

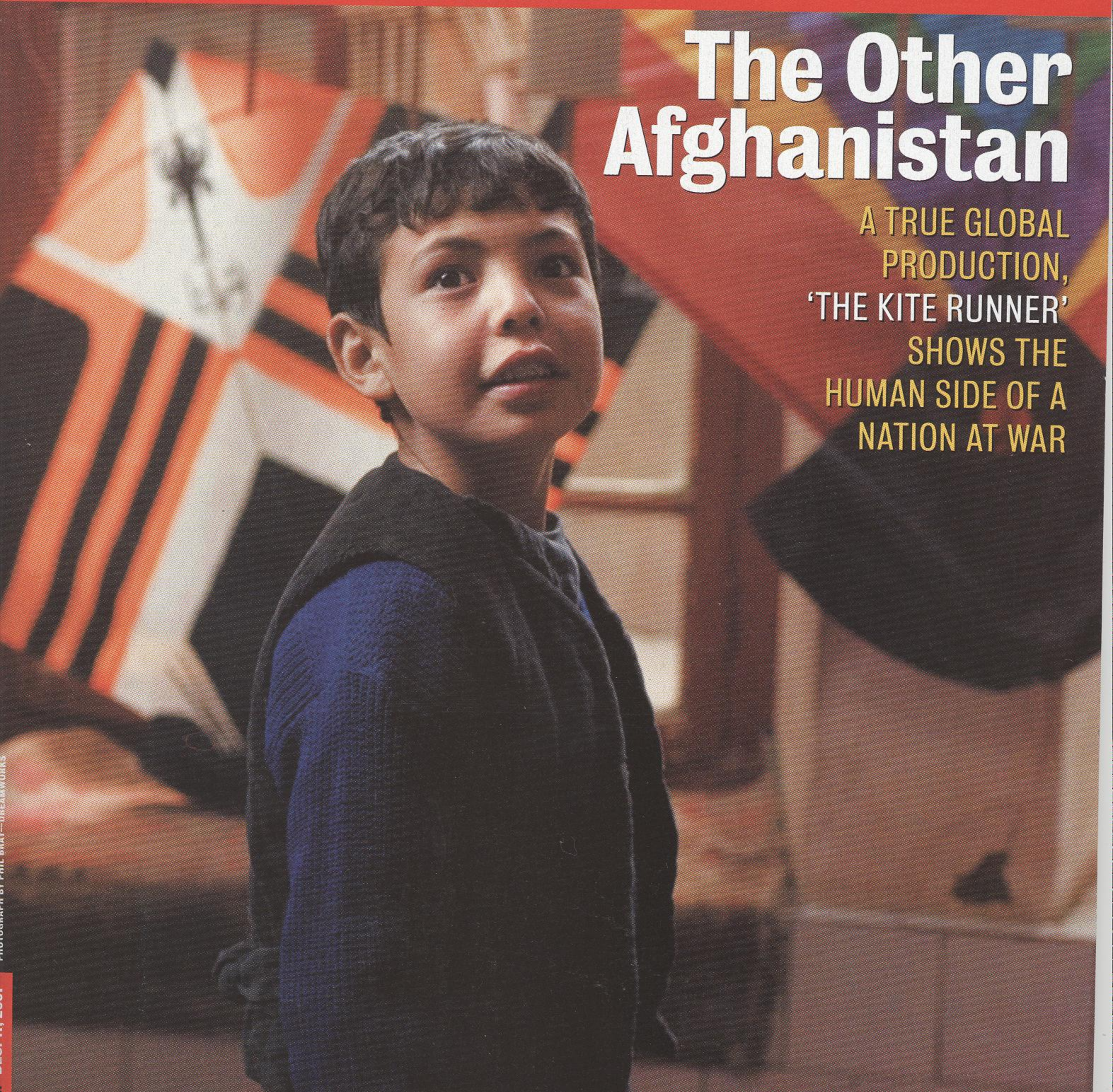
THE MODERN MOBSTER

AMERICA'S HOLY WARS

Newsweek®

The Other Afghanistan

A TRUE GLOBAL PRODUCTION, 'THE KITE RUNNER' SHOWS THE HUMAN SIDE OF A NATION AT WAR



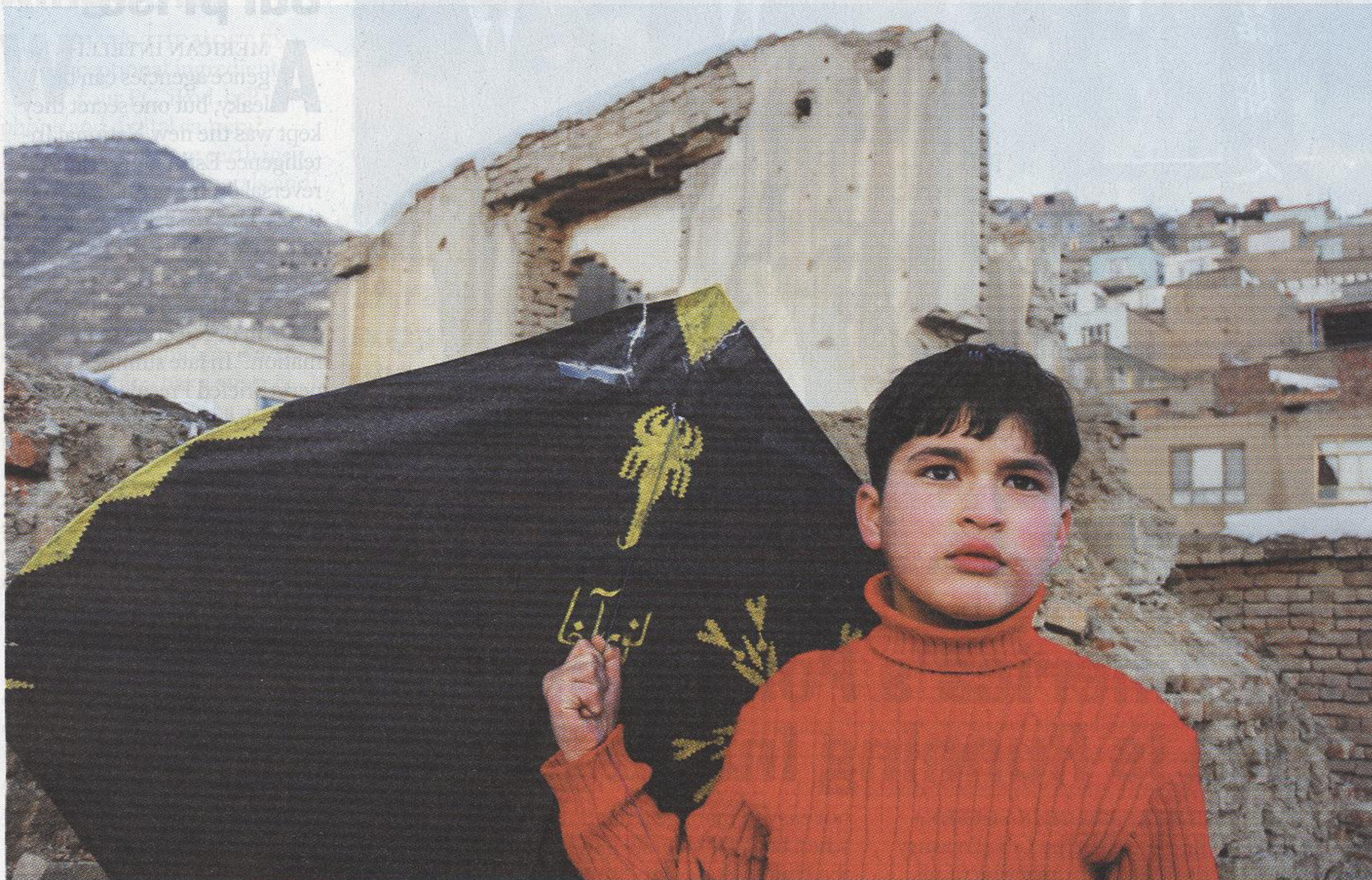
Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada in 'The Kite Runner'



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TOP of THE WEEK



MICAH GAREN—FOUR CORNERS MEDIA-REDUX

Discovered in Translation

With 'The Kite Runner' opening this week, the principals talk about the challenges of filming the real Afghanistan with a truly global cast and crew. **Page 62**

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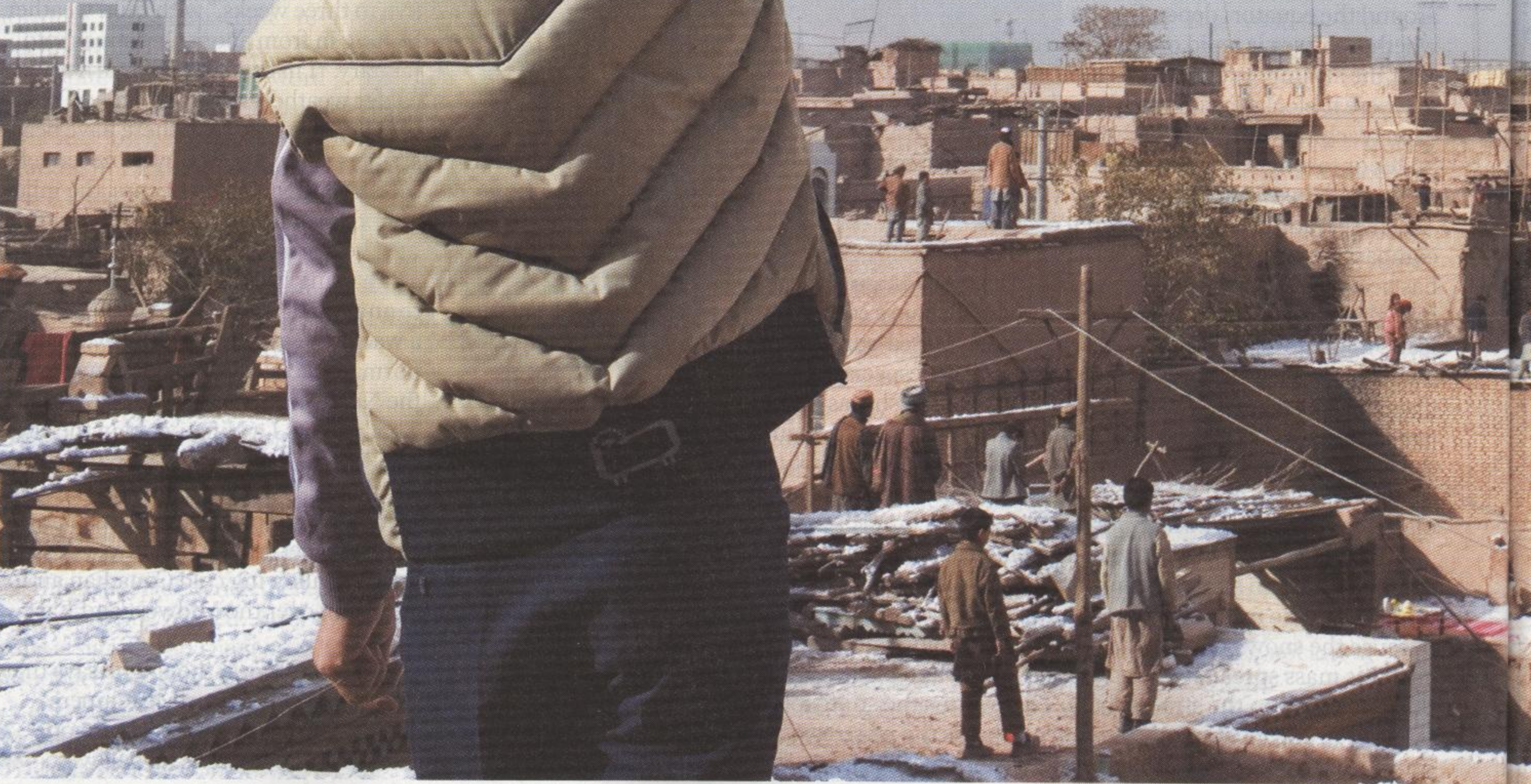
COVER: PHIL BRAY—COURTESY OF DREAMWORKS AND KITE RUNNER HOLDINGS

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Snow Domes and Crystal Balls



JUST WHEN WE WERE THINKING THAT WINTER HEATING BILLS MIGHT not bankrupt us after all—the official seasonal forecast from the Federal Government's Prediction Center calls for warmer temperatures every where except for a triangle from Seattle to North Dakota to southern California—along comes bad news from Siberia: the region had received an epic advance snowfall of 25 inches in November, an epic advance snowfall that has a 1-in-100 chance of occurring in any given year. As the director of seasonal, atmospheric and environmental research, the National Center for Environmental Prediction in Massachusetts, Dr. Cohen sees an extensive snow cover over the region as a harbinger of a meteorological event, with a 70 percent probability of a major winter storm, where they were propagating in the atmosphere, where they were watered down over the North Pole and ... well, that's the part that's hard to forecast. Cohen calls for a cold start to the East and a mild early January, followed by a deep freeze around March. Further south, the deep freeze is expected to be the official start of the winter season. The new breed of meteorologists like Cohen illustrates a far-off in the accuracy of long-range weather forecasts. Traditionalists gave us the 15-day forecast, which was good for a week or so. The new breed of meteorologists gave us the 15-day forecast, which was good for a week or so. The new breed of meteorologists gave us the 15-day forecast, which was good for a week or so.



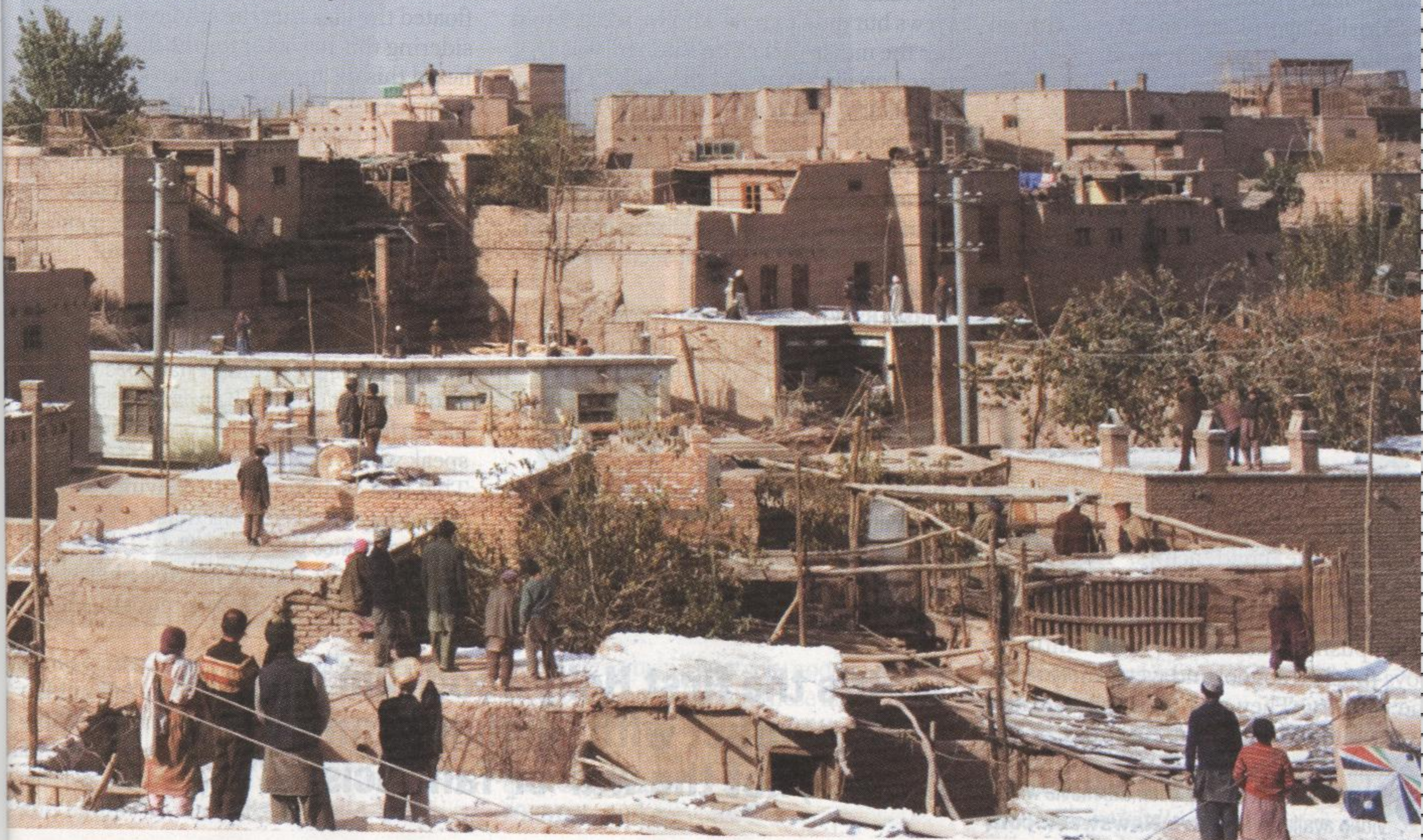
Blowing in The Wind

The film adaptation of
'The Kite Runner' is a model
of cross-cultural collaboration.

By LORRAINE ALI

KHALED HOSSEINI'S 2003 NOVEL "The Kite Runner" introduced Western readers to an Afghanistan beyond the Soviet invasion, Osama bin Laden and U.S. military strikes. By focusing on the complicated relationship between an Afghan boy and his father, and the bond between two childhood friends in Kabul, it illuminated the humanity behind the politics and showed the world that Afghans laugh as well

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: *Kabul before its decimation*



as cry. The book has since sold more than 8 million copies worldwide—not including millions of bootleg editions in such languages as Farsi.

This week the long-awaited screen adaptation of “The Kite Runner” opens in America; it will be released across much of the rest of the world over the next few months. The film, like the book, follows the unlikely friendship between the wealthy Pashtun boy Amir (Zekirya Ebrahimi) and his friend Hassan (Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada), the Hazara son of the family servant. Pashtuns are Sunni and make up Afghanistan’s ruling party, while the Hazara, Shia Muslims of Mongolian descent, are largely discriminated against. The two boys are inseparable until one day, following their victory in a kite-fighting tournament, Amir betrays the loyal Hassan with an act of cowardice that haunts them for the next three decades. Their story of love, remorse and atonement is set against the 1979 Soviet invasion, the Afghan diaspora and the rise of the Taliban in Kabul.

“The Kite Runner” is a moving, smart and sensitive film and a worthy tribute to the book. The kite-flying scenes are so beautifully shot they’re near spiritual, while the story’s emotional appeal renders cultural boundaries obsolete. Though one of the few major pictures to consider Islam and the Muslim-American experience from an insider’s perspective, the film remains highly accessible, moving between the Muslim world and the West with an ease unparalleled in Hollywood.

This cross-cultural fluency likely comes from the fact that “The Kite Runner” is, in every sense, a global film. The closing credits read like a U.N. roster of delegates. Hosseini is Afghan and lives in America, director Marc Forster (“Finding Neverland”) is Swiss and lives in America, and lead actor Khalid Abdalla (“United 93”) is Egyptian and resides in the U.K. The film also stars noted Iranian actor Homayoun Ershadi, as well as first-timers like Ebrahimi who were plucked out of secondary schools.

Originally slated for a fall release, “The Kite Runner” was delayed because of controversy surrounding a grueling rape scene involving the child actors. Due to the scene’s potential to offend, Afghan authorities and the film’s studio, Paramount Vantage, pushed the release back until the boys finished school and were safely out of the country. They and their families now reside in the United Arab Emirates. ■

How to Fly Kites And Other Lessons

The writer, director and lead actor dish on the joys and hardships of turning a beloved book into a film.

ON THE EVE OF “THE KITE Runner’s” Los Angeles premiere, Hosseini, Forster and Abdalla spoke with NEWSWEEK’S Lorraine Ali about their hopes for the film, their love of the book and their fear of Hollywood.

ALI: Marc, was this a daunting project? I heard you knew very little about Afghanistan before taking on the film.

FORSTER: That’s true. But it was more daunting that 8 million copies of the book have been sold worldwide and that every second person has read it. Whenever I even mentioned it, it was, like, “Oh, it’s my favorite,” or “Oh, my wife’s book club is reading it, again.” People worship this book ... except for that one woman we met the other day. It’s funny, we were at lunch and, well, Khaled, you should tell this one...

HOSSEINI: The waitress saw us doing interviews but didn’t know who we were. I told her the movie “The Kite Runner” was based on my book, and she said, “That’s fantastic!” “Hopefully this will help put your book on the best-seller list!” I said, “Hopefully.” It was very sweet.

The majority of the dialogue in “The Kite Runner” is in Dari, with English subtitles. For a mainstream film, that seems like a huge risk.

FORSTER: When we first put it out there, I think the studio imagined it all done in English. When I came onboard, I just couldn’t see two boys flying kites in Kabul while speaking English. I thought it wouldn’t feel right.

Judging from the diverse cast and crew, this is a truly global film. Plus it had to be shot in China. What were some of the production challenges you faced?

HOSSEINI: All the scripts were in Chinese,

Farsi and English.

ABDALLA: The first day, we were shooting this busy market scene, and that was crazy enough. Donkeys, cars, pedestrians—but then there was this relay race of communication from one language to another. It was chaos.

Were any of the scenes shot in Afghanistan?

FORSTER: Nothing. You just don’t have the infrastructure and the crew there. China has all that. Also, in Kabul, a lot of the architecture had been destroyed after 30 years of war.

Was there ever an idea that a big-name actor like Tom Cruise should play the lead role of Amir?

HOSSEINI: I actually had discussions where those kinds of names were thrown around. I remember wincing inside, thinking, I can’t see these actors featured on “Entertainment Tonight” in Kabul. I remember early on talking to Marc, and I floated the idea that the studio was considering this big actor for the film. When I heard this disapproving groan come out of him, it made me happy. He drew the line in the sand and said, “This is the film I want to make. It has to be this way.”

Khalid, you are an Egyptian Brit, yet you played an Afghan. Did you have to be a cultural contortionist to fit into the role?

ABDALLA: The script I was given to read was in Farsi transliterated. I speak Arabic, not Farsi or Dari, but I thought I would go in and give it everything I had, because I know what it’s like to be misrepresented. I had to learn all these different sounds and speak words that had no meaning to me. That first audition was to convince anyone who does not speak Dari that I speak it.

Did he convince you, Khaled?

HOSSEINI: Well, I could see that physically, he was wonderful—his mannerisms, his

“It’s the first Hollywood film whose main contact with [Afghanistan] is the people, not the war or fanaticism.”

N Fareed Zakaria weighs in on the movie with a video available at extra.newsweek.com



facial expressions—but when he started talking in Dari, I couldn't understand a word. I eventually became quite distracted, so I muted the words and watched him act. I spoke with Marc a few days later, and I knew he really liked Khalid. So I

said, "He's obviously a very good actor, but he's speaking gibberish; these are my lines and I don't recognize them." Marc said, "He's going to Kabul, he'll learn," but I was quite skeptical—
FORSTER: And nervous.

HOSSEINI: Yes, I mean, this was the central role!
ABDALLA: I started to hear through the

IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: (From left) Hosseini, Forster and Abdalla shared their views

grapevine that every time my name was mentioned around Khaled, he'd say, "Yes, but how's his Dari?"

HOSSEINI: In China, he surprised me when he walked on set and started conversing with me in Dari. I was quite astounded. So much attention is paid to actors when they gain 60 pounds or don an accent for a role. But what he's accomplished is unparalleled—in one month in Afghanistan, he learned the language.

How did you find the kids who play the lead roles in this film?

FORSTER: The casting director I did "Finding Neverland" with basically looked all over the world where Afghan refugees had settled—Holland, Germany, Virginia, England. We couldn't find anybody that really represented them, especially since Hassan's Hazara, and they didn't have the means to leave the country. At the time,

cause you wanted to move the children out of Afghanistan due to concerns over the rape scene and the way Afghan audiences might react to it. Were there actual threats?

FORSTER: There were no threats, but if there were any repercussions in Afghanistan, we wanted them out of the country. Their safety was our main concern. Their school year ended in September; that's why we pushed the release of the film so they could finish school before it came out. You see, there are no movie theaters left in Afghanistan. The Taliban destroyed them all, so it's all DVD piracy copies.

Khaled, what were your concerns in having the book adapted to the screen?

HOSSEINI: Ian McEwan had a great quote about that. He said, "A screen adaptation of a novel is like a controlled act of vandalism." But I loved film from a very early

us which moves are the best, the best attacks and retreats.

Were there other cultural advisers?

ABDALLA: Yes, too many, and they all started fighting with each other.

FORSTER: When setting up the really emotional funeral scene, and one would say, "Yes, there should be flowers on the grave when a Muslim dies." Another said, "Absolutely not, there are no flowers." Most of the time they were helpful, but sometimes, not so much.

HOSSEINI: To be fair, it would happen with any culture. Ask an American family what you serve for Thanksgiving, and you'll hear 15 different ways of doing it.

The film also gives you a sense of how much Kabul intersected with Western culture pre-Soviets. I think there is a sense here that Afghans were living in the Stone Age.

HOSSEINI: People tell me quite bluntly, "I



A REAL GROUP EFFORT: Forster on the set (left), Abdalla learned Dari for the role of Amir, Ali Dinesh Bakhtyari plays his adopted son

Kabul seemed safe, and I thought we needed to go there to understand the culture better, so we went, saw thousands of kids, then focused on two schools. Out of those kids we found Amir, Hassan and Sohrab. Most people we met were familiar with the book. It's been published in Farsi. Khaled, is that official?

HOSSEINI: No, pure piracy. My overseas agent calls just to say, "Your book's doing amazingly well in Iran. It's in its fifth printing. I'll send you a copy." And it's all bootleg. "The Kite Runner" in Farsi is a best seller.

Was it frustrating, dealing with non-actors?

ABDALLA: To me, they have Afghanistan in their bones. To find kids somewhere else and have them do those things would be an impossibility—the way Hassan squats to sit, the way they eat a pomegranate—there's stuff like that you could not find anywhere else.

The film's debut had to be postponed be-

age, as you can see from the Steve McQueen references in "Kite Runner." I didn't have any misguided romantic notions that my novel had to be translated exactly on screen. But what cannot be vandalized is the emotional arc of the story, its spirit—that has got to be intact for it to work so the film is a similar emotional experience as the novel. For me, it was a matter of divorcing myself from the notion that it had to be a replica of my novel. It ought to be a piece of work that can stand on the basis of its own merit and virtues.

Kite flying is a national pastime in Afghanistan. Were you ever worried about getting it wrong? That would be the equivalent of botching football scenes for a movie set in England.

FORSTER: We actually hired kite experts who taught the kids to fly kites in Kabul and China. We choreographed all the kite fights with a kite master—he showed

had no idea there were trees in Afghanistan. I thought it was all desert, like the Sahara." But it is lush, green valleys, rivers, flowers—it's a stunningly gorgeous country. The word Afghanistan summons such negative images—bin Laden, terrorists. But there's such a romantic, enchanted quality to those early scenes in the film—the first hour. A beautiful childhood, this peaceful country. For a lot of my readers, it's a shock that such an era ever existed in Afghanistan, but the fact is Afghanistan didn't come into being with the Soviet war. There was a long history of tradition and culture.

ABDALLA: I also think it's the first Hollywood film whose central focus and main contact with that part of the world is the people, not the war or fanaticism.

I'd say there is another first here in that all degrees of Islam are represented, from secular to devout to militant. The film is not about their being Muslim, or

how their faith drives their decisions. It's just a part of the culture.

HOSSEINI: Marc's film is very accessible though every character is Muslim. You're seeing them through their own eyes, not those of a visiting Westerner. We see them in their context, in their world, in their element, without that extra buffer or barrier. I think that's a remarkable thing.

Amir is the only lead Muslim character in a Hollywood film who's not hatching a dastardly plot.

HOSSEINI: There are a billion Muslims in the world; that means 5 billion prayers a day. Out of that, how many times do they follow the prayer by blowing up a building? Yet if you just knew Islam through film, seemingly quite a lot of the time prayers are followed by something exploding. In this film, Islam is simply the rhythm of life.

Is this film for an American audience, or is its aim global?

HOSSEINI: There's not an intended target audience. The story and struggles arise out of a conflict in Afghanistan, but ultimately the struggles are so universal. It's about the troubled relationship between father and son, about this friendship that's very complex, about losing your homeland, about forgiveness, about trying to overcome your own nature. It doesn't matter if you're from Iraq, Afghanistan, South America ... you can identify emotionally. I think the film will have a very global appeal. It'll bring Afghanistan into millions of living rooms around the world, and that can only be good.

One thing I did not expect going into this film were all the parallels between Kabul then and Baghdad now: war, an occupying force, displacement. It was really striking.

ABDALLA: Yes—civil war, refugees. Part of me imagines a book like "The Kite Runner" in 15 years coming from a displaced Iraqi. I definitely see parallels.

HOSSEINI: Yes, my story took place in Afghanistan, but this same story is being played out everywhere, all over the world. Iraq is a dramatic example, but I get letters from Africa, and I was just speaking to refugees in Chad. The nature of the conflict may be different, but the end result is so tragically similar. The people who have no control over what's happening ultimately end up paying the price.

FORSTER: In general, wars led by superpowers—Russia in Afghanistan, America in Iraq—there's a similar structure to it. How a superpower invades and what happens after that—there's a lot of parallels, even if you go back to the Roman times. I'm always surprised humanity doesn't seem to learn.

The View From the Inside

Forster's vivid film is unabashedly sentimental.

By DAVID ANSEN

If "Atonement" hadn't already been taken, Khaled Hosseini could have used it as a title for his novel "The Kite Runner," whose protagonist, a privileged 12-year-old Afghan boy named Amir, grievously betrays his childhood friend Hassan. Only years later, as an adult, will he be able to

He's a man haunted by his past, and Forster's movie soon transports us back to Kabul in 1978, before the city was decimated. The young Amir (Zekiria Ebrahimi) has grown up in the cultured home of his militantly anti-mullah father, Baba (the marvelous Homayoun Ershadi). They are Pashtun, and Hassan (sad-eyed Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada),

Amir returns, in disguise, to Kabul, in an attempt to redress his childhood sins. Forster's re-creation of the war-ravaged city is vivid: a treeless, rubble-strewn landscape where glum crowds are forced to witness the stoning of adulterers in the public stadium. Amir re-encounters, a bit too conveniently, the pale,



FLYING HIGH: Ebrahimi as Amir, who betrays his best friend after their kite-fighting victory

atone through an act of considerable courage.

Hosseini's novel, reputedly the first in English by an Afghan writer, became a surprise best seller. Director Marc Forster and screenwriter David Benioff have abbreviated Hosseini's tale but remained true to the book's heart-tugging, sentimental power and sturdy, symmetrical storytelling, as well as its sometimes clumsy melodrama.

The story begins in San Francisco in 2001. The adult Amir (Khalid Abdalla) is now a novelist, having fled Afghanistan with his father after the Soviet invasion.

the son of the family servant Ali, is of the Hazara tribe.

The two friends may be servant and master, but they are inseparable until the day Hassan is beaten and raped by teenage Pashtun bullies—a horror Amir witnesses and does nothing to prevent. Converting his guilt into enmity, he turns on his friend.

Ershadi's soulful, morally complex Baba is the film's standout performance, but these two memorable Afghan child actors are the heart of the movie. We miss them when they vanish from the story. The grown-up Amir seems rather bland and mopey in comparison.

sneering teenager who had masterminded Hassan's rape, only now he's grown up to be an oddly swarthy, posturing Taliban villain. If Hosseini's plotting owed a debt to Hollywood, here the debt is repaid, as "The Kite Runner" momentarily transforms itself into a cliffhanging action movie.

"The Kite Runner" isn't subtle, but it allows us to see a country and a culture from the inside. Forster's solid, unpretentious movie hits its marks squarely, and isn't afraid to wear its heart on its sleeve. Only a mighty tough viewer could fail to be moved.

Don't Give Up on Afghanistan

The fact that Afghans haven't is all the more reason for us to stay engaged.

By KHALED HOSSEINI

EVERY TIME I STEP BEFORE A PODIUM, SOMEONE will inevitably raise his hand, and say, "So, Mr. Hosseini, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan?" The first thing I do is remind the audience that I am a novelist. If I have any expertise, it is in the inner lives of the characters I have created in my books—which makes me spectacularly underqualified to answer a question of such magnitude. But even as I say these words—and they are true—

I know that I am stalling because I do not have a ready answer. So I do give an answer, but one that in the end amounts to the verbal version of a shrug.

To say you are optimistic about Afghanistan opens you to charges of being hopelessly naive. I can hear the retorts in my head: Do you need reminding that there is a raging Taliban insurgency in the south that has taken nearly 6,000 lives this year? Don't you know that your country produces 93 percent of the world's opium? Are you not aware of the corruption in the government, the still-powerful warlords, the rampant poverty in the provinces, the illiteracy rate, the persistent oppression of women, the suicide bombings that kill children?

Yes, I am aware of these things. I traveled to Afghanistan this past September with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and I saw for myself the high blast walls on the streets of Kabul, aimed at protecting against suicide attacks. Those walls did not exist the last time I was in Kabul, in the spring of 2003, and I didn't feel then the unease I did this time when I walked through crowded streets and bazaars. I saw thousands of young people in Kabul living in slums without work, without direction. In the north, I met homeless families of 20 or more who had spent the past two winters cooped up in holes they had dug underground. In village after village between Kunduz and Mazar-e Sharif, I met people who had no access to clean water, to a school for their children, to a clinic for their sick; families who lived on less than \$1 per day—that is, if they could find work—and who received little or no help from a central government still struggling to meet the basic needs of its people.

Perhaps, then, I should be pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan. But that hardly takes an intellectual leap. And besides, what about the positive developments that have taken place over the past six years? When I visited Kabul in 2003, it looked like a war zone, a grim landscape of jagged debris, flattened buildings and roofless walls. The Kabul I saw in September is dramatically

improved. Many of its neighborhoods have been rebuilt. I was happily surprised to visit cultural landmarks, like the famed gardens of Babur, and find them successfully renovated. In many towns, I saw children in uniform walking to school. School enrollment, in fact, has increased to more than 5 million children over the past five years. Land mines are being cleared, the press is relatively free (if under attack by religious conservatives) and telecommunication is booming. (Even in the poorest, most remote villages, I had the surreal experience of seeing old men in tattered clothes speaking on cell phones.) The rebuilt roads I traveled in northern Afghanistan were in excellent shape, and traffic on them was brisk, boding well for commerce.

And what message does relentless skepticism send to all the people—both Afghan nationals and expatriates—who are risking their lives trying to rebuild the beleaguered country? People like Dawood Salimi, an Afghan UNHCR worker I met in Kunduz, who has decided to remain in Afghanistan and help refugees even though a suicide blast in July barely missed his 3-year-old son. Or the countless rural teachers who refuse to leave their classrooms despite death threats from the Taliban.

Pessimistic or optimistic? Maybe it is too early—a handful of years after 9/11—to ask such a question about a country that is still recovering from nearly 30 years of war, famine, drought, extremism, lawlessness and massive displacement. Or maybe I, and even legitimate experts on Afghanistan, are the wrong ones to ask. Maybe someone should ask the Afghans.

Earlier this year the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission conducted a survey in 32 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan, and found that nearly 80 percent of Afghans polled said that they felt optimistic about the future. Nearly 80 percent. I find this to be an extraordinary statistic (I suspect far fewer of us here in America would say the same about our own future). This finding isn't proof of a dramatic improvement in Afghan standards of living. Rather, it reflects the constitutional ability of Afghans to remain hopeful and optimistic in the face of overwhelming hardship. Which, to me, makes it a moral imperative that we in the West not give up on a people who have not given up on themselves.

The only certain thing about Afghanistan is this: without a genuine and sustained long-term commitment on the part of the United States and its allies, Afghanistan is doomed. Though Afghans take pride in their sovereignty, polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of Afghans view the foreign presence in their country favorably. They know that a weakened Western resolve will mean that the gains made so painstakingly will vanish swiftly. I suppose that then, if someone were to raise his hand and ask me about the future of Afghanistan, I would have a ready answer. For now, I will settle for the shrug.

HOSSEINI is the best-selling author of "The Kite Runner" and "A Thousand Splendid Suns." He has served as a good-will envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees since 2006.



HIGH HOPES: Afghans remain optimistic despite it all