

Interviewee: Syed Iftikhar Hussain Shah (LTG, ret.), Governor of the Northwest Frontier Province

Date: October 25, 2003

Location: Governor's House, Peshawar

Participants: Other NWFP officials, including the general commanding the Frontier Corps. Americans were Zelikow, Scheid, Hurley, and CG Ferrill.

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Beginning with pre-9/11 history, the Governor described the emergence of the Taliban as a reaction to the warlord-dominated disorder in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. The border area was in turmoil from Jalalabad to Herat – rapine and murder with no control. No one would share power. Rabbani was the president and Hekmatyar was his prime minister, but Hekmatyar was not even permitted to enter the city of Kabul. There was no leadership in the Pashtun belt. So people near Kandahar decided to act and the Taliban gained momentum.

Pakistanis were unhappy with the Northern Alliance government in Kabul. It was aligned with Russia and Iran, and was talking to India. Pakistani representatives met with Masood and others in Kabul. Both sides had their grievances. So when the Taliban took power, Pakistanis breathed a sigh of relief.

Asked about historic Pakistani support for Hekmatyar, the Governor said such statements were absurd. That was Masood's accusation. The Pakistanis had been even-handed in their support for Masood.

When the Taliban came to power the war continued. Pakistan attempted to find a rapprochement to end the fighting, working with Saudi Arabia. With the Taliban in charge, Pakistan hoped for improved conditions. These hopes were disappointed. But there was no nexus then with Al Qa'ida; people in Pakistan had never even heard of Al Qa'ida back then. The Taliban turned to Al Qa'ida once they were isolated. Pakistan slowly distanced itself from the Taliban, over issues like the Bamiyan statues. Then came 9/11.

The Afghan situation was now returning to that of the earlier era. Again the border area was in turmoil from Jalalabad to Herat.

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The governor acknowledged that the Taliban and Al Qa'ida might be regaining some momentum in light of these conditions, based in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's policy was: (1) Pakistan soil would not be used by any foreign element; (2) If they learn a foreigner is in the tribal areas they will track him down; (3) Tribals who harbored such people were being punished; and (4) All jihadi organizations were banned.

To implement this policy, the government had taken the huge step in deploying the Army – its XI Corps – into the tribal areas. The Army was backed by the Frontier Corps, the political administration which had its own intelligence network

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Zelikow pressed the point about bases, alluding very generally to the kind of information coalition military forces had gathered about the enemy. The Governor strongly disputed the coalition perception of the situation. He flatly stated that terrorist groups could not have a base in the NWFP; it was “impossible.” Madrassas were in cities, not the countryside. Weapons would have to be used for training, making noise that would give them away. That would be reported. Most of the population was not with the jihadis. These people were probably being harbored in Afghanistan.

Zelikow pressed some specific concerns about training and equipment. The governor again said that this was impossible. Tribals who harbored terrorists would face severe punishments. It was inconceivable that the Pakistani military could lose military equipment, “even a single rifle bolt.”

The governor then complained about the “total lack of professionalism” he perceived in the activities of various coalition soldiers on the other side of the border. Our security forces, he said, have a system that is totally lacking on the Afghan side of the border. Maybe there were training camps on the Afghan side of the border. Perhaps 1 or 2 terrorists could hide in a house somewhere in the province, or 5 or 10 people passing through in 1 or 2 houses. But it could be no more than that. A larger body could not find refuge.

The governor turned to a broader point about the breakdown of order in Afghanistan. The traditional system had relied on the tribes to keep order among their people. In Afghanistan that system had broken down, had been neutralized by the warlords, but it had not been replaced. On the Pakistani side the tribal system was intact. He gave examples from South Waziristan.

General Hamid of the Frontier Corps added that the inaccessible areas were now being occupied by the Army and by the Frontier Corps. So the chances of terrorists finding a place to rest and train were diminishing. XI Corps was sitting on the border and in the tribal agency.

The governor returned to the new role of the Army. The Army was independent and did not have to work through or rely on the political agent. The Army entered into written

agreements with the various tribes, seeking their help and in return offering development assistance – roads, schools, wells, and clinics. So there was no tension between the Army and the tribes. The Army was being viewed with respect. The governor offered to take Commission staff to XI Corps GHQ – or anywhere else in the province. (Comment: The

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The governor again stressed that he thought the terrorism problem emanated from inside Afghanistan. The writ of the Afghan government did not extend beyond Kabul. The countryside was in chaos. And if Pashtuns were not given their proper share of power, the Taliban would capitalize on that. If the new Afghan National Army was dominated by the Northern Alliance, with few Pashtuns, that would add to the trouble.