



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes



Kandahar, June 3, 2005

Dear people, I don't really know how to do this one...

...The road to Khakrez passes behind Elephant Rock and the stony crests that are Kandahar's bulwark to the north. It crosses the Arghandab plain, leaving the leafy walled orchards behind, then climbs through another serried range of rocky hills, to a plateau, with yet more mountains bulking in the distance. It is a beautiful place. Profoundly peaceful -- though once the scene of violent battles against the Soviets -- strangely close to God.

We left Kandahar in a convoy; lights and blinkers on; green and white police vehicles before and behind the black van that carried Muhammad Akrem Khakrezwal's body. The streets of Kandahar, the dirt road weaving through baked mud villages, were lined with people, standing silently, watching him pass.

I slept that night in a courtyard of his brother's mud-brick compound in Khakrez, along with his bodyguards and one or two close friends. The mountain cumin had just been harvested, and there were stacks of the long, spindly stalks of it spread out to dry against the walls and on the flat roof. The stars were sharp, the Milky Way a clear glow across the sky. The next morning, we put him in the ground, in the lee of a little rise, set apart from the stony mounds marking other graves, scraps of cloth fluttering like flags from the cut saplings that mark head and foot.

Zabit Akrem, as I knew him, police chief of Kabul, was bar none the ablest Afghan official I

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have met. And he was a rock-solid friend. I think I want to tell you a little bit about him first, then I can get to what happened, who made it happen, what it means.

He was a large and imposing man; his face would come to rest in a glower of concentration that belied the well of compassion inside. And yet, his absolutely flawless manners, his elegant and respectful way of treating people, his generosity, the formality of his language -- without ever tipping into pomposity -- gave him an uncanny grace. At the same time, he retained the decisiveness -- even the capacity for harshness -- that is essential to functioning in Afghanistan.

He was an extraordinary analyst of the Afghan scene, ever attuned to strategic issues, though his training was that of a career army officer not a political scientist, and he had never travelled to the West. It was a natural ability, a home-grown sophistication. His sensitive intuition about tribal dynamics was married to an utter lack of tribal prejudice. On the contrary, all of his efforts went in the direction of overcoming the barriers, bridging the chasms among the various tribes and ethnic groups, to unite Afghanistan. He knew exactly how tribes functioned, and was able to work with those dynamics, harness them to bring Afghans together, rather than split them apart. (Among the mourners stretched out in long rows to pray at his burial were Uzbeks from Mazar-i-Sharif, Tajiks from Panjshir, Kabulis; funeral orations were in Persian and Pashtu.) And he never spared himself. In Kabul, he was in his office by 6:00 AM, and would be patrolling the streets at night till 10:00 or 11:00. I was with him once on a round to check on two precinct stations. It was clearly the first time a chief of police had ever bothered to visit.

On a personal level, he was...a friend. I'm not sure what else to say, except that, in life, friends are not so many. And here, they are very few indeed.

He came down to Kandahar to collect his family and bring them to Kabul, at last. He had been police chief in the northwestern town of Mazar-i-Sharif since late 2003, and that was too far and too nasty a place for a household. Now he had rented a house in Kabul, had fixed it up, and was thrilled to be reunited. Along with an older son and daughter, he had two little girls a year apart, one of whom, devilishly smart, would crawl all over him and tweak on his beard when we would be talking with some visitor of a late afternoon. They doted on each other.

On Tuesday I was on my way to Arghandab to eat apricots, driving along the dirt bank of the canal that runs near his house, and I saw a dark green vehicle just like his pass us from the other direction. I put a call through, and sure enough, he had made it. When I got back to town, my phone rang with a characteristic, enthusiastic summons from him to join him for more apricots, and mulberries, which he knew I loved, in another friend's garden.

The topic of conversation was the recent assassination of a respected religious leader, the head of



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the Kandahar council of religious elders, and a courageous debunker of extremist misinterpretations of Islamic thought. We were on about who did it, how, the usual speculations. Someone said it just had to be the government (meaning the provincial administration), since the "Taliban" such as they are, wouldn't dare do such a thing in the middle of town. I disagreed, saying there was no proper security in Kandahar, anyone can hide a gun in a vehicle, there are no real searches. The mullah's family had wondered: if it was the Taliban, why they didn't kill him in one of the districts where they were powerful, which he often passed through. I opined that their policy is precisely to make a splash. In a restricted access street next door to the governor's palace at mid-day makes a splash. Someone else countered that it was still inconceivable that the person had been able to escape -- out the gate to the palace access road, always manned by soldiers, without some complicity from the provincial administration. He had a point.

What we did agree on is that the Taliban, as an indigenous, ideological, active movement, do not exist. Without the organizational, motivational, and material support of Pakistan there would be no insurgency here. My feeling, as it has always been, is this: the strategy, and the specific plan, are manufactured across the border. The provincial authorities do have a role: not active, but passive. They are to let the various operations happen, to grease the skids. But alone, they are not capable of fomenting such a murder.

"We have a proverb," said Akrem. "Pakistan takes one step forward, then ten steps backwards. Then a step further forward. The advance proceeds very very slowly. But steadily."

I reminded him of the time in 2003 when he managed to land an informant inside one of the infamous training camps for "insurgents" in Pakistan. He learned what the training course consisted of. One of the subjects was targeted assassinations of public figures. "Do you remember?" I asked him. "They were training it then, and now it's started." "Woh," he answered in a gentle voice, nodding yes. "Now it's started." "It was slower than we thought it would be back then, but it's happening. Just like you said. Slowly but steadily." He nodded again.

We were talking like this, my dear friends, as we have been talking like this for years, we were agreeing on the evidence of a pattern, a clear series of deteriorating phases in the security situation here since the fall of the Taliban -- he was the one who could see the big picture like that, and define it, point it out, like the traces of an image just beginning to appear on photographic paper immersed in its chemical bath. But it was so abstract, our conversation. I wasn't thinking about HIM. Somehow I guess I always believed that if anything was going to happen, we would all go together in some big conflagration.

After the evening prayer, he left for home, and I let him go, thinking it was his first night with his family in months. The next morning, I heard the news, by fluke, on the radio, some two hours



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after it happened: an explosion in an ancient mosque downtown, where a prayer service for the assassinated mullah was being held. I heard Akrem's name, but the radio was still reporting "no information" as to his condition. I flew to the hospital, but he had never been there.

You may have read or heard that an Arab al-Qaeda member committed this crime. That is false. There are no Arabs active in the Kandahar area. Perhaps you heard that documents were discovered confirming the "foreign" identity of the suicide bomber, or that he was wearing a soldier's uniform. That is false. It is quite clear to us, his friends, the only ones who conducted anything that could be called an investigation, that there was no suicide bomber.

The only clear evidence pointing in that direction are the two unclaimed legs I saw in a cold-storage container at the hospital. But they were sheared off below the knees, in a manner many experienced people I consulted afterwards said was consistent with the effects of a Claymore mine. No one saw anything they could identify as a suicide bomber; and three eye-witnesses distinctly remember the rug that covered the mosque courtyard lifting, the flash of the explosion piercing it. Once I talked to the bodyguards and -- obsessively forcing them to walk the event again, back at the mosque -- worked out a map of the event, it was clear to me that they had done their job properly. They had established a close-protection perimeter around Akrem. From the disposition of the wounds on his body and that of his nephew who was standing just behind him, and the bodyguard who bent down to give him his shoes, it is clear that the explosion took place right behind Akrem and in front of his nephew. There is no way those bodyguards would allow an unknown person into that space.

And so what is the meaning of the finger that was so hastily pointed the other way -- at some non-existent Arab -- by the governor in particular, but also the interior minister, backed up by President Karzai? Quite clearly, in my view, the declarations were a smokescreen, to deflect attention from the real masterminds, south of the border, and in local government. It was precisely to play this role that the Pakistani intelligence agency insisted Gul Agha Shirzai be governor of Kandahar. I have seen him play it repeatedly in the past.

The difference between a suicide bombing -- committed by some fanatic that even the best security forces might have missed -- and a mine planted ahead of time, is profound. In the second case, a contradictory alliance with hostile Pakistan is partly to blame, as is the stubborn maintenance in power by both the Afghan president and his American supporters of people well known to be working against the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Policy needs to be deeply rethought. In the first case, of course, merely redoubling the military response seems the appropriate (and self-serving) response.

Well...I guess that for now I'm not sure what else to say, except to return to Khakrez, and the



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image of Hajji Muallam Akbar, bereft of a son as well as his brother Zabit Akrem. How graciously he greeted and thought about the comfort of each new arrival to the recently erected girls' school across from the family house, where we all gathered to sit when we arrived...how he called for food, arranged pillows for people, between his bouts of tears. I don't really know how to thank him for breaking every conceivable local custom and allowing me to share in that sacred moment. He would sit me at his left hand, let me interject into the conversation; he made sure I was comfortably settled to sleep that night, under the stars, beside his drying cumin, with Akrem's heartbroken bodyguards' pallets arranged in a square a few paces away. He let me be present at the graveside, throw my handful of dust, oblivious to what any of his neighbors might think or say. I will never forget this kindness.

Sarah