[Azaz Syed](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/azaz-syed)

July 17, 2021

**Afghanistan: talking peace**

Friday, Kabul, Afghanistan: as he walked down the stairs of his office – holding a cane in one hand, I stepped forward to shake hands with him. About six feet tall, full-bodied, this middle-aged man had once – during the Soviet era – worked for the Afghan secret service ‘KHAD’. This is the same KHAD that had close ties with the Soviet intelligence agency KGB, and which was once also accused of terrorism inside Pakistan.

In 1987, at the age of 19, he lost his leg while defending his homeland in Jalalabad. At the time, he was a communist and also a critic of Pakistan. After a while, when Kabul was captured by the Taliban, he was forced into exile in Britain.

The man I was meeting was none other than Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar, who has served as the minister of interior and as the national security advisor in Afghanistan – and who is now the Afghan foreign minister.

In what is both surprising and encouraging, I discovered that while Atmar may disagree with Pakistan, he is not against Pakistan. There is a thin line between disagreeing with someone or something and being against someone or something. Disagreement is based on rational argument which can be countered with logic and even explained away. But irrational opposition is based on hatred which is the enemy of reason. Atmar believes that Pakistan has the potential to play a key role in resolving the Afghanistan issue.

During the meeting, Foreign Minister Atmar also told me that he had solid evidence that the Taliban are fighting the Afghan government with the cooperation of other international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jundullah and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in China and the alleged terrorist group Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan. It is important to remember that in the past we in Pakistan used to think that the TTP was being sheltered by the Afghan government. While that may have been so, in time the group began to side with those opposed to the Afghan government. According to the Afghan foreign minister, if the Taliban take over Afghanistan, the country will become a hub for terrorist organizations, leading to the most dire repercussions for Pakistan, India, China and Uzbekistan.

Just a day before, here in Kabul, the Afghan defence minister had met with Indian defence officials. I broached the subject of whether Afghanistan is getting defence assistance from India. Atmar said that in the past Afghan army officers had been trained by India and provided with helicopters, but that he was unaware of any new cooperation regarding defence between Afghanistan and India.

When I drew the attention of the foreign minister to Pakistan's concerns regarding India, he said that Afghanistan had assured Pakistan that it would not allow anyone to use its territory against Pakistan. For his part, the Afghan foreign minister hopes that Pakistan will bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table and help Afghanistan cut off their supplies.

At the end of our meeting, the Afghan foreign minister also lightly praised Prime Minister Imran Khan and said that he had heard positive statements from Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and DG ISI Faiz Hameed, and would like those words to also be given a tangible form. I saw hope in the meeting with the Afghan foreign minister regarding Pakistan.

Despite Atmar's hopes, though, people are also frustrated with the Afghan government's internal turmoil. In a leaked audio tape, Amrullah Saleh, the Afghan vice president and former head of the Afghan intelligence agency NDS, who recently severely criticized Pakistan, is heard allegedly scolding an Afghan government official in the Badghis area for apparently working towards the Afghan forces surrendering. So this way the rumours of internal squabbling, animosity and mistrust within the Afghan government came to light in a concrete way.

In Kabul, I have engaged less with government or official figures and more with ordinary people to find out what they really think. One such meeting was with two educated Afghan women – Baharan and Zainab. Both have Persian backgrounds, and both are supporting their families. My one question to them was: "What is your future [here]?" Baharan said that she does not see anything in the future. Zainab told me that she had not even been born yet when her parents had to emigrate to Iran due to the situation in Afghanistan in the nineties. She said that not only her, but her parents too were worried because in Iran Afghans had no rights, and they are now once again scared at the prospect of getting trapped in yet another exile.

During my stay here in Afghanistan, I have not found anyone who is in favour of war and bloodshed. Whether educated or not, everyone wants peace. In fact, those that are pro-war can easily be divided into three categories. First, those that want to take over the government. Each of these characters has some regional government that is backing them.

Second are those that are benefiting from the war economy. And third are the powerful drug lords, who realise that if Afghanistan gets a strong government, their business will go bust, since the country is the world's largest producer and supplier of drugs. In the face of such groups, what is a common Afghan citizen supposed to do?

The writer is an investigative journalist at The News and Geo TV. He is the author of 'The Secrets of Pakistan’s War on Al-Qaeda'.

Twitter: @AzazSyed