

NEWS | RESEARCH

One Graduate Student's Mission on the Afghan Front

BY MONICA CAMPBELL

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN
ONE MORNING this winter, Farouq Samim maneuvered his 1999 Toyota Corolla through the muddy streets of downtown Kabul. He arrived at a compound of squat concrete and field-stone buildings, the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan. Bearded men wearing traditional tunics greeted

Samim and escorted him to a musty library warmed by a wood-burning stove.

Inside, an elderly man wearing a gray wool hat greeted Mr. Samim and offered him tea. The man was a ranking scholar and member of a Pashtun tribe, part of the country's largest ethnicity and the group most often linked to the Taliban.

With little time and plenty of ground to cover, Mr. Samim, a

33-year-old Afghan now completing his master's in organizational communication at the University of Ottawa, quickly dove into a series

Notes From Academe

of questions. What's the smartest way to interact with Afghan tribes? Where and how should

foreign forces consult with tribal elders? Is it better to sit and talk directly, or should other channels be considered?

Caressing cream-colored prayer beads, the man offered advice. Deliver messages from the ground up, through tribal chieftains and local religious leaders, not only through provincial governors and high-level politicians, often disconnected from people on the ground. "The tribal

structures are still intact," the man said. Let the tribal and religious leaders face the people and inform them first, and then foreigners can enter.

As the man spoke, Mr. Samim, stocky with sharp dark eyes and thick black hair, nodded along and monitored his iPhone's digital recorder. It was now brimming with the voices of Afghanistan's Pashtun tribal leaders, voices that Mr. Samim is determined to make heard.

He argues that despite the tribal leaders' ability to exert influence in remote villages, which often serve as Taliban footholds, their opinions are often sidelined by higher-ranking, non-Pashtun Afghans or the country's centralized government structure: "We have erred in not paying closer attention to the complexities in the Pashtun tribal system, its codes and nuances."

The real-world implications of Mr. Samim's work are clear. This year is a critical time for United States forces to build on the momentum of Osama bin Laden's death, halt the Taliban's recruitment, and turn a corner in Afghanistan before a planned 2015 exit. But foreign forces still face a tremendous public-relations battle in Afghanistan. Recent polls show Afghan public support for foreign troops deteriorating, as civilian casualties increase and daily life remains a precarious struggle.

"Of course we worried about security, but we also saw how important it was for Farouq to get voices firsthand, from the ground," says Rukhsana Ahmed, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Ottawa and Mr. Samim's adviser.

On a practical level, Mr. Samim's research is tricky. He is focused on Pashtun tribal members from the southeastern provinces of Khost, Paktika, and Paktia, a mountainous area bordering Pakistan. There, tribes are conservative and often isolated. The Taliban can claim strongholds. Insurgents recruited from Pakistan can find shelter. Firefights, aerial attacks, and suicide bombings are also common in these areas— dangers that persuaded Canada's Research Ethics Board to approve Samim's field study only as long as his interviews took place in Kabul. He would also hide the identities of his interviewees. Luckily, enough Pashtun leaders from the border region shuttled between Kabul and their provinces to pack his schedule.

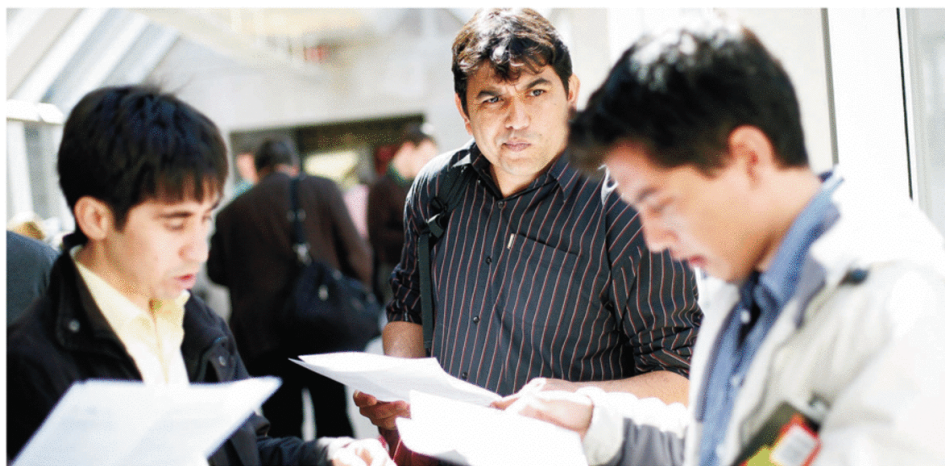
Yet even in Kabul, security was not assured. Only days after Mr. Samim finished his research and left for Canada, a Taliban suicide bomber killed eight people in an attack on a Kabul supermarket, a few blocks from where Mr. Samim conducted interviews.

In some ways, the graduate student is well positioned to go deep in



Farouq Samim, a graduate student in organizational communication at the U. of Ottawa, interviews a Pashtun tribal leader in Kabul, Afghanistan, for his research into how foreign forces should consult with local leaders.

MONICA CAMPBELL



Mr. Samim, shown here with colleagues in Ottawa, was born in Afghanistan and is himself Pashtun. He worries that, despite tribal leaders' ability to exert influence in remote villages, their opinions are often sidelined.

BLAIR GABLE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Afghanistan. His family is Pashtun, and he knows intimately what it means to be in a war's crossfire.

Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, mujahedeen rebels imprisoned Mr. Samim's father, a wheat farmer, for being pro-Soviet. He wasn't, but his moves to organize other farmers to get better seeds smacked of Communism. His father escaped jail, hidden in a large, woven basket carried on the back of a sympathetic farmer. After that, the family fled their farm and sought safety in Kabul.

Eventually, Mr. Samim studied at Kabul Medical University. During his residency in 2001, he practiced surgery on wounded combatants as civil-war battles erupted around the campus during the Taliban regime, which he calls "the suffocating period." His residency was interrupted when the Taliban's Vice and Virtue Ministry squads suspected him of converting Muslims to Christianity at the English academy where he worked for extra cash. He fled to Pakistan, but it was just months before the September 11 attacks.

When the Taliban fell, Mr. Samim returned to Kabul, but jobs for doctors were scarce. He soon

Farouq Samim's iPhone is filled with the voices of tribal chiefs, who he says must be heard.

found work as a "fixer," or a journalist's guide, interpreter, and, often, lifeline in a conflict zone. He worked with outlets ranging from *al Jazeera* to the *Chicago Tribune* (His years working with the former *Tribune* correspondent Kim Barker are documented in her new memoir, *The Taliban Shuffle*). The work took Mr. Samim to Afghanistan's far corners, to small coalition-run military bases and interviews with insurgents. He saw the importance of communication, the Taliban's propagandist messages at work over mosque loudspeakers and the Americans' struggle to try to connect with Afghans.

CULTURAL MISTAKI

On the way to the next interview, this time at a government office in Kabul's heavily guarded Green Zone, Mr. Samim passed numerous checkpoints, where Afghan soldiers waved him on. He arrived at government offices and a large room lined with photos of Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, standing with foreign and military officials. There he met a prominent young tribal member and former Parliament member from a powerful Pashtun clan in Paktika.

The woman, wearing a coffee-colored pantsuit and headscarf, spoke frankly about the mistakes she felt foreign forces make when approaching tribal villages. It's the details that make her bristle: the sight of American troops entering

mosques, sacred spaces, wearing muddy boots. "Imagine how such an action affects Pashtuns' mentality?" she says. "I do not claim that Americans do that intentionally. It seems normal to them." She also stressed the importance of where people should talk. Meet tribal leaders in natural settings, she said, such as a *hujra*, a tribal leader's guest room, or a *peer khana*, a spiritual leader's home. Sit under the shade of a mulberry tree.

She also pointed to the Taliban's deftness at bonding with villagers over tragedy. She noted their habit of going to villages bombed by coalition forces and offering condolences to families who lost relatives—their keen awareness that quick sympathy can help fuel resentment toward foreign troops and make it tougher for tribal leaders to steer villagers, particularly young Afghans, away from the Taliban.

Expectations are that Mr. Samim's research will have reach. "There's a thirst for the type of information Farouq is collecting," says Tom Gregg, a former United Nations official who worked extensively in southeastern Afghanistan and is now a senior program coordinator at New York University's Center on International Cooperation. "There's a growing awareness that to stabilize Afghanistan there has to be a more coherent approach toward the tribes, which have long been considered part of the terrain instead of being power brokers."

Naqibullah Mayar, a former Afghan soldier (and Pashtun), who now trains American troops on Afghan culture and history before the soldiers deploy, is anxious to share Mr. Samim's research with others. "We need this type of knowledge," he says. He points to the dearth of Pashtun interpreters and cultural advisers working with troops on the ground. Often, Pashtuns can be fearful of working directly with the military because of reprisals they may face when they return home to villages where the Taliban retains influence.

"So you have Tajiks or Hazaras struggling to interpret the Pashto language, along with a tribe's traditions and customs," says Mr. Mayar, referring to Afghanistan's other dominant ethnic groups. "It can get to the point where any Pashtun wearing a black or white turban is a Taliban."

Now back in Canada, where he lives with his family and three young children, Mr. Samim is poring through what he collected in Kabul. Aside from transcribing interviews from Pashto to English, he is also researching how communication theory, from Aristotle's thinking on rhetoric to thought on "soft power" and persuasion, might offer more insight on how to approach Afghanistan's dilemmas. "I realize that what's happening in Afghanistan is complex and there's no single cure," says Mr. Samim. "But I'm constantly asking myself, how can we find peace? What can I do to help? This is what runs through my mind." ■



MONICA CAMPBELL

A Pashtun scholar and tribal leader caresses his prayer beads during an interview in Kabul.

Great change
begins with
great ideas.



Matthew G. Springer

- Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education
- Director, National Center on Performance Incentives
- Editor, "Performance Incentives: Their Growing Impact on American K-12 Education"

Explore Our Difference
peabody.vanderbilt.edu



VANDERBILT
PEABODY COLLEGE

