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## Three Cups of Tea and an IED: The Death of Haji Abdul Jabar and the Future of the Alikozai Tribe

Patrick Gaydon and Jonathan Pan

Haji Abdul Jabar pulled out his pistol and with tears in his eyes, he pointed to his head shouting, “If you go, I will pull the trigger!” Jabar was the District Governor of Arghandab District, Kandahar Province, who served as the logistics chief for Mullah Naqib, the legendary mujahedeen commander who checked multiple Soviet advances into Arghandab in the 1980s.

Jabar’s emotional outburst occurred when he discovered that the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment was being relocated out of Arghandab in December 2009. Jabar had developed a close bond with many soldiers and officers of 1-17 Infantry but above all, he treated Captain Jon Burton, the battalion’s civil-military officer, as his own flesh and blood. As a hardened mujahedeen, his tears resounded deeply with Burton, who admired the old warrior for his tenacity, honor, and above all his passion for the people of Arghandab. Burton refused to answer any phone calls after Jabar’s death but recently he had the following to say,

“Like everyone who has met Haji Abdul Jabar, I am deeply saddened by his loss. For a man of such exceptional character to lose his life by a cowardly and dishonorable act is difficult to stomach. The people of Arghandab nominated Haji Abdul Jabar as the Governor with full confidence he possessed their best interests at heart; they will suffer the most from his loss. We can only hope the people of Arghandab rise to honor Haji Abdul Jabar by defeating a shameless enemy and bringing peace to his district.”

Like Greg Mortenson’s best seller, *Three Cups of Tea*, our relationship with Jabar was forged over *chai* during the late summer and fall of 2009. When we first met Jabar, he was courteous but reserved. He had seen coalition forces come and go from Arghandab and many promises remain unfulfilled. But this time, it was different. The Stryker Brigade had teamed up with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to permanently station a combined civil-military team at the Arghandab District Center. The team was devoted, often fanatical in their efforts in building positive momentum with Jabar in the lead. Such dedication has led to legendary Burton-Jabar lore.

One day, during Burton’s transition with his replacement in Arghandab, Jabar gave Burton a *qamis*, a traditional Afghan loose-fitting shirt that reaches to the knees, as a gift. Right after

Burton put on the *qmis*, he discovered that his replacement went around Jabar on an issue so Burton gave the poor guy a severe dressing down. Others present for this event cannot hold back their laughter whenever they reminisce of this comical event of a U.S. Army Captain dressed in traditional Afghan “man-dress” chewing out a new lieutenant. Over the coming months, Arghandab would become the focal point for civil-military coordination in Kandahar. The successes of Arghandab were echoed by Jabar in a local newspaper in March 2010, “Security problems are now solved in Arghandab” and, “ten thousand jobless people are given job opportunities by USAID.” As we formed a bond with Jabar, our relationship evolved beyond being just partners; we were now family.

While military operations rooted out and temporarily defeated Taliban forces in Arghandab during the final months of 2009, Jabar reached out to village elders and pulled them into the weekly *shuras*. As security dramatically improved, he enthusiastically greeted lines of ordinary Afghans requesting his help to solve their problems every day—governance had finally connected with the people of Arghandab. He worked with the newly arrived US civilians to bring the right projects to the right places to improve the agricultural productivity of the fertile valley. Over 20,000 Afghan men received cash-for-work jobs. As Arghandab became the model example of counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan, Jabar hosted ambassadors, congressional delegations, and generals on almost a daily basis to give them a glimpse of what right looked like. However, those VIPs never saw the charismatic sparkle in Jabar’s eyes that we saw every time we walked into his district center. That sparkle was reserved only for those that had taken the time to get to know him, those who shared his intimate passion to bring progress to the contested valley.

Jabar was killed as he drove home from work by a vehicle born improvised explosive device on June 15, 2010, only six days after a suicide-attack killed 40 and wounded 87 in the village of Nangahan, Arghandab. This can be seen as a continuation of the systematic targeting of Alikozai tribal leaders that started approximately six years ago. Haji Granai, a deputy to Khan Mohammad, was assassinated in April 2005. Akrem Khakrezwal, the Kandahar Chief of Police, was assassinated two months later. In March 2007, Mullah Naqib was nearly killed in a mine explosion that killed one of his sons and severely injured another. Abdul Hakim Jan, a former Kandahar Chief of Police, was killed in a large bombing at a dog fight in February 2008. Before his death, he was recently appointed as the Arghandab “*arbakai* leader” to avoid confusion. Later that year in June, Akrem Khakrezwal’s brother Malim Akbar Khakrezwal, a former Kandahar Intelligence Chief, was assassinated. Dad Mohammad Khan was killed in a road bomb blast on the highway in March 2009. Later that year in November, a police station in Arghandab was attacked, killing eight officers and wounding three. When Mullah Naqib died (of natural causes), the tribe’s leadership was passed to his son, Kalimullah.

Our first impression of Kalimullah, the current Tribal Leader of all Alikozai across Afghanistan, was formed by the reports we read before we even met him- that he was soft-spoken, weak, and young. However, during our meeting with him the day after Jabar died, he had the composure of a leader, “I don’t care how many people die, I’m going to stick with my people because that’s what my father and grandfather did.” Nonetheless, sadness was evident in his eyes and we often felt that he was holding back tears. The Alikozais are known as a tribe of warriors and tough-men, and Kalimullah is emerging as their leader. In fact, of over the 100 contractors that we’ve

interviewed, over half of them reminisced of the time when the Alikozai maintained security in Kandahar when they were senior leaders in the Afghan National Security Forces.

It seems unusual that the Alikozais are targeted in such a manner while other prominent tribes, such as the Popalzai, the Barakzai, and the Achekzai, have not been targeted to such a degree. Why are the Alikozai being targeted? Is it because Mullah Naqib supported Tajik Yunus Qanuni against Hamid Karzai in the 2004 Presidential elections? Is it to control the water that flows down the Arghandab River, the lifeblood of Kandahar Province? Is it because there are no senior Alikozais in the Taliban? Is it because the Alikozai Tribe has been the historical warrior tribe charged with security of Afghan kings since the 1700s and they hold the key to future security in Afghanistan?

We must remember that Jabar was assassinated and Nangahan was attacked because stabilization was working in Arghandab. While we grieve for our Afghan friends, we must strive to continue the momentum of progress in Arghandab and Kandahar. If we get this right, someday we'll be able to return to an Afghanistan without our uniforms and visit the grave of our dear friend. When Burton left Jabar a 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division patch, he wore it to honor all the 1-17 IN soldiers that were wounded or killed. He was always very appreciative of our sacrifice and would show me the patch every time I visited him. Haji Abdul Jabar will not only be mourned by his people but by all of us, who consider him a father, a brother, friend, and fellow warrior.



**U.S. Army Lt. Col. Patrick Gaydon, Haji Abdul Jabar, and Edward Messmer from the Department of State enjoying the view on the roof of the Arghandab Joint District Coordination Center.**

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*The views in this article are solely of the authors and not those of the Department of Defense.*

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