

An ascetic among the kafirs of Chitral

THE FEAR came later," Thanasis Lerounis explained to me during my visit to the mountain kingdom of Chitral in the spring of 2007.

He was recounting how, in 2002, he was one of only two Westerners inhabiting the lush succession of valleys rolling between north-western Pakistan's mountain ranges, when the local police chief summoned him to identify a Spaniard's slumped and lifeless body.

Someone had assassinated the well-known anthropologist Jordi Magraner in August of that year, just a few months after US-led forces had invaded Afghanistan.

Visitors to Chitral occasionally stumble across Magraner's grave - a humble affair wreathed in banners. Lerounis was the only foreigner to see Magraner's body before it disappeared in the soil he had dedicated his life to. He was buried even before his family could arrive from Spain.

Lerounis and Magraner had become friends only recently. Rumours swirled about the allegedly flamboyant and secluded life that Magraner led, unlike Lerounis, whose work at constructing sanitation facilities for Kalash tribesmen firmly anchored him to the administrative capital of Bumburet Valley.

But Lerounis, a schoolteacher from Thessaloniki who has spent up to six months every year in Pakistan since the 1990s, was not safe even among his local companions and patrons.

On September 8 of this year, gunmen swarmed into the building where Lerounis lives among a community of 3,000 pagans called the Kalash. The kidnapers hauled him off, forcing a local shepherd to carry him on his back.

Before leaving, they shot dead one of the two guards that the Pakistani government had assigned Lerounis and severely wounded a servant and another guard.

Isolated

Even after Chitral joined Pakistan and ceased being an independent kingdom, it remained an isolated mountain redoubt. With pro-Taliban militias swarming over from neighbouring Afghanistan and an open revolt spreading through Pakistan's tribal areas, Islamabad's sovereignty over this parcel of

border territory looks increasingly shaky.

Lerounis may have become this turmoil's unwitting victim.

When I met him in 2007, I struggled to understand why he insisted on remaining in an area increasingly infiltrated by Wahhabi Islamic missionaries from the south and Taliban-style Islam from across the nearby Afghan border.

But the idyllic landscape and true love with which Lerounis approached his work obscured the risks he braved. In cultivating pride in Kalash identity, creating jobs and offering an economic alternative to the financial rewards dangled by Islamists as an incentive to convert, Lerounis had reason enough to stay.

At the same time, he had a deep respect for Islam. He spoke at length with Muslim Pakistani visitors about the Muslim translation movement of the Abbasid Empire, which safeguarded Greek philosophical texts in the Arabic language even as war ravaged Europe and then retransmitted them to Europe from the Middle Ages onwards.

"Most say that Islamic countries are backward and ignorant," Lerounis said. "We've been brainwashed into misinterpreting Islam and its civilisation, even though I've met mullahs who have huge respect for Plato, Aristotle and Socrates."

After Magraner's death, Lerounis became the only remaining foreigner to be permanently based in the valleys. He reluctantly accepted two armed guards provided by the Pakistani government to shadow his every move and continued his work.

As I followed him on his tours around the picturesque Bumburet Valley, Lerounis good-humouredly griped about the armed men protecting him, worried their rusty Kalashnikovs would contradict his pacifist message.

Fissures

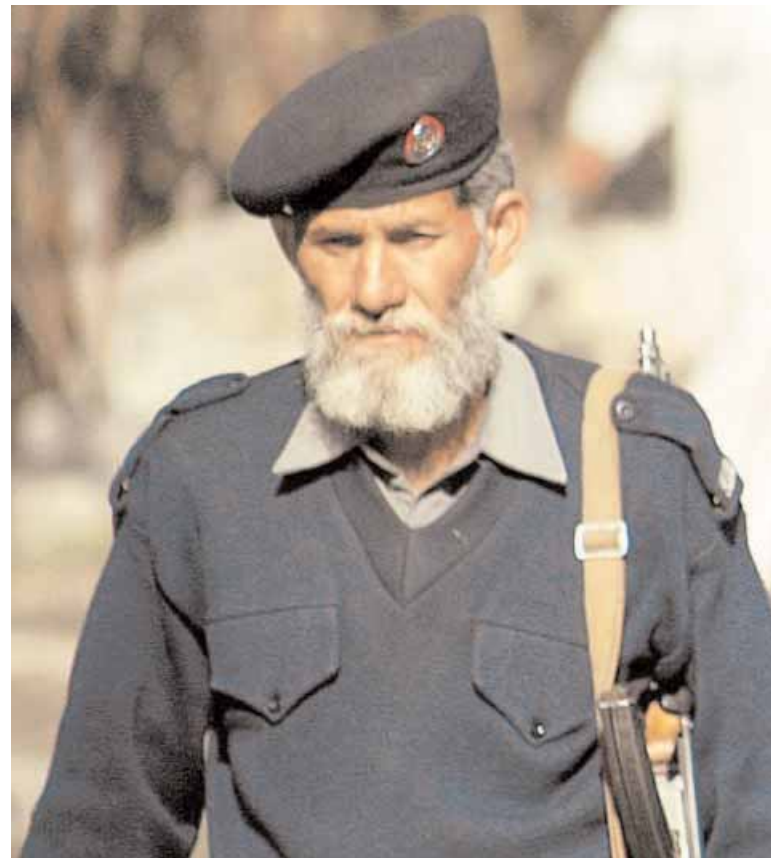
But signs that the fissures of the civilisational war between Islam and the West were spreading through Pakistan started registering even before Magraner's death. Six months before, an Al Qa'ida-affiliated militia kidnapped and performed an on-camera decapitation of American Wall Street Journal writer Daniel Pearl.

Lerounis believed that he would remain untouched, either by the petty rivalries that coursed through the district or the great geopolitical conflicts of our time.

"It never occurred to me to leave the valley," he told me in 2007. "Ever."

Lerounis is a mountain climber who stumbled across the Kalash while on a hiking expedition in the mid-1980s. Fascinated by the myth that the fair-skinned Kalash represent genetic remnants of Macedonian settlers culled from the ranks of Alexander the Great's armies, Lerounis fundraised upon his return to Greece, intending to collect enough money to build a school once he returned. He has been spending almost half the year in the valleys of the Kalash since then.

But reality - in the form of a brazen dawn raid on Lerounis' living quarters in the same school that he had raised funds for and built from scratch - came crashing in this month.



One of the two guards appointed to protect Lerounis. It is not known if this was the guard shot dead by Lerounis' kidnapers

The local press is reporting that Lerounis may have been spirited off across the untraceable Afghan border and into the insurgency-racked provinces of Kunar or Nuristan.

Unique

"It's about making the Kalash realise that what they have is something unique and they must preserve it," said Lerounis, explaining why he has put some 20 years of his life into these people.

The Kalash adore Lerounis. I witnessed proof of this when he was showered with welcoming strings of embroidered cloth as he walked through their villages.

Last week, they travelled en masse to Chitral's administrative capital to protest for his release. The Greek embassy, by contrast, appears to have done little.

But his actions did not endear Lerounis to local Muslim fundamentalists, who have already converted more than 70 percent of the Kalash.

Although religious conversions have now slowed to a trickle, a network of Islamic

seminaries is being built throughout the valley, allegedly with Saudi funding. Burkawearing girls as young as six now proceed in ghostly lines through the fields and paths cut through the woods on their way to or from the madrassas.

Lerounis' greatest failing, in the eyes of the local Islamists, was to build a school designed exclusively for the Kalash community. Aimed at nurturing pride in their heritage through teaching their language and customs to an all-Kalash student body, the three-storey, stone-and-wood building had raised the ire of local Muslim organisations.

To add insult to injury, the Greek foreign ministry-funded building, which includes a hospital and museum alongside the school, has been so successful that several Muslim families have sought to enrol their children in it.

"[The school] is viewed by the Islamists as the Kalash World Trade Centre and they want to topple it," a local Kalash who lives in the conservative city of Peshawar told me when I visited.

But Lerounis was always viewed as a benign influence in the valley. Proof of this was the enraged reaction of the Kalash themselves in the days since his disappearance. They have demonstrated outside Chitral's police station, threatened to emigrate from the valleys if Lerounis is not returned to them and dispatched a delegation of their elders into Afghanistan's neighbouring Nuristan province to negotiate his release.

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Bedecked with embroidered ribbons with which the Kalash greet respected visitors, Lerounis talks with village elders