

## “What an Unlucky Country”

EARLY IN SEPTEMBER, Massoud's intelligence service transmitted a routine report to the CIA's Counterterrorist Center about two Arab television journalists who had crossed Northern Alliance lines from Kabul. The intelligence sharing liaison between Massoud and the CIA concentrated mainly on Arabs and other foreigners in Afghanistan. If Massoud's forces captured prisoners or if they learned about movements by Arab-led military units, they typically forwarded reports across the dedicated lines that linked the Panjshir Valley directly to Langley. In this case officers in the bin Laden unit at the Counterterrorist Center took note of the movement of the two Arab journalists. It did not seem of exceptional interest.<sup>1</sup>

The pair carried a television camera and other equipment, possessed Belgian passports, and claimed to be originally from Morocco. One was squat, muscular, and caramel-skinned. He cut his hair very short, shaved his face clean, and wore European clothes and glasses. His companion was tall and darker. One spoke a little English and French, the other only Arabic. Their papers showed they had entered Kabul from Pakistan after arriving from abroad.<sup>2</sup>

The conspiracy they represented took shape the previous May. On a Kabul

computer routinely used by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor who was bin Laden's closest partner, an al Qaeda planner wrote a letter of introduction in patchy French. On behalf of the Islamic Observation Center in London, the letter explained, "one of our best journalists" planned to produce a television report on Afghanistan. He sought an interview with Ahmed Shah Massoud. A list of proposed questions written on the computer in French included one infused with dark irony: "How will you deal with the Osama bin Laden issue when you are in power, and what do you see as the solution to this issue?"<sup>3</sup>

Inserting disguised al Qaeda agents from Taliban-ruled Kabul into Massoud's headquarters near the Tajikistan border was a daunting operation. Massoud's troops were on continuous hostile alert against Arab volunteers. Al Qaeda had tried to smuggle agents carrying explosives into the Panjshir the year before, but the perpetrators had been arrested. This time bin Laden's planners prepared the deceptive legends of their assassins carefully and exploited the long history of Arab jihadists in Afghanistan to complete the infiltration.

Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, the white-bearded, Arabic-speaking Afghan Islamist first selected and promoted by Saudi intelligence in 1980, had aligned himself with Massoud in recent years. His military power had been much reduced since the late 1980s and early 1990s when he had been the favored recipient of hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and weaponry from Prince Turki al-Faisal's service and independent Persian Gulf proselytizers.

Aged and politically irrelevant, Sayyaf maintained a modest headquarters compound outside of the capital; he was no longer active in the war. Because of his long history as the host of Arab volunteers in Afghanistan and his wide contacts among Arab Islamist theologians, he provided a link between Massoud and Arab radicals. Massoud was chronically uncomfortable about his reputation in the wider world of political Islam. Just as he sought American and European aid to isolate the Taliban, he reached out to Arab and Islamic audiences to counter bin Laden's incendiary propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

Al Qaeda's planners tapped their connections to Sayyaf and played on Massoud's desire to be understood in the Arab world. An Egyptian who had fought with Sayyaf during the anti-Soviet years called him by satellite telephone to recommend the visiting Arab journalists. Sayyaf relayed an endorsement to Massoud. Through this and other channels the journalists emphasized that they intended to portray the Northern Alliance in a positive light, to help rehabilitate and promote Massoud's reputation before Arab audiences.

Massoud authorized a helicopter to pick up the pair just north of Kabul and fly them to Khoja Bahuddin, a compound just inside the Tajikistan border where Massoud had established a headquarters after the loss of Talogon. The two Arabs checked into a guest house run by Massoud's foreign ministry where a dozen other Afghan journalists and visitors were staying.

But Massoud was in no hurry to see them. Despite their letters and endorsements, their interview request languished. Days passed, and still Massoud was too busy; the visitors were told. They shot video around Khoja Bahuddin, but their interest slackened. They lobbied for their interview, branched their credentials again, and eventually declared to their hosts that if a meeting with Massoud did not come through soon, they would have to leave.<sup>5</sup>

AFGHANISTAN AFTER 1979 was a laboratory for political and military visions conceived abroad and imposed by force. The language and ideas that described Afghan parties, armies, and militias originated with theoreticians in universities and seminars in Europe, the United States, Cairo, and Deoband. Afghans fought as "communists" or as "freedom fighters." They joined jihadist armies battling on behalf of an imagined global Islamic *umma*. A young, weak nation, Afghanistan produced few convincing nationalists who could offer an alternative, who could define Afghanistan from within. Ahmed Shah Massoud was an exception.

Yet Massoud did not create the Afghanistan he championed. Partly, he failed as a politician during the early 1990s. Partly, he was limited by his regional roots, especially as the Afghan war's fragmenting violence promoted ethnic solidarity. Most of all, Massoud was contained by the much greater resources possessed by his adversaries in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

At the end of his life, as he fought the Taliban and al Qaeda, he saw the potential to recover his nationalist vision of Afghanistan through an alliance with the United States. He saw this partnership primarily as a brilliant tactician would—grounded not in ideology but in urgent and mutual interest, the need to contain and defeat Osama bin Laden and his jihadist volunteers.

Massoud did fight also for political ideas. He was not a "democrat" in an American or European sense, although conceivably he could have become one in a peaceful postwar era. He was indisputably tolerant and forgiving in the midst of terrible violence, patient, and prepared to work in coalitions.

Massoud frustrated bin Laden and the Taliban because of his extraordinary tactical skills, but also because he competed credibly for control of Afghanistan's political identity. It was Massoud's unyielding independence

that earlier had enticed and stymied both the Soviet Fortieth Army and the CIA. In the early years of the jihad the agency's station chiefs read British imperial history and managed Afghanistan more or less as Kipling recommended. They raised Pashun tribes against their Russian adversaries and kept their distance behind the Khyber Pass. Later, between 1988 and 1992, presented with a chance to do the hard neo-imperial work of constructing a postwar, national, sustainable Afghan politics, Langley's leaders argued against any direct American involvement. Neither the CIA's managers nor any of the American presidents they served, Republican or Democrat, could locate a vision of Afghanistan to justify such an expensive and uncertain project. The Afghan government that the United States eventually chose to support beganning in the late autumn of 2001—a federation of Massoud's organization, exiled intellectuals, and royalist Pashuns—was available for sponsorship a decade before, but the United States could not see a reason then to challenge the alternative, radical Islamist vision promoted by Pakistani and Saudi intelligence. Massoud's independent character and conduct—and the hostility toward him continually fed into the American bureaucracy by Pakistan—denied him a lasting alliance with the United States. And it denied America the benefits of his leadership during the several years before 2001. Instead—at first out of indifference, then with misgivings, and finally in a state of frustrated inertia—the United States endorsed year after year the Afghan programs of its two sullen, complex, and sometimes vital allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

And at the end of this twisted road lay September 2001 when the American public and the subsistence traders of the Panjshir Valley discovered in twin cataclysms that they were bound together, if not by the political ideas they shared, then at least by the enemies who had chosen them.

THE OPPORTUNITIES missed by the United States on the way to September 2001 extended well beyond the failure to exploit fully an alliance with Massoud. Indifference, lassitude, blindness, paralysis, and commercial greed too often shaped American foreign policy in Afghanistan and South Asia during the 1990s. Besides Massoud, the most natural American ally against al Qaeda in the region was India, whose democracy and civilian population also was threatened by radical Islamist violence. Yet while the American government sought gradually to deepen its ties to New Delhi, it lacked the creativity, local knowledge, patience, and persistence to cope successfully with India's

prickly nationalism and complex democratic politics—a failure especially ironic given the ornery character of American nationalism and the great complexities of Washington's own democracy. As a result, America failed during the late 1990s to forge an effective antiterrorism partnership with India, whose regional interests, security resources, and vast Muslim population offered great potential for covert penetrations of Afghanistan.

Nor did the United States have a strategy for engagement, democratization, secular education, and economic development among the peaceful but demoralized majority populations of the Islamic world. Instead, Washington typically coddled undemocratic and corrupt Muslim governments, even as these countries' frustrated middle classes looked increasingly to conservative interpretations of Islam for social values and political ideas. In this way America unnecessarily made easier, to at least a small extent, the work of al Qaeda recruiters.

Largely out of indifference and bureaucratic momentum, the United States constructed its most active regional counterterrorism partnerships with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, despite evidence that both governments had been penetrated by al Qaeda. Dependent upon Saudi oil and unwilling to re-examine old assumptions about the kingdom's establishment, Washington bounced complacently along in its alliance with Riyadh. Nor was the United States willing to confront the royal families of neighboring energy-rich kingdoms such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, even when sections of those governments also appeased and nurtured al Qaeda. In Pakistan, the hardest of hard cases, the Clinton administration allowed its laudable pursuit of nuclear stability and regional peace to cloud its eyesight about the systematic support for jihadist violence within Pakistan's army and intelligence service. Unwilling to accept the uncertainties and high political costs of a military confrontation with the Taliban, American diplomats also suspended disbelief and lazily embraced Saudi and Pakistani arguments that the Taliban would mature and moderate. Even by late 2000, when many members of Clinton's national security cabinet and his Joint Chiefs of Staff at last accepted that hopes for Taliban cooperation against bin Laden were absurd, the Clinton cabinet adamantly opposed military action in Afghanistan. This caution prevailed despite week after week of secret intelligence cables depicting active, advanced, but unspecified al Qaeda plans to launch mass attacks against American civilians.

President Clinton, weakened by impeachment proceedings and boxed in by a hostile Republican majority in Congress, proved unwilling or unable to

force the astonishingly passive Pentagon to pursue military options. As an alternative he put the CIA's covert action arm in the lead against al Qaeda. Historically, the CIA has carried out its most successful covert actions when its main patron under American law, the president of the United States, has been eager to push the agency forward and has proven willing to stomach the risks and failures that accompany CIA operations. This was not Clinton. The president authorized the CIA to pursue al Qaeda and he supported the agency to some extent. Yet he did not fully believe that the CIA was up to the job, and he at times withheld from Langley the legal authorities, resources, and active leadership that a president more confident about the agency's abilities might have provided.

Was the president's evident skepticism about the CIA justified? Since the advent of spectacular modern terrorism in the late 1960s, the record of even the most accomplished intelligence agencies in preventing terrorist attacks has been mixed at best. The CIA in the 1990s was generally seen by intelligence specialists as strong on technology and mediocre at human intelligence operations against hard targets. Agent penetrations and covert action often work best where an intelligence service shares language, culture, and geographical space with its adversary—as with British operations in Northern Ireland, for example. Even then, it usually proves impossible to stop all terrorist attacks, and an intelligence service's efforts to maneuver a terrorist group into surrender or peaceful politics often requires decades of persistent secret effort. The difficulty is compounded when the enemy are religiously motivated fanatics who see their violence as above politics and divinely sanctioned. The Israeli spy and security services, widely regarded as leaders in human intelligence, agent penetrations, and covert action, have been unable to thwart suicide bombings by Islamist radicals. In the case of the CIA's attempts to disrupt al Qaeda's leadership in Afghanistan, the severe inherent difficulties were extended by the vast cultural gaps and forbidding geographical distances that separated CIA operatives from their targets.

Still, even within these limits, the agency did not do all it might have done. George Tenet's discretionary, internal allocation of money and people did not fully reflect his rhetoric about an all-out war, as he later acknowledged. The Counterterrorist Center's failure early in 2000 to watch-list two known al Qaeda adherents with American visas in their passports appears, in hindsight, as the agency's single most important unforced error. If it had not occurred, the specific attacks that were to unfold with such unique destructive power in New York and Washington might well have been prevented. Some of the

CIA's disruption operations in Afghanistan after 1998 were creative and resourceful, while others, such as the Pakistani commando plan in 1999, were naive and ill-judged. In the end, however, it is difficult to evaluate fully the agency's performance in covert operations against bin Laden after 1998 because some significant ideas generated by CIA officers—notably their plan to partner more actively inside Afghanistan with Massoud—were never authorized by the White House.

THE BUSH CABINET met at the White House on September 4. Before them was a draft copy of a National Security Presidential Directive, a classified memo outlining a new U.S. policy toward al Qaeda and Afghanistan. The stated goal of the draft document was to eliminate bin Laden and his organization. Its provisions included a plan for a large but undetermined amount of covert action funds to aid Massoud in his war against the Taliban. The CIA would supply Massoud with trucks, uniforms, ammunition, mortars, helicopters, and other equipment to be determined by the agency and the White House—the same rough shopping list drawn up the previous autumn. There was to be money as well for other anti-Taliban forces. Under the plan Massoud's coalition of commanders and scattered insurgents in Afghanistan would soon be better equipped than at any time since the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The Cabinet approved this part of the proposal, although there remained uncertainty about where the money would come from and how much would ultimately be available.

A long, inconclusive discussion followed about whether to deploy an armed Predator to Afghanistan. The CIA remained divided internally. Cofer Black and the bin Laden unit at the Counterterrorist Center wanted to go forward. James Pavitt at the Directorate of Operations worried about unintended consequences if the CIA suddenly moved back into the business of running lethal operations against targeted individuals—assassination, in the common usage. Such targeted killings carried out directly by the CIA could open agents in the field to retaliatory kidnappings or killings. The missions might also expose the agency to political and media criticism.

The CIA had conducted classified war games at Langley to discover how its chain of command, made up of spies with limited or no military expertise, might responsibly oversee a flying robot that could shoot missiles at suspected terrorists. By early September of 2001 Tenet had reviewed a "concept of operations" submitted by his Counterterrorist Center that outlined

how a CIA-managed armed Predator might be fielded and how a decision to fire would be made. At the September 4 Cabinet meeting, Tenet said he wanted the Bush policy makers to understand the proposal: The CIA would be operating a lethal fixed-wing aircraft of the sort normally controlled by the Air Force and its Pentagon chain of command. If Bush and his Cabinet wanted to entrust that operational role to the CIA, Tenet said, they should do so with their eyes wide open, fully aware of the potential fallout if there were a controversial or mistaken strike. Some at the meeting interpreted Tenet's comments as reluctance to take on the mission. There were differing recollections about how forceful Tenet was in outlining the potential risks. For his part, Tenet believed he was only trying to clarify and facilitate a presidential decision that would break recent precedent by shifting control of a lethal aircraft from the uniformed military to the CIA. The armed Predator was by now a CIA project, virtually an agency invention. The Air Force was not interested in commanding such an awkward, unproven weapon. Air Force doctrine and experience argued for the use of fully tested bombers and cruise missiles even when the targets were lone terrorists. The Air Force was not ready to begin fielding or commanding armed robots.<sup>7</sup>

The word went back to Langley after the meeting: The Predator was in limbo again.

On Massoud, however, they could at least start the paperwork. CIA lawyers, working with officers in the Near East Division and Counterterrorist Center, began to draft a formal, legal presidential finding for Bush's signature authorizing a new covert action program in Afghanistan, the first in a decade that sought to influence the course of the Afghan war.<sup>8</sup>

MASSOUD READ PERSIAN POETRY in his bungalow in the early hours of September 9. The next morning he prepared to fly by helicopter toward Kabul to inspect his forward lines and assess Taliban positions. A colleague told him that he ought to meet the two Arab journalists before he left; they had been waiting for many days. He said he would talk to them in the cement office used by his intelligence aide, Engineer Arif. Around noon he settled in the bungalow on a cushion designed to ease his back pain. Massoud Khalili, his friend and ambassador to India, sat next to him. As the more compact Arab journalist moved a table and set up his tripod at Massoud's chest level, Khalili joked, "Is he a wrestler or a photographer?"<sup>9</sup>

Massoud took a telephone call. Eight Arabs had been arrested by his

troops near the front lines. He asked Engineer Arif to see if he could find out more about them, and Arif left the room.

The visiting reporter read out a list of questions while his colleague prepared to film. About half his questions concerned Osama bin Laden. Massoud listened, then said he was ready.

The explosion ripped the cameraman's body apart. It smashed the room's windows, seared the walls in flame, and tore Massoud's chest with shrapnel. He collapsed, unconscious.

His guards and aides rushed into the building, carried his limp body outside, lifted him into a jeep, and drove to the helicopter pad. They were close to the Tajikistan border. There was a hospital ten minutes' flight away.

Several of Massoud's aides and the lanky Arab reporter sitting to the side of the blast recovered from the noise, felt burning sensations, and realized they were not badly hurt. The Arab tried to run but was captured by Massoud's security guards. They locked the assassin in a nearby room, but he wiggled through a window. He was shot to death as he tried to escape.

On the helicopter Massoud's longtime bodyguard, Omar, held the commander's head and watched him stop breathing. Omar thought to himself, he said later, "He's dying and I'm dying."<sup>10</sup>

AMRULLAH SALEH CALLED the CIA's Counterterrorist Center from Tajikistan. He spoke to Rich, the bin Laden unit chief. Saleh was in tears, sobbing and heaving between sentences as he explained what had happened.

"Where's Massoud?" the CIA officer asked.

"He's in the refrigerator," said Saleh, searching for the English word for morgue.<sup>11</sup>

Massoud was dead, but his inner circle had barely absorbed the news. They were all in shock. They were also trying to strategize in a hurry. As soon as the Taliban learned that Massoud was gone, they would swarm up the Panjshir Valley in attack. Massoud's surviving aides felt certain. Based on the Taliban's past behavior in newly conquered lands, the valley faced devastation and atrocities. Massoud's aides had to get themselves organized. They had to choose a new leader and reinforce their defenses. They needed time.

They had already put out a false story claiming that Massoud had only been wounded. Meanwhile, Saleh told the Counterterrorist Center, the suddenly leaderless Northern Alliance needed the CIA's help as it prepared to confront al Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>12</sup>

This looked to many of the CIA's officers like the end of the Northern Alliance. Massoud's death immediately called into question a central plank of the national security strategy designed to confront al Qaeda in Afghanistan, endorsed by Bush's Cabinet just five days earlier. There was no one in the wings who approached Massoud's stature. The CIA's quick assessment was that Massoud's coalition might not be viable either militarily or politically without him.<sup>13</sup>

Officers in the Counterterrorist Center alerted the White House to the news that Massoud was dead. Within hours the story had leaked to CNN. From Tajikistan, Saleh called Langley again, angry. The CIA was the only call he had made confirming Massoud's death. How had the agency let it leak so fast?

On the morning of September 10 the CIA's daily classified briefings to President Bush, his Cabinet, and other policy makers reported on Massoud's death and analyzed the consequences for America's covert war against al Qaeda.

Officers in the Counterterrorist Center, still hopeful that they could maintain a foothold in northern Afghanistan to attack bin Laden, called frantically around Washington to find a way to aid the rump Northern Alliance before it was eliminated.

Massoud's advisers and lobbyists in Washington, aware of the truth, ducked media phone calls as best they could, trying to keep alive the speculation, still prominently featured in news accounts, that Massoud might still be alive. But privately, as September 10 wore on, phone call by phone call, many of the Afghans closest to the commander, in Dushanbe and Tehran and Europe and the United States, began to learn that he was gone.<sup>14</sup>

Hamid Karzai was in Pakistan when his brother reached him. With less than three weeks to go before Pakistani intelligence planned to expel him, Karzai was torn. He did not think southern Afghanistan was ripe for rebellion, yet he did not want to end up as just another Afghan exile in Europe. Karzai had talked to Massoud a few days earlier. He was considering a flight to Dushanbe, from where he might enter Afghanistan across Massoud's territory. From there Karzai could try to begin his quixotic rebellion among anti-Taliban Pashtuns.

Karzai's brother said it was confirmed: Ahmed Shah Massoud was dead.

Hamid Karzai reacted in a single, brief sentence, as his brother recalled it: "What an unlucky country."<sup>15</sup>