

# **“AYATOLLAH S.G. SAFAVI ON IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN”**



## **SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY THE NEXT CENTURY FOUNDATION**



**10 AUGUST 2022**



### **OVERVIEW**

As part of the Next Century Foundation’s ‘Healing the Nations Conference’ held on Zoom from August 7th to August 14<sup>th</sup> to discuss various issues affecting specific crisis areas in the Middle East region, Ayatollah Seyed Ghahreman Safavi (a close member of the ‘Deep State’ in Iran and brother to the former Commander of the IRGC, Rahim Safavi who is now a military aide to the Iranian Supreme Leader) made a short presentation (10 August) on the subject of Iranian foreign policy with some specific remarks on Afghanistan.

Acknowledging the complex economic and political relationship that has always existed between Iran and Afghanistan that has now been exacerbated by new and additional challenges due to the renewed rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the discussion – although hampered by a lack of clarity on the part of Safavi because of his own security concerns with the authorities in Iran – tried to provide some light on certain issues of concern such as the situation of the Shia community in Afghanistan, non-recognition of the Taliban government and issues pertaining to Afghan immigration in Iran. Subsequently, some reference was also made to other key areas of Iranian foreign policy concerns at this time.

### **SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY AYATOLLAH SAFAVI**

#### **1. On Afghanistan**

- Safavi began his comments by taking note of the long-standing history of cultural and other ties that have between Iran and Afghanistan.
- Safavi said that Iran was happy about “the American defeat and escape from Afghanistan” which has now brought Iran closer to the Taliban.
- As a result, some 2.5 million Afghans have now entered Iran – what he called the largest single migration of Afghans to any one country.
- This new wave of Afghan migration had been a double problem for Iran coming on top of existing sanctions.
- Safavi then referred to the 2014 Fatwa that had been issued by Ayatollah Khamenei declaring that all Afghans – i.e., male or female – needed to receive education.

- Safavi next turned his attention to the problems confronting Shias, which according to him consisted of some 30% of the country's total population and in particular the Hazare Shias who had been specifically targeted and discriminated against by what he called 'Pakistani trained Wahabi fundamentalists'.
- It was thus no surprise that the Hazare community distrusted the Pashtu Taliban leaders, and it was for this that the Taliban now needed to guarantee the safety and security of the Shias in Afghanistan who were now being also targeted by the Islamic State (ISIS).
- Safavi said that due to crisis amongst themselves, interaction between the Taliban and the Shia had been limited.
- At the more regional level (i.e., more local levels) the situation was much worse with Wahhabi fundamentalists projecting a much more aggressive stance which could potentially lead to another civil war.
- Safavi next turned his attention to the assassination of Al Zawahiri in Kabul and said that this was proof that Al Qaeda was still active in Afghanistan with Taliban consent - something which in addition to the poor treatment that was given to women and the Shia community, was an important factor for Iran's non-recognition of the Taliban government.
- Safavi concluded his remarks regarding Afghanistan by saying that the Islamic Republic of Iran was trying to persuade the Taliban to agree to holding free elections given that the IRI was most anxious that a new era of civil war in Afghanistan should be prevented.

## **2. On Other IRI Foreign Policy Issues**

- On the subject of ongoing talks for resuming the JCPOA agreement, Safavi resorted to repeating the usual 'party political broadcast' about the US having unilaterally withdrawn from the 2015 Agreement and for having reimposed cruel and inhuman sanctions and saying that until such time that those sanctions had been removed, nothing could be achieved.
- He said that no major change had been seen in the attitude of either the US or Israel towards Iran.
- He added that the new Biden administration had simply carried on with the same policies of the Trump era.
- However, on a personal note, Safavi said that he was nonetheless optimistic that as a result of the tough stance of the current Iranian administration that was better equipped for dealing with such issues, that something may eventually be worked out.
- Safavi said that Iraq and Yemen had their own internal problems, although Iraq was much more complicated because of competing political forces in an atmosphere of rampant corruption.

- The IRI and especially the current Raisi government was at this time trying to promote and give priority to a policy of 'détente' with all its neighbouring states in the region.
- This included having better ties with Saudi Arabia and it was now hoped that by reaching a compromise a way may be found for KSA to make an exit from Yemen with its dignity intact.
- Safavi was adamant to point out that unlike the British who had left India with at least some semblance of government and self-rule, the US had left both Afghanistan and Iraq without leaving anything behind having destroyed everything beforehand. As a result, chances of ensuring stability in the near term were at best difficult.
- On Iran's increasingly close ties with Russia and China, Safavi said that Iran did not support the US narrative on the Ukraine war, though the topic more broadly speaking had different dimensions.
- Hence, context was needed for understanding the foreign policy of the IRI and its relationship with Russia:
  - 1. Sanctions of "the US against the people of the world" has created many problems forcing nations to work together against this terrible behaviour.
  - 2. The war in Ukraine was a new chapter in which one bloc has been the West and the other Russia, China, Iran, India, Syria and many others.
- Safavi noted that even the Persian Gulf Arab states had not accepted the US position on oil.
- As a result, Europe is so far the only country damaged with the big oil conglomerates making record huge profits which is a further reflection that the US has been the main party that has been behind this war.

*Note: Following Safavi's initial comments on Afghanistan, a webinar participant from Afghanistan by the name of 'Mohammad Dawod' responded to Safavi (referring to him as 'Mr' rather than 'Ayatollah' Safavi) and accused Iran of double standards by having sided with the US in 2001 only to hail what Safavi had called its "escape" twenty years later. Dawod further challenged Safavi with regards to the percentage of Shias in Afghanistan saying that they at best constituted somewhere between 9-15% of the population according to different statistics. Dawod further challenged Safavi on Iran's poor treatment of the Afghan refugees. He also accused Safavi of being inconsistent in his facts while accusing ISIS of murdering Hazare's without mentioning the fact that thanks to Iran, the Hazare have killed thousands of Syrians in that country. When asked by the moderator (William Morris) to respond, Safavi point blank refused to further discuss the subject.*

