

WORLD

# Filmmaker mocks Afghan police corruption with 'reverse bribes'

DION NISSENBAUM - MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

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A tailor in the central market of Kabul, Afghanistan, waits for customers wanting to buy Afghan military and police uniforms. *DION NISSENBAUM / MCT*

KABUL, Afghanistan — On the hidden camera video, it looks like any other Kabul police checkpoint where motorists are asked to pay small bribes.

A tall, scraggly bearded officer stops a battered station wagon, looks through the trunk and

checks the driver's papers.

Then the uniformed officer leans into the car window and makes an unexpected offer.

"On behalf of the city of Kabul and the Kabul police, if you have paid a bribe or 'tip' to someone in the past, I apologize," the officer says in Dari to the disbelieving driver. "Please take 100 Afghanis," or about \$2.

One warm afternoon last summer, Kabul-based artist Aman Mojadidi flagged down dozens of cars at a fake checkpoint and handed a little reverse "baksheesh" while his co-conspirators filmed the befuddled responses of drivers.

Mojadidi wanted to draw attention to the pervasive misuse of power in Afghanistan and to see how Afghan drivers would react when he apologized on behalf of the widely scorned police force.

"To see the abuse of power it can be as easy as putting on a uniform," said Mojadidi, a 39-year-old Jacksonville, Fla., native who recently transformed the footage into a short film called "Payback."

Putting on an Afghan police uniform wasn't difficult, either.

Mojadidi set out last year to find out how easy it would be to transform himself into a police officer after seeing Taliban insurgents disguised as policemen stage a series of attacks in the Afghan capital.

It's against the law to sell police and army uniforms in Afghanistan's open markets. Last spring, however, Mojadidi and "Payback" director Walied Osman went to Kabul's central market, where they bought four uniforms complete with pins, police patches and boots for about \$125.

"The sale of military uniforms, including police uniforms, is absolutely forbidden," Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashary told McClatchy. "If criminals, terrorists and bad guys can use these uniforms, it is an act against the nation of Afghanistan."

Bashary appeared unaware of the warren of shops where military uniforms are openly sold.

"There are shops that sell some key things, like ammunition vests and simple hats, but not uniforms," Bashary said. "The sale of military uniforms is absolutely barred from being sold in open markets and bazaars."

However, the market where Mojadidi and Osman bought the uniforms is still bustling. The one-room shops are filled with police hats, military patches, camouflage pants, army boots and tailors ready to custom fit full uniforms for customers.

On a recent afternoon, McClatchy reporters easily purchased an Afghan police uniform, complete with police patches and pins, for about \$13 as uniformed police officers and soldiers strolled through the markets buying belts, boots, shoulder insignia and uniforms.

"If anybody can go buy a police uniform in a bazaar then anyone can go buy a police uniform in Kabul and the implications are really heavy," Mojadidi said.

After buying the uniforms for his faux checkpoint last summer, Mojadidi went to the local police station to seek permission for a project he described only in vague terms.

Remarkably, the police not only gave him the OK, they also dispatched a real police officer to keep an eye on things.

Checkpoints are the most visible reminder to Afghans that the nation is riddled with corruption while the U.S. is investing billions of dollars into trying to train a new police force that's supposed to shed its image as a state-backed gang of highway robbers.

"Police are the first thing that people see, touch and feel that gives them either confidence or a lack of confidence in their government," said U.S. Army Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell, who heads the NATO police and army training mission in Afghanistan.

The task is daunting.

Entry-level police officers earn about \$165 a month. Most don't make much more unless they work in the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan.

The low pay means that police officers, especially those at checkpoints, often try to pad their pay by demanding that drivers pay them "tea money" or "baksheesh."

As a result, Afghan drivers often approach police checkpoints with a sense of dismay, and convincing low-paid police officers to abandon a longstanding practice isn't easy.

"The corruption that people are dealing with at checkpoints and in everyday life is what you need to focus on," said Mojadidi, who's a nephew of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, the former president who now leads Afghanistan's upper house of parliament.

Nevertheless, the real police officer merely looked on as Mojadidi and the conspirators used boulders and traffic signs to set up their fake checkpoint on a stretch of road between two real police roadblocks.

The officer watched as Mojadidi, in his illegally purchased police uniform, flagged down car after car.

With his untucked, wrinkled police shirt and silver thumb ring, Mojadidi didn't quite look the part. Nevertheless, drivers acquiesced as Mojadidi checked their papers and car trunks before reaching into his pocket and pulling out some cash.

Mojadidi often had to explain the offer twice to disbelieving drivers. Most eventually took the bill and rumbled away with amused grins on their faces.

A couple of the men emphatically turned down the offer.

"You don't bother anyone," one driver told Mojadidi. "I should be apologizing to you."

When it was all over, 16 of 20 drivers had taken the cash, and Mojadidi had 400 Afghan dollars left — about \$8.

As they were packing up, Mojadidi said, the real police officer made an unrepentant request for a little "baksheesh" of his own.

"So, you gave all those drivers something, but I was out here with you and I haven't gotten anything," Mojadidi said the officer complained.

Mojadidi said he gave the police officer the remaining 400 Afghan dollars — more than one day's pay for the average cop on the street.

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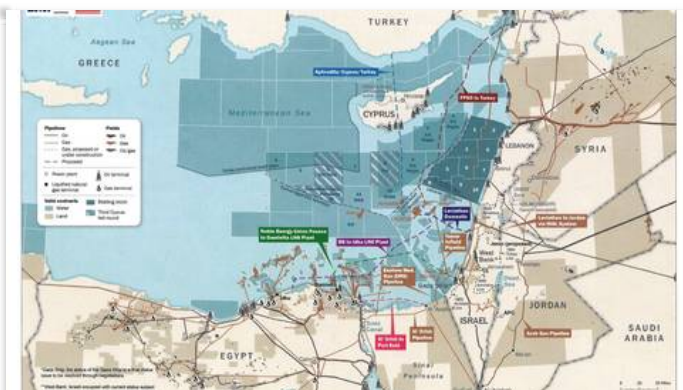
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