

## Dialogue with the Islamic World

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### Interview with Ahmed Rashid on Mali "Worse than Afghanistan"

Pakistani writer and Taliban expert Ahmed Rashid reports on the failures of the international community in Mali and how Islamist Al-Qaida affiliates have been able to establish themselves there. He spoke to Silke Mertins

#### Mr Rashid, could Mali become the new Afghanistan?

**Ahmed Rashid:** Mali is about a transnational conflict and transnational terrorism. It's involving at least four countries: Libya, Algeria, Mali, and Niger. That is a situation very similar to Afghanistan. The big difference is that al-Qaida is already in control of Northern Mali. Al-Kaida was never in control of Afghanistan, it always had to go through the Taliban. So you have in Mali actually a worse situation than in Afghanistan. In spite of that the international community has been dithering and deciding and talking for month and month.

#### Why did you characterize the Jihadist groups in Northern Mali as "African Taliban"?

**Ahmed Rashid:** These groups have existed in the Sahara area for many years. They have been mainly associated with criminal activities. But through religious influence by foreign extremists, a very rapid ideological radicalization took place. What we see in Mali - chopping of hands and the like - was certainly under the influence of extreme religious ideology and is similar to what the Taliban and al-Qaida practiced in Afghanistan.

And it happened, like in Afghanistan, in a predominantly moderate Sufi environment. Because if you have failed states with this huge vacuum - a lack of governance, justice, law and order - it is very easy to fill this vacuum with extremists.

#### How do you explain that a relatively small group with limited means succeeded getting such a large territory under their control and establishing, even expanding, their power?

**Ahmed Rashid:** What we have seen in Mali was a total state collapse - the army fled.

#### So it was the weakness of the state that made al-Qaida so strong?

**Ahmed Rashid:** Exactly. According the New York Times, the US spent in the past four years 500 Million Dollars in West Africa on the fight against terror. It was obviously totally ineffective. There was no national ideology that could have motivated and mobilized the Malian army.

#### Was the French intervention the only way to stop these Jihadist groups from taking Mali as a whole?

**Ahmed Rashid:** The Malian army was so humiliated, you couldn't ask them to do it. International mediation should have been tried at an earlier stage. If the French would have put together a group of trustworthy, well-known Muslims from the region, negotiations would perhaps have been possible.

#### Negotiations with whom? Al-Qaida? The Tuaregs?

**Ahmed Rashid:** Earlier on, it wasn't so clear. There was a fusion between these groups. There was no effort to rebuild trust with the Tuaregs. There was no diplomatic effort at all. We have

been rushed into another military conflict.

**How?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** I think the world didn't see how urgent this problem was. From the beginning there has been too much effort on preparing a military team, going to the UN security council and so on.

**So, when France intervened there was actually no other option anymore?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** It was a kind of 9/11 situation. The French rightly feared that the whole country could fall under the rule of al-Qaida. They had to immediately take military action. The capital was about to fall.

**How important is it for the Jihad movement to have this territory under their control?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** Terribly important. We have seen that also in the tribal areas of the Taliban in Afghanistan. They need a territory for the safety of their personnel, they need it for training, they need a base of operation. And they also want to demonstrate to the world that they are capable of governing.

**There seem to be a lot of foreign fighters among those extremist groups. Has Mali become the main battleground for the global Jihad?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** Those who believe in global Jihad and the message of Osama bin Laden will go anywhere, especially if al-Qaida side is the winning side. The successes in Mali came as a surprise for the whole Jihadist movement. Now it is pictured in the movement as a new major base for al-Qaida - an area that Western armies will have difficulties to deal with. And a region with access to four or five countries.

**How dangerous is this development for Europe?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** Extremely dangerous. You see already now a stream of Africans coming through the Sahara illegally to Spain and Europe because of economic deprivation. This could also be the access for extremists to commit terrorist attacks in Europe. Especially if you have a territory so close. Countries like Libya can barely stand on their own feet since they got rid of Ghaddafi. Their weak security apparatus could easily be penetrated to have access to the Mediterranean sea.

**What is your advice to European governments?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** There should be a pan-European reaction in support of what France is doing. We should also try and see if these al-Qaida groups can be isolated and separated from local groups so that a dialogue with the Tuaregs and others is possible.

**Wouldn't it be better if African countries solved the problems in Mali by themselves?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** These African countries involved don't have the capacities to deal with a crisis situation like this. They lack the experience to fight al-Qaida.

***Interview conducted by Silke Mertins***

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*The 1948 born Pakistani bestseller author Ahmed Rashid is one of the leading experts on international terror and Afghanistan. His book "Taliban" sold more than 1.5 Million copies. His latest book, "Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan" was published in 2012. Rashid lives in Lahore, Pakistan.*