

# THE NEW YORKER

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## It's Always the Fixer Who Dies

It's difficult not to feel a certain bitterness about the death of Sultan Munadi. He was what journalists call a "fixer," the local man or woman who helps the foreign correspondent. The help takes every conceivable form: interpreting, finding the phone number of the Iraqi member of parliament, knowing the personal history of the Afghan battalion commander, setting up interviews, hiring a car and driver, figuring out where to get food on a long drive in the desert, dispensing political analysis and cultural insight and—sometimes most importantly—security advice, about this or that contact, this or that road. In Baghdad, after 2004, it became impossible to cross the street without the help of a fixer. In some cases, the fixer's work lay at the heart of a news story that wouldn't have existed without it; whether or not the fixer received an attribution depended on his bosses in the Western news organization. I've seen cases in which the fixer was cheated of credit, but over time, as the war in Iraq became so dangerous that reporting began to resemble self-imposed house arrest, these cases diminished. Anyone who understood the supreme, indeed, indispensable, value of the fixer would make sure that credit was given.

The relationship between fixers and foreign correspondents can be very close. Shared dangers and successes will do that, especially when the work done together, the tie between you, is what puts you at risk. In Iraq and Afghanistan and a growing number of other places, the foreign correspondent would be a target with or without the fixer, but the fixer is a target because he or she is with the foreign correspondent. Both are considered spies, but one is only an infidel, while the other is something worse—an apostate, a traitor. In my experience, this mutually voluntary risk is rarely a source of resentment on the part of fixers. They are generally young, cosmopolitan, quick-witted, stoical, tinged with idealism, implacable foes of their countries' extremists; and, after all, they understand better than anyone what they have signed up for. For the most part, the risk strengthens the bond. It becomes a cause of tension only when it's borne by just one side.

In spite of the closeness, the relationship is troubled by a kind of imbalance of power. In the course of the work, the fixer is relied on so heavily by the foreign correspondent that an observer who didn't understand the system might assume that it's the fixer who is in charge. After all, it's the fixer's country, and he or she knows it so much better. And yet the foreigner has the money, the name, the infrastructure, the power to hire and fire, and the ability to come and go, especially if things get sticky. It's inevitable that the news organization back in the home country is going to value the correspondent, who has the professional skills, who is well-known back at headquarters and probably has close friends, more highly than the fixer, who is only heard about, and whose importance isn't always understood thousands of miles away. In the philosophical terms of master and slave, the former ends up weaker, more dependent, than the latter, and yet remains the master. It's a subtle part of the relationship between correspondent and fixer, often unnoticed and unimportant. It really only seems to matter when there's a crisis.

Somehow, it's always the fixer who dies. Of course, this is a false statement of fact on its face—at the very least, an exaggeration. But it feels emotionally true. When I think of the cases I know of correspondents and fixers faced with some emergency, the fixer is suddenly revealed to be the more vulnerable, and perhaps the more disposable. The fault may lie with terrorists and extremists, with officials and security forces of the host country, with foreign governments and militaries and intelligence agencies, with news organizations, with the individuals themselves, or with no one at all. But when I read the terrible news that the rescue operation staged by British special forces in northern Afghanistan to free Stephen Farrell and Sultan Munadi of the *Times* left the former safe and the latter dead, my shock was accompanied by a sinking sense of unsurprise. A similar outcome, in very different circumstances, occurred in Afghanistan two years ago, after an Italian journalist, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, and his Afghan fixer, Ajmal Naqshbandi, were kidnapped by the Taliban: the former was released, the latter beheaded. (The story and the larger relationship are the subject of a very good documentary, "Fixer," directed by Ian Olds.)

I didn't know Sultan Munadi, though some of his colleagues in the *Times* Kabul bureau, past and present, American and Afghan, are friends. One of them, David Rohde, was kidnapped along with his fixer Tahir Ludin last year in eastern Afghanistan; in their case, both escaped, though their driver remains in Taliban hands. Rohde knew Munadi well, and he's composed a moving portrait; other colleagues remember him, too; and Munadi himself wrote this short account of his own life a week before he was killed. It's fitting to have these tributes; some of them are written with obvious love. But if I were a fixer, I would have the taste of ashes in my mouth today.

Posted by *George Packer*

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