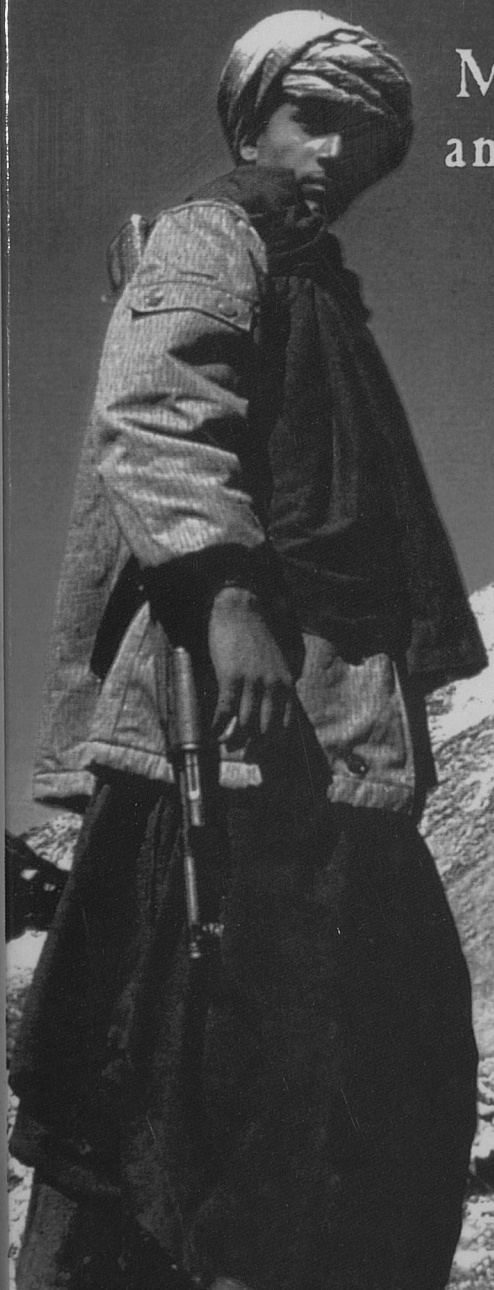
TALIBAN

Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid



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Ahmed Rashid

Shrouding themselves and their aims in deepest secrecy, the leaders of the Taliban movement control Afghanistan with an inflexible, crushing fundamentalism. The most extreme and radical of all Islamic organizations, the Taliban inspires fascination, controversy, and especially fear in both the Muslim world and the West. Correspondent Ahmed Rashid brings the shadowy world of the Taliban into sharp focus in this enormously interesting and revealing book. It is the only authoritative account of the Taliban and modern-day Afghanistan available to English-language readers.

Based on his experiences as a journalist covering the civil war in Afghanistan for twenty years, traveling and living with the Taliban, and interviewing most of the Taliban leaders since their emergence to power in 1994, Rashid offers unparalleled first-hand information. He explains how the growth of Taliban power has already created severe instability in Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and five Central Asian republics. He describes the Taliban's role as a major player in a new "Great Game"—competition among Western countries and companies to build oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to Western and Asian markets. The author also discusses the controversial changes in American attitudes toward the Taliban—from early support to recent bombings of Osama Bin Laden's hideaway and other Taliban-protected terrorist bases—and how they have influenced the stability of the region.

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Taliban

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For my mother,
what I have seen she taught me to see.
I hope I have honoured it.
And for Angeles.

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Yale University Press
NEW HAVEN ● LONDON

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First published by I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd in the United Kingdom.
Published in the United States by Yale University Press.

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ISBN 0-300-08340-8

Library of Congress Card Number: 99-68718

Typeset by Wyvern 21 Ltd, Bristol, U.K.
Printed in the United States of America.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

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PROLOGUE

Since 1989 the United States and other western nations have ignored Afghanistan's continuing civil war. Such policies were revised, however, on 11 September 2001, when the world was changed forever by terrorists from Afghanistan who visited their wrath upon the world in a brutal, tragic fashion. The nineteen suicide attackers, who hijacked commercial airliners and then rammed one into each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and another into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., belonged to the Al'Qaida organization, which is based in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and led by Osama Bin Laden. Their targets were the heart of the post–Cold War world—the nerve center of globalization and the supposed international efforts to make the world a safer, better place.

Within hours of the fiery attacks President George W. Bush announced that America was at war with international terrorists. "Those who make war on the United States have chosen their own destruction," he said on 15 September after declaring a national state of emergency. He warned that the US response would be "a conflict without battlefields or beachheads" and that "the conflict will not be short." He pledged to build an international alliance through NATO and other allies to punish Al'Qaida and the Taliban.

The suicide attackers, who had trained as pilots in the United States and Germany, came from a new generation of Islamic mili-

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tants. They were educated and middle class, with jobs and families and girlfriends. Yet they were filled with an implacable rage and anger that they had quietly nurtured for years, and these feelings enabled them to think nothing of killing some 7,000 people—many of them ordinary, pious American Muslims. (Understanding this rage and the organization that trained and inspired them is what this book is partly about.)

Yet Al'Qaida could not have spent the years of planning and organization that went into the attacks without a safe sanctuary where everything it needed was available—training, funding, communications, and inspiration. The long years of western neglect have allowed the Taliban to turn Afghanistan into just such a sanctuary for extremist groups from more than two dozen countries. Al'Qaida, with its 2,500–3,000 fighters in Afghanistan drawn from at least 13 Arab countries and its global network spread over 34 countries, is only the tip of a very large iceberg. The Taliban also host Islamic extremist groups from Russia, Pakistan, China, Burma, Iran, central Asia, and several countries of the Far East, which all fight for the Taliban while quietly carrying out their political agendas at home. Afghanistan has become the hub of a worldwide terrorist network, even though none of this is the fault of the misery-stricken Afghan people, who are facing drought, famine, civil war, and enormous deprivation as a result of the continuing war between the Taliban and the anti-Taliban forces of the United Front (UF).

The harbinger of the 11 September attack was the assassination just two days earlier of the UF leader Ahmad Shah Masud. Two young Moroccans carrying Belgian passports and posing as journalists had traveled from Brussels, London, and Islamabad to Kabul with a bomb hidden in a video camera. As they began their interview with Masud in the far northern part of the country, they blew up Masud and themselves. With shrapnel lodged in his head and torso, Masud survived only a few hours. There was little doubt that the assassination was organized by Al'Qaida as a means to further cement its close relationship with the Taliban leadership and to deprive the UF of its most gifted leader at the precise moment when Al'Qaida was about to carry out an even bigger act of terrorism—which it knew would suck

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revenge-seeking US forces into Afghanistan. Bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar apparently have no doubts that just as the Afghan Mujaheddin had destroyed the Soviet army after a ten-year war, they would now do the same to any US invasion force.

Taliban anger against the West had already escalated at the beginning of the year. On 19 January the UN Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1333, imposing sanctions on the Taliban including a complete arms ban, a seizure of Taliban assets outside Afghanistan, and the stoppage of all Taliban travel or international flights by the national airline, Ariana Afghan Airlines. The UNSC said that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was the world center for international terrorism and demanded the extradition of Bin Laden. The Taliban reacted angrily, saying they would never expel Bin Laden. Taliban anger was heightened by the fact that no ban was made on arms supplies to the UF, which continued to receive military aid from Russia, Iran, India, and the central Asian republics.

Pakistan, the principal supplier of weapons and fuel to the Taliban, was now in an awkward position but pledged to abide by the UN sanctions. However, the US State Department's annual report on global terrorism, released on 30 April, said that Pakistan was continuing to back the Taliban with "fuel, funding, technical assistance and military advisers." At the same time, the New York–based Human Rights Watch issued a blistering report, saying that Pakistan was breaking the UN sanctions by continuing to provide military supplies and men to the Taliban. With increasing international suspicion that Pakistan was continuing to supply arms to the Taliban, the UNSC passed Resolution 1363 on 31 July, setting up a team of monitors to be positioned on Afghanistan's borders to ensure that the UN arms embargo was enforced. The Taliban and Pakistan's Islamic parties that supported them responded with a threat to kill any UN monitors who were assigned to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

In the first nine months of 2001 there were several signs that a terrorist attack could be imminent. On 5 February the trial began in a New York courthouse for four Arab accomplices of Bin Laden accused of bombing two US embassies in Africa in 1998. On 29 May all four were convicted of 302 charges of terrorism and were sentenced to

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long jail terms. In April, an Algerian, Ahmad Ressam, was convicted of bringing explosives from Canada into the United States, where he had planned to blow up a Los Angeles airport in 2000. Between January and August, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Britain arrested twenty Algerians who were allegedly planning several terrorist attacks in Europe. They had close links with Bin Laden and had been trained in Afghanistan. On 23 June US forces in the Arabian Sea went on the highest state of alert after a terrorism alert was issued. US embassies were shut down in several countries in Africa and in the Persian Gulf region as Washington warned the Taliban that it would hold them responsible if Bin Laden mounted any attack.

As a result of UN sanctions the Taliban leadership was internationally isolated, but they, too, went on the offensive, determined to defy western pressure, even as the year-old drought continued, and as the civil war and the collapse of agriculture led to an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis and a flood of some one million new refugees both inside and outside the country. Heavy fighting occurred in January between the Taliban and the UF for the control of the Hazarajat region in central Afghanistan. This area is populated by the Hazara ethnic group, which is made up of Shia Muslims and is therefore loathed by the Sunni Taliban. The Taliban recaptured Yakowlang on 8 January, and human rights groups later documented the Taliban massacre of 210 civilians in and around the town. The UF recaptured Bamiyan city on 13 February, but it was quickly retaken by the Taliban.

On 26 February, as punishment and in a bid to cower the Hazaras, the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar ordered his troops to destroy two giant, 1,800-year-old statues of Buddha that dominated the Bamiyan valley. The Taliban assembled dynamite and tanks in Bamiyan amid widespread international condemnation, and many countries, including Japan, Sri Lanka, and Egypt, sent delegations to plead with the Taliban to halt their destruction of the statues. There were anti-Taliban demonstrations by Buddhists, Afghans, and art lovers in many world capitals, but the Taliban refused to relent and on 10 March the statues were destroyed by dynamite and tank fire. The Taliban also destroyed some forty statues in the Kabul Museum and a massive ancient statue of a reclining Buddha in Ghazni. The

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Taliban accused the world of isolating its regime and ignoring its starving people in favor of the statues, even though they themselves seemed little concerned about the plight of their people.

The destruction of the Buddhas roused some countries from their slumber regarding the dangers posed by the Taliban. UF leader Ahmad Shah Masud paid his first visit to Europe in April. He addressed the European Parliament in Strassburg and was received by the European Community in Brussels and the French foreign minister in Paris. The UF had been strengthened by the return to the country of both General Rashid Dostum, who, with the help of Turkey, set up a base in northern Afghanistan to rally Uzbek ethnic fighters against the Taliban, and Ismael Khan, the former governor of western Afghanistan who set up a new Iran-supported resistance base against the Taliban in Ghor province in western Afghanistan. The UF were thus able to open two new fronts to stretch Taliban forces during the summer.

The head of the Taliban Shura, or cabinet, in Kabul and deputy leader of the movement, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, died of cancer in a Karachi hospital on 16 April. Rabbani was considered a moderate who had been an advocate of a Taliban dialogue with Masud. His death signaled the end of any serious attempt by moderate Taliban leaders to resist the regime's hard-liners, who were determined to confront the West in order to create what they claimed was the purist Islamic state in the world.

Taliban defiance included escalated confrontations with UN and other international humanitarian agencies working in Afghanistan as well as the passage of new laws that created grave human rights violations and antagonized many Afghans. On 19 May, the Taliban closed an Italian hospital in Kabul, forcing European doctors to flee after they were accused of consorting with Afghan women. Two days later the Taliban refused to cooperate with UN agencies regarding a children's polio immunization campaign. On 22 May the Taliban declared that all Hindus in the country would have to wear yellow badges for identification purposes, a move that resulted in more international condemnation, which continued for several weeks before the Taliban backed down, saying Hindus would instead have to carry identity papers. An estimated 1,700 Hindus and Sikhs are still in Afghanistan.

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On 31 May the Taliban banned foreign female aid workers from driving cars.

The Taliban's most serious dispute with the aid community was their refusal to allow the UN World Food Program (WFP), which feeds some three million Afghans, to carry out a survey of recipients of subsidized bread at WFP bakeries in Kabul. After months of failed negotiations the WFP threatened to close its 157 bakeries in Kabul by 15 June. The Taliban sought help from Arab and Muslim relief agencies, but little aid was forthcoming. The WFP shut down its bakeries on 15 June, prompting the Taliban to agree to a compromise solution two days later. On 13 July the Taliban banned the use of the Internet inside the country. A week later the Taliban issued another decree banning the import of thirty items, including games, music cassettes, and lipstick. The Taliban's confrontation with aid agencies escalated on 5 August, when they arrested eight foreigners and sixteen Afghans belonging to Shelter Now International and accused them of promoting Christianity—a charge punishable by death. The trial of the eight foreigners, which included four Germans, began on 4 September at the Supreme Court in Kabul under Sharia or Islamic law.

The annual summer offensive of the Taliban began on 1 June with the attack by some 25,000 Taliban troops, including some 10,000 non-Afghans (Arabs, Pakistanis, and central Asians), on UF front lines outside Kabul, in Takhar province in the northeast part of the country, and in the Hazarajat. The UF was unable to capture territory, but it held its position against the Taliban, and the UF's new battlefronts in northern and western Afghanistan were effective in stretching Taliban forces. In an August report to the UNSC, Secretary General Kofi Annan urged a new "comprehensive approach" to try and bring peace to Afghanistan, terming past attempts "fruitless endeavors," and he outlined the need for a strategy of incentives and disincentives as well as the need for a reconstruction plan for the country. Annan also mentioned that a greater number of foreign Islamic radicals were now fighting on the side of the Taliban than ever before.

Through this political crisis the suffering of the Afghan people has increased relentlessly, with Afghanistan rated the world's worst humanitarian disaster zone in 2001. Afghans constitute the largest

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refugee population in the world, with 3.6 million refugees outside the country, of which 2.2 million are in Pakistan and 1.2 million are in Iran. By September there were more than a million new victims—800,000 displaced Afghans inside the country, 200,000 refugees in Pakistan, and another 100,000 in Iran. The long-running drought forced millions of people off the land and into the cities, where aid agencies were overwhelmed because of a lack of resources and Taliban harassment. In January, 100 Afghans, many of them children, died of severe cold in six refugee camps in Herat, where some 80,000 people had gathered. In northern Afghanistan, where some 200,000 Afghans were displaced, people had turned to eating grass, animal fodder, and rodents and were selling their daughters for a pittance in order to buy food.

The UN was overwhelmed by the crisis in agriculture. A WFP survey of 24 provinces in April stated that 50 percent less land would be cultivated in 2001 because of the drought and seed shortages, while 70 percent of the country's livestock had been destroyed by the acute water shortages and the lack of grazeable land. In June the UN warned of mass starvation and deaths due to food shortages unless the international community responded with increased aid. However, the Taliban's harassment of aid agencies caused many western donor countries to be reluctant to commit aid. WFP said it would need to feed 5.5 million destitute people in the winter of 2001–2002, compared with 3.8 million in 2000. The plight of Afghans became an international issue at the end of August, when Australia refused to grant asylum to 438 refugees, mostly Afghan, who were plucked by a Norwegian container ship from a sinking Indonesian boat as they tried to make their way to Australia. Afghans now constitute the largest number of illegal migrant workers in Europe.

Ironically, the economic crisis was exacerbated by the Taliban's single compliance with international demands—the ban on poppy cultivation. The poppy flower is converted into opium and heroin, which have provided a major source of financing for all the warring Afghan factions. Mullah Omar had banned poppy cultivation in July 2000, and the ban was rigorously enforced. In March 2001, the UN and the United States acknowledged that the Taliban had prevented all

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poppy cultivation, and several countries pledged direct aid to thousands of farmers who had lost everything because they had no seed or fertilizer to grow alternative crops. Consequently, many of the new refugees were farm laborers who had lost their livelihood. The current ban notwithstanding, opium stocks from previous years continued to be smuggled into neighboring countries such as Tajikistan and Iran and then exported illegally to Russia and Europe, as the price of Afghan opium rose ten times compared with 2000 prices.

Before 11 September all the signs were clear that Afghanistan had become a major threat to international and regional stability. The drought, the civil war, the mass migrations, drug trafficking, the hard line espoused by Taliban leaders, and the increase in terrorist groups operating from the country should have alerted western powers that a crisis was at hand. The world realized the significance of Afghanistan only on that sunny morning in New York, when people watched aghast as planes were crashed into each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Now, as the United States and its western allies prepare a devastating military campaign against the Taliban and Al'Qaida, one can only hope that there will also be a political and economic strategy to bring about a new government in Afghanistan and deal with the economic crisis that has only helped to fuel extremism and terrorism.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been 21 years in the writing – about as long as I have covered Afghanistan as a reporter. The war in Afghanistan has taken out a good chunk of my life even though as a Pakistani journalist there was enough going on at home to report on and later there was Central Asia and the collapse of the Soviet Union to cover.

Why Afghanistan? Anyone who has been touched by an Afghan or visited the country in peace or in war, will understand when I say the country and the people are amongst the most extraordinary on earth. The Afghans have also been affected by one of the greatest tragedies of this century – the longest running civil war in this era which has brought untold misery.

Their story and their character involve immense contradictions. Brave, magnificent, honourable, generous, hospitable, gracious, handsome, Afghan men and women can also be devious, mean and bloody-minded.

Over the centuries, trying to understand the Afghans and their country was turned into a fine art and a game of power politics by the Persians, the Mongols, the British, the Soviets and most recently the Pakistanis. But no outsider has ever conquered them or claimed their soul. Only the Afghans could have been capable of keeping two empires – Britain and the Soviet Union – at bay in this century. But in the last 21 years of conflict they have paid an enormous price – over 1.5 million dead and the total destruction of their country.

For me, luck has also played a role in my relationship with Afghanistan. Many times I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I watched as army tanks blasted their way into the Kabul palace of President Mohammed Daud in 1978, a coup that was to set off Afghanistan's

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disintegration. A year later I was sipping tea in Kandahar's bazaar when the first Soviet tanks rolled in. As I covered the Soviet Union's war with the Mujaheddin my family urged me to write a book, as so many journalists were doing at the time. I abstained. I had too much to say and did not know where to start.

I was determined to write a book after spending several months in Geneva covering the excruciating UN sponsored negotiations in 1988, which ended with the Geneva Accords and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Packed in with 200 journalists I was fortunate enough to be privy to many of the internal stand-offs between diplomats from the UN, the USA, the Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. That book never got written as my first love, the Afghans, drove straight from Geneva into a bloody, senseless civil war that still continues today.

Instead I went to Central Asia to see the ancestors of the Afghans and became a witness to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which I wrote a book about from the perspective of the newly independent Central Asian states. But Afghanistan always drew me back.

I should have written another book in 1992 when I spent a month dodging bullets in Kabul as the regime of President Najibullah collapsed and the city fell to the Mujaheddin. By then the Afghan saga had taken me to Moscow, Washington, Rome, Jeddah, Paris, London, Ashkhabad, Tashkent and Dushanbe. Ultimately it was the unique nature of the Taliban and the lack of literature about their meteoric rise, which convinced me I had to tell their story as a continuation of the last 21 years of Afghanistan's history and my history.

For years I was the only Pakistani journalist covering Afghanistan seriously, even though the war was next door and Afghanistan sustained Pakistan's foreign policy and kept the military regime of General Zia ul Haq in power. If there was another abiding interest, it was my conviction as early as 1982 that Islamabad's Afghan policy would play a critical role in Pakistan's future national security, domestic politics and create an Islamic fundamentalist backlash at home. Today, as Pakistan teeters on the edge of a political, economic and social abyss while a culture of drugs, weapons, corruption and violence permeates the country, what happens in Afghanistan has become even more important to Pakistan.

Pakistan's policy-makers did not always agree with what I wrote. It was not easy to disagree with Zia. In 1985 I was interrogated for several hours by Zia's intelligence agencies and warned not to write for six months because of my criticism. I continued to write under pseudonyms. My phones were constantly tapped, my movements monitored.

Afghanistan, like the Afghans themselves, is a country of contradictions that are constantly played out for any reporter. Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, the extremist Mujaheddin leader sentenced me to death for being a

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communist sympathiser – along with George Arney of the BBC – and for a year published my name in his party newspaper, like a wanted ad. Later, in Kabul, a crowd chased and tried to kill me when I arrived moments after a rocket fired by Hikmetyar had killed two small boys in the Microyan housing complex. The Afghans thought I was a Hikmetyar agent checking out the damage.

In 1981 when Najibullah was head of the notorious KHAD, the Afghan communist secret service modelled on the KGB, he personally interrogated me after KHAD officers arrested me for reading a banned copy of *Time* magazine at Kabul's Post Office. After he became president and I had interviewed him several times, he thought I could carry a conciliatory message from him to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. I told him she would not listen to me, and she did not.

And many times I have been caught in the contradiction of crossfires, between Afghan communist troops and the Mujaheddin, between rival Mujaheddin warlords and between the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Masud's tank-gunners. I have never been the warrior type and mostly ducked.

My interest in Afghanistan could not have been sustained without the help of many people, above all the Afghans. To the Taliban mullahs, the anti-Taliban commanders, the warlords who went before them, the warriors on the battlefield and the taxi-drivers, intellectuals, aid-workers and farmers – too many to mention and mostly too sensitive to mention – my many thanks..

Apart from the Afghans I have received the greatest help from Pakistani ministers, diplomats, generals, bureaucrats and intelligence officers, who either wanted to take me on or were sincerely sympathetic to my views. Many of them have become firm friends.

Over the years the UN agencies and the non-governmental aid organizations have provided a home for me all over Afghanistan and have given me ideas, information and support. At the UN Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan I owe many thanks to its successive chiefs, Martin Barber, Alfredo Witschi-Cestari and Erick de Mul and to Brigette Neubacher, who has been in the Afghan business almost as long as I have. At the UN High Commission for Refugees I thank Robert Van Leeuwen, Shamsul Bari, Sri Wijaratne, Jacques Muchet, Rupert Colville and Monique Malha. At the World Food Programme the indefatigable Adan Adar understood the Taliban better than any other UN officer.

At the UN Special Mission for Afghanistan many thanks are due to Francis Okelo, James Ngobi, Hiroshi Takahashi, Arnold Schifferdecker and Andrew Tesoriere and at the UN in New York, Benon Sevan and Andrew Gilmour. At the International Committee of the Red Cross, Thomas Gurtner and Oliver Durr, at Acted aid agency Frederick Rousseau

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and Marie Pierre Caley and at Save the Children Andrew Wilder and Sofie Elieussen. The friendship and support of Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Afghanistan has been critical to this work.

For 16 years I have reported on Afghanistan for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and I owe my editors, especially Nayan Chanda, enormous thanks for giving me space in the magazine, travel funds and sustaining an interest in running stories from what has now become an obscure war on the edge of Asia. The former foreign editor V.G. Kulkarni took a huge risk when he convinced sceptical bosses that my 1997 story on the oil and gas pipeline battle in Afghanistan and Central Asia was worthy of a cover story. From that story was to emerge the now common phrase, 'the new Great Game'. Foreign editors Andrew Waller and Andrew Sherry have continued that tradition.

My thanks to the *Daily Telegraph*'s successive foreign editors Nigel Wade, Patrick Bishop and Stephen Robinson for not totally forgetting about Afghanistan. And to fellow journalists and friends at the BBC World Service, Radio France International and Radio Australia for constantly letting me air my views.

In Pakistan, Arif Nizami, editor of the *Nation* has stood by me as I wrote reams on Afghanistan. He always gave me front page space and he always took the flak, fielding phone calls from invariably angry Pakistani government officials. Sherry Rehman, former editor of the *Herald* also allowed me to fill her magazine with my photographs and stories.

This could not have been accomplished without the enormous support and friendship – not to speak of the website – of Barnett Rubin, who knows more about Afghanistan than anyone I know. I owe heartfelt thanks to the Afghanistan brigade of scholars, journalists and human rights activists who like me cannot leave the story and from whom I have learnt so much – Olivier Roy, Nancy Hatch Dupree, Ashraf Ghani, William Maley, Anders Fange, Citha Maass, Eqbal Ahmad, Patti Gossman, Abbas Faiz, Steve Levine, Tony Davis, Edward Giradet, Sadao Sakai, Tim McGirk, Bob Nicklesberg, Maleeha Lodhi, Rahimullah Yousufzai, Leslie Cockburn, Francois Chipaux, Jennifer Griffin and Gretchen Peters.

I am deeply grateful to Cathy Gannon, the bureau chief of Associated Press in Islamabad and Kabul, who deserves several Pulitzer Prizes for her excellent coverage over the years, not to speak of her generosity and modesty. My many thanks to successive Reuters bureau chiefs in Islamabad, Jane Macartney, Alistair Lyon and Andy Hill. Many thanks to Sarah Hunt Cooke, my editor at I.B.Tauris who believed in the project from the start and was patient with deadlines.

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This book could not have been written without the patience, love and understanding of my wife Angeles and my two children, who have put up with my wanderings and absences and have shared my feelings for Afghanistan for a long time.

Ahmed Rashid
Lahore

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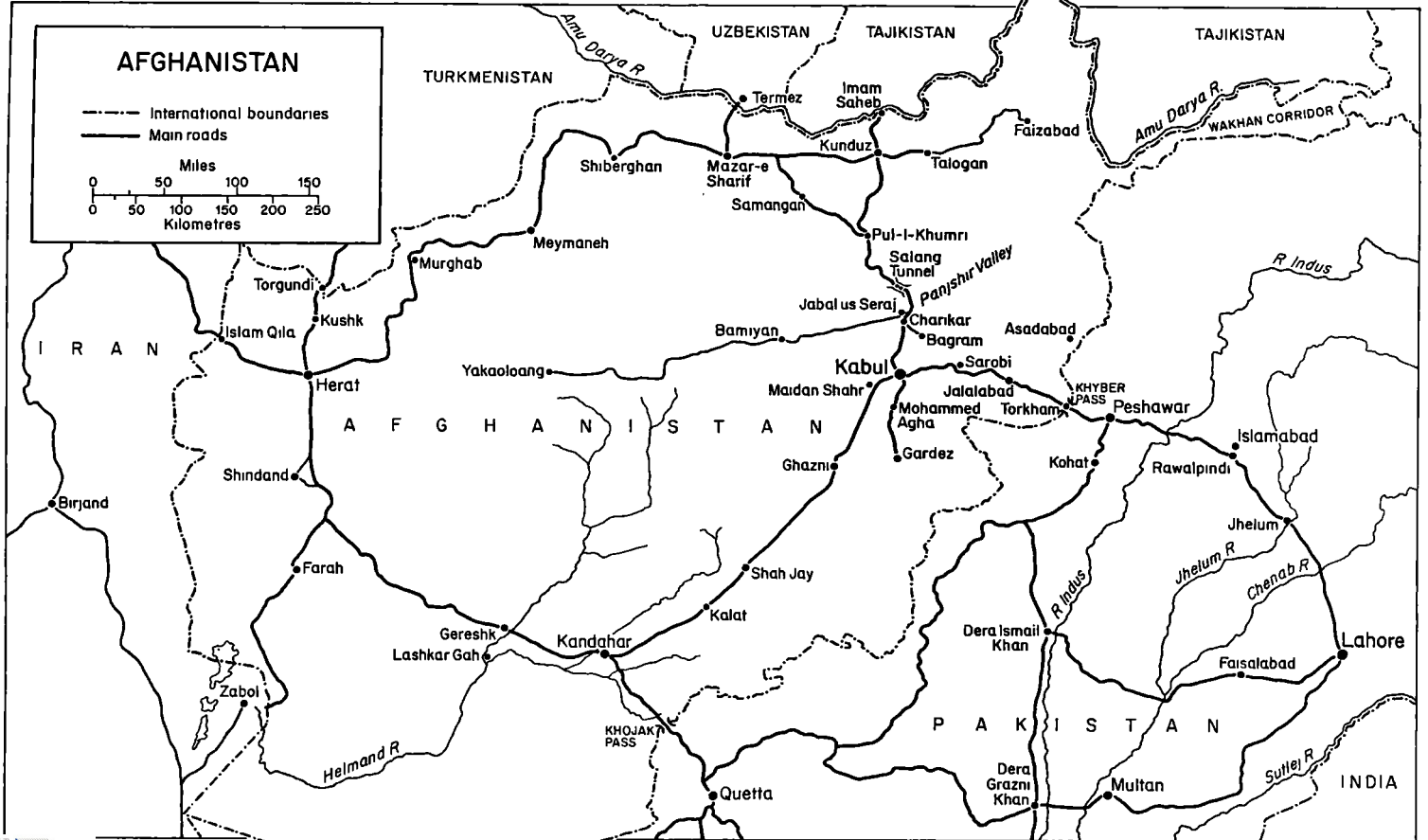
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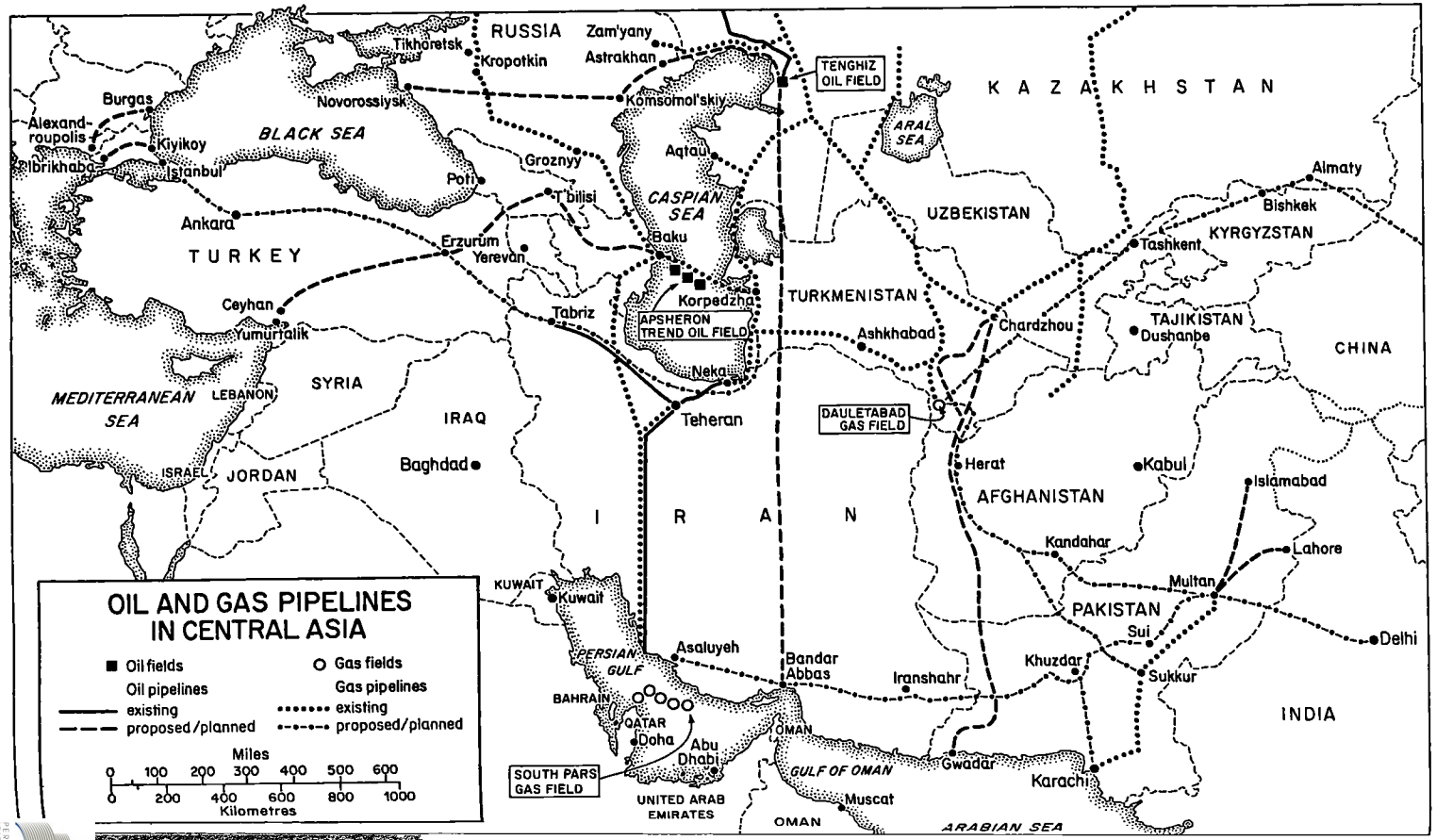
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I R A N
Kandahar
Lahore
KUWAIT
Kuwait
Multan
PAKISTAN
Sui
Delhi
PERSIAN GULF
Asaluyeh
Bandar Abbas
Khuzdar
Iranshahr
Sukkur
BAHRAIN
QATAR
Doha
Abu Dhabi
OMAN
INDIA
SOUTH PARS GAS FIELD
GULF OF OMAN
Gwadar
Karachi
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
Muscat
OMAN
ARABIAN SEA
OIL AND GAS PIPELINES IN CENTRAL ASIA
Oil fields
Gas fields
Oil pipelines
existing
proposed/planned
Gas pipelines
existing
proposed/planned
Miles
0 100 200 300 400 500 600
0 200 400 600 800 1000
Kilometres

INTRODUCTION: AFGHANISTAN'S HOLY WARRIORS

On a warm spring afternoon in the southern city of Kandahar, Afghan shopkeepers were pulling down their shutters in preparation for the weekend. Heavy-set Pashtun tribesmen with long beards and black turbans tied tightly around their heads made their way through the narrow, dusty alleyways to the city's football stadium just beyond the main bazaar. Children, many of them orphaned and in rags, ran up and down the alleys, gesticulating and shouting with excitement at the thought of the spectacle they were about to witness.

It was March 1997 and for two and a half years Kandahar had been the capital of the fierce Taliban Islamic warriors, who had conquered two-thirds of Afghanistan and were now battling to conquer the rest of the country. A handful of Taliban had fought the Soviet Red Army in the 1980s, more had fought the regime of President Najibullah who had hung on to power for four years after Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, but the vast majority had never fought the communists and were young Koranic students, drawn from hundreds of *madrassas* (Islamic theology schools) that had been set up in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.

Since their dramatic and sudden appearance at the end of 1994, the Taliban had brought relative peace and security to Kandahar and neighbouring provinces. Warring tribal groups had been crushed and their leaders hanged, the heavily armed population had been disarmed and the roads were open to facilitate the lucrative smuggling trade between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia which had become the mainstay of the economy.

The Taliban, drawn from the majority Pashtun ethnic group which

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accounts for some 40 per cent of Afghanistan's 20 million people, had also galvanized Pashtun nationalism. The Pashtuns had ruled Afghanistan for 300 years but had recently lost out to the country's other smaller ethnic groups. The Taliban victories revived hopes that once again the Pashtuns would dominate Afghanistan.

But the Taliban had also implemented an extreme interpretation of the Sharia or Islamic law that appalled many Afghans and the Muslim world. The Taliban had closed down all girls' schools and women were rarely permitted to venture out of their homes, even for shopping. The Taliban had banned every conceivable kind of entertainment including music, TV, videos, cards, kite-flying and most sports and games. The Taliban's brand of Islamic fundamentalism was so extreme that it appeared to denigrate Islam's message of peace and tolerance and its capacity to live with other religious and ethnic groups. They were to inspire a new extremist form of fundamentalism across Pakistan and Central Asia, which refused to compromise with traditional Islamic values, social structures or existing state systems.

A few weeks earlier in Kandahar the Taliban had lifted their long-standing ban on football. The United Nations (UN) aid agencies – seizing a rare chance to do something for public entertainment – rushed in to rebuild the stands and seats of the bombed out football stadium. But on this balmy Thursday afternoon – the beginning of the Muslim weekend – no foreign aid-workers had been invited to watch the stadium's inauguration. No football match was scheduled. Instead there was to be a public execution and the victim was to be shot between the goalposts.

I had just got off a UN plane arriving from Pakistan and was told about the execution in hushed tones by depressed and embarrassed foreign aid-workers. 'This is not exactly going to encourage the international community to give more funds for aid projects in Afghanistan. How do we explain the use the Taliban are putting our renovation of the football stadium to?' said one Western aid-worker.

They also looked nervously at my colleague Gretchen Peters, an American journalist. A tall, lanky blonde with a broad face and chiselled features, she was dressed in a one-size-too-small shalwar kameez – the local dress comprising baggy cotton pants, a long shirt that extended to below the knee and a long scarf that covered her head. But that did not hide her height or her striking American looks, which posed a threat to every concept the Taliban held – that women should be neither seen nor heard because they drove men away from the proscribed Islamic path and into wild temptation. Whether it was a fear of women or their abhorrence of femininity, Taliban leaders had frequently refused to give interviews to female journalists.

Ever since the winter of 1994, when the mysterious Taliban first

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emerged to conquer Kandahar and then swept north to capture Kabul in September 1996, I had been reporting on the Taliban phenomenon, making more than a dozen trips to Taliban strongholds in Kandahar, Herat and Kabul. I was even more interested in trying to get to grips with who they were, what motivated them, who supported them and how they had arrived at this violent, extreme interpretation of Islam.

Now here there was another Taliban surprise, both a nightmare and a gift to any reporter – a horrific event that made me tremble with both fear and anticipation. I had witnessed much death during the years of war, but that did not make it any easier to be a spectator at the execution of a fellow human being. And to view it as an entertainment, shared with thousands of people and as an expression of Islamic justice and Taliban control, was harder still.

At the stadium the Taliban first resisted our entry but then allowed me in if I stood quietly at the touch-line and promised not to talk to anyone. Gretchen Peters slipped in, but she was quickly ousted by a posse of panic-stricken armed Taliban guards who nudged her in the back with their kalashnikov automatic rifles.

By mid-afternoon every seat in the stadium was taken as more than 10,000 men and children packed the stands and overflowed on to the sandy football pitch. Children played games of dare by running on to the pitch before they were pushed back behind the touch-line by angry guards. It seemed as though the whole city's male population had turned up. Women were banned from appearing at any public events.

Suddenly the roar of the crowd subsided as two dozen armed Taliban, wearing plastic flip-flop sandals, black turbans and the male version of the shalwar kameez, came charging onto the pitch. They ran alongside the touch-line pushing the playful children back into the stands with their gun barrels and yelling to the crowd to be silent. As the crowd quickly obeyed, the only sound was the Taliban's flip-flops.

Then, as if on cue, several Datsun two-door pick-ups – the Taliban's favourite mode of transport – drove onto the football pitch. One pick-up sprouted a tinny sounding loudspeaker – the kind seen on thousands of mosques in Pakistan and Afghanistan. An elderly man with a white beard stood up in the vehicle and began to lecture the crowd. Qazi Khalilullah Ferozi, a judge of the Taliban's Supreme Court of Kandahar spoke for over an hour, extolling the crowd on the virtues of the Taliban movement, the benefits of Islamic punishment and a full history of the case.

Abdullah Afghan, a young man in his early 20s had allegedly stolen medicines from Abdul Wali, a farmer who lived in their common village near Kandahar. When Wali resisted, Abdullah had shot him dead. After several weeks of searching for him, Wali's relatives tracked Abdullah down, arrested him and bought him to the Taliban for justice. Abdullah

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was tried and sentenced to death, first by the Islamic High Court of Kandahar and then on appeal by the Taliban Supreme Court. These were trials without lawyers where the accused is presumed guilty and expected to defend himself.

The Taliban's interpretation of the Sharia or Islamic law demanded the execution of the murderer by the victim's family, but not before a last-minute appeal is made by the judge to the victim's relatives to spare the murderer. If they granted mercy the victim's family would receive blood money or monetary compensation. But how much of this interpretation of Islamic law by the Taliban is owed to the Sharia and how much is owed to the Pashtun tribal code of behaviour or Pashtunwali, is what is disputed by many Muslim theologians, both inside Afghanistan and beyond.

By now some 20 male relatives of the victim had appeared on the pitch and the Qazi turned to them. Raising his arms to the sky, he appealed to them to spare the life of Abdullah in exchange for blood money. 'You will go to Mecca ten times if you spare this man. Our leaders have promised to pay a huge sum to you from the Baitul Mal [Islamic fund] if you forgive him,' he told the relatives. As the relatives all shook their heads in refusal, the Taliban guards pointed their guns at the crowd and warned that they would shoot anyone who moved. There was silence in the stands.

Abdullah, who had been seated throughout the proceedings in another pick-up guarded by armed Taliban, was now let out. Wearing a bright yellow skullcap and new clothes, his feet shackled with heavy manacles, his arms chained behind his back, he was told to walk to the goalposts at one end of the stadium. His legs visibly shook with fear as he shuffled across the pitch, his chains clanking and glinting in the sunlight. When he reached the goalposts, he was made to kneel on the ground with his face turned away from the crowd. A guard whispered to him that he could say his last prayer.

A guard handed a kalashnikov to a relative of the murdered victim. The relative swiftly stepped up to Abdullah, cocked the automatic and from a few feet away shot him three times in the back. As Abdullah fell on to his back the executioner moved alongside his twitching body and at point-blank range pumped three more bullets into his chest. Within seconds his body was thrown into the back of a pick-up and driven away. The crowd quickly and silently dispersed. As we drove back into town, thin slivers of smoke arose from the bazaar as tea stalls and kebab stands lit up for their evening trade.

A mixture of fear, acceptance, total exhaustion and devastation after years of war and more than 1.5 million dead have forced many Afghans to accept the Taliban ways of justice. The next day in a village near Kabul, a woman was stoned to death by a baying crowd after being sen-

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tenced for trying to flee Afghanistan with a man who was not her blood relative. Amputations of either one hand or one foot or both are common Taliban punishments for anyone caught stealing. When they captured Kabul in September 1996, to be initially welcomed as liberators, many Kabulis and the world turned away in disgust after the Taliban tortured and then publicly hanged former President Najibullah, the ex-communist strongman who for four years had been living in a UN compound under UN protection.

Since the end of the Cold War no other political movement in the Islamic world has attracted as much attention as the Taliban in Afghanistan. For some Afghans the Taliban created hopes that a movement led by simple Islamic students with an agenda of bringing peace to the country might succeed in finally disposing of the warlord factions which had devastated people's lives since the communist regime in Kabul had been overthrown in April 1992. Others feared that the Taliban movement would quickly degenerate into one more warlord faction, determined to thrust despotic rule upon the hapless Afghan people.

The Pashtun Taliban have also brought the question of inter-ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic state to the forefront, as well as other issues including the role of Islam versus clan, tribal and feudal structures and the question of modernization and economic development in a conservative Islamic society. Understanding the Taliban phenomenon is made even more difficult because of the excessive secrecy that surrounds their political structures, their leadership and the decision-making process within the movement. The Taliban do not issue press releases, policy statements or hold regular press conferences. With their ban on photography and television, nobody knows what their leaders even look like. The one-eyed Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar remains an enigmatic mystery. After the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Taliban are the most secretive political movement in the world today.

Yet the Taliban have inadvertently set a new agenda for Islamic radicalism in the entire region, sending shock waves through Afghanistan's neighbours. Not surprisingly, Iran, Turkey, India, Russia and four of the five Central Asian Republics – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – have backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance with arms and money to try and halt the Taliban's advance. In contrast Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have backed the Taliban. In the post-Cold War era, this has created unprecedented polarization across the region. The Taliban victories in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 1998 and their control of over 90 per cent of the country, set in motion an even fiercer regional conflict as Iran threatened to invade Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban.

At the heart of this regional stand-off is the battle for the vast oil and

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A prologue has been added that reviews events leading up the attacks of 11 September 2001.

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Printed in the U.S.A.
Jacket design: Andy McColm
Jacket photograph: © Robert Nickelsberg

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Yale University Press
New Haven and London
yalebooks.com

ISBN 0–300–08340–8
9 780300 083408

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