

BRANDON LINGLE

Messages without Writing

A conversation with Atiqullah Shahid

DURING ONE OF MY TRIPS TO AFGHANISTAN I came across the impressive, and often heart-breaking, work of Atiqullah Shahid, a prolific Afghani artist who critiques world events through political cartoons. As a member of an occupying force in a foreign land, I marveled at the effectiveness of Atiq's images. They communicated hard truths and shed light on the feelings of those trying to live in the middle of a country awash in violence. I remember thinking of Atiq's cartoons as small weapons of clarity barraging the Afghan countryside. Imagine the corrupt politician seeing his likeness with his morning chai. The young girl eyeing the drawing of refugees seeking a better life. The bomb maker catching a reflection of himself in comic form. The general considering what yesterday's tragedy looks like to the locals. Atiq's art consistently tackles the toughest global issues with humanity and grace, and we're honored to share his work here.

Brandon Lingle: *How did you get interested in art and political cartoons?*

Atiqullah Shahid: I've always had an interest in political and social news in Afghanistan. Cartoons are and have always been an interest to me. Seeing cartoons that other people have published, not only inspired me, but also drove me to portray political events in Afghanistan. My adventure as a cartoonist began with my portrayal of the corruption of Afghanistan in my very first publication.

BL: *Your work often reflects world events within hours of them occurring. Can you tell us about your process?*

AS: I always try my best to keep up with world news. Whenever I read an article, I am able to take a message away which I can then later incorporate into one of my cartoons. This process lets me transition messages from real life world events to my publications both quickly and effectively.

BL: *While largely focused on Afghanistan and the Middle East, you also create art from news around the world. How do you decide what to draw about?*

AS: My ideas and inspiration can come from anywhere—the news, as well as everyday objects. While my interests lay mainly in Afghan politics, I also keep tabs on news around the world. Therefore any news events from around the world can spark an idea for another cartoon. I often see inanimate objects lying around the house or on the streets and form connections between them and the initial idea or message that I started with and incorporate them into my cartoons. This can lead to a restructuring or alteration in some parts of the cartoon, however the final message or idea remains the same from start to finish.

BL: *How do you think your art transcends language?*

AS: The goal of any cartoonist is to go beyond the language barrier and allow the reader to comprehend the message of the cartoon without being able to read any text to reach the same conclusion. In Afghanistan there are many people who have problems reading and writing, which is why I use this form of art to portray my messages. Breaking down this barrier makes the messages of my cartoons more accessible to a wider audience. The title of the cartoon is also a most important point, in that it has to add deeper understanding and explanation, but should not be required to understand the cartoon.

BL: *Have your critiques of leaders, politicians, terrorists, and thugs created any hardship for you or your family?*

AS: There are always people who misunderstand and misinterpret the messages of my cartoons, and I have received, and continue to receive, threats from many people via my social media outlets. I do not let this deter me. I am aware that my cartoons will always be interpreted in a variety of different ways, and I am prepared to face any feedback. As long as it creates a discussion, it means the message or political issue is being brought into the public spotlight.

BL: *How has the global art community reacted to your work?*

AS: I have a lot of artistic friends from all over the world. I have a great relationship with other artists. We regularly communicate our ideas with one another and give feedback on any new projects we might be working on, or have recently released.

BL: *Why do cartoons make it easier to talk about human suffering?*

AS: Message without writing. For those who are less fortunate, not able to receive an education because of limited resources or have other problems that prevent development or access to certain language skills, a cartoon provides a visual representation in a simple format, making it easier to understand the meaning of more complex issues in just a single image.

BL: *Sometimes you incorporate mixed media into your work with stunning effects. What are your thoughts on how real images relate with cartoons?*

AS: Colors in a simple cartoon drawing or painting can be enhanced by graphics or pictures which can elevate my cartoons and make them more vivid. Not only does it save time but it adds an aspect of realism not achieved by other means.

BL: *Any advice for aspiring political cartoonists?*

AS: The idea isn't to be looking at the best thing to draw. It's about putting your ideas and views about society on a piece of paper. Just make sure the message is meaningful and real and people will take interest.

BL: *How do you know when your art reaches someone?*

AS: I know that a person has truly understood the meaning of the cartoon when I receive angry comments—as well as comments from people who really enjoy my work. I look at it two ways, they either react really aggressively or really appreciative my work because they interpret and take away different things.

BL: *What are you working on now?*

AS: There are always new things going on in the world, so there is always an opportunity to create a new cartoon. The current political state in Afghanistan allows me to continuously create new pieces

on a day-to-day basis. I am currently working on a cartoon depicting the relationship of groups of people by presenting members of the Taliban in Moscow.

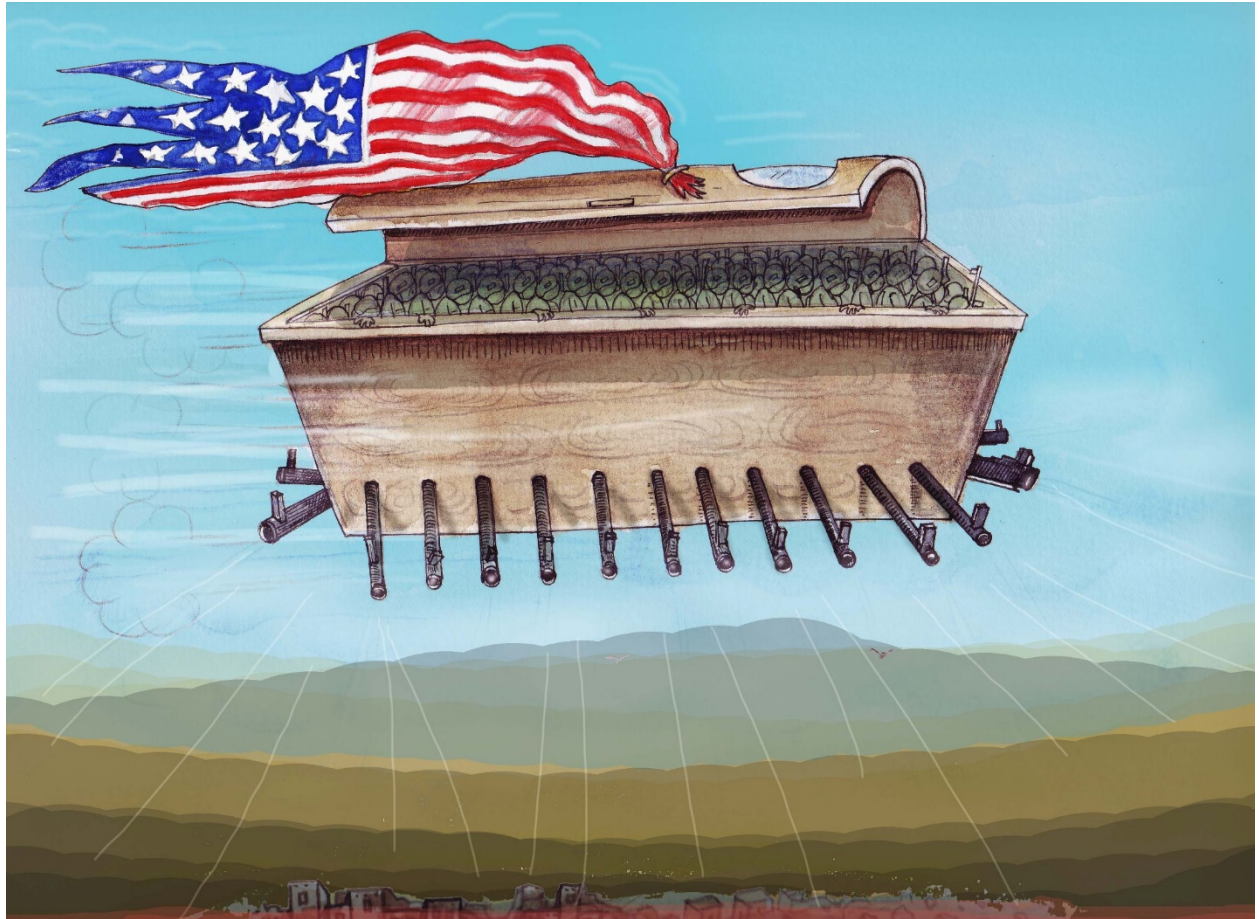


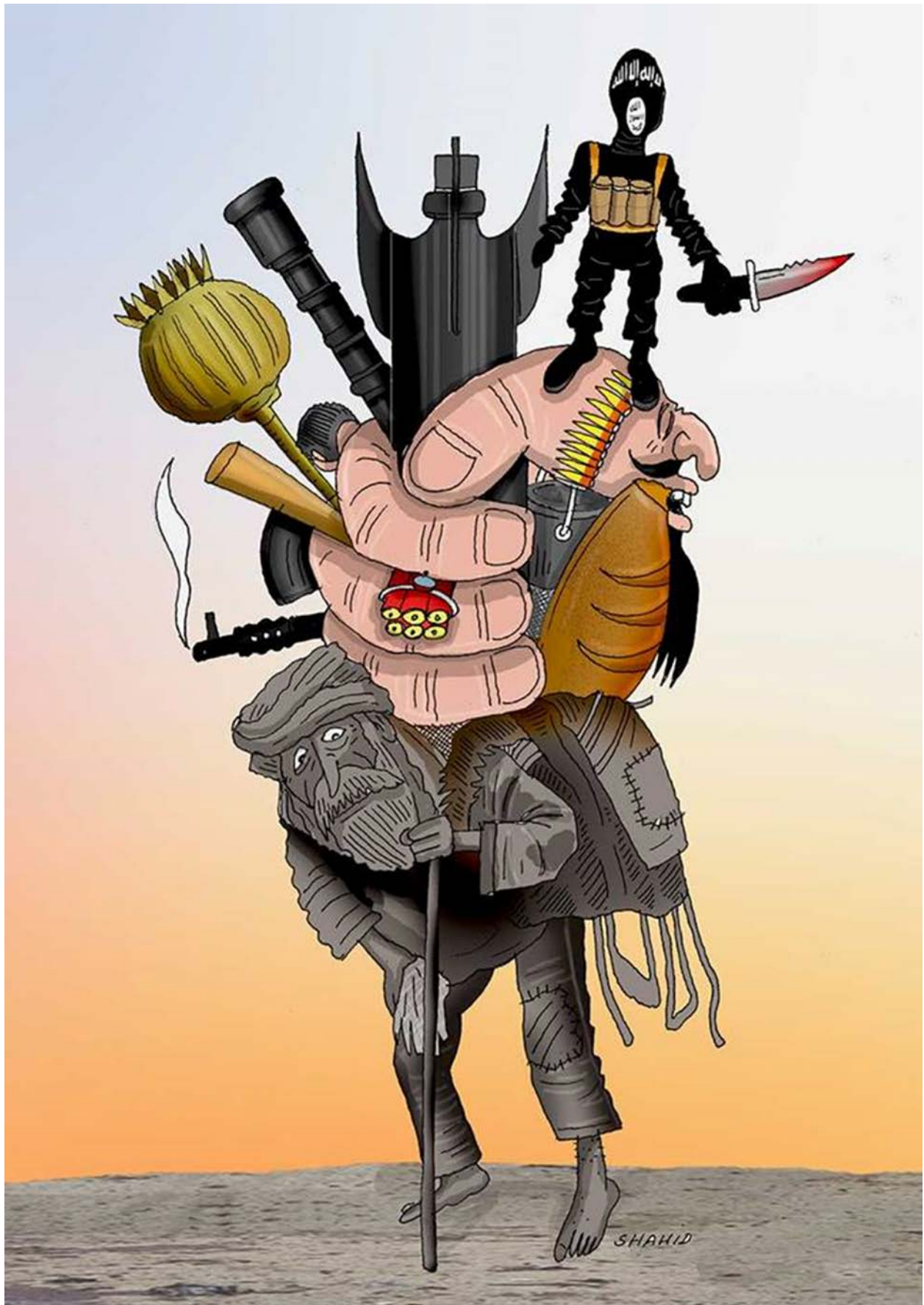










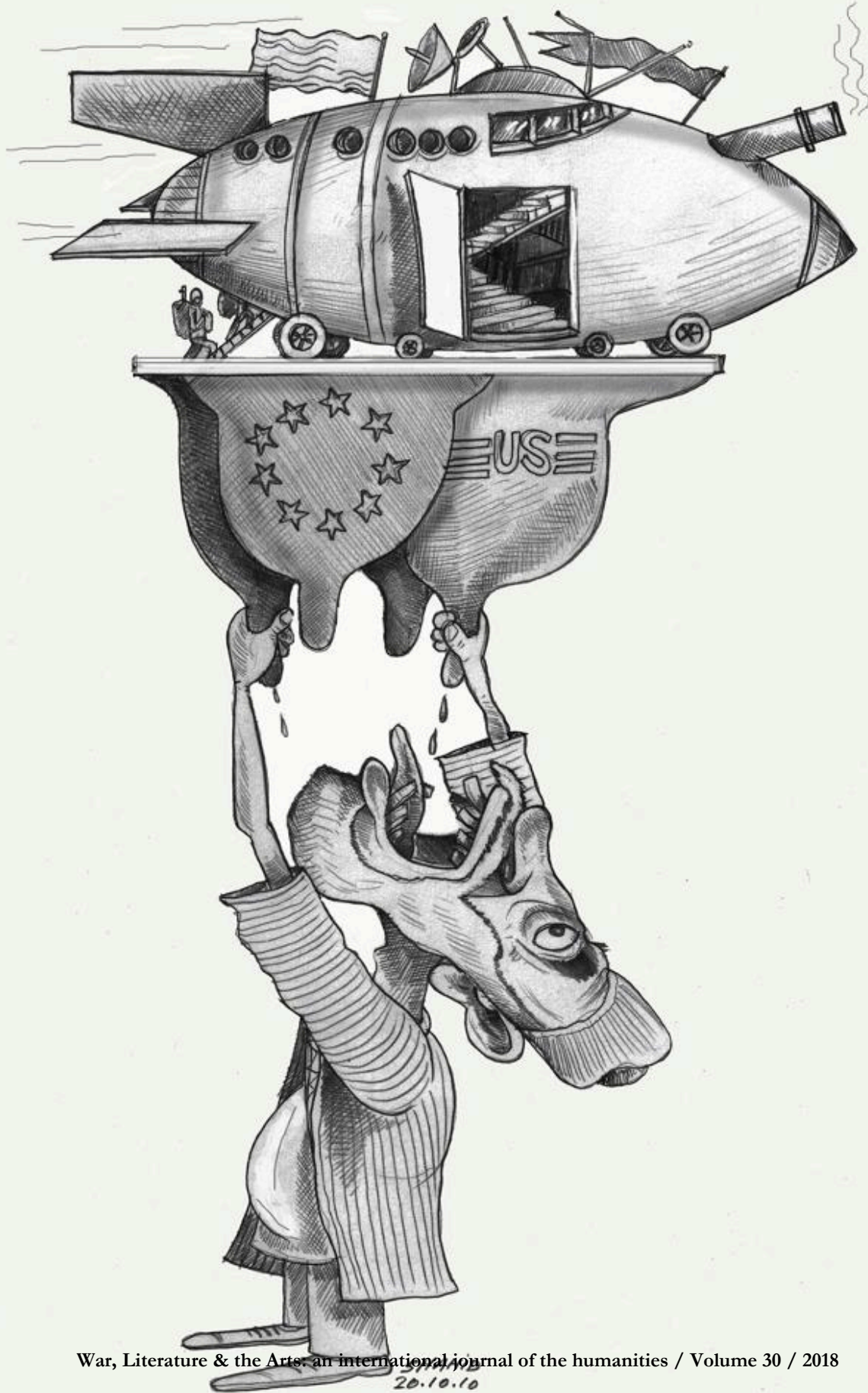


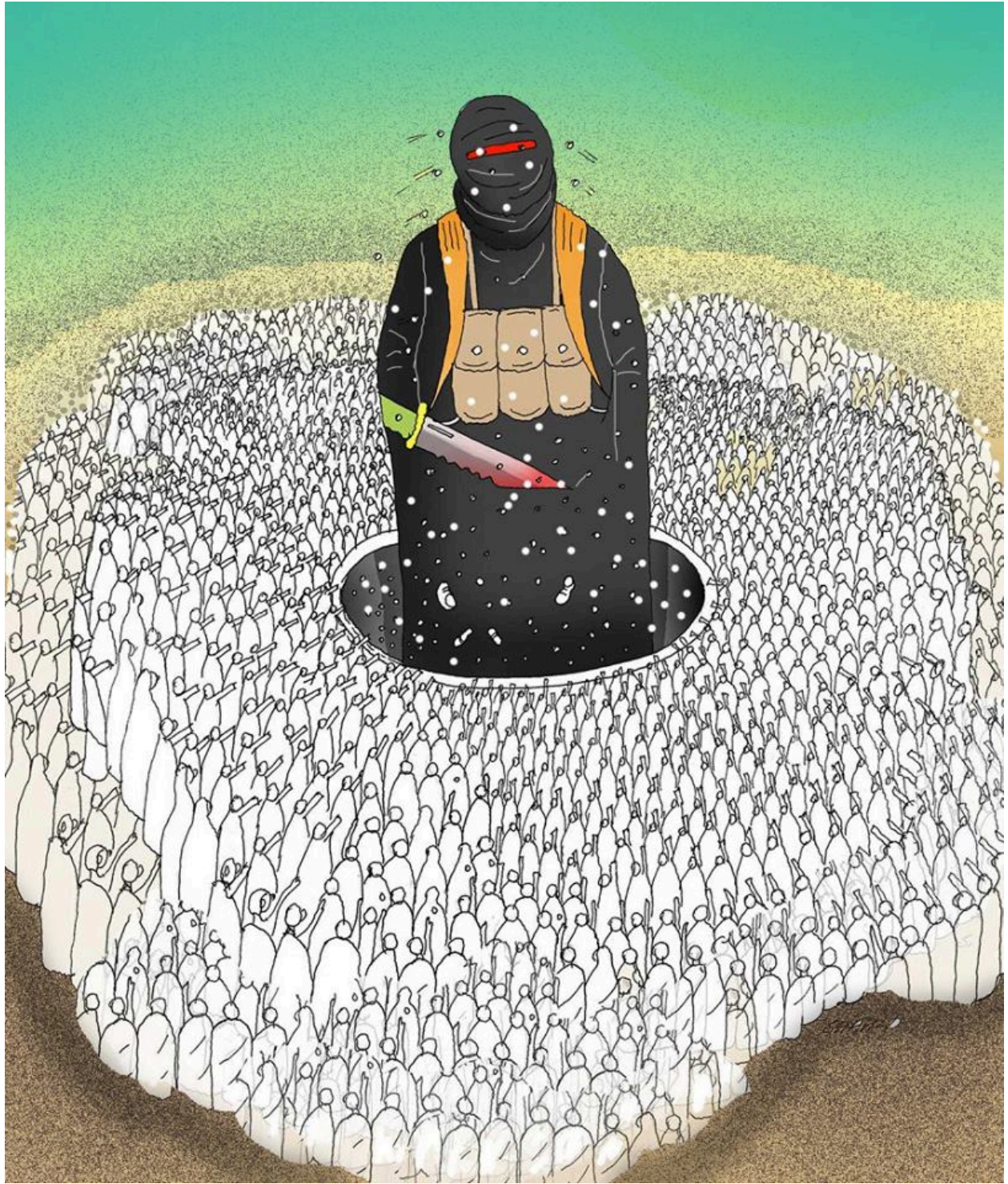




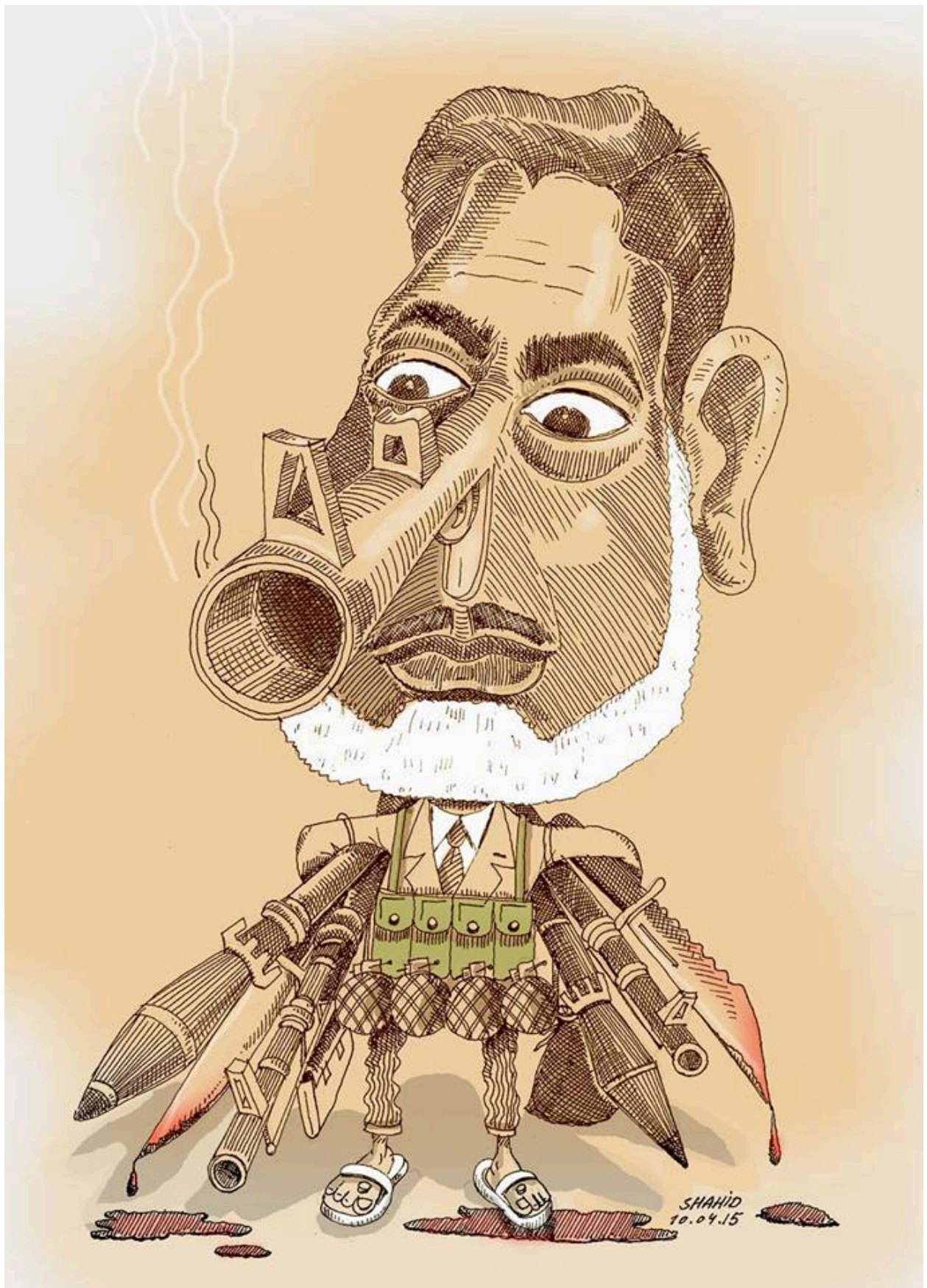












A native of Kabul, Afghanistan, **Atiqullah Shahid** studied economics and art at Kabul University. He began drawing political cartoons in 1986. His work regularly appears in publications worldwide. You can see more of his work at: Facebook, *Afghancartoon* and *Shahid Atiqullah*; Twitter, *@atiqshahid2*; Instagram, *atiqshahid_3*; CartoonMovement.com; and ToonPool.com.

Brandon Lingle served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Air Force public affairs officer. He's published photos or essays in various publications including *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times At War*, *Guernica*, *The North American Review*, *The Normal School*, and *Catamaran*. Views are his own.