

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Dinner Guest

### *Sharing a pillow with al-Qaeda*

By Nicholas Schmidle

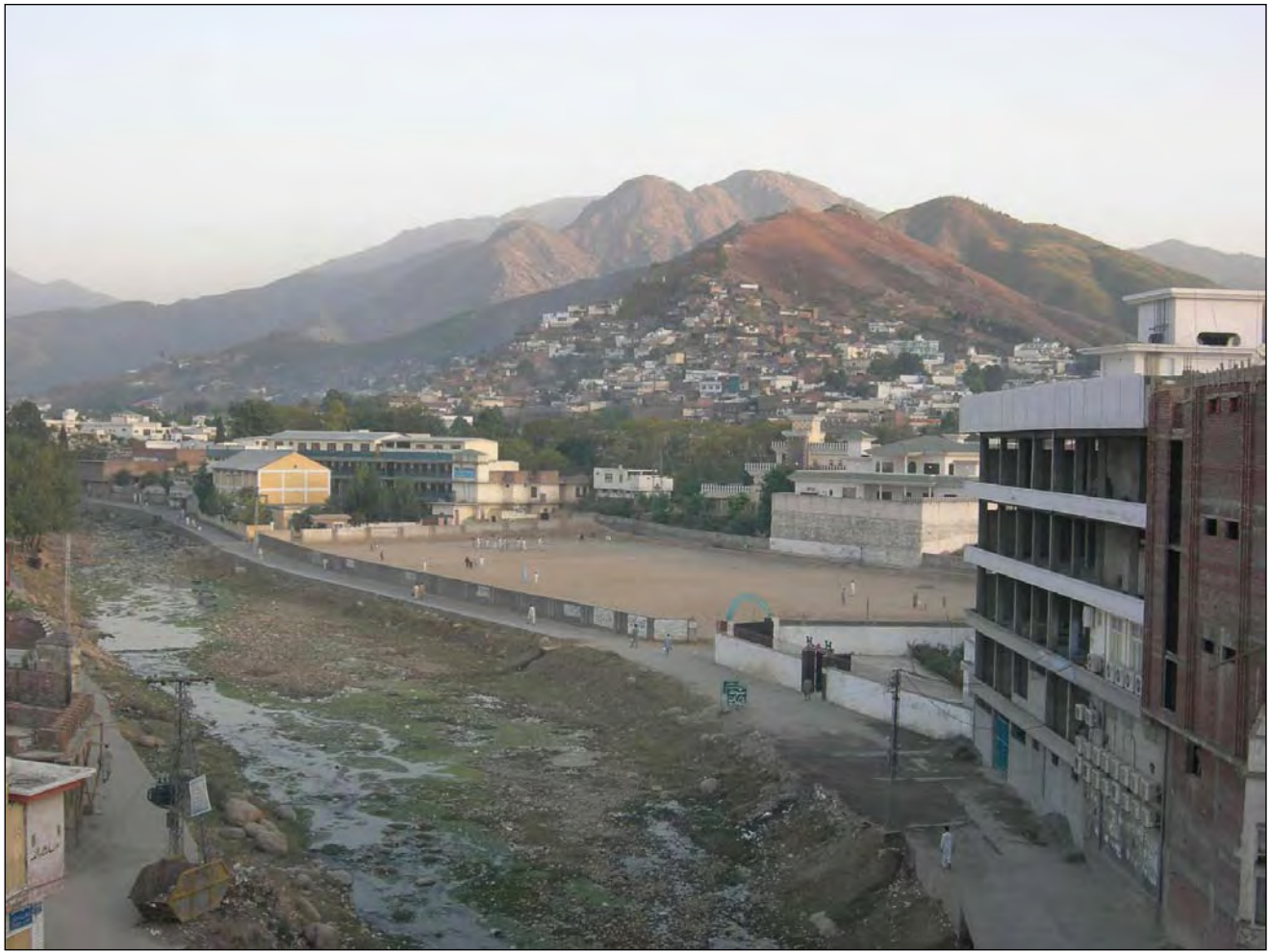
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**FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS**, Pervez Musharraf has been feted by the Bush administration, and praised for his cooperation in fighting the “War on Terror.” In September 2001, the United States arm-twisted him into the alliance, with former Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage warning him that he could either cooperate or “be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age.” He wisely chose the first option. And to reward him for his efforts, Washington agreed to overlook Musharraf’s dictatorial impulses and to pay his army around \$100 million every month. Six years later, with public opinion having long since turned against him (the most recent poll gauged his popularity at 21 percent), Musharraf felt confident enough in his American backers that he turned his despotism up a notch and declared a state of emergency. Still, that’s ok, because the United States has propped up plenty of martial law regimes (four previously in Pakistan alone) when it fits the U.S.’s larger geopolitical interests. They probably would have supported Musharraf now too, if he had been bombing al-Qaeda training camps in the tribal areas, or chasing the Taliban out of his country.

But instead, Musharraf’s regime is locking up political opponents, pummeling lawyers in the streets, and threatening journalists to either comply, or be “hunted down like rats.” Meanwhile, the Taliban, whose continued existence in Afghanistan — and now Pakistan — is arguably the driving reason for the U.S.’s ongoing commitment to funding Musharraf and his army, have taken advantage of the uncertainty prevailing in Pakistan. Over the past two weeks, the Taliban first fended off a short-lived military operation in the Swat Valley, and then began their advance. By November 8, five days after Musharraf decreed the emergency, pro-Taliban militias controlled 75 percent of the Swat district in the North West Frontier Province. They had replaced the Pakistan state flags flying over police stations with their own. Their supporters had set up donation stands around the valley, where local people could contribute funds to the “mujahideen” battling with Pakistani security forces. And they manned checkpoints throughout the valley, armed with rocket-launchers, Kalashnikovs, and, in some cases, long, curved swords of the sort you might have expected to see Saladin wielding back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Less than a week into





*Mingora, the largest town in Swat, is surrounded by mountains blanketed with pine forests.*

the state of emergency, thousands of lawyers and political activists were behind bars. Those who hadn't been arrested were hiding from the police. A few dozen members of the mainstream Islamist parties were under house arrest, but Musharraf had given the Taliban a virtual free hand. The emergency period could last another two days, another two months or another year. Judging by the pace at which the progressive elements of Pakistani society were disappearing into the back of paddy-wagons, and the speed with which the Taliban were taking over the Swat Valley, it seemed possible that Musharraf could be, inadvertently, creating his own mini-Taliban state to rule over.

**THREE WEEKS BEFORE MUSHARRAF** declared the emergency, I spent a few days with the Taliban in the Swat Valley. Swat, which is also the name of an administrative district slightly smaller than Luxembourg, is surrounded by mountains blanketed with pine forests. The Swat River pours from the peaks of the Hindu Kush and meanders through the valley, nourishing apple and persimmon orchards. During the summer, thousands of tourists flock there for a break from the heat and humidity choking the lowlands. When I visited Swat in June, I had trouble getting a room at the exclusive Serena Hotel. By the time I returned in October, I was the only guest.

Almost immediately after arriving in Mingora, the main town of Swat, for the second time around, I saw why; at the edge of town, hundreds of Taliban rode in four flat-bed trucks, pointing weapons in the air and ordering motorists to remove the tape-decks from their cars. Like their predecessors in Afghanistan, the Taliban in Swat deem music — and anything that plays music — un-Islamic.

An hour earlier, Shaheen, my 28-year-old Pashto translator, had gotten word that the Taliban were patrolling outside of Mingora. We were scheduled to meet one of the top pro-Taliban leaders, whose house was on the other side of the Taliban-run roadblock, for dinner. Shaheen called him in a panic. "Don't worry and come along," Iqbal Khan replied, chuckling on the other line. "Those are our boys."

Iqbal, a tall man in his late 40s, waited for us on the side of the road. He wore a long beard and short, graying hair that he combed back and covered with a white prayer cap. Iqbal is the amir of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi, or the Movement for the Implementation of Sharia, in Swat. The movement is best known by its Urdu acronym, TNSM. Iqbal has been a member since the movement began in the early 1990s. In January 2002, Musharraf banned the organization when reports emerged that the leader of the group had taken 10,000 madrassa students

to Afghanistan the previous autumn in order to fight the Americans. Most of them died. Iqbal confessed to being a commander during the misadventure, and admitted that most of the “mujahideen” were, in fact, “martyred.” “But we were only 6,000 at the beginning,” he said.

Having safely passed the cluster of Taliban fighters and found Iqbal to be a cordial host, I relaxed in the back seat and watched fishermen wade chest-deep in the Swat River, casting their nets. We drove for more than an hour. At dusk, we finally arrived in Iqbal’s village. It was Ramazan, the month when Muslims fast until sundown. We eased along a single-lane road, edged on either side by the dried-mud walls of village homes. Young boys hustled past us, squeezing between the car and the walls, holding armloads of flatbread like stacks of firewood.

The call to prayer signaled that the fast was over, and we each drank a glass of rosewater, followed by plates of rice, chicken, fish, and thick, hot, bread. Shaheen and I sat on the floor around a long, plastic placemat, along with ten other male members of Iqbal’s family. Iqbal fetched a 9 mm Beretta pistol from another room that he wanted to show me. When he came back, he explained that he and 25 other TNSM activists had recently gone to Kunar Province in Afghanistan, where they teamed up with local Taliban to fight the American army. He described the Beretta as *qanimat*, an Arabic word that refers to those weapons which a victorious army recovers from their opponent.

After dinner, Iqbal and I leaned against large pillows pushed against the wall and he told me about his love for

al-Qaeda. “I was the first person from this part of Pakistan to meet Mullah Omar and Sheik Osama in Afghanistan,” he said. Iqbal referred to both men as “our leaders” and told me how he determines whether a bin Laden tape is authentic or not. According to Iqbal, al-Qaeda continues to have a hierarchical and sophisticated system for disseminating information. “When statements from our leaders like Dr. Zawahiri, Sheik Osama, or Mullah Omar come down, they are first sent to the country-level. Then the tapes are taken to the district-level, where the district-level amirs write down the statement,” Iqbal said. I asked him about a recently released bin Laden tape in which the al-Qaeda leader exhorted his followers to wage jihad against Musharraf. “If Sheik Osama really wants us to fight Musharraf, he won’t tell the whole world, only his close aides and workers.”

Iqbal leaned toward me and turned the large screen of his cell phone so I could see it. He scrolled through photos of bin Laden and Zawahiri, stored in a folder on his phone titled “Mujahideen.” He played footage of IEDs blowing apart tanks in Iraq and Taliban firing missiles on Humvees in Afghanistan. We sipped tea. The wooden beams of the porch outside creaked when one of Iqbal’s family members left the room to fetch more jihadi propaganda. He came back with a stack of DVDs and a gas mask. In another room, Iqbal pointed to a backpack. He said it belonged to Zawahiri.

Later, Iqbal proudly showed me a framed letter, sent to him by Mullah Omar in 1998. It was written on the office stationery of the “Office of the Amir ul Momineen” of



*The silhouette of a minaret in Mingora.*

the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” Mullah Omar dubbed himself “Amir ul Momineen” — leader of the faithful — when his militia of turbaned fighters took over Afghanistan in 1995. The letter thanked Iqbal and TNSM for orchestrating a huge fundraiser in Peshawar. In middle of 1998, al-Qaeda attacked the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, and the Americans responded by slapping strict economic sanctions on the Taliban. Iqbal led the relief effort that eventually donated \$75,000, more than three pounds of gold, 196 wrist-watches, and 22 truckloads of rice, wheat, blankets, shoes and medicine.

When Iqbal finished displaying his al-Qaeda souvenirs, I asked him what he, and TNSM, wanted. Thankfully, it wasn’t just about killing Americans. Iqbal never indulged in al-Qaeda rhetoric about re-establishing the caliphate or fighting a crusade against the West. For him, it all came down to law. “We believe that peace cannot be established without a legal system following Islamic principles and injunctions. Some Christian and Jewish groups are trying to establish their own legal system in their own countries. But ours was handed down by the British from the time before the creation of Pakistan,” Iqbal explained. “I am a Muslim. I have a book revealed to me by Allah. So why are we not following it?”

We sat for hours. And besides giving me the eerie feeling that perhaps Zawahiri and other terrorists had rested against the same pillows I was now resting against, Iqbal proved to be an extremely welcoming and hospitable host. Shaheen later said, “This hospitality is causing so many problems — these Arabs also know they can get a good meal and tea at Iqbal’s house!”

**LONG PAST DARK**, Shaheen and I both decided it was best to begin heading back to Mingora. We still had to navigate through a river (the bridge had washed away nearly a year ago), and potentially, Taliban checkpoints. Police had stopped patrolling in Swat months ago. Iqbal offered us his Beretta for the ride home. “We are journalists, we don’t need guns,” Shaheen said. I thought having a pistol wasn’t a bad idea, but eventually went along with Shaheen.

Iqbal ripped off a piece of paper and scribbled a note in

Pashto. It read: “These people are guests of mine. Please show them respect. Iqbal Khan, District Amir, TNSM.” Shaheen folded it and stuck it in his pocket. Iqbal recommended tearing it up once we arrived safely in Mingora. Toting a letter signed by the head of a proscribed militant group, he reminded us, might guarantee our safe passage to Mingora, but it carried its own hazards past that.

We made it back to Mingora without incident. No police. No Taliban. And the water level in the river wasn’t high enough to leak under the doors. The only thing that slowed us down was a group of people making speed-bumps, laying rocks across the road and spreading concrete overtop, at the entrance and exit of a small town. “This is a symbol of anarchy in this area,” said Shaheen. “There is no law. There are no police. Cars are speeding through their town and there aren’t any police to tell them to slow down. These people don’t have jobs and anything else to do, so you know what? They build speed-bumps. Who is going to tell them not to?”

We rode quietly, in the dark, for another minute before Shaheen thought about the gangs of Taliban we had seen earlier that evening and broke the silence. “Actually, if those militants come patrolling through this area tonight and they don’t like the speed-bumps, they’ll tear them up. Everyone is afraid of them now.”

(Four weeks after my visit to Swat, the Pakistani Army moved into the valley and launched a massive military operation against the Taliban there. By the second week of December, the Taliban had abandoned most of their bases and strongholds in the valley and were confined to the hilltops, from where they continued to organize suicide bombing missions and occasional attacks on Pakistani security forces. Army spokesmen reported incidents of locals burning the homes of Taliban militants and welcoming the army soldiers as liberators, though intense curfews and army-controlled checkpoints have prevented journalists from reaching the area to confirm or deny such reports. A week after the operation began, Iqbal Khan’s phone switched off, leaving Shaheen and I only to speculate whether he had been killed or flushed underground.) □

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