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Foreign civilians in Afghanistan

The greatest breach

by J.K

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<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/01/foreign-civilians-afghanistan>



A SQUAD of insurgents burst into a restaurant in Kabul on January 17th and conducted the worst massacre of foreign civilians since the war began. They killed 13 foreigners along with at least seven Afghan civilians. They also stripped away the last veneer from the sense of safety that “soft targets” had once enjoyed in Afghanistan.

The roll call of expatriate victims showed what the Taverna du Liban had been until then—almost a rite of passage for foreigners coming to Kabul for the first time, and a regular haunt for the old hands who stayed. Behind its unassuming façade was a tasteful oasis with an abundantly generous proprietor who plied his guests with free food. Yet by the time of the attack, Taverna, as Kabulis called it, had been struggling to hold its expatriate clientele, despite its reputation as a popular place.

For several years now, after the relatively freewheeling period from 2002 to 2009, many international organisations have been restricting access to unfortified public venues—soft targets in the parlance of security professionals. The foreign agencies were learning to keep their staff largely bolted inside private, heavily guarded premises or in compounds with triple-layered security.

In these privately-run compounds a growing number of foreigners are charged up to \$350 a night to be kept in “green zone”-like conditions reminiscent of Baghdad in 2005. Staffed by Filipinos and eastern Europeans, their facilities have kept Kabul’s expatriate community safely insulated from the city at large. But many of the expats loathe the life there, preferring the sort of conflict-zone existence where they can live and dine on their own and mingle almost freely in Afghan society. They argue that forming personal relationships with their Afghan counterparts was of critical importance; those freedoms were supposed to be essential to doing the job right.

The attack on Taverna, in the short term at least, has put an end to that argument. It has some managers worrying about the exodus of international staff and the difficulty of recruiting good replacements. These imported civilians are still providing vital support to the wobbly government of Afghanistan. It would struggle terribly to serve its citizens without hands-on help from foreigners.

The president, Hamid Karzai, has been lurching erratically through his last months in power. Presidential elections are scheduled for April and he is constitutionally forbidden from standing again. It took him 20 hours to issue his statement condemning the attack. Among the Afghans killed was a 22-year-old waiter who had been working two shifts seven days a week to support his family and to pay for his own wedding engagement, which had been due to take place on January 24th.

In his eventual statement, Mr Karzai spared a moment to complain about the foreign presence in Afghanistan. “If NATO forces and...the United States of America want to co-operate and be united with Afghan people, they must target terrorism,” he said. The next day his National Security Council blamed “foreign-intelligence services” (read: Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence) for the attack, reasoning that it could not have been the work of ordinary Taliban. One Western diplomat said politely that Mr Karzai’s reaction was “disappointing” and then remarked as an aside that it was “almost unintelligible to a student of the English language”.

It was more like predictable than disappointing however, and pathetic too. Mr Karzai knows that neither his side nor the Taliban have any chance of running a functional government without foreign assistance. Whoever holds Kabul will need money or expertise from abroad, as the Taliban also know. So the president's decision to fix blame for this attack on his partners in NATO and America, exactly while he is stonewalling a pact that would keep their troops in his country for years to come (and would also, in effect, fund three-quarters of his government's budget), illustrated how unstuck from reality his public speech has become.

The international community in Kabul has bounced from other heinous attacks. For most people who live in Kabul however, the most recent one feels different. The gulf between the international community and the people they mean to be serving in Afghanistan had already grown enormous in the days before the assault on Taverna. And then it became wider still.