

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Prophet's cloak can't shelter Kandahar from terror

One of Islam's holiest relics was once a rallying point for the Taliban. Now their insurgency is putting its guardian in harm's way

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- At the heart of Kandahar's dirty labyrinth of streets stands a clean square and a lavishly decorated building housing a religious artifact that's key to understanding why this city has suffered the worst of the insurgency.

For more than two centuries, the legendary cloak of the Prophet Mohammed - one of Islam's most treasured symbols - has rested here in a locked silver box, itself protected by two wooden chests.

The keys are held by a grey-bearded man named Mullah Masood Akhundzada, and these days he's afraid for his life.

His family has held the sacred responsibility of protecting the cloak in its shrine ever since Afghanistan's founder, Ahmed Shah Durrani, brought the shimmering garment from Central Asia in 1768.

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In all the years since, Mr. Akhundzada said, serving as Keeper of the Cloak has never been so dangerous.

"We never had problems," he said. "Only now, under this government, people are attacking us."

He inherited the job last year when his brother, Sayed Imam Akhundzada, was gunned down during an evening walk through a market near the shrine. He almost suffered the same fate when a suicide bomber narrowly missed him this spring.

The attacks are part of a Taliban campaign to kill the most prominent figures in Kandahar city who support the central government. The

most recent victim was a member of parliament shot dead near his house last week.

The Taliban have been using similar tactics elsewhere in Afghanistan, but the insurgents appear to be making their greatest effort in Kandahar.

As of July 6, security consultant Sami Kovanen of Vigilant Strategic Services Afghanistan had counted 527 insurgent attacks this year in Kandahar province.

That's vastly more than in any other province in the country; the two other most violent provinces were Kunar, with 316 attacks, and Helmand with 311.

Despite the official importance of the capital city, Kabul province has suffered only 77 insurgent strikes this year, according to VSSA.

Military planners often say that Kandahar has a more prominent place on the insurgents' target list because the city served as the Taliban's former seat of government.

Kandahar also holds a deeper symbolic importance in Afghanistan, however, and arguably the city's most powerful icon is the mysterious cloak inside the ornate blue-tiled shrine protected by Mr. Akhundzada.

Legends vary about how Ahmed Shah Durrani took the cloak away from Bokhara, a city in what is now Uzbekistan. One favourite tale in Kandahar is that he asked to borrow the sacred garment from its keepers, who refused. The Afghan conqueror replied by pointing to a large stone and promising that he would never allow the cloak to stray far from that rock. Reassured by the promise, the protectors released the cloak - and were likely horrified when the Durrani king ordered the stone removed as well, transporting both of them back to Kandahar. The stone is said to still sit near the cloak's resting place.

The silver box that protects the garment has remained sealed for decades at a time, revealed only during the most important occasions.

Mr. Akhundzada's grandfather displayed the cloak during a plague in the early part of the last century. "They prayed, and the disease disappeared," he said.

His father opened the box again for King Mohammed Zahir Shah, Afghanistan's last monarch, who apparently changed his mind at the last minute and decided it wasn't necessary to look at the sacred artifact.

One of Mr. Akhundzada's brothers, Qari Shawali, was serving as the cloak's keeper during its most famous moment in recent history.

In 1996, Mullah Mohammed Omar was struggling to lead his new Taliban movement north to capture Kabul. To solidify his support, he took the cloak out of its shrine and displayed it to a large crowd.

An assembly of religious leaders declared the Taliban leader "Commander of the Faithful" and 500 cows were slaughtered to mark the occasion, Mr. Akhundzada said.

Locals believe the cloak gave good fortune to the Taliban, as they took Kabul the same year.

The silver box then remained closed until Gul Agha Shirzai seized power in Kandahar with a team of U.S. Special Forces in 2001, and was declared governor. As the international community started building a new government in Afghanistan, Mr. Shirzai decided he wanted a private viewing of the cloak. Only a few senior officials attended.

"My brother took out the cloak and Gul Agha kissed it," Mr. Akhundzada said. "I also touched it."

He paused, remembering with great solemnity the last time anybody saw the cloak.

"It's hard to describe," he said. "It's very soft, like silk. You cannot say what colour it is, because many people see different colours. It was made with hair from the camels in Paradise.

"It's a gift from heaven."