

# COVERING UP KARZAI & CO.

Arthur Kent

The Taliban are “suffering an acute operational crisis brought about, to no small degree, by the great skill and determination shown by the Canadian Forces,” writes Arthur Kent, who has covered Afghanistan as a television correspondent going back to 1980. Perhaps the most experienced Canadian journalist in the region, Kent has also found a disturbing and distressing level of corruption and cronyism in the Karzai regime in Kabul, which undermines the efforts of Canadian and NATO forces to win the hearts and minds of Afghan civilians in the mission to provide a security perimeter around the larger effort to build a democracy out of the ruins of a failed state.

Les talibans « traversent une grave crise opérationnelle causée en grande partie par l’habileté et la détermination des forces canadiennes », écrit Arthur Kent, qui couvre la situation en Afghanistan depuis 1980 en tant que correspondant de télévision. Sans doute le journaliste canadien ayant la plus grande expérience de la région, l’auteur a aussi découvert que le gouvernement Karzaï est miné à Kaboul par une corruption et un favoritisme si troublants qu’ils sapent les efforts des forces canadiennes et de l’OTAN pour gagner les civils afghans à leur mission. Une mission qui consiste à créer un périmètre de sécurité susceptible d’encadrer la difficile construction d’une démocratie à partir d’un État en ruine.



**I**t's not the Harper government that's principally to blame for prisoner abuse and other Afghan scandals — it's the den of thieves it's protecting.

The way Abdul Rab sees it, he and his family are enduring several wars, throwing challenges in their path every day. This morning, behind the wheel of his big 4x4, bullying a path through the traffic of Kabul, his dark and tired features are set with particular purpose, and a degree of enthusiasm. It's not his family's battle for economic survival that he's concerned with just now, or the struggle for his children's education, and much less for his country: Afghanistan, he feels, is beyond hope.

Abdul Rab's mind, just now, is focused on the war he wages as a professional, as an undercover officer of Afghanistan's national security forces. He's on his way to meet an informant, part of the network he's assembled, over the years, to probe the netherworld of Pakistan's tribal areas, on Afghanistan's southern border.

"There is word of my man," he explains between calls on his cellphone. "We came very close to catching him last year, when he came to Kandahar from Quetta on an operation. Now he's in Peshawar. He's coming here. I'm sure of it."

As he speaks, he produces a 9-mm pistol from beneath his belt and places it on the console, in easy reach. He smiles: nothing would make Abdul Rab's day like picking up a few solid facts about the movements of his man — an al

Qaeda field operative he's been tracking for three years, a facilitator who arms suicide bombers and dispatches them on their missions. The terrorist is an adversary, someone Abdul Rab can try to capture or kill. In short, an enemy he can deal with.

It's Abdul Rab's other wars that wear him down, that make him sigh with fatigue and discouragement. "What do you see there?" he asks, pointing at the rear-view mirror. He's not talking about the donkey carts and taxis. "It's Kabul, the home of our worst enemies. All the big people, working for themselves. And against us, against Afghanistan."

**H**e tells the story of a colleague, a general in the Karzai regime's Interior Ministry, which oversees policing throughout the country. The General was driving north from the capital one day, when he came across a police officer beating a man at a checkpoint. The General stopped and confronted the officer, ordering him to stop.

"The General asked what the man had done to deserve such a beating," Abdul Rab says. " 'Smuggling,' the policeman told him. But there were no drugs or other goods in the car. The policeman was just after money."

This stop-and-bribe practice by corrupt policemen led to a strike by Afghan truckers in April. Known as *mushkil tarashi*, the bribes can cost long-distance drivers up to \$10,000 a year. Hauling freight across the country, say

from Iran to Pakistan's Khyber Pass, a trucker could be stopped 400 times.

In this case, the driver was lucky: the general who rescued him from the policeman's fists also happens to be stridently honest. Still, the crooked cop defied his order to free the driver, instead pulling out his cell-phone.

"He called Zarar's office," Abdul Rab says, laughing, "and spoke to Zarar himself."

Zarar Ahmad Muqbul is President Hamid Karzai's minister of the interior. The checkpoint was located in Zarar's hometown of Charikar, north of Kabul. After a brief conversation, the police officer reported that the Minister had ordered the car impounded and the driver arrested. Both were taken back to Kabul. Later in the day, Minister Zarar alleged that the General was secretly in league with the driver, smuggling heroin.

"It came down to two stories," Abdul Rab says. "So the honest people at the ministry had a choice. Either they would believe their general or the Minister."

**A**bdul Rab's tale might seem grim enough if Minister Zarar were just a small-time hood, using local cronies to put the squeeze on passing truckers. But the multi-tiered graft afflicting Zarar's department is so chronic, so extensive and so resistant to correction that the Interior Ministry is regarded by most seasoned Afghan observers as one of the most corrupt branches of the Western-backed Afghan regime.

So much international aid money has vanished into the concentric rings of corruption that make up the Karzai administration that no reliable estimate exists of its total dollar value. Similarly, Foreign Affairs officials in Ottawa have resisted repeated requests, for the purposes of this article, to estimate the total sum of Canadian aid to Afghanistan.

**P**rime Minister Harper is fond of saying that the Afghan mission

constitutes Canada's largest single foreign aid package. But ask for a number, and you'll be invited to surf through a half-dozen ministerial websites to come up with a figure of your own. And there's no boasting in Ottawa about the auditing of these Canadian tax dollars once they begin making

**It's Abdul Rab's other wars that wear him down, that make him sigh with fatigue and discouragement. "What do you see there?" he asks, pointing at the rear-view mirror. He's not talking about the donkey carts and taxis. "It's Kabul, the home of our worst enemies. All the big people, working for themselves. And against us, against Afghanistan."**

their way through the many outstretched palms in Kabul. When millions go missing — as in the case of the embezzled police salaries we'll examine here — the blame game among embassies, aid agencies and the UN resembles a *buzkashi* match, in which Afghan horsemen scramble over the carcass of a headless goat.

The sheer scope of fraud within the regime's ministries has caused a collapse of public trust. So much so that Hamid Karzai's corrupt dominion arguably constitutes a greater threat to the long-term security of Afghanistan than anything those backcountry no-hopers known as the Taliban are capable of mustering on the battlefield. Yet Canadians have had little exposure to the troubling duality of their country's efforts in Afghanistan, distracted as they are by the fog of political war on the floor of the House of Commons over flashpoint issues like the mishandling of prisoners taken on the battlefield — itself a consequence of untrustworthy Afghan authorities.

The Taliban are suffering an acute operational crisis brought about, to no small degree, by the great skill and determination being shown by the Canadian Forces. But the troops' political masters are squandering this advantage, as proven by the evidence lurking just beneath the surface of the affairs of state in Kabul. The Harper government, by accepting a subservient role to the Bush administration's deeply flawed political and

diplomatic approach to Afghanistan, has allowed itself to become trapped into providing public relations cover for a Kabul regime that is desperately in need of a complete overhaul. Rather than trying to effect the necessary repairs, Canadian diplomats and civil servants have been reduced to two

main functions: making excuses for the regime's failures, and lowering expectations for the future.

**A**fghanistan's genuine democrats say that by perpetuating the Karzai administration's myth of viability, nations like Canada are smothering attempts to root out corruption and get on with winning the peace. "It is a disaster for the Afghan people," despairs Ramazan Bashar Dost, a popular member of Parliament from Kabul. "Mr. Karzai doesn't really want to fight corruption, and the international community, too, doesn't have the will to fight corruption in Afghanistan."

Doubters may refer to Abdul Rab. What are his plans, once he nails his man? This front-line counterterrorism specialist, this dedicated and accomplished Western ally in the fight against al-Qaeda, says he and his family are clearing out.

"There is no future for Afghanistan. When my war is finished with this killer, we will leave."

A walk through the crumbling architecture of the Karzai regime is like stumbling through a funhouse on the midway, with warped mirrors reflecting a weird array of characters, all of them darting mischievously among the shadows. Some, in truth, are honourable appointees, trying their best for the country, while others are imposters, clowns — and, predominantly, villains.

15 years ago, the cable industry created CPAC,  
Canada's only privately-owned, not-for-profit  
commercial-free politics TV.



Today, we say thank you to  
the cable companies who own CPAC.



The man at the top, Hamid Karzai, was once portrayed as his nation's great hope. His greatest success was his malleability: in his American mentors' hands, he became a stylish projection of leadership, a media darling. But after five years of waiting in vain for basic services (electricity is still unreliable, even in Kabul, where only one in five citizens receives piped water supplies), many Afghans, including some of the President's leading political allies, have had enough.

**K**abul MP Shukria Barakzai traces Karzai's undoing all the way back to his installation as interim leader in December 2001, a month after the Taliban fled Kabul in the face of a post-9/11, US-led assault. Both at that juncture, and at the subsequent conference in Bonn, Germany, which created the governing infrastructure Afghans endure today, the Bush administration was in the driver's seat.

"The Bonn agreement was a very bad start for a new political life in Afghanistan," says Barakzai, who had a hand in writing the country's new constitution. "The old criminals were given new places. It was difficult for Mr. Karzai, as president, without any soldiers, without a penny in the government's pocket, while the cabinet was full of malicious leaders, warlords and people with direct connections to drug money." Barakzai says she no longer supports Karzai "because he simply hasn't done his best" in the past five years to reduce his vulnerability to the scoundrels in and around his palace. Instead, she says, he's become more dependent on them.

Witness the career path of Interior Minister Zarar Ahmad Muqbul. Zarar's predecessor, Ali Jalali, is a respected, reform-minded administrator. But he resigned as minister in 2005 over Karzai's failure to support him in ridding areas under his jurisdiction of corruption. Specifically, Jalali had insisted on the dismissal of a reviled regional strongman

named Gul Agha Sherzai, who had been granted the governorship of Kandahar province after the collapse of the Taliban regime. Karzai's family, however, maintains close ties to Gul Agha. The president's solution was to airlift the old rogue to Jalalabad, where he became governor of Nangahar province — thus spreading the mantle of corruption, rather than containing it. When Jalali stepped down, Karzai replaced him with his undistinguished deputy, Zarar.

**S**ince then, another figure has taken Gul Agha's place as the most suspicious man of means in Kandahar: Wali Karzai, the President's younger brother. At a news conference in March, reporters in Kabul asked openly if widespread

**A walk through the crumbling architecture of the Karzai regime is like stumbling through a funhouse on the midway, with warped mirrors reflecting a weird array of characters, all of them darting mischievously among the shadows. Some, in truth, are honourable appointees, trying their best for the country, while others are imposters, clowns — and, predominantly, villains.**

rumours of Wali's connections with Kandahar's drug trade are being investigated. "That's just anti-Karzai propaganda," came the reply from the President's attorney general, Abdul Jabar Sabet. "I've seen no evidence of this."

Could this be because the Attorney General is looking the other way? That's the suspicion of Sabet's critics in Parliament. Supporters of one of his victims, the respected former chief of border police at Kabul Airport, General Aminullah Amerkhel, don't mince words: Sabet, they say, was acting on behalf of Kabul's leading druglords when he had Amerkhel removed from his post last October.

Circumstantial evidence appears damning. Amerkhel was an accomplished drug-buster: his face had

become well known to viewers of Afghanistan's TV news channels as he and his men nabbed smugglers almost daily. Then, last year, he challenged corruption up the chain of command. He told reporters that too often, he would arrest a courier — kilogram bags of pure heroin in hand — only to see the smuggler released the next day, on orders from above. Since Amerkhel's suspension by Sabet, arrests have plummeted. Only five traffickers have been collared at the airport in the past six months. Amerkhel regularly racked up five or six per week.

So is Hamid Karzai's attorney general really in league with the heroin gangs? It's a question that should interest the government of Canada for at least two reasons. First, heroin profits help finance the Taliban's war effort. Second, Sabet boasts to friends of enjoying residency in Canada: his wife and children live in Montreal. Yet officials in Ottawa — at Foreign Affairs, Immigration and the Prime Minister's Office — have refused since mid-March to confirm the status of President Karzai's attorney general.

**S**abet's past is littered with reasons that he should never have gained entry into Canada, particularly his long history of association with the black prince of Afghan extremists, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Sabet was a longtime counsellor to Hekmatyar, once the United States' most-favoured anti-Soviet guerrilla leader but now on their most-wanted list of terrorists. In 1992, Sabet's continuing links with Hekmatyar led to his dismissal from a job at the Voice of America in Washington, D.C. He was denied residency in the United States.

Sabet turned next to Canada, immigrating with his family to Montreal in 1999, where he became a familiar face at the downtown mosque Masjid as-Salam. Sources within Montreal's Afghan community confirm that Sabet portrayed himself as a simple refugee to gain residency,



Canadian Forces, Kevin Paul

Canadian Forces Medical Technician Cpl. Catherine Vaters (left) and NATO colleagues evacuate a wounded Afghan soldier at Kandahar Airfield. The good work of Canadian and NATO forces fighting the Taliban, writes Arthur Kent, is being squandered by corruption in the Karzai regime in Kabul that undermines support for the mission.

and that he failed to disclose the previous denial of re-entry into the US. Thus he allegedly by committed two “material misrepresentations” with regard to Canadian regulations. Sabet returned to Kabul in 2003, where he picked up a lawyer’s position at the Interior Ministry.

Then, in an ironic twist typical of US policy in Afghanistan, Sabet used his smooth command of English to form a relationship with a US Justice Department adviser who was seeking favourable reviews of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. As a result, Sabet led an Afghan government inspection of the site, declaring afterward that there were “only one or

two” complaints from prisoners, and that “conditions of the jail were humane. The rumours about prison conditions were all wrong.”

Soon after, both the US and British embassies in Kabul began lobbying for Sabet’s promotion, according to an aide of President Karzai’s who witnessed the sessions. Sabet was nominated as attorney general just months later. How that nomination was approved by Parliament says much about the power structure in Kabul. In order to ensure enough votes for Sabet, a deal was brokered by Karzai’s aides between the candidate and a key Karzai ally, Abdul Sayyaf. This brigand is one of Afghanistan’s most feared

warlords, a leading force of disunity among the militias that devastated Kabul in the civil war of the early 1990s. Today, Sayyaf’s an MP — and leader of the parliamentary minority.

In return for Sabet lending support to the controversial amnesty bill that Sayyaf and other accused war criminals pushed through the House earlier this year, the nominee secured his confirmation as attorney general. Since then, Sayyaf’s hold over Sabet has strengthened.

Sayyaf is frequently accused of land grabbing by citizens of villages to the west and north of the capital. A British lawyer happened to be in Sabet’s office when one such dispute

came forward. A grieving widow alleged that her home had been occupied by one of Sayyaf's militia commanders. The attorney general listened for a time, then leaned across his desk and yanked the letter of complaint from the widow's hands. He tore it up and ordered her to leave.

According to a senior Justice Ministry source, most if not all of Sabet's key staff appointments have

**More spectacularly, Kasim and his men have been the Attorney General's storm troopers in putting the squeeze on Kabul's vibrant young news media. On April 17, enraged by the coverage of one of his speeches by Tolo TV, Afghanistan's most popular independent channel, Sabet ordered Kasim and more than a hundred armed policemen to bring the errant journalists to his office. The police stormed Tolo TV's studios, arresting seven journalists, including four from other agencies covering the raid. Several of the reporters were rifle-butted and punched.**

been cleared through Sayyaf, particularly that of his deputy of narcotics affairs, General Stanakzai. This left Sayyaf with two trusted henchmen in key counter-narcotics posts: earlier, he had used his influence to place a close aide named Sadat in the Interior Ministry's hierarchy.

Sabet, meanwhile, has been equally determined to succeed in the game of connections. Just days after securing the attorney general's chair, he elevated a minor police officer named Nadir Hamidi to the rank of full general and made him his deputy. Within weeks, General Nadir — known widely as "Choor," or briber — fled Afghanistan to Dubai, his pockets stuffed with several hundred thousand dollars of state funds.

Sabet ducked accusations that he'd helped Nadir escape. Then he made an even more disruptive appointment. General Kasim is a former security chief of Baghlan province, north of Kabul. A Hekmatyar loyalist like Sabet, he was facing corruption charges — until the Attorney General had his file wiped clean and installed him as chief of Kabul's District Ten police station.

There, he's been a useful tool for Sabet's barnstorming "anti-vice" raids on foreign-owned Kabul restaurants. (In one incident in February, Kasim's men helped themselves to seized alcohol, according to foreign aid workers who witnessed the raid. An hour later, one of the expats was stopped at a checkpoint and beaten by policemen "whose breath reeked of vodka." He filed a complaint,

which now languishes at the Interior Ministry.)

More spectacularly, Kasim and his men have been the Attorney General's storm troopers in putting the squeeze on Kabul's vibrant young news media. On April 17, enraged by the coverage of one of his speeches by Tolo TV, Afghanistan's most popular independent channel, Sabet ordered Kasim and more than a hundred armed policemen to bring the errant journalists to his office. The police stormed Tolo TV's studios, arresting seven journalists, including four from other agencies covering the raid. Several of the reporters were rifle-butted and punched.

All of this occurred without warrants, as in the Amerkhel case. Saad Mohseni, Tolo TV's director, protested: "Sabet has shown that he is totally unfit to hold his position. Our international allies must tell the President this type of official is not acceptable to the Afghan people."

The UN agreed, denouncing the raid as "unlawful." But from the US and its NATO allies, including Canada, there has been only silence. President Karzai, feeling no heat from

his foreign sponsors and pressured by allies like Sayyaf, an avowed foe of the news media, had only this to say: "The Attorney General we have today is one that is in a head-on clash with the bad guys."

The concurrent practices of going soft on criminals while cracking down on the media should tell the people of Western democracies everything they need to know about the

Karzai regime, say its critics. "We are facing the old difficulties of Afghanistan's history in the last 25 years," says Shukria Barakzai. "Who is there who isn't working for his own pocket, who is there who isn't a warlord or criminal?"

"The President is completely isolated from the people. He only listens to this mafia group inside the palace."

Whose reach, the evidence shows, goes far into the countryside.

Zabul province sprawls northward from the Pakistan border in epic sweeps of desert landscape. Zabul's poverty is relieved only by the traffic flowing along the highway from Kabul in the east to the neighbouring province of Kandahar in the west. Zabul is preyed upon by the Taliban, who move arms and men through the backcountry and regularly attack remote police and army posts.

In March of 2006, the Governor of Zabul, an imaginative and successful administrator named Delbar Arman, made a direct plea to the visiting commander of US and coalition troops in the region, General David Fraser of Canada. Please ensure, he asked, that President Karzai and his functionaries pay Afghanistan's policemen, in full and on time. Many officers and men in Zabul's most restive districts hadn't received their salaries in three months.

Fraser, who believes that Arman is the kind of leader the international community needs to support, relayed the request up the chain of command.

Then politicians and bureaucrats got involved, both Western and Afghan. One year later, Zabul's police salaries are four months in arrears, a shameful betrayal of a province viewed by the US and NATO as an indicator of the Taliban's capabilities. In early June, Taliban gunmen attacked a police convoy in Zabul's Shahjoy district. Sixteen policemen died in the fighting.

A UN-administered program called the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, or LOTFA, was launched four years ago to distribute policemen's pay. Canada is one of 13 nations bankrolling the fund, along with the European Union and the UN. This year Canadian taxpayers will donate \$30 million to the effort. Trouble is, LOTFA has yet to come up with a way to place international aid directly into the hands of individual policemen. For now, the money must first find a way through — yes — the Karzai regime's Interior Ministry, and across the palms of people like Minister Zazar.

According to one general at the ministry, who laments the "losing battle" against corruption fought by honest officials and staff members, up to 30 percent of the department's foreign-donated finances go astray. Routinely, he says, at least one-tenth of provincial police funding is embezzled, mainly by officials posted to the ministry's headquarters in Kabul. The withholding of money for salaries for many months, he explains, helps conceal the crimes.

Canada has police and military officers stationed within the Interior Ministry, as does the US State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. In Ottawa, Foreign Affairs responded to queries about the Zabul scandal only by pointing a finger at the United Nations. "LOTFA is subject to the internal and external auditing procedures provided for in the finan-

cial regulations, rules and directives of the [United Nations Development Programme]."

This foreign bureaucratic smoke-screen is matched on the regime's side by a determination to deceive at every level. For instance, President Karzai's General Independent Administration of Anti Corruption and Bribery. This body has a staff of more than one hundred, who have toiled for 18 months without a single substantial conviction.

In this context, Canadians and other foreign sponsors of the Karzai regime need not wonder where so many of their tax dollars are winding up.

The footnote to this litany of wrongdoing is the damage it is inflicting on Canada's own political culture. Governments can be expected to spin and evade and make every effort to keep the public in the dark about the

**A UN-administered program called the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, or LOTFA, was launched four years ago to distribute policemen's pay. Canada is one of 13 nations bankrolling the fund, along with the European Union and the UN. This year Canadian taxpayers will donate \$30 million to the effort. Trouble is, LOTFA has yet to come up with a way to place international aid directly into the hands of individual policemen. For now, the money must first find a way through — yes — the Karzai regime's Interior Ministry, and across the palms of people like Minister Zazar.**

grimy underside of contentious issues. Journalists depend upon this kind of official evasion. It gives us a *raison d'être*, a mission to reveal and explain.

But it would be remiss of this correspondent, after 28 years of reporting regularly from Afghanistan, to fail to point out the remarkable degree of secrecy maintained by the Harper government regarding Canada's Afghan initiatives. Even the Kremlin was less manic in its information control during the Soviet occupation of the 1980s. It is regrettable to report that perhaps the only undisputed policy success in Afghanistan chalked up by the Prime Minister's Office is the complete stifling of virtually every public servant concerned with any aspect of the mission.

In Ottawa, one high-ranking official with oversight responsibilities in several of the areas covered by this article contacted me after hours, "ashamed," he said, to have to request anonymity. "The PMO spends more energy trying to control people than accomplishing goals," he said. "Here's how things work: questions come to us, people want us to explain the mission. We call the PMO to ask approval. They tell us to put it in writing, in an email. We send it in, and wait. Usually the approval never comes."

He went on: "We have to constantly fight the system. But if you're not going to let people do their jobs, what's the point? We're being handcuffed."

A more senior figure at an Ottawa-based agency states: "This prime minister's approach, and that of his staff, is a considerable impediment to the public's ability to comprehend what the

government is doing. It's really a different way of doing business than anything we've experienced before.

"The PM and his advisers treat every issue as if it's his own, as if it's personal. It's just very strange, and it results in a management style that blocks every door, including the ones that might actually take the government forward."

*Arthur Kent's film reports and articles are available online at [www.skyreporter.com](http://www.skyreporter.com). He has reported regularly from Afghanistan since 1980 for networks including the CBC, NBC News, BBC News, PBS and the History Channel, as well as for the Calgary Herald, Britain's The Observer and Maclean's.*