



The “Great Game” for the Twenty-first Century: Islamic Extremism and Central Asia

By Ian Sethre



Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan by Michael Griffin. London: Pluto Press, 2001. 272pp.

Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 281pp.

Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 274pp.

Journalists used to use the idiom “Afghanistanism” to dismissively describe media coverage of regions or events considered to be too esoteric or complex to be of interest to the general reader. The term itself became obsolete—at least temporarily—in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Following the identification of Afghanistan as the home base of terrorist financier Osama bin Laden, the establishment of U.S. airbases in the formerly Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and the subsequent overthrow of the repressive Taliban regime by the U.S., this otherwise side-lined corner of Central Asia was thrust onto the global stage. Those seeking to learn about the region could easily be deluged with the series of books, articles and experts that emerged as the “War on Terrorism” got underway.

In the nearly two years since the attacks however, the Taliban—along with Osama bin Laden—have been forced into retreat, and subsequently, attention has again shifted dramatically away from Afghanistan and Central Asia. Indeed, even Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld seems to have forgotten the ongoing skirmishes between American soldiers and opposition in Afghanistan when he suggested that the United States military was prepared to wage a two-front conflict—against Iraq and North Korea. As if to further attest to the return to indifference, after a mere eighteen months in operation, CNN actually closed down its Kabul bureau altogether in May 2003. Nonetheless,

American and other forces continue to battle with remnants of the Taliban and other militants in the Afghan borderlands, regional warlords continue to battle each other, and a series of recent bombings in the Arab world and warnings emanating from the Bush administration suggest that *al Qaeda* is still very much a functional organization, most likely operating from within Afghanistan and tribal regions of northwest Pakistan.

The often overlooked but no less pertinent region of Central Asia—namely Afghanistan and the five formerly Soviet “stans:” Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—is the focus of Michael Griffin’s *Reaping the Whirlwind* and Ahmed Rashid’s two recent books, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* and *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. Griffin is news editor for the *Index on Censorship* and has worked intermittently in Afghanistan as a consultant for the United Nations. Rashid is a Pakistani journalist and scholar who has enjoyed unparalleled access in the region, beginning with coverage of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He has long been the primary Central Asia correspondent for a range of periodicals, including the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *London Daily Telegraph*. Over the course of the last two years, he has become a familiar face to American cable television news audiences. His book on the Taliban is widely regarded as the most authoritative and accessible book on the regime, and following the attacks of September 11 it became by far the best-selling book on the subject. Meredith Schreiber, a store manager at Powell’s City of Books in Portland, Oregon, reported selling only seven copies of the book in the ten months prior to the September 11. She sold more than 200 the following month.

In the months following September 11, Griffin too became a staple of the cable news circuit. In one interview, he suggested that mainstream media’s depiction of the Taliban, its relationship to *al Qaeda* and internal dynamics of Afghanistan were oversimplified to a fault. As a sociopolitical movement, the Taliban cannot be effectively analyzed without consideration of the circumstances of contemporary Central Asia. Consequently, in his assessment of Afghanistan and the Taliban in particular, Griffin pays considerable attention to the influence and agendas of the United States, Russia and other formerly Soviet neighbors, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China, all of which have meddled to shape Afghanistan into what it has become.

Indeed, it seems that an understanding of wider regional factors—the Taliban’s reliance on Pakistani and Saudi support, the oppressive forms of government in neighboring Uzbekistan and other former Soviet republics, the shifting alliances and brutality of prevailing warlords in Afghanistan, the historical interference of global superpowers—is imperative to comprehending the nature of Islamic extremist movements such as the Taliban or other radical outfits. On numerous occasions, Rashid has explained that he followed *Taliban* with *Jihad* to serve as a “warning:” that although the Taliban regime was bound to collapse (with or without its complicity in international terrorism, he contends), whatever peace there is in the region is extremely tenuous, and the prevailing set of circumstances and personalities are not likely to lead to prolonged stability. In the introduction to *Jihad*, Rashid suggests that “the civilized nations’ battle against terrorism may well define the twenty-first century just as Nazism and the Cold War defined the twentieth.”

Rashid and other analysts are particularly concerned about how international economic, strategic and perceptibly imperialistic interests in the region—such as the abundance of oil in geopolitically

“inconvenient” countries like Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—may serve to undermine human rights and democratization. Indeed, in the post-Soviet era, the region has been of particular and generally mutually exclusive interest to firms and administrations in the United States, Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, China and others, evoking the so-called “Great Game” of imperial domination between the Russians and the British more than a century ago. These economic considerations, taken in conjunction with more immediate concerns about global terrorism, indicate that the ramifications of distant regional affairs extend far beyond the borders of these seemingly unpronounceable and indistinguishable nations.

Rashid contends that it is for this reason that the Bush administration’s promises of military aid and assistance to these regimes (given in exchange for access to former Soviet airbases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan near Afghanistan’s northern border) is insufficient to ensure stability. He suggests that the international community—presumably a conglomerate of intergovernmental and agencies, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—should take an active role in guiding a comprehensive geopolitical strategy that adequately addresses the political needs, religious and ethnic dynamics, as well as economic, environmental and health concerns unique to the region. Without such engagement, it appears likely that the standard of living will continue to deteriorate, political repression will escalate and religious extremism will flourish.

This has most certainly proven to be the case in countries such as Tajikistan, which actually collapsed into a civil war in 1992, just after gaining independence, and Uzbekistan, where political opposition to the authoritarian president has become increasingly violent and increasingly religious in character. Like most of the current political leaders in the post-Soviet borderlands, virtually all of the region’s top leaders rose to power through the ranks of the Soviet bureaucracy. All of Central Asia’s leaders have promised to fully implement and faithfully abide by the tenets of democratic governance, but this has proven to be a long—and for the most part, nonexistent—process. Over the course of the last decade, the leadership of each of these former republics has become increasingly singular and totalitarian.

In the thirteen years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, only one of the five post-Soviet Central Asian administrations—that of Tajikistan—changed, and that came only after a catastrophic civil war. All other leaders have been “elected” to the office of president for life. Even Kyrgyzstan’s Askar Akayev, the one Central Asian president which Rashid and most other analysts expected to follow a course of democratic reform, has essentially fallen in line with the all too “Sovietesque” autocrats of the region. The leaders of all five states have implemented antidemocratic policies and practices that range from the absurd to the extremely repressive. For instance, after renaming himself *Turkmenbashi*—chief of the Turkmen nation—and renaming several cities and towns after himself, the president of Turkmenistan has renamed several months of the year after his mother and other relatives. All five leaders have also gone to Stalinist extremes to suppress freedom of expression and all—most notably Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov—have used the threat of Islamic extremism and domestic terrorism as a pretext to crackdown on opposition political parties and movements, and as a means of distracting a potentially disaffected population from more pressing problems faced by these underdeveloped and consequently destitute nations.

It was from these borderlands that the Kremlin recruited Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik and other Central Asians to fight in the Soviet war on Afghanistan—both due to their linguistic and ethnic kinship, but also to reduce the perceptible appearance of Russian colonialism and presumably reduce the impact of Russian or Ukrainian casualties among the Soviet Union’s dominant Slavs. Likewise, it is also within these regions that Cold War-era analysts (and more recently the second Bush administration) have noted the potential influence of radical Islam.

In *Jihad*, Rashid profiles a number of local extremist groups that began as relatively innocuous spiritual groups, but have since become increasingly militant as local regimes have become more authoritarian, thus perpetuating a self-destructive cycle. Accounts of repression (exaggerated or actual) fuel the flames of reactionary extremism, and, in turn, the determinedly secular autocrats seek to quash their enemies (real or imagined). According to Rashid, the current militant incarnations of these elements have no interest or agenda for eliminating government corruption, improving education or providing jobs. Instead, these new “Jihadi” groups (as he calls them) are obsessed with implementing an antidemocratic and archaic variation of traditional law, beholden to single charismatic leaders such as Mullah Omar of the Taliban, Juma Namangani of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or Osama bin Laden of *al Qaeda*. While the origins of these and other groups remain shrouded in secrecy, Rashid traces the emergence of these homegrown militant outfits to the densely populated and impoverished Fergana Valley, where the borders and ethnic populations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan converged (and occasionally overlapped) just prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

At the time of *Jihad*’s publication—more than a decade after the regional religious revival and just prior to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) seemed the most pressing threat to stability in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. What started out as a vigilante movement seeking to regulate prices during a period of economic instability, as well as impose *Shari’a* law on a somewhat reluctant population, ultimately grew into a full scale insurgency. Their leader, Juma Namangani, a former theology student and onetime Soviet paratrooper, hoped to topple the repressive regime of Islam Karimov and establish a theocracy akin to that of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. By 2001, George Bush had denounced the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as among the terrorist organizations of paramount concern to US security.

Karimov, who is described by Griffin as “Islamophobic,” in turn seized upon this insurgency to provide a distraction from Uzbekistan’s economic and other woes. Karimov labeled virtually all critics—including the most secular and democratic—as Islamic “fundamentalists.” In May 1998, Karimov had called for a nationwide crackdown on Islamicists, notifying his rubberstamp parliament that, “Such people must be shot in the head. If necessary I will shoot them myself.” He followed by closing hundreds of “illegal” mosques and detaining or disappearing thousands of “activists.” In response to government harassment, Namangani’s siblings publicly disowned him, and even after several family members implored him to surrender to authorities, his brother was arrested and sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment for his affiliation. Later, Namangani’s mother was denounced in a school auditorium.

For the most part, these developments went unnoticed, even after February 1999, when at least five bombs exploded in the capital Tashkent, killing sixteen, wounding more than on hundred, and

missing President Karimov's motorcade by seconds (he was late for a meeting). Karimov blamed all opposition groups, from the most secular to the most radical, for conspiring to assassinate him. Thousands were hauled in for questioning and many never resurfaced. Karimov vowed to arrest the parents of suspected IMU militants, declaring that "If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip off his head." In 2000, authorities determined that Namangani's forces were behind the kidnapping of a group of Japanese geologists and another troop of Colorado-based rock climbers in Kyrgyzstan (all of whom escaped or were released for ransom).

It was not long, nor is it particularly surprising, that the ongoing Afghan civil war in the north, and the Islamicist insurgency in the former Soviet borderlands would meld into a largely indistinguishable regional conflict. In the late 1990s, after retreating from Uzbekistan, Namangani forged a highly lucrative relationship with Osama bin Laden. Analysts suggest that in preparation for an eminent US invasion of Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, the two came to an arrangement whereby Namangani would provide young men for the Taliban's defenses, and his IMU could then use Afghanistan as a base of operations against the Uzbek regime. Additionally, Namangani's movement—which had been financed largely through a network of opium cultivation and smuggling—would receive financial and material support from Osama bin Laden's *al Qaeda* network.

While initially profitable, this arrangement was the harbinger of Namangani's undoing. In October 2001, just as Rashid's *Jihad* went to press, Taliban leader Mullah Omar assigned Namangani to the task of generating radio chatter that would serve to distract American bombers from Taliban targets but would subsequently be targeted by American forces. After a little more than a month of what one *New York Times* reporter called "the worst job on the planet,"¹ Namangani and several of his followers were killed when Coalition forces struck their convoy in northern Afghanistan. As recently as May 2003, there were reports that Namangani had survived the attack and was preparing for a new offensive. But Rashid and mainstream news sources estimate that at the time of Namangani's death, his fighting forces likely numbered less than 1,200. Today, without his charismatic leadership, they have dwindled to a few hundred, dispersed throughout Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and tribal areas of Pakistan—and possibly elsewhere.

In an interview last summer, Rashid suggested that the underlying support network of such groups remained "untouched."² He predicted that Islamic radicals will move away from their earlier offensives against the regime of Karimov, resorting instead to terrorism and assassinations. This suggests that while the US-led War on Terrorism may have driven regional Islamicists further underground, it has not neutralized them. To the contrary, Namangani's death, combined with Karimov's continued repression and his apparent inability to address pressing socioeconomic concerns, may ultimately serve to further radicalize the support base of the Islamicists.

1 C.J. Chivers, "Threats and Responses: Central Asia: Uzbek Militants' Decline Provides Clues to U.S.," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2002, A15.

2 Scott Peterson, "Central Asia: The Next Front in the Terror War?," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 10, 2002

Since Namangani's death, the prominence of the IMU has been eclipsed by the agenda and scope of another radical clerical movement, the *Hizb Ut-Tabrir* (HT). Leaders of the movement call for the establishment of an encompassing "caliphate" which would unite all of Muslim Central Asia—including China's restive Xinjiang province—and would be modeled on the medieval Islamic empire which encompassed much of Southwest Asia within a single Islamic state. According to Rashid's assessment, HT leaders believe that destitute and disenfranchised Central Asian Muslims have reached a "boiling point," and the time is right for the establishment of a region-wide theocracy. Unlike the IMU of bin Laden's *al-Qaeda*, HT does not advocate a violent overthrow of regional governments, but instead seeks to foment widespread popular discontent, thus undermining the legitimacy of repressive *secular* regimes.

Not surprisingly, the organization—which is actually a Central Asian offshoot of a movement founded in Saudi Arabia and Jordan in the 1950s—has been banned not only in Uzbekistan, but in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and a number of other Islamic countries in the region. Authorities have yet to penetrate the chain of command. Nonetheless, international human rights groups estimate that of the nearly 7,000 people held in Uzbek prisons for religious or political reasons today, more than half are accused of being HT members and most of the others are dismissed as supporters of *Wahhabism*, a conservative Saudi sect of Sunni Islam (though HT leaders make the highly exaggerated claim that there are more than 100,000 political prisoners in Uzbek jails).

Rashid suggests that the fact that there are more people jailed for their suspected affiliation with HT as opposed to any other political or religious organization in Central Asia indicates the concern with which regional regimes view the organization and its potential challenge to Karimov and his minions. In order to deal with this influx of prisoners, a new maximum security prison has been built in the remote desert region of Karakalpakistan, in which Muslims are forbidden from prayer or reading the Quran. It is important to note, as Rashid and other analysts have, that HT has not yet turned to terror in its campaign to depose regional regimes. However, amid reports of torture, summary execution and routine denial of medical treatment, it is apparent that Uzbeks and other Central Asians have become increasingly resentful of their leadership. Griffin likens Karimov to the unpopular, autocratic and ineffectual Afghan President Mohammed Najibullah, who was ultimately lynched by a radicalized population—an incident that cleared the way for the Taliban to assume power.

Clearly the United States perceives these elements as a threat. In exchange for allowing the U.S. to deploy more than 2,000 troops to former Soviet airbases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Karimov and his Kyrgyz counterpart Askar Akayev have received unprecedented American military aid packages. Critics suggest that this constitutes tacit approval of these regimes, and an unspoken understanding that the U.S. will "look the other way" on the issue of human rights.

In the fall of 2002, the U.S. embassy in Tashkent surrounded itself with a 12-foot concrete wall. Similarly, American and Coalition forces in neighboring Kyrgyzstan have been restricted to weekly trips into the largely secular capital Bishkek, lest they become targets. Despite the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, American forces remain anxious there as well. In May, jittery marines guarding the U.S. embassy compound in Kabul opened fire, killing four Afghan government troops who had been approved to operate within that area. The effects of this particular incident remain to

be seen, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that a substantial proportion of Afghans resent the continued and perceptibly disruptive presence of foreign troops as much as they do ongoing civil conflict. As Griffin and Rashid explain, the Taliban offered stability, albeit at a tremendously repressive cost, and the current government of President Hamid Karzai, whose real authority hardly extends beyond the city limits of Kabul, has been unable to provide this or other basic amenities to the population—even with the support of international peacekeepers. It is no surprise then that Afghan society is by no means unified, with many Afghans continuing to support the likes of ethnic Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum, who—with the support of Karimov and the Uzbek government—controls his own *de facto* autonomous fiefdom in the north, or Ismail Khan, who maintains an independent army far larger than that of the Afghan national army.

What remains is the perennial question of Osama bin Laden, whose whereabouts are still undetermined. It is neither Griffin's nor Rashid's intention to provide a detailed account or analysis of Osama bin Laden or the *al Qaeda* network. Although bin Laden has been active in the region, he is not from there, nor was he formally affiliated with the Taliban movement. Nevertheless, Griffin asserts that it is a mistake to attribute control or leadership of the *al Qaeda* "network" solely to bin Laden. Both authors contend that agency cells maintain a considerable degree of autonomy in their maneuvers, and that while Osama bin Laden serves as a financier and a charismatic figurehead (not to mention a convenient media scapegoat), he is hardly the lone mastermind of what Griffin dismisses as an oversimplified "grand conspiracy."

Given that the bulk of their readership was expected to be American, both authors provide a detailed chronology and analysis of American responses to turmoil and terrorism in the region. Beginning with President Reagan's ill-considered and naïve armament of the anti-Soviet *mujahedin* forces, who were motivated in large part by Islamic extremism and ultimately evolved into the Taliban and other such outfits, continuing through Clinton's apparently ineffectual retaliatory pinprick air strikes (following the bombing of U.S. embassies in Africa), and culminating with George W. Bush's effort to "smoke them out of their caves," American policy in the region has thus far been reactionary, predictable, symbolic and lacking in foresight. Griffin and Rashid's analyses indicate that the Bush administration would be best served by following a consistent and just policy in dealing with Afghanistan and the other Central Asian states.

The authors suggest a strategy of engagement and support that has not been—nor will it likely be—the strategy of the Bush administration. This is particularly evidenced by the authors' extensive assessments of American-led Coalition forces' new allies in the War on Terror: the so-called Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of ethnic warlords and militias that has since splintered into several competing and repressive factions. With a full sixth of the population of Afghanistan displaced (and another fifth living off of ostensibly illicit poppy cultivation or distribution), much about Afghanistan remains unsettled. Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, Pashtuns and others continue to fight for control of the borderlands, seeking to usurp tariffs (and the bribes that come with them). Griffin simplistically describes this myriad of shifting alliances and multidimensional conflicts as a "celebration by traditional battle rites of an almost mystical sense of national kinship incomprehensible to non-Afghans." As regional borders—and in fact nationalities—were

determined somewhat arbitrarily by Stalin some seventy years ago (as one Uzbek satirist mused, “prior to the partition into nationality republics, we got so completely befuddled that we couldn’t figure out which of the nationalities we ourselves belonged to”³), it comes as no surprise that considerable ethnic hostility exists alongside political, economic and religious tensions.



In a recent interview, Michael Griffin suggested that “if you really do want to understand Afghanistan—not terribly many people do—you have to go there.”⁴ As this is not option for most interested readers, Griffin’s *Reaping the Whirlwind* and Rashid’s *Taliban and Jihad* will have to suffice. It is worth noting again that none of these books is intended to provide a biographical account of Osama bin Laden, his agenda, or the events of September 11. Indeed, the publication of two of the books prior to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington makes them even more valuable—as the authors’ focus is organized around the sequence of events that have led to the rise of extremism throughout the region. To that end, Rashid also emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness and reluctant interdependence of the region. I would also note that Griffin has published a second, much-expanded edition of his book, which includes a description of ambivalence of the Bush administration prior to the hijackings of September 11, as well as a critical examination of the funding network—with its ties both to the Saudi and the American governments—that continues to partially sponsor *al Qaeda*. Griffin’s book is also the only one of the three under review that has been updated to assess the American-led efforts to neutralize the Taliban and other extremist elements in Afghanistan. Although global attention has shifted once again to Iraq and the Middle East, these three books could benefit from substantive epilogues addressing recent developments.

Although this region of the world has again slipped from the radar of public interest, it is evident that the United States will remain entrenched—both politically and economically—in Afghanistan and Central Asia for many years to come. Accordingly, Rashid’s accounts are of considerable value and a worthwhile study for academic and general readers as well as policymakers. As this trio of books—particularly the two by Rashid—are intended for the general reader, they provide the most accessible and most comprehensive survey of this volatile region.

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³ *Mushtum*, no. 11, October 3, 1924, 8, cited in Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks: A Cultural History from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 189.

⁴ Danny Schechter, “Afghanistan: War & Democracy: An Interview with Michael Griffin,” *MediaChannel.org*, November 28, 2001. (available online: <http://www.mediachannel.org/views/interviews/griffin.shtml>)