



Hamid Ismailov

A Poet and  
**Bin-Laden**

A reality novel

G L A G O S L A V   P U B L I C A T I O N S



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A reality novel

**ENGLISH  
PEN**



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# A POET AND BIN-LADEN

A REALITY NOVEL

by Hamid Ismailov

*2nd Edition*

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Arts Council England

First published in Russian as "Поэт и Бин-Ладен"

Translated from Russian by Andrew Bromfield  
Poems translated by Richard MacKane  
Edited by Camilla Stein

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*To Christopher MacLehose  
who inspired me to write this book*

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## In Place of a Preface

*A Poet and Bin-Laden* is a novel set in Central Asia at the turn of the 21st century against a swirling backdrop of Islamic fundamentalism in the Ferghana Valley and beyond. It tells the story of the poet Belgi, who may be a grown-up version of “the boy” in Hamid Ismailov’s book *The Railway*. The new novel is equally rich in descriptive passages and teems with vivid personalities but, whereas the mood of *The Railway* was nostalgic and its setting a provincial backwater in Uzbekistan during the Soviet years, *A Poet and Bin-Laden* tackles the most urgent and topical subject of today’s world – the “war on terror” – and the novel’s scope is correspondingly international, with the action straddling the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. However, in *A Poet and Bin-Laden* documentary elements, instead of folklore, are used to propel the narrative. Real events and characters, including Osama bin Laden, who has a walk-on role, bulk large and give the novel its unique quality. But the English translation has, of necessity, to simplify and clarify the historical background for the general reader.

The hero of *A Poet and Bin-Laden* is Belgi, whose presumed death in 2001, while fighting on the side of the Taliban, prompts the narrator to ask, *Citizen Kane*-style: how did a Sufi recluse living in harmony with nature come to die with other Islamic militants on the hilltops of Afghanistan? To answer this question, he retraces the story of Belgi’s life in the setting of some of the key events of Central Asia’s post-Soviet history: the purging of the democratic opposition, the rise of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (“Party of Freedom”) and the emergence of Islamic militancy, the cross-border wars of the 1990s, including the 1999 terror attacks in Tashkent, and the Batken insurgency of the following year. The novel also includes flashforwards to fighting in Vaziristan and the May 2005 massacre of civilians in the Uzbek town of Andijan. But the primary focus of the narrative is the image of this poet who becomes a terrorist in the eyes of the world. This wonderfully original construct allows Ismailov to explore the relationship between the timeless and dreamlike aspects of Uzbek culture – already familiar from *The Railway*, and now personified in Belgi – and the harsh reality of life caught between the dictatorship of President Karimov and jihadism.

The story begins on the eve of 9/11, with the narrator's haunting description of the airplane attack on the Twin Towers as seen on TV while he is on holiday in Central Asia. Subsequent chapters shift backwards and forwards in time, but two main themes emerge: the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan under the charismatic but reclusive leadership of Tahir Yuldash and Juma Namangani; and Belgi's movement from the outer edge of the circle, from the mountains of Osh, into the inner sanctum of al-Qaeda, and ultimately to a meeting with Sheikh bin Laden himself. His journey begins with a search for a Sufi spiritual master and ends in guerrilla warfare, and it is this tension between a transcendental and a violent response to oppression, between the book and the bomb, that gives the novel its specific poignancy. Along the way, Ismailov provides wonderfully vivid accounts of historical events (as witnessed by Belgi) such as the siege of Kunduz, the breakout from Shebergan prison – a kind of Afghan Guantanamo – and the insurgency in the Ferghana Valley.

In the Tajik village of Hoit, an IMU stronghold, he is recruited by the Islamists and subsequently crosses the border with Afghanistan during the US bombings. He is taken prisoner by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, but after escaping from Shebergan is reunited with his defeated comrades – and all this time he is writing poetry!

His poems, along with the stories of eyewitnesses and participants in events leading up to the Andijan massacre, grant the reader insight into the very heart of a secretive world previously concealed from outside view. This, of course, is a very topical book, with reports of the death of the Taliban in 2001 now clearly exaggerated. From a journalistic point of view, it is so rich in first-hand and exclusive material, not least the appearance of bin Laden, that it is certain to attract a great deal of interest. But the real achievement of *A Poet and Bin-Laden* is an imaginative one – this is a very powerful story about the forces of extremism in human nature, good and evil, poetry and terror. It is in every way a grown-up version of *The Railway*.

Hugh Barnes

*On your road there are nails, staples,  
rusted corks, the dried apricot of time,  
a concrete path, the railway, grass here and there,  
a living snowdrop or simple, ordinary wire...*

*In actual fact, in fact all this leads one  
to think then, but at the same time your premonition  
realises: your life in its complete uselessness  
can be tied in with these things.*

*Do not grieve about this,  
death in fact is neither high nor low.  
It is not death that is greater  
but the thought of the road to death  
that overcomes death itself.*

-Belgi

## Cast of Main Characters and a Simple Timeline of Events

**Belgi, aka Yosir** – an Uzbek “new generation” poet, widely translated in the West, who becomes a militant,

**Bakh, aka Haroun** – his friend, interested in Sufism, who is killed by militants,

**Alish, aka Umar** – Belgi’s friend and his translator, who also joins the militants,

**Sher** – Belgi’s brother, killed by the Uzbek authorities while being held in detention

**Caroline Rowley** – an American journalist, Belgi’s girlfriend,

**President Islam Karimov** – the current Uzbek President who came to power in 1989,

**Tahir Yuldash** – aka Amir Muhammad Farruk – leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, killed in 2009,

**Juma Namangani** – military commander of the IMU, killed in 2001,

**Zubair** – spokesman for the IMU, killed in 2001,

**Zainiddin Askarov** – aka Abdurahman Mansur, former spokesman for the IMU, died in an

Uzbek prison,

**Abdurashid Dostum** – an Afghani general who is an ethnic Uzbek.

Numerous journalists and experts, who have contributed materials, memoirs and stories, as well as many militants and members of the Taliban.

1989 – Islam Karimov comes to power as the First Secretary of Uzbekistan’s Communist Party. He later becomes President of Uzbekistan;

1992 – a standoff between Islam Karimov and Tahir Yuldash, when the Muslims of Namangan effectively take the President hostage, and he promises an Islamic state. This is when Belgi first names him “Comrade Islam”;

1992-1996 – President Karimov crushes the secular opposition and dissenters take refuge in the mosques, he launches his campaign against Islam in the country under the pretext of fighting Wahabbism;

1998 – the mutilated body of Belgi's brother Sher is handed over to him by the police, who claim that he committed suicide. Belgi and his friends end up in a militant camp in Hoit.

1999 – six explosions that occur in Tashkent are blamed on Islamic militants, but later substantial evidence indicates the involvement of the Uzbek special services; the authorities imprison thousands of believers, thousands flee to Tajikistan and Afghanistan;

1999 -2000 – in summer Islamic militants make incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan: the so-called Batken war;

2001 – “9/11”: the Americans start bombing Afghanistan: Belgi is arrested by the Americans, then released and, like many Uzbek militants, he disappears.



MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA



11/09/2001

The website "Conference of the Refined" at <http://library.ferghana.ru/uz/index.htm> provides the following information about Belgi (real name Asror Abutov, *nom de guerre* Yosir):

Belgi is a poet of the Uzbek "new wave" and author of the volumes of poetry *Yo'l (The Path)*, *Ikkinchi kitob (The Second Book)*, *Bambergiana* and *Moskva Daftari (Moscow Notebook)*. The recently published English book *Poet for Poet* included a number of poems by Belgi, as well as this brief biographical note: "Born in 1961 in Osh in the Ferghana Valley, applied unsuccessfully to the Literary Institute, took work where he could find it, travelled widely. Now living in seclusion in the mountains of his native province..."

When I asked the author of this note about the final sentence, he exclaimed: "At that time how could I have known that this reclusive Sufi retreat in search of a spiritual master would lead to Afghanistan?" And indeed, at the time when those words were written, the mountains of the Osh province were far from being a theatre of military operations where Islamic militants made annual forays or a political bazaar where some traded in politics and others in narcotics or foreign hostages.

I shall try to recount all this in detail, but I shall start, I think, from the very end.

On September 11, 2001 I was on holiday with my family at Issyk-Kul Lake: how can you expect any Tashkent or Central Asian intellectual to summon up the effort to go any further than that? Before lunch we had been swimming and riding in a catamaran, and after lunch we were relaxing at home. In an attempt to salvage something from those meaningless, monotonous days when, as Pushkin said "*Fare niente* is my law", I was sitting there with a pen and a sheet of paper and a gradually mounting sense of frustration with the members of my household because of the pointlessness of it all. The members of my household were applying their own precautionary defensive measures: in other words, it was normal family life during a holiday. Eventually we decided to walk to the lake again, I blamed my fruitless depression on my wife's

zealous attitude, she got even with me for absenting myself from family activities for two hours, and our two children automatically took mental note of the new cracks between their parents in order later to coerce one into buying ice cream and the other into the interminable construction of skyscrapers of sand.

And now I attempt to recall every little detail, as if there had been some kind of portent, the way a bird will occasionally fly for some distance in front of the windscreen of your car, or the silence is suddenly sucked into both your ears in a contracting sphere of dread, but there was nothing like that, except perhaps for those sandcastles that were washed away by the cold water of the lake.

We got back to our room in the early evening, but there was still some time to go before supper and so on this occasion I felt justified in switching on the television and flicking through the channels. It was strange, though – the foreign satellite channels were all showing a picture of a fire that had started in some tower or other. For some reason I thought about the Tate Gallery in London – I had recently read about it being opened in the magazine *Ogonyok*. Why did I think about London? Most likely because there was someone speaking from London: then I realised it was the BBC channel and I started listening carefully. I wouldn't claim that my English is very advanced – sure, I studied it in school and passed the minimum postgraduate reading requirement, but I'd say I'm probably better at expressing myself in Uzbek at the market than understanding what those analysts are barking about in all those dreary, identical studios. Even so, I did make out the words "New York" a couple of times. And while I was wondering just what it all had to do with New York, the little aeroplane appeared on the screen, exactly like in a second take, and flew slowly and surely into another tower concealed behind the first one. This time I understood without any words – simply from the childish cry emitted by the anchor man – that they weren't showing a Hollywood film, that these unimaginable things were happening even as I watched, and at that moment the entire world was turning into one big Hollywood....

Our whole family sat in front of the television all that evening, missing supper – no great loss – and later, after the whole chilling event had been dubbed and explained by the Russian language channels, in the dead of that cold Issyk-Kul night I had a strange dream that I still remember to this day.

In one of the *kishlaks*, or mountain villages, where I used to be sent for Young Pioneer camp, I walked out of the gate and saw a car hurtling along in my direction. The car's wheels were running along the unbroken line of yellowing clay fences sticking up out of the white snow, as if these fences marked its only road through the snowfall; it

was attached to these fences, and its impetuous motion followed their curves. I would have thought the car was racing along almost vertically, if it had not gone whooshing past me, turned in a steep arc and shot off beyond the dark forms of the bridge and the river that I could see down below. "Lunatic!" I thought, and was about to carry on walking downhill when the car emerged from a dip, swung round and set off back across the bridge. Now it was aiming for me. I went dashing across the snow to get as far away as possible from those fences that held the car the way the electric wires hold a suburban train, but the car made a sharp U-turn and seemed to come lunging after me. I dashed along through snow up to my knees, sometimes slipping into steep holes, but in any case leaving a deep track behind me as I fled. The car could easily pinpoint my location. I put on two rapid spurts of speed and slid down the side of the hollow, all the way to the channel of the glimmering river, and a thought flashed through my mind like lightning: "The car will run straight off into the river here!" True, there was also the thought that it might hook me and pull me with it, but the thought that came after that was even more frightening: "What if the driver comes after me without his car..." How could I defend myself on the white snow?

Woken by a chilly shiver of fear in that black, cold, Issyk-Kul or, rather, Tian-Shan night, I gazed out through the window of our wooden hotel building at the morning twilight advancing from the east, unwilling to admit to myself that this fear under my skin was changing my life forever. And this fear is the point from which I wish to start my story.

## Chapter One

"When did it all begin?" Yosir thought in his solitude. On either the sixteenth or the seventeenth day of the month of Sha'ban in the year 1422 of the Hidjra (November 2001), when the time for the after-sunset prayer was approaching, they were ordered to assemble on the southern outskirts of the Zulmat *kishlak*, which fortunately the Americans had not bombed yet. When Yosir asked the messenger if they should turn out with their things – since any other question that was natural in other places and other circles, such as "What for?", "What's going to happen?", "Will it be for long?" could cost you dear – the messenger replied briefly: "As usual!" and Yosir and Hamsa began hastily packing their *hurdjuns*, or traveller's bags, and the AKMS automatic rifles wrapped in Afghan felt cloaks.

Seven minutes later they were sitting in the yard of one of the local mosques after putting their *hurdjuns* down beside the clay fence nearby. Some men were counting off their prayer beads, some were intently reciting to themselves the most glorious names of God, and a few of those who had only just joined them were bent over in the afternoon prayer that had been missed. But there was something here that went beyond an ordinary gathering, as if the sound of the myna-bird's light, delicate whistle was about to be replaced by the first sound of a plane and a bomb or rocket flying through the air, and the chirring of the first cricket in the corner, its voice cracked from the drought, was about to be drowned out by the rattle of a machine gun replying to the imperturbable plane....

The yard of the mosque filled up quickly, someone ordered the doors to be closed and, glancing from under his brows, Yosir noticed a tall, burly figure appear in the doorway of the mosque itself and move rapidly to the front of the gathering, accompanied by several armed guards. It was Muhammad Tahir Farruk (Tahir Yuldash – the Amir of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan). Like everyone else in the mosque, Yosir was sitting with his head bowed low, but since he was in one of the front rows, out of the corner of his eye he saw the Amir halt facing the gathering, while three of his bodyguards walked on further and three stayed beside him on his right, probing the community with their eyes. That had never happened before. Yosir had prayed with the Amir

numerous times, and the Amir had very rarely played the part of an Imam, preferring to make himself inconspicuous somewhere in the general body of the community, but everything was different now.

In a low, hoarse voice the Amir read out the obligatory *hamd* and *naat* – the blessing in the name of Allah and his Prophet – and then, with mounting fervour, he moved on to the sermon itself. He spoke of *jihad*, a holy war against the infidels and above all against the empire of Satan – America; he spoke of *shahids*, who had died a righteous death on this path, of children who had been made orphans, but also avengers, and yet again Yosir wondered in amazement where Muhammad Tahir found that blazing passion that spoke prophetically above and beyond his own thoughts, will and lips, so that he never faltered, or hesitated or stumbled over a misplaced breath. He didn't learn it all off by heart, did he, he didn't rehearse it all in front of a mirror – for where would he get a mirror?

Yosir suddenly remembered that when he came back to Mazari-Sharif from Kabul with the film, they have been shooting, in the afternoon of the twenty-third day of the month of Jumad Al-Sani in year 1422 of the Hidjra (September 11, 2001) and entered a house belonging to Uzbek fighters on Puli Havoi Street, the Amir was sitting in the yard, shaving the head of one of his bodyguards by the light of a small flaming torch. The other two bodyguards were sitting nearby with their already shaven heads bleeding.

A certain alarm, not exactly fear, must have shown in Yosir's eyes, and the Amir had laughed and spoken first, before he could say anything: "Look, I am letting the bad blood out of their heads. It's very good for you, would you like to try it?" He made several cuts in his bodyguard's cleanly shaven skin and covered them with a glass jar heated briefly over a flame, the way in which a cold is usually treated. Blood covered the walls of the jar like dark paint. The bodyguard tensed up, but he didn't groan. "He's short of iron! Look how brown the blood is! You're all short of iron!" the Amir had joked and then, leaving his bodyguards in the yard, he had gone into the house to talk to Yosir.

That evening, following communal prayers in the yard of that house, at which people had gathered, as usual, by making their way through openings between one yard and the next, so that no one in the street could possibly guess who they were and what they were doing there, Yosir, who was tired after his long journey, had decided to go to bed early, without telling the curious all the latest news from Kabul and the Turkistan *madrassah* there. But no sooner had the final mountain passes before Mazari Sharif flashed in front of his eyes than he heard sounds from the next room, where the three sentries on duty were listening to the BBC, the Voice of America and Radio Liberty respectively: a loud braying in three voices was followed by rapid repetitions of "Allah-u Akbar!" –

"Allah is great!" over and over again. Everybody in the house jumped up and, in defiance of the rules, went dashing towards the room on the upper floor, but one of the sentries was already flying down towards them with a radio pressed against his ear, and all Yosir could hear was "New York" and then something else, followed by "destroyed". The sentry went rushing past – to do as he was supposed to do and report the extraordinary news to the Amir, who was dealing with somebody in the basement. For some strange reason Yosir caught himself thinking of the gigantic wave that was expected when half of a Spanish island slipped into the sea, and felt horrified as he imagined it:

*Hovliqar u, talpinar u, shoshar u,  
Go'ringizdan na'ra tortib toshar u...*

He had once translated these words of Chulpon about a wave of fire into Russian, and now, in the milling throng of that dark house, he tried to recall the ending:

*And the wave will seethe and surge and rage  
And scorch your coffins with a mighty roar ...*

And from there it was but half a step to Brodsky:

*Someday it and not, alas, we  
Will flood along the railings of the promenade,  
Advancing to shouts of: "Don't!..."*

"Don't!" the Amir shouted and Yosir, adrift on his sea of memories, shuddered when he suddenly saw the bodyguards, who had pointed their rifles up into the sky, towards the sources of the rumbling that had been expanding for so long, lower their gun barrels, and heard the Amir first shout after them in his wheezing, sleepless voice: "Death to America! Death to the empire of Satan! Allah-u Akbar!" and then order everyone to leave the house one at a time and assemble immediately in the trenches.

Running out of the mosque when the bombing had already begun, Yosir glanced up as if for the last time at the sky, which was scored across by several long, bloody slashes, as if someone had decided to let the sky's bad blood, and high up above, slicing imperviously through the air and glittering like sharp blades in the cuts, he saw the American super-heavy B-1 bombers. Or that same wave of fire....

## Chapter Two

*To this pool,*

*to the trees in this pool,  
beyond the trees,  
the sudden fear of falling  
in the bottomless cloud-filled sky,  
closing wet eyes.*

*Within oneself,  
in the veins within oneself,  
beyond the veins  
a groan on which one cannot hang words,  
or in non-revelation  
that is wider than this, more boundless,  
more borderless than this.*

*I was suddenly afraid of falling.*

-Belgi

After the prolonged and ultimately unsuccessful defence of Kunduz, when each of the commanders blamed another for the failure, and all of them secretly blamed Juma, who had been killed or disappeared; when the soldiers who were still alive – Pakistanis, Afghanis, Chechens and Uzbeks – had all thanked the one God in their various tongues for the slushy road back to possible freedom, Yosir knew for certain what lay ahead for him in the torture chambers of General Dostum. I have a photograph in front of me – the bombed-out building of the Sultan Razia Lyceum in Mazar Sharif, where the Uzbek fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan took refuge in October 2001, together with the Taliban and Arabs from Al-Qaeda. A little earlier, in September 2001, the US administration had included the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in its list of terrorist organisations. At the same time the leader, or Amirul-Muminin of this movement, Muhammad Tahir

Farruk<sup>1</sup> had declared in an interview with the Uzbek service of the BBC that they were prepared to fight on the side of the Taliban.

After the Americans started bombing Afghanistan and NATO – which had previously occupied no more than a tenth of the country – suddenly came to life and went on the offensive, the Taliban in Kabul had sworn publicly to “stand to the death against the aggression of the infidels”, and the analysts had argued about a protracted guerrilla war, like the previous war against the Soviets, but there had not been any effective resistance. The local commanders, who had all grown beards under the Taliban, began shaving them off and switching their loyalty once again just as soon as they could tell which way the wind was blowing. And the only ones who were left hostage to the situation were the foreigners: Arabs, Uzbeks, Chechens, Kashmiris and Uigurs, each of whom was here for his own particular reason.

The slaughter at Kal'ai Jangi, in the former citadel of General Dostum<sup>2</sup>, was only one page in the story of those troubled late autumn

---

1 The factual information here and below has been downloaded from the Internet, and the hand of the special services can be clearly felt in it. I am leaving it just as it is – *Author's note*.

Tahir Yuldash (Yuldashev) was born on October 2, 1968 in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan. He attended the Muhadillia-Husain regional seminary. In 1991 Yuldashev became the leader of the Namangan Islamist movement “Adolat”. He was involved in the establishment of the Islamic organisations “Ishlom lashkorlari” and “Tovba”. In 1992, after the persecution of Islamists began, Yuldashev moved from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, where he became leader of the Uzbek Islamic Opposition in exile. In 1996 he became political head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Yuldashev established extensive ties with many Islamic organisations and also raised funds for the Islamic Opposition of Uzbekistan. For these purposes he visited Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In February 1999 he was one of the leading organisers of an attempted coup in Uzbekistan. In late 1999-early 2000 he held meetings with the leaders of opposition movements in order to unite all the forces opposing President Islam Karimov. Yuldashev's primary residence was in Afghanistan, in an area controlled by the Taliban movement. Killed in 2009 in Vaziristan. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/8287714.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8287714.stm).

2 Born in the village of Hojadukuh in the Shibirgan district of the province of Juzjan. The son of a peasant. His father was an Uzbek (according to some sources, from a family of Uzbeks who emigrated from the USSR during the struggle against the counterrevolutionary *basmachestvo* movement). Graduated from a three-month officer training course at the Tashkent advanced training school of the KGB of the USSR (early 1980s). Until the April revolution of 1978 was an oilfield worker in Shibirgan.

Graduated from a regimental school and soon became a brigade commander. From 1983 commander of a national (Uzbek) battalion and a national brigade at Shibirgan.

In 1991 fought with Rabbani, Masud and Hekmatiar on the side of Najibulla. In January 1992 Dostum abandons Najibulla to enter a coalition with A. Sh. Masud, the regime collapses and all factions consolidate the positions they have managed to seize at the time. In April 1992 he airlifts his units (four thousand soldiers) to Kabul, forestalling G. Hekmatyar, who is about to “surrender” Kabul to Najibulla, and soon he is joined by Masud's forces. After the Taliban take Kabul (September 1996), he opposes them.

In May 1997, after switching to the side of General Malik's Taliban forces, he was forced to flee to Uzbekistan, and then to Turkey. In 2001 he returned to Afghanistan and



days, when it was discovered who was really fighting in Afghanistan.

The Afghan journalist Daud Qorizade recalls: "After the Americans began bombing the north of Afghanistan, many local commanders changed their allegiance once again and went over to the side of General Dostum, who had appeared in the region. With these forces Dostum first moved against Mazari Sharif and quickly took it; then he moved against Kunduz. That was when two contradictory pieces of news appeared: according to General Dostum himself, when he was speaking to the Uzbek service of the BBC, the military commander of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Juma Namangani<sup>3</sup>, had been killed in the fighting at Mazari Sharif.

According to other accounts, besieged Kunduz was under the control of foreign mercenaries who were commanded by none other than Juma Namangani. In any event, General Dostum did not attack the town; instead he offered the chance of unconditional capitulation, promising freedom to every Afghani who surrendered. "Lay down your arms and go wherever you wish!" That was his appeal to the Afghani commanders in the town. What the fate of the mercenaries would be was not clear. But when the Taliban capitulated and surrendered the town, the foreigners had no choice but to do likewise. However,

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in the early autumn of that year he assembled several detachments and led the attack on Mazari Sharif. In October 2001 Rabbani appointed him "Commander in Chief of North Afghanistan" for the "United Front of the National Liberation of Afghanistan" (the "Northern Alliance"). Since December 2001 – deputy minister of defence in the government of Hamid Karzai. Now has no official posts.

3 Jumaboi Ahmadjonovich Hodjiev (better known as Juma Namangani) was born on June 12, 1969 in the village of Hodja in the Namangan district of the Namangan region. He graduated from Secondary Technical School 28 in the town of Namangan. In November 1987 he was drafted for military service in the airborne forces. In 1988 he fought in Afghanistan. When demobilised in 1989, he returned to his homeland and contacted Islamic activists. In 1991 he established close contacts with the most radically inclined leaders of the Party of Islamic Revival of Uzbekistan (PIRU), and a year later he moved to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan Namangani found his way into a training camp for the Tajiki opposition, located in the northern province of Kunduz, which borders on Tajikistan. When he returned from Afghanistan in the summer of 1993, Juma Namangani founded his own camp in the Karategin Valley in Tajikistan in order to train fighters for the Islamic opposition of Uzbekistan. He later established an entire network of military and training camps in the north of Tajikistan. A detachment under his command was actively involved in the civil war on the side of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Juma Namangani's central headquarters were located in the locality of Hoit in the Tajikabad region of northern Tajikistan. The fighting units were armed with almost every possible kind of firearm. Their heavy armaments included several infantry combat vehicles and armoured personnel carriers, as well as recoil-free cannons, several "Grad" rocket launchers and anti-aircraft defence systems. In 1997 Juma Namangani became "commander in chief of the armed forces of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan". In November 1997 his fighters infiltrated the territory of Uzbekistan from Kyrgyzstan and made several attacks on Interior Ministry personnel in the town of Yangiabad in the Tashkent province. In 2000 these incursions were repeated. Juma Namangani is believed to have been killed at the beginning of the American bombing of Afghanistan in autumn 2001, when he had been appointed commander in chief of Taliban forces in the northern region.

rumours circulated in the town about a huge military helicopter with no identifying markings that had carried the top leadership of the foreigners away from the besieged town to an unknown destination.

The foreign fighters were loaded into trucks and taken to the citadel of Kal'ai Jangi for further debriefing. They were first locked in the barracks hut and then interrogated. The interrogations were conducted by American instructors, who everyone there knew to be CIA field operatives.

Later the other prisoners said that when one of these operatives was interrogating a group of foreigners, including the American Abdul Hamid, he asked them in very arrogant manner: "Who invited you here? What are you doing here anyway? Why did you suddenly turn up here?" And then one of the Chechens threw himself on him with his bare hands, saying: "Your kind should be killed!"

In the confusion the other foreigners threw themselves on the guards and very quickly not only disarmed them, but killed them all. The guns they now had were used to start the so called uprising at Kal'ai Jangi, which was suppressed in three days with the help of American bombing raids, basements flooded with water and rocket strikes. The number of casualties was huge: more than four hundred foreigners – Arabs, Pakistanis, Chechens and Uzbeks – were killed in this uprising."

And so this was the very time when rumours began circulating that Juma Namangani, an IMU field commander and former paratrooper who had fought in Afghanistan before on the side of the Soviets, had been appointed commander in chief of this entire "foreign legion" in the northern region of Aghanistan. Although, as Daud Qorizade mentions, at the very height of the negotiations at Kunduz, when General Dostum offered the foreigners and the Taliban freedom in exchange for laying down their arms, he also said, in an interview with the Uzbek service of the BBC, that Juma Namangani had been killed in one of the American bombing raids.

How did it happen that Juma Namangani, a former Soviet paratrooper, and Tahir Yuldash, who graduated from a Soviet school with a gold medal, and, most surprisingly of all, Belgi – a poet whose works were being read at that time in French, German and English in the clubs and studios of London, Paris<sup>4</sup> and Berlin – were still fighting in a place where even the Taliban had decided it was better to disguise themselves or run? What kept them there in that war-torn land, why and how did they find themselves in this foreign country beyond mountains and rivers, a neighbour to their own homeland in space but far removed from it in time?

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4 On October 5, 2001 the journal *Missives* presented Belgi's poetry to the public at the Raspaille theatre in Paris.



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Hamid Ismailov, the acclaimed author of *The Railway*, is an Uzbek poet and writer who was forced to flee Uzbekistan in 1992 and came to the UK, where he took a job with the BBC World Service. Writer in Residence of the BBC World Service whose works are banned in Uzbekistan, Ismailov has followed the history of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia and in Afghanistan starting from its very beginning in the late 80-ies, and as the BBC journalist travelled to Taliban Afghanistan to meet their elite. His observations and experiences have become part of the highly topical book *A Poet and Bin-Laden*.

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