

FEATURE REVIEW

The Taliban, radical Islam and Afghanistan

AMALENDU MISRA

Afghanistan: A New History

Martin Ewans

Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001

Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan

Michael Griffin

London: Pluto Press, 2001

Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism

John K Cooley

London: Pluto Press, 2000

The Taliban: Ascent to Power

M J Gohari

New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

The Taliban Phenomenon—Afghanistan (1994–1997)

Kamal Matinuddin

New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978–1992

Antonio Giustozzi

London: Hurst, 2000

Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid

London: I B Tauris, 2000

Amalendu Misra teaches at the School of Politics, Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1PA, UK. E-mail: misra.a@qub.ac.uk.

Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban

William Maley (ed)

London: Hurst, 1998

In a curious sort of way, our lives have become so much more intertwined in recent months that any particular obtrusive action by an individual, community or state is invariably treated as an affront against our very civilised existence. At a time when transnational activism has led to the decline of state sovereignty, any unilateral undertaking by any of these agents is treated with extreme anxiety. National interest, in other words, is slowly becoming a thing of the past and has gradually made space for global interest. But this raises some difficult questions. What if a society or state chooses to interpret the rules of interaction with its counterparts according to its own distinct vision? Similarly, should this attitude be interpreted as illiberal and the community castigated? Most fundamental of all, how are we to react if the said community consciously decides to inflict injury upon itself and against imaginary enemies?

A case in point is the Taliban's decision to create a society of its own liking. While the regime insisted that its policies were strictly in accordance with scriptural Islam and that, therefore, it had a legitimate right to introduce and implement them, liberals among us were pained to emphasise that its policies were an affront against basic human values. From a liberal perspective the Taliban's claim to authority was suspect on two counts. First, its interpretation of Islam was flawed. Second, the Taliban did not represent the legitimate national will in Afghanistan. However, beyond these ontological debates, the question that looms large and requires a coherent explanation is the evolution and working of the Taliban. The Taliban remains an enigma, even after its overthrow. It poses more questions than it answers.

Was the Taliban a product of eccentricities of a society that was visibly bewildered by a world which had left it behind? What was the rationale behind the Taliban's interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan's political process? Why was a Third World state with a rudimentary infrastructure used as a pawn during the heyday of the Cold War and later by mindless Islamic fanatics, mercenaries and their ideologues? How could a failed state without a coherent political life make an arresting impact on the larger international scene? And have we seen the end of reactionary Islamism with the overthrow of the Taliban?

Taliban and its surrogates

Martin Ewans argues in *Afghanistan: A New History* that, although there are clear indications that Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan coincided with the Soviet invasion of the country in the late 1970s, one can trace back its roots to a much earlier period. In the first quarter of the 20th century there were conscious attempts by various ruling houses in Afghanistan to introduce a particular variant of Islam propagated by a radical Indian cleric named Maulana Madoodi. Similarly, in the 1950s, there existed a flourishing Islamic movement in Kabul. Around this time many Afghan intellectuals at Kabul University's faculty of theology established links with the Islamic Brotherhood movement in Egypt, and envisioned a total Islamic revolution.¹

Interestingly, the Taliban's preference for a particular variant of Islam was a mere reintroduction of the Deobandi School of Thought, which was tried almost a century ago.²

More recently, the radical Islamisation of Afghanistan began as a CIA-initiated move to unite the Muslims of the country against the occupying communist forces. As Michael Griffin points out in *Reaping the Whirlwind*, under the 'Reagan Doctrine', an estimated \$3.5 billion was invested in the Afghan war efforts. Although Washington stopped its arms supply to Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, it did not sever strategic linkages with Afghan *mujahidin*, who occupied the power vacuum left behind by the retreating Soviet occupational force, and later with the Taliban.

Between 1994 and 1996 Washington maintained a shaky and ambivalent relationship with the Taliban and provided it with vital political support through its traditional allies in the region, namely Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. By propping up the Taliban, policy makers in Washington thought they could create an anti-Iranian and anti-*Shi'a* movement which could severely limit Iran's influence in the region.³ In Ahmed Rashid's view, the Taliban, which had not yet tasted real power, tempted the USA to believe that:

The movement disliked Iran, that it would curb poppy cultivation and heroin production, that it was opposed to all outsiders remaining in Afghanistan and including the Arab-Afghans and it had no desire to seize power or rule the country. As a matter of fact, some US diplomats who had opened up contact with the Taliban saw them as messianic do-gooders—like born-again Christians from the American Bible Belt. (p 182)

Once it assumed power, the Taliban ignored all its promises and to the horror of the USA went about publicly ridiculing the latter. In Martin Ewans' opinion, because of the interests the US oil company UNCOAL had in Afghanistan Washington was not just muted about, but was dismissive of, the social and judicial excesses of the Taliban rule (p 184). As things got worse the USA simply handed over the responsibility of dealing with the country to its one-time ally in the region—Pakistan. Pakistan's continuing support of the Taliban regime was couched in larger geo-political designs in South Asia. Like its predecessor civilian government, the military regime in Islamabad recognised the importance of a strategic ideological partnership with the Taliban while keeping in view the issue of Kashmir.⁴

But somewhere along the line the Taliban adopted an Arcadian premodern, and in some cases anti-Islamic, vision which did not reflect the CIA's original enterprise in Afghanistan. And Pakistan found itself in the middle of international criticism for recognising and promoting the interests of a regime in Afghanistan which was internationally considered fascist, fundamentalist and terrorist. What went wrong? As Martin Ewans suggests 'not for the first time where Afghanistan was concerned, the vagaries and inconsistencies of American policy worked against their own best interest in the region' (p 184).

While all the books reviewed here have clearly stated how external intervention was responsible for the ruination of the Afghan state, only Giustozzi raises the crucial question, ie whether the process which brought about the collapse of Afghanistan could have been stopped at some stage (p 247). M J Gohari shares Giustozzi's view in *The Taliban: Ascent to Power*. Before the Taliban stepped into

the tumultuous history of the country, Afghanistan was simply a failed state without a coherent political life and therefore unacceptable to most other nations of the international community.

While the civil war continued, the Taliban was the only force capable of keeping the masses together in a fast disintegrating state where nationalism had truly and fully dissipated. There was plenty of scope to allow Afghans to escape the civil war and the fascist Taliban regime. Perhaps the events following 11 September would never have happened. Although the USA was quick to enlist Afghanistan into the wider conflict of the Cold War, it was obviously non-committal about steering the country back into the folds of normalcy. There is a unanimous voice that emerges from all the authors reviewed here that the onus at this point rested solely on the USA to help Afghanistan recover from the ills of a long-drawn-out war. In the end, in Giustozzi's opinion, only the USA and Pakistan could have averted the systematic vandalism of Afghanistan. Both these powers pursued a policy in Afghanistan that primarily aimed at perpetuating their self-seeking narrow national interests and wilfully ignored the interests of Afghans.

Clearly, there was no forgiveness on the part of the new regime—which had brought death and destruction while settling scores with another superpower—towards the USA. Once it stepped into the chasm of Afghan politics the Taliban merely replicated the strategic thinking of its once intellectual gurus from the CIA. During the Soviet occupation the USA encouraged the recruitment of non-Afghan Islamic mercenaries to fight against the Soviets. The Taliban 'pursued the same method, but the only difference this time around was that it was waged against the United States and its allies' argues Griffin, in his highly informative, although journalistic, study. John K Cooley shares Griffin's view and argues, 'the Taliban and its cohorts were not slow to identify a new godless infidel enemy in the CIA'.

The rhetoric this time had a wider appeal because it was laced with some highly evocative messages. Evidently, in its attempt to raise the spirit of the *mujahidin* against the Soviet occupational force, the CIA had liberally used the analogy of the lost honour of Islam before the godless Communists. The Taliban effectively summoned the conscience of the Islamic community as a whole and demanded that they respond to the evil designs of the West. Osama bin Laden's rallying cry, that 'Muslims are starving to death while the United States and the west are stealing their wealth and honour', did infuse a spirit of resistance akin to the *mujahidin* defiance of the Soviets, argues Cooley.

An antiquated vision

One does not wish to insist on the central ideology of the Taliban too much. Yet there was little that the regime proposed to tell the outside world about itself or its national agenda of action. It had an official website, however, in which the regime claimed to have brought security, peace and prosperity to the country. Its 20-odd A4 page manifesto was also a conscious critique of the working of international society. One might be tempted to argue that, when the Taliban insisted on the right to absolute impunity in matters relating to internal issues, it lacked a critical vision and had thrown itself into such an ideological construct without thinking about the repercussions. Not quite. The repudiation of the idea of a conventional and modern

society as we know it was a conscious and perceptive action undertaken by the Taliban.

The story that the Taliban proposed to tell was that Afghanistan under its rule would assume the character of an archetypal and self-conscious community based on *Quranic* principles. It further argued that this community was a product of the people's will, which individual members had chosen as a form of self-dedication, to abhor the professed rationalism and modernity of the world around them. This nostalgia for an ideal type had little to do with Islam. Contrary to its claims, the Taliban's authority was not rational Islamic communitarianism mediated by a contract. The appeals it made on behalf of Islam were historically grounded tribal behavioural patterns, values and norms which were either pre-Islamic or had little to do with the code of conduct laid down in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. The interpretation, distortion and use of Islamic religious texts by the Taliban was therefore arbitrary and designed to incorporate its own narrow vision.

One is prepared to risk a large generalisation here that the Taliban did not have intellectual curiosity. Despite the parade of orthodoxy there still remained plenty of ambiguity in its interpretation of Islam. As a close observer of Afghan politics writes, the Taliban were 'neither radical Islamists inspired by *Ikhwan* (the Muslim brotherhood founded in Egypt in 1928), nor mystical *Sufis*, nor traditionalists ... The Taliban represented nobody but themselves and recognised no Islam except their own'.⁵

Although it promised to establish an egalitarian order based on the principles of Islam, the Taliban's relationships in the socio-religious and political arena were dominated by a vertical arrangement. In its preoccupation with the promotion of virtue and the abolition of vice, the Taliban had either thrown overboard issues such as political rights and minority cultures or relegated questions of national importance to a secondary space. In this hierarchical order the consequentialist view of means and ends had a special place indeed.

The Taliban imposed religiously satisfying cultural narratives constructed to meet traditional orthodox expectations of the clerics, and to satiate various conservative elements in society. The Talibanisation of Afghanistan could be interpreted as an adventure with oneself. The Taliban introduced the idea of a puritanical Islamic state in order to postpone the transition to normal civilian rule after the Soviet withdrawal. In the opinion of Michael Griffin, thanks to the globalisation of radical Islam, Afghan *mujahidin* were taken on board and found such conflict zones as the Balkans, North Caucasus and Kashmir extremely fertile. Yet the number of war-loving Afghan *mujahidin* making it to these far-flung places was a trickle. Thus, devoid of a cause and to vent their habitual warmongering, they turned their hatred and anger inward. The result was a spectacular backlash against everything associated with what we call facets of modernity.

According to Martin Ewans, the economic, political and finally religious atomisation of Afghan society went through various phases. In the first phase the contest was between the urban elite and the rural poor. During this conflict their rural counterparts treated a politically conscious enlightened urban mass as religiously emasculated beings. Therefore a vigorous campaign to eliminate everything related to the urban way of life became a fundamental duty for the Taliban forces, which had originally belonged to the periphery of the society. Having *demodernised* the society,

in the second phase, the Taliban went about restricting the freedom of women. Since the remnants of an earlier non-Islamic civilisation represented a semblance of secular identity, in the third phase, the regime took up the task of systematically eliminating it. Interestingly, like Stalinist Russia or Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban-initiated revolution in Afghanistan was controlled from above and was not horizontal in its approach.

It is an established truth that Afghanistan is a 'man's country'.⁶ The basis of this idea of male superiority has both a tribal and religious origin. The coercive measures undertaken by the Taliban, which reduced women to 'second class citizens', were to some extent designed to reinforce the tribal patriarchal order. Moreover, this strict regimen in the realm of sexuality could be imposed because of the religious injunctions of the *Quran*, which explicitly presents a male-dominated society where women only play a secondary role.

For instance, that the Taliban targeted the minority Persian speaking non-Pushtun elite women over their counterparts is a little known fact. Indeed, the Taliban was especially cruel to women in the cities, but those in the rural areas were left to live a normal life, as they satisfied the premodern moral order envisioned by the former. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that women did not enjoy the right to civil identity. Unfortunately, in the Taliban's interpretation, the civil identity of women was restricted to the confines of the home. In this context, there clearly existed a fundamental difference between our notions of the 'right to an identity in the feminine mode', which is negotiable, and its exact opposite in an Islamic polity, where it is non-negotiable.⁷

Moreover, the camaraderie that existed among the rank and file of the Taliban forces, and their obsession with misogyny, argues Ahmed Rashid, had a psychological, historical and religious explanation. Since the Taliban were orphans of war, who in their long hard battle against Soviet occupational forces had little or no interaction with women and their company, they retreated into a male brotherhood compared to that of the Crusaders of the Middle Ages. Therefore, as Nancy Hatch Dupree suggests in her contribution, 'Afghan women under the Taliban', in William Maley's volume, 'although the Taliban's pronouncements regarding women may be couched in Islamic rhetoric, the web of hidden attitudes governing official actions and colouring public statements was woven of many complexities' (p 151).

The same goes for the Taliban's treatment of cities, other repositories of modernity and comfortable living. Both in theory and practice, the upper echelons of the Taliban despised the forces of modernity. A majority of Taliban warriors grew up in the refugee camps in Pakistan in utter poverty, squalor and minimalist grey desperation. In their destitution, they were encouraged to espouse the idea of revenge in countless *madrassas* sponsored by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the CIA.

This indoctrination into radical Islamism and the psychological and emotional scars incurred during their time as refugees produced a deep-seated contempt for a normal lifestyle associated with a peaceful urban existence amid modernity and prosperity. In the opinion of a contemporary observer, the Taliban 'embodied a lethal combination; a primitive tribal creed, a fierce religious ideology and the sheer incompetence, naiveté, and cruelty that are begot by isolation'.⁸ Nevertheless, there could be other explanations for the Taliban's war against modernity.

Pre-Taliban urban Afghanistan was a world completely interiorised by a non-

Pushtun ethnic minority. Its Persian-speaking urban elites lived a life absolutely alien to the rest of the populace. In Matinuddin's view, throughout Afghanistan's modern history this urban elite maintained a disdain for and was contemptuous of the rural masses, keeping them at a safe distance. During the communist era, this elite went so far as to direct its energy towards persecuting the rural majority. In the tradition of messy tribal politics, the Taliban, consisting of Pushtun peasants, mountain people and nomads, pursued a policy of musical chairs as it reclaimed its cities. The elites were slaughtered, their mansions vandalised and women sentenced to a life under the *burqua* and condemned to the confines of home. Absolute aggressive puritanism, in other words, became the order of the day.

According to Matinuddin, in the hectic early days of its emergence the Taliban liberally used various tribal practices to consolidate its position. Consolidation of its authority, however, overburdened it with expectations. Being unable to deliver, it had to engineer chaos in society. In the first phase it directed the masses looking for action against a fading minority that was well versed in modernity. Having succeeded in fulfilling that endeavour, it later turned the masses against themselves. In the classic revolutionary mode it became a country where everyone had been taught to be suspicious and to hate. This attitude can best be explained as a circular position common to many revolutionary regimes. In this construct the regime experiences a profound inability to define its objective in clear terms and pits society against itself.

Since this inverse revolution is country-, culture-, and time-specific, the concerned regime might devise a particular notion of the enemy for public consumption. In circumstances such as these, it may either turn every individual against the other, as was the case during the Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, or target a particular class, as was evident during the Maoist Cultural Revolution in China. A new variant of this intramural struggle which has emerged in recent years is a community's adoption of extreme hatred towards a particular sex and such inanimate objects as culture, as exemplified in the case of the Talibanisation of Afghanistan.⁹

However, once that inward revolution was complete the Taliban required new targets to keep the masses occupied. With the coming of Osama bin Laden and his mercenaries, the regime found an enemy in the world outside. Also, as Gohari argues in this context, the Taliban easily embraced the martyrdom logic of al-Qa'ida ideologues thanks to the parallel understanding of reactionary Islam common to both parties. Curiously enough both found themselves on the margins of wider society. Whereas the Taliban was isolated and shunned because of its conservative statecraft, al-Qa'ida members were social rejects and literally homeless.

Hanging on this abstract Archemedian point, both vowed 'to act out, to realise, to practise the faith as an expression of their uncompromised belief'. Unsurprisingly, both randomly quoted the *Quran* to satisfy their course of action. In this ideological and strategic alliance they considered the freedom and duty of a true Muslim to be to act according to *hakimiya*, or the sovereignty of God. Since the larger world had rejected them it was easy for both to associate it with *jahiliyat*, a godless world. And, by the same logic, they took upon the task of ending *jahil* (modern) activity, even though this involved terrorist strikes and the killing of innocent civilians.

Islamic consolidation

To assess the role of the Taliban in Afghan politics, it would be useful to distinguish between those political movements which are genuinely inspired by religion and those that use religion as a convenient legitimisation of political agendas based on non-religious interests.¹⁰ Islamic orthodoxy, according to Abd-al Ibn Khaldun, the last great Muslim thinker, is most likely to take root in the periphery of a state. It exists on the margins of a society where there is little or no economic development, where people are destitute and there is constant fighting among various groups. This is a society that is caught up within itself, where there is widespread resistance from the orthodoxy to the logic of modernity.

In such an anarchical condition, orthodox Islam provides a modicum of normality, by bringing together an ill assortment of individuals, groups, tribes and communities. Radical Islam, in other words, is a direct outcome of the state's diminished authority. But after having consolidated itself, radical Islam does not necessarily aim to reinstate the authority of the state. Instead, it reiterates that what really matters is not the state, but the complex mechanism of religion-inspired institutions and associations that can act as an alternative to the state.

Michael Griffin points out that the Taliban Movement had put a lid on perpetual banditry, tribal vendettas and sectarian violence, and had disarmed much of the mountainous countryside. But the institutional mechanism that was required to keep a society running was largely absent in Afghanistan. Apart from imparting quick and violent justice, creating a sense of fear and forcing the populace to adhere to extreme religious orthodoxy, the institutions spawned by the Taliban did little. Almost three-quarters of the population lacked a proper job. People survived on subsistence, international aid and through smuggling arms and drugs. Why the Taliban adopted such policy postures requires a psychoanalytical study.

Like the radical Islam of the Hamas variety, the Taliban viewed international relations as an 'anarchical state of nature' dominated by independent, self-reliant civilisations struggling for power and prestige in a milieu inimical to co-operation. This condition of perpetual hostility required the followers of the Taliban to arm themselves against all non-Muslim forces competing to undermine them. This consolidation effort led the Taliban to adopt two extreme measures to retain this space: first, holy war or *jihad* against the outsiders; second, adoption of a strict self-imposed moral code which could be interpreted in terms of a 'discipline and punish' procedure.

Ironically, although scriptural Islam demands brotherhood among Muslims, there existed little tolerance towards various sects within Taliban interpreted Islam. The Taliban and its cohorts were essentially truth tellers from the dark side. The conception of anarchy, therefore, was not attributed to non-Muslims only, but liberally used against competing tribes and groups. In Michael Griffin's view, although Islam was given pre-eminence in the Afghan political process under the Taliban, the latter frequently persecuted other Islamic sects.

This view resonates in Ahmed Rashid's work. According to Rashid, even though the Taliban began as Islamic reformers espousing the notion of *jihad* against non-Muslim infidels, it soon broadened its scope to target minority Islamic ethnic groups and sects. By and large all non-Pushtun Muslims in Afghanistan felt that the Taliban

was ‘using *jihad* as a cover to exterminate them’. Indeed, among the non-Pushtun, the Talibanisation of Afghanistan was interpreted as nothing less than the spread of Pushtun fundamentalism.

Also, in Rashid’s view, the Taliban’s obtrusive position in the religious realm and its political adventurism were products of naiveté, frustration, and ideology’. Since the regime was not recognised either by international society, or by all fellow Muslim nations it adopted the mentality of a problem child. The net outcome of this was its persistent defiance of all conventional international norms. This rejection in turn pushed in to harbour dissidents, meddle in the domestic conflicts of various countries, persecute its own citizenry and export global terrorism.

That it revelled in its notoriety was evident when it refused to comply with Washington’s repeated extradition demand for the Saudi-born radical Osama bin Laden before 11 September and in the period following. Arguably, the Taliban’s continued engagement in such actions, suggests Michael Griffin, was directed at taking revenge on the international community. More precisely, the introduction of religious orthodoxy to the country and the export of terrorism beyond its borders was aimed at injecting the type of self-pride that comes with defiance.

The Taliban and globalisation

While comparative study of the Taliban is not exempt from acerbic criticism from modernists averse to the idea of radical conservatism which this movement espoused, it is striking that this conservatism is in fact a product of modernism and other forces of globalisation. The evidence in this regard comes from James Cooley. In *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, Cooley highlights how both the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union, through their rivalry, inadvertently brought a traditional tribal society under the intense scrutiny of global politics. Furthermore, in Cooley’s view, by infusing the *mujahidin* with radical Islam as a bulwark against the evil Soviet empire, Washington inadvertently became a party to the promotion and export of Islamic extremism and a worldwide terrorist network.

Since the events of 11 September 2001, those sympathetic to the Taliban have argued as follows: since its overall attitude to civilisation came into conflict with our indulgent lifestyle and morality in the West we were vindictive in our attitude towards this regime. It is not far fetched to suggest that, although various Islamic regimes denounced the Taliban and supported the international campaign against al-Qa’ida, their citizenry were supportive of the Taliban.¹¹

Islam, by and large, has difficulties with radical new ideas. The globalisation of Western-dominated culture, whose contours are yet to be identified, is naturally viewed with suspicion and scepticism by the followers of Islam. Similarly, globalisation in the economic and political spheres and in the realm of communication inevitably challenges many old orthodoxies. Ironically, it was not only the Taliban who adopted a differential treatment of women and made religion the central hub of society. Other contemporary Muslim societies ‘find it impossible to contemplate the separation of religion and state, or admit to a changed place in society for women or permit the free exchange of ideas’.¹² Some 10 years ago, in one of his provocative essays, Ernest Gellner remarked that ‘no secularisation has taken place in the world

of Islam: that the hold of Islam over its believers is as strong, and in some ways stronger, now than it was 100 years ago'.¹³

Moreover, even when Muslims cease to believe in Islam, they may retain Islamic habits and attitudes;¹⁴ this certainly is not helpful to the dissemination of supposed universally held norms and values. Viewed from the perspective of globalisation, it is evident that Islamic movements have now largely 'displaced secular nationalist and leftist movements as the primary mobilising forces of resistance against real and imagined western political, economic and cultural domination'.¹⁵

Since globalisation has primarily been constructed against the backdrop of Western experiences and overwhelmingly seeks to impose the latter's own conception of modernity, it has quite naturally been contested in some societies. But, before we proceed further, it might be prudent to ask what Islamic understandings, experiences and interpretations of globalisation are. Furthermore, one needs to address another crucial question, ie what aspects of globalisation are offensive to political Islam in the above-mentioned societies?

In the context of globalisation, radical Islam, though it draws on 'pre-modern readings of the *Quran* and other religious texts, is wholly modern in its revolutionary existentialism'.¹⁶ Radical Islam has its own interpretation of globalisation, as is explained in the context of martyrdom. As a critic suggested following the events of 11 September, 'radical Islam is built on the failure of liberalism, communism and nationalism'.¹⁷ And each of these schemas captured aspects of reality in Afghanistan. First, it was king Zahir Shah's surreptitious liberalism that helped a homegrown communist movement, only to be replaced by nationalists.

Second, since nationalism was too alien an ideal in a society divided by ethnic, clan and tribal loyalty, radical Islam was a natural choice to act as a fixture. Third, the non-recognition of the Afghan state by the international community forced the Taliban to give sanctuary to all the radical elements rejected by their own Muslim societies. As in many other underdeveloped states, pressed from outside, corrupt and incompetent from within, the successive regimes proved unable to defend Afghanistan's national interests or to deliver social and economic justice. Martin Ewans agrees: caught in the middle of this malaise, Afghanistan choked.

Those belonging to the Taliban and the now infamous al-Qa'ida brotherhood clearly felt that Islamic civilisation was adrift, and took upon themselves the task of rescuing it from that listless, uncertain voyage. In a somewhat skewed Islamic existential schema the Taliban argued that there is no essential humanity and a Muslim is defined by his or her own actions. While recounting the current history of Afghanistan, Martin Ewans is forced to entertain the question: what future for the Taliban? Since the publication of his book predates the events of 11 September, one cannot help but sympathise with his argument that 'the Taliban's control of Afghanistan will remain unshakeable' (pp 202–209). But can we say with certainty that Ewans was wrong?

While reflecting on the future of Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan one can draw parallels between the Soviet suppression of the *mujahidin* during the former's occupation of Afghanistan and the current international campaign to dismantle the Taliban and its cohort, al-Qa'ida. In his survey of the Taliban, Kamal Matinuddin refers to the diffuse nature of its command structure. As the current campaign shows, its operatives were only loosely connected organisationally. For the *mujahidin*, any

setback against the Soviets was merely a battle lost; the war was far from over. This organisational structure helped continue its offensive against the Soviets.

The Taliban clearly did not worry too much about its disasters. And the evidence in this regard is not hard to find. Asked of the future of the Taliban towards the end of the international military campaign, one supporter is reported to have said: 'in the event of death or elimination of Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar and the rest of the leaders there will be others to take their place, because "everyone who works for Osama is like Osama"'.¹⁸ This exit strategy demands a fresh examination. As the inner mechanism of the Taliban and its military wing al-Qa'ida begins to unravel, it is apparent that neither believed in national states. The Taliban's vision of an Islamic entity was not confined to Afghanistan but stretched all the way from Morocco to Malaysia. During a tactical retreat its troops either sheepishly surrendered or defected to the advancing non-Taliban force, perhaps to regroup and fight in the future. Seen in this light 'the Taliban's rout in Afghanistan would appear as not defeat but just a withdrawal, which left its armed wing al-Qa'ida to fight another day'.¹⁹ On that score at least it would be unwise to conclude that we have seen the end of the Taliban.

Some other long-term observers of Afghan politics share this sentiment. As Olivier Roy argues in his highly stimulating essay on the future of Islamism in Afghanistan in William Maley's volume, the 'Taliban model may not survive for very long as a political model, but could succeed in reinforcing the traditional conservatism and puritanism of Afghanistan's tribal south, the *Quran* belt' (p 204). Kamal Matinuddin makes a similar prognosis in *The Taliban Phenomenon*. He gives in to the temptation of using an intellectual field glass to assess the future of radical Islam in the region. He argues that it is not unreasonable to suppose that in a post-Taliban scenario elements of Taliban-initiated radicalism will continue to affect the lives of people and to colour regional politics. In any event, Matinuddin suggests, the fall of the Taliban hardly disposes of the problem posed by radical Islam of a fundamentalist variety.

What future?

As a Western scholar of political Islam put it, 'the role of Islam as a symbol of political legitimacy and a source of political and social activism and popular mobilisation has become global in scope, as various regimes have appealed to Islam in order to enhance their authority and legitimacy, implement policy programmes, increase popular support to the government and finally buttress nationalism'.²⁰ But more importantly, the use of Islam in the political process has come to challenge the hitherto dominant view that nation building requires a secular orientation.

Since prevalent thinking in the West is in favour of secularism and multiculturalism, the potential for schism between Islam and the West is obvious. Most often this ideological divide is mutual and responsible for serious antagonism. The general public in the USA and Europe today share an interest in seeing only the negative derogatory side of Islam, which often boils down to racist caricatures of the religion. While there exists an appetite for Islam, unfortunately it is only 'the "news" of a particularly unpleasant sort' that is mostly sought.²¹ Yet, as Bernard Lewis put it recently, the Islamic world is on a downward spiral owing to its 'internal uncompromising blind rage, spite, poverty and oppression'.²²

While strategically important, Afghanistan has no oil. Therefore it has a diminished value in the economic globalisation process. True, as Rashid points out, a stable political atmosphere could facilitate the construction of gas and oil pipelines through Afghanistan for markets in the Indian subcontinent. But the territorial importance of the country could be bypassed. As is apparent from the statements of President Bush, there will be 'no help from the United States towards the nation-building process in Afghanistan'. Naturally, Afghanistan may provide a disposable emotional interest for the West, with a weighty catalogue of confrontation but no constructive engagement.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), postwar reconstruction in Afghanistan will cost \$15 billion over 10 years. But raising that amount will be a task for Sisyphus. There is room for plenty of cynicism. When the UN asked the parties that floated the idea of a post-Taliban interim government in Bonn for an initial \$20 million, there was much reluctance to pick up the bill. The UN finally handed over less than \$10 million to the interim government.²³ Already there are dire warnings that, unless the international community makes a serious contribution to the rebuilding of Afghanistan, it may remain a failed state and continue to be a menace to regional and world peace.

What role for Afghans? Perhaps it is time for introspection and self-reflection. For Afghans, it is time to stop wallowing in self-pity. The rebuilding of Afghanistan cannot be done only with money. The people of Afghanistan are equally responsible for the ruination of their country. The causes were as much internal as external. The chief threat to a new Afghanistan is the future attitude of its citizenry towards each other. Owing to ethnic, clan and tribal divisions, the Afghans let the best of themselves slip away and become their own enemy. Since the country was trapped in an existential no-man's land it was easy for external forces to steer its citizens into issues and ideas which were not entirely beneficial to the country as a whole. If they are to escape any future manipulation and humiliation, Afghans need to chart a course between secular modern Islam and democracy.

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Barnett R Rubin, 'Arab Islamists in Afghanistan', in John L Esposito (ed), *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997, p 182.
- ² South Asian Islam has three spiritual inheritances: Deobandi, Barelwis and Faranghi Mahal. Of these three, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb established the last one in 1694 in Lucknow. While the Barelwis offered the possibilities of progressive transformation and apparent diversity of choice in terms of the worship of tombs, ascription of semi-divine qualities to the Prophet and intercession of Muslim saints, the Deobandis abhorred this supposed decadence among the Barelwis.
- ³ For a good discussion, see Benjamin B Fischer (ed), *At Cold War's End: US Intelligence on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1989–1991*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Press, 1999.
- ⁴ For a recent assessment, see Jessica Stern, 'Pakistan's jihad culture', *Foreign Affairs*, 79(6), 2000, pp 116–126.
- ⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London: IB Tauris, 2000, pp 87–88.
- ⁶ Eric Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, London: Picador, 1981, p 75.
- ⁷ For a stimulating discussion, see Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, London: Athlone Press, 2000.
- ⁸ Robert D Kaplan, 'The lawless frontier', *Atlantic Monthly*, 286(3), 2001, p 71.
- ⁹ In one of his essays Fred Halliday points out that 'The real danger of Islamisation lies not in its excesses, its random changes of direction, its blind groping, its utter obsolescence, but in the fact that

being incapable of setting up a structured historical order, it produces chaos; and this favours the more subversive and sinister elements who loiter in the corridors of power waiting for their time to come'. Fred Halliday, 'The politics of "Islam"—a second look', *British Journal of Political Science*, 26, 1995, p 410.

- ¹⁰ I am paraphrasing Peter Bergen's comment on the role of religion in international politics. See Peter L Berger, 'Secularism in retreat', *The National Interest*, 46, 1996/97, p 11.
- ¹¹ For a stimulating discussion, see Peter L Berger, *Holy War Inc, Inside the secret world of Osama bin Laden*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001.
- ¹² Paul Kennedy, 'Bernard Lewis asks what went wrong?', *New York Times*, 27 January 2002.
- ¹³ Ernest Gellner, 'Islam and Marxism: some comparisons', *International Affairs*, 67(1), 1992, p 2.
- ¹⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History*, Illinois: Open Court, 1993, p 7.
- ¹⁵ Paul M Lubeck, 'The Islamic revival: antinomies of Islamic movements under globalization', in Robin Cohen & Shirin M Rai (eds), *Global Social Movements*, London: Athlone, 2000, p 149.
- ¹⁶ Malise Ruthven, 'Signposts on the road: the nature of al-Qa'ida and the parochialism of Western intelligence', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 December 2001, p 4.
- ¹⁷ Fred Halliday, 'Islam and the West—roundtable', *Prospect*, November 2001, p 18.
- ¹⁸ *The Economist*, 1 December 2001, p 24.
- ¹⁹ Tim Judah, 'The centre of the world', *New York Review of Books*, 17 January 2002, p 12.
- ²⁰ Esposito, *Political Islam*, p 3.
- ²¹ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how we see the Rest of the World*, London: Vintage, 1997, p 144.
- ²² Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- ²³ 'Afghanistan: reluctant donors', *The Economist*, 19 January 2002, p 59.