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MIGRATION: A COMPAS ANTHROPOLOGY

Bridget Anderson and Michael Keith (eds.) 2014, COMPAS Oxford

REPRESENTATIONS: POWERS AND PITFALLS

The Limits of Research

Liza Schuster

One of the challenges of research in the social sciences is maintaining boundaries, and this is particularly true when working on asylum and deportation. The following case illustrates some of the challenges faced during fieldwork investigating what happens post-deportation.

My research has brought me into contact with a number of activists and campaign organisations who act as gatekeepers, putting me in touch with young men pre- deportation or recently deported from Europe. In return, I try to provide advice and information that will be helpful to activists and asylum seekers around Europe. I work closely with Abdul¹, himself recently deported, who has become a deportation activist. Together we meet some of those who arrive at Kabul airport, often alone and distressed.

In November 2013, I received a call from Abdul. He was worried about Asmat, an Afghan deported from Norway in 2012. Since Asmat's return, he has been moving from one hiding place to another as he is discovered and attacked, and at the time he was in hiding near Jalalabad with a close friend of his father's, preparing to flee again. Those who have sheltered him have paid a high price: at least one of his own brothers had been killed, two others have disappeared, as have the son and three of the bodyguards of one of his hosts. At least one of the safe houses has been partially destroyed.

I originally heard about Asmat from a Norwegian activist. She had written asking if I could approach embassies in Afghanistan who might grant Asmat a visa to leave the country again, unaware that no embassy would. I had recommended that Asmat try to gather as much documentary evidence as possible, cross the border to Pakistan, and approach UNHCR there, since I knew UNHCR in Kabul couldn't/wouldn't help. But the activist told me that Asmat had already tried to get to Pakistan, and had been arrested and held for 15 days before being deported back to Afghanistan. He had to find an alternative place of safety.

The call in November was urgent – Asmat had phoned his supporter in Norway in a state of terror. His hiding place had again been discovered and a large group of Taliban were on their way to seek him out. She had called Abdul to ask if he knew anyone in the province who could intervene. But Abdul's Afghan contacts were limited – he had been deported to Afghanistan, but in fact he had grown up in Pakistan and had no family or networks in Afghanistan. I racked my brains – we needed someone senior in the Afghan army or police. Some months earlier, I had interviewed the deputy minister of the Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation² and we had stayed in touch.

I called him and asked if he knew anyone who could help. I gave him Abdul's number so he could get Asmat's exact location to send the security forces. However, in the meantime Asmat had phoned Abdul to say the men had arrived in the village, but then the phone had gone dead. Abdul had no other way of contacting him, and didn't know from where he had been calling.

Sometime later, Asmat managed to call Abdul again. The Taliban had come in to the house where he was hiding, but didn't recognize him. They had asked him if he had seen 'Asmat' and

he said no, he didn't know anyone like that, but that he would let them know if he found anything. As soon as they had gone, two of his host's bodyguards took him across the mountain to another village.

When Abdul brought me up to date, he told me that the area where Asmat is hiding is, like many rural areas, completely under Taliban control. Asmat is afraid to leave because of the Taliban checkpoints on all roads leading out of the area. He asked the police for help, but was told, "Look, there are ten of us in this area – what can we do against the Taliban?"

Later, my Norwegian contact emailed me. She had been Skyping with Asmat when the Taliban came. He had put his phone to the window so she could see them, but turned it off when they came to the door. The next time they spoke, he told her he had a gun and that he would use it on himself if they came for him because he is afraid of being tortured. He cried. She sat with him until the connection was broken. For now, there is nothing any of us can do.

Of course, this story will inform my research. And I will use it in expert reports for asylum appeals. But, given the opportunity, I will try to get Asmat out of Afghanistan, and do what I can to help his supporters get him to a place of safety. Boundaries, of whatever kind, may be necessary but they should not be fetishized – especially not at the cost of human suffering³.

Notes

1. Abdul writes a blog under his own name (Kabulblog) and wishes his real name to be used. Asmat's name has been changed.
2. MoRR is responsible for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the six million refugees who have returned to Afghanistan since 2001. However, it has no resources of its own and relies on international agencies.
3. Following the last attack, the friend of Asmat's father sent Asmat back to Kabul with a bodyguard. He is currently waiting to leave for Turkey and will try again to get to Europe – this time with sworn documentary evidence that his original claim was valid, and that events since his return give him grounds for a new claim.