

# THE PROGRESSIVE

Interview with **Tariq Ali** , January 2002 Issue

Tariq Ali was born in 1943 in Lahore, in what was then British-controlled India. He was educated in Pakistan and then at Oxford. His opposition to the military dictatorship in Pakistan during the 1960s led to permanent exile in Britain. He was active in the anti-war movement in Europe during the late 1960s.

Ali is a longstanding editor of *New Left Review* and has written more than a dozen books on history and politics. His forthcoming book is *The Clash of Fundamentalism: Crusades, Jihad, and Modernity* (Verso, 2002). He also has been working on two sets of novels. Three novels of the "Islamic Quintet" have been published by Verso: *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, *The Book of Saladin*, and *The Stone Woman*. They portray Islamic civilization in a way that he says "run counter to the standard views." His "Fall of Communism" trilogy has seen the publication of *Redemption* and *Fear of Mirrors*. Ali's creative output extends to scripts for stage and screen. A short play of his on Iraq was recently performed at Cooper Union in New York. A veritable "all 'rounder," as they say in South Asia, he is currently working on an opera on Ayatollah Khomeini.

In late October, he was detained at the Munich airport. "The inspector's eyes fell on a slim volume in German that had been given to me by a local publisher," he said. "It was still wrapped in cellophane. In a state of some excitement, the inspector rushed it over to an armed policeman. The offending book was an essay by Karl Marx, *On Suicide*." Ali said he was rudely instructed to repack his bag, minus the book, and was then taken to police headquarters at the airport. The arresting officer, Ali added, "gave me a triumphant smile and said, 'After September 11, you can't travel with books like this.' At this point, my patience evaporated."

Ali demanded to call the mayor of Munich, who had earlier interviewed him on the current crisis at a public event in the city. The threat of the call was sufficient, and Ali was allowed to continue on his journey.

Ali lives in London, and I spoke with him in late November by phone.

**Q: A Pakistani general once told you, "Pakistan was the condom that the Americans needed to enter Afghan-istan. We've served our purpose and they think we can be just flushed down the toilet." That was in the 1980s, when the United States and Pakistan funded and armed the mujahedeen to defeat the godless Soviet Union. Is the United States again using Pakistan as a condom?**

Tariq Ali: I think the Americans fished out the same condom but found it had too many holes in it. So they supplied a new one, and they've gone in again. But this time they couldn't go in with the Pakistani army, since the Pakistani army created the Taliban and propelled it to victory. It could hardly be expected to kill its own offspring. The U.S. forced the Pakistani army to withdraw its support, which it did, reluctantly. But it had to. Once Pakistani support was withdrawn from the Taliban, they collapsed like a house of cards, though one hardline faction will probably carry on in the mountains for a bit.

**Q: Most Americans may not know the history of Pakistani-U.S. support for the Taliban. In a talk you gave in late September, you said, "People are taught to forget history." What did you have in mind there?**

Ali: In the West, since the collapse of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union, the one discipline both the official and unofficial cultures have united in casting aside has been history. It's somehow as if history has become too subversive. The past has too much knowledge embedded in it, and therefore it's best to

forget it and start anew. But as everyone is discovering, you can't do this to history; it refuses to go away. If you try to suppress it, it reemerges in horrific fashion. That's essentially what's been going on.

It's a total failure of the Western imagination that the only enemy they can see is Adolph Hitler. This is something that actually started during the Suez War of 1956, what I call the first oil war. Gamal Abdal Nasser, the nationalist leader of Egypt, was described by British Prime Minister Anthony Eden as an Egyptian Hitler. Then it carried on like that. Saddam Hussein became Hitler when he was no longer a friend of the West. Then Milosevic became Hitler. Now Al Qaeda and the Taliban are portrayed as fascists. The implication strongly is that Osama bin Laden is a Hitler, even though he has no state power at all. It's just grotesque if you seriously think about it. In reality, the only player in this game who was soft on the Nazis was King Zahir Shah, who then sat on the Afghan throne. He hoped they would defeat the British in India, and he, having collaborated, might share part of the spoils!

But the reason they can get away with it is that history has been totally downplayed. We have populations now in the West with a very short memory span. One reason for this short memory span is that television over the last fifteen years has seen a big decline in the coverage of the rest of the world. History, when they do it, is ancient history, and they sensationalize even that. Contemporary history is virtually ignored on television. If you see what passes as the news on the networks in the United States, there's virtually no coverage of the rest of the world, not even of neighboring countries like Mexico or neighboring continents like Latin America. It's essentially a very provincial culture, and that breeds ignorance. This ignorance is very useful in times of war because you can whip up a rapid rage in ill-informed populations and go to war against almost any country. That is a very frightening process.

**Q: Contrast the last wars of the twentieth century with the first war of the twenty-first century.**

Ali: One difference is that the previous wars were genuinely fought by coalition. The United States was the dominant power in these coalitions, but it had to get other people on its side. In both the Gulf War and in Kosovo, the U.S. had to get the agreement of other people in these alliances before it moved forward. The war in Afghanistan, the first war of the twenty-first century, shows the United States doing what it wants to do, not caring about who it antagonizes, not caring about the effects on neighboring regions. I don't think it's too bothered with what happens afterwards, otherwise it would be more worried about the Northern Alliance. The U.S. is telling the Northern Alliance to kill Taliban prisoners. It's totally a breach of all the known conventions of war. Western television networks aren't showing this, but Arab networks are showing how prisoners are being killed and what's being done to them. Instead, we're shown scenes that are deliberately created for the Western media: a few women without the veil, a woman reading the news on Kabul television, and 150 people cheering.

All these wars are similar in the way ideology is being used. It's the ideology of so-called humanitarian intervention. We don't want to do this, but we're doing this for the sake of the people who live there. This is, of course, a terrible sleight of hand because all sorts of people live there, and, by and large, they do it to help one faction and not the other. In the case of Afghanistan, they didn't even make that pretense. It was essentially a crude war of revenge designed largely to appease the U.S. public. In Canada in mid-November, I was debating Charles Krauthammer, and I said it was a war of revenge and he said, "Yeah, it was, so what?" The more hardline people, who are also more realistic, just accept this.

And the United States has perfected the manipulation. The media plays a very big, big role.

**Q: In what way?**

Ali: During the Gulf War, journalists used to challenge government news managers and insisted they wouldn't just accept the official version of events. It seems that with the war in the Balkans and now this, journalists have accepted the official version. Journalists go to press briefings at the Ministry of Defense in London or the Pentagon in Washington, and no critical questions are posed at all. It's just a news-

gathering operation, and the fact that the news is being given by governments who are waging war doesn't seem to worry many journalists too much.

The task does really devolve to alternative networks of information and education. The Internet has been an invaluable acquisition. I wonder how we would do without it. Information can be sent from one country to the other within the space of minutes, crossing channels, crossing oceans, crossing continents. But still, we can't compete with the might and power and wealth of those who dominate, control, and own the means of the production of information today. These are the five or six large companies that control and own the media, publishing houses, and the cinema.

**Q: Tony Blair has occupied center stage in the war on terrorism. In many ways he is even more visible than Bush. What accounts for Blair's enthusiasm for the war?**

Ali: Blair does it to get attention. He does it to posture and prance around on the world stage, pretending that he is the leader of a big imperial power when, in fact, he's the leader of a medium-sized country in Northern Europe.

I think Clinton certainly liked using him. But the Bush Administration doesn't take him that seriously.

**Q: Noam Chomsky points out that Britain did not bomb Boston and New York, where major IRA supporters and financial networks are located.**

Ali: I think Noam's right. But to just even raise the point goes to show that Britain isn't an imperial power and the United States is. The United States is now The Empire. There isn't an empire; there's The Empire, and that empire is the United States. It's very interesting that this war is not being fought by the NATO high command. NATO has been totally marginalized. The "coalition against terrorism" means the United States. It does not wish anyone else to interfere with its strategy. When the Germans offered 2,000 soldiers, Rumsfeld said we never asked for them. Quite amazing to say this in public.

**Q: In a recent article, you cited a poem by the tenth-century secular Arab poet al-Maarri:**

**And where the Prince commanded, now the shriek,  
Of wind is flying through the court of state;  
"Here," it proclaims, "there dwelt a potentate,  
Who would not hear the sobbing of the weak."**

**Talk about "the sobbing of the weak."**

Ali: The sobbing of the weak today is the sobbing of the victims of neoliberal policies. They consist of billions of people all over the world. These are the people who leave their countries. These are the people who cling onto the belly of a plane leaving Africa for Europe, not caring if they are killed in the process, and many of them are. This desperation is the result of globalization. The question is, will the weak be able to organize themselves to bring about changes or not? Will the weak develop an internal strength and a political strength to ever challenge the rulers that be? These are the questions posed by the world in which we live. People are increasingly beginning to feel that democracy itself is being destroyed by this latest phase of globalization and that politics doesn't matter because it changes nothing. This is a very dangerous situation on the global level, because when this happens, then you also see acts of terrorism. Terrorism emanates from weakness, not strength. It is the sign of despair.

Dear old al-Maarri was a great skeptic poet. He wrote a parody of the Koran, and his friends would tease him and say, "al-Maarri, but no one says your Koran." And he said, "Yes, but give me time. Give me time. If people recite it for twenty years it will become as popular as the other one." It was a good moment in Islam when people were actually challenging authority at every level. Very different from the world we live

in now, incidentally.

**Q: And in this world, the United States is projecting a long war on terrorism. They're talking about it lasting for ten or fifteen years, and involving up to sixty countries. The Bush Administration reminds us almost on a daily basis that the war on terrorism is still in its earliest stages. What are the implications of that?**

Ali: The main implication is a remapping of the world in line with American policy and American interests. Natural resources are limited, and the United States wants to make sure that its own population is kept supplied. The principle effect of this will be for the United States to control large parts of the oil which the world possesses. There are some people who say this war was fought because of oil. I honestly don't believe it. But that doesn't mean once they have sorted out the first phase of it, the war won't be used to assert or reassert U.S. economic hegemony in the region.

They want to do it in the Middle East, as well. A big problem in the Middle East is that the Iraqi state and Syrian state are potential threats to Israel just by the very fact they exist. Iraq also sits on a great deal of oil, and as that cutthroat Kissinger once said, "Why should we let the Arabs have the oil?" Since Israel is the central ally of the United States in the region, the U.S. would like to weaken the potential opposition. Attacking Iraq, and possibly even Syria, is one way to do that. This is a policy fraught with danger for those who carry it out because it totally excludes the reaction of ordinary people. Could there be mass explosions? And if there are, then you will see countries like Saudi Arabia going under. No one would weep if the royal family were overthrown, but they would probably if it were replaced by a U.S. protectorate or a U.S. colonial-type administration, or the U.S. disguised as the U.N. Other corrupt sheikdoms, like the United Arab Emirates, would crumble, as well. Then what will the U.S. do? Have the Israelis acting as guardians of oil in the whole region? That will mean a permanent guerrilla warfare. Or will they have American and European troops guarding these regions? That, too, would mean limited guerrilla warfare. The only way they'll be able to rule is by killing large numbers of people who live there.

**Q: What about Iraq?**

Ali: If they attack Iraq in the next phase, it could create big problems for them. I'm sure that in Europe the anti-war movement would just mushroom. The Arab world could really explode. That is what their close allies in Saudi Arabia and Egypt are telling them: Do not attack Iraq. The coalition will break up, and even Turkey is saying that it will not be party to an attack on Iraq. Probably the plan is to create an independent state in a corner of Iraq, and then use that as a base to destroy Saddam Hussein. If they go down that route, the world then becomes a very unpredictable and very dangerous place. The one thing that it will not do is curb terrorism. It will increase terrorism, because the more governments you destroy, the more the people will seek revenge.

After flirting with neoisolationism, the U.S. is now deciding it wants to run the world. The U.S. should come out openly and say to the world, "We are the only imperial power, and we're going to rule you, and if you don't like it you can lump it." American imperialism has always been the imperialism that has been frightened of speaking its name. Now it's beginning to do so. In a way, it's better. We know where we kneel.

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