An Interview with Said Tayeb Jawad

Embassy of Afghanistan

As a candidate, Barack Obama campaigned on the principle of reaching out to our adversaries, and he has done so most notably with Iran. If Mullah Omar were to extend an "open hand" to President [Hamid] Karzai, what should and would be President Karzai's response right now?

STJ: President Karzai has publicly said that he is ready to talk with Mullah Omar. We think that reconciliation is an important part of fighting insurgency in Afghanistan. Of course, the issue of reconciliation, especially with a group such as the Taliban—with a very dark past—is complex not only for President Obama or the U.S. Government. Even internally in Afghanistan, there are different approaches, ideas, and opinions on how to reconcile with the Taliban and what should be the extent of the compromises to be made. If we have full military power at our disposal—Afghan security forces or international security forces—we should continue the military pressure on the terrorists and other groups. But if everyone is in Afghanistan half-heartedly and with limited commitment, then we have to be realistic and seek every possible way of ending the war and violence in Afghanistan.

What do you think of the concept of justice and reconciliation in terms of taking legal steps against those guilty of atrocities in the past?

STJ: When you have limited resources at your disposal in a postconflict country like Afghanistan, you are forced to choose stability over justice. There is no other option: first, because you do not have the enforcement capability; second, you do not have the proper institutions to deliver justice. If you don't have the proper institutions to deliver justice, what you

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deliver will be revenge, not justice. However, in the long run, if you do not deliver justice, the stability will not last.

What about international institutions for transitional justice? For example, in the case of Rwanda, an international tribunal was established—the same with Yugoslavia. Would anything like that be welcome, acceptable, or viable in Afghanistan?

STJ: I think the solution in Afghanistan will be more like South Africa—people should acknowledge what they did to their own people, the atrocities they have committed, and then decide jointly to turn the page. There has been enough violence and revenge in Afghanistan. We should look forward to a new opening, a new tomorrow based on hope, forgiveness, peace, and stability.

Given the significant perception of fraud in the recent election and the justified doubt about President Karzai's ability to distinguish between his interest and Afghanistan national interest, what steps do you think the president should take to reassure the international community? Should he state that he will not seek another term when this current term ends?

STJ: First, the perception in the media and the perception among the international community do not comply with the reality on the ground. There has been a lot of intentional propaganda against the political leadership of Afghanistan, unjustifiably. He is an elected leader of Afghanistan; he has a difficult job; he is facing a brutal enemy; he has limited resources at his disposal; and he is the best partner that the West can find. Therefore, he should be supported. As far as seeking another round, no, this is not possible. The president has no intention of doing that, and the Afghan constitution will not allow this to take place. We have to make sure, however, that in the remaining 4 years, we work together to focus on our common enemy of terrorism and work closely to achieve our shared objective of peace and prosperity for the Afghan people.

Afghanistan is in the process of trying to establish a consolidated, independent state. In the past, Pakistan has played an interventionist role in Afghanistan, and if you agree with the Pakistani author and journalist Ahmed Rashid, he has argued that the Inter-Services Intelligence **[ISI]** ***in particular has been extremely intrusive in Afghanistan's internal politics. What is your assessment at this time of the role of Pakistan—the overall net role of Pakistan in Afghanistan's consolidation?***

STJ: First, on the national consolidation of Afghanistan, Afghanistan has been a nation for 2,000 years. Pakistan as a state is younger than I am. These are two different distinctions. We as Afghanistan are a strong nation with weak state institutions. What we need to focus on in Afghanistan is to build state institutions and improve the capacity of the state institutions to deliver services to our historically strong nation.

There need be no fear of disintegration of Afghanistan, despite the atrocities of the Taliban, the civil war by the mujahideen groups, the Soviet invasion; we never had a scenario of Afghanistan splitting into different states. In fact, when I was helping with drafting the new constitution, while we were discussing possibilities of even a federal state, people at the grassroots level were very much against it

because they would consider that a way of weakening national unity. So people are jealously maintaining the national unity of the country. But what you need to do—to establish—is to improve the capacity of the government to serve the people.

The role that Pakistan can play is to recognize that terrorism is a threat to the *region*—both to Afghanistan and Pakistan. We will not have stability in Afghanistan unless Pakistan fights extremism and terrorism sincerely, both in Pakistan and in its cross-border infiltration. And vice versa. We have to work with Pakistan closely. This is our closest and best transit route to the outside. Pakistan could benefit from stability in Afghanistan to access the Central Asian market, and the flow of energy from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan would benefit the region. So we are like twins; our destiny is intertwined. What we are hoping is that all institutions in Pakistan work with us to fight against our common enemies and to work together to achieve our mutual goals of financial prosperity and regional economic reintegration.

Do you believe that the ISI and those people in Pakistan who are considered extremists are continuing to support the Taliban in Afghanistan?

STJ: Unfortunately, the biggest phobia or fear in Pakistan is India. So sometimes in order to confront India or reduce India's influence, extremism is regarded as a tool of policy. We know that this is a dangerous route. Countries in the region—in the world—have taken that path and have paid a heavy price. We see today in Pakistan that the Pakistani people are paying this price through terrorist attacks. Cities such as Lahore, which were centers of civilization and were known for their libraries and bookshops, are now grounds for suicide bombing and roadside bombing. This is unfortunate, and the people and the civilian government of Pakistan have realized this.

Could you discuss the ramifications for Afghanistan of the U.S. decision in 2003 to invade Iraq?

STJ: We are grateful for U.S. assistance. I think the United States came rightfully to Afghanistan, as demanded by the Afghan people and supported by strong international consensus, to fight an enemy that was a threat to the Afghan people, to the region, to the world. It is questionable that the same kind of threat existed in Iraq. We were hoping when the invasion in Iraq took place that the United States would have enough resources to handle both crises, but a lot of attention and resources were diverted to Iraq. The consequences of the continued conflict there also made, by oversimplification and analogy, the rightful Afghan struggle to fight terrorism look similar to the situation in Iraq. So we did pay a price not just in terms of reduction of resources and attention from the United States, but also in that the global perceptions changed to a certain degree—a just and fair war in Afghanistan was compared to Iraq.

Do you believe that if the United States had not diverted those resources, if it had "kept its eye on the ball" in Afghanistan, the problems we are facing today in Afghanistan, the insurgency, could have been headed off much earlier?

STJ: Certainly. If we had had adequate resources to fight the Taliban and terrorists from

the beginning, in a decisive way, we would have permanently resolved the threat. The fact was that the Taliban were not beaten, defeated, or eliminated; they were pushed aside, and military operations stopped when they were pushed aside into the countryside or into Pakistan. If we had continued that fight in a resolute way to completely defeat them and put adequate pressure on the countries in our neighborhood and the region to stop the ideological, financial, and logistical support of the Taliban, we would have not had to pay the prices that we and you are paying today, in terms of military operations and stability costs in Afghanistan.

One of the "solutions" that U.S. forces have concluded will help is the so-called population-centric counterinsurgency. Do you think that will have the effect of defeating the insurgency?

STJ: It will deliver a sense of security, at least to major urban centers, and frankly, it is much more difficult to create a sense of security and stability in big cities than in the countryside because the nature of the terrorists and our brutal enemy is that they use suicide bombing and roadside bombing—tactics that have a lot more psychological impact in more populated areas and big cities. In the countryside, it is less evident.

Talking with my Afghan military folks in Afghanistan—particularly those who fought the Soviets and now are part of our Ministry of Defense—I clearly hear that they have their doubts about the effectiveness of focusing on delivering security only in the big cities. They have fought on the other side, as insurgents too, and they have said to me that if, for instance, you remove a military post on a mountaintop or on the remote roadside in the countryside, then you are making it easier for the terrorist to reach a city in 1 or 2 hours instead of traveling 2 or 3 days over mountain passes to avoid those outposts.

They come to the cities, and they are a lot more lethal in the cities. The point is that if you leave roads in the countryside unattended and these roads are used to supply the terrorists, suicide bombers, and others, then access to the city is much easier. That is what I hear from my generals. That is what I hear from my former anti-Soviet fighters. Once you leave the countryside undefended, the Taliban will not just sit there; they will come to the cities.

So you see this as a risk of the urban population-centric approach?

STJ: The Taliban claim more control of the countryside, and they force more people to join near them. This gives the enemy a bigger playing field. Also, any time and every time that they succeed in bringing a car full of explosives or a suicide bomber, the impact is much greater.

The other side of the coin, if you will, is the so-called civilian surge. In addition to a surge of military personnel, President Obama has proposed a surge of civilian personnel who are diplomatic and development professionals. After nearly a decade of American presence in Afghanistan, do you think that Afghanistan's citizens will welcome civilian Americans?

STJ: Definitely. If Americans, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], civilians, or the military came with the mission of helping and protecting Afghan people, they are welcome. Why wouldn't they be? My country is poor. Our only hope is that we will build

Afghanistan through our partnership with the rest of the world. However, if the civilian surge means bringing an expert with a laptop into our ministry or into a remote province, the impact will be limited. We can use the same resources to recruit qualified Afghans. There is capacity in Afghanistan today. However, there is limited capacity of the Afghan government.

The reason that fewer Afghans are working for the Afghan government is that the international organizations, the donors, and even Afghan businesses can afford to pay a lot more. Fortunately, the economy is growing, but Afghans are making a lot more money by forming their own construction companies instead of working for the Ministry of Rural Development. So I think a combined approach of seeing a capacity or competency surge by Afghans, along with bringing a limited number of technical assistants, would work best. I think the civilians coming to Afghanistan should come with a specific, long-term mission of providing technical assistance. They should not push aside or compete with Afghan institutions. And you are right; if they elbow Afghans out, there might be resentment. Overall, better plans of recruiting, empowering, and enabling Afghans will be less expensive, more effective, and a lot more sustainable than bringing a consultant who comes in with a laptop, writes a report on a laptop, and leaves with a laptop. You should invest more in building Afghan human capital.

Do you think that the Afghanistan security forces will be able to assume the full responsibility for national security before the withdrawal of U.S. forces or the International Security Assistance Force?

STJ: They are completely willing—the security forces, the Afghan government, and the Afghan people—to do so. However, their ability to do so effectively depends on two factors. First, to what extent their professional capacities are being built. For instance, we are making significant progress by building the Afghan National Army, and they are fighting well. At the same time, the army still depends heavily for their transport and movement on heavy firepower and air protection, and for their surveillance and intelligence on international sources. We have to build these capacities as part of the army—especially air transport, heavy firepower, close-combat air force, surveillance, and intelligence. That is one factor.

The second factor is how serious the threat remains in Afghanistan. The threat coming to Afghanistan has its roots in the neighborhood, in the region. So if you are able to reduce the amount of support that the terrorists and Taliban are getting from the countries in the region, then our job will be easier. But as long as that support continues, not only Afghans, but our allies in the United States and the NATO countries, will have a tough time defeating this menace. So if we work closely and sincerely at the regional level with our partners, with our neighbors, and if we truly build the capacity of Afghan security forces—meaning army and police—and equally important, the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver services, we will be able to take full responsibility. It is not just enough to have capable soldiers and police forces; the court system should be functioning, the school system, the clinics. So here we are talking about truly enabling the Afghan government to deliver services so that the people can say, "Yes, there is a difference. If the government is here, I am better off." If people do not reach the conclusion that the presence of the government means betterment in their life, they will be neutral; they will take sides as it is

convenient to them. It is the Afghan government's responsibility to show them that if you take our side, we are there to serve you. That capability and these resources are still not there.

You mentioned the relatively successful performance of the Afghan National Army. What about the Afghan National Police? Why are we doing so much less well with the police, and how do we remedy that?

STJ: First, we had the wrong approach. We had the so-called lead nations concept. Germany was the lead nation in building the police force. This was the wrong concept. The lead nation to build anything in Afghanistan is Afghanistan. Everyone else is in the supporting role, and we—Afghans and the international community—should not feel that if the Germans are doing it then we are off the hook; they're on it; we are not. That is what happened. And Germany started with a systematic approach of building police appropriate for peacetime. I remember well engaging with German authorities back then and even our Minister of the Interior; they were talking of giving to the Afghan police force only batons and pistols. It is a noble idea of a civil police, but the enemy is coming at them with RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], and the police cannot just issue a citation that says "you're wrong being here"; they'd get killed right away. So it was the wrong approach.

And second, there are very limited resources. Since we were initially offering something like $70 per month, we had to enlist whoever showed up, and a lot of people that showed up had no qualifications or had ill intentions. They used the gun and the uniform to make themselves rich. Now this is changing. We are paying better. There is a better training system in place. But still, building police overall is tougher than building the army because in the police force, you have to recruit locally. If you do not have a sense of stability in the locality, in the region, the police force performance will be impaired because the enemy, the terrorists, know who they are—who is their brother, who is their father, who is their uncle—especially in a tribal society. So they get this message, and it says, "Look, we know you are working for the police, but don't forget that we know where your father lives, too." As far as equipment and uniforms, the police are doing much better, but as far as professional training, a lot more investment needs to be made—first to recruit better officers, and second to train them adequately and equip them even more properly.

Is there more the international community could be doing on that particular front?

STJ: We are short 3,000 trainers right now. Of course, you, especially your NATO partners, can send more trainers.

Are Pashtunwali and Afghan Islamism compatible with democracy as we understand it in the United States and Europe?

STJ: Beginning in the 18th century, a certain degree of romanticism and fascination with the Afghan culture and history started, mostly by authors and researchers who came from Europe with colonial powers and troops. Pashtunwali is a code of conduct not different from codes of conduct in Senegal or Colombia, or an Indian tribe in Montana. It is completely compatible with values of freedom, and it is based on equality and dignity.

Frankly, what you mention as Afghan Islamism is the most moderate reading of

Islam that existed before the Soviet invasion. Historically, Afghanistan has been a country where mysticism, which is the most humanistic way of looking into Islam and religion, had strong roots. Even if you look at the prominent Afghan leaders such as President Mujadedi, he's the leader of the Mujadedi, or Naqshbandiya, mystic or Sufi order; so is Pir Gilani, another Afghan leader. So Islam in Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion, before the infusion of extremism from outside and the arrival of the Arabs and other foreign extremists, had the most humanistic, the softest approach that you could imagine.

But yet, are they compatible with democracy? Again, we should look at this question as human beings. If democracy means going to bed without fearing the state secret service or the invasion of an armed group, if democracy means being assured that when your wife gives birth, she and your newborn will survive, if democracy means hoping to have access to basic government services, this is what every human being deserves and demands anywhere in the world. That is our nature as human beings. We want to have a life where we do not have to fear the state police or a terrorist group coming in the middle of the night into our home and ordering us around and asking us if we had prayed that night or not. So the values of freedom, the values of a sense of personal security are universal. Who would want the happy occasion of his wife giving birth to a child turning into tragedy because there is no clinic and his wife is dying? These are the rights to basic services and basic freedoms that people demand. Democracy is a value that is demanded naturally by human beings everywhere. If we think that there are some people who are naturally happy with terror or tyranny, this is racist. That is not right. That is against the nature of human beings.

Furthermore, you are not in Afghanistan to build democracy. We know. But you and I together are in Afghanistan to prevent the imposition of tyranny. We have no option. We have to prevent the imposition of terror and tyranny, and the only way that we can do it is to give a voice to the people, and when they have a voice, when they ask for something, deliver for them. The credibility of democracy is in our ability to deliver. It is not just that you allow a person to express his or her wishes through the media, through the free press or television—we have done that. But the other part is when they say, "I do want a clinic," "I'm fed up with insecurity," "I want a capable police force," you and I should be able to deliver. Otherwise, we undermine this process of building pluralism.

In Afghanistan, we are spending hundreds of millions of dollars empowering people to elect their member of parliament, but that parliament has no say about how the money is spent in Afghanistan, about where the money goes. Imagine you are the delegate of a poor district in Afghanistan and I as a poor Afghan farmer or a poor Afghan teacher come to you and say, "I'm proud I've elected you as my delegate to parliament. We need a school in our village," and you tell me, "Go see the commander of the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] or the director of USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development]." So what will be the level of my confidence in the political system that we've established? Why should I go to vote next time if I see that my government and my representative neither have the information about where money has been spent nor the authority to direct these resources?

But there is also the question of corruption—another aspect of democracy to me is fairness. There have been allegations

of endemic corruption in Afghanistan—that some people, some families, some members of families are getting very rich and building very big houses outside of Kandahar, whereas many people are not benefiting from the transition that Afghanistan is struggling through.

STJ: That is right and this is a serious challenge that we have to examine to find out why it is happening. Why is it that, for instance, an official of the government is getting rich with a salary of $100 or $200 a month? Why is it that the international community is giving a contract to the governor of a province? Nepotism is wrong. Why are a lot of the criminals that have formed the so-called security companies getting paid extensively?

So I absolutely agree with you that corruption adversely affects the life of every Afghan as much as waste affects the perception of state institutions and state-building in Afghanistan. You as a taxpayer have the right to ask why the cost to build a school in Afghanistan is $1 million when an Afghan can build it for $200,000. We have these examples that Afghan nongovernmental organizations and individual Afghans have gone and rebuilt their school in their village for $80,000 while next to it, exactly the same school is being built through the international contracting system for $600,000. That is the challenge that we face. Corruption is a serious problem in Afghanistan. You have mentioned some big corruption—of building these huge houses. That is equally as bad as the petty corruption. The life of an Afghan is sometimes more impacted by the $5 corruption by the police because he has to deal with it every day, as much as the big political corruption.

Here we need to work together. We have to. On our part, we have started the process of registering the property of every government official. We have to take the next step—and the laws are right now being changed—not only to register but ask, "Where did you get this?" "What is the source of this income?" We have just conducted the trial of a former minister accused of taking bribes under new, strong anticorruption laws [designed] to strengthen the mandate of the Anti-Corruption High Office. There is no way to justify waste with corruption or corruption with waste. Both of them are equally bad and both of them create a perception of impunity. I know that there is increased pressure on the contracting system in Afghanistan and that is very welcome. This has been, unfortunately, the case. Most of the post-conflict countries are suffering from this kind of problem because of the big infusion of money coming into the country, and in Afghanistan the matter is even worse, with narcotics, which generate a lot of money.

What is the strategy that you would propose for dealing with the narco-economy that has become such a huge part of Afghanistan's economy?

STJ: That's an excellent question. The international community and the Afghan government together at the beginning did not actually make fighting narcotics a high enough priority in the struggle against terrorism. I think that fighting narcotics and corruption both should be part of the mandate of fighting terrorism because both endanger the lives of Afghans and people in the region and the world. We will only win the fight against terrorism if we deliver the safety and security of the Afghans. If we say that we are here to kill some foreign terrorists who are operating in the mountains, they say, "It's not my fight. I'm not interested." If we fail

to protect the interests of the people, we lose the fight. From the beginning, the mandate for fighting terrorism did not include fighting narcotics. That was a mistake.

Second, a lot of resources—billions of dollars—were spent on eradicating poppy fields. Mistake. Second major mistake. You cannot fight narcotics with eradication. The way to fight narcotics is to prevent cultivation. Once it is cultivated, it is too late. If you eradicate, you push the farmers into the hands of the terrorists. If you do not eradicate, part of the proceeds and money will go to the terrorists. So how we prevent cultivation is by giving an alternative to the farmers. People are not criminal by their nature. If you give them a dignified option, they will take it. But if you push them against the wall, they will kill to survive. Everyone will do this—it's not just in Afghanistan but anywhere. If you and I have to keep our family alive, you would probably break the law if needed. And so, the way to prevent cultivation is to give an alternative. That alternative on one hand could be some new crop, let's try soybeans in Afghanistan. Noble idea, not such a bad idea. However, people have been growing things in Afghanistan for 2,000 years. An Afghan farmer knows exactly what grows in his province, in his village. What we need to do is to add value to this crop by building processing facilities, cold storage, cold transport, and opening new markets for our agricultural products. If people are growing pomegranates in Kandahar or grapes in the Shomali plain north of Kabul, we should be able to transport that to Dubai, to Frankfurt, to Moscow, to somewhere where the value of that increases—or turn it into pomegranate juice instead.

Of course, alongside that we need to keep the pressure on by focusing on interdiction and removing some of the big criminals. The real money in narcotics is in trafficking. It is not in cultivation, it is in trafficking. That is where the value is added. But to answer your question, the best strategy is really to prevent cultivation by providing alternatives to the farmers.

I like the way that you started out with the connection of corruption, terrorism, and illicit drug trafficking. It sounds like what you envision is a holistic approach that realizes their connectivity. Is that a fair description of your comprehensive approach?

STJ: Absolutely. I grew up in Afghanistan. As a child, we did not have a problem of addiction or corruption in government or society. If it were some corruption of paying 5 Afghanis, which is like 10 cents, to get some certificate from some government office, then that kind of corruption might be going on in many other countries; it might be going on in Afghanistan, too. But we never had someone paying $200,000 to a judge. That kind of money did not exist in the entire village where I grew up. We never heard of it, nobody could have seen, actually, 200,000 or 2 million Afghanis. As I grew up, I never saw that much cash in one place. So the issue of corruption is related to narcotics and to insecurity and to these huge infusions of cash through narcotics, through neighboring countries, through development assistance.

We can fight these phenomena only if we assure the Afghan people that what we are doing is to improve their lives. In the fight against terrorism, one of the problems is that we have lost the interest of some of the Afghans. Everybody welcomed the United States when they came into Afghanistan—with open arms—and the Taliban was pushed aside quickly,

mostly with the assistance of the Afghan people because people's anticipation was that the whole world was here to help us out.

But then, when gradually the mission was defined that no, really, it is al Qaeda and certain groups who pose a threat to the region and to the world, Afghans felt that, "Well, my life is endangered by poverty, by the fact that the warlord is taking away my land or my shop. So al Qaeda is a threat. I never liked them, but it does not impact my life on a daily basis." It was not their fight. They became indifferent and said, "If you kill them, if you take them away, good for you, but it's not my fight. If you can help me against the local warlord, if you can help me build a clinic, then I'm with you. If you can't, then good luck." We have to turn this around, so with any decision that we make, any military operation that we conduct, Afghans should see a benefit to themselves that says, "Yes. If you come here and you stay in my village and make sure that the Taliban and criminals are chased away, and you build a school and a court system, I'm with you." And they will be with us. We should show them that if they are with us, they are better off. But if our police are abusive like the terrorists, why should a guy stick out his neck for any of us? You will be pragmatic. When the Taliban is in his village, he is with them. When we come with the military operation, he changes sides and is with us. But he is not going to get himself killed for us, unless we convince him that we are here to serve and protect him and his village permanently.

What should we focus on over the long term? Over the 50-year time span?

STJ: Investing in people and supporting your friends, moderate Afghans. So much was invested in elections, then there were allegations of fraud. A lot of the money that was spent in Afghanistan to finance these plastic boxes, or put them in a helicopter, should have been invested before that in moderation. Empower women's organizations. Empower a young Afghan student from Kabul University who says I want to be the president of the country or in parliament. Go with him and support him and say, "That is a good vision. I want you to be president."

The United States is doing a great job of funding processes and institutions such as elections and a police force. But invest more in building Afghan human capital, the Afghan professional capacity to run and manage these processes and institutions. Support Afghan civil society, support moderation, and support the new generation of young Afghan leaders.

People love the United States for the values it stands for. But still, Afghans need assistance, but assistance should not be giving them cash. Invest in moderation, invest in people, strengthening the culture and political parties in Afghanistan. That is the way to fight warlords, not just replacing one warlord with another. PRISM