refugee, the middle child of five siblings born in Pakistan and Iran. During the summer of 2015, almost 20 years old, Akbar left again to begin a life far from Kabul’s insecurity.

After a few days of discussions with his family, I asked if I could interview them about Akbar’s journey and their involvement with it. Ten years earlier, I had conducted life history interviews with his parents, and these provide family context to Akbar’s experience. Together with a mutual family friend, Rohullah Amin, (a clinical psychologist and director of an Afghan research institute), we conducted interviews with Akbar and the family that we have arranged into this account.

## Family History: “We Stayed in the Mountains”

*The following section draws upon interviews conducted in Kabul with Akbar’s parents in 2005.*

Ghahreman (Akbar’s father) is from Ghazni: a millennia ago, the capital of the vast Ghaznavid Empire<sup>3</sup> that stretched from North India to Iran and Central Asia. Today, this city of 150,000 residents, located a dangerous three-hour drive south of Kabul, is infiltrated by insurgents. As a young man, Akbar’s father was conscripted by the local Mujahideen<sup>4</sup> to fight against the Soviet and Afghan communists. But as an untrained foot soldier thrust onto the frontlines of a popular uprising, he found his Mujahideen commanders to be abusive and corrupt.

“We stayed in the mountains,” he complains, “hungry and thirsty, feet bleeding, sleeping on the rocks and in caves. Sometimes the villagers fed us, while our leaders grew fat and wealthy sitting comfortably in Pakistan and Gulf State.”<sup>5</sup> After four years he escaped both the Mujahideen and the Soviet-sponsored Afghan government for refuge in Iran, cementing a distrust in national politics shared by many Afghans of his generation, a distrust that only hardens as multiple regimes have risen and fallen through violence since.

Jamila (Akbar's mother) is from a rural village in Paghman, a mountainous farmland on the outskirts of Kabul. Her father died in a car accident when she was young girl, shortly before Soviet forces entered Afghanistan (in 1979). Initially her family (at this time unacquainted with Ghahreman) risked their lives as well in support of the resistance, secretly feeding fighters hiding in the mountains.

Jamila says "Cooking for the Mujahideen meant rewards in the afterlife", adding that she was never sure what the Russians wanted in Afghanistan. But as young Jamila and her sisters matured, war and lawlessness made them increasingly vulnerable to abuse from both the Mujahideen resistance and government forces. Three years into the war, Jamila's mom decided they had to leave, and after months of thwarted efforts, the family finally succeeded in crossing the border into Pakistan. A year later, Jamila was introduced to Ghahreman, fourteen years her senior and just days before an arranged marriage.

Akbar and all his siblings were born outside of Afghanistan: his two older brothers in Pakistan; he and his two younger sisters in Iran. After the Taliban fell from power in 2001, his family returned to Kabul, finding employment and residence at an American NGO where Ghahreman still works. Akbar was eight when he first set foot on Afghan soil. Twelve years later, with the bulk of US and NATO forces recently withdrawn and the Taliban and Islamic State (IS) expanding, Akbar prepares to cross Iran for prospects beyond.

## Preparations: "The Game is On"

*The following section draws upon family interviews conducted in Kabul in late 2015.*

After weeks of delay, at 11 pm on a hot summer night in the first week of June, the smuggler called, "the game is on" he said. Akbar had an hour to get to the bus station. With 250 USD hidden in the folds of his Shalwar Kameez<sup>6</sup> and a knapsack containing an old Samsung phone; two pairs of clothes; dried fruit; hard-boiled eggs; naan; and a sewing needle - his mother taught him to sew in preparation - Akbar set off to begin a life far from Afghanistan, unsure of his destination.

After a rushed, emotional goodbye, Omar, Akbar's middle brother, took the younger Akbar to the bus station. The eldest boy, Mahmood, and Akbar's dad were both away at work when the call came, and unable to say goodbye in person. Akbar and Omar waited into early morning for the bus to board to Nimroz, a remote desert province notorious for smuggling and banditry on the Iranian and Pakistani border.



**One of the local means of transportation used by migrants and refugees in Afghanistan**  
*Credit: James Weir*

Omar recounts the departure at the bus station, “I hugged Akbar a few times, and I told him not to forget us. It is painful to watch your brother leave. I cried 100%. He sat in the bus. I said goodbye two or three times, waiting for the bus to leave. This moment was very painful. If he goes to Turkey, and then somewhere else, when his life becomes better, he might forget us. My mom kept calling. We were afraid he would die, or be put in prison, he’d be lonely. He was very young, and never traveled, we did not believe he would arrive.”

A few weeks earlier Akbar and his father met the smuggler, Aziz, in Paghman to discuss the trip. Aziz’s family is well known for taking people to Turkey and Europe. A third party, an “agent”, was given 1,500 USD at a money exchange shop in Kabul. When the agent received a call from Akbar about his safe arrival in Turkey, the agent would release the money to Aziz’s associate in Kabul – at least that was the plan.

Akbar’s father, Ghahreman, earns 250 USD a month working as a live-in guard and caretaker at an American NGO, a job he has had since the family returned from Iran over a decade ago. The entire family had lived at the institute’s compound, where Akbar’s mother cooked and cleaned, until pressure from two uncles forced her to leave the job.

These two uncles have threatened the family for years, calling them “kafirs” (infidels) and “slaves of Americans”, accusing Jamila of being a prostitute because she worked openly with Americans. These confrontations grew as Akbar became a young man. Finally, a particularly heated altercation between Akbar and these two former Mujahideen – described as drug addicts with Taliban mentalities – convinced the family to support Akbar’s asylum efforts. Jamila explains, “the Taliban is threatening because we work for Americans, the boys can be killed if they join government, but these two uncles are even more dangerous.”

Between the smuggler’s fee and travel money, the family committed 1,750 USD – seven months of Ghahreman’s income – to Akbar’s journey. By the time he reaches Germany, the cost will be four times higher, 7,000 USD (over two years of income), gambled on the hope that one day perhaps one son will live in safety, and even help the family.

## **The Journey: “I Was Ready to Die”**

*The first person account that follows is a paraphrased version of the journey told from Akbar’s perspective, based upon a series of Skype interviews conducted in early 2016, while Akbar was in a German refugee hostel. This account has been reviewed with Akbar.*

### **Kabul to Iranian Border (3 days – 250 USD)**

I thought travel across southern Afghanistan would be the most dangerous, but I was wrong. The Taliban stopped and searched the bus multiple times between Kabul and Nimroz. In Nimroz I had to find Aziz, the smuggler, who arranged things.

On the first day, I met Ali. He is a little younger than me, from Baghlan. He was scared. We talked and began traveling together. We took care of each other all the way to the Bulgarian border. He is in Austria now; we stay in touch.

Aziz (the smuggler) told us about the route, put one guy in charge of us, and then left. He coordinated everything by phone, and we never saw him again.

That first night we were walking in a dangerous desert towards Iran. It was so hot. I called my brother Omar and told the family to pray for me. The Iranian border police shoot people.

Suddenly, Toyota pickup trucks drove out of the darkness towards us. Dark people with black hats and guns captured us. They told us to lie face down and recite the Koran. We waited, expecting them to shoot us. They robbed us and drove away.

### **Iran (20 days - 1,500 USD)**

Two days later we were in Iran. Baluch<sup>7</sup> smugglers took over. They began with these rules: "1) Obey us at all times; 2) Don't speak; 3) Pay in advance; 4) Stay with the group; 5) Or die alone."

They had three Toyota pickup trucks, each crammed with about 20 passengers in the back. They drove really fast across the desert; we bounced around and became so caked in dust we could not tell who was who. Our mouths were coated with dust. At stops, they didn't let us clean.

One boy was vomiting, with bad diarrhea and weak. When we told the smugglers, they said if he couldn't travel he'd be left behind in the desert.

Usually we traveled at night, from near midnight and until just before dawn. During the day, we were hidden in basements, farmhouses, stores, and petrol stations. At each location new people took over. They made us clean toilets and carry stuff. We never had enough food or water. When I resisted, they beat me.

About five days into the trip, one guy complained and they beat him nearly to death. After that we got quiet.

Sleeping was scary, we were so tired, anything could happen. We slept on the floor, sometimes they gave us straw mats. Someone stole my phone and 100 USD, from my pocket while I slept, probably the other passengers. We worried they'd abuse (rape) us while we slept, Ali especially.

Near the border, they locked me and Ali up in a stable with cows, sheep and donkeys. They gave me a phone and made me call my family to tell the agent to release the money. At the Turkish border we waited three days. Finally, when they had more passengers. Ahmed, Aziz's brother, came from Turkey and took over.

### **Turkey - (25 days - 700 + 2,500 USD)**

Travel in Turkey was easier than Iran. We didn't have to hide so much. But Ahmed was cruel. He gave us less food. He would lock me up, forced me to clean toilets, and beat me if I resisted. He was always complaining about the cost of my food. He told my family to pay 700 USD: 200 USD for a new phone, 200 USD for food, and 400 USD for travel. He got me a cheap phone and kept the extra money.



One night, after waiting too long in Turkey, I got into an argument with Ahmed. I was weak and don't remember clearly, but I was ready to die. After this I left with Rafiq.

Rafiq is a little older than me, about 25, he speaks English, some Turkish and Norwegian, very smart, and had a good phone with GPS. He lived in Norway illegally for five years and had come back to Afghanistan for a wedding.

We found two Afghan Turkmen smugglers, Arif and Bashir, who demanded 2,500 USD to get me into Bulgaria. My family was told to pay this to an Uzbek carpet dealer in Kabul.

After days of waiting at the border, two days before Eid, (July 18), we left for Bulgaria.



**Akbar's itinerary map.**

*Credit: Lorenzo Rinelli*

### **Bulgaria (30 days – 370 USD)**

In a small village in Bulgaria, some young guys came up, threatened us and took our valuables; they even got my second phone. I wanted to defend our stuff, but Arif stopped me. Later, I did not pay him all the money. He was supposed to protect us.

The smugglers pointed us to a track through a field. We walked four days through the forest until we got near Sofia, where we got arrested and driven the rest of the way. The police fingerprinted all ten of my fingers. They asked us why we were there and whether we would stay in Bulgaria. We knew if we said we would keep going, they would let us go. Then they filled out a form. I heard so many terrible stories about the Bulgarian police.

The police put us in a huge prison, in the middle of a field, with bars and razor wire, full of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran. At least we had regular food and mattresses. The potato soup tasted like they peed in it.

After about 28 days, the guards collected us and asked if we wished to continue. When we said, "Yes, to Germany, we will leave" they released us. Rafiq and I decided to travel alone, to take taxis, to try to blend in. My family wired 370 USD for a taxi. After two days we got to Serbia.

We got arrested as soon as we got into Serbia and deported by train back to Sofia, Bulgaria. We rested for about three days. This time, we took a taxi through the mountains to a bus station in a Serbian village. From there we got a ride to Belgrade.

### **Serbia (10 days - 700 USD)**

A taxi driver said he would take us to the Hungarian border for 200 Euros. He asked us to turn off the GPS, and drove around for sometime before dropping us at some smelly water. He told us to cross. When we turned on the GPS, we saw we were still in Belgrade. Eight or nine Syrians and Iraqis came towards us who had just been robbed. They were cold without clothes, and they looked abused. We didn't know this was about to happen to us.

After crossing the pond we saw the police waiting. We ran, but they unleashed dogs. I fell and almost drowned. The dogs bit us a lot but did not break the skin. Someone really big sat on my chest, and punched me. Rafiq told them he knew European law and he would report them. This made them angrier.

They hung us upside down from a tree, stripped and beat us. They broke my hand, my jaw still hurts; my hand is still crooked and hurts. The police searched our bags for money, and said we are evil Afghans coming to destroy their country. After some hours they released us. We walked into a small village and fell asleep on the side of a street, exhausted. An old lady found us and brought us food.

### **Hungary and Austria to Germany (5 days - 750 USD)**

We were arrested shortly after crossing into Hungary, taken to Budapest, and each of us had all ten of our fingerprints taken. After two days in prison, we were released. We got a cheap hotel. After a while we got a ticket that took us almost all the way across Austria.

### **Germany**

We did not know where we were. We thought we were still in Austria when the train stopped, I hid under the seat. A fat policeman picked me up using just three fingers. I had never been so afraid; I thought my heart would stop. When the police said we were in Germany, we were so happy and relieved. Suddenly I felt more tired than I had ever known.

### **Waiting: "If I Had Known"**

*The following sections summarize Akbar's description of life waiting in Germany, where he has been since late September 2015.*

Akbar arrived in Frankfurt three months after leaving Kabul. He has been placed in a refugee hostel with other Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, and Somalis. He has German language classes two times a week and plays soccer once a week. Summarizing the trip he said, "If I had known Europeans were so unfriendly, I would never have left. Bulgarians, Hungarians and Serbs are the cruelest people in the world, worst than any Afghan, even the Baluch. They are thieves and smugglers."

He describes himself as depressed, and sounds a little traumatized. His accounts jumped abruptly from topic to topic. He constantly worries about deportation. Most of the time he has nothing to do. Relations with his few friends at the hostel can be tense; with others it borders on combative. He has nightmares and eats irregularly. He sleeps most days.

He says the trip was a mistake, at times bitterly blaming his parents for allowing him to come. The debt his family has incurred – enough he says, for his family to have bought a house – is nearly impossible to repay. His broken hand makes his future as a carpenter uncertain. He shakes hands now cautiously, using three fingers, to avoid pain. Over the course of our conversations, his emotional state appears to have improved.

The shame of resuming life with his family after failure and debt, especially in an honor-based Afghan culture, is difficult for him to imagine. Forced to return to Kabul, or to witness his two uncles abuse his family again, he is not sure what he would do.

Although these two appear not to be active Taliban, they are thought to have associations with them, and grow bolder in their demands and threats. He says returning to the insecurity of daily life in Kabul, after the hardships and costs of the journey, is impossible. Meanwhile, given an opportunity to work and study in Germany, Akbar would one day likely thrive.

In early April, a representative of the German office coordinating refugees gathered a group of twenty refugees from the hostel. They took a train to an immigration office, which Akbar describes as a police station. Akbar was fingerprinted, photographed, his height and identifying features were recorded, and he responded “yes” to the only two questions: “Are you from Afghanistan?” and “Are you a Muslim?” The process took ten minutes. He explains, “I was so nervous, my hands were shaking, but when I was given that card, it felt like they gave me a million dollars.” He believes the card means that he won’t be deported.



## Conclusion: “I Will Not Stay”

Statistics, images of refugee camps, and European political tensions all frequent the media, but the family history and transit experiences of people who make the journey – here a young Afghan man who leaves Kabul with a little money, a knapsack, and hope – escape the public eye. As a quarter million Afghans contend with uncertain futures in Europe, while others continue leaving or consider the possibility, we conclude explaining our concern about the ramifications of their deportation, and locating the present circumstances in two longer periods of Afghan “lived” history.

The particulars of Akbar’s story are unique, but most Afghan asylum seekers in Europe share the arc of his experiences. A family history of displacement due to past wars is the norm. The cost of being smuggled across borders is a tremendous. Meanwhile, the Taliban’s capture of Kunduz City (October 2015), territorial control of poppy rich Helmand, unrelenting deadly bombings in Kabul, and launch of their Spring Offensive, dubbed “Operation Omari”<sup>8</sup> – (after their deceased leader), all add to uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile, recent devastating attacks by Islamic State (IS) create trepidation that exceeds even the concern about the Taliban.

After the debt and abuse experienced making this harrowing journey, Europe’s welcome, especially for Afghans, wanes. The European Union<sup>9</sup> quietly discusses deporting eighty thousand Afghans, using aid to leverage the Afghan government into compliance; while President Ghani says,<sup>10</sup> “I have no sympathy” for Afghan migrants. If tens of thousands of young Afghan men become abruptly and forcibly repatriated, beyond the individual suffering, this would further destabilize an already fractured political environment, where the Taliban prey upon vulnerable and disenfranchised youth. A NY Times article reinforces<sup>11</sup> the difficulties of deportees resuming life in Afghanistan, indicating that the majority leave again, while those who remain often become drug addicted.

The experience of two historical periods help to understand the motivations and frustrations of recent Afghan refugees. The first period involves the past fifteen years. After the US routed the Taliban in 2001, war-weary Afghans had hope. The Taliban were gone from power, the economy was improving, society was opening, and there were great, perhaps unrealistic, expectations of what the US and NATO could accomplish, followed by multiple blunders. 2016 finds most NATO and US troops withdrawn, the Taliban controlling one third of the territory,<sup>12</sup> IS gaining a foothold, poverty deepening, and Afghanistan ranked the third most corrupt country<sup>13</sup> in the world. After a period of great expectation, the international intervention winds down with insecurity growing and concern the country will soon be abandoned.

Paradoxically, the political and economic turmoil of 2015 and 2016 are also the best Afghan circumstances have been in four decades. Akbar’s grandparents left early in the Soviet war (early 1980s), escaping a conflict that would kill over a million Afghans and displace two thirds of the country.<sup>14</sup> Across a five-decade period an Afghan elder has had to contend with the violent rise and fall of six political regimes: a monarchy

(1933 – 73); a republic (1973 – 78); a Soviet sponsored communist government (1978 – 92); Mujahideen civil war (1992 – 96); and the Taliban (1996 – 2001). Today, after a contested election, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah lead a divisive National Unity Government; while corrupt institutions propped up by Western money and might engage a Taliban in control<sup>15</sup> of a nearly 90% of the world’s poppy production, and who continue to have safe haven in Pakistan. Many young Afghans, watching insecurity and poverty deepen again, are prepared to risk their life and limited resources to pursue the dream of stability, employment, and education, elsewhere. As Akbar declares, “I am changed since I came to Europe, if I am deported back to Kabul, I will not stay.”

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> 2015 saw 60 million people, – one in every 122 people worldwide – displaced by conflict, the most since WW II. Amongst refugees, Syrians and Afghans are the two largest populations, each separately comprising about 20 percent of the total. The IOM estimates that of the over a million refugees that have reached Europe in 2015, nearly a quarter are Afghan.

<sup>2</sup> His family describes Akbar as young boy as “intense, driven, serious and emotional”.

<sup>3</sup> An empire (977–1186) once based in present day Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> An Arabic term translated as “freedom fighter” or “holy warrior”.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews were conducted in confidentiality, with names changed by mutual agreement.

<sup>6</sup> Traditional, loose and baggy clothing common in Afghanistan, and parts of South and Central Asia.

<sup>7</sup> The Baluch are a large tribal community who live on the dry mountainous Iranian plateau between western Pakistan, southeastern Iran and southern Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup> Abdul Sharif, “Operation Omari: The Taliban & Afghanistan’s Vicious Cycle of Violence” The Huffington Post, April 4, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abdul-lah-sharif/operation-omari-the-taliban\\_b\\_9683674.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abdul-lah-sharif/operation-omari-the-taliban_b_9683674.html)

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Holehouse, “Secret EU plan to deport 80,000 Afghans” The Telegraph, March 21, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/12200582/Secret-EU-plan-to-deport-80000-Afghans.html>

<sup>10</sup> Yalda Hakim, “President Ghani calls for Afghans to remain in country” BBC News, March 31, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35928538>

<sup>11</sup> May Jeong, “Afghans, the Refugees’ Refugees” The New York Times, May 30, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/opinion/afghans-the-refugees-refugees.html?version=meter+at+5&contentId=&mediald=&referrer=http%253A%252F%252Fwww.nytimes.com%252F%253FWT.z\\_jog%253D1%2526hF%253Dt%2526vS%253Dundefined&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/opinion/afghans-the-refugees-refugees.html?version=meter+at+5&contentId=&mediald=&referrer=http%253A%252F%252Fwww.nytimes.com%252F%253FWT.z_jog%253D1%2526hF%253Dt%2526vS%253Dundefined&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article&_r=1)

<sup>12</sup> Ken Dilanian, “Taliban Control of Afghanistan Highest Since U.S. Invasion” NBC News, Jan 29, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/taliban-control-afghanistan-highest-u-s-invasion-n50703>

<sup>13</sup> Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2015”, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi20>

<sup>14</sup> To the demise of Afghan society, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century “Cold War” became concentrated on Afghan soil in 1979, after the Soviet military intervened and the US armed the Mujahideen resistance, creating circumstances that would eventually morph into the 21<sup>st</sup> century “War on Terror”.

<sup>15</sup> James Weir and Hekmatullah Azamy, “The Taliban’s Transformation from Ideology to Franchise” *Foreign Policy*, Oct 14, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/17/the-talibans-transformation-from-ideology-to-franchise/>

<sup>16</sup> David M. Graham, “Violence Has Forced 60 Million People From Their Homes” *The Atlantic*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/refugees-global-peace-index/396122/>

<sup>17</sup> “Thousands of Afghan migrants have hit a dead end in Turkey” *The Economist*, April 6, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21696242-town-van-boasts-mountains-lake-and-stranded-asylum-seekers-thousands-afghan-migrants-have>



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