Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, I think we can begin. On behalf of Chatham House, it gives me great pleasure to welcome Dr Amin Saikal from the Australian National University. Dr Saikal and I share one thing in common: that at the time of the fall of the Shah we got our books out with contradictory consequences in all cases. He’s written a book on the rise and fall of the Shah. One book on Afghanistan has already been published and a second book on the Soviet withdrawal which he’s edited and introduced is in the press with Cambridge University Press. He’s well known to members of Chatham House as a frequent contributor to “The World Today.” He’s travelled widely. He’s taught and studied extensively in the United States and his talk today will be on the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Dr Saikal.

Speaker: Thank you very much. One of the problem that I’m facing at the moment is the way the situation with regard to Afghanistan has been changing so rapidly. I had prepared a text in Canberra before I left for England and that was three weeks ago and to my total dismay I found that, perhaps to the pleasure of the Afghans, I found yesterday that that piece was dated, so that forced me to sit up last night and jot down a few points. I hope I’m going to make some sense today.

But let me start off the talk with a couple of jokes quite appropriate and to the Afghan culture – because Afghans love to laugh away things from time to time – and perhaps that’s how they have been quite successful in handling the Soviets and their protégé regime in Afghanistan. One joke was very popular among the
Afghans about three or four years ago and it concerned conversation between two Soviet soldiers, one asking the other “What are we in Afghanistan for?” And the reply was, “We’re still looking for the people who invited us” (laughter). And the second joke which a friend of mine told me in Lyon just a few days ago was that – this also concerned a conversation between two Soviet officers and one says to the other, “What have we achieved in Afghanistan?” And the reply was, “Well, the people who had invited us, we couldn’t unite them and the people who hadn’t invited us, we thought perhaps they might be a better alternative and we started negotiating with them.” Just that really sums up the Soviet position.

This week’s direct talks in Tbil, Saudi Arabia, between the Soviet government and the Afghanistan resistance forces – the Mujahedin – marks the start of perhaps the most crucial phase in a nine year-old bloody conflict in Afghanistan. The talks happened against the backdrop of not only the Soviet commitment under the Afghan-Geneva Accords of 14th April 1988 to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by 15th February 1989, but also several other major developments – the most important of these developments are the growing serious nationality unrests in the Soviet Union; the continued weakening of the Soviet protegé government of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, or PDPA as it’s known; and the documented [unclear 03.50] Kabul; and particularly during the course of the Soviet withdrawal since mid-May this year, the recent coming to power of the somewhat centre-left – and I call it centre-left because perhaps a few years ago you could have referred it as simply centre-left – Pakistan People’s Party – PPP under Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan; the ceasefire in Iran-Iraq war; the marked improvement of Soviet international relations, especially with the West and China; and Mikhail Gorbachev’s apparent resolute desire to capitalise on foreign policy issues and achievements to support his domestic reforms in the face of formidable odds. When considered in the context of these developments, Moscow’s long-awaited direct talks with the Mujahedin provide some scope for optimism about not only the completion of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan by mid-February but also a more constructive role by Moscow in pursuit of settlement of the Afghan problem.

However, this is not to say that a viable settlement of the problem which could bring peace and stability in Afghanistan is either at hand or achievable in the near future. In fact, even if the Soviets do meet the mid-February deadline of troop withdrawal, a viable settlement of the Afghanistan problem may be a long way off. This is because of a number of factors. First of all there’s still a wide gap between the Mujahedin and the Soviets in what in their views can constitute a viable
settlement. Of course from the Mujahedin’s perspective, the Soviet decision to negotiate with them directly – something which they had demanded all along – amounts to a Soviet public acknowledgment of their ideological and practical triumph against Communist forces at the cost of undermining further the credibility of the debilitated and beleaguered a PDPA government in Kabul. It provides them with added psychological boost not only to shy away from any compromise which could either prolong the life of the PDPA regime more than absolutely necessary, or allow some of the PDPA leadership elements to have positions of influence in any post-Soviet withdrawal Afghan government. It also make the Mujahedin to make sensibly so a number of wider demands which have not been effectively tabled hitherto. These demands most importantly include war reparations; dismantling of also the military bases; withdrawal of non-combat Soviet personnel in whatever capacity; abrogation of at least all Afghan-Soviet treaties signed agreeing that PDPA rule; a clearance of thousands of mines laid by the Soviets throughout Afghanistan; and return of hundreds of young Afghans who are being trained in the USSR as the future PDPA cadres. In return, the only undertaking that the current Pakistan-based Mujahedin leadership can give to the Soviets is a guarantee or rather to guarantee the future of Afghanistan as an Islamic but neutral and non-aligned state in world politics without any overt hostility towards the Soviet Union. As for the future of Afghan-Soviet relationship, that would have to be determined by the post-Soviet withdrawal non-Communist government of Afghanistan. It is precisely within the parameters of such an approach and set of demands that the Mujahedin leadership has attended the Taif talks and they are most likely to insist on this path in the future round of negotiations.

On the other hand, the Soviets have neither preaced the direct talks with a statement of objectives, nor have they made it clear since the talks what is that they precisely want to achieve. It appears that they have approached the talks in the form of what has become familiar as Gorbachevian mind and heart probe to test the water before making a major policy decision. So, in other words the Soviets have really entered these direct negotiations without really a clear position and this probe, Moscow seems to want to accomplish four things, with a sharp eye on the recent changes in regional and international political environment. The first is to make a direct assessment of the political unity and capacity of the Mujahedin leadership as an alternative to that of the PDPA. The second is to see whether the Gorbachev Kremlin could live with such an alternative should it become necessary. The third is to examine the possibility of a deal with the Mujahedin leadership whereby the Soviets could complete their troop withdrawal by 15th February without losing too much face as well as influence in Afghan
politics in the long run. The fourth is to see what benefits it could reap from possible outcome of these talks for Soviet Union’s international relations and assistance particularly with Saudi Arabia with which the USSR has had no diplomatic relations. It will be on these bases that Gorbachev would probably make a final decision. This decision could result either in ditching Najibullah and his government in favour of the inclusion of some Soviet sympathisers – and that is Afghan sympathisers – and second their positions under the rubric of good Muslims and a Mujahedin-led government, or in a continuation of current Soviet policy to support the PDPA and to do everything possible to exacerbate divisions within the heterogeneous resistance in pursuit of a favourable compromise on the part of the Mujahedin. Consequently, the final outcome of the Taj talks in Saudi Arabia will depend on Gorbachev’s assessment of the Mujahedin leadership, the Soviet domestic considerations; and the Soviet foreign policy interests.

This leads me to the second factor which could prevent a viable settlement from materialising in the near future. That factor stems from the fragility of the Mujahedin unity which essentially arises from heterogeneous nature of the Afghan society. Although the Pakistan-based Mujahedin leaders have recently – have exhibited a marked degree of corporation and unity and have been able to present a fairly coherent – at least so far – position at Taj talks and that their current spokesman, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of the largest Mujahedin group – the Islamic Society of Afghanistan – this cannot disguise the fact that serious divisions still exist among the Mujahedin. There is no concrete consensus among them over their approach either to dealings with Moscow beyond securing the immediate and total retreat of Soviets from Afghanistan and the fall of the PDPA government in Kabul, or to form – or to the form that the future Afghan government should take and beyond what they have called a representative Islamic government and to the method by which such a government can be achieved. Indeed, there are at least a dozen Mujahedin groups. Several of them, however, would really matter in a settlement of the Afghanistan problem, namely the major groups with Pakistan-based leaderships. These groups, which vary in size and strength, range in their political ideological disposition from Islamic radicals to pragmatic Islamists, to Islamic nationalists. The groups in the first two categories which comprise the three largest ones and the small one want a strong Islamic government, though in various degrees and forms. The remaining groups desire an Islamic nationalist but Western-type democratic government and support in various measures the return from exile in Rome of the former Afghan king, Zahir Shah, to head such a government as the only figure capable of creating national unity.
Furthermore, there are several Mujahedin field commanders who are in one form or another associated with one of these groups but have their own regional power bases inside Afghanistan with capabilities to play independent roles in a settlement. There are also certain radical Mujahedin leaders who have in the past exhibited considerable personal power ambitions, although since the death of Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq in mid-August, who favoured such leaders over the others for reasons of his own self-interest, the position of these leaders have become marginalised to some extent, enabling the mainstream Mujahedin leaders to take the central stage lately. Indeed, the Soviets and the PDPA have had pinned considerable hope on this underlying diversity of the Mujahedin to materialise their process of national reconciliation as a way to retain a leading role for the PDPA in Afghan politics beyond the withdrawal of Soviet troops. No doubt these Soviet-PDPA hopes have so far been dashed in the face of greater cooperation between the Mujahedin field commanders and their Pakistan-based leadership – leaders than reported – than have been reported in the outside world.

This, however, does not mean that the differences between the Mujahedin leaders will not come to the fore either during the current direct talks with the Soviets or after the Soviet should pull out. These differences which could be fuelled most – for by those radical elements who feel marginalised surface in the course of the next round of the Paris talks, they could persuade the Kremlin to press on with its present policy of reliance on the PDPA as the only means for retaining some degree of Soviet influence in Afghan politics in the long run. If they surface in the aftermath of Soviet troop withdrawal, as many serious analysts of Afghan politics predict that they would, the chances of instituting a process of self-determination and stabilising the situation in Afghanistan would be in peril for some time to come. This process is very difficult to achieve – and that is the process of self-determination – is very difficult to achieve even under normal circumstances, let alone under the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan. The biggest long-term damage that the Soviet aggression has done to Afghanistan has been the destruction of the traditional pattern power, authority and loyalty and forcing of a generation of Afghan who learn little more than the culture of war and the use of force as the prime means for self-assertion. This, together with the Soviet-PDPA...
The third factor that could change the direction of the Soviet-Mujahedin negotiations and affect adversely the future for Afghans concerns the current level of outside aid to the Mujahedin. So far this aid has not been central to the existence of the resistance but it has proved to be crucial to its successes. Without the supply of outside arms, particularly American stinger missiles since mid-1986 and Pakistan’s logistic support, the resistance would have not been able to turn Afghanistan into a bleeding wound for Mr Gorbachev, motivating him urgently to seek a way out of the problem. This aid is equally going to be important to the final outcome of both the direct Soviet-Mujahedin negotiations and the Afghan conflict as a whole, although thus far there has been no marked drop in the level of outside aid despite Pakistan’s signing of non-interference agreement with the PDPA regime. This has been largely because General Zia relied on the American declaration of symmetrical supply of arms by the Soviets to the PDPA and the United States to the Mujahedin at the time of the signing of the Geneva Accords and thus continued to transfer of arms to the resistance – an act which has continued to have considerable support among the current Pakistani military leadership. Benazir Bhutto has stated that her government will continue to honour its predecessor’s commitment in this respect.

This, however, does not mean that Miss Bhutto at that – at the same time will not remain open-minded about this given the ideological nature of her party, Pakistan’s pressing domestic problems and Gorbachev’s powerful method of winning the minds and hearts of particularly those who want to reach some realistic understanding with him. Although Miss Bhutto will find it expedient to listen seriously to her generals on this matter, at the same time she has made some apparent moves to neutralise the voices of some of the staunchest supporters of the Mujahedin among the Pakistan armed forces by retaining as foreign minister former army general, Jakub Khan, in his old capacity. One of the objectives may be to pitch Jakub Khan, who signed Geneva Accords on behalf of Pakistan and therefore take responsibility for implementation of the Accords, to pitch him against those military leaders who may seek to ignore Miss Bhutto’s wishes for a reduction in Pakistan support for either half or whole of the Afghan resistance when the right time comes for appeal with the Soviet Union over the settlement of the Afghan problem. In the event of the failure of the current Soviet-Mujahedin negotiations a reduction in outside aid to the Mujahedin as a result of this development could not only seriously undermine the position of the resistance but also cause re-alliances and greater conflict among different Mujahedin groups in bids for self-preservation. This could jeopardise the present relative unity, a
development which could in the short-term help the PDPA regime survive for longer than expected and in the long run, or medium to long run, obstruct a viable Mujahedin-led government from coming rapidly into existence.

In addition to these factors, it cannot be concluded with total certainty that in the event of Gorbachev deciding to dump the PDPA regime, the committed elements of that regime who number about 30,000 will not seek to obstruct any Soviet-Mujahedin deal for a cause of self-survival, despite the control that the Soviets claim to have over them. They could do so in the first instance by applying the massive destructive firepower which the Soviets have left at their disposal and they could do that with the aid of an air force which is fairly loyal to them and subsequently in the face of a defeat for the Mujahedin by forming their own – they could form their own guerrilla bands. This together with the potential for disunity among the Mujahedin groups could only prolong the agony and suffering of the Afghan people for many years to come. So in spite of the current Soviet-Mujahedin talks and of Gorbachev’s long desire to complete – strong desire to complete the Soviet troop withdrawal by middle of February next year, the future of Afghanistan seems to be in the balance. There is no certainty that peace and stability in the country will prevail in the near future. Neither the fall of the PDPA regime nor the subsequent establishment of a reasonably stable government to replace that of that of the PDPA and to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan rapidly will be any less traumatic than the bloody struggle by which the Mujahedin have finally prompted the Soviets to undertake a military retreat from Afghanistan. There is still considerable doubt about the future of Soviet behaviour towards Afghanistan; the unity of the Mujahedin; and extent of regional and international support particular from Pakistan for the Afghan resistance. Any of these influences could easily change the overall situation and let the Afghan conflict go on and change forms and with even greater suffering for Afghan people for months or years to come.

For the current Soviet-Mujahedin talks to succeed and for the Mujahedin to establish a viable government and post-Soviet withdrawal Afghanistan with a capability to attract the Afghan refugees to return and stabilise the domestic situation rapidly, several things must be achieved. First, the Mujahedin must continue to retain and strengthen their unity. They can do that either by bringing their radical elements into the mainstream or by marginalising them and this they could need – they would need the cooperation of the all those outside forces which have supported such elements. Meanwhile, the time is coming for the Mujahedin to unite politically under a single leadership – a leadership which could
articulate their demands and negotiate on their behalf with one voice and a necessary degree of tactical flexibility. Second, the international support for the Mujahedin must continue if not at a greater degree at least at its present level until they have succeeded in achieving their final goal of securing the unconditional and complete Soviet withdrawal and of removing the PDPA regime as a precondition to a process of self-determination for Afghan people. This should be accompanied with a more vigorous and wider campaign by the West led by the United States and regional actors led by Pakistan to encourage Mr Gorbachev that the best option is to support the formation of a broadly based non-aligned Mujahedin-led government in place of that – of the PDPA. They must also assure Mr Gorbachev that after the establishment of this government, the West and the regional actors would have no other interest in Afghanistan than to help the Afghan refugees to return to safety and the Afghan government to succeed in the monumental task of post-war reconstruction. Third, the Gorbachev leadership must accommodate the fact that its acceptance of a Mujahedin-led government as the best option will necessarily incur some costs but these costs will not be of the magnitude that the Soviet Union could not easily absorb. The Soviets will be required not only to disarm the PDPA but also to provide haven for its key elements. The move – the more slowed is the transfer of power to the Mujahedin-led government the more will be the prospects for a reasonable working relationship between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union in the future.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin must know that no post-PDPA government in Afghanistan will be in a position to pose a serious threat to Soviet national security. Such a government will not only be under as much geopolitical constrains which had prompted the pre-PDPA Afghan government to have good relations with Moscow, but also will be under additional pressures from post-war reconstruction and power consolidation. Should hostility breakout among the Mujahedin groups after the Soviet withdrawal and after they have taken over Kabul, then it will be the master concern of Afghans. At this point it’s too early to advance an analysis of what could precisely happen in Afghanistan once the Soviets have withdrawn and the Mujahedin have taken over, and of course it’s very difficult to predict anything in the Middle East and that reminds me of a joke about the – there’s a scorpion which wanted to cross the Suez Canal and since it couldn’t swim it looked at a frog and said, ”Can you give me a ride?” And the frog said, ”No, why should I? You’re going to sting me and then we’ll drown.” And the scorpion said, ”Why would I sting you? That’s just stupid – I would drown as well if I do that.” And the frog said, ”Well, that sounds very reasonable.” He said, ”All right, I’ll give you a ride.” They hop into the Suez Canal and the scorpion stung the frog and the frog
Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have half-an-hour for discussion. This is a discussion meeting but it is on-the-record. I would ask questioners to give their name and affiliation and to keep their interventions to the interrogative and the comment form as is usual. The floor is open.

Question and Answers

Participant: [Unclear 26.29].

Chair: Yes.

Participant: Could I ask a question? My name is Anthony Hyman and I'm a journalist. I was — actually I think we're all interested by your discussion and your analysis. I wanted to ask you really what your confidence is that this unity that you talked about can be preserved; whether it can be improved. You mentioned the meeting in Taif and you said that the leaders went there — rather — mainly, you mention Professor Rabbani — but the fact is that out of these seven parties who of course may be the main ones but not the only ones [unclear 27.00], only five approved of this meeting at all; two disapproved including, very intriguingly, Professor Zia who was entirely funded by the Saudis and I wondered what your opinion is about this degree of unity and how it can actually be improved; if it can be improved to ensure this basically [unclear 27.20] united government comes into being to replace this present one in Kabul, or rather to give a hope of peace and preserving order — whatever you may want to call a future for Afghanistan — instead of anarchy and civil war?

Speaker: I must say that I'm a little bit more optimistic about this unity now than I was before and although [unclear 27.48] may have disapproved of the Taif talks and although there may have been some grumbling on the part of some — of the other leaders, but I think the composition of the delegation reflected a marked degree of unity among the Mujahedin. My understanding is that now [Eunice Hollis? 28.14], who's the leader of the second Hezb' army in Afghanistan — understand the party] of Afghanistan and [Sayaf? 28.23] had given Professor Rabbani the authority to represent them at that meeting and they have edged more and more towards the Jamiat, Professor Rabbani's group in the last few months.
As for the three moderate groups which support the return of the former Afghan king as one of their objectives, was – were represented by Professor [Mujaddid? 28.57] in that meeting and as for perhaps what has become known as the most radical Mujahedin group, and that is the Hezb-i emami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, that one also had its representative in the meeting and [its president? 29.16] was [unclear 29.16] and as far as I’m aware, no major brawl, which has characterised the behaviour of the Mujahedin leadership for so many years, occurred during the talks and I think that is largely because that I feel particularly sense the death of General Zia[,] some of the most radical elements within the Mujahedin movement have been marginalised to some extent, and now it’s the mainstream of the Mujahedin leadership which is in a position to play a more effective role and the fact that they have accepted Rabbani as the head of the delegation – I mean, he is of course the current spokesman – but the fact that they have accepted him, that to me is a positive development and Rabbani represents the voice of recent Islam, if I could call that, and Rabbani had also gone inside Afghanistan just before he went to Saudi Arabia, he had received a very warm reception in the northern part of the country and he had been instructed by his commanders, and particularly Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, to play a more effective role now on the international arena than he had in the past. So, if they succeed in either bringing the extreme elements into the mainstream or marginalising them, and they can only do this with the help of outside forces, because the Mujahedin group – certain ambitious leaders have been supported by forces from outside and have become and if there is an international solidarity on that point – international cooperation, then my feeling is there are more chances now for unity of the Mujahedin to strengthen than perhaps has been the case in the past.

Chair: Yes.

Participant: Two points. First –

Chair: Could you say your affiliation, please?

Participant: Oh, sorry. My name is [unclear 31.34] a personal question. [Unclear 31.39-31.47] acting prime minister in Pakistan so I wonder if that changes your – ?.

Speaker: No, no. I’m sorry. No, it really doesn’t.

Chair: Sorry, is there more of your question? Would you like to finish your question, or is that [unclear 32.00]?
Participant: Well, I have another question.

Chair: Well, why don't you let us have both questions then?

Participant: The second question is the total absence in the debate on the future of Afghanistan of – you know, what could happen with the human rights situation et cetera, et cetera. It does seem that – the main preoccupation does seem to be the establishment of an Islamic government. I wondered how you could, for example, answer your critics that would point to the fact that [unclear 32.37], an opposition force is resorting to the ideology, to an Islamic ideology and theology, credibility of the new government and the existing government and then what happens? The result is that usually the human rights situation seems to be stopping as a result of a government who is purely establishing this credibility on the basis of [unclear 33.07]. I wonder how you would actually answer your critics who would say, for example, is it really worth it to replace the government just simply on the basis of the fact that it is not an Islamic government?

Speaker: Well, on your first point I think you're absolutely right. It was [unclear 33.27] [accords? 33.29] but I think [unclear 33.31] played a very important role behind the scenes and I think he was the main force and of course there were two people who advised General Zia at the time and was the head of the Pakistan intelligence service very regularly and of course he still remains very influential and he also remains a very strong supporter of one of the most radical groups of the Mujahedin to the present day and the other, of course, was Jakub Khan.

On your second point, which didn't come across terribly clear to me – I suppose you're basically asking me that is it worthwhile allowing a Mujahedin government to take over on a basis of an Islamic ideology. Is that what you – am I right? Well, I think the – what is really important to me is the institution of a process of self-determination for Afghan people. If a majority and possibly an overall majority – overwhelming majority of the Afghan people decide that an Islamic government is a better alternative to what they have had under the PDPA to the present day, then I think on both democratic grounds and on the grounds of the Afghan cultural value system, that would have to be supported. Of course, no one can expect, and we shouldn't really expect, that a Islamic Mujahedin government is going to be exactly the same as a Khomeini's type of Islamic government because there are fundamental differences between Afghanistan and Iran.
Afghanistan has never been a highly socially and politically centralised society. That is to do with two things. First, the Sunni nature of Islam in Afghanistan and, two, that if you try the tribal de-centralisation of the social structure of Afghanistan, I don’t think that your – you can get an Islamic leader in Afghanistan which would be in a position to centralise power as much as possible and has had — as for example to the extent that Khomeini has done in Iran. That’s just not possible, or the people who’ve done it in the name Khomeini. We — that cannot really materialise in a country like Afghanistan and particularly after the last ten years of warfare, because the traditional structure, the social structure of Afghanistan has broken down altogether. What you now do have — we have armed regional leaders and these armed regional leaders will always be in a position to limit the power of a central government more than even the tribal leaders had succeeded in the past and for that matter I do not think that an Islamic government in Afghanistan will be similar to what has come into existence in Iran. Even in Iran that Islamic government has now found its limitations. It’s now turned to pragmatism, if for nothing else at least for the survival of the regime itself so I think for that reason — but if a majority of the Afghan people do want an Islamic government, and that seems to be the case at the moment because the Mujahedins have had popular support throughout the country and if they didn’t have that popular support, they wouldn’t be able to become as successful as they have — then I think through electoral or non-electoral process of self-determination they should be given a choice to make that decision and that has to be respected.

Chair: Yes.

Participant: Alexander [Voss? 37.54] from the BBC. When you say the Mujahedins have popular support, there are indications that regional commanders and sub-commanders actually have that support and most of the support given to the Peshawar leadership in the past has been because they can supply weapons, ammunition etcetera. Now that the groups inside Afghanistan are more or less dependent on the Peshawar group, perhaps because there’s less arms are coming in from Pakistan — perhaps because less arms need to come in from Pakistan because they built up their own supplies — do you think there could be splits emerging [unclear 38.26] within the seven — between the seven and the people who’ve actually been doing the fighting and gaining the popular support within Afghanistan? That’s my first question, and my second question was that you talked a fair amount about unity and the fact that Professor Rabbani is playing a more important role which I think is very interesting and also very significant, but when you talked about the PDPA, you tended to give the impression that it was a
cohesive PDPA and I just wonder, as we’re entering the endgame whether you feel that divisions, and old divisions like [unclear 39.04] and also new divisions could get worse, or as the endgame comes this could bring them together and in connection with that, how you assess the recent reports that [unclear 39.15] has been sent to Moscow because he and his faction were planning at the end of the game to stage a coup?

**Speaker:**

In answer to your first question, there’s always a possibility of a split between the Pakistan-based Mujahedin leadership and the field commanders. I think the Pakistan-based leaders have realised that. I mean, they are fully aware of that and that’s why I think there has been more consultations between them and the field commanders in the last three weeks than perhaps was the case before that, and I think that’s why a number of Mujahedin leaders from Pakistan have now travelled inside of – to Afghanistan and have met the field commanders – that, for example, Rabbanı went to the north; met all the field commanders and most of all Ahmad Shah Massoud. Rabbanı has exchanged or have had extensive exchanges with [unclear 40.15] in the west in Iran. Certainly, [unclear 40.19] himself have been going and fighting inside Afghanistan. He has kept close touch with his commanders – people like Haqqani and Abdul Haq and so on in Kabul, and of course other Mujahedin leaders are trying to do that as well but let me put it this way. I think there is at the moment a consensus on the part of the field commanders that these Pakistan-based leaders should continue to represent them in international arena but my own feeling is that the future of Afghanistan is going to be decided more by the field commanders rather than these Pakistan-based leaders. I think once a settlement has been achieved, the Pakistan-based leaders’ positions will be fairly marginalised, unless they really keep in tune with the field commanders. And my understanding also is that there has been a degree of cooperation between the field commanders inside Afghanistan and there has been a marked increase and exchanges between them. There has been correspondence between them and so on so they are trying to make coordinated efforts. So when we talk about a settlement, we really for the time being have to really look towards the Pakistan-based leaders but when we talk about implementation of the settlement and the final outcome of the settlement, then we really have to look at the commanders inside Afghanistan and I think that is very important.

As for your second question – the PDPA – well, I just don’t need to say much about it. I mean, it’s so obvious. I say it’s debilitated – beleaguered – I mean so true – I mean the – I think – my feeling is that the Soviets have finally come to the
conclusion that the regime is beyond saving. That may be one of the reasons behind Moscow’s latest move to open direct negotiations with the Mujahedin. Of course as I pointed out, we have not really come to these talks with a clear-cut position but that may be one of the considerations which have prompted to open these dialogues. I mean, you’re absolutely right — I mean, since the Soviet invaders — since the Soviet troop withdrawal — and in fact these divisions have exacerbated it — there is not only rivalry between the Parchams and the Khalq but now among the [Parchamis? 43.03] [unclear 43.04]. I heard three days ago that [Baba Kamal? 43.09] is back in Kabul. I don’t know what they want to do with him now. And I also heard that [Salway? 43.16], who used to be the — Amin’s chief of secret police and responsible for the massacre of the — particularly Afghan intelligentsia and who was in [unclear 43.29] has come back to Kabul. [Unclear 43.32] made several trips to the Soviet Union and tried to convince the Soviet leaders, “Look, you know, we are the best. We can really manage the situation. These Parchams are going to, you know, sell out and they are not capable of substantiating this process of national reconciliation so it’s time for you to transfer power to us.” But of course the Soviets didn’t buy that and the best option was to transfer as ambassador to Moscow and of course another strong member of the Khalq has been deposed — removed and that’s [unclear 44.04] and apart from that, of course, a good number of Khalq at the moment have been arrested and also a good number of [Parchamis? 44.12]. So, you know — I mean, the Soviets observe all this and it must give them an idea [unclear 44.20]. You know, what are we going to do? I mean, even at the time when we told them, look, we’re going to withdraw and you’re going to be on your own, even that hasn’t really invited — united them and what is going to be the prospects when the last Soviet soldier leaves? So, I mean, that’s why I don’t say much about the PDPA regime.

Chair: Edward Mortimer.

Participant: Edward Mortimer; “Financial Times.” You said in your introduction — you mentioned a number of changes in the area including the end of the Iran-Iraq war. It strikes me that this is the dog that hasn’t barked in the whole Afghan affair and — I mean, what do you see as actually having been the role of Iran, if any, in this war and do you see it as playing a role in the endgame?

Speaker: Well, Iran’s role in this — I mean, in the war with Iraq you mean, or with — in Afghanistan?

Participant: [Unclear 45.11] the Afghan.
In Afghan. I mean, Iran's role has been very limited really from the very start I think for a number of reasons. First of all, let me put this – one is historical and not many people really talk about this. The Iranians have always looked down upon Afghans. They really are not really prepared to give much credibility to these savage warriors from the mountains and that has been – that's been the case to the present day, I mean, the Iranians have always had an air of supremacy and superiority. They've exhibited that in their behaviour towards Afghanistan. In fact, they've been very patronising. I mean, they were very patronising under the Shah, very much, and that's what really barred the Afghan king from making a trip to Iran even to attend this lavish anniversary that the Shah – 2,500th anniversary of the [unclear 46.10] dynasty. And the second [break in recording 46.14-46.17] decided there were a number of problems the Khomeini regime was facing. I mean, [the mass? 46.21] problems and of course that was coupled with the Iran-Iraq war subsequently.

I don't think that the Iranian leadership was really in a position to do anything more than giving some token help to a number of the Shiite groups. The Khomeini regime tried to only help those groups who publicly professed that they were friends of Iran and enemies of the United States. No Mujahedin group was in a position to do that except a very tiny group of Shites and in Central Afghanistan. That also meant the Khomeini regime could not heavily rely on the Afghan Mujahedin for spreading the cause of the Iranian revolution and on top of that, the Khomeini regime of course has been very much limited in resources. I mean, it has most of its resources tied down in the war with Iraq and really didn't have the necessary capacity and of course [unclear 47.33] and this Khomeini regime which at times may be too dogmatic but at the same time they have been very realistic when it comes – when it's come to the question of self-survival and they have found it imperative from the very beginning to maintain a fairly reasonable working relationship with the Soviets. They have not [unclear 47.55] – they have not gone out of their way to antagonise the Soviets and in fact they've already declared that the only problem or the only obstacle in the way of normalising relationship between Tehran and Moscow is the presence of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan and once – and President [unclear 48.12] said that very clearly about two months ago, that once the Soviet troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, that will provide grounds for better relations with the Soviet Union and they will do that simply because [unclear 48.26] is now to put an end to Iran's regional international isolation and also to gain some of the things that they had promised the Iranian public as the fruits of the revolution, which they haven't
got so far. And I then I think for that reason I think we will see - I think we can expect dramatic improvement in Iranian-Soviet relations over the next few years but of course that will also depend how the West is going to respond. Is the Americans going to remain as gullible as they have with regard to their policies in the Middle East in total disarray as they have been? Will they be going to continue this but - I mean, I think on the whole to me it seems that the prospects for better Iran-Soviet ties *(unclear 49.23)*.

**Chair:** Well, we have about five minutes left. Time for two quick questions. Yes, the person in the middle.

**Participant:** *(Unclear 49.29)* I was going to ask...

**Chair:** *(Unclear 49.30)* equally quick question.

**Participant:** *(Unclear 49.33-49.37)* You mentioned the importance of tribalism. Do you think the fact that Rabbani's supporting *(unclear 49.40)* will limit his ability to play a leading role in the negotiations and, perhaps more importantly, will the same *(unclear 49.50)* Massoud *(unclear 49.52)* limit his role in post-withdrawal 50 mins Afghanistan?

**Speaker:** I think that's a very important question. I think that both Rabbani and Massoud are very conscious of that and I think they lately been very pleased that *(unclear 50.10)* Islamic party is the - has come forward to cooperate with the Lebanese group and also I think they've been very pleased to receive some support from [Sayof? 50.31] but one must not forget that there is also very close cooperation between Rabbani and the three moderate groups and there are quite a large number of Pashtun in the three moderate groups and so as a result of that if there is a coalition of Rabbani's Jamiat with these other Pashtun groups, which I think is very possible now, then I think that problem may be overcome to some extent. Yes.

**Chair:** Another question.

**Participant:** Yes, yes. *(Unclear 51.09)* from the BBC. What external role can there be in reconstruction in Afghanistan and when do you think it could start realistically?

**Speaker:** I think the important thing is we should not really repeat what the Americans did with regard to Vietnam. The end of the war should not be the end of our
involvement in Afghanistan. I think we have to remain extremely vigilant not only in terms of helping the Afghans to achieve an effective process of self-determination but also to extend, whether through on a basis of bilateral – on a bilateral basis or multilateral basis through the UN agencies, as much economic and technical aid and particularly knowhow to the new Afghan government as possible. I think we have to also remain very vigilant to keep the issue of Afghanistan alive after the Soviet withdrawal. There is a tendency in the West that when we see – as an agreement signed and some progress is made in the implementation of that agreement then we tend to push that issue to the background and particularly the Western media and the press is very capable of doing that. But then I think in this case we don’t want the experiences of Vietnam to be repeated as now the North Vietnamese are really struggling hard in terms of doing their reconstruction and the Americans keep accusing them that they’re relying too much on the Soviets. Well, the Americans didn’t do much good to them either after the war.

**Participant:** [Unclear 53.04] thank you. Will this cooperation have to be with the central government or to a more decentralised government?

**Speaker:** They will have to be with a central government because the new government would need as much international credibility as is necessary. I mean, it’s not going to be therefore that government to function easily anyway and I think for that government to have the necessary resources and the necessary international capability and credibility to establish itself and to spread its influence in Afghanistan then that – those contacts must be on the basis of bilateral relations for that government for it to happen in any case.

**Chair:** I think perhaps on that note we should come to an end now. We’ve just struck on and Dr Saikal was speaking but of course there is one other constituency whom the guerrillas perhaps might address more with greater tact and those are the two or three million Afghans who are not supporters of the regime but who live under PDPA rule and while many of them, despite the Soviet presence and despite the PDPA, I think it would be true to say that many of them are rather apprehensive as to what the Mujahedin will bring. The rockets on Kabul recently and indeed the conduct of the guerrillas in the towns such Kundasang and Kunar that they have recently occupied do not reassure these people that the transition will be as peaceful and as self-determined as you ever hope, and I think perhaps one would be looking – I think they will be looking certainly in the coming months for a degree of reassurance in that way as well, but we can only see.
Speaker: Well, I think for that we really have to wait but my reading of the situation is that a large number of those people who are in Kabul, they just simply want to stay on the payroll of the government because they have got to live. They've got to support their families and I don't think there is as much genuine support for the government.

Chair: Not for the government – well, the Mujahedin have their supporters [unclear 55.03].

Speaker: Well, that I think we certainly have to wait.

Chair: Well, thank you very much indeed and I trust you will return to enlighten us on the problems of reconstruction after the establishment of peace.

Speaker: Thank you very much (applause).

[Recording ends]