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False Promises: How We Are Failing Our Afghan Allies

Posted: 04/08/2015 12:10 pm EDT | Updated: 04/08/2015 12:59 pm EDT

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Sharif* was ten years old when U.S. troops drove the Taliban from his hometown, Kabul. Ten years later, he was working in Kandahar province, the birthplace of the Taliban and a hotbed of insurgent activity in Afghanistan. He interpreted for U.S. military advisors, training the Afghan Air Force. Sharif faced the same dangers that his American colleagues faced -- gunfire, mortar rounds, and IEDs. One of Sharif's friends, who is now in the United States, was stabbed several times in Afghanistan for his work with U.S. forces. But unlike many soldiers who Sharif worked with who are now safely home, Sharif cannot return home because the Taliban have threatened to kill him for his association with the United States. Moreover, the program that Congress created to protect Afghans like Sharif who provided faithful and valuable service to the. government -- the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program -- has been a failure.

Sharif had been working for nearly two years when he received approval from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to apply for an SIV on March 10, 2013. During the summer of 2013, Sharif was visiting his family when his father was threatened for the family's association with American forces. Sharif rearranged his travel plans and went into hiding for several days to ensure his and his family's safety. As a result, Sharif overstayed his allotted period of work leave by two days. Despite informing his supervisors of his security concerns and travel plans in advance, Sharif was terminated from his employment by Mission Essential Personnel (MEP), a private contractor that provides the U.S. military with linguists in Afghanistan.

MEP updated Sharif's personnel file to state that he had been terminated for "job abandonment," disregarding that his life was in imminent danger and that he had dutifully informed his supervisors that he was in hiding prior to missing work. Worse still, Embassy Kabul revoked his approval to apply for an SIV on August 9, 2013, relying on MEP's context-free description of "job abandonment," notwithstanding the fact that he had worked with American forces for over two years and had been recommended for an SIV by his military supervisors.

Sharif's situation is not a unique incident of injustice or even an extreme example of miscommunication. Rather, his situation mirrors that of many Afghans who have applied for SIVs only to be denied for illogical reasons. MEP's practice has been to use the formulaic description "job abandonment" to refer to virtually any instance where an employee loses his job. The underlying circumstances of the termination, which could provide valuable context, are not included in the employee's file. If the words "job abandonment" appear on an applicant's employment verification letter from

Afghan has worked for the U.S. government or the number of recommendations he has received from military supervisors.

Another interpreter, Farooq*, was between assignments when his mother fell gravely ill and needed a temporary caretaker. When Farooq explained that he could not return to work until after his mother was well, MEP terminated him -- not for family reasons or for voluntary departure, but for "job abandonment." He had never expressed an intention to abandon his job and even attempted to return after his mother recovered about one month later.

At the time he applied for an SIV, Farooq had four letters of recommendation from his military supervisors. One U.S. Army Lieutenant had been so impressed with Farooq's work that he wrote an additional letter promising to provide Farooq with financial assistance until he was gainfully employed in the United States. Farooq was ultimately denied an SIV because of "job abandonment," despite the strong recommendations from his military supervisors. Essentially the U.S. Department of State (DOS) determined that his supervisors' opinions were less valuable than MEP's assertion that Farooq had abandoned his job -- with absolutely no context provided about why he was unable to return to work.

The practice of MEP and the U.S. government to deem even the most sympathetic and reasonable circumstances "job abandonment" and to deny Afghans SIVs -- their only opportunity for safety in America -- on this basis is bad policy and bad judgment. The term "job abandonment" should be reserved for those situations where an employee disappears while on duty or fails to inform his employer that he is not returning to his position. MEP must adopt new standards for its personnel records and include the specific details of why an employee left or was terminated. Additionally, in order to deny an application on "job abandonment" grounds, DOS should require specific facts regarding an employee's termination. Otherwise, Farooq, Sharif, and our other Afghan Allies who we promised to protect will continue to live in fear, and our government will continue to abdicate its responsibility to them.

*Please note that the asterisk next to the names, indicates the name has been changed to protect the identity of the translators due to ongoing threats against their lives.



Report: Ukraine rebels executed government soldiers

Amnesty International says alleged killing of prisoners by pro-Russian armed groups may amount to war crimes.

09 Apr 2015 12:08 GMT

Pro-Russia separatists in Donbass, eastern Ukraine, have carried out summary executions of Ukrainian soldiers they have captured, according to Amnesty International.

In a statement posted on Thursday, the rights group, said it had reviewed footage purporting to show a Ukrainian soldier with signs of abuse on his face, and who kept in captivity until he was killed.

The organisation says a number of people say they saw Ihor Branovytsky being shot dead at point-blank range by a rebel commander.

His body was returned to Kiev earlier in April, and Ukrainian security services have since started an investigation.

Amnesty International also says it has seen video and photographic evidence showing bodies of Ukrainian troops with bullet wounds to their heads and upper bodies, apparently a result of executions.

The soldiers had been captured by pro-Russian forces in Debaltseve in February 2015 when the defending Ukrainian forces were encircled there, according to the group.

The statement by the organisation follows a report that appeared in Ukrainian newspaper *Kyiv Post* on April 6, in which a rebel soldier, Arseniy Pavlov, better known by his nom-de-guerre "Motorola", reportedly admitted shooting dead 15 captured Ukrainian soldiers.

Pavlov, who is believed to be a Russian national, is alleged to have killed Ihor Branovytsky.

"Summary killings are a war crime, plain and simple. The leaders of the self-styled 'Donetsk People's Republic' in eastern Ukraine must send their members a clear message: those who fight with them or on their behalf must respect the laws of war," said Denis Krivosheev, Europe and Central Asia deputy director at Amnesty International.

"These claims must be promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated, and the perpetrators prosecuted in fair trials by recognised authorities."

Source: Al Jazeera

Why we needn't fear the Isis hackers

Mary Dejevsky

By hacking into TV5 Monde, Isis has achieved little except to prepare media outlets and governments for more serious cyber attacks

Thursday 9 April 2015 11.30 BST

If you call up France's international TV network, TV5 Monde, this morning, you will find a blank screen with a terse message: "Nous sommes actuellement en maintenance. Merci pour votre patience." Which translates as: "Maintenance in progress. Thank you for your patience." The reason for the interruption of services is not given, but the channel, and its associated social media, appeared to have been taken over for a while by hackers operating on behalf of the self-styled Islamic State (Isis).

Now I happen to be a fan of French international broadcasting. TV5 Monde, along with France 24, and the radio station France Inter, are to my mind among the most informative, balanced and professionally presented services in the world. They are the stations I turn to first when travelling abroad - for their global perspective, and, yes, their style. Sorry, BBC.

So it would have been pretty shocking to have switched on TV5 Monde or tried to access its social media sites and found the sort of crude propaganda that was being aired. A message stated that "The CyberCaliphate continues its cyberjihad against the enemies of Islamic State." Social media profile pictures were replaced by pictures of a masked Islamist fighter. There was also an intimidatory aspect. Posts included documents said to be identity cards belonging to relatives of French soldiers taking part in anti-Isis operations.

The first reactions to the reported hacking, and still more to the repellent content, reflected the horror that Isis had managed to take over someone else's airwaves and bandwidth in pursuit of its "civilisational" war. The attack has also served to reinforce the argument that cyberwarfare is the way of the future; that Isis is ahead of the technology curve, and that the western world had better beef up its conventional defence and cyber budgets without delay.

But how far is such alarm really justified? TV5 Monde described the attack as "unprecedented" - which it is, in relation to a mainstream TV station. Isis or its operatives have form in this area, however. There have been several instances of new media hackings attributed to Isis, including a clutch after the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris in January. Targets included social media services in France and Belgium and @Centcom, the Twitter account the US central military command .

Such attacks were irritating, but they were small-scale and relatively easily dispatched.

As the US military pointed out, being able to access Centcom's Twitter account is far from the same as penetrating the actual command.

To be sure, TV5 Monde, and the other social media services that Isis has hacked need to strengthen their cyber defences. In a way, the attacks have done them a service by highlighting their vulnerability in this area. But what has Isis actually achieved beyond this?

As it has swept across northern Iraq and Syria, Isis has revealed an ability to combine a medieval, even pre-medieval, mindset with 21st century technology. It has also shown itself cannily able to manipulate and exploit western media thinking. Its release of beheading videos present open societies with a dilemma. If you do not report the killings, you are imposing censorship and covering up crimes; if you do report them, and post the videos or even a single picture, you are doing the group's propaganda bidding.

There comes a time, though, when the shock effect of even this footage wears off. Isis has recently appeared to be looking for new propaganda weapons. And while success in commandeering a French media outlet for a few hours might boost morale in some Isis quarters, it could well prove counterproductive in the wider world. The fact of the hacking, plus the crudeness of the messages, is unlikely to enhance Isis's appeal beyond those already converted.

So long as we recognise propaganda as such - as with Russia's efforts to impose its views about Ukraine, so with Isis - those trying to influence western opinion have failed.

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Palestinian envoy: 'military' option agreed for Syrian camp against Islamic State

9 APRILE 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



A Palestinian official says an agreement has been reached with the Syrian government to use military force to expel **ISIS** militants from an embattled Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, wrote DailyStar.

Palestinian Labor Minister **Ahmad Majdalani** told the Voice of **Palestine Radio** that “we have agreed with the Syrian government on ways to force the terrorist group ISIS out of the Yarmouk refugee camp.”

He says “the military solution is the only one to force these terrorists out” of Yarmouk, which ISIS militants largely overran last week.

Majdalani is leading a **West Bank** delegation to **Damascus** to address the Yarmouk crisis.

Majdalani also says the Syrian government has agreed to ensure safe passage to refugees in Yarmouk and to provide them with shelter outside the camp.

AQAP Gains as Yemen Implodes

Security Weekly | APRIL 9, 2015 | 07:53 GMT | Text Size



By **Scott Stewart**

Early April 2, a convoy of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula fighters descended on Mukalla, Yemen's fifth-largest city and the capital of Yemen's Hadramawt province. The gunmen stormed the central prison on the northern outskirts of the city and reportedly released some 300 inmates, many of who were AQAP members, including senior military commander Khalid Bartafi. AQAP fighters then moved into the city and seized control of the port, the central bank and several government buildings, including the presidential palace. Bartafi later posted photos of himself in the presidential palace to Twitter.

The next day, the militants turned their attention to nearby military facilities. The soldiers defending the headquarters of Yemen's second military zone and a Special Security Forces base fled after putting up minimal resistance, and AQAP fighters were able to loot weapons stores.

Such raids are not new to Mukalla: AQAP captured the second military zone's headquarters in September 2013. During the group's [period of rapid expansion in 2011](#), it also attacked the central prison and released some 40 AQAP fighters. The jihadist group is continuing to capitalize on Yemen's power vacuum to expand its reach in the country.

A Much Needed Boost

The raid on Mukalla scored AQAP a terrorist trifecta — fighters, weapons and cash — that will greatly benefit its efforts to expand its power base in Yemen. On the manpower front, in addition to releasing foot soldiers, the group recovered Bartafi, a senior military commander who was instrumental in the group's 2011-2012 campaign that captured large chunks of the country. The group also seized large quantities of small arms, light weapons, ammunition and heavy weapons such as armored vehicles and artillery pieces. *The New York Times* cited a Yemeni official who said the amount of cash looted from the central bank was in the tens of millions of dollars. The windfall will go a long way in paying salaries, buying weapons and purchasing good will from some Yemeni tribes.

Some reports indicated that tribal leaders in Hadramawt were assembling a force to push AQAP out of Mukalla, but the group still controls much of the city. Also, despite the large concentration of AQAP fighters and vehicles in and around Mukalla, coalition aircraft have completely ignored AQAP targets. Instead, coalition aircraft continue to focus on hitting Yemeni military units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and al-Houthi militias, a decision that benefits AQAP because it weakens its two most dangerous enemies. In fact, several media outlets reported that AQAP militants stormed and captured a Yemeni border post near Zamakh wa Manwakh on April 6, indicating that the group may again be attempting to seize and control a large portion of Yemen as it did in 2011.

The bounty and publicity that came with the capture of Mukalla could not have come at a better time for AQAP. The group has suffered heavy losses on the battlefield and from airstrikes launched by U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles since January 2012. Also, the Islamic State had begun to supplant AQAP as the most sensational jihadist group in the country. [A wave of Islamic State suicide bombings](#) targeting three mosques frequented by al-Houthis in Sanaa and a government building in Saada killed at least 137 people and wounded hundreds more, garnering worldwide attention. More important, the attacks demonstrated that Islamic State members were willing to take deadly action against the al-Houthis, while AQAP fighters were mostly on the defensive. Many younger AQAP fighters were beginning to grumble about the group's lack of success compared to the Islamic State's gains in Iraq and Syria. Some of them even defected, pledging their allegiance to the Islamic State.

In this context, AQAP's capture of Mukalla and nearby military installations was a much needed boost for the group. Battlefield success combined with the release of jihadist prisoners and the infusion of cash and weapons should help AQAP leader Nasir al-Wahayshi and his deputies stem dissent and defections of rank-and-file members.

The Saudi Calculus

Few have benefitted from the bloody and destructive war [destroying most of the infrastructure of Yemen's western cities](#) from Saada in the north to Aden in the south — except for AQAP. When Riyadh chose to attack AQAP's enemies on the ground in Yemen, they certainly knew the jihadist group would benefit. Indeed, while AQAP also opposes the various factions of the southern secessionist movement and the forces loyal to embattled President Abd Rabboh Mansour Hadi, none of these groups have been as effective in fighting AQAP as the al-Houthi militias and the Saleh-loyalist units, many of which were trained by the United States.

Why, then, did Saudi Arabia choose to intervene in Yemen's civil war? First of all, this is not the first time it has done so. Following the 1962 Nasserite coup that overthrew the Zaidi Mutawakkilite Kingdom, the Saudis feared they would be the next country the Nasserites targeted. So they intervened on the side of the monarchists, ensuring that the war would be long and bloody, but stay south of the border.

Also, besides military incursions, Riyadh has long meddled in the affairs of its impoverished neighbor by providing money and weapons to tribes and other political actors supportive of Saudi interests. Quite often, such payments went to or through Saleh, who ruled north Yemen from 1978 to 1990 and the united Yemen from 1990 until 2012. Saudi Arabia also intervened on Saleh's side in the 2009-2010 war against the al-Houthis (the sixth such flare-up since 2004).

However, the real driver of Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is its need to strike back against Iran — or at least appear to strike back against Iran — after [Tehran and Washington agreed on the framework of a nuclear deal](#), which is the first step in a broader rapprochement between the two countries. Saudi Arabia sees the improving relationship as a substantial threat to its geopolitical situation, which is based on the promise of U.S. protection. The United States is again pursuing a [balance of power strategy](#) in the region. With Iran involved militarily in Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia believes it needs to do something to flex its growing strength and showcase its military power.

The Saudi solution was to select the weakest target: Yemen, which is far easier for Saudi Arabia to attack than Hezbollah, the Syrian government or Iran itself. Intervening in Yemen also provided an opportunity for Riyadh to display its ability to build a pro-Saudi regional coalition. However, Saleh and the al-Houthis proved resilient, standing up to two weeks of airstrikes and showing no sign of capitulating.

As we've previously noted, however, [the Yemeni conflict is not sectarian in nature](#), nor is it a regional one. It is really more of an internal power struggle for control of the country. Nonetheless, forces have worked to make Yemen's struggle appear sectarian. Ironically, one of the first to cast the fight against the al-Houthis as a sectarian struggle was Saleh, who is now aligned with the al-Houthis.

Following his first conflict with the al-Houthis in 2004, Saleh repeatedly attempted to convince the U.S. and Saudi governments that Iran was backing the al-Houthis and that they should respond by supporting Yemen's efforts to destroy the rebels. Saleh even asked U.S. officials for intelligence he could use to kill al-Houthi leader Abdel Malik al-Houthi. However, as numerous State Department cables from 2004 to 2010 demonstrated, the United States was not convinced by the claims of Iranian support, and Saleh and his ministers were unable to show proof of Iranian or Hezbollah connections.

In addition to Saleh, Iran also attempted to portray the al-Houthi conflict as a sectarian struggle to increase the perception of their regional reach and clout in the hopes of intimidating rivals. In fact, Iranian sources in the region even provided Stratfor with false [information inflating Tehran and Hezbollah's involvement with the al-Houthis](#).

It is impossible to be sure whether Saudi Arabia really believes Saleh and Iran's false claims, or if they are merely using them to justify flexing their muscles in Yemen. Either way, Saudi Arabia's destruction of weapons depots it gave to Yemen to help Saleh fight the al-Houthis is an ironic turn of events.

A Dangerous Snake

In the end, Saleh cannot win in Yemen. A man who was once known as being able to "dance on the heads of snakes" because of his prodigious and precarious efforts to balance all of Yemen's competing interests against one another is seeing everything come crashing down around him. Still, Saleh pursues only his own interests and will quickly turn on an ally if doing so benefits him. He has used the conservative tribes and the jihadists against his enemies in the south — for example, during the civil war in 1993-1994 — but also repeatedly against the al-Houthis during the six wars he fought against them. In addition to using the jihadists to attack his enemies, Saleh also used them as a boogeyman to secure

funding, weapons and training from the United States.

Since being deposed in 2011, Saleh has been deeply bitter, using his old enemy, the al-Houthis, to lash out against the al-Ahmars, a [powerful family that leads the Hashid tribal confederation](#) that started the civil war that ultimately forced Saleh to step down. He has also sought revenge on those he believes are responsible for his misfortune, including Hadi and the interests of the foreign powers. Furthermore, like some sort of comic book villain, Saleh is also seeking vengeance over the [June 2011 assassination attempt](#) that nearly killed him and left him scarred.

Yemen continues to deal with a resurgent jihadist group, a vitriolic and manipulative former president, and a wide array of miscellaneous tribal leaders and warlords. Airstrikes and intense urban combat compound the situation. For the past several decades, Yemen has teetered on the precipice of disaster because of endless civil wars, tribal insurrections, jihadist movements, a failing economy, [overpopulation, hunger and water shortages](#). Now the Saudi-led coalition appears to have finally pushed Yemen over the edge and into the void. Like Somalia, Iraq, Libya and Syria, putting Yemen back together again will be difficult and take time. In the instability, AQAP will thrive.

2 New Ebola Vaccines Pass Important Early Test, Researchers Say

By DENISE GRADY APRIL 8, 2015

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Two

new [Ebola](#) vaccines have passed an important test, protecting monkeys against the strain of the virus responsible for the current deadly outbreak, researchers reported on Wednesday. Only one dose was needed, and there were no apparent side effects.

The vaccines have not yet been tested in people, but safety trials in healthy volunteers will probably begin early this summer, said Thomas W. Geisbert, an [Ebola](#) expert at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, and the senior author of a report published on Wednesday in the [journal Nature](#).

Tests in nonhuman primates are an important step, because those animals are far more closely related to humans than are other lab animals.

The study of the new vaccines involved 10 macaques. Eight were vaccinated, and two, as

RELATED COVERAGE

[In Africa, a Decline in New Ebola Cases Complicates Vaccine Development](#) JAN. 9, 2015

controls, were not. The vaccinated animals showed no signs of side effects from the vaccine, Dr. Geisbert said. On the 28th day after the vaccines were given, all the monkeys were injected with Ebola virus from the current outbreak. No vaccinated monkeys became ill, but the unvaccinated ones both died within a week.



[How Ebola Roared Back](#) DEC. 29, 2014
[Times Topic: The Ebola Outbreak in West Africa](#)



Thomas W. Geisbert, an Ebola expert at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, in his office.
 Michael Stravato for The New York Times

The two new vaccines are improved versions of an older one that was licensed to [Merck](#) and is now being tested for efficacy in people in Liberia. The older vaccine can cause unpleasant side effects like [fever](#) and pain in joints and muscles. (Another vaccine, licensed to GlaxoSmithKline, is also being tested in West Africa, and has not had serious side effects.)

The side effects of the vaccine licensed to Merck were not considered serious enough to block its use. But they could pose problems during an outbreak because they resemble early symptoms of Ebola, so patients with a [fever](#) soon after vaccination might have to be tested or even quarantined until it was determined whether they were infected or just having a reaction to the shot.

“I think these improved vaccines should fix that,” Dr. Geisbert said in an email.

The two newer vaccines are being made by [Profectus BioSciences](#). The company’s chief scientific officer, John Eldridge, said the company had received \$55 million in recent months to work on Ebola vaccines from a consortium of government agencies that includes the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense. He said that Profectus was also working on another vaccine that would protect people against several strains of Ebola as well as Marburg, a related virus. None of the vaccines is likely to be approved much before 2017, he said.

Several authors of the Nature report are scientists employed by Profectus.

The study described in the report was paid for by the National Institutes of Health and the University of Texas Medical Branch.

The Merck and Profectus Ebola vaccines are made from vesicular stomatitis virus, or V.S.V., which causes a mouth disease in cattle but rarely infects people. Profectus specializes in vaccines based on V.S.V.

In the Ebola vaccines, the stomatitis virus is genetically engineered to make a protein from the surface of the Ebola virus, which stimulates the immune system to recognize Ebola, fight it off and prevent infection.

The side effects are caused by the stomatitis virus, which replicates in the bloodstream. In the newer vaccines the V.S.V. has been genetically altered further to attenuate it, meaning that it will not replicate as much or reach such high blood levels as the original. The lower levels reduce side effects but do not reduce the vaccine's ability to create immunity, Dr. Eldridge said.

Half the monkeys in the study received a highly attenuated version, and the other half a less attenuated form. The two vaccines worked equally well, so Profectus plans to develop the more attenuated one, because it should be safer, Dr. Eldridge said.

The 28-day period between vaccination and exposure to the virus was picked to match up with previous studies, so that results could be compared, but the vaccine probably starts working much sooner than that, Dr. Geisbert said. Future studies will try to find out just how quickly the vaccine works.

Correction: April 8, 2015

An earlier version of this article misstated the plans Profectus BioSciences has for developing an Ebola vaccine. The company plans to develop a more attenuated version, not a less attenuated one.