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Afghan Tells of Ordeal at the 'Center of Al Qaeda'

By **CARLOTTA GALL**

KABUL, Afghanistan — Abdul Khaliq Farahi's kidnappers attacked fast, smashing into his car to stall it, seizing him and executing his driver as he tried to make a phone call. Within seconds, they were driving away to a hide-out just 20 minutes away.

It was Sept. 23, 2008, and Mr. Farahi, the Afghan consul general in the Pakistani border town of Peshawar, was driving home from work. His kidnapping was one of a series singling out foreign officials that included the taking of an Iranian diplomat and an attempt to kidnap the American consul, Lynne Tracey, who escaped thanks to the quick reactions of her driver.

Mr. Farahi, 52, spent two years and two months as a captive of Arab members of [Al Qaeda](#) in [Pakistan's](#) lawless tribal areas. Questioned under torture for the first six months, he was moved 17 times. Apart from the first days when local Pakistani and Afghan militants handled him, he was always held by Arabs, he said.

He spoke for the first time at length about his two-year ordeal in an interview in a hotel in downtown Kabul, just yards from the presidential palace where he has been living as a guest of President [Hamid Karzai](#) since his release last November. Within days of being snatched, Mr. Farahi was driven deep into the mountains of South Waziristan, one of the most inaccessible of Pakistan's tribal territories, where Islamist militants run a virtual ministate beyond the control of the Pakistani government.

He found himself in a remote valley. Inside one of a few small huts, an Arab man was waiting for him.

“Whatever you need, we are ready to bring you,” Mr. Farahi recalled the Arab's saying.

“We will start the questions tomorrow.”

“I understood this is the center of Al Qaeda,” he said. His interrogator was in his 20s, gave

his name as Hassan and spoke English with a British accent, he said. "When I saw them, I realized they were Al Qaeda. I thought they would kill me, that first they would ask me questions and then they would kill me."

By 2008, Pakistani and Qaeda militants were spreading their reach beyond their base in Pakistan's mountainous tribal areas into the heart of the country's main cities, and exposing the perilous weakness of the Pakistani state as they conducted assassinations, suicide bombings and kidnappings. Mr. Farahi said that seeing Al Qaeda up close brought home to him how powerful they were in Pakistan. "They could do whatever they wanted," he said.

Pakistani militants had long been carrying out kidnappings to extort money and sometimes to exchange for prisoners being held by the government. They had gained the release of a number of high-level prisoners in exchange for the Pakistani ambassador to [Afghanistan](#), Tariq Azizuddin, just months earlier. Al Qaeda, Mr. Farahi said he came to realize, was engaging in kidnapping for the same reasons.

"At the beginning, I could not understand why they took me," he said, recalling his ordeal in sometimes imperfect English. "They would say: 'You are a representative of America. Your government is not a Muslim government. We have the right to kill you. You are not Muslim.'" They also accused him of working with the [Central Intelligence Agency](#).

"Then later I realized they had aims to release their friends and get some money," he said. "I concluded they organized the kidnapping."

The group, which he sensed was large and had multiple sections, was led by an Arab in his 40s who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation. The man gave different names; one was Abdul Haq, but it was not his real name, Mr. Farahi said. Mr. Farahi met him 12 to 15 times, until he was killed in a [drone](#) strike last spring.

There was another man in charge of security, an Arab from Saudi Arabia, about 30, who gave numerous names — Ali, Muhammad, Mustafa.

"For the first six months, they gave me a lot of torture and a lot of questions," he said. "After that, they treated me better."

He said he was blindfolded and handcuffed, his feet manacled and chained to his hands, or was made to stand for 12 or 13 hours in a locked room. Then he would be questioned for an hour or more.

He was allowed to go to the bathroom only after 24 or 30 hours. Sometimes he was suspended painfully for three or four minutes at a time by his arms. During one period, he was kept down a well, in a space dug out from the side of the wall, for four or five days at a time. The room down the well, he later came to understand, was designed for people to hide from American drones and other air activity.

The Arabs had very specific questions about intelligence subjects, American diplomats and civilian contractors, and Afghan government and tribal relations.

“They asked me hundreds of questions,” he recalled. “ ‘Where is the Blackwater center? Where is the center of the drones?’ They asked me for details of the American Embassy in Islamabad. They asked too many questions, the location of the Afghan government intelligence. I did not know the locations.”

Although the Arabs seemed to live and operate on their own, Mr. Farahi learned that there was a close cooperation between them and the Pakistani militant groups. At one point, he was moved to a Pakistani village in another valley, indicating a level of interaction or cooperation with local Pakistanis, he said.

At one time two Pakistani Taliban, Pashto speakers, were among his guards, he said. “The Pakistanis know very well the Arabs are there, because this group of Al Qaeda was mixed with the Pakistani Taliban,” he said.

After six months he was moved to a big room where another prisoner was behind a curtain. “At the beginning, I thought he was an Afghan businessman from Herat,” he said. “But then I realized he was an Iranian diplomat.”

His fellow prisoner was Heshmatollah Attarzadeh, the Iranian consul in Peshawar who was kidnapped two months after Mr. Farahi in November 2008. They were held on and off together for the next year until [Mr. Attarzadeh was released, after some delays, in March of last year.](#)

Most of the time they were not allowed to talk to each other, but they found one place where they could, softly, so as not to attract attention. Mr. Attarzadeh had come to the same conclusion — that Al Qaeda had kidnapped him in order to win the release of prisoners and extort money from his government, Mr. Farahi said.

Pakistan officials have said Iran’s government made direct contact with Al Qaeda and negotiated Mr. Attarzadeh’s release. One Pakistani official said the Iranian government

exchanged him for anti-aircraft missiles.

A security official said the diplomat was exchanged for high-level Qaeda operatives, including Saiful Adil, an important figure who was the organization's commander for external operations and had been in Iranian custody since 2001, as well as some families of Qaeda members. A daughter and a son of [Osama bin Laden](#) were allowed to leave Iran at that time, and Pakistani officials said their release from house arrest was part of the deal to gain Mr. Attarzadeh's freedom.

The release of the Iranian gave Mr. Farahi hope. Six months later, he was released and deposited at the border near Khost in eastern Afghanistan. He says he does not know if any deal was made on his behalf, but officials in Afghanistan suggest that he was exchanged for money.

Mr. Farahi remains reticent about some things. "I was two years and two months with Al Qaeda in different places, and I realized so many things," he said. "I learned too many things about that issue and about the terrorists. I will write a book about it."

Ruhullah Khapalwak contributed reporting.