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by
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Chapter 11 – Governor Murad’s Vision

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Governor Murad has a vision for the future, the future of the people he now serves as Governor of Kapisa Province. I also owe him. Because of his vision, I was able to escape the confines of the Embassy’s security rules and the watchful eyes of the PRT soldiers, and walk among the people of Afghanistan and experience the awesome beauty of this ancient land and glimpse a life that had gone unchanged for centuries. I also shared tea with former freedom fighters and local warlords, and walked in places that became famous during the war against Soviet occupation, and heard stories of a brave and honorable people, united in their struggle for their way of life; all in just a single day in Afghanistan.

Back to Bagram – March 22

This is my second trip to the Bagram PRT and my third meeting with Governor Murad. I first met the Governor on January 5 during my first trip outside the wire (see Chapter 3). I had accompanied the PRT to their weekly meeting with the Kapisa provincial government. I still remember clearly that the Governor invited me up to his office after the meeting to tell me how important water was to Afghanistan and his desire to build a new city and expand irrigation to make room for returning refugees.

I next saw the Murad on January 27th at the Embassy’s reception for four US Governors on a State Department organized tour of the Middle East. One of the US Governors was Rick Perry of Texas and the reason I was asked to attend. The Embassy also invited 12 Afghan Governors who just happened to be in town for a conference. I remember thinking that the excellent Afghan food and nice speeches were fine, but that it was likely that the only lasting outcomes of the reception would be the photographs.



It wasn't until my trip to Helmand (see Chapter 10) and my meeting with another governor that I began to think about Murad's vision again. The governor of Helmand asked for my help in finding plans for an irrigation canal that could open up a new, large area for agriculture, a key element of his plan to quell the continuing insurgency by encouraging the many displaced persons and refugees to come back into Afghan society. With my help, there was a chance that the Helmand Governor's vision would happen.

An email and phone call to the Bagram PRT Commander, LTC McDonald was all that it took. Once again I found myself headed to Bagram and another mission to Kapisa Province.

It felt strangely familiar to be back at Bagram Airforce Base. Among the PRT soldiers taking me out today were familiar faces and some new ones. Once again, nine soldiers and three humvees make up the PRT convoy for today's mission. Leading our mission is Rich, the PRT Civil Affairs Officer, a lawyer and prosecutor back in the States. LTC McDonald had asked Governor Murad to send someone along with us to show us the way. Instead, the Governor himself will be our guide today.



National Education Day

Yesterday was the Islamic New Years and a national holiday. Today is another holiday that Afghans consider just as important: National Education Day that commemorates the beginning of the school year and the first day of class on Saturday. The Governor is speaking today at the Kapisa Province ceremony and asks us to meet him there.

We arrive at the district high school around 9:45 am. The entrance to the school is well guarded by armed police. Rich, the PRT translator and I leave the convoy parked outside on the street and walk up to the gate. We are expected and an aid quickly appears to show us to our seats of honor in the third row. Local dignitaries occupy the first two rows. As is customary here, they sit in couches and easy chairs. Several hundred people sit behind us in school desks that have been brought out into the school yard for the occasion.



The ceremony has already started and the Governor is giving his speech. The PRT translator tells me that the governor is telling the teachers to not complain about their low wages and lack of resources, but to instead think about what they can do with what they have, and the importance of education to Afghanistan and the future of their county.



Following the Governor's speech, a children's group first recites a traditional Afghan poem with exquisite rhythm and rhyme. Then they sing a song about spring time, learning and hope for the future.



Before the next speaker, we follow the Governor as he leaves the ceremony and walks out to the front gate where his armored plated SUV is waiting. The Governor asks if me if I will ride with him. The Rich gives his OK, so I join the governor in the back seat of his car and off we go. The Governor has a personal security detachment of nine guards who load into three vehicles, one vehicle takes the lead and the other two follow as the chase vehicles. The slow moving humvees of the PRT convoy quickly fall behind us and out of sight.

Reached by cell phone, we learn that the PRT convoy had taken a different route. The Governor and Rich agree to rendezvous at the site of the project. And for the first time since being here, I'm out and alone with Afghans.

Governor Murad

The Governor and I chat as we drive through the countryside and the many villages along the way. It'll take us about 45 minutes to get to the rendezvous site due to the poor condition of the dirt road. He tells me that work to pave this road is about to commence, then it will be easy to get there, only taking a fraction of the time.

As we pass through a village, he tells me that the people here are self-sufficient. *“They raise their own animals and grow their own food. In the fall, they dry meats and vegetables for the winter. They make their own clothes. They have few needs and wants. Thus, there is no economy here, no progress, things go unchanged year after year. Roads are important, because roads bring in new ideas and people, roads bring in change.”*



I tell him how much I enjoyed the poem and the song of the school children. The governor smiles when he tells me that he made it difficult for the speakers that followed him. *“I told them to speak plainly about what needs to be done and how they will do it, no lofty speeches about the grandeur of education in abstract terms, but to explain the real situation. Otherwise,”* he says, *“they will give long speeches that no one will understand.”*

He tells me that he normally would have stayed all day, to the very end of the ceremony, as this is a very important event and all important community and provincial leaders are there. But, he wanted to show me himself.

Murad speaks excellent English, having received a MS in Public Administration at a small college in Pennsylvania. But unlike many other Afghans that went to study in the US, he came back and made his life and career in Afghanistan.

He speaks disparately of the many Afghan-Americans who were gone for 20 years, returning only after the fall of the Taliban. Many are now appointed to important government offices, posts, and ministries. They run many aspects of the new government, but perhaps to people like Murad, they are strangers in their own nation.

Murad returned to public service reluctantly and stands out in a government known for its corruption; he's honest and seems to put the country's needs ahead of personal ambition. Murad was the Ambassador to Malaysia when the Taliban fell to the US and coalition forces. The new government asked him to be Ambassador to Bangladesh, but he declined. Instead, he left public service and became a successful businessman in Kabul, until a year ago when President Karzai asked him to be Governor of Kapisa.

USAID

He's displeased with USAID. They conduct projects with no knowledge of or coordination with the provincial government. Five months ago, USAID officials arranged a trip to Kapisa for visiting administrators from Washington. A week before the visit, they send him a list of \$3 million worth of projects being funded by USAID in Kapisa.

He is surprised at the list and sends out staff to check on these projects. They find that even with 20% profit factored in, the total value is less than \$900,000. He's angry about the waste of money. *“This is money of the US taxpayer. They deserve better than this.”*

At the meeting, he shows a PowerPoint that details each project on the list. USAID officials act surprised and embarrassed; they promise to look into the matter and get back to him. Five months later there still has been no follow-up by USAID.



Murad's Vision

We arrive at the rendezvous site 30 minutes before the PRT convoy which took a longer route. This is the site of the new city he is planning to build, Kapisa Center, a modern city that will serve as the catalyst for the economic development of Kapisa Province.

The Governor tells me that Kapisa has produced many noted Afghan scholars and leaders, but the young people don't return from Kabul or from the other places they go for education. Kapisa Center and the new economic opportunities will be able to attract these people back to their Province that needs them so badly.



The governor wants to build a hydro-eclectic dam up in the mountains to provide water for the new city, to generate the power to run the city, its new enterprises and agricultural value-added processing, to control spring-time flooding, and to irrigate new agricultural land to the southeast. Refugees and displaced persons will be given these new agricultural lands and be allowed to build their houses in Kapisa Center.

We linger at the site waiting for the PRT convoy before moving up river and into the mountain gorge to see the site chosen for the dam. His security detail is professional and secures the site, taking strategic locations all around. He shows me a nearby water diversion structure that measures and diverts flow for irrigation and domestic use. The road contractor shows up. They discuss how to work with the local villages, as the paved road will be wider than the existing dirt road. Some houses will need to be relocated, and sadly, some trees will have to be cut.

The PRT convoy finally shows up and we quickly load up into and head into the mountains. What a sight this must be; six vehicles in the governor's convoy and three PRT humvees following in the rear.

The road winds up and through the glacier outwash of the mountains of the Hindu Kush, the mountain range that runs through the center of Afghanistan with peaks ranging from 8000 to 24,000 feet. The area is strikingly beautiful. I'm amazed to see the seemingly endless terraces, like mismatched, broad stairways up into the mountains, continuing mile after mile. It must have taken centuries for the locals to construct these terraces, moving hand-by-hand the rocks that make up the retaining walls and filling in with soil. Every possible place where a terrace could be built, one exists, with intricate irrigation channels to provide water to each.



At the village of Malang Khail, we turn off the main road to the left and following a dirt road which runs up into the canyon, wide enough for only a single vehicle. In most places, the road is cut out of the mountain's side with a steep drop down to the valley floor. The height provides a dramatic view of the terraces running down the river valley to the glacier outwash area below.



The area is thick with walnut, mulberry, pomegranate, and blooming peach and apricot trees. Down below, in the larger terraces, the Afghans grow vegetables and grain. Cattle, sheep and goats graze on the hillsides among the many rock formations. The melting mountain snow at higher elevations feed water falls and springs on both sides of the canyon walls.



The PRT convoy has to turn back because of steering problems, so once again I am out alone with the Afghans. As we near the dam site, the road is blocked by a rock slide and we get out and walk for last couple of kilometers. And a good site it is, granite outcroppings on two sides of the canyon to anchor the dam, and create a large reservoir that will only cause the relocation of a few homes.

On the walk back to the vehicle, Murad points out the remains of a building up on the ledge. This was a fort of the freedom fighters who battled the Soviets for control of this valley and won. Murad tells me about his friend who fought and died here, taken out by a sniper but not before killing 14 Soviet soldiers.







Murad tells me that the locals are angry that he didn't tell them he was coming today. He explains to them that since I was with him, he couldn't announce the trip in advance. But the locals are not satisfied with his explanation. Murad says thousand would have turned out.



A little ways down the hill, we are met by local villagers who ask the governor to inspect a temporary school, a tent put up by the United Nations. Close by is the old, traditional school where students sat on rocks under a tree.

Murad shows me the blackboard made out of the face of a boulder, used to teach the children how to read and write for generations.



Murad points out a large boulder up on the side of the mountain, then scrambles up the hill to see. The boulder obscures a small cave which has walls blacken with the smoke of countless fires. Here was the bakery, where bread was made for the freedom fighters and each day sent out to their camps scattered along the gorge.



With us is a man he calls the Attorney General, who lead the freedom fighters in this area and still commands a small militia. Murad scoffs at the Afghan-Americans, *“Who are they to call him a warlord, where were they during the years of war and hardship?”*



We get back into the SUV but only ride for a few kilometers, then we're out again. We climb down a stone stairway, pass a terrace and out to an overlook where the General has prepared tea. Black or green tea is served, along with dishes of dried mulberries, walnuts, pistachios and fruit. This is a traditional meeting area; tea has been served here for thousands of years while village elders, political leaders and generals discussed and debated.



It's a beautiful day with fair weather clouds drifting in front of the blue sky and blending in with the snow capped mountains. The spot is shaded by a peach tree's blossoms; a few feet away is the ledge and drop-off to the river below. This spot has a view all the way down the canyon, to the valley floor below where the Governor will build Kapisa Center. The canyon walls tower above, covered with pink rocks and boulders.



The Governor translates for me; they say to tell me how glad they are that we came to visit today. I reply sincerely, “*They are not as glad as we are to be here today.*” Everyone laughs, and with this sincere witticism, I go from being a stranger to someone familiar. Gifts appear; a coat for the Governor and a wool vest for me. I try it on; the Governor tells me that the locals are commenting how good I look in the vest!

Too soon, we return to the SUV and make our way down the canyon. As we approach the village of Malang Khail, I see the PRT convoy waiting near the turnoff to the canyon road. But suddenly, the Governor says “*I will walk through the village.*” He and I are out of the SUV, down the hill with the security detail and the entourage quickly following.

At the far end of the street, the local militia stands in formation. Directly across the street from them, the District elders stand in a single line facing the militia. Murad quickly shakes hands with the elders and reviews the soldiers who stand at attention.





I'm distracted by the sights, sounds and smells of the Village and the rare opportunity to interact with locals and to walk openly down a village street.





The PRT Convoy joins us as we continue the day's journey. There are additional stops along the way, to inspect the bridge to no-where, houses that are likely to get washed out by the spring floods if something isn't done, a new district headquarters under construction. Each stop gives me the opportunity to take a short walk and to admire the scenery. I enjoy the vistas along with the Governor who suggests I take photos of unusually scenic views of green fields, blooming trees and snow covered mountains.



We eventually make it down to the main road and to the crossroads where I must part company with the Governor and rejoin the PRT convoy, to head back to Bagram, back inside the wire.

In two days, I'll be picked up by the Embassy security detail and taken back to the compound in Kabul surrounded by 10 foot tall walls, topped with barb wire. But for one day, I was free. Free outside the wire, free to make jokes with Afghans, free to connect as one human being to another.

I think about the British who do foot patrols in Lashkar Gah and ride in open jeeps in dangerous Helmand Province in order to win hearts and minds. I think about all the young men and women, American, coalition and NATO, who are out everyday risking and some losing their lives here in Afghanistan.

I then think about my life back in Kabul; the US State Department and its diplomats and aid officials hiding behind the walls and barb wire, trying to minimize all risks, unwilling to take any chances. I think about my day of freedom, sitting out in the open, sharing tea and jokes with former warlords and freedom fighters, and looking into each others eyes and seeing the same thing.

