

## Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan

**Edward Girardet**

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Afghan poet Massoud Khalili lamented that the wars that plagued Afghanistan for more than thirty years likely drove the cranes away from their annual migration over his country. Edward Girardet, who put his own life at risk several times while covering the wars, offers a compelling portrayal of the people and the land ravished by the Soviet Union, the United States, Pakistan, China, India, and Saudi Arabia: nations that invaded Afghanistan for their own purposes while showing little concern for the indigenous peoples. The cranes were often more fortunate than the Afghans.

Few people are likely as well qualified as Girardet to tell the tragic story of Afghanistan since the 1979 Soviet invasion. The American author has been a foreign correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* and is the author of *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*. Girardet began covering Afghanistan just before the Soviet attack, and the American's compassion for Afghans, who, in his experience, would share their meager food and few possessions with strangers, resonates throughout.

Girardet skillfully blends tales of bravery and tragedy with authoritative investigations of the history and culture of Afghanistan. The book is in part the story of two resistance fighters: Ahmed Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, men who symbolize the good and bad of Afghanistan at war. According to the author, Massoud was the most successful resistance leader, loved by Afghans because he envisioned a united nation in which all groups lived peacefully. "The Lion," as he was known, waged war against the Soviets and other invaders for twenty-five years until Al Qaeda followers murdered him two days before 9/11. Conversely, Hekmatyar is revealed as an extremist who brutally killed thousands of his opponents and also issued an order to kill the author. However, Hekmatyar was our man in Kabul, a secret CIA asset; and he, not Massoud, received the lion's share of American aid.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan for access to Gulf States oil and to prevent another radical Islamic border state, along with Iran, from taking hold. The Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, after ten years of a frustrating war in which they made critical mistakes that would be repeated by the United States. These included a failed attempt to install a national government in a land that mistrusted central authority and the failure to acknowledge that corrupt tribal warlords, more adept at drug running and stealing foreign aid than they were at leading their own people, were the real powers.

In addition to admiring Massoud, his allies, and ordinary Afghans, the author praises volunteer medical doctors, mostly French women, who put their lives at risk in this male-dominated society to provide much-needed care for wounded refugees. He includes horrific stories of Afghan refugees, three million by 1984, who lost their land, limbs, and lives to Soviet bombs. By 1987, large numbers of Arabs who did not respect Afghan customs entered the country. Girardet describes a shoving match he got into with a "tall Arab" who demanded that journalists leave the country. After the scuffle, his opponent was identified as Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden and the Taliban would return in 1996, brutalizing the population and stirring up anti-Western sentiment that would culminate in the attacks on 9/11.

Although most of the book describes Girardet's experiences during the years following the Soviet invasion, he offers keen insights into what has become America's longest war, beginning in 2001. President Bush lacked vision for the

future of Afghanistan and he might have avoided a war entirely if he had not supported Pakistan's self-serving military encroachment, claims Girardet. By 2011, corruption under President Hamid Karzai was a way of life, with the United States propping up his regime with \$2.8 billion a week.

This book is an excellent personal account of a nation in turmoil that offers insight into its history, its people, and its future. Serious readers of current politics will find this important work instructive and rewarding. Despite the great challenges Girardet identifies, he remains cautiously optimistic that Afghanistan could yet become stable—if foreign nations would stop encroaching and if Afghanis were truly free to decide their own fate—a land that would again be home to “migrating cranes.”

KARL HELICHER (August 29, 2011)

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