

IDEALNI PRO DISKUZII

Chapter 9

NON-NEGOTIABLE DEMANDS

SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2001

I WAS LYING ON MY back, staring up at the ceiling. It was well past midnight, but sleep was impossible. A thousand jumbled thoughts were competing feverishly in my mind. Suddenly it occurred to me: directly across the hall, in a similarly spare hotel bedroom, lay a stone killer whom I'd been threatening for several hours, however politely, with annihilation. Given the animation of our previous discussion, he was surely as wide awake as I was. I couldn't be sure what sort of impulse control he possessed, but what I had seen from him so far was not reassuring. Outside, down the hall, I could hear the soft murmurings of a group of heavily armed Taliban guards keeping vigil. I was unarmed, and my only ally was an Iranian-American Dari translator in the next room, who might have weighed all of 120 pounds. The latch on the door was laughably flimsy. I got up from bed to push a heavy armchair up against it. That wouldn't slow down an intruder very much, but at least I'd be assured of being awakened. The drop from my second-story window, I noted with perhaps undue optimism, didn't look so bad.

Since our initial encounter at Milam's residence at the beginning of the year, Mullah Jalil and I had established a pattern of regular *Immar-sat* satellite phone calls. I would dial him up at prearranged times from the rooftop veranda of my home, which afforded an unimpeded view of the night sky. The deputy foreign minister was cagey and opaque,

and gave no sign of willingness to compromise himself in any meaningful way; still, he was an intriguing contact, and our conversations gave me some further insight into Taliban thinking. Our interactions would not have been nearly as useful if it were not for the regular flow of clandestine reporting we were receiving from recruited, vetted agents concerning intra-Taliban dynamics. Their reports provided me the context in which to interpret Jalil's delphic pronouncements.

I had reached Jalil within twenty-four hours of the 9/11 attacks, and pressed him to meet with me. The response came quickly, and from a familiar, if not entirely welcome quarter.

Akbar called to say that Mullah Jalil and Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Osmani could travel from Kandahar to meet with me in Quetta; would I be willing to meet with them? I didn't have to consider long. Mullah Osmani was the Taliban's Southern Zone commander, in charge of all Taliban forces in the movement's southern stronghold, and the *de facto* deputy to Mullah Omar himself. Our reporting indicated that Osmani was strongly and vociferously opposed to bin Laden. I could only speculate as to what he intended in coming to meet with me; but this might be the opportunity we had been looking for to exploit the differences between Omar and his senior lieutenants over their Arab guests. The meeting was set for Saturday, September 15, at a quiet hotel in Quetta.

I wanted to keep this meeting as discreet as possible. My travel via commercial air to the remote capital of Baluchistan Province, the southern gateway to Afghanistan, mere days after the al-Qa'ida attacks in the United States, would surely have been flagged to Pakistani officials. But as luck would have it, our defense attaché, who had control of a small aircraft, was sending a team to Quetta to evacuate a U.S. Army officer studying at the Pakistan Army's Command and General Staff College. At my behest, they filed an official flight plan, but one that failed to mention a couple of extra passengers: my Farsi/Dari translator "Tom," and me.

I was glad to have Tom with me, though not everyone would have felt the same. Tom had started out in CIA as a Farsi-language instructor, and a good one. But even in that limited role, he quickly developed a reputation as a rather difficult personality within the CIA's

Farsi-speaking subculture. Blessed, as many in the Clandestine Service, with a healthy ego, and aspiring, again like many on the periphery of espionage, to get directly involved in clandestine operations, he had managed to migrate into real-time operational translation—the task he would be performing for me. Like many translators, a certain amount of exposure to what case officers do had convinced Tom that he could do the same as they, and perhaps better: rather than merely translating others' words, he felt he ought to be running the operations himself. The insular CIA culture is highly disposed to promotion from within. Several of Tom's supervisors had accommodated him by arranging for him to be trained in operations, despite a certain lack of the requisite judgment and self-control—which he had demonstrated in his first operational assignments. The challenge then became to rein Tom back in. Given his raised expectations, that was far more easily said than done, and many shrank from the job.

Still, Tom was a damned good translator. I had found that if he respected you, if you treated his contribution with the importance it deserved, and if you were firm and prepared to watch him very closely, he could be a real asset. Besides, he was amusing company.

In informing my headquarters of what I was doing, I was careful to stress that my objective in holding this meeting was primarily operational, not diplomatic. Yes, I would press the Taliban leadership to accede to the U.S. demand to turn over bin Laden. But my primary purpose would be to make direct contact with Osmani to see if I could exploit his animus toward the Arabs.

Tom and I arrived at the hotel in the late morning, and made contact with Akbar, who had just traveled overland from Kandahar. The two Afghans, he said, would be following close behind. Tom and I sat and waited. The hours dragged past, excruciatingly. I had a sense that each passing minute was a lost opportunity. I knew there was little time before an American attack might commence, but there was yet no way for me to know just how little. Finally, as dusk fell, Akbar knocked on my door. Osmani and Jalil had arrived. Seized by my own nervous anticipation, I expected that they would sit down with us immediately. I had somehow forgotten who I was dealing with.

"No," said Akbar. "It has been a long journey, and the road is very bad. They will need time to pray, to eat, and then to rest. They will meet with us at nine."

"Of course," I thought, shaking my head.

When at length we sat down, it was at a large round table. Mullah Osmani sat opposite me, with Akbar to his left. Tom sat to my left, and to my right, Mullah Jalil hunched over a stack of blank white sheets of paper. Akbar translated Osmani's Pashtu into English; Tom translated my English into Dari, which all of the others understood, even if they were not all comfortable speaking it.

Jalil began. He and Osmani had met with Mullah Omar the day before, September 14. Omar had authorized them to meet with me to find a solution to the impasse between us. They had no authority to make any agreements, he said, but could work with me to make proposals to present to Omar for his approval. With that, Jalil bent over and began writing in a sweeping, florid script. He hardly said another word throughout the proceedings, deferring entirely to Osmani, who was much the senior. It soon became clear that the deputy foreign minister was only present as a witness and note-taker.

I carefully stated that I was in precisely the same position as they: I had no authority to reach binding agreements, and could only refer ideas for possible approval to Washington. That said, I went on, I was confident that there would have to be at least three elements in any proposals we might develop for there to be any hope of Washington's agreement: Osama bin Laden would have to be rendered to justice in the United States, or killed in the attempt; other al-Qa'ida fugitives on whom there were formal U.S. indictments would likewise have to be detained and turned over; and all of the foreign militants in the Arab camps would have to be expelled to their countries of origin, and the camps permanently closed.

Beyond the first demand, I knew, I was speculating on my own. Four days after 9/11, Washington had yet to formulate any detailed message to the Taliban beyond the long-standing demand to turn over bin Laden. I felt certain, though, that the United States would insist on justice for other known, senior al-Qa'ida members on whom there

were outstanding warrants. I had scoured the files to develop a list of some fourteen individuals thought to be in Afghanistan, and on whom we held judicial warrants. If we were going to demand the arrest of the al-Qa'ida leadership in Afghanistan, the Taliban was likely to demand specific names, and we certainly couldn't trust their discretion as to which al-Qa'ida members to turn over, even in the unlikely event they agreed to it.

As for the simple fighters in the camps, I knew it was unlikely that the Taliban could capture many of them even if they wanted to; they would probably scatter as soon as it was clear what the Taliban was up to. Most were only "guilty" of fighting against the Northern Alliance at that point, and not directly involved in international terrorism. Surely the U.S. government was not about to take them into custody. CIA had long been in the business of working with sympathetic countries to render such militants to their places of origin; once they had been driven out of Afghanistan, and particularly in the context of a striking post-9/11 upswell in international support, there would be opportunities to do so again. The important thing, I knew, was for the Taliban to make clear to these foreigners that they were no longer welcome—to end the safehaven. I couldn't be sure what Washington might say later on, whether they might demand unrealistically that all the militants be rounded up and turned over to us, but left on my own I was not about to make the perfect the enemy of the good, not in a chaotic place like Afghanistan.

Osmani then launched into his own preamble. The situation was difficult, he said. Both the United States and the Afghans would have to take domestic opinion into account. That said, the Taliban would not risk the destruction of their nation for the sake of one man. Bin Laden and his followers were a common problem for both countries. Both would have to work together quietly—he stressed quietly—to solve it.

I was silently elated. This was precisely what I had hoped to hear; now we were getting somewhere. When I asked for his ideas as to how we could accomplish this, though, the *Maulavi* (senior mullah) had none. What could I propose?

I said there are any number of ways we could cooperate to do what

is necessary, and we could work together to flesh out the details. But there are just a few broad approaches we could take. I listed them, as possible points of departure: Mullah Omar could publicly announce on his own that the attacks in the United States against civilian targets were contrary to Islam, and take action on his own against the perpetrators. As a slight permutation of that approach, he could state that he had demanded and received proof from the Americans of bin Laden's responsibility for the horrific attacks on their soil, and was taking the appropriate action on that basis. If, on the other hand, such a public approach was too difficult, the Taliban could move against both the individuals and the camps quietly, with no public announcements, and allow others in Afghanistan to speculate that foreign forces had done this without Taliban knowledge. If such direct but unattributed action were also too difficult, the Taliban could quickly and quietly facilitate our contact with willing commanders susceptible of being suborned with money, of which there were many, and allow them to render bin Laden and his lieutenants and to close down the camps at our direction. Finally, if all these approaches were unavailing, the Taliban could simply step aside and allow U.S. forces to take action unopposed, merely providing quiet guidance and intelligence.

Osmani paused, looking downward, and began to slowly shake his head. No, he said, none of these options would work. The Taliban could not take actions against al-Qa'ida without their becoming known. The people would never accept this: they would rise up. On the other hand, any direct U.S. actions in Afghanistan would also become known, and would be seen as an invasion. Afghans would reflexively resist, he said. Taliban units would not just stand aside for the Americans, even if ordered to do so.

With more than a little exasperation, I wound the conversation back to where we had started. "The Taliban will not sacrifice their country for the sake of one man," I quoted. If bin Laden were a common problem for us, and if my proposals were unworkable, what alternative could he suggest to save his country?

The conversation ebbed and flowed for hours, frequently generating eddies that threatened to spin the meeting out of control. Several

times, Osmani began to launch into a rant. "If you attack us, we will defeat you, just as we defeated the Soviets!" Each time, I cut him off before he could elaborate.

"This is *haram* [religiously forbidden]," I said. "It is not the place of man to predict the future. Whether we are to be victorious or defeated will be in God's hands." Countering a bearded Islamic obscurantist, a senior mullah at that, on religious grounds, I found, was deeply satisfying. "The only thing we can safely predict," I continued, "is that if war comes, it will be a disaster for everyone, victor and vanquished alike, and it will destroy the Taliban movement. Your enemies—and they are many—will seize the opportunity, and will make no end of problems for you. We have a mutual interest in seeing that these things do not happen."

At one point I said, "Look, I have not come here just to threaten you." This elicited a chuckle from both Afghans. Jalil looked up from his paper.

"He knows us," he said, looking at Osmani. And then to me, with a smile: "Threats don't work very well with us." Pashtuns pride themselves on their defiance: If you have your foot on the neck of a Pashtun, it is said, he will use his last breath to curse you.

Time and again, I presented myself as the intermediary, who knows and respects both sides. I compared myself to a man sitting at the top of a high hill. On one side, I can see a train hurtling down a track. On the other side, I can see another train, moving at speed around the curve in the opposite direction. Only I can see that the two trains are on the same track, and that by the time they see each other, it will be too late to stop. It is my responsibility, I said, to try to avoid the crash.

In the end, after five hours of exhausting and mostly circular conversation, the only counterproposal I could coax from the Southern Zone commander was that the United States, on its own and without help from the Taliban, should recruit a small group of Afghans to attack bin Laden. Others, to include senior indicted members of al-Qa'ida, he said, should be left alone.

"I do not think any of your proposals will work," he reiterated, "but we will bring them to Mullah Omar, and he will decide." Even Akbar, sympathetic to the Taliban as he was, was disgusted.

"You've given him every opportunity," he said. "And he has given you nothing."

Minutes later, alone in my room as the clock struck two, I was obsessed with the need to speak alone with Osmani. The animus he expressed toward bin Laden, I felt, was genuine, and confirmed our reporting. Perhaps his refusal to engage with me was due to the fact that all details of the meeting were to be reported by Jalil to Omar; he would gain nothing by appearing to make concessions when in the end the decisions would be made by the Taliban chief alone.

Just before dawn, I had Tom place a call to Osmani's room. Another voice answered. "I must speak with Mullah Saeb," Tom said, using the commander's Taliban nickname.

"He is not here," came the response. Osmani had left.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2001

It was unusual to see General Mahmud with such an entourage. Normally, we met alone, or with one or two others at most. This time, he was flanked by a large number of his senior people. They would not have been there had he not wanted them; but they must have been expecting quite a show.

For me, the question had been whether I should conduct such a show at all. The instinct of an intelligence officer is always to be as discreet as possible, to reveal nothing, particularly to a foreign service, unless it is absolutely necessary. That would have been particularly true with the ISI.

But I resisted my instinct. President Musharraf had pledged his support to us, and Mahmud had indicated verbally, at least, that he was on board. The ISI chief would have every motive to avoid the coming conflict, and as a longtime Taliban supporter, his influence with them could prove useful. There was no question in his mind as to what we would do if we did not get satisfaction. He had seen with his own eyes Americans' frenzied reaction to the 9/11 attacks: "Like a wounded animal," he had said. His testimony regarding what he'd seen

firsthand in Washington might prove persuasive to Mullah Omar. And it was most likely that he would come to know of my meeting with the two Afghan clerics in any case; there was little point in gratuitously alienating him by appearing to hold out. Better to bring him at least partially into confidence and encourage his cooperation, at least for the time being.

I gave them a lengthy, arm-waving, blow-by-blow account of the proceedings in Quetta. All sat in rapt, silent attention. At the end, Mahmud pronounced himself "amazed." I had seldom seen him so animated. "This is a huge breakthrough," he enthused. He was particularly seized with Osmani's "agreement in principle" to find a solution to the bin Laden problem. This was much further than he had ever gotten in his own past discussions with the Taliban. The fact that Osmani had failed in the end to come to closure on any of my proposed solutions was not a worry, he said, and merely reflected Osmani's lack of instructions from Omar. "These are exploitable concessions," he noted, which he would use in his meeting with Omar, scheduled for the following day. We arranged to meet as soon as he returned from Kandahar.

As a frequent visitor to ISI Headquarters, I was used to letting myself out. As I rose, however, a round-faced major from ISI protocol leapt to his feet to escort me. Once we had descended to the ground floor and stepped outside into the courtyard, he gave me a look of frank admiration. "You did everything you could, sir," he said, beaming. I did not take this necessarily as a good sign. If my efforts seemed so heroic to the ISI, I thought, I must have gone too far.

In my report to Langley that night, I confessed I found it hard to share the ISI chief's optimism. "It may be," I said, "that Mahmud has greater insight into Taliban character than I." But it was even more likely that he was hoping against hope to drag out some level of negotiations with the Taliban leadership as a means of forestalling American military action.

I would soon discover that my decision to meet with Mahmud had been the correct one. Osmani and Jalil, rather than returning straightaway to Kandahar, instead traveled to Islamabad to meet with Mahmud, to consult on their discussions with me and, presumably, to seek

his help with the Americans. He received them later the same night he met with me. He had neglected to mention it.

SEPTEMBER 18, 2001

Everything, they say, is relative. Though someone else may think my current circumstances bad, to me they will seem very good if yesterday's situation was much worse. A bad situation will seem all the worse if my prior circumstances were particularly good. According to General Mahmud, this theory of existential relativity very much applied to the Kandahar of September 17, 2001.

News of the assassination of Ahmad Shah Masood on September 9, just two days before 9/11, had been received with elation among the Taliban leadership. The death of the illustrious leader of the Northern Alliance, they were sure, would bring them final victory in the civil war, and enable them to consolidate their hold over all of Afghanistan. When Mahmud and his delegation of Afghan specialists from the ISI and the Foreign Ministry arrived, though, they found their hosts in a very different mood, and one all the more gloomy for their recent euphoria.

Mullah Omar, in particular, seemed completely out of sorts. He put off afternoon prayers to meet with the Pakistanis—something unprecedented in Mahmud's long history with him. He was full of petulant, and sometimes irrational, questions: Why hadn't the Americans eliminated bin Laden before his arrival in Afghanistan? Now he was in the Taliban's lap, and what could they do about it? If the Americans had a problem with al-Qa'ida, why were they also pursuing the Taliban? Was it because the Taliban was Islamic? Besides, the 9/11 attacks had been far too sophisticated for al-Qa'ida; they couldn't possibly have done it. And irrespective of that, the Americans certainly had nothing to fear from bin Laden in future: he was "tethered to a nail," incapable of doing anything.

Mahmud, in his telling, had been brutally frank with the Taliban leader during their four-hour meeting. He described what he had seen of the Americans' furious reaction to the attacks in vivid terms. Their

resolve to eliminate the threat from al-Qa'ida, once and for all, was absolute. Omar's pleas for bin Laden's innocence, he said, no longer mattered. The United States was committed to eliminating both bin Laden and the Afghan sanctuary; if the Taliban would not do so, the Americans would attempt to do so themselves. The Taliban, he said, would have to weigh the alternatives in the balance: one man versus 25 million Afghans.

In the end, the "Commander of the Faithful" had been ambivalent. On one hand, Omar was characteristically fatalistic, in the way fundamentalists are: "If war comes, it is the will of God." He agreed to send a trusted emissary to meet with bin Laden and to seek his voluntary departure, but did so without enthusiasm and with the caveat that bin Laden, now in hiding, would be difficult to find.

On the other hand, Mahmud found one great reason to be encouraged. Omar had decided to convene a consultative council of several hundred *Ulema*, or Islamic scholars, from throughout Afghanistan to advise him on the correct course to pursue toward bin Laden. Properly managed, this so-called "Supreme Council of the Islamic Clergy" could provide the Afghan leader the religious cover he needed to do what was politically necessary. They were expected to meet on September 19.

Finally, Mahmud wanted to create the opportunity, at least, for direct discussions between Omar and a U.S. emissary. Had the one-eyed cleric ever met with an infidel? Would he meet with such an emissary if offered the chance? The answer to both questions was yes, but Omar underscored that he would meet with an American only in secret, and only if given iron-clad assurances that no word of such a meeting would appear in the press.

Mullah Jalil, of course, had been included among the handful of participants in the meeting. As soon as it broke up and Omar went off to pray, he seized on the opportunity to help nudge events in the right direction: He brought Mahmud immediately to meet with Nur Muhammad Saqeb, chief justice of the Taliban Supreme Court, who would preside over the upcoming council of *Ulema*. He wanted to be sure Saqeb was aware of what was at stake.