

## **A journey into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan**

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"The Russians were stronger than the Americans, more fierce. We will put the Americans in their graves."

The highway that leads south out of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, passes through a craggy range of arid, sand-colored mountains with sharp, stony peaks. Poplar trees and green fields line the road. Nomadic Kuchi women draped in colorful scarves tend to camels as small boys herd sheep. The hillsides are dotted with cemeteries: rough-hewn tombstones tilting at haphazard angles, multicolored flags flying above them. There is nothing to indicate that the terrain we are about to enter is one of the world's deadliest war zones. On the outskirts of the capital we are stopped at a routine checkpoint manned by the Afghan National Army. The wary soldiers single me out, suspicious of my foreign accent. My companions, two Afghan men named Shafiq and Ibrahim, convince the soldiers that I am only a journalist. Ibrahim, a thin man with a wispy beard tapered beneath his chin, comes across like an Afghan version of Bob Marley, easygoing and quick to smile. He jokes with the soldiers in Dari, the Farsi dialect spoken throughout Afghanistan, assuring them that everything is OK.

As we drive away, Ibrahim laughs. The soldiers, he explains, thought I was a suicide bomber. Ibrahim did not bother to tell them that he and Shafiq are midlevel Taliban commanders, escorting me deep into Ghazni, a province largely controlled by the spreading insurgency that now dominates much of the country.

Until recently, Ghazni, like much of central Afghanistan, was considered reasonably safe. But now the province, located 100 miles south of the capital, has fallen to the Taliban. Foreigners who venture to Ghazni often wind up kidnapped or killed. In defiance of the central government, the Taliban governor in the province issues separate ID cards and passports for the Taliban regime, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Farmers increasingly turn to the Taliban, not the American-backed authorities, for adjudication of land disputes.

By the time we reach the town of Salar, only 50 miles south of Kabul, we have already passed five tractor-trailers from military convoys that have been destroyed by the Taliban. The highway, newly rebuilt courtesy of \$250 million, most of it from U.S. taxpayers, is pocked by immense craters, most of them caused by roadside bombs planted by Taliban fighters. As in Iraq, these improvised explosive devices are a key to the battle against the American invaders and their allies in the Afghan security forces, part of a haphazard but lethal campaign against coalition troops and the long, snaking convoys that provide logistical support.

We drive by a tractor-trailer still smoldering from an attack the day before, and the charred, skeletal remains of a truck from an attack a month earlier. At a gas station, a crowd of Afghans has gathered. Smoke rises from the road several hundred yards ahead.

"Jang," says Ibrahim, who is sitting in the front passenger seat next to Shafiq. "War. The Americans are fighting the Taliban."

Shafiq and Ibrahim use their cellphones to call their friends in the Taliban, hoping to find out what is going on. Suddenly, the chatter of machine-gun fire erupts, followed by the thud of mortar fire and several loud explosions that shake the car. I flinch and duck in the back seat, cursing as Shafiq and Ibrahim laugh at me.

"Tawakkal al Allah," Shafiq lectures me. "Depend on God."

This highway - the only one in all Afghanistan - was touted as a showpiece by the Bush administration after it was rebuilt. It provides the only viable route between the two main American bases, Bagram to the north and Kandahar to the south. Now coalition forces travel along it at their own risk. In June, the Taliban attacked a supply convoy of 54 trucks passing through Salar, destroying 51 of them and seizing three escort vehicles. In early September, not far from here, another convoy was attacked and 29 trucks were destroyed. On August 13th, a few days before I pass through Salar, the Taliban staged an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the U.S.-backed governor of Ghazni, wounding two of his guards.

As we wait at the gas station, Shafiq and Ibrahim display none of the noisy indignation that Americans would exhibit over a comparable traffic jam. To them, a military battle is a routine inconvenience, part of life on the road. Taking advantage of the break, they buy a syrupy, Taiwanese version of Red Bull called Energy at a small shop next door. At one point, two green armored personnel carriers from NATO zip by, racing toward Kabul. Shafiq and Ibrahim laugh: It looks like the coalition forces are fleeing the battle.

"Bulgarians," Shafiq says, shaking his head in amusement.

After an hour, the fighting ends, and we get back in the car. A few minutes later, we pass the broken remains of a British supply convoy. Dozens of trucks - some smoldering, others still ablaze - line the side of the road, which is strewn with huge chunks of blasted asphalt. The trucks carried drinks for the Americans, Ibrahim tells me as we drive past. Hundreds of plastic water bottles with white labels spill out of the trucks, littering the highway.

Farther down the road, American armored vehicles block our path. Smoke pours from the road behind them. Warned by other drivers that the Americans are shooting at approaching cars, Shafiq slowly maneuvers to the front of the line and stops. When the Americans finally move, we all follow cautiously, like a nervous herd. We drive by yet more burning trucks. Ibrahim points to three destroyed vehicles, the remains of an attack four days earlier.

A few miles later, at a lonely desert checkpoint manned by the Afghan army, several soldiers with AK-47s make small talk with Shafiq and Ibrahim, asking them about the battle before waving us through. As night falls, we pass a police station. We have reached Ghazni province.

"From now on, it's all Taliban territory," Ibrahim tells me. "The Americans and police don't come here at night."

Shafiq laughs. "The Russians were stronger than the Americans," he says. "More fierce. We will put the Americans in their graves."

It has been seven years since the United States invaded Afghanistan in the wake of September 11th. The military victory over the Taliban was swift, and the Bush administration soon turned its attention to rebuilding schools and roads and setting up a new government under President Hamid Karzai. By May 2003, only 18 months after the beginning of the war, Defense Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld all but declared victory in Afghanistan. "We are at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction," Rumsfeld announced during a visit to Kabul. The security situation in Afghanistan, in his view, was better than it had been for 25 years.

But even as Rumsfeld spoke, the Taliban were beginning their reconquest of Afghanistan. The Pentagon, already focused on invading Iraq, assumed that the Afghan militias it had bought with American money would be enough to secure the country. Instead, the militias proved far more interested in extorting bribes and seizing land than pursuing the hardened Taliban veterans who had taken refuge across the border in Pakistan. The parliamentary elections in 2005 returned power to the warlords who had terrorized the countryside before the Taliban imposed order. "The American intervention issued a blank check to these guys," says a senior aid official in Kabul. "They threw money, weapons, vehicles at them. But the warlords never abandoned their bad habits - they're abusing people and filling their pockets."

By contrast, aid for rebuilding schools and clinics has been paltry. In the critical first two years after the invasion, international assistance amounted to only \$57 per citizen - compared with \$679 in Bosnia. As U.S. contractors botched reconstruction jobs and fed corruption, little of the money intended to rebuild Afghanistan reached those in need. Even worse, the sudden infusion of international aid drove up real estate and food prices, increasing poverty and fueling widespread resentment.

The government of Pakistan, seeking to retain influence over what it views as its back yard, began helping the Taliban regroup. With the Bush administration focused on the war in Iraq, money poured into Afghanistan from Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists, who were eager to maintain a second front against the American invaders. The Taliban - once an isolated and impoverished group of religious students who knew little about the rest of the world and cared only about liberating their country from oppressive warlords - are now among the best-armed and most experienced insurgents in the world, linked to a global movement of jihadists that stretches from Pakistan and Iraq to Chechnya and the Philippines.

The numbers tell the story. Attacks on coalition and Afghan forces are up 44 percent since last year, the highest level since the war began. By October, 135 American troops had been killed in Afghanistan this year - already surpassing the total of 117 fatalities for all of 2007. The Taliban are also intensifying their attacks on aid workers: In a particularly brazen assault in August, a group of Taliban fighters opened fire on the car of a U.S. aid group, the International Rescue Committee, killing three Western women and their Afghan driver on the main road to Kabul.

The Bush administration, belatedly aware that it was losing Afghanistan, responded to the violence as it did in Iraq: by calling for more troops. Speaking at the National Defense University on September 9th, the president announced a "quiet surge" of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, saying additional forces are necessary to stabilize "Afghanistan's young democracy." But the very next day, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, offered a sharply different assessment. His prepared testimony, approved by the secretary of defense and the White House, read, "I am convinced we can win the war in Afghanistan." But when Mullen sat down before Congress, he deviated from his prepared statement. "I am not convinced we are winning it in Afghanistan," he testified bluntly.

In early October, the president's plan for a surge was once again contradicted by his top advisers. American intelligence agencies drafting a classified report on the war warned that Afghanistan is in a "downward spiral" fueled by worsening violence and rampant corruption. Defense Secretary

Robert Gates also admitted to Congress that the Pentagon is stretched so thin in Iraq, it will be unable to meet even a modest request for 10,000 more troops in Afghanistan until next spring at the earliest.

But those closest to the chaos in Afghanistan say that throwing more soldiers into combat won't help. "More troops are not the answer," a senior United Nations official in Kabul tells me. "You will not make more babies by having many guys screw the same woman."

It is a point echoed in dozens of off-the-record interviews I conducted in Kabul with leading Western diplomats, security experts, former mujahedeen and Taliban commanders, and senior officials with the U.N. and prominent aid organizations. All agree that the situation is, in the words of one official, "incredibly bleak." Using suicide bombers and other tactics imported from Iraq, the Taliban have cut Kabul off from the rest of the country and established themselves as the only law in many rural villages. "People don't want the Taliban back, but they're afraid to back the government," says one top diplomat. "They know the Taliban will ride into the village and behead anybody who has made a deal with the coalition."

According to the diplomat, military solutions are simply no longer viable. "The analysis of our intelligence people is that things are getting worse," he says. "CIA analysts are extremely gloomy and worried. You have an extremely weak president in Afghanistan, a corrupt and ineffective ministry of the interior, an army with no command or control, and a dysfunctional international alliance."

As one top official with a Western aid organization put it, "We're simply not up to the task of success in Afghanistan. I'm increasingly unsure about a way forward - except that we should start preparing our exit strategy."

To travel with the Taliban and see firsthand how they operate, I contacted a well-connected Afghan friend in Kabul and asked him to make the introductions. He knew many groups of fighters in Afghanistan, but said he would only trust my security if those I accompanied knew that they and their families would be killed if anything happened to me. Through a respected dignitary, I was connected with Mullah Ibrahim, who commands 500 men in the Dih Yak district of Ghazni. We met at my friend's office in Kabul on a hot, sunny afternoon. Midlevel Taliban leaders like Ibrahim move freely about the capital, like any other Afghan: U.S. forces lack the intelligence and manpower to identify enemy commanders, let alone apprehend them. (To protect Ibrahim's identity, I agreed to change his name.)

Now in his 40s, Ibrahim has been fighting with the Taliban since the 1990s. He walks with a pronounced limp: He lost his right leg below the knee in the country's civil war, and he had undergone surgery only the week before to repair nerve damage he suffered in a recent firefight. At first he told me his wounds were from an American bullet, but I later learned he had been injured in a clash with a rival Taliban commander.

After our meeting, Ibrahim promised to contact the Taliban minister of defense and request approval for my trip. As I waited for word, I went to a market in Kabul and bought several sets of salwar kameez, the traditional tunic and baggy pants worn by Afghan men. I had grown my beard longer to pass as an Afghan, and before leaving New York I had supplemented my Arabic and basic Farsi with a week of Berlitz classes in Pashtu, the language spoken by the ethnic group that dominates the Taliban. Pashtu is not exactly in high demand, and the book Berlitz gave me was clearly designed for military purposes. It contained a list of military ranks, including "General of the Air Force," and offered a helpful list of weapons, including "land mines" and "bullets." It also provided the Pashtu

translation for a host of important phrases: Show me your ID card. Let the vehicle pass. You are a prisoner. Hands up. Surrender. If I wanted to arrest an Afghan, I was now prepared. The book did not include the phrase I needed most: Ze talibano milmayam. "I am a guest of the Taliban."

On a Saturday afternoon, Ibrahim picks me up in a white Toyota Corolla, its dashboard covered in fake gray fur. His friend Shafiq is behind the wheel, wearing a cap embroidered with rhinestones. Afghan culture places a premium on courtesy, and Shafiq comes across as unfailingly polite. At one point, almost casually, he mentions that he has personally executed some 200 spies, usually by beheading them. "First I warn people to stop," he says, emphasizing his fair-mindedness. "If they continue, I kill them."

Shafiq, who fought the Soviets with the mujahedeen, now commands Taliban fighters in the Andar district of Ghazni. "Andar is a very bad place," an intelligence officer in Kabul tells me. "The Taliban show a lot of confidence and freedom of movement there." While coalition forces have focused on driving the insurgents from the south, they failed to maintain a buffer in central regions like Ghazni, where the Taliban now routinely pull people off buses and execute them. "They have that level of control right on Kabul's front door," the officer adds. "Environments regarded as extreme two years ago are much worse now. There has been a staggering intensification."

As we head south, Shafiq tells me that fighters from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have come through the Andar district. Most are suicide bombers, but some fight alongside the Taliban. He is impressed with their skill, but like many Taliban, he doesn't care for their politics. "Pakistan and Iran are not friends of Afghanistan," Shafiq says dismissively. "They don't want peace in Afghanistan - they want to take Afghanistan." Despite their extremely conservative views on religion, most Taliban are fundamentally nationalist and Afghan-centric. They accept the support of Al Qaeda, but that doesn't mean they approve of its tactics. "Suicide attacks are not good because they kill Muslims," Shafiq says.

In the darkness, we roll into the village of Nughi. We no longer have cellphone reception; the Taliban shut down the phone towers after sunset, when they stop for the night, to prevent U.S. surveillance from pinpointing their position. It is the holiday of Shaab eh Barat, when Muslims believe God determines a person's destiny for the coming year. Young boys from the village gather to swing balls of fire attached to wires. Like orange stars, hundreds of fiery circles glow far into the distance. The practice is haram - one of many traditions banned by the Taliban, who consider it forbidden under Islam. The fact that it is being tolerated is the first indication I have that the Taliban are not as doctrinaire as they were during their seven years of rule.

Shafiq maneuvers the car on the bumpy dirt road between mud houses. After a few stops in the village we are led to a house where a group of young Taliban fighters emerges. Several of them are carrying weapons. We greet the traditional way, each man placing his right hand on the other's heart, leaning in but not fully embracing, inquiring about the other's health and family. Ibrahim, who had promised to protect me on the trip, decides to go home, leaving Shafiq to guide me the rest of the way.

With the moon lighting our path, Shafiq and I follow the Taliban on foot to another house, entering through a low door into a guest room with a red carpet on the floor and wooden beams on the ceiling.

A dim bulb barely illuminates the room. A PKM belt-fed machine gun and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher lean against a wall, next to several rockets. We are joined by Mullah Yusuf, Ibrahim's nephew, who serves as a senior commander in Andar.

Yusuf has dark reddish skin and a handsome face. He wears a black turban with thin gold stripes and carries an AK-47. A boy brings a pitcher and basin and we rinse our hands. We drink green tea and eat a soup of mushy bread called shurwa with our hands, followed by meat and grapes.

Yusuf became a commander last year, when the Americans killed his superior officer. He sleeps in a different house every night to avoid detection. Only 30 years old, he has big ears and an almost elfin air; the ringtone on his cellphone is a bells-and-cymbals version of The Sorcerer's Apprentice theme. A year and a half ago, Yusuf was injured in his thigh by a U.S. helicopter strike, and now walks with a limp. He joined the Taliban in 2003 after studying at a religious school in North Waziristan, the border region of Pakistan where many Afghan refugees live. He seems less motivated by religious ideals than by defending his homeland: He took up jihad, he tells me, because foreigners have come to Afghanistan and are fighting Afghans and poor people.

"The Americans are not good," he says. "They go into houses and put people in jail. Fifteen days ago the Americans bombed here and killed a civilian."

The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan has not been helped by its rash of misguided bombings. This year, according to the United Nations, 1,445 Afghan civilians were killed by coalition forces through August - two-thirds of them in airstrikes. On July 6th, a bombing raid killed 47 members of a wedding party - including 39 women and children - near the village of Kacu. On August 22nd, more than 90 civilians - again mostly women and children - were killed in an airstrike in Azizabad.

Yusuf makes it clear that it is only the Americans he has a problem with. Once the foreigners leave, he insists, the Taliban will negotiate peace with the Afghan army and police: "They are brothers, Muslims." What's more, he says, girls will be allowed to go to school, and women will be allowed to work. It is a stance I will hear echoed by many Taliban leaders. In recent years, recognizing that their harsher strictures had alienated the population, the Taliban have grown more tolerant. To improve their operations, they have even been forced to adopt technologies they once banned: computers, television, films, the Internet.

After we finish eating, we walk to a mud shed. Shafiq opens its wooden doors to reveal another white Toyota Corolla. The men load the RPG launcher and four rockets into the car, along with the PKM machine gun. We drive through the moonlit desert on dirt paths to the village of Kharkhasha, where Shafiq lives. On the way, Shafiq pops in a cassette of Taliban chants. They are in Pashtu and without instrumentation, which is forbidden by the Taliban.

Arriving at Shafiq's house, we enter the guest room in darkness and sit on thin mattresses. A small gas lamp is brought out, as well as grapes and green tea. Shafiq says he fought the Soviets in the 1980s and spent five years in jail. But following the Soviet withdrawal, as the mujahedeen turned on one another, Shafiq felt they had become robbers. He joined the Taliban in 1994, he says, because they wanted peace and Islam.

Shafiq has met Osama bin Laden twice - once before the Taliban took over, and once during the Taliban reign. He was impressed by bin Laden's knowledge of Pashtu. He has also met Mullah Muhammed Omar, the one-eyed cleric who calls himself the "commander of the faithful." Omar, who served as leader of the Taliban government, is now in hiding across the border in Pakistan, where he rebuilt the Taliban with the help and protection of Pakistani intelligence. Shafiq hopes that Omar will return to lead the country, but other Taliban leaders no longer view him as the only option. The shift is significant - a sign that the Taliban are not fighting merely to restore the hard-line government they had before but are prepared to move forward with a greater degree of flexibility and pragmatism than they have shown in the past.

The next morning, we get back into the Corolla, loading the PKM, the RPG launcher and four rockets into the trunk. Shafiq and the machine gun are in the front passenger seat. Yusuf drives, his AK-47 beside him. Another Taliban fighter rides a Honda motorcycle alongside us, an AK-47 strapped to his shoulder. They have promised to take me to see the Taliban in action: going out on patrols, conducting attacks, adjudicating disputes and providing security against bandits and police. As we head deeper into the province, the land becomes increasingly flat and arid. Everything is the color of sand. Even the dilapidated mud homes, bleached almost white by the sun, look like sand castles after the first wave has hit them.

Yusuf points to a police checkpoint. The police know him, he says, but do nothing to stop him. "Every night I go on patrol, and they don't fight me," he says. "They don't have guns, and they are afraid."

The police, in fact, often defect to the Taliban. Shafiq recently bought two jeeps from the police, who later told the Interior Ministry that the vehicles were destroyed in an attack. "The police are highly corrupt," a senior U.N. official in Kabul tells me. "They are at the center of the collapse of the Karzai government - their corruption makes people support the Taliban." The cops have even taken to robbing U.S. contractors. "The police will raid foreign companies and just steal everything - iPods, money, weapons, radios," says an intelligence officer. "People might hate the Taliban, but they hate the government just as much. At least the Taliban have rules. This government, they're just parasites fucking with you."

In the village of Khodzai, we visit a commander at a mosque where eight men and two boys sit on the floor, drinking tea. When they aren't attacking checkpoints or ambushing convoys, the Taliban spend most of their time praying or listening to religious lectures. The men ambushed the Afghan army two days earlier in a nearby village, killing 20 Afghan soldiers. "The Americans do not come here," their commander says proudly. "We control this area. The Taliban is the government here."

Outside, in a sunny courtyard, the men get ready to go on patrol, checking their ammunition and slinging their AK-47s over their shoulders. Suddenly, a coalition military helicopter swoops low overhead, nearly coming to a hover above us. Throughout the war, the U.S. has compensated for its lack of troops by relying on aerial shows of force: It's possible to go for days in Ghazni without seeing a single coalition soldier. I clench my fists in terror, waiting for the helicopter to fire at us, but the men ignore it and laugh at me. One tells me he fired an RPG at a helicopter yesterday, and will fire a rocket at this one if it attacks us. My fear may be comic, but it's not misplaced: A month after I leave, an airstrike in Andar will kill seven suspected Taliban fighters.

To my relief, the helicopter flies off. The men leave on their motorcycles to patrol the countryside. As the Taliban have attempted to counter the Americans by adopting the tactics of Iraqi insurgents, they have become far more brutal than they were when they ruled Afghanistan. To sow insecurity, they routinely enter villages and bypass traditional tribal mechanisms, waging a harsh campaign of social terror.

"They're killing more and more tribal elders," one intelligence officer tells me. "We can't expect communities to show solidarity with the government when we can't provide for their security - it's ridiculous."

As we leave the mosque, Shafiq tells me of the trials that the Taliban frequently hold to prosecute collaborators. The suspects are given a hearing by a qazi, or judge, who orders those convicted to be beheaded. As he drives, Shafiq plays more Taliban songs about brave boys going to fight.

As the Taliban insurgency spreads, it has fallen victim to the tribal rivalries and violent infighting

that are endemic to Afghanistan, which is home to hundreds of distinct tribal groups. "The leadership is totally fragmented," a senior U.N. official says. "There is a lot of criminality within the Taliban." With the targeting of civilians now sanctioned by the Taliban, top commanders compete for prize catches, stopping cars in broad daylight and checking the cellphones of foreigners to determine if they are worthwhile captives. As we drive deeper into Ghazni, we are entering territory where such factionalization is now as lethal as the rocket launcher stuffed in the Corolla's trunk.

In the middle of a sandstorm, we head to a local shop, pulling up with the PKM in plain view and the Taliban chants blaring from the car's speakers. The people in the shop greet Yusuf warmly. He buys shoulder straps for AK-47s. Then, as we're passing through a nearby village, we are stopped by a bearded man on a motorcycle. An AK-47 is slung over his shoulder, his face partially concealed by a scarf.

He demands to know who I am. Shafiq tells him I am a guest. The man asks me if I am Pashtun. "Pukhtu Nayam," I say, drawing on my Berlitz lessons. "I am not Pashtun." He glares at me and rides off.

Arriving at another mosque, we find a dozen men inside. A large shoulder-fired missile is on the floor, an anti-armor weapon. Shafiq tells me we are waiting to meet the commander who will approve my trip.

This is news to me. I thought my trip had already been approved by the Taliban defense minister. Suddenly, as I am talking to one of the fighters, the angry man on the motorcycle bursts in holding a walkie-talkie. He barks at the fighter to stop talking to me until the men's commander shows up. A judge, he says, will decide what will happen to me. Upon hearing the Pashtu word qazi, I start to panic. As Shafiq made clear earlier, a meeting with a judge could end with decapitation.

I am ordered to get into a car with the angry man and the other strangers, who will take me to the judge. To my alarm, Shafiq says he will join Yusuf, who is praying in the mosque, and catch up with us later. He seems to be washing his hands of me.

I have been held by militias in both Iraq and Lebanon, but in those situations I could speak the language and talk my way out of trouble. Now I am in one of the most desolate places I have ever seen, far from any help and unable to speak more than a few garbled words of Pashtu. Trying to contain my mounting sense of helplessness, I tell Shafiq that I am not leaving him - I am his guest. Once I am out of his control, I will be at the mercy of men who kill almost as routinely as they pray. Brandishing their rifles, the men shout at me to get into their car.

Yusuf comes out and tells me to get into our Corolla. He won't leave me, he says. He puts another man with an AK-47 in the car to guard me. As I wait, a standoff ensues. Frantic, I send text messages to my contacts back in Kabul to tell them I'm in trouble. In the tense silence, my guard's cellphone abruptly goes off: The ringtone is machine-gun fire, accompanied by a song about the Taliban being born for martyrdom.

My mouth goes dry from fear; I feel as though I have lost my voice. My friend in Kabul who helped arrange the trip manages to get through to Shafiq. He tells him he should not leave me, that I am Shafiq's responsibility and he will hold him personally responsible if anything happens to me.

We sit in the car for more than an hour, windows up. The sandstorm is still raging, and it's impossible to see more than a few yards. Outside, men with guns flicker into view, only to vanish in the blinding haze. Finally, Shafiq tells me I can get out. The angry man and his companions depart,



taking the rocket launcher with them. Thinking it is over, I put my hand on my heart as they leave, to indicate no ill will. Then Shafiq tells me there has been a change of plan. He has been ordered to escort me to visit a rival commander - a man called Dr. Khalil - who will determine what will happen to me.

I later learn that I have been caught in the midst of the bitter and often violent infighting that divides the Taliban. Ibrahim's recent injury, it turns out, was the result of a clash between his forces and a group of foreign fighters under the command of Dr. Khalil. The foreigners wanted to close down a girls' school, sparking a battle. Two Arabs and 11 Pakistanis commanded by Dr. Khalil had been killed by Ibrahim's men.

As we leave to meet Dr. Khalil, the car jolts forward in the sandstorm, rocking back and forth on the stony path. I feel as though I am in a boat being tossed about by waves. Yusuf tells me not to worry - if Dr. Khalil tries to take me, he will fight them. It is the only reassurance I have. Throughout all our time in Ghazni, we have seen no authority other than the Taliban. Even if American helicopters were to appear suddenly, that would hardly be a relief - it would only be to target us in an airstrike.

I struggle to find a signal for my phone, cursing as the bars appear and disappear. I reach another of my contacts. "I spoke to Dr. Khalil," he says. "If they behave bad with you, don't worry - they just want to punish you." Shafiq also tells me not to worry - that he will die defending me if necessary. My only hope, I realize, is the Pashtun code of hospitality known as Pashtunwali - the same tradition that forbade the Taliban from handing over Osama bin Laden to the Bush administration after September 11th. Unfortunately, as young Taliban fighters have substituted their own authority for tribal customs, more and more insurgents now ignore the code. "All the old rules have broken down," an aid official who has spent two decades in Afghanistan tells me. The guarantees of safety that once protected civilians have been replaced by a new generation removed from traditional society - one for whom jihad is the only law.

Our car crawls through the empty desert. I can see nothing on the horizon. I ask Shafiq if Dr. Khalil is a good guy. "He's like you," Shafiq answers. "No Muslim is a bad man." His faith in the brotherhood of Islam does little to reassure me. "Don't worry," Shafiq says. "The Doctor has a gun, and I have a gun."

Ibrahim calls to say that he has reached a Taliban leader in Pakistan, as well as someone in the United Arab Emirates, and they have promised to call the Doctor and tell him not to harm me. "The Doctor will fight with me, not with you," says Shafiq, who seems to be warming to the idea of bloodshed. My contact in Kabul calls again. "They might slap you, but they won't kill you," he tells me. "It's just to punish you for coming without permission. They might keep you overnight as a guest. You are lucky you called me." Later, he tells me that the Doctor had assured him that he would not "do anything that isn't Sharia," or Islamic law. This was little consolation, even after the fact, since the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia includes beheading.

"I'm a martyr, I'm a star," the Taliban on the car's tape deck chants. "I will testify on behalf of my mother on Judgment Day. When I was small, my mother put me on her lap and spoke sweetly to me...."

We finally arrive at a mosque somewhere between the villages of Gabari and Sher Kala. The Doctor, I am told, is waiting for us inside. As I enter, I inadvertently step on a pair of Prada sunglasses - just as the Doctor walks into the room.

A burly man with light skin and a dark brown beard, the Doctor picks up the bent glasses and

examines them somberly. His hands are thick, enormous. He wears a white cap, with palm trees and suns embroidered in white thread. He straightens the glasses and puts them on - it turns out they're his. My heart sinks. Not the best beginning, perhaps.

After everyone prays, the Doctor orders the others to leave the room, except for Yusuf. His voice is low and gruff. We sit on the floor. "Deir Obekhi," I say, apologizing for entering his territory without permission. He accuses me of being a spy for the Afghan army. He asks how I got a visa to Afghanistan. I tell him I am here to write about the mujahedeen and tell their story. If I like them so much, he sneers, why don't I join them?

The Doctor asks about my contact. I say he fought with the mujahedeen from Jamiat-i Islami. The Doctor scoffs, saying the man never fought the Soviets. Then he gets to his feet and announces that he is going to make phone calls to Pakistan to investigate me. We will have to spend the night in the mosque, and he will come back for us in the morning. As I try to protest, he stalks out.

I sit glumly on the floor in the guest room. A few minutes later, Shafiq sticks his head in and says, "Yallah" - Arabic for "come on." I jump up, relieved to get out of there. The Talib fighters sitting with us insist that we drink the tea they have made. I hurriedly gulp it down and step out into the darkness, eager to get away from the mosque. But Shafiq has more bad news: We will have to return in the morning. My mind flashes to the videos I have seen on the Internet of victims being decapitated by jihadists in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We get in the car and Shafiq drives slowly, winding through nearly invisible paths, the moonlight obscured by dust. When we reach Shafiq's house, he carries a television into the guest room and turns on the generator. Reading the English titles on the program guide, he finds Al-Jazeera, the Arabic news channel. We watch coverage of the attacks we drove by the day before. Shafiq switches to an Afghan channel, and we watch an Indian soap opera dubbed in Dari. The women are dressed in revealing Western attire. I am amazed that Shafiq would watch something so anathema to the Taliban. It's OK, he tells me - "it's a drama about a family." Later he puts on a satellite channel devoted to Iranian-American pop music. We watch as a portly singer with stubble and long hair imitates bad Eighties rock, but in Farsi. The next video features an Iranian pop singer dressed in leather fringe and a tank top, like a cross between Davy Crockett and Richard Simmons. The Taliban commander watches, mesmerized.

In the morning, I awake to the drone of military planes overhead. Stepping outside, I see a convoy of American armored vehicles a mile away. I fight the urge to walk to them and beg for rescue. Even if they don't mistake me for Taliban and shoot me themselves, approaching them would doom everybody who had helped me.

I wait impatiently for the phone network to go back up. When it does, one of my contacts in Kabul tells me that he had spoken to senior Taliban officials who told the Doctor not to harm me, but the Doctor continued to insist that I am a spy. He thinks the Doctor is just trying to assert his independence and exchange me for a ransom. He tells me that Mullah Nasir, a one-armed Kandahari who serves as Taliban governor for Ghazni, is also trying to secure my release. I try to convince Shafiq to drive me to Ghazni's capital, but he says that if he doesn't return me to Dr. Khalil, the Doctor will arrest him.

In the end, I am saved by the same official who authorized my trip. According to my contact, the Taliban minister of defense called Dr. Khalil and ordered him to release me, warning the Doctor that "he would be fucked" if anything happens to me. My contact tells me I will be let go this afternoon but that once we are on the road we should take the batteries out of our phones, to prevent anyone

from tracking us. "This Doctor, he is a very nasty guy," he says. "He might send somebody to kidnap you on the way, and then I can do nothing for you."

As we wait for the Doctor to arrive, Shafiq has other problems to deal with. His nephew has been arrested by a Taliban patrol after being spotted walking with a girl. After Shafiq secures his release, other Talib fighters call to complain that they heard music coming from his house the night before. Exasperated, Shafiq protests that it was only Al-Jazeera. He doesn't mention the Iranian pop singer.

A few hours later, Dr. Khalil finally shows up. He examines my passport and leafs through my notebooks, asking me to show him the photos I took. "Zaibullah Mujahed said I should hit you," he says, referring to the chief Taliban spokesman. "But I will not." Rifling through my bags, he seems particularly fascinated by my toothbrush. Puzzled, he riffles the bristles with his finger, trying to deduce their purpose.

For a man who has spent much of the past 24 hours contemplating whether I was worth more to him dead or alive, the Doctor is now surprisingly friendly. "What can I do for you?" he asks, a model of courtesy. I cautiously ask him a few questions. The Doctor tells me he studied at an Islamic school in Pakistan before entering medical school in Afghanistan. He joined the Taliban early, eventually serving as a commander in a northern district. He says he is fighting to restore a government of Islamic law, but that Mullah Omar does not have to be the leader again. God willing, he adds, it will take no more than 30 years to rid Afghanistan of foreigners. Like the other Taliban leaders I've spoken with, he says he is prepared to allow women to attend school and to work.

We pile into the Corolla and drive off to meet Ibrahim, loading an RPG into the trunk just in case. Dr. Khalil gets behind the wheel, with Shafiq beside him holding the PKM. After an hour of driving, the car gets stuck, and we all collect rocks to put beneath the tires. As we drive through the Doctor's village, he points to its outer limits. "This is the border between the Taliban and the government," he says, stressing his control. He is now jocular and relaxed.

At the edge of town, close to the main road, the Doctor gets out of the car, followed by Shafiq, holding his PKM. The locals appear stunned. Everyone stops and stares, immobilized, their daily routine interrupted by the sudden appearance of two heavily armed Taliban commanders escorting a large foreign man in ill-fitting salwar kameez. The Doctor stops a pickup truck and orders the driver to take us to the bazaar. We part warmly.

Arriving at the bazaar in the back of the pickup truck, we find a tense and apologetic Ibrahim waiting for us. Like my contact, he was worried that the Doctor had set up an ambush for me on the road. "I should not have left you," Ibrahim says. "I was lazy. That was my mistake."

On the way back to Kabul, we dodge more craters in the highway. The military trucks I saw burning two days earlier are still smoldering by the road. Children play on the blackened vehicles, removing pieces for salvage. I tease Ibrahim that the Taliban have made our drive more difficult by destroying the highway. To my surprise, he agrees.

Back in Kabul, we all have lunch together at the office of my friend where I first met Ibrahim. My friend teases me for sending him so many text messages - more than a dozen - and reads some of them aloud. Everyone laughs, relieved that the ordeal is over. I look at Ibrahim, wondering if he would have taken me hostage himself under different circumstances. He again surprises me by expressing disapproval of the Taliban for harming civilians in what he views as a war for national liberation. There used to be rules. Now, for many Taliban, there is only killing. "They are not acting like Afghans," he says.

To return to Kabul from a feudal province like Ghazni is to experience a form of time travel. The city is thoroughly modern, for those who can afford it: five-star hotels, shiny new shopping malls and well-guarded restaurants where foreigners eat meals that cost as much as most Afghans make in a month, cooked with ingredients imported from abroad. If you can avoid falling into the sewage canals at every crosswalk, and evade the suicide bombers who occasionally rock the city, you can enjoy the safety of Afghanistan's version of the Green Zone.

But the barbarians are at the gate, and major attacks are getting closer and closer to the city each day. Upon my return to Kabul, I discover that the Taliban have fired rockets at the airport and at the NATO base; the United Nations has been on a four-day curfew; and President Karzai has canceled his public appearances. The city is being slowly but systematically severed from the rest of the country.

"The road from Kabul to Ghazni is gone," an intelligence officer tells me, "and most of the rest of the roads are going. The ambushes are routine now, which tells you that the Taliban have a routine capability." The Parwan province, which borders Kabul to the north, has also become dangerous. "All of a sudden we see IEDs on the main road in Parwan and attacks on police checkpoints," the intelligence officer says. "It's the last remaining key arterial route connecting Kabul to the rest of the country."

The Bush administration is placing its hopes on presidential elections in Afghanistan next year, but everyone I speak with in Kabul agrees that the elections will be a joke. "The Americans are gung-ho about elections," a longtime nongovernmental official tells me. "But it will only exacerbate ethnic tensions." In Pashtun areas controlled by the Taliban, registration would be virtually impossible, and voting would invoke a death sentence - effectively disenfranchising the country's dominant ethnic group. "You can't fix the insurgency with an election," a senior U.N. official tells me. "It's a socioeconomic phenomenon that goes well beyond the border of Afghanistan." Real elections would require the cooperation of the Taliban - and that, in turn, would require negotiations with the Taliban. The war, in effect, is already lost.

"This can't be solved other than by talking to the Taliban," says a top diplomat in Kabul. A leading aid official adds that it is important to understand the ideological goal of the Taliban: "They don't have an international-terrorist agenda - they have an Afghanistan agenda. We might not agree with their agenda for the country, but that's not our war." Former Taliban leaders agree that only talks will end the war. "If the U.S. deals with Pakistan and negotiates with higher-level Taliban," says one, "then it could reach a deal."

Negotiating with the Taliban would also enable the Americans to take advantage of the sharp divisions within the insurgency. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, has been openly criticized by a rival named Siirajudin Haqqani, who has called for Omar to be replaced. In provinces like Ghazni, the Taliban leadership is now divided between commanders loyal to Omar and men who follow Haqqani. A recent meeting between supporters of the two men in the Pakistani city of Peshawar reportedly descended into fighting when an Omar official threw his tea glass at a Haqqani man. The internal split provides an opening - if U.S. intelligence is smart enough to exploit it.

"The U.S. should try to weaken the Taliban," a former Taliban commander tells me. "They should make groups, divide and conquer. If someone wants to use the division between Haqqani and Omar, they can."

The Bush administration believes it can stop the Taliban by throwing money into clinics and schools. But even humanitarian officials scoff at the idea. "If you gave jobs to the Viet Cong, would they stop

fighting?" asks one. "Two years ago you could build a road or a bridge in a village and say, 'Please don't let the Taliban come in.' But now you've reached the stage where the hearts-and-minds business doesn't work."

Officials on the ground in Afghanistan say it is foolhardy to believe that the Americans can prevail where the Russians failed. At the height of the occupation, the Soviets had 120,000 of their own troops in Afghanistan, buttressed by roughly 300,000 Afghan troops. The Americans and their allies, by contrast, have 65,000 troops on the ground, backed up by only 137,000 Afghan security forces - and they face a Taliban who enjoy the support of a well-funded and highly organized network of Islamic extremists. "The end for the Americans will be just like for the Russians," says a former commander who served in the Taliban government. "The Americans will never succeed in containing the conflict. There will be more bleeding. It's coming to the same situation as it did for the communist forces, who found themselves confined to the provincial capitals."

Simply put, it is too late for Bush's "quiet surge" - or even for Barack Obama's plan for a more robust reinforcement - to work in Afghanistan. More soldiers on the ground will only lead to more contact with the enemy, and more air support for troops will only lead to more civilian casualties that will alienate even more Afghans. Sooner or later, the American government will be forced to the negotiating table, just as the Soviets were before them.

"The rise of the Taliban insurgency is not likely to be reversed," says Abdulkader Sinno, a Middle East scholar and the author of *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*. "It will only get stronger. Many local leaders who are sitting on the fence right now - or are even nominally allied with the government - are likely to shift their support to the Taliban in the coming years. What's more, the direct U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan is now likely to spill over into Pakistan. It may be tempting to attack the safe havens of the Taliban and Al Qaeda across the border, but that will only produce a worst-case scenario for the United States. Attacks by the U.S. would attract the support of hundreds of millions of Muslims in South Asia. It would also break up Pakistan, leading to a civil war, the collapse of its military and the possible unleashing of its nuclear arsenal."

In the same speech in which he promised a surge, Bush vowed that he would never allow the Taliban to return to power in Afghanistan. But they have already returned, and only negotiation with them can bring any hope of stability. Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan "are all theaters in the same overall struggle," the president declared, linking his administration's three greatest foreign-policy disasters in one broad vision. In the end, Bush said, we must have "faith in the power of freedom."

But the Taliban have their own faith, and so far, they are winning. On my last day in Kabul, a Western aid official reminds me of the words of a high-ranking Taliban leader, who recently explained why the United States will never prevail in Afghanistan.

"You Westerners have your watches," the leader observed. "But we Taliban have time."

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