

## Ascending From Chaos?

The Majalla interview with Ahmed Rashid

20/04/2010



By Manuel Almeida

In this interview with *The Majalla*, Pakistani journalist and author Ahmed Rashid discusses a number of topics ranging from the prospects of the political effort to bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan, to the integrity of the Pakistani state in the face of several threats, including the growing insurgency in Balochistan and the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Since 9/11, the eagerness of the US to tackle militancy in Pakistan has traditionally clashed with the position of the Pakistani army. Pakistani authorities always had considerations in mind other than Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, such as maintaining its influence in Afghan affairs and playing the great game against the old foe India.

Ahmed Rashid is perhaps the analyst who best bridges the gap between Pakistani and American views, adopting an almost unique position of neutrality and balanced criticism regarding what ought to be the strategies of both countries for stabilizing the region. Mr. Rashid has covered political developments in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia for three decades, and he is, in the words of Christopher Hitchens, "Pakistan's best and bravest reporter."

Mr. Rashid graduated in English from Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam College. In the 1960s, he returned to Pakistan where he was involved in the political developments of Balochistan, the southwest province that has witnessed five insurgencies since 1947. In 1978, Mr. Rashid was in Kabul for the coup that put the Communists in power, and in Kandahar a year later when the Soviets rolled in. His book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* was published just before 9/11 and was the first comprehensive introduction to Western readers of the group that provided Al-Qaeda a safe-haven, selling more than 1.5 million copies in English.

Today, from his home in Lahore, Mr. Rashid continues to write prolifically about political developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also provides advice to regional and Western diplomats involved in the nation/state-building efforts in the region. It was from Lahore that Mr. Rashid spoke with The Majalla about the prospects of the political effort to bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. Among other issues, he discusses the possibility of convincing the Afghan Taliban to drop their close connections with Al-Qaeda. Mr. Rashid likewise examines the ideological differences between the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani counterparts, and evaluates the several threats to the integrity of the Pakistani state—including the insurgency in Balochistan and the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

***The Majalla:* Do you agree with the analysis of US officials that most of the Taliban in Afghanistan fight for local reasons or money rather than because of ideological commitment to the movement, and can as a result be won over?**

I think the majority of the rank and file of the Taliban are fighting for other reasons—for revenge, for the lack of development in their region, for inter-tribal rivalries. It is for these kinds of reasons that they have been recruited by the Taliban. We should also remember that there is false forced conscription in southern and eastern Afghanistan by the Taliban. I don't know if this figure that the Americans put forward of 70 percent of the Taliban being ready to stop fighting is true, but clearly, there are large numbers of the Taliban who could be bought over if there was a proper dialogue with them and proper compensation packages.

**Q: What kind of assurances are there, in the case that a political agreement is reached, that the Taliban will not resume fighting against the government in Kabul as soon as US and NATO troops withdraw from Afghanistan?**

Certainly the Taliban have this option of sitting and waiting for the start of expected US troop withdrawal in July 2011 and expecting also that NATO would withdraw their troops. But at the same time I think the Taliban also recognize the need for a dialogue, and the reasons for that are several. Firstly, they are extremely tired; they have suffered enormous casualties. Secondly, they are also perfectly aware that they cannot take the cities as long as Western firepower patrols the

cities. And thirdly, they have certainly realized that for them to come to power again will only create another crisis because they would be totally isolated from the international community with no money or aid, and it is far better in these circumstances to have an agreement with the Kabul regime so that they can be more responsible towards the Afghan people.

**Q: What role can Saudi Arabia play in re-integrating the Taliban into Afghanistan's political life?**

I think Saudi Arabia has offered a venue for the Taliban and the Kabul government to talk, and that role played by Saudi has been very important. Taliban leaders have been meeting with the Kabul administration in Saudi Arabia and with Saudi intelligence, which is now seen by both sides as being a neutral venue and a helpful venue. Whether the Saudis are actually in a position to broker real negotiations between the two sides and work as a party that can help these negotiations I think we still have to see. But certainly I think Saudi does offer a venue that is acceptable for both sides.

**Q: Do you think the Afghan Taliban realize that it might be a strategic mistake to be closely associated with Al-Qaeda?**

I think a lot of the Taliban now accept that fact, and they accept the fact that bringing foreigners into Afghanistan and depending on foreigners was and is a strategic mistake. Certainly, if there are very serious negotiations with the Kabul regime and with the Americans, I think this is something that most Taliban would be willing to acknowledge and thereby dump Al-Qaeda. It is certainly the key demand of the Americans.

**Q: Do you believe the Afghan population, especially the non-Pashtun population, will be willing to live side by side with the perpetrators of horrible crimes and human rights abuses, much like what is happening, for example, in Rwanda today in relation to Tutsis and Hutus?**

I think that is a very very important and sensitive question. We should see that the Afghan government has actually failed to carry out any truth and reconciliation process since 2001. With the warlords there was an enormous pressure on the government to implement some kind of reconciliation for all the abuses they carried out for so many years and the government has not done that, and I think that has been a very big failure. Now how exactly the government and the Taliban are going to agree on some kind of peace and reconciliation process is very difficult to see. Clearly, if there is a negotiation there will have to be an amnesty for the Taliban, and will that amnesty cover protection against the Taliban being prosecuted for human rights abuses, the murders and assassinations of so many Afghans? This is a very sensitive issue which many civil society groups in Kabul and non-Pashtuns, the Tajiks and the Uzbeks are very much opposed to. They would want to see some kind of retribution against the Taliban.

**Q: Do you think the threats posed by the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban can be treated in isolation?**

The Afghan and Pakistani Taliban I think are two completely different entities, very different, even though they are allies; they work together, they share logistics, supplies and fighters, but I think ideologically they are very different. I still see the Afghan Taliban as essentially a peasant army with deep grievances against Kabul, against the foreign troop presence in their country, and with a thin layer of very ideological leaders. On the other hand, the Pakistani Taliban are, generally speaking, much more ideological. Many of their young fighters have been to madrassas, many of them are semi-educated—which perhaps is even worse than being uneducated—many of them are more politicized and more ideological than their Afghan Taliban brothers, and that has given them a certain edge here in Pakistan and made them much more ruthless. They want to topple the establishment, the political government in Pakistan, defeat the Pakistan army, and set up a Khilafat (Caliphate). The threat they pose is even greater than the threat posed by the Afghan Taliban. I think the Afghan Taliban, at the end of the day, will become Islamist nationalists uninterested in expanding their zone or territory beyond Afghanistan, trying to establish some kind of Islamic system in Afghanistan. I think the Pakistani Taliban are more ambitious—they have ambitions in Kashmir against India; they would like to see a greater Talibanization against the entire region.

**Q: You have always been a strong critic of Islamabad's neglect of Balochistan and you point this out as the biggest threat, even bigger than the Taliban, to the territorial integrity of Pakistan. How serious is the current situation in Balochistan?**

There is a very serious insurgency going on there. This is the fifth insurgency since 1947, and it's a reflection of the complete deprivation and the lack of resources and development that the Balochs have suffered from at the hands of the centre. So there are very deep-rooted economic and social reasons for this insurgency. Unfortunately, because of the mishandling of the insurgency by first Musharraf and also after him, and the state trying to seek a military solution for this insurgency, it has been hugely mishandled, and we now have a worsening of the situation, because the Balochs who were first demanding autonomy are now demanding a separate state. In all the previous four insurgencies you did not have this degree of separatism that exists today and that makes the Balochs insurgency very dangerous.

**Q: In your book *Descent into Chaos* you point to the tensions in Kashmir between India and Pakistan as a fundamental obstacle for Pakistan's contribution in stabilizing Afghanistan. Do you think the current US Administration understands this?**

Yes, I think they do. They certainly understand the connection between the need to make peace between India and Pakistan and to also, and perhaps most immediately, try to reduce the tension between both countries and Afghanistan. They are both now rivals in Afghanistan; Pakistan considers India's presence in Afghanistan a major threat and there needs to be a dialogue between both countries in making their presence in Afghanistan more transparent to the other, coming to some kind of agreement about their presence; unfortunately none of that is happening. Certainly of course there needs to be a wider dialogue on their longstanding disputes over Kashmir, water and other issues.

**Q: The group Lashkar-e-Taiba has been characterized as the Frankenstein of Islamabad's own making, and some analysts now fear that this group will replace Al-Qaeda as the biggest international terrorist threat. Are the Pakistani authorities in a position to tackle this threat?**

Lashkar is posing a major threat to the state and many of the militant groups in Punjab like Lashkar have joined up with the Pakistani Taliban in the northwest frontier and are trying to destabilize Pakistan. But the problem in Punjab is that there is a state of denial about the existence of the so-called Punjabi Taliban. The government, the army, the opposition, the federal government, the provincial government, are all refusing to accept the fact that the Punjabi Taliban are a mortal threat to the state, are part of the extremist network that has been developing in Pakistan, and also are part of the international Jihadist network led by Al-Qaeda. Until we face up to the reality of accepting that this threat exists, it is very difficult to see how the government is going to tackle the problem. First you have to acknowledge the problem before you tackle it.

**Q: The Pakistan authorities recently captured two important Taliban leaders. What do you make of the timing they were captured?**

There is a lot of controversy about this and it is not clear. The army, which is running Afghan policy at the moment, has not even made clear exactly how many Afghan Taliban leaders they have captured. The numbers go from five to 15, but certainly they have acknowledged the capture of Mullah Abdul Gani Baradar; he is the Taliban's number 2 and is considered one of those who have been talking to the Kabul regime and would like to see a dialogue. And it is clear that some of those arrested in Pakistan belong to his group if you like, within the Taliban Shura. I think Kabul is deeply suspicious of these arrests. It feels that these arrests have come at the wrong time, at a time just when Kabul is trying to have a dialogue with these groups; they come in a time when Pakistan is perhaps trying to muscle its way into this dialogue wanting a seat at the table. Clearly Pakistan is a critical element in any future negotiations and has to play a role in any future negotiations between the Taliban and Kabul, and even the US. But at the same time Pakistan must allow a natural process to take place, and the most important dialogue has to be between Afghans, rather than having a third country involved.

**Q: After The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?; The Taliban; Jihad; and Descent into Chaos, what is your next book?**

I completed the book *Descent into Chaos* last year, which took four years to write, and it was a very exhausting process. At the moment I am not involved in any book project, but I am working on some long and more thoughtful pieces about how the war in Afghanistan can be brought to an end.

**Interview conducted by Manuel Almeida**

Source: <http://www.majalla.com/en/interview/article44125.ece>