

The Face of the Enemy

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KABUL, AFGHANISTAN—The vehicle braked to a halt outside an unmarked gate and the guards gestured at me to dismount. It had been a circuitous route through crowded Kabul streets, and we had changed vehicles twice. Although my escorts were from the elite Afghan National Directorate of Security (or secret service), the final mode of transport had been a battered, old Nissan minivan, which the NDS uses in order to remain discreet.

The reason for the cloak-and-dagger measures was because I had been granted access to their top security detention centre, which is reserved for Taliban terrorists. I had been authorized to interview a would-be suicide bomber the NDS had captured just prior to him detonating his explosive device.

After a series of thorough security checks, four NDS agents, my cameraman and myself proceeded through a metal door into the dank, damp concrete interior of the detention centre. Further down the dark corridors, cell doors were slammed shut with a metallic clang and orders were shouted for the prisoner to be brought to the interrogation room where we were waiting.

There was a small bench on one side of the four-meter by four-meter room; a single desk and two broken chairs completed the furniture. Some graffiti had been scratched on the walls in Dari and Pashtu, but the largest slogan, "In God We Trust," indicated that U.S. advisors are a key component of the new Afghan NDS.

Shuffling and shouts from the hallway heralded the arrival of the Taliban suicide bomber. However, when the door was thrust open and the prisoner stepped meekly into the room, the drama quickly dissipated. Instead of a fearsome maniacal, bearded Talib, I saw only a bleary-eyed and frightened 14-year-old boy.

NDS officials shouted at him to be seated; he winced at every command, as though he feared he would be beaten.

Once everyone was in place, I began the interview by asking the prisoner to identify himself. As my question was translated into Pashtu, it seemed that the only person who didn't respond was the prisoner himself. The NDS officials began shouting instructions at the petrified boy, who finally stammered out the fact that his name was Yasim Shakirullah. He was from the tiny village of Barwan, in the district of Jandullah, Waziristan, on the Pakistani side of the border.

The youngest of five siblings, Shakirullah acknowledged that he had a brother in Dubai, another in Karachi and a married sister. A third brother lived and worked in Jandullah. With

family members sending money home from abroad, Shakirullah said that his parents had been relatively well off in their village.

When he was 13, his parents had paid 100 rupees a month (\$2) to enrol him in the Jandullah madrassa. He was illiterate at the time, having only received some rudimentary home schooling from his father prior to attending the madrassa. In six months, Shakirullah had completed his study of the holy Koran.

Although there were 50 other young students at the madrassa, Principal Saleb and the only other instructor, Azizullah, advised Shakirullah that he had one more duty to fulfil before completing his studies.

“We had collected money and food from the villagers during our stay at the madrassa,” said Shakirullah, “but when I wanted to go home they explained to me that they had spent extra money on me and that it was not possible.”

In order for him to be reunited with his family, Saleb and Azizullah told their student he must cross the border with them into Afghanistan. “Azizullah came to my room every night preaching to me that Afghanistan was in the hands of the infidels and that they were hurting Muslim people,” said Shakirullah. “The only way for us to stop them was to wage jihad.”

At this point in the interview, Shakirullah admitted that prior to the incident he had never been outside of his village and, until his capture, he had never even seen a foreigner—even on television. “The Taliban mullahs ban us from watching such things,” he said.

When asked to point out his village on a map with reference to the Afghan border, Shakirullah tearfully admitted that he “had no knowledge of maps and such things.”

The bombing plot involved both of the boy’s instructors driving him by cattle truck to the border town of Miram Shah, where the group was met by an Afghan Taliban by the name of Dr. Sahizaman. Shakirullah admitted that he had never in his life been issued with either identification papers or travel documents, but that this did not pose any problem as the border along these tribal regions is completely open.

Dr. Sahizaman then drove Shakirullah to the Afghan town of Khost, where he was housed and given two days of rudimentary instruction on how to drive a car. Although he had originally been told his mission was to kill infidels, Dr. Sahizaman now advised Shakirullah that the target had been changed. They were now going to hit the Khost bazaar on New Year’s Eve, when it would be packed full of civilians celebrating. Shakirullah was to drive the bomb-laden car into the crowded market, at which point Dr. Sahizaman would remotely detonate the bomb.

When I asked for a description of how the plot was foiled, the NDS interpreter advised me that the details remained confidential as they could compromise future operations. Instead, I asked Shakirullah to explain his motivation for wanting not only to kill but also to forfeit his own young life in the process. He seemed not to understand my question, so I prodded him by asking him if it was martyrdom that he sought, or what exactly a 14-year-old boy envisioned as the promised paradise.

Once again he teared up and replied, “I only wanted to go home to see my family. Mullah Saleb promised me that if I performed this one task, I would be able to go and see my

mother again.”

I asked the interpreter if Shakirullah had indeed not understood what suicide meant. The interpreter whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “He is a very simple boy.”

When I asked him if he had any fear for what his future would hold, Shakirullah remained naively optimistic. “I only hope that I can see my family again soon.”

While it is unlikely that Shakirullah will be set free in the near future, last July Afghan President Hamid Karzai set an unusual precedent by granting a pardon to another 14-year-old would-be suicide bomber. At the time, Karzai’s decision was challenged by several of his own military commanders who felt such leniency would encourage other boy bombers to volunteer.

“President Karzai has opened a business for the Taliban,” General Said Mohammad Ghulbazai told journalists at the time. “They will send immature kids to carry out suicide attacks, and if they hit the target that’s fine. If they are capture, that’s fine too, as they will be freed.”

In the meantime, Yasim Shakirullah is escorted back to his tiny cell to await the phone call from a mother who still has no idea where her boy went last January.

Scott Taylor is the publisher of Esprit de Corps military magazine and author of several books. Since the 1990s, he has covered conflicts in Iraq and the Balkans. This was his third unembedded trip into Afghanistan.

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