



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Taliban in the Pomegranate Goves

Kandahar, Halloween 2005

I suppose this is a propitious day to launch into the subject of this letter: fear.

A main aim of ours at Arghand is to work directly with farmers in villages, to establish long-term relationships with them, to help solve their infrastructure problems by picking up their produce at the farm, and to consult with them and include them in our membership. This is proving temporarily impossible at the moment, for a reason I had not predicted. Security. Not mine, theirs.

A little over two years ago, in a fit of alarm, I wrote a similar letter, predicting that Kandahar might go up in flames within a couple of months. Mercifully, I was wrong. But the security situation has been deteriorating, if at a far slower rate than I predicted then. Because the progression is not linear, it can be deceptive. That is, there's a spike in violence, then a lull, often a long one. Then another spike. And this saw-tooth progression masks the steady, general upward trend in "anti-government" activity that has been noticeable here since the end of 2002. Now we have become inured levels of violence far higher than what sparked my alarm two years ago.

But to me, the number of actual attacks – the explosions we hear almost daily, and clamber up our new bamboo ladder to the roof to look for the smoke, the assassinations of district commissioners, the murders in mosques – only represent the obvious part of the story. There is a quieter and equally disturbing side, as indicated in what follows.

Yesterday, an elderly gentleman came to visit. His eyes were rheumier than I when I saw him last, about a year ago, and he brandished a metal cane, embossed with geometric designs, which he used to keep our puppy from nosing around his clothes...which would make it impossible for him to pray while wearing them, since dogs are ritually unclean for Muslims. He is the elder of Kohak, a village in leafy Arghandab district, just over a line of rocky hills like the back of a dinosaur. Arghandab is blessed with a river, and its pomegranate orchards, behind their mud-plaster walls, are like forests of tousled hair. I used to send our truck out to Kohak and three neighboring villages every morning at six, to pick up milk; we worked with a hundred different families on our route, and the children and oldsters would gather at the collection points with their pails and their yellow plastic jerry cans, and all their assorted receptacles, hoping our little glass tube that measured milk density wouldn't show up the water their mothers had added that morning. I went along on this jaunt at least once every two weeks.

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It was the Kohak villagers who inspired Arghand. “Milk is fine,” they told me when I gathered them for a farewell meeting before taking six months off last year. “But for us it’s pocket change. What would really make a difference to us is if you were to work with fruit. Our pomegranates and our grapes, that’s what we put our effort into. Those are our cash crops.” And so the idea of Arghand was born: an effort to add value to these legendary fruit crops, to transform them into something stable, light, and expensive, for export. Even the name, Arghand, comes from Arghandab, that leafy district. “Arghand,” in Persian, means “triumphant,” or “conquering;” and “ob” means “water.” The district is named for its river, and we adopted the first part of its name.

Since Kohak village was at the origin of this whole venture, I was determined to buy our pomegranates from Kohak, to build on the close relationships we had established over six months of collecting milk. So I sent Nurallah and Abd al-Ahad and Karim out on Saturday, and the village elder told them he would pay me a visit.

As soon as he began speaking – warding the puppy off with his cane -- I realized my plan to collect pomegranates in Kohak as we once collected milk was doomed, for this year, anyway.

“Forgive me for not coming myself yesterday,” I opened, “but I didn’t want to cause you any difficulties.”

“No,” he responded with an entirely frank smile. “I wouldn’t give you permission to come.”

He is the second Arghandab village elder who has told me not to come to his village. The first one explained his refusal with a glancing reference to “those fairies who come around at night.”

The point is this. “Resurgent Taliban,” for lack of a better word, have mounted such an effective intimidation campaign that virtually no one is willing to take the risk of being seen as connected...not just with an American, but with any NGO, even a local one, and especially not with the government. My truck, with its subtle firebird symbol on the door in adhesive vinyl sent by a friend, red on the red background of the truck, is too type-cast. No one wants it seen near his house.

A word about fear. Though Afghans have a reputation for bloodthirstiness and stamina in battle, they are, I have discovered, quite fearful – in the wake of almost three decades of sadistic and arbitrary bloodletting. The objective level of violence against Afghans connected with the current regime may be lower than that against their counterparts in Iraq, but Afghans are easily cowed, because their souls are more damaged. Think of Afghanistan as an entire society suffering PTSD. Playing on the latent fear, these insurgents, or whoever they are, very can

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effectively intimidate thousands of people through their choice of just a few victims and the manner of their deaths. And that is what is happening, in ever-tightening rings around Kandahar city, till Arghandab, just a stone's throw away, is practically out of bounds for me. Not because my life is in danger there, but because my Afghan friends believe their lives would be in danger if they welcomed me. The deterrent is strong enough to offset both the Afghan tradition of hospitality and the prospect of a better deal on their pomegranates.

Akrem, my late friend the police chief, used to say this: "The Taliban are working just the same way we mujahideen worked against the Soviets. We used to start way out in the countryside, taking effective control of villages. Then, slowly, slowly, we would move in on the cities, till the government held only the cities. Then we could attack the government people there. The Taliban are doing the very same thing."

Who these Taliban actually are is another question. Without doubt, they are not an indigenous ideological opposition to the current order. Kandaharis, believe me, have had enough of violence and bloodshed. They do not want a reactionary Islamist regime. They want a regime that functions, that delivers law and order, that allows them to educate their children and to get on with their lives. These "Taliban" are Pakistani exports, paid more than they could earn at a regular job if there were such a thing to sow these deadly seeds. When Afghans help them, or tolerate them, there are two causes, I believe. One is necessity. There is simply not the kind of security force out in the countryside that can protect the villagers from these people. So if someone shows up with a gun at their door and asks for bread, they have to give it. The second reason is exasperation with the provincial administration. Despite a change in governors, provincial officials and provincial and national security forces continue to act as predators, amassing money and power, treating inhabitants like dirt rather than serving and protecting them. And so, out of spite, perhaps, rather than a developed conviction that the "Taliban" would provide a better alternative to the current regime, some villagers collude.

The Afghan response to this threat has been characteristically weak. What the villagers need is the constant presence of a reliable police force, which knows the ways of the countryside, treats people with respect, patrols regularly, knocks on doors, makes itself available. "Community policing," is, I believe, the American term for this. Instead, the Afghans have adopted the US war-fighting mentality, and sally forth on occasional raids, soldiers sporting dark glasses, and then return to town, leaving the people alone to deal with the consequences.

The US response has been characteristically misguided. Despite various proclamations of intent, and genuine battles against "insurgents" in isolated mountain valleys, US military and civilian officials here remain preoccupied to the point of obsession with "al-Qaeda" and any apparent manifestations of a Usama bin Laden-style ideological confrontation with the US. "We are



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particularly concerned about al-Qaeda and suicide bombings,” one special forces soldier wrote to me recently. I tried to explain that this concern was amounting to a set of blinkers, which Afghans of various stripes as well as neighboring Pakistan are deftly exploiting.

The fact is that there is virtually no genuine al-Qaeda activity here. Think about it logically: Why would al-Q. send Arab or Chechen operatives to a place like southern Afghanistan, which is notoriously chauvinistic, which hated the domineering presence of the al-Qaeda Arabs when they were the guests of the Taliban regime, and when such operatives don't speak the language and would stick out like Rudolph the Reindeer? Why send operatives into such a context when there is a much easier, closer, and more spectacular battleground in Iraq?

Note Afghans and Pakistanis are perfectly aware of this US obsession with international elements and suicide bombing, so “Taliban” are beginning to mimic these tactics. Afghan officials, meanwhile, are delighted with the suicide bombing explanation, since it absolves them of incompetence or of the responsibility to investigate properly, and since the Americans seem so happy with it.

The further problem is that the Americans, with this obsession, are proving incredibly hard of hearing regarding legitimate Afghan concerns. They don't take on board the huge risk for Afghans even to meet or speak with them – don't offer any kind of protection against potential retaliation, or any long-term relationship, except with bigwigs. The Americans show little interest in the gradually increasing presence of “Taliban” in districts all around Kandahar. They don't react usefully to events like the murders of the few respected members of the provincial administration, or of Afghan humanitarian workers like the four doctors and a nurse killed on their way to a refugee camp earlier this month. Americans don't react because those events aren't the work of al-Qaeda or suicide bombers. But Afghans really don't care very much about the ineffable al-Qaeda; they care about the corrupt officials we have helped bring to power and continue to empower, eg. through the recent parliamentary elections, supposedly to combat al-Qaeda.

They care about those “fairies who come in the night.”

This state of affairs has become so bewildering to Kandaharis that the following belief has gained almost universal credence here: that the Americans are in cahoots with the Taliban. I am telling you, 95% of the population of Kandahar is convinced of this. The people are convinced for reasons of logical deduction: 1) America is such a rich and powerful country, and the insurgency is such a petty little thing in reality, if America really wanted to, it could bring an end to it in a month. 2) America remains a close ally of Pakistan, the country that is manufacturing



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this “insurgency.” Just like in the days of the anti-Soviet jihad, America must be funneling money to the insurgents via Pakistan.

Kandaharis are also swayed by “evidence” that circulates from mouth to mouth, in the form of anecdotes. Every single person I have asked about this has come up with at least two such anecdotes. For example: “A friend of mine said his army unit captured a Taliban hide-out once, and they found the wrappers from US Army Meals Ready To Eat.” “A friend of mine was driving through Zabul, and he passed a Taliban check-point, and then 200 yards further on, there was a US army checkpoint. How could the Taliban have been manning a checkpoint so close to the Americans if they weren’t working together?” “My brother-in-law got a contract to drive some equipment to Urozgan for the Americans. He hit a Taliban check-point, and the men made him get out of the car; they unloaded the US equipment, burned his car, and then later the Americans came by and picked up their equipment from the Taliban.”

I pass these anecdotes along not because I think they are literally true, but because they indicate Kandaharis’ state of mind. Afghans are growing angry at Americans not because they represent Christianity or Western values, but quite the opposite: for apparently siding with Islamic extremists (and Pakistan) against the best interests of Afghanistan. I think it’s a pretty devastating development.

A coda on the recent elections, the type of “democracy” we are supposedly imposing at the point of a gun. It certainly does feel familiar, from some of our own recent votes.

The Kandahar results were finally announced a few days ago. One of the winners spends less than a month a year here. Another is a notorious war criminal from the post-Soviet civil war era. Another has held office in Pakistan. I really only know of two or three winning candidates who actually obtained any votes, from people I know, anyway.

There were three distinct phases in which the cheating took place. One was on election day itself. Entire districts were dubbed unsafe to open polling places in villages, so there was only one polling place, in the district capital, where the district commissioner could see to the filling of the boxes. Some boxes came in with hundreds of ballots marked with the same name, in the same ink, with the same type of X in the box. In one district, the voting supervisor took the ballot-box home, and when villagers protested, he claimed he was letting the women in his family vote. Boxes from several outlying districts took three days to arrive in Kandahar for counting. Roads are bad, but not that bad. There is no part of Kandahar Province that is more than four hours away from Kandahar. The second phase in cheating involved the transfer of the number of ballots in each box to the written register. In some cases, the number of votes inscribed by the polling station chief did not correspond to the number of ballots in the box when it was opened.



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(Discrepancies of 50-60 were passed over without comment.) In other cases, counters were bribed to add an extra zero or two when they wrote the scores into the register, or to reverse the scores of two candidates. Finally, the third phase was the transfer of the totals from the register to the computer database, at which point numbers could again be changed.

Of course all of this escaped the notice of the international media, which showed up for the day of the vote, secretly hoping for blood, and left the next day, disappointed.

The significance of this kind of cheating is that it leaves people without any sort of real political recourse. How can you register a protest vote if there is no chance of its being counted? In this context, by offering an evening meal and a place to sleep to “fairies” who come knocking on your door at night.