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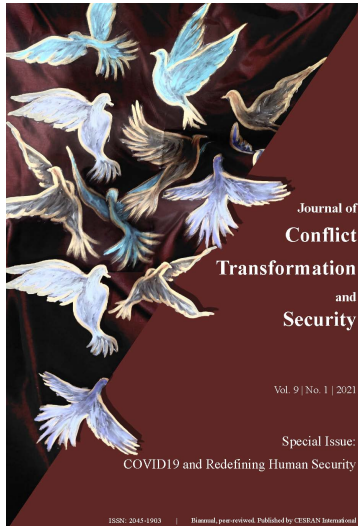
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* The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.

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The Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) provides a platform to analyse conflict transformation and security as processes for managing change in non-violent ways to produce equitable outcomes for all parties that are sustainable. A wide range of human security concerns can be tackled by both hard and soft measures, therefore the Journal's scope not only covers such security sector reform issues as restructuring security apparatus, reintegration of ex-combatants, clearance of explosive remnants of war and cross-border management, but also the protection of human rights, justice, rule of law and governance. JCTS explores the view that by addressing conflict transformation and security holistically it is possible to achieve a high level of stability and human security, requiring interventions at both policy and practitioner level. These would include conflict management, negotiated peace agreements, peacekeeping, physical reconstruction, economic recovery, psycho-social support, rebuilding of primary services such as education and health, and enabling social cohesion. Other macro-level governance issues from constitution writing to state accountability and human resource management also need to be considered as part of this process of change.

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Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue on The Protracted Crisis in Afghanistan: Decolonial Perspectives

Susanne Schmeidl and Mujib Abid

Biographical Notes:

Susanne Schmeidl is a transdisciplinary critical peace researcher and practitioner with nearly three decades of experience working at the intersection of conflict, peace and development. Between 2002 and 2014, she worked in Afghanistan with two grassroots organisations she co-founded on civil peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive research to inform development, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Sociology from The Ohio State University (USA) and currently works as a research and conflict sensitivity consultant on Afghanistan for swisspeace, ACAPS and the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. She is also an Honorary Academic at UNSW Sydney.

Mujib Abid has a PhD from the University of Queensland. His research focuses on histories of encounters with modernity in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on modernist enactments of power and subaltern experiences, resistance and tradition. Mujib's work foregrounds a decolonial theoretical sensibility for the Afghan context, drawing on traditional, subalternised Afghan knowledge perspectives. He holds an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Sydney and a BA from the American University of Afghanistan. He currently teaches as a Sessional Academic at Southern Cross University.

On 15 August 2021, the world changed for many Afghans when the Taliban succeeded in overthrowing the Western-installed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In many ways, the chaotic evacuation that followed, especially the desperate images around Kabul airport, would serve as a fitting stand-in for the broader politics of the intervention: frantic, violent, and mismanaged. The unexpected blitz of armed conquest, coupled with shrewd negotiations at the district and provincial levels, is perhaps only paralleled by the Taliban's initial rise to prominence in the mid-1990s, and suggests a consistent misunderstanding of context and people.

The subsequent crisis that unfolded in Afghanistan, coupled with a reckoning with what went wrong, is further exacerbated by the persistence of imaginaries of Afghanistan informed by scholarly and expert knowledge that has struggled to disengage from the neoliberal state-building agenda and overcome its own wartime (and modernist) perspectives. Euro-American-centric scholarship and expertise has been a key site for reproducing material relations in Afghanistan, especially over the past two decades, but too often fails to adequately theorise or historicise peace and stability in contexts that do not fit its own. This is a challenge precisely because this scholarship assumes a position of universality as it remains invested in global agendas.

The current situation in Afghanistan is one in which many policy-makers and experts, and of course Afghan citizens, are still coming to terms with the fact that the Taliban have come to power for a second time and have revived their Islamic Emirate two decades after they were ousted by a US-led intervention. This uncomfortable experience of *déjà-vu*, which many did not see coming (or did not want to), reinforces the urgency of the call for a critical, decolonial critique of Western intervention and how we know and understand Afghanistan. It is in response to this context and problematique that we have curated the content of this special issue, questioning how Afghanistan is understood and how and by whom knowledge about the country is produced. Although the

contributions in this special issue do not directly deal with the current situation in Afghanistan, they do provide a window into how to read what is happening differently, with a new *de facto* government that lacks international recognition but nevertheless is busying themselves with building a state after their own vision of Sharia. While the Taliban leadership, as Afghanistan's *de facto* rulers, negotiates political hegemony and pluralism in its own complex and contradictory way, a widely acknowledged humanitarian crisis is unfolding. In particular, women, children and minorities are faring badly under the Emirate's watch. For those who want to know what might be done differently in Afghanistan today, the articles in this special issue invite critical reflection. There is an impetus to think 'differently', to transcend fundamentalist ideological determinisms of various origins and to foreground alternative perspectives of knowledge.

A new way forward

Although we came to this special issue with very different positionalities - Susanne as a white female European, perhaps tempered by having lived in Afghanistan for over a decade, and Mujib as an Afghan male who has only recently migrated to Australia - we shared some common motivations, including a passion for applying a critical decolonial lens that challenges modernist and neoliberal perspectives to the production of knowledge about Afghanistan, and an investment in foregrounding Afghanistan's subaltern knowledge perspectives.

We have both struggled, in our own ways, with Western forms of knowledge production about Afghanistan and how a majority has failed to adequately capture the complexity of the country, relying on the romanticisation of "wild tribes," extensive "othering" based on a racialised antipathy to liberalisation, and the reproduction of tropes such as "graveyard of empires" and "war-torn land." In both scholarship and fiction, "'Afghans' have been alternately described as treacherous or chivalrous, egalitarian or fanatical,"¹ or "as a sort of deadly *deus ex machina*, whose only role

¹ Foschini, "Creating the 'Idea' of a Country", 15 Sept 2022, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/dossiers/creating-the-idea-of-a->

country-the-afghanistan-in-world-literature-dossier/ (Accessed 20 Dec 2022).

in the drama was to mete out bloody punishment to the Europeans whose deluded antics always take centre stage.”²

Susanne worked for over a decade with two local organizations in Afghanistan, strengthening local knowledge production and exploring forms of knowledge co-production, reflecting on the ethical and professional dilemmas of this kind of oppositionality. Mujib wrote his PhD on the history of encounters with modernity in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on modernist enactments of power and embodied subaltern experiences, resistance, and tradition.³ The contradictions of training and working within the Eurocentric academy, and then critiquing that very institution, continue to animate his theoretical inquiries.

In order to equalise and democratise sources of knowledge and philosophy on Afghanistan, we feel it is necessary to break away from Euro-American-centric thinking and open up spaces for different ways of thinking and knowing. In order to break new ground, we have deliberately reached out to authors of Afghan origin, from the region and/or with lived experience of Afghanistan to ensure a more nuanced narrative that differs from the usual Western gaze. The contributions to this special issue reflect this diversity.

We are proud that the authors are by and large of Afghan origin and female (Morwari Zafar, Zarlisht Sarwari, Mejgan Massoumi, and Tamana Barakzai). Co-editor Mujib Abid is also of Afghan origin. Other contributors include Sepi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, a UK-Iranian national who has spent considerable time in Afghanistan since the 1990s, Sari Kouvo, a Danish national who worked in Afghanistan for several years, and Jeremy Simpson, an Australian national who worked in Afghanistan for a couple of years.

Featuring voices from Afghanistan, especially female voices, either by authorship, art or through reviewing stories written by them, is our way to demonstrate that voice is nearly impossible to suppress. Citizens of Afghanistan – both men and women – have voice, and they are willing to raise it. Afghans were “talking

back”⁴ during the difficult years of American-led occupation, to counter the discourse and praxis of the “war on terror” and now, even under an autocracy such as the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate, they strive to maintain that agency. All we need to do is listen.

The special issue contains four original articles, two review articles covering three books (two of which are written by Afghan authors), a longer interview piece with two Afghan writers and an artistic intervention, presenting a form of non-verbal communication/knowledge production about Afghanistan. The strength of all the contributions is that they are based on lived experiences – many on extensive (auto)ethnographic work and/or qualitative interviews. All the contributions are in conversation with each other, as they seek to offer counter-narratives of Afghans, Afghanistan and the Western perspective. In this sense, they each explore a different facet of the central problematique of the special issue. Together they offer a critical reflection on how to understand Afghanistan differently, from the lens of gender, power, identity and change.

Morwari Zafar’s article “The Old West and the Wild East” critiques the dangers of a narrow Western view of a complex country like Afghanistan, driven by a simplistic frontier mentality. She thus brings out the need for reflection by world powers (in this case the US) about the countries they seek to change in their image. She presents a compelling analysis that shows how US policy, driven by US analysts, has consistently essentialised Afghans and Afghanistan into a cultural caricature, often to justify its own failures. Her article exposes a country that has yet to come to terms with its own settler-colonial history - and thus engage with other cultures in much the same way as it did with Native Americans - perpetually stuck in an image of the Wild West and a frontier mentality where the white man is the saviour.

Jeremy Simpson’s article “Failing to Decolonise Knowledge Production in the Periphery” focuses on the negative impact that US-led or ‘metropolitan’ intervention has had on the way research is conducted in Afghanistan and the failure to strengthen local knowledge

² Morrison, “Twin Imperial Disasters”, 254

³ Abid, “Resurgent Histories of Afghanistan: Encounters with Modernity”.

⁴ Hooks, “Talking Back”, 123.

production through support for higher education. Inspired by what he observed while working in Afghanistan, he outlines the subordination of Afghan knowledge production to Western expertise, where Afghan voices are treated as raw data and Afghan researchers as data collectors rather than analysts, resulting in inadequate knowledge about Afghanistan. He then examines Afghanistan's higher education sector and how the past twenty years of the international state-building project in Afghanistan have failed to strengthen the necessary institution that could have strengthened local knowledge production. His article invites reflection on the inadequacies of Western development aid priorities and the short-sighted emphasis on replacing rather than building research capacity.

Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam's article "Taliban Performativity through the Distortive Orientalist Looking Glass" combines postcolonial theory and performativity to explore the Taliban as a theoretical conundrum. It discusses the inherent colonial bias in understanding the Taliban and how this has affected 'our' understanding of who the Taliban are, and the need for a decolonised lens to understand their actions. In particular, she focuses her analysis on how the lack of an 'objective, decolonial' lens has consistently led to a reductionist and ahistorical understanding of the Taliban movement, and here she is in conversation with Morwari Zafar, who also argues against the reductionist reading of Afghanistan and the people who live in it. Sepi goes on to argue that many fail to read the Taliban's sophisticated form of performativity, a postcolonial politics that responded to varying degrees of subalternity, but which was "rooted in processes of contestation and subversion against the power/knowledge nexus that had relegated Afghans to permanent subaltern status". Drawing on examples from the 1990s to the present, and through her original analysis, Sepi provides new insights into the Taliban that should serve as new points of research in the future and should be mandatory readings for diplomats wanting to engage with the Taliban.

The themes of exile and diasporic identities are further explored by Zarlusht Sarwari in her article "Beyond Watan: Valency of place among a fragmented Afghanistan diaspora". Zarlusht explores the factors that have contributed to

lack of a cohesive national identity in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulation of identity. Her analysis reveals the diversity of identities in Afghanistan across decades of conflict and displacement. Zarlusht's research, like Morawi's, thus challenges how outsiders simplify and "other" the people of Afghanistan, denying them complexity. She finds that in fragmented societies, such as Afghanistan, the notion of 'place', especially home (*watan*) can be the glue that binds people together rather than the more contested construct of 'nationality'.

For the Interview, Mujib Abid speaks with two Afghan writers in Australia – Hamid Parafshan and Omer Sabore – in order to explore what inspired their writing journey, the influence of Sufist, traditional knowledge on their writing, and how conflict and displacement have shaped their work and knowledge production. Mujib notes that "both writers respond through poetic writing, to the political imperatives of their adopted homelands". To demonstrate the immense decolonial potential of their work, the interview concludes with written words of both writers in the form of a poem, a widely used and unexplored form of knowledge production in Afghanistan.

For the book reviews, we offered the authors a choice from a list of manuscripts written by Afghans or based on extensive fieldwork, in the hope of highlighting a different understanding of Afghanistan. The resulting three book reviews offer diversity, the first by a young Afghan scholar on cultural diversity in Afghanistan, the second a non-academic compilation of short stories by Afghan women describing everyday life in Afghanistan, and the third by an Italian ethnographer/anthropologist studying masculinity among Pashtuns in Afghanistan.

Mejgan Massoumi reviews young Afghan scholar Omar Sadr's first book, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan*, and finds that it offers a refreshing alternative narrative of Afghanistan and complicates simplistic views of Afghan identity. Similar to Sarwari's analysis of the Afghanistan Diaspora in Australia, Massoumi's reading of Omar Sadr unpacks the diversity of Afghan identity and the failure of the Afghan state to manage a multicultural society. This highlights the need for those who wish to

govern Afghanistan to reflect upon the ambiguities and gaps inherent within the project of state-building, something the Taliban should consider as they rebuild (and hopefully reimagine) their Islamic Emirate. Massoumi concludes that Sadr's book "focuses on a committed study of cultural diversity while exposing the disjunctures and fissures inherent in the nation-building project from 1992 to 2014".

Sari Kuvo reviews two books that deal with the complexities of gender in Afghanistan, an area she has researched extensively. One of the books is a collection of short stories written by 18 anonymous Afghan women (*My Pen is the Wing of a Bird*) and the other by ethnographer Andrea Chioyenda, based on interviews with young Pashtun men (*Crafting Masculines Selves*). She notes that the books "provide nuance to superficial assumptions about Afghan women as victims and all Afghan men as beneficiaries of patriarchal structures". Her discussion outlines the similar issues and themes that both books address, albeit from different perspectives, highlighting how the lives of Afghan women and men are "constantly constrained by the demands of family, community and culture", although "the consequences of breaking the rules are harsher for women". Her discussion thus challenges often-repeated colonial and neo-colonial myths about Afghanistan's social organization as a solely tribal structure and ethnic hierarchies. She concludes that both books, in emphasizing Afghan voices, offer invaluable insights into the lives of Afghans, beyond grand political narratives.

Last but not least, in the artistic intervention Tamana Barakzai presents her journey as a female artist in Afghanistan, and how her lived experiences as a woman have led her to make women the subject of her art. Her words, and art, are powerful and raw. They show that art is an important form of knowledge production and can transcend language barriers. They show the aspirations of Afghan women that not only the Taliban, but also the West should listen to. Tamana's work is in dialogue here with the book review by Sari Kuvo, giving us a direct insight into women's agency.

Taken together, all contributions offer a different view of Afghanistan and invite readers

to consider new ways of understanding and knowing Afghanistan. Given the dominance of Western knowledge on Afghanistan, we believe that this special issue contributes to the decolonisation of scholarship on Afghanistan and the growing body of work produced by critical scholars of Afghanistan. We hope that our efforts will inspire others to follow suit in promoting critical and decolonial knowledge production that gives voice to indigenous scholars and storytellers.

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