

## Chapter Twelve – Bin Laden and the Taliban

Relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda were characterized by a great deal of suspicion when bin Laden first arrived in Afghanistan in 1996. The Sheikh and Mullah Omar didn't know each other. Bin Laden didn't speak fluent Pashtu and the spiritual leader of the Taliban understood a little Arabic but couldn't hold a conversation in it. An interpreter was required, in this case Abdel Majid al-Tabouki.

Among the jihadis and al-Qaeda leadership, the general feeling was that these religious students (the Taliban emerged from a student movement) were strongly influenced by Marxism and were, in effect, neo-communists. When the Taliban conquered Jalalabad and other towns, we worried that they were once again in the hands of the communists. At that time, Sheikh Osama was very much against Arab jihadis joining the Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance and Commander Massoud.

In order to understand the situation, al-Qaeda sent emissaries to the Taliban, notably Sheikh Abdel Rassoul Sayaf. The contact that ensued helped dissipate the misunderstanding between the groups. It turned out that al-Qaeda had been misled by members of the Northern Alliance who spread these rumours about the Taliban.

After their conquest of Jalalabad, in Spring 1996, the Taliban wanted to visit our camp. Wary, bin Laden asked his followers to be ready for a fight. But the Taliban arrived waving white flags and greeted us warmly:

'How are our Arab friends? We are brothers, we are all Moslems and jihadis!'

But behind these demonstrations of friendship, the lack of trust was still there. We noted that Mullah Omar immediately asked bin Laden to site his organization in Kandahar, the Taliban's main base. For his part, in the beginning, bin Laden refused to meet the Mullah's emissaries himself, sending representatives instead.

In August 1998, the Embassy bombings became the source of the first real conflict between ourselves and the Taliban. The latter had been very put out by the interviews the Sheikh had given to the international media. Mullah Omar did not control him and bin Laden didn't even let the Taliban know what he was planning for Nairobi and Dar es Salam.

Several weeks after the East African operations, a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Hassin Rabani went on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. Before they left, the Saudi government sent messengers to put them on their guard: 'Osama bin Laden, whom you are harbouring, has been cast out of Islamic law and the Saudi state; we had to do this because of the Egyptians, you have to let him go, stop protecting him.'

Since most of the leaders around bin Laden were Egyptian, the Taliban thought the Saudis were telling the truth.

Mullah Rabani's delegation came to speak to bin Laden when they got back to Afghanistan. This was the first meeting between the Sheikh and Rabani; Ahmad Wakil Moutawagil and Mullah Jalil were also present on the Taliban side. Bin Laden was surrounded by al-Qaeda top-brass and when he introduced his right hand men – Abu Hafis, an Egyptian; Saif al-Adel, Egyptian; Abu Mohammed al-Masri, another Egyptian – the Taliban said, 'The Saudis were right!'

Bin Laden flew into a rage and called me, asking me to bring in other al-Qaeda leaders and introduced us:

'This one is from Riyadh, he's from Aden, that one is from Sana'a...' There were quite a few of us and bin Laden told the Taliban, 'You see: I am not alone, it's not true that I am surrounded only by Egyptians! On the contrary, nearly every tribe on the Arabian Peninsula is represented in my entourage!'

The Taliban were surprised, apparently they were not aware of this fact.

Bin Laden had become quite emotional by now and continued in his defence:

'No I am not alone! Each of these men has a whole tribe behind him! We are all against the United States and the American occupation of the Arabian Peninsula and the holy places in Saudi Arabia'.

The Sheikh's straightforward explanation shattered the previous misunderstanding and in the end the Taliban started to apologize.

'Rest assured, your enemies will never kill you unless they kill us first! Even if you have all these people to protect you, we are going to protect you too,' Mullah Jalil, Mullah Omar's advisor, promised bin Laden.

In autumn 1998, the Clinton administration sent an emissary, his Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, to the Taliban. Until the 1998 attacks, American oil companies had been in discussion with the Taliban about a pipeline which would cross Afghanistan. Now, Richardson brought them a new message, 'Bin Laden has attacked us. You are a small state, we want to help you make Afghanistan into a modern state. Make sure bin Laden keeps his mouth shut or we will have to use force!'. But the Taliban disliked this sort of threat. A short while later,

Mullah Omar sent Mullah Jalil to see bin Laden again...to give him *carte blanche*.

In December 1998 however, a new turn of events occurred when bin Laden gave two more interviews – the first (in the desert) to Djamel Ishmael for *Al-Jazeera*, and, the next day, another to Youssef Zeid from the BBC Arabic service. In both interviews he severely criticized the Americans, denouncing their occupation of Saudi Arabia and the way they were looting its oil. Bin Laden knew this was a popular theme among al-Qaeda supporters.

The Taliban immediately let their feelings be known. Mullah Omar, accompanied by Mullah Jalil and Moutawaqil went to the al-Qaeda base near Kandahar airport to give him a warning:

'Your strident speech has enraged the Americans and now the whole world is against us. Please, you have to stop this!'

'Is that your final decision?' Bin Laden asked.

'Yes!' Mullah Omar replied.

'In which case, thank you for the protection you have given us but this evening I intend to leave Afghanistan. I would like to leave mine and my men's wives and children here for a while as I cannot leave the country with them immediately.'

Al-Qaeda had an evacuation plan in place in case relations with the Taliban deteriorated. The new base would be in Somalia but nothing had been completely finalized and I would actually be sent there a month later to tie up the loose ends.

Scarcely had he returned to his house in Kandahar than Mullah Omar sent Mullah Jalil back to bin Laden, bearing the following message: 'Say whatever you like, we are all your soldiers! We will do everything to protect

you, we are willing to risk the lives of our children, our women, and all the Taliban.'

What had made the Taliban chief change his mind? Moutawaqil had influenced him against bin Laden prior to the meeting but on the way back he was accompanied by Mullah Jalil, who was much more favourably disposed towards us, and he convinced Mullah Omar to reverse his decision.

Bin Laden acted immediately on Mullah Omar's warning. Gathering forty Afghan and Pakistani *ulemas* into a *shura* (advisory council), overseen by Mullah Nidam al-Deen Shamzi, bin Laden explained his position: 'My aim is to defend the Arab and Islamic cause. I denounced the American presence in Saudi Arabia. Mullah Omar asked me to stop giving speeches and making announcement criticizing the West, then he sent Mullah Jalil to me and he gave me *carte blanche*. I think Mullah Omar can be influenced, so I am asking you to make the decision on my behalf! Do you agree with Mullah Omar, or do you wish me to remain your guest?'

The religious experts considered that bin Laden was right and they sent a message to the Taliban chief: 'Mullah, you should defend bin Laden even if Afghans and Pakistanis are killed; bin Laden is not to be handed over to the Americans or the Saudis. We must defend him to the death because he stands for Islam.'

By creating a slight feeling of panic, bin Laden had skilfully manipulated his *ulema* friends.

Until summer 1998, bin Laden had not formally pledged his allegiance to Mullah Omar although other al-Qaeda leaders had done so earlier. Now the Sheikh decided to take this step. Theoretically, from then on, bin Laden would not be able to make any strategic decisions

without consulting the Taliban leadership in advance. This act of fealty was a form of constraint, then.

In February 1999, under increasing international pressure, the Taliban announced that they now were in control of bin Laden's communications and that he would not be making any new declarations. Even though this caused something of an uproar inside al-Qaeda, the Sheikh had to take notice of what the Taliban said now that he had given his oath.

A tragic event would cement relations between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. On 25 August 1999, Mullah Omar's home in Kandahar was attacked. A car bomb exploded outside the main gate, killing one of his wives and a son. Bin Laden went to visit him immediately afterwards. Al-Qaeda had a guest-house next door to Mullah Omar's home in which several fighters and leaders - notably Abu Hafs and Saif al-Adel - were staying. These were among the first to help the victims of the attack, while the *Mujaheddin* from a second al-Qaeda guest-house immediately set up road-blocks all round Kandahar. From then on there was a lot more trust between the ourselves and the Taliban.

We began to co-operate more widely with the Taliban, especially in security matters. Bin Laden suggested that our security service train Taliban members to better protect their leadership, an offer Mullah Omar accepted. Meanwhile the Taliban beefed up protection for Arab fighters in Jalalabad and Kabul.

This collaboration quickly bore fruit. The unit that had carried out the attack on Mullah Omar was identified. It had been arranged by Iran in revenge for the deaths of eight of its diplomats, killed by the Taliban at Mazar-e Sharif two years earlier. Analysis of fragments of the vehicle used in the explosion showed it came from Herat,

an Afghan town near the Iranian border. Witnesses to the attack said they saw two men getting out of the vehicle just before it blew up. The Taliban found them three days later and they confessed. They were Afghan refugees, sent by Tehran to assassinate Mullah Omar. They had managed to penetrate the Taliban's intelligence service, which was still weak at the time; they hadn't yet managed to purge the security apparatus they'd inherited from the Soviets. Saif al-Adel and Abu Hafis al-Masri attended the Taliban enquiry into the attack.

Following the assassination attempt, we advised Mullah Omar not to travel – as he had been doing – in a convoy of the latest in luxury 4x4s and Toyotas. This made him highly visible and easy to target. We recommended instead that he tried to blend in with the general population in unmarked cars. As with bin Laden, the fear of assassination was now very real and we stepped up security around both leaders.

These events undoubtedly brought al-Qaeda and the Taliban closer together, but some mistrust remained. Among Mullah Omar's closest advisors, Moutawaqil never took to the Arabs – he would later give himself up to the Americans.

All doubt was finally expelled when, two years later, al-Qaeda offered the Taliban the head of their number one enemy, Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. Just two days before 9/11, al-Qaeda sent two suicide bombers to eliminate the Northern Alliance commander (this attack is described in greater detail in a later chapter) and bin Laden consolidated his sanctuary in Afghanistan.

I was present at several meetings between bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Blind in one eye, the Taliban chief was as tall as bin Laden. He used to wear a black and blue

sleeveless jacket, shoes but no socks, and a long knee-length shirt. He wore the turban of the Kandahar region. He spoke little, even during meetings, and, like bin Laden, used short sentences, speaking in a very serious tone. Their meetings in the heart of the al-Qaeda camp rarely lasted more than half an hour.

The two delegations used to sit opposite each other. I always remained standing, behind bin Laden. Sometimes the two leaders met one to one in a sort of glasshouse.

In the course of these meetings, any anxieties the al-Qaeda leadership had that they were dealing with ex-Communists disappeared. We did continue to have reservations about Moutawaqil who remained hostile to al-Qaeda, despite speaking fluent Arabic. He was completely against us, it was more that he thought the welfare of the Afghan state should take priority over the Arab cause. He disliked bin Laden, but could do little about it because of Mullah Omar's support for the al-Qaeda leader. On the other hand, Mullah Jalil was our greatest ally among the Taliban leadership.