

AFGHAN VOICES

**TWO AFGHAN VIEWS OF AUSTRALIA FROM
URUZGAN**

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The Lowy Institute for International Policy is an independent international policy think tank. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia – economic, political and strategic – and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia’s international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate.
- promote discussion of Australia’s role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Afghan Voices is a series of occasional papers which aims to inject a range of Afghan views into the discussion of issues surrounding the international community’s intervention in Afghanistan.

Introductory notes

On 28 July 2011 Omaid Khpalwak, an Afghan journalist, was one of 22 casualties of a Taliban attack in Tarin Kot, the provincial capital of Uruzgan province in Afghanistan.¹ Tragically, while Omaid survived the Taliban's suicide bombs, he was accidentally killed by a US soldier. According to NATO's official account, he 'was shot by US forces who believed he was an insurgent that fired on them with a weapon and was subsequently taking action to detonate a suicide vest IED.'² According to Omaid's brother he was probably reaching for his press pass.

At the time of his death Omaid was working on a paper for the Afghan Voices series. We had asked him to write on local attitudes toward the Australian military presence in Uruzgan. That paper was never completed. We have, however, been able to recover and translate what we understood to be an almost completed first draft, written in Pashtu, excerpts of which we now publish as part of the Afghan Voices series.

While it is unusual to publish an unfinished piece of work, we felt the need to honour Omaid's thoughts and work, not least as they provide a relatively rare local perspective on Australia's military operations in Uruzgan. Omaid was one of only a few Afghan journalists working in southern Afghanistan. He was passionate about his profession, was always working to improve his skills as a journalist, and was rarely deterred or intimidated by what government officials or local strongmen thought of his work.

The excerpts below of Omaid's work need to be read with three caveats.

First, Omaid had not yet submitted his first draft to us, although we knew he was close to submitting it. We were therefore unable to review the draft with him, as is usually the case in the Afghan Voices series. Often, this will involve reorganising the structure of the text, editing and clarifying the meaning of sentences, and discussing with authors the evidence for particular arguments or assertions. We have, therefore, chosen to publish excerpts of his draft only where the meaning was clear. Our judgements about what to publish were also informed by a number of discussions that the editor of the Afghan Voices series, Susanne Schmeidl, had with Omaid about the paper. We have, however, re-ordered the original text and placed it under headings of our own.

¹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/deadly-attack-on-afghan-government-compound/story-fn3dxity-1226103816068>.

² <http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/AhmadOmidKhpalwak/Executive%20Summary%20of%20Army%20Regulation%2015-6%20Report%20on%20Death%20of%20Khpalwak.pdf>.

Second, Omaid's observations, and those of his interviewees deal with the period leading up to his death in the middle of 2011. While some things will have changed since that time, we believe that many of his insights continue to be applicable to the present day.

A final caveat relates to the nature of the Afghan Voices series. Its aim is to provide a forum for young and relatively unknown Afghans to express their views on issues relating to the international intervention in Afghanistan. These papers by no means provide a definitive or majority reflection of Afghan views on any given issue. While Omaid clearly interviewed people for his piece, the excerpts published do not necessarily reflect the views of most locals in Uruzgan (although in some instances, they may do). Nor do they necessarily reflect the views of the Lowy Institute or the editors of the Afghan Voices series.

With this last caveat in mind, and with a view to providing an official Afghan government perspective on many of the issue covered by Omaid, we also publish as a part of this Afghan Voices an interview by Susanne Schmeidl and Hekmatullah Azamy with Mohammed Shirzad, the Governor of Uruzgan Province. The interview was undertaken at the Governor's residence in Kabul on 15 October 2011.

The Governor takes a different view on a number of issues discussed by Omaid in his draft. We know that this probably won't provide any easy answers for those in Australia who are wondering what is happening in Afghanistan and how locals view Australia's presence there. The reality is, however, that local attitudes on these issues are complex and sometimes even contradictory. Nevertheless, the views provided by Omaid and Governor Shirzad are valuable if for no other reason than they provide the Afghan voices that are often missing from the debate and discussion of the war in Australia. And that, literally, is what the Afghan Voices series is all about.

Susanne Schmeidl, Editor, Afghan Voices

Anthony Bubalo, Director, West Asia Program

Excerpts from Omaid Khpalwak's draft paper

Editorial comment in parentheses

Mixed feelings about Australia in Uruzgan

(Omaid's draft makes it clear that there are different attitudes towards the Australians in different parts of Uruzgan and amongst different tribes. Much of this depends on the experience and contact the different residents of Uruzgan have had with Australian forces.)

'...People in Gizab (district where the Australians helped to re-establish government authority), support the Australian forces, and think that the Australians are serious and support the Afghan government in many ways. They say that the Australian forces should stay in Uruzgan province for a long period to help the Afghan government stand on its feet. In general not all (Pashtun) Achekzai tribe support the Australians, but the Achekzai tribe in Gizab support a long-term Australian presence in the province to assist them in reconstruction and improving security.

These locals in Gizab say that they backed the Australian forces because their elders told them that when they opposed the Taliban the Australian forces and Matiullah Khan came to their aid. They say they are happy with the Australians and that if the Australians leave, the Afghans will be unable to protect the country. Some people who I talked to said that they do not think that the Afghan government will be capable of taking all the responsibility for security and government in two years time...'

'...In Dehrawud district the locals I spoke with were unaware of the 'works' of the Australian forces and identified all foreigners as Americans. They say that the withdrawal of foreign forces in 2014 will likely lead to a deterioration in the security situation...'

'...Locals in Dehrawud say that support by foreign forces for the Afghan government will not pay off in three years (i.e. by 2014) and the foreigners should have started such efforts long ago. Many foreigners have not paid attention to this issue. Residents say that foreign forces should not hand over responsibility for security yet; responsibilities should be handed over to the Afghans only when the foreigners are a hundred per cent sure that the Afghans can handle it...'

'...One tribal elder of Dehrawud, however, said that during a night raid the foreign forces completely destroyed his house because they had branded him as a Taliban. He argues that similar such acts committed in the district will not be forgotten by the people...'

Favouring one tribe or leader over others

(Omaid's draft placed a lot of emphasis on the perception that Australian forces favoured one tribe and one leader as a reason for local ambivalence. In particular he was critical of Australia's support for Matiullah Khan, Uruzgan's Chief of Police (PCoP) since 7 August 2011, who is in the view of many the most powerful man in the province, especially since the death of his second cousin and former Provincial Governor Jan Mohammad Khan on 17 July 2011. Matiullah was one of several commanders who helped President Karzai in the fall of 2001 to launch an armed uprising against the Taliban from the mountains between Dehrawud, Tarin Kot, and Nesh district of Helmand to retake Uruzgan and later Kandahar from the insurgency.³ Before being appointed PCoP, Matiullah was the commander of the Afghan Highway Police (AHP) in Uruzgan, which, was disbanded in 2006 and became a private security force, the Kandak-e Amniat-e Uruzgan (KAU). The KAU maintains control over the Tarin Kot-to-Kandahar highway, where Matiullah charges for providing security on so-called convoy days.⁴ The KAU has also been a sort of a strike-force for U.S. and Australian Special Forces, and assisted with the re-taking of Gizab district on 22 April 2010.⁵ Six of Matiullah's men have also received training in Australia by the ADF.⁶

Matiullah Khan belongs to the Popalzai tribe, which is part of the Zirk Durrani Pashtun confederation that has held power in Afghanistan for all but a few years of the country's history. While constituting only about 10 per cent of the population in Uruzgan (mostly concentrated in Tarin Kot, Chenartu and Dehrawud), since the election of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president the tribe has been able to consolidate power in the South, especially in neighbouring Kandahar where the tribe is more numerous.)

'...The Australian forces have established a relationship with a cruel strongman who is contracted to fight for them in Uruzgan. The Special Forces regard him as the 'Aristotle of Uruzgan' and the most trusted and famous person in the province. Some of Matiullah Khan's forces, which accompany the Special Forces during night raids, are said to loot houses and return with money. For instance, a

³ Others included the late Rozi Khan, Malem Rahmatullah, Sultan Mohamed, Haji Zaher Khan, Saifullah Khan and Haji Mohamed Hashim Khan. See Susanne Schmeidl, *The man who would be king: the challenges to strengthening governance in Uruzgan*, Conflict Research Unit Occasion Paper, The Hague, The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', November 2010:

http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2011/20110316_cru_publicatie_sschmeidl.pdf.

⁴ Congress of the United States, *Warlord, Inc.: extortion and corruption along the U.S. supply chain in Afghanistan*, Washington D.C., Majority Staff of the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2010: <http://publicintelligence.info/WarlordInc.pdf>, p 25.

⁵ Tom Hyland, Our mate, the bloody warlord, *The Sunday Age*, 8 August 2010:

<http://www.theage.com.au/world/our-mate-the-bloody-warlord-20100807-11pd8.html>.

⁶ Rafael Epstein, Afghan warlord's men trained in Australia, *The Age*, 29 October 2010:

[http://www.theage.com.au/national/afghan-warlords-men-trained-in-australia-20101028-](http://www.theage.com.au/national/afghan-warlords-men-trained-in-australia-20101028-175pw.html#ixzz1dtXEGKiM)

[175pw.html#ixzz1dtXEGKiM](http://www.theage.com.au/national/afghan-warlords-men-trained-in-australia-20101028-175pw.html#ixzz1dtXEGKiM); Dan Oakes, Military chief defends warlord ally, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 2010:

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/military-chief-defends-warlord-ally-20101029-177iv.html>.

month ago (mid 2011) during a night raid in Khanaqa village one of Matiullah's soldiers stole money and proudly declared that he had taken it from a Taliban house...'

'...The Australian forces in Uruzgan are seen by locals as 'benefactors' of the Popalzai tribe. When I ask locals about the Australians, they responded, oh you mean "the friends of Matiullah Khan" or "the friends of the Popalzai". The Australians have not yet understood that supporting one tribe is to their disadvantage. The Australian Ambassador's visit to Uruzgan (earlier this year) was a good case in point as he stayed at Matiullah Khan's house overnight and invited the Provincial Governor and (the then) Provincial Chief of Police there for a meeting, signalling that Matiullah Khan was 'their man' in Uruzgan and had to be treated with care...'

'...When I asked about this, an Australian civilian told me that short-term goals are important for the Australian military and Matiullah Khan and his force can quickly achieve that, as he has a track-record in killing Taliban. They do not think about the long-term consequences such actions may cause...'

Australia should work more closely with the Afghan state

(Omaid argued the need for Australia to work more closely with the Afghan state rather than relying on local strongmen like Matiullah Khan – although since this was written he has become the Provincial Chief of Police.)

'...Locals I spoke with told me that the Australians should work with the *qanoni* (lawful) authorities such as the police. They should enhance the police's capabilities, and provide them with training and equipment. Locals told me that that the Australians do not seem to trust the Afghan police, so how can local people trust them?

They also told me that they are happy with the cooperation between the Australians and the Provincial Governor. Yet, the Provincial Governor faces a major obstacle in the form of local power holders. There are around 10 such individuals in Uruzgan province and they are often backed by foreign forces. This contributes to lawlessness and is an obstacle to good governance...'

'...A former Provincial Governor of Uruzgan once told me that the Australians help build the Afghan state on the one hand, but on the other hand have helped to form such a big militia force that it undermines the Afghan government's authority. He said that they have not supported the Afghan police the same way they have provided support to Matiullah Khan. Governance cannot be improved this way. The former governor told me that he paid an Afghan policeman 8,000 Afs per month (about

USD 160), but Maitullah Khan gives USD 300 to his militia men, so it is obvious that they join Maitullah Khan.

But the current Provincial Governor Muhammad Shirzad said that whatever operations the Australians execute they cooperate with us and do nothing without our permission. He said that the Australians consult with him about everything and that since he has been Provincial Governor the number of (civilian) casualties has decreased...’

Civilian casualties

(Another focus of Omaid’s draft were the civilian casualties caused by Australian military forces.)

‘...Local people are afraid of the Australian Special Forces who are known for their aggressiveness. During one patrol of the bazaar (local market) they killed four innocent people. Locals closed the bazaar for two days in protest...’

‘...In the course of their mission, the Australian forces have killed many people including local notables such as Rozi Khan from Chora district and elder of the Barakzai tribe; Shah Wali, a commander of a security checkpost in Chora; Amrullah as well as two children in Sar Murghab, and an eight-month-old child with his uncle in Shah Zafar village in Tarin Kot...’

‘The Australians have about 300 Special Forces in Uruzgan province who arrest innocent people each night. When you go to the Provincial Reconstruction Team headquarters in Tarin Kot, you will see people arrested by the Australians and released after 5 or 6 days...’

‘...The Australians have killed many people across Uruzgan province and searched their house. Some local people back President Karzai’s statement that searching people’s houses at night should be stopped so that people live in peace during the night and ‘breathe in peace...’

Concluding thoughts on Australia’s role

‘...It the Australian forces treat tribes equally and ‘work’ for all equally, it is possible that security will improve in Uruzgan. The people of Uruzgan want jobs and security. But there are also ‘war-mongers’ amongst them who see benefits in war and the Australians should pay attention to these people...’

‘...Some people in Uruzgan think it is better if the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police accompany the Australian Special Forces during operations (instead of Matiullah’s militia).

Furthermore, Australia should limit the authority given to Australian Special Forces and rely more on Afghan National Security Forces...’

‘...The Australians should operate with more information, carry out operations with precision, and befriend the local population so that they can complete their mission successfully. Authority should be handed over to the Afghan government in Uruzgan province as soon as possible...’

Interview with Governor Mohammed Shirzad by Hekmatullah Azamy and Dr Susanne Schmeidl

In a recent front-page story in the Sydney Morning Herald (November 10, 2011), it was claimed that you wanted to leave the province because of your fears about your safety. Is this true?

I was very surprised when I heard about the news published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Afghan websites that I want to resign from my position, because I have never ever uttered such words. I only said that working in Uruzgan is hard, that Uruzgan needs more work - to be secured, to reduce corruption, etc.. The main point is that although it's hard to work in Uruzgan, I am willing to work and try my best for the province. I reject claims of the media and I never said that I was scared or was threatened.

How do you see the development situation in Uruzgan? Is progress being made? What is your view of Australian development efforts in the province? What could be done better?

If we evaluate and compare Uruzgan with the other provinces of Afghanistan in the development sector, I can say that it needs more work because in the past years neither the international community nor the Afghan Government have taken care of Uruzgan province. I request both the Afghan Ministries and the internationals, especially the Australians - because currently they are fully involved in the Provincial Reconstruction Team and training the military of Uruzgan - to pay more attention to developing Uruzgan.

I am not saying that nothing is done. Some projects are implemented such as the very important and useful road from Chora to Tarin Kot, the airport runway, various schools were built, many NGOs are implementing hundreds of projects, etc. But the key point is Uruzgan needs more work and more attention.

Another problem is the (geographic) imbalance of development projects. In some specific districts or areas we have many projects implemented, but in others we don't have any. Thus, I request that any future project which is going to be implemented in all parts of Uruzgan and not be limited to some districts or areas.

The other thing that should be kept in mind is the quality of projects. We have had many projects which were useless and of low quality. Thus, whatever we are doing in Uruzgan should be first considered as to its effectiveness.

How do you see the security situation in Uruzgan? What progress is being made? What progress is being made toward the handover of security to Afghan forces in Uruzgan?

Regarding security, if we compare Uruzgan with Helmand and Kandahar (provinces) it is clear that it's better than the previous years. Even in (previously insecure) districts the security situation is better. One problem that remains is that the roads are not paved and (because of this) the enemy can easily set roadside bombs and mount suicide attacks. But I can proudly say that the enemy can't fight face to face with our magnificent military and security forces and generally security is better.

With regard to the handover of security to Afghan forces, security in Uruzgan is not due to be handed over in the second stage of the security handover to Afghan forces but I am sure that *Inshallah* in the third stage, the Afghan forces of Uruzgan will be ready to assume responsibility for security in some areas from the Australians. And therefore Australian forces and Afghan Government are busy building the capacity of all Afghan (National) Security forces.

What still remains to be done in this regard? What should Australia focus on over the next two years (until 2014)?"

Before Australia leaves Afghanistan in 2014 it should focus on the following development priorities:

1. Don't just focus on development work only in some areas of Uruzgan, because we can see that in some areas there are more projects but in others we have no projects.
2. Road construction
3. Education sector

And in the military realm they should ensure that the capacity of the Afghan forces is increased and that they are able to secure Uruzgan once the Australians leave.

Do you think Australian forces should stay beyond 2014? If yes why? And in what capacity?

It is up to a diplomatic agreement between the Afghan and Australian governments whether or not the Australians stay or leave after 2014, but in my own opinion if their forces stay longer it would be good as Afghan forces would be trained to a more professional level.

What is your view of the Australian military in Uruzgan, including their impact on security and their development efforts? Do you think your views are the same as that of the people of Uruzgan? If they are different, why?

The Australian military has had a deep impact on the security of Uruzgan. Today if I am saying that Uruzgan is secure, it's all because of the Australian military. As a representative of the people of Uruzgan, I thank them for their efforts and wish them more success.

Australian military development efforts are admirable, but we hope they continue their efforts after 2014 as well. I think that the majority of Uruzganis have the same point of view as I have and the people of Uruzgan are happy with the Australians.

What is your view of operations by Australian Special Forces in Uruzgan province?

From what I've heard, the operations of the Australian Special Forces are useful and I appreciate them. (That being said), during fighting with enemies, very few and limited problems exist in their operations - for example, capturing civilians or civilian casualties. To improve their operations they need to pay attention to the following two points:

1. They should operate jointly with Afghan [National] Security Forces
2. They should inform and get permission from the Provincial Governor's Office and the Police headquarters (before mounting operations).

To combat the Taliban, the Australians should try to reduce the number of (civilian) casualties during their operations. When (Australian military forces) are operating Afghan Security forces should accompany them because Afghan forces know the culture and customs of the people.

Another important point is that they should increase reconstruction efforts (in the province) as this creates jobs for the people and when they have jobs they are less likely to join the Taliban or any other enemy. A majority of the people who join our enemies do so because of unemployment and poverty and a lack of income. And if the Afghan and Australian governments create jobs for people we will have good security in Uruzgan in the next years.

A number of Australian soldiers have been killed and injured recently by individuals within the Afghan National Army who they were training. In your opinion, why has this happened? Will it undermine the efforts to hand over security in the province? Is this reflective of Afghans being tired of international military forces? How can this in your opinion be prevented in the future?

I think that such accidents come down to individual personalities and shouldn't affect the relations between two governments. This sometimes happens because of mental stress and pressure or any personal conflict between the commander and trainer.

Such issues even happen between the ANA (Afghan National Army) and ANP (Afghan National Police) and Coalition Forces have sometimes shot an Afghan policeman or soldier. It doesn't mean that people don't like the Australians or Afghans are not happy with them. And it should never affect the good relations of both governments.

And such accidents will never delay the process of handover of security to Afghan Forces.

To prevent such cases, the Afghan forces should be trained wisely and the foreign forces should also try to understand the culture and customs of Afghanistan.

What would happen in Uruzgan if Australian military forces were withdrawn early?

I think that they will not leave before 2014, but if they did the result would not be positive because the Afghan forces are not yet fully trained. Half of the process (or training locals forces) is complete and half of it is still remaining. So if they leave we would need another country to take over the responsibilities that Australia currently has.

Concluding thoughts

I think that before the Australians leave Uruzgan they should also leave something by which the people can remember the goodness of the Australians and something which Uruzganis can use efficiently. As I mentioned, the Australians should focus on paving roads and the educational sector. They should continue to support us and increase that support.

I urge them to support Uruzgan's administration and fulfil the promises they have given to us even though they plan to leave.

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