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How To Create an Afghan Blackwater

By Tom Engelhardt

April 5, 2015

The other day, as I was reading through the *New York Times*, I came upon this headline: “Powerful Afghan Police Chief Killed in Kabul.” His name was Matiullah Khan. He had once been “an illiterate highway patrol commander” in an obscure southern province of Afghanistan and was taken out in a “targeted suicide bombing” on the streets of the capital – and I realized that I knew him! Since I’ve never been within a few thousand miles of Kabul, I certainly didn’t know him in the normal sense. I had, you might say, edited Matiullah Khan. He was one of a crop of new warlords who rose to wealth and power by hitching their ambitions to the American war and the U.S. military personnel sent to their country to fight it. Khan, in particular, made staggering sums by essentially setting up an “Afghan Blackwater,” a hire-a-gun – in fact, so many guns – protection agency for American convoys delivering supplies to far-flung U.S. bases and outposts in southern Afghanistan.

He became the protector and benefactor of a remarkable Afghan woman who is a key character in Anand Gopal’s *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, which I edited and published in the American Empire Project series I co-run for Metropolitan Books. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that Gopal covered the Afghan War for years in a way no other Western journalist did. He spent time with crucial allies of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and with a Taliban commander, with warlords and American Special Ops guys, politicians and housewives. He traveled rural Afghanistan as few American reporters

were capable of doing. In the process, he made a discovery that was startling indeed and has yet to really sink in here.

In a nutshell, in 2001, the invading Americans put al-Qaeda to flight and crushed the Taliban. From most of its top leadership to its foot soldiers, the Talibs were almost uniformly prepared, even eager, to put down their weapons, go back to their villages, and be left in peace. In other words, it was all over. There was just one problem. The Americans, on Washington's mission to win the Global War on Terror, just couldn't stop fighting. In their inability to grasp the situation, they essentially forced the Taliban back onto the battlefield and so created an insurgency and a war that they couldn't win.

Reaction to Gopal's book, published last April, was at first muted. That's not so surprising, given that the news it brought to the table wasn't exactly going to be a popular message here. In recent months, however, it's gained real traction: the positive reviews began coming in; Rory Stewart made it his book of the year pick at the *New Statesman* ("Anand Gopal has produced the best piece of investigative journalism to come out of Afghanistan in the past 12 years"); it was a National Book Award finalist and is a finalist for the New York Public Library's Helen Bernstein Book Award For Excellence in Journalism. Most strikingly, it just received the prestigious Ridenhour Book Prize for 2015. ("Through a blend of intrepid reporting and clear-eyed – even beautiful prose – we see and can begin to truly understand the violence and tragedy of our longest war.")

So today, with thanks to Metropolitan Books, I thought I would give you a taste of a work of reportage that turns the American narrative about the Afghan War on its head. Here, from *No Good Men Among the Living*, is what it felt like when the war that rural Afghans thought was over just wouldn't end, when the Americans couldn't stop shooting and that new crop of Afghan warlords began using Washington's war on terror for their own ends. The toll in wrecked lives, including most recently that of Matiullah Khan, is now 13 years old and unending. ~ Tom

**The Real Afghan War
How an American Fantasy Conflict Created Disaster in Afghanistan
By Anand Gopal**

[This essay is taken from chapter five of Anand Gopal's No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes and appears at TomDispatch.com with the kind permission of Metropolitan Books.]

The sky clotted gray and the winds gusted cold as the men crowded into an old roadside gas station. It was daybreak in Band-i-Timor, early December 2001, and hundreds of turbaned farmers sat pensively, weighing the choice before them. They had once been the backbone of the Taliban's support; the movement had arisen not far from here, and many had sent their sons to fight on the front lines. But in 2000, Mullah Omar had decreed opium cultivation to be un-Islamic, and whip-wielding police saw to it that production was halted almost overnight. Band-i-Timor had been poppy country for as long as anyone could remember, but now the fields lay fallow and children were going hungry. With the Taliban's days numbered after the U.S. invasion, the mood was ripe for a change. But could they trust the Americans? Or Hamid Karzai?

An enfeebled elder, Hajji Burget Khan, rose to speak. A legendary war hero and a chief of the millions-strong Ishaqzai tribe, Burget Khan commanded respect that few present could rival. “He was an inspiring leader,” a tribal elder told me later, “as pure as the rain falling from the sky.” He was also a consummate pragmatist, having forged alliances over the years across the political spectrum, including with the Taliban. Now he was extolling the virtues of the coming American order. There would be jobs, he said, and there would be development. And, most important, farmers would be left alone to do the work they’d always done.

A second elder then addressed the audience. A generation younger and a few waist sizes larger than Burget Khan, Hajji Bashar was a leader of the politically important Noorzai tribe, a frontier tycoon who had made his millions smuggling opium. Like Burget Khan, he had a knack for backing the right horse – he was an early financier of the Taliban – and now he insisted that with American wealth and power on their side, the future had never looked brighter.

For the first time in years, hope took hold of the poor farmers of Band-i-Timor. The local Taliban council of religious clerics was declared null and void, and in its place the attendees formed a council composed of representatives from all Maiwand tribes. Hajji Bashar was elected governor of the district, prompting the former governor and police chief to flee overnight. It was, in effect, a bloodless coup, with the Taliban authority replaced by an America-friendly administration. Although Maiwand would have many governments in the decade to follow, only this one, farmers would say for years afterward, truly belonged to them.

The parched Maiwand desert began to show signs of life. Schools and clinics, long ignored and abandoned by the Taliban, reopened their doors. Aid workers arrived to repair water channels and irrigation systems. Step by step, elders worked to help the fledgling government stand on its own. Hajji Burget Khan persuaded hundreds of former Taliban foot soldiers to declare their allegiance to the Karzai government.

It was a move as old as the wars themselves: just as these men had once flocked to the Taliban, they would now, for sheer survival, throw their weight behind the new power. Hajji Bashar delivered to the Kandahar governor 15 truckloads of weapons, including hundreds of rocket launchers and anti-aircraft missiles, that he had collected from former Talibs. Bashar, in fact, harbored ambitions to become a national player and was quick to find his way to the Americans. He had initiated contact as early as November 2001 – when the Taliban was still in power – via clandestine meetings with U.S. officials.

Then, in January 2002, he showed up at an American base and spent a few days telling officers everything he knew about the Taliban. His crowning achievement came the following month, when he helped convince erstwhile Taliban foreign minister and Maiwand native Mullah Mutawakkil to surrender to U.S. forces, making him one of the highest-ranking Talibs in American custody.

The Taliban Surrender

In fact, Mutawakkil’s defection was only the latest in a rush of Taliban officials looking to switch allegiances. Within a month of its military collapse, the Taliban movement had ceased to

exist. When religious clerics in Pakistan launched a fund-raising campaign to get the Taliban back on their feet and waging “jihad” against the Americans, it was roundly rejected by the Taliban leadership. “We want to tell people the Taliban system is no more,” Agha Jan Mutassim, finance minister of the fallen regime and Mullah Omar’s confidant, told reporters. “They should not give any donations in the name of the Taliban.” He added: “If a stable Islamic government is established in Afghanistan, we don’t intend to launch any action against it.”

Khalid Pashtoon, spokesman for the new Kandahar government, declared: “Ministers of the Taliban and senior Taliban are coming one by one and surrendering and joining with us.” The list included the Taliban ministers of defense, justice, interior, vice and virtue, information, health, commerce, industry, and finance – in effect, the entire Taliban cabinet; key military commanders and important governors; diplomats; and top officials who had worked with Mullah Omar.

The avalanche of surrenders knew no bounds of ideology: leaders of the notorious whip-wielding religious police were among the earliest to defect. A group of former Taliban officials even announced that they were forming a political party to participate in future democratic elections. “We are giving advice to Hamid Karzai,” said their leader. “We support him.”

By surrendering, the Taliban were following the pattern that had marked Afghan politics for much of the previous two decades. After the Soviet withdrawal, many Afghan Communists had rebranded themselves as Islamists and joined the mujahedeen. During the civil war, factions shifted loyalties based on nothing more than bald pragmatism. Upon the Taliban’s entry onto the scene, warlords across the Pashtun belt had either retired, fled, or joined them. Now it was the Taliban’s turn, and as one member of the movement after another submitted to the authority of the Karzai administration, there emerged the possibility of a truly inclusive political order.

It had long been Karzai’s desire to convene a *loya jirga*, a grand assembly of elders, to elect a transitional government. The idea took hold around the country. At Kandahar’s soccer stadium (last used under the Taliban as an execution ground), thousands of farmers and dignitaries packed the stands to rally for the *jirga*. Delegates were to be drawn from each of the nation’s three hundred-plus districts. In Maiwand, unsurprisingly, the revered Hajji Burget Khan was elected despite his advanced age. “We felt as if we were born anew,” recalled Kala Khan, a fellow tribal elder. “There was nothing we couldn’t accomplish.”

The Americans Attack

Spring washed over Band-i-Timor and the acacias bloomed and pomegranate groves grew thick, and for the first time in years the fields were lavender bright with poppies. Not far from the main river, overlooking those fields, stood a large quadrangle of mud buildings, with cars and jeeps parked out front and dozens of farmers milling about. This was the home of Hajji Burget Khan, who was busy day and night receiving Ishaqzai tribesmen from other districts, other provinces, even as far afield as Pakistan. They came to pay their respects to the octogenarian leader, and Abdullah, the family driver, would usually be dispatched to ferry them in from the bus stop.

One hot May night, Abdullah was sleeping in the courtyard when a thunderous blast shook him awake. Looking up, he saw a blinding white light in the space where the front gate had been. Silhouetted figures rushed toward him. He ran for the guesthouse, shouting that the house was under attack. Inside, Hajji Burget Khan was already awake; he had been sipping tea with visitors before the dawn prayer. His bodyguard Akhtar Muhammad raced into the courtyard, firing his weapon blindly. Before he knew it, he was thrown to the ground. Two or three men were on top of him. He was shackled and blindfolded, and he was kicked again and again. He heard shouting, in a language he couldn't understand.

Hajji Burget Khan and Hajji Tor Khan, Akhtar Muhammad's father, ran into the courtyard with other guests, heading for the main house. It was then, as the first morning light shaped the compound, that they saw armed men standing on the mud walls in camouflage uniforms and goggles and helmets. American soldiers. Gunfire erupted, and Hajji Tor Khan went down. Before Hajji Burget Khan could react, he, too, was shot.

Nearby, women huddled in their rooms, listening. Never before had strangers violated their home – not during the Russian occupation, or the civil war, or under the Taliban. A woman picked up a gun and headed into the courtyard to defend her family, but the soldiers wrested it out of her hands. Then a soldier appeared with an Afghan translator and ordered the women outside. It was the first time they had ever left their home without a *mahrem*. They were flexicuffed and had their feet shackled, and some were gagged with torn pieces of turban. The group was then herded into a dry well behind the compound. As the day broke and village farmers stepped out into the dawn air, the women's cries rang out across the fields and mud houses, never to be forgotten.

The soldiers stayed for hours. House by house throughout the village, men were pulled out and marched to an open field. There, Hajji Burget Khan lay clinging to life. Then he and the rest – 55 of them in all, nearly the entire adult male population of the village – were loaded onto helicopters and trucks and taken away.

Creating an Afghan Blackwater

The central thesis of the American failure in Afghanistan – the one you'll hear from politicians and pundits and even scholars – was succinctly propounded by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage: "The war in Iraq drained resources from Afghanistan before things were under control." In this view, the American invasion of Iraq became a crucial distraction from stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, and in the resulting security vacuum the Taliban reasserted themselves.

At its core, the argument rests upon a key premise: that jihadi terrorism could be defeated through the military occupation of a country. That formulation seemed natural enough to many of us in the wake of 9/11. But travel through the southern Afghan countryside, and you will hear quite a different interpretation of what happened. It comes in snippets and flashes, in the stories people tell and their memories of the time, and it points to a contradiction buried deep in the war's basic premise.

You can find this contradiction embodied in a sprawling jumble of dust-blown hangars, barracks, and Burger Kings, a facility of barbed wire, gunmen, and internment cages: Kandahar Airfield, or KAF, as it came to be called, the nerve center for American operations in southern Afghanistan, home to elite units like the Navy SEALs and the Green Berets. A military base in a country like Afghanistan is also a web of relationships, a hub for the local economy, and a key player in the political ecosystem. Unravel how this base came to be, and you'll begin to understand how war returned to the fields of Maiwand.

In December 2001, an American Special Operations Forces unit pulled into an old Soviet airbase on the outskirts of Kandahar city. They were accompanied by a team of Afghan militiamen and their commander, a gregarious, grizzly bear of a man named Gul Agha Sherzai. An anti-Taliban warlord, Sherzai had shot to notoriety in the 1990s following the death of his illustrious father, Hajji Latif, a onetime bandit turned mujahed known as "the Lion of Kandahar." (Upon assuming his father's mantle, Gul Agha had rechristened himself *Sherzai*, Son of the Lion. His first name, incidentally, roughly translates as "Respected Mr. Flower.") With American backing, Sherzai seized the airfield, then in ruins, and subsequently installed himself in the local governor's mansion – a move that incensed many, Hamid Karzai among them. Nonetheless, Sherzai brought a certain flair to the office, quickly catching notice for his fist-pounding speeches, tearful soliloquies, and outbursts of uncontrollable laughter, sometimes all in a single conversation.

Sherzai may not have had much experience in government, except a brief tenure as Kandahar's "governor" during the anarchic mid-1990s, but he knew a good business opportunity when he saw one. The airbase where the Americans were encamped was derelict and weedy, strewn with smashed furniture and seeded with land mines from the Soviet era. Early on, one of Sherzai's lieutenants met Master Sergeant Perry Toomer, a U.S. officer in charge of logistics and contracting. "I started talking to him," Toomer said, "and found out that they had a knowledge of how to get this place started." After touring the facilities, the Americans placed their first order: \$325 in cash for a pair of Honda water pumps.

It would mark the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership. With Sherzai's services, the cracked and cratered airstrip blossomed into a massive, sprawling military base, home to one of the world's busiest airports. Kandahar Airfield would grow into a key hub in Washington's global war on terror, housing top-secret black-ops command rooms and large wire-mesh cages for terror suspects en route to the American prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

For Sherzai, KAF would be only the beginning. In a few swift strokes, he made the desert bloom with American installations – and turned an extravagant profit in the process. He swiped land and rented it to U.S. forces to the tune of millions of dollars. Amid the ensuing construction boom, he seized gravel quarries, charging as much as \$100 a load for what would normally have been an \$8-a-load job. He furnished American troops with fuel for their trucks and workers for their projects, raking in commissions while functioning as an informal temp agency for his tribesmen.

With this windfall, he diversified into gasoline and water distribution, real estate, taxi services, mining, and, most lucrative of all, opium. No longer a mere governor, he was now one of the

most powerful men in Afghanistan. Every morning, lines of supplicants would curl out of the governor's mansion.

As his web of patronage grew, he began providing the Americans with hired guns, usually from his own Barakzai tribe – making him, in essence, a private security contractor, an Afghan Blackwater. And like the employees of that notorious American firm, Sherzai's gunmen lived largely outside the jurisdiction of any government. Even as Washington pumped in funds to create a national Afghan army and police, the U.S. military subsidized Sherzai's mercenaries, who owed their loyalty to the governor and the special forces alone. Some of his units could even be seen garbed in U.S. uniforms, driving heavily armed flatbed trucks through the streets of Kandahar.

How to Fight the War on Terror Without an Adversary

Of course, even in the new Afghanistan there was no such thing as a free lunch. In return for privileged access to American dollars, Sherzai delivered the one thing U.S. forces felt they needed most: intelligence. His men became the Americans' eyes and ears in their drive to eradicate the Taliban and al-Qaeda from Kandahar.

Yet here lay the contradiction. Following the Taliban's collapse, al-Qaeda had fled the country, resettling in the tribal regions of Pakistan and in Iran. By April 2002, the group could no longer be found in Kandahar – or anywhere else in Afghanistan. The Taliban, meanwhile, had ceased to exist, its members having retired to their homes and surrendered their weapons. Save for a few lone wolf attacks, U.S. forces in Kandahar in 2002 faced no resistance at all. The terrorists had all decamped or abandoned the cause, yet U.S. special forces were on Afghan soil with a clear political mandate: defeat terrorism.

How do you fight a war without an adversary? Enter Gul Agha Sherzai – and men like him around the country. Eager to survive and prosper, he and his commanders followed the logic of the American presence to its obvious conclusion. They would create enemies where there were none, exploiting the perverse incentive mechanism that the Americans – without even realizing it – had put in place.

Sherzai's enemies became America's enemies, his battles its battles. His personal feuds and jealousies were repackaged as "counterterrorism," his business interests as Washington's. And where rivalries did not do the trick, the prospect of further profits did. (One American leaflet dropped by plane in the area read: "Get Wealth and Power Beyond Your Dreams. Help Anti-Taliban Forces Rid Afghanistan of Murderers and Terrorists.")

For several hours a day in a small Kandahar office, special forces and CIA officers pored over intelligence reports from the field, almost all of them originating from Sherzai's network. They worked closely with the head of the local spy agency, a Sherzai crony named Hajji Gulalai. An ex-mujahed, he had been tortured so badly by the Communists that he had acquired a skin condition for which an aide had to constantly scratch and massage his back.

With such a history, your list of enemies ran long, and the Americans knew it. According to former special forces soldiers, the two sides had an informal pact. “He’d give us intel,” explained one, “and then we’d let him do whatever he wanted.” A group of soldiers in a special forces detachment wrote in a collective memoir that on operations, Gulalai’s men “could get into places and exact payback for something that had nothing to do with their mission.” They added, “It happened a few times. The detachment had a deal with him.”

Whatever they had been before, Sherzai and his men were now creatures of a world where, as the Bush administration had proclaimed, you were either with us or against us. Sherzai’s network fed intelligence – which in the absence of an actual enemy was almost all false – to the Americans, and reaped the rewards: a business empire strung across the desert, garish villas abroad, and unfettered control of southern Afghan politics. The Americans, in turn, carried out raids against a phantom enemy, happily fulfilling their mandate from Washington.

Amid this bounty, Sherzai’s operatives homed in on one place in particular: a district not far from Kandahar city that they nicknamed “Dubai,” a reference to the port metropolis of shopping malls and palm trees that represented, for Kandaharis, an oasis of unbridled wealth and opportunity. For Sherzai’s men, their new land of opportunity, their new Dubai, was none other than the impoverished desert district of Maiwand.

“Success” in Maiwand

Hajji Burget Khan and the other captives were brought to KAF and deposited in metal cages stacked side by side in the open air and flooded by bright white lights. They were forced to kneel there for hours, their hands bound behind them. Some passed out from the pain. Some lost sensation in their hands and feet. Then they were marched into a room and made to strip and stand in front of American soldiers for inspection, inspiring a humiliation that, in the Pashtun ethos, was difficult to even imagine.

“When they made us walk naked in front of all those Americans,” captive Abdul Wahid later told a reporter, “I was praying to God to let me die. If someone could have sold me a poisoned tablet for \$100,000, I would have bought it.”

In a final act of emasculation, soldiers appeared with clippers. One by one the captives’ beards were shorn off, and many of them broke down in tears. Some, for resisting, had their eyebrows removed as well.

Hajji Burget Khan, tribal leader and war hero, would not be seen alive again. The truth of what happened in his final hours may never be known. One account has it that he died en route to KAF from his gunshot wound. Another version, a confidential dispatch from the Canadian Joint Task Force 2, part of the special forces team that carried out the raid, states that “an elderly father died while in custody” at Kandahar Airfield, “reportedly from a butt stroke to the head, which has caused much grief/anguish in the village.”

For days, the prisoners were questioned. “We don’t know who we have, but we hope we got some senior Taliban or at least some Taliban folks in there,” Lieutenant Colonel Jim Yonts,

spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, told reporters. Yet it soon became apparent that the captives had all followed Burget Khan in embracing the new American order. After five days, they were brought to Kandahar's soccer stadium and released. A crowd of thousands, who had made the trip from Maiwand, was there to greet them. A few months earlier many of these farmers had packed the stadium seats waving the new Afghan flag and chanting in favor of the coming *loya jirga*. Now, for the first time, anti-American slogans filled the air.

"If we did any crime, they must punish us," shouted Amir Sayed Wali, a villager elder. "If we are innocent, we will take our revenge for this insult." Tribal elder Lala Khan asked, "Is there any law? Any accountability? Who are our leaders? The elders, or the Americans?"

The raid would leave lasting marks on a number of levels. "If they touch our women again, we must ask ourselves why we are alive," declared villager Sher Muhammad Ustad. "We will have no choice but to fight." Back in the village, one woman was heard shouting at her male relatives, "You people have big turbans on your heads" – the quintessential accoutrement of Pashtun manhood – "but what have you done? You are cowards! You can't even protect us. You call yourselves men?"

Hajji Burget Khan's son, wounded in the raid, was left wheelchair-bound. Burget Khan's close friend Tor Khan, who had been shot four times, died a slow, agonizing death. Villagers did not take him to the hospital for nearly 24 hours, fearing that the Americans would find him and finish the job. Six-year-old Zarghuna, fast asleep when the soldiers arrived, awoke in a panic and, searching for her parents, fell into a well shaft. It took hours for her parents to find the body. "She was the laughter of the house," her mother said.

American officials declared the mission "definitely a success." As Major A.C. Roper explained, "It's all a coalition effort to help rid this country of people that stand against peace and stability." Roper's confidence was grounded in intelligence indicating that Hajji Burget Khan had been meeting with senior Taliban leaders. That charge, it turned out, was true, but only in the most literal sense: he had been trying to convince the Talibs to support the Karzai government. The brief against him had been written almost entirely from the accusations of Sherzai and his allies. "Burget Khan was too independent," said Hajji Ehsan, a member of the Kandahar government. "He was independently popular and Sherzai saw him as a threat."

In the weeks following the killing, Ishaqzai tribespeople from around the country descended on Maiwand to pay their respects. The large Ishaqzai community in Pakistan staged angry protests. In the years to come thousands would be killed on all sides, but it would be the memory of Hajji Burget Khan's murder that villagers would never relinquish.

Resurrecting the Taliban

The men of Band-i-Timor were no strangers to tragedy, and as the summer came they returned to their fields, gathering at the mosque on Fridays to talk about the work and the rains and the future. Then, one morning in August, three months after the death of Burget Khan, they learned that U.S. forces had raided Maiwand again, this time arresting the entire police force – 95 officers – in one precinct. The government announced that the captives were "al Qaeda-Taliban."

Locals were mystified. “They were part of the government,” said the police chief of a nearby station. “The government paid for their salaries and food. I don’t understand how they could do this.” The policemen had, in fact, been appointed by Hajji Bashar, the Noorzai elder who had worked so assiduously to win support for the new government. Within days of the arrests, a new police unit took over the precinct – all of them Sherzai’s men. Meanwhile, the captured policemen in U.S. custody were beaten, some of them suffering broken ribs, and stripped of their possessions, only to be released eventually, with the government spokesman admitting that officials “never had hard evidence” of a connection to militants. Instead, the spokesman acknowledged that “these people were all tribesmen of Hajji Bashar and very loyal to him.”

The mood in Band-i-Timor continued to harden. If the government could do this “to their own people,” said Amanullah, a storeowner, “then there is no guarantee they won’t come after regular people. No one is safe from this.” Some weeks later, U.S. forces stormed Band-i-Timor once again, this time detaining Hajji Nasro, a local leader and supporter of Hajji Bashar who had also allied with the new government.

The noose was tightening around Hajji Bashar himself. At first he had met regularly with U.S. military and intelligence officials. The goal, he later told a reporter, “was to make the situation in Afghanistan stable and also to help the Americans negotiate with moderate members of the Taliban to reconcile with the government.” But now the writing was on the wall: the Americans were not fighting a war on terror at all, they were simply targeting those who were not part of the Sherzai and Karzai networks. Bashar fled with his family to Pakistan to wait for the dust to settle.

Bashar’s story might have ended there, if not for his unquenchable ambition to land a position in the Afghan government. By 2005 he would rekindle contacts with the Americans, this time through a private company working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Over tea in a series of meetings in Dubai and Pakistan, he opened up about some of his business activities in hopes of winning Western backing for his political aspirations.

U.S. officials, however, had other plans. Bush administration officials had drawn up a list of the most wanted international drug barons who posed a threat to U.S. interests. When Assistant Secretary of State Bobby Charles saw it, he asked, “Why don’t we have any Afghan drug lords on the list?” This was, in fact, a thorny problem, because some of the biggest Afghan narcotics kingpins – Gul Agha Sherzai and Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president’s brother, chief among them – were allied with Washington, and in some cases even paid by the Americans. Finally, U.S. officials settled on a name: Hajji Bashar. He was a small-time player on a list of heavyweights, and potentially valuable to Washington as a peace broker, but political expediency sealed his fate.

Bashar was lured to an Embassy Suites hotel in New York City. For days he spoke with officials from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency on intelligence matters, sharing meals and tea. When they finished, he was – to his astonishment – handcuffed and read his rights. A trial on drug charges followed, and he is now serving a life sentence at Brooklyn Metropolitan Detention Center.

The Noorzais and Ishaqzais, the two largest tribal populations of Maiwand, had lost key leaders, both of them bridges to the Americans, and now the communities felt cut adrift. “We felt decapitated,” said elder Kala Khan. “How could we convince our people that the Americans were our allies after this?”

As the seasons turned, the raids continued. Band-i-Timor was also the home of Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, former head of the Taliban air force, who had retired and offered his backing to the new government. Watching the violence unfold, he repeatedly approached government officials, pledging his support to anyone who would listen. Finally, learning that he was on the American target list, he, too, fled to Pakistan. Unlike Hajji Bashar, however, he abandoned reconciliation. Years later, he would become one of the leaders of the Taliban insurgency.

To the Americans, Sherzai’s “intelligence” rang true because the tribes populating Maiwand had supported the Taliban when the movement first appeared. But the exigencies of the war on terror meant that U.S. forces were unable to recognize when those same tribes switched allegiances in 2001 – which is precisely what made Maiwand so lucrative in Sherzai’s eyes. There were weapons to be requisitioned, tribal elders to be shaken down, reward money to be collected – boundless profits to be made. For Sherzai and his allies, it was indeed the New Dubai.

Once, when soldiers had come through Band-i-Timor, locals would smile and call out in greeting, but now they only watched in silence. People started carrying weapons again. The raids continued and villagers began fighting back, and that meant some people were caught in the middle. Soon, for many there was no choice but to leave.

Whole villages decamped to Pakistan, deserting their fields, returning to refugee camps. It was a development that officials in Kandahar city could not ignore, but they insisted that it was a necessary evil in the fight against terror. “Sometimes, the best way to catch a fish is to drain the pond,” said Khan Muhammad, a high-ranking security official.

What if, however, there were no fish to begin with?