

HOW I ENDED UP IN AFGHANISTAN FEBRUARY–JULY 2008

I WAS APPOINTED NATO's senior civilian representative for Afghanistan in early May 2008. It was sheer chance really, a combination of events. With the fall of the Prodi administration in February, I had to look for another job after two years as deputy diplomatic adviser to the prime minister. At the same time, NATO's secretary general was looking for a new personal representative in Kabul, and the Italian Foreign Ministry had decided to put forward one of its diplomats for the position, so that secured me a place on the list of candidates. I was keen; I was looking for a new challenge to sink my teeth into, and I looked forward to the interview.

Afghanistan had always fascinated me and, more than ever, it was now at the center of the international stage. Moreover, the role of civilian representative of the leading organization (even if it was military in nature) present in the country promised to be interesting, especially since the international community was relentlessly demanding a political solution to the crisis.

My father encouraged me and this was of fundamental importance; in the past we had never discussed my choice of overseas postings, and I had simply informed him when it was all decided. This time, however, leaving Italy would be different because he had just been diagnosed with a form of stomach cancer and had been given a very poor prognosis.

In some aspects, my father was like my grandfather, and in turn my grandfather was like all those who had experienced a war and its aftermath. Work for my father and generations before was virtually the be-all and end-all, and when a big opportunity came your way, you grabbed it with both hands without giving it too much thought. My father made me understand this while we were having dinner together, the evening

after he'd started his chemotherapy. We were talking about skiing, as we always did, when out of the blue he told me he was sure they'd offer me the job, and that I'd be doing the right thing if I accepted it.

IN EARLY APRIL I was selected for an interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, secretary general of NATO. We spoke for half an hour; I was very frank and to the point, mainly because I felt the "right chemistry" was there. I told him I knew very little about Afghanistan, but I did have good multilateral experience and I knew the mechanisms used by the international community in crisis situations. I also told him that a few years earlier, in the Balkans, I'd already met Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat who had begun to coordinate international civilian activities on behalf of the United Nations and with which NATO would be working in Kabul.

De Hoop Scheffer knew that I'd had a similar assignment in the Balkans a few years before, working for Javier Solana, high representative for European Union common foreign and security policy. He was also hopeful that an Italian diplomat would have more of a chance of winning Afghan trust, since—as I later discovered—NATO was struggling in that respect, to say the least.

A couple of weeks later I got a call from Ambassador Giampiero Masolo, the Italian Foreign Ministry's secretary general; he confirmed that I'd been given the assignment and it was time to start packing.

That afternoon I went to browse the bookshops in the center of Rome. In the evening I had dinner with my mother, and then I went to the cinema with my partner, Francesca, to see *The Kite Runner*, a movie based on Khaled Hosseini's bestseller. Francesca had hoped for a different decision and wasn't at all happy about a relationship that in a few days' time would be conducted on Skype.

Before we went into the cinema, I texted Kai Eide in Kabul to tell him I'd got the job and how happy I was that we'd be working together. When the movie was over, I turned the cell back on and found his reply, "We'll make a good team!" which sounded encouraging and was an incentive to prepare myself as best I could.

IN THE WEEKS before my departure, just like anyone else given an international assignment of any importance, I embarked on the crucial "tour

of the capitals,” visiting the key countries of the Atlantic Alliance to gather suggestions on how to proceed once I got to Kabul and to seek the required political support.

I went to Washington, Ottawa, Paris, London, and Berlin. I also went to Ankara, to meet the former Turkish foreign minister, Hikmet Çetin, who had held the position I was about to take over a few years earlier and had maintained a close relationship with President Hamid Karzai and many other Afghan leaders.

In Paris I made my first appearance at the side of NATO’s secretary general during the international Afghanistan donor conference of June 12, 2008. Immediately afterward I spent a week at NATO headquarters in Brussels, meeting my new co-workers. It was a frenetic time, during which I tried to absorb as much information as possible, establish contacts, and make an inventory of important issues: how I was going to get International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military to co-exist with United Nations and European Union civilian staff; how to achieve the gradual empowerment of Afghans for the management of reconstruction projects; how to support the political process for the upcoming 2009 presidential elections that were supposed to confirm the country’s democratic consolidation, and so on.

Despite the crazy schedule, I was as euphoric as I always am when I’m getting ready to leave. I didn’t feel responsible for anything. I was in a kind of limbo, and suddenly it was as if everything else in life was no longer my concern. The mere prospect of crossing a border and settling in a distant country had swiftly erased the duties and concerns of everyday life. Not that I’d be lacking for responsibilities in Afghanistan. If anything, there would probably be more. Yet there was a sense of lightness that floated over the preparations for my departure, as if the venture wasn’t really directly related to me, or perhaps it was too immense for me to relate it directly to myself. I suspect my face betrayed my satisfaction, because in the days leading up to the trip, my colleagues at Palazzo Chigi kept repeating that I looked like the cat that had lapped up all of the cream. I have to be honest. I was pleased with this opportunity, although perhaps those around me did not feel the same.

My mother had begun to focus and was concerned by the alarming news she was hearing about Kabul. She said I was reckless, that I needed to grow up and lacked any inkling of what it feels like to be a parent.

Francesca observed it all from her own perspective, but said more or less the same. She too thought I was being totally selfish, and said it was as if I didn't care about the two of us at all.

My father saw it differently. Every day he got weaker from the cancer and the chemo, but the evening before I left, he insisted on inviting friends and family to Casina Valadier, a well-known venue for parties and receptions in downtown Rome, so I could say goodbye. He'd lost a lot of weight and it was clear he wasn't well, yet his face seemed strangely youthful, looking as he had in our summers together of thirty years back. Would he recover? Would I see him back on his feet? Or was this to be our last time together?