

Military Resistance 13C3



AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

A Week On The Front Lines With The Afghan National Police:

**“It Was Seemingly Left To Qasim,
And To Him Alone, To Prevent A
Slide Into Anarchy”**

**“The District Governor Should Be
Doing This,” Qasim Told Me. “But
He’s Hiding”
“Beyond The Porch, As Far As The Eye
Could See, The Government Had No
Control”
[Long, But Worth It; Most Cautiously
Presented Truth Peeps Through]**



Maj. Mohammad Qasim, second from left, a district chief for the Afghan National Police, and the district governor, Mohammad Rahim Amin, center, were among the officials trying to settle a land dispute between two families. Credit Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

The United Nations interviewed 300 detainees held by the police over the course of the last two years, and roughly a third of them provided credible evidence that the police had tortured them, using electric shocks, asphyxiation and other methods to extract confessions.

MARCH 4, 2015 By AZAM AHMED, New York Times [Excerpts]

Early one cold January morning on the high plains of eastern Afghanistan, Maj. Mohammad Qasim and a few of his officers gathered in the rundown barracks that serve as a district headquarters for the Afghan National Police in Baraki Barak.

Qasim and his officers were the only government security available to the 100,000 people living in a district roughly twice the size of Manhattan, and about half of the district was now controlled by the Taliban.

Kabul is just 40 miles away, but the Afghan National Army had not been to Baraki Barak in two years. The ceiling in Qasim's office leaked when it rained, and the electricity was out indefinitely, so the men had taken to sitting on floor cushions around the wood stove in Qasim's bedroom, drinking green tea from smudged glass mugs and dealing with the problems of the day.

“Three Taliban Gunmen Had Fired Into His Car, Exploding A Propane Canister In The Trunk”

This morning, the first problem was the death of Hajji Khalil.

He had been one of the wealthiest men in Chiltan, a small village about eight miles from the district headquarters. He farmed apples and apricots, and he owned a grocery store hundreds of miles away in the Pakistani city of Quetta. He also ran a hawala, an informal money-transfer business, through which Afghan workers in Iran sent money home to their families.

Khalil was deeply troubled when, a little more than a year ago, he saw Taliban insurgents walking openly in Chiltan, pressing young men to join them and questioning anyone who seemed connected to the government.

His status earned him the respect of the Taliban — “hajji” is an honorific for Muslims who have completed the hajj; like many Afghans, he has only one name — but it also obliged him to respond to their harassment of his neighbors.

With Qasim's help, he organized about 50 of his neighbors, including two of his brothers, into a militia — one of a few dozen such groups, referred to as “uprisers,” who have joined the government in battling the Taliban.

Armed with secondhand rifles, the militia helped Qasim's men in a firefight in the next village over. After that, the Taliban knew they could no longer walk freely in Chiltan.

Now Khalil was dead, murdered a few days earlier on his way home from a meeting with Qasim right here at the district headquarters.

Three Taliban gunmen had fired into his car, exploding a propane canister in the trunk and incinerating the vehicle, along with Khalil and two passengers.

A third passenger who survived, and even managed to shoot and kill one of the fleeing insurgents, was now recovering at a hospital in Kabul.

But Qasim needed to compensate Khalil's family for his death, and quickly, before the remaining uprisers of Chiltan — farmers, shepherds and unemployed men, maybe 17 in all — decided that the fighting was no longer worth the effort.

One officer had drafted a diagram of the attack to attach to the death-payment requisition for the Interior Ministry, and Qasim, who is just over 50, squat and potbellied with an unruly beard, now peered down at it. "This is all wrong," he said, shaking his head. Landmarks were missing, distances miscalculated. The river went the wrong way.

The author of the map was unabashed: What did it matter? Who in Kabul would even know the difference?

In answer, Qasim put the drawing aside and, with a clean sheet of paper and a ruler, began drawing a new diagram. He drew a compass, then he sketched the roads, the footpaths, the farmland, the water and all the other landmarks. Eight minutes passed. Qasim placed the two maps side by side and looked at the officer.

"Your drawing is fine," he said. "But this map explains itself."

"The District Governor Should Be Doing This," Qasim Told Me. "But He's Hiding."

In a district shadowed by constant violence, it was seemingly left to Qasim, and to him alone, to prevent a slide into anarchy.

A week earlier, masked men dragged the district judge, Ghulam Hassan, from his car and pummeled him unconscious, leaving him on the side of a dirt road.

Now, as another officer who had just rushed into Qasim's bedroom was explaining, the judge had sent word from his hospital bed that he no longer felt safe working in Baraki Barak.

He wanted to move the courts to Pul-i-Alam, the provincial capital. Qasim saw where such a move would lead. No one would use the courts if they were in Pul-i-Alam, a half-hour drive by the safer of two roads. The prosecutor would leave next, forced to abandon the district, having nowhere to work. Then, with every other civil service absent, the district governor, who rarely spent time here anyway, would probably disappear. It would amount to a Taliban takeover.

A single beating could collapse what little civil society remained in the district.

Qasim picked up his cellphone, a punch-button Nokia relic, and began making calls to local politicians, arguing that they should use all their influence to prevent the judge from fleeing.

"The district governor should be doing this," Qasim told me. "But he's hiding."

As it happened, the governor's office was just on the other side of the compound. After a few calls, Qasim tore a scrap of paper from a notebook, scribbled on it and handed it to an officer.

I asked him what the scrap was for. He said it was an i.o.u.: \$3 for cellphone refill cards from the shopkeeper in the bazaar across the street. "We haven't been paid our salaries in two months," he said.

Armed with pledges of support from his political connections, Qasim decided to walk over to the governor's office. The governor, Mohammad Rahim Amin, rose to embrace Qasim, who in turn introduced me.

We sat near the window, in the sunlight that was the main source of heat in the office. Amin, a tall man with carefully combed hair, understood the situation. Qasim had brought a reporter; better behave. The chief made his pitch — “If we lose the courts, we lose the people,” he concluded — and Amin leaned back in his chair, a practiced look of concern spreading across his face. He looked at me, then looked at his cellphone, an iPhone 6, for several moments.

“We will keep the courts here,” he said finally. “If the judge refuses, he can quit. We'll find someone else who is willing to stay.”

What little government there was would remain, at least for a few more days.

The Afghan Police are on the front lines of both fights that matter in Afghanistan: one to defeat the Taliban, the other to gain the loyalty of the people.

To deliver services, there must be security; to deliver security, there must be services.

And in too much of Afghanistan today, there is neither. In Baraki Barak, 30 of Qasim's 200 officers were killed in the last year, representing one of the highest police death rates in all of Afghanistan.

Nationwide, of the 5,588 security personnel who died in 2014 — the deadliest year on record — 3,720 were police officers, double the number of soldiers killed on the job, according to an internal report that a Western official provided to me.

(He asked to remain anonymous because he did not want to publicly contradict the lower numbers published by the Afghan government.)

Civilian casualties, meanwhile, surpassed 10,000, the highest number since the United Nations began tracking them in 2009. No one expects 2015 to be any less violent.

Members of the Afghan National Police are largely illiterate, widely reputed to be on the take and in some cases actively working with the Taliban they are charged with defeating.

A nationwide drug screening in 2009 found that more than a fifth of the force tested positive for drug use, primarily hashish.

Physical abuse is commonplace: The United Nations interviewed 300 detainees held by the police over the course of the last two years, and roughly a third of them provided credible evidence that the police had tortured them, using electric shocks, asphyxiation and other methods to extract confessions.

In a country where police work and military work are nearly identical, some police officers have engaged in, as a 2013 State Department report put it, “arbitrary or unlawful killings.”

“The Victims Of The Killings Are Often Other Police Officers”

The victims of the killings are often other police officers.

In early February, two officers with unknown motives helped arrange a Taliban assault on a police checkpoint, leading to the deaths of 11 fellow officers. Last summer, one officer in southern Afghanistan knocked out five others with a sedative, then invited the Taliban into the police compound to execute them.

On the same day at another base, an officer let six Taliban assassins creep past the security perimeter and kill six of his comrades as they slept.

These betrayals are just one facet of the complex local power struggles that define postwar Afghanistan. The quiet release of insurgents is common, as are tacit cease-fires observed for the sake of the people.

The 157,000-man Afghan National Police operates in nearly every one of Afghanistan's 364 districts.

Recently it has been supplemented by the Afghan Local Police, a group of roughly 30,000 men who live and work in their own remote villages and try to keep the Taliban at bay; the local officers are paid less, enjoy an even worse reputation and die at higher rates than the national police.

Together, these two forces have been left to deliver whatever services the state has to offer. They battle the Taliban, but they also investigate robberies, issue identification cards, settle land disputes and manage traffic. Just resolving a simple domestic dispute can require driving roads seeded with bombs.

When I asked Brig. Gen. Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai, the Afghan National Police commander who oversees all of Logar, the province that is home to Baraki Barak, who his best police chief was, he told me without hesitation that it was Qasim. He was older; he understood the importance of connecting with the people; his sons worked with him in the district, where he grew up; and for a short time, he had even been a schoolteacher there. He was rooted in the community, Ishaqzai said. Qasim's most trusted deputy, a widely respected local police chief named Sabir Khan, was also one of his closest friends.

Being more approachable — driving soft-skin Ford Rangers, not wearing body armor, establishing checkpoints without heavy concrete barriers — means the Taliban can target the police with greater ease.

In the face of endless violence, the Taliban have not been killed off.

The nation is not pacified, the political future remains deeply uncertain and the death toll has never been higher.

When we returned from the governor's office, two of Hajji Khalil's brothers, Farhad and Abdul Wakil, were there to discuss the future of the Chiltan uprising. Farhad was an engineer; he graduated from college in Jalalabad and ran a construction company that

built roads, schools and clinics in Kabul and Pul-i-Alam. Abdul Wakil worked at Farhad's company. They were covered from head to toe in a layer of fine dust. Neither had done much construction since the uprising began, and now they were the movement's de facto leaders. Qasim offered them tea, and we all sat down on the cushions near the stove.

Farhad barely greeted Qasim. He hadn't slept in days and seemed to harbor little warmth for the police.

But he acknowledged that the Chiltan militia was in chaos.

Hajji Khalil had been a popular leader. When local families fell on tough times, he helped pay for their children's marriages. He bought lunch for the construction crews that turned up to build roads, at least before the Taliban put a stop to such development.

If a man like him could be killed in the middle of the day, less than a mile from Qasim's own headquarters, who was safe?

Without Khalil's leadership, the uprisers were no longer patrolling the roads. Some were even refusing to leave their homes.

Qasim was all they had now. They needed support, Farhad said to the chief.

They needed a plan, and they needed bullets.

"Don't worry," Qasim said, leaning forward, hands out, palms down. "We will be with you."

He knew that if the uprisers of Chiltan gave up, the repercussions would be felt all the way to Kabul. Hajji Khalil's work in Chiltan had interrupted an important Taliban smuggling route. Qasim promised the brothers that this effort would be recognized, that justice would be served.

An informer had named five young people from a village near the site of the ambush who acted as spies for the Taliban by providing Khalil's location that day.

Abdul Wakil, who had said almost nothing, now spoke: "Leave those men to us." He looked directly at Qasim.

"No," Qasim said. Vigilantism would not do. "We are collecting evidence, and once we have enough, we will arrest them."

There was a final bit of business. Farhad had heard a rumor: The Afghan National Army was returning at last to Baraki Barak.

As the Americans closed bases and international military support receded, the army had for two years been falling back, especially from rural areas — too many losses for too little gain.

“The Army Knew That This Was Tantamount To A Retreat, That The Territory Would Fall To The Taliban”

In some regions, the army knew that this was tantamount to a retreat, that the territory would fall to the Taliban. But what was the alternative?

For more than a year, Qasim had campaigned to get soldiers deployed to his district. For more than a year, he was ignored. But the death of Hajji Khalil might have finally rattled some of the decision makers in Kabul. If this was true, Farhad said, he wanted assurances that the army would not simply reoccupy its abandoned base and leave the men of Chiltan to fend for themselves. He need the soldiers. “They must set up a check post in Chiltan,” he said.

Qasim had heard the same rumors, but he could make no promises for the army.

He sent two officers to an ammunition locker, and they returned with five boxes of AK-47 ammunition and three rocket-propelled grenades, drawn from his own dwindling supply.

There would be more to come, he promised — more men, perhaps even a Humvee. Farhad said nothing. The brothers loaded the weapons into the back of their station wagon and left.

The next day, Qasim sent a young detective, Zulfaqar, fresh from the four-year police academy, to the village of Deh Sheikh.

His assignment was to track down one of the five young people Qasim suspected of acting as spies for the Taliban. We set out in a convoy of two Ford Rangers, along the same route Khalil had taken a few days before, and parked near the blackened tract of sand where he died. Three local police officers joined us for the remaining half-mile trek to the mud home where Syed Mahboob, 19, lived with his parents. Zulfaqar announced that we would enter the village with caution.

We set off on foot down a dirt path, racing through patches of slender trees, then crouching through the openings to stay out of sight. We crossed a river on a meager bridge of logs and branches, the officers’ assault rifles dangling over the water. The men appeared to know every field, every path and road, every irrigation canal.

The night before, in complete darkness, Qasim’s officers had taken me on a two-hour night patrol through Zaqumkhil, a village a few miles west of their headquarters. They navigated the trails without night vision or flashlights, walking in a single-file line through a depthless black into hostile areas where a few months earlier they had been in open firefights.

Now I followed Zulfaqar into the front yard of a mud house, the home of Syed Mahboob. No one was home, so we waited. After 10 minutes, an old man ambled into the compound.

“Where is Syed Mahboob?” Zulfaqar asked.

The man was his father. He said Mahboob was at college, in Pul-i-Alam.

Zulfaqar had more questions. What about the day Hajji Khalil was murdered? Where was he that day?

The old man wrinkled his face, shifted his weight between feet and took a guess. "He must have been at school then, too," he said.

Mahboob was little more than a name to the police, picked up from sources within the insurgency, all of whom had their own competing agendas. Zulfaqar couldn't say for sure that Mahboob was really a student, and he had no clear theory about why Mahboob might want to help the Taliban. The men called Qasim to ask if they should arrest the father. "No," he said. "He will bring his son to us."

We retraced our steps back to the trucks. It had been a fruitless trip, but Qasim radioed the officers with better news: A separate detachment of officers had arrested the other four suspects. Zulfaqar would interview them back at headquarters.

When we returned, the suspects were seated on a wooden bench outside. The youngest was 15, the oldest 23. Zulfaqar ushered them one by one into a closet-size office, into which he had somehow squeezed a filing cabinet, a small desk and three rusted chairs.

The first of the four, an 18-year-old with short black hair, recounted his activities on the day of Khalil's death while Zulfaqar scribbled notes onto a single sheet of white paper, repeating the words aloud as he wrote: I was at home when the shooting began at noon. I climbed onto the roof and saw black smoke curling into the sky. Later I left the house to get a snack from the store. Two local police officers were there.

They said this is the work of the people of Deh Sheikh. As he talked, the young suspect tucked his socked foot beneath his thigh.

It was the same with the next two suspects. No one admitted a thing.

Zulfaqar's technique appeared unpracticed. The police academy enrolls roughly 600 students a year; many seem to be accepted simply because they can read, placing them in the top tier of the Afghan National Police.

The police had very little in comparison, so they, too, learned from the coalition forces, instruction that prepared them better for firefights than for detective work.

For Zulfaqar, "What else?" was a favored demand, along with "Did anyone tell you who did it?" More than once he looked over at me, seated along the wall of his office, and asked whether I had any questions for the suspects. I said I didn't.

A knock on the door interrupted the third interview. The old man from Deh Sheikh entered with a red-faced teenager dressed in black. It was Syed Mahboob. Zulfaqar dismissed the suspect seated in his office and told Mahboob to sit.

He asked Mahboob for his national identification card, which the young man did not have. Well, what about a student ID? the detective asked. Mahboob did not have that either.

Zulfaqar slapped his desk. What kind of a person would come to the police station with no identification?

After a long pause, Zulfaqar moved on. Let's talk about Jan. 4: What time did you get out of bed? Whom did you speak to on the phone? Whom did you meet later in the day?

Mahboob looked up. "I was in Pul-i-Alam for an exam that day," he said. "I missed the entire incident. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you anything about it."

Zulfaqar glared at him.

"Give me your thumb," he said finally, pulling Mahboob to his desk to fingerprint his statement, convinced he was lying. "I know who you are, and you are not a student."

Watching Zulfaqar's bombast and the young man's befuddled reaction, it was difficult to believe that Mahboob had anything to do with the attack.

That night, Zulfaqar organized his evidence and stamped his statements. The next morning he would send all five suspects, including Mahboob, to Pul-i-Alam for processing.

Qasim preferred to focus on community problems. Amid all this activity, he had scheduled a large meeting immediately north of the district headquarters, in the Sang-i-Mamar Desert, to settle a land dispute. The police drove 30 of us — Qasim, the district governor, the plaintiffs, several other local officials and a delegate from the Ministry of Agriculture in Kabul — in a convoy to the disputed area, an undifferentiated dirt field near a dry concrete canal.

More than a dozen police officers arranged themselves on the banks of two hills facing north, establishing a security perimeter. The land, brown and wide open, stretched to a line of mountains on the horizon.

The argument was fundamental. "This is the land under my control," Syed, in a leather coat and white cap, said to the Kabul delegate. "No, it's not," said Shirin, who had crept up from behind to listen. The delegate from the Ministry of Agriculture, Syed Alam, silenced them.

"Don't use the word 'control,'" he said, unfurling a roll of maps stuffed into a tube. Control signified ownership, and ownership was the subject of the dispute. "Right now, we're trying to determine whom it belongs to."

Two aides to Alam held the edges of the maps open.

Each parcel of land was delineated with a tidy, hand-drawn stroke from the cartographer. The two landowners agreed about who owned all the parcels but one, a plot over a hill to the east. To orient themselves, the group decided to hike to the disputed parcel. Qasim, wearing his winter police uniform of gray fleece, scurried behind the taller members of the party.

The group climbed the hill to the east for a better view of the terrain. Bits of shale shifted beneath their feet as they scrambled up. Now the entire district lay before us, interlocking tracts of farmland, corrugated tin bazaars, mud homes and leafless forests.

“You two are brothers who are trying to play a trick on me,” Qasim said to them. He placed one arm around the shoulders of Shirin, another around the shoulders of Syed. “One of you says, ‘Oh, the land belongs to me.’ The other says, ‘No, it is mine.’ What you’re really trying to do is increase your holdings, knowing neither of you own this little piece of extra land. But I’m not that stupid. I called Kabul for help!”

Shirin and Syed laughed.

We continued our hike, sliding down the opposite side of the hill. Alam paused to review one of the maps. The edge of the disputed parcel was marked by a concrete chute built to funnel water from a natural spring. Nearby, four flags were buried in the ground, the graves of Taliban fighters killed by the police over the summer, Qasim said.

Alam produced a ledger with the names of the landowners. He slid his finger along the entries until he found the parcel. Mir, a forebear of Syed, owned the land, he announced. But he continued reading and discovered a footnote, stating that the family of Ghulam, the grandfather of Shirin, also held a claim on the land.

Alam sighed, handed the ledger to an aide and addressed the two men. There would be no resolution today. He warned the pair not to use or sell the land until the government made a decision. It would take up to a year to determine the true owner of the property. This appeared to be sufficient to hold the peace. “Eight years have passed since this dispute began,” Syed said. “I can wait another year.”

“Police Complain That The Army Sits In Large, Fortified Bases While The Police And The Uprisers Do All Of The Fighting And Dying”

The next morning, news came: The army had arrived. A small company of 40 soldiers from the Fourth Brigade of the 203rd Corps had assumed control of a base in Baraki Rajan, a cluster of villages just a short drive from Qasim’s headquarters. As soon as Qasim heard, he headed out to his Ford Ranger to make the trip over. Because he outranked the army captain, he could have insisted that the meeting happen at his headquarters, Qasim explained. This journey was a gesture of good will.

Fifteen minutes later, a guard directed us to a concrete building, where the soldiers were settling in. Captain Zabiullah, round-faced and stocky, greeted us warmly. He apologized for not visiting Qasim first. It was nothing, Qasim said, and shook his hand.

Like Qasim, Zabiullah had also decided to make his bedroom the center of activity. The two sat side by side on the captain’s ancient steel-spring cot, exchanging war stories. Qasim claimed to have once fired 36 mortars in less than 30 minutes. Zabiullah boasted that the Taliban could not fight his forces for 20 minutes.

“Would you believe I have not spent more than four days at my house in four months?” Qasim asked.

The captain laughed. It was clear that Qasim was working the young captain, angling. He needed the army to send troops when the police came under fire.

He also wanted help for the uprisers in Chiltan.

The Fourth Brigade was responsible for security in this province and another near Kabul, but it seemed picky about when and where it helped. The police complain, almost constantly, that the army — with its many airplanes, helicopters and sophisticated armored vehicles — sits in large, fortified bases while the police and the uprisers do all of the fighting and dying.

(It didn't help that a relatively inexperienced police officer earned \$210 a week, while an equivalent soldier earns up to \$280.)

The uprisers wanted the soldiers' help building fortifications and also some heavier weapons, maybe some .50-caliber mounted guns or even an armored vehicle. Qasim wanted to deliver them, but he needed a better approach. Once again deploying flattery, he told the captain that his officers would be very happy to help the soldiers with anything they needed.

"Listen, one of your men is worth 10 of our people, because you are the ones being targeted," Zabiullah said.

Qasim bowed his head an inch or two, accepting the counter-compliment. He then tried a more direct approach: Was it true what he had heard?

Were the army special forces coming here specifically to aid the uprisers in Chiltan? It was unclear to me whether Qasim had actually heard this or was simply improvising.

Zabiullah said nothing.

"The morale there is very low," Qasim said. "We are going there now to check on them."

This was an invitation for the captain to join him. The entreaty sat between the men for a full 30 seconds, understood yet unexpressed.

"Any time you need, call me," the captain finally said. "We will be there in minutes."

Qasim gave the captain a hug before departing for Chiltan, alone.

The following evening, Qasim made good on his promise to take more men and a Humvee to the uprisers — but they were police officers, not soldiers, and it was a police Humvee.

On the edge of the Chiltan bazaar, Farhad waved our convoy past, his machine gun slung over his right shoulder. The corrugated gates of a compound swung open, and the convoy sped through. Here was the home of Hajji Khalil, painted foam green, with yellow windowsills.

“Beyond The Porch, As Far As The Eye Could See, The Government Had No Control”

To its west and south was open land that ran into Taliban country. It was the literal front line in the district: Beyond the porch, as far as the eye could see, the government had no control.

A crowd was gathered by the home's entrance, an assembly of men and boys in various states of disarray. Some wore uniforms, but others did not. They clutched their ancient assault rifles like crutches. A few of them smoked hashish on the raised porch, their faces little more than red eyes and yellowed teeth.

This was the uprising in Chiltan.

Ainuddin, a 17-year-old rookie we met five days earlier, was among the police officers selected to join the uprisers. As first jobs go, his had to rank among the worst.

He smiled at me, ignoring the hash scent wafting through the air, and entered the house before I could ask him what he thought of the assignment. An upriser, wearing soiled tan pants pulled up to his chest, followed us as we conducted interviews, asking questions of his own with a cigarette pursed between his lips. Where were we from? Whom did we work for? Why were we there? We ignored him.

The vibe was not hostile, but neither was it welcoming. Our comfort was beside the point, though. Qasim and the others used the uprisers because they would fight the Taliban, adopting the same stance the Americans did when they ran the war.

The green Humvee sat near the gate, a symbol of Qasim's good will. It would probably never amount to more than that. The vehicles require so much fuel and so much maintenance that entire Afghan army battalions struggle to keep them on the road.

The uprisers, who slept in a secondhand tent on their mountain outpost and borrowed bullets from Qasim, would be fortunate to get more than a week of use out of theirs.

Farhad received the gift without a word.

The sun receded farther behind the mountains, etching them in pink. It would be dark soon. Qasim shook hands with a few of the uprisers and gave Farhad an unreciprocated hug. His men were eager to leave. The older men among the uprisers followed the police out, waving goodbye in a cloud of dust kicked up by the departing trucks.

Policing in Afghanistan is unpredictable.

In Pul-i-Alam, Syed Mahboob was arrested, questioned, then released by the same provincial police commander, Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai, who first recommended our trip to Baraki Barak. Ishaqzai explained the problem to me as I sat on a sagging, overstuffed sofa in his large fluorescent-lit office at his provincial headquarters. There simply was not enough evidence against Mahboob to file charges, so they had to let him go.

Qasim Arrested

A month after our last visit to Ishaqzai's office, Taliban suicide bombers stormed the compound. Ishaqzai was away, but the attack killed more than 20 of his men, many of whom were eating lunch in the cafeteria, the most devastating single assault on the police in more than a year.

Soon afterward, Qasim stopped answering his phone. I called Ishaqzai. What happened? He said officials from the Interior Ministry in Kabul had arrested Qasim. They suspected that he was involved in the assault.

The ministry, Ishaqzai explained, had accused three of Qasim's closest lieutenants of using Qasim's car to drive the suicide attackers through the initial police checkpoints around the compound. In another startling development, Farhad had also accused Qasim of colluding in the assassination of his brother.

A group of officers from Kabul and Pul-i-Alam arrested Qasim and the three lieutenants in Baraki Barak on Feb. 23, the day Qasim stopped answering my calls.

He was in Pul-i-Alam now, under the supervision of the police and the National Directorate of Security.

The prosecutor had not filed charges, but Ishaqzai told me that in Qasim's bedroom, the police had found a kind of wiring that was often used to make improvised explosive devices and a tracking device used by insurgents that tells them when a car is approaching.

The thought that Qasim could be guilty of these crimes was jarring, to say the least.

And yet truth in Afghanistan, where allegiances shift on a daily basis, is never easy to pin down.

Could Qasim have helped killed Khalil? Could he have facilitated the murder of more than 20 of his fellow officers in Pul-i-Alam?

Just as his true motivations were unknowable, so, too, were the motivations of those who accused him.

Arrests for political reasons occurred all the time. The police and the intelligence service were interrogating him now, and they could just as easily release him as charge him with murder.

As Mahboob's father told me, the police had also arrested Mahboob again, just 10 days after they released him, and on the same charges.

Ishaqzai said he couldn't tell me much else. He wasn't in charge of the investigation, but he doubted that Qasim was involved in Khalil's death.

He was less certain about whether Qasim could have helped the insurgents attack the Pul-i-Alam headquarters.

Such things happen, Ishaqzai said. He had known Qasim well, considered him his finest police chief. But, he reminded me, "people can change their minds in minutes." Ishaqzai had already replaced Qasim with a younger chief from a neighboring district, he told me before we hung up.

I wanted to hear someone defend Qasim, or reflect the camaraderie and loyalty I thought I saw when I was there. I called Sabir Khan, his good friend and deputy, his most esteemed colleague. Khan told me that the men in Baraki Barak didn't know how to feel.

Even he wondered whether Qasim was involved in the Pul-i-Alam attack. You never know, he said.

"I cannot trust him now."

YOUR INVITATION:

Comments, arguments, articles, and letters from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or email contact@militaryproject.org: Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Same address to unsubscribe.

DANGER: CAPITALISTS AT WORK

Who Loves Obamacare?

"The Top Brass From The 1,300 Or So Private Health Insurers Who Are Raking In Enormous Profits"

"Few If Any Restrictions On Ever-Escalating Prices"

“The ACA Still Primarily Serves As A Huge Government Marketing Campaign For Private Insurance Companies”

March 5, 2015 by Carl Finamore, Socialist Worker [Excerpts]

It's hard to believe it's been five years since Congress passed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) on March 23, 2010. The bloviating, vein-popping right wing still goes ballistic at the mere mention of the word Obamacare.

Still, putting aside their senseless distortions and diatribes, not too many of us have cause for celebration except perhaps the top brass from the 1,300 or so private health insurers who are raking in enormous profits--health care stocks soared by almost 40 percent in 2013, the highest of any sector in the S&P 500.

Nonetheless, as a reminder, the controversial law does contain some important positives for regular folks. For example, it guarantees coverage for everyone without tacking on higher premiums because of pre-existing medical conditions and it requires annual free preventive-care health checks for those on Medicare.

But five years in, as critics continue to emphasize, the ACA still primarily serves as a huge government marketing campaign for private insurance companies, funneling millions of new customers with few if any restrictions on ever-escalating prices.

"The ACA built upon the flaws of our market-based system and, quite predictably, is failing to contain costs and provide broad access to affordable, quality health care. Corporate interests still trump the common good in U.S. health care," wrote John P. Geyman in a five-year ACA assessment appearing in the February 10 International Journal of Health Services.

Dr. Geyman is not alone. Other very prominent scholars and caregivers agree that ACA's reliance on private insurers is its downfall.

For example, the developer of the cardiac defibrillator, Dr. Bernard Lown, completely dismisses their role in providing quality care for the simple fact that "like all businesses, their goal is to make money."

In essence, we still only get the care we can afford depending on which of the thousands of plans we subscribe.

Ability to pay is still the big problem.

As a result, medical bills remain the number one reason for personal bankruptcy even though most of the petitioners have health insurance.

For the rest of us, it's not much better.

Shockingly, roughly 40 percent of Americans have trouble paying medical bills, as noted in an extremely detailed 2011 National Scorecard on U.S. Health System Performance commissioned by the Commonwealth Fund.

And, though many have found policies with affordable premiums, the report also indicated that adults are likelier than those in other developed countries to forgo care because of cost.

The statistics are alarming.

In the past five years, according to a thorough 2015 Bloomberg View review], the average price to see a primary care doctor has risen 20 percent.

For a specialist, it's gone up 29 percent and for outpatient surgery it's up 43 percent.

“22 Percent Of People Now Say The Cost Of Getting Care Has Led Them To Delay Treatment For A Serious Condition”

No wonder, the article explains, 22 percent of people now say the cost of getting care has led them to delay treatment for a serious condition.

That's the highest percentage since Gallup started asking in 2001.

Another poll cited found as many as 16 million adults with chronic conditions have avoided the doctor because of out-of-pocket costs.

Single Payer Now organizer Don Bechler in San Francisco explained to me that the multiplicity and complexity of insurance plans are largely designed as "marketing lures to hook more customers." Plans are tweaked, individualized and adjusted for the particular amount of up-front money each business is willing to put up for employees.

Thus, Bechler said, to seal the deal and keep premiums coming in, insurers set up a multitude of corporate plans that impose a wide variety of burdens on employees for premium-cost sharing, co-payments and deductibles.

Figuring out the billing for each patient, for each physician and for each care facility among the tremendous diversity of plans, Bechler added, "becomes a nightmare fraught with delays and confusion."

This was confirmed by a recent study of private insurance Medicare Advantage programs that discovered patients were overcharged around half the time.

So, it's clear, the bloated bureaucracy that is crippling our health care resides in the private sector, not in government.

In addition, the complexity of plans, each with its own marketing, paperwork, enrollment, premiums, rules and regulations, also contributes to an enormous administrative cost overhead.

I spoke about this with James G. Kahn, M.D., MPH, who is a researcher at the Philip R. Lee Institute of Health Policy Studies at the University of California, San Francisco, and senior author of a recent study analyzing grotesquely excessive administrative costs of insurance companies and how it diverts several hundred billions of dollars annually from actual hands-on medical treatment.

What appears as wasteful to the normal person, such as the enormous resources devoted to complicated billing and other insurance related activities (BIR), as documented by Dr. Kahn, is considered as income and revenue by insurance companies because they charge for these excesses.

Thus, extravagant squandering of funds and resources is endemic to the business model of insurance companies and precisely because it adds to their bottom line, there is no incentive to eliminate the bureaucratic discombobulation.

Health care economics scholar Uwe Reinhardt expressed his exasperation even before the ACA in his November 19, 2008, testimony to U.S. Senate Finance Committee: "900 billing clerks at Duke with 900 beds. Not sure we have a nurse for each hospital bed but we have a billing clerk. It's obscene."

This chronic problem has grown with the ACA.

Dr. Kahn tells me that his study measured billing and other insurance-related over-costs at an astounding \$375 billion annually.

A national health system that would offer the same comprehensive care for everyone without fracturing care into thousands of different plans "would save us billions," he says.

He points to Australia and Canada, where government medical insurance administrative fees are lower than 3 percent, similar to our Medicare.

Kahn also indicated in our interview that these lower costs are sharply contrasted to the 33 percent administrative toll for care funded through U.S. for-profit insurers--all of which we pay.

These figures are truly stark.

"It makes no sense," Kahn said, "to unnecessarily spend what amounts to \$1,200 extra each year for every man, woman and child in the U.S. just to push papers around" as part of the billing and extraneous marketing functions of insurance companies.


We have to return to a "focus on quality clinical care where the patient and health provider themselves consult directly about the best care available," Kahn emphasized, without jumping through hoops of complex and cumbersome financial restraints encoded in each policy.

Activists like Bechler hope that experience with the ACA will awaken more to support HR 676, the Expanded and Improved Medicare for All Act, which provides Medicare for All or Single Payer as supported by Dr. Kahn and Dr. Geyman.

Realistically, however, he says that the daunting economic and political power of insurance companies means we have a lot of grassroots organizing to do.

We must first recognize fatal flaws in the ACA and then act to get something better, Bechler suggests, by signing up for activities through Single Payer Now in California or Health Care Now nationally.

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OCCUPATION PALESTINE

Occupation Forces Attack Unarmed Palestinian Fishermen, As Usual

03/04/2015 Ma'an

GAZA CITY -- Israeli naval boats on Monday opened fire at fishermen off the coast of northern Gaza, residents said.

The incident occurred near the neighborhood of al-Sudaniyya, with the fishermen returning to shore for fear of arrest or having their vessels confiscated.

An Israeli army spokeswoman said she was looking into the incident.

On Sunday, residents said Israeli boats opened fire at fishermen in the early morning. No injuries were reported.

There are around 4,000 Palestinian fishermen in the coastal enclave, 90 percent of whom are poor according to a 2011 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Aug. 26 ceasefire agreement between Israel and Palestinian militant groups stipulated that Israel would immediately expand the fishing zone off Gaza's coast, allowing fishermen to sail as far as six nautical miles from shore, and would continue to expand the area gradually.

Since then, there have been widespread reports that Israeli forces have at times opened fire at fishermen within those new limits, and the zone has not been expanded.

Zionists Attack Elderly Palestinian Man Leaving Prayers: Another Mob Hits A Farmer And His Children While Working On Their Land

March 08, 2015 by IMEMC & Agencies

Palestinian medical sources have reported that an elderly man was injured, on Saturday evening, after a number of Israeli extremists assaulted him as he was leaving the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in occupied Jerusalem.

The sources said the man, Ahmad Mahmoud al-Qaq, 64 years of age, suffered various cuts and bruises, including under his right eye.

Eyewitnesses said the man was leaving the mosque after performing evening prayers when a number of Israeli extremists approached him, and started beating him, before local worshipers saw the attack and intervened.

In related news, a number of Israelis from the illegal colony of Beit Eyin, built on Palestinian lands near Beit Ummar, north of the southern West Bank city of

Hebron, attacked on Saturday afternoon, a farmer and his children while working on their land.

Mohammad Abdul-Hamid Sleibi and his children were in their own land, near the illegal colony, in the Abu ar-Reesh area.

Mohammad 'Ayyad 'Awad, spokesperson of the Popular Committee against the Wall and Settlements in Beit Ummar, said five masked settlers hurled stones, using slings, at the farmer and his family, forcing them out of their land.

'Awad said Sleibi recently managed to obtain an Israeli court ruling allowing him to build a wall around his land due to ongoing attacks.

Brave Occupation Troops Attack Palestinian International Women's Day March: “Soldiers Fired Tear-Gas Canisters, Stun Grenades, Rubber-Coated Bullets, And Pepper Spray”



Israeli border police officers use pepper spray to attack a rally by Palestinians International Woman's Day, at Qalandiya checkpoint near the West Bank city of Ramallah March 7, 2015. (REUTERS/Mohamad Torokman)

03/07/2015 Ma'an

RAMALLAH – More than 30 Palestinians, mostly women, were injured as Israeli troops forcibly dispersed a peaceful march marking International Women's Day at Qalandiya checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah on Friday.

Israeli soldiers fired tear-gas canisters, stun grenades, rubber-coated bullets, and pepper spray at hundreds of women to prevent them from reaching the checkpoint. Fourteen of the 30 injured were evacuated to hospitals.

The rally began at Qalandiya refugee camp and marched toward the nearby checkpoint. Witnesses say more than 1,000 women joined the rally along with Palestinian political leaders.

When the rally neared the checkpoint, Israeli soldiers barricaded themselves behind the steel gates and attacked female participants in the face with pepper spray as they approached.

As defiant women refused to move back, Israeli soldiers showered them with tear gas and stun grenades, forcing them to move.

A Ma'an reporter present at the event explained that altercations broke between Israeli soldiers and journalists after the soldiers "deliberately" fired tear gas at the journalists.

A heavy traffic jam then ensued on the main road in both directions causing bottleneck backups near Qalandiya checkpoint, where vehicles travel between Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Hebron.

Palestinian lawmaker representing the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Khalida Jarrar said the rally was a message from Palestinian women confirming that they would continue to struggle against Israeli occupation until Palestinians achieve freedom and independence.

Palestinian women "have always been a major component of the struggle against Israeli occupation and won't give up this national duty," she added.

Similarly, secretary-general of the Palestinian Democratic Union Zahira Kamal said Palestinian women hope to send the message that they reject and would continue to resist Israeli occupation, emphasizing that Palestinian women "urge the Palestinian leadership not to resume negotiations with Israel."

Palestinian law should be in agreement with international women rights conventions, particularly the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Palestine became a signatory to CEDAW on April 2, 2014 as the PLO continued efforts to join several international conventions and treaties.

President Mahmoud Abbas signed letters to join nearly 20 international treaties in December 2014 -- including the Rome Statute that guarantees accession to the International Criminal Court -- after the UN Security Council rejected a resolution supporting an end to the Israeli occupation.

To check out what life is like under a murderous military occupation commanded by foreign terrorists, go to:

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/Default.aspx> and

<http://www.palestinemonitor.org/list.php?id=ej898ra7yff0ukmf16>

The occupied nation is Palestine. The foreign terrorists call themselves "Israeli."

DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK



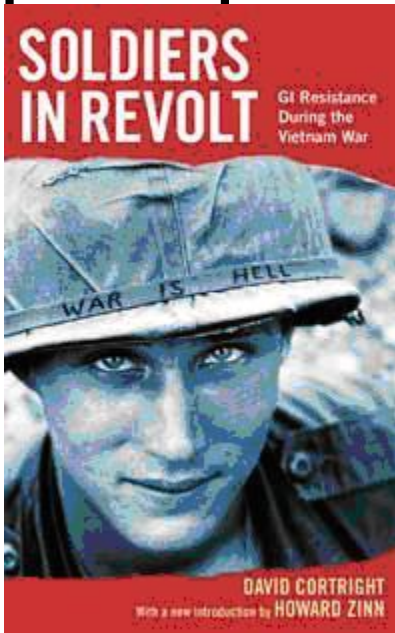
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