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Confessions of a Pakistani spy

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

4/24/2010

ISLAMABAD - Retired squadron leader Khalid Khawaja, a former Inter-Services Intelligence official and a close friend of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden during the resistance in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, has explained in videos sent to Asia Times Online how he was on a mission to broker a deal between militants and the army when he was captured by militants, and how he played a double game by deceiving a radical cleric into being arrested.

Khawaja was dismissed from the air force in the late 1980s and subsequently earned a reputation of having close ties to some militant groups. Khawaja has played an important behind-the-scenes role in both regional and national politics. Before the US attack on Afghanistan in late 2001, he was a part of the back-room diplomacy between the US and the Taliban, which failed miserably.

The revelations appear in five video clips sent to Asia Times Online by an al-Qaeda-linked group of militants from the Pakistani North Waziristan tribal area. The clips appear to have been heavily edited, with some of Khawaja's sentences - he is speaking in Urdu - cut off. At times it appears that a frail Khawaja, in his early 60s, is under duress.

On March 25, Khawaja traveled to North Waziristan to interview commanders Sirajuddin Haqqani and Waliur Rahman Mehsud. He was accompanied by a British citizen, Asad Qureshi, a reporter with Channel 4, and Colonel Ameer Sultan Tarrar, also a former long-time ISI official and once Pakistan's consul-general in Herat in Afghanistan.

Tarrar was nicknamed "Colonel Imam" by the mujahideen as he was instrumental in helping raise the Taliban militia and he trained present Taliban leader Mullah Omar and

other top Afghan leaders, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the slain Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud. "Colonel Imam" is widely referred to as the "Father of the Taliban."

The three men have not been heard from since March 25.

Soon after their disappearance, Punjabi militants calling themselves the "Asian Tigers" sent a video to the media in which they demanded a ransom of US\$10 million for the release of Asad Qureshi and the freedom of Taliban leaders Mullah Baradar and Mansoor Dadullah in exchange for Khawaja and Colonel Imam.

The Afghan Taliban have distanced themselves from the kidnappings and their spokesman Zabiullah Muhajid said they were working for the release of the two.

In the video footage, Khawaja confesses to a scheme to bring down the radical movement that had become centered around Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in the capital, Islamabad. By mid-2007, the movement had become increasingly aggressive. Students from nearby educational faculties had taken to the streets to persuade video shops not to sell "vulgar" movies. The campaign took a turn for the worse when the students seized a suspected brothel owner in the Aapara area, where both the Taliban-supporting Lal Masjid and the ISI were situated.

Khawaja says he hatched a plan with Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the chief of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (the largest Islamic party in the country), the Gand Mufti of Pakistan, Mufti Rafi Usmani, and other scholars to eliminate the Lal Masjid movement from Islamabad.

Khawaja says he trapped Maulana Abdul Aziz, the prayer leader of the mosque and the brother of Ghazi Abdul Rasheed, with whom Aziz ran Lal Masjid.

Khawaja says he telephoned Aziz and lured him into being arrested. Rasheed was killed in the military raid on the mosque in which scores of militants also died.

"I am known among the media and masses as a thoroughbred gentleman, but in fact I was an ISI and CIA [US Central Intelligence Agency] mole ... I am remembering the burnt bodies of the innocent boys and girls of Lal Masjid ... I called Maulana Abdul Aziz and forced him to come out of the mosque wearing a woman's veil and gown, and that's how I got him arrested," Khawaja says in one of the video clips.

The Lal Masjid incident proved a defining moment in Pakistan's recent history: it culminated in the decline of president Pervez Musharraf, who stepped down in August 2008, and provoked a fierce reaction among militants against the Pakistani state.

Khawaja says that top jihadi commanders were the ISI's proxies and were given a free hand to collect funds. The leaders included Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil (who laid the foundations of the International Islamic Front with bin Laden in 1998), Maulana Masood

Azhar (chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammad), Abdullah Shah Mazhar (a former supreme commander of the Jaish-e-Mohammad.)

"I brought here a list of 14 commanders and was aiming to malign them among militant circles ... Abdullah Shah Mazhar, Fazlur Rahman Khalil, Masood Azhar and jihadi organizations like Laskhar-e-Taiba, al-Badr, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkatul Mujahideen, Jamiatul Mujahideen etc operate with the financial cooperation of the Pakistani secret services and they are allowed collect their funds inside Pakistan," Khawaja says in the video.

Khawaja was arrested immediately after the Lal Masjid operation and spent several months in jail. He had been involved in talks with the government to prevent the military from moving into the mosque and he had assured the government that he would resolve the matter without force. However, the government intercepted some of his messages in which he apparently urged those inside the mosque not to surrender and he was arrested as a collaborator with the Lal Masjid.

He was a known critic of the role of the Pakistani Intelligence agencies after September 11, 2001, when Pakistan sided with the US in the "war on terror".

He was one of the few prominent people to openly provide assistance to Arab-Afghan families whose male members had been arrested or killed during the US invasion on Afghanistan in 2001.

At the time of his disappearance, Khawaja was working for the cause of missing people - mostly militants. But because of his past links to the air force and the ISI, he has always been viewed with some suspicion by al-Qaeda.

Khawaja was retired from the air force in the late 1980s after he wrote a letter to the then-president, General Zia ul-Haq, in which he called him a hypocrite for not enforcing Islam in Pakistan. He then went to Afghanistan and fought alongside bin Laden. He was a recruiter and trainer of Pakistani fighters for the resistance against the Soviets.

Khawaja's name hit the headlines again in February 2002 in connection with the kidnapping, torture and murder by militants of American reporter Daniel Pearl. It was alleged that he was involved in the abduction at the behest of the ISI.

Khawaja gave several interviews to Asia Times Online in which he revealed how he had set up a meeting in Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s between bin Laden and then leader of the opposition, Nawaz Sharif, to dislodge Benazir Bhutto's government. Her government fell in 1990 and Sharif became premier. Khawaja also revealed that in the late 1980s he passed on funds from bin Laden to a former Pakistani minister, Sheikh Rasheed, for the operation of training camps for Kashmiri separatists.

It is unclear why Khawaja took Colonel Imam with him to North Waziristan. In the video footage, Khawaja says, "I was sent by the Pakistan army in North Waziristan because the

army was badly caught in the middle of a conflict and was unable come out. I was sent to get reconciliation between the army and the militants so that the militants would give safe passage to the military to leave the area."