

## Interview Jorrit Kamminga on Trust and Afghanistan

**Interviewer:** Welcome, Jorrit to the TrustTalk podcast. You are an expert on Afghanistan. Before we go into the trust aspects around Afghanistan, I would like to ask you what comes to mind if I mention trust in relation to the recent developments in Afghanistan?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Thanks a lot for having me on TrustTalk. Yes, I have just written a book, a Dutch book about 20 years of the Netherlands in Afghanistan. And while I don't really use trust as a lens in the narrative of the book, I think you do see it everywhere in the past two decades that the international presence was in Afghanistan. For example, you see the trust between coalition parties in the Netherlands, between the cabinet members and their fellow party members in the parliament. It's all part also of the international coalitions that were working together in Afghanistan, I think. Maybe just to give you a recent example, in 2018, we trusted former President Trump of the United States to do the right thing. When he started to negotiate with the Taliban, that was an important moment. After that, we trusted the Taliban and the Afghan government to be able to move beyond their differences when the trust negotiations led to this intra-Afghan peace process. But what is most interesting, I think, is that we as citizens so also me as a Dutch citizen, we also trust our elected governments to do the right thing in a country like Afghanistan. So in a way that is the basis of our foreign policies, I think right in in the Dutch case, we have an international ambition also reflected in the Constitution. We want to support international security and the rule of law abroad. We want to protect human rights, for example, and that is generally accepted. But then we put our trust in our governments to also do the right thing when it actually comes down to doing this abroad, in countries like Afghanistan. So I think trust is everything. And let's also not forget that this also is the case for the Afghans.. It's not only us, the Afghans have also put a lot of trust in us after 9/11, 51 countries intervened in all aspects of their lives, so they have also trusted us to have good intentions, you could say, right, to really be there for the development of the people and to not abandon them like we abandoned them at the end of the Cold War.

**Interviewer:** Since 2005, you worked in Afghanistan doing field research in Helmand and Kandahar, organizing opinion surveys with military-age youth across the country. You also filmed Afghanistan's Facebook generation in Kabul, and you worked on the 2009 documentary

"Afghanistan, Land of Wonders", about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. So you must have been bewildered to see the recent developments in Afghanistan.

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Well, definitely, yes. Bewildered, but also especially very sad this is the most tragic ending, I think, of 20 years of international involvement. And my expectations were that withdrawing the international troops this year would actually have a positive effect on all the efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan. Also, as it was part of the long-term political demands, you could say, of the Taliban, but how things have developed over the past few months with eventually the Taliban taking power, it's just tragic. I definitely did not predict it. I think we still don't even realize what it means. What it means for the future of Afghanistan or actually what has happened. We're probably still in a state of shock when it comes to the developments of the last few months. And the fact that I have been working in different roles in Afghanistan over the past 16 years makes it even sadder for me personally. I was working a lot with development projects, also part the last six years of Oxfam in Afghanistan. So I've worked with a lot of Afghans, colleagues, local partners, etc. And for them, of course, it's the saddest part. There are so many well-educated Afghans now, men and women that also have the potential to really make a difference for their country. But currently, of course, part of those we have been evacuating or they're hiding or they want to get out at the moment. So I think that is the saddest part in all of this.

**Interviewer:** The withdrawal of the US and its Western allies from Afghanistan and the consequences that may have on trust by Europe and Asia, let's think about Taiwan and the disputed Japanese Senkaku Islands, the trust they have in their US ally. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles wrote in an opinion piece in The New York Times, and I'm quoting him, "any partnership needs capable allies and political trust." So my question is, can we still trust the US as an ally?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Well, I think in recent years, the whole Trump administration has been a big wake-up call right for Europeans. And you now see that the Biden administration is basically continuing many of the policies of Trump. Like just look at the migration policies, for example, and you can also see it in the recent deal, the US, Australia and the UK signed, which I think was also quite a surprise for many people. And this was the deal about strengthening stability in the Indo-Pacific region, as China is expanding its military might and influence there. So that in a way

was a message to China, primarily, but there is also a message in there for the European Union and for NATO that basically says, like, we don't really need you to advance on our collective security. So can we still trust the U.S.? Well, I guess, yes, of course, I hope, yes. And we should continue to trust the US because we continue to be dependent on the US for our military and security missions abroad. And that is also the biggest story I think of the past 20 years in Afghanistan. And you also saw it in the recent reactions after Biden got elected. The reactions from NATO and the European Union were immediately inviting basically Biden to rebuild transatlantic relationships, transatlantic ties because we think that these ties are important, that they matter. So that means actually that we need to trust each other. There's simply no choice and in Afghanistan, we've recently seen it also in the evacuation efforts. There was a strong dependence on the US there. And yeah, we've always depended on the US. So I think it's quite also ridiculous to suddenly hear people talk about, for example, the need for a European army. We've seen that in recent weeks. Well, there's probably a real need for a European army in terms of efficiency, etc. But you should have started to talk about that 20 years ago, and not at the end of one of the longest international missions in Afghanistan.

**Interviewer:** U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted that the world today is suffering from a "trust deficit disorder", he calls it, where trust among states and in multilateral processes has weakened. Do you see this trend as well?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Yes, I think on the one hand, of course, the easy example is the withdrawal of Trump from various international treaties. This may have been a temporary trend, right, because we've also seen President Biden, for example, signing an executive order to have the country re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement. So it might have been temporarily, but we also see in the general picture that there is all these global governance issues that require actually more and more cooperation at the international level. Climate change is only one example. You can see it with terrorism, you can see it with transnational organized crime. There are all these issues that states simply cannot solve single-handedly. So I think we need to work together, but states indeed need to trust each other. And they seem to trust each other less and less. Closer to home, you see it with the European Union, where the Brexit has severely weakened the trust relationship, which actually, I think was the basis for the European integration during many decades. European integration almost seems to be seen to be this this automatic process to work towards ever more integration and ever closer union as they called it. But that has

disappeared. And I think trust has definitely played a role in weakening those, ties. In many countries, even within the European Parliament, you have all these eurosceptical parties, these nationalistic tendencies. So I think there's a big trust factor there at play as well. National and European parliaments, I think, have failed for many years to consistently explain very well why we need the European Union why we need European integration and European collaboration. Why do we need a European Parliament? And they have just taken it for granted, I think. And now we realize actually that we really have to explain why all this international and European collaboration is so important.

**Interviewer:** I have a question, it's a little bit lengthy one, but I would like to present it to you. A Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Ivan Krastev, he wrote in 2019 in a New York Times piece, entitled "*Will Europe Ever Trust America Again?*". He compared the attitude of Europeans towards the US with an experience he had earlier as a member of a Bulgarian group visiting the US for the first time. He received instructions from his American host on how to behave in supposedly dangerous places. If you don't want to become a crime victim, don't behave like one. Walking in the middle of the street and looking around nervously in the hope of spotting a police officer would only increase the likelihood of getting mugged. Keep your bearings! his US host stressed. And according to Krastev, Europeans under the presidency of Trump followed that same advice when it comes to international politics. They are preoccupied with not allowing themselves to look like a victim in the hope that this will prevent us from being mugged in a world abandoned by its once trusted sheriff. So do you recognize this in EU relations even before the recent departure of the US and Western allies from Afghanistan? And again, sorry for the lengthy question.

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Well, it's a nice question. I think it's a nice metaphor. It's, of course, also reminds me of, you know, the way we Westerners actually walking the streets or used to walk the streets of Afghanistan, also drawing often a lot of attention to ourselves because we simply were afraid. So we're doing all the wrong things to try to be actually more secure than we would be if we would just act normal. Coming back to the question, we have trusted the US, I think the past 20 years, as I mentioned briefly, to do everything for us. We followed them after 9/11, almost blindly. Of course, it was an important attack, it was a symbolic attack, but it was also a unique attack. So we had, in a way, no choice. But since then, as the ties got weaker with 9/11, we still have been dependent on the US and we have been following them in Afghanistan

everywhere. We were dependent on the air support that they supplied the logistics, the transport helicopters, etc. And we followed Trump's process also when he started to negotiate in 2018 with the Taliban and that, coming back to my book, I think that was really ironic because in the Netherlands, our official policy has been always and it's still is, that we don't negotiate with terrorists. And we actually also put that label of terrorists on the Taliban. So that was used over and over again in the Netherlands as an argument in a political debate to not negotiate with the Taliban. And then suddenly, when President Trump in 2018 decided to say, OK, I'm just going to negotiate with the Taliban, then the Dutch government in response certainly said, Oh, this is great, we welcome all initiatives that have a chance to bring peace to Afghanistan. So then suddenly all these reservations were out of the window in a way. But this dependency has continued also ever since we followed also the Biden administration, when they suddenly started to withdraw all the troops in April this year, the day after basically NATO had to go. So in a way, I think one commentator in the Netherlands said: we're in Afghanistan until the last American, so the last American leaves and we're out of there. And that is also what you've seen in this evacuation, the tragic evacuation where the US were able to send 5000 troops into Afghanistan to the airport to assist the evacuation process, and nobody could match that.

**Jorrit Kamminga:** So we were dependent until the last moment in a way. So what does it mean for Europe? As Europe, we can probably trust the US as an ally, still. But the question is, do we also want to follow the US blindly into any kind of future conflicts? Where again, it's probably likely that we will continue this dependency? So that is where Europe and the US, the European Union, I think, should also make up their own mind. In Europe, we think differently about a lot of issues, ranging from human rights, probably also the climate. So there a lot of disagreement and this disagreement was also there for the past 20 years and Afghanistan when it came to the war on terror that the US was pushing for, the drone war, using a lot of drones to kill people in Afghanistan, in Pakistan. And the fact that also Europeans criticized the practices of the US, the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq later, the Bagram prison scandal in Afghanistan, but in a way we were never powerful enough to really say, OK, this is enough, we are just going to go our own way. Throughout this story, basically, we still needed the United States for everything.

**Interviewer:** Let's go back on the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the aspects of trust. There are two. The first being the result of that decision in the relationship between the U.S. and its

allies. And the second is the question can the Afghan people and the international community trust the intentions of the Taliban in maintaining human rights and social order? How believable is their statement that they will contain the breed of terrorists? We just talked about the first aspect. Let's talk about the second one. Can we trust the intentions of the Taliban?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Well, I would say no. The Taliban have tried over the past few weeks to paint a beautiful, moderate picture of themselves right from girls education to human rights. You know, they've all set the right words. So in a way, their PR machine has become very western-oriented, you could say. So it has been marvellous, but it all has been political rhetoric. The reality that we have seen over the past six weeks has been quite different. There have been popular protests in various cities where the response of the Taliban has resulted in people being killed. There have been beatings on the streets. Girls are still only allowed to go to primary school for the moment. Many women that actually were able to or we thought they were able to go back to work, also in government institutions, they have been sent home by the Taliban, so we should not believe in this moderate image of the Taliban. There's no reason to believe in it for the moment. They continue to have a national agenda, but they urgently are in need of this international support and international recognition. So that is why they are having this narrative about you know, we are different, we are more moderate. They're not going to get this international recognition, I think, by the way, that they are behaving now by a formation of an interim government that they announced last week, which is all about men. It's all about religious hardliners. Eight of the ministers, the interim ministers have come from one of the most renowned madrassas in the north-western part of Pakistan, a madrassa called Haqqania. So I think, you know, that's all very clear. That's the wrong message for international donors. What is important also, I think, is the big divide between the perception that we have in the West about the Taliban and the Afghans themselves. So I also, in the past months, sometimes thought that, you know, the Taliban probably is a bit more moderate. Or at least Afghanistan has changed so much in the past 20 years that the Taliban actually should change a little bit, should be more moderate, to adapt themselves to this changing context. But if you look at the Afghans and also former colleagues of mine and Afghan friends that I speak to, so a lot of them, young Afghans, also they have benefited from our support in the last 20 years. They have worked in our projects, they have been our local partners, etc. and they are the first ones that want to abandon the country now. And I think that reaction shows that the Taliban has not changed because if there would have been a chance that the Taliban would be more

moderate, their reaction would be quite different. They wouldn't have fled the country immediately. They would have just waited and see how things would have developed. So it's not about trust in Afghanistan. I think from our side, it's the hope that the Taliban has changed, actually. But the current signs, I think, are all in the opposite direction, unfortunately.

**Interviewer:** Trust is limited to situations where actors judge that others have the same incentives they do to cooperate or play by the rules. So if the Taliban says they have changed and will, from now on, respect women's rights, what incentive do they have to play by their promise?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Well, a huge incentive. They need the international support, as I was saying. Just to give an example, maybe, humanitarian needs in the country are still enormous. There's about 18.4 million Afghans that needed some kind of humanitarian support this year, as calculated by the United Nations. So more than half of the people currently still live below the poverty line. Half of the people is also still illiterate. The economy has suffered, especially also with the COVID pandemic. But it's going to take another big hit, I think, because of the international funds that have dried up in the last few months, so that is the reality in a way, the economic reality that the Taliban has inherited by their taking over of power, and they will have a lot of problems to deal with that reality and for years, it's very ironic, actually, but because for years they, the Taliban, have been criticizing the regime in Kabul as a puppet regime of the West, of the United States. But now they're in the position that they have to meet the needs of the people themselves. And they also still want to do that from Kabul in this sort of like central way of good governance, bringing it from the capital. And that has been very problematic over the last 20 years. Also because the power is especially found at the regional level. So they have a huge task, it will be more difficult. So that's why they're pushing so much to trying to get this international recognition because that will mean that they will be able to get some international funding again going.

**Interviewer:** In the intro of this interview, we already mentioned your book and in the book called "You Are Being Thanked, Bin Laden", published on a historical date September 11, is in fact the political history of the role of the Netherlands in Afghanistan. It offers a unique analysis of the conflict, political decision making and the tension between The Hague and Afghan reality.

In terms of trust, as we just discussed, when we talked about international diplomacy, was there ever a relationship of trust between the tribal society of Afghanistan and the West?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Yes, I think there was, in the beginning, there was a period of hope you could say with the Afghans generally welcoming the international intervention, the removal of the Taliban regime, which was quite strict. Of course, that Taliban dream had also been welcomed when they started. But I think a lot of Afghans were hoping that things would improve in Afghanistan, especially in terms of the underdevelopment, etc. But I think Afghans soon lost trust in our intentions, in our actions. Also, maybe with the best intentions that we had in the beginning, but we also started to immediately from 2001 onwards already, to increase our footprint in the country. So we started to determine what was right for the Afghans. We started to take over a lot of jobs. We started to show them how they should build their country, et cetera, with Western models for state-building, etc. So from the first moment, I think, we have started to create these parallel realities, as you could call them with our development programming, which until recently also when it comes to the funding of it, it did not go through the Afghan government budget, which actually was also a promise of the international community that all our assistance or at least half of it would eventually go through the Afghan government budget. And that's interesting, I think, for this conversation that we're having today because that's a trust factor in there as well. We in the West, the Netherlands, but also the other 50 countries that were in Afghanistan, we never fully trusted the Afghan government to do the right thing. We were afraid for corruption and of course, rightly so, right, because we were spending taxpayers' money of European countries, for example. But we did not want to talk about our own role in fostering corruption, by pouring millions and millions of dollars into a very fragile country with a very low absorption capacity for these funds, with limited projects, etc. So we also continued, I think, during 20 years with a predominant military approach while we were talking about state-building, sometimes even nation-building. It was all pretty much still within a military framework. While we should, I think, and that's also one of the biggest conclusions of my book, we should have supported a political solution from the start. So instead, we in the West and I also think in the Dutch parliament and government, we always kept alive in a way this link with 9/11 the focus on international security, the fight against terrorism.

**Jorrit Kamminga:** And that has been also, I think, you know, resulting in a situation where we have been able to help more or less half of the population. But because of the fact that we only helped half of the population, we probably actually made things worse by strengthening this divide in Afghanistan between the modernity, the more modern approaches and the conservatism that you can still find in a lot of places. And especially, of course, those places where a lot of the support for the Taliban is still coming from. So I think the net result of our 20 years of international intervention is quite disappointing. Especially if you compare it to all the rhetoric, all the positive rhetoric that we had for the last 20 years. We would not abandon the Afghan people, we would improve their lives, et cetera. For many Afghans, I think our promise has been sort of like an empty shell. And now that's even more clear with the return to power of the Taliban.

**Interviewer:** You just mentioned the military approach, and my last question would relate to that. Some say that the overreliance on airstrikes without adequate civilian protections, relying on abusive warlords to fill security and political leadership roles and largely ignoring wholesale corruption and rights violations, fostered deep resentment and distrust of the US and Afghan governments, which weakened Afghanistan's military and political capacities and made it far easier for the Taliban to gain ground. Would you agree with that?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Yes, I think so, although in the beginning, of course, we started with airstrikes, but later on there was also international boots on the ground. Eventually, quite a lot more than 100,000 international troops, which was really amazing. As I call it, sometimes an overreaction to a terrorist attack very far away from Afghanistan. So we did change our approaches. And we started, especially from 2006 onwards, we started to implement this hearts and minds approach to try to win the hearts and minds of the people. And that's interesting, because that's also a transaction of trust, I think. You try to convince the people to trust you. But then of course, the next step is that you also should deliver on that. And I think we fail to deliver. Of course, we had the international military missions. There were a lot of so-called civil-military projects, so small-scale projects that were trying to help the people. But it was all part of this international military approach. So indeed, that has been problematic, I think from the start and our footprint in general, has been way too big. We have also often, also taken the places that Afghans should just have taken. And we have by doing that not only militarily but in all places of society, in all parts of society, by taking their places, we have also

limited their opportunities to really step forward and to take control about their own development, their own destiny, etc., So it's quite ironic if you look back at 20 years of international intervention because we have been talking about Afghan ownership and Afghan leadership for 20 years. But in the end, it was all about our own interests. Or about our own, our own well, frameworks and our own Western models, etc. So if you look at the very tragic ending of the quick gains of the Taliban, I think that can also be part of the explanation. Our focus on ourselves and our own interests. But I don't think it's the whole story, though. You also see many local and regional power holders that have sort of like temporarily now backed the Taliban. So they have placed their bets with the Taliban, but they are trusting the Taliban now to also put something in return, right, to also get some benefits from this trust that they have placed in a new Taliban government. So I think that will also be in a way, a new source of conflict in the next few months and years. Because you will see that those local backers of the Taliban will not get anything in return or the returns might be distributed very unevenly.

**Interviewer:** Jorrit, we are coming at the end of the podcast. Obviously, there is a lot more to say about this. And my last very short question, maybe with the short reply, will you still be involved in anything that happens to the Afghan people?

**Jorrit Kamminga:** Yes. And of course, I hope I will be strongly involved. The last few months has been mostly doing interviews from abroad and trying to help some Afghan colleagues and some Afghan friends with the evacuation. So that was a very sad way of being involved with Afghanistan. Of course, also creating a lot of stress, a lot of well, difficulties in terms of, you know, the whole emotions involved in that. But I do hope that I will be involved in supporting some of the projects that I supported in the past. But it's very difficult to see when it is again possible to go back to Afghanistan, to do research there to follow up on some of the projects. I think it will be very complicated and we first have to see what will happen at the political level and what a country like the Netherlands also will do in terms of backing perhaps the Taliban government, maybe eventually even recognizing the Taliban government. You know, I think we have to keep on being engaged with the Taliban government, but before we really know what, what will come out of that? What the situation will look like for any kind of work in Afghanistan, I think that will take some time, unfortunately.

**Interviewer:** All right. Well, thank you very much Jorrit, for the interview and I hope your book is doing well and your involvement with Afghan people and very happy with having talked to you about this situation. And thank you very much for that.

**Jorrit Kamminga:** You're welcome, and thanks a lot for having me.

**Interviewer:** Of course. Bye-bye.