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The Afghans Fighting Assad's War Syria's Mercenaries

By Christoph Reuter

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Syrian dictator Bashar Assad is running out of soldiers and is forced to rely on mercenaries in his ongoing battle against rebels. Many of his foreign fighters come from Afghanistan -- men like Murad, who is now being held in Aleppo as a prisoner-of-war.

His war only lasted from one dawn to the next. When the sun rose for the second time over the Syrian city of Aleppo, Murad, a farmer from Afghanistan, was still cowering on the second floor of the house he was supposed to defend to the death. That, at least, is what his Iranian officer had ordered him to do.

How, though, did he get to this war-torn city far away from his village in the mountains of Afghanistan? All he had wanted was an Iranian residence permit, he says. But at the end of his trip, he found himself fighting as a mercenary in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Bashar Assad regime.

On that morning in Aleppo, Murad didn't know how many from his unit were still alive, nor did he know where he was or who he was fighting against. His four magazines had been empty for hours. When a violent explosion caused the house he was in to collapse, he found himself thinking about his daughters, he says. "I screamed and thought I was suffocating. And then, everything around me was quiet."

Men arrived and pulled Murad, who was still screaming, out of the rubble. He was lucky, even if he didn't see it that way at first. "I thought they would kill me immediately. But they bandaged me up and took me to their quarters. There was someone there who spoke a bit of Persian and he told me I didn't need to be afraid."

That was seven months ago. Since then, Murad and another Afghan have been sitting in a makeshift prison belonging to the "Damascus Front," one of Aleppo's larger rebel formations. They are being held in a neon-lit basement, next to a roaring generator. The walls are crumbling, a product of the myriad explosions that have shaken the city. In addition to Afghans, Pakistanis and Iranians have also been taken prisoner by other rebel groups, all of them fighting on the front lines.

The war in the northern-Syrian city of Aleppo -- but also around both Hama and Damascus and down to Deraa in the south -- has taken on an Afghan face. Or, to be more precise, a face with distinctly Asian features. Many of those Afghans that have been sent into battle come from the Hazara, a Shiite minority that are the poorest of the poor in Afghanistan.

Running Out of Soldiers

The Assad family dictatorship is running out of soldiers and is becoming increasingly reliant on mercenaries. Indeed, from the very beginning the Assad regime had an opponent that it could never really defeat: Syria's demography.

In order to prevent the collapse of Syrian government forces, experienced units from the Lebanese militia Hezbollah began fighting for Assad as early as 2012. Later, they were joined by Iranians, Iraqis, Pakistanis and Yemenis -- Shiites from all over, on which the regime is increasingly dependent. But the longer the war continues without victory, the more difficult it has become for Assad's allies to justify the growing body count. In 2013, for example, Hezbollah lost 130 fighters as it captured the city of Qusair and has lost many more than that trying to hold on to it. Indeed, Hezbollah has begun writing "traffic accident" as the cause of death on death certificates of its fighters who fall in Syria.

The Iraqis have almost all returned home. Rather than fighting themselves, they largely control the operations from the background. The Iraqi militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, for example, organizes the deployment of Pakistani volunteers in Syria. But no ethnic group is represented on all of the regime's fronts to the degree that the Afghan Hazara are. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but some 700 of them are thought to have lost their lives in Aleppo and Daraa alone. What's worse, most of them don't come completely on their own free will.

Up to 2 million Hazara live in Iran, most of them as illegal immigrants. It is an inexhaustible reservoir of the desperate, from which the Pasdars -- as Iran's Revolutionary Guards are called -- have recruited thousands for the war in Syria over the last year and a half.

Forty-five year old Murad Ali Hamidi, the man who is now sitting in the Aleppo prison, was previously a farmer in the northern Afghanistan village of Chaharзад Khane, or "400 houses". He had a small field measuring 50 meters by 50 meters (27,000 square feet), but there was no

electricity, running water or school. He fled to Iran without valid travel documents and worked illegally in a rock quarry -- until he was arrested in September 2013. "They accused me of selling drugs, but that isn't true," he says. For 15 days, he says, he was whipped with heavy cables and beaten.

A circular scar on his back would seem to provide evidence for his story that he was also burned with a cigarette. "They are racist in Iran. They don't want us only because we are Afghans. Hardly any of us received refugee papers." Such credentials would have allowed him to at least send his children to school and to receive some food.

'Suddenly, There Were Raids'

Murad claims he was sentenced to six years in prison. After serving the first year in notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, he received an unexpected visit from a visitor wearing the green uniform of the Pasdars. "Why are you here?" the man asked.

"Drugs," Murad replied.

"Do you want to have the final five years of your sentence commuted?"

Murad didn't say no. He would have to join the war in Syria for two months, the officer told him, saying that he would only be given simple tasks and guard duty. When he returned, the officer promised, he may even receive a residency permit. The other Afghans in his cell also agreed to trade in the rest of their sentences for two months of service in Syria. They were promised a monthly salary of 2 million toman, the equivalent of \$700.

Said Ahmed Hussein, who is being held with Murad, mentioned the same sum. Hussein had spent years working in construction in an exclusive residential district in northern Tehran. "Suddenly, there were raids and I was one of 150 illegal immigrants arrested. All of us were Hazara. Then, the Pasars came and promised us money and residence permits if we would voluntarily go to Syria. But they said 'we're sending you there no matter what.' Everybody signed up."

From prison, they were sent to different military bases near Tehran for Kalashnikov training. "The trainer told us we would be fighting terrorists in Syria," Murad says. Dressed in civilian clothes, they were taken by bus to Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport for the flight, in a passenger plane, to Damascus. "There were even families on board. Nobody was supposed to see that we were soldiers," Murad relates.

Two Iranian officers welcomed them upon arrival in Damascus and they were given tea. They then traveled further, to the coastal city of Latakia, and then by bus to a military base on the outskirts of Aleppo, where they stayed for 10 days. "Here, the Iranians weren't so friendly anymore, much less the Syrian soldiers who looked after us. When we spoke Persian to each other, they yelled at us."

One evening, weapons and uniforms were distributed and they were driven in cars to a collection point for some 300 men from Afghanistan. "We began walking, the whole night, until three or four in the morning. Then they pointed into the darkness at a multi-storied building and ordered a dozen of us to storm it and to hold it at all costs! They kept telling us that we couldn't surrender because the terrorists would cut off our heads," he says. "Don't surrender, don't surrender," he keeps repeating, like a mantra.

'Incredibly Tenacious'

Two rebel commanders who likewise took part in the battle, but on the other side, say that the Afghans were like machines. "They are incredibly tenacious, run faster than we do and keep shooting even after they have been surrounded. But as soon as they lose radio contact with headquarters, they panic."

"All of us were afraid," Murad says. "I asked myself, what am I doing here? This isn't my country." When the interpreter asks him why he allowed himself to get into such a situation in the first place, Murad became angry for the only time during our discussion. "Fifty meters by 50 meters of poor soil! How are five people supposed to live off of that?!" He wearily raises his hands and continues telling his story: "We started running. Luckily, the building was empty and we spread out among the different floors. We came under fire and didn't even notice that, aside from us, no one else was there. Inside the house was an Iranian officer who yelled at me: 'You have to fight or I'll kill you!' I fired off all my ammunition without looking where I was shooting."

Abu Hassanain, one of the two rebel commanders involved in the fight that night, recalls: "It made absolutely no sense for them to keep fighting. But they didn't surrender. So we blew up the entire building." That was the explosion that buried Murad and Said, the only two from the original group that survived.

Now, they are prisoners in a city that is more dangerous than any prison and are at risk everyday of being blown apart by a barrel bomb dropped by the army they came to fight for. The bombs, too, show just how desperate the regime -- which has suffered significant military defeats in recent weeks -- has become. Every morning between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. is "barrel time" in eastern Aleppo. That is when most of the barrel bombs, which are now produced in industrial quantities, are rolled out of military helicopters, tumble to the ground and destroy everything within two dozen meters.

"Come after nine," the man responsible for the Afghan prisoners recommends. It's Sunday, May 3, shortly before the SPIEGEL team in Aleppo is to head out to the rebel prison, when we hear a massive detonation in the neighboring quarter of Saif al-Daula. On the way to our meeting with the prisoners, we keep seeing people with horrified looks on their faces, some with tears in their eyes, as they walk towards Saif al-Daula. It seems surprising at first. Most barrel bombs only hit empty ruins, and even if there are casualties, people here normally don't run through the streets. Death comes quickly in Aleppo and the stoic resistance of the last 100,000 residents who have remained behind is expressed in their refusal to leave.

Beyond Hope and Desperation

But this bomb, dropped shortly before 9 a.m., scored a direct hit on the only school in the quarter, a four-story building that has been turned into a rubble-filled crater. The remains of the floors hang into the crater like gigantic rags. Sunday, was exam day, the only day on which schoolchildren still gather together. It is the same day that exams take place in the western part of the city as well, which is under regime control. It is almost certain that the pilots knew what they were doing.

At least six children and a teacher were killed instantly, with doctors unsure if several other children will survive. Late that afternoon, a man on a motorcycle stops next to the rubble and asks those still digging whether they had found his daughter. He says he has gone to every hospital in the city and visited every morgue, but hasn't been able to find her. He is met by silent head shaking. "My daughter," he sighs with a tone beyond hope and desperation -- and drives off.

As though their fates were momentarily intertwined, Murad, the Afghan, had said the same thing in almost the exact same tone a short time earlier: "My daughters." They haven't heard anything from their father in more than two years. He doesn't have any brothers in the village and his parents are dead. Only his mother-in-law is still alive, but she too is bitterly poor. "Who is taking care of my family? Do they have enough to eat, do they have clothes, did they get through the winter?"

He says that his fate is not in God's hands. Using an imam and the Red Crescent as intermediaries, the rebels from the Damascus Front have tried to exchange him and other Afghans for their own men being held in regime prisons. That, though, is not cause for hope for Murad. Rather, he thinks it would just be another type of horror. "What do I do if they give me back to the Syrian army? They'll just put me right back into one of their suicide commandos like last time. I don't want to do that again. I want to go back to Afghanistan." Back to the misery that he once tried to escape.

For the moment, it doesn't look like there will be a prisoner exchange, says Sheikh Abdulqader Falas, who is leading the negotiations. "In the past, we have exchanged Syrian officers, and the regime is particularly willing to release prisoners in exchange for Iranians and Hezbollah fighters. But for the Afghans, nothing. We have contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross, but again, nothing. Those two will likely stay with us until the end of the war.

A rebel commander from Aleppo, who is leading negotiations for six other Afghans, at least managed to reach one of the most powerful Syrian officers on the telephone: Colonel Suhail al-Hassan, called *Nimr*, or tiger, by his supporters. The colonel's answer was succinct: "Do what you want with them. You can kill them, they're just mercenaries. We can send you thousands of them."