



Newsmakers

The Siege of September 13

Shortly after President Obama declared a kind of victory in Afghanistan—and days after the tenth anniversary of 9/11—a gray van sped through the streets of Kabul. Its destination: a high-rise overlooking the U.S. embassy. What happened over the next twenty hours sure as hell didn't look like victory. In a *GQ* exclusive, Matthieu Aikins takes us for the first time behind the embassy walls and into the crossfire

BY MATTHIEU AIKINS

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Like most of the American staff, Jayne Howell rarely went outside the walls of the Kabul embassy. Beyond the blast barriers and fences of green anti-sniper netting was a city where "official Americans," as the State Department calls U.S. government employees, couldn't go around on business without an assault-rifle-toting security escort. Outside was a mess of traffic jams and uncontrolled boomtown sprawl where suicide bombers and kidnappers might strike at any moment. Outside was America's ten-year-old war against the Taliban.

On September 13, 2011, two days after a ceremony commemorating the events of 9/11 had been held in front of the main embassy building, Howell took her lunch to a little open-air plaza near the cafeteria. Ahead on work at the office, she permitted herself, for the first time since arriving eight weeks before to head the embassy's consular

section, to linger the full hour. She thought to herself what a beautiful day it was turning out to be. Fall was the loveliest time of year in Kabul. The mountain breezes cleared the bowl-like valley of its summertime smog, but the city's inhabitants had not yet begun burning wood, coal, dung, or garbage to keep warm, as they would come winter. On a clear day like this, you could see the dark peaks of the Hindu Kush north of the city, part of the Himalayan mountain range that stretched all the way through Pakistan and India on into Tibet.

After lunch, Howell strolled back across the grounds of the embassy, savoring the sunshine. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, in tandem with a military occupation and nation-building project that no one had quite foreseen, the embassy had grown into a sprawling complex for the 1,200 U.S. citizens who worked and lived there. There were meal halls, a gym, a post office, shops. It was a sort of self-contained universe, an island America.



Moments after the attack begins, journalists and bystanders run for cover; Afghan security forces arrive on the scene.

It's not that Howell didn't want to get out more. Foreign travel was one of the great perks of a State Department job, after all. Her work had taken her to Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Haiti, and Turkey, and she had learned one of Afghanistan's two principal languages, Dari. For a year, in 2004, she had been posted to Kabul as a cultural-affairs officer. Even then, the diplomatic staff could move about the city more freely. Now, along with Baghdad, the Kabul embassy was rated at the State Department's most critical level of security. It was located inside what was known as "the diplomatic quarter," an enclave of embassies, military bases, and Afghan-government facilities, not quite as fortified or hermetically sealed as Baghdad's Green Zone was, but nonetheless monitored and controlled by heavily armed checkpoints.

Unlike many of her colleagues, Howell did have frequent contact with locals by virtue of her position. Each day she and her staff in the old chancery building dealt with Afghan petitioners seeking visas—one of the few trickles of outside life permitted inside.

It was a little after 1 p.m. when Howell punched in a code at the entrance to the consular section. Her office was built on an open plan, with around twenty staffers, an even split of Americans and Afghans, and was separated from the consulate's waiting room by thick-glassed windows behind which visitors would sit patiently, their lives held in small bundles of paperwork in their hands. The consular section had just reopened for visitors following lunch, but Howell noticed that there was already an Afghan family waiting. One

of their children, a cherubic little dark-haired girl, was up at the window, charming Howell's staff with her small, winsome voice. Howell smiled; you didn't get to see children in the embassy very often.

She had just walked over to the desk of her colleague Chris Meade, who had recently arrived on his first overseas posting. As she asked him how his second day was going, the wail of the duck-and-cover alarm went off. There was a sudden scraping of chairs as people hustled to get under their desks, as they had been drilled to do. One of her Afghan colleagues was still standing up at the waiting-room window with the little girl, pleading with her to take cover.

"We gotta do it, duck and cover," Howell told him. "Everybody get down." They all crouched there on the stale-smelling light brown carpet, waiting for the alarm to stop. After a minute, Howell started to feel a little absurd. Alarms were an ordinary occurrence at the embassy. The loud noise and the sudden dive to the floor got your heart pounding, but it wasn't anything to get too excited about.



Around an hour earlier, while Howell was at lunch, four miles to the east, on the outskirts of Kabul, a gray Toyota Town Ace van had threaded its way through the backstreets of Utkhel, a rough neighborhood, infamous for its thieves and petty criminals. American forces sometimes raid the area, searching for insurgents. The van's driver

joined the flow of rusting taxis, cargo trucks, and shiny SUVs that were moving westward on the Jalalabad road toward the center of town. Next to the driver was a young male passenger, bearded and in local dress. In the back of the van were four passengers, at least three of whom were clad in powder blue burkas, the head-to-toe cloaks worn in public by traditional Afghan women. One of the burka-clad figures lay between the seats, as if ill or in labor.

The van's driver seemed to know his route well. As he headed west, approaching the diplomatic quarter, he deftly avoided the big intersections guarded by Afghan police checkpoints, cutting through the side streets of Microrayon, a neighborhood of apartment blocks built by the Soviet Union during its ill-fated engagement in the country. There were a couple of checkpoints that couldn't be avoided, but at each of them, the policemen, after a perfunctory glance at the passengers in back, waved the van through.

In Afghanistan's conservative culture, it would be a serious breach of social norms for a man to inspect too closely a woman who wasn't his relative, particularly a woman who'd modestly covered herself up with a burka. Women in burkas could therefore glide through checkpoints unseen. If on some premonition a police officer had commanded any one of the van's burka-clad passengers to lift up the veil, he would have gotten a nasty shock: All of them were bearded men.

Underneath their burkas, they were dressed in *shalwar kameez*, the traditional local garb of baggy trousers and knee-length tunics. In the van with them, they had olive green rucksacks stuffed with ammunition, grenades, juice packs, bandages, and energy bars. They carried Kalashnikov assault rifles, rocket-propelled-grenade launchers, and belt-fed machine guns.

Beneath the figure who lay between the seats was the massive tube of an eighty-two-millimeter recoilless rifle, a portable antitank weapon that could fire armor-piercing rounds at targets over a quarter mile away. The van itself was packed with explosives and rigged to a remote-controlled detonator.



On the other side of the diplomatic quarter, Lieutenant General Ayub Salangi, police chief of the city of Kabul, was on his way back from his weekly security meeting with the city's intelligence and army chiefs. A bulky, sleep-deprived man with perpetual dark rings under his eyes, Salangi relaxed in the plush leather seat of his armored black Toyota Land Cruiser, digesting the meal he had just shared with Turkish and American officers. That week, there had been plenty to discuss. Terrorist attacks were on the rise in the city. In response to the U.S. troop surge in rural areas and an intensive campaign of night raids, the Taliban had begun to emphasize more nimble, asymmetrical tactics: roadside bombs, assassinations, and commando-style suicide assaults in the urban centers. Kabul had already endured two particularly brutal and sensational attacks that summer. On June 28, in a scene reminiscent of the Mumbai siege of 2008, a team of assailants had stormed the InterContinental, a luxury hotel perched on a hilltop. Stalking the halls, they'd murdered all the guests and staff they could find, holding off security forces in a chaotic gun battle that had lasted all night.

Several weeks later, shortly after daybreak on August 19, a car loaded with explosives had rammed into the offices of the British Council. A group of insurgents shot their way in after it, taking over the building and turning its hardened defenses against the security forces who responded. Throughout the ordeal, a group of British staff had remained barricaded in a safe room, pleading into their cell phones for help as the insurgents tried, unsuccessfully, to break down the door. That battle had also dragged on for hours.

Salangi knew his enemy well. A former mujahideen commander with the Northern Alliance, he'd fought the Taliban for five years during the civil war. Back then he'd been the one living rough in the mountains while the Taliban occupied Kabul. After September 11, when the first U.S. Special Forces had joined up with his men during their lightning campaign to overthrow the Taliban, he had had trouble finding his American allies enough bread and rice to eat. Now he was a big-bellied, wealthy, and powerful man who had the thankless job of



trying to maintain order in a city that, as a result of a boom in foreign aid, had experienced uncontrolled urbanization at one of the fastest rates in Asia. This in a country whose government is ranked the fourth-most-corrupt in the world by Transparency International, after Somalia, North Korea, and Myanmar.



Afghan security forces had the primary responsibility for protecting Kabul and for manning the checkpoints, known as the Ring of Steel, that girded the city. But the gridlock traffic outside Salangi's window illustrated well the difficulties that Kabul's defenders faced. According to the police chief, between 2,000 and 3,000 trucks entered the city each day, many coming from Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia laden with supplies for the war. The population of the city had more than doubled in the past ten years, to an estimated 5 million, because of the insecurity in the rural areas and the money flowing into the capital. Many refugees came from parts of the country where the Taliban's roots ran deep. They settled in haphazard, illegally built neighborhoods, creating an illegible urban geography that was difficult to govern and police. The fact of the matter was, Kabul was permeable and exposed. It was an open city.



Abdul Haq Circle is a wide traffic roundabout named for a deceased mujahideen commander who fought against the Soviets. On a billboard at the center of the roundabout, Haq's chubby visage gazes out over the snarl of traffic that, on September 13, a couple of whistling, shouting policemen were struggling to control. Beside a few dusty pine trees at the edge of the circle, vendors peddled cheap Chinese socks from pushcarts, and among them moved a motley collection of hustling money changers and ragged little kids begging passersby to purchase packs of gum. A line of kebab shops ran down the southwest side of the street, and behind them was a grungy openair car wash.

The roundabout was dominated by two construction sites: on the northwest corner, a vast open pit where a foundation had been partially poured, and diagonally across from it, a massive twelve-floor unfinished edifice whose concrete skeleton gaped out onto the street, covered in a wire frame of metal scaffolding from which hung long sheets of green fabric made ragged by the wind. Its base was screened off by a line of advertising billboards. One of them promoted a new energy drink, represented by a can with a grinning demon and flames pouring out of the top. HELL was the name, in big red letters.

The building was empty, not an uncommon occurrence in Kabul, where construction moved in fits and starts. Like a lot of new buildings, this one had been put up without the proper permits and encroached on public land, and so the city had shut the site down in a dispute for the better part of a year. It had sat there, an eyesore, looming over the neighborhood on the diplomatic quarter's northeastern edge.



CLICK TO ENLARGE

At around 1 p.m., the gray van pulled to a halt in front of the tower. The passengers in back, who had thrown off their burkas, rolled open the sliding door and spilled out onto the pavement. They fired their assault rifles into the chest of first one traffic cop, then the other. A stray bullet killed a taxi driver circling the roundabout, and suddenly everyone on the street knew what was coming, had heard these sounds before, and was scrambling to escape—drivers jumping from their cars, the money changers abandoning their bicycles, shopkeepers hurriedly pulling down their shutters and fleeing out the back door.

But the attackers weren't interested in the people on the street. After killing the two policemen, they ran into the building site and opened the front gate to let the van in, which they parked at the building's entrance as an explosive trap. Three took up positions on the second story and started exchanging gunfire with police checkpoints farther down the road. The other three raced up the stairs to the top. They reached the eleventh floor and sighted their weapons through the gaping bay windows. As one of the tallest structures in the area, the tower on Abdul Haq commanded an excellent view of some of the most sensitive and important buildings in Kabul. From the eleventh floor, you could see a large compound belonging to the Afghan intelligence

service. Next to that was the headquarters of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF. Adjacent to it was the U.S. embassy compound, the squat ochre cube of the main building small but distinguishable from that height. Just to the south was the smaller old chancery, where, in response to the gunfire in Abdul Haq Circle, the alarms had begun to sound.



After a few minutes on the carpet, Howell and her staff began joking to lighten the mood. Across from her, Chris Meade pulled out an orange, grinned, and said, "Oh well, I'll take this moment to have a snack."

In an image that remained strangely fixed in her mind afterward, Howell watched as he slowly peeled the skin off. As he was peeling off the very last bit, there came a heart-stopping screech and then the bang and shock of an impact. Something had just blown up in her waiting room, and though the thick glass had protected the office, they had all felt the concussion and could smell the acrid stench of burning.

"That was an RPG!" one of her Afghan colleagues said as they scrambled to their feet. All Howell could think of was the other recent attacks in Kabul, where explosions had been a prelude to armed strangers coming in on foot and slaughtering anyone they could find. She called out to see if everyone was all right and then told her staff to evacuate. As they were moving toward the door, security officers came through, shouting, "Let's go, let's go!"

Howell glanced back at the glass that looked out on the waiting room, where the little girl had been playing before. There was just an opaque wall of smoke.

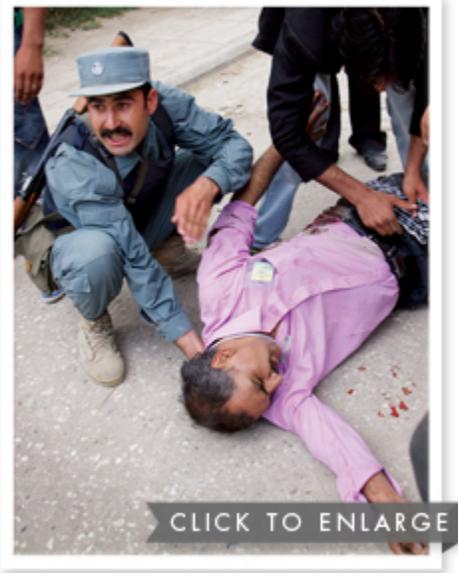


Salangi's SUV was passing down the main road north of the embassy when the sound of gunshots and his police radio simultaneously erupted. He told his driver to turn around and head toward the sounds.

At Massoud Circle, the next roundabout down from Abdul Haq, they encountered a bottleneck of police vehicles, and so Salangi continued on foot, ducking as he heard the crack and whine of bullets passing close by. Intense gunfire was coming from the Abdul Haq tower, and the policemen in the street were lying flat on their stomachs, returning fire, or else crouching behind buildings and concrete barriers. There was a mass of abandoned cars farther out toward Abdul Haq, their doors gaping open, and on the pavement was the body of a slain policeman.

Salangi started bellowing orders, telling his men to evacuate the police and civilians who had been wounded. The roar of gunfire was overwhelming. The insurgents had, in essence, kicked a massive hornet's nest in the diplomatic quarter. Thousands of armed security personnel were spread across the various installations, and a lot of them were firing on the high-rise, giving the impression of a gigantic—if one-sided—gun battle. Some Afghan patrolmen were firing rifles, others shooting from their compound with their truck-mounted heavy machine guns, the American and Macedonian troops at ISAF headquarters lighting up the building from their guard towers. There were even some American soldiers assigned to desk jobs who'd climbed to the roof of the HQ to return fire with their pistols just for the hell of it, even though Abdul Haq Circle was well out of range.

The insurgents had chosen their position well. The building's thick concrete walls were impervious to small-arms fire, and the six men had innumerable windows and positions to choose from. It was a high-rise bunker. Despite the volume of incoming fire, they were still launching rockets every few minutes. Someone would have to go in after them, Salangi thought.



Just down the street from Abdul Haq Circle lies the headquarters of the Afghan Ministry of the Interior's special forces, which include the Crisis Response Unit, or CRU, an elite commando team that is responsible for reacting to major incidents in Kabul. The CRU teams are among the best-trained Afghan units in the country and—in a police force marked by incompetence and corruption—stand out for their high morale.



One CRU team is always on standby, sitting around like firemen, smoking, praying, playing cards, and waiting for their alarm to go off. And when it does, it often means that it's time to venture out into some hellish confusion of smoke and gunfire and sirens, to suck it up and charge into the shattered hulk of a burning building wherein wait suicidal killers with bombs strapped to their bodies, mangled corpses, screaming hostages.

Captain Ahmad Sharif (a pseudonym, given his sensitive job) was part of the team on standby on September 13. Only in his late twenties, Sharif had already racked up five years of special-forces experience. He had a rangy frame, big chapped hands, and a blunt shaved jaw. His teammates were like him—young, athletically built, with an easy carriage, but there was a flatness and tightness in their gaze that betrayed an inner tension. It was the kind of gaze that tells you that someone has been through awful things and that he knows he will have to go through them again soon.

Shortly after the first shots were fired on Abdul Haq Circle, the CRU team—about thirty men—strapped on their weapons and, in their distinctive khaki fatigues and body armor, rushed to their black Humvees and roared out of the gate. As the designated quick-reaction force for Kabul, they took command of the scene from Salangi, set up their six Humvees around the perimeter of the building, and started pounding the insurgents with their big 12.7-millimeter guns mounted in the vehicles' turrets, heavy machine guns that fired cartridges the length of a man's hand. The insurgents replied with a barrage of rockets, damaging one of the Humvees.

Sharif was chosen to lead the first group of commandos into the construction site. From past experience, he suspected that the insurgents' van might be rigged with explosives, but there was no way he could get a bomb team up there in the middle of a firefight. There was nothing to do about it, so Sharif took a deep breath, grabbed his gear, and while his teammates around the perimeter poured fire at the building, ran in, skirting the edge of the yard, praying all the while that the van wouldn't explode.



Inside the embassy compound, rocket and small-arms fire rained down from the high-rise. One RPG punched through a twenty-foot shipping container being used as staff housing, though no one was home at the time. The vast operations of the diplomatic quarter had ground to a halt. The embassy was preparing for a full-blown ground assault, if it came to that, setting up vehicle barriers and manning the guard towers.

Meanwhile, security officers raced to get everyone into bunkers, stone-walled buildings, or shelters underground. Howell and her team were lucky enough to be taken to a room with phone and Internet. As the initial excitement of the assault faded, she became anxious for something to do—as a consular officer, she was used to being the one helping other Americans in crisis—so she had her team set to work creating call lists, one for families of local staff and one for the Americans, many of whose loved ones would be turning on their TVs soon; the sun was just coming up on the eastern seaboard, some 7,000 miles away. As she made the calls, Howell wondered what had happened in her waiting room.

William Green, the head medical officer at the embassy, had just come back from his hooch on the east side of the compound and was in his office when the alarm went off. A tall, lean Californian who wore Tilley hats around the embassy, he'd been in the country only four days, and



this was his first time in a combat zone. Shortly after he started hearing explosions and gunfire, security called and told him he was needed at the first-aid station—there were casualties inbound. Two security officers showed up, and he and a nurse sprinted across the lawn. Between them and their destination lay a couple of hundred yards of dangerously exposed terrain. The flat-out run at 6,000 feet was not kind to the jet-lagged 61-year-old physician. Gasping for breath in the thin mountain air, he thought to himself how embarrassing it would be if he had to stop for a rest in the middle of a firefight, with bullets and rockets impacting around him.

Arriving safely at the station, Green saw that personnel had already set up gurneys and stretchers, laid out in triage sections, along with boxes of medical equipment. The building they were in was a designated shelter, and a large stream of people were just then rushing in. As he looked at some of the older staff, themselves breathing hard and red in the face, Green thought that the first injury he was going to treat would be a heart attack. At least it wouldn't be his own. Then the security officers delivered the first casualties. Among them was the Afghan family from the consulate. The little girl was soaked in blood. Shrapnel from the RPG's blast had punctured her torso. Her vital signs were stable for the moment, but these kinds of puncture injuries were hard to assess. Green knew she needed to be evacuated—fast—to a proper hospital.

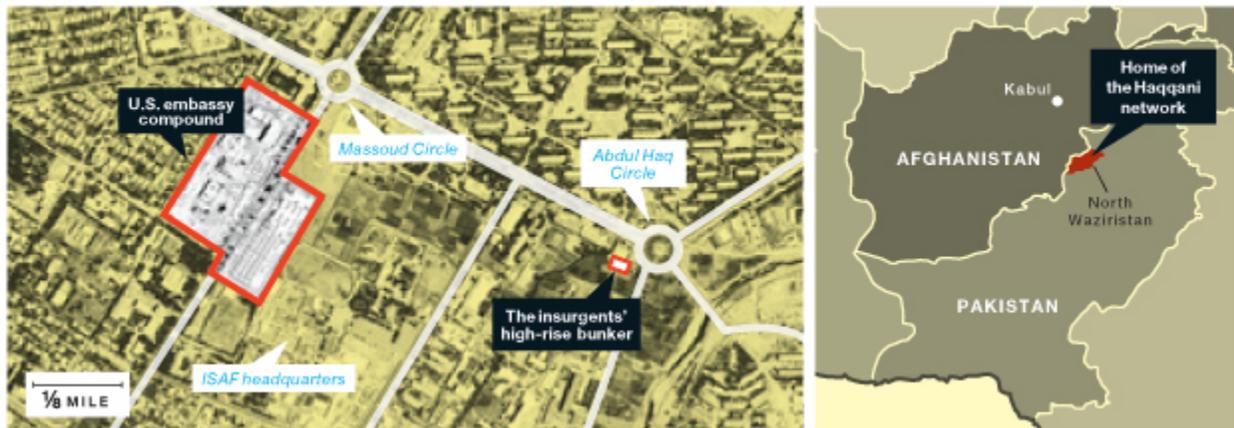


On the far side of the globe, Americans were waking up to news of the siege and to footage of the gray concrete high-rise lit up with gunfire and explosions. A Taliban spokesman had already claimed responsibility, the morning news shows reported, but the spokesman's claim revealed little about who the six men in the high-rise really were or what they hoped to achieve.

Far from a monolithic organization, the Taliban is now a shadowy and highly complex network of militant groups, some of which overlap with criminal gangs, some of which in turn overlap with corrupt rival factions within the Karzai government. Complicating matters further are the ghostly, meddling hands of a number of foreign intelligence agencies that are playing out proxy wars in the region, none more influential or feared than Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI.

Kabul The Scene of the Siege

The



sophistication and scale of the embassy siege pointed to one militant group in particular: the Haqqani network, named for its patriarch, Jalaluddin Haqqani. A tribal elder with a bushy hennaed beard, Jalaluddin rose to

prominence as a mujahideen commander in the 1980s, when the CIA was, via the ISI, funding their war against the Soviet-backed government. Back then, Haqqani had been a darling of both the United States and Pakistan for his group's military effectiveness. U.S. congressman Charlie Wilson, the best-known exponent of funding the mujahideen, famously called Jalaluddin "goodness personified."

In a classic example of blowback, the Haqqanis were now one of America's deadliest foes. They had, however, maintained their relationship with elements of Pakistan's military, which is widely believed to have been playing a double game for the last ten years, overtly supporting the United States while covertly supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. ISI agents regard the Taliban in general and the Haqqanis in particular as Pakistan's best hedge against arch-rival India, which had helped back the Northern Alliance—men like Salangi— during the post-Soviet civil war.

The Haqqanis' command-and-control operated out of the lawless area of North Waziristan in Pakistan's mountainous tribal zone bordering southeastern Afghanistan. In recent years, they had made significant inroads in the provinces adjoining the capital. From the mountainous terrain ringing Kabul, the group had launched a number of spectacular strikes, and circumstantial evidence suggested that at least in some of these incidents, Pakistan had played a role.

Take, for example, two devastating car-bomb blasts against the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009, the first precisely timed to assassinate a senior Indian intelligence official who was arriving in a motorcade. In that incident, the bomber's car had military-grade explosives installed inside its door panels so as not to be detected at a typical checkpoint. It was a mix of logistical delivery and precise targeting that, to a number of subsequently vocal U.S. and Afghan officials, had all the hallmarks of the Haqqanis and the ISI at their cooperative best. It was a clear message to the Indians that they were on enemy terrain.

Such suicide missions were as much psychological and symbolic as military. The insurgents holed up in the high-rise on Abdul Haq were doomed, but to them their inevitable deaths mattered little. They wanted to be martyrs. By dying in such a spectacular way, they hoped to send a message to the Americans: that the seat of U.S. power in the Afghan capital was—and would always be— vulnerable to attack.



On the ground floor of the Abdul Haq building, Sharif was relieved to note that he and his men had made it inside unnoticed. The van hadn't exploded. They hadn't taken any gunfire, though they could hear the shells plinking off the floors above. He cradled the modified Kalashnikov assault rifle in his hands and looked around at his teammates. It was time to start moving up.



Jayne Howell, consular section chief. She'd just returned to her office from lunch when the wail of the duck-and-cover alarm went off.

The building, unfinished, with rebar and electrical wiring protruding from bare concrete, was a nightmare of blind corners, the sort of death-trap layout that a fiendish video-game designer might have come up with. A single staircase, wide enough for three or four men to stand shoulder to shoulder, spiraled up the center of the high-rise. Moving from open floor to open floor meant emerging blindly into a doorway that was exposed to a wide arc of positions. A single militant lying in wait with his gun trained on the staircase could defend an entire level.

As the CRU team ascended from the second to the third floor, they could hear, over the explosive din, the voices of the insurgents, speaking loudly to each other in Pashto as they exchanged fire with the police out in the street. It was impossible to say how many were up there. Cautiously, weapons at the ready, Sharif and his men crept closer, and as they did so, they heard one of the insurgents remind another to check if anyone was coming. "If the infidels get inside, they'll finish us," one of them said. A bearded man in a dark brown *shalwar kameez* and sandals, carrying an AK-47, came around the corner of the stairs, and face-to-face at last, one of the CRU

commandos quickly dropped him with a burst of gunfire.

A firefight erupted, the insurgents firing their rifles and tossing grenades, the commandos replying in kind, and when

the melee was over, a second insurgent lay dead. A third had escaped to the floors above.



Clouds had gathered in the day's previously blue sky. As Salangi drove from Abdul Haq back to police headquarters, it was raining hard on the city. Back at his base, he met with an ISAF general and his staff to coordinate their response to the embassy siege. The insurgents had cell phones with them in the building, and ISAF had intercepted their conversations with unseen handlers who were advising them from afar, suggesting targets and techniques. Whoever the handlers were, it was clear they were watching the media coverage. That's why the journalists needed to be kept back, Salangi thought. Meanwhile, reports were coming in of seemingly coordinated attacks elsewhere in the city. Southwest of the diplomatic quarter, a suicide bomber on foot struck a station belonging to a police quick-reaction force, killing a policeman and wounding a civilian. At a checkpoint on the airport road, a policeman wrestled another suicide bomber to the ground. The bomber detonated, killing them both but sparing the checkpoint.

These widely spaced strikes—along with wildly circulating rumors—created a sense that the city was besieged from all sides. At the various cafés and restaurants catering to internationals, patrons were warned not to leave. At checkpoints, nervous policemen clutched their assault rifles, jumpy at the approach of vehicles, wary even of their fellow cops; it was a favored tactic of the insurgents to don stolen uniforms. Civilians living near the diplomatic quarter cowered as rockets shot from the high-rise landed in the streets and struck homes. Though the insurgents' targets were military and governmental, their fire was indiscriminate. They showed no concern for the innocent.

Enayatollah Qureishi was riding back from Asian Star elementary, a private school in the western part of Kabul, where he worked as a watchman. His cousin Sharafat was driving the school van. With them were six other passengers: a teacher, an older student named Sayed, and four younger boys wearing matching school uniforms, white dress shirts, and dark dress pants, their hair neatly combed. All four—Mahaz, 10; Abdul Rahman, 9; Yasser, 7; and Hamza, 5—were brothers, the sons of the school's owner, to whom Qureishi was also distantly related. The brothers looked alike—big brown eyes and round faces under a bowlcut of straight dark hair. Mahaz and Abdul Rahman were the noisy, rambunctious ones who loved cricket and stick fighting. Hamza tagged along, when they'd let him. But Yasser was quiet, kind, and attentive in class, his teachers all said, with a small, gravelly voice. He was the best student.



William Green, head medical officer at the embassy. Security summoned him to the first-aid station. There were casualties inbound.

Enayatollah and Sharafat knew there was an incident in progress that day—the boys' father had called to warn them—but these sorts of incidents were frequent. You couldn't live in fear of them, and life had to go on.

As they came down the street leading to Massoud Circle, they could see that the police had blocked it off. One officer yelled at them to turn around. As Sharafat pulled a three-point turn, the thrum of heavy machine-gun fire grew louder, followed by several deep thuds. The kids had gone quiet, scared, and Enayatollah tried cheering them up with some of the gallows humor common in Kabul. "I'll inherit your bicycles if you die," he teased them. As the van sped away from Massoud Circle, away from the fighting, a rocket launched from the high-rise came streaking in, hitting the pavement just to the right of the van, knocking it sideways and peppering it with hot shrapnel. Enayatollah's head swung sharply to the left, and he felt a stinging pain as something struck his temple. The van filled with smoke and dust and, grinding on its punctured tires, rolled to a halt.

For a moment, Enayatollah could see and hear nothing. He felt hot blood dripping down his face where a sliver of steel had slashed open his temple. Then, as the smoke cleared and his hearing returned, he was greeted by the terrible sound of the children screaming. Abdul Rahman had been wounded lightly in the leg and was crying. Hamza had shrapnel wounds along his leg and back and was bleeding badly. Sitting up front, Mahaz had been wounded in the leg and arm, but he'd been wearing his backpack, and his schoolbooks had stopped several fragments. Yasser looked the worst. He was lying unconscious, blood pouring from his open mouth. A metal shard had entered the back of his neck, lodging inside his throat. Dozens of other fragments had sliced into his back and thighs, and one piece

had hit the base of his spine. When Enayotallah scooped him up, he saw that the 7-year-old's white dress shirt had turned crimson. Staggering forward with the child in his arms, he brought him to a taxi that had stopped in the road. "For God's sake, let's go," he shouted to the driver. They piled all four children in and sped to the nearest hospital.



The Abdul Haq high-rise was the worst terrain Sharif and his men had ever encountered, worse than the Inter-Continental, worse than the British Council. The insurgents seemed to have an endless supply of grenades (raising suspicions that they'd stockpiled arms in the building in advance). They kept tossing grenades down the stairs and open elevator shafts or setting them up as booby traps by wedging them in gaps in the concrete and stringing trip wires to their pins.



Outside, the commandos could hear attack helicopters roaring in on strafing runs, their big chain guns punching holes in the concrete walls of the floors overhead.

As the light outside faded and the rain turned heavy and then tapered off, Sharif and his men pushed steadily upward, at the rate of about a floor an hour. As a testament to their experience, only one of the commandos had sustained an injury, a minor bullet wound in the leg, and even that was the result of friendly fire coming in from outside. The insurgents above hadn't touched them. By 11 p.m., about nine hours after entering the high-rise, the CRU team had cornered the four remaining insurgents on the eleventh, penultimate floor.

But there, they were stalemated. An insurgent had barricaded himself with bags of cement mix in a small room at the top of the stairs and was lying there with a belt-fed machine gun trained on the staircase. Beside him another insurgent, armed with an AK-47, lobbed grenades down at the slightest motion.

The CRU men, exhausted, smoked their cigarettes in the bullet- and shrapnel-pocked hallways, crouching in strangely intimate proximity to their enemies. They didn't call out for fear their voices could be used to target grenades. By now they knew two of the insurgents' names,

Hamza and Mansour. They'd heard them calling encouragements to each other, trying to rally the will to carry on.

In the bravery and violence they'd shared while trying to kill one another, a strange symmetry had formed between these two groups of young Afghan men. One had to give the insurgents a grudging respect for facing off against the entirety of Kabul, a thousand against one, with their deaths the guaranteed result. Their job made a suicide bomber's look easy. Press a button and vanish in a flash of light and smoke, that's one thing. But to hold at bay the violence and fury of ISAF and the Afghan government required a courage and physical strength that few could claim. Whoever they were, they weren't cowards.

As Sharif and his men paused on the tenth floor and the insurgents awaited them on the eleventh, a relative stillness fell over the building. Sharif's broad face was streaked with sweat and soot. Out in the darkness of the intersection below, the slain taxi driver's stereo was playing the same cassette of Pashto folk songs over and over again.



The normally bustling consular office was eerie at night, Howell thought to herself, especially after the grisly incident that had taken place that day in her waiting room. As darkness fell over the diplomatic quarter, the attackers, locked in their battle with the CRU commandos, had ceased firing on the embassy. The security personnel had begun allowing limited movement around the compound. Howell's local Afghan staff had been able to leave the diplomatic quarter for their homes. She'd returned to her office to catch up on work. There was a batch of visas she wanted to print out so that they could be given to applicants who had taken shelter in one of the safe rooms. It was a weirdly normal thing to be doing in these circumstances.

As she listened to the purr of the printer mingling with the occasional rattle of the helicopters' strafing runs, she thought about the fraction of an inch that had separated her staff from the people in the waiting room. If that insurgent taking aim almost 1,000 yards away had moved his rocket launcher a hair higher, the rocket might have hit the office. The girl and her family, she'd learned, had been evacuated in armored vehicles to a U.S. military hospital.



Over at the building on Abdul Haq, the Afghan forces were running into problems. Still stalemated at the eleventh floor, the CRU's commanders had come up with a plan to have commandos armed with gas masks and knockout gas dropped on the roof of the building by helicopter. They got as far as assembling a team at the airport before the plan was deemed too risky; unlike the gunships firing on the building, a landing helicopter loaded with commandos would be a sitting target, well in range of an RPG.

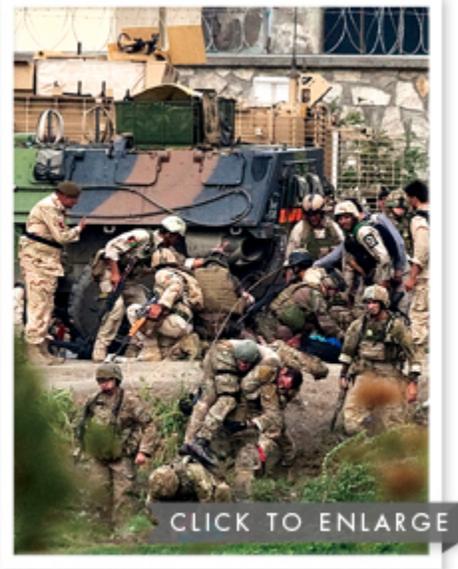
Early on the morning of September 14, furious that the attack had turned into an unending media spectacle, the minister of the interior ordered a reserve unit to take over from CRU. The reserve unit comprised several teams from Commando Force 333, normally based just outside Kabul, in Logar Province, along with their British special-forces mentors.

In the opinion of Sharif, the 333 was less suited for the job; they participated mainly in night raids and drug interdictions in open rural terrain and lacked the urban-combat experience of the CRU team. Sharif advised them against a frontal assault, but the 333 had their mandate from the minister himself. At the foot of the stairs to the eleventh floor, the CRU team fell back and the 333 moved in. One of the British commandos loosed an attack dog in the hope that it would pounce on the machine gunner, allowing them the chance to storm up. The dog was shot and came yelping back down, injured. The 333 then tried to storm the stairs anyway, but the insurgents dropped two hand grenades, wounding a number of them. A second 333 team tried an assault with the same result. The insurgents were holding out, carefully conserving ammunition now, firing in short bursts.

When dawn came, the citizens of Kabul woke to a second day of gunfire and explosion. Not long after sunrise, a crowd of gawkers assembled around the outer police cordon to watch and listen—and they got a show. In the early-morning hours, the decision was made to bring in NATO Black Hawks to finish the job. With the insurgents pinned down from below, exhausted, almost out of ammunition, there was little they could do to hold out against the helicopters' relentless spray of gunfire. Those early risers on the sidewalk all turned their faces to the sky, where high overhead the Black Hawks were circling, drawing ever closer, until finally they were hovering in midair, just outside the buildings' windows, machine guns blasting away at any sign of movement within until there were no such signs, and the commandos were told to move in.

At last they took the top floor. The remaining booby traps were defused, and then the corpses of the six bearded men in sandals were pulled out, some stiff from lying there all night, the last still warm and fresh. Young men. In their early twenties. The police fingerprinted and photographed them and carted them away for forensic examination. Eventually their bodies might be returned to their families through the International Committee of the Red Cross. Sometimes this bad news will be the first a family has received of their kid ever since he disappeared into the mountains to give his life to the cause. Congratulations, a family will be told by a local commander. Your son has become a martyr in paradise.

As the CRU commandos exited the building site, their weapons slung over their shoulders, the assembled crowds started cheering and whistling for them. Sharif and his teammates grinned and waved, but they were bone tired, their adrenaline finally running out.



Afghan and NATO soldiers evacuate the wounded and the dead.

In a defiant press conference at the embassy the following afternoon, Ambassador Ryan Crocker downplayed the siege, calling it "not a very big deal." This was from a man who, as the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, had lived through the insanity of the worst violence in Baghdad, and from a military standpoint it was true—the insurgents had inflicted little substantial damage. But his comments outraged many Afghans, especially those who lived near the diplomatic quarter and had endured twenty hours of terror. Psychologically and symbolically, if not militarily, the siege had certainly been a big deal.

In the days after the assault, the embassy's maintenance staff cleaned the waiting room, mopping up the blood, patching up the shrapnel holes, painting over the scorch marks. Howell proudly reopened the consular section that Saturday, missing only two business days—not bad for taking a rocket through the front door. Customer service was priority number one, she joked.

The attack had actually improved morale, for the most part, among the embassy staff. A major rotation of new personnel had just come in at the end of the summer, and the shared experience of the danger had formed new bonds among them. Those beyond the embassy's walls were less fortunate. An estimated twenty-five Afghans died in the fighting that day, not counting the insurgents.



The unfinished high-rise on Abdul Haq Circle from which insurgents rained down gunfire and RPGs.

On September 22, in testimony before the Senate, Admiral Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the Haqqanis "a veritable arm" of the ISI and said that Haqqani operatives had planned and carried out the siege of September 13 with Pakistan's support. The allegation ignited a media firestorm. It's not as if senior U.S. officials hadn't publicly connected the Taliban and the ISI before, but Mullen's charge was shockingly blunt: Mullen was suggesting that an ostensible ally had by proxy waged war on an American embassy.

The White House and State Department subsequently walked back Mullen's statement, taking great care to reiterate that they remained intent on working with Pakistan to confront the threat of the insurgency in the border areas. But the fiction of common interests that has underpinned U.S.-Pakistani relations is wearing thin.

A U.S. air strike on a Pakistani border post on November 26 killed twenty-four Pakistani soldiers after an exchange of fire between the two sides. The United States expressed regret and said that it was accidental, but the incident reinforced the impression that, in some sense, America and Pakistan are locked in a deadly struggle. A dire truth is increasingly becoming utterable: The 9/11 era, in which Pakistan's military was forced into a reluctant alliance with the United States against the Taliban, is coming to a close.

For most of the past decade, the violence in Afghanistan was largely contained to provincial battlefields. No longer. Kabul is now a wounded city that reels from blow to blow. A week after September 13, Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council, former leader of the Northern Alliance and onetime president of Afghanistan, was killed by a suicide bomber in the most high-profile assassination since the fall of the Taliban. About two weeks after the siege, on September 26, an Afghan guard employed at the embassy opened fire on a CIA office, killing one contractor and injuring another. And in October, a Toyota Corolla packed with explosives struck an armored shuttle bus in Kabul, killing twelve Americans, more than any other single strike in the city since the beginning of the war.

The Haqqanis were also blamed for the shuttle-bus blast, though, as with the embassy siege, there was no public evidence released, and plenty of other groups are capable of carrying out such operations. The recent increase in violence suggests that the attacks will only get worse as the post-9/11 settlement between Washington, Islamabad, and Kabul breaks down, and the insurgency grows both more powerful and more fragmented. On December 6, in an act of sectarian violence unprecedented for the city, a suicide bomber struck a crowded Shia religious gathering in Kabul, killing at least seventy men, women, and children. A Taliban spokesman denounced the bombing and blamed

the U.S.-led coalition. A Pakistan-based militant group, Lashkar-e Jhangvi, is suspected. They had never been known to operate in Afghanistan before.



There was one American casualty during the siege of September 13—the little girl in the waiting room, whose parents had come to the embassy that morning to apply for visas. Although she was born in Afghanistan, her father had U.S. citizenship, making her a U.S. citizen, too. She has since fully recovered from her injuries.

But 7-year-old Yasser, the most egregiously wounded of the Qureshi boys, is still partially paralyzed from the waist down. He screams and weeps when strangers enter his room, thinking they are doctors bringing more painful tests and examinations of his damaged spinal cord. At night, he dreams of writhing snakes that feed upon his legs. He and his brothers can't bear to hear the sound of sirens.

There is little doubt they will hear them again soon.

Matthieu Aikins has been reporting from Afghanistan since 2008. This is his first piece for GQ.

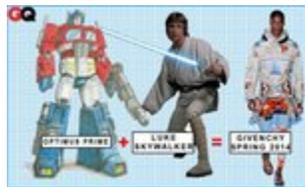
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