

The Taliban Torturer



*'The evil that men do lives after them,
the good is oft interred with their bones.'*

SHAKESPEARE, *Julius Caesar*

THE INSTRUCTIONS FROM the commanding officer were clear. 'You must become so notorious for bad things that when you come into an area people will tremble in their sandals. Anyone can do beatings and starve people of food and water. I want your unit to find new ways of torture so terrible that the screams will frighten even crows from their nests, and if the person survives he will never again have a night's sleep.'

I listened in horror. We were sitting at a table in the orchard of the Serena Hotel in Quetta in early October and the evenings were just starting to turn cold. There was a homely scent of apples from the trees all around and the sound of water trickling through narrow pebble-filled canals crisscrossing the orchard. Up above, the Milky Way cut a dusty path through a sky sprinkled with stars. I remembered long ago, on a chilly mountaintop in Paktia, a mujahid telling me that this was the trail left by the Prophet's winged horse Buraq as he galloped towards the heavens.

Sitting at the table with me were Jamil Karzai, the young nephew

of an old friend Hamid Karzai, who handed me a letter that I did not open till later, and three people Jamil had brought to talk to me. All three had been members of the Taliban but it was one in particular who was holding my attention.

His name was Mullah Khalil Ahmed Hassani and he was a small thin man who seemed anxious to be liked, with the pinched face and restless hands of one whose darkness hours are constantly haunted. His eyebrows were unusually highly arched under a gold-embroidered Kandahari skullcap that perched rather than fitted on his head, and as he spoke shadows played in the dark recesses of his face. He looked like a torture victim. Instead, as a member of the Taliban's feared secret police, for the previous three and a half years he had been one of the perpetrators charged with carrying out the commanding officer's instructions.

Aged thirty and married with a wife and a one-year-old baby daughter, he was a graduate in business studies and had been working as an accountant until he joined the Taliban. Like many in the movement, Khalil had been largely educated in Pakistan where he had grown up as a refugee, and two of his elder brothers had died fighting among the forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the most fundamentalist of the seven mujaheddin leaders, in the jihad, or holy war, against the Russians. But his family was well off, owning lands and several houses in Kandahar to which they returned after the war, while he remained doing a degree at Peshawar University. Although he had introduced himself as Mullah Hassani, he explained with a nervous laugh, 'I became a mullah just by joining the Taliban. I'm not a religious scholar.'

'Like many people, I did not become a Talib by choice,' he continued. 'In early 1998 I was working here in Quetta as accountant for a company trading dried fruit, almonds and pistachio nuts when I got a message that my grandfather, who was eighty-five, had been arrested by the Taliban in Kandahar and was being badly beaten and would probably die. They would only release him if we provided a male member of his family as a conscript, so I had to go.'



Many of Khalil's friends had already joined the Taliban. Some because their families had been told their lands would be confiscated if they did not, though a few got round this by paying a bribe of \$20 a month not to be conscripted, a huge amount in a country where the average salary is less than \$200 a year. Others had been lured into its ranks with offers of money and Datsun two-door pick-ups with bumper bars – the vehicle of choice of the Taliban – which were provided to the leadership by smugglers and drug-barons in return for being able to ply their lucrative trade as Afghanistan became the world's largest producer of opium¹. The deliberate destruction of the irrigation channels by the Russians during their ten-year occupation meant that poppies were all that would grow in much of the country, and were the main crop in the south-western provinces of Helmand, Zabul and, to a lesser extent, Kandahar. Although the Taliban had banned the consumption of narcotics as un-Islamic, and in July 2000 had banned cultivation of opium poppies, the trade continued and

¹ According to the US State Department, Afghanistan's opium crop in 2000 was 3,656 tonnes, 72 percent of the world's total, compared to 31 percent in 1985.

the country remained one of the world's major trafficking routes, known as the Golden Crescent.

Assigned to the secret police, Khalil patrolled the streets at night looking for thieves and signs of subversion. Initially he thought the Taliban were doing an effective job. 'It had been a crazy situation after the Russians left,' he explained. 'In Kandahar warlords were selling everything, even stripping the telephone wires, kidnapping young girls and boys, robbing people and blocking the roads, and the Taliban seemed like good people who brought law and order.'

This was something I had heard over and over again. Afghanistan is roughly speaking, split into north and south by the Hindu Kush. To the north are mostly Persian and Turkic peoples, and to the south the Pashtuns, while Tajiks and Hazaras live in the mountains. By the time the Taliban emerged in 1994, ethnic and tribal divisions in a land awash with weaponry² had turned the country into a shifting patchwork of fiefdoms run by warlords who switched sides with bewildering frequency.

The predominantly Tajik government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani controlled Kabul and the northeast, backed by commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the famous Lion of the Panjshir, but was under siege from the forces of the fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar based to the south, a man who had once stopped an interview with me because he could see my ankle. Herat and the three westernmost provinces were ruled by Ismael Khan, an egocentric mujaheddin commander whose men wore black and white checked scarves, called him 'Excellency' and carried pictures of him with flowing black beard on a white horse. Mazar-i-Sharif and the six northern provinces were governed by the vodka-swilling Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum, who had been on the Soviet payroll during the jihad. Dos-

² The combination of US and Soviet aid probably made Afghanistan the world's largest recipient of personal weapons during the 1980s, according to figures from the 1991 SIPRI Yearbook on World Armaments, with total weapon imports greater than those of Iraq. For more details see Barnett Rubin.

tum's 20,000-strong Jawzjani militia was so terrifying that they were known as *galamjari* or carpet-thieves, the ultimate Afghan insult. After the collapse of the Communists, he had subsequently allied with and betrayed just about every faction and at the time of the emergence of the Taliban had just switched his support from Rabbani to Hekmatyar. In the mountains of central Afghanistan, Hazaras ran the province of Bamiyan. A *shura* of bickering commanders in Jalalabad governed the three eastern provinces bordering Pakistan.

The worst situation was to the south of the Hindu Kush among Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, particularly around Kandahar. Gul Agha, the Governor, son of the late Haji Latif, a notorious bandit-leader turned mujaheddin commander, was said to have controlled no more than his office and the stretch of road outside. Small-time warlords and petty commanders had stripped the city of anything that could be sold for scrap and set up their own checkpoints.

Everyone talked of the chains across the roads, five on the main street of Kandahar, fifty just on the two-hour sixty-five-mile stretch between Spin Boldak and Kandahar, each manned by different warlords demanding money. Businessmen and truckers were paying far more in bribes to transport things than the value of the goods themselves. Wali Jan, *sardar* of the Noorzai tribe, and owner of a petrol station and one of the principal bazaars in Kandahar, whom I met at his marble-floored house in Quetta, told me he had happily given money to Mullah Omar. 'It had been a terrible situation,' he explained. 'The roads were full of dacoits and we had to pay a fortune to transport our stuff and our market was full of thieves.'

Then there were the rapes. No one slept safely in their homes as young girls and boys were kidnapped and violated, causing many parents to stop sending them to school. According to Taliban legend, the whole movement was sparked off in the spring of 1994 when a commander paraded on his tank around town a young boy that he had taken as his bride after a dispute with another commander who had also wanted to sodomise the boy. Another version was that a

commander had abducted two young sisters from the village of Sanghisar where Mullah Omar preached at the small local mosque, taken them to his military camp and repeatedly gang-raped them. Mullah Omar was said to have gathered thirty men and attacked, hanging the commander from the barrel of his own tank.

Later interviews with some of the founding members of the Taliban, as well as villagers from Sanghisar and officers from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which gave military and financial support to the movement, cast doubt on both these versions and made it clear that it had been planned for some time with active recruitment going on among *madrassa* students in Baluchistan. However war-weary the population and eager for change, it seems inconceivable that a bunch of illiterate small-town mullahs and religious students could have masterminded the often sophisticated military offensives that saw them capture ninety percent of the country within four years, not to mention economic measures such as flooding the currency markets of Mazar-i-Sharif with counterfeit Afghani notes to destroy confidence in the local administration. All of this pointed to the involvement of the ISI, which for years had been trying to install a sympathetic government in Kabul. General Nasirullah Babar, Interior Minister in the government of Benazir Bhutto who was ruling Pakistan at the time the movement emerged, publicly referred to the Taliban as 'our boys'. Whatever the truth there is no doubt that initially Mullah Omar and his men were seen as noble figures simply intent on restoring law and order to the country, then to hand over control to someone else.

'Mullah Omar told me we don't want chairs, you tribal leaders can have those, we just want food for our men,' said Wali Jan. 'For the four days it took them to capture Kandahar our *nan* shops gave all the bread they produced to them. We also gave them watermelons. Then they said they wanted to take Herat which was good for us as we import through Iran and wanted that road cleared so we gave them money and they captured Herat and again Mullah Omar told

me don't worry, we don't want chairs. They also said we don't want taxes, just *zakat*, the Islamic tax, just 2.5%. But they cheated us for they took the chairs and then they started taxes, demanding more and more money.'

Patrolling the streets of Kandahar in his black Taliban turban, Mullah Khalil Hassani also felt cheated. Throughout 1998 the leadership began issuing more and more radical edicts and his duties changed. Instead of searching for criminals or subversives, the night patrols were tasked with finding people watching videos, listening to music, playing cards or chess, or keeping birds, something that had always been popular in Kandahar where people would train so-called Judas pigeons to lure birds from other people's flocks and capture them. Men sporting beards that did not meet the regulation length of being long enough to squeeze a fist around it and still have some beard protruding at the bottom, were to be arrested and beaten, as were any women who dared venture outside the house in squeaky shoes, white shoes, or shoes that clicked. Even owning a kite became a criminal offence.

One of Wali Jan's market stalls was burnt down for selling Malaysian soap because printed on the green and yellow packets was a silhouette of a woman; another for stocking washing powder with a photograph of a housewife and children. 'It was a nightmare - the police were always confiscating food because they had pictures of people on them,' he recalled. 'We had to close down the photo booths and video shops, and could no longer sell music, only the Taliban Top Ten.' According to him, the Taliban's favourite singer was a man called Siraji, who intoned monotonous war chants inciting people into battle with lyrics such as:

*This is our house, the home of lions and tigers
We will beat everyone who attacks us
We are the defenders of our great country.*

'They banned everything,' he continued. 'The only entertainment was public executions. The only safe activity was sleeping. Once I asked Mullah Omar what people were supposed to do for enjoyment and he said, "walk in gardens and look at flowers". But the funny thing is after he took over there were five years of drought and everything died so there weren't even flowers.'

'Was there a list of forbidden things?' I asked Khalil. 'Not exactly a list,' he replied. 'Most of the things we knew and notices would come round with new ones as well as orders, such as to keep our turbans straight.' He thought for a while then asked for a sheet of paper from my notebook and wrote down the following, adding to them throughout our conversation as he remembered more. I later had it translated.

1. All men to attend prayers in mosques five times daily.
2. No woman allowed outside the home unless accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative such as a father, brother or husband).
3. Women not allowed to buy from male shopkeepers.
4. Women must be covered by burqa.
5. Any woman showing her ankles must be whipped.
6. Women must not talk or shake hands with men.
7. Ban on laughing in public. No stranger should hear a woman's voice.
8. Ban on wearing shoes with heels or that make any noise as no stranger should hear a woman's footsteps.
9. Ban on cosmetics. Any woman with painted nails should have her fingers cut off.
10. No woman allowed to play sports or enter a sports club.
11. Ban on clothes in 'sexually attracting colours', (basically anything other than light blue or mustard).

12. Ban on flared trousers, even under a burqa.
13. Ban on women washing clothes in rivers or any public place.
14. Ban on women appearing on the balconies of their houses. All windows were supposed to be painted so women could not be seen from outside their homes.
15. No one allowed to listen to music.
16. No television or video allowed.
17. No playing of cards.
18. No playing of chess.
19. No flying of kites.
20. No keeping of birds – any bird-keepers to be imprisoned and the birds killed.
21. Men must not shave or trim their beards which should grow long enough to protrude from a fist clasped at the point of the chin.
22. All men to wear Islamic clothes and cap. Shirts with collars banned.
23. Anyone carrying un-Islamic books to be executed.
24. Ban on all pictures in books or houses.
25. All people to have Islamic names.
26. Any street or place bearing a woman's name or any female reference to be changed.
27. All boy students to wear turbans.
28. Any non-Muslim must wear a yellow cloth stitched onto their clothes to differentiate them.
29. All sportsmen to have legs and arms fully covered.
30. All audiences at sporting events to refrain from cheering or clapping but only to chant Allah-o-Akbar.

'Basically any form of pleasure was outlawed,' said Khalil, 'and if we found people doing any of these things we would beat them with logs soaked in water like a knife cutting through meat until the room ran with their blood or their spines snapped. We did different things, we would put some of them standing on their heads to sleep, hang others upside down with their legs tied together, and stretch the arms out of others and nail them to posts. Sometimes when their spines were broken we would throw bread to them so they would try to crawl. Then I would write the report to our commanding officer so he could see how innovative we had been.'

'Once in Kandahar Jail, I watched the prison superintendent Mullah Burki beat people so harshly that it was impossible to tell afterwards whether or not they had been wearing clothes and when they drifted into unconsciousness we put salt on the wounds to make them scream.'

The state of terror spread by the Taliban was so pervasive that it began to seem as if the whole country was spying on each other. 'As we drove around at night with our guns, local people would come to us and say there's someone watching a video in this house or some men playing cards in that house,' he said. 'I was shocked. We are a land of feuds and I suppose some people were using us to settle old scores.'

After Kandahar, Khalil was put in charge of secret police cells in the provincial capitals of Ghazni and then Herat, a once beautiful Persian city in western Afghanistan that had suffered terribly under the Soviet occupation and had fallen to the Taliban in September 1995. It was renowned as a highly-cultured place where women would dance at weddings and many girls had been in school until the Taliban closed them all down. Mullah Omar was infuriated when 150 women dared appear on the streets of Herat to protest against the closure of the female public bath-houses. Khalil and his men were told to be particularly cruel to the Heratis who were Persian-speaking and had a large Shia minority, unlike the Pashto-speaking Taliban who were

all Sunni Muslims. Speaking in Persian was forbidden and a strict curfew imposed from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. Anyone out on the streets in those hours, even for emergencies such as illness or giving birth, was arrested. 'Some Taliban had been killed by the ordinary people in Herat,' he explained, 'so we were told to beat them much more harshly.'

Another group that came in for particularly harsh treatment were the Hazaras who make up about 19 percent³ of the population and live mostly in the infertile central Afghanistan highlands of Hazarajat as well as large communities in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. Persian-speaking Shias with flat Asiatic features, the word 'hazar' in Persian means thousands and they were said to be descended from Genghis Khan and his hordes of Mongol warriors who had swept through the region in 1221-2. Genghis Khan detested cities because they deprived his warriors' horses of grazing and he razed them wherever possible, wiping out the ancient cities of Balkh, Herat, Bamian and Ghazni, leaving only a single watchtower at Bamian, and slaughtering so many of the inhabitants of Balkh that a visitor reported arriving and finding only dogs.

The Hazaras had grown to expect a rough time from Pashtun rulers. In 1838 Alexander 'Bokhara' Burnes, a young Scot whose book *Travels into Bokhara* had been a bestseller, was sent as British emissary to the court of Dost Mohammed supposedly on a trade mission but in fact part of a network of British agents in Central Asia gathering intelligence about Russian plans to secure warmwater ports to the south which they had coveted since the time of Peter the Great. In his subsequent account *Cabool*, he wrote of the Hazaras as 'oppressed

³ Population figures in Afghanistan can only be estimates and are all hotly disputed by the various ethnic groupings. The CIA World Fact Book 2001 puts the population at 26.8 million of which 38 percent are Pashtun, 25 percent Tajik, 19 percent Hazara, 6 percent Uzbek and 12 percent other.

by all the neighbouring nations whom they serve as hewers of wood and drawers of water', adding that 'many are sold into slavery and there is little doubt that they barter their children for cloth'. Worse was to come in the 1890s when the British-backed king Abdul Rehman massacred thousands and took thousands more to Kabul as slaves. When the Tajiks took power in Kabul, a minority themselves, they too did not spare the Hazaras. In 1993 Ahmad Shah Massoud's men swept through the capital's Hazara suburbs, killing an estimated 1000 civilians, beheading old men, women and children and stuffing the bodies down wells, cutting off hands and throwing them to dogs, and raping the women.

But the Taliban took this discrimination to new extremes. Not only did they see them as heretics – at almost five million people the Hazara make up Afghanistan's largest Shia community – but they also resented the active role of women in Hazara society and the way they dressed, provocatively as the Taliban saw it, wearing bright full skirts and boots as well as lots of silver bangles and earrings and not covering their faces.

In August 1997, having captured Kabul but failed to take Mazar-i-Sharif, Taliban forces blockaded Hazarajat, cutting off all four access roads in an attempt to starve the one million Hazaras living just below the peaks of the Hindu Kush. No notice was taken of outraged protests from foreign aid organizations such as Oxfam that these people in the provinces of Bamayan, Ghor, Wardak and Ghazni would die because their crops had failed in the continuing drought and they had already slaughtered all their animals and eaten all the grass.

Then, after finally capturing Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998 when General Dostum fled to Uzbekistan and several of his commanders switched sides, the Taliban launched what witnesses described as 'a killing frenzy' in retaliation for the heavy casualties suffered when they had tried to take the city the previous year. Driving through the streets with white Taliban flags flying from their Datsun jeeps and machine guns mounted on the roofs, they peppered the streets with

bullets. One witness described seeing them mow down a group of women on their way to a wedding, a small boy pushing a cart of bread and an old man grinding wheat. After one day of indiscriminate killing, they focused on the Hazaras, carrying out a house-to-house search for anyone of fighting age in the Hazara areas and shooting them on the spot, usually in the face or testicles.⁴

The new Governor of Mazar-i-Sharif, Mullah Manon Niazi, who had distinguished himself as Governor of Kabul by stepping up the number of public executions, announced: 'Hazaras are not Muslim, they are Shia. They are *kofr* (infidel)'. This was taken as official licence both to rape and kill. Shia patients were dragged from hospitals and shot and Mullah Niazi forbade their relatives from removing the bodies from the street for five days until wild dogs had eaten them, as Dostum's men had done the same to the Taliban the previous year. Thousands more were imprisoned in metal shipping containers twenty to forty feet long that had been used to bring in Cold War arms supplies, and then were either left to asphyxiate or shifted to prisons in the south.

Some of these containers arrived in Herat where they came under the guard of Khalil Hassani and his men. Describing what happened as 'among the worst of so many bad things', he recalled: 'One day when I was in Herat several old Russian trucks were brought from Mazar-i-Sharif on the way to Kandahar. They were carrying metal shipping containers inside which were Hazara prisoners. There were about 450 of them and they were all women and children – I suppose the men had been killed. It was still summer and the trucks were left in the square for two days in the baking heat and the children were crying for food and water but our instructions were to give them nothing and we refused to let them out of the containers for toilet or anything. I can still hear the noise, the desperate banging on the

⁴ For more details see the Human Rights Watch report of November 1998 – 'Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif'.

metal and the muffled cries that gradually grew softer. It was more than 40°C outside and must have been like a furnace inside. The old and the babies must have been dead.'

Coincidentally, that afternoon before meeting Khalil, I had wandered around the suburb of Kirani on the outskirts of Quetta, a labyrinth of mud-walled houses and tiny stores, which is mostly home to Hazara refugees. In a small dirt-floored mosque with no roof I came across a huddle of about thirty hungry and frightened Hazara women and children in vividly coloured but very dirty clothes, and a few old men. They told me they had travelled twenty days to come to Pakistan by truck then foot, from a village near Bamiyan, the town famous for the giant Buddhas carved into its mountains, which the Taliban had blown up earlier in the year in defiance of worldwide protest. Having got all the way to Pakistan, they had discovered they could not enter the refugee camps as the borders were officially closed so they could get no aid and would have to keep moving around or risk being picked up by police and dumped back at the border.

'We left because we had nothing to eat,' explained Asma Rosaman, a woman in a bright cerise dress with a red-rose patterned shawl, her three sons and three daughters clutching at her wide skirts. Usually refugees at least manage to bring out a quilt to sleep under and a kettle and pot. These had absolutely nothing with them beyond the clothes on their backs and stories of being forced to watch their men-folk burnt alive as the Taliban rampaged through their villages, demolishing their houses, raping women and killing the men.

'My husband was killed when we escaped,' said Asma in a voice too tired of tragedy to be emotional. 'The Taliban followed us on horses. He was carrying our household goods so he was behind and they shot him. He was a wheat farmer but we had not had wheat for a long time because there was no rain. One lady in the village was pregnant and they locked her in her house and set fire to it with her

children screaming. They killed children with steel rods and plucked out eyes. I saw them dynamite a cave where 200 people had taken shelter. I closed my childrens' mouths so that no one would hear them. They killed 3000 people in one month.'

This was probably not an exaggeration. The details took a long while to come out in the world, only when the first refugees started to arrive in Pakistan, but testimony collected by human rights organizations suggests that between four thousand and six thousand people were massacred in Bamiyan after its surrender that August of 1998.

Another woman called Peri Gul with eyes like black olive pits tugged at my arm. 'There were 300 killed in my village,' she said. 'They locked my husband in our house and set fire to it and beat me when I tried to run inside. Afterwards I had to beg bread for my three sons and daughters. Every house was burnt and they sprayed the fields with chemicals and set fire to them so no one had food. Mostly we just scraped moss from rocks. I even thought about selling one of my children but who would buy? Nobody had anything.' I guessed she was in her mid-20s, ten years younger than me, but she looked old enough to be my mother. Clutching my hand with her calloused dirt-encrusted fingers, she sobbed, 'We were innocent people just trying to survive. First they starved us then they murdered us. Why didn't anyone do anything?'

Such stories were so inhuman sometimes I would just want to snap shut my notebook and run away. There were more than three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and it wasn't as if it was just the occasional individual with a sad story, it was everyone. I felt like a parasite, sucking up all these tales of tragedy to regurgitate in newsprint for people thousands of miles away, and with no tangible advantage for those I interviewed. I had no answer to why the world had done nothing.

Back in the 1980s when I had lived in Pakistan before, I had interviewed lots of refugees, sometimes spending the night in the camps. But then the Afghans had only suffered eleven years of war, their men were defeating the Russians, and there was still hope in

their eyes. Now they had been through twenty-three years of war; their men were killing each other and their eyes were blank. As I watched these Hazara mothers unable to feed their babies, I thought of my own well-fed son back home, dressed in a different outfit every day, a wooden train set taking over the living room, parties with cake and balloons, holidays in the sun. I couldn't imagine looking into those trusting blue eyes knowing I had no food for him and no place for him to sleep. At a store nearby, I bought them a sack of rice, some bread and apples and some blankets, and their gratitude only increased my guilt. It was not enough, it never would be.

In the orchard that evening, we took a break to go and help ourselves to the barbecue, steaming slices of *sajji*, leg of lamb rotating on an enormous skewer, and for a while we talked of other things. I showed them the photograph I carry of my husband who has the dark eyes and olive skin of the Moors who once ruled Portugal. 'He looks like an Afghan,' said Khalil approvingly.

By the time the inevitable pot of green tea arrived, there was a bitter chill and the orchard had emptied of diners. But Khalil had more to tell. Between postings for the secret police, he had spent some months as a bodyguard for Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban. He came from the same branch of the Ghilzai tribe and so was trusted.

Holding my teacup in both hands to keep them warm, I asked him to describe Mullah Omar. One of the most enigmatic things about the Taliban was the reclusiveness of their one-eyed leader. Not only had he never travelled outside Afghanistan, Mullah Omar had barely visited his own country. He had only twice gone to Kabul, preferring to rule from his adopted home of Kandahar though he was actually born in Tarin Kot in Uruzgan, the mountainous province north of the city. He had never given interviews to western journalists, and he had refused to meet with western diplomats.

No pictures of him hung in government offices. Newspaper articles about him were always illustrated by the same blurred photograph taken from television footage of him in Kandahar holding up the Sacred Cloak of Prophet Mohammed at a special gathering of Taliban in 1996. At this ceremony, he had himself declared as Amir ul Momineen, Commander of all Islam; it was also the first time the cloak had been taken out for more than sixty years.

All that was known about Mullah Omar was that until 1994 he had been a simple village mullah in Sanghisar, a small community of mud-walled houses an hour's drive north of Kandahar. He was about forty, bearded, wore a black turban and had only one eye, having lost the other in a Soviet rocket attack during the jihad in the 1980s, supposedly clawing it out of the socket when he realised that he had been blinded. Even the one eye was sometimes disputed. A few days earlier a friend of a friend had come to my hotel, whispering because of all the ISI officers in the lobby, that he had a picture of the real Mullah Omar. I opened the envelope to see a small black and white passport photograph of a man with a turban and two eyes.

Khalil was not very enlightening on his appearance. 'He looks normal, medium height, a bit fat and has an artificial eye which is green.' He had more to say on his personality. According to Khalil, Mullah Omar modelled himself on Caliph Umar, a seventh-century leader of Islam who had been declared Amir ul Momineen of the peoples of Arabia and was the second Caliph after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. A simple man who owned just one shirt and one mantle, and who ordered his own son killed for immorality, Caliph Umar used to disguise himself in ragged clothes to mingle incognito amongst the common people. In the same way, Mullah Omar would go out of his compound at night on his battered old motorcycle to find out what his people were saying about him in the bazaars and *chai-khanas* or tea-houses.

Khalil said that Mullah Omar presented himself as a man of simple tastes but though he berated his cook every day for serving meat

when his soldiers in the field had none, he ate it anyway, and he liked listening to war-chants and riding his Arabian horse around his compound. In fact Khalil had quickly come to the conclusion that the great enigmatic mastermind behind the Taliban was just simple-minded. 'Mullah Omar knows only how to write Omar and to sign his name,' he said. 'He's completely illiterate.'

I had been told the same thing a few days earlier by General Ishaq, administrator of the hospital in Kandahar that used to treat Mullah Omar, and a former general in the Afghan army. 'His doctor told me he thought that the rocket had left bits of shrapnel in his brain. He said Omar likes sitting at the wheel of one of his cars making engine noises and that he had days of terrible headaches and mood-swings when he would not see anyone and dreams when he thought he was having visions.'

For Khalil, coming into such close contact with the Taliban leadership was what made him lose faith in the whole movement. 'It is the first time in Afghanistan's history that the lower classes of the country are governing and by force. There are no educated people in this administration - like Mullah Omar they are all totally backward and illiterate. They have no idea of the history of the country and they call themselves mullahs but have no idea of Islam. Nowhere does it say men must have beards or women cannot be educated, in fact on the contrary the Koran says people must seek education.'

For all the Taliban leader's avowed simplicity and proclaimed intention of returning Afghanistan to the time of the Prophet, 1400 years earlier, Khalil said Mullah Omar loved the trappings of power. Not poor himself, he had however been shocked by the lavishness of Mullah Omar's house, set in a vast walled compound with a mosque, guesthouse, its own farm, stables and houses for the uncle who acted as a father-figure and all his relatives. Built in 1997, all paid for by Osama bin Laden, it had specially reinforced walls and roofs, six feet thick and cushioned with car tyres, to withstand even a cruise missile. He had even had a road moved because it went too close to the compound.

The main house where Mullah Omar lived with his three wives and five children was in an inner walled area. In front of the wrought-iron entrance gate was a fountain flowing over a fibreglass sculpture of a fallen log dotted with small Miami Beach-style plastic palm trees. The house itself was a two-storey building, set either side of a central courtyard which contained a water purification system and was painted with murals of the scenic attractions of Afghanistan including the fort at Kalat, the minaret at Jam, the mosque of Herat and oddly one of the swimming pool at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, but not of course of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Whichever wife was in favour would sleep on the same side of the house as Mullah Omar while the other two would sleep in the other section with the children.

Just outside the inner compound was the guesthouse, a bungalow with a large patio with columns painted like tree trunks and walls decorated with gaudy flower murals. Mullah Omar spent the mornings there, sitting on a bed with a tin of money and a walkie-talkie by his side, receiving his commanders, handing out cash and issuing instructions, usually sent out on paper chits.

Khalil said he sometimes saw Osama bin Laden at Mullah Omar's house, arriving in a black Land Cruiser with tinted windows, usually in a convoy of seven or eight cars at a time. 'His bodyguards were all very tall people, Sudanese I think, with curly hair and all with wireless sets and earpieces like those American bodyguards. Sometimes I went to Mullah Omar's house in Uruzgan when they went hunting for birds or deer together or fishing with dynamite.'

The more he saw of them together the more he became convinced that the Taliban were not really in control. 'We laughed when we heard the Americans asking Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden,' he said. 'The Americans are crazy. Afghanistan is not a state sponsoring terrorism but a terrorist-sponsored state. It is only Osama bin Laden that can hand over Mullah Omar not vice versa.'

During his time in the Taliban, Khalil had attended two Arab-run training camps, one in Jari Dasht, the Yellow Desert, four hours from

Helmand, an area with its own airstrip where Arab sheikhs used to go hunting, and one near Herat. 'We were taught by Pakistani military trainers how to shoot exact targets and how to move along the ground in the front-line,' he said. They were also told that if they died while fighting under the white flag of the Taliban, they along with seventy-two members of their families would go to paradise. They were also given blank marriage certificates signed by a mullah and encouraged to 'take wives' during battle, basically a licence to rape.

Being ordered to the front-line was to provide Khalil's chance for escape: 'We were sixty-two friends sent to Bagram, north of Kabul, and our line was attacked by the Northern Alliance and they almost defeated us. Many of my friends were killed and we didn't know who was fighting whom, there was killing from behind and in front. Our commanders fled in cars leaving us behind so we also escaped, walking all night.'

'I was very afraid of being caught. I got away but then I was stopped by a line of Arabs who demanded to know why we were escaping. For two days we were under their arrest then taken back to the front-line.'

One night he was put on watch and saw a truck of sheep and goats coming through the lines from Northern Alliance territory so he jumped in and got to Kabul and from there back to Kandahar. There he was arrested and put in jail for eight days and interrogated but managed to get out to Quetta through the intervention of some relatives who were high-ranking Taliban members.

Since leaving the Taliban, Khalil had been living back in Quetta with his wife and baby daughter, and was looking for work. Although he insisted that the Taliban had become an organization 'in name only', he feared for his life and I wondered why he had taken the enormous risk of speaking to me. 'I want people to understand,' he said, shaking his head. 'I have done terrible things and the only way I can make up for it is to tell the world the truth about these people.'

Kabul, September 24 2001

Respected Mr Jamil Karzai

Salam alay kum

I hope you and the rest of your family will be alright. I received your letter and I informed other female members of ours, Farishta, Najeba, Sadaf and Maryam about your request to write to a lady journalist who writes for the Sunday Telegraph of Britain.

Respected Karzai, we here really appreciate what you do for the new generation of Afghanistan and we are really worried about your life too. Please be careful.

Here is the letter for Miss Christina Lamb.

Dear Christina

Jamil Karzai has written about you that you are a nice kind beautiful and helpful lady and has asked us, specially me to write a letter about our life under the Taliban regime and I hope this will help you outside understand the feelings of an educated Afghan female who must now live under a burqa.

My name is Fatema, this is my real name but please I ask you to use this name of mine Marri, as what we are doing is dangerous. I'm thirty years old and live in a three-roomed flat with my family on a big estate, it's called Microrayon. I was born here in Kabul and I graduated from the twelfth class of Hishai Durrani High School, our biggest girls' school.

I speak Dari, Pashto and English. I think you are surprised I know English but my father was a diplomat and my mother an English teacher. My mother went to university in India. So don't worry.

I know from our friend that you have a kind husband and a beautiful son and you travel the world reporting and meeting people. I dream of a life like that. It's funny we live under the same small sky yet it seems we live 500 years apart.

You see us now in our burqas like strange insects in the dust, our heads down, but it wasn't always this way. I do not remember much before the Russian invasion as I was only eight when they came and I felt bad then when I saw the soldiers with their white faces and hair because my parents said they had made slaves of us but even at that time we still went to school. Women worked as professors and doctors and in government. We went for picnics and parties, wore jeans and short skirts and I thought I would go to university like my mother and work for my living.

I know in the villages many schools had been destroyed in the war but here in Kabul we were lucky. Only when the Taliban came were all the girls' schools and university closed. When the mujaheddin came to Kabul my school was closed for a year because of all the fighting which was very bad particularly here in Microrayon and we were the first line of battle, but then I finished school and became a teacher. I particularly liked science and wanted to go to university to study science but there was no money because my father had lost his job.

When the Taliban came to Kabul, it was September 1996, they told us all to stay at home. They announced it on the radio just like they announced we all had to wear burqas. I had never worn one before, they were something from the

village, and it was like not being able to breathe or see, just seeing in front through that small square like a cage, and in the summer it is so hot and the sun blinds you. I fell over twice the first day.

In our house behind all the burqas and shalwar kamiz is a red silk party dress, my mother's from the time when the king was in power and my father in the foreign ministry. Sometimes I hold it up against me and imagine dancing but it is a lost world. Now we must wear clothes that make us invisible and cannot even wear heels. One of my friends was beaten with cable for wearing white shoes because the Taliban said, 'how dare you wear the colour of our flag', and another because they said they could hear her shoes click on the pavement.

You might think we women are doing nothing but my friends and I struggle for the rights of Afghan women working secretly here for the Afghan Women's League, trying to educate our women and young girls. Some of our members make nan bread and distribute it to widows, there are so many widows from this long war, you see them in all streets in the city begging in their torn clothes but the Taliban beat them and say they are not allowed out without mahram, that's what we call men relatives like a husband or father.

My sister and I hold secret English and science classes in our house. It is hard as all the time we fear someone might report us and we cannot get books. Our students pay a little and we use it for firewood to keep warm. We do not even have a blackboard. We tell them do not bring bags and sometimes we stop for weeks because we have heard the Taliban are onto us. We thought about contacting an NGO but we are worried the Taliban would find out. Some other schools have been found and the teachers beaten.

We have small rebellions. Maybe you do not know we are

forbidden to wear make-up under the burqa but I have a red lipstick. One of my friends runs a secret beauty salon in her bedroom.

In my family I am the eldest and apart from my sister Latifa, I have two brothers. One is a tailor, the other still a student but in school now all he learns is the Koran and the Hadith, not science or foreign languages. Science was my favourite subject. I wanted to be a science teacher.

Life here is very miserable. We have no rights at all and we have asked many times other countries of the world for help but they have been silent. Now we heard about this attack on the towers in America with many people dead and my father says the Americans will come and remove the Taliban but we do not dare hope. I wonder, maybe the world will think all Afghans are terrorists and we are not. It is the Arabs, who drive around in their Datsuns with black windows and live in big houses behind high walls in Wazir Akbar Khan and buy their foods in tins in the import shops in Chicken Street. If you saw how we lived, you would know we cannot be terrorists, we are the forgotten people.

We do not have schools, the doors of education are closed on all, especially us. I don't know if we will ever go to school again. We cannot paint or listen to music. The Taliban ran their tanks over all the televisions.

We asked the world, are we not human beings? Do we not deserve to live in peace? Can we not have rights as women in other countries?

I do not know what you want me to write to you. If I start writing I will fill all the paper and my eyes will fill with tears because in these seven years of Taliban no one has asked us to write about our lives. In my mind I make a picture of you and your family. I wonder if you drive a car, if you go out with friends to the cinema and restaurants and

dance at parties. Do you play loud music and swim in lakes? One day I would like to see and I would also like to show you a beautiful place in my country with mountains and streams but not now while we must be hidden. Maybe our worlds will always be too far apart.

Marri