

2. A man I knew became a suicide bomber for IS¹

Kristin Solberg

Once I asked a man if he wanted to kill me.

Yes, he replied, looking directly into my eyes.

Khalid Kelly and I were standing outside a white marble mosque in Islamabad. It was 2009 and we knew each other well, having moved to Pakistan at the same time. The turbulence in the country had drawn us both there: I was there to report on it as a journalist, he, to create it as a jihadist.

That day he spoke with radiant expectation about how he longed to become a suicide bomber. It was during a period when bombs were going off in Pakistan on a daily basis. Khalid longed to carry out one of them; this was his greatest dream. “If you see a man in a hotel lobby, freshly shaven and carrying a suitcase in his hand, and you feel that there is something familiar about him, you ought to embrace Islam fairly quickly,” he said.

His tone of voice was almost teasing as he referred to the suitcase bomb he hoped to carry, as he departed for the paradise in which he believed.

“Would you detonate the bomb if you saw me there?” I asked.

“Allah is my concern, not journalists”

A naïve question perhaps. However, at that time, despite our completely different interpretations of reality, we shared a sense of fellowship. I wrote a book in which Khalid was one of the characters and we spent many long days in each other’s company. Beyond that, we were both

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foreigners – and to some degree lonely – in a new country. In addition, I really believed we liked each other, although for my part this waxed and waned. At one moment, Khalid might say that Osama bin Laden was a hero, and in the next moment, he could show an almost touching thoughtfulness, such as when he purchased dates before coming to an interview because he knew I liked them.

We stood closely together, closer than ever before, because we did not want anybody else to hear what we were talking about. I could feel his breath when he answered “yes”.

“It’s Allah I care about, not journalists.”

“I kill for Allah. It is the best reason for killing.”

I do not remember what I answered because those minutes standing there in the sunshine outside the mosque did not become truly poignant until now, many years later. I probably did not say anything because I did not believe him. Little did I know that it would be put to the test seven years later, in another country and another conflict.

Suicide bomber in Mosul

Khalid actually became a suicide bomber for IS in the struggle for Mosul. I was in the city at the precise moment it happened. Once again, we were at the same place at the same time: I as journalist, he as jihadist. He blew himself up only a few kilometres from where I was.



Image of Khalid posted by IS. Photographer unknown. Published by NRK 2016, November 19

IS disseminated a picture of him, probably taken right before he climbed into a car filled with explosives. In the photo, he looks directly into the camera. In his hand, he has a Kalashnikov, on his chest a walkie-talkie. In this photo, he looks different from when we stood together in the sunshine in Islamabad. He is thinner, his beard greyer. To me, who knew him back then, he looks miserable, almost devastated. He does not look like a man about to make his dream come true.

And when I hear what happened since, I feel a kind of sorrow. Even though I have seen up close the suffering IS stands up for, I am also a writer and I have lost one of my main characters. Indeed, I knew Khalid the way a writer knows his or her main character: well. Very well. At one point in time, I knew him as well as I knew some of my close friends.

Feared kidnapping

I must admit I was afraid the first time we met in Pakistan. I asked a friend to sound the alarm if I was not back at home some hours later. I asked my driver to wait outside and ring me every half hour to check I had not been kidnapped. But Khalid had no concrete plans to kidnap me even though he stressed that it would not have been unjust since Norway at that point had soldiers in Afghanistan. He wanted to tell his story. He had finally discovered the truth – his truth – and he wanted to share it.

He was born Terence Edward Kelly in Dublin in 1967. As a child, he wanted to become a Catholic priest, but lost his faith during his youth. He moved to London and trained to be a nurse. From the hints he gave me, I concluded it was a time marked by a lot of alcohol and women.

Lured by better wages that were also tax-free, he moved to Saudi Arabia. When the mosques called the faithful to prayer in Riyadh, he tuned up the volume on his stereo and opened the windows. He also made good money on the side, selling alcohol, which is forbidden in the conservative country. He was arrested and sentenced to nine months in prison. A fellow prisoner gave him a copy of the Koran, leading to the most significant event of his life.

“When I embraced Islam it was as though all the bricks in my life fell into place,” he said one day as we sat in a hotel room and ate dates. He was dressed in a light blue *shalwar kameez*, the normal Pakistani attire.

He took the name Khalid and returned to London. There he became increasingly radical. When he married and had children, he called his first son Osama, after Osama bin Laden. “I hope they become suicide bombers” he said, referring to his three sons.

Tried to belong

He had come to Pakistan to join up with the Taliban, who, by the way, he referred to as “the beautiful Taliban brothers.”

“Why aren’t you already fighting in their ranks?” I asked.

For a second he seemed to feel sorry for himself.

“Try joining the Taliban with an Irish accent, and see where it gets you,” he replied. I gradually realized that his whole life had been a long search for acceptance, for a sense of belonging. It was not easy to find, not even among the Taliban.

I was often stunned by the extremity of the words he used, but then, my role when we met, was that of a journalist and writer. My job was not to judge but to try to understand. Moreover, understanding is not the same as justifying or accepting.

So, over time I looked on him as a man in search of meaning. By chance, in prison, he had found it in a literal interpretation of Islam, but he could just as well have found it elsewhere: in Catholicism, alcohol, right-wing populism or extreme sports. What defined him, more than religion, was a deep-seated fundamentalism. The hole could have been filled by virtually anything, as long as it was something extreme.

Jihad

When he spoke about jihad, he talked a great deal about politics – because, above everything else, that is where today’s jihad is. Within IS as well, the arguments for jihad are more political than religious.

Khalid talked about the wars of the West in Afghanistan and Iraq; he talked about the discrimination of Muslims in the West. These are arguments jihadists often use, arguments that are exaggerated but nonetheless are often linked to actual injustice – and therefore become so explosive when they are manipulated by groups like IS. “They want to bomb us back into the Stone Age. We have to fight back,” Khalid said.

We met in parks, at cafes, in hotel lobbies and mosques over a period of many months. We went for walks, drank tea and ate cheesecake. We

complained about the heat and exchanged travel tips. In some ways, one could almost say we were friends – although neither of us would have said so: Khalid because he would never be friends with a *kafir*, an infidel; I because I would never become friends with one of my jihadist sources. However, sometimes language fails us; it is not always possible to describe the space shared by two human beings.

Perhaps that is why I did not believe him when he said he would have killed me. Nevertheless, I took precautions. I never told him where I lived. If we shared a taxi home, I always asked to be let off in a neighbourhood other than my own.

Feared arrest

The last time we talked together was over the telephone, after both of us had been thrown out of Pakistan. Khalid was in Romania. He was broke and his passport had been stolen. The intelligence service had asked him to leave the country, but without a passport, Ireland was the only country he could go to. He was afraid he would be arrested in his homeland. His family had been interrogated.

“It’s a strange thing to say, but it’s lovely to hear a friendly voice. It has been so terrible,” he said.

“Remember, I’m a *kafir*,” I said, and this time I was the one teasing.

“So you haven’t become Muslim yet?”

“No.”

“*Inshallah*.”

Paths that cross

He was not arrested, but rather became even more radicalised.

It could be that our paths crossed many times in recent years. Both journalists and jihadists gradually moved from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria and Iraq, the two professions being closely intertwined. While I moved from being a freelancer working for *Aftenposten* covering South Asia, to become a correspondent for NRK for the Middle East, Khalid moved from being a *wannabe* member of the Taliban to a full-fledged member of IS. While we both followed our respective paths, radical jihad also morphed, moving from Al Qaida’s *terror-cell* structure to today’s so-called Islamic State, with a brutality from which even Al Qaida has distanced itself.

Khalid was one of the first people I thought of when IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared a caliphate in 2014. He made a supportive statement on Twitter, where we followed each other. Then his account was shut down.

Mosul

The closest we got to each other since that time was in Mosul, on Friday, November 4th 2016. I was in a field hospital in the Eastern part of the city. In front of me, nine-year old Ahmed was fighting for his life. Ten minutes earlier, he had been playing football with a cousin when he kicked the ball into an ISIS made IED. Ahmed died shortly afterwards.

I did not know Khalid was in the city too but at that moment, Khalid was driving his car bomb in the Western part of the city.

A picture released by IS supposedly shows the moment when his car exploded right outside Mosul. IS maintained that he killed a group of militiamen.

When I first heard about this, I did not quite believe it. I thought, “maybe it’s not true; it is just something put out by IS, for the sake of propaganda. I began to write an email to Khalid: “Is it true? If it is, I hope you are resting in peace. If not, make contact.”

Rest in peace? Can one say that to someone who has just killed other people? But what else could one say?

Bastard?

May your days in hell be long and horrible?

I could have written it all and meant it. I did not send the email because I could not find the right words. In any case, gradually I realised that it would not be read.

An answer I will never get

Since then, part of me wished that Khalid had driven to the east instead of the west in Mosul. Towards me. Why would I wish such a thing? I do not know. Maybe because, since that modest beginning in Pakistan I have seen so much violence and I long for a sign that it is possible to sit together and eat dates. Perhaps it is because I do not want to accept that he actually was a suicide bomber and that I should really have stopped him. Or perhaps only to show us both that I was right when I did not believe him seven years earlier.

And what would have happened if I had seen him? Would I have run toward him, as quickly as my heavy bullet-proof vest allowed, or would I have run in the opposite direction, which, strictly speaking, I should have done if an IS fighter came driving along? And if I had done the first, what would I have done then?

“Khalid, it’s me!” I would have shouted. And I would have seen the surprise and the recognition in his grey-green eyes. Perhaps I would also have seen a smile. Maybe.

“Don’t do it! DON’T DO IT!” I would have shouted, and no doubt also swung my arms back and forth, as if one could stop a vehicle loaded with explosives. “Here, look, a child has been killed. He was killed by one of you. Stop this killing, for God’s sake!” I would have said.

I have no illusions that I could get him to change direction. I had already pointed out the logical and moral flaws in his worldview while we were in Pakistan, but I never got anywhere. Yet, I do not believe he would have blown himself up if it meant he would have to kill me, despite what he said in another country, in another conflict.

But perhaps I give myself too much importance. We all have our own truths. We are all at the centre of our own lives, even when they intimately cross the lives of others.

Note

1. Originally published in Norwegian language in NRK, the Norwegian Public Broadcaster, 2016, November 19. Published with permission from the NRK. Translation: Richard Daly.