



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

Dubai, October 31 and Paris, November 1-2, 2007

Dear Friends:

I woke up this morning to the sound of artillery, thudding off to the west, the direction our compound faces. It was the batteries at an army post on the Herat road, firing into Arghandab. Each report felt like the beat of a heart, the way your heart stops for a second, then thuds, chokingly. I have been listening these last few nights, ears pricking like a dog's, to the faint popping of gunfire, that awful staccato, the clattering of helicopters, the urgent whine of personnel carriers speeding along the roads, only falling to sleep when the morning call to prayer rings out its cacophony in the pre-dawn chill.

I can't tell you how this feels. Arghandab, with its riot of tangled fruit trees, is our lung; its meandering, stone-studded river is the artery of the whole Kandahar region. Arghandab is shade and water, and children playing in the canals, and mud-walled orchards, and mulberries and apricots and above all pomegranates -- this year the size of grapefruits, hanging from the willow branches. Arghandab lies just behind Elephant Rock and the spine of crags that form Kandahar's northern bulwark. It is the buffer directly beyond that rocky defense.

This magical land was first given to the fighting Alokozai tribe by Nadir Shah, who brought down the Safavi Empire of Persia with its help in 1738. The latest in the line of Alokozai leaders was the gentle, jocular, military genius Mullah Naqib, who died in his sleep of a heart attack not three weeks ago. Mullah Naqib fought the Soviets from his base in Arghandab; they could never dislodge the Mujahideen from that place of trees and walled alleys and irrigation channels and mud trellises and treacherous passages of riverbed. A whole new pattern of life and commerce grew up in the safety created there, with heaving trucks wallowing in its rutted lanes and village crossroads transformed into bustling bazaars.

As the Taliban gathered strength and insolence in the past few years, they would contact Mullah Naqib from time to time, trying to strike a deal; telling him they wished no ill to him or his, but just to pass through Arghandab. He would bellow his retort, as he bellowed when I asked about the rumors of negotiations with the Taliban the day he died. He would get on the radio to challenge them and vow by God that should they dare set foot inside his Arghandab the whole population would rise up. And thus, by the force of his word, he would hold his fractious, disgruntled tribesmen firm against them.

A week after his death, Zmarai, the odd little fellow who is the police chief for the district, received a phone call at one in the morning. The unknown voice insulted the memory of Mullah Naqib and his womenfolk, and Zmarai cut the connection. The number rang again. "You're alone

[www.arghand.org](http://www.arghand.org)

All rights reserved Copyright 2009 by Arghand Inc



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

now that Mullah Naqib is gone. We're coming to Arghandab, no matter what. Why don't you just stand aside? There is no blood on your hands so far as we know, so we have no debts to settle with you. We're your friends and tribesmen."

"If you're coming as our friends," Zmarai shot back, "don't come. If you're coming as our enemies, we're ready for you."

I heard about this the next day. Some of us were sitting in another Alokozai elder's house, in a neighborhood on the north side of Kandahar, on the bank of a canal near the graveyard where I used to live. We were trying to figure out how things would shake out in the wake of Mullah Naqib's death. It seemed as if the government -- the governor of Kandahar and President Karzai's two local brothers and the president himself -- were deliberately creating the conditions for disaster in Arghandab. They had the deputy chief of police, an energetic officer from the same Alokozai tribe, called to Kabul to await promotion to another province. Using a couple of opportunistic members of the tribe as stalking horses, they interfered in the process of selecting a new "elder." Sidelined in the hasty process was a man who, though not without a variety of faults, was Mullah Naqib's deputy during the jihad, former Kandahar army corps commander after the fall of the Taliban, then chief of police in Kandahar and Mazar-i Sherif, following the footsteps of his tribesman and my late friend, Muhammad Akrem Khakrezwal. This man, moreover, has been implacable in his opposition to the Taliban since before they first appeared in Kandahar in the summer of 1994. If anyone has weight with this unruly tribe, if anyone knows how to fight the Taliban in Arghandab, it is he. And yet, the government machinations were plainly aimed at shutting him out.

We spent several urgent days, then, thinking strategy, poring over maps, avid for news, rehashing and cross-checking the stories people were reporting... The Taliban now owned the whole district of Khakrez, just to the north of Arghandab. They had mined the roads and trapped the police and government officials in the district headquarters. Taxi-drivers were told to take the long route around; when they complained about the extra fuel, the Taliban authorized them to raise their prices.

We looked at the roads leading down towards Arghandab, through the mountains and out onto the peeled, open ground. 'There would be a good place for a checkpost, or there.' Veteran fighters I canvassed said there only had to be about fifty ISAF soldiers in each one, and about two hundred Afghans. When I went to the Canadians with the advice, they shook their heads and laughed. Under tremendous political pressure back home to focus on training and reduce their combat role, the Canadian command simply didn't have the men.



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

After a couple of advances across the district border into Arghandab, the word leaked out last Thursday, from someone infiltrated into Taliban councils, that it seemed they were withdrawing back to Khakrez for the moment. No great move was planned for the immediate future, though hit-and-runs would doubtless continue.

It was a lie.

This lie, and the effectiveness with which it was put about, demonstrates a significant degree of command control. In the apparently loosely-structured atmosphere of Taliban operations, for word of this decision to emerge convincingly enough to be peddled by an informer, and for the truth to be so hermetically locked away, is ominous.

I don't think I will ever forget that Friday, though, when I was cocooned in the cradle of the gentle lie. It was the absolutely first day in more than a month that I let down my guard. The key tribal elder was going back to Kabul the next morning. I felt we had done everything we could, and it seemed we could breathe again, for a little while. It was Friday, our day off, and I was alone with the two dogs. The scent of fall in the air, the crystal light and wisp of a breeze, took me straight home to New England, even if the leaves tossed on the wind were mulberry, not maple. I rolled up my cotton-filled mattress and LL Bean's down quilt, jammed a book under my armpit, heaved it all outside and spread it out on our porch. And lay there the whole day long, alternately reading and sleeping and having the wind knocked out of me when the dogs took their wrestling match to on top of me. Fayzullah came around at mid-day and fixed himself a salad. I dragged myself upright and ate some pomegranates to keep him company, then curled back up, just snug.

I think I'm grateful for those moments, even if it was a lie.

Perhaps the previous day or the day before that, the Khakrez district chief -- reportedly a friend of the Karzais' -- struck a deal with the Taliban: a deal reportedly sealed with a transfer of some weapons and some wheat. They could go where they liked; government forces wouldn't hinder them, so long as they didn't attack the police either. We didn't know about this deal, or when we did, didn't understand the immediate significance.

Monday morning I had a missed call from the Arghandab police chief, Zmarai, on my phone. A friend stopped by and we rang him back. The Taliban were in Chahar Ghulba, his racing words announced. It is Mullah Naqib's home village -- that place where the road to Khakrez turns left, and the old warhorse and his men had stood, that harsh day in June, 2005, waving Akrem's funeral cortege past. The Taliban were in Mullah Naqib's very house. They were holding a



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

council of war in the village mosque, and they were thick in the country around: Dang Kolacha hamlet, Seyyidan Kalacha, and the two Khosraws...

All through that day, the battle lines were being drawn: the Taliban to the north of the rock-strewn Arghandab river bed, government forces to the south. Cars urgently ferried women and children away from the scene of the impending fight. Others, on foot, drove the few animals that sustained their families' lives ahead of them as they moved south, towards town. It was that scene which -- like the wreckage left by suicide bombers -- has so come to characterize the tragedies of these recent years: poor people, struggling people, people innocent of the decisions that brought about violent events, fleeing ahead of their unfolding.

Only that night was a general council of war convened on the NATO military base. All the different actors were there, each with his idea as to what should be done. The cast of characters was so disparate: the chief of police -- a corrupt official from a different province, whose men, last time he was posted to Kandahar, had brutalized the people -- the head of the army corps, likewise from elsewhere, a representative of the governor away on vacation, the Canadian battle group, the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team, US police trainers and Special Forces officers, the untried son of Mullah Naqib -- swimming in his oversized tribal chief's role. What a strange task it must have been for the Canadian commander to try to wrest a concerted plan from this company.

I was out at the base the next day, to ship our last cargo of soap before I left Wednesday. I stopped to say good bye to my friends among the Canadian officers. There was a quietly exultant mood of work well done: they had responded, the Afghan National Army had responded, in number and fairly swiftly, some villages had been retaken, with significant Taliban casualties. The beginnings of a noose had been arrayed around the remainder.

And yet, I knew that the significance of this event could not be weighed in the usual quantitative metrics dear to journalists and military men. The number of bodies (few on the government side), the number of houses vacated, the inches of terrain occupied or retaken militarily did not add up to the full reality of what had taken place. That reality was in the hearts of the people, the sinking sense of impending tragedy descending on the city. That reality was on the frozen face of Fayzullah, our tough and bony cooperative member from Arghandab, who called his father in law and heard an eastern accent say he was wounded. "The Taliban have him," Fayzullah could barely squeeze out, his voice ashes. "I have lived through everything," he had told me the previous night. "The Jihad, the chaos after the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban and their fall. And never have I been afraid. Never until now. For now, I don't know who my enemy is, and who my friend." His father in law turned out to be OK, the reply on the phone was a defensive falsehood -



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

- the Taliban are known to take people's phones and hit the redial button to see who the person is in contact with.

What has in fact transpired, in my view, is a deft and successful "psy-ops" action on the part of the Taliban. Psy-ops, or psychological operations, are the activities in war meant to impact the morale of the enemy. The Taliban's attack on Arghandab was designed to communicate. And it did so, eloquently. It said that they are here. It said that, despite the likeliness of their attack after the death of Mullah Naqib, despite a trumpeted warning that they were on the way, no obstacle was thrown up to oppose them, and they could walk into the district. The targeting of Mullah Naqib's house was a deliberate affront, it was the body-language version of the insults proffered to Zmarai on the phone. It said: you see, O men of no honor? You can't even protect his house, let alone the whole district. You are nothing now. And, by coordinating attacks on Arghandab with others in two neighboring districts, they demonstrated their mastery of organization, of tactics, terrain, and the numbers -- their knowledge of how thinly the Canadians are stretched. The sum of all these messages was aimed at the people, the ordinary people that are, legendarily, the prize in any insurgency: our encroachment is inevitable. You should align yourselves with the inevitable.

Today the Taliban have withdrawn, and the mood on the military base, according to a friend out there, is celebratory. But they were not crushed in the jaws of a closing trap, as we were led to expect. They executed a disciplined, fighting withdrawal -- one of the most difficult maneuvers on a battlefield. Even their retreat emphasized their message.

Now, it is my belief, they will quietly capitalize on this psy-ops victory. They will visit the villages and the mosques in tiny groups. They will instill their poison -- a savant dose of seduction ('Brother, we have nothing against you, you are a Muslim and we love you. Our fight is with the infidels. Let us pass.') and terror -- a "collaborator" tracked down and cut in pieces, a suicide bomber at a normally tranquil village market. Thus will they work to turn the people towards the inevitable, making it more so. It will be instructive to watch the trickle of refugees who will be leaving Arghandab now -- less noticeable than the flood that gushed out on Monday and is now sweeping back. This will be a trickle of people who have had some doings with this post-Taliban regime, or with foreigners, or development projects, or international forces. They will no longer trust their neighbors. Fayzullah, for example, is looking for a patch of ground in town. It would be the first time ever that his family abandoned their father's land.

All of this is par for the course, really, repetition of a pattern already familiar from other districts. What troubles me more is evidence that the Battle for Arghandab may have been a piece of psy-ops mounted by quite a different set of actors, aimed at a different audience, against a backdrop of diplomatic initiatives that a few short years ago would have been unthinkable.

[www.arghand.org](http://www.arghand.org)

All rights reserved Copyright 2009 by Arghand Inc



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

What I am driving at is this. There is suddenly this back-beat -- persistent references in the the media, pronouncements by President Karzai that go unchallenged or seconded by international officials, even desperate wishes of the exhausted Afghans -- to the effect that the only way to end the "insurgency" is to negotiate with the Taliban, to invite them back to share power over Afghanistan. This is a seductive refrain, for it seems to chime with much international experience. Wasn't the IRA brought to the table? Wasn't Nelson Mandela jailed for decades as the equivalent of a terrorist? Didn't Yasser Arafat win a Nobel Peace Prize? Isn't it true that insurgencies are never defeated, they are always accommodated in the end, through negotiations?

Only, and I keep repeating this, these Taliban are not home-grown insurgents. These Taliban were resoundingly rejected by a population thrilled with the promise held in the arrival of the international community in 2001. I was there. I saw it the excitement and the hope of a decent future cherished by that population. That's how it was, even in Kandahar, the stronghold of the just-dislodged Taliban. These Taliban were deliberately reconstituted into a force for mischief by the military establishment -- in other words, the government -- of Pakistan, as a proxy fighting force dedicated to advancing Pakistan's long-cherished agenda: control of all or part of Afghanistan, directly or indirectly.

The ONLY reason what was an invasion by proxy has morphed into something even vaguely resembling an insurgency is that the Afghan population is absolutely at the limit of its endurance with a government (which we installed) that pillages and brutalizes them, and lies to them barefaced. There has been no ideological or instinctive rejection of the international presence in Afghanistan, and the current government was initially greeted with enthusiasm. In the past six years, however, its depredations have led to its rejection, and to resentment against the international community that installed it, and then refused to supervise it. From those feelings of rejection and anger have spread pools of collaboration with the Taliban as a default protest vote, or under pressure to survive.

In the meantime, in this period of transition from pariah to potential negotiating partner, have the Taliban changed their approach to the exercise of power? Not in the least. They still seek to gain social control via terror -- now by hanging bodies upside down to trees, and putting pieces of men like quarters of meat in gunny-sacks to horrify their neighbors, and by applauding the death of innocents. They still seek to impose a strict dress code, and the subjugation of women.

So what has changed in six years, except our failure to provide a palatable alternative to such a regime? Is this to be our response to that failure? "Oh, we weren't able to do any better for the Afghans than the Taliban, so we may as well bring them back in and get the place off our hands." What has changed in six years, except a sudden reorientation in Washington against Iran as the



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

bugbear of the day? Does Washington now seek partnership with a kind of Sunni bloc to the east of Iran?

In a conversation on the PRT lately, the US State Department representative indicated that as far as he could tell, so long as al-Qaeda were not handed the reins of Afghanistan, Washington didn't really care who was in power.

The way these disturbing thoughts relate to Arghandab is as follows. The battle I've just described never had to happen. The likely consequences of Mullah Naqib's death were plain even to me, a non-Afghan, with only a middle schooler's grasp of the Pashtu language, and no spy network or access to classified reporting. I wrote about them to you just weeks ago. Surely these likely consequences were plain to Afghan leaders who have spent their whole lives bathing in the tortuous politics of the place. But, far from taking steps to prevent the Taliban attack, those leaders did exactly what would help bring it about. As I wrote above, it was almost as if they desired it to happen. If they did so desire, perhaps they, too, sought the battle for its psy-ops value -- aimed at the West. The message would be: 'You see, there's just no way to achieve a military victory over the Taliban. You don't have the forces or the political will. You will always be putting out fires, one hotter than the next. You should let us negotiate.' For their government to be talking this way adds mightily to the bewilderment of the Afghan people.

And yet, as if echoing this very message, in London last week, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown emerged from a meeting with President Karzai to tell the press that solutions in Afghanistan "are not simply dependent on security." They require "reconciliation of all the groups." In answer to a reporter's question, President Karzai alluded to "agreement on all fronts" with regard to "the need for political activity alongside our military campaign." Of course these statements were embedded in mellifluous words about all the progress being made in Afghanistan, and how terrorists will be implacably opposed, only nice Taliban, not linked to al-Qaeda, would be spoken to. Absent from these statements was the least recognition that the best antidote to the Taliban is proper conduct of government. Provided with accountable, responsive, respectful leadership, the Afghan people wouldn't give that lot a second glance.

Love to you all,

Sarah

Dubai, October 31 and Paris, November 1-2, 2007

Dear Friends:

[www.arghand.org](http://www.arghand.org)

All rights reserved Copyright 2009 by Arghand Inc



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

I woke up this morning to the sound of artillery, thudding off to the west, the direction our compound faces. It was the batteries at an army post on the Herat road, firing into Arghandab. Each report felt like the beat of a heart, the way your heart stops for a second, then thuds, chokingly. I have been listening these last few nights, ears pricking like a dog's, to the faint popping of gunfire, that awful staccato, the clattering of helicopters, the urgent whine of personnel carriers speeding along the roads, only falling to sleep when the morning call to prayer rings out its cacophony in the pre-dawn chill.

I can't tell you how this feels. Arghandab, with its riot of tangled fruit trees, is our lung; its meandering, stone-studded river is the artery of the whole Kandahar region. Arghandab is shade and water, and children playing in the canals, and mud-walled orchards, and mulberries and apricots and above all pomegranates -- this year the size of grapefruits, hanging from the willow branches. Arghandab lies just behind Elephant Rock and the spine of crags that form Kandahar's northern bulwark. It is the buffer directly beyond that rocky defense.

This magical land was first given to the fighting Alokozai tribe by Nadir Shah, who brought down the Safavi Empire of Persia with its help in 1738. The latest in the line of Alokozai leaders was the gentle, jocular, military genius Mullah Naqib, who died in his sleep of a heart attack not three weeks ago. Mullah Naqib fought the Soviets from his base in Arghandab; they could never dislodge the Mujahideen from that place of trees and walled alleys and irrigation channels and mud trellises and treacherous passages of riverbed. A whole new pattern of life and commerce grew up in the safety created there, with heaving trucks wallowing in its rutted lanes and village crossroads transformed into bustling bazaars.

As the Taliban gathered strength and insolence in the past few years, they would contact Mullah Naqib from time to time, trying to strike a deal; telling him they wished no ill to him or his, but just to pass through Arghandab. He would bellow his retort, as he bellowed when I asked about the rumors of negotiations with the Taliban the day he died. He would get on the radio to challenge them and vow by God that should they dare set foot inside his Arghandab the whole population would rise up. And thus, by the force of his word, he would hold his fractious, disgruntled tribesmen firm against them.

A week after his death, Zmarai, the odd little fellow who is the police chief for the district, received a phone call at one in the morning. The unknown voice insulted the memory of Mullah Naqib and his womenfolk, and Zmarai cut the connection. The number rang again. "You're alone now that Mullah Naqib is gone. We're coming to Arghandab, no matter what. Why don't you just stand aside? There is no blood on your hands so far as we know, so we have no debts to settle with you. We're your friends and tribesmen."

[www.arghand.org](http://www.arghand.org)

All rights reserved Copyright 2009 by Arghand Inc



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

"If you're coming as our friends," Zmarai shot back, "don't come. If you're coming as our enemies, we're ready for you."

I heard about this the next day. Some of us were sitting in another Alokozai elder's house, in a neighborhood on the north side of Kandahar, on the bank of a canal near the graveyard where I used to live. We were trying to figure out how things would shake out in the wake of Mullah Naqib's death. It seemed as if the government -- the governor of Kandahar and President Karzai's two local brothers and the president himself -- were deliberately creating the conditions for disaster in Arghandab. They had the deputy chief of police, an energetic officer from the same Alokozai tribe, called to Kabul to await promotion to another province. Using a couple of opportunistic members of the tribe as stalking horses, they interfered in the process of selecting a new "elder." Sidelined in the hasty process was a man who, though not without a variety of faults, was Mullah Naqib's deputy during the jihad, former Kandahar army corps commander after the fall of the Taliban, then chief of police in Kandahar and Mazar-i Sherif, following the footsteps of his tribesman and my late friend, Muhammad Akrem Khakrezwal. This man, moreover, has been implacable in his opposition to the Taliban since before they first appeared in Kandahar in the summer of 1994. If anyone has weight with this unruly tribe, if anyone knows how to fight the Taliban in Arghandab, it is he. And yet, the government machinations were plainly aimed at shutting him out.

We spent several urgent days, then, thinking strategy, poring over maps, avid for news, rehashing and cross-checking the stories people were reporting... The Taliban now owned the whole district of Khakrez, just to the north of Arghandab. They had mined the roads and trapped the police and government officials in the district headquarters. Taxi-drivers were told to take the long route around; when they complained about the extra fuel, the Taliban authorized them to raise their prices.

We looked at the roads leading down towards Arghandab, through the mountains and out onto the peeled, open ground. 'There would be a good place for a checkpoint, or there.' Veteran fighters I canvassed said there only had to be about fifty ISAF soldiers in each one, and about two hundred Afghans. When I went to the Canadians with the advice, they shook their heads and laughed. Under tremendous political pressure back home to focus on training and reduce their combat role, the Canadian command simply didn't have the men.

After a couple of advances across the district border into Arghandab, the word leaked out last Thursday, from someone infiltrated into Taliban councils, that it seemed they were withdrawing back to Khakrez for the moment. No great move was planned for the immediate future, though hit-and-runs would doubtless continue.



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

It was a lie.

This lie, and the effectiveness with which it was put about, demonstrates a significant degree of command control. In the apparently loosely-structured atmosphere of Taliban operations, for word of this decision to emerge convincingly enough to be peddled by an informer, and for the truth to be so hermetically locked away, is ominous.

I don't think I will ever forget that Friday, though, when I was cocooned in the cradle of the gentle lie. It was the absolutely first day in more than a month that I let down my guard. The key tribal elder was going back to Kabul the next morning. I felt we had done everything we could, and it seemed we could breathe again, for a little while. It was Friday, our day off, and I was alone with the two dogs. The scent of fall in the air, the crystal light and wisp of a breeze, took me straight home to New England, even if the leaves tossed on the wind were mulberry, not maple. I rolled up my cotton-filled mattress and LL Bean's down quilt, jammed a book under my armpit, heaved it all outside and spread it out on our porch. And lay there the whole day long, alternately reading and sleeping and having the wind knocked out of me when the dogs took their wrestling match to on top of me. Fayzullah came around at mid-day and fixed himself a salad. I dragged myself upright and ate some pomegranates to keep him company, then curled back up, just snug.

I think I'm grateful for those moments, even if it was a lie.

Perhaps the previous day or the day before that, the Khakrez district chief -- reportedly a friend of the Karzais' -- struck a deal with the Taliban: a deal reportedly sealed with a transfer of some weapons and some wheat. They could go where they liked; government forces wouldn't hinder them, so long as they didn't attack the police either. We didn't know about this deal, or when we did, didn't understand the immediate significance.

Monday morning I had a missed call from the Arghandab police chief, Zmarai, on my phone. A friend stopped by and we rang him back. The Taliban were in Chahar Ghulba, his racing words announced. It is Mullah Naqib's home village -- that place where the road to Khakrez turns left, and the old warhorse and his men had stood, that harsh day in June, 2005, waving Akrem's funeral cortege past. The Taliban were in Mullah Naqib's very house. They were holding a council of war in the village mosque, and they were thick in the country around: Dang Kolacha hamlet, Seyyidan Kalacha, and the two Khosraws...

All through that day, the battle lines were being drawn: the Taliban to the north of the rock-strewn Arghandab river bed, government forces to the south. Cars urgently ferried women and children away from the scene of the impending fight. Others, on foot, drove the few animals that



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

sustained their families' lives ahead of them as they moved south, towards town. It was that scene which -- like the wreckage left by suicide bombers -- has so come to characterize the tragedies of these recent years: poor people, struggling people, people innocent of the decisions that brought about violent events, fleeing ahead of their unfolding.

Only that night was a general council of war convened on the NATO military base. All the different actors were there, each with his idea as to what should be done. The cast of characters was so disparate: the chief of police -- a corrupt official from a different province, whose men, last time he was posted to Kandahar, had brutalized the people -- the head of the army corps, likewise from elsewhere, a representative of the governor away on vacation, the Canadian battle group, the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team, US police trainers and Special Forces officers, the untried son of Mullah Naqib -- swimming in his oversized tribal chief's role. What a strange task it must have been for the Canadian commander to try to wrest a concerted plan from this company.

I was out at the base the next day, to ship our last cargo of soap before I left Wednesday. I stopped to say good bye to my friends among the Canadian officers. There was a quietly exultant mood of work well done: they had responded, the Afghan National Army had responded, in number and fairly swiftly, some villages had been retaken, with significant Taliban casualties. The beginnings of a noose had been arrayed around the remainder.

And yet, I knew that the significance of this event could not be weighed in the usual quantitative metrics dear to journalists and military men. The number of bodies (few on the government side), the number of houses vacated, the inches of terrain occupied or retaken militarily did not add up to the full reality of what had taken place. That reality was in the hearts of the people, the sinking sense of impending tragedy descending on the city. That reality was on the frozen face of Fayzullah, our tough and bony cooperative member from Arghandab, who called his father in law and heard an eastern accent say he was wounded. "The Taliban have him," Fayzullah could barely squeeze out, his voice ashes. "I have lived through everything," he had told me the previous night. "The Jihad, the chaos after the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban and their fall. And never have I been afraid. Never until now. For now, I don't know who my enemy is, and who my friend." His father in law turned out to be OK, the reply on the phone was a defensive falsehood - the Taliban are known to take people's phones and hit the redial button to see who the person is in contact with.

What has in fact transpired, in my view, is a deft and successful "psy-ops" action on the part of the Taliban. Psy-ops, or psychological operations, are the activities in war meant to impact the morale of the enemy. The Taliban's attack on Arghandab was designed to communicate. And it did so, eloquently. It said that they are here. It said that, despite the likeliness of their attack after



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

the death of Mullah Naqib, despite a trumpeted warning that they were on the way, no obstacle was thrown up to oppose them, and they could walk into the district. The targeting of Mullah Naqib's house was a deliberate affront, it was the body-language version of the insults proffered to Zmarai on the phone. It said: you see, O men of no honor? You can't even protect his house, let alone the whole district. You are nothing now. And, by coordinating attacks on Arghandab with others in two neighboring districts, they demonstrated their mastery of organization, of tactics, terrain, and the numbers -- their knowledge of how thinly the Canadians are stretched. The sum of all these messages was aimed at the people, the ordinary people that are, legendarily, the prize in any insurgency: our encroachment is inevitable. You should align yourselves with the inevitable.

Today the Taliban have withdrawn, and the mood on the military base, according to a friend out there, is celebratory. But they were not crushed in the jaws of a closing trap, as we were led to expect. They executed a disciplined, fighting withdrawal -- one of the most difficult maneuvers on a battlefield. Even their retreat emphasized their message.

Now, it is my belief, they will quietly capitalize on this psy-ops victory. They will visit the villages and the mosques in tiny groups. They will instill their poison -- a savant dose of seduction ('Brother, we have nothing against you, you are a Muslim and we love you. Our fight is with the infidels. Let us pass.') and terror -- a "collaborator" tracked down and cut in pieces, a suicide bomber at a normally tranquil village market. Thus will they work to turn the people towards the inevitable, making it more so. It will be instructive to watch the trickle of refugees who will be leaving Arghandab now -- less noticeable than the flood that gushed out on Monday and is now sweeping back. This will be a trickle of people who have had some doings with this post-Taliban regime, or with foreigners, or development projects, or international forces. They will no longer trust their neighbors. Fayzullah, for example, is looking for a patch of ground in town. It would be the first time ever that his family abandoned their father's land.

All of this is par for the course, really, repetition of a pattern already familiar from other districts. What troubles me more is evidence that the Battle for Arghandab may have been a piece of psy-ops mounted by quite a different set of actors, aimed at a different audience, against a backdrop of diplomatic initiatives that a few short years ago would have been unthinkable.

What I am driving at is this. There is suddenly this back-beat -- persistent references in the the media, pronouncements by President Karzai that go unchallenged or seconded by international officials, even desperate wishes of the exhausted Afghans -- to the effect that the only way to end the "insurgency" is to negotiate with the Taliban, to invite them back to share power over Afghanistan. This is a seductive refrain, for it seems to chime with much international experience. Wasn't the IRA brought to the table? Wasn't Nelson Mandela jailed for decades as

[www.arghand.org](http://www.arghand.org)

All rights reserved Copyright 2009 by Arghand Inc



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

the equivalent of a terrorist? Didn't Yasser Arafat win a Nobel Peace Prize? Isn't it true that insurgencies are never defeated, they are always accommodated in the end, through negotiations?

Only, and I keep repeating this, these Taliban are not home-grown insurgents. These Taliban were resoundingly rejected by a population thrilled with the promise held in the arrival of the international community in 2001. I was there. I saw it the excitement and the hope of a decent future cherished by that population. That's how it was, even in Kandahar, the stronghold of the just-dislodged Taliban. These Taliban were deliberately reconstituted into a force for mischief by the military establishment -- in other words, the government -- of Pakistan, as a proxy fighting force dedicated to advancing Pakistan's long-cherished agenda: control of all or part of Afghanistan, directly or indirectly.

The ONLY reason what was an invasion by proxy has morphed into something even vaguely resembling an insurgency is that the Afghan population is absolutely at the limit of its endurance with a government (which we installed) that pillages and brutalizes them, and lies to them barefaced. There has been no ideological or instinctive rejection of the international presence in Afghanistan, and the current government was initially greeted with enthusiasm. In the past six years, however, its depredations have led to its rejection, and to resentment against the international community that installed it, and then refused to supervise it. From those feelings of rejection and anger have spread pools of collaboration with the Taliban as a default protest vote, or under pressure to survive.

In the meantime, in this period of transition from pariah to potential negotiating partner, have the Taliban changed their approach to the exercise of power? Not in the least. They still seek to gain social control via terror -- now by hanging bodies upside down to trees, and putting pieces of men like quarters of meat in gunny-sacks to horrify their neighbors, and by applauding the death of innocents. They still seek to impose a strict dress code, and the subjugation of women.

So what has changed in six years, except our failure to provide a palatable alternative to such a regime? Is this to be our response to that failure? "Oh, we weren't able to do any better for the Afghans than the Taliban, so we may as well bring them back in and get the place off our hands." What has changed in six years, except a sudden reorientation in Washington against Iran as the bugbear of the day? Does Washington now seek partnership with a kind of Sunni bloc to the east of Iran?

In a conversation on the PRT lately, the US State Department representative indicated that as far as he could tell, so long as al-Qaeda were not handed the reins of Afghanistan, Washington didn't really care who was in power.



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

The way these disturbing thoughts relate to Arghandab is as follows. The battle I've just described never had to happen. The likely consequences of Mullah Naqib's death were plain even to me, a non-Afghan, with only a middle schooler's grasp of the Pashtu language, and no spy network or access to classified reporting. I wrote about them to you just weeks ago. Surely these likely consequences were plain to Afghan leaders who have spent their whole lives bathing in the tortuous politics of the place. But, far from taking steps to prevent the Taliban attack, those leaders did exactly what would help bring it about. As I wrote above, it was almost as if they desired it to happen. If they did so desire, perhaps they, too, sought the battle for its psy-ops value -- aimed at the West. The message would be: 'You see, there's just no way to achieve a military victory over the Taliban. You don't have the forces or the political will. You will always be putting out fires, one hotter than the next. You should let us negotiate.' For their government to be talking this way adds mightily to the bewilderment of the Afghan people.

And yet, as if echoing this very message, in London last week, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown emerged from a meeting with President Karzai to tell the press that solutions in Afghanistan "are not simply dependent on security." They require "reconciliation of all the groups." In answer to a reporter's question, President Karzai alluded to "agreement on all fronts" with regard to "the need for political activity alongside our military campaign." Of course these statements were embedded in mellifluous words about all the progress being made in Afghanistan, and how terrorists will be implacably opposed, only nice Taliban, not linked to al-Qaeda, would be spoken to. Absent from these statements was the least recognition that the best antidote to the Taliban is proper conduct of government. Provided with accountable, responsive, respectful leadership, the Afghan people wouldn't give that lot a second glance.

Love to you all,

Sarah