

Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan – my story 1970s-80s

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With Yunus Khalis mujahideen on bridge near Bargam north of Asmar, Kunar, August 1985 (4th from left).

Recently (2010) I was interviewed about my experiences in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s. Here are my answers:

About writing an autobiography:

... I do hope to find the time to write a book, primarily because I want to tell the story of the lessons I have learnt in my life to my family and friends. I will need a lot of time because I am a very slow writer.

I have put some of my thoughts and brief accounts of my experiences on the Internet just in case it is of interest to others, especially old friends with whom I have long lost contact and who might be looking for me and may be curious about what happened to me without necessarily wanting to get in touch. They might not like how my religious and political views have changed.

About Saudi Arabia 1972-73:

The people with whom I traveled to Mecca were my friend "Ali" – whose real name I won't reveal, to protect his identity, and whom I met on an earlier trip outside Europe -- and Ali's brother and the brother's family (Pakistani wife, from Lahore, and three small boys).

They lived in England and came to Luxembourg to pick me up in December 1972. They had two cars: a VW van with a mattress and gas cooker in the back and a Ford Capri 3000 GT sports car. They had to get to Jeddah by early January 1973, in time to pick up their old mother, who was coming there by plane from London for her first and probably last Haj. After the pilgrimage and putting their mother on the plane back to London they were going to continue their trip to Lahore in Pakistan to visit their family there.

They wanted me as a backup driver, and I was all gung-ho about going to Pakistan. But since I could not accompany them to Mecca we were going to drive to Kuwait, where I was going to stay with their eldest brother (they were a family of 12 kids, and "Ali" was the youngest) and I was to wait for them to return after about a month in Saudi Arabia.

When we got stuck at Abu Kemal on the Syrian-Iraqi border, where the Iraqis refused to let us enter their country, my friends had to change their plan and drive down through Jordan and directly into Saudi Arabia's Hejaz. When they offered me the choice I decided to officially become a Muslim so that I could accompany them, and they were my witnesses at the Saudi Embassy in Damascus where we all got special "pilgrim entry" visas for the kingdom.

We arrived in Saudi Arabia at the end of 1972 and stayed in that country until 1 February 1973.

In Mina, the tent city outside Mecca, where we spent at least 2 weeks, many people were very curious about me and invited me into their tents for a cup of tea and to ask me questions about my background

and my thoughts about the world of Islam. Some people refused to believe that I was from western Europe and insisted I must be Turkish.

The same happened in Medina, where we rented a small apartment in the old Uhud quarter near the main mosque, where Prophet Mohammed's tomb is located, during the period of 40 prayers after the Haj. The old quarter where we stayed and which seemed like a town from the Middle Ages, was torn down a few months after we left to make way for a project to expand the great mosque of Medina.

I received a big Quran in Arabic and English from the director of the Islamic University in Medina and read a little bit from time to time, including the lengthy commentaries in footnotes by the translator Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

I remember the big crowds in Mecca and Medina, more people than I had ever seen before. In Mecca we used to wash up in a large underground facility under a square just outside the big mosque before going inside for the Tawaf, the counter-clockwise circumambulation of the Kaaba, and the walks between Safa and Marwa, and so on.

"Ummi" (or mother), as I also came to call my friends' mother, only spoke to me in Punjabi, though she tried Suaheli sometimes when I didn't understand. I quickly learned the few words I needed to know in order to follow her instructions. Like many old or infirm people she could not do the Tawaf by herself, and we paid a pair of big, strong men to carry her on a stretcher with a sort of basket in the middle.

After we saw "Ummi" off we stayed a few more days in Jeddah. We lived in the house of a family of Pakistani origin, and my friends suggested that I marry the youngest daughter of that family – who was only 16 at the time – and stay in Saudi Arabia. A Filipino friend of Ali's who acted as our guide on the Haj had received a scholarship some years earlier to study at Medina's Islamic University (with the support of King Faisal, if I remember correctly), and my friends thought I could try to get one too and stay behind in Saudi Arabia rather than go with them to Lahore.

I was very impressed by the experience of the Haj and meeting so many people who were mostly very nice to me, but I was not ready at all to get married and to stay in Saudi Arabia. Again, to make a long story short, I accompanied my friends to Kuwait, where we spent 9 days in a big villa doing nothing but eating, drinking fruit cocktails and having fun -- then later they dropped me off in Abadan, Iran, and I made my way from there back to Europe on my own, with very little money.

Nowadays I wonder how much of my experiences I still remember correctly. I learned some Arabic from my friends and others, and still remember the numbers and quite a few words that I had had to learn, such as the Shahada, etc.

About my attachment to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and whether my experiences there were the most special time in my life:

As far as Afghanistan and Pakistan are concerned, my interest in those countries comes from the wonderment I felt in my first experience traveling outside Europe, as well as my fascination and awe of mountains. Luxembourg has only low hills, and the first time I saw real mountains was when I went to Austria with my boy scout troop in 1963. I was so fascinated and awe-struck that I stared for long periods of time at Mt. Grimling near Tauplitz, in Styria, without uttering a word.

My first trip outside Europe took me to Teheran, Iran in March 1972. I met Ali there. As I mentioned, his family was originally from Lahore, in what is now Pakistan. He was born and grew up in Kenya. When I met him he was on his way to Lahore, in a car he had bought while studying in the United States. He wanted to share expenses on the trip so he was looking for people who would travel with him.

To make a long story short, we traveled together from Teheran to Kandahar, and I had to return from there on my own because I had to get back to my job in Luxembourg. The experience of that short, two-week trip affected me so much that it was almost impossible for me to re-adjust to my workaday life in Luxembourg. I longed for the mountains and the very different kind of life I thought I had glimpsed especially in Afghanistan.

About the contrast between the Afghanistan I saw in 1972 and that of the 1980s:

I entered Afghanistan from Iran on the day after Nowruz (that is, the New Year, 21 March), which was 2. 1. 1351 in the Hejra solar calendar used there. In Saudi Arabia and most of the Islamic world the Hejra lunar calendar is used, so when I went there 9 months later it was the year 1392, because the lunar year is shorter.

In 1972 I traveled only to Herat and Kandahar, and spent just five days in Afghanistan. King Mohammed Zahir was still on the throne and a lot of western hippies passed through the country on their way east to India and Nepal. Young boys followed foreigners almost everywhere in the towns to beg for some spare change. It was clear the country was poor and life was hard for most people -- but it was a country at peace.

I remember talking to young men in both Herat and Kandahar. You could not talk to young women in those towns; though I am told it was different in Kabul. Some of the young men I met were unhappy because they saw no future for themselves, and they hoped to be able to go to the west, perhaps because they envied the seemingly happy hippies they saw.

Generally, though, I did not get the impression in 1972 that the country might be headed for serious political trouble. The atmosphere was peaceful, perhaps because people seemed resigned to their fates -- I don't know. At any rate, I liked the atmosphere of the country very much and wished I could have stayed much longer to explore and get to know it.

In the 1980s I did not visit any of the towns of Afghanistan but passed through several villages, some abandoned, mostly within 20 kilometers of the border with Pakistan. I went to the Jaji area in Paktia Province in 1984 and to different areas north and south of Asmar in Kunar Province in 1985 and 1987. At this time, of course, the country was at war -- and it seemed almost as much a civil war as it was a war against foreign invaders.

Naturally, the mujahideen emphasized the fact that they were fighting the Soviet infidels and those they regarded as their lackeys. But it seemed to me that there must have been substantial numbers of Afghans who welcomed some of the changes the so-called communists were making with the support of the Soviet Union.

The mujahideen I was with were mostly fighting the Afghan Army. Of course, my newspaper being of a rather conservative, anti-communist orientation, I felt it would be unwise to mention this. At the time I also felt a personal solidarity with the mujahideen in their struggle against a superpower that had invaded their country.

I must point out here that I had very little training as a journalist, and that in any case I had learned the trade from very conservative Americans who had a strong ideological commitment against anything socialist or communist.

I saw some of the damage done by bombing and shelling in villages, and I also saw children who had lost limbs to mines, and refugees who fled the fighting.

Overall I feel my experience and knowledge of Afghanistan is very limited, and I could by no means be regarded as an "expert," whatever that really means. Nonetheless, as a result of my experiences there I cannot help feeling deeply concerned about the situation in that country as the state of war has continued for more than 30 years now.

To tell the truth, when I first visited that country in 1972 I knew very, very little about Afghanistan and didn't bother to read up on it even after I got back to Luxembourg. That time I just wanted to get out of Luxembourg -- badly. And seeing Afghanistan -- even for such a short time -- had at least taught me that there were places in the world that were really very different from my country, much more like the places I had read about in the many adventure stories that I had read. --

I did not get back to Afghanistan until 12 years later -- 1984 -- and many things had changed in the meantime, both for me and for that country.

1984 was also the first time I visited Pakistan, and I think I sort of fell in love with at least some aspects of that country at first sight. I went to Jaji, Paktia Province, Afghanistan with mujahideen of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittihad-e Islami Mujahideen Afghanistan group.

In the western media Sayyaf's group was known by a different name, but they emphasized to me that this was their real name. Together with a Japanese journalist friend who had lived in Pakistan for 9 years I interviewed Sayyaf himself in a tent in Jaji -- I still have the transcript of that interview as it appeared in my newspaper, the weekly Middle East Times, which I had helped to found in Cyprus at the beginning of 1983.

I returned to Pakistan and Afghanistan again in 1985, and that time I also traveled to Baltistan and Hunza, as far as Passu. At that time the Karakoram Highway beyond that village was closed to foreigners. Both in 1984 and 1985 I couldn't spend as much time on my trips as I wanted because I had to get back to my newspaper office in Cyprus, plus I was short of money -- as always. I used my own cheap camera and paid most of my expenses from my pocket because the newspaper was just barely surviving financially.

In August 1987, after getting married in Japan, I settled down in Islamabad -- my wife stayed behind in Tokyo for the time being -- in a house rented by my Japanese friend who had taken me with him on the 1984 trip to Jaji. He could not come to Kunar with me in 1985. In October 1987 I went from the Bajaur tribal area to Kunar Province, again without my Japanese friend, intending to travel into Nuristan.

But after a brief battle north of Asadabad (a few mortar rounds, answered from the Soviet and Afghan Army side by many hours of bombardment with rockets, field guns and heavy mortars) the mujahideen I

was with refused to let me stay in Kunar and took me back across the border. [See: [My 1987 trip into Kunar Province](#)]

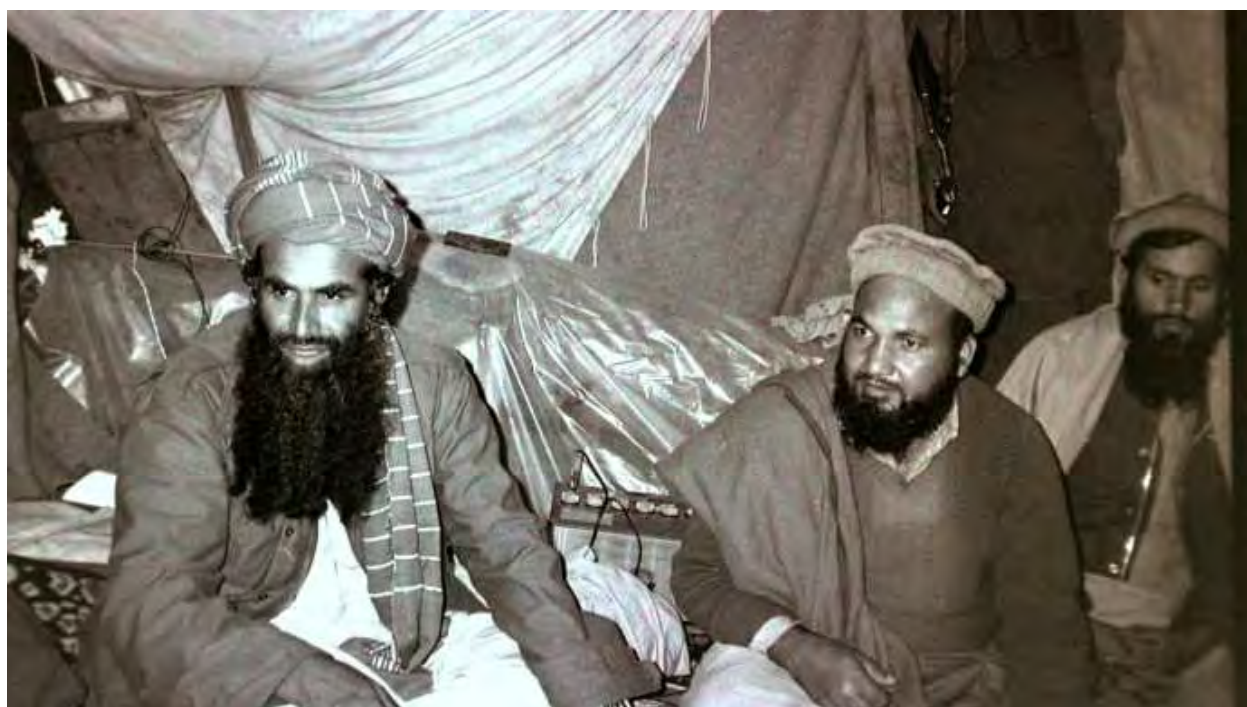
About an example of how good the mujahideen were as fighters against the Soviets and the Afghan Army:

In the battle I witnessed in 1987 the mujahideen scored a few direct hits on an army base north of Asadabad from positions in the mountains but extensive minefields did not allow them to even get close to the treacherous Kunar River, which they would have had to cross in order to pursue their assault. There were mujahideen from at least four different and supposedly allied parties in the area but cooperation among them was very limited.

The Soviets, who at the time had several hundred well-equipped spetsnaz commandos (according to the mujahideen) stationed in three mountaintop bases above the major air base of Chagha Sarai, and their Afghan allies retaliated by firing multiple rocket launchers, «Bimsiezda», and heavy field guns and big mortars at mujahideen positions for several hours until long after the rebels stopped shooting.

It was clear that those troops in Kunar had a good idea of the exact location of the rebels' mortar positions, their "zikuyak" – the 14.5-mm anti-aircraft machine gun nests –, their hidden shelters and even the paths they used because a number of shells missed by less than 30 meters over distances ranging between five and 15 kilometers without the aid of spotter planes, at least none observed by me or the mujahideen I was with.

About how I met Abdul Rasul Sayyaf in 1984, the man who introduced Osama Bin Laden to Afghanistan and helped him to set up his first base there (I met Sayyaf two months after Bin Laden was with him):



Abdul Rasul Sayyaf -left- Jaji Paktia Afghanistan late August 1984

My Japanese journalist friend, who had lived in Pakistan since 1975 and who had been to Jaji in 1983, found out in Peshawar that Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's men had taken over that area and had driven the Afghan Army out of one base there, which the mujahideen called Sarai.

He is the one who organized the trip to Jaji for the two of us that time, through a man named Abdul Hannan, who had connections with different mujahideen groups. Soviet and Afghan Air Force planes had repeatedly bombed the positions of Sayyaf's men for more than two months before we went there in late August 1984.

We did not expect to meet Sayyaf himself there, but a few days after we arrived we were told that he had come and was willing to meet us in one of the tents, supplied by a Saudi relief agency, that the mujahideen had pitched in a pine forest on the slope of a hill just 2 kilometers behind the Durand Line – the border. He met us there with some of his lieutenants, and we interviewed him at considerable length. His English was very good.

He spoke with confidence of overcoming the Soviets "because God is helping the mujahideen," and of having detailed plans to establish a "pure Islamic system" of government. He also predicted that "someday you will see the power of the Soviets vanquished, and all of those poor countries now under their domination will be free -- they will get their freedom as a result of the freedom of Afghanistan."

About the importance of Jaji, Paktia Province, where Osama Bin Laden set up his first base in 1984:

Jaji is strategically important because it is located just inside Afghanistan near the point where the Pakistani border comes closest to Kabul. I described Jaji this way in my first report from there in 1984 -- I

shall quote this: It is a beautiful area, with many springs and brooks of sparkling and delicious water from the mountains. But many people had to leave their villages here for a dreary existence as refugees in the steaming hot lowlands of Pakistan, where there is no clean, fresh water.

Hardly one of the more than a dozen villages I passed through on a 60-kilometre trek from a resistance camp just inside Afghanistan, on the way to the frontline, seemed to have escaped the bombing, rocketing, shelling and strafing by Soviet and Afghan forces – Babrak Karmal's forces. Many houses sustained heavy damage, leaving their inhabitants without shelter for the harsh winter in these highlands.

Strategically, the Jaji area, less than 80 kilometres by air southeast of Kabul, was vital for both mujahideen and the refugees because it is one of the main avenues for traffic between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The struggle for control of this area, therefore, was constantly intense, as the Soviets and the Babrak Karmal regime tried to prevent the Muslim fighters from bringing food, ammunition and supplies into the country.

They were facing an uphill struggle in this terrain. After September 1983, when the resistance forces overran the government base of Sarai after three months of heavy fighting, they have pushed their powerful enemy out of all of Jaji except for one base of two square kilometres in an area called Chownee. Morale at that base was by all accounts very low. Some deserters died on the way trying to flee from that base, on the minefields in the surrounding area. --

About a photo I took where a guerrilla aims a rocket-propelled grenade launcher at my head:



The guy on right is aiming a bazooka at my head -Jaji Paktia Afghanistan 1984

That picture shows 6 mujahideen in a tent in Jaji in 1984. They were preparing to go on a long trek from there to Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. One man in the front of the picture on the right was actually a defector from the Afghan Army, who had escaped from the Sarai base before it was captured and joined the mujahideen. The guy in the background pointing his RPG launcher at me was, of course, just trying to look funny for the photo.

About the religious conviction of the mujahideen and what role it played in their struggle:

I must say I was impressed, sometimes, by the religious fervor of some of the mujahideen – though they were by no means all like that. In 1985, some of Yunus Khalis's men I was with in Kunar Province tried very hard to teach me some Pakhto (with "kh" as in the northern dialect) and some basics of Islam, even though they could not speak English. In 1987, also in Kunar but further south, the Yunus Khalis men there once ran for close to an hour over treacherous terrain just to get to a small mosque in time for the evening prayer. Even though I wasn't carrying any weapons like they did I was barely able to follow them and totally exhausted when we arrived.

I felt that their religious convictions may very well have helped those men to be strong enough to face an enemy with greatly superior firepower, equipment and training. If a mujahed was seriously wounded, in most cases he was doomed, because the others could not provide medical aid. One mujahed in Kunar in 1987 stepped on a mine and bled to death because the others could not help him. I saw him only after his body was already wrapped up in a blanket. But I am sure very many mujahideen died like that after being

wounded, because no one could help them. I am also sure that this is still happening today in Afghanistan to the Taliban and other insurgent forces, probably a lot more than in the 1980s because the Americans today are a much more powerful and dangerous enemy than the Soviets ever were.

What is interesting in this is that the Americans themselves also generally hold quite strong religious or quasi-religious convictions, and they are clearly well aware of how important those are in keeping up the morale of their troops in the field. I have met American Army chaplains (not in Afghanistan, of course) who seemed to play a role similar to that of communist political commissars, but probably much more effectively because of the enormous potential power of religious belief.

Few things can help people overcome the fear of death as much as religious belief. But at the same time few things can drive people to commit atrocities without remorse on the scale that religious conviction has done. Probably the only thing that comes close in this sense is a conviction of racial superiority like that of the Nazis.

About what I think of Sayyaf's activities today, as a member of the Afghan parliament, etc.:

I know very little about what Sayyaf has done since I met him in 1984. I have read the Wikipedia article on him, and some other accounts that accuse him of having ordered massacres and of having helped the fake journalists who murdered Ahmadshah Massoud in 2001. But I have not heard from him or anyone connected with him, and don't know his side of the story at all. I know that he always had good connections with the Saudis. I have grave doubts about the role that the Saudi government has played and is playing in the world, and in Pakistan and Afghanistan in particular.

It seems like they are playing both ends, supporting the propagation of radical Islam on one hand while keeping strong military and economic relations with the US on the other. I can only guess that this is because they feel they need both in order to preserve the House of Saud. About whether the West should cooperate with people like Sayyaf, I don't know.

I believe the US-dominated foreign military intervention as it is now must end as soon as possible. Perhaps a peacekeeping force could be put together with the help of neighboring Islamic countries, and then a wholly new political process should take place that would include the Afghan insurgents. These are just my feelings but I don't know anywhere near enough about the situation to be able to give any kind of advice on what can be done to bring peace and good fortune to Afghanistan.

About my memories of Pakistan:

In December of 1987 I spent two weeks in Baltistan observing the work of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, and for a number of years after that I felt that I had to return to that area to help with development programs and get a chance to hike a bit in those awesome mountains.

I have since read the book *Three Cups of Tea*, about an American by the name of Greg Mortenson, who was in Baltistan a few years after I left and who has built many schools for both boys and girls not only in that area but also in Hunza, Afghanistan and the Pamirs – much more than I could have hoped to accomplish. That book is now my favorite. --

Getting back to your initial question, yes, I do have a special attachment to Pakistan and Afghanistan. But whether it was the most special time of my life: I would have to say no. It was special and a unique set of experiences for me in some ways but it was not the most special time. I feel there were many very special experiences, mostly very different from each other and unique in some ways -- but none stands out as the most special of all.

About my stays in Pakistan, in 1984, 1985 and 1987-88, I have to point out that they amounted to a combined total of barely six months, and I spent most of that time in Islamabad and Peshawar -- so that was not so long. I found most people I met there quite friendly and hospitable, and I liked the atmosphere in the towns very much. I found most places I saw very beautiful because there was a lot of green all around, especially in Islamabad. I very much enjoyed walking in the Margalla hills, for example, and along Rawal Lake.

Another thing I enjoyed very much was the food. I often ate food I bought from people in the street or in cheap eateries, and almost always liked everything. The only time I ever felt sick from food was when some British people I met in Skardu, in Baltistan, gave me some British shepherd's pie -- I ate it out of politeness but hated it from the start and vomited afterwards...

Also, during my third stay of exactly five months in 1987-88 I started drinking the water in Islamabad and Peshawar straight from the tap and never had any problem. And, of course I loved seeing the big mountains in northern Pakistan, even though I didn't get a chance to do any real hiking in them as I was always short of time and money, and not adequately equipped for that type of thing.

On the negative side, apart from seeing the juxtaposition of opulence and miserable poverty and disease, which is sadly, of course, not at all unique or unusual, one of the most difficult aspects of life in Pakistan

for me was what I would call the "absence" of women from street life in the countryside, and that was the same in Afghanistan.

I find the presence of women extremely important and comforting. In the cities you can see women in the streets but in the countryside it seems almost like they don't really exist or at least they are always hidden because you cannot see their faces. I don't know of anything more beautiful than the face of a beautiful woman -- though I am not and have never been a womanizer at all; it is just one of the greatest pleasures to see them. Pakistan has many really beautiful women, but you don't see them in the countryside.

It is very hard for me to pick out one particular point that I liked most about Pakistan; I think every country has a certain "feel" to it, and I just liked the "feel" of Pakistan very much, even though I am also aware of its dark side, which I could not ignore. I have hope that the country's problems can be overcome someday.

About what I think the most tragic outcome of 9/11 was, and whether I see a glimmer of hope for the world:

I think that the reaction of the United States to 9/11 was much worse for the world than 9/11 itself. The so-called war on terror, to me, is a war of terror. Humankind's addiction to violence and war has worsened very much because the USA tries hard to make them look clean and neat even while inflicting great suffering and damage on other countries and wasting enormous resources that could be used instead to help resolve the problems that generate terrorism in the first place. –

I do see glimmers of hope as more and more people in the United States and elsewhere are slowly coming to realize that military means cannot resolve the world's problems. I was inspired when I saw how people around the world expressed solidarity with the American people after 9/11, but then, tragically, the feeling of empathy was lost as the US embarked on what was really a campaign of revenge. Recently, after a series of natural disasters struck various places around the world, it seemed that a new spirit of empathy and solidarity started to emerge. I only hope I am not just dreaming...



Passu Cathedral peaks above Hunza Valley late August 1985