Afghanistan:

As Bad as Its Reputation?

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Articles & Testimony

Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (and the breakaway Chechen government) recognize the Taliban state, but the self-styled Islamic Emirate is a fact of life. Taliban rule began in 1994, when students from madrasas (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan and Afghanistan took up arms to end civil strife and restore order to an increasingly anarchic country. In September 1996, they captured Kabul, and reports reached the West of harsh new restrictions against women and public executions of criminals.

The Taliban (Arabic for "religious students") have now ruled southern Afghanistan for almost six years and have been in Kabul for nearly four. So how goes life in the Islamic Emirate? Are Hollywood entertainers1 and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright2 accurate when they declare the Taliban have driven the country back into the thirteenth century?

To find out, I went to Afghanistan in March 2000. Three months earlier I had met the Taliban's representative in New York, Abdul Hakeem Mujahid, at a Middle East Forum event. I expected him to rebuff my request for a visit, and so was pleasantly surprised by his invitation to visit Afghanistan and see the situation for myself. The Taliban permitted me to travel unescorted and without a translator in their territory during a two-week period. I had the opportunity to speak to government officials and the man on the street. I visited major towns and cities: Jalalabad, Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar (the last being the seat of the Taliban leadership). This was my second trip to the country, having been there in May 1997, when I guest lectured at Balkh University in Mazar-i Sharif, one of Afghanistan's last coeducational institutions, and was forced to leave when the Taliban attacked the city.

Through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan

The two sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border provide a sharp contrast. The former is patrolled by armed officers; the latter relaxed with no weapons in sight. Pakistanis assign foreigners an armed guard to protect against banditry in their tribal territories, while banditry has all but disappeared on the road to Kabul since the Taliban's rise to power. Driving through the Khyber Pass from Peshawar, Pakistan, toward the border, the Afghan driver kept pointing out people on the hills above the road whom he identified as Pakistani Interservices Intelligence (ISI) agents taking down license plate numbers of cars heading to the frontier. (The Pakistani intelligence agency is often accused of supporting the Taliban regime.) At the border post of Torkham, Pakistani soldiers mingled among the hundreds of people walking each way through the border, stopping those who looked obviously Western. I was ushered into a Spartan office to process my visa, and my passport was passed back and forth until, some twenty minutes later, it was stamped and I was allowed to proceed.

On the Afghan side of the border, in contrast, there were no soldiers and no weapons in evidence. The Afghan passport office, basically an empty room with a table and ledger, was about 100 yards down the road. The officer—a jovial, elderly man—stamped the passport with hardly a glance at the visa, welcomed me, and let me continue on my way. (When I left Afghanistan, the office was unlocked and unattended; I ended up having to go to his apartment to

interrupt his breakfast.) The Afghan half of Torkham bustles, though it is basically a one-road town. Money-changers have stalls openly stacked with piles of currency—local afghanis, Pakistani rupees, U.S. dollars, Iranian rials, and United Arab Emirates dirhams—displaying an openness unmatched even by money markets in other relatively crime-free Muslim countries like Kuwait. Despite dire poverty, the money-changers clearly are not afraid of snatch-and-grab robberies. Although on January 13, 2000, thieves stole approximately $200,000 from Kabul's money market, all indications point to an inside job, perhaps by the Taliban guards, rather than a random act of violence.3 Other shacks along the road served meat, bread, and tea. Many shops operate out of old American truck trailers and train cars. A dusty field had become a parking lot for taxis, trucks, and buses, drivers and their friends each seeking out passengers to fill their vehicle before the ride onward to Jalalabad and Kabul. Perhaps Afghanistan doesn't have a strong government, but first impressions indicated at least a functional status quo.

Jalalabad, forty-six miles from the border, is the first major Afghan city along the road to Kabul. The seat of many international and Afghan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), it is the capital of the subtropical Nangrahar province and an important trading center. Prior to the arrival of the Taliban, the road from Torkham through Jalalabad and onward to Kabul was infamous for its various warlord and bandit robberies and checkpoints; now the ride was surprisingly smooth. Huge trucks, laden with petrol, tires, and smuggled hardwood, rumble through town.

Opium

While U.N. anti-narcotics programs flourish inside the towns, bright red opium blossoms bloomed outside. In October 1999, the U.N. Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention released a finding that Afghanistan would produce 75 percent of the world's opium in 1999, although Taliban officials hotly deny this. According to U.S. anti-drug officials interviewed in Peshawar, the Taliban benefit from the opium production in two ways: The first is direct trade, smuggling the dried opium gum through Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran to Europe and the Middle East, where it is converted into heroin. The second way is by taxing farmers, who gladly grow opium because it is a far more lucrative crop than wheat. While some label Afghanistan a failed state, its efficient taxation suggests that perhaps Western governments should not allow such a designation and should instead hold the Taliban accountable for activities in the country. Moreover, the Taliban have brought stability to Afghanistan and recreated a central government, capable of taxation, infrastructure improvement, and war.

But this year's drought in Afghanistan has had a severe impact on the opium crop, especially in the south where production is reportedly greater. It has been so severe that Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Muhammad 'Umar closed the Kandahar bazaar on the morning of March 7 so that the population could go to the mosques and pray for rain (but much of the population instead seemed intent on drinking tea in the shade). The poor prospects for the opium crop combined with allegedly uncontrolled currency printing by the United Front opposition have caused the currency to plunge from 54,000 afghanis to the dollar in mid-March to 75,000 a month later; although the rate has since rebounded to 63,000. Oddly enough, the lack of a functioning national bank and state economic policy means that a currency black market does not exist, and Afghans (except, I am told, in Khost), accept their own currency alongside Pakistani rupees and U.S. dollars.

Mercenaries and Terrorists

Much of the opium grown in Afghanistan does not directly affect the United States. However, the revenue raised has a corollary impact. Afghanistan is a desperately poor country engaged in a brutal civil war that, according to Doctors Without Borders, has cost 1.8 million lives over the past two decades. Of the more than 100 Afghans I interviewed inside the country, I found not a single person who thought the civil war would end soon. The most optimistic answer I got was, "maybe in four years." It is opium money that helps fund the Taliban's war effort. While Iran reportedly donates equipment to ethnic Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Mas'ud's forces in the north, and Pakistan's ISI allegedly supplies the Taliban, there is always a need for more equipment and more men.

In particular, Arab mercenaries are important to the war effort. I did not go to the front line, but I was on the lookout for non-Afghan mercenaries and foreign soldiers among the Taliban. Guarding the foreign ministry, I found, were Taliban soldiers who were clearly foreign. They did not speak Dari nor, according to Afghan friends, Pashto, but rather Urdu, the language of Pakistan. Unlike Afghan Taliban who were perfectly polite and hospitable, these were condescending and rude, spat out orders at passersby while making a point of waiving their weapons around. (Afghan frustration with foreign mercenaries resident in the country was clear.) I also made a point of talking to money-changers. In Jalalabad especially, they dealt in Arab currency, and Arabs in kafiya were wandering around the Jalalabad market, many more than could possibly be employed by a nongovernmental organization.

Clearly, the Taliban not only receive funds from Islamic radicals overseas but also use foreign volunteers to press their cause. When a friend sought a visa in Pakistan a week before I did, he met five Sudanese heading into the country; they did not appear to be educated enough to be working for the U.N. or any of the other NGOs. Storekeepers in Kabul told me about the foreigners—mostly Punjabi Pakistanis—coming to fill out Taliban ranks. Julie Sirrs, a former Defense Intelligence Agency official, visited Mas‘ud’s territory in March and interviewed foreign prisoners-of-war held by the north, mostly Pakistanis, but also some Yemenis and Chinese Uighurs. Afghans would point out Pakistani Talibs along the road. Most said there were fewer around than during the previous year, although they added that their numbers were on the increase again. Rumors circulated in March that 5,000 Pakistani religious students and volunteers had just crossed the border to supplement Taliban ranks along the front line. Most likely, the rumors were exaggerated but had a basis in reality. These mercenaries may not be an effective fighting force compared with Western troops, but they are gaining practical experience and skills that they can perhaps sell after their time on the Afghan front is over. As Lebanon found with Palestinian fighters in the 1970s and 1980s, flirting with foreigners for short-term military gains can haunt domestic stability and international relations for years afterward.

Terrorist training camps are a more serious issue than mercenaries. It is difficult for the Western media to address this issue since journalists by law are not free to travel unescorted and few Afghans willingly answer questions honestly within earshot of a government translator. However, my unescorted snapshot of the country convinced me the issue is real. In Kabul, I asked shopkeepers about foreigners they encountered. One bookseller said he regularly saw French, Swedes, Arabs, Pakistanis, and Filipinos. When I asked him what the French were doing in Afghanistan, he said they were doctors. When I asked him what the Filipinos were doing, he said they were in the country for a jihad.

A few kilometers outside Kabul is Rish Khor, reportedly a base for the Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HUM), a militant Pakistani group dedicated to wresting Kashmir away from Indian control. In December, members of the group allegedly hijacked an Indian airways flight to Kandahar, killing a hostage, winning the release of their leader from an Indian jail, and escaping.4 Kabul residents in the neighborhood of the camp could attest to strict checkpoints and continued activity at the camp, in sharp contrast to Taliban denials. The camp reportedly shut its doors in June, but it is anyone’s guess for how long; or the Taliban may simply have moved its occupants to locations where they will draw less attention.

Many Afghans also talked about Usama bin Ladin’s homes in Jalalabad, though on my last day in Kabul, one friend insisted his father had just returned from Kandahar and was "100 percent sure" that bin Ladin had been there the previous week. In reality, bin Ladin probably does not stay in the same house twice, but the fact that so many Afghans believed they knew where he was and always placed him near the populous eastern cities indicates that bin Ladin is not nearly so isolated as the Taliban claim. Ironically, while the Taliban regime refuses to extradite him to face charges in the West, Taliban Information Minister Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal declared, when demanding Iran return escaped anti-Taliban figure Isma‘il Khan, "When somebody commits a crime and escapes to somewhere else,

he should not be given shelter."5

Rebuilding a Ruined Land

More than a decade after the Soviet withdrawal, red rocks still mark mine fields, some within a meter of the roadside outside of Jalalabad and around Kandahar. Afghan and British NGOs continue to make slow progress in their struggle to clear mines, but 700 square kilometers of minefields still remain. Contrary to popular belief, most of the remaining mines are not the result of the Soviets, but rather of the mujahidin themselves, who scattered anti-tank and anti-personnel mines without recording locations during the internecine warfare that followed the Soviet withdrawal.

After leaving Jalalabad, the road progressively worsened. Kabul is less than 100 miles away and more than 4,000 feet higher. A 1977 guidebook advised leaving two and a half hours for the trip but today it takes almost six hours. Past Kabul, the road deteriorates even more. Bridges are destroyed, the road washed out, and rocks strewn across what was once an American-built masterpiece. Along the roadside are rusting hulks of tanks and armored personnel carriers, some ironically now sporting stenciled advertisements for "Duckhams Motor Oil." Men, women, and children make a show of shoveling dirt and pebbles into potholes when any vehicle approaches. As cars pass, they drop their shovels and hope for a 500 or 1,000 afghani note (a cent or two).

However, not everything in Afghanistan was destroyed, and the Taliban are making some effort to improve infrastructure. While sections of Kabul were heavily damaged, these have been photographed by international reporters far out of proportion to the total destruction. Much of Kabul is undamaged, save for some bullet-pock marks in the facade. The Kabul Museum has been looted and destroyed, but the National Archives, housed in a former palace more than 100 years old, remains unscathed. I arrived in Kabul on March 3 in the midst of a snowstorm. Opening the curtains of my hotel room for my first view of Kabul, I was surprised to see lights flickering to the horizon. While electricity is not available for a full twenty-four hours a day, it was consistent (for example, in Ghazni, electricity would work between 6:30 p.m. and 5:15 a.m.). People rely on city-wide systems rather than individual generators; Kabul is largely powered by a hydroelectric plant several kilometers outside the city. While store fronts promise satellite phone services even in small towns like Mukur (halfway between Kabul and Kandahar), people in Kabul mention the resumption of international phone service to the city through land lines. New buildings in Kabul are identified by local men as commercial centers and hotels, and, between Ghazni and Kandahar, the Islamic Emirate is actively smoothing portions of the road and building a new bridge. In Kandahar, a huge new mosque is being built in a main square to replace a cinema, since razed.

The Taliban alone are not responsible for all development. Water largely comes from pumps built by a Danish NGO. Tens of other NGOs manage and supply hospitals, schools, and emergency relief. Various United Nations agencies such as the U.N. Development Program and U.N. Children's Fund, are active, but aid workers contend that with the exception of the World Food Program, they are inefficient and ineffective; many foreign U.N. workers do not even speak the local language. Foreign aid does have an impact, and organizations like the women's issue-oriented and American-run Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan , and Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), with low overhead and large staffs of practitioners have immediate payoff in health and education. Afghans are aware of European aid because Swedish, British, and Danish names are attached to many visible and practical projects like de-mining operations, well-digging, and medical clinics, but the United States gets little if any public credit for its donations to the United Nations. Unfortunately, the European Union may slash funding to NGOs in the Taliban-controlled portion of Afghanistan in protest against Taliban policies. The bureaucrats in Brussels are misguided if they believe that European funding for the SCA girls' schools allows the Taliban to divert money to the war effort; closed girls' schools will, unfortunately, not receive funding from the Taliban.

Markets are filled with produce, meat, tea, rice, and other goods. Canned tomato sauce comes from Iran and Coca-

Cola from Turkmenistan. Merchants told me their rice was from Pakistan and their tea from Sri Lanka. Electronic goods come from Pakistan. While some might label the trade smuggling, border guards and Taliban check posts along the road to extract taxes and tolls. Subsidized bread stands and bakeries dot the cities. Hunger and supply are separate issues, though. In a culture without supermarkets, each seller is not considering whether they should price their own product so that someone can get a complete meal. Accordingly, meals become either potatoes or rice or beans or, on rare occasions, meat. Merchants complain that business is bad and that many people cannot afford to take advantage of the availability of foodstuffs. In Jalalabad, I bought a liver, bread, and tea lunch for the equivalent of 17 cents, but most Afghans can no longer afford meat. When Afghans expected me for a meal, I ate rice, meat, yogurt, turnips, and oranges. When they did not, I had greasy potatoes and bread.

Human Rights

The Feminist Majority exaggerates the pre-Taliban progress of Afghan women by using pre-Taliban Kabul as an example of women's progress throughout Afghanistan. Using pre-civil war Afghan numbers to describe the demise of women's rights by nature is inaccurate, since the former communist regime massaged statistics to demonstrate its progressive achievements. Furthermore, Kabul was always more progressive and cosmopolitan than the rest of Afghanistan. For example, the Feminist Majority's "Stop Gender Apartheid" campaign still reports that women cannot leave their house unless accompanied by a close male relative. However, women in every city I visited walked around in pairs. While the Feminist Majority claims that women have been banished from the work force, this is only partially accurate. Even in the countryside, I saw rural women working in the fields and with livestock. The situation is bad, perhaps worse than anywhere else in the Muslim world, but it should be addressed with precision.

While the Taliban have prevented vast numbers of girls and women from receiving an education, a token Taliban-funded medical school class for women has opened in Kabul. The question then should become why classes have not opened in other towns and cities. Restrictions continue to occur, but NGO-operated girls' schools are not truly clandestine, as they are often described. Some foreign employees helping to coordinate girls' schools both in and outside of Kabul told me not only of obstacles placed in their way by specific Taliban authorities, but also of assistance they have received from other Taliban government officials. The problem is that there are not enough schools (for men and women) to satisfy demand while Taliban government money continues to be wasted on a war effort. However, while the Taliban regime as a whole must be held accountable for its actions, it would be a mistake to portray the movement as monolithic. Rather, the Taliban include uncompromising radicals, more pragmatic radicals, and bureaucrats whose adherence to the movement's beliefs extends not far beyond the ends of their beards.

It is also untrue that all women wear burkas all the time to cover themselves from head to foot. They do so largely in urban areas but, even in cities, older women and girls up to young teens show their faces and, sometimes, a bit of hair. (The more religious among the Taliban men also cover their face, clutching their cloaks in their teeth like religious women in Iran.) During my previous trip to areas in Afghanistan not yet controlled by the Taliban, many women dressed the same way, although in the university, women did not cover their heads or faces. The problem should not be reduced to the fact that in Afghanistan the women wear the burka, for many would choose to anyway; the problem is that they are forced to do so. The situation of women in Afghanistan is perhaps worse than it is anyplace in the Middle East (though Saudi Arabia and Yemen are close), and the Taliban should be confronted, but exaggeration allows the Taliban regime to dismiss all Western complaints as based on propaganda. And the Taliban do have a point when they ask why few Western governments or celebrity wives went out of their way to condemn the rapes and assaults which characterized the streets and checkpoints before the Taliban disarmed gangs and warlords, including those affiliated with the government then in power.

The same holds true for executions. Human Rights Watch, for example, commented in their 1999 World Report that,

"Every Friday, thousands were pressured to witness public executions and punitive amputations in Kabul's stadium."6 Afghans (including self-described opponents of the regime) said that while the Taliban does carry out public executions, sometimes with shocking cruelty, they are not conducted regularly and probably occur less frequently than in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Massacres which mandate further investigation did occur in 1997 when the United Front took Mazar-i Sharif after a brief occupation by the Taliban and in 1998, when the Taliban took and held the northern city. However, they by no means occur regularly. And while the frontline mirrors an ethnic divide between primarily Tajik, United Front-held areas, and the Pushtun-dominated south, Afghanistan has not become polarized to the extent that Kosovo has. Even in the south, Tajiks and Shi'i Hazaras live and work among Afghans of other ethnicities.

In general, life has relaxed a bit since the initial onslaught of the Taliban. One NGO worker explained that the Taliban officer in charge of "Prevention of Vice" forces and responsible for the worst excesses of the Taliban's restrictions in Kabul had been sacked for watching pornographic videos in his office. In contrast to just a few years ago, young boys and girls play together in playgrounds, boys fly kites, and men play volleyball and soccer in parks. I watched teenage and younger girls march around a city block in Ghazni playing drums, something not imaginable in countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen. One Afghan man explained, "Girls are children, too." I heard banned music, even in Kandahar (though I was in a taxi that had its cassettes confiscated and destroyed days later): in Ghazni, I learned how to buy an illegal television. While men have to wear beards, many do illegally trim them, albeit extremely carefully.

Is the Honeymoon Over?

The Taliban were initially welcomed in many of the towns they occupy. They promised security against warlords and rampaging bandits and an end to war. In the short-term, they delivered enough to win them a hesitant welcome from people in areas they came to occupy. However, there are signs the honeymoon is over. Without prompting, people in Kabul complained of burglaries perpetrated by the Taliban. Taliban patrols zoom through Kabul streets scattering pedestrians. One woman related how her husband was killed by a Taliban pickup truck that did not even bother to stop. As war continues (there was a surface-to-surface missile strike in Kabul when I was there, and I saw tanks heading north toward the end of my trip), the economy worsens, and people become more desperate, such a traffic accident could easily set off a rebellion. After all, it was a car accident that sparked the intifada in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

Already, there are signs that the Taliban's grip is becoming more precarious. People still speak of an armed uprising against the Taliban in Khost, put down only when Mullah 'Umar sacked the governor. Parts of Nimruz province, in the southwest of the country near Iran, are no longer under Taliban control. In late March, there were rumors of an aborted uprising in Jalalabad. By and large, Afghans want peace, education for their children, and food on the table. Many Taliban officials realize this and advocate a more pragmatic line, although one often obstructed by the uncompromising Mullah 'Umar. The more pragmatic among the Taliban realize that if they cannot deliver peace and economic growth, then the population may decide that the Taliban's restrictive pronouncements are not worth their patience. People can be expected to trade freedoms for only so long before deciding that the Taliban cannot deliver the peace and security people crave and the economy requires. As one Kabul resident explained, "We've already had twenty years of war. Who can wait another twenty years?"

Culture

Afghans I met across all levels of society were hungry for freer expression of culture. Upon finding out that I taught at a university in America, a book store owner ushered me into his backroom (posters and postcard racks obscured the doorway) to show me his collection of used books about all sorts of history, literature, and art. When the caretaker of the National Archives learned I wanted to see his collection of old documents, he arranged a meeting between myself and the minister of culture to secure permission and then proudly guided me around the now-deserted, but largely

intact repository.

Across the country, Afghans of all ethnicities and religious bents regularly tune into an education soap-opera sponsored by the British Broadcasting Corporation's Afghan Education Project. However, these same Afghans are suspicious of Voice of America (VOA), interpreting the allegedly different slants of the Pashto and Dari news services as evidence of an American plot to divide Afghanistan ethnically.

The thirst for knowledge opens an opportunity for more moderate Middle Eastern states. Despite their dislike of VOA, Afghans remain starved for education and news, while the Taliban thrive on ignorance. The same Talibs enforcing religious law receive their only education in madrasas where they absorb anti-Western ideology in the name of a narrow and extreme interpretation of Islam. If moderate Middle Eastern states created a "Voice of Islam" radio to broadcast debates with real Islamic scholars discussing the role of religion and the state, the place of women in Islam, and the nature of jihad, then perhaps earnest but uneducated religious students would learn that adhering to Islam and accepting the Taliban's edicts are not necessarily one and the same. The Qatar-based hard-hitting, independent al-Jazeera television network has demonstrated that independent and pan-Islamic media can exist, at least in some parts of the Middle East.

U.S. Policy Considerations

Traveling not long ago through Iran and Tajikistan, I found that everyone I met believed that the United States supported the Taliban. Inside Afghanistan, though, Taliban officials accused the U.S. government of supporting the other side. With all factions convinced that the United States supports their enemy, even the traditional friendliness of the Afghan people toward America and Americans (a friendliness reinforced by U.S. aid to the mujahidin during the Soviet occupation) cannot be expected to last.

In part, the muddled and often contradictory interpretations of U.S. policy reflect the nature of politics in the Middle East, but they also follow from a public diplomacy vacuum among U.S. policymakers. The muddle-through approach to Afghanistan of the Bush and Clinton administrations has failed. Only after the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania attributed to the Taliban-hosted Saudi financier Usama bin Ladin did the Clinton administration pay more than cursory attention to the Afghan problem. However, despite a five-hour visit to Pakistan by Clinton and a longer May visit to Pakistan by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering, Islamabad has little reason to bow to U.S. pressure or fulfill any pledges knowing that the Clinton administration will soon end. It will be up to the new administration to decide on an approach to Afghanistan.

The issues that divide Americans and the Taliban are many and are real. On April 28, 2000, Pickering identified four American concerns in Afghanistan: terrorism, narcotics, human rights, and ending the civil war. (While the Taliban may pose a long-term threat to a failing Pakistani state, Far Eastern Economic Review correspondent Ahmed Rashid's thesis that the Taliban pose a long-term threat to Central Asia is alarmist and not particularly realistic given the cultural differences between former Soviet Central Asia and the largely Pushtun Taliban.) Pickering's concerns were reflected in the State Department's 1999 Patterns of Global Terrorism report which concluded that "the locus of terrorism directed against the United States continued to shift from the Middle East to South Asia" and accused the Taliban of exacerbating the problem by sheltering international terrorists like Usama bin Ladin. So what can the United States do?

For the United States, Usama bin Ladin is perhaps the outstanding problem; the August 1998 bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and subsequent efforts on his part, present an obstacle the U. S. government cannot ignore. The Taliban can perhaps be pressured to send bin Ladin to a third country. After all, the precedent has been set with the Libyans accused of the Lockerbie bombing and, more successfully, with the Kurdish terrorist leader Abdullah Öcalan, who had long been sheltered by Syria until Turkey put firm resolve behind its demands. But

it must be remembered that the Taliban receive substantial benefit from hosting bin Ladin. His troops support the Taliban's fight against Ahmad Shah Mas'ud in the north. While they number perhaps only in the hundreds, interviews with prisoners-of-war held by Mas'ud indicate Usama bin Ladin controls the most dedicated fighters and the only ones who are in practice willing to fight at night. The loss of bin Ladin's financial support and men could put the Taliban at an immediate disadvantage among portions of their frontline. This means that Kabul will not sacrifice such a benefit if the U.S. government then treats other issues (such as human rights) as an impediment to relations.

Washington, then, must decide whether it is willing to do business with the Taliban once the bin Ladin obstacle is removed; if so, this must be made clear to Taliban officials. Conversely, Washington may feel that the Taliban's oppressive restrictions upon women and their collusion in the opium trade merit their remaining an international pariah. If so, Washington should pressure the Pakistani government to end its adventurism in Afghanistan or risk isolation. Pakistan must stop its citizens and the refugees it hosts from returning to Afghanistan to continue the Afghan civil war. Such a policy will not be easy for Washington—the sacrifice of long-term interests for short-term stability is always a temptation, even if it has regularly proven to be a failure (as in the case of using Syria to impose stability in Lebanon).

If the decision is made to oppose the Taliban, then Washington must decide whether to do business with the Iranian- and Russian-backed Mas'ud. On many issues, especially counter-narcotics and security issues, U.S., Iranian, and Russian interests converge; there is good reason to cooperate with former enemies. Indeed, a cooperative relationship with Iran in Afghanistan may do more for advancing U.S.-Iran rapprochement than high-profile political initiatives and a so far largely rhetorical dialogue of civilizations.

The worst option for American policymakers would be to allow the Afghan quagmire to continue without any clear direction. The 1998 embassy bombings and recent attempted terrorist operations allegedly perpetuated by operatives loyal to Usama bin Ladin indicate that Afghanistan cannot be forgotten, for in an age of globalization, isolation does not contain chaos within a country.

NOTES

1. Sharon Waxman, "A Cause Unveiled; Hollywood Women Have Made the Plight of Afghan Women their Own— Sight Unseen," The Washington Post, Mar. 30, 1999.

2. Eric Malnic, "Albright Decries Low Status of Women," Los Angeles Times, Oct. 6, 1999.

3. The New York Times, Mar. 5, 2000.

4. Jane's Intelligence Review, Mar. 1, 2000.

5. Agence Presse France, Mar. 30, 2000.

6. 1999 World Report, Human Rights Watch, at http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/asia/afghanistan.html. ❖

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