

**Conversation between Professor Noam Chomsky and the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers  
December 17 2010**

**Doug Mackey facilitating**

**Hakim translating**

**Prof. Chomsky:** Hello, good to talk to you.

**Hakim:** Thank you for taking the time off to talk to us. We know you have a busy schedule, so I'll just ask one of the boys to ask the first question.

**Abdulai:** My name is Abdulai.

**Hakim:** Abdulai is asking on behalf of the youth this question: Obama had announced in his diagnostic December review that the U.S. is making significant progress in Afghanistan. Could you please comment on this review being a 'diagnostic' review rather than a real, evaluative review? Of facts on the ground, for example, -- facts about health, education, food security, water security, electricity

**Prof. Chomsky:** Well of course you know vastly more about what's happening in Afghanistan than I do. I only know from secondary sources but it's worth noting that a few days ago the ICRC released a report which is extremely unusual for them, -they rarely do it,- in which they said that the situation on the ground has deteriorated radically. They gave particulars and said it's now far worse than it's been in the past.

They're actually working there and have experience.

Plainly that's not consistent with the picture of progress.

**Hakim:** Thank you. We are aware of the ICRC report that the situation is the worst over the past 30 years. Among the ordinary people of Afghanistan, we know on the ground that in all the various sectors of development the systems are near collapse. It is unusual that Obama should be calling this significant progress. For example in health we have one of the worst indices of maternal mortality in the world. We have the worst food security in the world. More than 50% of the people of Afghanistan do not have clean water. Education, though touted as one of the areas of success, is riddled with corruption and the lack of trained and qualified teachers.

And in areas where it's insecure, women and girls and children in general do not have the opportunity to go to school.

Thank you for reminding us of the ICRC report.

**Hakim:** Mohammad Jan says thank you and we are really happy to have this opportunity to ask you questions and consult with you.

**Mohammad Jan:** The opinion of experts in intelligence agencies, particularly the NIE, humanitarian agencies across the board and world public opinion assessed through various polls clearly opposes the notion that the U.S. is making progress. For example, a recent ABC Washington Post poll shows 60% of Americans are not in favor of the war. Hillary Clinton announced that the government does not make decisions based on polls but in the interests of the country. How do we as the youth and the people of Afghanistan and of the world bridge this disconnect between commentaries that have swung against the war to turn this opposition into practical action?

**Prof. Chomsky:** We have to do it in different ways. What you can do in Afghanistan and what we can do here is of course different but we ought to do it in parallel and in mutual support and solidarity that depends on finding common goals. I know for me at least and the people I work with in the antiwar movement the goal for Afghanistan would be for Afghans themselves to take over the planning, the determination of what will happen, so that there won't be a review conference in Washington where they have their own goals, --the welfare of the people of Afghanistan is not high among them,-- but rather the decisions will be made by people like you and others in Afghanistan who have the fate of your country and your lives at heart and people of the US here should support your efforts in whatever way we can.

**Hakim:** Thank you, Prof Noam. This morning we had a conversation with a 50 year old Afghan man who talked about how all decisions in this country are made by the United States --that is, decisions definitely are not made by the people perhaps decisions are not even made by the people of America. Certainly we are very keen on and interested in self determination.

**Prof. Chomsky:** It's certainly true that decisions are made in Washington, not in the villages of Afghanistan, and it's also correct, as the man said, that decisions are not made by the people of the United States. To a limited extent popular opinion influences decisions that are made in Washington. But there is extensive study that demonstrates that there is a very wide gap between the decisions of the government and the will of the population.

That's true on domestic issues. It's true on international issues and it reflects the fact that though the U.S. is an unusually free country by comparative standards, it's only in a very limited way a functioning democracy.

Power does not lie in the hands of the population except in a very limited way and popular opinion does not determine policy. And that's in fact one of the reasons why there's such hysteria over the leaks of government documents. Anyone who has studied secret documents for many years as I have knows one of their main purposes is to protect the government from the population, not security, but just keeping the public controlled and obedient. That's a battle that has to be constantly fought in the more free societies as well to try to overcome this dysfunctional element of formal democracy which keeps it from functioning properly.

Popular movements have in the past and should in this case too integrate themselves with those of other countries and form a common force, often against their own governments.

That was true for example in the case of the Viet Nam war and in the case of Washington's wars in central America in the 1980s the war in Iraq and in this case too. There should be common bonds among the peoples of the countries often in opposition to the decisions of the governments which reflect other concerns and other concentrations of power.

**Hakim:** Thank you. Ghulamai is our third youth who is going to ask you a question.

**Ghulamai:** What should Afghan people be asking for? Should they be seeking reparations?

**Hakim:** Prof., his voice sounds very young and he is very young. He's in the fifth grade and we have talked about these questions way before speaking to you this evening and he's asking, in the light of what we've just said that government's policies are not in the hands of the people and that people should come together in common goals in the popular movement, what should the people of Afghanistan be asking for in making requests or demands of governments of the world, should they be asking for reparations for the war?

**Prof. Chomsky:** Oh that's quite important. Afghanistan has a very dramatic, important history of independence, but for the last thirty years it has simply been a plaything of the great powers which have virtually destroyed it. All of them.

All of the ones who were involved owe Afghanistan not aid but reparations. Apology and reparations. That includes Russia, of course, and certainly the United States and it also includes Pakistan.

They have played a miserable role in destroying Afghanistan and should be responsible for doing whatever they can to help the Afghan people overcome the consequences of these interventions and atrocities. Again I stress that doesn't mean aid, that means reparations.

Aid sounds like something we give out of our good nature or good will.

Reparations means what we are responsible for providing because of the extreme damage we have caused. And yes, that's a very important demand. It should be made here and should be made in Afghanistan. And not just on this case.

The United States for example owes massive reparations to Iraq for having virtually destroyed the country in the last few years

To Indochina for having killed many millions of people having destroyed the country

The same is true of other great powers.

We can go back hundreds of years with the record of crimes and atrocities on the part of the powerful states, primarily Europe and its offshoots but the United States. There's a tremendous burden to be met if our own countries the rich countries can become civilized enough to face these realities. That's a hard task.

**Hakim :** Thank you very much for those words. We have Lala who will ask the next question.

Lala is the farmer on our team and he reflects the peasant wisdom of the world by asking this question.

**Lala :** The U.S. is constructing a narrative of success. Are they doing this so they can eventually leave gracefully or do you think they are constructing a narrative of success so that they can stay permanently?

**Prof. Chomsky:** Well the United States-- we have to bear in mind that the U.S. government like other governments and other states is not dedicated to serving the interests of the people of the countries where it intervenes or attacks or interferes.

In fact, it's not even dedicated to the welfare of its own population. It's dedicated to the policies of the states, and this has been understood for centuries, states are controlled by concentrations of power within the domestic society and those are the interests that are pursued.

In the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. government and other sectors of concentrated power and capital in the United States- they do have interests, for example they are very interested and have been for decades in their TAPI pipeline plan, a plan to get natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India which would go through Afghanistan and which would undercut reliance of the South Asian states on Iran. The United States is trying to isolate and change the regime in Iran. So that's a longstanding interest.

Nevertheless I think that at this point when the U.S. government defines success it means not success for the people of Afghanistan or Vietnam or Nicaragua or whatever but success for the interest that it is pursuing.

At this point, I think it's not unlikely that even just for domestic, political reasons, the U.S. will try to find a way to withdraw most of its forces and try to portray it as some kind a victory. That's for domestic reasons.

But, I don't think that's what should concern us. We're not concerned with making officials in Washington look good to their associates.

We should be concerned with what matters for the people of Afghanistan. And that's of course for you and others like you to decide. Success, I would understand as meaning success in achieving your aims, not Washington's aims.

**Hakim:** Thank you for those empowering words.

We have one last question from Ali.

**Ali:** What do you think Afghan peace activists should focus on, given your experience with activists in other countries in conflict?

**Prof. Chomsky:** What Afghans should focus on is finding ways to join together to formulate their own ideas and plans as to the course of policy, internal to Afghanistan, and their demands on other countries that are engaged in Afghanistan. That means primarily the US but also others that are involved.

Afghans should formulate those goals and policies and jointly with people in the rest of the world in particular in the United States that work to support those plans, so the activists in the United States should be and to an extent are waiting to hear from people of Afghanistan. What

do you want us to do? We're not going to tell you what to do. You know that better than we do. Much better than I do.

I would like to know what you want us to do to support, to pursue here, your own goals for the future of Afghanistan.

**Hakim:** Thank you so much for that.

We will certainly work on this to deliver clear statements on what the people of Afghanistan would like activists everywhere to do to work together with us to bring peace to the people of Afghanistan.

I would like to open this time up for any last question before we end our time with Prof Noam.

**Doug:** Prof. Chomsky, on the line is also a leader of Afghans for Peace. She now lives in the United States, Fatima Mojadiddy.

**Fatima:** It's an honor to speak with you. First of all we don't have leaders in our group, we have collective consensus inspired by anarchist values.

**Prof. Chomsky:** Glad to hear that

**Fatima:** For Afghans it's very new.

We all work together. We vote members in or out, not out, but in so far.

Afghans for Peace is the first Afghan led peace movement.

I've been with the antiwar movement for the last 19 years.

It's really hard to find Afghan voices to oppose the war. A lot of Afghans even today support the war, due to the powerful war machinery, the war propaganda machinery. Some of the concerns are very legitimate, the fear of, you know, the Taliban taking over again but the reality is that Taliban have taken over and my fear is that the US will quote, unquote negotiate with the Taliban and once again place another oppressive regime that's not representative of the people and then say that they've left.

And I don't think they'll basically ever leave. I mean they're still in Iraq. When they say they leave what does that really mean? They changed the name but it's still an occupation.

It will be interesting to see how it unfolds.

Give us advice on what we can do as far as actions. Being Afghans, we have members in Afghanistan too ...But the ones that are in the west the ones that have some privileges here, like, what can we do?

I really don't believe in our political systems. I really don't think that writing letters to Congress can change anything, but will it have an effect?

Should we try that route too?

What is your advice?

Like, what kind of actions can we...I don't know if we can change US policy. I hope that we can. I dream that we can.

**Prof. Chomsky:** I wouldn't feel pessimistic about that. In the United States and western countries popular movement have over time have had a significant effect on compelling governments to act in different ways.

Take the war in Iraq. It's the first time in the history of western imperialism that there was massive popular protest against the war before it was officially launched. And that had an effect.

I mean the attack on Iraq was devastating enough, but it didn't even come close to the U.S. invasion of Viet Nam. At that time there was almost no protest and the attack was far more severe and vicious. I won't go into the details but it was just a totally different scale. Finally protest developed, and that did put limits on it. Well, in the case of Iraq the protest even in advance limited the extent of the attack to a significant degree, a degree which made it possible for Iraqis to reconstruct something from the carnage and maybe to move on to build a decent society. So, popular movements do matter.

I think what you can do as Afghans here is try to bring to people in the United States, whether it's in somebody's living room or in a meeting or in a demonstration or in an appeal to Congress or whatever it is - try to get an understanding of what Afghans want so that success will be understood in a very different way. Success shouldn't be understood here as a means whereby President Obama could be re-elected, but rather success should mean: "Have we achieved the goals that Afghans seek for themselves?"

I agree with you that there shouldn't be U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, but Afghans are going to have to negotiate among themselves and work things out among themselves. And the popular movements here can do nothing more than support them in those efforts.

You as Afghans have a unique possibility of bringing to people in the United States the views of people in Afghanistan themselves which they don't hear otherwise.

**Doug:** Perhaps this is a good time Fatima to mention the Global Day of Listening to Afghans.

**Fatima:** The Global Day of Listening to Afghans is something that was created by Voices for Creative Nonviolence.

**Doug:** It's been a team effort.

If you could call anytime during the 24 hours that would be great. We're streaming it live.

Many different groups are going to be calling Afghan youth volunteers and some of the other activists that have traveled there like Kathy Kelly. Others have traveled from all over to come there and the youth from Bamiyan have come all the way down to Kabul.

People will be calling and sharing their thoughts in a Global Day of Listening to the Afghan people and what they want.

**Prof. Chomsky:** That's a very important initiative and I certainly hope that it gains extensive outreach.

**Doug:** In Afghanistan, in Kabul, including Kathy Kelly, perhaps Hakim or Kathy you can mention the others that will be there.

**Kathy:** We look forward to welcoming Mike Ferner, the president of Veterans for Peace and Col. Ann Wright. Mike will just have been released from jail and with the Washington DC protest yesterday and Ann Wright started a US Embassy here in 2001 and resigned in protest of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

We'll also be joined by several other groups here in Afghanistan. This technology is a bit new to all of us. We're hoping that people from all around the world will be listening, including friends in Iraq and in Palestine and Gaza. I've had the privilege of listening to the boys talk to people in Gaza before and there is a great deal of similar goals that they share.

**Prof. Chomsky:** These are important steps toward creating a really international movement of solidarity with oppressed and suffering people particularly those under occupation who are suffering the most.

**Hakim:** Thank you so much Professor Noam for taking so much time off to speak with us. I would like get the boys to send you greetings of peace in saying goodbye. We wish you all the best in all that you do. Thank you for all that you do.

**Prof. Chomsky:** It was a real privilege. Thank you.

**Hakim:** That was Mohammad Jan on behalf of the boys. Thank you for your work and for speaking to us.