

British-controlled Taliban threaten regional war

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

If coordinated efforts involving the United States, Russia, and Iran are not undertaken immediately, there exists the danger that the escalating crisis in Afghanistan may explode into a regional war. Were that to occur, all hopes for completing the project for Eurasian transportation infrastructure, through a cooperative regional effort, would be dashed.

The crisis itself has come into being over the past several years, as the result of the insurgency of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, which insurgency has been actively supported financially, militarily, and politically, by forces which claim they are committed to infrastructure development of the region. As has been documented, it is the Union Oil of California (UNOCAL) group, in agreement with its Saudi partners of Delta, which have backed the Taliban insurgents, arguing that, once they have unified the country, plans for a multibillion-dollar pipeline from Turkmenistan across the country into Pakistan, could be carried out. Pakistani support for the Taliban has been massive, from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the military, and increasing layers of the political establishment. Another, unstated interest in sponsoring the Taliban warlords, is defined by the lucrative narcotics production of the country. As documented recently by the United Nations drug control program, 80% of the heroin invading Western markets, is produced from opium grown in Afghanistan.

The tragic irony inherent in the war, is that the integration of a post-war Afghanistan into the economy of the Eurasian continent, would indeed require massive infrastructure development, especially rail connections, but also pipelines of the type UNOCAL is proposing; however, by opting for a marcherlord force like the Taliban, allegedly to “unify the country,”

these international sponsors have unleashed an irrationalist, Pushtun tribal, essentially fascist force, which could very well turn into a Frankenstein’s monster, eluding the control which the Pakistanis et al. believe they exert. Furthermore, the original creators and continuing behind-the-scenes backers of the Taliban, are the scenario-spinners of British geopolitics, like the infamous Lord Avebury, who are sitting back, amused, at the total chaos about to engulf the region, which, they fervently hope, will eliminate any and all plans for economic development of Eurasia.

Iranian-Afghan tensions exacerbated

It was on Aug. 8, when the Taliban conquered the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, that tensions with neighboring Iran flared up. Entering the city, the satanic Taliban militias began systematic massacres of the civilian population. According to reports verified by UN and other humanitarian aid officials, the Taliban slaughtered up to 6,000 ethnic Hazaras, who, like the Iranians, are Shiite Muslims. According to reports of diplomats who had fled the city, “Young men over 16 were brought out of their houses into the streets and had their throats slit in a ritualistic killing.” Debriefings of surviving Hazaras family members, provided further reports, that “younger boys had both hands chopped off at the wrist.” Children were mutilated, bodies were left to rot in the streets, and anyone seeking to flee, was summarily shot.

At the same time, the crazed Taliban invaders stormed the consulate of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and kidnapped the ten diplomats and one journalist from the national press agency IRNA, who were there. Although the Taliban would systematically deny that they had abducted the diplomats,

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesmen presented proof of the contrary. At the moment of the Taliban's forced entry into the consulate, a number of diplomats were on the telephone with Tehran, and the conversation, reporting on what was unfolding, was recorded. It was only on Sept. 10, that Taliban spokesmen admitted that the Iranians had been killed. They claimed that the men had been shot by fighters "acting on their own," i.e., rogue elements not following orders of the central command. It was mooted by the Arabic daily *Al Hayat*, that such an order could have come from Pakistani intelligence officers, who are active inside Afghanistan, with the Taliban.

The Iranian government, which had from the outset declared sponsoring Pakistan to be responsible for the killings, demanded that the assassins be identified and promptly brought to justice. At the same time, Iran lodged official complaints with the United Nations, denouncing the illegal abduction and later murder of their diplomats. The fate of the remaining two Iranians abducted remains unknown.

Military show of force

Inside Iran, public outrage at the killings, and at the broader ethnic cleansing operations by the Taliban, against ethnic Shiite Hazaras, exploded, and calls for retaliatory action were voiced. While three days of official mourning were declared, Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami denounced the atrocities, in a message read at Friday prayers on Sept. 11. "The primitivity, irrationality, and adventurism of the uncouth Taliban has been the cause of enormous catastrophe taking the innocent and defenseless lives of thousands and thousands of Afghan children, women, and men," it read.

At the same time, Iranian military maneuvers along the Afghan border were proceeding, in an impressive show of force. Following the official news that the bodies had been found and would be sent back to Tehran, the government announced that another, larger round of maneuvers would take place, involving massive numbers of troops. The commander of Iranian ground forces, Brig. Gen. Abdolali Purshasb, announced on Sept. 12, that the maneuvers would engage 200,000 troops, beginning on Sept. 23. The exercises, he said, were motivated by "intensified insecurity on our eastern borders." He added, "Our policy is defensive, but we are ready to answer any move by the Taliban with full power."

The conflict escalated significantly on Sept. 13, when the Taliban pursued their three-pronged attack on Bamiyan, the last remaining Shiite stronghold, and intense fighting took place. Again, reports of house-to-house searches, ethnic cleansing, and streets littered with bodies, reached Western press outlets.

Despite the increasing calls for military intervention inside the country, the Iranian government maintained a resolute position, to increase pressure on the Taliban through its large-scale military exercises on the border, in an effort to force the Pakistani sponsors to facilitate a diplomatic solution,

in the interests of avoiding a regional conflagration, in which there would be no winners. The U.S. State Department seemed to acknowledge this Iranian approach, when department spokesman Jamie Rubin expressed "understanding" for Iran's reaction to the killing of its diplomats, while calling for restraint on all sides.

The military threat mounted by Iran had to be credible, and it has been. The Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, explicitly warned the Taliban on Sept. 13, of possible war. "I have so far prevented the lighting of a fire in this region which would be hard to extinguish," the highest Iranian authority stated, "but all should know that a very great and wide danger is quite near." He went on to specify, that war could "only be prevented [by] forcing Pakistan's army to stop intervening in Afghanistan and obliging the leaders of the Taliban group to submit to logic, to abandon actions which lead to a catastrophe and to make up for their past errors."

Taliban spokesman Wakil Ahmed initially responded with bravado, telling the Afghan Islamic Press, "Iran must know that if the soil of Afghanistan is attacked, we will target Iranian cities." However, Taliban leader Mohammad Omar then told the same agency, that he wanted to invite Iran "to come and sit with us for negotiations to take [place] under United Nations law." This was followed up by a request presented at the UN by the Taliban deputy representative there, for talks mediated by the UN. Pakistan also made an about-face; initially, the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Jehangir Karamat, responded to the Iranian words and moves, saying, "Events across our western borders could lead to a situation disastrous for Islam." Then, however, it was reported that the Pakistani government had ordered its borders to Afghanistan sealed. The action along the 1,200 kilometer border was explained, according to the Pakistani daily, *The Dawn*, as a measure to block the "entry of extremist elements from Pakistan into Afghanistan to receive training in guerrilla warfare and use of sophisticated weapons." Furthermore, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif offered to mediate between Iran and Afghanistan.

The more likely reason for these Pakistani moves, could be found in initiatives taken by the U.S. government. On Sept. 15, State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin told the press, "We've made it clear to all parties, Pakistan included, not to interfere through logistics or other assistance, not to inflame or make the situation worse." Rubin characterized the situation as "very tense," pointing to the "tens of thousands of troops" along the border, which he said the United States was monitoring "very, very closely."

More explicit indications of diplomatic progress emerged on Sept. 17, when news was released that a meeting would take place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) session in New York, which begins on Sept. 21. On Sept. 16, the UN Security Council had denounced the killings of the Iranian diplomats as a flagrant violation of international

law, and demanded that Taliban release any remaining Iranians it held. It was then reported, that Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Kamal Kharazmi might be at the same meeting of representatives of the UN-sponsored mediation effort, with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The UN initiative to bring peace to Afghanistan includes representatives of Russia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the United States, Pakistan, and Iran. It has been strongly supported by Iran, which was instrumental in mediating a cease-fire inside the country, prior to the Taliban's assault on Kabul two years ago. If talks do take place during the UNGA, and the United States exerts political pressure on its regional ally Pakistan, to withdraw its own military, intelligence, and weaponry from the conflict, a solution can be found for some coalition government inside Afghanistan which represents all major ethnic components of the country.

The regional cauldron

In the absence of a timely negotiated solution, backed by the United States, the danger of regional war will grow. At present, virtually all the neighboring states are on alert. Following the Taliban's capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, the Russians, who had been deploying 25,000 troops to protect the lengthy Tajik border with Afghanistan, dispatched 10,000 more. The Uzbek government closed its relatively short border with Afghanistan.

Members of the Northern Alliance of anti-Taliban forces travelled to Iran for consultations, among them the official President of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani. The talks centered on the possibility that Iran, without entering the war directly, might provide the same kind of military and logistical back-up to the Northern Alliance, that Pakistan has been providing to the Taliban.

All political factions in Iran have reportedly recognized the fact, that any direct military intervention into the neighboring country—whether a mooted surgical strike, or a more extended engagement—would be suicidal. Regardless of Iran's considerable military strength and demographic superiority, any military conflict would erase the considerable achievements the country has made over the past seven years, in establishing thriving economic relations with the Central Asian Republics, through its consistent diplomatic efforts to build continental infrastructure links, in transportation and pipelines. War with Afghanistan would effectively take the Eurasian Land-Bridge project off the agenda, and replace it with chaos and disintegration. Iran's relations with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the two leading Islamic backers of the Taliban, would be obliterated.

More broadly, Iranian direct engagement would precipitate more overt Pakistani involvement. Russia and Uzbekistan would not be able to maintain neutrality for long, particularly as the Taliban insurgents move farther northwards toward their borders. China, which has a strategically important border with Afghanistan, would be threatened.

Out of these considerations, cool heads have prevailed among the Iranian leadership. Warnings, issued by the Uzbeks, Saudis, and others, to the effect that entering the conflict would be a trap for Iran, have been redundant, since Tehran has from the onset been fully aware of the entrapment danger.

The British, again

It comes as no surprise, that those who are fanning the flames of regional conflict, are the same British geopolitical circles which created the Taliban and its synthetic, pseudo-Islamic ideology, in the infamous *madrasas*, or schools, in the refugee camps in Pakistan. (see *EIR*, Aug. 21). The British press has been spinning out wargames scenarios, explicitly provoking conflict. In the London *Daily Telegraph* on Sept. 16, unidentified defense attachés in Islamabad were cited, who claimed that Iran had a war plan ready. The alleged plan, foresaw Iranian takeovers of the provinces of Nimruz, Herat, and Farah, which were historically part of Persia. Author Alan Philips noted, that if this were to occur, the Taliban's allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia would be drawn in, as would Iran's allies, including the Central Asian Republics, Russia, Turkey, and India. India, Pakistan, and Russia, he declined to note, possess nuclear weapons.

A day later, it was the *Times* of London which outlined the foreseeable disaster for Pakistan, were the conflict to expand. "Pakistan's backing for Taliban," it said, "could lead to the country's greatest catastrophe," as the Taliban's fanatic belief in their invincibility "might persuade it to turn its attention to the old dream of creating a region called Pushtunistan, taking in Pushtun tribal areas in both Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Finally, the *Times* stoked the fires of regional war, by raising the issue of Kashmir in this context. It reported on a study in *Jane's Defence Weekly*, a British military intelligence outlet, according to which Pakistan was "disarming local Kashmiri insurgents" in India and planned to replace them with a new formation of mercenaries composed of Taliban militias. This group, the Harkat ul Jihad Islamee Tanzeem, made up of 30-40,000 Taliban, would then embark on the "decisive phase" of confrontation in Kashmir.

Such scenarios are anything but fanciful. As numerous Pakistani intelligence and military officials have publicly stated, in the wake of the country's first atomic tests, they are intent on "solving" the Kashmir problem, the way they are "solving" the Afghan problem: by sheer military force.

The British intent, as revealed in the report by *Jane's Defence Weekly*, is to unleash chaos through regional war, throughout Central Asia. One look at recent developments in the Great Lakes region of Africa, gives a taste of what London has in mind. Recognition of this clear and present danger, must provide the impetus to the parties meeting under UN auspices—without the British—to define and implement a political solution to the Afghan drama.