

Turbaned men shade from midday sun in Sangi Sar, Kandahar Province, where Mullah Muhammad Omar founded the Taliban in the 1990s. Loyalists from around the country come to pray in the mosque that Mawlawi Hayatullah (second from right) now leads.

AFGHANISTAN'S LOST ROAD

A 2,000-mile journey on what's left of its major highway reveals a battered nation moving in reverse.

BY JASON MOTLAGH PHOTOGRAPHS BY BALAZS GARDI



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WE'RE FREE AT LAST from the crush of Kabul morning traffic, and the map on my smartphone estimates it'll take nine hours to drive 300 miles to Kandahar on National Highway 1, the most expensive and important road in Afghanistan.

The United States poured hundreds of millions of dollars into this stretch of asphalt—one leg of the 1,400-mile road that circles the country—to speed travel and boost commerce between the nation's capital and its second largest city. But it would be foolish to make dinner plans in Kandahar.

The highway was first built in the 1950s and '60s by the Soviet Union and the United States, Cold War rivals jockeying for influence over Kabul. It was ruined by decades of war and neglect, and only about 30 miles of paved road remained in 2001. When the Kabul-to-Kandahar stretch was repaired and reopened in 2003, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad proclaimed, "We are standing—literally—on the road to Afghanistan's future ... It is a future of prosperity. It is a future of peace." Nineteen years later, the battered roadway is a bone-rattling testament to the toll of rampant violence and graft that followed instead.

Less than an hour south of Kabul, in Wardak Province, the pavement starts to break apart, pockmarked by craters from Taliban explosives and weakened by ripples in cheap asphalt, forcing me to peel off the road or slam on the brakes repeatedly to avoid accidents. I seldom shift above third gear. Burka-clad widows begging for handouts and boys with shovels are cues to slow down for more bomb damage.

In the absence of repair crews, children such as Ehsanullah, 15, and his brother Rafiullah, 10, pack chasms with dirt from dawn until dark for tips of two dollars on a good day.

A heavily laden truck topped with plastic jugs plies its way through a remote part of Farah Province in western Afghanistan. Drivers say police demanded bribes to allow cargo transport under the old government, when salaries went unpaid and graft was common. The Taliban, they say, aren't doing that now.

PREVIOUS PHOTO
Cattle and goats throng a livestock market in Maimanah, capital of Faryab Province. Years of drought have withered grazing grounds, threatening livelihoods in this mainly agricultural nation.



“Our father is sick, and my older brother is an addict,” Ehsanullah sighs. “What else can we do?”

The drive is less stressful than my last trip through this stronghold of the Taliban, the hard-line Sunni Muslim militia that first seized power in 1996 and was ousted by the U.S. in 2001 for sheltering Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks. In August 2020 I was on this road as Taliban militants were hammering Afghan Army convoys. Firefights erupted out of nowhere, and a trickle of civilians traveled at their peril as outgunned government troops hunkered down in bullet-strafed outposts.

The police outpost where I’d spent the night is now a heap of rubble. Dozens more are abandoned, the steel-wire casings from dirt-filled defensive barriers scavenged for scrap. Columns of hard-packed earth are worn down by rains, dotting the hills like a constellation of ancient ruins. Hulks of tanks destroyed during the 1979-89 Soviet occupation sit within eyeshot of mangled American Humvees of more recent vintage, a jarring mash-up of nation-building ventures gone wrong.

It’s been a year since the Taliban seized power again as the U.S. withdrew its forces after 20 years. Photographer Balazs Gardi and I have rented a Toyota Land Cruiser to traverse National Highway 1, better known as the Ring

order restored. But there is also gathering despair that the new Taliban regime is no milder than its original incarnation.

Despite promising amnesty for former enemies and respect for rights of minorities and women, the Taliban have carried out summary executions of government forces who surrendered, have failed to stop sectarian attacks, and have aggressively erased efforts at women’s inclusion—from barring them from certain government jobs and forcing women newscasters to cover their faces to banning secondary education for girls. Since the Taliban takeover, the heavily aid-dependent economy has dried up, leaving 95 percent of the population hungry, according to the World Food Programme.

In dusty urban centers and crumbling villages, we find few traces of the two-decade, U.S.-led modernization project. With each mile we drive, ominous signs of Afghanistan’s dark and insular past emerge, underscoring a sense of a country moving in reverse.

WE TURN OFF the highway in Shaykhabad onto a gravel road to visit Roshanak Wardak, a physician and outspoken former member of parliament. Wardak, her hair covered by a black scarf, is virtually at a loss for words when we meet. It’s the first day of school across the country, and the Taliban have just announced that girls above sixth grade will be barred from attending.

“I am in shock,” says a stone-faced Wardak. She plays a cell phone video of a teenager pleading for entry into class. “It means the destruction of her future. A human being without education will be nothing.”

Wardak opened a women’s clinic in 1996, shortly before the Taliban came to power. Afghan women were dying at alarming rates during childbirth, and Wardak defied conservative authorities by providing medical care while refusing to veil her face. She was among the first cadre of women elected to parliament after the Taliban fell, and in 2010 she returned to being a full-time doctor to treat casualties from the insurgency against foreign forces. She wanted the bloodshed to end and saw the Taliban as the best hope for evicting the U.S. military. She also believed she could have a moderating influence on the Taliban in her community, many of whom she had known since they were boys.

In dusty urban centers and crumbling villages, we found few traces of the two-decade, U.S.-led modernization project. With each mile, signs of a dark past emerged.

Road, which connects four major cities in the east, south, west, and north. In our two decades of reporting in Afghanistan, it was too perilous before to make the full journey. But a lull in violence presents a rare opportunity to explore a country emerging from U.S. occupation.

Over two weeks, 18 provinces, and 2,084 miles—including off-road forays on rocky terrain that dent our truck—we meet hardened fighters, itinerant farmers, women enduring draconian restrictions not seen since 2001, and children forced to work to support their families. A unifying thread is relief that a long war that killed more than 150,000 Afghans is over, and a semblance of



Riding the Ring

For two weeks our team drove 2,000 miles along Afghanistan’s Ring Road and its spurs to document life since the 2021 Taliban takeover. Started in the 1950s, the highway was destroyed by successive wars, rebuilt in the 2000s, and devastated again by forces fighting U.S. occupation.

The past year has dashed her hopes. The Taliban have reimposed decrees that forbid women from traveling without a male relative, going to parks on the same day as men, or showing their faces in public.

“This is not Islamic,” Wardak complains. “All my good opinions of them have changed. The world is going forward; we are going back.”

We follow Wardak to the district hospital where she sometimes works, a spartan facility dependent on foreign donors. Afghanistan’s backcountry has been hit especially hard by lost aid, U.S. sanctions, and asset freezes, along with low harvests and a harsh winter.

In the malnutrition ward, Ayesha hovers over her withered infant daughter, Reshma, who’s being fed through an IV drip. At eight months old, Reshma weighs less than six pounds. Hospital director Abdul Hakim sees 50 to a hundred malnutrition cases a month and expects more. When the Taliban returned, many trained medical workers fled. “Now we don’t have enough

doctors and supplies to treat people,” Hakim says.

Strikingly, the trauma ward is nearly empty. During the war, corpses of government forces and Taliban militants piled up like “stacks of wood” in the lobby, Wardak recalls. Today the lone patient is a trucker getting his cheek stitched after a traffic accident to avoid a bomb crater in the road.

Some miles down the highway, a rangy 50-year-old who goes by the nom de guerre Khan boasts that he’s the man responsible for most of the Highway 1 attacks in Sayyidabad District. From 2006 to 2019, he says, his roadside bicycle repair shop was the lookout post for a bomb-emplacement squad that terrorized U.S. and Afghan convoys; by his count, they struck more than 2,500 vehicles. “Sixteen people were killed in that explosion,” he says, pointing to a bald patch of pavement. “No one was safe on this road.”

Khan is now a security guard at the Ministry of Public Works in Kabul, an irony not lost on him. Like every Taliban fighter we meet, he says he waged jihad because foreigners were corrupting



Taliban fighters patrol National Highway 1 near Maidan Shahr, capital of Wardak Province. The gateway to Kabul, this stretch of road was targeted by Taliban bombmakers during their yearslong insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government.



**CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT**

WARDAK PROVINCE:

Wahida, 30, just delivered her fourth child at the Malek Mohammad Khan District Hospital. Afghanistan has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates; more than 600 women die for every 100,000 live births.

BALKH PROVINCE:

Homayoun Morady, 15, from the Hazara ethnic minority, sits in his father's shop while studying math beyond what he's taught at school.

HELMAND PROVINCE:

Seasonal workers harvest opium poppies along Highway 1 near the town of Gereshk. Days later in April, the Taliban banned the cultivation, sale, and use of the lucrative crop.

JOWZJAN PROVINCE:

A Taliban court in Shibirghan hears testimony from a man accused of selling alcohol. The Quran, the Muslim holy book, prohibits drinking alcohol. Its sale was illegal under the previous government, but the Taliban have stepped up enforcement.



Coal miners shower off after work at a government-owned mine in Baghlan Province. Afghanistan's deepening economic crisis has drawn many men without alternatives or experience into hazardous mining jobs.



Afghans' traditional way of life. With the war over, his animus against outsiders has softened into curiosity, and he invites us for dinner.

Rumbling across a floodplain at dusk, we pass vehicle carcasses staked with tattered prayer flags—memorials to comrades killed by U.S. drone strikes. Woodsmoke rises from the high adobe walls of Khan's fortress compound, and we sit down to a meal of okra stew and unleavened bread, prepared by a wife and daughter we never see.

We're joined by his former comrade who goes by the name Elham, a sturdily built man in a camouflage jacket. The pair reminisce over tea, nostalgic for the charged sense of purpose they once shared. "Before, we suffered but we were happy," says Elham, who now works in a provincial passport office. "Now I'm bored and not sure what to do. I miss the war."

WARDAK PROVINCE'S jagged gray ridges level into washed-out plains as we enter Ghazni Province. The last time I drove here was in an armored U.S. Army convoy, and our trip was cut short when an improvised explosive device killed two Afghan policemen up front. This time, Taliban fighters inspect our trunk for weapons and wave us on with an apology for the hassle.

A sandstorm engulfs the highway, and it's getting dark when we reach Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban. In the past year, security has improved and "no one steals a single afghani," Gulalai, a vendor churning ice cream in the main bazaar, tells us, referring to the currency. "We welcome them back." Several stalls down, fabric seller Sabor Sabori counters that while law and order have improved, there's a trade-off: People no longer can speak their minds freely.

"Whether you are happy or sad," he says, "you say you are happy."

Near the city center, the grave site of Abdul Raziq, a fearsome U.S.-backed police commander and Taliban nemesis, has been walled off, his once ubiquitous image stripped from billboards and car windows. At the height of his power he ran Kandahar as his personal fiefdom, lining his pockets with customs revenue while police shook down merchants to supplement meager salaries and henchmen allegedly carried out torture and disappearances. Human rights groups have amassed credible evidence that the Taliban committed revenge killings against former government forces, with some of the most blatant cases

in Spin Boldak, the ancestral home of Raziq.

A four-mile line of empty, colorfully painted "jingle" trucks, so called for the chimes that embellish the flatbed vehicles, waits to cross from Spin Boldak back into Pakistan. The crippled Afghan economy relies on imports; nearly 28,000 pounds of commercial cargo pass through this border every day, along with UN aid convoys destined for far-flung provinces.

The Taliban takeover sparked a human exodus for Pakistan and Iran, among them technocrats, doctors, engineers, and other professionals essential to running a functional state. To stem the brain drain and the flight of staff who worked at foreign missions and businesses, the Taliban decreed in February that Afghans without travel documents couldn't leave without special permission.

LESS THAN A MILE beyond Kandahar's city limits, opium poppy fields flare up along the highway. Snow white, pale purple, and lipstick red, the flowers are loudly, enticingly everywhere.



LEFT

Girls crowd into a community school supported by a foreign charity in Wardak Province. Such schools were established in rural and Taliban-held areas before the hard-line Islamic group regained power in 2021, and they were often the only education option. Diminished access to international aid and a ban on secondary education for girls have put the schools' future in jeopardy.

BELOW

Physician Roshanak Wardak, 64, visits maternity ward patients at a hospital in Sayyidabad District, Wardak Province. During the 1990s Afghan civil war, she treated fellow refugees in Pakistan before returning home to address staggering rates of infant and maternal mortality.





Burka-clad women wait outside bombed courtrooms for their cases to be heard in Shibirghan, capital of Jowzjan Province. The Taliban have banned women from many government jobs and ordered them to cover from head to toe in public to avoid provoking men. Even female TV newscasters must now cover their faces.

Growing opium poppies was banned for the last two years of the first Taliban government; the Taliban later taxed the sale of opium and heroin in regions they controlled during the U.S. occupation. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan was the top producer of opium last year, yielding 7,500 tons worth as much as \$2.7 billion, about 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Desperate

'Taliban founder Mullah Omar said of the U.S., "You are the most powerful country in the world, and after 20 years you will be the weakest."'

—ABDUL MAJID

to ease the economic crisis, the Taliban had a choice this year: Crack down and deny rural poor their most lucrative crop—or turn a blind eye.

I wade into a field and inhale the sickly sweet scent of poppy latex drying in the sun. Ali Jan, 36, scores bulbs with a purpose-made tool, as he has done since he was a teenager. He earns about five dollars a day. "If there were other work, we would leave the opium business," he says.

Under the last government, Jan says, he had to pay kickbacks to local authorities. So far the Taliban aren't interfering, but there's a rumor they will impose a ban after harvest, allowing them to collect taxes now and curry favor later with Western countries seeking to stem the flow of heroin. Despite \$8.62 billion in U.S. counternarcotics spending, opium poppy cultivation surged during the war.

Poppy fields multiply down a dirt track to Sangi Sar. The farming hamlet is unremarkable except that it was here that Mullah Mohammad Omar, a one-eyed veteran of the 1980s mujahideen struggle to end the Soviet occupation, formed the Taliban in the 1990s. Warring commanders were killing and thieving during the civil war that broke out after the Soviet pullout, and Omar built a following of fundamentalist religious students known as Talibs, who captured all but a few pockets of the country in 1996.

Omar fled to Pakistan after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan five years later, and died of illness in 2013. His former village home was bombed, but the mosque where he was the imam has been

rebuilt. An old comrade, Abdul Majid, tells me that Omar "had the belief that whether he was dead or alive, the [Islamic] emirate would one day prevail. He would say of the Americans, 'You are the most powerful country in the world, and after 20 years you will be the weakest.'"

IN LASHKAR GAH, the capital of Helmand Province, we link up with a Talib named Rozi Billal, whom I'd met months earlier at a sporting event in Kabul. He'd kept in touch, sending family pictures and updates, adamant that we meet again on my next trip. Given his cheerful demeanor and taste for social media, I assumed he was somewhat progressive. I was wrong.

On a rutted road along the Helmand River, Billal, 28, tells us he originally signed up to be a suicide bomber because he was outraged by U.S. air strikes and raids on his community. Taliban officers thought him too smart to sacrifice and tasked him with training bombers instead. For 12 years he led a double life as a militant and part-time university student. Coeducation did little to temper his conservative values. Now a teacher, he insists women be separated.

"Women are a distraction," he says, adding he once had a stubborn female student removed from his classroom for trying to study with men.

The twinkling lights of Herat snap us back to life after a tedious drive through hard, barren country. Afghanistan's third largest city, with more than half a million residents, is an ancient trade center that shares cultural ties with Iran, just 75 miles west. The old city's 15th-century citadel was restored in the 2000s, and the city retains a veneer of prosperity.

But in the districts north of Herat, poverty is stark. There are widespread reports of parents selling daughters into early marriage to afford food for their families, and the sale of kidneys for transplants is on the rise. In Dazwari, a highland village near the Turkmenistan border, residents have relied on USAID and UN food deliveries since drought cut wheat output by more than half and decimated sheep. One in three children is malnourished here, community leader Arbab Nader says. "The [Taliban] government does nothing for us."

In a one-room, mud-brick home, Ma Bibi weaves carpets seven days a week to support her

five children, earning \$25 for two months' work. Her 10-year-old daughter, Sharifa, now toils alongside her. "I wanted to be a teacher, but that is no longer possible," the girl says with resignation.

IN BADGHIS PROVINCE, one of the country's poorest, makeshift camps of displaced people straddle the highway, waiting for aid deliveries that no longer come. The pavement crumbles into patches of dirt, until it disappears.

At a remote checkpoint in Darah-ye Bum, a Taliban guard looks bemused when I tell him we're driving to Maimanah in Faryab Province, the next major city 145 miles northeast. We start up a steep mountain track, and a boy runs up to warn us it's too dangerous, redirecting us into a riverbed. I check my smartphone map, which confirms we are still on National Highway 1: The riverbed *is* the road.

So begins a punishing ride down a boulder-strewn canyon. Several times I get out and move rocks to continue. We grind on for the rest of the day, averaging two miles an hour, not another vehicle in sight. It's dark when we reach Bala Murghab, a dead-end town of fire-scorched ruins.

We stop at a filthy teahouse and eat tough kebabs in silence. A shopkeeper lets us crash on his floor, but we hardly rest. The route to Maimanah is off-road, and we must follow a predawn taxi to avoid getting lost. Soon we're slashing through hill clefts and edging along steep ravines, one rockslide away from tumbling into the abyss. There's no choice but to keep chasing the taxi's taillights and white-knuckle our way through a gantlet of climbs and drops.

When the pavement finally reappears five hours later, we emerge as if from a fever dream. "The Ring Road is a myth," I say aloud, wondering how many people could have driven the entire circuit. For all the claims of mapmakers and military planners, Afghanistan's celebrated highway is another overhyped nation-building project left incomplete.

THE SMOOTH, SLEEPY DRIVE into Shibirghan, the capital of Jowzjan Province, is a welcome relief. But the sun-blasted desert that surrounds the highway is haunted by a brutal past.

We pass the turn to Dasht-e Leili, where in late 2001 as many as 2,000 Taliban fighters captured by Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum

suffocated in shipping containers and were dumped in mass graves. Dostum became first vice president and then marshal of Afghan armed forces while reigning over Jowzjan with absolute power for the past two decades, living lavishly in palatial homes in Afghanistan and abroad.

An energetic Taliban information officer named Hilal Balkhi informs us that we drove past a recently discovered mass grave. Scattered bones had been spotted along the highway, and a man came forward claiming to have seen Dostum's fighters bulldozing bodies in 2001. Desert winds had licked the concealing sands away.

Balkhi cancels an appointment to show us the site. He drops to his knees and starts digging with his hands, unearthing jawbones, femurs, shreds of clothing. He moves to the next pile and the next, and vows there will be justice under the new regime.

At the bombed-out provincial court building, people are arguing their cases before turbaned clerics. Many disputes involve land. Ahmad Javed, 39, a clean-shaven IT professional in a leather jacket, alleges that Dostum cronies seized his land. Dostum's people "could do anything" under the last government, he says. "They beat me up and broke my left hand. I feel very happy the emirate is here; they uphold Allah's law, not the will of strongmen."

UNDER THE FIRST Taliban government, justice was summary and brutal: public hangings for murder and rape, amputations for theft. Mufti Zahed, Jowzjan's chief justice, affirms that the death penalty and dismemberments would

The Ring Road turned out to be a myth. The celebrated highway is another overhyped nation-building project left incomplete.

again be enforced, though he'd not done so yet.

I notice a leather paddle on his desk and ask if he's ever used it. "Only once," he smirks, recalling a man who ignored warnings to stop cursing in his office.

That day the Taliban announce a ban on opium, from its cultivation to its use and sale. With government assets frozen and scant diplomatic recognition, the Taliban seem to be trying



RIGHT

Taliban fighter Omara Khan Mazlomyar, 40, stands guard at a former police outpost near Maidan Shahr, Wardak Province. An avid poet, he recites lengthy verses lamenting the vices of the past government and extolling the virtues of the Taliban.

FAR RIGHT

Abeda and her brother Ehsanullah ride their donkey home past the shrine of Amir Agha near Garmsir, Helmand Province. UNICEF calls Afghanistan the world's hardest place to be a child because of high child mortality rates, malnutrition, widespread hunger, and rampant sexual abuse.





An unpaved section of Highway 1 cuts through the village of Buzbai in Badghis Province, one of the country's poorest. The Asian Development Bank was supposed to pave the road from Badghis to Faryab years ago, but security risks and supply shortfalls halted the work.

Once the center of a powerful Islamic empire, the old city of Ghazni, capital of Ghazni Province, has fallen into disrepair from war and mismanagement. Most residents have decamped to the new city, where services are better.



to gain favor with the international community.

Mawlawi Gul Mohammad Saleem, deputy governor of Jowzjan, concedes “there were problems” during the last Taliban regime. A delegate at Taliban peace talks with the U.S. that were held in Doha, Qatar, he says the movement’s leaders have traveled widely since the 1990s and want to engage with the world, not seal off the country as before. U.S. geologists estimate Afghanistan has a trillion dollars’ worth of untapped minerals—enough to lift millions out of poverty if foreigners invested in infrastructure.

THE FINAL STAGE of our journey is the 1.6-mile-long Salang Tunnel at an altitude of 11,000 feet, carving through the Hindu Kush, the mountains

that divide the north from Kabul. A daring feat of Soviet engineering designed to handle a thousand vehicles a day when it opened in 1964, the passage has degenerated into a muddy, potholed, smog-choked shaft through which as many as 9,000 vehicles drive each day. An untimely breakdown could snarl domestic trade, spike gas prices, and mean death for those trapped inside.

The mouth of the tunnel is belching smoke as we enter. Visibility drops to zero. What seems like an eternity later, we emerge from the black lung and pull over to suck down fresh air before a winding descent to Kabul.

There’s one more detour to make: to the Panjshir Valley, the fabled bastion of resistance that

the Soviet Army and first Taliban government never managed to tame. Panjshir again held out when every other province fell in rapid succession in summer 2021, but Taliban fighters finally punctured its myth of impenetrability.

The road into the valley knifes along sheer rock walls and a rushing emerald river. Billboards that once featured the late commander Ahmad Shah Massoud and other ethnic Tajik heroes have their faces scratched out. The mood is somber in this holdout of anti-Taliban sentiment.

“Maybe five out of every hundred families are left—only people who couldn’t afford to leave,” says Habibullah, a bakery owner in Unabah village. Every other shop is shuttered. “Darkness,” he says, “is everywhere.”

What’s left of Panjshiri resistance has retreated up the mountains. Grainy videos on social media and funerals for slain Taliban indicate there’s still fighting. But for now, resistance is mostly symbolic.

When we reach Kabul, a massive new Taliban flag billows over Wazir Akbar Khan hill, a park in the city center. A gathering there has the boisterous feel of a family reunion—minus any women. Fighters from across the country laugh and take pictures, savoring their moment at the top after years in obscurity.

But the Taliban’s transition from guerrilla movement to government is taxing Afghans’ patience. New decrees are curtailing personal and media freedoms, and the nation is largely cut off from trade and aid, plunging the economy into free fall. Food, jobs, and health care are scarce. Infrastructure is a shambles.

“We have spent our entire lives in conflict, so I can predict the future,” says Abdul Khaliq, a 50-year-old laborer who lived through the Soviet invasion, the civil war, and the U.S.-led campaign. “This country will not be rebuilt for another 50 years.”

On our last day we drive back to Shaykhabad to see Wardak, the doctor. Her fatalism on the day the Taliban banned older girls from school has been replaced by defiance. She is delivering notebooks and pens to a community-based girls school she supports.

In a private compound, high in a mud-walled hamlet miles from a paved road, girls as young as six are cramped together on the floor of a small room, reciting facts about the circulatory system. Wardak complains the quality of education is not good—no tests, few textbooks—but at least the girls are learning something, fueling “hope that maybe one day they will return to school.”

Back at home, Wardak has something to show us. Past a grove of apricot trees and rosebushes is a hidden stone building with a vacant terrace.

“If the Taliban does not allow girls to go back to school, I will build one here,” she declares, the vision sparkling in her blue eyes. “I’ve made up my mind to stay and resist however I can—it is my duty as an educated woman. The next time you come here, this place will be full of beautiful voices.” □

For the September 2021 issue, **Jason Motlagh** reported on Afghan youth and the urban-rural divide on the eve of the U.S. pullout. Photographer **Balazs Gardi** first visited Afghanistan in 2001.

WEB HEADLINE

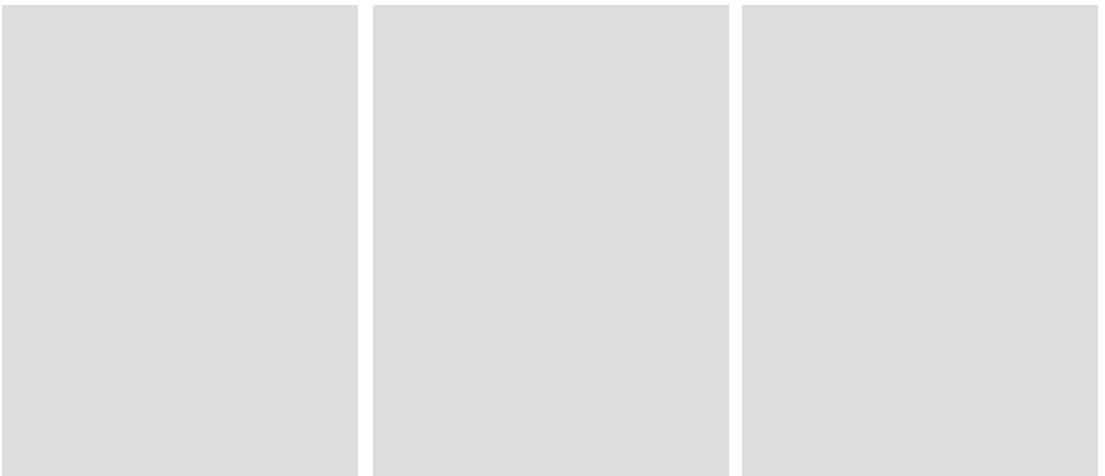
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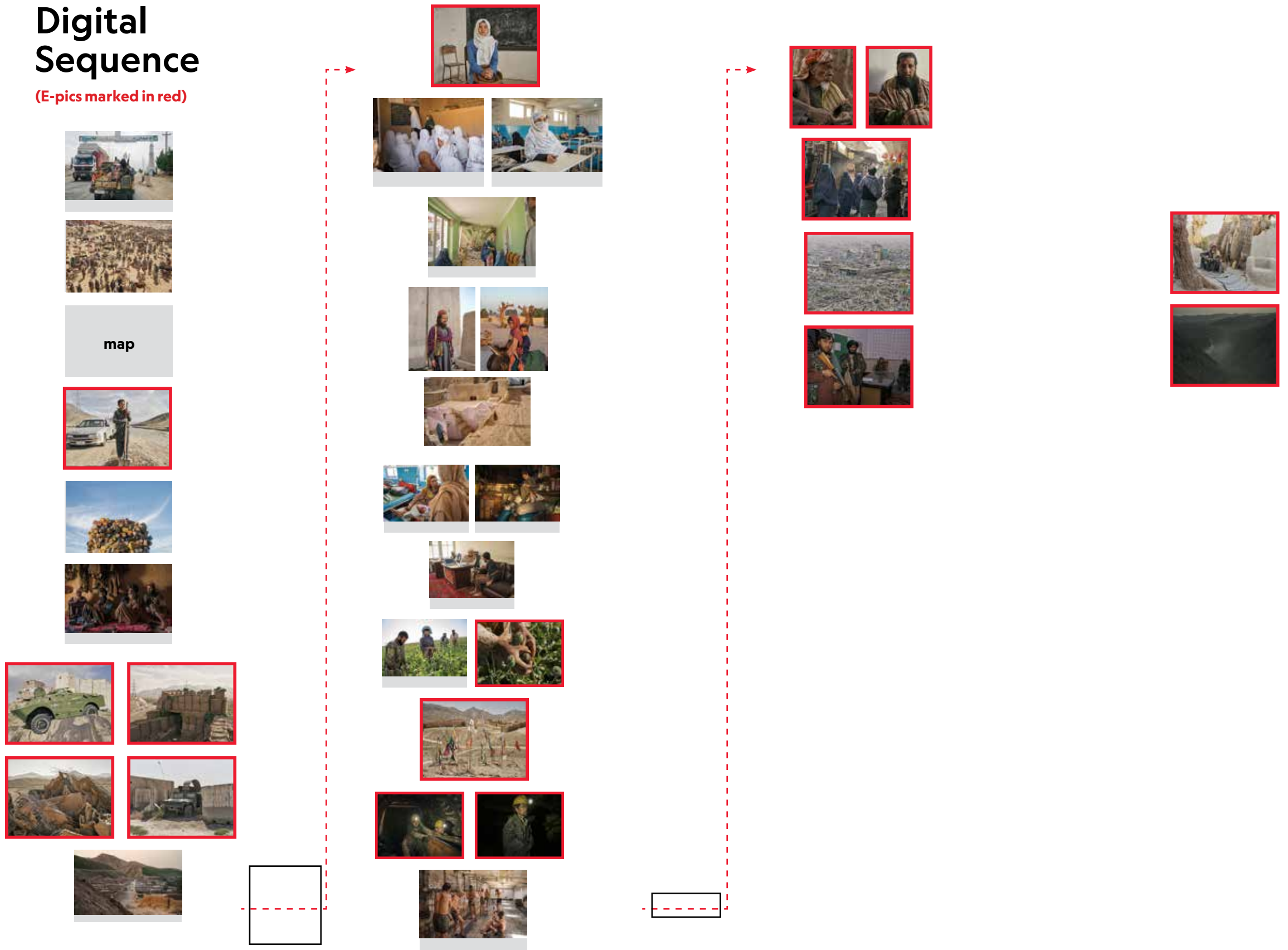
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APPLE NEWS+ VERTICAL CROPS



Digital Sequence

(E-pics marked in red)





Flags mark the graves of Taliban fighters in Sayyidabad District, Wardak Province. Locals say that as U.S. forces reduced their presence here, deadly drone strikes surged.



An elderly man (at far right) wafts smoke over merchants' stalls at a bazaar in the city of Kandahar. The gesture is meant to bring good luck to shopkeepers whose fortunes have plummeted since sanctions on the Taliban and the freezing of the Afghan central bank's assets severely curtailed trade.



The writer and photographer barrel after a taxi driver who offered to guide them through the backcountry between the northwestern provinces of Badghis and Faryab. Absent pavement or signage, Highway 1 fractures into dirt tracks that require familiarity and grit to navigate.



Farzana, 17, an ethnic Hazara, visits the school in Ghazni Province that she can no longer attend. "I cried for days" when the Taliban banned secondary education for girls, she says. She'd hoped to follow the path of her sisters—a teacher, a nurse, an engineer, and a business manager—all educated during the previous government.



Rafiullah, 10, packs dirt into a bomb crater on Highway 1 near Maidan Shahr, Wardak Province. He and an older brother, like many boys who live near the Ring Road, serve as ad hoc repair crews, relying on tips from passing motorists to support their families.



MAYBE?



Afghans gather at a graveyard in the Qaryah-ye Wazirabad neighborhood of Kabul on Nowruz, the first day of spring. Nowruz used to be a public holiday, but the Taliban canceled it. The festival has Persian and Zoroastrian roots and is especially important to Shiite Muslims, a minority of Afghans. The Taliban consider it pagan.



Taliban gunmen wait outside the office of Mawlawi Gul Mohammad Saleem, the deputy governor of Jowzjan Province. Saleem, who was a Taliban adviser in international talks, says the regime “lacked experience” in the 1990s and wants to engage with the world now, not wall the country off as before.



A Soviet-era armored personnel carrier sits derelict outside a former police outpost that was overrun by the Taliban in Maidan Shahr, Wardak Province. Some one million Afghans were killed during the resistance by Islamic mujahideen militias to the 1979-89 Soviet occupation.



Dirt-filled defense barriers are all that's left standing at a former police outpost on the outskirts of Maidan Shahr, Wardak Province. Traffic along the Kabul-Kandahar highway below has increased since the war ended because security on the road has improved.



A pile of destroyed portable defense barriers sits outside a former American base in Sayyidabad District, Wardak Province. Leftover steel casings have been repurposed by Afghans into everything from shop doors to chicken coops.



The remains of a disabled Afghan Army Humvee litter the side of the road in Nawah-ye Barakzai District, Helmand Province. It's estimated the Taliban inherited more than seven billion dollars' worth of American military equipment when they seized power from the previous U.S.-backed government.



Elham, a former Taliban fighter, relaxes in his hometown of Kuz Jangjay, Wardak Province, on a break from his government job as a passport clerk. For years, Elham set roadside bombs against U.S. and Afghan forces along the Kabul-Kandahar highway. He confides he's lost his sense of purpose now that the war is over.



Taj Muhammad, 90, is an ethnic Arab who claims to descend from the Prophet Mohammad. He has spent the past six decades taking care of the Amir Agha shrine near Garmsir, Helmand Province, as his ancestors did for generations.



Seasonal poppy farmers harvest opium along Highway 1 near Gereshk, Helmand Province. Used to make heroin, the profitable crop previously was taxed by the Taliban, but they recently outlawed it, perhaps to seek favor with the international community. The farmers were paid for their two-week labor in opium product equal to five dollars a day.

PAIR



Coal miners Muhammad Saber (at left) and Muhammad Nasir work at a state-owned mine in Baghlan Province where men labor with scant safeguards and with primitive tools.



Coal miner Muhammad Saber inside a state-owned mine in Baghlan Province.