August in Kabul with Andrew Quilty

Andrew Quilty
Journalist and author of *August in Kabul*

In conversation with

Ebony Bennett
Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

Ebony Bennett [00:00:03] G'day. Everyone, thanks for joining us. My name's Ebony Bennett. I'm Deputy Director at the Australia Institute and welcome to our webinar series. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that Canberra is Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay my respects to elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. A couple of Zoom tips to help everything run smoothly today. You can type in questions for Andrew in the Q&A box and you can upvote questions and make comments on other people's questions there as well. A reminder to please keep things civil and on topic in the chat or will boot you out. And lastly, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded and you'll be able to find a copy of that up on our YouTube channel at Australia Institute TV later today. And we'll also try and turn the audio into a podcast on our Follow the Money podcast. I'm delighted to introduce our guest today. Andrew Quilty is the recipient of nine Walkley Awards, including the Gold Walkley for his work in Afghanistan, where he's been based since 2013. August in Kabul, which you can see behind me here is his first book. It's the story of how America's longest war came to an abrupt end, humiliating end after 20 long years, as on the 15th of August, the Taliban entered Kabul. August in Kabul is the firsthand account of those dramatic final days told through the eyes of Afghans whose lives were turned upside down. Andrew was one of only a handful of Western journalists who stayed in Kabul as the city fell. And I can promise you, it is a gripping and very intense but highly recommended rate of hardly being able to put it down. And for everyone joining us today, I want to thank you for coming along. And we do have a very special offer for anyone who wants to purchase Andrew's book. If you go to MUP Dot com dot AU and find Andrew's book and use the code Kabul 20 you can get 20% off the paperback edition of August in Kabul on the MUP website website. Andrew Quilty, thank you so much for joining us today and congratulations on the book.

Andrew Quilty [00:02:13] Thanks for having me.

Ebony Bennett [00:02:15] I wanted to start at the beginning of the book in the prologue, where you kind of write about being on a plane back to Kabul on the 14th of August, kind of the day before the Taliban entered Kabul. It must have been very hard to pick a place to start with this book. Why did you start there and tell us about that decision to fly back into Kabul on that day?

Andrew Quilty [00:02:38] Why did I start there? I think. I mean, this is the first book I'd ever written. And I thought I. I didn't quite know where to begin. You know, I'd compiled over 100 interviews. And, you know, the the all the information I'd absorbed over more than eight years living in Afghanistan. And and I thought the easiest place to start was probably from my own perspective, which was although the book didn't, didn't follow in in that way, the prologue led into the story as it was told by others who experienced it firsthand. And I just thought. Leading into it from as I as I experience the days leading up to the the return of the Taliban would probably be the easiest way to to literally get some words on the page. So and those those days that I write about, I mean, why did I decide to go back in? I. I look, it was twofold. I on the one hand, I'd been working in Afghanistan as a photographer and a journalist for eight years by that stage. And I knew that this was going to be by far the biggest news event in that time, probably the biggest news event and certainly the biggest news event since the American led invasion in 2001. And so I it was obviously a place and a time and a place where I a time that I needed to be in in Kabul. But that said, I think the even greater was the fact that I had become part of the community there. And I. I had a lot of friends and colleagues. I had a couple of staff that worked at my house. I had housemates that had a dog and and I just felt that I needed to be with them at that time, even though I wouldn't be able to do a whole lot to help any or many of them. I just felt as though I needed to be with them and that not being with them would have been akin to, I guess, the same sort of abandonment that they were feeling on a much greater level.

Ebony Bennett [00:05:20] Yeah. And I mean, what was that like flying in as I'm sure other people were starting to fly out? It was obviously the day before, kind of so much urgency was applied to the situation and things got very dire. But, you know, obviously there'd been a lot of clashes in the lead up to that day. It was, yeah. You talked about kind of being on a plane that was kind of mostly empty, heading back in. That must be quite something kind of heading back into that situation, kind of knowing what's going to be waiting when you get there.

Andrew Quilty [00:05:59] Yeah, it was pretty eerie, although, I mean, it took me a couple of days to really come to terms with or to make that final decision. I guess, although the factors that I described that contributed to my ultimately going back, you know, there was a lot of I was I was afraid I would say I you know, we didn't really know how it was going to go down or how how long before it would. And there was still a very good chance that it was going to be it was going to turn into an all out battle for the city and that it would return to something similar to the the Civil War of the 19 9090s. What you had in this case, it would have been the Taliban on the edge of Kabul, you know, shelling from the outside. And until the government forces ultimately collapsed, as it turned out that it couldn't have the transition, couldn't have happened much more peacefully than it did or with with much less bloodshed than it did, at least in in the final days. That obviously been a huge amount of fighting and loss in the in the months, not to mention the years prior, but in the final the final day, it was I mean, it was mercifully bloodless. Yeah, it was. I mean, it was strange being on that on that plane. It wasn't the first time I'd been on a on a plane flying into a besieged city while everyone else was trying to get out. But I've done that a couple of times in other cities in Afghanistan, but I think flying back into Kabul, I mean, firstly, the fact that it's a city of 5 to 6 million people, it was also my home city and my my home. And so it had a lot more. You know, whereas in

the past, when I'd flown into besieged cities, it was I was nervous and excited and on a more, you know, because of the what I was going in as something I was going in as an observer or a journalist. In this case, I was I was just going into the journalists, but I was also getting in as a resident who was, you know, looking to yeah. Coming home. So it was it felt very different. And I had my feelings for that reason were also very, very different.

Ebony Bennett [00:08:40] Yeah. And for the book, essentially, you talked about that you spoke to kind of hundreds of people for you picked out a couple of key people and followed that kind of first person accounts of of what happened. But before we kind of dive into those, I do wonder if you could take me through your experience of that day, the 15th when the Taliban entered Kabul and what that kind of felt like and did the city was they was everyone kind of well aware? Were people caught unaware by how fast it all happened? What was that like on the day for you personally?

Andrew Quilty [00:09:20] Yeah, well, when we woke up on August 15, I don't think we it wasn't certain at that point that it was going to what was going to what happened was going to happen the night before. It was it was pretty clear that the Taliban were you know, they were making their final approach to the to the outskirts of Kabul. And it looked as though they were going to be at the city gates within probably a day or two. But, I mean, it wasn't even certain that morning I had that the night before I'd I'd been frantically, although I'd just flown in probably 6 hours earlier, I was frantically trying to book tickets out of the country just so I, I had them in my back pocket if I needed them. So I booked a couple of flights for later that week and. Excuse me. And yeah, as I say, just, just so I, I had them I would didn't know whether I would need to use them or whether the airport would even be open with whether the planes would be flying or not. But it was, you know, something to to give me and my housemate who did the same some sense of an out, I guess. But and so the following morning, August 15. To obviously to board those flights. We're in the middle of COVID, right? So we had to go and get PCR tests. So this is at about 11 a.m. on August 15, and me and one of my housemates went to this local health clinic, had our tests, walked outside, and we heard some faint gunfire off in the distance. And and then all of a sudden, we saw people rushing towards us down down the street where we were walking on the side of the street, and everyone was rushing back in the opposite direction and cars were turning around in the middle of the road and heading in the opposite direction. And people were saying, the Taliban are here, the Taliban here. And we were for we sort of quickened our pace to get back home. And as it turned out, it wasn't the Taliban at all. The gunfire was from security guards at the front of banks in Kabul who were trying to control crowds that were lining up to withdraw their savings. And so, yeah, from that point on, it it that was the that was the first domino to fall. And the Taliban were not even in the city. I mean, no, there had been reports of some small cells popping up here and there, but they had probably been existing cells that were coming up from from behind the the cover. The cover. But there was certainly no they didn't have any significant presence in the city. There were still the security forces were still at the posts and patrolling the city. And but it was from that point that those security forces I mean, they just got spooked. And I think this moment had been building up for so many months and they'd been hearing the stories of checkpoints getting overrun out in the provinces and soldiers being offered amnesty and surrendering to the Taliban. And and I think this this moment just just broke any resolve that was left. And, you know, one after the other policemen and soldiers started peeling off the uniforms, a lot of a lot of them had been had arrived to work that morning with civilian

clothes under there, under the military uniforms, the police uniforms. And so they could just strip them off to toss them aside and and blend into the into the community for to a point anyway. And so. My my housemate, who was a an American photographer and I we kind of nervously jumped on the back of my motorcycle and we just went for a ride. We we dressed in local clothes and slung our cameras over our shoulders. And we we drove around to see what we could see. We we first of all, we headed for as close as we could get to the US embassy, which is obviously behind a lot of security. And, and so we couldn't, we couldn't get to the, the embassy itself, but we could get to the point a couple of hundred metres from it, which was in between it and the airport. And the first thing we noticed was the helicopters that were doing constant back and forth between the embassy in the airport. There was also some smoke rising from within the grounds of the embassy. And I believe that was an incinerator that was that was working overtime at that point, burning documents and hardware and all sorts of things. And yeah, and that day just kind of unravelled from that point on. My housemate and I were feeling a hostility that we've never felt in Kabul before. People were looking at us in a in a much more hostile way. And that was they were, you know, sort of looking at us and the helicopters and then yelling abuse at us and basically lumping us in with the with what they considered the abandoning foreigners. And so we yeah, we I mean, it got to a point where we were we got threatened with a knife and and and in the end, we sort of jumped on the bike again, hightailed it out of there. We picked up a bunch of like fruit and vegetables on the way home thinking that, you know, not knowing how the the days to come were going to pan out. We thought we might not be able to leave the house for a few days. And this this goes to show how ill prepared even we were, you know, had been we'd been watching it. I mean, that's all we've been doing for the last of the previous weeks and months. And yeah, we hadn't even sort of stocked up on food. Such was the pace and the shock that came when that happened. And I remember at one point, you know, we picked up a I'll pick up a watermelon, it'll last for ages and it'll be good, as was, you know, middle of summer. It was hot. And Victor, my housemate, had had a had the watermelon on his on his lap sitting behind me and holding a bag of fruit and vegetables. And and the traffic by this point was just was not moving anywhere. Like all the roads were blocked. Cars and bikes were up on the footpath and things we to get around to a convoy of UN armoured UN vehicles that were leaving a compound on the same street as us all, all the other occupants of the vehicles were in there fully kitted out in their Kevlar helmets and body armour and had suitcases on their laps and they were all looking pretty nervous. And to get around them, we jumped up on the on the gutter. And when the back tyre went up, Victor lost lost hold of the watermelon, it went flying. And it was like it was like those moments in the movie. It was like, you know, leave it, leave it, go. It's just this watermelon bouncing down the street and we hightailed it for home and basically just. Conor took shelter there, too, and to try and reassess what was going on. You know, he jumped on Twitter, as you do these days, to get a sense of what's happening, where and and we we just kind of hunkered down for for a little while trying to work out what to do, we thought. So that the UN convoy that had passed us made us realised that the that the, that the UN on our street had abandoned their compound. And we thought, well, soon to follow will be the security guards which have blocked the entrance to our street that we just also happened to be on. And we thought once the security guards go, our street is going to be it's going to be a free for all. People are going to come in and look at the UN compound and we're sort of across the road, down the street a little bit. We thought we're going to be in trouble here. So he started calling around friends, asking whether they had a room for us to come and just sort of hunker down the houses that were not necessarily any more secure, but that they weren't as they weren't as maybe vulnerable. They were on quieter streets where people would be less likely to go looking for looting potential. So we did that for a couple of hours. And I was I was also making phone calls to to veterinarians to get the drugs to to euthanize my dog in the

event that we needed to do that. It was he is a very loyal he is a very loyal dog, but he's quite aggressive towards people. He didn't know. There was no way we were going to be able to take him with us anywhere, even to another house, let alone if we if we evacuated. And so, yeah, I had to consider putting, putting the dog down and and then yeah, after a few hours of this sort of and I was also affected, I went to pack a suitcase and just throw all my essentials in a, in a suitcase. And I was kind of surprised to realise that. My you know, after eight years living in Afghanistan, my essentials added up to about a quarter of a suitcase. So I ended up just filling it out with carpets that I, you know, that I'd collected over the years. And and then at one point, we Victor and I. Time came together in the house and we just we just sort of realised that everything had gone quiet before. You could hear the sounds of the traffic and shouting and gunfire over the very high walls that surround our house from the street. Then all of a sudden we realised it's gone deathly quiet. And so we parked ahead outside the gate, looked up the street, and it was just empty. All the traffic had gone. Everyone had left the streets. And we thought, okay, this is the this is the security vacuum point. This is that this is kind of the point that I'd been most worried about, even more so than than the Taliban entering the city. Just because I thought that the Taliban are going to but they have no reason to to want disorder in the city. Once they come in, like once they do come in, they're going to want to secure the city. And it's certainly not going to be tolerating looting or violence or, you know, meted out by anyone other than themselves. And so I thought, okay, this is yeah, this is the lawless period where. Yeah. Anyone who wants to take advantage of the vacuum is going to be doing so now. Fortunately, we know those gods at the end of our street was still there and we went and spoke to them and they said, Yeah, we know what's happening. Everyone else is banning it, abandoning their posts. We're going to stay here until the Taliban arrive and we'll just hand over our weapons and. And and and walk home, basically. So we were confident to an extent that our house would be relatively safe. And so we got back on the bike and drove out into the city just again, trying to see what we could see. And first of all, it was quiet. It was like a weekend. There was very little traffic, but there were weird, weird things were going on. You know, we what we we passed one guy who was walking down the street with a scarf, fully wrapped around his face, holding a pistol, probably just looking to rob people. We passed a guy beside a overturned motorcycle who was looked to be dead on the ground in a pool of blood. So it was this very strange, spooky, scary atmosphere. And then it was probably at about 4:00 or 430 that we came across. This was a far away from home, towards the edge of the city. We came across a a group of people huddled, huddling around something on the side of the road. And I sort of took a second look and. I could see two guys on a motorcycle. One of them was holding a AK 47 on the back. It was like, they're Talibs. And so without even thinking, I just pulled to the side of the road and I just said, follow me and just acted confidently, walked over to them and said, Can we take some photos of you guys? And they were fine. They were happy to be photographed. And we did. And then, you know, everyone was standing around them taking selfies, and there was this real nervous energy. And then after a couple of minutes, they, you know, they hightailed it off on the bike and we gave chase. And then soon enough, we came to a the traffic jam that was being caused by a handful of cars and a an American made army armoured Humvees, Humvee that was full inside and out of Taliban fighters with rocket propelled grenade launchers and 40 sevens and pickup machine guns and Taliban flags. And we thought, okay, this is it. Here and again, people were lining the streets, kind of cheering, pretty nervous. I think it was probably doing this in a performative way to try and, you know, make out as if, you know, they had some affinity with the Taliban, whether they did or not. You know, it was a it's a sort of survival tactic. And we hung around this this convoy as it was making its way through the crowd for about 10 minutes, you know, pretty, pretty nervously. And it was a big crowd. And we were foreigners. And we thought, you know, this could really turn ugly easily. But the the convoy

was edging along constantly enough that we probably didn't give anyone enough time to think about, like, okay, this is where there are some foreigners. Shouldn't we be, like sitting upon them or something? And then eventually they got out of the traffic and sped off. And Victor and I just sort of wound our way through some back streets to get back to the motorcycle and headed for home again. Was it was getting dark by this stage and we thought it's still pretty dicey. The is there's not there's certainly weren't a lot of Taliban on the streets at that point that were the only ones we'd seen. And the Taliban actually hadn't given the orders for their fighters to come into the city. It wasn't it wasn't until early that night that we found out later the American commander at the time was in contact with the Taliban leadership in Doha, and they were arguing over who should take control of Kabul at this point to secure it. And in the end, the American general said our orders are to secure the airport for our evacuation. If you want to take if you want to take charge of security to give Kabul over to you. And at that point, the Taliban leadership ordered their forces who were surrounding Kabul to to enter, and they made their way towards the palace. And another sort of filtered out throughout the city and took up posts throughout the city. And and that was kind of that.

Ebony Bennett [00:26:24] Yeah. I want to come now to the to the some of the stories that you explore from the book. You there's three stories in particular that really I wanted to get into. The first one is Solomon at Indiana Post. And the story of that then I wanted to ask you about Hamad, who is at the presidential palace and Nadia, who I believe was a student. So three kind of very different perspectives. A soldier, you know, a public servant working in the presidential palace and and a student there as three of many, many stories tell. Tell us a bit about Antenna Post and and what happened there.

Andrew Quilty [00:27:10] So intent opposed was a Afghan national army, a small Afghan national army outpost on the top of a hill that was punctuated by a mobile phone antenna. It's the name, and it was in the province of Maidan Wardak, which is just south of Kabul. And Captain Suleiman, who you mentioned, was posted there to command it and three other satellite outposts that were protecting a small road that ran into the district capital of one of the districts of modern Wardak. And he had he by the time he arrived there in May last year, the Taliban were really starting to push their offensive in rural areas around the country. So and including in modern Wardak. And so he was coming under quite a lot of pressure. And I mean, they were virtually surrounded. They were coming under attack every night. They couldn't resupply. They couldn't be resupplied with food or water or ammunition by road anymore.

Ebony Bennett [00:28:26] Yeah. You talked about morale being, like, really awful because, yeah, they were deprived, essentially. Couldn't get a lot of supplies.

Andrew Quilty [00:28:33] Yeah. And at the top of this very isolated hill and the only way for supplies to get in was by helicopter at Night-Time. Because, I mean, the Taliban were literally surrounding the bottom of this hill and would fire on on any helicopter that I could see coming to bring supplies. And they got some supplies were dumped. I mean, off target a couple of weeks after Sooliman arrived at

the outpost and was begging for these supplies to be flown in, which which kept them afloat and alive for a couple more weeks. But, you know, the ammunition was was was was being depleted and the attacks were getting more and more brazen. Taliban fighters, some of whom I spoke to, who had been part of the offensive against this outpost, said they would get as close as to the the outside of the the fortifications of this base. They'd be able to get up the side of the hill at night and to lob grenades and and even steal some of the floodlights that the Afghan National Army would place around the perimeter of the outpost to to to blunt the efficacy of their Taliban night vision capacity. And, yeah, the morale was just, you know, dropping and dropping. They had wounded soldiers who couldn't be evacuated. They were running low on food and water. In the end, they were having to drink. After they drank the water from the radiators of their vehicles, they started to drink their own urine. And then all the while, the Taliban were they were through intermediaries. They were offering amnesty if if any of these soldiers surrendered. And and so there was one surrender. One of these soldiers ran down the hill into the waiting arms of the Taliban. And that was a big propaganda victory for the Taliban. They the Taliban then took his phone. And so they had all the phone numbers of other people in the in the checkpoint. And they started calling them and sending them voice notes and and offering them amnesty and money if they bought weapons and things. And so the morale was just plummeting. And and maybe I'll leave it there. So I don't know the surprise of the book.

Ebony Bennett [00:31:11] Yeah, but at.

Andrew Quilty [00:31:12] That point.

Ebony Bennett [00:31:13] It was very just palpable, the sense of kind of, I guess, despair that was there and not coming after being requested. It was quite a contrast. I felt like, you know, quite a contrast to the story of the the presidential palace and the civil servant that you talk to there. It was kind of nice. Yeah. He was seemed very close to what was happening. And still there was that lack of information not knowing what was going to happen. Everyone just seemed to be operating in kind of a vacuum of information, even someone who was working in the palace. Can you tell us a little bit more about him?

Andrew Quilty [00:32:01] Yeah, he'd worked in the media department of the palace for several years. And he. Told me how he was. It was like he was living in two different worlds in the palace where he was constantly told, you know, everything's fine. The army has everything under control and we're going to, you know, recoup and mount a defence of Kabul and everything will be fine. The morale is good. Our security forces are aligned and strong. We have the support of the Americans and then they go home at night and everyone would be, you know, afraid of what was being said and watching the news and seeing the Taliban, you know, taking over province after province. And he didn't really know who to believe, even though he was I mean, he worked very closely with the president even. But, yeah, it was there was a lot of delusion within the in the palace, I think, and and a and a misguided sense of the loyalty of the security forces. And so on August 15, he he turned up to work as usual. He was used to arriving at work on on days where there was tension in the city. There might have been violent attacks or bombings that morning. Roads would be closed. But he

knew he had to be at work as a as a as a secretary. And so it wasn't that unusual for him. But he you know, when he arrived at work, he noticed that, as I heard, people were sort of flocking in the opposite direction to that which they should have been going to at that time of day and and the day, you know, as it did for for me and everyone else, the day just sort of slowly, quickly unravelled. He also heard that that gunfire that I alluded to earlier and and then kind of watched from within the palace as as everything started to crumble. And the ministers, ministers of interior and defence started losing grip on their forces. And the Presidential Protection Service, the the Secret Service service of the Afghan government were kind of in disarray. And the national security adviser was sort of running from meeting to meeting, trying to work out what was going on with his American counterparts and organising evacuation flights with spies from the United Arab Emirates. And it was I mean, it was very chaotic. And as you said, he he had a well, a very privileged perspective from within the palaces as the republic was crumbling from from its centre.

Ebony Bennett [00:35:02] Yeah. And you talked about in the book he was kind of watching this happen during the day and assessing what to do and if he needed to get out. But he was also quite conscious of the security of his staff. And I was really struck by the stories that you told of him getting rid of documents that might identify people and things like that. How widespread was that in the palace and how important was that in the end to ultimately did the Taliban end up targeting people like him? And was he correct to be worried about those types of security concerns?

Andrew Quilty [00:35:43] And no one really knew that the Taliban had been very careful and strategic with the with their rhetoric over the months prior. As I said, they'd been offering amnesty to members of the security forces. So there was some reason to hope, at least, that that civil servants like Ahmed Safi, that they would be okay. Certainly if the security forces were going to be handled with with leniency, I think there was reason to believe that public servants would be. But but then again, no one that I spoke to really trusted the Taliban's word on the on the amnesties. And so no one wanted to take the risk. So. Ahmed Sofian and certainly a lot of other government staff and obviously members of the security forces were destroying documents and and went into their offices that morning to do so. And yet, as you said, because a lot of the other palace staff had been told to stay home that morning, Ahmed Safi took it upon himself to to destroy destroyed documents on their behalf. He had been in charge of organising presidential visits overseas and things. So he had lots of documents of identification documents and passport photos and passport applications, visa applications and things. And so he took all those and burned them and destroyed deleted files from computers and things. In the end, I mean, the Taliban, I don't think there's been as big a sweep of retribution as some people expected, but it certainly has been going on. And I'm aware of some people who have been who were initially granted amnesty and who have later been picked up and arrested. And I know of at least one member of the security forces who is who is being tortured and others have fled the country, however they have been able to. And then others, again, bureaucrats and public servants have have been called in, called on to go back to work to work with the Taliban, to to teach them how to the you know, to run a government to work as their secretaries and and the, you know, I.T. support. And, you know, how do these systems work? How to you know, how does the how does the passport printing machine work or all these things that the Taliban have never had experience in? And they they need a lot of these people that said, they can't I don't think many of them are being paid. So and that's not a punitive measure. It's because they don't have any

or very little capacity to to raise revenue. And so few Taliban members are being paid a lot. Mm hmm.

Ebony Bennett [00:38:56] I want to come now to Nadia's story. Nadia Amani is a student, a young woman who at the time all this is happening is essentially just completed her exams. It was such a powerful story. I don't want to give too much away, but yeah, essentially worried about her family being at risk and her brother working with the police. Tell us a little bit more about about Nadia's story and why she tries to put that in.

Andrew Quilty [00:39:30] I really wanted to have the perspective of the young woman, because obviously young women were going to be amongst the most affected by a return of the Taliban. And Nadia was someone who had reached a lot of the rewards of the past 20 years. She'd had a good education. She spoke several languages, and she hoped to go to university. But her she'd grown up in a family that had been quite closely tied to the government her father had been a policeman in during the communist era, in the Soviet era. He had been arrested by the Taliban when they first came to power in the nineties before for escaping to Pakistan. And then when he had a family of his own, as well as Nadia, he had several other children, the eldest of whom also became a policeman. And in the around 2014, 2015, the pressure on him from the Taliban, who who didn't control the. Where they lived, where they were from, but had enough influence to be able to threaten threaten it quite seriously. They started threatening him and the family and and it got to the point that in 2015, the family once again had to leave for Pakistan. They and from there, that that elder brother and another one of his sisters went by overland to Iran, Turkey, and ended up in in Germany as part of the the huge wave of refugees that that transpired that year from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria primarily. And with so with that son safely in Europe, not his father, who hated living as a refugee, there was no dignity and no status. He decided it move the family back and instead of moving back to the village that was becoming increasingly threatened by the Taliban and they moved into Kabul where they thought they'll be safer and they'll be able to hide amongst the masses. And even even so, they they would move house every year. They wouldn't be particularly social in the neighbourhood. They would, you know, they would keep their business to themselves in order to try and ensure their security. And then, of course, as the Taliban started to round on Kabul, they became very nervous because they thought we've been able to hide until this point. But if the Taliban take control of Kabul, not only will we not be able to run that we know to hide either. And so. Nadia's father and her remaining one of her other brothers who remained in Kabul sort of came up with this plan to appease the Taliban. And as unthinkable as it is that their plan was to hand over to a Taliban fighter into marriage, and with the assumption that that would let their family off the Taliban sort.

Ebony Bennett [00:42:50] It's something very hard to contemplate for someone sitting here in Australia. But looking at that families plot and the risks that they were under and what they were dealing with as a refugee family as well. You know, it's just unthinkable for any family to have to face. But Nadia, too, seems to listen to another interview that you did with Phillip Adams, where you talked about she was very forgiving of her family and quite understanding in the end of how that all transpired. It's quite amazing.

Andrew Quilty [00:43:31] Yeah. She. She she could see it from her father's perspective. She she knew he was under extraordinary pressure and yet extraordinarily was was able to forgive him for for the choices he'd made, even though it was potentially going to. You know, ruin or end her life. She made it quite clear that she started carrying a razor blade, razor blade around in her handbag, because she said, if if my life is going to be ended by by being married to a Taliban fighter, I'd prefer to end it myself. And and so, yeah, I mean, to give it given that, you know, she was fully aware of what marriage to a Taliban fighter meant and the fact that she was able to to forgive her, her father for that decision is quite extraordinary.

Ebony Bennett [00:44:37] Yeah. Obviously, all of these stories and there's, you know, millions of them are very traumatic in different ways. I wanted to ask you, as a photojournalist or as an author in this case, talking to all these people and being with them at some of the worst times in their life, that must be very confronting for you to deal with. How do you deal with that tension and what's your reflections kind of now that we're almost a year on from all the events?

Andrew Quilty [00:45:14] Yeah, it was. I mean, and obviously. Witnessed a lot of people going through a lot of pain and suffering over the years in Afghanistan. But when it when that started happening in Kabul and happening to people that I knew, friends and colleagues, it took on a whole new level of significance and has been a lot harder to to come to terms with. I think previously the the war had it had mostly been fought outside of Kabul, although there were obviously a lot of isolated, sometimes quite common incidents of extreme violence in Kabul. It never really felt to me like a city that was at war, and I don't think it really felt like that for most people, although, you know, there was always fear it on the streets that you could get caught up in a bombing or something. It wasn't like you were crossing frontlines on a daily basis or anything like that. And so, yeah, seeing it in in my home city occurring to people that I was close to, it was that made it a lot more confronting than anything I'd seen before. Even if it was even if it was just it wasn't necessarily violence that was happening to these people, but it was it was their life being taken away from them and the rug being pulled out and, you know, having to give up, give up their lives, give up their jobs, say goodbye to their families, you know, pull a pull the door of their home, close behind them, leave everything in it, just in the hope for many of these people that they could get inside the airport and then get on a plane abroad. Many of them, of course, weren't able to do that. And many, many ended up ended up, you know, taking the much more dangerous route and fled across into Iran, Turkey and beyond, and are living in extremely precarious circumstances. You know, in this this kind of purgatory where they have no no sense of security or safety or or home and, you know, just basically surviving at this point.

Ebony Bennett [00:47:36] Yeah. I've got a question here from the audience from Timothy McNaught that I think speaks to that a little bit. He asks, Do you identify with the anger and frustration of some of our veterans who've tried in vain, some, in some cases for years to get visas for their interpreters and failed assistance and things like that. What are your reflections on that and the obligations that we still have as one of the countries that helped invading Afghanistan?

Andrew Quilty [00:48:04] Yeah, of course. I mean, look, Australia the Australian embassy was the first embassy by a matter of several months to pull out of Afghanistan. And they they pulled out without warning in April 2021 and before any other embassy had really, seriously contemplated it. So that gives you a sense that they of the the fear that they had of a the likelihood of a Taliban return. And so if they were that fearful and if they thought that leaving was was as necessary as that, then surely they had some kind of inkling that or, you know, if I had an inkling that they needed to leave, then why not those who they also had responsibility for? And why did it? Why did it come down to this 11th hour scramble to the to the gates of the airport, you know, for which was not wasn't even possible for for a number of people who were I mean, I think it was something like 18, 800 people were issued emergency humanitarian visas for Australia who was who at least a couple of months ago still remain in Afghanistan. And I'm aware of several of them myself. And yeah, it's look, the Taliban that did I mean, I was surprised by the speed of it. So as was everyone. So there was, I suppose. I suppose everyone thought that they might have had more time than I did in the end. But, you know, if as you say, people had been advocating on behalf of interpreters for four years, and I know that seemed to be true certainly in the US and other countries, you know, why did it have to be be pushed up against the I guess that against that final closing gate. To the extent that it was, is is. Yeah. I guess obviously someone of can help account for that.

Ebony Bennett [00:50:25] Yeah. Yeah. There's a couple of other questions along similar lines about, you know, does Australia have a special responsibility to help to help those and increase our refugee intake from Afghanistan as well? We are a year on from all these events now. I mean, has the situation improved at all or is there any sense that this will be resolved in a in a meaningful way? Or is it just. Yeah, it was poorly handled and continues to be so.

Andrew Quilty [00:51:03] Look, I think I mean, the process has turned into just a slow, grinding, bureaucratic one at this point. And look, I know I mean, I received a letter, a response to a letter I wrote to the Minister for Immigration myself recently. I you know, look, they are working through them. But there's I mean, the the the the labyrinth of Australian immigration bureaucracy is just incredible. I mean, when, when I started having to look at these forms filling in on boxes of Afghan friends, I mean, I was just at a loss how, how an Afghan in in Kabul, let alone in some other province, maybe with limited English or access to Internet, would navigate this process. I just have no idea. And so it's it's I mean, yeah, look, I've got one friend who's basically going from city to city to try and stay out of the Taliban's crosshairs all while this process is just working along at a snail's pace. And, you know, I don't know whether that whether it can be hurried along. It's certainly not it's certainly not resolved. As I said. It's just it's just slow at this point. And obviously, I think the you know, there's always an argument for increasing the refugee intake. But I know that since the war in Ukraine has begun, the competition for those positions all around the world, particularly in Europe, has increased. And, you know, Ukrainians often winning out in that sort of quota battle, which is which is pretty hard to see. I think, you know, the Australian involvement in Afghanistan and our military involvement surely imposes some kind of, you know, moral imperative that we need to not let be forgotten and a need to need to both acknowledge and to act upon. Okay.

Ebony Bennett [00:53:27] Um, we've talked a lot about kind of that day of the 15th when the Taliban entered, but of course there was a period of a couple of weeks after that and kind of before the Americans had pulled out entirely where the situation just did seem to deteriorate, particularly at the airport very rapidly. What are some of your reflections on on that?

Andrew Quilty [00:53:50] Oh, gosh, I always get I always find it frustrating trying to recount these stories just because they like, you know, if I had 5 hours to to tell you the story of one of those days, I would I'd still find it frustrating because I can never seem to evoke the the senses that were, you know, just firing on those days. But, I mean, I hated going to the airport. It was just it was it was a horrible, dangerous, unpredictable place that that, you know, I mean, both as my both as a photographer. I needed to I needed to get there to try and document this this time that at this point in time that, you know, the past eight years of my career had been leading up to, I guess, and also on several occasions in an effort to try and help people get inside friends and colleagues and and others who, you know, people back in Australia had asked me to help. And yeah, I mean it was, you know, I don't know where to begin. I mean, you know, I had a Taliban hold the knife from his his AK 47 bayonet held to my belt, to my throat. I had I had I got bundled up by a crowd in outside a gate that was being controlled by a CIA led militia that I'd done a lot of reporting on in the past, the critical reporting, and then got handed over to this militia. And I thought, I hope they don't recognise my name. And then I got handed over to a CIA agent, the and he he was pretty forgiving and actually said, look, this guy, it's going to close in the next within the next 24 hours, you should come inside. And I said, Fine, thanks, a little sign, but I believe you mind if I go and and and and I had other times where I mean, I was involved in a couple of minibus convoys that were carrying between 150 and 250 people, a number of them friends of mine or colleagues of mine or other journalists that I that I knew into the airport. But they were always, you know, 24 hour affairs where we would we would gather at a at a staging point. And and we'd have people coordinating the efforts in several different countries from inside the airport with Taliban contacts, with CIA contacts, with American military contacts, all in an effort to make the these bus convoys run as smoothly as possible. One of them, we managed to get inside the airport. And so me and a couple of colleagues, including that photographer friend I mentioned, Victor and I ended up inside the airport and then driving back out on the on these empty buses and then trying and trying the same thing again the next night or a couple of nights later. And failing on that occasion, being basically spending the entire night until midday, the next day going from checkpoint to checkpoint around the around the airport, being barred entry. And and then another one where I was trying to help a guy who had an Australian visa to get in on foot. We, we got to the place we're told to get to and we're told that the Australian Special Forces who were going to be there to collect us had had left or left the gate and, and that all the Australians would be out the following day. So it was pretty, pretty harrowing times.

Ebony Bennett [00:58:03] Yeah, it sounds like it. Well, I want to thank you again for your time today and thanks, everyone, for your questions. I'm sorry we couldn't get to them all.

Andrew Quilty [00:58:11] Yeah. Sorry is rambling on the.

Ebony Bennett [00:58:12] No, that's alright. I mean, fascinating. It's a gripping read. It's August in Kabul. It's available now in all good bookshops. And don't forget our special offer today. You can find that in the chat. Use the code. Kabul 20 to receive 20% off the paperback edition at the new website. That's Mipcom dot EU and thank you so much for sharing all that with us today and for writing such an unfortunate, damnable book. Be careful about when you pick this up and start reading it everyone, because it's very hard to to put it down. But such an important story to tell and one obviously that Australia has such responsibility for as well. So thank you for for documenting it and sharing it with us. And thanks for your time today.

Andrew Quilty [00:58:58] Thanks for having me. Thanks for the joint.

Ebony Bennett [00:59:01] Thanks. Everyone will see you soon. Don't forget to head on over to Australia Institute. Talk to you for our future webinars. Next week is our regular poll position webinar. And coming up we'll be talking to Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young about the need for a climate trigger in our national climate legislation. Heaps of stuff coming up. Stay safe out there and we'll talk to you soon. Thanks very much, everyone. Bye bye.