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[The Macleans.ca Interview: Omar Samad](#)

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For many Canadians, Omar Samad has been the most visible face of Afghanistan ever since he was posted here as Ambassador in September 2004. Born in Kabul, he fled Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation began in 1979 and settled in the United States, but he remained actively involved in Afghan politics from abroad. Following 9/11 and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban, he returned to Afghanistan to join the new government's Foreign Ministry. He is leaving Canada this month to become Afghanistan's new ambassador to France.

M: When the attacks happened on September 11, did you have an idea of what they would mean for Afghanistan?

A: I happened to be living less than a mile away from the Pentagon and was at home when the plane hit. I felt the shock of it. Within an hour or two, I was on the phone with some Afghans, including one of President Karzai's brothers, Qayoom. We assumed that this was al-Qaeda related and then concluded that if it was al-Qaeda related, it is going to be a turnabout for Afghanistan and may signify the end of the Taliban. It turned out to be true. I decided that this was a momentous historic shift for my country, and this was the time to be there and to serve in any way possible. On December 22, 2001, I was back in Kabul.

M: How big of a decision was that for you to leave what had been your home?

A: It was a heavy decision, but one that was very simple to make. I felt that this was the natural thing to do. Afghanistan needed people like myself. And I had invested so much of my time and energy—during the Soviet occupation, the post-Communist period, the Taliban occupation of the country—trying to promote the cause of Afghanistan and also be an advocate for it.

M: What was it like to go back?

A: I knew that Afghans were suffering under the Taliban and al-Qaeda. I just didn't know the extent to which this suffering had demoralized people and made them so hopeless. So when I went back in December 2001, you could clearly see the signs of hopelessness and fear in the eyes and on the faces of the average Afghans, especially women, who still for many months following these changes, out of fear, were reluctant to get rid of their burkas, for example. The Taliban and that regime had such an impact on the psyche of the people that it

took a while for them to overcome it.

M: What instructions did President Hamid Karzai give you when he sent you to Canada?

A: He basically pointed to the fact that Canada has become more involved in Afghanistan over time. Canadian aid was a fraction of what it is today, but historically speaking, it was the largest ever. So we knew that Canada was becoming a major donor. I was told to work on expanding those relations, because Canada not only has a large Afghan population, but it also has this eagerness to help.

M: In late 2005, the Canadian mission in Afghanistan expanded and shifted from Kabul to Kandahar. What discussions did you have with members of then Prime Minister Paul Martin's government about that?

A: One factor that came into play had to do with how fast countries were signing up for this new NATO expansion. It seems that the quicker the decision made by the partners, the better the chance of selecting a certain region of Afghanistan that was their choice. It seemed to us on the Afghan side that the Canadian discussion was going on for a long time. And this led to some extent to fewer choices by the time the decision was taken.

M: Where would Canada have rather gone?

A: There were several options that were discussed and studied. And I'll leave those names to the Canadians to share. All I can say at this point is that the fact that the decision was not taken quicker did have some effect on the choice of Kandahar.

M: Do you think the Canadians realized when they took Kandahar how much more intense the mission would be, how much more likely casualties would be?

A: Yes. Once Kandahar became one of the more obvious choices, everyone was aware of the fact that it was not an easy location. The proximity to the border regions, the fact that the insurgency may pose a greater threat, was on the minds of both Canadians and Afghans.

M: Shortly after Canada's mission shifted to Kandahar, Stephen Harper was elected prime minister and was initially very robust in his support of the mission. What can you say about your relation with the Harper government?

A: His first foreign trip was to Afghanistan, and we were delighted to see such attention given to Afghanistan in early 2006 and beyond. Afghanistan really became the main focus of Canada's foreign and security policy. To this day, the commitments in terms of aid have increased by eight-fold, at least. Unfortunately, the casualty costs have also increased because of the inherent dangers in Kandahar.

I believe that any party in power would have had to deal with the situation, and we feel that since then, Afghanistan has become a very controversial issue in Canada. The issue just exploded. I don't think that anyone expected the casualties to reach three-digit numbers. And we all underestimated the intensity and violent nature of the insurgency itself. That had to do to some extent with the fact that we assumed that post-2001, until 2005 or so, the Taliban were basically defeated—whereas that was not the case. There was a worry with some Afghans, including myself, that they might find sanctuaries and be able to regroup and reorganize, find funding and arms and make a comeback, which they did. This was to some extent influenced by the attention given to Iraq while the job in Afghanistan was not completed. And the resources provided to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2006 also did not match the needs of the country.

M: In 2006, During Stephen Harper's visit to Afghanistan, he said that Canadians don't cut and run and would not as long as he was prime minister. Since then, he's announced an end to the Canadian mission in 2011, although it certainly doesn't appear that the need for foreign soldiers will end by then. How do you interpret that?

A: Canadian policy toward Afghanistan is not only influenced by events on the ground and by its relationship with its partners, but also by domestic politics and public opinion. And I believe that we could all have done a better job of explaining the reasons for why the international community is engaged so heavily in Afghanistan,

and also adopted a more comprehensive approach toward the Afghan issue that would have not only focused Canadian attention on the military, but also on the other dimensions of aid and development, governance, human rights, that are overshadowed by the gigantic military engagement.

M: I was surprised when you told me that Harper didn't tell you in advance before announcing that Canada's mission would end in 2011.

A: It was a surprise—to me, at least. And basically, at the time, I did not fully understand the rationale. Today, eight or nine months later, I believe that it was driven by mostly domestic political and public opinion conditions. And we have always said that nations involved in Afghanistan are absolutely free to decide what their involvement will look like. But we also have cautioned our friends about premature disengagement, or one that is not fully coordinated, because that could easily send the wrong signal to those who have blood on their hands and those who are destroying what we are trying to build.

M: How will all this end?

A: We are at a very critical crossroads right now, and the decisions that are being taken today are going to shape the future of this war and the overall mission to rebuild Afghanistan. We've spent eight years dealing with all the challenges. We don't have the luxury of many more years to succeed, so all efforts have to be focused on learning from the past and applying credible, meaningful, effective, realistic measures—to deal with the insurgency and create the space for reconstruction, for good governance, for the rule of law, and everything else that the Afghan people want to seek.

M: Is it too late?

A: It's definitely not too late. There are many positive things that continue to happen, but unfortunately, to a large extent, they are overshadowed by the bloodshed and the loss of life that has taken place, and now has regional dimensions. I think that world leaders understand the importance of being able to turn the tide and manage the issue in a different manner. Afghan people are showing signs of frustration. The international community at times shows signs of fatigue. And the insurgency feels that it is emboldened and shows signs of victory. I believe that should be a signal to all of us to take action and to focus on the immediate needs on the ground and at the regional level.

M: You've taken on a very public role as ambassador here. Why?

A: In this very diverse, widespread, and intense debate that has taken place in Canada, there needs to be an Afghan voice and an Afghan face that provides the Canadian people with an Afghan viewpoint. It is absolutely amazing to me, on so many occasions, with small and large audiences, how an explanation about Afghanistan's history over the last 30 years has changed minds in favour of the mission. Most Canadians are not aware of what has happened to Afghanistan over the last 30 years. Few people know what are the reasons for this engagement and why it matters. Once you put that in context for people in a 30-minute lecture, it is amazing to see how they grasp it and understand, and viewpoints shift.

M: What about your time here are you most proud of?

A: I'm proud of the fact that Afghanistan, a country in need of rebuilding itself and standing on its own feet, and eager to do so, has the attention and the generosity of the Canadian people on its side. We have fought alongside each other today against an enemy that does not believe in some human values. And I think that I have played a small role over the past almost five years in strengthening those ties.

M: Where have you come up short?

A: I would have like to see myself more engaged with those political parties that opposed the mission. I tried. I tried my best to even invite the anti-war groups and engage them in discussing the issues with me, but they were not very much interested in doing so. I think I should have done better, or should have done more to create that dialogue.

M: Your two sons have been born here. How will that tie you and your wife, Khorshied Samad, to Canada?

A: They will always carry that 'Made in Canada' tag somehow, and we will always look back at Canada as a wonderful country with generous, genuine people, who care and have given so much to my people. And my sons hopefully will understand what the meaning of that has been, as they were born here and carry that connection and bridge in the future. I firmly believe that over the past few years our histories have intertwined and connected in ways that we would never have imagined. We are one of the poorest countries in the world, one of the most war-torn nations in the world, very different than Canada. But as Her Excellency the Governor General said to us today over lunch, it is the humanity that has connected us.

The largest group of individuals who can testify to that are the thousands of soldiers, men and women in the Canadian Forces, and the hundreds of civilians from the government and non-governmental organizations, who have worked in Afghanistan. If you talk to any of them, you will be surprised to hear that they believe in the mission, and they think it is the right thing to do. And that is the most powerful testimony to this linkage of humanity and care and compassion.

M: Your next assignment will be as Afghanistan's ambassador to France. What are your plans for Paris?

A: I'm going to take a bit of time to evaluate the situation with the French engagement, which is growing. I would like to see France, and Europe in general, be more involved. And there are good signs that that is happening. I look forward to this interesting and, I'm sure, challenging posting. I will definitely not have a passive role, as I have tried not to in Canada as well.

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