

The following is a translation of the VOA TV Persian program “Roundtable with You,” which was broadcast via satellite on August 14, 2007 at 1730 UTC.

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[Introduction Music]

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Good evening! From Washington, this is *Voice of America*! I welcome you, dear friends, to tonight’s program “Roundtable with You.” President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, in a meeting last week with President Bush, spoke of Iran’s supportive policies and positive role in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, Rahmatullah Safi, the border commander of western Afghanistan said, “Pakistan is transparent about transporting arms into Afghanistan, whereas Iran operates covertly and gives aid to the Taliban and insurgent groups opposing the new government in Afghanistan.”

Today in Kabul, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in response to a question on this same topic, stated that Iran has always supported a secure and strong Afghanistan. He further added, “Those whose arms are seen openly in Afghanistan must bear more responsibility towards the people of Afghanistan.”

The President of Afghanistan, moreover, described the situation in Afghanistan as a triangle between the U.S., Iran, and Afghanistan saying that he is glad that both countries – meaning the U.S. and Iran – have an understanding with regard to their relations with Afghanistan. He added that the U.S., like Iran, has fulfilled an important role in rebuilding Afghanistan.

Now, is Iran’s role in Afghanistan limited to that which is verbally exchanged in formal speeches between the leaders of the two countries? Or is it the case that, as Rahmatullah Safi points out, Iran is playing another undisclosed role in Afghanistan?

We are now joined by Mr. Aminollah Habibi, a specialist in Afghan affairs. He has lived in Iran for years and completed his university curriculum in Iran; he is now pursuing his doctorate in London. Tonight we’re going to talk about this very topic: “Iran’s Apparent and Hidden Role in Afghanistan.” Greetings Mr. Habibi! Welcome to our program.

[Aminollah Habibi]

Hello Mr. Baharlou and greetings to all viewers of Voice of America!

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Dear Mr. Habibi, you left Afghanistan for Iran after the former Soviet Union attacked the country. You first went to Pakistan and then to Iran. Is that correct?

[Aminollah Habibi]

Yes, that's right.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

How many years did you live in Iran, when did you attend university, and how did you leave?

[Aminollah Habibi]

My family and I joined the resistance movement during the occupation of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, within a few months of entry into Kabul University, I was unable to continue studying there. Finally, along with a number of family members, we exited the country through Pakistan, and arrived in Iran in 1985. After coming to Iran, I stayed there for a few years but was not afforded the opportunity to attend the university, so I returned to Pakistan. In the early 90s, I came to Iran again. This time I was able to complete a degree in political science at Azad Islamic University.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Mr. Aminollah Habibi, please give us a brief history of Iran's policies in Afghanistan during the past few decades so that we may better review today's current affairs.

[Aminollah Habibi]

In the last two to three decades, Iran and Afghanistan had an acrimonious relationship. That is to say, one side – Afghanistan – was experiencing a state of continual crisis. Therefore, it was up to Iran to seize the reins and determine the nature of the two countries' relations. However, as Iran was undergoing its own crises, such as the Islamic Revolution and war with Iraq, it chose to focus on ideological issues, thereby viewing the situation in Afghanistan from the standpoint of Iran's confrontation with the West, instead of policy based on its national interests, or even its "civilized

interests” so as to play a positive role that would be beneficial to Afghanistan.

In the beginning, when Afghanistan was invaded by the former USSR, Iran focused more on its ideological conflicts with the West. Therefore, Pakistan automatically assumed the key role in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan and took action. At the beginning of the Afghan crisis, when the world community set out to protest the occupation of Afghanistan, hundreds or maybe thousands of charity organizations from around the world entered the region and resided in Pakistan to fight the occupation in Afghanistan. Sadly, Iran at this junction decided to pursue a passive policy and failed to convince the international community to support a nationalistic movement in Afghanistan.

Due to its close ties with Islamists such as Mr. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and prior to the Communist coup d'état of 1357, Pakistan was able to strengthen these forces, “Islamizing” the state of affairs, and ban the activities of the nationalistic forces in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Iran was automatically steered toward such a strategy, leaving Pakistan in charge of the agenda in Afghanistan.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Now, what about Iran’s current role? How is it that on the one hand, Iran supplies electricity to Herat, builds a train line to Herat, and provides other types of aid mentioned by Mr. Kasai, but on the other hand, according to Mr. Safi, Iran provides arms and promotes instability in Afghanistan? What is the logic behind this kind of dual role – what is Iran’s incentive in serving two contradictory functions?

[Aminollah Habibi]

I think that Iran needs to acknowledge that there is a national government in Afghanistan. A united, independent, and homogenous Afghanistan could be a natural ally of Iran. Iran has vast potential for development. Perhaps no two neighboring countries in the world share such close similarities as do Iran and Afghanistan – we have a great deal in common historically, linguistically, and culturally. Iran could capitalize on these common grounds, instead of trying to destabilize the situation in Afghanistan.

From a diplomatic viewpoint, we see Iran demonstrating strong support for Afghanistan and its progress. Today, Mr. Ahmadinejad said that Iran will

support the current situation as much as possible. This can be considered a positive step. Iran could capitalize on such points and support Afghanistan. I was going to point out later in my talk that Pakistan, following the incident at the Lal Mosque and the ensuing crises, seems to be headed toward a position accepting Afghanistan's sovereignty and the new developments that are taking place there.

If this is true, healthy competition for investing in the reconstruction of Afghanistan will begin to take shape. Iran undoubtedly has the power to take a lead in this competition and prevent other countries from dominating the situation. The reason for this is that Afghanistan harbors many differences with Pakistan that may not be resolved any time soon, whereas Iran is in a position to capitalize on its positive advantage.

However, certain parties seem to exist within Iran's internal system who operate as a 'government within the government' – these groups appear to be carrying out operations in Afghanistan outside of Iran's diplomatic arena, which are, in my opinion, harmful to the Iranian leaders. Iran's leaders must be aware of this and prevent such issues so that Iran and Afghanistan could retain their amicable and brotherly relations.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

There is also the question of the Taliban government. What was the basis for conflict between the regimes of the Islamic Republic and the Taliban?

[Aminollah Habibi]

The forming of the Taliban in 1994, under the leadership of Mullah Omar, was spearheaded by Pakistan. After the withdrawal of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan and the ensuing civil wars, Pakistan failed to realize its goals in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Taliban was the brainchild of the Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), formed by this organization with the help of the Nasrullah Babar, the Interior Minister under the Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and was able to take control of a large portion of Afghanistan.

During the Taliban regime, for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, Pakistan was provided with an unprecedented opportunity to turn Afghanistan into an Islamist colony. Allow me to point out, Mr. Baharlou, that no other country in contemporary history, that is to say in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has come so close to the "rim of

the precipice of annihilation” as did Afghanistan. The Taliban had come with a mission to rob Afghanistan of its national identity. No Afghan Talib – or any other Talib, for that matter – would ever do this.

You see, they destroyed the Buddhist statues, emptied our national museums, and shipped out the last vestiges of Afghan culture and identity out of the country in order to turn the country into an Islamist colony. Thankfully, this plan did not succeed – yet regrettably, Iran’s passive policy continued throughout this period, though Iran was an observer who could see the destruction of a common heritage before its very eyes as the Taliban was destroying the common civilization of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Iran unfortunately, chose to remain passive.

To this day, in Iranian media and propaganda, we hear from Iranian leaders that Afghanistan opposes the presence of foreign troops in that country who have caused carnage on the Afghan people. I have heard such claims verbatim from Iranian leaders, and here I wish to state, speaking as an Afghan citizen, that had it not been for the intervention of the international community to free Afghanistan from the domination of the Taliban and its supporters, namely the Pakistan ISI, no force could have saved Afghanistan from this terrible crisis.

Mr. Baharlou, we Afghans have a proverb that says, “There is no good that does not come from evil,” and out of the tragedy that claimed thousands of lives on 9/11, was born a blessing that saved an entire nation from the danger of cultural extinction. If it were not for the aid of the international community and action on the part of the United States, Afghanistan was on the brink of downfall and destruction – and Iran, unfortunately, was doing nothing to help as a passive observer.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

In effect, it was the Taliban who declared war on Iran by the brutal killings of Iranian diplomats, is that not so? Meaning, Iran was pursuing a passive yet peaceful policy until the Taliban instigated a conflict. What was the motivation of the Taliban for instigating a clash with Iran?

...What was Taliban’s motive to clash with Iran?

[Aminollah Habibi]

I should say that the issue of the Taliban was strongly influenced by the extremist Salafi movement and its ideology as well as other movements within Al-Qaeda. Not only do they differ from Iran ideologically, they don't even consider the Iranian and Afghani civilizations as valid! In my view, this difference in ideology - the difference between Iran and the West - is not much; it is, for the most part, a political jest as to which group takes control of leadership vis-a-vis its relationship with the West. I think the difference between Iran and other groups such as the Taliban, with the support of Al-Qaeda and Sakhawat's army in Pakistan, is very significant and strange. Since they were located next to Iran, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda could have been a great danger to Afghanistan and, of course, to Iran.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Now, Afghanistan has always fought against intruders, be it the USSR or any other nation. How did Al-Qaeda establish such deep roots in Afghanistan and become so-to-speak, one with the Taliban?

[Aminollah Habibi]

After the forces of the USSR left Afghanistan, the world unfortunately abandoned Afghanistan. This was a mistake that not all western politicians would admit. In the 90s, the civil war exhausted the people. As I mentioned earlier, Pakistan failed to realize its goal of installing its own puppet government in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Taliban was created. Taliban wasn't at first anti-west and didn't have anti-west policies.

Taliban's access to power was rarely met with negative reactions by the major and powerful nations, including the United States. In the early 90s, Bin Laden, who was in Afghanistan after the collapse of the USSR, went to Saudi Arabia trying to block Saudi Arabia's support of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf War. He then went to Somalia, to Yemen, and then to Sudan. From Sudan he again enters Afghanistan in 1996, boarding Ariana Airlines, which was at the time controlled by the Masood forces. He then goes to Jalalabad, taking residence in the late Haji Qadir's area.

From there he establishes his ties with the Taliban, and it is from here on out that events begin taking shape inside the Taliban pushing it out of its traditional context. In general, the Taliban didn't expect much except overlooking the law of Sharia in Afghanistan. It had no ideology regarding Afghanistan. But with the presence of Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden in Afghanistan, the process became radicalized and Taliban directed its

efforts toward opposing the West. It is from here that we see the Taliban becoming the voice for Al-Qaeda or its ally against any independent mind.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

In this regard, as you said, Taliban was a product of Pakistan. On the other hand, did Pakistan have a role in this or was it a contrivance of Mullah Omar to bring the Taliban and Al-Qaeda so close to one another?

[Aminollah Habibi]

No doubt Pakistan had a major role; the Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan is a very complex organization, Mr. Baharlou. This organization directed all of the operations from Kashmere to Afghanistan. In fact, it is a government within the government of Pakistan. It also has no ear for Pakistan's political leader.

It was the ISI that could bring hundreds of thousands of Arab, Chechens, and others from across the world into Afghanistan, including members of the Sakhawat of Pakistan's military forces. In fact, Pakistan's military generals, along with ISI inside Pakistan, would direct combat operations against Afghan resistance groups and people. Such that after the fall of the Taliban, a large number of Pakistani nationals in the Gardez province, in the north of Afghanistan, were surrounded and could only get out with the aid of Pakistan's aircrafts.

Therefore, without doubt, Pakistan was the cause of all of these problems and the director of such scenarios. Even right now, I have no doubt that Pakistan knows where Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are operating, where their centers are located, and where the terrorists' weapon stockpile camps are placed. I think there should be more pressure exerted on Pakistan by the U.S. and the world community. Mr. Musharraf, in a recent meeting, for the first time acknowledged the support for the Taliban from Pakistan saying that he will try to establish trust among us (the Afghan people) and oppose them.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Please tell us more about the ISI organization in Pakistan.

[Aminollah Habibi]

This organization was created by a British officer after the independence of Pakistan in 1947. From that point on, the organization grew and extended

into various centers and branches, including diplomatic and military, observing operation pools of countries within the area. I should say, Mr. Baharlou, that Pakistan itself is not an integrated entity. So it can hardly be called a country. That is because it is composed of various tribes and factions that cannot continue to govern and remain in existence without a heavy handed military power, namely the army and ISI. Twenty-nine or thirty million Pashtunes live on the other side of the border or line of "Durand," a border disputed by Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the time of Pakistan's independence, this tribal area has remained much the same as during the time of the British colonization of the Indian sub-continent. That is why we see this organization growing with a military system or organization dominating all of the power based organizations.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

What is the relationship between this organization and the government of Pervez Musharraf?

[Aminollah Habibi]

ISI resisted the request of the United States to Pakistan in the aftermath of September 11th to go along with its new strategies to remove the Taliban from Afghanistan. As we know, after the September 11th upheavals, Mr. Mahmoud Ahmed, head of ISI, was removed. This was because ISI was in disagreement with him. ISI's relations with the regime and with the political leaders are such that they have the final word. But since Mr. Musharraf is also the head of the Pakistani military, he is able to control and confront this organization and apply the policies of Pakistan's government and military if he has the inclination to do so.

My discussions with western politicians, including Mr. Gary Hart, the former U.S. senator, as well as with British politicians about issues that concern Afghanistan, have typically been that by placing more pressure on Pakistan could possibly destabilize the government of Mr. Musharraf. But U.S. and Afghanistan believe that not to be the case, thinking that Mr. Karzai could be effective. They believed that the reason [Musharraf] failed to put any pressure on ISI and on those independent nationalists going their way, was that because he had found ISI's interferences to have been in the interest of Pakistan's domination of Afghanistan. I therefore believe that Mr. Karzai is able to face up to this organization and can direct this organization towards peaceful relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]
What is Iran's role or reaction to ISI?

[Aminollah Habibi]
As I mentioned earlier, [ISI] is unfortunately independent. ISI acts as an organization within Pakistan but it does so in behalf of the government of Pakistan. Unfortunately, I see a contradiction in the policies of Iran. Since Iran interprets its ideological preferences and policies mainly in the context of its opposition to the West, its views concerning many of these conditions will be unfortunately harmful to its own national interest. You know that when Pakistan's atomic bomb was tested, Iran welcomed that as an Islamic atomic bomb.

But this same Taliban, with the support of the Sakhawat in Afghanistan, killed the Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif. As I mentioned earlier, it unfortunately held reactionary policies. It would be proper for Iran to act aggressively at the time of the Taliban, as did the western [countries]. It could have supported the nationalist forces in their effort towards Afghanistan's independence. This support to the national forces could be provided, given the lingual and religious commonalities. But unfortunately Iran did not do so. Most of Iran's foreign policy priorities are concerned with areas such as Palestine and Lebanon rather than opposing Pakistan's advancements in Afghanistan.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]
Now about an enigmatic personality that appeared amid these events. Only one very obscure photo of this man was seen in western publications. This was of Mullah Omar. How did this Mullah Omar appear and does anyone know what has happened to him?

[Aminollah Habibi]
During the war against the USSR's invasion, Mr. Mullah Omar was active in the Islamic movement of the Maulvi Muhammad Nabi Mohammadi Party and lost one of his eyes during this war. But during the early 90s when the Taliban was shaped, Mullah Omar assumed leadership. Later we see that he established his headquarters in Ghandehar. Of course, there were other people on the side of Mullah Omar such as Mr. Mullah Rabbani, who was a much more moderate individual. But Mr. Mullah Rabbani mysteriously becomes ill and dies. I guess that he must have perished from a different cause. But Mullah Omar remained in Kandahar and directed the Taliban. I

said previously, we later see that the relations of Mullah Omar and Bin Laden developed as Al-Qaeda further dominated the Taliban. It is from here that we see Mullah Omar continuing on with his activities. Mullah Omar escapes following the fall of the Taliban and is now undoubtedly living in Pakistan. And it is said that he is living in an area called Koweit in Pakistan.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Jalal, from Iran, says, "in your program, please mention Ahmad Shah Masoud, Afghanistan's great fighter. He truly struggled hard to unite Afghanistan through his fights against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Even though they cowardly assassinated this great hero, his memory will always remain among the people of Afghanistan." He then asks you who killed Ahmad Shah Masoud?

[Aminollah Habibi]

The late Ahmad Shah Masoud was no doubt one of the most brilliant faces of Afghanistan's resistance against the occupation force as well as the terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The late Ahmad Shah Masoud waved the banner of resistance high until his last moments and fought against foreign interference. Unfortunately, he was killed in a suicide attack by two Belgian terrorists. They had entered Afghanistan using Belgian passports posing as journalists. He unfortunately lost his life in that suicide attack. But without doubt Ahmad Shah Masoud is one of the lasting personalities of Afghanistan's resistance against previous intrusions of the USSR and perhaps by others.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Karim, from Iran asks you, "How much power and resources do Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have in their possession that even after all of these years the U.S. and NATO forces have not been able to overcome them? Is it not possible to destroy these forces with an all encompassing military operation solving all of the problems of these regions, so that Afghanistan could return to peace?"

[Aminollah Habibi]

Concerning the issue of Taliban and its fall, it is important to note that the Taliban is not a powerhouse with public support behind it. It does not even have the backing in the sense of a party organization and does not have the people's influence promoting its party ideology. The Taliban does not

have popular support. In Afghanistan, there has fortunately come about a national accord where all of the various tribes support the present process.

We no longer have any tribal disputes in Afghanistan. However, we should not forget that Afghanistan's changes and turmoil could be entirely defined in the disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. If you recall, Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad, the current U.S. delegate to the United Nations who was the ambassador of this country in Afghanistan - also being an Afghan - was very openly critical of Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan. Our problem is with other people such as Mr. Karzai. The issue had been repeatedly brought up in addresses to the international community. It was constantly said that we do not have a domestic problem; our problem comes from outside. We don't even have a war taking place in Afghanistan. That is a war taking place in a battlefield. That is because no particular person, tribe, or faction in Afghanistan is against the system's security and peace in Afghanistan.

There is no opposition to the presence of international forces in Afghanistan. But there are people outside of Afghanistan who don't want this country to be independent, and seek to turn it into an adjunct country. That's why during the Taliban era they tried to turn Afghanistan into a colony. When the world community wanted to discuss its issues with Afghanistan it had to get directives from Islamabad and bring up their issues with Islam Abad!

We see that even after the fall of the Taliban, at least according to an article I read, Afghanistan's method did change but its ideas did not. Again, they tried to gather those forces, nourish them, finance them, and train them in various camps in Pakistan to reenter Afghanistan and recreate crisis. Unfortunately, our problem is not a domestic problem; it is from the outside. The thing that Mr. Karzai has repeatedly told the world is that Afghans would not kill their own teachers, Afghans would not kill their own Mullahs, and Afghans would not kill their own children and school kids. In the southern parts of Afghanistan, Mr. Baharlou, hundreds of students are deprived of education. In whose interest can this be? Is it in the interest of the Afghan people? No! Unfortunately! Those who come across the border along with Al-Qaeda in order to strengthen these groups have caused these situations, these forces, and such destruction to remain and continue. In my opinion, the Regional Security Front showed, in recent days, that Pakistan has reached this conclusion. The U.S. as well as the

West is now hearing the voice of Karzai, hearing the voice of the Afghans, and know that if they want to confront these issues they must exert pressure on the source of these organizations and prevent them from coming into Afghanistan to create wars that result in further destruction and problems for the Afghan people.

Another point, Mr. Baharlou, is that after the fall of the former USSR and the civil wars, the Afghanistan National Army unfortunately met its demise, and the Afghanistan National Police no longer existed. Civil and social organizations in Afghanistan then disappeared. Afghanistan was in fact left as a society without any organization for defending itself. I think if the international community invests more in the reconstruction of the Afghanistan National Army and the Afghanistan National Police, then in my opinion, Afghanistan can again continue its resistance through such efforts and remove these obstacles.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Now, dear Mr. Habibi, why doesn't anyone learn this lesson from history that although Afghanistan may not be rich materially and economically, all Afghans have a national pride? When you talk with any one of them, they never allow themselves to be a colony to others. Just as the great power of the USSR at that time was unable to make a colony out of Afghanistan. How is it now that these tiny countries have such ambitions, thinking that they can make Afghanistan their colony?!

[Aminollah Habibi]

I should say, Mr. Baharlou that at the time of late Dawood Khan, when he went to Moscow to visit Brezhnev, Brezhnev said to him, "we don't like the western forces or western individuals to come inside Afghanistan working and meddling in the affairs of that country." Dawood Khan got up perturbed, leaving without even waiting to say goodbye to Brezhnev, saying, "I don't allow anyone to meddle in the internal concerns of Afghanistan." His advisor reminded him that it is the diplomatic custom to say goodbye to one another! And in recent days, you witness, Mr. Baharlou, when Mr. Karzai went to Camp David during the past few days, considering all the pressures upon him, with all of the information Mr. Karzai probably had including news about Iran meddling in the affairs of Afghanistan, Mr. Karzai was still willing to adopt a contrasting position against George W. Bush, the U.S. President who is one of the guarantors of peace and security and new

reforms in Afghanistan, declaring Iran a friend and approving the present process.

Under such pressures, he nevertheless showed great stature to take such a position. I also think that Mr. Ahmadinejad's trip was a kind of affirmative reply. That is why... I moved away from your subject somewhat! Please, if you would, return to the subject of your question so that I can respond.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

I think you have answered my question. My knowledge of the people of Afghanistan tells me that Afghanistan and the Afghan people cannot be colonized. My question is that why are there are still countries which have the ambition to make a colony out of Afghanistan and the Afghan people? My question was why do they even entertain the thought of such ambition?!

[Aminollah Habibi]

I must say, Mr. Baharlou, that in the history of Afghanistan this danger has always presented itself in the form of religion. It tried to colonize Afghanistan through a movement called "Taliban." Mr. Baharlou, we proved it impossible. We have a border dispute with Pakistan - the problem of Divrand Line. Even the Taliban was unwilling to officially recognize the "Divrand Line." That is because the Afghan Taliban are nevertheless Afghans themselves! I think that from here, I would like to give a message to Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership who are Afghans: If you are truly Afghan and have Afghan national pride...I read a Pashtun poem and will translate it.

It is said by Rahman Baba, one of our Pashtun poets, "I would refuse your gift of medicine relieving me of my pain if there is a string attached, even a cure from the Messiah!" But how is it that Mr. Mullah Omar and those Taliban who consider themselves Afghan would destroy our schools and create insecurity in the South? In whose interest is it? Is it in the interest of Afghanistan? No, sadly to say! That is why we see they abuse religion in order to sway Afghanistan away from its own interests. Fortunately, the pain and prayers of the orphans of Afghanistan was answered and this process did not succeed.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

I want to ask your viewers to participate in our program. I read a few of their emails, but we will now announce the phone numbers. We will hear from our viewers in the remaining eighteen minutes of this program.

[Interlude]

[Male Announcer]

Please contact the Roundtable program and participate in our discussion. Our number is 202-619-3062; our email address is roundtable@voanews.com; our website is www.voanews.com/persian.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

We have a call from Holland. Holland, please go ahead.

[Caller #1]

Greetings to you, the host of the program, and to dear Mr. Habibi! I have a question to ask of Mr. Habibi. I want to know whether he has heard of a person named Shahnawaz Tanai in the local Afghan news, presently the president of one of Afghanistan's popular parties, called Ghorzang. He had an interview with Ariana Television. I don't know whether Mr. Habibi watched the program.

My question is why is it that a former Afghan minister of defense approves of the same thing admitted by Mr. Mosharaf? His reasoning was that during these last days of talks in Afghanistan regarding the security issues — in the last day, Mr. Musharraf arrived and said that the Taliban must become part of the political force. This matter was also supported by Mr. Shahnawaz Tanai, an individual who had started a coup-de-tat against the government of Dr. Najib in Afghanistan and quite shamelessly took refuge in Pakistan. He too approved of the same matter being the solution for Afghanistan! I would like to hear Mr. Habibi's opinion on this issue.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Mr. Habibi, please go ahead. Please go ahead.

[Aminollah Habibi]

Well, we Afghan people must learn from our previous experiences. I don't think there should be any inhibition for holding discussions with any Afghan person, regardless of his beliefs, as long as he has not been involved in any bloodshed. It is my belief that we must open the doors for discussion

with the Afghan Taliban if they are truly Afghans and have not been involved in killing our children in the south of Afghanistan, in suicide attacks, and in killing our teachers and religious clerics. We must talk with them. They are Afghans, even though we may not share their beliefs and persuasions.

This is extremely important in a democracy. As you see in modern Turkey, after eighty years, an Islamic party assumes power. What is important here is that there is an accepted process in this country; they have accepted the rules of the game. The Afghan people who are Talibs, leftist, or belong to other group, are all Afghans. This country belongs to all of us. They could come and join the process and hold dialogues. I would think this would be the right policy. The actual course of action will be, however, determined by the government of Afghanistan. We have a constitution in place as well as a system which came to being by the people of Afghanistan and was ratified by the Great National Parliament. They could come and join this system and support the new process. We have no problem with that.

I think we should be a bit more lenient and forgive the past. After twenty seven years of imprisonment in South Africa, Nelson Mandela treated his enemies [benevolently] in order to save his country. We could do the same. I wrote an article titled *Karzai: The Afghan Mandela*, which was published in London shortly after the fall of the Taliban. The reason was that I believed that Mr. Karzai could play a similar role, and he has in fact done so to a great extent. I don't even see any problem in his recent stance on holding a dialogue with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, allowing them to join the process.

Those who have committed treason or a crime ought to be brought to trial or to other forms of legal prosecution. But no Afghan should be kept out of the process of peace and security in Afghanistan. We need peace; we need security. Let us be lenient; let us forgive the past and unite. I know that forgiveness is painful, especially for those who have suffered pain and have lost their loved ones in civil wars. Unfortunately, however, you cannot cleanse blood-by-blood. We have no choice but to unite. If we fail to be active, a country will fall prey to others.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

We have a telephone call from Iran. Iran, please go ahead.

[Caller #2]

Hello Mr. Baharlou.

[Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Please go ahead.

[Caller #2]

With my sincere greetings to your dear guest! I have a question for your guest, since he is quite informed about the political history of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and other places. Afghanistan is essentially a piece of Iran. As you know Afghanistan has independence. We hope that its independence continues forever. In view of this fact, what would be Iran's motivation in interfering in Afghanistan? In the case of Pakistan we could say that Iran has non-political and unordinary relations with that country. What sort of issues does Iran have with Afghanistan so as to interfere in its affairs? Does Iran's interference in Afghanistan have to do with fighting the American forces or is it the case that they are after something else? I want to ask your guest to expound on that.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

You asked a very good question. I personally have the same question. Dear Mr. Habibi, is Iran's hidden role in Afghanistan for the sole purpose of fighting American forces. What is Iran's motivation? As you and the caller pointed out, logically it doesn't really make sense for Iran to play a destructive role in this.

[Aminollah Habibi]

Mr. Baharlou, we see a duality in Iran's policy toward Afghanistan. On the one hand, Iran is happy to see that the Taliban is no longer in power and there is a system in place in Afghanistan which is friendly toward Iran. On the other hand, since Iran defines its interests in terms of opposition to the West, Iran is disturbed by the presence of the West in Afghanistan. That is the reason that we often come across information suggesting the involvement of Iranian elements in Afghanistan.

It is not the case that Iran seeks to create problems with Afghanistan. Fortunately, Iran and Afghanistan do not have a problem with one another. As I mentioned, however, in Iran's opposition to the West, it is possible that there are forces in Iran who want to interfere with the works of western

forces. This is not to say that they want the Taliban forces returned to power again.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

We have another question: “Are the people of Afghanistan satisfied with Hamid Karzai’s performance in the past few years? Wouldn’t the situation of fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan have been better if it was handled by someone else?” This was asked by Aria from England.

[Aminollah Habibi]

As I mentioned a few moments ago, Mr. Karzai is one of the most democratic figures in the history of Afghan leadership. Mr. Karzai made a great effort to bring various factions and tribes to his administration. There may have been some mistakes in the system of Afghanistan, which is to say I personally believe that we moved a bit fast toward democracy because the voices of opposition were reflected more than that of the government. Moreover, Mr. Karzai [didn’t have the chance] to act with more power. We needed a strong government in Afghanistan, one that is able to enforce law using the government’s power, fight administrative corruption and drugs, which are of one of the greatest calamities in Iran, Afghanistan, and possibly the entire world. Afghanistan is unfortunately a producer of these fatal drugs and could have encountered this challenge. But it is my contention that given all the challenges and the realities in Afghanistan, Mr. Karzai has done relatively well.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Mehdi from Tehran asks, “I wanted you to ask Mr. Habibi about the extent of the awareness of the Afghani people and government about the semi-Islamic schools in Pakistan. Has there been any thought given to taking action against these schools which are at the root of terrorism?” He further asks, “Are these schools present in Afghanistan as well?”

[Aminollah Habibi]

We do have some [similar] schools in Afghanistan. I wanted to point out earlier that the founders of the Afghan Taliban were studying in the schools of Ghazni and Kandahar even prior to the Communist Coup. But the main schools and the main centers were located in Pakistan. It is said that there are more than 17,000 schools that are active in Pakistan, with a budget equal to that of the Department of Education of Pakistan. They are [funded]

by various sources, including institutions in the gulf regions, etc. The problem is not the schools.

[Before the Taliban takeover] the Afghan schools used to teach Afghan, eastern, and Iranian culture and mysticism in addition to Islamic courses. But unfortunately, once the process became radicalized and movements such as Sepah-e-Sahaba and other similar movements joined the field, this process deviated from its previous course. We see that schools turned into terrorist training facilities. Many of those who are brainwashed are innocent people.

If you remember, there was a fourteen or thirteen-year-old child who was pardoned by Mr. Karzai. They are brainwashed and are sent to kill themselves and injure others. Unfortunately, these schools do exist. But we can't do anything about them since they are on Pakistani soil. It seems like Pakistan has itself experienced the negative repercussions of this phenomenon and seems to be moving in the direction of limiting [the school's] activities, because they are a problem for Pakistan as well.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Let us take a phone call from Iran. Iran, please go ahead. We lost this phone call. We have a phone call from Germany. Germany, please go ahead. There seems to be a problem with this phone. We are pressed for time. [I am holding a letter] by Ghasem from Iran, who asks, "We hear in the news that many of the terrorists and Al-Qaeda members are hiding in a region called Vaziristan and lead their operations from this region. Is Vaziristan an autonomous region, or is it under Pakistani or Afghani control and supervision?"

[Aminollah Habibi]

The Ghabaeli in Pakistan, which was referred to as the autonomous region of Ghabaeli in the northern province of Pakistan, was autonomous to some extent. Pakistan's role in that region was tantamount to that of the British colonizers. We see that once Pakistan came to power, it maintained the same course of action. Mr. Baharlou, I was in Pakistan in the early 90s and lived in Peshawar. When you exited certain segments of the city, there were some fences separating the "Ghabaeli" regions. You could find any kind of weapon there. If you lived in the city, you would at times hear the noise of gunshots and cannons. That's why the field was ready for the development of Islamist and Al-Qaeda forces.

I should point out another very important issue. We should not forget that the Pashtunes living on the other side of Pakistan, which we used to call Pashtunistan, had some nationalist parties who sought autonomy and independence for Pashtuns. They were nationalist parties. Unfortunately, Pakistan never let them express themselves. Islamizing the Pashtun regions in Pakistan was also an effort to fight the Pashtun nationalists. Pakistan has tried to break this nationalism and use the presence of the international forces present here to benefit its own regional policies in Afghanistan as well as Kashmir.

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

I want to thank you dear Aminallah Habibi! I want to thank you for sharing your knowledge and information with us. You clarified many issues, which I did not know prior to this roundtable discussion. Dear Mr. Habibi, I hope we could learn even more from your knowledge and information in future programs.

[Aminollah Habibi]

I want to thank you and Voice of America. Unfortunately, there was not enough time for me to express my gratitude to the people of Iran and Pakistan for hosting our immigrants in the course of the past years. I also have a small favor to ask ...

[Host Ahmad-Reza Baharlou]

Mr. Habibi, unfortunately we are out of time! I hope to be able to talk to you about this matter in future programs. Let us go to Studio 50 for "Shabahang" [Late Edition] and Luna Shad who will start that program shortly. Dear Luna, please go ahead.

[Luna Shad]

Thank you Mr. Baharlou! Greetings to ...

TRANSLATION ENDS HERE