

*Review Essay*

## The Taliban's Enablers

by A.J. Caschetta

Since the 9/11 attacks, numerous books have been written about the Taliban, documenting its history and resurgence. Many writers fault the United States for failing to turn Afghanistan into the Shangri La that it could be, claiming that beginning with the Bonn conference in December 2001, the Afghanistan war has been a disaster punctuated by one missed opportunity after another, guided by a hubristic new imperialism.

Some recurrent themes pervade this literature. To begin with, it is believed that the Taliban is not as bad as is commonly thought and that its actions should be equated with those of others, thereby implying that bad behavior is the norm. It has likewise been argued that the Taliban can be coaxed into behaving better if only Washington will provide the right combination of carrots and sticks, and that isolating the movement, and holding it accountable for its atrocities, will only embolden it. Finally, there is the view that the West in general and Washington in particular must excuse the Taliban's "excesses" as just another way of life: This requires treating Pashtunwali (the tribal code of behavior traditionally governing Pashtun society), Shari'a, and democracy as merely different approaches to living, none better, none worse than another.

Through often learned prose, plenty of repetition, and the kind of authorization conferred by academic presses, these placating chroniclers have greatly burnished the Taliban's image in the West. As U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan shifts from surge to surgical strikes to peace talks, Americans had better get to know the real Taliban.

### **TALIBAN: MILITANT ISLAM, OIL AND FUNDAMENTALISM**

As a correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Ahmed Rashid reported on the rise

of the Taliban as it happened. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, first published in 2001 prior to 9/11, now in its second edition (2010),<sup>1</sup> was among the first book-length examinations of the Taliban. Rashid's work is best known for the section, "The New Great Game," which outlines a new colonialism in which

---

**A.J. Caschetta** is senior lecturer in English at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He can be reached at [ajcgs1@rit.edu](mailto:ajcgs1@rit.edu).

---

<sup>1</sup> Yale University Press.

**Nothing short of a full invasion of Pakistan could have prevented the Taliban from resurging.**

Iran, Russia, China, the United States, and even Japan control the fate of the region. He faults Washington for the rise of the Taliban

because it failed to provide the proper circumstances and funding that could have prevented its resurgence. As Rashid puts it: “The pipeline of U.S. military aid to the Mujahedin was never replaced by a pipeline of international humanitarian aid that could have been an inducement for the warlords to make peace and rebuild the country.”

In a chapter for the new edition—“The Taliban Resurgent 2000-2009”—Rashid argues that excluding the Taliban from the Bonn conference was a disastrous oversight but fails to acknowledge that the Taliban would certainly have opposed its goal—to create, in Rashid’s words, “a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.” He goes on to blame the Taliban resurgence on U.S. failure to commit adequate forces to the country in its “rush” to move on to Iraq: “even a few more U.S. troops could have made a huge difference.” What he neglects to mention, though, is that even if the Bush administration had decided to commit every person, dollar, and piece of equipment that went to the Iraq war to Afghanistan, much of it would have spent years sitting at Bagram Air Base, awaiting transportation over Afghanistan’s nonexistent infrastructure.<sup>2</sup>

While Rashid acknowledges that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence has provided safe haven and intelligence to the Taliban since its founding, he downplays those efforts, putting them on equal footing with “problems within NATO and lack of U.S. focus.” These problems, however, are not on equal footing. Nothing short of a full invasion of Pakistan could have prevented the Taliban from resurging.

Rashid’s solution has always been to negotiate with the Taliban, bringing it into the civilized world, in part, by honoring it. He argues that the

Taliban of the 1990s was “essentially a peasant army rather than an international terrorist organization. This is what they still are ... not

a monolithic organization, but one in which there [are] several interest groups, some of which could be won over.” Here Rashid makes the same error of omission made by many of the Taliban’s enablers: He pretends that Washington has never treated the movement with the same kind of diplomatic engagement it treats genuine governments. In fact, from 1995 until January 2001, the Clinton administration negotiated with the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> Michael Rubin has documented the steady stream of U.S. diplomats (Thomas W. Simons, Robin Raphel, Warren Christopher, John Holzman, Madeline Albright, Donald Camp, William B. Milan, and Bill Richardson<sup>4</sup>) who negotiated with the Taliban.<sup>5</sup> Clinton administration insiders Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon claim that Karl Underfurth, then assistant secretary of state for South Asia, met with “Taliban representatives at least twenty times between the August 1998 [African Embassy] bombings and the end of the Clinton administration.”<sup>6</sup> The Japanese government negotiated with the Taliban in an attempt to remove and purchase the fourth-century twin statues of Buddha overlooking Hazara before their destruction in March 2001.<sup>7</sup> Those negotiations too came to naught. And what is a diplomat to make of the fact that Mullah Omar will not meet face-to-face with non-Muslims?

In 2011, the Karzai government set up the High Peace Council (HPC) to pursue diplomacy, naming as its leader Berhanuddin Rabbani, the closest thing Afghanistan had to an elder states-

2 For information on Afghanistan’s infrastructure, see “South Asia: Afghanistan,” *World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C., July 10, 2013.

3 Jayshree Bajoria, “Backgrounder: The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., Oct. 6, 2011.

4 For background on Richardson’s discussion with the Taliban, see Bruce O. Riedel, “Islamism Is Not Unstoppable,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Dec. 1999, pp. 51-60.

5 Michael Rubin, “Taking Tea with the Taliban,” *Commentary*, Feb. 2010.

6 *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 272-3.

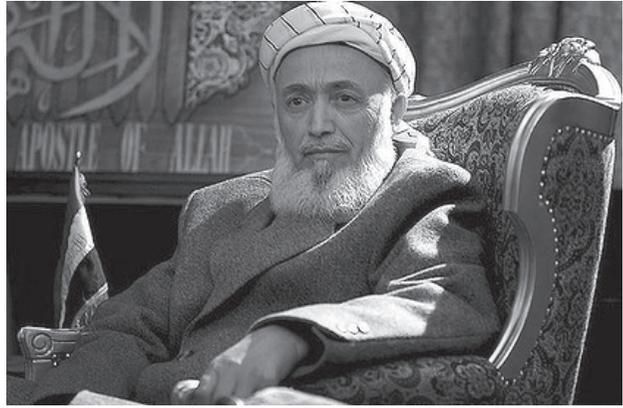
7 Reuters, Mar. 5, 2001.

man. U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker marveled at the monumental accomplishment of getting the Taliban to the negotiating table. But soon the Taliban began behaving like the Taliban: On September 20, 2011, one of its “negotiators” detonated a bomb hidden in his turban, killing Rabbani and four other HPC members. When former “moderate Taliban” Arsala Rahmani succeeded Rabbani, he too was murdered, gunned down on the way to work. As might be expected, no one is currently clamoring to fill the job of chief HPC negotiator.

## THE TALIBAN SHUFFLE

In *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*,<sup>8</sup> Kim Barker, former foreign correspondent for *The Chicago Tribune* covering India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, describes her love affair with Afghanistan and Pakistan as “more all consuming than any relationship I had ever had.” If this kind of glib, colloquial prose, adored by *Rolling Stone* and *New York Magazine*, was her book’s only fault, it would not be so bad. Unfortunately, readers learn more about Kim Barker—what she eats, drinks, wears, or with whom she flirts, travels, and has sex—than about the Taliban.

Barker only shallowly explores the damage done to the image of the West caused by the collection of journalists who invaded first Kabul and then the rest of the country after the Taliban was toppled in November 2001. She describes toga parties, trampoline orgies, rooftop raves, and general drunken revelry at journalist hangouts but never speculates that such behavior may

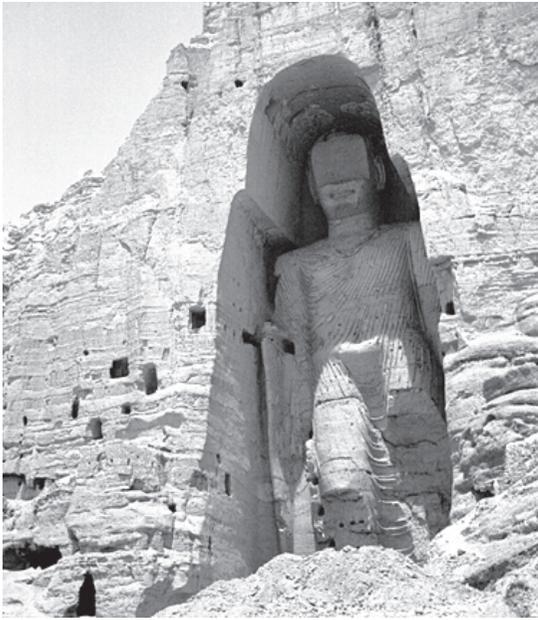


*In 2011, the Karzai government set up the High Peace Council to pursue diplomacy, naming Berhanuddin Rabbani—the closest thing Afghanistan had to an elder statesman—its leader. U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker marveled at the monumental accomplishment of getting the Taliban to the negotiating table. But soon the Taliban began behaving as always: On September 20, 2011, one of its “negotiators” detonated a bomb hidden in his turban, killing Rabbani and four other HPC members.*

have presented the West in the most negative light possible to the Afghan people. Instead, she is quick to blame George W. Bush, the U.S., British, Canadian, German, and Dutch militaries, the CIA, and frequently India, for the woes of Afghanistan and Pakistan. To her mind, Western aid is never quite enough. (Even the non-Western Chinese government is faulted for its insensitivity in including pigs as a gift to the Kabul Zoo.) After complaining about the deplorable state of clinics built by U.S. Agency for International Development contractors all over Afghanistan, some of which had no medicine and no doctors, Barker blames Washington for the deficiencies rather than the Taliban who prevented the female half of the Afghan population from becoming physicians, regularly destroyed clinics before 9/11, and made life in Afghanistan generally miserable and unsafe for foreign physicians.

Alongside an explanation of the concept of jihad that is embarrassingly shallow, Barker has an astonishing penchant for tolerating shortcom-

<sup>8</sup> New York: Doubleday, 2011.



*As part of the current trend of whitewashing the Taliban, past atrocities are forgotten or explained away. In 2001, the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan buddhas, including the one seen here, despite international pleas to spare the statues. The monumental sculptures in central Afghanistan were built in the sixth century when the practice of Buddhism was well-established.*

ings, including outright predatory sexual behavior, among the native peoples. She notes the irony of the situation of “Islamic clerics [who] forced me to wear a black abaya showing only my eyes, but then privately asked to see my face and hair,” but is unwilling to label it hypocrisy. After a lengthy description of the tendency of Pakistani men to engage in frequent “ass-grabbing free-for-all” sessions, she explains: “An ass-grab was about humiliation and, of course, the feeling of some men in the country that Western women needed sex like oxygen, and that if a Pakistani man just happened to put himself in her path or pinched her when the sex urge came on, he’d get lucky. I blamed Hollywood.” But why not blame Pakistani men? This condescending and infantilizing tendency to write about Afghans and Pakistanis as dependent on others, unable to think or act critically or curb

their impulses, makes Barker’s book a useless exercise in West-bashing.

## **CAPTIVE: MY TIME AS A PRISONER OF THE TALIBAN**

A more insightful look into the Taliban comes in *Captive: My Time as a Prisoner of the Taliban*<sup>9</sup> by Jere Van Dyk, student, chronicler, and former prisoner of the Taliban. Having first ventured into Afghanistan in the 1970s on the so-called “hippie trail,” Van Dyk returned after the Soviet invasion, living and traveling with warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani and his followers. Those years were documented in his book *In Afghanistan: An American Odyssey*.<sup>10</sup> In 2008, believing he could get inside the new Haqqani network (now run by Jalaluddin’s son Sirajuddin) with the right fixers, he returned. In search of a group of Pashtuns identifying themselves as members of the Taliban who were to take him to meet up with the Haqqanis, he and his fixers were captured shortly after crossing into Pakistan and eventually released only

when CBS paid a ransom.

In preparation for the mission, Van Dyk grew his beard, dressed like an Afghan, and wandered the streets of Kabul studying and imitating the mannerisms he observed. His one handicap? An inability to speak Dari, Pashto, or Nouristani. The whole enterprise smacks of Gonzo journalism and extraordinary naiveté:

I wanted to find out what the Taliban were really like, to see how different they were from the mujahideen. I wanted to learn what they thought and what their goals were. I wanted to go to their training camps. I wanted to explain the Taliban to the outside world. I wanted to

9 New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010.

10 New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983.

**Fergusson intentionally whitewashes one of the most destructive regimes of modern times.**

go deep into the heart of Taliban country, to get to their leaders, men I knew from the 1980s, and through them perhaps even Osama bin Laden himself.

I felt that with my contacts, my history with the mujahideen, and my knowledge of Pashtun culture, I could do what no one else could do. I knew these people. We had once been friends.

Van Dyk's love of Afghan culture blinds him to its horrors as when a description of Pashtun tribal code ends with the blithe observation: "Under Pashtunwali, a rumor can end a woman's life." His jailer Gulob promises freedom and safety if he will convert to Islam. Van Dyk complies in order to save his skin, leading to effusive passages of admiration for his captors and their culture and a refusal to condemn the Taliban for what it did to his beloved Afghanistan. Stockholm syndrome overtakes him, and he soon begins to pray, speak, wash, eat, and even think (or so he says) like a Pashtun.

Nonetheless, there is a good deal of information to be gleaned from Van Dyk's considerable experience in the region, and he comments on his own situation with humor and insight. In retrospect, the most interesting bit of information has to be Gulob's comment that "Osama and al-Zawahiri are not in the tribal zones. They are being protected by institutions. Pakistan will never give them up." It would appear that Van Dyk did get the inside scoop after all.

**TALIBAN:  
THE UNKNOWN ENEMY**

Scottish journalist James Fergusson's *Taliban: The Unknown Enemy*<sup>11</sup> incorporates every element of the pro-Taliban-anti-U.S. agitprop template. The title bespeaks the book's thesis—the in the West do not really know the Taliban.

Fergusson even questions the validity of the

term "Taliban," or as one unnamed British special forces officer put it: "In 2006, when the fighting started, we called everyone

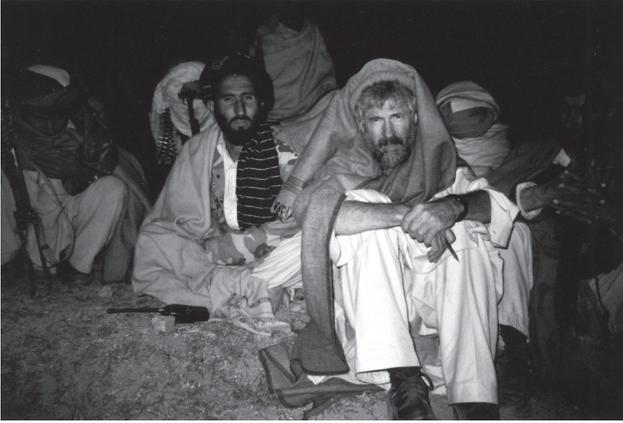
who resisted us 'Taliban.' But they really weren't necessarily. They were just the community's warrior class who had always defended their community against outsiders and were bound to do so again. The 'Taliban' in that sense were an enemy of our own creation." The anonymous officer may be correct in the sense that the Taliban has grown beyond the original Pashtun warlords who pledged loyalty to Mullah Omar between 1994 and 1996. But the term has not lost its significance or its usefulness. "Taliban" has become something of an umbrella term capable of signifying a movement of diverse characters sharing the same goals. Arguing whether those loyal to Hekmatyar, Haqqani, or Lashkar-e-Taiba are "genuine" Taliban is a bit like arguing whether al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Ansar al-Islam in Iraq, the Somali al-Shabab, and Nigerian Boko Haram are "genuine" al-Qaeda. Their goals, enemies, tactics, and beliefs are the same. Taliban fighters may be Kashmiri or Punjabi; they have even been known to admit Americans like John Walker Lindh.<sup>12</sup>

Fergusson's revisionist history of the Taliban portrays the regime as not quite as bad as the West has painted it. Women were not really treated as badly as was believed—denied education, barred from working, or forced to hide themselves. Fergusson reassures us that "women were not always automatically beaten for showing their faces," which must come as quite a relief to all.

This intentional whitewashing of one of the most destructive regimes of modern times covers all bases. Fergusson underreports well-known Taliban atrocities like the (literal) poisoning of the wells on the Shomali plains in 1997. On the destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas, Fergusson quotes (but does not document) a decree from Mullah Omar to protect the statues as a source of

11 Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2011.

12 Peter A. Olsson, "Homegrown Terrorists, Rebels in Search of a Cause," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2013, pp. 3-10.



*Author Jere van Dyk went searching for the Taliban, convinced that his love of all things Afghan would bear fruit. Instead, he was captured by his intended subjects and was eventually promised freedom and safety if he would convert to Islam. Wisely, he complied and now serves as a consultant for CBS News.*

tourist revenue but is unable to explain how the decree was ignored. As the “first Western journalist in more than two years to interview the fugitive warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,” Fergusson essentially becomes a cheerleader for the terrorist leader and his group by promoting what might be called the “wing theory” of terrorist organizations, whereby a group poses as a bicameral enterprise in which its “political wing” promotes an agenda peacefully while a “militant wing” promotes that same agenda violently.

Ameliorating the guilt of the Taliban requires playing up someone else’s to explain Afghanistan, and there is a long list of guilty parties in the book. Hamid Karzai bears the brunt of the scorn reserved for Afghans. Karzai’s greed and his government’s corruption are now well-known, but Fergusson goes too far in describing it as no better and perhaps worse than the Taliban’s. Offering no evidence, he refers to the current National Directorate of Security as “the successor to the KHAD,” the much-feared Afghan iteration of the KGB secret police run by the Soviet puppet Muhammad Najibullah.

But Washington is the true villain in Fergusson’s telling. Beginning with the cliché

that after 9/11 the “international community” was sympathetic to the United States, he proceeds to lament that “Americans failed miserably to exploit this tide of goodwill.” And then it gets absurd when he writes that “with just a little more patience from the U.S., bin Laden might have ended up in a courtroom, al-Qaida might have lost its figurehead, and 9/11 and the entire War on Terror might never have happened.” The “U.S.’s reliance on proxy local forces” is faulted on one page and the U.S.’s excessive militaristic footprint on another.

So what should Washington do according to Fergusson? Invest in Afghanistan and coerce further invest-

ment from the “international community.” As his friend Mullah Abdul-Basit told him in 2007, had U.S. forces arrived in Afghanistan unarmed, solely to rebuild the country, “you would have been our guests ... If your engineers and agriculture experts had come to us and explained what they were trying to do, we would have protected them with our lives.” Perhaps such an idea would not seem quite so absurd had the Taliban no history of (and penchant for) kidnapping and killing aid workers.

As a result of Fergusson’s partisan revisionism, in which the group is more sinned against than sinning, the real Taliban remains “unknown.”

## **INSIDE AL-QAEDA AND THE TALIBAN**

Unlike Van Dyke, who was ransomed from his captivity, Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad paid the ultimate price for his inside connections. Nearly everyone, the U.S. government included, believes that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence killed Shahzad for his reporting on

**Van Linschoten and Kuehn  
have become the Taliban's  
most generous supporters  
and most prolific apologists.**

the close and growing ties between it, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda.

But Shahzad's posthumously published book, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*<sup>13</sup>—the go-to source for all the minutiae on the post-9/11 Taliban—is no antidote to the reflexive anti-Western tracts reviewed above. For Shahzad, the word “terrorist” only refers to the U.S. government as he prefers the term “militants” or “Commanders” (always capitalized) for the Taliban he befriended. Likewise al-Qaeda is “a resistance movement against Western Imperialism,” fighting the “occupation forces” of the “U.S.-NATO-led war machine.”

*Inside Al-Qaeda* does have some value, outlining in stunning detail the post-9/11 Taliban, comprised of extremist Taliban, malleable Taliban, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, tribal Taliban, Taliban affiliates, and al-Qaeda-Taliban affiliates. He painstakingly explains the various rivalries that divide the tribal Taliban and seems to have known (and liked) everyone involved. Ignoring the pre-9/11 connections between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Shahzad insists that the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan drove them to collaborate, rather than the other way around.

While still alive, and in this postmortem book, Shahzad gave credibility to the assortment of Taliban fighters, mullahs, and “Commanders” who spoke freely to him. Though they certainly said things they wanted the world to believe, stretching the truth in the process, if even half of what they told him is accurate, the West is still greatly underestimating the dangers posed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban in all their iterations.

**TALIBAN LIFE,  
POETRY, AND MYTH**

Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn have become the Taliban's most generous sup-

porters and most prolific apologists. The two moved to Afghanistan in 2006, settling in Kandahar, where they set up the now-inac-

tive blog, AfghanWire.com. By running cover for the Taliban, minimizing atrocities, and deflecting blame elsewhere, they ingratiated themselves with Mullah Mohammed Salem Zaeef and became the editors of his self-pitying and evasive biography *My Life with the Taliban*.<sup>14</sup> This work promised the ultimate insider's history of the Taliban but delivered little more than an anti-U.S. polemic, peppered with passages of execrable (and unintended) irony: “The Taliban had also started to implement shari'a law: Women were no longer working in government departments, and the men throughout the city had started to grow beards. Life in the city was returning to normal.”

Another piece of Van Linschoten and Kuehn's charm offensive on behalf of the Taliban is an anthology titled *The Poetry of the Taliban*,<sup>15</sup> the goal of which is to humanize the Taliban fighters. The poems themselves are inconsequential, neither great nor terrible by today's admittedly low standards. As one might expect, there are poems about killing, waging jihad, confronting the enemy, glorious Shari'a, and so on. What is perhaps most interesting (and ignored by Van Linschoten and Kuehn) is that among the list of predictable Taliban obsessions (Bush, Obama, Karzai, Guantanamo Bay) emerges the true enemy: the Western invention of human rights and, collaterally, the nongovernmental organizations that oversee their implementation and report on their absence.

But far more important than the quality of the poems themselves is their utility in selling the idea that the Taliban is morally and culturally equal to the West. Take, for example, the back cover blurb where Harvard's Michael Semple writes that the Taliban is not “culturally backward” but is in fact

14 New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; see, also, “Brief Reviews,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2011.

15 New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

13 London: Pluto Press, 2011.

**The myth of Afghan  
invincibility endures today  
with the United States  
portrayed as the latest  
invader.**

“inspiring a people to resist a dull global plan to modernize them.” The bulk of this rhetorical salesmanship is found in Van Linschoten and Kuehn’s introduction.

One of their tropes equates poetry written by British combat veterans who fought the Taliban with examples of Taliban verse: “Both sets of poets take leave of their mothers before they leave for the front, both are in turns thrilled and fearful when the moment of battle arrives, and both grieve at the death of friends and family.” The sales pitch may convince some, but it fails on the follow-through: When their war is over, returning British soldiers will not try to close girls’ schools, compel non-Anglicans to join the Church of England, and force everyone to eat, work, and play as they do in a coordinated effort to efface and annul the very idea of human rights.

Van Linschoten and Kuehn’s latest effort is an academic revisionist history, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*,<sup>16</sup> which tries to dispel the “popular discourse” that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have merged into a singular entity they call “Talqaeda.” The first problem is the failure to convince that such a discourse is popular; even Shahzad did not suggest a merger so much as a symbiotic convergence of interests leading to cooperation. Aside from its thesis, the book has serious methodological flaws. Nearly every important assertion hangs on a footnote that reads merely: “Interview,” followed by a location and date. While anonymity may be acceptable for a journalist’s fixers, drivers, and perhaps even translators, it has no place in “for-the-record” sources. It is simply impossible to gauge the veracity of the work without being able to assess the credibility of the sources. Ironically, the authors reject sources like the *9/11 Commission Report* as being unreliable, along with information “extracted under duress from Khalid Sheik Mohammed.” The cumulative effect of this work

of pseudo-scholarly journalism renders the project little more than a book of rumors cloaked in a veneer of academic paraphernalia.

Van Linschoten and Kuehn’s primary goal is to disassociate al-Qaeda from Mullah Omar’s movement, but history is not on their side. By their account, the Taliban leadership was completely unaware of bin Laden prior to 1996, and they even fatuously claim that the Rabbani-Massoud government invited bin Laden to Afghanistan. In seeking to absolve the Taliban of all guilt relating to the 9/11 attacks, they unconvincingly argue that its leaders neither knew the attacks were coming nor approved of them after. Even the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001, when he was leader of the Northern Alliance (and therefore the Taliban’s number one enemy in the region), caught the Taliban by surprise according to the authors. Their insinuation that al-Qaeda’s desire to restore the caliphate and the Taliban’s desire to restore Afghanistan to some kind of Qur’anic Khurasan are incompatible is based on scant evidence.

Finally, the book closes with what reads like an opaque threat: Unless “serious negotiations” conducted “on multiple levels” about the future of Afghanistan include the Taliban, the “escalated levels of conflict ... will increasingly resemble the violent civil war of the 1990s.” Work with the Taliban, or else.

## CONCLUSION

In Taliban lore, the indigenous Afghan mujahideen defeated the Soviet Union with very little help from the outside just as earlier generations of Afghans defeated a steady stream of foreign invaders from Alexander the Great to the British, each bent on enslaving them. The myth of Afghan invincibility endures today with the United States portrayed as the latest invader, no different than the Soviet Union. The myth-makers’ adherents are confident that history will repeat itself. In the April/May issue of *Azan*, Taliban propagandists push the U.S.-U.S.S.R. comparison by blend-

16 New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012.

**With the Taliban seen as a legitimate political force, there can be little doubt that it will eventually take over Afghanistan.**

ing the names Obama and Gorbachev into Obamachev, “meant to draw parallels between... the USSR under the leadership of Mikail Gorbachev on the eve of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 with that of the United States under Barack Obama amid the upcoming U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014.”<sup>17</sup>

This facile equalization of all foreign invaders, especially the Soviet Union and the United States, is understandable from Taliban sources, but far too many Taliban experts are complicit in these gross misrepresentations. Washington’s involvement in Afghanistan has always been motivated by the desire to oppose enemies (Soviet, Iranian, al-Qaeda) and to ameliorate the lives of the Afghan people. The Soviet Union, by contrast, sought to own Afghanistan. In the post-Kennedy era of U.S. largesse, so much aid went to Helmand province that it became known as “Little America.”<sup>18</sup> In the 1980s, Moscow’s top scientific minds devised bombs resembling toys so as to attract and maim children.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, in the days between 9/11 and the October invasion, U.S. planes dropped untold tons of food along with leaflets explaining to the Afghan people that better days were coming. Perhaps the Taliban leaders really cannot see the difference between Soviet perfidy and U.S. attempts to wipe out al-Qaeda and make life better for all Afghans, but Western scholars and journalists know better. Rather than lending credence to Taliban propaganda, they ought to admit that were Washington to adopt Soviet-style tactics, Afghanistan would never stand a chance.

As we enter a new era in which the Taliban is seen as a legitimate political force, there can be little doubt that it will eventually take over Afghanistan. From Vice President Biden’s claim that

“the Taliban, per se, is not our enemy”<sup>20</sup> to the ongoing rewriting of history, its enablers, apologists, and admirers assist the takeover in big and small ways by denying that the era of Taliban rule was a travesty of governance during which abominable crimes were committed. And though the constant drumbeat of “negotiate, negotiate, negotiate” finds a willing audience in the Obama administration, the Taliban is interested in negotiation only to gain, not to compromise.

So when the announcement of three-way negotiations in Qatar between Washington, the Karzai government, and the Taliban were applauded this spring in the usual circles as positive progress, the Taliban immediately showed its true nature: On June 16, Mutasim Agha Jan of the Taliban praised the upcoming talks as “a major step in formulating a channel for talks between Kabul and the Taliban,”<sup>21</sup> but on June 18, the Taliban office in Doha opened bearing a plaque and the banner of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”<sup>22</sup> (the name used under Mullah Omar from 1996-2001) and publicly denounced Karzai as a U.S. puppet (implicitly likening him to Najibullah and predictably prompting the Karzai government to pull out of the negotiations). As Davood Moradian of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies recently put it: “A peace that is ‘Made in Pakistan,’ promoted by London, sold by Washington, and financed by Qatar is doomed to fail.”<sup>23</sup>

As of this writing, the diplomatic enterprise appears to be on hold, but it will surely be restarted. And if Mullah Omar is allowed to emerge from hiding in Quetta and revive his atavistic, seventh-century utopian fantasy, the world will see just how unregenerate the Taliban is. Only this time around, no one will be able to claim ignorance.



17 *The Jihad and Threat Monitor*, no. 5329, Middle East Media Research Institute, June 6, 2013.

18 *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, July 5, 2010.

19 *CBC News* (Can.), Oct. 28, 2000; M. Siddiq Noorzoy, “Afghanistan’s Children: The Tragic Victims of 30 Years of War,” Middle East Institute, Apr. 20, 2012.

20 *ABC News*, Dec. 19, 2011; *Fox News*, Dec. 19, 2011.

21 *Tolo News* (Kabul), June 17, 2013.

22 *The New York Times*, June 19, 2013.

23 “Taliban Guns Send a Message about Obama’s Peace Process,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2013.