

Incident on the Termez Road

If a herdsman standing on a desert rise within view of the ancient city of Balkh had looked east across the dry vastness that morning, he might have made out a Russian-built truck pelting north along the road from Mazar-i-sharif to Termez.

If he had been closer, he would have heard the whine of an engine pushed to its limit, and seen that the men sitting four across in the cab, the driver and three others, were bearded and dressed in dark business suits. He probably could not have seen that the man at the passenger window was shouting into a field radio.

The herdsman would not have known that these were Iranian diplomats, carrying sensitive state documents, who were fleeing for their lives with 60 kilometers still to go to Termez, the Amur Darya river crossing, and safety in Uzbekistan. Or that when they fled Mazar to radio for help and spirit away the documents, they left seven diplomatic colleagues barricaded in the basement of a burning consulate building that was taking direct mortar hits from Taleban gunners.

In a short time, though, if the wind had been right, the herdsman would have heard the exhaust blast of a helicopter and the thwock-thwock of its rotor blades as it appeared to the west and dropped down to fly low over the same road along which the truck had passed. A few minutes later, gazing at the now-empty road, he would have guessed that the echoing rattle he heard in the distance was machine-gun fire from the helicopter.

And then, as one who had seen helicopters and heard their gunfire almost every week for ten years, he would have lost interest.

“Forty kilometers,” the driver called out over the noise of the engine. “Half an hour, inshallah!”

He had his eyes glued to the road. The two men next to him on the bench seat braced themselves against the instrument panel and muttered prayers as the truck lurched around a curve. Their colleague at the window pushed against the panel with his knees as he cupped his hands around the mouthpiece of their radio.

“Mashad, Mashad, do you read me?” he shouted.

“Mashad. All stations! Help. Help! Send choppers to Mazar. Choppers to Mazar! Consulate under attack!”

As he repeated this message, he and the driver saw chunks of asphalt and earth spurt up from the pavement ahead. Then the roar of another engine joined the sound of their own, and they knew they would never reach Termez.

“Allah is great,” the driver shouted as he held the gas pedal to the floor and pulled the wheel to the right. Tires squealing, the truck pitched violently as he pulled back to the left and again to the right.

The pilot of the reconnaissance helicopter had taken the craft up at short notice several times since the Taleban had captured it, and he expected no surprises in carrying out this mission. The terrain was flat, there would be little maneuvering, and the target, dead ahead of them now at a kilometer, was unarmed.

Holding course on a line to the left of the road to give them a firing angle, he took the craft down to 50 meters and nodded to the gunner. As the muzzle of the heavy machine gun winked, the chopper vibrated heavily for several seconds, and they saw impact on the roadbed ahead of the truck.

The pilot held steady on course. The truck was weaving now, and the gunner shouted happily at the challenge. A hundred fifty meters and closing. Details appeared: the roof tarpaulin flapping, the rear tires bouncing, pigeon-toed, across the pavement, the license plate. How many Sons of Ali were in there?

The gunner fired again, almost point-blank, this time with a long burst that sawed sidewise and then vertically along the chassis. They passed the target too fast for the pilot to check the result of their work. He banked right to see

the truck, or two thirds of it, tumble front end first into a ditch alongside the road. Most of the rest of the vehicle sat in a smoking pile in the middle of the pavement.

“Praise Allah!” bellowed the gunner. He waved his helmet as the ends of his beard blew across his face.

Halfway through their turn over the wreck, they spotted a figure clambering out of the ditch. A man in a suit hobbled into the clear and dug into his pocket to hold a white handkerchief in the air. He spread his arms.

The gunner let off a burst in his direction, but they were too far around in their turn. Circling again, they saw the man moving in a one-legged gait toward a gully fringed by bushes.

“Bastard son of Ali,” cried the pilot as the man fell and was up again.

Their approach was slower this time. Rocks and soil flew as the machine gun stitched a crisscross pattern.

And then the man simply blew apart. His white handkerchief skipped off in the breeze, and then soared up in the chopper’s propwash.

The pilot set a Mazar-i-sharif heading and spoke into the radio.

“By Allah’s grace, mission complete. Fuel low and returning. Repeat, fuel low. Do you read?”

A reply crackled back from Mazar.

“Yes,” said the pilot. “Confirmed. Tell Nasrullah all dead.”

He listened and nodded.

“All. Send tow vehicle and flatbed for cleanup. Do you read? Please repeat and confirm.”

At the open port, the gunner straddled his weapon and leaned back to take the sun, his legs dangling in the wind.

The confirmation message came back.

“Over and out,” said the pilot.

He took the chopper up at an easy gradient, turning a few degrees west for a better view of the fortress remains and the plain around Balkh. At university he had read poems saying that a century and a half ago, a great shah had ordered channels dug there from the Amur Darya, and that figs and peaches had grown in abundance.

He could not remember the shah’s name.

Kandahar

They had arranged the meeting in Kandahar, nearer the border, to make it easier for the old man, who was past seventy. He would have arrived in comfortable state aboard an Airbus, or one of the sumptuously configured Iraqi Boeings, the air limousines of the Baath elite that had been flown over the border with the rest of Saddam's planes for safe haven during the Gulf War, but because this was a secret mission, unknown to the rank and file on both sides, nothing in the skies over Afghanistan would be immune to zealous Taleban gunners.

Ordnance control among the Taleban was spotty. No one could be sure which units had Stingers or the improved Oerlikons provided by Pakistan. Hence an Interior Ministry pilot and crew had brought the old man, four assistants, and six bodyguards from Tehran to Zabol, and they had crossed from the airport there into Afghanistan in Land-cruisers, behind an escort of Lada jeeps driven by men in floppy turbans.

The old man had ayatollah rank, and had studied and taught at Qom for more than twenty years. Toward the end of that period he had written a magisterial study on the Hadith, and his decade as dean of engineering sciences at Isfahan, rather than tarnishing him in the eyes of other high clerics, had gained him a reputation for righteous pragmatism – for managing to yoke empiricism and the natural logic of the Holy Koran without diminishing either.

He had a sense of humor, and was known in the inner circles as the only one who could make Khamenei laugh.

His students and academic colleagues loved him, not so much for his humor and the wispy grandfatherly side he often showed as for his lack of fear. He was mild of speech, but he spoke straight. There was seldom any hedging or mouthing of certitudes. Candor of this kind was all but unheard-of in a society where thought police set the norms. And so, among the younger generations, the old man became a kind of folk legend.

He was going now to Afghanistan to seal an understanding that Iran had force-fed to the Taleban after the massacre at Mazar. Mazar had not been an ordinary affront. The Islamic Republic had massed troops at the border and, as the Taleban leadership made motions of propitiation, had sent to Kabul a diplomatic wrecking crew led by one of the President's hard men. He laid down a simple ultimatum. At the next provocation, Iran would march in and annex Mazar and the corridor leading to it.

The bad cop, then, had completed his mission. Future consequences had been made clear. The good cop, the old ayatollah, would now go in to pick up from the rattled Taleban what was in effect a title deed. To do this, to mildly sound them out, and to build a bridge or two.

In the future the Taleban might have their uses. They preoccupied the Russians. Soon enough the seemingly solid front of Pakistani support behind the mullahs would begin to crack. The external pressures on Islamabad to give up its Afghan adventure would exact too many costs. A supply-hungry Taleban regime, put on short rations by Pakistan, might be bent as needed to Iran's purposes. Or left to thrash about and destroy itself.

The old man settled back against the pillow they had given him, and looked out the tinted-glass window to take in the stark countryside. His turban sat on his lap, a modest gray coil against the white of his robe. The sun was behind them, a third of the way down the sky. Everything he could see, the great cracked blocks of stone on the bare hillsides, the sentry-like solitary trees, the vultures that coasted past the hilltops, all of them were cast in double by their own black shadows.

There was something stripped and melancholy in the scene that reminded him of the work of a painter...who? Ah, yes. That Italian. Or was he American? DiChirico.

"Are you comfortable, Teacher?"

"Yes. Very. This is a quiet one you brought today, Firuz."

"It's armored, that's why."

"Aha. They drove it over from Karaj, did they?"

"Oh, no, Teacher. This one we brought by air. It's for our special people."

“The nomenklatura.”

The earnest-faced young man looked puzzled.

“The Soviet bosses. That’s what they were called. I suppose there’s a resemblance.”

Firuz felt a wash of indignation, and then saw that he was being teased.

“Well, certainly not in this case,” he blurted.

The old man smiled and stretched his legs.

“But Firuz. Power corrupts, you know. Even the decrepit.”

And then he laughed out loud and clapped a hand on Firuz’s shoulder as he saw the younger man’s confusion.

A voice came from the front seat.

“Teacher. These Taleban. What do you expect?”

“A cordial reception.”

“They killed our brothers.” It was the driver.

“Yes. I expect a cordial reception.”

The escort jeeps threw up dust from the broken road ahead. Slowing, the driver changed gears and closed the air intake louvers.

“Why are we going to see them?”

“You know why. To show that the strong and the weak, the mature and the rash, can sit together in some peace. Some degree of peace. To show that the strong can forbear. Within limits.”

“Is this the real Taleban we’re meeting, Teacher?”

“Real?”

“The Taleban of Mazar.”

“Those were ‘traitorous elements.’”

There was a pause.

“Teacher, with all respect, can you believe that?”

“Some of it. The rest we take on faith.”

Firuz spoke glumly as he looked at the old man.

“How many ‘elements’ do the Taleban have?”

“How many kinds of pistachios are in Iran?”

He shifted against his pillow and folded his hands over his turban.

“Now I am going to sleep,” he said.

Eight guards had been stationed across the front entrance of the main Kandahar medrese where the meeting with the Iranians would be held, but the tall man in the drooping turban and the patched dress of a Taleban foot soldier knew that only one sentry was posted at the narrow rear door leading to the kitchen. He had bribed that guard with a shiny new Finnish mobile phone.

Even with retribution at hand, it galled the tall man that he now needed disguise and bribery to gain entry to a school made famous by his own teaching. This was his medrese, it was he who had galvanized the students that had fanned out across the land, all of it was a monument to him. Even the bricks and mortar had been touched by the fire of his witness to Allah.

Yet it had not taken them long to proscribe him after the purging of the Shiites at Mazar. No – he should not say “them.” It was him – and no one else. That stuttering liar Omar. That shy-seeming hypocrite.

A choking rage rose in him. He saw his reflection in a car window as his crossed behind the medrese. Hunched, nondescript, filling in with the passers-by. So it had come to this, he said to himself. Skulking down alleys like a stray dog. But no jihad is ever easy. He shifted the bag he was carrying from his left hand to his right. Other blows will be struck.

He brushed past the guard he had bribed, and in seconds was through the kitchen and up the stairs leading to

the third floor, where he knew his study had been emptied – emptied, probably ransacked, but not boarded shut, the bribed guard had told him. He still had the key. The fools were too haphazard to have changed the lock. The boy would be there, or nearby.

Footfalls and the beeps of security phones sounded from the corridor above. Easing the bag to the floor, he stepped into an alcove, leaned against the inner wall, and watched coolly as three men with clipboards went slowly down the stairs. There was desultory talk as they descended. He tapped his toe softly and wedged the tip of his little finger into the gap between his front teeth as he listened. So. They were talking about the Iranians who were coming this afternoon. The old ayatollah.

No, he's mine, he said to them in an inner whisper. You oafs know nothing of it.

At the end of the third-floor corridor the tall man looked carefully about and waited. He put the key to the door and opened it slowly, remembering the noisy hinges. It was stuffy inside. In the darkness the study looked alien. They had cleaned it out. Its emptiness made it larger than the cluttered place where he had smoked Pakistani cigarettes and drafted his sermons. He put the bag down and rubbed his arm, clenching and unclenching his hand.

There was a scraping behind him. He wheeled about.

The boy stood silhouetted in the doorway. He held a tea tray.

"Crazy boy," he said. He dropped his voice to a whisper.

"You made me jump."

"Kiss me!"

"No," the man laughed.

The boy put the tray on the floor, and they stood and kissed with their mouths open. The boy locked his fingers behind the tall man's head. The turban fell to the floor. The groaned.

"Fondle me."

"No."

But he fondled the boy, and in the midst of their play he pushed him back and slapped him.

The boy giggled with pleasure.

"Shoosh! No more of this," whispered the man.

"Now the holy mission begins. We need a chair to get you ready. Two chairs. Go find them. Quiet!"

The boy bent to the floor to pull up his baggy shalvars, and went out. A few shafts of light came through the shutters at the end of the study, enough to work by, the man decided. He knelt on the floor next to the bag, unzipped it, and took out four strands of light electrical wire. He was twisting and shaping them in the light as the boy edged into the room with a chair on each shoulder.

"Good. Quiet now. Put them down side by side, close the door, and sit."

He began to whisper now in a slow cadence.

"Allah is with us here now. In this room. Think of Paradise, where He and ministering angels will wait for you."

The boy looked up from the chair where he sat, and turned his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Kiss me," the boy said.

The man bit his lip and went on.

"Waiting for you in Paradise tonight will be joys beyond any kisses."

He had taken two short dynamite sticks out of the bag, and was snapping binders onto the wires. As he worked, a small device resembling a traveler's clocked dangled from one hand. He slipped out of it a shilling-sized piece of dull metal, a modified clasp.

"You remember this," he said to the boy.

"This is the key. Your ticket to Paradise and life unending."

The man pulled a padded vest out of the bag, laid it on the floor, and smoothed it. The vest could have been a shop window zipper display. Seven of them ran side by side vertically down the chest, a metal one down the middle and three plastic ones on each side.

"Easy now," the man said to himself as the boy watched from the chair.

The man leaned down to slide a dynamite stick into one of the left-side zipper pockets, and did the same on the right. He stroked and straightened the wires that poked up like cockroach feelers.

“Look at that,” said the man, pointing to the spread-out vest.

“We could put six in there, but that would make you look too bulky, and two will deliver you to Heaven just as well. And less weight.”

The boy gave a small shrug.

“Less weight, that’s right,” he said.

“Yes. Now stand. We’ll fit you into this.”

The man took his place behind the boy, who slipped his arms into the vest and worked his shoulders to settle it into place.

“Good?”

“Good.”

“Now the big zipper. Like before. Right. Watch the wires. Just like before. Perfect. The clamp is right there for you when you need it.”

“I take the tea to the old man?” The boy’s chin quivered slightly as he spoke.

“For the hundredth time, yes. And you press the clamp, and a glorious moment later you are in Heaven among the other martyred warriors of the faith. Who will greet you with shouts of praise.”

“And my sins?” The boy asked as if he knew the answer.

“Martyrdom expunges all sin, and leaves you pure as a newborn.”

“And you, your sin, my mentor?” Being so near to Heaven made the boy bold.

“My sin?” The man spoke in a tone of surprise and dropped to a knee in front of the boy. There was a change in his voice. His face had darkened, and his lips parted over the space between the teeth and spread into the terrible smile the boy knew.

“My sin?”

“Our sin.” The boy’s voice cracked. He wanted to retreat from the precipice.

“It will be mended.” The man’s voice was normal again.

“Our compact,” said the boy. The words had jumped out.

“Yes.” The man had taken the other chair, turning it so that he sat facing the boy, their knees touching.

Voices came from another part of the medrese, and then there was silence again.

“I am afraid,” the boy murmured.

The man snapped his fingers. The crack was as sharp as a castanet. He cocked his head and listened, and then fixed his eyes on the boy.

“Faster than the blinking of an eye,” he whispered, “I will join you in Paradise.

“In the shade of green meadows by the great river we shall feast, the two of us, at a table set by angels.

“Like you, but after you, I will ride to Paradise on the wind of holy martyrdom.”

He held the boy’s eyes, and this time the boy saw a different promise in the spreading smile.

“On your feet.”

The boy stood.

“Dress. Now.”

The boy slipped the long shirt over his head and buttoned it to cover the two layers of muslin they had wrapped across the vest.

“It’s hot.”

“Go, boy. Pick up the tray. You will see them gathering. It may be an hour or so. You will bring the old man tea.”

The boy stood in the door with longing on his face.

“We will meet soon in Paradise,” the man smiled.

Shouts and the sounds of car horns and a rush of voices came up from outside.

“Go! Boil the tea. Think of Allah!”

In a wood-lined sitting room in another part of the medrese, the old man took his ease, half-engulfed in large

pillows of a green armchair. He unfolded his hands and gestured at the framed Koranic verses and admonitions on the walls.

“Do they outdo us in piety?”

The question hung in the air. His assistants looked at one another. Was the old man thinking out loud? Was an answer expected?

One of them ventured a reply.

“In pious ostentation, they win by six goals, Teacher.”

The old man laughed quietly and they all followed.

“Are you comfortable, Teacher? In these rooms, I mean?”

“Comfortable. Yes.” He looked at his watch.

“They accepted our agenda, did they? You went over the joint statement with them?”

“Both of them, Teacher. All of it.”

“The Mullah Omar is not here, Teacher.”

“I didn’t expect it.”

“Teacher, he cannot show his face since Mazar.”

“Very well.” The old man sat forward and raised himself on the arms of the chair. Their eyes were on him. He made a lifting motion with one finger, and a guard who had been checking a bookcase for listening devices switched on a small portable tape player.

In a rhythmic slow beat, the sound of strings and woodwinds swirled softly through the room.

The guards exchanged grins. Villa-Lobos again. Good chaff.

They read his lips as the old man spoke slowly.

“We will meet with our friends in ninety minutes. You all know your roles. We know what we want from the drafting committee; don’t let it drag on too long.

“The guards can eat now. I propose to meet for five or ten minutes now with you two, Ali and Firuz, and then I will rest.”

He looked around and cocked his eyebrow.

“Our of the room, now, all of you who have any sense. Rest, pray, go over your notes, check all the documents, and be at your place at the table, ready to sit, at five before seven.

“Out!” They saw the twinkle in his eye. The room emptied, and the two assistants moved their chairs toward him as he began to speak.

One of them interrupted.

“No guards, Teacher?”

“Here, now?”

“We said two at the minimum, always, Sir.”

“Bring one in, then.”

Ali brought a guard and posted him just inside the door.

“I need a little nap. It looks as if we’re ready. There’s just one thing I had in mind...What...Ah, yes. The photos you boys had of the consulate in Mazar. The worst ones. Of the basement. Let me look them over again. Some of them may be of use.”

“The other Ali has them, Teacher. Ali Rejaii. Let me go...”

The guard had approached, and was motioning at the door. Firuz raised his hand to cut him off.

“Let him speak, Firuz.” The guard drew himself up shyly.

“Teacher, a young boy out there has tea for you. Their kind of tea.”

“Tea. That sounds good...Well, bring him in. It may help me sleep.”

“It may not help your stomach at all, Teacher.” Firuz’s face was disapproving. “We have our own good tea if you wish, the good tea you took on the road.

“Hussein, did the two of you check this kid?”

“He’s a little boy, Mr. Firuz.”

“Let’s let him in, Firuz,” the old man said.

“Let him in. The boy thought to make me tea. Suffer the little children. Remember? The prophet Isa.”

The boy felt the guard’s hand, light on his shoulder, usher him into the room. He held the tray steady. There, over there on the green, was the old man, just as his mentor had said. There were others. He felt their eyes on him.

“Come ahead, son.”

The old man was smiling at him. Kindness. You will ride to Paradise with me, Grandfather.

His feet glided forward, three steps, four, the tea tray steady, the fluted grass steaming in its silver holder, as if Allah Himself were guiding his sandals over the carpet.

The old man watched as the boy approached. God often brings us these small touches of grace, the old man thought. Appreciate them! Look at this gentle boy, passing a gauntlet of stern adults to bring me tea.

Too shy to look at me.

Firuz glanced up from the documents checklist on his lap, and saw the dreamy eyes of the boy as he placed the tea glass and its saucer on a little table.

On opium like all the rest, he thought. They start them that young. The primitives. A shame.

The boy set the tea tray down and slowly straightened. There was beatitude on his face. He raised his chin, and his lips moved as he passed his hand down inside his shirt.

As the boy did this, the old man lifted the tea glass, Firuz opened his mouth to shout, and the room split and vanished in a whiteness brighter than Paradise.

The tall man with the gap between his teeth had a Kandahar-to-Herat ticket in his turban as he climbed to the roof of the bus station, where men who looked like him sat smoking and talking as they waited for departure.

It was 5:45. He checked his watch as he looked for a place to sit. From here on the roof he would be able to feel, and perhaps even to see, the fruits of his effort. By his estimate it would be another fifteen or twenty minutes. And then, as the whole town ran in circles in terror and confusion, he would be on his way to Herat.

It would take them hours to seal off Kandahar. And he would be long gone on a dogleg route they would never follow. He might do better on a horse, he mused. Leave the fools clutching at thin air. But that was the old days. The bus would suffice.

A man got up to leave from a nearby table. Good. He stepped forward to pull back the empty chair.

It scooted away from him as the building lifted and then settled back with a thudding impact that threw him to his knees. In the next few moments a roar like an artillery report came up from the center of town. He found himself next to an overturned table. Pushing himself to his feet, he put his hand on a burning cigarette and cursed.

Early, too early, why would that be, he muttered to himself as he struggled toward the stairs. A dozen or more other passengers were headed that way, shouting in each other’s faces and calling out, “Allahalla!”

He waited for the crush on the stairway to ease. Maybe now I can savor it, he thought, moving to the roof railing. If not as I anticipated.

And then, looking out in the direction of the medrese, he saw a faint pillar of smoke rising. Yes! He shivered with pleasure.

There were sirens now, and the sound of what seemed to be thousands of voices beating the air. Where the smoke rose he could see tiny fingers of flame. He took a last long look.

He went down the stairs then, and out onto the street, where he mimicked the stunned expressions of the other passengers. Enjoying this, he stopped one man, and then a second, to ask, “What was it? What was it? Monstrous!”

Then he boarded the bus marked “Herat,” and took his seat.