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DR. BARNETT RUBIN

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's May 15, 2023. I'm Robin Matthewman. Today I have the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Barnett Rubin for ADST's Afghanistan project. May I call you Barney?

RUBIN: Yes, please do.

Q: Just to start off, can you tell us about your background and how you got to be so involved with Afghanistan.

RUBIN: I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago Political Science Department, and I concentrated on South Asian studies. I wrote my dissertation on India. While I was in Chicago, I also founded, with a colleague, an Amnesty International adoption group, which is the basic grassroots unit of Amnesty International. Then I was asked by the Amnesty Research office in London to start what they called a coordination group for South Asia in the U.S. section. I did that together with another colleague from the University of Chicago, Patricia Gossman. Then we started working on all South Asia.

At that time, soon after the 1978 Zia coup, a lot of the work we did was on Pakistan. Then after 1978–1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and I started getting, from various sources, a lot of information about atrocities and abuses, and so on, which Amnesty was not covering for various reasons.

I started working to research human rights violations in Afghanistan, myself, from various sources: France, Afghans who came to the United States and so on. Then I was asked by Jeri Laber, director of what was then Helsinki Watch, which was something that became part of Human Rights Watch, to write the first human rights report on Afghanistan. That was in the fall of 1984: "Tears, Blood, and Cries." I wrote another one in 1985. By that time, I started getting interested in Afghanistan as a research subject as a political scientist as well.

I also had a friend named Larry Lifschultz who at that time was the South Asian Bureau chief of the Far Eastern Economic Review. It was a magazine. It doesn't exist anymore. He was the South Asian Bureau chief. He was also covering Pakistan and various things about the Afghan war. He started covering the start of negotiations led by UN [United Nations] Special Envoy Diego Cordovez. He and also Selig Harrison, who was with the

Carnegie Endowment for Peace, encouraged me and said, "You're studying the problems. Why don't you also look at studying the solutions." So I started meeting Cordovez and that was how I got introduced to the world of the UN, politics, negotiation, and conflict resolution. I think I first met Cordovez in 1986.

I also experienced blowback because a lot of the people—who wanted to support the Mujahideen and continue the war—were rather angered. They liked what I had done earlier, documenting atrocities by the Soviet army, but they were very much against the idea of negotiation to try to end the war. I first experienced that in 1988.

Then I looked at the Geneva Accords, which were signed in 1988. I told Cordovez these Geneva Accords were supposedly between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the communist government in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the Afghan Mujahideen they were fighting needed to be involved, too, because they were fighting the former government in Afghanistan. As a UN official at that time, he had no way of requesting a meeting with the Mujahideen. He said he could do it only if they requested such a meeting. He asked me to figure out a way that I could go and talk to the Mujahideen leaders about meeting him to talk about the negotiations.

I wrote an op ed piece that appeared in the *New York Times* and then I sent it to a friend of mine, Anders Fänge, who was head of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan in Peshawar, and he went around with it to some of the Mujahideen leaders and asked them what they thought about it. I said that they should ask to talk to Cordovez. Cordovez said, "I can only talk to them if they ask me to do it."

We were all amateurs, so Anders did an amateur thing, such as I have done as well. He talked about it to Eddie Girardet, who was at that time covering Afghanistan for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Eddie Girardet wrote an article for the *Christian Science Monitor* about what we were doing [though without mentioning names], and therefore the whole thing was called off and I never went. That was a good lesson, which I still haven't probably learned.

Then there wasn't much to do. I kept following the negotiations after the Soviet pullout to the extent that I could, but I started doing other things for a while, too. I was at the Council on Foreign Relations, head of the Center for Preventive Action, starting in 1994. I now had these UN contacts, so I had a different perspective, and we were all working at Preventive Action. That also was a different kind of diplomacy, having to do with conflict resolution, conflict prevention, as well as maintaining my region specialty.

It was in the course of work that I was doing on the Balkans—especially on the Albanians in Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia—that I met Richard Holbrooke, who at the time was the envoy. He arranged for us to meet in Milosevic in Belgrade. So thanks to Holbrooke I met Milosevic. I mention that because it was important. The relationship with Holbrooke was the key to the whole thing.

Meanwhile, in 1987, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had appointed Lakhdar Brahimi, the former foreign minister of Algeria and by then also an experienced UN hand, to be his personal representative on Afghanistan. Brahimi immediately contacted

me because he said, “They’re asking me to work on Afghanistan, but the United Nations knows nothing about Afghanistan. Can you help me learn about Afghanistan?” I put together a think tank for him, which consisted of five people: me, Ashraf Ghani in Washington, Bill Maley in Australia, Ahmed Rashid in Pakistan, and Olivier Roy in Paris. If I were doing that today I wouldn’t create an all-male group, but at the time, I didn’t think about it.

While doing that, we had some meetings. We had one at UN HQ. We organized a meeting in Norway, a briefing for Brahimi, with a larger group of people and that continued to some extent. I developed a close partnership with Ashraf at that time and we worked on that together. Then when Francesc Vendrell became a special representative, the special envoy, we were still involved but not to the same extent.

Vendrell was a Catalan, a Spaniard, a current UN official. He just died recently. He organized a consultation outside Berlin where Ashraf and I participated along with other people. But I didn’t have the same kind of day-to-day contact with him as I had with Brahimi.

After 9/11, the day itself was something else. I was actually in the subway when it happened.

Q: Before we move on to that period, were you working on Afghanistan during the Taliban period, six years?

RUBIN: Yes. I was working on it quite a bit actually. The in-depth academic research that I had done predated that. During the Taliban period I had no official role, but I would give talks, I would testify before Congress. I was still concerned about how to find a political settlement. I was talking to those that were working on it, but I wasn’t really involved at all.

Q: Was this all in English or did you have some of these languages?

RUBIN: I speak to them, but not very well. Most of my work is done in English or French. I also, during that time, became a member of the Board of the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Foundation, the Soros Foundation, which meant that I was working on Central Asia, so I traveled quite a bit around Central Asia, and that integrated with my work with the Council on Foreign Relations. We did a project at CFR on the Fergana Valley, which took us to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Q: Was it mostly an economic project?

RUBIN: No, political. It was about preventing conflict. That was in the ’90s. Then at that time, Brahimi was appointed in ’97, not ’87. I may have misspoken. Then I was at the Council. In ’97–’98 I went to Central Asia with the Soros Foundation and also for my own project. On one of those occasions when I went with the Soros Foundation, Brahimi also asked me to look at what the UN was doing in Afghanistan, this was in the spring of 1998, and do an evaluation. So I asked him, “What are my terms of reference?” And very Brahimi-like, he said, “Go there and look around and tell me what you think.”

Q: What did you tell him?

RUBIN: I flew to Islamabad. The UN had just been expelled from Afghanistan by the Taliban. I went first to Islamabad and then I flew to Kandahar on the first UN flight back into Kandahar after they were all expelled, and I was staying with the UN. I went around and I interviewed some NGO and UN staff, as well as Taliban officials in Kandahar and, most notably Abdul Wakil Mutawakkil, who later became the Taliban foreign minister. I'm still in touch with him. He was in Kabul during the U.S. period. He didn't join the fighting.

Then I went to Kandahar. Then from Kandahar, I was driven in a UN vehicle from Kandahar to Farah, in the southwest, via Helmand. I spent all night in Lashkar Gah [capital of Helmand] and then I went to Farah to look at the UN field operations in the rural areas of the country. I stayed out there and observed the situation the best I could, met some of the Taliban in Helmand and non-Taliban Afghans as well, including farmers, customers in a tea house, currency traders, and bank officials.

Then I went back to Islamabad. Then I flew to Kabul and met Taliban officials and UN officials and NGO people who were there. Then I was supposed to fly back to Islamabad, but all the planes were being used for emergency relief for an earthquake. So I drove back from Islamabad to Peshawar. It was safe to do that at that time. Then I wrote a report.

Q: Can you give us an outline of what you saw, what your report said?

RUBIN: The Taliban had effective control of most of the country. I also went to teahouses to talk to people in Kandahar and then on the road to Farah. My driver, who was a former army officer from Ghazni, didn't want to take me to certain places, because he was afraid of the Taliban and even Kandaharis more broadly. For instance in Kandahar he took me to a tea house which I gradually came to understand was a gathering place for non-Kandahari men. .

One thing that impressed me in my conversations in the tea houses was that everyone I talked to was talking about development. They were complaining. One man said, "Before the Taliban came, there was so much violence, crime that we were afraid to go out of our houses. Now it's safe to go out of our houses. We'd also like our children to be educated and we would like some development." He didn't use the word, but he talked about how the roads under Zahir Shah were smooth.

In another place in a teahouse on the way to Farah, this guy said, "Look, here's the Helmand River. They can build dams. They can make electricity, irrigate the land and they're not doing anything." And they talked about politics. There was recognition of the Taliban's accomplishments in bringing crime and disorder under control, but also generally a desire, a chafing against the limits that the Taliban placed on them. People did not understand why there was still a war going on. They said, "Why are Afghans fighting with Afghans?" I didn't meet anyone who supported fighting against the Northern Alliance. They didn't see the point of it. The Taliban had some other agenda. The non-Taliban Afghans were trying to figure out what the agenda was. Is the United States

trying to take control of the minerals in Afghanistan? They were serious about that. What really struck me was how people were focused on development.

When I came back from that trip, I concluded that the Taliban were likely to win the war because they were the only side that had nationwide organization that was really organized in a unitary way. The other side was too divided, plus, the Taliban had religious legitimacy, not necessarily with the population, but in their ranks. Members of the Taliban had a religious obligation to follow their leader, which was something you didn't have in any other organization.

When I came back, I had a small group meeting with a journalist from Le Monde. I remember I said to her, "Outside of Afghanistan, when people talk about Afghanistan all they talk about is Islamic extremism. But when inside Afghanistan, the only thing people talk about is money." Do you know the film, *My Dinner with Andre*?

Q: No, I haven't seen it.

RUBIN: It's a film of two guys having dinner in a restaurant in New York. One of them is older, a theater director, the other one is younger, an actor and playwright. The younger guy, on his way in a taxi to the restaurant, comments in voiceover, When I was ten years old, I was rich, I was an aristocrat—riding around in taxis, surrounded by comfort—and all I thought about was art and music. Now I'm thirty-six, and all I think about is money."

Q: I was an economic officer at State, so I always think things come down to money.

RUBIN: They do come down to money a lot more than people realize. For instance, the Taliban got the support of the traders because they cleared the highways from banditry. That was one of their sources of their income, besides drugs. Drugs were not so profitable at that time because they weren't treated as illegal.

Q: In the '90s, the assistant secretary for South Asia, Robin Raphel, went and met Taliban leadership, and then came back to the State Department and gave a briefing to interested staff.

RUBIN: I know her quite well.

Q: I remember being sure to go. I was working on oil and gas pipelines in Central Asia, so I was interested in whatever might make sense or not make sense about the gas pipeline Occidental Petroleum was talking about. I asked, "What are the Taliban like?" She said, "They have a very strong emphasis on purity." Did you get that sense when you talked to the officials that they had a strong ideological agenda?

RUBIN: I knew that they did. I talked to non-Taliban too. In Kabul, I had a driver from the UN who was a regular Afghan. He told me, in Persian, he was dressed like a mullah. He said the people of Kabul used to be free. And because I knew the importance of money, I went to see the moneychangers in Kandahar and Kabul. In Kandahar, there's a moneychanger street. In Kabul, there is a building, like an exchange. There were no women there. A woman came in with her son, about ten years old, who was her mahram, to escort her. And as soon as she came, this armed Taliban started looking at her

suspiciously. Then all the men who worked in the money exchange got up to protect her or to see what they could do for her. I could see the tension of the presence of this one woman. Plus, the poverty. While I was being driven through the city, one old guy practically threw himself under my car to try to get something out of us.

Q: It was one of the poorest countries in the world. The war had been going on since 1980.

RUBIN: Now, it's absolutely the poorest country in the world. I'm certain, no doubt about that. It has to be.

Q: Was there anything else you wanted to mention, on the eve of 9/11? Were there any other views that you had about reconciliation, about conflict prevention?

RUBIN: I should also mention, after the Taliban took over in January of 1997, they sent a delegation to New York to ask the secretary general to recognize their government. I had to explain to them that's not how the UN works. While they were there, somehow it was arranged that they would give a talk at Columbia University. I was at the Council on Foreign Relations by then, but I had taught at Columbia, so Columbia asked me to chair the meeting. So I chaired that meeting, which included a number of people in the Taliban whom I knew and worked with to some extent later, after 9/11, when, like Wakil Ahmad, they did not go back and join the insurgency.

That was when I first met Abdul Wakil before I went to Kandahar, and Abdul Hakim Mujahid, who was later on the High Peace Council. He was the guy who gave me my visa to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, because he was in charge of the embassy in Islamabad. That was interesting watching them interact, not just with each other, but with the students at Columbia, mostly grad students, many of them foreigners.

Q: What happened?

RUBIN: At that time, they were looking for international recognition. Mutawakkil gave a speech in which he said something like, "Taliban are not terrorists. Taliban are not extremists. We will help the United States in the fight against terrorism." During the question period, the head of the Muslim Student Association of Columbia stood up and said, "Why are the Taliban accepting the American definition of terrorism?" And the Taliban were taken aback because this was all new to them. They didn't know this world. They met Osama bin Laden for the first time a few months before that and they didn't really know who he was.

Q: What did the student mean when he referred to the U.S. definition of terrorism?

RUBIN: Treating people he would regard as liberation fighters or Mujahideen as terrorists.

Q: They had met Osama bin Laden a few months before, you said?

RUBIN: When they captured Jalalabad in September 1996, they found Osama bin Laden. When Osama bin Laden came back to Afghanistan from Sudan in May 1996, he did not

go to the areas controlled by the Taliban. He didn't know the Taliban and the Taliban didn't know him at all. He went to Eastern Afghanistan where he had been active before, where he knew people. So the Taliban just found him in Jalalabad. And what they knew about him, as they told me later, was he was a Mujahid in trouble, so naturally, they gave him refuge. Then they started having some conflicts with him over his militant and aggressive public statements, and they asked him to come to Kandahar so they could keep their eyes on him. I got this from reading and talking with them, not personal experience. When Mullah Umar told Osama to come to Kandahar, he thought they were going to kill him, but they didn't, of course.

Q: Did bin Laden, at some point, start funneling money to the Taliban government?

RUBIN: I don't think he gave money to the government. Financial things were organized. But he built things. It's impossible to verify any of this. He built Mullah Omar's compound in Kandahar, so I was told. He helped improve the transmission of electricity from the Kajaki Dam to Kandahar City. Most of what funds he had he used for military purposes. That was a subsidy to the Taliban in the sense that his men were getting trained for what they really wanted to do by fighting on behalf of the Taliban.

Q: Let's go back to what you were starting to say about 2001, September 11.

RUBIN: I was in the subway when there was some kind of announcement, the subway is not going below Union Square because of a plane crash at the World Trade Center and they told you what other trains you could take.

Then I got to my office, which was downtown, and I found out what was happening. I immediately knew it was al Qaeda. I knew it was Osama bin Laden. Almost nobody was familiar with the term "al Qaeda" at that time. We just called them the Arabs. I managed to get home finally after the subway reopened, above Fourteenth Street.

I was wearing a suit and tie that day because I was supposed to speak at the Council of Foreign Relations that afternoon, chairing a meeting. The main speaker was General John Vessey, who had been the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Ronald Reagan. Vessey chaired my Advisory Board at the Council on Foreign Relations. I went to see him in his hotel the next day, and I said, "It's like Pearl Harbor." He said, "It's worse than Pearl Harbor."

That morning, September 12, I remember I told my wife, "Well, the rest of my life is now going to change," something like that.

Q: You knew.

RUBIN: Yes. Then several things happened. Craig Karp—who at that time worked in the South Asia regional bureau at the State Department—sent me a brief email and asked me to come to a meeting. He said, "Can you come to State on Tuesday, for the Future of Afghanistan discussion." I said okay. So I went there. I also convinced him to invite Ashraf to that as well. It was mostly relatively junior interagency folks, but also four people from the outside: Me, Ashraf, Arnie, and Tom Gouttierre from the Afghan Studies Center at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and it was chaired by Richard Haass,

who at that time was chair of policy planning. I believe this was a setup done by him and Colin Powell.

This meeting was interesting. Richard said the decision to invade had already been made. Except in the unlikely event the Taliban turned over OBL [Osama bin Laden], the U.S. was going in to overturn the government. Then Richard asked, what do we do after that? First, he turned to the outside experts. All the experts said, you can't just destroy the country's government and then leave. You have to help them put together something that's an interim government. As soon as we said that, all the young people from the Bush White House [NSC] said, "That's nation building. We don't do nation building."

Q: They actually said that, at the time?

RUBIN: Yes. We don't do nation building. They were very aggressive about it. Then there was a guy, a Special Forces officer I knew from the previous wars in Afghanistan, David Champagne. He trained Special Forces in cultural competence. He was there. He said, "We did this to the Afghan people and we have a responsibility." The room went completely silent.

Q: We hadn't gone in militarily yet. What did he mean?

RUBIN: We had supplied the Mujahideen with weapons and acquiesced to Pakistan's priorities about who should receive them. The U.S. had done nothing to build up a political alternative. That silenced the debate at that point. Then we went on and talked about the role for the UN, an international force, things like that. Both Ashraf Ghani and I urged support for a UN role and a sort of multinational force to maintain security while the Afghans built their new government and security forces.

As I recall—there was no documentation for this—toward the end of the meeting, I said, "All I'm saying is, go in there with some Afghan leaders, help them set up some kind of a functioning authority that could police the territory and then leave. I'm not saying turn Afghanistan into a functioning democracy in four years." Richard Haass said, "Okay, nation building-lite," which was the first time I heard that phrase. Maybe he invented it on the spot. It's interesting that I said we weren't going to try to make Afghanistan into a functioning demo, but we did it, and I was involved.

Back in New York, a few days later, I went to the dentist. I was sitting in the dentist chair when Brahimi called me. He told me, "The secretary general has asked me to come back to the UN and lead the Afghanistan mission to take over from Vendrell and we're going to have negotiations, and I would like you and Ashraf to come and help me." So I went to work for Brahimi.

Q: What did Ashraf Ghani say in the meeting?

RUBIN: One thing I remember him saying is that it was necessary to have some kind of international UN force in Kabul because without that, Kabul was at risk of being torn apart again by warlords as it had been under the previous Mujahideen government, and there would be no space for politics. He and I both pushed that idea. That's what later became ISAF [International Security Assistance Force].

Soon after that, I went to see Jean-Marie Guehenno, who was under secretary general of the UN for Peacekeeping Affairs. I met Jean-Marie and Salman Ahmed, who was JMG's chief of staff and is now in Policy Planning at the State Department. I told Jean-Marie and Salman, "The UN might be asked to send a peacekeeping force to Afghanistan." And all the blood drained out of their faces. But it turned out that it was impossible to send a PKO, so the Security Council approved a resolution authorizing a multi-national force under chapter six of the Charter, enforcing peace and security, not chapter five, peacekeeping.

A few days after Brahimi called me, he came to New York. At first, he and I and Ashraf met over dinner together with Iqbal Reza, a Pakistani retired UN official. Brahimi had known him for a long time, because he had some role in supporting the Algerian national liberation movement. Then that weekend he went down to Washington to talk to what he called "the Americans," i.e. the U.S. government. I also went down and we all had dinner at Ashraf's house.

Q: Ghani was at the World Bank at this point?

RUBIN: Yes. We talked over various concepts for the UN mission that Brahimi would assemble. Then the idea was that I should write tentative terms of reference for that UN mission. I took the train back to New York with Brahimi and while I was sitting next to him, I started writing the terms of reference. It was far from the final product, a Security Council resolution passed in March 2002, but that was the first draft of the UNAMA [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan] Terms of Reference.

Q: What was the original idea and what did it end up being?

RUBIN: The idea was the UN presence in Afghanistan at that time, before 9/11, was all humanitarian. That meant within the organization humanitarian people had the greatest say in Afghanistan. There was no political mission.

I wrote that from now on, the political side has to be in the lead. When one of my drafts got circulated, a lot of humanitarian people were pissed off. I said that in some meetings in the UN, but I didn't have a contract with the UN. I never was formerly hired by the UN, but because of Brahimi, he treated me as if I was his close assistant, his aide, so I got into all kinds of meetings.

I remember there was one meeting with all the under secretary generals, senior people, assistant secretaries. This was when the Taliban realized they were defeated and were planning to hand over the northern hub of Kunduz to the Northern Alliance. But there were also a bunch of Pakistanis, "retired" officers on contract, and a lot of al Qaeda fighters, too. They were trying to figure out what to do. So we were trying to figure out what to do about that, but nothing came of it. Suddenly, I'm dealing with high levels of the UN. Also many of the UN missions were contacting me.

When I went to Washington, Ashraf proposed to me that we should do a joint project. This was before Brahimi called. The project was to restructure Afghanistan to convene working groups of Afghan professionals and diaspora to start making up plans for a future Afghan state. So I put that together as a proposal for a project to be housed at CIC,

the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. That's where I was working at the time.

Brahimi and Ashraf came back to New York. We went to lunch with the Norwegian state secretary for international affairs—Ashraf, Brahimi, and I. The Norwegians gave us a million dollars. The Soros Foundation gave us three hundred thousand dollars, so we started working on that in parallel with my work at the UN. The idea was to support the UN; eventually, it turned into a project in support of the implementation of the Bonn Accords. There were no Bonn Accords at that time. At that point, people were just showering money on us. I turned down some grants because it would have given me more money than I had budgeted to use and I didn't think it was proper.

Q: Did Ghani know a lot of expat Afghans who would be interested in going back to try to help?

RUBIN: He said he did.

Q: The other Afghan-born person important at that time, who was in the U.S. government and also had some knowledge of the country, was Khalilzad.

RUBIN: I met Ashraf in 1984, when he gave a talk to the Asia Society and I was at Columbia. This was when we started working together.

I went to graduate school with Zal. He came to the University of Chicago in January of 1974 from American University in Beirut, so I knew him way back from that time. After 9/11 he was at the National Security Council, but he was also appointed as a special envoy. So he was also at Bonn along with Jim Dobbins. Jim Dobbins was the formal envoy and he would attend meetings. Zal would be like a fly on the wall, talking to everybody and making plans. He'd get on the phone and talk to the Afghans on the ground in Afghanistan and talk to the Special Forces.

Before Bonn, Ashraf and Lakhdar went on an international trip. They were going around to various regional countries to talk to people about this. After they got back, Ashraf and I were with Brahimi in his office when Richard Haass called Brahimi and said, "The president is getting impatient. He wants to go faster." Brahimi said, "No," and hung up. He looked at Ashraf and me and said, "You see how they treat us."

Q: When they said the president wants you to go faster, what was the product they wanted?

RUBIN: I didn't hear him say it, but as relayed to me from Brahimi, he said this meeting in Bonn is taking too long. Just get the British Special Forces to bring Rabbani to Bagram Air Base, have a ceremony and make Rabbani the president without any political process involving Afghans. In other words, he was completely ignoring, rather than just making bad judgments about, the politics of Afghanistan.

While Lakhdar and Ashraf were away, The leaders of the Northern Alliance, who were in Tajikistan, issued a statement criticizing Brahimi for hiring Ashraf because they saw him as a person with an ethnic agenda opposed to them. Then I called Ashraf—he was asleep

in Tehran—and told him about it. He was annoyed that I woke him up. So Brahimi called off his visit to Tajikistan.

When they returned, one day, I went to the UN, and Ashraf and I had cappuccino in the "Viennese café" in the basement. At that time, Ashraf had already had stomach cancer and had to watch what he ate, but he still was drinking cappuccino all the time. He can't do that now, of course. And while we had cappuccino he said to me, "When do you think I should go to the other side?" I asked, "What do you mean?" He said, "To the Afghan government." I said, "What role do you see for yourself?" He said, "Prime minister." In the pre-war royal governments, the position of prime minister ran the whole government on behalf of the king.

Then I went upstairs to see Brahimi and he said, "The Northern Alliance has issued a statement saying that Ashraf is a political figure and they won't meet with him or deal with him." He said, "You can go tell your friends," at that time he considered the Northern Alliance people, mainly Ahmad Shah Massoud's group, as my friends. He said, "You go tell your friends Ashraf is a professional international civil servant. He has no political ambitions."

I said, "You have put me in an awkward position because Ashraf just told me he wants to be prime minister." Then Brahimi told me, "You go tell Ashraf that he can't do that." I said all right. I couldn't just say that to Ashraf, so I suggested that he discuss it with Lakhdar. Later, Ashraf came to me and said, "I talked to Brahimi about it and everything is okay." I don't know what, if anything, really happened.

Meanwhile, Brahimi instructed me to try and reconcile Ashraf with the Northern Alliance during the meetings in Bonn. I arranged for him to have private talks with Ahmad Wali Massoud and Humayun Tandar. Whatever they might have agreed on, it didn't stick.

Q: Is this December?

RUBIN: It was the end of November. We left for Bonn after Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was Thursday then I think we left on Sunday. Meanwhile, I had given an interview to *Le Monde* while I was at my sister's house for Thanksgiving. And I had just talked to a BBC reporter in Kabul who was telling me, "The Russians are giving Rabbani a lot of money. They're trying to put him in power. It feels like this is a coup." She told me all these things and I was worked up about it because we were trying to start a new government through a UN-led political process and the Russians were trying to preempt that effort. Putin had already met Rabbani in Tajikistan for a photo op, and said this is the leader of Afghanistan.

I was very inexperienced as an official, to put it mildly, I didn't even know that I was a UN official. Nobody ever made me an official. I wasn't getting a salary or anything like that. This was Brahimi's way of operating. He told me to come, and I came. Because he asked me to come, everybody accepted it. But I had no formal position. I said to the reporter, "Les russes sont très irresponsables. Ils donnent beaucoup d'argent à Rabbani." ["The Russians are very irresponsible. They're giving a lot of money to Rabbani.] Then *Le Monde* published it with a headline, "Aide to Brahimi said the Russians are

irresponsible." Lavrov raised it in the Security Council three times and tried to get me fired. I didn't know about it until much later. Brahimi protected me, but the Russians were quite angry at me at that time and for several years after. So we went to Bonn.

Q: You were a small group still or were you much larger?

RUBIN: It was much larger. The whole group was ten, fifteen people on the UN team.

Q: What happened in Bonn? I think you wrote that there were four or so Afghan groups that were negotiating.

RUBIN: There were four groups there. Having these four groups was Vendrell's idea. He gave me a paper about it, asked me what I thought of it, and I told him I didn't think it was a good idea because the groups did not represent anybody, but at least the so-called Northern Alliance had forces on the ground. The Taliban weren't at Bonn because the Taliban were fighting the war against the United States at that time and getting targeted. They were considered terrorists just like al Qaeda, not a political force. They were not sent to Guantanamo because Guantanamo wasn't there yet to be sent to. Pre-Guantanamo, they were sent to detention on prison ships and elsewhere—anywhere that no system of law was in force.

While we were there, I was in charge of drafting certain things and talking to the Afghan delegates—many of whom I knew—about certain issues and talking to some of the regional and European diplomats there. Javad Zarif was there from Iran. He was then the director general for International Organizations. I had known him when he was deputy rep at the Iran UN mission in New York. I had been introduced to him by Giandomenico Picco, who was working with Cordovez at that time. So I interacted with them.

That's when I first met Dobbins. One moment I was sitting at breakfast in the hotel by myself. [It was Ramadan, so the Afghans were eating only from sundown to sunrise.] Then Dobbins and Zarif came over to me together and said, "Why doesn't the Bonn Agreement text say anything about having elections or fighting terrorism?" Brahimi and Vendrell had strongly disagreed over whether the agreement should set a date for elections. Brahimi says, "Elections cause conflict. They don't have the mechanisms in place. We should just let them start and let them decide when they can have elections." Vendrell, who died this year in London, was a strong believer in the liberal peace idea and he wanted elections. The United States wanted elections because elections are part of the exit strategy. They show that you succeeded.

The Northern Alliance and Iran wanted elections for strategic reasons. Humayun Tandar, the spokesman of the Northern Alliance/United Front delegation, a guy I knew since 1984 when I met him in Paris, he was a Tajik from Kabul province, he arched his eyebrows and said, "Il y aura des surprises!" ("There will be surprises") which meant you'll see there are not so many Pashtuns in the country. They are outnumbered by the non-Pashtuns. The Pashtuns are the plurality but a minority of the population. At any rate, no one knew how many people were living in the country. That's a problem for having elections.

Finally, the combination of Iran and the United States, Vendrell, and the Northern Alliance was irresistible, so they put a deadline for elections in the agreement.

Q: Who had the idea of forming an interim government?

RUBIN: The idea of an interim government, that was actually taken from the Rome group, which had a plan.

Q: What was the Rome group?

RUBIN: The Rome group was a group organized around Zahir Shah, the former king, who was living in exile in Rome. That was one of the four groups at Bonn. There were two groups that really counted politically, the Northern Alliance/United Front, and the Rome group. The Rome group had been working on a peace plan intermittently for years. Their plan was to have a Loya Jirga, which would choose an interim government. The interim government would write a Constitution. So we basically adopted that model. None of the other delegations had any proposals.

We adopted the idea of an "Emergency Loya Jirga" from some work by legal scholars associated with the Rome group. That was the first step. Bonn would choose the interim administration. Then the interim administration would convene an Emergency Loya Jirga, just as called for in the documents we got from the Rome group. But these documents gave no practical details. So we said, Okay, we'll have an Emergency Loya Jirga, but we have to set a date for it. How long does it take to organize one? Ashraf wanted it to take place on Nowruz, the Afghan-Persian-Central Asian new year at the beginning of spring, which was also the start of the Afghan government's fiscal year, but it seemed not enough time.

I was looking through the documents from the Rome group to see how you organize a Loya Jirga. There's nothing there. It said, "See detailed Appendix." So I called up the Afghan in California who had sent me these documents and I asked him, "Where is the Appendix?" He hesitated and said, "We haven't written it yet."

Q: What is a Loya Jirga?

RUBIN: Loya Jirga means Grand Council in Pashto. It is based on an old tribal tradition of making tribal decisions through consultation among tribal leaders. Sometimes it was representative in a [non-democratic] way, sometimes its results were dictated by the leader. It was made into a state institution by rulers of Afghanistan in order to provide a kind of tribal legitimacy for the government. It was by no means democratic, but it involved some popular consultation. Some Loya Jirgas were just rubber stamps, whatever the ruler wanted. Some did actually discuss proposals and changes to some extent.

Theoretically, in principle, the Loya Jirga is the highest authority in Afghanistan, higher than the ruler. That's not true in practice, but people have been taught that, and it is kind of a hegemonic belief. So if there are major decisions to be made, they think the Loya Jirga has to make them.

Q: Going back to the ethnic issue, you pointed out that there's never been a census. People don't know what the electorate is composed of. But the major ethnic groups are important and many people believe that the Pashtuns are the majority. So there was a sense that the interim leader would need to be a Pashtun. Is that right?

RUBIN: No, I don't think anyone believed Pashtuns were the majority, but they did believe that Pashtuns were a plurality and had ruled Afghanistan for two hundred and fifty years, though not because they won elections. The Afghan state was structured originally as a conquest empire. Pashtuns were the largest group, but it was like this particular tribe, the Durranis and specifically the Popalzais and later the Muhammadzais [who were Barakzais] owned the state and then distributed the benefit of that state to others. Pashtuns were the core of that power; not all Pashtuns, but those who were aligned with or empowered by the government. Amir Abdul Rahman Khan [ruled 1879–1901] made a treaty with the elders of the Muhammadzais, naming them "Sharik-ud-Dawlat," partners of the state.

It was not a modern bureaucratic state. It survived the Communist Revolution. Before that, the Republican Revolution had disrupted all of that and there was no way to bring that system back. All kinds of things had disrupted it. But it still existed in the minds of the people. And the main area where the Taliban operated and the main support of the Taliban was among Pashtuns. Pashtuns also supported the Taliban.

In 1999 I attended a UN conference on narcotics in the region in Tashkent, over lunch with Doctor Abdullah, and he said something like, it's hard to understand, but the people of Afghanistan really believe in the Afghan state. There is practically nothing on the ground that corresponds to it, but they believe in it. I don't know why.

At Bonn, we were concerned that if it seemed that the UN was consecrating an ethnic victory by Tajiks—because the Tajiks had already entered Kabul with their guns and were in charge of everything, because whoever has the guns to control Kabul are in charge of the army—it might have given the Taliban a way to turn it into an ethnic conflict and make a comeback. That never fully happened, but it was something that the Taliban tried to do.

Also to try to legitimize the government, the idea was to try to appeal to the long hundreds-year old traditions of Afghan statehood. So Hamid Karzai was not just Pashtun; he was from the Popalzai, from the same tribe as the founder of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Durrani, founder of the empire of the Afghans, the State of the Afghans. The capital would be in Kabul, as it had been since 1775. Then there was a major role for other ethnic groups as well and Karzai was relatively good at being inclusive in that way.

Q: Did you know Karzai before?

RUBIN: Yes, I met Karzai sometime in the 1980s. I knew Karzai and his brother, Qayum.

Q: What was he doing? Am I right that he had ended up in India instead of Pakistan, where many had gone?

RUBIN: He didn't end up in India. He just studied in India. I first encountered him in Islamabad and his brother in Maryland. Hamid Karzai stayed in Pakistan and he was active with the resistance, not militarily, with the party with the Islamic National Salvation Movement led by Sibghatullah Mujaddidi. When I first saw him in Islamabad, in 1988, he was acting as spokesman for Mujahideen. After 1992 he joined the Mujahideen government as deputy minister of foreign affairs, but some of his factional foes arrested him, and he escaped.

Politically he was very active with the Rome group. But he and his father, who was an important tribal leader, were organizing around the theme of the Loya Jirga. It was interesting because he didn't start military activity. They didn't put the emphasis on killing people. They put the emphasis on creating an alternative source of political legitimacy through the Loya Jirga. And because of that, his father was assassinated, presumably by the Taliban. When his father was assassinated, I called him in Quetta to give my condolences. Qayum gave me his number.

Q: His name started surfacing in Bonn?

RUBIN: Before Bonn, I think Karzai was already a done deal. Karzai went to Dushanbe with, I think, some CIA logistical support and Massoud decided to work with him. The Panjshiris were looking for a Pashtun who would concede to them a good share of power.

Q: Massoud was in Pakistan?

RUBIN: No, Massoud never left Afghanistan except for one day in Pakistan in 1990. He was assassinated at his base in northern Afghanistan by al Qaeda agents on September 9, 2001.

Massoud's group, known as Shura-i-Nazar-Shamali, or Supervisory Council of the North, had concluded they needed to have a Pashtun leader for the same reasons I gave above, so as to reduce the risk of an ethnic war. They didn't want Zahir Shah because that provided a path to bringing back the monarchy, which had a whole lot of baggage with it. That was a big issue at Bonn. And they didn't want Abdul Haq, a major commander from Eastern Afghanistan. Abdul Haq thought Zahir Shah should recruit his own army and saw himself as its commander. When he saw Shura-i-Nazar start to enter Kabul, he decided to go into Eastern Afghanistan, where he was from, and started fighting himself, so he would have a claim to a share of power. The Taliban captured him and hanged him, which was a great loss.

I knew from the beginning Karzai would be the leader because of the various ways he had been working on this Loya Jirga project with his father. He talked to a lot of people. He had gone into Afghanistan after 9/11 with the help of the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. The CIA was working with him. Then he was extracted at one point when his security was at risk, and they brought him back in, and he was near Kandahar. At the opening session of the Bonn conference, by pre-arrangement Karzai addressed the delegates via satellite telephone. This was a strong signal that he had the support of the U.S. and the United Front.

We in the UN team didn't know this at the time, even though it was reported in the New York Times, because we were too busy in Bonn and then immediately going on to a donor's conference. I have to fault the UN Secretariat for not alerting Brahimi to this news. Karzai had negotiated a truce with the Taliban in return for an amnesty that included allowing Mullah Omar to "live in dignity" in Kandahar. This was the day after he was named the interim President, and the Taliban said they would recognize him as the president in return for amnesty and for making a certain person, Mullah Naqibullah, who was an intermediary between the Taliban and Mujahideen, making him the governor of Kandahar. But Rumsfeld said no, no negotiation, and certainly no dignified life for Mullah Omar.

Q: This was after Bonn?

RUBIN: It was starting December 6, 2001. Karzai had been named president at Bonn, but he had no one in Kabul. The Northern Alliance/United Front, led by Shura-i-Nazar, was already in Kabul. Karzai didn't have his own fighters, a few of them, but not like Massoud's people did in the North. Later when Karzai flew to Kabul for his inauguration on December 22, he walked off the plane alone. He was greeted by Muhammad Qasim Fahim, Massoud's military commander who became acting minister of defense in the interim administration. Fahim saw Karzai was alone and asked him, "Where are your men?" Karzai replied, "You are my men."

Q: I wanted to ask you about that because there are reports that we pushed for the Taliban to agree to give up al Qaeda and they wouldn't. The Pakistanis said they traveled to Kabul and asked them and they came back and said that they wouldn't. At the same time, there are these reports that are saying that the Taliban was willing to make a peace treaty that would include trying to protect Osama.

RUBIN: They weren't trying to protect Osama. They were trying to protect Mullah Omar. The thing is, we were asking them to do something that's completely impossible for them to do. We were asking them to turn a Muslim, who many people considered to be a hero, over to non-Muslims and without any legal procedure whatsoever. They heard the U.S. non-Muslims saying that he's guilty of this atrocity. We all saw it on television. There was no television in Afghanistan. Nobody knew where New York was or what was going on there.

What some Taliban were proposing, quietly, was let us take care of it the Afghan way, which looked to Americans like a trap. The Taliban convened a Shura of ulama who said, "We would like to thank Osama for all the services he's given to Jihad. We think it's now time for him to leave Afghanistan." Bin Laden didn't turn to Mullah Omar for protection; he ran away from Mullah Omar. That's why he was in Eastern Afghanistan where he thought he'd get more protection.

It was impossible for us to find a face-saving solution for both the Taliban so that they could do something about him in accordance with Islamic law and for the U.S. to satisfy the political demand for a harsh response.

The agreement with Karzai said nothing about OBL. We don't have a written copy of it, though. Basically, the idea was the Taliban would surrender the four provinces they still held to Karzai. They would make Mullah Naqibullah the governor of Kandahar. There would be a complete amnesty for the Taliban and Mullah Omar would live in Kandahar with dignity. There was no power-sharing with the Taliban, or giving them positions. That was basically what the agreement was about. I can't say that it would have helped or would have been a good basis for statehood. Even if the U.S. had agreed to it, there would have been huge problems.

When Rumsfeld vetoed that agreement, that assured the Taliban would go into military opposition and he assured that they would seek protection from Pakistan. They always had Pakistan's support because of Pakistan's concerns about the U.S. and the new Afghan government in power and also for Pakistani domestic political reasons.

I can talk about some of the issues in Bonn in no particular order. One of the issues was in the original draft, which was written by Vendrell, who was a constitutional lawyer, said, "The interim government shall not provide for amnesty for war crimes and crimes against humanity." This caused quite an uproar among the Northern Alliance commanders. They also saw that there was an annex to the agreement about security, it said that the UN would send a multi-national force to secure Kabul.

When this was reported back to Afghanistan to the commanders, what they understood was the United Nations is going to send troops to Afghanistan to arrest the Mujahideen for war crimes. Also, there was nothing in the agreement about the Mujahideen, what role they would play in the new setup, which was a tremendous source of anxiety for them.

I was the point person. I had to negotiate with the Northern Alliance guy, my old friend, Humayun Tandar, language to put in the Bonn Agreement, thanking the Mujahideen, who have been for being heroes of resistance and who would now become champions of peace. The new language thanked President Rabbani for turning over power peacefully, even though, in fact, he did it only under tremendous pressure. We put that in. Many people resented that, not just the Taliban, many other people did. But it was a condition for getting the agreement implemented, even to the extent that it was.

They never implemented the annex that said the resistance forces should not enter Kabul. The fact is they were already in Kabul. It was too late to undo that. The only way that would have kept them out of Kabul would have been if the U.S. or the UK had been willing to send Special Forces to secure Kabul, and neither of them was willing to do that. As it happened, the international coalition had become a partner of the Afghan forces that were already in Kabul rather than a replacement for them.

There was an issue about the structure of the interim government. First of all, Ashraf wanted there to be a fifteen-person cabinet because he said it would be more efficient to consolidate ministries. He was thinking about government like a technocrat. Qanuni said no, there's twenty-eight ministries, because he had a patronage problem. He had to give positions to all the various people in his coalition. He wasn't thinking about a government. Actually, nobody was thinking about governing Afghanistan. That's an

important point to make. We ended up with one extra ministry because we also got the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

There was the question of the executive. Vendrell was a convinced adherent to and a believer in parliamentary democracy. He would have liked to have to restore Zarif Shah and have a parliamentary democracy. We did have a discussion about Zahir Shah because eventually Zahir Shah said that he would chair and open the Loya Jirga. Originally he said he would chair the Loya Jirga and the United Front said no. They really didn't want him involved at all. They were very suspicious. Eventually, they conceded they would allow him to open the Loya Jirga and that was all.

Then the question is who has the executive power. The way Vendrell had drafted it for a constitutional monarchy, the prime minister had most executive power. So there would be a prime minister and then there would be a president who would replace the king as the representative of the state but not running the government.

I wish I could remember how this happened. I know that Brahimi really didn't like that system. He thought it would create a civil war inside the government because there were no institutions to limit the powers in each one. The president and the prime minister would be fighting all the time, like Rabbani and Hekmatyar, in the '90s. So somehow or other the prime minister was removed from the plan and they just had a president.

Even though the president had no power, that was the main thing because it gave him the power to appoint people. Gradually, he changed the composition of the government. But they had conveyed, the Panjshiris, the Northern Alliance, not the whole Northern Alliance, they wanted to have a prime minister. They also wanted to get foreign minister, defense minister, interior minister, intelligence, and they did. They got all those things.

Q: In Bonn?

RUBIN: In Bonn, yes. In fact, they got them on the ground in Kabul, and Bonn ratified it.

One other question. I hear from many people that the United States imposed a centralized government on Afghanistan, which is traditionally decentralized, which is a half-truth. Afghanistan is traditionally decentralized. It is still decentralized today. But the government of Afghanistan is centralized. Many institutions of governance in Afghanistan are not controlled by the government, but they are not established by a decentralized constitution or legal framework either. It's non-centralized more than decentralized. There has never been an institutionalized devolution of power. The Bonn Conference never discussed decentralization of government.

The thing was we needed some kind of legal framework for the interim government. So we reached back to the last constitution of Afghanistan before all the trouble started, the 1964 constitution, which was the King's constitution. Except for the parts about the monarchy and the Parliament, because the interim government wouldn't have a king or a Parliament. That was difficult for the Iranians because it meant there was a danger of restoring a Shah. Zarif said, "I'd be putting myself in danger if I agree to this." But we gave him assurances. Some of the people in the room were disappointed and they were still trying to get Zahir Shah in office later.

It also used some UN boilerplate language to say that there would be disarmament. The fighters would be disarmed. The trifecta of things that the Mujahideen understood was that the U.S./UN were going to disarm the Mujahidin, arrest them and then imprison them for war crimes. That was what they thought was the plan.

I was working with Humayun Tandar on the paragraph to appease them and I could see how nervous he was because people back on the ground were getting really nervous.

The first few days of the meeting, the issue was what are we doing here. Rabbani had instructed Qanuni not to make an agreement. As far as Rabbani was concerned, he was the president. Putin had endorsed him. He told Qanuni, you just go there and consult, then come back and talk to me.

I happen to know through my personal contacts that the Panjshiris didn't agree with that because the Panjshiris wanted to use Hamid Karzai to get rid of Rabbani. That was the jiu-jitsu of three-dimensional chess that they were playing, and they made it clear to me that's what they were trying to do. But they couldn't do it openly.

We controlled their transport. The U.S. and Britain controlled their transport. The United Front came to Bonn on a British military aircraft. Brahimi sent me to greet them at the front desk of the hotel, where a nice German woman told me that for each guest she would need their date of birth and a credit card. I tried to explain to her that these guys did not have credit cards [though they got them soon enough] and didn't have any documentation of their date of birth.

At one point, under pressure from Rabbani, Qanooni was half-heartedly threatening to leave. I remember Ashraf, Brahimi and I were discussing the state of play—we were trying to arrange negotiations between Northern Alliance opponents of Rabbani and the Rome Group—when Jim Dobbins came in and asked to speak to Brahimi alone. On our way out we heard Dobbins saying, "Powell says not to let them leave." They didn't really want to leave, and we didn't let them leave. Then we had to get Rabbani to agree to step down as president. That was not easy.

Q: Who was doing that work?

RUBIN: Reach back to U.S. forces in Afghanistan plus ultimately a coordinated effort with Russia and Iran that made it clear to Rabbani that no one would support him if he insisted on staying in office. That's how that work was done on many issues. For instance, at the beginning the Rome group was insisting on keeping a larger role for the king. The Rome group had nominated Abdul Satar Sirat to be the interim chair [president], who was an Uzbek and former Chief Justice, who was teaching Islamic law in Saudi Arabia. Basically, the idea means they're nominating for an interim chair someone who could not become the president at the emergency Loya Jirga. He's holding the seat open for Zahir Shah, whereas Karzai, a Durrani Popalzai could become president. So Brahimi called the king's son-in-law, General Abdul Wali, in Rome, and speaking to him in French, politely asked for his assistance. Could he persuade the Rome group to withdraw the nomination of Sirat, and would Zahir Shah be willing to announce that he did not wish to lead the government? Abdul Wali declined.

The Rome group was claiming that somehow they had been given the power to choose the leader and they had "elected" Sirat, so he was the democratic choice. In reality, the U.S. and the United Front had agreed on Hamid Karzai. As far as Brahimi was concerned, the delegations at Bonn did not represent anyone and could not decide things by voting among themselves. Instead, the choice of leader had to be ratified by consensus, by agreement of all four groups.

So Brahimi called in Qanooni and asked him if he objected to Sirat as leader. Qanooni said he did, but he could not say that as a public position because his wife and Sirat's wife were cousins [both Safi Pashtuns]. So ultimately, Brahimi got Hamid Gailani, the head of the Peshawar group, and son of Sayyid Ahmad Gailani, the leader of the Qadiri Sufi order in Afghanistan, to object to Sirat. Then [as I recall] Brahimi, Dobbins, and Qanooni agreed that Karzai would be the chair. Sirat complained that if this was the plan all along, we should have told him, and he had a point, but the speech of Karzai at the opening session was a message he failed to understand.

Then Qanooni came with his proposal for a government. The main thing was we had cabinet lists, which each delegation had given us. Because they had the power and people on the ground, we basically had to work from the list the Northern Alliance had given us, but it was very ethnically and regionally unbalanced. It had Hamid Karzai as the chair [president], but Panjshiris had the positions of prime minister [Qanuni], Foreign minister [Abdullah]. Defense Minister [Fahim], Interior Minister [also Qanuni, concurrently with PM], and intelligence chief [Arif]. The complete domination of a single small group would not be acceptable. So Brahimi sent me to show the list to Sirat and solicit his opinion about the cabinet list. We anticipated that he would say that one group could not dominate everything. But when I gave the list to Sirat and asked, "What do you think of this?" his only response was, "Hamid Karzai is not capable of doing that job." He wanted that job. So, as a result, Sirat has written articles about how I personally established Pashtun domination in Afghanistan along with Khalilzad, Hamid Karzai, and Ashraf Ghani.

Afghanistan was not a tabula rasa. While people were labeling it a "failed state," the old state institutions were still in place, even if not functioning. State institutions were there before we got there, with the centralized structure and bureaucratic procedures. A lot of what we put in the Bonn Agreement was just to try to find a framework within which what was actually on the ground could operate. It didn't work that well. The other thing that was going on with the government in Afghanistan was the war on terror, which was totally outside the purview of the Bonn Agreement, except that, at the insistence of the U.S. and Iran, it contained a proviso that the interim authorities would cooperate in fighting terrorism.

Q: I think in one of your books you made a comment that for the U.S., the war that was trying to be resolved had started in 2001, but for the UN, you were looking at a war that had been going on for seventeen years.

RUBIN: Many Afghans, and also us in the UN, we thought that Bonn was a peace conference. One thing that happened there was Congressmen Dana Rohrbacher from Orange County [California's Fourth-Eighth district] showed up and somehow he got in.

He asked the UN to gather the Mujahideen. So we got the people from the Northern Alliance and he met them. To translate we got the official translator who was Jawed Ludin, who later became deputy foreign minister, at that time, was a grad student at LSE [London School of Economics and Political Science].

Rohrbacher started his talk by saying, "I want to thank you for taking vengeance on our enemies and I want to let you know that any weapons that you need we'll give you." That was the tenor of it.

Q: Is that what you got out of Dobbins and the U.S. delegation as well?

RUBIN: No. Jawed Ludin was very upset and said, "I thought this was a peace conference." That's just to illustrate the different perspectives. A lot of the Taliban thought, so did Jalaluddin Haqqani thought, "I'm against the Americans invading, but this is an opportunity for Afghans to make peace." A lot of the Taliban surrendered. A lot of the commanders who captured them all had the same idea, now is the time to make peace. Now that the Americans are here, we can rebuild the country. I don't know that they're capable of doing it. But, the US didn't want peace. We wanted the war on terror.

Q: If we had caught Osama bin Laden immediately, maybe it would have been different.

RUBIN: It certainly would have been different. I can't predict what would have happened.

Q: But that was on our mind?

RUBIN: It was sort of on our mind, more the U.S. mind than the UN. The UN mandate was an agreement on the next government. When the U.S. had a chance to capture Osama, they sent the troops to Iraq instead.

Q: Anything else on Bonn that you want to mention?

RUBIN: Ashraf had drafted an article for the agreement that said there would be a civil service commission, which will appoint civil servants based on merit. It will provide lists from which the government will appoint people, this, that and the other thing, and there would be a code of conduct. That was the one thing that all four Afghan groups at Bonn agreed on—they did not want that. The exception I should say was Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady. He endorsed it.

Q: Because it's a culture where giving appointments—

RUBIN: The only power they would have if they got out into office would be to make appointments. It's the way the government works.

Q: After Bonn, what happened?

RUBIN: I was sitting in my office sometime in January, I think, and somebody told me, "It says on the radio that you've been invited to Kabul as a special guest of the government for Nowruz."

Q: Can you explain what Nowruz is?

RUBIN: Nowruz is the Persian New Year to mark the beginning of spring, approximately March 21, which is celebrated throughout that whole region, from Turkey to North India, through Central Asia. They never really managed to send me an invitation. They were not very well organized, but I found out that it was true. So I went. I had dinner with Karzai and Zal and my fellow honorees, there were only three or four of us, on the eve of Nowruz, in the palace. And I had a good talk with Karzai there about politics.

I was trying to launch the project that Ashraf and I had started, and he was already there. He set up a new organization, the Aid Coordination Agency. So I saw him, but he was not really working on our project. It could never work that he and I tried to run a project together. There was a vacuum when he left, nonetheless.

I'm trying not to confuse different visits. At that time, Zahir Shah had not returned. Later he did return, and when I was there in May, he had returned. I went to his residence and he was holding jirgas and he was having visitors, tribesmen from Paktia.

Q: You are talking about the former King?

RUBIN: Yes, the former King, tribesman from Paktia, Eastern Afghanistan, the same tribes that had brought his father into power, in 1928, 1929, by kicking out a short-lived Tajik usurper, as they viewed him. First, the rebels kicked out King Amanullah. Then This guy came in for nine months and then the Pashtuns kicked him out again. I met someone I knew there, the son of a famous scholar in Afghanistan, whom I had known in Peshawar. He was translating for me. He said the tribesmen were saying, "Just give us the word. We will chase the usurpers out of Kabul like our fathers did before us." Zahir Shah told him, no, the most important thing is peace.

Q: That's one good thing. What month was this? Crocker got there in January.

RUBIN: Crocker had left already.

Q: And Ambassador Finn came. He was there for two years.

RUBIN: I was present when Finn was sworn in around Nowruz. I was accompanied by Anthony Richter from Open Society Foundation. The government took me on a tour of the areas north of Kabul that had been devastated by the Taliban. I met some former commanders. I found out that I was much more well-known than I thought. They said that Ahmed Shah Massoud used to tell them to listen to my radio addresses.

Q: You were one of the only people in the United States that knew so many of these people.

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: There were very few people that knew as many as you did.

RUBIN: Yes. Then I also found Amrullah. In 1996, I went to Kunduz in Northern Afghanistan with an OSF mission. Basically our mission was to look at the situation of

refugees from Tajikistan. Massoud's representative in Paris informed Massoud that I was coming. When I was in Southern Tajikistan preparing to cross the river, somebody pulled up in a car to the UNHCR guest house where we were staying and had a fax saying, "He is waiting for you. He is sending someone to meet you."

When I got to Kunduz there was a person that Massoud had sent for me who was Amrullah Saleh, who later became the intelligence chief. At that time, he was twenty-three years old and deputy spokesman of the Ministry of Defense. Then I met him again in 1999, when Massoud had made him his liaison with the CIA after the bombing of the embassies in Africa. He was here in the U.S. for training, so I had lunch with him.

Then I went looking for him in Kabul. It wasn't easy because a lot of people didn't know who he was, and he was in intelligence. People in intelligence don't like their names and addresses to be broadcast. I tracked him down and he said, "How did you find me? I am not a public person." And that started a relationship, which is pretty much destroyed now. He was one of my best contacts.

That also made problems for me with the U.S. government. I had several problems like this because I had my own personal relationships with the intelligence chiefs in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, and the CIA thought that it should manage the relationship with intelligence chiefs, not me.

Q: And you were still seen as a UN figure?

RUBIN: No, I was seen as an academic.

Q: I think I read in one of your articles that Saleh was already talking about problems of people being arrested or fired upon by coalition forces, civilian deaths.

RUBIN: Yes. My assistant aide, my deputy, Helena Malikyar and I had lunch with him in Kabul in March 2002 and he said 50 percent of his time was dealing with the mess made by U.S.-made civilian casualties.

Q: So that problem was starting from the beginning?

RUBIN: Oh yes. You take eighteen-twenty-year-olds out of the heartland of America and you send them down to Afghanistan and tell them this place is full of terrorists, and they can't tell a terrorist from your average Afghan. And the intelligence they got was not very good either.

Q: Had the Taliban already come back? Were they already fighting?

RUBIN: No, they weren't fighting. They were regrouping across the border. They were setting up feelers politically for three years more. In 2003, they killed the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] representative and that was the sign, which they said they did because the international community was not being neutral. It was siding with their enemies.

Q: At this point, were you involved in any of the meetings that ended up in the formulation of the government or the Constitution?

RUBIN: Before Brahimi asked me to come monitor the first stage of elections to the Loya Jirga, the second stage elections, the emergency Loya Jirga, there were election representatives at the local level. Then they would all gather at the regional level and they would pick a small number of representatives. He asked me to come and monitor the second stage of elections in Jalalabad, for Eastern Afghanistan.

I went there with Steve Smith, who is now head of the political department at UNAMA. I saw them conduct the elections. They were puzzled by it. There were people from one area, they said, "We don't need to vote. There are two tribes in our area. They've each chosen their representatives, so you just take these two." They said, "No, you have to vote." So they voted, but they didn't quite see why, but they were happy to have that opportunity.

Then on the side, we went to the UNAMA office in Jalalabad. I met a guy from the Taliban. He wasn't actually from the Taliban, he was the head of the Salafi group in Kunar, named Hajji Ruhullah. He had these big binders full of candidates for the Emergency Loya Jirga to give to the UN. Then Steve Smith and I went in and talked to the UN office together with the governor of Jalalabad, Hajji Abdul Qadir, who had been at Bonn before walking out claiming that Pashtuns were underrepresented. I said, "We just met this guy Ruhullah." And he said, "He's a terrorist." Soon after that Ruhullah was arrested and sent to Guantanamo, where he told people that the emergency Loya Jirga was rigged. Anyone who had certain ideas got sent to Guantanamo. He was released and went back but never joined the insurgency. Haji Qadir was assassinated in Kabul in July 2002. It was never solved, and I never got the impression that anyone wanted to solve it.

Then Brahimi asked me to work with the Constitutional Commission. There were three main foreign advisors that were working closely with the Constitutional Commission. There was Yash Pal Ghai, who was a Kenyan of Indian origin, a distinguished international Constitutional lawyer; Guy Carcassonne a distinguished French constitutional lawyer who has since died, unfortunately, was sent personally by President Jacques Chirac; and me. I'm not really a specialist in constitutional law, but I knew about Afghanistan and its constitutional problems, or at least I thought I did.

We at CIC commissioned study papers on different themes from various international experts. Finally, toward the end, Karzai told the Constitutional Commission to spend a couple of days with the three of us. They appointed six core people, leadership of the Constitutional Commission. Yashpal Ghai wasn't there at that time. Carcassonne and I sat with them and went over everything.

I made some judgment calls that I think damaged me later. When we were discussing the article that said something like no discrimination by religion, gender and tribe, I looked at the original and what they translated as religion was "mazhab," which means sect. So that meant that there would be no discrimination between Shia and Sunni. I said it should be "Din" as well, because there should be no discrimination against non-Muslims. because there's a Hindu and a Sikh community there. There were also two Jews, but that wasn't concerning at that time. The early constitutions of Afghanistan always said Jews and Hindus had their rights to follow their religion, but there weren't any Jews left except for these two people. The other two Jews in Kabul at that time were Carcassonne and me.

The chair of the Constitutional Commission interpreted that as that I was trying to take Islam out of the Constitution. In other words, Afghanistan wouldn't be an Islamic state. It would treat all its citizens equally instead of treating Muslims and non-Muslims differently. What they finally compromised on was they said there would be no discrimination, period. They didn't say by what.

That came back to bite me later at the Constitutional Loya Jirga. The head of the constitutional commission started telling people, "There's a Jew here who wants to take Islam out of the Constitution." I have to say, in defense of the Afghans, nobody was interested in what the guy who attacked me said. Mujaddidi, who was the chair of the Loya Jirga, dismissed it. He said something like, we used to have Jews in Afghanistan and we hope they will come back. Brahimi was concerned that this would turn into a scandal, but it didn't.

Q: The significance of it being an Islamic state, not taking Islam out—what were the key important aspects of that for them?

RUBIN: In the first article, it says Afghanistan is an Islamic state.

Q: That affects the legal system, Sharia law?

RUBIN: What it says in Article 3 of the Afghan Constitution is that in Afghanistan, "No legislation can contradict the beliefs and provisions of the noble religion of Islam." That is what is called a no-repugnancy clause. In other words, no laws can violate Sharia. But it does not say what other Islamic countries say, some of them do, that Sharia is a source of law or that Sharia is the only source of law. And under pressure from the United States, in the West in particular, they did not use the word "Sharia" in the Constitution. They used equivalent words like "fiqh," Islamic jurisprudence.

The fact that that's in Article 3, some people say that's in Article 3 so it takes precedence over all the other articles, including basic rights. People interpret things according to their life.

Q: You talked about centralization versus decentralization. How did that play out in the Constitution?

RUBIN: The Constitution adopted language on centralization similar to the Constitution of 1964, except it actually made provisions for the devolving of power to localities through legislation, which was never passed. I had written some language that the local communities would partner with the government for security and Ashraf took that out. There were various proposals like the governors should be appointed from lists of people nominated by the Provincial Council. That came from the Hazaras and Uzbeks. But the commission rejected that.

There was a Pashtun resurgence at the emergency Loya Jirga. There was a very complicated compromise on ethnic relations and sectarian relations. First of all, the constitution never says that the official religion of Afghanistan is Sunni Islam or Hanafi Islam. In the past, the constitutions said "the religion of Afghanistan is Hanafi Islam." So then the Shia felt they were not recognized. This time it just said "Islam." However, it

also said that in deciding court cases, if the Court does not find a provision of the written law then it should use the jurisprudence of the Hanafi sect except in cases involving members of Shia, in which case it can use Shia personal law to resolve disputes.

Q: The Hazara ethnic group is mostly Shia?

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: Is that a major group?

RUBIN: Yes. They're probably the third most numerous group after Pashtun and Tajiks.

Q: And not treated well over the years.

RUBIN: They were enslaved and massacred at one time. They're better off now.

Q: I think one of the important things was that Karzai as the head of the government was going to appoint governors. So there was really no set-up in this government for having local grievances or local preferences bubble up into law. Is that right?

RUBIN: When I spoke to Karzai on Nowruz, local commanders had taken over many of the provinces, so now many of the province governors were from that area themselves. I said maybe this could be the foundation for a new system that is more representative of the people. And he said, "No, as soon as we can we're going to go back to the centralized system," because his view was the state would not have any coherence because each of those people wouldn't be serving Afghanistan. They'd be serving their own clients, not even all the people in that district, but their own faction in that district and possibly foreign countries who were infiltrating, which is a widespread point of view. There were arguments to and fro about what kind of decentralization.

If you want to make governors elected in a more decentralized manner then you have to give them some powers that would enable them to do something, which they don't have right now. They have no budget. They can't raise taxes. They can't spend anything. They don't control the police or anything. It requires a lot more reform and a whole new government model.

They got that kind of balance between the Shia and the Sunnis. The word "Afghan" originally meant Pashtun. Uzbekistan means Country of the Uzbeks. But even non-Uzbeks were citizens of Uzbekistan, or somebody called Uzbek, although not usually in Uzbekistan, only outside of Uzbekistan.

The previous Constitution said, for many decades, that every citizen of Afghanistan is an Afghan. Because Afghan also means Pashtun, some non-Pashtuns are against that and they want to be called "Afghanistanis" Or they want to change the name of the country to Khurasan, which is the older name for that area.

Then there's the question of the official language. The constitution says, "The official languages of Afghanistan are Pashtun and Dari." The language of instruction will be Pashto and Dari, depending on what the population is, and the other languages of

Afghanistan will be languages of instruction in those areas in which already the population speaks them. So you can have schools in Uzbek or something.

They had an article in the beginning of the Constitution where they are laying out the nature of the Afghan state. It says, "The State of Afghanistan is composed of—" then it lists fourteen ethnic groups. They were all recognized in the Constitution.

Sometimes in the past, ethnicity has been a category on your identity card, but it was not all fourteen. When they started electronic identity cards a few years later, that became controversial, because the Pashtuns wanted the word "Afghan" on there somewhere and the non-Pashtuns didn't want to be identified as Afghan. So it was quite controversial. Do you break down the ethnic groups into small units? Because all ethnic groups have smaller units. It was very controversial.

That was about the language of instruction. But it also said the official languages are Dari and Pashto. But the national language is Pashto. It said that the language of the National Anthem must contain the words, "Allah Akbar." It must mention all of the ethnic groups, but it must be in Pashto language. That was a compromise they got to on that.

The idea of instruction in Uzbek and other languages, there was a lot of resistance by the Pashtuns, but finally Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani the Sufi leader came in and said, "Put it in my daman, meaning a sort of apron of his long kurta, which was a way of showing respect."

Q: Is it his version of saying, blame me for it?

RUBIN: No. Do it as a favor for me. Honor me by doing this. He has barakat. He's kind of a holy man, so they agreed to it at that time.

There's also the stipulation that certain official terms will be used and they are all Pashto words. The Supreme Court has to be called Stara Mahkama not Mahkama-I Ali. University has to be called Pohantun. There are a few others. That was very controversial. In fact, there are people who claimed that that Article was put in after the Constitution was approved, after they voted on it. And it became controversial because in Mazar-i Sharif, the director of the university, put up the word university in Persian, Danishgah; the minister of culture had it taken down. Amrullah told me, "Tajiks are interpreting this as meaning everybody who works for the government has to speak Pashto." In fact, in practice the language of bureaucracy and education has been Persian, for centuries.

Pashtuns who are in the bureaucracy or in Kabul speak Persian, most of them. This idea of Pashtunizing the state is something that goes back to the time of Daoud Khan under the royal regime.

Q: All of this was happening in Kabul when you were there?

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: How long did it take?

RUBIN: Two or three weeks. I actually had to go home for New Year's, so I missed the end.

Q: You were working with the UN. Did you have a lot of contact with the U.S. embassy?

RUBIN: I knew Zal.

Q: Zal was managing it for the U.S. government?

RUBIN: Yes. He was the troubleshooter. When he heard about my being the target of an anti-Semitic attack, he told me, "I heard you're having problems."

Q: He was just trying to make sure about that? He wasn't trying to push a particular agenda?

RUBIN: I can't be sure of that. The thing is the American agenda and the Karzai agenda were pretty congruent. I can't say it was one or the other, but together they got what they wanted. Did the United States government have very complex and sophisticated ideas about how Afghanistan should be governed? No they did not. They wanted to be able to do military operations then justify it by saying it was a democracy.

Q: We really didn't understand how hard it would be to have a flourishing democracy.

RUBIN: No. There was no audience for such arguments. I had it when I was working with Holbrooke for the 2009 election. We had a meeting in his office in the State Department. Holbrooke disliked Hamid Karzai. He wanted to get Karzai out and some Afghans did as well. He said, "Here's our strategy. The U.S. is not going to support any candidate. We're going to try for a level playing field to put political pressure on Karzai to improve his governance." I said, "That's ridiculous," or words to that effect. I said, "You cannot choose who is ruling Afghanistan through arithmetic."

Q: Which means voting?

RUBIN: Voting, yes. You can still vote, but what you need is an elite consensus behind someone that you could ratify by vote. But as you see, every presidential election in Afghanistan was settled by the United States, not by Afghan institutions because they don't have the institutions to do that because there's not been a census, not sufficient trust. Then there's the issue that many Pashtuns were refugees and out of the country. Many other Pashtuns are living in Pakistan of what Pashtun Afghans consider to be an historical part of Afghanistan. So if Pashtuns are a majority of Afghanistan they think that is a result of some unfair historical results that need to be corrected.

There are all kinds of reasons like that why you cannot have a winner take all, one man, one vote presidential election in Afghanistan.

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Q: It is May 19, 2023. I am continuing the conversation for our Afghanistan project with Barnett Rubin. Barney, I think last time you were talking about the development of the Constitution in Afghanistan, the first Constitution in this new era. Maybe you want to resume with that.

RUBIN: This is not Afghanistan's first Constitution. It was the Constitution of 2004. I was working with the Constitutional Commission. I was working with Guy Carcassonne giving advice to the Constitutional Commission whether they wanted it or not. At a certain point in the fall of 2003, the Constitutional Commission was called the Constitutional Review Commission. It had completed a draft and they submitted it to the palace. Then the National Security Council would review it and decide what would be submitted to the Constitutional Loya Jirga.

Sometime during that process, probably in November, Karzai called a cabinet meeting and he asked Brahimi to come for the discussion. I was there at the time and Brahimi said, "I'm tired of all these discussions. You go." So I went there.

We were in the big cabinet room first, which was where President Daoud was killed by the coup makers in 1978. Then instead of having a meeting, President Karzai decided everybody should go see Zahir Shah, who was living in a different part of the compound. So they all went to see Zahir Shah.

They came back in a smaller group and they went into a side room, a small cabinet room. I was lingering behind to see if they would invite me in and I did drift in, and I thought I'd be a fly on the wall. Then Karzai saw me and he said, "Barney, sit here," pointing at the table to sit next to him. "Tell us about the Constitution."

I gave a very undiplomatic analysis of what I thought were the weaknesses of the Constitutional draft right in front of the chairman of the Constitutional Commission. I actually humiliated him, which was a big diplomatic mistake on my part.

The top issue in the Constitution was how to structure the executive power. Originally, the issue had been presidential versus parliamentary. They were let known by the U.S. that they wouldn't have a parliamentary system. They didn't have any political parties so it was hard to see how they would have a parliamentary system. They wanted to have a presidential system with a prime minister, which could be a structure similar to what they had in the past, a king with a prime minister.

The big question in any such Constitution is how you structure the division of powers between the president and the prime minister. And how do you assure that, if in the event of a dispute between the two of them, there is a manner for resolving it other than having the president and the prime minister each mobilize their own militias, and shooting it out, which is how they did it in the 1990s when Rabbani was president and Hekmatyar was prime minister.

They came up with a scheme and that reflects the ethnic issue. A strong president was something the Pashtuns wanted and the non-Pashtuns, in particular the Tajiks, wanted a

strong prime minister to balance the president because they figured they would have the prime ministerial position because they would dominate the parliament, because non-Pashtuns were a majority. Uzbeks and Hazaras wanted decentralization and they didn't get anywhere. The draft said that the prime minister would convene the cabinet except in special circumstances, when the president could do it. The prime minister made appointments. And in the case of a dispute between the president and the prime minister they would then call a Special Council consisting of the chairs of the two Houses of Parliament, the chief justice, the president and the prime minister, something like that, and those five people would decide who was right, which was, in my opinion, a formula for permanent stalemate. They'd never be able to get anything done.

Personally, though no one asked me, my preference was for a president and prime minister system in which the prime minister was responsible for day-to-day running of the government and the president had the overall executive power. The president was the one in charge. But the pro-presidential faction didn't want that at all. They just wanted a president.

I explained rather vividly why I thought that model of having this unwieldy committee resolve differences between the president and the prime minister would be completely unworkable and would lead to chaos. I criticized a few other things, too. The vice-chair of the Constitutional Commission was sitting next to me and said, "Very important points."

The people who were there were Karzai, Fahim, minister of defense, Abdullah, minister of foreign affairs, Ashraf Ghani, minister of finance, Umer Daudzai, who at that time was chief of staff, Jawed Ludin who was working as presidential spokesman. I forget who else, a few other people, the intelligence chief, Arif, at that time. It was the inner Cabinet.

The next day I was back in UNAMA. I was walking down the hall and Brahimi stopped me, and he was grinning. He said, "Karzai called me," and he said, "I finally understand there's a problem with the constitution." Brahimi was pleased about that.

Then they went on and adopted a system that I didn't think was a good idea, a pure presidential system. But who cares. That's never been publicized before, but various rumors about it greatly exaggerated my role.

Q: It's interesting they needed a guidepost to how the Constitution would work, drafted as it was, and you provided that.

RUBIN: I was actually transmitting a lot of the ideas of the French Constitutional scholar, Carcassonne, who was not there at the time and didn't have the kind of relationships that I did. He was the expert on how a mixed presidential, prime ministerial system should work, not me.

Q: At that time, how did they all get along, Abdullah and Ghani, who later were at loggerheads for years?

RUBIN: This was still early. Abdullah's role at that time was that he was a great conciliator. He would manage to find consensus in the cabinet. Ghani was already

knocking heads together. One guy said to me once. I was with Haji Din Mohammed, who at that time was the governor of Nangarhar. I was having dinner at Omar Zakhilwal's house. He later became minister of finance. Haji din Mohammed said, "It's a good thing that the finance minister only has half a stomach." He had cancer and he had his stomach taken out. "Otherwise, he would eat the whole cabinet."

Q: He was like a Hamilton. He knew what he wanted to do.

RUBIN: Yes. And he was not very diplomatic. He didn't have very good people skills.

Q: They went ahead and they had a presidential system, but they had appointed governors. They never really gave the regions a chance to develop politically?

RUBIN: No. The thing is it doesn't make any sense to have elected governors unless you endow them with the power to do something with their mandate, which they don't have under the present system. It would involve a significant revamping of the whole fiscal system, which they didn't have the time or inclination to pursue at that time, at that moment. The general perception of Karzai and other Pashtuns was that if you took power away from the center, the country would disintegrate.

Q: At this point, all eyes were on the Constitution. Then once it was done, it didn't go out to referendum because of the election issue?

RUBIN: No. It didn't go out to referendum because it was approved by the Loya Jirga.

Q: Then all eyes then went to the election of the permanent government, the president?

RUBIN: Yes. That date was given in the Constitution. That was the only election date that they actually managed to keep to. It took place in September.

Q: From there, what did you do?

RUBIN: By then Brahimi had left and Jean Arnault, who was also a friend of mine, became SRSG. I tried to set up an Afghan think tank. My associate director at NYU [New York University] was an Afghan, Humayun Hamidzada, who now is in Canada, whom I met in Islamabad in 1990, managed to set up some kind of a think tank funded by UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] at Kabul University. It had to do with human security. Actually, we were overtaken by events and lots of other Afghans started founding think tanks, so there were a bunch of think tanks.

Then the government started working on the Afghan National Development Strategy, which was the name that they gave to something required by the World Bank and IMF [International Monetary Fund] for a certain type of aid program, which was called the Poverty Reduction Remediation Plan. There's a technical name for it. The Japanese funded it, my consultancy with UNDP, at that time. Mrs. Ogata was the head of the Japanese Aid Agency, whom I knew when she was UN high commissioner at UNHCR. They came up with a small amount of money, a hundred thousand dollars. That was enough to pay for a partial consultancy.

I went there and I worked in the office of the Afghan National Development Strategy, which was headed by Professor Ishaq Nadiri, who was an economist at New York University. His deputy was Adib Farhadi, who is now at University of South Florida. He's from a relatively prominent family. His uncle had been the UN ambassador for President Rabbani.

We had a whole team from the World Bank and other consultants. It was also the time when a young generation of Afghans started coming back from their higher education abroad, and we started hiring a bunch of them, which made a big difference, a bunch of them.

I was working with a team helping to draft that National Development Strategy. The only really interesting thing that I can remember from that was there was a section on counter narcotics. Meanwhile, I was also at CIC. We were doing a study on counter narcotics and we came out with a report called something like, The False Hope of Crop Eradication. And we argued that leading with crop eradication was counterproductive and a bad idea, especially if you're trying to do counterinsurgency at the same time.

This was at a time when the Bush administration had decided because the Taliban profited from drugs; therefore, the way to eliminate the Taliban was to eliminate drugs. And they appointed a special representative, an anti-narcotic czar, and they appointed the former ambassador to Colombia, Bill Wood, who was a strong proponent of eradication, as the ambassador. I always had personally good relations with both of them, but we completely disagreed about this. Later I found out, Adib told me, they had called him up and said that he should not allow me to work on counternarcotics.

Q: But he didn't listen.

RUBIN: My views were much more in sync with most of the Afghans. But most of the Afghans were not in a position to tell the American ambassador that he was wrong. I wasn't in a position to do that either, but I did it anyway.

Q: To summarize your position on this, you were saying, don't lead with crop eradication?

RUBIN: If you want to make counternarcotics, counterinsurgency, you have to be clear what your goal is. If you want to deprive the insurgency of resources, your problem is not the drugs, it's the money from the drugs. So what you want to do is have a strategy that reduces the amount of money going to the insurgency, not necessarily that reduces the physical quantity of drugs.

What eradication does is, and people who do it are overlooked. No matter how much you eradicate, you don't eradicate everything. You just eradicate a little. If you're really successful at eradication, what you do is you push the prices way up. That means, depending on the elasticity, the drug traffickers and the protectors of the drug traffickers actually make more money, which is what happened when the Taliban banned poppy production.

I said you have to aim higher on the value chain. Support the peasants but hit higher on the value chain, not that that's easy to do either. And that failed, too, when they tried it later. Bill Wood wanted to spray, crop spray.

Q: Glyphosate, the substance in Roundup?

RUBIN: Roundup. They recently found out it causes cancer. They wanted us to spray that, but Karzai stopped it, because he said that any disease the people got, the people would attribute it to poisoning by the Americans. So they never did that, which is just as well. That was a big issue for a while.

Q: Robert Finn was there for two years, then Khalilzad, then Ron Neumann, and Bill Wood was there after that, then later Eikenberry? You were working on this there when Bill Wood was ambassador?

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: Before we leave development strategy, the strategy had to say how they were going to increase education and invest in healthcare? They had a sector-by-sector strategy?

RUBIN: At the same time, I was doing something else, which was linked to this. I started a company in Afghanistan. I was taking my vacations in Provence. Every day I would drive past a distillery where they would distill lavender into essential oil and lavender water. It finally occurred to me, this is an industry that has exactly the same structure as the opium industry. You take a plant then you distill it into a high value, low volume product that is very stable and then you export it.

I wrote a paper called "Flowers from Afghanistan," in which I advocated changing over from drugs to production of essential oils and I sent this out on a list server that I had at the time. Then this Danish woman who was at UNDP picked it up. She became the wife of the Canadian ambassador. Now she's living in Ottawa. He's a ranking member of Parliament in Canada now. She found a French consulting firm, someone who was already working in Afghanistan, and she organized a meeting where we discussed this. They hired one guy to do a feasibility study of this. He came back, we had a meeting, and he said, "Lavender will not work because lavender has mechanized harvest so that wouldn't work in Afghanistan. Afghanistan uses cheap labor." He said that roses and some others could work very well, and orange blossoms.

Then this consulting firm, which had offices in Paris and in Kabul, put together a meeting at the Afghan embassy in Paris, in September 2004. Based on that meeting, we started a company in which I was one of the seven shareholders, along with two French Afghans and a few other people, called Gulestan Ariana LLC.

The guy who had done the feasibility study, Mathieu Beley, he actually went to Jalalabad and started working there. Jalalabad has a huge crop of bitter oranges and it's the flowers of bitter oranges from which the essential oil néroli is made. They have a long history of rose growing there. They have famous rose gardens there, too.

We capitalized it with our own money. We got some money from USAID [United States Agency for International Development] to train a master distiller. We sent him to Turkey where he was trained by the Robertet company, which grows roses in Turkey. He came back and then we had to make deals with the farmers to get their blossoms and we had to start planting roses. We did this in partnership with one of the local families, the Arsala family, who let us use their land and water. So we started these rose nurseries.

We didn't manage to import the distillery we bought from Turkey in time, for the 2005 season, in the spring. Then we started producing in 2006. Some of the local Afghan engineers reversed engineered the Turkish distillery system, so we got more machinery. And they set it up in the former olive oil plant, the same place where I had gone with the Mujahideen in 1989, and started producing essential oils. Then we started blending them into perfume.

We found all kinds of other wild plants in Afghanistan that are very interesting, as well. It was difficult to do it to scale and export it. None of the structure was there. One time we made perfume that added essential oils to alcohol. We got a permit for using the alcohol, because it's a Muslim country. Nonetheless, our workers were arrested by the police for transporting alcohol. They had to pay a bribe to get a second permit.

They wouldn't accept our tax payments unless you paid bribes. Our distiller had a relative who worked in the Finance Department. So using those connections, we got them to accept our taxes without bribes. Then they charged us a late fee, which was even larger than the bribes. So we took that to a higher level, the Investment Support Agency. I actually personally raised it with President Karzai in London at a meeting with businessmen, at the time of the Afghanistan-London Conference in January 2006 and then minister of finance, Anwar-ul-haq Ahady took me aside and said, "If you have any problems just talk to me privately."

There was one thing after another. It's hard to do business in Afghanistan. It was a high-quality product because we had it evaluated by the French wholesalers who did this. I went to Paris and with Mathieu Beley, with our rose oil and orange blossom oil, I presented it to Olivier Baussan, to the guy who founded L'Occitane. I took a tour of their factory when I was in Provence. He was impressed with the quality. But we could never guarantee production to scale.

Eventually, we decided we couldn't continue anymore because the taxing at the distillery hadn't been resolved. So we decided to auction off the equipment. And the member of the local family won the auction, but he never paid us. He just took it. He's still been pursuing the industry very vigorously. They have a store in Kabul and they export several hundreds or thousands of bottles of a kind of perfume called Seven Virtues, to Canada, which you can actually buy on the Sephora website.

Q: Very interesting. Was this just a business venture or were you trying to prove a concept to be an alternative?

RUBIN: I didn't do it because I thought I would make money. As I said, at the time, I'm one of the most unusual persons who is subsidizing his business activity with his

academic income. I'm proof of concept of what to do for alternative livelihoods in Afghanistan.

Q: At that time, were you aware of the Taliban gathering strength for an offensive, in 2006?

RUBIN: Sure. I wrote an article about it that came out in January 2007, because when I was there in 2006, I was made aware that that was all coming. And I wrote an article, which I later found out, I presented it in preliminary form at a congressional hearing. Apparently, this article had a revered status in the CIA.

At that time, no one was listening to the CIA, which was saying what the problems were and the Defense Department was saying everything was going great. Although Rumsfeld suspected something, and he emitted a snowflake. A Polish American, Marin Strmecki, he and I went around for a bit talking to people and trying to figure out what was going on.

Q: That offensive was in the south?

RUBIN: Around Kandahar. They were trying to capture Kandahar.

The other thing I did, then they started a successor to the Bonn Agreement. The implementation of the Bonn Agreement came to an end with the Parliamentary elections in 2005. So in anticipation of that, the international community started discussing a Successor Agreement to the Bonn Agreement, which eventually became the Afghanistan Compact.

I was initially invited to a gathering in London, which was chaired by Ameerah Haq, the deputy SRSG. We had a discussion over what the successor document could be. The British were very much invested in this. That's why much of the conference was in London. And this turned into the Afghanistan Compact. I was closely involved in the drafting and negotiation of the Afghanistan Compact.

Ashraf had a very biting critique of it, which in retrospect was probably true, which was that it turned into a log rolling exercise among all the UN agencies, each one getting their little piece of it in the text. So it was just like a laundry list of projects and unattainable goals, things that did not really take into account the reality of the country.

Q: Were you in the camp that the U.S. should have been spending more on development?

RUBIN: Yes, I was. I was also in the camp that the U.S. really didn't know what it was doing in development, in Afghanistan, even if we knew the U.S. government is not organized in such a way that it would be capable of doing what would really be helpful.

I'll give you a small example. The Kandahar narcotics office of USAID was down in Helmand where they were living in what was known as the Pink Palace, which was a huge palace, huge mansion that was built by one of the drug lords. They were paying rent.

Then one day, the deputy secretary of education of Helmand Province came into their office with a paper bag full of hundred dollar bills, and he said, "I would like to invest in a flour mill. Can you help me?" They all got excited and started mobilizing, and figuring out how to do it. Then they were informed USAID does not do money laundering. Development in Afghanistan would have required a huge money laundering operation.

Q: Money laundering from who?

RUBIN: Drug dealers. Helmand was a big center for opium and heroin production. Some of them wanted to take their money and invest it in something legal and productive, but we wouldn't help them.

Q: The administration changed in January 2009, and you got approached by Holbrooke to come back into the U.S. government?

RUBIN: Before that Holbrooke was very close to Hillary Clinton. He imagined that, after the election, he would be Hillary Clinton's secretary of state, and he became the chairman of the Board, the president of the Asia Society. As I mentioned, we had known each other from things having to do with Kosovo. He anticipated that Afghanistan would be one of the main issues that he would be handling as secretary of state. He actually went to Afghanistan twice with the Asia Society. He also got funding to set up an Asia Society study commission on future Afghanistan policy, which I co-chaired with Tom Pickering, and we came out with that report at the beginning of the administration. Of course, Holbrooke left to go join it.

What happened was in November, I had been asked to come down to Fort Bragg [now Fort Liberty] in North Carolina where the Special Forces train. I was on my way there and I was walking through the airport in Charlotte, which is the hub in that part of the South. Holbrooke was calling and he said there's a leak in *The Economist*, which says Obama was going to announce he was going to appoint Hillary. And that Hillary is going to appoint me as point man on Afghanistan. He said, "That's not confirmed. You can't talk about it. But if that happens, would you be willing to come work for me?" So I said yes.

The day after the inauguration, I was up in Ottawa at a meeting, a Canadian Intelligence conference on Pakistan. I remember I had a terrible flu. At six in the morning, that was the day that Hillary went to the State Department to be sworn in. She introduced Holbrooke and the senator who worked in Ireland.

Q: George Mitchell?

RUBIN: Senator Mitchell as special envoy.

At six in the morning, Holbrooke called me and asked if I would agree to work for him, more definitively, so I said yes. Then I had to go through security clearance.

Meanwhile, I had already been pursuing this question of reconciliation. You asked me about 2006. I was in Kabul in January-February of 2006. I suddenly got the feeling that everything was starting to fall apart with the Taliban offensive. Also there was this case

where an Afghan had converted to Christianity. He went to Germany and then he wanted to come back to Afghanistan to get his kids, and he was arrested because it's a capital crime in Islamic law to convert from Islam to another religion. That is not formalized. There's no written law about that in Afghanistan. Legally the question is, is it written law. It says Islamic law is supposed to step in when there's no written law, but only in civil cases, not in criminal cases.

There was a big agitation asking for this guy to be killed, not by the Taliban, by people in government. Karzai finally managed to get him declared insane and deported him. There were other things going on, too.

I sent Brahimi an email and I told him things are falling apart. He said, "That's because there's no political settlement. You should look into the possibilities of a political settlement."

One of the first things we did was I convened a meeting in New York. I was head of an organization called the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum. I had founded that organization earlier when I thought I would be unemployed. I would become the Director, but I hired someone else to be the director. We had high-level consultations on conflict issues with the UN. We invited Brahimi, Chris Alexander, Jim Dobbins, people who had senior U.S. and UN positions in Afghanistan.

At that time, Ashraf was out of the government. Karzai did not appoint him to a second cabinet. Ashraf and I had worked for Brahimi, so we invited him to speak at the dinner the night before. We didn't invite him because he was becoming a political figure and was running for president.

After this virulent speech about how everything is going wrong, there had been ethnic riots in Kabul and some people were killed by Americans, in a traffic accident. I was chairing the dinner. Afterwards, Ashraf came up to me shaking and said, "You should be hanged."

Q: Why?

RUBIN: That's what I asked. He said, "You wrote the Afghanistan Compact." And I said, "No I didn't. I helped draft and negotiate it, but no one person wrote it." What I basically understood was this was an implication, not something he said directly. He thought by acting as a consultant to the government I was enabling and involved in the program, and the Afghanistan Compact, that I was enabling the Afghan government, a corrupt government, in its belief that it could survive without Ashraf's brain. He admitted that I have a brain, but I was not a political actor in Afghanistan. I was doing public relations for a corrupt government.

Q: He was upset about not being in the government sector?

RUBIN: I suppose so. That's not what he said to me, but he was very angry.

Later that year, two months later, he sent me a copy of an article he wrote. I said, "Why are you sending this to me if I should be executed?" And he sent me an email saying he

had apologized, but somehow I passed over that and didn't notice it. We had a feud that has not died yet.

Then what I did was in spring of 2006, I started looking into how do I talk to the Taliban? What I found was that Ahmed Wakil, whom I had first met when he came to Columbia to give a talk in January 1997, and then again met in Kandahar in June 1998, was now in Kabul, one of the reconciled Taliban. He was quite close to Rahmatullah Hashemi, who had been the translator for Mullah Omar and a spokesman, with whom I had appeared on the Charlie Rose Show, in the spring of 2000, when he was there as an official delegation from the Taliban. After that, he sent me a message that I should come to Kandahar to talk to the Taliban because, even though I was critical of them, I knew what I was talking about.

Rabbani's government ambassador to the UN [Rawan Farhadi], who was Adib's uncle, also called and said I did a great job exposing his [Rahmatullah's] lies. He's the guy that later went to Yale. He was in Kabul. I got in touch with him and he took me to Wakil Ahmad. Then through them, I also, through TOLO Television, I met Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef. He had already written a memoir in Pashto of his time in Guantanamo. Saad Mohseni, head of TOLO, who I had just talked to, sent Mujahid Kakar, one of his top television producers—he has since died of cancer—to take me to see Mullah Zaeef.

I went and talked to Mullah Zaeef. I would say that my conversations with Mullah Zaeef were the most important in shaping my thinking about reconciliation and our partnership was extremely important. He told me to never talk about it.

Q: Tell me about that. What do you mean?

RUBIN: The first time I went to see him he said the Americans have a legitimate interest in making sure that they are not attacked from Afghan soil. They don't have a legitimate interest in changing our political system and way of life. He didn't accept any military occupation. That was the contours of a deal, of a possible peace agreement. He said the Taliban don't want to fight the whole world. Taliban aren't anti-American. Then he said, "We didn't know who Osama was. We found him when they took over Jalalabad in September 1996." All they knew was that he was a Mujahid in trouble and he fought for the Mujahideen against the Soviets. He was expelled from Sudan in May 1996.

Dr. Abdullah had told me about that earlier, before 9/11. He told me about how Osama bin Laden came to Jalalabad, which was supposedly under Rabbani government control, in May 1996. So I already was familiar with that story. The Taliban found him there when they took over.

Zaeef and I had a long discussion about the Constitution, the Constitutional Loya Jirga. He said in Guantanamo, he met Hajji Nurullah, this guy in Jalalabad who had brought a binder full of candidates. He told him the Loya Jirga couldn't possibly be legitimate because they were arresting people who wanted to go through it and it was under the control of the security services. This was the same guy, Nurullah, that I had met in Jalalabad in 2002. That was the contours of having to work on that.

Then he outlined, this took over a couple of years, somebody developed and transmitted to him the position that the Taliban outlined to the U.S. when we had the first bilateral talks in 2010, which was to open an office, at that time, he said to Saudi Arabia. Bring the Guantanamo Five back to Saudi Arabia and make that into a center for agitating for peace within the Taliban. Then have direct negotiations, first with the United States and then with the Afghan government, other Afghans. He was working on different parts of that.

Meanwhile, I was invited to a meeting in Madrid where Kai Eide], who was then the UN SRSG, was there. He was very pro-reconciliation and [was exploring] contacts as well. There was somebody there I think from the European Council on Foreign Relations. And I said a few words about reconciliation. And the guy from ECFR said, "You should talk to Abdullah Anas." Abdullah Anas is an Algerian who fought in the Jihad in Afghanistan. He was actually close to Ahmad Shah Massoud. He worked for Massoud for about ten years, which is unusual because almost all the Arabs in Afghanistan were working with [Sayyaf] with the Pashtuns. Abdullah Anas was married, still is married to the daughter of Abdullah Azam, the Palestinian legal scholar who is thought to be the father of the idea of global Jihad, who was head of the Office of Services that coordinated the activities of the Arab Mujahideen.

He told me, "I outrank Osama. Osama was one of my commanders." He was very anti-al Qaeda after 9/11, and he was very outspoken against that. Actually, he was also on the death list of the Islamic group in Algerian and he had political asylum in Great Britain.

I got in touch with him by email and he said, "We're doing the same thing." I managed to meet him in Heathrow airport. I was going somewhere. He was living in London and came to meet me. He told me about what he was doing. His idea originally was he wanted to get international Islamic scholars, not approved by the American government, very radical and trusted Islamic scholars, to tell the Taliban they did not have a legitimate Jihad.

He went to see Qaradawi in Qatar, who was the chief ideologist, an Egyptian from the Muslim Brotherhood who had been expelled from Egypt. Anas's argument was that the Americans have a right to fight because they were attacked, but now the Americans are confused because they're not fighting terrorists anymore. Al Qaeda is not there. The Taliban are confused because they're not doing Jihad. So they need to come to an agreement that the whole thing is currently based on a misunderstanding. Sort of what Zaeef was saying.

So Anas went to Saudi Arabia and he met two of his fellow Arab Mujahideen, who were very prominent. He tried to convince them, he claims they were convinced, they told them we can't do anything because we're on the UN sanctions list and we can't travel. One of them eventually won a case in the European Court of Human Rights because all of his assets in Europe were blocked on the grounds that he was a member of al Qaeda, but he succeeded in proving in court that he was not a member of al Qaeda. He was just a Saudi who fought for the Afghan Mujahideen and he was not a member of al Qaeda. So he got his assets back.

He said Abdullah Anas should ask to see his lawyer, who had done his case for him, a guy named Mansour bin Saleh al-Khonizan. Mansour, as it turns out, did odd jobs for Prince Muqrin who was the Saudi Intelligence Chef. The other person who was involved in all this was Qayum Karzai, who was President Karzai's brother and lived in Maryland and runs an excellent restaurant. He still does. I had known him for a long time. Somewhere in this mix, I got in touch with him and he told me he was involved in all this, too.

In the spring of 2008, Mansour, Qayum and Zaeef went to Kabul and they had discussions with people in the Afghan government about this. Then they went to Kandahar. Qayum gave Zaeef his car and Zaeef drove to the border. At the border he was met by some people, presumably Taliban. He told them what he was doing. Supposedly, he got authorization to pursue this idea of dialogue with Saudi Arabia.

Abdullah Anas wanted to meet Muqrin but Muqrin didn't agree to meet with him. Then President Karzai wrote to King Abdullah and asked him to become involved in the peace process. Then Muqrin sent Mansour to contact Abdullah Anas and the Saudis invited him back, and he presented his ideas and they talked to him. And they came up with this idea of having an Iftar in Jeddah.

Q: An Iftar is a dinner.

RUBIN: Yes. It closes the fasting of Ramadan.

Meanwhile, King Abdullah sent a message to Mullah Omar through Mansour saying, "You have to do three things: Address the King of Saudi Arabia as Khadim al-Haramain, the Guardian of the Two Shrines, Mecca and Medina. You have to publicly announce that you're cutting ties with al Qaeda and you have to agree to open talks with the United States and the Afghan government." He was hoping that Mullah Omar would send back a message to this Iftar, agreeing to these things. But he did not. But he did send a very trusted person, the head of his political commission, Agha Jan Mu'tasim. He did not attend the Iftar, but he was in a hotel nearby, and Mutawakkil and Zaeef talked to him.

I learned all this over time from Muqrin, from Mansour and Qayum. But then I was talking to them quite regularly. Qayoum was a good friend of mine. I used to go have lunch and dinner with him in Baltimore on my way between Washington and New York.

In March 2008, I was invited to Australia for a five-day visit to consult with the government about Afghanistan. Australia had troops there and somehow, they got the idea that I can give them some useful information. I flew to Australia via Dubai instead of the usual way, over the Pacific. I'm sorry, this was 2009, after Obama was inaugurated, before my security clearance had come through. I was still a private citizen.

In Dubai, I arranged to meet Qayum and Mansour. Mansour was a lawyer. Qayum had just come back from Kandahar where, as in any country, the brother of the president met some prominent people who were in the armed opposition to the president. He told me about his discussions with them. We had lunch at a Lebanese restaurant. I had met Mansour in January in New York.

Q: What was Mansour's position?

RUBIN: Mansour's position was a lawyer in private practice who worked on missions involving al Qaeda for the Intelligence Chief of Saudi Arabia. Mansour's great-grandfather was one of the twenty-one companions of Abdul Aziz el Saud when he captured the Ottoman fort in Riyadh in 1907. His name was on a plaque there. Mansour had a direct personal relationship with King Abdullah.

We were sitting in this restaurant in Dubai. I had met Mansour in New York in January. Qayum had arranged for us to meet. Then we met in Dubai. We talked over lunch in the hotel in Dubai. He had gained confidence in me and he said, "Would you like to come to Saudi Arabia?" I said sure. He got on the phone and he punched a few buttons, and he said, "Okay, when you get back to New York, go to the Consulate. Your visa will be waiting for you."

I went back and I got a visa, which said, in Arabic, "Purpose of visit: Visiting His Royal Highness Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz al Saud." I showed that to Prince Turki once and he said they blew your cover!

I paid for my own travel out of the money from Norway, but they picked up the tab for me when I was there in Saudi Arabia. I spent a lot of time with Prince Muqrin, with people in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including this guy Major General Saad al-Jabri, who is now in exile in Canada trying to escape the wrath of Muhammed bin Salman, and the American ambassador, and a few others. Mansour had just been to see some Taliban, who were in Saudi Arabia at that time.

Muqrin, Mansour, and I had long discussions about how we could get this whole thing started and what was already going on, the negotiations that Zaeef and Mu'tasim had already had with Muqrin for many months, after the Iftar. That gelled together the plan that Zaeef had. They proposed the whole thing. They wanted to open an office to Saudi Arabia and open a dialogue. Then I went to Australia and flew back to New York through Dubai.

Meanwhile, Holbrooke, who had been in office about two months, had gone to Abu Dhabi for a secret meeting with President Zardari of Pakistan. It was at this time the military was plotting to overthrow Zardari. So I arranged for Holbrooke to detour via Dubai on the way back. I brought Mansour to meet Holbrooke in one of the VIP lounges, in the Dubai Airport. Holbrooke came in off his helicopter, talking over the phone and said he had to go to the bathroom. In addition, before the meeting, his aide had asked me, "How much time do you think you'll need." I said, "About two hours ought to be enough." He said, "I'll try to get you a half hour."

Mansour was there, so I introduced him. I don't know how experienced you are with this part of the world, but it is not the custom to cut to the chase. I realized when I heard him talking to Holbrooke, his English wasn't as good as I thought it was, because I understood the Arabic expressions he used sometimes. He started talking to Holbrooke, Respect is very important, blah, blah, blah. Holbrooke interrupted him and said, "Look, you claim to be in touch with the Taliban, right?" He said, "Yes, that's right." By the way,

at that time the dogma in Washington was anyone who claims to be talking to the Taliban is lying or they've been fooled by imposters. The Taliban are not interested in talking. Holbrooke said, "If you're really talking to the Taliban then do something about David Rohde."

David Rohde was a New York Times reporter and a friend of mine. I had known him for many years. I had lunch with him just before he left for his reporting trip on Afghanistan, in the spring of 2008, during which he was kidnapped by one of the people he was trying to interview and held hostage by the Haqqanis. Holbrooke had already gotten David Rohde released from hostage-takers once, in Bosnia, and he was tired of getting David out of trouble. He said, "Do something about David Rohde." Mansour said okay.

We were flying back to Washington. Holbrooke was in first class, I was in business class and the aide was in Economy. I met with Holbrooke in the galley between business and first class. He was wearing his famous yellow pajamas that Hillary Clinton talked about. He said to me, "What the hell was that guy talking about? I couldn't understand a word he was saying. Is he one of those guys you have to sit around with for hours and drink tea with?" I said yes. He said, "You do that. I don't do that."

Q: That's a beautiful story. I want to back up. It was clear what the Taliban wanted from the United States but when they talked about talking to the Afghan government, did either the Afghan government or the people that seemed to be Taliban political folks, did they have a sense of where that would lead, what reconciliation would look like? Any visions of what that would look like?

RUBIN: They may have. First, almost nobody in the Taliban knew about these things, as we found out when we had our first direct meeting with the Taliban. It was very secret on their part. As for the Afghan government, the President's brother was doing it, so I didn't feel like I was doing it behind the backs of the Afghan government. But he had no official position. There were four people with no official positions: me, Qayum, Mansour and Abdullah Anas, cooking these things up with Zaeef, who also had no official position. Of course, in a matter of a few weeks I did have an official position. That's because nobody who was in an official position would touch it from those organizations.

As far as the Taliban talking to the government, you don't expect things to be clear when you start a negotiation. You start vague and then you try to narrow it down. They said, we have to talk to the United States. We will talk to the Afghan government, but we will not call them a government. We call them the Karzai Group. We'll call them the Karzai Group.

Q: You considered that to be understandable in their context, for all those years that the U.S. government tried to pursue this? They thought that the Karzai government should be involved, and they should be recognized by the Taliban?

RUBIN: I don't think the United States government was ever one-minded about this. It never decided what it would do. The idea was the Afghan government would set up the High Peace Council, which was not technically part of the government. When we finally

did set up the office in 2013, the High Peace Council was going to have a meeting with the Taliban after the U.S. had met them, after the office opened.

The High Peace Council was in Kabul ready to go for a follow-up meeting, but then the Taliban raised the flag and put up the sign saying "Islamic Emirate," the Qataris did, saying "Islamic Emirate," and the whole thing fell apart. It was never clear. At the beginning of a negotiation, you don't know in advance what's going to happen. It also depends on the situation on the battlefield.

The problem was the United States military had a delusion that it was winning in the war or if it wasn't now, it would be very soon. So we should wait to negotiate until we were in a stronger position. I would say if you wanted to do this when you're in a strong position you're too late. That time has passed.

Q: The number of the Taliban grew?

RUBIN: If you ask how many Taliban fighters are there, the answer is, as many as they needed. The problem was that the government was not capable of exerting its authority in rural areas. It could only control the urban areas with the help of the U.S. military. It didn't have the social networks to govern.

Q: At some point, something happened and the Saudis broke with this idea of hosting peace talks.

RUBIN: Yes. It's a complicated story.

Q: By this time, you were in the U.S. government.

RUBIN: Yes. Iftar was in September of 2008. After that, Muqrin started having talks with Zaeef and Mu'tasim, the Head of the Political Committee of the Taliban, and Qayum Karzai. Mu'tasim, at the request of the Saudis, actually called Qayum in the United States, and they met in Saudi Arabia. That was a big step for him because Qayum was in touch with people related to the government. They were having those negotiations.

Meanwhile, in November Obama was elected, January, he's inaugurated, Holbrooke was appointed. Their negotiations are still going on. I met Qayum and Mansour in Dubai in March then introduced Holbrooke to Mansour on the way back.

Then I came back in April and I went to Saudi Arabia and to Kabul. It was when I was in Saudi Arabia, I was actually in the bathroom of the Interior Ministry when Holbrooke called me and told me that my security clearance had come through. I was meeting with Major General Sa'ad al-Jabri, the guy who's hiding in Canada.

When I came back, I wrote a memo based on my discussions with Muqrin, Karzai, and Zaeef. I talked to Zaeef for two days in Kabul. I had long meetings with him to try to work out how this might actually work, his position on what the proposal was. I had several meetings with Prince Muqrin and Mansour, in Saudi Arabia and I laid out all my work.

Then I went down to Washington, and I was sworn in. Holbrooke and I were speaking in some U.S. Institute of Peace event. Then we took the shuttle back to New York. He was living in New York, but he had houses all over the place. He got me seated next to him in first class although I didn't have a first-class ticket. He could do things like that. I gave him my memo on how to start a dialogue for political settlement. He read it and he said, "I don't know if this can work, but it's the only way we'll ever get out of there." It was totally against the policy of the U.S. government to do this at the time.

I was working for the State Department part-time. I had a certain deniability. And he would authorize me to do things that nobody else really knew about. I checked before I did any of them, what were the legal rules that I had to observe. I knew what they were, but other people did not and they accused me of violating them.

Q: For instance, there were restrictions on meeting with the Taliban?

RUBIN: No. There were only restrictions on providing them with material support. There are restrictions on official contacts between officials of the Taliban and officials of the U.S. government. But I did not ever meet an official member of the Taliban. Zaeef, Mutawakkil, everybody else that I met, they were all ex-Taliban. Later that changed and I did meet them. That was after he was no longer in the Taliban either. The whole time I was in SRAP, I never met with an active member of the Taliban. Other people were eventually authorized to do that, but I was not.

Q: We're in 2009. Holbrooke died at the end of 2010?

RUBIN: Two thousand and ten. Meanwhile, I was also working on another portfolio, which is that Afghanistan was a regional conflict. It's not just Pakistan that was involved. But neighbors of Afghanistan were involved one way or the other and they would all be required to guarantee political settlement. There were many different conflicts in the region and at least Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, China, and some central Asian countries had to be involved.

We had no framework whatsoever for doing this. In the U.S. government, as you know, there is no way for someone in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs to get involved in Afghanistan. In the Defense Department, the chop line runs between Pakistan and India. In the State Department, the chop line runs between Afghanistan and Iran, and there's another chop line between Afghanistan and Central Asia and Russia. So there was no way to cross all these lines diplomatically.

I decided to organize a Track II of people from the region. I organized the Track II meeting. It took a while to put together. It took place in Dubai, in June 2009. Mansour came, as did former Intelligence Chiefs of Pakistan and India. Iran at that time was in great turmoil in demonstrations of the election against Ahmadinejad. Journalists came and some people from high up in the Afghan government: Central Asia, European Union, UN, Russia, and China. We had a good preliminary discussion, the first meeting of its kind that I know of.

Then I started preparing a second one for Istanbul in January 2010, which was alongside a regional conference on Afghanistan, run by Turks. At that point, at another meeting in

Istanbul, the Turkish special representative for Afghanistan, [Burak Akçapar], came up to me and said, "I want to have some kind of regional process in Afghanistan. Do you have any ideas?" And I said, "It so happens I am organizing something." I told him I already have this Track II, and he joined it. He kind of adopted it. Burak Akçapar, the Turkish special representative for Afghanistan, and Stefan de Mistura, the UN rep in charge.

After we had this meeting in Istanbul, we developed the idea of turning it into a Track 1.5, which is an unofficial meeting of officials. We eventually did that, as I recall, starting in April of 2010, we had the first meeting in Dubai. Kabulov was there. The Chinese didn't come because they were mad at the Norwegians at that time, the Norwegians were funding it, because the Norwegians had given the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident. That was going in parallel with regional issues and reconciliation issues.

In 2009, after I arranged for Holbrooke to meet Mansour, Mansour said Holbrooke should come to Saudi Arabia to meet Prince Muqrin. I said, "You know the Special Representative of the State Department cannot request a meeting with the Intelligence Chief of Saudi Arabia. Why doesn't Prince Muqrin call Holbrooke." So we arranged that and he did.

Holbrooke and I went to the meeting of the Bilderberg Conference outside Athens. The Bilderberg Conference is a conspiracy theorists' dream. It's a slightly right-wing Dutch foundation, every year convenes a bunch of extremely rich influential people to have a secret meeting. I went to two of them, thanks to Holbrooke, and I concluded the reason they're secret is they don't want anyone to find out that nothing of importance takes place there.

We went to Athens for this meeting. Then Holbrooke and I flew to Riyadh and we had a meeting with Muqrin. Then we went to see King Abdullah. That's when Holbrooke asked King Abdullah to please help us with David Rohde. So King Abdullah cast a glance at Muqrin and said yes. So Muqrin authorized Mansour. Also, King Abdullah authorized Muqrin to try to free David Rohde. That was what Mansour needed in order to carry out the mission that Holbrooke had given him.

He very quickly went to Karachi to meet with some of the Taliban leaders who were there. And when he went to Dubai in June, he told me he had been in Karachi, met Mullah Baradar and he said, "They're ready." They're ready for talks. He had managed to work his way, so they told him to come to Dubai. There they blindfolded him and took him to a safe house where the kidnapper of David Rohde called him. Meanwhile, they had issued a video with David Rohde, showing David crying. They were pointing a gun to his head. Mansour said this is unacceptable. You need to show him in a dignified way. So they did, in the next video.

What happened then, this is a little confusing. As far as I understand, people started talking, other people got involved. Word got around that Saudi Arabia was interested in David Rohde, so the price went up. And they thought this is really valuable.

Somehow or other, I believe someone got money to the people who were guarding David Rohde. They didn't bother to tell the Taliban, but they got money to his guards. They all

fell asleep one night, and David and his translator were able to escape. Much later, I introduced David to Mansour in New York.

Q: Where were they?

RUBIN: They were in Waziristan, controlled under the Haqqanis. David had a lot of experiences with the Haqqanis, in spite of the Pakistan military, while he was their prisoner. We finally got him out.

I wouldn't say Mansour got him out. It was always ambiguous how he actually got out. I'm not sure myself. Mansour established contact with the real kidnappers of David Rohde, with real Taliban. This was a proof of concept for Mansour that he was actually in touch with the Taliban. Mansour has implied, but never said, that he got the money to the guards.

Then Holbrooke started to take what I was reporting for him, together with Mansour and Abdullah Anas, more seriously. Qayum was giving me regular updates over dinner at his restaurant, because he was in touch with all these people all the time.

Meanwhile i,n the summer of 2009, Mullah Omar fired Muta'sim, the head of the Political Committee, on the suspicion that he had taken money from Prince Muqrin and had not turned it over to the organization. Everyone says they're innocent. I have no idea what actually happened. He was eventually replaced by Tayyab Agha, who had been Mullah Omar's secretary. Tayyab Agha's wife is related to Zaeef's wife.

Zaeef went back to Saudi Arabia to introduce Tayyab Agha to Muqrin. This is during Ramadan in 2009. The background of this is King Abdullah wanted to do something about Afghanistan. Mansour wanted to do something about Afghanistan. As far as I could tell, nobody else in Saudi Arabia wanted to do anything about Afghanistan, including Muqrin. Muqrin told me there are two things you should never do: getting involved with Afghanistan and trying to help America. He was fired after King Abdullah died.

Zaeef brought Tayyib Agha to meet Muqrin in Jeddah. They had a conversation with Muqrin. Muqrin told them, you have to meet these three conditions. You have to break to al Qaeda, those three things. Tayyab Agha said something like, "They won't do that until Karzai swears loyalty to Mullah Omar." They parted on bad terms. It got worse. Eventually, Muqrin had Tayyab Agha expelled from Saudi Arabia.

Q: Do you think that President Karzai knew what was going on?

RUBIN: He knew something about it because Qayum told me that he used to refer to me sarcastically as "your friend." Who knows if he was getting accurate reports. Probably not, because the CIA got reports about what Qayum told me. And when they read them to me, they were not accurate about what I told Qayum.

Q: They were getting it from Karzai or somebody?

RUBIN: Yes. They got it from somebody. That was the end of the Saudi track. That was in 2009. Then Tayyab Agha went to Dubai and he talked to Zaeef. According to Zaeef, Tayyab Agha said this isn't working. Let's give up. Zaeef said, "No, I have another idea."

Afghans have a very special feeling about Germany, which can lead to some awkward moments. Germany, like Afghanistan, fought against Britain and Russia. The Afghans consider them as different from other Europeans for that reason.

Zaeef went to meet with the German Intelligence representative in Kabul and they arranged for him to go to Germany under cover of medical treatment. He had a back problem because some of our soldiers stomped on his back while he was on a prison ship. While he was there, he met with people from German Intelligence and with some Afghans who had contact with the Taliban, and they talked about their ideas.

Soon after that, Tayyib Agha asked to have a meeting in Dubai with Germany. He met with Mützelberg, who was the German special rep for Afghanistan.

In January 2010, I went first to Saudi Arabia and met the usual suspects. Meanwhile, Holbrooke went to Abu Dhabi. There was a meeting of what they then called the Contact Group, which was the meeting of all the SRAPs that had been appointed around the world. While we were there, Mützelberg told Holbrooke and me that he had been meeting in Dubai with a representative of the Taliban, whose name he couldn't remember. I knew the whole story of what was going on. He was going to meet with Tayyib Agha.

The idea was Germany didn't want to go against the wishes of the United States. So Holbrooke got permission from Hillary to tell them to go ahead to see what they could learn. Then Mützelberg retired and was replaced by Steiner, somebody who Holbrooke knew well from Bosnia. In 2010, those talks between Steiner and Tayyib Agha started, and it was more like indirect back and forth.

Finally, in the summer of 2010, we the United States government, received a request to meet with Tayyab Agha in Dubai. I say it that way because I'm not sure if Tayyab Agha requested that we meet him or if the Germans had asked Tayyab Agha to ask us. I suspect the latter. But he maneuvered so he would. That request came and that put the inter-agency into action. They had to decide whether it was a yes or not.

First thing was they needed proof that this guy really represented the Taliban.

Meanwhile, an Australian who worked for me at NYU, who was also working for the Norwegians, was also meeting with Ibrahim Haqqani, brother of Commander Jalaluddin Haqqani in Islamabad, and later, in Dubai.

Finally, what happened was, meanwhile, Bowe Bergdahl had been captured.

Q: The U.S. soldier who walked off?

RUBIN: He was trying to walk to another post because he reported that he was being abused by his commander. Not a wise thing to do. He was being held by the Haqqanis like David Rohde. In response to the U.S. request for proof that Tayyib Agha represented

the Taliban, the Taliban arranged for the same guy in the Haqqanis, Ibrahim Haqqani, who was meeting with the guy working for me, got a video of Bergdahl.

In the video, Bergdahl was saying some things that the FBI had transmitted to him through Tayyib Agha that he should say. He said some things about the situation in Somalia that were up to date, to prove that it was genuine. U.S. intel saw that Ibrahim Haqqani took that tape to Dubai and gave it to Tayyab Agha. The U.S. intel community had the tape before Tayyib Agha turned it over to us. The Taliban never told us that. Intelligence found that out. Then Tayyab Agha gave us that tape and that made a huge difference because it showed that this guy sitting in Dubai [Tayyib Agha] had reached back through the Taliban leadership in Quetta to the Haqqanis to get us proof of life for Bowe Bergdahl. He was the real deal.

Then they had to make a decision, do we meet with them? You can imagine this consumed quite a bit of time and energy in the interagency. The president wanted to do it, but the condition was you can meet with him, but not negotiate. You're in listening mode.

They set up that meeting outside of Munich in a German Intelligence safe house end of November 2010. There was a guy from Qatar there, too. I'm not sure exactly how Qatar got involved, but apparently Qatar owns 25 percent of Volkswagen. And the Taliban were fundraising in Qatar as they had been in Saudi Arabia. Qatar, like most of the Gulf countries, wanted the United States to get out of Afghanistan so they could focus their attention on Iran. Plus Qatar was more sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, to Taliban than Saudi Arabia. That's when Qatar became involved.

They had the first meeting. Frank Ruggiero, who was at that time deputy at SRAP and Jeff Hayes, who worked for Doug Lute at the NSC. Frank had been Head of the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] in Kandahar, the civilian head, senior civilian officer. Jeff Hayes was the DIA guy who was serving on NSC [National Security Council] with Doug, Chris Kolenda, another guy from DOD, was an observer. He wasn't actually in the meeting, but he observed it.

They had this meeting for a couple days. Basically Tayyab Agha opened it by saying, "I have been instructed to read this statement to you. You won't like this statement, but let me read it" So he read a statement, which was, you can imagine. Then he outlined exactly what Zaeef had told me in April, the same plan. And Frank and Jeff just nodded, and they came and reported back. They said they were not prepared to negotiate. Tayyib Agha said, "I came to this meeting prepared."

Right after this meeting I was on my way to Kabul. Holbrooke and I went to Dulles Airport to meet Frank on his way back. We were debriefed by Frank. I went to Kabul and I briefed General Petraeus at ISAF headquarters, which Holbrooke didn't want me to do, I found out later.

Then what happened, one of the important things for the Taliban was we should release those five guys from Guantanamo. When we discussed this in the inter-agency, we were told that will never happen. In fact, the moment Frank, Jeff, and Chris got back, somehow John McCain decided to make it impossible for Obama to let anyone out of Guantanamo.

They added an amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act, which put all kinds of conditions that you had to go through in order to get someone out of Guantanamo, which made it politically almost impossible to do it. I always suspected that Petraeus had called McCain, but I don't know that.

By the time we had the next meeting, Holbrooke had died. That disrupted a number of things. Meanwhile, in the fall while all this was going on behind the backs with Qatar and Tayyab Agha, the Saudis were escalating the rhetoric to us saying, don't do anything with Qatar. They knew something was going on. Mansour met me in Istanbul and told me that Tayyab Agha was an Iranian agent being paid ten thousand dollars a month by Qasem Soleimani. I asked the CIA to check that, and they never found anything to substantiate it.

Once it became known, it wasn't publicly known, that we had this meeting, the Saudis didn't know at first, Holbrooke had been planning to go to Saudi Arabia in January 2011 to talk to the King and explain what we were doing so that it didn't cause damage to our relationship with Saudi Arabia. He also developed this idea for how to use the regional Track that I was doing as part of the regional strategy.

That's why earlier on the day that he died, he went to see David Axelrod at the White House to try to get a meeting with Obama to talk to him about the regional strategy. Then he went back to the State Department and had his heart attack and died a few days later.

I was in Dubai at the Track 1.5 regional meeting while he Holbrooke had the attack, was hospitalized and died, so I missed seeing him die and wasn't part of the immediate group mourning. Then I came back.

So there was this vacuum because Holbrooke never really told anybody what I was doing. He told Hillary, but it wasn't reported through regular channels, so things were cut off.

Then I went to Kabul with Frank in January. There were other people on the mission, too. And at that time, Mansour was there, too, staying in the palace. I had dinner with him and Qayum at Qayum's house. Qayum was there, too. Mansour was furious with me. He said, "Karzai told me that you guys met with Tayyab Agha in Qatar with Qataris without telling us about it." I think we had a second meeting in Qatar. I said, "Holbrooke was going to tell you about it." I tried to smooth it over best I could, but I was not in a position to actually do that.

Eventually, he was a little mollified by the fact that I personally had not met with Tayyab Agha, so I had not personally betrayed him. And Karzai had told him that because Karzai was worried that it would spoil his relationship with Saudi Arabia if they found out. He hadn't authorized this because we didn't ask his permission, but we had told him we were going to do that. It was a real mess. Holbrooke thought he could manage all that, but he couldn't, at least not when he was dead.

Then I went to Riyadh on my way back and I met Mansour in the airport. He was on his way to Morocco to see Muqrin to tell him about it. We tried to work out a plan for making everything work. Saudi Arabia was basically out of it by that time.

Karzai was rather alienated from it. So they had a couple more meetings with Tayyib Agha, I can't remember how many. I wasn't in those meetings. The United States went in and said, "I'm sorry. We are not going to be able to release anyone from Guantanamo because of this." So we had Tayyab Agha read the Defense Appropriations Act. As you can imagine, that was very productive.

I was in Oslo in the summer of 2011. Zaeef was there, too, for the Oslo Forum. We were having a conversation, and he said, "Can't you do something about Guantanamo." I said, "Obama is not the Amir of America. That's not how our system works. Can we release people from Bagram?" They were quite firm. They wanted someone from Guantanamo.

In the spring of 2011, Karzai was unhappy about it. Someone from the palace leaked Tayyab Agha's name to a Pashto newspaper and then later it appeared in *Stern*, in Germany. Then Tayyab Agha sent a message, "The condition for this was confidentiality, and therefore, I'm suspending the talks."

Then we made various efforts communicating through Qatar. Frank and I went to Qatar. The Qatari guy working with us was Sheikh Faisal. He gave us a letter from Tayyab Agha saying this broke our agreement about confidentiality. We responded and talked about what to do.

In July, I think, The attorney general of Qatar invited Frank and Jeff for an informal personal meeting at his farm, to which he also invited Tayyab Agha. It was not an official meeting. Also, that meant that Steiner, the German envoy, was not there.

Q: Frank and Jeff were deputies in SRAP?

RUBIN: No. Frank was by then a deputy reporting to the new SRAP, Marc Grossman. I reported to Frank, and Jeff was working for Doug Lute at NSC. While they were there in Qatar, Tayyab Agha handed over an unsigned note, which he said was a letter from Mullah Omar to President Obama. The CIA never contradicted that. It was in English. I suspect it was written by Zaeef. It said, "I've made some difficult decisions. Now you have to make some difficult decisions." Basically, that's what it said.

Q: This was when?

RUBIN: This was spring or summer of 2011.

Q: The military surge had started? It's after Holbrooke?

RUBIN: Yes. So it was 2011.

Q: Is Marc Grossman in place at this point?

RUBIN: Yes. Grossman was appointed when Hillary gave her speech at the Asia Society, which was in February 2011. This [the ruckus in Kabul] took place in January. The White House had simultaneously leaked to Steve Cole that the U.S. was having talks with the Taliban, and he published it in *The New Yorker* without giving details. I was in Kabul when that happened and I had to deal with Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council, on that. There was a lot of blowback.

Frank and I went to Qatar in the spring, and Faisal gave us a note from Tayyib Agha saying we had agreed on confidentiality. Then-attorney general invited Frank and Jeff, and Tayyib gave them the letter from Mullah Omar. That letter motivated, I believe President Obama, to try to see if there was something he could do about Guantanamo.

The negotiations, we still couldn't get anywhere, the sequence of opening, releasing the people from Guantanamo, their making a statement differentiating themselves from al Qaeda, opening negotiations with the Afghan government and a whole bunch of things. The sequencing of these things was still very much up in the air and delicate. But according to the legislation, we couldn't let anybody out from Guantanamo. You have to announce it and then wait sixty days. Then in sixty days you can imagine what a hullabaloo there would be, which would have made it even more difficult and impossible. But Obama decided that he wanted to find a way to do it.

Q: Is this because of Bergdahl?

RUBIN: No. I think he wanted to get out of Afghanistan. He said he did it for Bergdahl. Bergdahl provided a cover for that overall reason, which was to get out of Afghanistan, the reason that Trump was negotiating too. Marc worked on this. I wasn't directly involved with this. I was having discussions back in Washington. Marc and Hillary were all working on this, what to do.

Actually, Marc and Tayyab Agha got pretty close. The Taliban must have thought it was too close, because in August 2011 they sent somebody else with Tayyab Agha who actually came along. That was Muhammed Abbas Stanikzai, who is now deputy prime minister in Kabul. He's one of the people who has been denouncing the leadership over the issue of girls schools. He led the Taliban negotiating team that dealt with Khalilzad in Doha.

Q: What's his name again?

RUBIN: Muhammed Abbas Stanikzai. He was there in August 2011. He made a lot of trouble. This was when we started to get suspicious that Tayyab Agha was not relaying what he agreed to, back to headquarters because all the things that Marc repeated at the time, Marc thought Tayyab Agha had agreed to, Stanikzai said, no, that's unacceptable.

Then the usual American bureaucratic stuff. We had negotiated an agreement with Tayyab Agha about terms of reference for the office, and then Defense Department had rejected it. So we had to renegotiate the agreement with ourselves. Marc at least thought that we were close to an agreement.

Meanwhile, the Turks were organizing this regional meeting in Istanbul, in November. That was the culmination of the regional process that started with our track two, then went to the Norwegian-backed track 1.5s, which the Turks had taken over. That was in November in Istanbul. Then we had a meeting in Bonn, in December, which was on the tenth anniversary of the Bonn Agreement. Karzai came and all the high-level people came. Ryan Crocker was there. Marc Grossman was there. Hillary was there.

We were just on the verge, we thought, of going back to Qatar after that, and reaching a deal with Tayyab Agha. But suddenly Karzai changed his mind after a long plane ride with Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Spanta. He said, "You cannot go ahead with this without our being involved." He was worried about the political blowback, of course.

Also I think that Grossman and Crocker did not quite have the same viewpoint. Crocker thought that the most important thing was the U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement, which they would then negotiate. My opinion was always that it was not worth the paper it was printed on. That was true, but I guess that turned out to be true with the Taliban agreement, too. So it evens out.

Crocker thought there should be loyalty to Karzai and the Security Agreement was more important. So there would be a U.S. long-term presence. Grossman, I don't know what his real position was. He didn't say.

Karzai didn't say not to go ahead with reconciliation, because he supported the idea, but he said we [Afghan government] have to be involved. He said the Taliban have to talk to us before you sign an agreement.

Then we went to Qatar. Marc Grossman and Frank Ruggiero, maybe Jeff was there, too. I'm not sure. They went to see Tayyab Agha. First they told the Qataris and the Qataris were outraged, because we had an agreement and now we were setting new conditions. When you're a star they let you do it. He told Tayyab Agha, and Tayyab Agha took it pretty well. He said, "I'll have to take this back to the leadership."

Meanwhile at a previous meeting with Tayyab Agha, he had said, "You're telling us you want us to break ties with al Qaeda. What do you mean by that?" That was a reasonable question. So we wrote a paper and we gave it to him at the next meeting. Then he reported back on it when he met Mark in Qatar, in January. He said, "We gave the paper to the ulama to look at," And they said, "We cannot cut ties with any Muslim." So Tayyab Agha said, "Can you find some different language?" That was in January.

Then some members of the Afghan government "met" with the Taliban. The Taliban were invited to a meeting in Japan, in Kyoto. The Head of the High Peace Council was there, too. They sat in the same place. There were a couple of other places that they sat at the same table. They didn't speak to each other directly.

Because all this was going on, it had leaked to the press that the U.S. and Taliban were talking and that had created severe internal problems for Mullah Omar because the other leaders whom he had not told about it plus his fighters were not happy about it. Our fighters at the Defense Department were not happy about it either. The Taliban were having trouble recruiting people for the spring offensive because if they hear that the Taliban leadership is talking to the Americans, even though as indicated the discussions were extremely limited, people's imaginations are unlimited. They thought, they're going to sell us out and they didn't want to fight.

Then a U.S. sergeant in Kandahar went on a rampage and killed twenty-one civilians at night, shooting them in their beds.

Meanwhile, Frank had been on the phone with the Qataris. He thought he was about to set up the next meeting. The intel guys were saying the Taliban leadership doesn't want to do it. But after this massacre happened, the Taliban said they were suspending the talks. Interestingly, they never publicly linked the suspension of the talks to that killing in Kandahar. They said it was because the U.S. had imposed new conditions, which were unacceptable.

The next step was, there was a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] summit in Chicago. Now it's June 2012. Obama was there. Karzai was there. Of course, Hillary Clinton was there.

Meanwhile, after Holbrooke died, I had lost my main channel to Hillary Clinton because Holbrooke would take me to see her. But I arranged through Jake Sullivan, her deputy chief of staff, I would send her direct notes that I had cleared through Marc Grossman from time to time, mostly my screeds about how the military wasn't letting us do anything and what the U.S. were doing in Afghanistan was completely unsustainable.

We were at the big conference center in Chicago, the McCormick Place, which had all these open escalators. Hillary was having a talk with President Zardari of Pakistan. I positioned myself outside of the room. She came out and she said, "Barney, let's talk." She pulled me with her on the escalator and we went down the escalator. And she said to me, "I understand why reconciliation is important. I understand what you're saying, but I'm just skeptical it's going to work." I said, "Your skepticism is well founded, but you should be equally skeptical about the military strategy." And she looked me in the eye like, do you think I'm an idiot, and she said, "Duh!"

Basically, what I got out of that was she knew what we were doing couldn't work. She knew what Holbrooke said, if we're going to get out of there this is the only way we can do it. But she wasn't confident at all that it would work. Here she was trying to be the first woman president, and she's not going to use her political capital to negotiate with the Taliban, this anti-woman group that was involved with terrorism, especially if it had virtually no chance of succeeding. Although she had made that speech at the Asian Society after Holbrooke died, which gave Marc Grossman his orders. There were so many obstacles in the interagency.

Rabbani, who was Head of the High Peace Council, sent a letter to Ambassador Crocker requesting the United States release one of the Guantanamo five, Khairullah Khairkhwah, who he thought was pro-peace and would help in the peace process. Crocker never responded to the letter. I proposed to the interagency the various things we could do to incentivize the Taliban to come back, such as let Khairkhwah out, and everybody was against it. The first time we discussed it, everybody was against it. I said the peace talks are making it harder for the Taliban to recruit people for the spring offensive. Dennis McDonough said, "We have no evidence that the Taliban are having trouble recruiting people for the spring offensive."

After I had said that, there was a leak to the Wall Street Journal from the Defense Department saying that the State Department didn't care about the troops. They're trying to get these people out of Guantanamo to go and kill our troops again. That angered

Grossman a great deal. So the next time there was an inter-agency meeting Grossman went back to the sitting room outside and the people from DOD said to him, "Now we have this information that the Taliban are in an insecure situation and are having trouble mobilizing for their offensive. Why don't you propose letting out Khairkhwah again?" Grossman said, "I'm not going to do it. Don't tell me I'm not supporting the troops. You want to do it; you do it." Of course nobody did it. So we were in kind of a stalemate again.

Finally, that fall, the Qataris came to us with an idea they said was from Tayyab Agha, which is to break the stalemate on the negotiations so that we don't have to meet the Taliban first. [Actually, I don't know where that proposal originated.] We'll open the office and then meet the Taliban. The Taliban would make a statement and then they would open the office and we would meet them, and then we would negotiate the prisoner exchange. And then they would meet with the Afghan government. That seemed like a way out.

Karzai came to Washington on an official visit in January, and that was discussed in detail. Staknikzai and I sat together, not the Taliban Staknikzai, the High Peace Council Staknikzai. We sat together until two in the morning, drafting the part of the final communique about the office, which was crafted to say that Karzai and Obama requested the Emir of Qatar to authorize the opening of an office for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Qataris selectively quoted from that and the Qatar government accepted it, So it looked like it was moving ahead.

Grossman left at the end of 2012 but stayed on through the January official visit, and then, after a hiatus [nobody wanted that job] Dobbins came in as SRAP. Then we started shuttling back and forth in 2013.

Nobody told Dobbins what had already been "agreed." So when he first went to see Karzai, I'm sitting here with him, Karzai, in Karzai's living room. This wasn't even in the office. Karzai raised all of his old demands. He said, "It's unacceptable that Qatar would sign an MOU with the Taliban about the offer. If the Taliban want the office, they have to sign an MOU with us." The Taliban had said we would never accept the offer as a gift from the Afghan government. Dobbins wanted to open that again and we told him there's no point in opening again. We had already been through it.

Then there was this complicated diplomatic dance. What eventually happened was there was no signed MOU. But Qatar sent a diplomatic note to the United States saying that the office would operate under the rules and then incorporated the rules from the MOU into the diplomatic note. And Obama sent a letter to Karzai promising him that the office would not compromise Afghan sovereignty in any way, which was very subjective. Of course it was not the same as what the Qataris had sent to us. What the Qataris sent to us, it turned out there were a lot of ambiguities in it too.

As you know, in any difficult contract, one of the stages, after you initial a draft, then the parties sit down and before signing they read through it together, go over every article to make sure they understand them all the same. We never did that. In addition to which

there was a lot of side talking going on by various people, so different impressions were given.

Nobody in the United States government wanted to take ownership of this process. There was nobody senior from Washington in Qatar while the preparations were being made, just me, Jeff Hayes, and Jarrett Blanc. Then Jarrett and I went home the weekend before the office opening and Jeff stayed there.

I was on the plane coming back on Tuesday thinking the office had opened and now we were going to open talks, and then the Afghan government was going to come. And I get off the plane in Qatar and I see in my Blackberry at that time, that the Taliban had opened an office in the name of the Islamic Emirate, the sign on it says "Islamic Emirate," which was contrary to the text in the agreement, as we understood it. But they had an interpretation of the agreement under which the Qataris said, "You said they could call it whatever they want inside the office." And this was inside the office. And I said if it's on Al-Jazeera it's not inside the office. Then I had to get the office closed down.

The foreign minister of Qatar was off in Turkey, having discussions about Syria. So I decided I would go get the flag taken down and the sign. There were no official cars from the embassy available because the Qatar embassy only had four cars. Two of them were being repaired and two of them were being used to prepare for a visit by Secretary Kerry. So one of the junior officers took me in his personal car.

We drove there in this unmarked car, as Karzai later described it. Of course, all the Qatari security guys came out with their guns drawn. The junior political officer from the embassy said, "Maybe we should leave." And I said, "No, I'll handle this." So I got out and I shook everybody's hand, explained who I was, and said, "You can call back to your office and check it. We just need that sign taken down. I'll wait until you get back." I got back into the car and waited a while. Then the sign was taken down. Then I took a picture of the wall without the sign. Then came the most difficult part of the evening, which was trying to transfer a picture from an iPhone into the State Department email system. I figured out how to do it and I sent it to the embassy. Jim Cunningham, the ambassador, showed it to Karzai.

That whole thing was over and there were bruised feelings all around, as you can imagine.

Q: Do you think it was a misunderstanding? Do you think this just was the way the Taliban saw this that they were a competing government?

RUBIN: They did, of course. We knew they thought of themselves that way, but we had reached an agreement that they wouldn't call themselves that in this office. They could call themselves all they wanted on their website, in their speeches, and so on, in their internal communications.

It seemed to be widely agreed in the U.S. government that the Qataris were more at fault than the Taliban.

Q: Did you continue working with Dobbins?

RUBIN: No. After that, there were raw feelings. People in the Afghan government said some hostile things about me, many people who had been my friends. I was also getting tired because I was commuting between New York and Washington, and having two jobs at the same time while I was in on all this. So I went to Dobbins and said I'm going to resign in October. He tried to convince me not to, but I had enough.

There was that but then also when Holbrooke was there I had direct access to the Secretary. I could do something. The whole thing I was working on had fallen apart. I didn't see there was much for me to do and I didn't really have a partner to work with, so I resigned.

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Q: It's May 24, 2023, for the Afghanistan project, I am continuing the conversation with Dr. Rubin. Barney, Last time we talked about your time working within the State Department on peace and reconciliation. I know that you left in 2013. Can you discuss how you proceeded after that?

RUBIN: I put most of my energies elsewhere, mainly on back channel efforts between the United States and the countries in the region, including Afghanistan. For instance, I had a long association with Javad Zarif] in Iran and his Afghanistan team. I knew him in Bonn.

In the fall of 2013 just before my resignation took place, foreign minister Javad Zarif came to New York for the UN General Assembly. He was invited to speak to the Asia Society. It wasn't actually at the Asian Society. It was some place in a New York facility. I sat near the front and I talked to Abbas Araghchi, the deputy foreign minister whom I knew well, and I told him I had resigned from the State Department. He looked disappointed and he said, "We were counting on you to be our interlocutor to talk about Afghanistan," because the nuclear negotiations were going on at that time, and I had met Araghchi at a meeting we had organized in Abu Dhabi.. I said, "I don't think Iran will have direct negotiations on Afghanistan with the U.S. for some time. But because I won't be in the government anymore, I'll be able to do things unofficially."

In January 2014, as part of the U.S.-Iran dialogue, organized by the Asia Society, I was invited to Stockholm, for a dialogue between the U.S. and Iran co-hosted by SIPRI, the Swedish International Peace Research Institute. We had meetings and a public forum. One of the participants in the Iranian side was Mostafa Zahrani, who was then the head of the Iranian Foreign Ministry think tank, IPIS, Institute for Policy and International Studies. I had known him when he was in the UN mission in New York. They always had someone there who was a liaison in charge of academics. He was in charge of the think tank, thereby, he was working for the deputy foreign minister of education research, something like that.

I knew there was supposed to be a presidential election in Afghanistan that year. And it seemed to me that in that presidential election, the outcome was going to be contested between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah. I don't know if they had been named as nominees yet, a Pashtun and a Tajik. I told him they're going to try to have elections in

Afghanistan. The elections will wind up in a deadlock with accusations of fraud. I think the two outside countries that can have the most influence to try to pacify this are the United States and Iran, because the U.S. has relations with people on both sides of the Afghan political divide with the Iranians, particularly with Tajiks.

I had met the former ambassador to Afghanistan and then head of Afghanistan Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, Ebrahim Taherian. I can't remember where I first met him. I met him in Tokyo at an international meeting on counter-narcotics in Afghanistan. I met him again in Rome in 2008. Maybe it was later than that, 2010. It was when the United States government was making charges that Iran was providing weapons to the Taliban. He took me aside and said, "I don't know what's behind these charges, but if your government has any evidence of them please send it to me. Here's how you can send it to me. Give it to Dr. Abdullah, Mustafa Kazemi, Qanuni, or a fourth person, I can't remember who.

I went back and I reported that to the CIA and the State Department. That meant those four people were linked to Iranian Intelligence because they trust them. It was also interesting. Taherian didn't want to turn around and ask his government what was going on, but he suspected that some people in the Iranian government were doing things he wasn't informed about. So he wanted to see what evidence the United States might have about it. I knew him. I had seen that he had regard for me as a scholar.

Back to January 2014 in Stockholm. I told Zahrani that it was going to be necessary for the United States and Iran to communicate and have a back channel about these elections. Otherwise, we could get caught up in charges and countercharges about manipulating the election and fraud, which weren't necessarily true. We also might beneficially be able to coordinate to calm things down. I said, "What I would like to do is I would like to meet with Taherian periodically to set up a channel," which I could do because I wasn't in the government. He went back to Tehran.

Then I was contacted to meet Taherian in Istanbul in March. As a result of that, I had discussions with Taherian. I was accompanied by a guy who worked for me, Tom Gregg, who worked for the UN in Afghanistan, and Taherian was accompanied by Zahrani. We met several times in Istanbul, once in Norway where the Norwegians were having a meeting, another session with the [Asia Society dialogue group in Copenhagen]. And we met in Vienna at the same time the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] negotiations were taking place, so we could exchange notes with the two delegations in real time.

I believe I persuaded Taherian that the United States actually did want the elections to take place, but Iran was under the impression that the United States didn't want the elections to take place. Taherian later told me that, "If the elections took place it's because of our talks." I don't know what he was referring to and I don't agree with it, but that's what he said.

Q: Did you have any unofficial backing from either the U.S. government or the UN, doing this kind of informal project?

RUBIN: I told the U.S. I was doing it and I reported to them after every meeting. Otherwise, it would be pointless. At times, I even passed messages. For instance, Jim Dobbins, who was then the SRAP knew Zarif because they were at Bonn together. At one point when we were in Vienna, they were suspicious about the U.S. trying to manipulate the elections. Dobbins sent me a note for Zarif saying, "Please tell him on my personal word of honor this is not true." Interestingly, they believed Dobbins. So I reported regularly to them, the White House and the State Department. They all knew about it and encouraged me to go on.

In early September, the situation in Afghanistan was getting very tense. The supporters of Abdullah Abdullah were pressuring him that he would take over the government and there was talk about a coup. So I called Zahrani and I said, "We have to talk. Tell me where you're going to be and I'll get there." He said he would be in Warsaw on September 29, which was a Monday. So I went to Warsaw.

Now there's a connection to Poland and Zahrani because he was fired from his position during the time of President Ahmadinejad. And what he told me was, he was fired because, you may or may not remember, they had a Holocaust denial conference at that institute, and he objected to it. He said, "What does this have to do with the national interest of Iran?" And he was fired for that.

While I was waiting for him, I went to Auschwitz on a tour. That was Friday or Saturday. On Sunday, I was sitting in the market square and he called me from Iran and said, "I can't come. My wife is sick." So I didn't get to see him. I called him and we had a little conversation, and in principle, we agreed to visit Auschwitz together in the future, but he wasn't able to do that.

I told you I had started those regional dialogues. I branched out quite a bit there. In July 2012, an inquiry came in from the U.S. embassy in Beijing that they had been contacted by a scholar in the Academy of Sciences in China, Ye Hailin, who said they wanted to have a dialogue on Afghanistan with me.

So they contacted me and I managed to get some money from the Institute of Peace, so I brought a small group to Beijing. This was in connection with an official visit where I was with a team from the Defense Department led by Peter Lavoy, who was assistant secretary for Defense Policy. We had that meeting at Peking University. Then I was pressured by the Chinese Foreign Ministry to do it with a foreign ministry think tank instead of the Academy of Sciences.

Later I learned the Center on the Study of the U.S. at the Academy of Sciences had proposed such a dialogue as part of China's policy for the U.S.—not China's policy for Afghanistan—to find something to cooperate on.

I was in contact with China's Institute for International Studies, which was the think tank of the foreign ministry. Our dialogue was officially under the foreign ministry. We had numerous meetings over the years until 2018. Then I just had another one two weeks ago, in Washington, this time through the Stimson Center.

First, we had bilateral meetings in New York, Beijing, and Washington. We had trilateral meetings in Beijing with Pakistan and Afghanistan in succession next to each other. We were supposed to have one with Iran in Beijing, but the Iranians, as usual, pulled out at the last minute. We had one with Russia in Beijing and we had two in India with India. The Chinese said, "We cannot have a meeting with India in China unless we also invite Pakistan, but we can go to India." So we had those meetings in India.

We were trying to develop ideas on how the U.S. and China could cooperate on Afghanistan because we had some common interests, unlike in the South China Sea. In other words, one of the Chinese said at the first meeting, the U.S. and China have contradictory interests in China's front yard, but we have convergent interests in China's backyard, so let's work on that.

We came up with a number of proposals. I can't draw a clear line from our meetings to what happened, but eventually, China participated in the efforts toward a peace process. U.S. and China were co-observers in a meeting between the Afghan government and the Taliban outside Islamabad, in 2016. Unfortunately, that all fell apart when the United States killed the leader of the Taliban with a drone shortly after the meeting. And the Chinese concluded that if the United States is going to kill the person who is negotiating with them, it wasn't serious about the negotiations.

I had been told in the Situation Room. We were discussing what to do with the negotiations with the Taliban at the next level with the Iranian government. The Taliban told us that at the next level, it would bring in real decision-makers to talk to us. In fact, Mullah Mansour, who later became the de facto leader when Mullah Omar died. He became the leader of the Taliban. Then he became the actual leader. We had a discussion in the Situation Room of what we would do if Mullah Mansour was to go to Doha. I won't mention his name, but a senior military officer said, "Of course, we would target him." I said, "It's not considered best practice in negotiations to kill a person you're negotiating with." But that's what we did in 2016.

Q: So the rest of the world believed we were just having those talks in order to target him?

RUBIN: Something like that. They were serious about it. Those who knew us knew that we were uncoordinated.

Shortly after that, we had a meeting in Kyrgyzstan with China and people from Central Asia. That was dominated largely by the Chinese expression of displeasure that the United States had killed Mansour. But we continued to have bilateral meetings. We had a meeting in Brussels with people from the EU [European Union] special envoy. Then I began to get more interested in Russia because Russia was getting more involved.

In late 2016 after Trump was elected, before he was inaugurated, I was trying to find out what the U.S. policy toward Afghanistan would be under Trump. He hadn't said much, but whatever he said didn't have any relationship to what he would do. So I went to Washington and I talked to Zalmay Khalilzad and I talked to Lisa Curtis, who both told me they had no idea.

Then it occurred to me to try to get better insight into what the Russians were doing. I joked that maybe Trump's Afghanistan policy would be made in Moscow. Nobody in Washington was taking Kabulov seriously. The thing is Kabulov is a very obnoxious person and very anti-American. He doesn't have an aura of wanting to cooperate with us. Consequently, we didn't think much of what he was doing.

I had been invited to Stockholm by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, hat fall, for a conference. And from Stockholm, I went to Moscow, where I had been a few times before, and I met with Kabulov, as well as with my fellow scholars whom I knew. Kabulov told me that he was starting a peace process, which he called the Moscow Process. He was about to convene a meeting of Russia, Pakistan, China, and Iran, to start it and then he would try and broaden it later. That meeting took place in December. He outlined to me his conception. And I talked about it with Russian scholars whom I knew.

Then I went on to Beijing and we had a meeting. While I was there, I was invited to Xi'an for a conference that China was having with Central Asian scholars, some of whom I knew. I met them there and I gave a talk there as well, including a poorly received talk about Xinjiang.

I went and I started making contacts, in addition to which I was invited to join a U.S.-Russia dialogue on Afghanistan by the East West Institute, whose program was at that time headed by Cameron Munter, former ambassador to Pakistan, whom I knew. So I would go to Moscow for that, from time to time.

I got Vitaly Naumkin, former head of the Oriental Institute, whom I had known for many years, to agree to be co-chair of the U.S.-Russia dialogue. In the summer of 2017, he was in London, and I flew to London from France, where I was taking my vacation. We met and we reached an agreement on how to have this dialogue. And he put me in touch with the Russian International Affairs Council. He said that would be a good venue. They're affiliated with the government, and they have good facilities.

We arranged to have a meeting in Moscow in November in conjunction with a meeting with the East West Institute at the Russian International Affairs Council.

Q: November 2017?

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: Trump was in office.

RUBIN: Yes. Then we had another meeting in Washington always in conjunction with the East-West Institute, I think in the spring of 2018.

Then there was another meeting. I was in Moscow again in December 2019. I'm a little fuzzy as to when these meetings took place. We were exchanging information, learning about what they were trying to do. That was a time when the Moscow process had gotten started and when Kabulov started it, in the second and third stage, he invited the United States, and the United States refused. When Kabulov first invited Afghanistan to join it, one of the U.S. ambassadors in Kabul, there were four ambassadors in Kabul, went to the

foreign ministry and told Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Karzai, who was planning to attend, that Afghanistan should not attend, and told him not to go.

In the middle of 2017, Ghani tried to co-opt the Moscow Process with a meeting in Kabul, the Kabul Process, and in August, Trump came out with his policy, which was actually McMasters' policy on Afghanistan. He made a speech.

A year later, the CIA did an evaluation on how that policy was going in August 2018, and it gave the same verdict that, in my experience, the CIA had always given on all of our policies in Afghanistan, that it was failing. Trump seized on that because he didn't believe in it anyway and decided on getting out. He was persuaded somehow that he'd like to get something out of the Taliban for counterterrorism, and he and Pompeo appointed Khalilzad to be the special envoy.

As I mentioned, Zal and I were schoolmates and we kept in touch from time to time. So I briefed him on what I understood Kabulov was doing. And he went to see Kabulov. I saw Kabulov first before Zal. I said, "Zal is coming to see you to talk to you about this." Kabulov was very dismissive and said, "He's one of the architects of American-long-term presence in Afghanistan. No need to talk to him about it." I said, "I think you'll be surprised. Please keep an open mind."

Afterwards, I asked Zal how the meeting went and he said, "As well as could be expected under the circumstances." In fact, they started working together. Lavrov went to Doha and announced that they were supporting Khalilzad and they put their Moscow process on hold and got behind what Khalilzad was trying to do. The Russian main priority was to get the United States military out of Afghanistan.

Q: Same as the Taliban.

RUBIN: Yes. They never really believed that even Trump was sincere about doing that. But if the U.S. was making this effort, they would try to encourage it. Zal then tried to support an effort. I didn't have much to do with it. He tried to have a meeting of the U.S. special envoys from the U.S., China, Russia, and the EU, in Washington, in the spring of 2019. I was there at the same time. What happened was they all came, but Kabulov wouldn't sit in the meeting with the EU representative. He told me once, "Why should the U.S. have two votes?" That was what became what was called the Troika. The U.S., Russia, and China, which had several meetings, ultimately didn't have much influence either.

At that time there was still a possibility of some cooperation on Afghanistan with both China and Russia. Since then, there's been a steep deterioration in our bilateral relations with both of those countries, so that you can't think about this. As far as I know, there are no bilateral conversations between the U.S. and Russia or China about Afghanistan. We had this meeting a couple of weeks ago in Washington and the Chinese attempted to see if we could get some communication going, but I don't know if it succeeded. That was what we were doing.

Q: I know you were trying to get people to sit down. Was there any further visualization of what a reconciliation process would look like?

RUBIN: There were various concrete results. One of them was, in the spring of 2016, I can't be sure, I was in Beijing for two meetings, U.S., China, Pakistan and U.S., China, Afghanistan. From the beginning of the meeting with China, I insisted that we get somebody from the Chinese military.

There was a major general there who was from their National Defense University, whatever it's called, the same name as ours. He said in the meeting, and already we had agreed, and to some extent this may have come out of our dialogue, U.S. and China had started cooperating on training programs for Afghans, in diplomacy and healthcare workers. And they did the diplomacy ultimately. He said the U.S. and China should work together to build up the Afghan national security forces. I was quite startled to hear that. In the break, I went over to him and said, "Did I hear you correctly? Did you say the U.S. and China should work together training national security forces?" And he said yes.

Then I went back and had some discussions with people, and I went back to China for another meeting. And he said and I, and Vikram Singh were in the bathroom, and this general, Zhu Chenghu, said, "We got to get this going." We came up with this idea that what the Afghan army needed a great deal were helicopters. Particularly the Afghans had been trained on Soviet and then Russian MI-17 helicopters, for decades. I once almost rode in one, piloted by an Afghan.

It turned out China had hundreds of those old helicopters lying around. So I came up with a proposal that China could donate them or sell them at a nominal price to Afghanistan and help, together with the United States, to refurbish them. I presented this at a meeting with one of my Chinese colleagues from CIIS at the National Defense University in Washington.

Q: The National Defense University.

RUBIN: Yes, National Defense University, NDU. And they brought in somebody from PACOM, as it was then called, as well, to discuss it.

Later, I was in Beijing for some other reason. This was when President Carter's chief of staff, who became a climate envoy under Obama, John Podesta. He was there and one of his team was somebody I knew well, and we had dinner. He said they had taken this to DOD and the DOD lawyers said it's completely impossible. We have sanctions on China. We have rules against co-locating with them. We even built the Pakistanis a new military base for us to use in Pakistan because the Chinese were at the other one, so it's just completely impossible.

What we ended up doing was buying American helicopters for the Afghans, which were in fact much better helicopters. But the Afghans did not know how to use them. So they loaned American consultants to keep them running, so as soon as the American consultants left they became useless. That was part of the collapse. Nothing came out of that either. Also, that was part of the general skepticism about U.S. policy toward Afghanistan after the assassination of Mansour.

Q: In the meantime, in Afghanistan, a government was formed that was supposed to be a fusion between Ghani and Abdullah, and that never really worked very well.

RUBIN: No.

Q: Did you see that as something that was a useful thing in terms of thinking about bringing the Taliban in?

RUBIN: No. Only bring the Afghans in.

First of all, as I mentioned earlier, my personal relations with Ghani had disintegrated. I saw him once in the fall of 2018. I attended the Herat Security Conference in Herat. At the end of it we flew back to Kabul on a charter plane, and they took the foreigners who were there, the Americans who were there, to meet for dinner at the palace. We had dinner with Ghani. I asked him a question and said, "What are you going to do when the U.S. pulls out, because Trump wants to pull out and you're not self-sufficient." He said, "The foundation of our foreign policy is cooperation with the international community." That's what he said.

After that the U.S. Institute of Peace formed a group to advise Zal. There were some people in favor of my joining it and some people against my being invited to join because of my track record. But Zal put his thumb on the scales and said I should be there. Besides everything else, I was known as a very partisan Democrat.

In the course of that, I wrote stuff about what a framework for what a settlement might be. I went to Doha for the signing of the Agreement. I met once or twice with the Taliban delegation in Doha, just talked to them a little bit, nothing serious. But I didn't really have an ongoing mission.

Q: Did your framework that you drafted have any relation to the outcome of the Agreement?

RUBIN: No, none whatsoever. They never even got to discussing a framework for negotiating a government. Basically, the narrative was Zal said there were four elements in the Agreement:, counter-terrorism, withdrawal of U.S. troops, negotiating a new government, and a comprehensive ceasefire. Zal announced that nothing is settled until everything is settled.

In fact, that was not the case because the basic design was troop withdrawal for counterterrorism, which we didn't get anyway. The only way it could have worked better would be if Trump or whoever the president was had been equally committed to all four elements and it said, "Nothing is settled until everything is settled," so we're not pulling out the troops until there's an agreement. In fact, Trump wasn't interested. Biden wasn't interested.

Q: And, the negotiator for the Taliban was Baradar?

RUBIN: For most of the time, it was Muhammed Abbas Stanikzai. Then Zal got Mullah Baradar released from prison in Pakistan, and then he came to Doha and he was the leader. Then just then the Taliban leader Haibatullah sent a very close associate of his, Abdul Hakim Haqqani Ishaqzai, who was not a member of the Haqqani family, to Doha

to oversee the negotiations. That guy is the chief justice of the Supreme Court in Afghanistan now.

Q: You were involved in advising for the framework.

RUBIN: I just went to a lot of meetings and discussed with other people. It wasn't really operational.

Q: Do you want to talk about the Trump administration anymore?

RUBIN: One interesting sideline, in 2018, I went to Kabul. I don't remember why. I think I was invited for a meeting. And I had a meeting with Salahuddin Rabbani, who was the chairman of the High Peace Council and Massoum Stanekzai who was the CEO of the High Peace Council. We discussed various things and ideas of what we might do. Then from there, I went to Doha, and I talked to Sultan Barakat, an academic who was advising the Qatari government in Doha, and maybe I had one meeting with the Taliban negotiating team, I'm not sure, and I met with the Qataris.

A rumor immediately started in the Afghan media that I had gone to Doha with a secret message from the Afghan High Peace Council, to the Taliban. There was no such message. It was in the media. It was a rumor.

Q: On the draft framework that you proposed on paper, do you remember any of the elements?

RUBIN: It wasn't a draft framework for the whole agreement. For instance, I had done a lot of work on the Constitution. I did a comparison of the Islamic Republic's Constitution and the draft Constitution that the Taliban had published many years ago, and tried to argue where there were possibly some points of conversion and where points of difference were. It was more like setting up a framework for negotiations rather than setting up a framework for an outcome.

Q: The U.S.-Taliban Agreement was almost signed, then it was put on hold in 2019, and then it was finally signed in 2020?

RUBIN: It was February 29, 2020.

Q: Then there were elements involved, prisoner exchange, which were hard for the Afghan government?

RUBIN: Yes. First there was the exchange with Bergdahl, for which the U.S. released prisoners from Guantanamo. That wasn't really negotiated as part of the Doha agreement. That was under Obama. I had nothing to do with that negotiation.

Then one of the Taliban demands was that five thousand, ten thousand Taliban prisoners of the Afghan government should be released. But of course, the Taliban acted as if the U.S. was in control of everything and the U.S. could release them. From the U.S. point of view, there were prisoners in the Afghan government. We had gone through an elaborate procedure of handing over custody of prisoners from the U.S. to the Afghan government.

But the U.S. managed to put enough pressure on the Afghan government, so many of them were in fact released. Again, I had nothing to do with any of that.

Q: Were you working on Afghanistan when the Biden administration came in?

RUBIN: I had been working on it just as an individual researcher, but I didn't have an ongoing project. In January 2021, I wrote an article. The date for the implementation of the Doha Agreement was within sixty days of the first anniversary of its signing, or after that, May 29, 2021. I wrote an article in January, which was published in the Responsible Statecraft Newsletter of the Quincy Institute, saying what Biden should do about Afghanistan in his first hundred days. A hundred days coincided with the period of when the Agreement was supposed to be implemented.

What I said is, the problem is while we can agree to withdraw the troops, there's no political agreement in place. I said what we should do is get out of the U.S.-Taliban bilateral framework and regionalize it. We should regionalize diplomacy—it turned out most of the regional countries did not want the United States to leave then—and try to reach an agreement with Russia, China, Pakistan, and India, to ask the Taliban to postpone the deadline. I thought if the United States asked alone that it wouldn't fly. All of those countries, though, it might be effective.

Of course, it was very much a long shot. I'm not saying that if only they had done as I said, everything would have worked out wonderfully. That would be ridiculous. In practice, I exchanged a few sentences in email over it with Jake Sullivan. He asked me, what happens after the six-month extension if there's no agreement. I said, then you withdraw anyway, but we have more time to prepare. I said six months would give us more time to get prepared, because we're not prepared for the withdrawal. Biden was clearly not interested in doing it. I don't know what Jake did, what was said, but working for Biden, he couldn't do anything.

Q: Did you have a sense of what the consequences would be to have the troop withdrawal without a government agreement?

RUBIN: This is the biggest mistake I made. I was thinking along the lines of what happened to Najibullah when the Soviet troops pulled out, which was that he survived for another three years because he was getting financial and military supply support. I thought this government the U.S. had supported would be able to do the same thing. It never occurred to me it would just collapse like this when the troops left.

There are many things. One was the perception the U.S. had withdrawn its political support from the Afghan government. Second, the fact with the helicopters. We had built an Afghan military that was extremely dependent on U.S. technical expertise. So irrespective of whether they wanted to fight, they didn't get intelligence, they didn't get maintenance, all kinds of things, when the U.S. pulled out, so they were unable to fight anymore.

Q: There are people that say this was totally predictable, but many with whom I have spoken really thought that the government could last at least past the withdrawal day.

RUBIN: I think most of us thought that. Some people didn't. We all knew that if the aid were to stop the government would collapse very quickly. But we thought if the aid continued—we didn't appreciate the importance of the military advisors and the contractors' role.

Q: And the air wing getting supplies to the soldiers.

RUBIN: There was also a difference between President Najibullah and President Ghani.

Q: Since the Taliban was getting what it wanted by getting the U.S. military to leave, why didn't they just give us some breathing space? I didn't understand, as an outside observer, why did the Taliban step up all the fighting? Why didn't they just wait until the U.S. withdrawal happened?

RUBIN: In fact, they did not step up all the fighting. There was some fighting, but they were capturing territory largely with very little fighting. For instance, they didn't fight to get into Kabul. They were just telling people, you see the United States is leaving. They're not supporting the government anymore. Why would you want to fight with them? Come join us and we'll guarantee we won't take revenge against you. A lot of people joined and stopped fighting on that basis. Plus, because of the corruption of the organization of the Afghan armed forces, many of them were not getting food or paid.

Q: Where were you on August 15, 2021?

RUBIN: I was at home preparing to go to a wedding of one of my coworkers who was a Jew from Poland, and he was going to be married by the chief rabbi of Poland. But when this happened, I couldn't go to the wedding. I was on the phone talking to people trying to start arranging evacuations.

Q: Helping people get out.

RUBIN: Yes.

Q: Did you work on that for a while?

RUBIN: Yes. One or two people I helped to get out.

Q: These days, are you still involved with Afghanistan?

RUBIN: I am. I'm advising the Women's Forum in Afghanistan and I'm working for the Stimson Center on a dialogue with China. And from time to time, people come to me and ask me to do things, which I'm rather careful about at this point. But I'll see.

Q: It seems like you really believed in the reconciliation process. You put everything you had into it.

RUBIN: Yes. What I really believed was that there was no alternative to it. I don't think the reconciliation process caused the collapse. I think the collapse was going to happen sooner or later anyway. I was hoping that what might stall it or mitigate it would be the reconciliation process, but it did not.

Q: I don't think we've talked too much about Pakistan. The Pakistanis actually helped form the Taliban.

RUBIN: I did work with them. I believed very strongly that we had to get pressure on Pakistan or influence Pakistan. I went to Pakistan quite a lot and I had dialogue with Pakistani think tanks. In 2012, I had a series of meetings with the director of analysis at the ISI, trying to understand what Pakistan's motivations for doing these things in Afghanistan.

I didn't believe that the United States could threaten Pakistan into not doing it or coerce them into not doing it. We needed an understanding of why they were doing it so see if we could meet some of their needs without giving in.

I was involved in the U.S.-Pakistan strategic dialogue. That was a major dimension of what I was doing. I don't really talk about it very much. I had lots of friends and enemies in Pakistan, too.

Q: From all the conversations I've had, it seems that it was never in the cards that the Pakistanis were not going to support the Taliban in some form.

RUBIN: The thing is, the Taliban grew out of the Pakistan military's strategic outlook, which is that the big threat is India. They were worried about being encircled by pro-Indian countries. In 1971 and 1972, India invaded Pakistan and made half of it independent in conjunction with a Pakistani separatist movement. Their nightmare was that India would do it again from Afghanistan, and the U.S. was much more aligned with India and Afghanistan.

The number one priority of Pakistan was to get India out of Afghanistan. The United States was never quite clear on that. We would talk about how we had to do things to change Pakistan's strategic orientation. But in fact it's not possible to change a nuclear power's strategic orientation by yelling at them or putting a few sanctions on them, or threatening them.

Q: As far as what is happening inside Afghanistan now, do you subscribe to the fact that the Taliban also is too diverse and too decentralized to control what different parts of it do or if things coalesced more than they did in the early days?

RUBIN: On the contrary. The Taliban are the most effectively centralized organization in Afghanistan. That doesn't mean that they're not diverse and don't have disagreements. They do. They had some prominent ones just in the past week where some of the top leaders were summoned to Kandahar and the leader tried to put discipline on them. The fact is it ended up with them affirming their support for their leader. Because the Taliban is the only political organization in Afghanistan where the members have a religious obligation to obey the leader and that really means something. It's on the basis of religious obligation that people become suicide bombers. Think about that. They take it quite seriously.

They have a system set up of centralized authoritarian control, which has been quite effective. And they have before their eyes in their observation of what has happened to other Afghans. What are the consequences of relaxing that control?

Q: I want to thank you for this informative history that you provided us. I think it's going to be very useful. Do you want to give any reflections on the overall U.S. policy, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan?

RUBIN: In 2001, from my time at the Council on Foreign Relations or even earlier, I had been a strong believer in UN conflict resolution and UN peacebuilding. I had some colleagues, especially from Africa, who were very skeptical about it, and said it doesn't really work the way you say. I tried to convince them otherwise.

But after seeing it myself, I have to admit that they were largely right. I would be very hesitant, I would not ever recommend that the United States should intervene with another country militarily and try to rebuild its political and social systems. We did not have that capacity or that knowledge. It's better to try to work with the existing political forces, however obnoxious you may find them, because the danger is too great of things collapsing or of creating a kind of dream palace, as we did, where our money supported all kinds of things and gave people lots of hopes and career paths that turned out not to be sustainable. Now there are a lot of people who don't know what to do with their lives or are afraid.

End of interview