

tors of Shawkat Khanum Hospital. He was getting worse each day, and it was clear that he would not recover. Fluid was gathering around his inner organs and the physicians had to drain it daily. He went into multi-organ failure and, as his doctors had predicted, on the 8th day at 8.30 am he passed away.

7 اِنَّاللهَ وَاَنَا لاجنوب.

On his last night he gave me some advice that has been on my mind ever since. It was time for the evening prayer when my phone rang. I left his room to answer the call so as not to bother him. The call took longer than I had expected, and I talked for nearly half an hour. By the time I returned to his room they had already prayed together. Till the very end of his life, *Mullah* Mohammad Rabbani performed all his prayers with others in congregation. Back in the room he signalled me to come over to him. I could hardly hear his voice when he spoke, and it took great strength from him.

"Why did you not pray with us?" he asked me. I told him that I had been on the phone and went out so as not to bother him. The conversation took longer than I had thought and I missed the prayer. Also I did not know that they were praying in congregation.

He looked at me. "When it is the time to worship", he said, "don't get engaged in other affairs. Prefer the right of God over the rights of others!"

Then he said, "إِطَاعَتُهُ الْخَلْقُ فِي مَعْصِيَةِ الْخَالِقِ" ⁸

He never prayed alone, and every time I saw him pray he was doing so with the utmost modesty.

These were his last words to me. When he passed away, I was at home and someone informed me over the phone. By the time I arrived at the hospital, they had already taken his body to the morgue. They had placed the body into one of the refrigerated units but it did not work and his body was warm. I washed the body to fulfil the ablutions and while doing so I looked at *Mullah* Mohammad Rabbani. His entire body was riddled with Russian bullets. There didn't seem to be a single part of his body that did not show the scars of a bullet hole. God had given him life and had kept him alive then, and now he had taken him through the cancer. Later the same day, the body was transferred by a UN plane to Kandahar where *Mullah* Mohammad Rabbani was buried.

THE OSAMA ISSUE

The central office of the UN in Pakistan was located in Islamabad and was also responsible for coordinating activities across the border in Afghanistan. At the time it was headed by Francesc Vendrell,¹ the special envoy of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Other UN organizations, such as UNHCR or Humanitarian Aid, were sharing the same offices for their operations. Back then, the UN ran the only flight between Islamabad and Afghanistan. Diplomats from the Islamic Emirate would use it regularly until the imposition of new sanctions put an end to that. The UN worked hard to maintain a good relationship with Afghanistan and the embassy. They would visit regularly and make sure that whenever a senior official from abroad paid a visit to their department, they would include a meeting with our embassy in their schedule. In retrospect, I believe it was as a result of their frequent visits that we came under more and more pressure.

In a meeting with Francesc Vendrell that took place in his office one time, he was talking enthusiastically about handing over Osama bin Laden to America, saying that the *Taliban* should respect the decision of the UN. It was not the UN's decision to discuss handing someone over to America, and also it was not their right, but they were being pressured by America. I told him that I was not in the position to decide about Osama bin Laden. Nevertheless, I was curious and asked him why the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should hand him over to America. He was a wanted man in America; but Afghanistan had made no legal agreement with America that would oblige it to hand over individuals. Furthermore, how could he, representing the supposedly impartial UN, support a request without any legal basis? He did not answer my question but said, "Listen! The decision has been taken,

and if you don't hand him over soon, America will take him from you by force".

I didn't doubt that America was preparing for a war and that the UN was cooperating. Only when and how she would start her assault was unclear. "America might go to war", I said, "but she will never reach her objectives. A war will ruin her administration and ours, blood will flow, hostility will rise and Afghanistan will fall into war with itself and the world once again".

But they never listened to me. Vendrell travelled many times to Afghanistan and met with *Amir ul-Mu'mineen* in Kandahar. When Kofi Annan came to Pakistan he was staying in the Marriott Hotel and it was there that he met Mutawakil, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, along with a delegation from the embassy. Annan had also come to focus on the handover of Osama bin Laden to America so that he could be brought before a court. The UN always represented the stance of America and blamed Afghanistan while pretending to be impartial.

A prominent example of the UN's bias is its pronouncements about drugs in Afghanistan. One such report, which was presented to the General Assembly, was filled with baseless accusations and rumours. The *Taliban* had just managed to put an end to the cultivation of poppy and the production of opium throughout Afghanistan, but the report accused them of artificially increasing the world market price by stopping production, while sitting on stockpiles of raw opium. The report influenced public opinion throughout the world and tarnished the *Taliban's* extraordinary success in putting an end to the production of drugs, which remains unprecedented and unrepeatable to this day.

Other matters were often presented out of context, such as retaliation or other Islamic rules that were upheld by the Islamic Emirate and then presented by the UN as brutal killings and murder. In Islam, retaliation for a crime is the right of the heirs of the victim, especially in murder cases. According to these rules, no one can forgive a murderer except the heirs of the person who was killed. Irrespective of whether they are male or female, they should be brought before the *shari'a*.

A prominent example of such misrepresentation concerned the retaliation case of a woman called Zamina. She had killed her husband with her own hands and had confessed to the crime. The punishment was carried out publicly in Kabul Stadium by the relatives of the husband. To this day I don't know how the scene was filmed and the video brought to the UN, but they accused the *Taliban* of killing innocent

women without mentioning the court proceedings and crime of which she had been convicted.

On another occasion, the UN released a report accusing the *Taliban* of recruiting under-aged boys to serve in the army and of using children to safeguard and defend the front lines. Eric de Mul, the UN representative in charge, was taken to the front lines and was unable to find a single under-aged child or even young boy there. After his visit, he wrote another paper² for the UN explaining his previous report.

Each time the *Taliban* utilized their Air Force, the UN would condemn them for causing civilian casualties. This appears to be quite ironic given the countless civilian losses Afghanistan has sustained in the past years at the hands of ISAF and NATO. And when the *Taliban* detained six foreign nationals who were accused of proselytising Christianity—even though they had signed the visa application forms that clearly obliged them to refrain from any political or religious activities while in Afghanistan—the UN imposed sanctions against Afghanistan, a country of twenty-eight million people, due to six foreigners who had violated a rule they had agreed to uphold. There were two Americans in the group, and the US was quick to say that the *Taliban* had detained them illegally. Many reports were written, and incidents took place in the run-up to the war that often seemed to be provoked by America and that put Afghanistan and the *Taliban* under a bad light.

The UN has changed. It has become a tool that is being used by countries of the world against Muslim nations like Afghanistan and Iraq. What we witness today is unprecedented. America is swallowing the world, brutally bombarding and killing thousands of innocent people in Iraq and Afghanistan, turning hundreds and hundreds of villages into rubble. How can they be allowed to disgrace, kill and detain Muslims around the world in the name of a war against terrorism? How can they hold people for years without telling them their fate or taking them to court?

I was there, and many of my friends still are. We had no rights: there are no human rights at Guantánamo Bay. There are no explanations. There are no visits from friends or family. There is nothing, only the slow deterioration of hope grinding against your spirit, making you believe that it will never end. Yet the very UN organization that imposed the sanctions against Afghanistan stays silent or even supports what America is doing in the eyes of the world.

With the unfolding events and growing isolation of Afghanistan, fewer and fewer foreign diplomats asked for personal meetings in Kandahar or Kabul, and the embassy started acting more as the foreign ministry until the two institutions were hardly distinguishable any more. Even though most countries didn't recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a legitimate government, many foreign diplomats would still come to talk with us on a regular basis, or just whenever they had a problem concerning Afghanistan. I learnt a lot from the foreign diplomats when they visited the embassy and talked regularly with many of them.

Apart from the Russian ambassador, I had met all the other ambassadors personally, and I had close relations with most of them. Many of them were polite and knowledgeable. The only ones I do not have fond memories of were the ambassadors to Afghanistan of Germany, Belgium, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Pakistani ambassador was a very kind and intellectual man, however.

The ambassadors of Germany and Belgium were impolite, ruthless and arrogant. Both were tall, broad-shouldered and full of prejudice; they always wanted to discuss the position of women.

The ambassador of Kuwait was an extremely proud person. He had a yellow moustache, and whenever he spoke to me he seemed self-centred, with little regard for the Afghans. The Kuwaitis were always backing America; at times it seemed that they did not even notice that when they uttered the names of America and Bush they did so as if their lives depended on it.

The ambassador of Saudi Arabia looked young; he was eager, and used to making demands. He would often talk about Osama bin Laden. One day I went to his office to discuss the problems of the Afghan *Hajjis*,³ but when we got down to serious discussions he ignored the reason I had asked him for a meeting. Instead he talked loudly about Osama for a long time. I was astonished by his behaviour; more than once I told him that I was not there to discuss Osama, and that the very subject was far above my level of competence and would be decided by other people. But he would not listen.

The most sympathetic and pitiable ambassador was from war-torn Palestine. All the other ambassadors from the Islamic world were polite and good people, but the ambassador of Palestine was a kind man. Most other ambassadors from non-Islamic countries observed the principles of good diplomacy, however, and took great care to

maintain a good relationship with the embassy and despite the limitations caused by the lack of official recognition.

We would hold discussion with the embassies of China, France, Britain and others on specific or current issues. When an Ariana Airlines Airbus was hijacked and landed in Britain, the ambassador came and requested to try the hijackers in Great Britain, but the Emirate rejected their wish. They wanted the pilots of the plane to testify as eye-witnesses, but still the Emirate did not agree. Britain had allied itself with America on the issue of Osama bin Laden and pressure was mounting.

The ambassador of China was the only one to maintain a good relationship with the embassy and with Afghanistan. He asked to travel to Afghanistan and meet with *Amir ul-Mu'mineen* and I made the necessary arrangements to facilitate his trip. First he flew to Kabul where he was welcomed warmly before he travelled on to Kandahar to meet *Mullah* Mohammad Omar. The ambassador explained that the government of China was concerned about rumours that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was allegedly assisting the Muslims in Xinxiang, a former Islamic state that was now part of China and was host to an on-and-off armed struggle for liberty between Muslim resistance groups and the central government.

Mullah Mohammad Omar assured him that Afghanistan never had any interest or wish to interfere in China's domestic issues and affairs, nor would Afghanistan allow any group to use its territory to conduct any such operations or support one to that end. The ambassador seemed to be satisfied following his visit. He was the first foreign non-Islamic ambassador ever to see *Mullah* Mohammad Omar *Sahab*. After the ambassador of China had visited, Francesc Vendrell also met *Mullah* Mohammad Omar. We worked hard in the face of many obstacles to improve Afghanistan's relations with the outside world and overcome the differences.

Contrary to our efforts, however, the situation was deteriorating with each passing day. Sanctions and other impositions were toughened and increased, relations turned from bad to worse and one event after another took place that spoiled each previous effort. This was the downward slope heading to the events of 11 September 2001, when the world was turned upside down.

Our most troubled relationship was with the Americans, with whom we used to have frequent meetings. We had extremely tough discussions over the issue of Osama bin Laden. Their demands caused many

problems, and time after time we met in the American embassy or ours. When I first took up my position as envoy of Afghanistan, William Milam⁴ was the American ambassador, and a colleague of his, Paula Thedi, the political affairs officer at the embassy.

After President George W. Bush was elected in 2001, he nominated a new ambassador and senior embassy staff to Islamabad. Kabir Mohabat,⁵ an Afghan-American national much like Khalilzad,⁶ was appointed to a position in Islamabad. Mohabat would facilitate talks and act as a mediator, and at one time was selected as temporary extraordinary envoy. America insisted that Afghanistan hand over Osama bin Laden or drive him from its territory to a country that would be willing to do so.

The *Taliban*, however, argued for a trial—to preserve the dignity of Osama bin Laden. The issue caused a significant rift between our two countries.⁷ At one point I discussed the issue with the ambassador at his office late in the evening, long after office hours. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan had come up with three possible solutions that they deemed satisfactory for both sides, and I explained all three to him in great detail that night:

Firstly, if America blames Osama bin Laden for the bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania, and can present any evidence for its claim, it should present all its findings to the Supreme Court of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will legally summon Osama bin Laden to court. If there is proof, he will be found guilty and will be punished according to the Islamic *shari'a* law.

Secondly, if America finds the first suggestion unpalatable because it does not recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or because it does not believe in the independent, unbiased and impartial stance of the Supreme Court of Afghanistan, the Emirate suggests that a new court be formed, chaired by the Attorney Generals of three Islamic countries, proceedings of which would be held in a fourth Islamic country. America would be able to present its evidence in this court and make its case against Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan will be a partner of the court and will ensure that Osama is present at the trial and stands to answer any questions and defend himself against any allegations. If Osama is unable to defend himself and is found guilty, he will be punished for his criminal deeds.

Thirdly, if America does not trust a court that is set up by three Islamic countries and does not accept or recognize the Supreme Court of Afghanistan, we can offer to curb any and all activities of Osama. He will be stripped of all communications equipment so that his outreach will be limited to his immediate refugee life here in Afghanistan, and the Emirate will ensure that he does not use its territory for any activity directed against another country.

America rejected all three of our proposals and insisted that the Emirate hand over Osama bin Laden unconditionally, saying that he would be tried in a fair and impartial court in the US and be punished if found guilty. Afghanistan, however, could not accept America's demand. We explained and reasoned why we could not comply. For one, Afghanistan and America did not have any legal obligations towards each other to hand over criminals. No such contract or agreement was ever signed between the two nations. As is customary in cases like these, any criminal that is not subject to an extradition agreement would be tried in the country where they are imprisoned or found at the time. Bilateral recognition and the sovereignty of each country would be respected.

America insisted on judging Osama in America. No other country was ever discussed; they wouldn't even consider the UN court in The Hague that would at least have had some measure of independence and impartiality, and would have been an option that would have allowed both parties to keep face.

The Islamic Emirate had two principal objections to America's demand that we hand over Osama bin Laden. Firstly, if every country were to hand over any person deemed a criminal by America, then America would *de facto* control the world. This would in turn threaten the independence and sovereignty of all countries. Secondly, America's demands, and its rejection of all suggestions offered by the Emirate, imply that there is no justice in the Islamic world, and with it no legal authority of Islam to implement justice and law among the people. This stands in direct opposition to Islam itself and its system to protect the rights of the people and to punish criminals. This problem remained unresolved till the very end.

There were other solutions that were discussed but never officially acknowledged by the Emirate or America. One suggestion was made to install a joint court comprising America and some Islamic countries. Another was to seek a trial at the International Court at the Hague. None of these suggestions were ever seriously discussed since America would not divert from its demand that Osama bin Laden needed to be handed over to its justice system. The USA made it clear that they were willing to use force should Afghanistan not comply with its demand.

Christina Rocca,⁸ the Secretary of State for South Asian affairs, passed through Islamabad on a tour and requested a visit. We met on 2 August 2001 at the American Embassy in Islamabad. She was con-

cerned only with Osama. During the conversation she flouted every diplomatic principle, and every single word she uttered was a threat, hidden or open. Our meeting was a battle of harsh rhetoric.

I held four meetings with the US ambassador over the issue of Osama bin Laden, each without result. Even though we had both tried to improve the relationship between our countries, and had a good personal rapport, nothing came of these encounters as neither of us had the power to take decisions. Other people were responsible for authorising all of our meetings as well as all of our decisions and answers, all of which were negative.

One morning the US ambassador unexpectedly asked for an appointment that very same day. (The Americans occasionally got agitated over small things.) I was tired and on my way home to rest, but they insisted on meeting as soon as possible. After the late afternoon prayer the ambassador came to my house, accompanied by Paula Thedi. He seemed worried and impatient and started to talk as soon as he entered the room. "Our intelligence reports reveal that Osama is planning a major attack on America. This is why we had to come immediately at such a late hour. You need to tell officials in Afghanistan to prevent the attacks!"

I reported their worries directly back to the Emirate, even though I should have communicated this message to the central leadership through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But given the urgency of their visit, and remembering the old story of the border commander during Zahir Shah's time⁹ it seemed best to break official protocol. Twenty-three hours later I received a letter from Kandahar for the ambassador. "Afghanistan has no intention to harm the United States of America now or in the future. We do not condone attacks of any kind against America and will prevent anyone from using Afghan soil to plan or train for any such attack."

It was a letter of assurance that clearly outlined the Emirate's position. I personally translated it and passed it on to the American ambassador along with the original Pashtu text. But nevertheless, the letter did not rid America of her doubts.

The last time I saw the American ambassador was when he came to say goodbye. He told me that he appreciated the good diplomatic relationship that we had cultivated and expressed his concern about the future and about forthcoming events that were likely to spell disaster. He believed that Osama remained a threat and would continue his

fight against America. And nor would the US tolerate any longer his threats and attacks. It was time to find a solution or the problem will get out of hand, he said. Even though America had imposed sanctions on Afghanistan through the UN and had taken diplomatic steps to isolate it further, there were still concerns about Osama bin Laden. The issue was discussed in countless private parties and gatherings; America would drop all its other demands and formally recognize the Emirate if he were handed over.

When the attacks of 11 September 2001 took place on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, everything came to a standstill and the world was flipped on its back. The negotiation process was derailed by the events and all of us witnessed what happened next.

9/11 AND ITS AFTERMATH

It was around seven or eight in the evening and I was at home waiting for dinner to be served when Rahmatullah rushed into the house. He seemed worried, and turned to me with a pale face: "Zaeef *Sahab*, have you seen the news on TV?"

"No. What happened?" I replied.

"Turn on the TV. You need to see what is happening in the United States", he said. "America is on fire".

I didn't own a television at the time; the embassy had a set which was used for media monitoring, but I kept myself personally informed through press clippings and reports about current events happening around the world.

Rahmatullah was the brother of Ahmed Rateb Popal, who lived in the house across from mine, and was Popolzai, the same tribe as Hamid Karzai. He and I went over to Rahmat Faqir's house. Many people had gathered, including colleagues from the embassy, and we watched as one of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City burned. There was fire and large clouds of black smoke billowing up from the building. A second airplane hit the other tower soon afterwards. It smashed into the building like a bullet, with fire and debris shooting out of the tower on all sides. People who were caught above the fire threw themselves from the sky-high buildings, falling to the ground like stones. The scene was horrific, and I stared at the pictures in disbelief.

My mind raced as I looked at the screen and considered the probable repercussions of the attack. At that very moment, I knew that Afghanistan and its poverty-stricken people would ultimately suffer for what had just taken place in America. The United States would seek revenge, and they would turn to our troubled country.

The thought brought tears to my eyes, but those sitting with me in the room looked at me with genuine surprise and asked me why I was sad. To be honest, some of them were overjoyed, offering congratulations and shaking each other's hands for the events that we had just witnessed.

This happiness and jubilation worried me even more; I was anxious about the future. How could they be so superficial, finding joy in an event for a moment, but oblivious to its impact on the days to come? I turned to the others, asking them, "who do you think the United States and the world will blame for what has just happened? Who will face their anger?"

They said that they didn't know who would be blamed and that they didn't know why they should care. To them, America was our enemy, a country that had imposed sanctions on our country and one that had attacked us with missiles. The image on their screens—a symbol of that power burning on its own soil—was a reason for celebration.

I didn't talk with them for long time, but I felt the need to share what I believed to be true.

Drying my eyes, I spoke: "I don't want to convince you of anything, or change what you think is right, but I tell you now that you will remember this moment, here in this room with your colleagues, because we will have to pay the price for what has happened today. The United States will blame Osama bin Laden, a guest of Afghanistan as you all know. An American attack on Afghanistan is more than likely given the fear and sorrow of that country today. America might strike soon."

"Bin Laden is America's 'enemy number one' and has been blamed for major and minor incidents in the past. For America, blaming and incriminating a prominent figure of the Islamic world will give them the opportunity to interfere in Muslim countries with the support of the rest of the world. Osama bin Laden is the perfect scapegoat to allow America to pursue its wider agenda. America also needs to cover up its mistakes and failures; it will use individuals like Osama to mislead the world. I fear that he will claim responsibility for the attack and will give Americans the proof they need, whether he was involved or not. Osama's mouth is not easily controlled. And America does not tolerate such events in silence or without taking action."

I reminded them of the Second World War, when the Japanese air force launched a surprise attack on the US Navy at Pearl Harbor. The

Navy suffered greatly in the attack, with heavy casualties, and America was swift to retaliate. Without hesitation, the United States attacked Japan by dropping two nuclear bombs—"Little Boy" and "Fat Man"—on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and tens of thousands of civilians burned in the hellfire of the bombs. I told them that I was sure that America would invade our country with equal vigour. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was already a thorn in America's side, and now the world would join her. That, I told them, was the reason for my tears.

Those with me didn't share my worries, though, and insisted that most of what I said was wrong. They quoted a Pashtun proverb back to me: "look where the attacks happened and look where the war now takes place". They thought America was too far away to retaliate. I returned to my house, anxious about what would happen in the coming months.

Back at home, I called Sohail Shahin,¹ the political affairs chief at the embassy. We discussed what had happened and what position to take with the press, agreeing that we would issue a brief statement to the media in the morning. It was late when I headed up to bed. My worries prevented me from sleeping and a recollection of the meeting with the US ambassador a few months earlier haunted me. They had been talking about a major attack on the United States launched from Afghanistan, and at the time I did not believe them.

I kept recalling that day, and still I couldn't sleep. It was one o'clock and I was staring at the ceiling when my phone suddenly rang. Tayyeb Agha² greeted me from the office of the Islamic Emirate in Kandahar and said that *Mullah* Mohammad Omar, the *Amir ul-Mu'mineen*, wanted to speak with me. It seemed that they, too, were unable to sleep on account of what had taken place, just a few hours before. Tayyeb Agha put me through to *Mullah Saheb* and after a brief greeting he asked me about the attacks and what I had learnt about them so far. I told him what I had seen and shared my concerns with him. *Mullah* Mohammad Omar explained the official public stance that the Islamic Emirate would take. Our conversation continued for another fifteen minutes, after which I returned to bed.

I went to the embassy early the next morning and advised my monitoring team to follow the news on television closely. *Dawn* and *The*

Nation, Pakistan's main English newspapers, ran a selection of stories presenting media reaction from around the world to the attacks on the United States. I called a press conference for ten o'clock, and just before the press conference Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil, the Foreign Minister, called me to clarify the official stance to be adopted by Afghanistan and its delegates abroad.

We issued a short press release:

*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim.*³ We strongly condemn the events that happened in the United States at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. We share the grief of all those who have lost their nearest and dearest in these incidents. All those responsible must be brought to justice. We want them to be brought to justice, and we want America to be patient and careful in their actions.

We sent a copy to the US embassy in Islamabad, but it was already too late. America, in its moment of terror and fear, had become angry and was looking for revenge.

The situation then changed dramatically, especially when George Bush appeared on television on the second day after the attack, full of anger and hate. He looked terrified, standing in front of the camera in a bulletproof vest like a soldier. Without waiting for investigations to deliver reliable proof, he announced that bin Laden was responsible for the attacks of 11 September. Osama bin Laden, he said, was wanted dead or alive. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was sheltering bin Laden, and was therefore complicit in and responsible for his crime.

Our Foreign Minister, Mutawakil, voiced his disapproval of the statement two days later, but the fear of another attack continued to loom over the United States. President Bush was a refugee in the sky, circling America in Air Force One, unable to land. His plane only touched down for emergency meetings or important press statements. The location of these meetings was undisclosed and heavily guarded by the American security agencies. Each time he made an appearance, however, he seemed to have lost his senses. The situation for Afghanistan deteriorated quickly, especially after the United Nations voiced their support for America and demanded that Afghanistan hand over bin Laden to the USA.

The Muslim world scattered at the wrath of the United States, moving quickly out of her way without looking into the details. It was as

if doomsday itself had arrived. The world fell in line with America and in turn Afghanistan became more and more isolated. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, however, did not change its policy, even though it was being condemned for the attacks. It voiced the same doubts and pointed to the lack of evidence and proof, just as it had done after the Nairobi and Dar as-Salaam bombings.⁴

Sanctions on Afghanistan were tightened and the rumours of a possible war gained momentum each day; America was sending delegations to countries around the world to ask for their backing. Officials arrived in Islamabad more than once to ask for Pakistan's support, but they chose not to seek the cooperation of Afghanistan, isolating it throughout the months leading up to the war. America's list of demands grew day by day. They started with a call for the handing over of Osama bin Laden, but soon included provision for the formation of a broad-based democratic government, human rights and women's rights, as well as for full access to any location in the country for search operations by American troops.

I tried my best to resolve the dispute through political means, hoping to avoid a war through talks and negotiations. I had the personal email address of President Bush and the White House, as I had written to him in the past. Back then, I had congratulated him on winning the presidential elections. This did not mean that I was glad that he had won. I remember asking myself what need there was to congratulate a man whose personality was questionable, both from an Islamic and political point of view.

However, after 11 September I tried to initiate a dialogue with the White House and President Bush, hoping to be able to open up lines of communication and avoid what we all by now know actually happened. President Clinton had set the tone for America's behaviour in Afghanistan: he sent cruise missiles and imposed international sanctions.

Once again, I wrote a long letter to President Bush and the White House on behalf of the Afghan people, depicting the problems we faced: the hunger, the drought, the refugees... I went into great detail about the severe impact that continuous warfare had had on Afghan society, the many domestic enemies, the fractionalisation and the many casualties of war and lawlessness. I asked him to be cautious, to take into account the disastrous effects of war, and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. If they continued further down the same path, America would be solely responsible for what would follow.

“There is no doubt”, I wrote, “that America is the only superpower in the world, just as there is no doubt that Afghanistan has already lost everything in the previous two decades of war. We don’t have any power—economic or political—and even our military is stretched to hold on to the lawless provinces in the east, let alone stand up to America. Afghanistan grew tired of fighting during the *jihad* and civil war ten years ago. We don’t want to fight anymore, nor do we have the power to do so”.

With all this in mind, I advised him to choose dialogue and talks instead of war. A copy of my letter was sent to the US embassy in Islamabad and to members of the US parliament and Congress as well. I was trying to draw their attention to the terrible outcome that a military solution would have for both Afghanistan and the United States.

At the same time, I contacted the Afghan-born advisor to President Bush, Zalmay Khalilzad. I told him that as an Afghan he should help and make every possible effort to try to prevent the dispute from turning into a war. I always spoke with Khalilzad on the phone from Jalalabad, where I travelled from Islamabad so that Pakistan wouldn’t eavesdrop on our conversations. I told him that America should be talking to Afghanistan directly and that they shouldn’t focus on Pakistan. The *Taliban*, I said, do not listen to Pakistan, nor do they accept its decisions. As a mediator, I reasoned, Pakistan wouldn’t serve the interest of Afghanistan or America. Bush remained arrogant, though, and refused to listen to reason.

Despite the total obedience of Pakistan’s autocratic ruler to Bush, our embassy in Islamabad was not immediately closed. Musharraf could have closed it on the day of the attacks, but the United Nations and even the United States did not want to close the only open channel to Afghanistan straight away. In any case, Pakistan had also demanded that Afghanistan hand over Osama to the United States.

I recently read Musharraf’s autobiography,⁵ in which he portrays himself as a heroic figure, a courageous military commander. He writes that he isn’t afraid of anyone but God, and that he cannot be killed by anyone except Almighty *Allah*. There is little to criticise here: a Muslim should have faith in God the Almighty and know that only He can give life and take it away. Elsewhere in his book he wrote that he was threatened by President Bush in the period after the attacks. If Pakistan didn’t cooperate, so his narration of Bush’s threat goes, it would be sent back to the Stone Age. Musharraf should be clear: either he is

with us or against us. The threat, Musharraf writes, forced him to give access to military bases inside Pakistan to America, from which they were able to bomb the sacred soil of Afghanistan and turn the homes of our people to rubble.

How can someone who claims only to be afraid of God bow down to the threat of Bush when he is faced with an attempt to overthrow the Afghan government and target the people of Afghanistan—women, children and the elderly—with bombs and missiles?

During the months preceding the American attack the ISI contacted me several times. On one occasion two ISI officers came to the embassy. They wanted information about the different political positions within the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and who filled them at the time. Being aware of what they were actually looking for, I handed them an organizational chart of Afghanistan’s administration, pretending that I was not ignorant of the structure or system of the military. The officers were suspicious and continued to question me about the military but I assured them that I really was not the person to talk to on the subject.

Another time the ISI asked me to visit their central office. I replied that I could not come, but would be glad to meet them if necessary in the foreign ministry. There, I said, we could discuss any issue at hand. Their request was soon followed by a demand: I should come to their guesthouse. Again I declined. Finally General Mahmud, General Jailani and Brigadier Farooq, accompanied by Mahmud, came to my house, where I welcomed them.

They were not in the mood for pleasantries: “We know that you are aware of what will happen in the near future”, General Mahmud said, “and we also know that you believe that Pakistan will join the international community and America against Afghanistan. Maybe you think that this would be an action against Islam and neighbourly principles. Maybe that’s why you are suspicious and didn’t want to come to the central office. We have come today to tell you two things: firstly, we have received reports that you are planning to assassinate President Musharraf. Any plan for an assassination will fail and I must strongly advise you to immediately cease work on these plans, if indeed they exist. Secondly, we both know that an attack on Afghanistan from the United States of America seems more and more likely. We want to assure you that you will not be alone in this *jihad* against America. We will be with you”.

I listened to them patiently and when they had finished spoke to them calmly. "If someone plans to assassinate Musharraf", I said, "then that's an internal affair of Pakistan and none of my business. I for one have neither the possibilities nor the facilities to assassinate him". In a sarcastic tone I said that they should not involve the Emir-ate in such plans of theirs.

"Secondly", I said, "if America is going to attack Afghanistan, then you know better than me from which airports and territories it will attack us. We will see later how many Afghans will be martyred in this war. But, General, you will be responsible for the bloodshed and the killing when you cooperate with America, in this world and the next. You will be Afghanistan's enemy number one".

I was still in the middle of my sentence when General Jailani cut me off and started screaming. But even though he was already upset I continued talking, turning towards Mahmud. "Wait, General!" I said. "You speak of *jihād* while the Americans are stationed in your airbases and flying through your airspace, even attacking Afghanistan based on your intelligence reports. You should be ashamed even to utter the word *jihād*. Have you no fear of God that you talk to me of *jihād*? Why do you want Afghans to fight the *jihād*? Why don't you start it in your own country? Is *jihād* only an obligation for Afghans? General! Please don't speak to me about supporting something you are actually against!" I had become emotional and had talked myself into a rage. When I looked at General Mahmud, tears were running down his face. Jailani was crying out loud, with his arms around my neck like a woman. I was puzzled by their reaction. A few moments later they excused themselves and left.

Pakistan was sending out mixed signals. At the same time as General Mahmud was telling me that an attack was imminent, the Pakistani Consulate in Kandahar continued to assure us that America would never launch an attack on Afghanistan. They said that the rumours of war and Bush's ongoing bellicose rhetoric were just to calm the widespread anger of the American people. A number of high-ranking Muslim officers in the Pakistani army, though, also served as advisors to President Musharraf and they kept us supplied with information that seemed far more realistic. We also had ties to staff from the Pakistani Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs.

During those days I did everything I could to keep myself informed about the various plans and programmes that were being put into

motion. I even once asked for a meeting with Musharraf himself through one of my contacts in the Foreign Ministry. He declined the request.

I learnt of some of the war plans and America's efforts to form an alliance. This worried *Mullah* Mohammad Omar. America, together with the Pakistani intelligence agencies, had apparently prepared a plan to launch a cruise missile attack on the residences of *Mullah* Mohammad Omar and Osama bin Laden in order to eliminate them in the first phase of their campaign. This would, I had heard, eventually become part of a vast military operation including heavy air strikes by the US Navy and Air Force. The ground offensive, according to that plan, would be carried out by Afghan allies who would receive financial and material assistance—as well as guidance—from America. Most of the commanders who joined America were from the northern provinces.

Our enemies were known to us, and the implementation of America's attack on Afghanistan would rely on such commanders. Abdul Haq and Malik Zarin⁶ were the American allies in the east. The former was a prominent *mujahed* and anti-Taliban leader from Nangarhar, while the latter, a prominent commander in Kunar province, was from the Meshwani tribe. Padshah Khan Zadran⁷—the Pashtun leader from Paktya province—operated in the southeast along with a number of smaller commanders. Hamid Karzai, Gul Agha Shirzai, Hamid Agha⁸ and some others would be in the south. Only in the south-west were America and Pakistan unable to find allies.

I travelled to Kandahar to meet *Mullah* Mohammad Omar, the *Amir ul-Mu'mineen*, at his new house. I presented him with all the information I had gathered over the past few weeks about the operation America was planning. *Mullah* Mohammad Omar was unwilling to believe the details of what I had told him; he reasoned that America couldn't launch an offensive without a valid reason, and that since he had demanded that Washington conduct an official investigation, and deliver incontrovertible proof incriminating bin Laden and others in the 11 September attacks, the government of Afghanistan would take no further steps regarding the matter till they were presented with such hard evidence.

In *Mullah* Mohammad Omar's mind there was less than a 10 per cent chance that America would resort to anything beyond threats, and so an attack was unlikely. From the information I had seen, I told him, America would definitely attack Afghanistan. I told him that I was

almost completely convinced that war was imminent. Pakistan and America were on the verge of reaching an agreement that would seal Afghanistan's fate.

Pakistan was making every effort to meet with Communist generals and former *mujahedeen* commanders while the ISI facilitated contacts for the United States, introducing them to potential allies in a war against the Islamic Emirate. America was willing to pay for the cooperation of commanders; they spent millions of dollars, providing free satellite phones and other resources in unimaginable quantities. Even staff from the Afghan embassy in Islamabad received money to gather information for America. America's efforts were a blessing for Pakistan, which grasped at the generous provisions of money and resources with outstretched hands. Pakistan provided military bases in Sindh and Baluchistan province to the US and these were soon overflowing with stockpiled arms and munitions for the war against Afghanistan. The Pakistani and American intelligence agencies shared information on various issues, including details about the leaders of the Afghan forces who commanded the Afghan military and air bases.

The ISI, however, had their own secret agenda in order to gain a strategic advantage in Afghanistan. They sought to regroup and organize the *jibadi* commanders who were living in the frontier regions—as well as throughout Pakistan—who hadn't been involved in operations inside our country since the end of the wars of the 1980s. In a parallel move, they secretly planted commanders among the military forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan who would be used to bring down our government. And finally, Pakistan held its own secret talks with the Northern Alliance to discuss the military and political future of the country. Pakistan saw the Northern Alliance as the future leaders of Afghanistan, who would have not only a considerable stake in any new government, but also continue to be important to the United States, which would have to rely on them for a long while yet.

All the signs were pointing towards war, and the more I learnt the clearer it became to me that a war could not be avoided. Pakistan, once our brother, had turned its back on us and the world was rallying behind President Bush and his call for action. I knew that the calm days would soon come to an end, and that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan would have to face a mighty enemy in a battle for its very survival.

It was an October morning when I was told by high-ranking Pakistani authorities that the coming night would herald the start of the invasion. Americans troops had already been deployed in Pakistan's military air bases, their aircraft were patrolling our airspace. A US aircraft carrier with hundreds of jets and cruise missiles had dropped anchor in the Persian Gulf. Their computer-guided intelligence drones were already spying over Afghanistan; one had already crashed in Mazar-e Sharif.

The US ambassador to Pakistan⁹ had also handed over a secret file to Pervez Musharraf containing evidence about the 11 September attacks and the alleged complicity of the *Taliban* regime with *Al Qaeda*, thereby providing the General with a pretext to explain his government's cooperation with the Americans in the invasion of Afghanistan. It remains a mystery why the United States would give such proof to Pakistan rather than to Afghanistan, when our government had specifically asked for these documents. In reality, these were only the old confessions of an Arab called Ali who had been captured. The Americans claimed he had been involved in the Dar es Salaam attacks, and Ali disappeared, going crazy after he was injected with chemicals that meant he would never return to reality. This was a serious embarrassment for Musharraf, and his reputation was further tarnished.

I relayed all this information to my headquarters, saying that they should be prepared for an attack during the night.

As the next day passed into evening, I was tense and alert, trying to find out what was happening. It was 10 p.m. when I received a phone call from the commander-in-chief of Kandahar Corps, *Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Osmani*,¹⁰ now deceased. He told me that Kandahar airbase was being hit by missiles at that very moment. "Has *Amir ul-Mu'mineen* been informed?" I asked. The commander replied that, yes, they had told him. "Wait", he said. "More missiles are coming down on *Amir ul-Mu'mineen's* house!" He wanted to say more but the phone line went dead.

I became agitated. The thing that worried me more than anything else was the possibility that *Mullah Mohammad Omar* might be killed. He had been assured by some Pakistani authorities that there would no attack, so he might not have paid close attention to our information. In reality this wasn't a real assurance, but was intended to keep him in the dark about America's intentions and the secret conspiracy to kill him.

I was still thinking about this when the phone rang again, this time from Kabul. It was *Mullah Abdul Ghaffar*,¹¹ the head of the communi-

cations department at the Defence Ministry. "Kabul air base is being hit by missiles", he told me. Then he connected me with the minister, *Mullah* Obaidullah. I had given him the war plan, and he had been listening to my advice. I spoke to him using just a few short words: "This is not the time for soft beds and luxurious palaces. Get yourself somewhere safe. We will see what God wills". Then I hung up.

For a time I just sat there, head in my hands, wondering what would happen. How long would Afghanistan burn in this fire again? But I consoled myself with the old proverb about the man and his saddlebags—if you worry too much, you may lose everything. I told myself that this was no time to sit and worry; it would not do me any good. Better that I should work.

The telephone was ringing off the hook. People wanted answers, journalists wanted answers, but I did not pick up the phone. Instead I called Shahin and said, "It has begun. Call the journalists together. We can take care of them all at once". On that first night, I gave a press conference at midnight in my garden.

This was the beginning of the war.

Prior to the attacks, the ISI officers who had visited me earlier were all dismissed from their duties. General Jaulani was transferred to Maiwali,¹² and General Omar took General Mahmud's position as head of ISI. I never learnt what happened to General Mahmud after that.

According to a classified report, the ISI had burned documents regarding Afghanistan that the Americans had requested and had also informed *Mullah Sabeel* that the American's primary goal was to kill him and the senior leadership of the *Taliban*. The ISI had even advised *Mullah Sabeel* to find a safe haven.

Other Pakistani officials had dismissed the information, suggesting that America would continue to raise pressure through military measures but that no real attack or invasion was planned. *Mullah* Mohammad Omar stayed in his house and disregarded the growing danger. I had personally informed him of America's intention to go to war, sometimes showing maps and other evidence I had gathered, but Kandahar thought our reports to be wrong. *Mullah Sabeel* believed that there was no logical reason for America to attack Afghanistan and therefore considered the possibility of an attack rather unlikely.

Two days after the hostilities began, General Omar visited me. He had two demands: he said that as a senior leader and representative of the *Taliban* I should assist in separating the "fundamentalist" from the "moderate" *Taliban*. This, he said, would ultimately help the *Taliban* and would keep the movement alive. In reality, his intention was to split the *Taliban* into factions in order to weaken them. I was supposed to lead moderate *Taliban* against *Amir ul-Mu'mineen*. He assured me that they would support me financially and logistically.

This is the suggestion that the new administration of the United States under President Obama is working on. Bush, while he was still in power, and together with Britain and Karzai, also tried to do this during his seven years. They think that the *Taliban* exist for the sake of money or power, so logically it would seem that they can be destroyed with money and power. In reality, the *Taliban* movement is one based on Islamic ideology, struggling for holy *jihād* under the principles of *itta'at* or obedience and *samar* or listening, as well as that of dialogue. The thought of dividing them into moderates and hardliners is a useless and reckless aim.

Secondly, he told me to refrain from talking to the media and to cease all press conferences at the embassy.

If I needed to make a public statement, I was to hand over the press release to the Pakistani government before issuing it so that it could be censored and tailored to their needs. General Omar and the men that accompanied him left after he finished talking. I didn't respond to him, and continued my work. I understood what they had advised me to do, but I could not see how they expected to benefit from my forming a faction of *Taliban* or what the result would be for the *Taliban* and *Mullah Sabeel*. I kept the information to myself.

Every day at 4 p.m. I held a press conference to tell the world what was happening in Afghanistan. I would present information about the general situation or on specific events as well as answer the journalists' questions. I received frequent calls from Aziz Khan at the Foreign Ministry to keep quiet.

At 3 p.m. I would gather information from all over Afghanistan, and at 3:30 p.m. I would print it out. I then gave a copy to the ISI agent, but before he even got back to his office I was already holding the

press conference. In this way, I managed to get the news out before they had a chance to do anything.

The ISI formally warned me three times, saying that they were receiving the information at the same time as I was holding the press conference. I made excuses; I told them that I had only received the report from Afghanistan at three in the afternoon, and that I would correct it and send them a copy thirty minutes later. I would make excuses for the time delay, saying that my information was incomplete, that my translator was absent, that my typist was late. Using such methods I thwarted their every attempt to censor me.

Even while under constant threat, I continued my work. When Mazar-e Sharif fell to the Northern Alliance on 9 November, the ISI urged me to contact *Mullah* Obaidullah, the Defence Minister, and *Mullah* Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the governor of Kandahar, to tell them to come to Pakistan. I told the ISI representative that I could not simply call them and ask them to come to Pakistan since they were higher in rank than me. Furthermore, I told the ISI that I did not want them to come to Pakistan as I believed the ISI wanted to arrest them.

Every few minutes they called to ask if I had talked to *Mullah* Obaidullah Akhund or *Mullah* Mohammad Hassan Akhund. I replied that I had talked to them and advised them that they would be arrested as soon as they set foot on Pakistani soil. I did not trust anything Pakistani promised. It was difficult to navigate in Islamabad those days, doing my work while trying to prevent being banned and keep from losing my credentials.

I spent most of my time tracking events and following the international situation as well as that in Afghanistan. The last person I met from ISI was Colonel Imam.¹³ He was well-known among Afghans from the early years of the anti-Russian *jihad* and was now the Consul at Pakistan's Consulate in Herat. He was expelled from Afghanistan after America started its attack. The *Taliban* did not trust him and even though he tried to stay in Kandahar, he had to leave the country.

He asked for an appointment and we met in the embassy. After we exchanged greetings he started to cry. Tears were running down his face and white beard and when finally he composed himself he could not speak. Then he blurted out "Almighty *Allah* might have decided what is to take place in Afghanistan, but Pakistan is to blame. How much cruelty it has done to its neighbour! And how much more will come!" He blamed Musharraf, who had erased and stamped out the

achievements of the past two decades of cooperation, suffering and friendship, and had stripped the *jihad* of its glory. Pakistan would be forced to bear the shame, not Musharraf. He started to cry again, saying that they would never be able to repent for what Musharraf had done, and that they would bear the blame not only in this world, but in the next. He left straightaway, and I did not meet another officer from the ISI until they came to arrest me. I was watched closely, though. Three motorbikes and one car would follow me and stand outside the embassy and my house day and night.

This was the government of Pakistan; the public was quite different. All over the country violent anti-American demonstrations took place and there were daily clashes between the police and protestors; every day people died. The Pakistani government was trying very hard to suppress the protests. They put many people—including religious leaders—in jail, but still the demonstrations kept growing.

Thousands of volunteers were coming to our embassy in Pakistan to take part in the war. Thousands of others travelled into Afghanistan through Baluchistan and the NWFP in order to join a volunteer brigade, some ten thousand-strong, that crossed the Durand line at Miram Shah.

The government in Islamabad tried to discourage its people from going, but Pakistan itself was rocking on its foundations. The situation was now beyond the capability of the government to control. When I too became tired of the flood of volunteers, I spoke on television, saying that people should no longer come to us in order to get to Afghanistan. I said that we needed a financial *jihad* rather than a physical one. It did not work; still the people kept coming, motivated by their Islamic zeal.