

Tea (and Prejudice) with the Taliban

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Articles & Testimony

Afghanistan rolls out the carpet for a Jewish visitor, but it is importing a virulent strain of anti-Semitism along with radical Islam.

I drank tea with Habibullah Fouzi, first secretary at the Afghan Embassy in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, one of only three countries that recognize the fanatic Islamic regime. "You're Jewish," he observed half-jokingly, handing me my visa. "Don't you realize that you're our enemy?"

So began a two-week study trip to Afghanistan. I was surprised by the willingness of the Taliban leadership, which controls 90 percent of the country, to allow my visit. They're often antagonistic to the West and, diplomatic politeness aside, increasingly anti-Jewish. But when I met him in New York, Abdul Hakeem Mujahid, the Taliban's representative at the United Nations, assured me that my religion would not be a problem. "We want to live in peace with all the peoples of the world," he explained. And he was as good as his word, according me the right to wander unescorted through Taliban territory. In Afghanistan, where I interviewed 120 people, I met little or no grassroots anti-Americanism. But the Taliban do appear to be importing from their allies and mentors on Pakistan's fundamentalist fringe a virulent strain of anti-Semitism, a foreign ideology, onto an Afghan template once known for its hospitality and warmth toward all guests.

Near the Ministry of Planning in Kabul, a group of Pakistani-educated Afghan Talibs offered me tea and asked me my nationality. When I told them I was American, one who identified himself as coming from the mountainous northern region of Badakhshan launched into a diatribe. "Why does America support the usurping Zionist entity and oppress all Muslims?" I answered that America supports Israel, but is also friendly with many Muslim countries, like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Yemen.

"These countries are puppets. They are not Islamic," he countered. "We must destroy Israel. The Jews want to take over the whole world." I asked him if he had ever met a Jew, and he said no. How had he learned that Jews wanted to take over the world? He read about it, he replied, in a "History of the World" book in his madrasa (Islamic seminary).

In the West, Afghanistan is portrayed as a bastion of Islamic radicalism, more strict in its application of Islamic law than even ultra-conservative countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. On October 3, 1999, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told a women's conference that "the Taliban seems determined to drag Afghan women back from the dawn of the 21st century to somewhere closer to the 13th."

As if to confirm this, one Afghan student confided to me that his younger brothers and sisters have become experts at recognizing their veiled mother in a crowd just by her ankles.

But among the Afghan people, weary from two decades of devastating war and ongoing civil war that have claimed 1.8 million dead and created 2.6 million refugees, I seldom encountered hostility as an American. The greatest difficulty I had was drinking 31 cups of tea in one day so as not to insult the hospitality of any host. Few raised the issue of the August 1998 United States cruise missile strikes on alleged terrorist training camps near the eastern Afghan town of Khost, but the topic of Osama Bin Laden, the terrorist chieftain accused by Washington of

masterminding the blowing up of two of its East African embassies earlier that month, was ever present.

One afternoon in Kabul, I was drinking tea with a merchant in his shop. A Taliban pick-up truck, with loudspeaker blaring, roared down the street ordering shops to close so that everyone could go to the mosque and pray. True to what I learned was a daily routine, several friends rushed in: a student, a printer and a shopkeeper, an ex-policeman from the former Communist Najibullah regime, and an elderly man who spoke very broken English and said he had worked in the Ministry of Education before the 1979 Soviet invasion. The shopkeeper locked the door, closed the blinds, and poured tea for everyone.

When our host explained I was American and that I would be going to Jalalabad, the closest major Afghan city to the Khyber Pass and Pakistan, the former policeman jokingly asked if I would be staying at Bin Laden's villa there. As with everyone else I met across Afghanistan, none of them had heard of Bin Laden before the missile strikes, and no one particularly cared if he was extradited or not. They all just seemed sorry that his presence in their country had become an obstacle to U.S. aid.

Among merchants, shopkeepers, teachers, taxi drivers, day laborers and grave-diggers, the refrain remains, "Why has the U.S. forgotten us? Doesn't the U.S. know how friendly we are? How come they don't help us?" Despite the Taliban's anti-Western rhetoric, few have forgotten the almost \$600 million in U.S. aid granted the mujahadin resistance fighters during the 10-year Soviet occupation that ended in 1989.

In every town I visited, Afghans were curious about the U.S. and wanted to emigrate. One young Kabul resident, not realizing I was Jewish, even said he would consider converting to Judaism. "Then the Taliban would try to kill me and the U.S. would have to let me in," he laughed.

Most of the Afghan Talibs I met were shy but friendly. Even in the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban heartland, many asked me to take their photographs, although that is banned. One quipped that I had an impressive beard for one destined for eternal hellfire as a non-believer. He too had no reason to suspect I was Jewish.

But many Talibs have studied in seminaries run by the virulently anti-Western and anti-Semitic Pakistani Jamiati Ulema Islam party, across the border in Baluchistan or the Northwest Frontier Province. Their spiritual and political leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, surrounds himself with Pakistani advisors.

Much of the anti-Semitic literature available in the Middle East and Europe is published either by Iran's Islamic Propagation Organization or by Pakistani publishing houses. Many Pakistani newspapers and magazines regularly publish anti-Semitic articles and tracts.

The Taliban recruits Pakistani volunteers to aid in its fight against Ahmad Shah Masood, an anti-Taliban warlord and hero of the anti-Soviet resistance, in the north. According to Julie Sirrs, of the U.S.-based Argus International political consulting group, who visited Taliban prisoners-of-war held by Masood in March, 10 percent of the approximately 1,200 were Pakistani.

One day I struck up a conversation with a group of Talibs guarding a military facility. They too told me they wanted to fight Israel and kill Jews. They made no distinction between anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Americanism. After all, "the U.S. is controlled by Jews," one religious student explained to me. None in the group had previously met an American Jew like me, let alone an Israeli.

I asked how they had any right to engage in jihad against Israel, if the Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians, and Jordanians all chose to negotiate peace. They again responded that anyone who negotiated with Israel was not a real Muslim. When pressed, one explained that his religious teacher had taught him that true Muslims should undertake jihad to kill Jews even if the "puppet" states made peace with Israel.

This new anti-Semitism is not limited to the lowest-ranking Talibs just out of religious school. On April 9, Foreign

Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil blamed the tense relations between Afghanistan and Iran on Zionist plots.

The venom directed toward Jews is ironic, given the tradition that many Afghans have Jewish roots. While conclusive proof is scant, there is anthropological evidence to support the idea. Sir John Malcolm, Britain's ambassador to Persia in 1801, cited oral tales linking the Afghans to the Babylonian exile of the Jews in 586 B.C.E. Further, when studying the Koran, Pushtuns, the dominant ethnic group in tribal Afghanistan, often rock, as do religious Jews but few if any other Muslim communities.

In the streets of Kabul and the markets of Kandahar, I asked Taliban officials about the Pushtuns' Jewish roots. Younger Talibs had never heard such things and reproached me for asking a ridiculous question. Often, their elders intervened and put them right. "Yes, a long time ago our people were Jewish," they said.

The growth of anti-Semitism is also ironic given the demise of Afghanistan's Jewish community. Legend aside, what is now Afghanistan once hosted prosperous communities in cities such as Balkh, Ghazni, Herat and Kabul. Chroniclers like Moses ibn Ezra and Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Afghanistan more than 900 years ago, mentioned that the Jews of Ghazni alone numbered in the tens of thousands. At the time of the Soviet invasion, only 70-80 Jewish families remained. Today, only a half-blind 59-year-old man, Itzhak Levi, is still there in Kabul (Jerusalem Report, January 3, 2000).

Irrational hatred toward Jews threatens to become worse now that, according to Pakistani press reports, the Taliban have arrested an Iraqi and a Syrian Kurd on charges of spying for Israel and America. But the venom is not reserved for Jews. The Taliban, who project themselves as the defenders of the faith, have to present all enemies, even their rival in the north, the orthodox Sunni Ahmad Shah Masood, as being enemies of Islam. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism become useful, if familiar, tools as the currency slides (it plunged by 10 percent in one day in April), crops fail and missiles still fall from time to time on Kabul. ❖

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