THE MASTER OF SPIN BOLDAK

Undercover with Afghanistan's drug-trafficking border police

By Matthieu Aikins

When I arrived in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's restive Baluchistan Province, I found the city's old bazaar shuttered in preparation for Ashura, an important day of mourning in the Shia calendar. In the past, Ashura had served as an occasion for sectarian fighting in Quetta, and so a cordon had been erected; I had to seek police permission, I was told, in order to photograph the procession. The following day, still dressed in Western clothes, I set off on foot from my hotel toward the courthouse. Perhaps because tourists have become a rare sight in this violent city, a Toyota Land Cruiser stopped just ahead of me and two men in the front beckoned to me. Their plump, clean-shaven faces were unthreatening, so I walked over to chat. When they learned I was a foreign visitor, they invited me for a sumptuous lunch, and later we drove around the city's crowded bazaars and toured a restricted area of the military cantonment. I decided not to introduce myself as a journalist; they seemed to accept that I was simply a young traveler interested in poking around their rough corner of the world.

A few days later, one of the men, Jahanzeb, introduced me to his cousin, Sikander, who soon began taking me out around the city himself. As I had already discovered, Pashtuns are a frank and friendly lot with visitors, and one night, cruising around in the Lexus that Sikander used as a mobile office, he confided to me that he was shipping

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Illustrations by Danijel Zezelj

forty *mon,* or two metric tons, of opium once a month from the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak. The drugs were carried by a convoy, a few dozen heavily armed men in Land Cruisers, through the desert into Baluchistan and then into Iran. Although the police in Afghanistan and Pakistan were bribed to give the convoy safe passage, the Iranian police were not, and encounters with them out in the desolate borderlands often turned into violent, desperate battles. Once the convoy made it across the border, the opium was delivered to a group of Iranian Baluchis. Sikander didn't accompany the convoys personally, but by organizing and funding the operation, he said, he was making between $125,000 and $250,000 in profits each trip.

At twenty-seven, Sikander was prematurely owlish, with shaggy coarse dark hair, a full mouth, and sly, almond eyes. His lanky frame moved with grace, and he handled guns and luxury vehicles with confident ease. Sikander's father also was a smuggler, slain by rivals when Sikander was a child. But his family remained well connected with top police officials in Baluchistan, and they, together with his ties to fellow Pashtuns in Afghanistan, allowed him to carry on his lucrative operation.

The most important of Sikander's connections was Colonel Abdul Razik, the leader of a tribal militia and border police force that extends across Kandahar and Helmand provinces—which produce 80 percent of Afghanistan's opium, which in turn is nearly 90 percent of the world's crop. Sikander was taking care to cultivate his relationship with the colonel. "I am growing a baby tiger," he told me. "When it gets large, I will gift it to Razik." At thirty years of age, Razik was the most powerful Afghan Border Police officer in the southern part of the country—a former child refugee who scrambled to power during the post-9/11 chaos, his rise abetted by a ring of crooked officials in Kabul and Kandahar as well as by overstretched NATO commanders who found his control over a key border town useful in their war against the Taliban. With his prodigious wealth, loyal soldiers, and connections to top government officials, Razik was seen as a ruthless, charismatic figure, a man who brooked no opposition to his will. I asked Sikander if he would take me to Afghanistan for a day to show me Razik's operation, and he agreed.

Two months later, on a hazy morning this past March, we arrived in the town of Chaman after four hours on a crumbling road over the Khojak Pass. The town's Afghan counterpart, Spin Boldak, sits just a few kilometers away, separated by a high concrete arch and a few dozen rifle-toting guards. As we paused for a break, squatting down in the dust of a truck yard for a late breakfast of bread and sour butter, the deep boom of an explosion echoed from the direction of the border. We all cringed at the sound. Sikander swept up the blanket we were eating on, and we walked back though the hard-packed, greasy yard to the car. A consultation ensued with a man dressed, like us, in a traditional long tunic; he leaned in through the driver's window to speak urgently in Pashto.

"It is confirmed," Sikander said after the man left. He swiveled around to where I sat in the back seat with Jahanzeb, his cousin. His lips were pursed together. "There was an explosion at the border," he told me. Jahanzeb, younger and with more delicate features, fixed his eyes on me as well.

"Oh, Matthieu," he said mournfully. "You are a big problem." They had planned to avoid formalities by smuggling me across the border; now, because of the explosion, the guards would be on high alert. A few more of Sikander's friends came over to the car, and as they began to discuss a plan, Jahanzeb turned to me occasionally to ask questions in English. Do you want to go back? Do you want to go across on a motorcycle? I didn't want to go back—it had taken me weeks of hanging around Quetta to arrange the trip—so we decided that Sikander and Jahanzeb would go ahead and send for me later.

After a few tense hours in Chaman, a white Corolla with a gold plastic ARMANI air-freshener on its dashboard arrived for me. The driver, tall and clean-shaven with a gap-toothed smile, looked me over as we accelerated north. "Do you speak Pashto?" he asked me. I shook my head. "Urdu?"

"I speak Persian," I offered in that language.

"Then just don't say anything," he muttered in Dari, the Afghan dialect of Persian. He examined my half-Asian features and wiry beard, which together gave me the look of an Afghan from the north—an Uzbek or Hazara, perhaps—and then placed his red embroidered cap, a typical Pashtun accessory, on my head.

At the checkpoint, cutting into a side lane, my driver wove, honked, and waved his way past the black-clad Pakistani and camouflage-clad Afghan guards. They waved back in recognition. We drove around the arch and onto a wide, rough-paved highway swirling with dust and traffic. "How are you, my dear?" the driver asked in Dari, grinning widely. "This is Afghanistan!"

On the latest United Nations Department of Safety and Security map, which color-codes Afghanistan to denote levels of risk for U.N. operations, we would have been, just then, in a tiny island of "high" orange surrounded by a wide sea of "extreme" red. The orange island is Spin Boldak and the road to Kandahar city; the red sea stretches across most of the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan, and farther to the southeast. This schema is illustrative of four striking facts. First and foremost, it depicts how a ferocious and increasingly sophisticated insurgency—the "neo-Taliban," as many now call them—has spread across the predominantly Pashtun south and southeast. Second, that red sea also corresponds with the indefinite deployment of 20,000 additional U.S. soldiers, sent here during the months leading up to the eighth anniversary of the 2001 invasion, in October. Intended to bolster the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a patchwork of different nations, the increase was a belated recognition of just how badly the country has fared after years of neglect and misman-

agement. Third, all the red regions on the UNDSS map serve as a rough approximation of the areas with opium under cultivation, representing a billion-dollar industry whose tentacles grip both the neo-Taliban and the fledgling Afghan state, from foot soldier to government minister. And last, our little island of "high" orange in the sea of "extreme" red is Colonel Razik's private domain. Together, these four facts—the intensifying insurgency, the massive deployment of international troops and assistance, the opium, and Razik's relatively secure territory—go a long way toward explaining why an uneducated thirty-year-old warlord remains firmly entrenched as an ISAF ally and drug trafficker at a crucial border crossing like Spin Boldak.

The Afghan-Pakistani border region has long been awash in opium, which is grown in Afghanistan and then generally smuggled west to the Balkans, via Iran and Turkey, or shipped out of the port of Karachi to the Gulf states and Africa. The trade boomed during the Eighties, when both the CIA and the Pakistani government were happy to turn a blind eye to the drug operations of the mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan, since it helped fund the war against the invading Soviet Union. After the Soviets left, the drugs remained, and since then opium production in Afghanistan has increased fourteen-fold, from around 500 tons in the mid-1980s to 6,900 tons this year. Recent counternarcotics efforts have dramatically reduced cultivation in the north and east of the country, and so both cultivation and trafficking have shifted to the south, where security is most tenuous.

Like much of Afghan life, drug operations tend to be organized by tribal and family affiliations. Colonel Razik has built his own militia around his Adozai, a prominent branch of the Achakzai, a Pashtun tribe. Historically, the Achakzai, along with a rival tribe, the Noorzai, have controlled the smuggling routes around the Khojak Pass, one of the two major mountain passes that connect the Middle East with the Indian subcontinent, the other being the more famous Khyber.

My driver, as it turned out, was Razik's paternal cousin, also named Abdul Razik—a twenty-nine-year-old lieutenant in the Border Police force, whom the locals, when they want to distinguish him from his slightly older relation, call Small Razik. Small Razik lived a cross-border existence: he had three wives and two houses, one in Chaman and one in Spin Boldak, and he carried both a national-identity card from Pakistan and an Afghan passport.

After stopping to pick up a bearded, heavyset man, we veered off the pavement, away from the screen of shops that lines the highway and onto a rutted dirt trail that led us out to the desert. We halted about a hundred yards from a squat, mud-walled fort flying the Pakistani flag. To the south were the spindly peaks of the Khojak Pass, which I had just traversed. To the north and west the desert extended in a haze-shrouded plane stubbled with rocky outcroppings. "That is Pakistan," Small Razik said, indicating the fort. The heavyset man got out, and we watched him amble slowly toward the border post.

Razik turned to me suddenly. "Do you know what I do?" he asked. "I am a smuggler." He said it proudly—it is, after all, the natural heritage of his tribe, which has straddled the border since the British drew it in 1893. "I take cars and things to Pakistan."

Didn't he have problems with the Pakistani police? I asked. Razik beamed. "No problems! I just give them money. You see that man?" he said, waving toward our former passenger, who had by now reached the post. "He is the commander of that fort." Razik hopped out and walked after the man, leaving me alone in the car. As I sat there, a small boy flogging a worn donkey rode by on a brush-laden cart; out of curiosity, I opened the glove compartment, and found a garbage bag stuffed with Kalashnikov rounds.

Colonel Abdul Razik's rise exemplifies a classic Afghan narrative: the sudden ascent to power through violence and foreign patronage. Born in Spin Boldak around the time Soviet troops first entered Afghanistan, Razik grew up during a period of unprecedented social disruption. His family's fortunes soared when Esmat Muslim, a warlord from the same Adozai branch of the Achakzai, came to prominence in the region. A former military officer who had been trained by the Russians, Esmat became a mujahideen commander during the early 1980s and organized a force drawn mainly from his tribe; Razik's uncle Mansour became one of his principal lieutenants. Notorious for his treachery and cruelty, Esmat shattered the delicate peace that had existed between the Achakzai and Noorzai smuggling clans, and he eventually sided with the Communist government in return for control over the border trade. In the end, Esmat was driven out of Spin Boldak in 1988 by a combined mujahideen offensive, and later died of cancer in Moscow.

With the collapse of the central government in the early 1990s, Kandahar descended into anarchy. Local

warlords divided up and pillaged the province. Even the city of Kandahar itself was split among several commanders, and throughout the province roads were strangled by hundreds of checkpoints at which theft, rape, and murder were common.

It was in reaction to such depredations by the warlords that the Taliban emerged, in 1994, from the districts around Kandahar city. Their first major victory was the capture of Spin Boldak on October 12, 1994, an event encouraged by the Pakistani trucking mafia, who saw the group as a means of clearing the roads north to Central Asia. Consequently, the balance between the Achakzai, who were linked to the traditional aristocracy, and the Noorzai, who were more congenial to a radical Islamist movement, swung again. Noorzai tribal figures such as Mullah Akhtar Jan Noorzai, a former commander in Spin Boldak, and Hajji Bashir Noorzai, one of the region's largest drug smugglers, became influential supporters of the Taliban. (In April, Bashir Noorzai was sentenced to life in a U.S. prison on drug-trafficking charges, after having been lured to New York City by federal agents.) Razik's uncle Mansour, who had survived Esmat's departure by rejoining the mujahideen, was hanged from the gun of a tank north of Spin Boldak by the Taliban. Razik's father also was killed, and his family, along with many Achakzai tribal leaders, fled into exile in Pakistan—until the U.S.-led invasion arrived like a thunderbolt.

In November of 2001, the CIA paid Gul Agha Shirzai, who had been the ostensible governor of Kandahar during the chaos before the Taliban, to assemble an anti-Taliban militia in Quetta with the goal of capturing the province. Shirzai put together a force that drew mainly on Achakzai tribesmen. "The Americans said, 'We will help you take your country back from the terrorists,'" recalled Fayda Mohammad, the commander of this Achakzai contingent, when I visited him on a return trip in May at his modest, somewhat dilapidated two-story house in Spin Boldak. Abdul Razik also had been part of the unit, but few remember him from that time; he was then about twenty-two years old and completely obscure. "No one knew who he was," said Abdul Wali, a Mohammadzai tribesman who had been a fighter with the group and later joined the Afghan National Army.

The Americans had given the group cash to buy weapons in Pakistan and directly supplied more by helicopter—along with a group of Special Forces soldiers—once the militia had infiltrated Afghanistan and occupied Takht-e-Pul, a strategic pass between Spin Boldak and Kandahar city. With U.S. airstrikes clearing the way, Shirzai's forces advanced to the airport. The provincial capital itself was in the process of being handed over, after extensive negotiations between Hamid Karzai and the Taliban, to Mullah Naqib, a well-respected retired mujahideen commander. But American advisers had come to believe that Naqib was too close to the Taliban, and so they encouraged Gul Agha Shirzai—against Karzai's wishes—to wrest control from Naqib and retake the governorship of the province. Naqib, fearing U.S. airpower, backed off.

Shirzai, who is from the Barakzai tribe, had relied heavily on the Achakzai for muscle, and now they wanted to claim their reward. "There was a deal between me and Gul Agha," Fayda told me. "He went to Kandahar city, and he said, 'You and your tribe take the security of the border.'"

That summer saw the return of widespread opium cultivation in the south of Afghanistan, after the Taliban had banned it the year before. With stocks running low, the price paid to farmers for opium shot up to $250 per kilo at harvesttime, compared with $28 in 2000. The nascent central government had little influence; every warlord was running his own small fiefdom, and the economic incentives were clear. Fayda Mohammad, tasked with policing one of the world's largest drug-smuggling routes, soon found his job impossible to do with any honor. He and his men would stop trucks full of opium or hashish only to find them under the protection of prominent officials.

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On one occasion, he claimed, he was forced into releasing a truck under direct pressure from a powerful minister in Kabul. Another driver carried a letter from Bacha Shirzai, Governor Shirzai's brother.

As a result of his obstinacy, Fayda Mohammad says, he was gradually marginalized by Gul Agha Shirzai and other players in Kabul and Kandahar. A number of influential Achakzais I spoke to agreed, describing Fayda as an honest man in the wrong job; others said that he was simply ineffective at distributing resources to his tribesmen, who then pushed him out. In any case, about nine months after his appointment, Fayda left as the top commander of the Achakzai tribal militia.

A grand Achakzai tribal jirga was convened to choose a replacement, and the group settled on the twenty-three-year-old Abdul Razik. Since the American invasion, Razik had distinguished himself in bravery and tactical ability, and had been made a minor commander. As a candidate for the chief position, he would dispel any rivalry among the assembled commanders. He seemed simple and honest, and, since his father and uncle had been killed by the Taliban, he could be relied on to fight steadfastly against them.

"I said, 'Among you, this young man Razik looks innocent. We will put him as the new commander,'" recalled Hajji Ahmad Shah, one of the elders who presided at the jirga and is now Spin Boldak's parliamentary representative in Kabul. Razik was duly crowned with a turban in the traditional manner.

Others took a more cynical view of Razik's appointment. "They thought that Razik was nothing, that they could control him," said Mohammad Naeem Lalai, a former Border Police commander who was present at the jirga.

But whether the elders believed Razik to be honest or merely naive, they were wrong. Razik would quickly move to expand the force's involvement in the enormous opium traffic pouring through the region, and in the process would grow powerful enough to defy even his own tribal elders. Meanwhile, his abilities as a commander, and his fighting force that remained highly effective in the absence of a national army, soon made him indispensable to the central government and the ISAF.

In Spin Boldak, Small Razik and I made our way to a dusty lot of used SUVs. Entering a showroom made from a shipping container, with a sign reading SHORAM, we sat cross-legged on the floor to share tea and bread with the owner, Samiullah. Chubby and elfin, Samiullah had become one of the wealthiest men in Boldak by way of a string of car dealerships, office buildings, and construction projects; his father, Asadullah Wafa, was a powerful official in Kabul and the former governor of Helmand Province.

Sikander and Jahanzeb arrived, pleased to see me. But there was a hitch: Colonel Razik had suddenly gone to Kandahar city on urgent business. Now the two had to go back to Quetta, and if I wanted to see the colonel I would have to wait here in Boldak as Samiullah's guest.

"We will be back for you in a few days," Sikander said, "or they will bring you back. Don't worry, you can trust these men."

During my stay, Spin Boldak with Samiullah began to seem like a theater of the absurd. Each day, I'd inquire as to the whereabouts of Colonel Razik, only to be told he was in Kandahar, or Kabul, but would be coming very soon. And each day, our routine would be the same—up early in the morning for breakfast, before driving to the "shoram," where I'd spend hours swatting flies on the veranda while prospective buyers languorously conducted their business with Samiullah.

I was learning, however, that Boldak is a special sort of border town. The big business there is cars—right-hand-drive cars, to be precise, used cars bought mainly in Japan and shipped in duty-free via Dubai. Afghanistan is a left-hand-drive country, but the vehicles are intended for Pakistan. They are sent overland from Karachi in sealed containers, unpacked in Spin Boldak, and sent right back across the border, with forged papers and baksheesh given to various officials along the way.

This may seem like a strange journey, but it's a simple matter of comparative advantage. Under the Afghan Transit Trade agreement, which dates to 1965, Pakistan allows Afghanistan-bound goods to traverse its territory duty-free. Afghanistan is a free port with minimal duties, whereas in Pakistan taxes and customs can double or even triple a vehicle's cost. This price differential, combined with widespread corruption and inefficient law enforcement in both countries, has created an enormous market for smuggling. In fact, the smuggling of goods may

be the biggest economic sector in Afghanistan, larger even than the opium trade, according to World Bank reports.

As a result, places like Spin Boldak have become markets for all sorts of goods to be smuggled back into Pakistan. Each day, new shipping containers arrived, and Samiullah and I would often go to watch them being cracked open and unloaded. The haul was not just vehicles. It was all the cast-off crud of the First World, anything conceivably worth being shipped here: used microwave ovens, guitars, DVD players, bicycles, car stereos, TV sets, Beta camcorders, keyboards, propane stoves, motorized wheelchairs, generators, winches, children's toys, clothing. I watched one bent, beturbaned old man hauling a tangled bundle of PlayStation controllers slung over his shoulder like a bushel of thatching.

Once empty, the shipping containers find a second life as workshops and dwellings. A vast container town called Weish had grown up along the highway to Pakistan, a whole ecosystem of smuggling—from big dealers, like Samiullah, who also kept offices in Dubai and Japan; to the tamper-wallahs, who specialized in changing a car's serial and chassis numbers; all the way down to grime-covered little boys who scampered around wielding wrenches the length of their skinny arms, banging away at old Toyota transmissions.

Maintaining a sort of order in this chaos was Razik's Border Police, who protected the trade and in turn fed off it. The Border Police were so involved in smuggling that the duties of several commanders who frequented the showroom, Small Razik included, seemed to consist entirely of brokering goods. When I asked them why they were never in uniform, they told me they suited up only for major engagements. Their days were spent sizing up cars, gossiping on the showroom's veranda over cups of chai, and sealing deals. Toward the end of each afternoon, a group of boys would arrive with various permission chits, fake registration documents, and receipts for the petrol taxes paid to Razik's force, and the boys and the commanders

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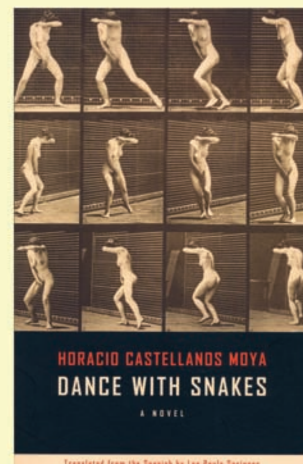

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would round up a convoy of vehicles destined for Quetta.

Of course, some Border Police officers were engaged in the serious business of securing Spin Boldak. The most active I met was Commander Hajji Janan, who wore a U.S. Army combat uniform with a captain's insignia and a 1st Infantry Division patch. Janan had been a police officer in the Taliban regime before he sensed the changing winds of fortune, shaved his beard, and joined his tribesmen in the new border force. Today, he roams around town in a green police Dodge Ranger, accompanied by a posse of five young soldiers carrying grenade launchers. One day at lunchtime, I watched as he set up a checkpoint on the highway in front of the showroom, where he ate and chatted with the other commanders while his beardless, swaggering troops accosted drivers. Most of these young men had joined the force when they were sixteen or seventeen, which for the oldest among them, Ahmad Shah, was five years ago. Not that they were green—they had all seen intense combat in the hilly scrublands that bordered Pakistan. They took their work seriously. Shah, the sergeant of Janan's little squad, was particularly proud one day when he caught a carful of Baluchis concealing a Kalashnikov and a pistol.

The most consistently uttered praise of Colonel Razik in Spin Boldak is that he has maintained a level of security unparalleled in Kandahar Province. The town is now far safer than Kandahar city, an hour and a half's drive north. "There is no water, no trees, no gardens here," one refugee from Helmand told me, "but there is *amniat*," pronouncing the Persian word for security as if it were a sacred name. Razik's success was attributed to his prowess in combat—"He was always at the front of the fighting," said a cousin of Samiullah's—and also to his equally well-known ruthlessness. Stories abound of men chained to the rocks at Takht-e-Pul and then executed with rockets; of long stretches spent in Razik's private prisons; of thieves' corpses being left, on orders, in the streets for three days.

Essential, too, were groups like Commander Janan's, which, relative to typical Afghan police, were trained and paid better. Nor was Razik the only one who found them useful. The Border Police's hand-in-glove cooperation with the local ISAF forces in Boldak was evident the first day I met Janan. That evening, Samiullah got a call and handed me his phone. A somewhat baffled-sounding American accent came through on the line: "Hi, yeah, is this Matthieu? This is Captain Cowles, with the U.S. Army. We heard from Hajji Janan that there was a Canadian citizen alone here in Spin Boldak, and, well, we just wanted to make sure that you were all right."

I assured him that I was, but the next morning Janan came by the house and asked if I would come to the ISAF just outside of town. "It is optional," he said.

I got in the truck and we rode out with his men to Forward Operating Base Spin Boldak, which is manned by a mix of Canadian, U.S., and Afghan National Army soldiers. A gruff American sergeant named McDermott drove out with an interpreter to meet us and bring us back to the base. I noticed that Ahmad Shah and his crew were allowed to bring their weapons, though McDermott frisked me.

Captain Cowles, a young and solicitous type, got me a soft drink. I produced my passport, and the officers started questioning me, with a combination of suspicion and concern, about what I was doing in the region. I couldn't say that I was a journalist in front of Janan, for whom the interpreter was translating our conversation, but I managed to convince them that I wasn't a spy, or worse. "We thought maybe it might be another case of that American Taliban, what's his name, Lindh," said Tim Bonnacci, a Canadian Army captain, only half in jest.

"You know, this is a battle space," Cowles told me. I said I was fine, since I was under the protection of the local Achakzai tribe. "Well, this is a mixed Noorzai and Achakzai area, so you should be concerned,"

he said. While a Canadian sergeant went off to photocopy my passport, some of the officers spoke privately to Janan in a corner. I sat down next to Cowles and asked him if perhaps Janan's wearing a U.S. Army uniform—with the Stars and Stripes on it, no less—might be sending the wrong message. "Oh, the locals know who he is," answered Cowles. I said I meant that his policies and actions might be interpreted as being American. "I don't think there's any worry about that," he said, sweeping the air with his hand. "Hajji Janan is one of our best guys. We don't go anywhere without them."

The sergeant returned with my passport, and we all stood up to go. "Be careful with these guys," he muttered to me, eyeing Ahmad Shah, who was in turn eyeing some of the gear on his webbing. "Some of them are pretty rough." I made a joke about how their weapons always seemed to be loaded and switched to full auto, with the safeties off. "Yeah, we see them come in all the time for treatment for things they've inflicted on themselves," the sergeant said.

Cowles, McDermott, Janan, and I got back in the pickup truck and rode back out to the perimeter of the base to say our goodbyes. "Whoa, no hugs, man. I don't do hugs," said McDermott, fending off Ahmad Shah's embrace. Cowles did return the hug, though, and Janan asked if I would take his and Cowles's picture. The Americans shook my hand.

"Okay, nice meeting you," Cowles said and then turned to his interpreter and Janan. "Now tell him to take our friend out to the desert and kill him." He burst out laughing before the interpreter could translate. It was the sort of slightly hysterical laugh that one probably acquires near the end of a rotation in a place like Spin Boldak.

Mohammad Naeem Lalai, a thirty-five-year-old Achakzai from Spin Boldak, joined the Border Police about the same time that Abdul Razik did. He and Razik once were close friends, but they had a bitter falling-out that led to Lalai's quitting the force in February of last year. Lalai told me he had become disgusted with Razik's corruption and had tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to change course. Others I spoke to told me that Lalai and Razik had simply quarreled over prestige and money. Whatever the case, Lalai nursed his grudge for a few months in Kandahar and then moved to Kabul, where he decided to join the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), a relatively new, centrally run police force dedicated to fighting drug cultivation and trafficking. Lalai was well connected, having spent time in prison during the Taliban regime for his work with Jamiat-e-Islami, the principal party within the Northern Alliance, and so he was offered his choice of postings. "I said, 'Send me to my province,'" he told me.

Sitting in a friend's apartment in Kabul, Lalai spread out a sheaf of documents that corroborated his story: documents detailing drug busts in Spin Boldak, commendations from the ministry for his work, and his promotion to major with the CNPA. Pulling up his shalwar kameez, he showed me further proof of his efforts—four bullet scars from an assassination attempt in September of last year. A bodyguard at his friend Zalmay Tufon's house had fired on him as he was leaving. Tufon's son shot back at the bodyguard, paralyzing him, and when they dragged him into the house, they later claimed, he confessed that Abdul Razik had offered him $100,000 to kill Lalai.

After his recovery, Lalai continued hounding Razik in Spin Boldak. But if the ways of the old Afghanistan had failed, the ways of the new Afghanistan soon frustrated his plan. According to Lalai, and to other sources who back up his account, Razik sent Assadullah Wafa, the former minister and governor of Helmand, to Kabul to lobby for Lalai's transfer. Lalai was summoned to the capital. "Razik doesn't have any problems with Kabul," he told me, "because he has enough money to pay all of them."

Idling around Kabul, waiting for his next posting, Lalai was now trying to undermine Razik as best he could. Two months before our meeting, he presented his evidence at a CNPA conference and also showed

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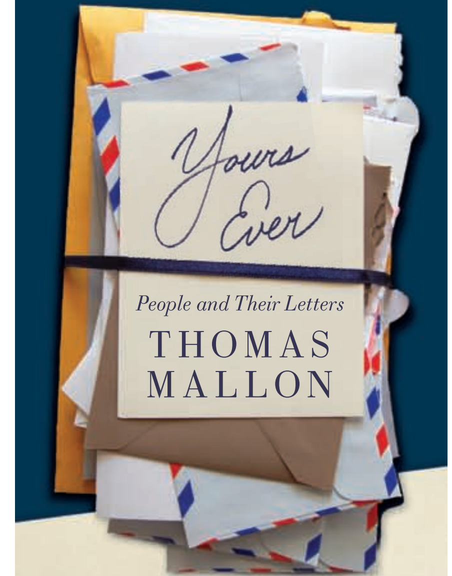

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it to his boss, the deputy minister of the interior for counternarcotics, General Mohammad Daud Daud (who has himself been documented, in an investigation by the *Globe and Mail,* as having links with drug smugglers), as well as to a number of Western advisers to the CNPA. Lalai has received no response yet, but he remained hopeful that the advisers, at least, would take interest. "They are slow," he said. "What we do in one day, the foreigners do in one month."

Lalai estimated that Razik pulls in between $5 million and $6 million per month in revenues, money he has invested in properties in Kabul and Kandahar and also abroad, in Dubai and Tajikistan. The racket itself is run directly by a select group of his commanders, who facilitate drug shipments and collect payment from the smugglers. Lalai showed me a list with their names—Janan was among them—and the names of the five biggest drug dealers in Spin Boldak. He said that Razik's men also had imported shipping containers full of acetic anhydride, a chemical used in heroin manufacturing, from China.

Lalai was the only person I found who would openly accuse Razik of drug smuggling. The conjoined mention of "Abdul Razik" and "drug smuggling" by a Western journalist in Kandahar was enough to cast a chill over most interviews. But on condition of anonymity, two other Kandahari politicians—Achakzai tribal elders with clean reputations and who were widely respected—made similar assertions to me about Razik's involvement in drug smuggling, his private prisons, his vast wealth, and his entanglement in a network of corrupt high officials and major drug smugglers. An official at the Kandahar office of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, who asked not to be named, agreed that Razik was operating his own prisons and conducting extrajudicial executions.

I also spoke to one of Razik's current commanders, who was initially extremely reluctant and agreed to meet only on the basis of absolute anonymity—Razik would kill him if he knew he was talking, he said. Still, he came forward because he felt that the corruption had swelled to monstrous proportions, and he was anguished about the worsening security situation that was costing the lives of more and more of his men. He said that even as the commander of a company-sized force in a volatile border zone, he was powerless to stop the convoys of drug smugglers that ran through his area. Not only were they better armed than he and his men; some smugglers had shown him letters of protection signed by Razik himself. Many of these convoys, the commander said, were in fact made up of green Border Police pickup trucks headed for the heroin laboratories in Helmand Province's Taliban-controlled areas. Others were unmarked Land Cruisers headed south into Baluchistan.

"These men are destroying our country," he said.

Razik's clandestine smuggling operations have spilled over into the allied fight against the Taliban, thereby bolstering the widely held perception that the ISAF and the central government are favoring certain tribes and marginalizing others. Soon after he assumed power at the border, Razik began to feud with elements of the Noorzai tribe, particularly the Sultanzai, a rival smuggling clan spread between Spin Boldak and Chaman. One notorious incident took place during the summer of 2006 in Panjwaii District, a volatile area just west of Kandahar city. A predominantly Noorzai district, Panjwaii is a lush river valley crisscrossed by thick orchards and mud-walled compounds, and it provides an excellent springboard for attacks on Kandahar city. During the course of the summer, Taliban fighters had infiltrated the valley, and eventually the district governor, an Achakzai, called in Abdul Razik's border force.

What followed was a debacle. The Noorzais, fearing their tribal enemies, rose up and joined forces with the Taliban. Razik and his men responded to the unexpected resistance with brutality. "They were killing women and children," said Ustaz Abdul Halim, a Noorzai and former mujahideen commander who lives in Kandahar city. "After that, everyone was with the Taliban."

Capitalizing on the tribal dynamics, the Taliban installed a Noorzai, Mullah Rauf Lang, as their commander in Panjwaii District. Later that fall, newly arrived Canadian troops in the area would launch Operation Medusa, a large-scale assault that killed hundreds of fighters and scores of civilians in weeks of close combat and withering bombardments. Today, the area remains one of the most violent in Kandahar Province—the Canadians suffer many of their casualties there and have recently abandoned two untenable forward operating bases in the area—and anti-government sentiments still run high.

On my tenth day in Spin Boldak, word arrived that Colonel Razik had returned. This fact was also evident from the increased security that appeared along the highway in front of Samiullah's guesthouse, which was near the main Border Police station. Samiullah, Small Razik, and I drove over to Colonel Razik's massive family compound, a walled mudbrick warren set back from the main road. Several heavily armed Border Police watched us alertly as we pulled in—Razik has been subject to numerous assassination attempts. They waved Samiullah through, and we pulled into a parking lot full of expensive SUVs.

The colonel's grandmother had just died, and the place was crammed with those angling to offer condolences. We joined the flow of mourners down a set of narrow interior walls, passing through several more cordons of security. Small Razik stopped to chat with the guards, who seemed older and harder than the youths I had met around town. These were Razik's praetorians, a "rapid reaction force" that he took around with him to tamp down crises.

At last we reached an inner compound where a final set of guards was frisking the arriving guests. We were allowed to pass through unmolested, in deference to Samiullah. Here, more than a hundred men were sitting under a canopy of raised fabric, some of it camouflage, in a courtyard large enough to fit not only this sizable crowd but also half a dozen armored Land Cruisers. Virtually every household in the district had sent male representatives to pay their respects to Razik's family. Scores of men, neatly done up in their best silk turbans and waistcoats, were coming and going under the billowing canopy.

"That's Rahmatullah Sangaryar," Samiullah whispered to me, pointing to a heavily bearded man in a dark waistcoat. "He was a big man in the Taliban. The Americans took him to Guantánamo." Sangaryar had been repatriated in April of last year.

We sat down on a stone ledge near the edge of the crowd. A young boy brought over some bottled water and asked us if we'd like tea. I craned my head to catch a glimpse of Razik. "He's over there," said Samiullah, pointing to a raised dais where the elders were sitting. From my perch I could only see a row of backs. Now and then a singsong Arabic cadence would pierce the soft murmur of the crowd, who would cup their hands together in supplication as prayers were recited for the deceased grandmother.

At last, Samiullah took me by the hand and, picking our way through the seated congregation, we approached the dais. As we got closer, I became aware of a young man sitting amid the whitebeards and knew immediately that this was Colonel Razik. The elders made space for me, and I got down on the dais. "This is Matthieu. He is a Canadian guest," said Samiullah.

Razik and I contemplated each other for a moment. He looked even younger than his thirty years and had a boyishly handsome, guileless face with a square jaw and clear eyes. It was not at all the face of a fire-breathing warlord. A tuft of short hair poked out from under his hat in what was nearly a widow's peak. He was dressed simply, in a white cotton shalwar kameez and a gray pinstriped waistcoat. Only his full mouth, with its crop of slightly crooked, strong-looking teeth, gave any hint of his great vigor and violence.

Pausing in his conversation, Razik greeted me with a reserved tone, and we shook hands. I told him I was a friend of Sikander's,

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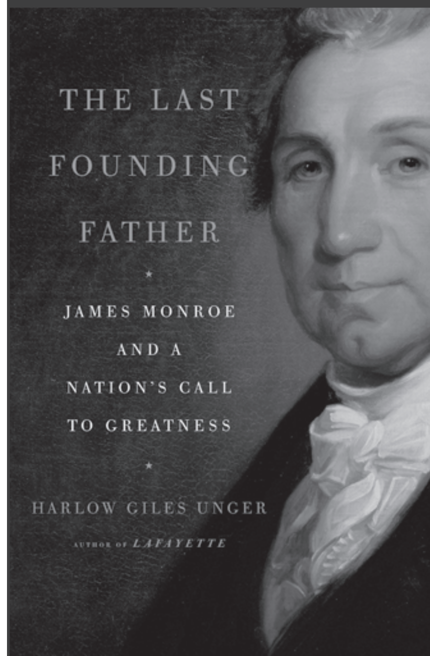

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and he said I was welcome here. I thanked him for his men's hospitality.

A grim irony of the rising pro-Taliban sentiments in the south is that the United States and its allies often returned to power the same forces responsible for the worst period in southerners' memory—the post-Soviet "mujahideen nights." In the case of Gul Agha Shirzai (now governor of Nangarhar but still a major force in Kandahar), the same man occupied the exact same position; in the case of Razik, nephew of the notorious Mansour, it is the restoration of an heir. By installing these characters and then protecting them by force of arms, the ISAF has come to be associated, in the minds of many Afghans, with their criminality and abuses. "We're doing the Taliban's work for them," said one international official with years of experience in counternarcotics here.

In the initial scramble to invade Afghanistan in 2001, there was a certain pragmatism to enlisting the mujahideen, who represented the best means of taking over the country in the absence of a substantial U.S. ground presence. But those troops were diverted to Iraq, and the ISAF was cobbled together slowly, arriving too late and with too few soldiers to upend the warlords' rule. Canadian forces didn't deploy to Kandahar until 2006, and even then their contingent of 2,500 was stretched far too thin to control one of the most critical provinces in Afghanistan; the base at Spin Boldak was largely abandoned for seven months at the end of 2006, when troops were needed for the offensive in Panjwaii.

"We were facing the worst-case scenario in 2006—a conventional takeover by Taliban forces," said Brigadier General Jonathan Vance, the Canadian commander of ISAF forces in Kandahar Province. He was proud that his country's small contingent had been able to hold the insurgency more or less at bay. But he admitted that the life of the average Kandahari had become less secure as the Taliban began to tighten their grip on Kandahar city. "I don't have the capacity to make sure someone doesn't rip their guts out at night."

Military officers like General Vance find themselves in a peculiar fix when confronted with characters like Abdul Razik. These entrenched figures hold posts or wear uniforms whose legitimacy must be respected. But many of those who maintain their power through corruption and coercion were originally installed by the U.S. military—a fact not lost on Afghans, who tend to have longer memories than Westerners here on nine- or twelve-month rotations.

I asked General Vance if he was aware that Razik was directly involved in the drug trade. "Yes," he said. "We are completely aware that there are a number of illicit activities being run out of that border station." He had few illusions about Razik, with whom he interacts directly. "He runs effective security ops that are designed to make sure that the business end of his life runs smoothly, and there is a collateral effect on public order," he told me. "Ideally, it should be the other way around. The tragedy of Kandahar is that it's hard to find that paragon of civic virtue."

Indeed, honest people in Afghanistan don't often occupy the halls of power, and they don't usually have the resources to be the first in line for big development contracts. Should one's security restrictions allow one to stroll the streets, however, one will find them there, pushing carts of vegetables, positively begging strangers to join them for a cup of tea that might cost them half their day's salary. If one looks a little harder, one will find them in crumbling little homes, so unlike the palatial "poppy palaces" of Kabul's new elite, dwellings such as Fayda Mohammad's in Spin Boldak, or Hajji Ahmad Shah's in Carte Nau Market, a poor area on the edge of town: places of exile, to which honest men have been marginalized either by force or by choice. In other cases—such as that of Malalai Kakar, Kandahar's top female police officer, who was shot in September of last year by unknown assailants, or that of Alim Hanif, chief judge of the new Central Narcotics Tribunals Appeals Court, killed outside his house in Kabul by masked men—the honest Afghans will be found in the cemetery.

As for Razik, he remains alive and very much the master of the borderlands. Occasionally, outside forces will annoy him: in July, CNPA teams, working with DEA mentors, raided two caches of hashish in Razik's territory, arresting one of his commanders in the process. But Razik is hardly at odds with his government. After the first round of national elections closed on August 20, his men forcibly took Spin Boldak's ballot boxes into his house for "safekeeping" overnight. It was just one of the many reports of electoral fraud in Kandahar Province, which polled overwhelmingly for President Karzai, according to the independent Election Commision of Afghanistan. The count from Spin Boldak's polling stations: Karzai, 8,341; his main challenger, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, 4. ■

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