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CONFIDENTIAL PTO3226

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PAGE 01 STATE 177309 250013Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 177309 TOSEC 310107

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FOLLOWING ISLAMABAD 7186 DTD 24 SEP 98, SENT ACTION
SECSTATE, INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK, ASHGABAT,
TASHKENT, PESHAWAR, ALMATY, BISHKEK, ANKARA, NEW
DELHI, LONDON, PARIS, ROME, MOSCOW, BEIJING, ABU
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QUOTE:

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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 STATE 177309 250013Z
TAGS: PGOV, KISL, PTER, PREL, AF, IR
SUBJ: AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN CONVENE ULEMA, IRAN AND BIN LADIN ON
THE AGENDA

- REFS: A) FBIS RESTON 221643Z SEPT 98
- B) FBIS RESTON 230837Z SEPT 98
- C) FBIS RESTON 221043Z SEPT 98

1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY JOHN R. SCHMIDT, POLITICAL COUNSELOR.

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: SHARON E AHMAD
DATE/CASE ID: 25 JUN 2003 200104094

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Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
Current Handling: n/a
Document Number: 1998STATE177309

Page: 2
Channel: n/a

Case Number: 200104094

REASON: 1.5 (D).

2. (U) THIS MESSAGE WAS COORDINATED WITH CONSULATE PESHAWAR.

SUMMARY

3. (U) IN KABUL, THE TALIBAN HAVE CONVENED SOME 1,500 ULEMA (ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS) FROM ALL OVER AFGHANISTAN. OFFICIAL TALIBAN SOURCES SAY THE ULEMA ARE DISCUSSING AFGHANISTAN'S RESPONSE TO THE THREAT OF ATTACK FROM IRAN. USAMA BIN LADIN'S PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN -- AN ISSUE OVER WHICH THE TALIBAN LEADERSHIP APPEARS TO BE SPLIT -- WILL ALSO PROBABLY FIGURE IN THE DISCUSSION. THE CONVENTION APPEARS TO BE AN ATTEMPT TO ORCHESTRATE A SHOW OF NATIONWIDE ALLEGIANCE TO THE TALIBAN IN GENERAL, AND TO THEIR PARAMOUNT LEADER, MULLAH OMAR, IN PARTICULAR. END SUMMARY.

4. (SBU) PRESS REPORTS, CONVERSATIONS WITH PESHAWAR-BASED AFGHAN JOURNALISTS, AND FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS FROM [REDACTED] SUGGEST THAT SOME 1,500 ULEMA FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, INCLUDING A SIZEABLE CONTINGENT FROM THE NORTH -- MAZAR, BADAKSHAN, TAKHAR,
CONFIDENTIAL

B6

PAGE 03 STATE 177309 250013Z
FARYAB, ETC., ARE ATTENDING. A FEW OF THE ULEMA MAY BE HAZARAS (AND, PRESUMABLY, SHI'AS), ACCORDING TO POLOFF'S SEPTEMBER 22 PHONE CONVERSATION WITH [REDACTED] MULLAH MOHAMMAD RABBANI, CHAIRMAN OF THE TALIBAN'S INTERIM SHURA, EXTENDED THE INVITATIONS. THE ULEMA REPORTEDLY MET SEPT 21 AND 22 AND WERE PLANNING TO MEET ONE MORE DAY, SEPT 23, AT AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION IN KABUL -- THEY WORRY ABOUT COMMANDER AHMAD SHAH MASOOD, WHOSE FORCES ARE DEPLOYED WITHIN ROCKET RANGE OF KABUL, ATTACKING THEIR MEETING PLACE.

AN AGENDA OF LOADED QUESTIONS

5. (SBU) [REDACTED] TOLD PESHAWAR PO SEPTEMBER 24 THAT, ACCORDING TO THE TALIBAN'S "RADIO SHARIAT" THE PREVIOUS EVENING, THE ULEMA HAD CONVENED TO ANSWER FIVE QUESTIONS:

B6

- IF IRAN ATTACKS AFGHANISTAN, SHOULD AFGHANS RESPOND WITH A JEHAD, OR MERELY BY "JUST FIGHTING"?
- IF IRAN ATTACKS, WAS THE DEFENSE OF AFGHANISTAN THE DUTY ONLY OF THE TALIBAN, OR OF THE WHOLE AFGHAN PEOPLE?
- IF WAR BREAKS OUT AND AFGHANISTAN IS LOSING TO IRAN, SHOULD IT SEEK HELP FROM "OTHER COUNTRIES"? ISLAMIC ONES OR NON-ISLAMIC ONES?

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL

Page: 2

DECONTROLLED/UNCLASSIFIED

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
Current Handling: n/a
Document Number: 1998STATE177309

Page: 3

Channel: n/a

Case Number: 200104094

-- IF WAR BREAKS OUT AND AFGHANISTAN IS WINNING, WOULD IT BE
RIGHT TO TAKE THE WAR INTO IRAN? IF SO, HOW FAR?

-- (IN A DIVERSION FROM THE THEME OF WAR WITH IRAN) SOME IN THE
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 STATE 177309 250013Z
OUTSIDE WORLD ARE SAYING THAT THE TALIBAN ARE NOT AN ISLAMIC
MOVEMENT. ARE THEY?

AN ANTI-IRAN, ANTI-SHI'A HATE-FEST?

6. (U) IN A MEETING WITH PAO AND PESHAWAR PO, SAID ISHAQ GAILANI,
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND NATIONAL UNITY IN
AFGHANISTAN (AN ORGANIZATION OF INDEPENDENT AFGHANS LOBBYING FOR A
PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT OF THE AFGHAN CONFLICT), SPOKE WITH MUCH
APPREHENSION ABOUT THE ULEMA CONFERENCE. HE BELIEVES THE TALIBAN

DECIDED TO SEEK THE ULEMA'S ADVICE (OR RUBBER STAMP) ON APPROPRIATE
ACTION BECAUSE THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE THREATS FROM IRAN. IN
CONTRAST TO OTHER REPORTS, HE ESTIMATED 5,000 ULEMA HAD BEEN
CONVOKED. HE FEARED THEY WOULD ISSUE SOME FATWA AGAINST SHI'AS AND
IRAN, AND POSSIBLY SUGGEST A MILITARY PACT WITH PAKISTAN, OR EVEN
CONFEDERATION WITH PAKISTAN.

7. (C) OUR AFGHAN JOURNALIST CONTACTS ARE LESS ALARMIST ABOUT THE
PURPOSES OF THE MEETING. THEY SUGGEST THAT THE MAIN REASON FOR
CONVENING THE ULEMA WAS TO SEEK A PUBLIC SHOW OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE
TALIBAN IN GENERAL AND TO MULLAH OMAR IN PARTICULAR. FOR THIS
PURPOSE, THE PARTICIPATION OF ULEMA FROM THE NORTH WAS ESPECIALLY
IMPORTANT.

BIN LADIN PROBABLY WILL BE DISCUSSED

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 05 STATE 177309 250013Z
8. (C) THE OTHER REASON FOR GATHERING SO MANY ULEMA TOGETHER WAS TO
GIVE ADVICE, PERHAPS A FATWA, TO MULLAH OMAR ON SEVERAL SUBJECTS,
WITH (AS THE RADIO SHARIAT ANNOUNCEMENT MAKES CLEAR) IRAN AT THE
TOP OF THE LIST. SOME HAVE SPECULATED THAT THEY WOULD ALSO DISCUSS
WHAT TO DO WITH USAMA BIN LADIN. [REDACTED] OFTEN A
WELL-INFORMED CONTACT, SUGGESTS THAT MULLAH OMAR "AUTHORIZED" THE
ULEMA TO "MAKE A FINAL DECISION" ON BIN LADIN'S PRESENCE IN
AFGHANISTAN (REF B). [REDACTED]

B1

[REDACTED] (PROTECT) DOUBTS THE ULEMA WOULD DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL

Page: 3

DECONTROLLED/UNCLASSIFIED

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
Current Handling: n/a
Document Number: 1998STATE177309

Page: 4

Channel: n/a

Case Number: 200104094

REITERATE WHAT MULLAH OMAR HAS ALREADY SAID ON THE SUBJECT, I.E., THAT BIN LADIN IS THEIR GUEST, HAS NOT BEEN PROVED TO BE INVOLVED IN ANY BOMBINGS, AND WILL BE PERMITTED TO STAY IN AFGHANISTAN, BUT WITH HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES CURTAILED.

9. (C) THE TALIBAN HAVE APPARENTLY PLANNED SELECTIVE INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY FOR THE GATHERING. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED]

B1

[REDACTED] THE AFGHAN CONSULATE IN PESHAWAR HAS BEEN AUTHORIZED TO ISSUE SEVEN-DAY, ONE-ENTRY VISAS TO KABUL ONLY FOR SELECTED WESTERN JOURNALISTS.

10. (C) MOST AFGHAN INTERLOCUTORS IN PESHAWAR AGREE THAT THE ULEMA INVITED TO KABUL HAVE ALL BEEN HANDPICKED BY THE TALIBAN. [REDACTED]

B1

[REDACTED] DID NOT EVEN WISH TO CHARACTERIZE THEM AS ULEMA, SUGGESTING THEY WERE DRAWN MOSTLY FROM THE LEAST EDUCATED OF THE AFGHAN ULEMA. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] NOTED THAT MANY OF THE MORE EDUCATED AFGHAN ULEMA RESIDE IN PAKISTAN AND IRAN AND ARE NOT ATTENDING THIS MEETING, NOR ARE ULEMA KNOWN TO OPPOSE THE TALIBAN IN ATTENDANCE.

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 06 STATE 177309 250013Z

TALIBAN DIVIDED OVER BIN LADIN?

11. (C) [REDACTED] ACCORDING TO HIS SOURCES, SAID FOUR ISSUES WOULD BE DISCUSSED: IRAN, BIN LADIN, RELATIONSHIPS WITH UN AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, AND HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS ON WHICH THE TALIBAN HAVE BEEN SO HEAVILY CRITICIZED ABROAD (WOMEN'S HEALTH, GIRLS' EDUCATION, AND ALLEGATIONS OF MASS KILLINGS IN THE NORTH, PERHAPS). ON IRAN, HE SPECULATED THE GROUP MAY TAKE A TOUGH LINE. ON BIN LADIN, HE THOUGHT THE TALIBAN WERE DIVIDED INTO TWO GROUPS. MULLAH MOHAMMAD RABBANI, THE CONVENER OF THIS MEETING, IS KNOWN TO OPPOSE BIN LADIN'S PRESENCE INSIDE AFGHANISTAN AND TO ARGUE THAT, IF BIN LADIN REMAINS IN AFGHANISTAN, HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES MUST BE STRICTLY CONTROLLED. MULLAH OMAR HEADS THE OTHER CAMP WISHING TO KEEP BIN LADIN IN AFGHANISTAN. [REDACTED] SPECULATED THAT THE ULEMA MEETING WILL DECIDE THAT BIN LADIN MAY STAY IN AFGHANISTAN BUT HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES, ESPECIALLY THOSE DIRECTED AGAINST THIRD COUNTRIES, MUST BE STRICTLY CONTROLLED.

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12. (C) FINALLY, [REDACTED]

B1

[REDACTED] SAID HE EXPECTS THE GROUP TO ISSUE A FATWA ON

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL

Page: 4

DECONTROLLED/UNCLASSIFIED

DECONTROLLED/UNCLASSIFIED

Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
Current Handling: n/a
Document Number: 1998STATE177309

Page: 5

Channel: n/a

Case Number: 200104094

IRAN, JUSTIFYING WAR AGAINST IRAN IF IRAN INVADES AFGHANISTAN.

COMMENT

13. (C) THIS ULEMA MEETING COULD PROVE QUITE SIGNIFICANT. THE LAST TIME THE TALIBAN CONVENED SUCH A LARGE GATHERING OF ULEMA, IN
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 07 STATE 177309 250013Z
KANDAHAR IN 1996, THEY ANOINTED MULLAH OMAR "AMIR UL-MOMININ" ("EMIR OF THE FAITHFUL"). IT APPEARS TO BE AN ATTEMPT AT LEGITIMIZING TALIBAN RULE IN THE NORTH OF AFGHANISTAN AS WELL AS A MEANS OF GAINING APPROVAL FOR A COURSE OF ACTION VIS-A-VIS IRAN AND, POSSIBLY, BIN LADIN. WITH POTENTIAL TROUBLEMAKERS ALMOST CERTAINLY SCREENED OUT BY THE TALIBAN AND (IF RADIO SHARIAT IS TO BE BELIEVED) AN OFFICIAL AGENDA OF LAUGHABLY LOADED QUESTIONS, WE DO NOT EXPECT TO SEE A FREE-WHEELING DEBATE HERE, MUCH LESS ANY DECISIONS THAT RUN COUNTER TO MULLAH OMAR'S PRONOUNCED VIEWS.

14. (C) COMMENT, CONTINUED: FROM TIME TO TIME, RUMORS SURFACE THAT MULLAH MOHAMMAD RABBANI HOLDS DIFFERENT, MORE PRAGMATIC, VIEWS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS COMPARED TO MULLAH OMAR'S. IF HIS ROLE IS ANYTHING MORE THAN JUST TITULAR CONVENER OF THE MEETING, THERE MAY BE MORE GOING ON IN THE MEETING THAN IMMEDIATELY VISIBLE.

MILAM UNQUOTE TALBOTT

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Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL

Page: 5

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