

Pino Arlacchi: Eradicate Opium from Afghanistan, Talk with the Taliban

Aug. 28—*Pino Arlacchi is the former Executive Director of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, a former Under-Secretary General of the UN, and a former European Parliament rapporteur on Afghanistan. During his tenure at the UNODC (1997-2001), opium poppy cultivation was all but eliminated in Afghanistan, only to come back under the presence of U.S. and NATO forces. In 2010, then-MEP Arlacchi again put forward a plan for eliminating opium production in Afghanistan. Today his proposals are getting wide international attention. He is currently professor of sociology at the University of Sassari in Italy. He spoke at two Schiller Institute international webinars on Afghanistan, July 31, and August 21, 2021. Below are excerpts edited from Professor Arlacchi's presentation and the dialogue at the August 21 event. His speech to the July 31 conference is in EIR, August 20, 2021 and can be read in full [here](#).*

Videos of the Schiller Institute conferences:

“Afghanistan: A [Turning Point](#) in History after the Failed Regime-Change Era,” July 31, 2021

“Afghanistan: [Opportunity](#) for a New Epoch for Mankind,” August 21, 2021

We should not restrict our discussion to Talibanology. What are their real intentions? Why should we trust them, or not? These questions are not very clever. I dealt with the Taliban 20 years ago. I had dealings with the top leadership of the Taliban when I was at the UN, about the issue of narcotics elimination. And I found them quite reasonable interlocutors. We're talking about the Taliban of more than 20 years ago.

I had a meeting with the Governor of Kandahar about the issue of reactivating a wool factory, which was donated by the German aid agency. This factory was good to give work to more than 2,000 people, men and women, and it was not active. For a small investment of a couple of hundred thousand dollars, it could be reactivated. So, the Governor said, “Yes, I have to consult somebody else”—which meant the top leader, who was living there, in Kandahar. Then, he got the



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Pino Arlacchi addresses the August 21, 2021 Schiller Institute conference on Afghanistan.

OK, came back, and we discussed the issue of women. He said, “Yes, but we have some issues about women working in the factory.” Our answer was, “No way. Women must work. If you don't allow women to work, say goodbye to our investment.” He asked again for some time to consult Mullah Omar, and then came back: “OK, women can work, but they should work in a different part of the factory.” We said, “Yes.”

And then we started to activate the factory. Then the investment was stopped, because somebody else arrived, a foreign investor bought the factory. The foreign investor was somebody called bin Laden, who was living at the time in Kandahar, close to where we were in the meeting. I informed the Americans about everything, and so on, and this occurred in 1998, so they had all the elements about bin Laden.

Anyway, I want just to say, about the Taliban today, I don't know these Taliban, and it would be really stupid to elaborate on their “heathen” thought, and so on. They made a statement. Now they have a government, and we will see. We should talk—every government should talk with them, because everyone talks with them. The Americans have been talking to them for two years, and in Italy, for instance, at this moment, we have a very

silly debate, “talking or not talking with the Taliban,” which is really something, driven by the media hysteria about it.

I agree with Helga [Helga Zepp-LaRouche, fellow panelist and founder of the Schiller institutes]: The real issue should be, what to do now in Afghanistan to work for peace and development? And here, I am quite positive. I believe we have a huge space, because first of all, we don’t need a huge amount of funds or money. Afghanistan is an extremely poor country, and if international aid will go in the right direction, and arrive for the people, with a small investment, in a few years we can have a huge result.

Let’s take the issue that mostly interests the Europeans, should interest them, which is narcotics production.

As you know, almost all heroin consumed in Western Europe comes from Afghanistan. And now I’m reading in several newspapers, that the Taliban cannot leave the control of opium poppy cultivation, because they live on it. Which is absolutely wrong! It’s not true!

You have very good studies made by the United Nations, not only the Vienna program, but also the Security Council, on the real amount of money that you can skim from opium poppy production, and the figures are the following: the farm gate production last year—we just got these figures a few months ago, from the survey that the United Nations does every year—the farm gate value of all opium poppy in Afghanistan was \$350 million—which was much reduced from the peak in 2010 when it was more than \$1.4 billion. So, the farm gate production is a very small figure.

That figure invited many governments in the past to consider the idea of buying the crop, to impede drug trafficking all over Europe. When this \$350 million [worth of drugs] arrives in Europe, in the streets of Berlin, Rome or Paris, the value is then about €10 billion. So, there’s a huge interest for Europeans to intervene.

My plan at the time, was to phase out all production in 10 years; first, for five years, eliminate production 20% a year, with an extremely small investment; at that time the value of production was much less than today.



Pino Arlacchi, then Executive Director of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (left) reported to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (right) on his success, working with the Taliban and virtually eliminating opium production in Afghanistan. New York City, February 25, 2011.

But if you start, like tomorrow, a plan in Afghanistan to eliminate opium production, we should invest, if we do 20% reduction a year, just \$335 million, which, it seems to me, doesn’t amount to an important figure.

But you have to have an idea, and you have to have a plan, and you have to have a correct sense of proportion, in the other issues that are involved. Even if the Taliban would appropriate all farm gate production, like a big cartel that buys all opium in the country, the most they can get is \$350 million. The budget today, the Afghan government, the departing government, is around \$8 billion. So, if the Taliban establishes itself as the government, they will have at their disposal \$8 billion to govern a country of 38 million people. All these figures do not impress me! They are not really figures that can impress any international investor. So, we have now, the total international aid in Afghanistan, average for the last 10 years, was around, more or less, \$7-\$8 billion—more or less the entire budget of government.

So now, if we continue to invest in Afghanistan, in a better way than in the past, the figure of international aid we did, we could have really substantial results. And when I say “we,” I say the international community, all, not just the U.S.A., and not just the Europeans, who have been the major international investors, until now, in Afghanistan.

We have now a big opportunity. We can seize this opportunity and start to make plans, or, we can say, “It’s bad, everything is impossible. Afghanistan continues to be the disaster it has been for the last 40 years,” and then, and then ... no more ideas and things to do.

No Military Solution; No Intelligence Failure

I want to make some remarks on the so-called intelligence failure in Afghanistan. True, but which kind of intentions? Government intentions. On many occasions, I saw very good analyses on Afghanistan in the last 10-15 years, that were perfectly predicting what would happen. It was very clear already 15 years ago that there was no military solution in Afghanistan. I wrote a [report](#), on the strategy of the European Union for Afghanistan when I was in the European Parliament in 2010. It was approved by a large majority, and in that report, the center of the report was that there was no military solution. Change the way the U.S. and the European Union are providing aid to the country, because most of this aid was wasted or never materialized. Eliminate the narcotic production through alternative developments. And stop thinking that the strategy of decapitating the Taliban could work. Decapitating means literally decapitation, or political and military decapitation.

I was there in Afghanistan for a couple of weeks, and I could see with my eyes that the situation was hopeless. There was no way the United States and its allies could win or could even achieve a stable result. So, there was no doubt for me and for whomever read my report, that that situation was no solution.

Now, why did the government collapse so quickly? That’s quite obvious. Every big change in history happens starting underneath, and then at a certain point, it reaches a breaking point, like revolutions, like collapse of systems, and so on. This is just a pattern that is quite well known. What struck me very much is the opposite of what I see in the media. The international media are making a huge mess, making the issue of Afghanistan as a huge catastrophe.

What I really do not see is any serious facts or data. I see that the country is relatively stable; there is no fighting going on. There is no significant bloodshed; I saw just a couple of cases of vendetta. I see that everyone is waiting for the new government. I saw a quite interesting statement by the Taliban about their intentions, and there is a huge gap between this catastrophic

image by the media, and the reality.

I believe that this is the main issue, that can cover plans [for new threats against Afghanistan]—Helga says there is the threat of financial warfare. Maybe. Maybe. Not being able to win militarily, there can be other ways to continue to spread the chaos in Afghanistan. But I don’t know.

My interpretation of all the issues, of all the war in Afghanistan is that it was a huge business. We have a huge industry, which is not just the security industry, the military industry. It is also the media industry, which is interested in selling fear, in obliging, first of all, the American government to invest a disproportionate amount of money in armaments and wars. And the media also needs a continuous state of fear and hostility to sell copies to their audience.

Now, this big business is over, basically. They have to find other enemies, other fields, other issues that can produce fear in the population, which can justify military budgets. I do not see what the other real big issue is.

There is also the geopolitical issue; the fact that it is very clear that the winner in Afghanistan is not the Taliban. The winner in Afghanistan is China. China got Afghanistan offered like a good wine by the Americans and the Europeans. Now, whatever they do is fine. They did not spend a huge amount of money in Afghanistan, they are ready to provide aid. They have no big issues with anybody there, not with the Taliban, and not with the others.

The geopolitical concern is the fact that you can have a kind of arc—I would call it a Eurasian arc, from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Central Asia, and Turkey—Turkey is now making a double game, which is not very clear—but you can have a full part of Eurasia, and of course China, completely out of the reach of Western powers. This can be a huge motivation to not bet on the stabilization of Afghanistan, and to transfer to Afghanistan the big geopolitical confrontation that we know is still in place. This is my view.

Counterterrorism—Work with Regional Powers

Just some consideration on the issue of terrorism—the danger of Afghanistan becoming a kind of stronghold of international terrorism. I believe that first of all, the decision on Afghanistan, the political future of Afghanistan, depends very much on regional powers. So,

we should pay attention much more to what Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran, are going to do in Afghanistan, than, as usual, to what the Americans will do. The Europeans today recognized the government if they will talk, and so on. The situation has changed completely.

Now, the future of Afghanistan is in the hands of regional powers. Terrorism, anti-terrorism—that is an issue that basically gets the convergence of all regional powers—Russia, the Central Asian countries, China (most of all), Iran. Iran is also very concerned about narcotics, because it has a 2,000 km border with Afghanistan, and is the transit country for *all* drugs from Afghanistan to Europe, and has a huge addict population, more than 700,000 people. Narcotics is also a good plus for convergence of regional powers, having Afghanistan free of terrorism, and free of narcotics production.

Terrorism in the area is mostly what the intelligence people call a “blowback” issue. It’s the result of the Western intervention in the area; it’s the result of the wars that have been carried out.... ISIS, we say, is a product of the Iraq War, of the really terrible decision of the American governor of Iraq to cancel, with the stroke of a pen, the Iraqi army. Many of those people, from one day to the next—there was a 500,000-person army!—many of those people went away and went into ISIS, blended with the terrorist groups that were already working in Syria, and they did. It’s a huge problem.

The more the Western powers’ army withdraws from that area, the more the chances of improving the situation in terms of peace. It’s exactly the opposite of what Western media and the complex [MICIMATT—military-industrial-Congressional-intelligence-media-academia-think tank] we identified during today, wants. It’s exactly the opposite: They want to create the impression that, in so far as Americans withdraw from the Middle East, then the Middle East and all countries there will explode with chaos and so on.

What is happening is exactly the opposite. If you

look at data on terrorism, produced by the University of Maryland, which had the most important database on terrorism, you see that, for the last five years, terrorism attempts, and terrorist casualties have been decreasing, now 50% of what they used to be five years ago! It’s an astonishing result, that the digital searches cannot explain, for political reasons, but that I can explain very easily: Trump started to withdraw American troops from the Middle East, and in so far as they withdrew, and the Europeans also, in so far as this withdrawal went on, terrorist acts and so on, decreased ver-



UNODC/Zalmay

It is in the interest of all Afghans, their regional neighbors, and in fact every nation, that the production of all illicit addictive drugs be stopped. Shown is a close-up of an opium poppy field in Afghanistan.

tically! And continue to decrease! This is exactly the opposite of what the media and the others want us to believe.

Start from this issue, and look at Afghanistan, also, from this point of view. What is the interest of the Taliban? To allow competitors, possible enemies, to enter the country and cooperate with them? It’s silly! I would never, in the state of mind of the Taliban, I would never allow—I just won a war, I just got the government of the country in my hands, and I ask people, who may have been similar to me in the past and so on, I ask them, “Please, come here and work with us in fighting Western powers, or the Americans, or Chinese,” or whatever. It would be simply silly! There is no basic motivation for them to do that.

We have a convergence of interest among different parts that can be very helpful; plus, if we want to care about peace and development in Afghanistan, and on issues of development, we have a positive issue also. The regional economic corridor is a great opportunity; the Belt and Road is a huge opportunity! You see, countries involved in this chain of investment by China are benefitting, and the international security they are in, is benefitting a lot! Pakistan got a reduction in terrorist attacks that is astonishing, in the last five or six years. And then, Pakistan is growing—Pakistan is growing well! And countries in the area of Central Asia and so on, are also experiencing a process of growth, which was lacking in Afghanistan, but can be revived now.

So, please, try to look at the situation with different eyes, vis-à-vis the past. We know that invading countries, making wars and so on, does not work! It benefits only the complex, the industrial complex, and security complex, and the media—the media, which wants to find conflicts, wars, and hostility all over—and so on.

We can provide a big contribution in changing our mind and looking at the situation as it is, not at the situation as we would like it to be—I mean, on the other side. They want there to be chaos. They want there to be Afghanistan and Central Asia in flames, plenty of wars, terrorist attacks, and so on.

The reality is completely different. You have also the forces of peace, forces of distinction, of solidarity that are also powerful, that are also at work. We don't just have the forces of war and the forces of violence. You have on the ground also, other forces, and we have to recognize the way they could operate and then sustain that.

Turn the Page to Development

Terrorism is a political issue. Terrorism is not an issue of crazy people, or extremist fanatics and so on, that go around with no reason, and no rational motives. Terrorism is a phenomenon, but it's political. There is somebody who funds terrorists, somebody who has an interest in terrorism, and must be dealt with, as having this mentality.

I know the Pakistani concern about terrorism. But they have to go a bit beyond it, asking, who is interested in funding terrorism? They have to invest resources in countering it in the right way; it means going back to the origin of the terrorist attack.

On the issue of the economic development of the area [South and Central Asia], I believe that the area has a huge potential that is already showing. We have substantial development going on in Central Asia, since more than 10 years. Countries there are growing at 3, 4, 5, 6% a year, in spite of the many problems they have. One important example is in Pakistan.

Afghanistan can be—a stable Afghanistan—an Afghanistan that starts to develop, can reduce poverty, and be in a good relationship with all its neighbors; it can be an asset of the area. It was clear that Afghanistan was not that way in the last 20 years. But I believe, and I hope that the lesson has been understood: Twenty years of Western military intervention there did not work. Let it turn the page. Unfortunately, I have seen very few leaders in Europe, not only in the United States, but in Europe, going this way.

I heard a very good statement by [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel, she was probably the only one who said, “We did wrong, let's change. It was all wrong, now let's try to help all these African refugees that arrive,” and so on, but the other European leaders say nothing! [French President Emmanuel] Macron said nothing significant; even the Prime Minister of my country, Mario Draghi, up to now has said nothing significant. I told you that the political discussion in Italy at this moment is, “Talk or not to talk to the Taliban,” which is really the most stupid issue.

Let's talk with them, and see if they are consistent with their statements, making it conditional whether they will continue to get European international aid. Pressure them on what they are saying about respecting women's rights and amnesty for all the people who stayed in the government, not having vendettas and bloodshed in the country. Let's challenge them on this point, and make long-term plans for the development of Afghanistan! This could be quite a good example of an international development. Afghanistan's potential in terms of economic development, it is huge. It has oil, it has minerals, it has potentially very good agriculture, as it has had in years past. Afghanistan can become a quite peaceful and productive country.

I believe that if we succeed to create a favorable intellectual and political movement in this perspective, we could achieve something, and we should also believe that we can get results. It is not to be taken for granted that, all the time, the forces of evil and violence will prevail, as they have in the past 20 years.