

Ex-ISI Chief Says Purpose of New Afghan Intelligence Agency RAMA Is ‘to destabilize Pakistan’

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In an exclusive interview with Foreign Policy Journal, retired Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul responds to charges that he supports terrorism, discusses 9/11 and ulterior motives for the war on Afghanistan, claims that the U.S., Israel, and India are behind efforts to destabilize Pakistan, and charges the U.S. and its allies with responsibility for the lucrative Afghan drug trade.

Retired Lieutenant General Hamid Gul was the Director General of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) from 1987 to 1989, during which time he worked closely with the CIA to provide support for the mujahedeen fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Though once deemed a close ally of the United States, in more recent years his name has been the subject of considerable controversy. He has been outspoken with the claim that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were an “inside job”. He has been called “the most dangerous man in Pakistan”, and the U.S. government has accused him of supporting the Taliban, even recommending him to the United Nations Security Council for inclusion on the list of international terrorists.

In an exclusive interview with Foreign Policy Journal, I asked the former ISI chief what his response was to these allegations. He replied, “Well, it’s laughable I would say, because I’ve worked with the CIA and I know they were never so bad as they are now.” He said this was “a pity for the American people” since the CIA is supposed to act “as the eyes and ears” of the country. As for the charge of him supporting the Taliban, “it is utterly baseless. I have no contact with the Taliban, nor with Osama bin Laden and his colleagues.” He added, “I have no means, I have no way that I could support them, that I could help them.”

After the Clinton administration’s failed attempt to assassinate Osama bin Laden in 1998, some U.S. officials alleged that bin Laden had been tipped off by someone in Pakistan to the fact that the U.S. was able to track his movements through his satellite phone. Counter-terrorism advisor to the National Security Council Richard Clarke said, “I have reason to believe that a retired head of the ISI was able to pass information along to Al Qaeda that the attack was coming.” And some have speculated that this “retired head of the ISI” was none other than Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul.

When I put this charge to him, General Gul pointed out to me that he had retired from the ISI on June 1, 1989, and from the army in January, 1992. “Did you share this information with the ISI?” he asked. “And why haven’t you taken the ISI to task for parting this information to its ex-head?” The U.S. had not informed the Pakistan army chief, Jehangir Karamat, of its intentions, he said. So how could he have learned of the plan to be able to

warn bin Laden? “Do I have a mole in the CIA? If that is the case, then they should look into the CIA to carry out a probe, find out the mole, rather than trying to charge me. I think these are all baseless charges, and there’s no truth in it.... And if they feel that their failures are to be rubbed off on somebody else, then I think they’re the ones who are guilty, not me.”

General Gul turned our conversation to the subject of 9/11 and the war on Afghanistan. “You know, my position is very clear,” he said. “It’s a moral position that I have taken. And I say that America has launched this aggression without sufficient reasons. They haven’t even proved the case that 9/11 was done by Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.” He argued that “There are many unanswered questions about 9/11,” citing examples such as the failure to intercept any of the four planes after it had become clear that they had been hijacked. He questioned how Mohammed Atta, “who had had training on a light aircraft in Miami for six months” could have maneuvered a jumbo jet “so accurately” to hit his target (Atta was reportedly the hijacker in control of American Airlines Flight 11, which was the first plane to hit its target, striking the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 am). And he made reference to the flight that hit the Pentagon and the maneuver its pilot had performed, dropping thousands of feet while doing a near 360 degree turn before plowing into its target. “And then, above all,” he added, “why have no heads been rolled? The FBI, the CIA, the air traffic control — why have they not been put to question, put to task?” Describing the 9/11 Commission as a “cover up”, the general added, “I think the American people have been made fools of. I have my sympathies with them. I like Americans. I like America. I appreciate them. I’ve gone there several times.”

At this point in our discussion, General Gul explained how both the U.S. and United Kingdom stopped granting him an entry visa. He said after he was banned from the U.K., “I wrote a letter to the British government, through the High Commissioner here in Islamabad, asking ‘Why do you think that — if I’m a security risk, then it is paradoxical that you should exclude me from your jurisdiction. You should rather nab me, interrogate me, haul me up, take me to the court, whatever you like. I mean, why are you excluding me from the U.K., it’s not understandable.’ I did not receive a reply to that.” He says he sent a second letter inviting the U.K. to send someone to question him in Pakistan, if they had questions about him they wanted to know. If the U.S. wants to include him on the list of international terrorists, Gul reasons, “I am still prepared to let them grant me the visa. And I will go.... If they think that there is something very seriously wrong with me, why don’t you give me the visa and catch me then?”

‘They lack character’

I turned to the war in Afghanistan, observing that the ostensible purpose for the war was to bring the accused mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, to justice. And yet there were plans to overthrow the Taliban regime that predated 9/11. The FBI does not include the 9/11 attacks among the crimes for which bin Laden is wanted. After the war began, General Tommy Franks responded to a question about capturing him by saying, “We have not said that Osama bin Laden is a target of this effort.” The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Richard Myers, similarly said afterward, “Our goal has never been to get bin Laden.” And President George W. Bush himself said, “I truly am not that concerned about him.” These are self-serving statements, obviously, considering the failure to capture bin Laden. But what, I asked General Gul, in his view, were the true reasons for the invasion of Afghanistan, and why the U.S. is still there?

“A very good question,” he responded. “I think you have reached the point precisely.” It is a

“principle of war,” he said, “that you never mix objectives. Because when you mix objectives then you end up with egg on your face. You face defeat. And here was a case where the objectives were mixed up. Ostensibly, it was to disperse al Qaeda, to get Osama bin Laden. But latently, the reasons for the offensive, for the attack on Afghanistan, were quite different.”

First, he says, the U.S. wanted to “reach out to the Central Asian oilfields” and “open the door there”, which “was a requirement of corporate America, because the Taliban had not complied with their desire to allow an oil and gas pipeline to pass through Afghanistan. UNOCAL is a case in point. They wanted to keep the Chinese out. They wanted to give a wider security shield to the state of Israel, and they wanted to include this region into that shield. And that’s why they were talking at that time very hotly about ‘greater Middle East’. They were redrawing the map.”

Second, the war “was to undo the Taliban regime because they had enforced Shariah”, or Islamic law, which, “in the spirit of that system, if it is implemented anywhere, would mean an alternative socio-monetary system. And that they would never approve.”

Third, it was “to go for Pakistan’s nuclear capability”, something that used to be talked about “under their lip”, “but now they are openly talking about”. This was the reason the U.S. “signed this strategic deal with India, and this was brokered by Israel. So there is a nexus now between Washington, Tel Aviv, and New Delhi.”

While achieving some of these aims, “there are many things which are still left undone,” he continued, “because they are not winning on the battlefield. And no matter what maps you draw in your mind, no matter what plans you make, if you cannot win on the battlefield, then it comes to naught. And that is what is happening to America.”

“Besides, the American generals, I have a professional cudgel with them,” Gul added. “They lack character. They know that a job cannot be done, because they know — I cannot believe that they didn’t realize that the objectives are being mixed up here — they could not stand up to men like Rumsfeld and to Dick Cheney. They could not tell them. I think they cheated the American nation, the American people. This is where I have a problem with the American generals, because a general must show character. He must say that his job cannot be done. He must stand up to the politicians. But these generals did not stand up to them.”

As a further example of the lack of character in the U.S. military leadership, the General Gul cited the “victory” in Iraq. “George Bush said that it was a victory. That means the generals must have told him ‘We have won!’ They had never won. This was all bunkum, this was all bullshit.”

Segueing back to Afghanistan, he continued: “And if they are now saying that with 17,000 more troops they can win in Afghanistan — or even double that figure if you like — they cannot. Now this is a professional opinion I am giving. And I will give this sound opinion for the good of the American people, because I am a friend of the American people and that is why I always say that your policies are flawed. This is not the way to go.” Furthermore, the war is “widely perceived as a war against Islam. And George Bush even used the word ‘Crusade.’” This is an incorrect view, he insisted. “You talk about clash of civilizations. We say the civilizations should meet.”

Alluding once more to the U.S. charges against him, he added, “And if they think that my

criticism is tantamount to opposition to America, this is totally wrong, because there are lots of Americans themselves who are not in line with the American policies.” He had warned early on, he informed me, including in an interview with Rod Nordland in Newsweek immediately following the 9/11 attacks, that the U.S. would be making a mistake to go to war. “So, if you tell somebody, ‘Don’t jump into the well!’ and that somebody thinks you are his enemy, then what is it that you can say about him?”

‘This state of anger is being fueled’

I turned the conversation towards the consequences of the war in Afghanistan on Pakistan, and the increased extremist militant activities within his own country’s borders, where the Pakistani government has been at war with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or Pakistan Taliban). I observed that the TTP seemed well funded and supplied and asked Gul how the group obtains financing and arms.

He responded without hesitation. “Yeah, of course they are getting it from across the Durand line, from Afghanistan. And the Mossad is sitting there, RAW is sitting there — the Indian intelligence agency — they have the umbrella of the U.S. And now they have created another organization which is called RAMA. It may be news to you that very soon this intelligence agency — of course, they have decided to keep it covert — but it is Research and Analysis Milli Afghanistan. That’s the name. The Indians have helped create this organization, and its job is mainly to destabilize Pakistan.”

General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, former Deputy Minister of Defense of the Northern Alliance under Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Chief of Staff of the Afghan National Army since 2002 — “whom I know very well”, General Gul told me — “had gone to India a few days back, and he has offered bases to India, five of them: three on the border, the eastern border with Pakistan, from Asadabad, Jalalabad, and Kandhar; one in Shindand, which is near Heart; and the fifth one is near Mazar-e Sharif. So these bases are being offered for a new game unfolding there.” This is why, he asserted, the Indians, despite a shrinking economy, have continued to raise their defense budget, by 20 percent last year and an additional 34 percent this year.

He also cited as evidence of these designs to destabilize Pakistan the U.S. Predator drone attacks in Waziristan, which have “angered the Pathan people of that tribal belt. And this state of anger is being fueled. It is that fire that has been lit, is being fueled, by the Indian intelligence from across the border. Of course, Mossad is right behind them. They have no reason to be sitting there, and there’s a lot of evidence. I hope the Pakistan government will soon be providing some of the evidence against the Indians.”

Several days after I had first spoken with General Gul, the news hit the headlines that the leader of the TTP, Baitullah Mehsud, had been killed by a CIA drone strike. So I followed up with him and asked him to comment about this development. “When Baitullah Mehsud and his suicide bombers were attacking Pakistan armed forces and various institutions,” he said, “at that time, Pakistan intelligence were telling the Americans that Baitullah Mehsud was here, there. Three times, it has been written by the Western press, by the American press — three times the Pakistan intelligence tipped off America, but they did not attack him. Why have they now announced — they had money on him — and now attacked and killed him, supposedly? Because there were some secret talks going on between Baitullah Mehsud and the Pakistani military establishment. They wanted to reach a peace agreement, and if you recall there is a long history of our tribal areas, whenever a tribal militant has reached a

peace agreement with the government of Pakistan, Americans have without any hesitation struck that target.” Among other examples, the former ISI chief said “an agreement in Bajaur was about to take place” when, on October 30, 2006, a drone struck a madrassa in the area, an attack “in which 82 children were killed”.

“So in my opinion,” General Gul continued, “there was some kind of a deal which was about to be arrived at — they may have already cut a deal. I don’t know. I don’t have enough information on that. But this is my hunch, that Baitullah was killed because now he was trying to reach an agreement with the Pakistan army. And that’s why there were no suicide attacks inside Pakistan for the past six or seven months.”

‘Very, very disturbing indeed’

Turning the focus of our discussion to the Afghan drug problem, I noted that the U.S. mainstream corporate media routinely suggest that the Taliban is in control of the opium trade. However, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Anti-Government Elements (or AGEs), which include but are not limited to the Taliban, account for a relatively small percentage of the profits from the drug trade. Two of the U.S.’s own intelligence agencies, the CIA and the DIA, estimate that the Taliban receives about \$70 million a year from the drugs trade. That may seem at first glance like a significant amount of money, but it’s only about two percent of the total estimated profits from the drug trade, a figure placed at \$3.4 billion by the UNODC last year.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has just announced its new strategy for combating the drug problem: placing drug traffickers with ties to insurgents —and only drug lords with ties to insurgents — on a list to be eliminated. The vast majority of drug lords, in other words, are explicitly excluded as targets under the new strategy. Or, to put it yet another way, the U.S. will be assisting to eliminate the competition for drug lords allied with occupying forces or the Afghan government and helping them to further corner the market.

I pointed out to the former ISI chief that Afghan opium finds its way into Europe via Pakistan, via Iran and Turkey, and via the former Soviet republics. According to the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, convoys under General Rashid Dostum — who was reappointed last month to his government position as Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Afghan National Army by President Hamid Karzai — would truck the drugs over the border. And President Karzai’s own brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, has been accused of being a major drug lord. So I asked General Gul who was really responsible for the Afghan drug trade.

“Now, let me give you the history of the drug trade in Afghanistan,” his answer began. “Before the Taliban stepped into it, in 1994 — in fact, before they captured Kabul in September 1996 — the drugs, the opium production volume was 4,500 tons a year. Then gradually the Taliban came down hard upon the poppy growing. It was reduced to around 50 tons in the last year of the Taliban. That was the year 2001. Nearly 50 tons of opium produced. 50. Five-zero tons. Now last year the volume was at 6,200 tons. That means it has really gone one and a half times more than it used to be before the Taliban era.” He pointed out, correctly, that the U.S. had actually awarded the Taliban for its effective reduction of the drug trade. On top of \$125 million the U.S. gave to the Taliban ostensibly as humanitarian aid, the State Department awarded the Taliban \$43 million for its anti-drug efforts. “Of course, they made their mistakes,” General Gul continued. “But on the whole, they were doing fairly good. If they had been engaged in meaningful, fruitful, constructive

talks, I think it would have been very good for Afghanistan.”

Referring to the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, General Gul told me in a later conversation that Taliban leader “Mullah Omar was all the time telling that, look, I am prepared to hand over Osama bin Laden to a third country for a trial under Shariah. Now that is where — he said [it] twice — and they rejected this. Because the Taliban ambassador here in Islamabad, he came to me, and I asked him, ‘Why don’t you study this issue, because America is threatening to attack you. So you should do something.’ He said, ‘We have done everything possible.’ He said, ‘I was summoned by the American ambassador in Islamabad’ — I think Milam was the ambassador at that time — and he told me that ‘I said, “Look, produce the evidence.” But he did not show me anything other than cuttings from the newspapers.’ He said, ‘Look, we can’t accept this as evidence, because it has to stand in a court of law. You are prepared to put him on trial. You can try him in the United Nations compound in Kabul, but it has to be a Shariah court because he’s a citizen under Shariah law. Therefore, we will not accept that he should be immediately handed over to America, because George Bush has already said that he wants him “dead or alive”, so he’s passed the punishment, literally, against him.” Referring to the U.S. rejection of the Taliban offer to try bin Laden in Afghanistan or hand him over to a third country, General Gul added, “I think this is a great opportunity that they missed.”

Returning to the drug trade, General Gul named the brother of President Karzai, Abdul Wali Karzai. “Abdul Wali Karzai is the biggest drug baron of Afghanistan,” he stated bluntly. He added that the drug lords are also involved in arms trafficking, which is “a flourishing trade” in Afghanistan. “But what is most disturbing from my point of view is that the military aircraft, American military aircraft are also being used. You said very rightly that the drug routes are northward through the Central Asia republics and through some of the Russian territory, and then into Europe and beyond. But some of it is going directly. That is by the military aircraft. I have so many times in my interviews said, ‘Please listen to this information, because I am an aware person.’ We have Afghans still in Pakistan, and they sometimes contact and pass on the stories to me. And some of them are very authentic. I can judge that. So they are saying that the American military aircraft are being used for this purpose. So, if that is true, it is very, very disturbing indeed.”

Jeremy R. Hammond is the Editor of Foreign Policy Journal, an online source for news, critical analysis, and opinion commentary on U.S. foreign policy. His articles have been featured and cited in numerous other print and online publications around the world. He has appeared in interviews on the GCN radio network, Talk Nation Radio, and Press TV’s Middle East Today program.

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