

WHEN AJMAL NAQSHBANDI WAS DECAPITATED LAST SPRING BY THE TALIBAN, HIS AMERICAN FRIEND FLEW BACK TO AFGHANISTAN TO FIND OUT WHY HE HAD BEEN MURDERED

# OUR BATTLES JOINED

BY  
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**T**hey killed Ajmal on Easter Sunday. I was at home in Brooklyn when it happened. My girlfriend was away, and I had slept in, awaking alone to the peaceful springtime view of the backyards on my block. As I had for almost a month, the first thing I did that morning was check online for news of Ajmal Naqshbandi. When the story came up that he had been murdered, I felt no shock or sadness or even disgust, just a sudden wave of nausea.

Here it was, the latest receipt from a hopeless war. It had always been a distinct possibility, and now it was a reality: Ajmal, a bright young man destined for great things, had instead been abused, humiliated and then rubbed out, his family left shattered by grief, his colleagues terrified, his best friends reduced to hollow shells.

Ajmal and I had worked together over the past three years, reporting on Afghan politics, corruption, the opium trade and the insurgency. During that time I had seen him mature from a good and ambitious young fixer to an ever more shrewd businessman and writer with a steady gig for a Japanese daily. He was about five-foot-eight with a stout build. His fashionable haircut was always moussed, but his goatee would be overtaken by a week's growth of stubble. He had bought a large Soviet-built apartment, was putting on weight and had married—all by the age of 25. But etiquette dictated that I not ask much about his wife or meet her or his mother.

On my first trip to Afghanistan, in 2004, I had stayed at Ajmal's small lodge, the Everest Guesthouse, though its squalor and the interminably slow pace of everything eventually drove me to more expensive quarters. Officially, the place had laundry service, but in reality you had to harass one of the eight young men Ajmal kept on retainer. All they did was sit on the filthy kitchen floor, drinking tea and playing cards. In about a week your clothes would show up in a heap on your bed, damp and not necessarily clean. Yet in certain ways I enjoyed the Everest's anarchic mix of foreign reporters, contractors and other unidentified free agents.

"AJMAL COULD BE A BRAWLER. HE LIKED THE NEAR MISSES."



Ajmal Naqshbandi (above, on a road trip with the author in Afghanistan) had become a valuable facilitator for many foreign journalists.

Everything has a price in Afghanistan, but the Everest was ruled by the old British maxim "You can never buy an Afghan—you can only rent him for a short while at a very high sum." It was a place where a brigadier in the Afghan National Police would slip in the front door and go upstairs with a girlfriend and a bottle of whiskey while the guard at the front gate did his afternoon supplications to Allah and oblivious European journalists watched Sky TV in the living room.

One day a cabdriver quadruple charged a foreign guest for a ride from the airport. Ajmal was incensed and told the cabbie it was outrageous; double charging unsuspecting new arrivals was enough. The driver was mocking and dismissive, so Ajmal punched him in the face. The police soon arrived and dragged Ajmal off to jail.

"It took a week to get out because they were demanding too much bribe money," said Ajmal. Eventually a fair price was agreed on, and Ajmal's brother bailed him out. But Ajmal was able to turn his stint in the clink into a networking opportunity, making friends with a hip young undercover police officer who had been jailed for a minor indiscretion. Ajmal and I later ran into the cop, who was nice enough to answer my questions (anonymously) about corruption and police tolerance of Chinese brothels.

The incident with the cabbie was not unusual; Ajmal could be a brawler. Once, high in the snow-covered mountains of the Hazarajat, a speeding jeep driven by locals clipped our truck in nearly a head-on collision. We were creeping up a steep track of packed snow while they were barreling down. A showdown ensued.

Soon the crew in the truck was joined by Hazara villagers who had been shoveling snow off the road. All of them wore small square sunglasses and cruel smiles, their heads and throats bundled in scarves. They had smashed our headlight while almost knocking us off the road, and now they wanted money. In his nasal voice, Ajmal excoriated the Hazara as thieves and liars. He was ready to throw down in what would have been a badly uneven fight. Finally I gave the head Hazara my business card and told him to have his boss get in touch with my boss to sort it all out. That seemed to save face for everyone. More important, it saved our asses.

When needed, Ajmal could also be cool. This came in handy during another near brawl when he slowly and accidentally ran over a teenager who was in the middle of a curbside fistfight. The fight spilled suddenly into the street, and in an instant we had rolled over the kid's leg. It was badly broken. The crowd that had been watching the fight was now encircling us. A second or two more and all hell would have erupted. Ajmal immediately loaded the wounded youth into the truck, and we took him to a hospital.

He liked the near misses. He told me that during one weekend in the Everest he had housed on one floor an American friend who was a former CIA agent turned Thailand-based contractor and on another floor—as a favor to a relative in Pakistan, no questions asked—a Chechen woman on a courier mission to Al Qaeda's safe haven in northwest Pakistan. "If either of them had known—can you imagine?" Ajmal asked me with a mischievous smirk.

Working with Ajmal involved numerous long road trips. We had driven across windblasted deserts, repaired flat tires and snapped chains on Ajmal's truck as snow closed in on us at the 14,000-foot Shibar Pass. We had eaten sheep kidneys with opium-growing warlords, wrestled the Afghan army's bureaucracy and coaxed an ex-Taliban commander turned parliamentarian to confess to his role in destroying the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan Valley. (The Buddha bomber, Mawlawi Mohammed Islam Mohammedi, was mysteriously gunned down a few months after the story came out, but I suspect it had more to do with the opium trade in Samangan province than with desecrated statues.) We had joked, bickered and haggled with each other. We had traded humorous, boastful and embarrassing stories about our lives. In distant guesthouses we shared the *haram*, or religiously prohibited, pleasures of hashish and beer. On one afternoon, with our backs to a canyon wall in southern Afghanistan, we had stared down the barrels of Taliban rifles while doing an interview.

Although he was a journalist, Ajmal was apolitical. Perhaps because so much of Afghan politics has been reduced to simple criminality, he had a hard time seeing ideas as interesting. The programs and ideologies of various parties bored him. He answered my questions about these subjects as best he could, but ultimately he didn't care who won. He seemed to find my interest in historical and sociological matters taxing and let me know as much. His passion was dangerous and exclusive news. His approach to work was decidedly mercenary: He enjoyed the adventure, building his network of contacts, the status and making money.

On long road trips our conversation would frequently, as it often does among young people, turn to sex. This banter—private, frank and conducted somewhat absentmindedly—revealed more about the differences, similarities and misunderstandings between our two cultures than did much of my reporting. One time, on the way to Mazar-i-Sharif, Ajmal announced, "I am very interested in writing a book about the dancing boys in Afghanistan. One chapter for the different customs of each province." In Afghanistan many "commanders" (read: warlords) have a taste for young boys and teenagers. "They maybe have hvo wives, but they keep these boys like girlfriends," said Ajmal. "They buy them clothes, they take them to the wedding parties, and the boys dance for them." (Wedding parties are a huge part of social life in Afghanistan, but like all else, they are strictly segregated along gender lines. A big wedding is really two simultaneous parties: one for men, the other for women.)

"What if two men fall in love as equals?" I asked.

"Hmm, no. That would not be good." He seemed to find the idea perverse.

When Ajmal's strange business contacts passed through Kabul they often wanted to rampage in the big city. On one long drive he told me how a Kandahari he knew had picked up a young prostitute working the streets in a burka.

"A prostitute in a burka?" I was dumbfounded. "Why (continued on page 161)



When the Afghan government refused to free several insurgents in exchange for an Italian journalist, Naqshbandi paid the ultimate price.

did he stop for that pale-blue sheet and not another pale-blue sheet?"

"She was moving her leg somehow abnormally, shaking it, putting it forward a little. It was a sign."

Only in Afghanistan.

The last time I saw Ajmal, in autumn 2006, he was evidently commanding more respect among the Afghan press corps. It was also apparent that he was getting more involved in the dangerous business of fixing high-risk interviews. When the Taliban regrouped after the 2001 invasion it was difficult to make contact with them. For several years access to the insurgents was controlled by a handful of rival fixers, most of whom were themselves ex-Taliban. One of these men, Nawab Moman, traded in his turban and robes for dark tailored suits and became a journalist for Tolo TV, Afghanistan's first private television station. Tolo's studios were across from the Everest, and true to form, Ajmal made friends with Moman and did special favors for him, such as scoring whiskey through NATO connections and allowing the short-term afternoon use of empty rooms at the guesthouse. In turn Moman began to let Ajmal in on the Taliban-access trade.

In the Middle East conflict zones, one of war reporting's dirty secrets is that access to insurgents is often sold for cash. Sometimes the price is low. To interview and film Taliban fighters, I paid \$800 to cover transportation, police bribes and fees to Moman and Ajmal. But ambitious and flush BBC and Korean TV crews, among others, regularly dished out thousands of dollars for face time with the bad guys.

In addition to seeking interviews, journalists also look to buy video. On my most recent trip to Afghanistan, my colleague filmmaker Ian Olds and I reviewed exclusive footage from the guerrilla leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hezb-e-Islami, as well as some Al Qaeda-shot combat footage showing the corpses of U.S. Navy Seals along with war booty such as American GPS devices and M4 rifles. And though it rarely makes it on the air, footage of brutally slow beheadings is always for sale. Someone even offered to sell me the video of Ajmal's decapitation. They said his killer wore a gray tunic and Ajmal struggled to the very end. I declined.

In Afghanistan this is how much of the news is made-like sausage from grisly floor scraps collected during back-room deals wherein the spectacle of war is bartered for cash over glasses of Johnnie Walker. It was just such a deal that led Ajmal into the heart of Taliban country. When it all went bad it was easy

to blame him as a fool. But it wasn't quite that simple.

The first indication that something terrible had happened was a text message from my girlfriend: "A translator named Ajmal has been kidnapped in Afghanistan. Hope that's not your guy." Around the Hindu Kush the name Ajmal is as common as the name Jason is around the Rockies. So it seemed unlikely that the kidnapped person was my friend Ajmal Naqshbandi. I sent him an e-mail, but he didn't write back.

As the story evolved, things began to look worse: The Taliban had captured an alleged British spy traveling with two locals in the southern Afghan province of Helmand. But the alleged spy turned out to be Daniele Mastrogiacomo, a stocky 52-year-old correspondent for the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. I had met Mastrogiacomo over morning cornflakes several years back at the Everest. Ajmal frequently worked with him; months before the abduction Ajmal had told me he had new and important Taliban contacts in Helmand.

*La Repubblica* soon confirmed that Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal had gone south to interview Taliban commanders, most likely Mullah Mohammed Dadullah, who was then the insurgents' chief military leader. Ajmal and I had done a similar interview with Taliban fighters only two hours from where Mastrogiacomo had disappeared. This was all too close for comfort.

About a week and a half into the drama the Taliban released a video of Mastrogiacomo calmly but intensely imploring Mghan president Hamid Karzai and the Italian government for help. Off camera, someone prompted Mastrogiacomo to say more. Ajmal's unmistakably nasal voice was translating. The person I knew best in Afghanistan was shackled in a mud hut somewhere near the Pakistan border.

Next came news that the third man, Mastrogiacomo's local guide and driver, Sayed Agha, had been peremptorily killed. Soon thereafter another video was released. It shows Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal kneeling, bound and blindfolded. Around them stand a dozen Taliban fighters. The camera pans over to Agha as he is forced down and decapitated on the rough desert ground. Then Mastrogiacomo stands weeping in front of the camera, begging for his life.

The Taliban demanded an exchange of five of their imprisoned commanders for the two remaining captives. An international crisis began to unfold. Italy's center-left government, which had already pulled its troops from Iraq, was on the brink of collapse. If Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal could not be freed, Italy's prime minister, Romano Prodi, could face a no-confidence vote over the increasingly unpopular war in Mghanistan. If the gov-

ernment fell, Italy's 2,000 troops in Afghanistan could be pulled out and its development projects stopped. The whole NATO mission in Afghanistan, the government of Afghanistan and, by extension, the international war on Islamic radicalism would take a major hit.

But all that was avoided, and two weeks later Mastrogiacomo stepped off a plane in Rome, flashing the victory sign as if he'd just won a cycling race. He had been swapped for five Taliban. A prominent left-wing Italian nongovernmental organization called Emergency had managed the delicate negotiations and prisoner swap; the first images of a liberated Mastrogiacomo were taken at Emergency's hospital in Lashkar Gar, the capital of Helmand province.

But Ajmal—who was supposed to be part of the deal—was still being held by the Taliban. Surprisingly, the man who brokered Mastrogiacomo's release—Ramatullah Hanefi, the director of Emergency's hospital in Helmand—was now in the custody of the Afghan secret police, accused of being a Taliban operative.

Two weeks after Mastrogiacomo's release the Taliban decapitated Ajmal. Shortly after that, Emergency, which had demanded Hanefi's release, closed its entire Afghan operation: three major surgical hospitals, each with scores of beds and multiple operating theaters, a major maternity ward and 25 fully equipped health clinics. Over seven years Emergency had treated 1.5 million Afghans with free high-quality health care. In war-ravaged Afghanistan these resources were desperately needed.

To understand this debacle and to bid my friend good-bye, I returned to Afghanistan. The story I discovered there, the story of his murder and the incompetence that surrounded it, embodies everything wrong with this famously forgotten war and forgotten country. The truth is never easy to pin down, particularly in Afghanistan. The last time I had worked with Ajmal he mentioned his new contacts in Helmand. They were, he said, facilitated by "Emergency, the Italian hospital," in Lashkar Gar. Then, in October 2006, Emergency negotiated the release of Gabriele Torsello, an Italian photojournalist and Muslim convert who had been kidnapped by the Taliban.

Ajmal had never been to Helmand and had no family or friends there. According to his younger brother Munir, whom I met several times in Kabul, the interview in Helmand was supposed to be with Taliban supreme military commander Dadullah. The rendezvous was reportedly set up by Sami Sharaf, one of those Taliban-connected fixers at the top of the Afghan press-corps food chain. Ajmal's main contact in Helmand was Hanefi, the administrator at Emergency's hospital. This set of connections would bridge the infinite political distance between Kabul and Helmand.

I meet Sharaf at the Gandamak, a Kabul lodge named for the fictional 19th century address of author George MacDonald Fraser's literary hero Harry Flashman. Sharaf's manner is agitated. He refuses to be videotaped or to comment directly about Ajmal. In fact, he agrees to the interview only because suspicions about his possible role in Ajmal's death are steadily mounting among Ajmal's male relatives. Sharaf has missed the important *ros cheZ*, a ceremony on the 40th day of mourning. It was Sharaf who first told Ajmal's family about the kidnapping, even before it was in the press.

Sharaf got his start in reporting during the last days of the Soviet-backed regime of Dr. Mobammad Najibullah. When Najibullah fell to the U.S.-backed mujahideen, civil war broke out among the victors. From the ensuing chaos emerged the millenarian zealotry of the Taliban. By 1996 these insurgents controlled most of southern Afghanistan. Made up of poor rural Pashtuns—the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan—the Taliban have always been as much an ethnic movement as a religious one. They see as their enemies *kafirs*

(nonbelievers) and foreigners but also the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara and other ethnic groups populating Afghanistan's northern half. From their first days to the present the Taliban have received covert support from elements in Inter-Services Intelligence, the Pakistani intelligence agency. Pakistan uses them to keep its neighbor weak.

"I was the only one who could report from Kandahar," brags Sharaf between hurried gulps of tea. As a freelancer in and out of Taliban-controlled southern Afghanistan, he did a thriving business selling footage to CNN and other networks during the Taliban regime. This was a time and place in which photography was largely illegal, but Sharaf was allowed to sell video. He tells me he split his time between Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Taliban country across the border. In Pakistan he studied journalism and then went to study sharia, Islamic law. To survive, says Sharaf, "you needed good connections. Anything is possible with connections."

That's what Ajmal was always after, particularly new connections with the Taliban. He had done well building links

with Taliban commanders in eastern Afghanistan, but Helmand was the deep south, the tribal Pashtun heartland.

Many of Ajmal's friends see Sharaf's shifty behavior as proof that he set up Ajmal and the high-priced Italian to be kidnapped. After all, only the Italians pay. Kidnap an American and all you get is a corpse and a Taliban snuff film. But an Italian could be a useful chip for the Taliban, or so go the conspiracy theories circulating in Kabul. Although I dislike the beady-eyed Sharaf, that scenario doesn't make sense, nor is there much evidence to support it. To plan so elaborately would have been too risky for Sharaf and unnecessary for the Taliban.

On the morning of March 5—with the interview in Helmand arranged—Mastrogiacomo and Naqshbandi set out. Just before leaving, Ajmal told his father and wife that he was going to research women's rights in Herat, a relatively safe city in western Afghanistan. But to his younger brother Munir, he gave the real details of his trip: They were meeting a trustworthy Taliban commander in Helmand; everything would be fine. It was Ajmal's custom to tell his wife and father a cover story but to call Munir at the last minute with the truth.

Reached by phone in Rome, Mastrogiacomo recounts the story as he experienced it. He knew nothing about how the interview was arranged and simply trusted Ajmal (Ajmal and I had often rubbed each other the wrong way over this issue: I would demand to know exactly how everything worked, and he would testily push back when he felt I was prying too much.) At dawn Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal flew from Kabul to Kandahar. There they met Sayed Agha, a local man from Lashkar Gar, Helmand, the next province over. The three of them drove to Lashkar Gar, where Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal waited two hours in the offices of an Afghan NCO while Agha went to fix the final details for the interview. Then all of them drove into the desert.

Just outside town, in Nad Ali, they picked up a boy. As Mastrogiacomo later put it, "Agha seemed to know him." They traveled a short way over a bridge and turned right, through poppy fields. Then the road dead-ended. Realizing their mistake, they turned back, whereupon they met six armed Taliban riding three motorbikes.

"Immediately they arrested us," says Mastrogiacomo in his thick Italian accent. "They tied our hands with weak rope and blindfolded us. We are so confused. I am demanding, 'What is this? It is a mistake! We are here for an interview. It is normal. Why this?'" In his indignation he broke free. "The rope was weak. I demanded to speak with someone in charge. And then they just beat us with Kalashnikovs. My head is cut bad. And now Ajmal is saying, 'They are serious. Daniele, be quiet. They think we are spies.' At that point he becomes very scared."

After five hours in one house the three captives were moved (or several hours through the desert, with Mastrogiacono locked in the trunk of Agha's car. Next they met a truck filled with Taliban. "Like 15 or 16, and from there we travel many hours through the desert down toward the Pakistani border," Mastrogiacono says. After that the hostages were moved every night.

Just after the three men went missing, Sharaf found Munir and explained that Ajmal had been kidnapped. Sharaf said he had learned this through Samiullah Yousoufzai, a Pakistani journalist close to Dadullah. The news broke the next day when the Taliban issued a statement from somewhere in Pakistan.

As Mastrogiacono explains to me, for the first eight days of their captivity he was together with Ajmal and Agha. "But it was hard to talk," he says. "Every time we spoke English the Taliban would demand to know what we were speaking about. Ajmal would say, 'Shut up. Don't talk. They really think you are a spy.' He was like, 'I don't understand. Something has changed in the Taliban policy.'" Though chained together, the men were psychologically isolated. "The Taliban were always soft, then strong, then soft."

The Taliban occasionally beat their hostages with hoses. During the first days the Taliban accused them all of being spies. But then other commanders showed up, among them Haji Lalai, a close lieutenant of Dadullah's. The Taliban finally seemed to accept that their hostages really were journalists. "They said, 'It's okay. We know you are not a British spy. You're a journalist, and many Taliban have called to say that Ajmal is okay, he is not a spy,'" recounts Mastrogiacono. But suspicion continued to turn on Agha. "Ajmal kept saying, 'It's not us, but they don't know about him.'"

In fact, Agha had worked briefly with the British. A Western intelligence contractor with regular oversight responsibility for the National Directorate of Security, or NDS, part of the Afghan secret police, told me he was under the impression Agha had passed information to Afghan government agents.

On March 13 the Taliban separated Agha from the other two. A day later they brought in a young Taliban with a video camera to record a statement from Mastrogiacono. "He was a nice guy who spoke a little English," says Mastrogiacono. "When it was over we chatted, and then they said, 'Wait, some other people are coming. We want to make another video. We have to tie you up again.' Then they brought out Agha, and someone read a paper. Ajmal started to cry, saying, 'They have condemned us to death. They will kill Sayed today, me tomorrow, you the next day.'" The Taliban had given Italy and Karzai three days to make a deal.

To Mastrogiacono's horror his captors proceeded to decapitate Agha. The video of his murder was later sold to journalists and broadcast on Italian television. In it one sees Ajmal looking down into the rag across his eyes while Mastrogiacono tips his head back to peer under his blindfold toward Agha. The Taliban tied Agha's head to his body and dumped his corpse in the Helmand River. News of the murder caused Agha's pregnant young wife to lose her unborn child.

I meet Sayed Agha's brother and brother-in-law when they come to Kabul to visit Ajmal's father, a rugged old mujahideen vet named Ghulam Haidar Naqshbandi. We sit in the second-story guest room of the Naqshbandi home, a small walled compound on the dusty plains of southwest Kabul. Yellow afternoon light filters through the room's high square windows while the shadows of pigeons circling outside flutter across the guests. As the light fades, Agha's family tell their story.

As soon as Mastrogiacono's party disappeared in southern Helmand, Agha's family sent out several uncles and cousins to search for their relative. Once it was clear that Agha was dead, they looked for his body, eventually finding their headless kinsman in a shallow grave by the river.

"In one of the villages where they were held, people saw Ramatullah Hanefi," says Agha's brother-in-law Khan Zaman, referring to the administrator from Emergency who fixed the interview and managed the negotiations. "Ramatullah went to where they were held, and the villagers saw Sayed and Ramatullah argue. After that the Taliban separated Sayed from Ajmal and Daniele. Then, a day later, they killed him because he knew too much." This account seems implausible. When I run it past Mastrogiacono, he dismisses it. Perhaps the elders in southern Helmand told Agha's relatives what they wanted to hear: Their relative died defiantly, confronting the man who had allegedly sold him out.

On Monday, March 19, five days after Agha's murder, the Taliban told Mastrogiacono and Ajmal they were to be freed. "They broke our chains," says Mastrogiacono. "Ajmal washed and got new clothes. Then I washed and got new clothes. We were put in a car and brought to the Helmand River. We got there maybe about noon or one, but it took several hours of moving and stopping. Then we found a big group of Taliban and local elders, maybe 50 or 60 people. The Taliban were shooting their guns in the air to celebrate. When Ajmal and I were separated we said, 'Okay. We'll be arrested by the NDS when we get back, but that is normal. They will need to talk to us, but then we will be

free.' We talked about how I would help Ajmal get to Italy, because after this it would be impossible for him to do his work. And we hugged. We were like, 'See you tonight in Lashkar Gar or maybe the next day in Kabul.' Ajmal went off one way. I met Ramatullah Hanefi. He seemed anxious to go, like maybe another group might kidnap us again. And we go off in the other direction in two cars full of elders, for protection. In maybe two hours we are in the hospital."

Around five or six that evening Mastrogiacono and Hand! reached the Emergency compound in Lashkar Gar and were greeted by Gino Strada, a surgeon and Emergency's founder and executive director. Mastrogiacono was checked by medical staff, took phone calls from his family and several Italian politicians and then began to write an account of his capture. The next morning he would fly to Kabul.

While writing, Mastrogiacono asked Strada about Ajmal. Strada explained he was safe in another room, taking photographs for the Emergency website. Another Emergency staff member subsequently told Mastrogiacono that Strada had misspoken; Ajmal was somewhere else, maybe on his way to Kabul but not at the hospital. Later, on Italian television, Strada explained that he had wrongly assumed a young driver was Ajmal. In reality Ajmal was either still under Taliban control or soon to be retaken by them. The infuriated Agha and Naqshbandi families are convinced Ajmal was at the hospital. It's unclear whether he was retaken from the hospital or never released at the Helmand River, but it seems likely he was never released.

The next day at dawn Hanefi—the man who had set up the interview turned kidnapping—was picked up by the NDS. A few days later Munir and Ajmal's father received a phone call from the Taliban. They put Ajmal on. He told his father that he was "in the same place as before" and that the family needed to lean on Karzai. In a few days the Taliban released another video. "You have forgotten the Afghan journalist," said Ajmal in an angry appeal to Karzai. "You are worried only for the foreigners, and you are not worried for Afghans." Again, Ajmal's back was to a mud wall. Then, on April 5, Easter, after two more weeks in Taliban custody, he was killed, a full day before his captors' own deadline.

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What happened at the Helmand River? What was the plan for the prisoner exchange? Was Ajmal supposed to be at the hospital? Emergency and Strada refuse to say. Instead, Emergency spokespeople give vague, legalistic, often implausible answers. When I press for an interview with Strada, I am told he is too upset to talk to the media. According to Emergency, its involvement in the Mas-

trogiacom case began only on March 6, when Italian prime minister Romano Prodi asked Strada to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban. Strada in turn asked Hanefi to contact the insurgents. Emergency denies that either the organization or Hanefi had relations with the Taliban before the kidnapping.

To anyone familiar with Afghanistan, that assertion doesn't ring true. Emergency had already managed negotiations for the release of another Italian journalist, in November 2006. Elements of the NGO's local staff certainly had a modus vivendi with the insurgents, who, after all, control most of Helmand province and have networks of spies and supporters in Lashkar Gar. On at least one occasion U.S. forces raided the hospital to extract wounded Taliban.

To understand this story one must grasp something of Emergency's origins and the charismatic nature of Gino Strada. In 1989 Strada began working in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Somalia and Bosnia. In 1994 he founded Emergency; his eloquent, down-to-earth lectures were widely broadcast, and money flowed in. Since then the organization has performed thousands of lifesaving operations free of charge on civilian war victims.

Over the past 14 years Emergency has become a more political version of Doctors Without Borders. Rather than just rendering humanitarian service in war zones, it actively protests war. Strada's tale of adventure and altruism has been the subject of several documentaries. His memoir, *Green Parrots*, sold almost half a million copies.

Emergency's lifeblood is public relations. But spinning complicated bad news is not its strength. It prefers the simpler moral tale: photos of smiling Afghan children maimed by old Soviet mines but regaining their lives thanks to your donations and Emergency's hard work. The murder of Sayed Agha and Ajmal Naqshbandi—and the apparent connection in these crimes of Emergency's representative Hanefi—sent the organization into a panic. Strada and Emergency professed Hanefi's innocence. They demanded his immediate release and attacked the Afghan government. After staging protests in Rome and Milan, Emergency even suggested it might have to leave Afghanistan and accused the Karzai government of managing a secret campaign to drive it out.

Afghan pride, nationalism and revenge culture being what they are, the government did not bend to the great surgeon's will. In fact, the Afghan president's office felt betrayed. The two sides dug in, and things went from bad to worse.

On April 10, two days after Ajmal's murder, the normally reticent head of the NDS, Amirullah Saleh, told an Italian daily that Emergency was an organization that "supports terrorists and also Al Qaeda men in Afghanistan," which Emergency

has denied. The next day, Emergency pulled its international staff except for a skeleton crew of five. A series of increasingly bitter press releases charged that for-profit medical clinics in Helmand were pushing for Emergency's ouster so as to scoop up its clients (never mind that many of those patients have nothing with which to pay). Emergency later claimed the Mghan government had intentionally driven out the group so Karzai could better cover up the fact that British and American forces were killing civilians during their bombing offensives against the Taliban in Helmand and Kandahar. But other NGOs also report civilian casualties, and Karzai himself has repeatedly condemned NATO's killing of civilians.

The war of words finally got so hot that the Afghan police raided Emergency's Kabul hospital, demanding the passports of the NGO's remaining foreign staff. The five Europeans were extracted under diplomatic immunity by the Italian ambassador and taken to the airport. Emergency then suspended its Mghanistan operations. In late May the government told the NGO it was free to stay if it was willing to obey Mghan law; otherwise Emergency's facilities would be given to other agencies. Emergency dispatched a few more press releases, and then Strada lapsed into a strange self-imposed silence.

In the end, what seems to have happened is this: The Taliban wanted the government to release five high-profile prisoners; key among them was a top Taliban spokesman known by his nom de guerre, Dr. Mohamed Hanif. Hanif had recently been captured while crossing from Pakistan. The Afghan government, under intense pressure from the Italians, was ready to make a deal. But when the day of exchange came, one of the prisoners, believed to be Hanif, refused to be freed. Why?

When pressed about 'what had happened, the head of the NDS said one prisoner had "refused to go." The truth was already apparent to those who looked closely: Hanif had broken under interrogation and given the NDS and NATO

lots of information. This had been briefly reported in the press in January, but until Hanif refused to leave his cell the news of his confessions was largely dismissed as Mghan government lies. Had the reported snitch Hanif been liberated at the Helmand River, the reunion with his robed and bearded brethren would not have been a happy one.

By all reports the negotiations were chaotic. The Italians and Karzai were poorly coordinated. In consideration of frequent assassination attempts, Karzai lives as a prisoner in the presidential palace. He didn't check with the rest of his government or with the NDS. Everything had to be kept secret and in particular hidden from the Americans, who

man-went ahead with the plan, or a version of it. It had five other prisoners. In place of the missing Hanif the NDS offered Mansoor Ahmad Dadullah, Mullah Dadullah's younger brother. The man who had to explain all this to the Taliban at the final moment was Emergency's director, the very unlucky Ramatullah Hanefi.

Left holding the bag, Hanefi did his best. Since Karzai and the Italians came through with most of their promises, the Taliban gave up their most valuable chip, Mastrogiacomo. Perhaps this explains why Mastrogiacomo spent so much time waiting at the river before he was released, to allow for last-minute negotiations between Hanefi and the Taliban commanders.

Several days after the exchange, Dadullah sent to an Mghan news agency an audio recording in which he explained that he had demanded Hanif but got his brother Mansoor Ahmad instead. Thus, he would continue to hold Mastrogiacomo's interpreter.

One last question remains: Why did the Taliban kill Ajmal 24 hours before their own deadline? A few weeks after Mastrogiacomo's release two French nationals and three Mghans were kidnapped while doing aid work in Nimroz province. The U.S. rounded on Karzai, condemning the deal and making a formal complaint to Rome. Chastened,

Karzai told journalists he "regretted" the deal. Shortly thereafter Karzai held a press conference in which he said such prisoner exchanges "will never be repeated." The Mghan foreign minister, Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, told journalists that even if he himself were kidnapped, he would not want any Taliban exchanged for his liberty. The message was clear: no more deals.

But other pressures were building behind the scenes. The double standard—"You are worried only for the foreigners, and you are not worried for Mghans," as Ajmal had put it—was untenable. The two main Mghan journalist associations and several prominent politicians were

adamantly oppose deals for hostages.

Apparently the Karzai government, notoriously corrupt as well as incompetent and disorganized, overlooked Hanif's cooperation. When at the last moment the NDS was confronted by the dilemma of a cooperative high-value prisoner who didn't want to be freed, it decided to punt. "I think they said, 'Oh fuck, what do we do now? Carry on and hope nobody notices,'" says the Western contractor who works regularly with the NDS.

The strategy had been that the five imprisoned Taliban would be freed and their identities verified. Then Mastrogiacomo and Ajmal would be released. So the NDS—short one top Taliban infor-

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mounting a campaign; supporters of Ajmal camped in front of the presidential palace. The Committee to Protect Journalists beat the bushes, and soon faxes, e-mails and letters from around the world poured in on the Afghan government.

Shortly after Karzai's no-deal pledge, the Taliban called Munir, telling him they would kill his brother on Monday if the government didn't come through. And because Ajmal was now a cause célèbre, the Taliban wanted three prisoners. Desperate, Ajmal's father demanded and received a meeting with Karzai on Saturday, April 7. He recounts the meeting to me in his living room one late afternoon.

Ghulam Haidar Naqshbandi had served with the famous mujahideen commander Ahmed Shah Masoud and had been one of his main urban operatives during the anti-Soviet jihad. That struggle cost Ghulam his right leg. Squinty, weathered and with close-cropped hair and a beard, he is an Afghan nationalist and Sufi fundamentalist who runs a traditional family. I never met or even saw any of the Naqshbandi family's many female members. Munir or another young male relative would shoo them away before male guests entered or exited the inner sanctum of the *mehman khana*, or living room. About a year ago I had asked to interview Ghulam about his view of the current situation in Afghanistan, but he declined.

"Sorry," explained Ajmal, who had acted as the go-between. "My father says, 'One spy in the family is enough.' He told me, 'You work with the foreigners, but not me.'" In the wake of Ajmal's death

Ghulam is more open to his son's foreign friends. Between stifled tears and understated tirades against the Italians and the government, he tells his story.

"After the Taliban called I told Karzai about the new deadline," Ajmal's father says as I listen and sip green tea. "He had been out of the country, and when he came back I went to the palace. I told Karzai he was just a tool of the foreigners. He cleared everyone out of the room and said, 'You are right. I do not have much power.'" The father's grief seemed to have an effect on Karzai. The Afghan president called the governor of Helmand to try to open channels to the Taliban, demanding that the NDS find out who and where the requested Taliban were. Ajmal's father left under the impression that the insurgents' demands would be met and his son's life spared.

But the next morning, the Taliban put Ajmal into a truck and drove him to meet a man with a knife and another with a video camera. When they were done they dumped his body in the desert. They simply said the government was not talking so they killed Ajmal a day early.

My friend Nawab Moman, the ex-Taliban turned Tolo TV reporter, had another explanation. Moman had introduced Ajmal to the Taliban and had fixed and accompanied Ajmal and me on the Taliban interview we had done a year before the Mastrogia-corno kidnapping. He had been a Taliban commander on the Shomali plain north of Kabul and had worked in the Taliban Ministry of Information. When the Taliban fell he reemerged as one of free Afghanistan's

TV journalists, but he has maintained contact with the insurgents.

I meet with Moman several times in Kabul. In a quiet shaded corner of a hotel garden he explains what happened. "Pakistani intelligence called Dadullah and told him, 'No deal. Just kill the prisoner now.'" Moman had heard this from a spokesman linked to Taliban leader Mullah Gmar and the Taliban leadership in Quetta, Pakistan. "The Taliban and Pakistani intelligence saw the big problems this was creating for Karzai. He would end up looking worse if Ajmal was killed. It was worth more—a bigger victory than getting three Taliban. That's why they killed him."

Ultimately, what really killed Ajmal was a perfect storm of political chaos that took the form the various interests gave it. The entire debacle is an example of what my friend the intelligence contractor calls "the fuck-up theory of history." It is the inverse of the conspiracy theory of history and explains much of what goes on in Afghanistan—a place, a war, where incompetence rules the day. The layers of error upon error have multiple causes. If it isn't a basic language barrier, it's the short-term thinking of foreign powers. If it isn't the factionalism of the Afghan government or the profound corruption of all its institutions (which means nothing ever gets done), it's the rosy-eyed foolishness of NGOs that want radio stations for women before anyone in isolated valley A or B even knows what journalism is. In that regard it's the reason Afghanistan under NATO is a failure, just as it was under the Soviets and the British before them. As always, the Afghan people—32 million of them, the Naqshbandi clan among them—pay the price, stuck in underdevelopment, their politics ruled by criminal networks, religious fundamentalism and foreign powers.

The last time I visit the Naqshbandis on the outskirts of Kabul, Munir takes me and two other friends to see Ajmal's grave. We cross a wide dusty boulevard and walk up a low hill into a dense neighborhood, where we find a small graveyard. The ground is barren and penned in by mud-brick homes. A pack of grimy little boys flies kites nearby. Cheap green cloth and plastic cover his grave. At the head some ragged prayer flags whip in the wind. "One of the journalist associations said they would build a cement monument on the grave," says Munir somewhat absently. "It will be in the form of a notebook and pen because he was a journalist." We stand at the grave, then Munir kneels in prayer. I bow my head and think of my departed friend and of other friends who died young. But I don't feel Ajmal's presence, and the mound of dirt over his corpse looks strange: It isn't wide and short like Ajmal Naqshbandi. It looks too narrow, too cramped.