

## MAN IN THE MIDDLE —Kabul

### Preface

It's been a bad start to the year for Afghanistan. As reports claim it is heading for failed-state status, the Taliban continues to defy US and Nato-led troops. President Karzai is increasingly frustrated with US and British military actions, meanwhile western leaders worry he's not the man for the job. One person finds himself in the middle of all this, trying to balance the conflicting expectations: Said Jawad, the Afghan ambassador to Washington.

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The garden at the back of the Serena hotel in Kabul is the perfect place for a confidential chat in a city where diplomats, journalists and officials all believe that most meeting places and mobile phones are bugged. Its high walls enclose the landscaped grounds and block out the dirty, congested city.

Said Jawad, Afghanistan's ambassador to the US, sets up shop in the hotel when he visits Kabul for a frantic set of meetings with top Afghans and international officials. An Afghan who moved to the US in 1986 before returning in 2002 to work for President Hamid Karzai, Jawad is comfortable in the very different political worlds of Washington and Kabul.

On a bright morning last month he took a stroll round the garden with Christopher Alexander, the former Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan, who now serves as a deputy special representative of the UN secretary general for Afghanistan. They had a lot to talk about.

One hot issue is the row surrounding the decision of the Afghan government to expel two top diplomats, one working for

the EU, the other for the UN, for allegedly negotiating with the Taliban. Kabul's international community reacted with incredulity, even anger, that the Afghans had had the nerve to push the issue so far. One top European official says the government should have been reprimanded: "They need to be told that you just don't throw out diplomats from friendly countries."

Later, relaxing in his hotel suite after a breakfast meeting at the presidential palace with President Karzai, a close family friend and political ally, Jawad says the international community has failed to understand the sensitivities surrounding outsiders apparently conducting free-lance negotiations with the Taliban.

"They have got to take Afghanistan's autonomy seriously. It's like when I travel to the countryside and ask for a security brief from international forces. They will give it to me, but not to the local governor, who they say does not have security clearance." But it is hard to be truly autonomous when you rely on outside donors to pay the costs of both reconstructing and running your country.

Jawad's aides say their boss is frustrated by a basic disconnection between what is prioritised in the Afghan parliament and in the US, Afghanistan's biggest single donor, which last year spent \$8.3bn (£5.7bn) on security assistance and around \$2bn on development.

He does what he can to earn brownie points through his policy of visiting US military bases to personally thank the families of servicemen in Afghanistan. But the hard part is dealing with the particular obsessions of American politicians, many of whom want to see women throw off their burkas and overnight results on countering the country's booming narco-economy. Where US and Afghan interests merge is on issues such as the pressing need to retrain and re-equip the country's security forces.

The ambassador meets with General Bismillah Khan, joint chief of staff of the Afghan National Army (ANA) at a Soviet-era office block a world away from the Serena. There are few complaints about the US's role. The two men sit on



Said Jawad, the ambassador of Afghanistan to Washington, leaves the Serena hotel, Kabul, January 2008



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- 01 Jawad with joint chief of staff Bismillah Khan at Kabul's Ministry of Defence
- 02 Jawad with a US diplomat in the grounds of the Serena hotel, Kabul
- 03 Jawad is interviewed by a local reporter
- 04 In the tea room of the Serena
- 05 Jawad prepares to depart Kabul

armchairs and review with satisfaction the prospect of new uniforms, modern machine guns and armoured vehicles that are heading the ANA's way.

The Afghans, however, not only want more money overall, they also want to spend it themselves rather than have it filtered through expensive international contractors, each of whom, in Oxfam's estimation, cost up to €350,000 a year. For his US audience, the articulate former lawyer stresses the risks of mis-spending money and "the high costs of doing too little in Afghanistan".

"The reconstruction process here is tied to the national security of the US and global security," he says. "If you build a school in Afghanistan that doesn't last the first winter, it affects the perception of the Afghan people about the degree of commitment of the resources of the US.

"So I tell them that financially it may make more sense to give that contract to an American company or to see that some of that assistance will come back to the US. But we have to make sure that the priorities of the Afghans come first."

Striking a compromise between the separate worlds of Washington and Kabul, Jawad accepts change will be difficult as long as lobbyists working for the big companies that have grown rich on contracts in Afghanistan remain active on Capitol Hill.

**Monocle:** *With the US elections in full flow, how does that affect your work as the main go-between for Kabul and Washington?*

**Said Jawad:** Fortunately Afghanistan is not a partisan issue and we see an increased degree of interest and commitment by the Democratic leadership and the candidates on the need to do more for Afghanistan. We are happy about the fact that their criticism of the administration is that more should have been done in Afghanistan and whether investment should have been taking place as far as building institutions in Afghanistan.

**M:** *What is your biggest challenge in communication between Kabul and Washington?*

**SJ:** The US not only has different interests in Afghanistan than some of the other Nato countries, it is also split on issues such as narcotics. The policy that the Department of State may have on fighting narcotics may differ from the policies of the Department of Defense.

**M:** *Are there disagreements over negotiating with the Taliban?*

**SJ:** There are different philosophies. The military would like to see things in a simplified, black and white way – they like to say, "He is the enemy and they are the friends." But those who are involved in the political process – the intelligence community – have a different approach.

**M:** *How do you try to persuade congressmen that Afghanistan's narco-economy cannot be shut down overnight?*

**SJ:** We disagree on approach – different institutions have different time frames. For instance, the administration wants to look into the delivery of the results within the next growing season, but our approach is that we are not going to overcome this problem unless we commit a lot of resources for the next 10 years. It has to be a gradual approach.

**M:** *Why was the US prepared to abandon its calls for aerial spraying of poppy fields with herbicides?*

**SJ:** The best strategy to fight narcotics is to do whatever it takes to prevent cultivation. Once it's cultivated, it is too late. The result is that you push the farmers into the hands of the terrorists and criminals. In Colombia, for instance, the spraying campaign had poor results. For us, fighting narcotics is a priority but it should be done by providing for development and alternative livelihoods and building the necessary institutions.

**M:** *How did the Iraq war affect your work?*

**SJ:** We suffered from the fact that Afghanistan and Iraq were coupled on financial assistance packages on political situations. Afghanistan is clearly not Iraq. We have our own challenges but we have

## Serene retreat

It is easy to be optimistic about Afghanistan when you are at the Serena. The chain of 22 hotels was founded as a for-profit economic development project by the Aga Khan. The two-year-old Serena in Kabul, with its polished marble floors, is a favoured meeting place both for visitors and Kabul's international community.

It was in the hotel's tea shop, just off the main lobby, that Ambassador Jawad told *Monocle* that the outside world should not conclude that Afghanistan is turning into a mini-Iraq. "While we had an increase in suicide attacks last year, overall our security forces and US security forces established a presence in areas where they had never been in the past 40 years."

However, less than a week later, customers sitting in those same surroundings were diving for cover as four terrorists stormed the hotel. Eight people were killed in the incident.

significant accomplishments – we have a government and parliament. The goodwill of the Afghan people towards the international community is very different from how it is in Iraq. And we see increasingly a willingness in the US to decouple Afghanistan and Iraq. I think this will also allow for more funding and resources to be allocated to Afghanistan.

**M:** *Why did US interest in Afghanistan tail off so quickly in 2002?*

**SJ:** Things were going relatively well to start with. The Taliban were pushed aside but they were not completely defeated; they certainly weren't eliminated and they disappeared into the neighbouring country. Afghan people enthusiastically participated in the political process but the cost of rebuilding Afghanistan was underestimated both by Afghans and by the international community. And I think that a lot of the resources both intellectually and financially were absorbed by Iraq.

**M:** *Why were the costs of rebuilding Afghanistan so badly underestimated?*

**SJ:** In the case of Afghanistan the return of the international community was not based on a systematic plan. The US came here very quickly after September 11 to punish those who were responsible. Only then did everybody start thinking about building the institutions of the govern-

ment. On the part of the Afghans, the capacity to ask for an adequate amount of money for the construction process was not there. At the Tokyo conference [on reconstruction assistance in 2002] Afghanistan asked for something like \$2bn; we didn't even have the necessary resources to estimate how much it takes to build a government and infrastructure.

**M:** *How much should the Afghan government get each year?*

**SJ:** To build up the necessary security institutions, the political institutions and the infrastructure in Afghanistan at least \$5bn a year for the next 10 years is required. The reconstruction assistance at the moment is slightly over \$1bn.

**M:** *How do you explain to US politicians that Afghan women can't be liberated overnight?*

**M:** The effective way of providing gender equality in Afghanistan is not just changing the laws. If you look at the era of the communists in Afghanistan, they tried to change the condition of women by issuing decrees banning certain acts. But it was counterproductive because everyone perceived female participation and emancipation as a foreign, communist agenda. We have to be patient; we have to continue to invest in education and create job opportunities for women. — (M)