INTERVIEWS

National Public Radio

Ahmed Rashid, author and journalist, discusses possible repercussions of an Iraqi war

12/02/2003

TERRY GROSS, host: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. We're going to talk about the possible

Consequences of a war with Iraq and the current threat of terrorism with journalist Ahmed Rashid. He's been covering militant Islam since the late '80s. His book "Taliban" was published in 2000 and became a number one best-seller after September 11th. His latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just been published in paperback. Rashid lives in Pakistan and reports from his country as well as Afghanistan and central Asia for the Far Eastern Economic Review and the London Daily Telegraph. He's also written pieces for The Wall Street Journal. Last month, Rashid was in Afghanistan.

He's currently visiting the United States. I recorded an interview with him yesterday, shortly after Colin Powell announced the appearance of the new bin Laden tape. Have you heard any inside information about what al-Qaeda is planning next?

Mr. AHMED RASHID (Pakistani Journalist): No, not

really, but I

think

it's

long been expected, at least for the last six

months or so. I mean,

I

was in

Kabul a couple of weeks ago, and there was a lot of

rumor there that

there was

going to be a big hit in the United States or in

Europe. The Afghan

intelligence

was saying that's what they were picking up, and

some of the

peacekeeping troops

and the American officers there were saying the same thing.

There has been renewed activity on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border with al-Qaeda and Taliban coming in and hitting at American bases, and a lot of the propaganda that's been released there has been actually about Iraq and, you know, launching a jihad against American forces in Afghanistan, but also about that the Americans are about to invade the Middle East and capture the whole of the Middle East and that kind of thing. So it's pretty apparent that they want to do something that will coincide with possibly an American attack on Iraq.

GROSS: So in some circles, this is being pitched

as an American
invasion of
the Middle East.

Mr. RASHID: Certainly. I mean...

GROSS: Well, I guess--right.

Mr. RASHID: Yeah. I mean, certainly, you know,
the groups like
al-Qaeda and
all are certainly talking about it. I mean, they
see this not just
as
a
question of changing the regime in Iraq but
actually occupying Arab
land, and
then occupying the whole Middle East.

GROSS: Well, I've been really anxious to talk
with you, because
I'm
very
interested in what you're hearing and what you're
thinking now.
Let's
start
with your just general reactions. Based on your

knowledge of that
part of the
world, do you think we should be going into war
against Iraq to
overthrow Saddam
Hussein?

Mr. RASHID: I think, you know, Saddam has to go,
but I don't think
the US
should be going to war, and certainly not in the
way that it's been
worked out
for the last three or four months. I think to go
to war without an
international consensus, without much more pressure
to be placed
through the UN
inspectors and the inspecting regime, and through
the United Nations
Security
Council, I think to go to war is going to be
extremely divisive in
the
West and
is going to sharpen the conflict between the Muslim
world and the
United States.

GROSS: Why do you think that Saddam has to go?

Mr. RASHID: Well, certainly I think Saddam has to go. I mean, you know--but I think there are other ways to do it. I think if this administration, six months ago, had gone step by step with the kind of pressures and perhaps moving troops to the Gulf, pressures through the UN or tried to build an international consensus with the Arab states, with the European powers--for example, I mean, the kind of speech we heard from Colin Powell a few days ago in the UN Security Council, I mean, to my mind, that speech should have been given three months ago, not, you know right on the edge of war. So, you know, you needed

a

consistent, a proper strategy, where the US was not

seen by the rest

of the

world as going it alone, as doing things

arrogantly, but wanting to

do

things in

consensus with everyone else.

GROSS: How much of a threat do you think Iraq's

weapons of mass

destruction

are?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, the fact is

that they

haven't--Iraq has

never targeted the United States. It has certainly

targeted, you

know, Middle

Eastern countries, but I don't think Iraq would

still target the

United States

even now. I don't believe Iraq has handed over

chemical weapons to

al-Qaeda,

the way that Colin Powell has asserted. I think

some al-Qaeda

members
may be
hiding out in Iraq, but I think Saddam Hussein's
whole strategy, if
we
go back
to 1991, has been always to try and target Israel,
to bring Israel
into the war
so that he can then turn around to his Arab
brothers and say, 'Look,
Israel is
now attacking an Arab country. Come and join me.'
I think that is
what his
tactics this time are going to be. I don't think
he has the kind of
global sort
of megalomania like al-Qaeda have, you know, that
they want to
strike
in
Manhattan or something.

GROSS: So are you suggesting that you think
Saddam Hussein would
attack
Israel with the intention of dragging Israel into
the war so that

Iraq
can say,
'Look, Israel is fighting us now. We all have to
go to war against
Israel'?

Mr. RASHID: Yeah. I think that is one of the
huge dangers in this
conflict,
and I think one of the biggest dangers would be if
Israel joins the
conflict,
and we really have not had anything from this
administration to
explain if they
are trying to keep Israel out of the conflict. I
think Israel--last
time, if
you remember, Scud missiles fell on Israel; this
time, God forbid,
you
may have
chemical or biological missiles falling on Israel.
But Israel has
to
keep out
of the war, because if Israel gets involved in the
war, I think it
will become a

much bigger and bloodier affair.

GROSS: You know, I know the Bush administration wants Israel to stay out of the war, and it seems like--well, here's the United States, on the verge of invading Iraq because of the potential threat of weapons of mass destruction, and is it a lot to ask of a country to do nothing if it's actually attacked with weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. RASHID: I agree with you, I mean, Terry, but you know, Israel showed patience in '91 when they were attacked by Scuds, and those Scuds could also have been carrying chemical and biological weapons.

GROSS: But they weren't. But they weren't.

Mr. RASHID: But they weren't. I mean, I agree with you. But I

think the

aftermath of a war with Iraq is going to be

extraordinarily

dangerous

anyway,

and if Israel does get involved, I think it's going

to be even more

dangerous,

with the Arab regimes up in arms, with protests in

the streets

against

the Arab

regimes, with an escalation of the Palestinian

issue. I think it's

critical

that the US does mount pressure on Israel to keep

out, or tries to

protect

Israel in some form or the other.

GROSS: Colin Powell in his presentation to the

Security Council

said

that the

militant Islamist group in northern Iraq, Ansar

al-Islam, is tied in

with

al-Qaeda. What do you know about that group?

Mr. RASHID: Ansar al-Islam is a Kurdish group; we should remember that. It's the Islamic fringe, if you like, of the mainstream Kurdish nationalist movement. There's always been a small Islamic fringe. Now it is certainly, I think, it's being funded and has been supported by al-Qaeda, but it is very, very small. It's a couple of hundred people, basically. They've carried out some terrible acts, atrocious acts against fellow Kurds, but you know, they're not in a position to be a fighting force for Saddam or to really affect the battlefield. I mean, the point is that, you know, these people can probably be eliminated. They will be eliminated, I'm sure, very quickly on in any kind of

American

invasion.

I think there are dozens of groups like this

scattered around the

Muslim

world now which have at some point been funded by

al-Qaeda, to which

also

al-Qaeda militants have fled after the war in

Afghanistan, so I

mean,

in my

opinion, there's nothing more in Ansar al-Islam

than there is in

many

groups in

Pakistan, in Iran, in the Far East, who are all

involved in

extremist

acts and

acts of terrorism.

GROSS: Is there any connection, as far as you

know, between this

radical

Islamist group, Ansar al-Islam, and Saddam Hussein?

Mr. RASHID: Yes, I think there is. I mean,

certainly there are
connections.
But I think Ansar al-Islam is too small to be any
kind of effective
fighting
force for Saddam Hussein in a conflict with the
United States. I
mean, they're
made up of a few hundred people. They control a
very small area. I
think they
would be immediately bombed or they would be
immediately surrounded
by
other
Kurdish fighters. It was an attempt by him to
create a kind of
Islamic bloc
within the Kurdish movement, which would split and
divide the
Kurdish
movement,
and really they haven't even succeeded in doing
that effectively,
because the
kind of extremism that they have espoused is very
unpopular in the
Kurdish
region.

GROSS: But if this group is linked both to al-Qaeda and to Saddam Hussein, does that effectively create some kind of link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda?

Mr. RASHID: No, I mean, Ansar al-Islam is one of the many, many groups which have been funded by al-Qaeda. It's one of the many groups in the world which, since the defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, has received and hosted al-Qaeda members. But you know, al-Qaeda has gone into many countries and been hosted by many countries, I mean, even hosted by intelligence agencies of many countries which are ostensibly with the Americans. I mean, we

can take

the example of Yemen, of Iran and even to some

extent of Pakistan.

Many Muslim

countries are hosting al-Qaeda willingly or

unwillingly, and Saddam

is

just one

of them, I think. I mean, you know, if this is a

raison d'etre to

go

after

Saddam, then you might as well go after another

half a dozen

countries

who are

doing much the same kind of thing.

GROSS: So you're saying that this link that Colin

Powell is using

as

a

justification for war isn't really significant.

Mr. RASHID: I don't think the al-Qaeda link is

really

significant.

I think

the al-Qaeda link is certainly there. I don't

think Saddam would be
about to
hand over chemical weapons to them. I think he's
given sanctuary to
some of the
al-Qaeda people fleeing Afghanistan, like many
other Muslim
countries
have given
sanctuary to al-Qaeda, which the United States
knows well about, and
I
think
this Ansar group is not so much al-Qaeda, it's a
fringe Kurdish
group
which has
connections to al-Qaeda, but it's not in a position
to really affect
the
strategic balance in the Middle East or any kind of
strategic
balance
in a war
between America and Iraq.

You know, I think the linkages with al-Qaeda are
very tenuous. I
mean, a lot

of countries, unfortunately, have developed links with al-Qaeda since 9/11, but, you know--and Iraq is no better or no worse than others. I think the much bigger--I think where Colin Powell was successful in his description was, of course, explaining the failure of Iraq to deliver on its chemical and biological weapons systems. I think the linkage with al-Qaeda is far more doubtful.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Ahmed Rashid, and he reports from Pakistan, Afghanistan and central Asia for the Far Eastern Economic Review and the London Daily Telegraph. He's the author of the best-seller "Taliban," and his latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant

Islam in Central
Asia," has
just come out in paperback. Let's take a break,
and then we'll talk
some more.
This is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

GROSS: My guest is Ahmed Rashid, and his latest
book, "Jihad: The
Rise of
Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just come out
in paperback.

A lot of people are speculating, you know, does
the Bush
administration have
a hidden agenda? Is the agenda something than just
overthrowing
Saddam Hussein
because he poses a threat with weapons of mass
destruction? From
your
reading
of the situation, do you see a hidden agenda? Do
you think oil is
the
real

agenda?

Mr. RASHID: No, I mean, oil is very important, there's no doubt about it, I mean, but I don't think, you know, the US is doing this whole thing because of oil. I think, you know, there's been a long-running standoff between the Bush family and Saddam Hussein. I think there's a very ideological group of officials at the top end of the administration who are very supportive of Israel and are very keen to try and reshape the Middle East in the way that they see it, and they're not going to allow anything to come in their way. So I mean, I think oil is a very important factor.

I mean, in fact, one of the problems I have

within the post-Saddam
era, how
is the next Iraqi government--which will be
installed by the
Americans--how is
that going to deal with the oil business? Who's
going to get the
contracts? The
point is that Saddam has signed contracts with the
Russians, the
Chinese, the
Europeans, with all sorts of major countries and
major oil
companies.
Who gets
now--you know, will those contracts be honored?
Who gets the
benefits
of Iraq's
oil? And I think there's a lot of suspicion right
now that, you
know,
is this
just going to be a kind of--you know, that the
American general
who's
running
Iraq or the Iraqi exiles who are installed by the
Americans are

going

to hand

out contracts to American companies?

I don't think, you know, that will be the case.

That would be

very

naive if

something like that happens. But certainly it's an

issue that has

not

been

discussed, that the Bush administration has done

not anything to

give

some kind

of sense of security to other major countries who

have got

investments

or

contracts in Iraq.

GROSS: Are there other dangers related to

terrorism or economic

dangers that

you think the Bush administration isn't prepared

for, or at least

hasn't told us

to be prepared for?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think the main thing which is completely missing from the administration's debate and discussion and information about this issue is the post-Saddam Iraq. What we don't know--I mean, where is the kind of discussion as to what kind of Iraq this administration wants? I mean, you know, do you think the Arabs or the Iraqis are going to be satisfied with a bunch of Iraqi exiles being flown into Baghdad by the CIA and then being told, 'Well, this is your new government'?

The point is that there has been no coalition building, not just for the war but for the postwar scenario, especially with Iraq's neighbors. The

problem is
that all of Iraq's neighbors have potential
candidates to be the
next
ruler in
Baghdad. They all want their proxies to be there.
The Turks, the
Saudis, the
Syrians, the Israelis, the Gulf Arabs, they all
want a particular
kind
of
government, preferably their kind of government, in
Baghdad.

Now they're not going to necessarily accept what
the US is going
to
set up
there. What the US really needed to do was, apart
from--you know,
the
whole
discussion today is just about whether so-and-so
country is giving
the
Americans
bases or military flights or whatever. What real
discussion needs

to
take place
is some kind of consensus building on post-Saddam,
and, you know,
like
in
Afghanistan, would there be a consensus government,
meaning would the
international community, perhaps through a UN
Security Council
resolution, give
support to a new government in Iraq which would be
uncontestable.
We
don't see
that at all.

GROSS: The Bush administration is hoping that the
Iraqis will
welcome
American troops as liberators. What do you think
are the odds of
that?

Mr. RASHID: I think it's a presumption. You
know, this is a
dictatorship.
It's been one of the most awful and bloodiest
dictatorships that the

world has
ever seen. There's no way that anybody has any
idea what the Iraqi
people are
thinking. Yes, we know in '91 that thousands of
troops laid down
their arms.
That could well happen again, but an attack on
Baghdad and on the
major urban
centers of Iraq, would that lead to resistance from
die-hard
supporters of
Saddam? Could that prolong the war? Could they
hide Saddam? I
mean,
I just
don't think we know enough about the mood amongst
the Iraqi people
as
to whether
they fight or not.

GROSS: Let's talk a little bit about your
country, Pakistan. What
are the
risks or the benefits to Pakistan if the United
States leads an
invasion of

Iraq?

Mr. RASHID: Well, Pakistan, like the rest of the Muslim world--I mean, there could be--it's a very unpredictable situation. We just don't know how the fundamentalist parties will react, and we should remember that in Pakistan now we had these elections in October which were very heavily rigged by the military, who facilitated the victory of a fundamentalist alliance in two of the country's four provinces. It's very unpredictable as to what they will do, especially in those two provinces that they're now governing.

Certainly we will see street demonstrations and that kind of thing. We may

well see even acts of, you know, violence and terrorism by some of the extremist groups against Western targets. I think at the moment now there's a very heightened sense of alert in Pakistan against acts of terrorism. But it remains very unpredictable.

GROSS: Is everybody in Pakistan talking about the possibility of war? Is that on the forefront of everybody's minds?

Mr. RASHID: It's a complete preoccupation, for several reasons. The first thing is that in '91, we suffered a horrendous economic downturn because, you know, the whole region was locked up. And if there's a second war, there'll be no planes, there'll be no ships, there'll be no

trade, there'll be
no
exports.
You know, Pakistan is heavily dependent on Gulf
oil. Ships will not
want to come
to Karachi. I mean, so there's enormous economic
fear.

There's enormous political fear about what the
fundamentalists
will
do, what
the repercussions will be. And you know, the
postwar scenario also
offers, you
know, a lot of hesitancy and doubt for many
Pakistanis. So there is
enormous--and you know, one thing which has kind of
gripped the
press
there at
the moment is this whole idea of many countries in
the Muslim world
saying,
'Well, who's next?' The Iranians are saying, 'Well,
after Iraq is
going to be
Iran.' And many Pakistanis are saying 'Well, with

Pakistan's nuclear
program and
Pakistan still, you know, not fully cooperating
with on the Taliban
and
al-Qaeda, maybe Pakistan is next.' And so there's a
lot of this kind
of
speculation also going on.

GROSS: And you're saying that that's one of the
problems of a
pre-emptive
strike.

Mr. RASHID: Well, exactly. I mean, I think this
pre-emptive
policy
of the
United States now has--you know, I mean, one thing
about the US
during
the Cold
War was that, I mean, the US and the Soviet Union,
no matter how
acute
the
tensions were, that you know, they were predictable
powers. The US

in

the last

10 years, since the end of the Cold War, as the

sole superpower in

the

world,

has been a predictable power. I mean, what it has

done or not done

under the

two Clinton administrations was fairly predictable.

I think where this whole doctrine of pre-emption

brings you to is

in

creating

enormous instability and unpredictability, and I

think, you know,

everyone from

the stock markets to politicians and intellectuals

and educators, I

mean, people

are very concerned about this. I think in America

they're very

concerned about

this, which is why, you know, we've been seeing

these demonstrations

against a

war in America.

GROSS: Journalist Ahmed Rashid will be back in the second half of the show.

His latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just been published in paperback. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

(Announcements)

GROSS: If the US goes to war with Iraq and ousts Saddam Hussein, we'll face rebuilding Iraq in the aftermath. Coming up, are we succeeding in rebuilding Afghanistan and creating a democracy there? We continue our conversation with journalist Ahmed Rashid. He was in Afghanistan last month.

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross, back with more of our interview

with journalist Ahmed Rashid. He's author of the best-seller "Taliban." His latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just been published in paperback. Rashid covers Afghanistan, Central Asia and his country, Pakistan, for the Far Eastern Economic Review and the London Daily Telegraph.

If we attack Iraq, we will also be responsible for rebuilding Iraq. We've taken on that responsibility with Afghanistan. You spent part of January in Afghanistan. Let's talk a little bit about your trip there and what you saw and how well the United States is succeeding in trying to rebuild Afghanistan. Let's

start with Kabul. What kind of shape is Kabul in physically?

Mr. RASHID: Well, Kabul is definitely, in many ways, in better shape. About a million--you know, the population has gone up from about three million to four million just in the last year because about a million refugees have come into Kabul and settled there. So there is extraordinary pressure on the infrastructure. Now, I mean, there's no electricity in most of the city. The center of Kabul has a little bit of electricity at night. And don't forget we're talking about freezing temperatures, below freezing temperatures here with snow on the ground. There is enormous pressure on water, on electricity, on fuel, on power, on everything.

But, you know, on the other hand, I mean, there are now--you know, the city is looking much fresher, women are going about unveiled. Kabulis are back to work and all sorts of things. There's an enormous hustle and bustle in the bazaar. The major urban centers, you know, are showing a very dramatic improvement and change. Schools are open, hospitals are open, government offices, you know, are open. And there's a lot of cultural activity, which of course is terribly important to restore civic life after the Taliban, who had destroyed all culture. You know, music recitals, concerts, things like that.

GROSS: In a recent report, you wrote, 'Despite pledges of help for President Karzai, Russia is arming one warlord and Iran another. India and Pakistan are continuing their long rivalry and secretly backing different claimants to power, while the Central Asian republics are backing their ethnic allies.'

It sounds like chaos.

Mr. RASHID: Well, unfortunately, I think, you know, the bottom line has been that for the last year, since the war ended, the reconstruction of Afghanistan has not taken place, the money for reconstruction has not been delivered, and the lead role that was expected of the United States in that process has not happened. Now what that has led to, of course, is

that the central
government
has not been able to expand its authority into the
provinces to curb
the power
of the warlords, to try and disarm and demobilize
these warlord
armies. And in
this kind of vacuum, a lot of the neighbors who
were interfering in
Afghanistan
before have made a comeback. And they're all, you
know, like they
were before.

I mean, if we remember in the '90s, one of the
major causes for
the
Afghan
conflict was the fact that all the neighbors were
involved in
backing
either the
Taliban or the opposition to the Taliban. And then
they kind of
laid
off, you
know, after 9/11. But now they've seen that the
Americans, some of

them are
judging perhaps the Americans are not serious about
reconstruction,
the
Americans may leave in a hurry. So we better get
back and create
our
spheres of
influence, which is what they're doing.

GROSS: Do you think that the Karzai government is
in trouble? Do
you think
it's possible it will be overthrown?

Mr. RASHID: No, I don't think so. I mean, I
think--the point is
that the
government is still supported by 90 percent of the
people. And the
warlords who
are opposed to the government are not defying the
government or
Karzai. I mean,
they may not be implementing what he orders to be
done, but they're
not defying
him. There's no challenge to Kabul at the moment.
But the fact is

that you
cannot have a kind of sustained, low-level kind of
anarchic
situation.
And you
have to strengthen the center. You've got to help
the center
rebuild
the
country, build up road and communications and
electricity and
agriculture and,
you know, all the necessary things. And it really
hasn't happened.

And I think there's enormous frustration amongst
many Afghans, but
that is
still not, I think, going to turn them against
Karzai because
Afghans
know that
if--you know, I spoke to many people on the street
and the kind of
common
assumption was, 'Well, he's better than anyone
else. If anyone can
deliver
international aid and assistance, he can do it.

Certainly nobody else can.' So there's still a belief in him, which I think, you know, is still strong.

GROSS: Did you get a sense of whether the popular sentiment is that America is fulfilling its promise to help Afghanistan rebuild?

Mr. RASHID: No, I mean, the popular sentiment is very frustrated with the Americans, with the United Nations and with all the donors. The fact is that a year ago, $4.5 billion was pledged to Afghanistan in reconstruction. None of that really started last year. Only now are we in March and April, something like, you know, a billion dollars will be coming in

for road
construction, which
is critical to kind of relink the country.
There'll be money for
agriculture.
There will be some money for demobilization.

But now, of course, the big theory is, you know,
that even if the
money comes
in a year, year and a half late, it would still do
incredibly good
things, I
think, and wouldn't be too late. But the real fear
is this effort
which now the
Americans and the donor community seem to have
launched for this
spring--will
that be completely overshadowed by Iraq? Will Iraq
now distract from
Afghanistan. And that's the fear of President
Karzai and other
leaders.

GROSS: If you look at Afghanistan and see how
things are going
there
in the

light of the bombing of Afghanistan, what lessons do you think--or what questions do you think we might take away and apply to the future of Iraq if the United States attacks Iraq?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, Afghanistan--first of all, the choice of Karzai to head the interim government right after the war in January 2001, this was a choice where all the Afghans, you know, sent their representatives to Bonn; there was an agreement which was endorsed by the entire international community. Even enemies of the United States, such as Iran, Korea--I mean, they endorsed Karzai. We don't see any of that kind of process happening in the post-Saddam Iraq.

I think the other big problem has been the--I had
hoped certainly
at
the end
of the war in Afghanistan that the Americans would
understand that
they needed
to help rebuild Afghanistan, not just for the sake
of the Afghans,
but
as a kind
of model for the whole of the Islamic world, to
show the Islamic
world
that,
look, we can bomb you but we can also help rebuild
you. But,
unfortunately,
that hasn't happened. And there's an enormous, I
think, amount of
mistrust in
the Arab world that, well, what'll the Americans
do? They'll come
in,
they'll
bomb Baghdad, they'll kill Saddam and then they'll,
you know, leave
a

kind of
chaotic situation in Iraq and then get up and just
take a backseat
as
they've
done in Afghanistan. So the American record,
unfortunately, in
Afghanistan, as
far as reconstruction and rebuilding, has not been
good.

GROSS: Is there a feeling in Afghanistan among
people you spoke to
that the
United States' bigger concern now is Iraq,
therefore Afghanistan has
kind of
dropped in its level of priority?

Mr. RASHID: Well, certainly, you know, I spent a
lot of time with
President
Karzai, and I would say it is about one of the top
issues on his
mind
right now.
He is being courted; President Bush has invited him
to Washington at
the end of

February and, clearly, American officials are trying to allay his fears and suspicions that the Americans are about to dump Afghanistan and, you know, not focus on it anymore. But certainly, you know, it remains an overriding concern because, you see, it's not just the Americans. I mean, if the Americans stop paying attention to Afghanistan as far as reconstruction is concerned, it really means that the rest of the international community will also drop by the wayside. It's not that the Europeans or the Japanese or the Arabs, who are all major donors to Afghanistan, are going to continue. They'll just feel, well, if the US is not interested, this is not important.

GROSS: My guest is journalist Ahmed Rashid. His latest book is called "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia." He's also the author of the best seller "Taliban." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Pakistani-based journalist Ahmed Rashid. He's the author of the best seller "Taliban," and his latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just come out in paperback.

Do you have any idea where the Taliban who fled Afghanistan are now?

Mr. RASHID: Almost the entire Taliban leadership which is still alive is

sitting in Pakistan. It's been given sanctuary there by the military government. The intelligence services have been working very closely with the Taliban, helping out their families, settling them down. And some of these Taliban have reorganized and are now crossing the border back into Afghanistan and attacking US forces there.

GROSS: But Pakistan is officially supporting President Karzai and has cooperated with the United States in handing over al-Qaeda operatives. So what's--how can they be doing both at the same time, cooperating in the war on terrorism and at the same time harboring the Taliban?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, this is an

issue that is creating growing concern in Washington and amongst many Pakistanis. President Musharraf is running a military regime there; he basically gets to do what he likes, and he does not take public opinion in. I think there was a lot of support for the U-turn he did after 9/11 towards dumping Pakistani support for the Taliban and siding with the US and joining the coalition against terrorism.

Now he seems to be doing a U-turn upon a U-turn. And there are several reasons for this, I think. I mean, I think one thing is that the intelligence services and the section of the military which are highly influenced by the Taliban-style ideas of Islamic fundamentalism have really not been

purged by the general. In fact, they've been strengthened to some extent. So you have an ideological affinity there with the Taliban. The other thing that Pakistan is very wary about is the growing political and economic presence of India in Afghanistan and the influence that India has. I mean, the last thing that Pakistan wants to face is a kind of two-front situation where it has India on the west and the east, as it were.

GROSS: What's one of the most interesting and surprising things that you saw in your trip to Afghanistan?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I still think, you know, it's extraordinary enthusiasm of the people and the extraordinary patience of the

people. Although,

you know,

their lives have not changed all that much in the

last one year,

they

are still

very expectant. I think the other thing has been

the remarkable

change in what

women are doing. I mean, you know, women are back

to work; children

are back to

school. I mean, you know, after visiting

Afghanistan so many times

and seeing

all the schools shut up, you know, to see children

carrying satchels

full of

books, you know, on the street in sort of raggedy

uniforms is really

one of the

most beautiful sights. I mean, it really makes you

want to just, you

know, stand

there and cry, basically, because for years and

years and years,

that

was not a

sight you saw. And I mean, I visited friends, you

know, where, I

mean, you

know, three months, six months down the road, when

mothers say

goodbye

to their

children in the morning as they go to school and

the mothers are

crying because

they can't believe that it's still, you know,

actually, their

children

are being

able to go to school. So, you know, there are

advances that have

taken place

there which are still very, very moving.

GROSS: In NATO now, one of the big issues is

Turkey, and the

United

States

wished to provide military aid to Turkey, military

assistance to

Turkey, if

Turkey is attacked during a war with Iraq. That was

vetoed. What do

you see

happening within the NATO alliance now?

Mr. RASHID: Well, first of all, let me just say I think Turkey is in a terribly difficult position. I mean...

GROSS: Yeah, talk about that a little bit.

Mr. RASHID: ...you have just had an election in Turkey. You've got an Islamic government in power which the military, the Turkish military which has always intervened in Turkey, has been very wary of. But I think this Islamic government has acted very moderately and very wisely in not trying to rock the boat too much at home. But it still has a very difficult agenda at home, you know, placating the military, placating--and then it has been lumped

with this
whole foreign policy issue of, you know, the war
with Iraq. And
clearly, the
population of Turkey is very much against any war
with Iraq because,
again, the
economic dislocation is going to be so enormous, as
it was for
Turkey
in the
first Gulf War.

So, you know, the Turks are really in a very,
very difficult
position. And I
think, you know, the US should be kind of
ultra-grateful for even
the
minimum
kind of support and basing rights, etc., that they
might be giving
the
US
forces. The issue in NATO, I think, has certainly
become very
divisive. You
know, the point is that the Germans, the French,
they're facing

enormous

pressure from their own populations. I mean, if

you look at the

polls

in

Europe, I mean, I think more than 50 percent of

Europeans are

opposed

to war,

generally broadly speaking. And these governments

in Europe which

are, like,

standing up to the United States right now face

enormous public

pressure and,

you know, I mean, their own political futures could

well be on the

line. And I

think this is the extent to which this policy with

Iraq has

unfortunately

become. Many regimes' lives are at stake.

GROSS: Do you think that the United States has a

dependable ally

in

Turkey

now?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think it still has to be tested. I mean, for Turkey, too, I mean, this is the first time that you have an Islamic government, an Islamic party in power which has got a kind of blessing from the military and which now has to work with the Western alliance, with NATO, and also pursue its agenda to try and join the European Common Market. Now, you know, all this puts a lot of burden on Turkey and this new government.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid, your latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just come out in paperback. So I want to talk with you a little bit about Central Asia and how that figures into the war scenario now.

And by the way, by Central Asia, you're talking about Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan. You say that the Bush administration has seemed to take the attitude that Central Asia is little more than a convenient base from which the US can stage its war on terrorism. How do you think--and I know that you think that might backfire, that that's not a good strategy and it might backfire. What kind of problems do you see ahead if the Bush administration continues with that strategy?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think again, you know, like in Afghanistan, there was enormous expectancy amongst people in Central Asia that once the Afghan war was over, the Americans would develop a kind of broad-based strategy here which

would nudge and cajole and pressure and persuade through a mixture of carrot and stick these regimes, very dictatorial, authoritarian regimes, to open up a bit, to carry out some economic reform, political reform, allow political parties to exist, you know, encourage some kind of civil society and middle class to emerge.

But in fact, none of that has happened. The US has now three bases in three countries: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has done very little--you know, apart from making some rhetorical noises, it's done very little to encourage democracy or reform or greater freedoms

there. And in
fact,
what
we've seen in the last 15 months since 9/11 is that
all these
regimes
have, in
fact, stepped up repression. They have used their
new alliance with
the United
States as a means to kind of make themselves
legitimate, and they
have
stepped
up repression against, you know, dissident groups,
against political
parties,
against, you know, human rights groups, against the
media. The
amount
of
journalists that are in jail right now in Central
Asia due to this
kind of
crackdown by the regimes was not there before. So
rather than
improving the
situation, we're seeing a new wave of repression
which is going on,

if

you like,

on the back of this kind of new strategic alliance

with the the

United

States.

GROSS: What impact do you think that repression

is going to have

on

the

militant Islamist groups within Central Asia?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, I think, you know,

9/11 was a huge

opportunity

for the United States, simply because

anti-Americanism was not

prevalent in

Central Asia at all; it was perhaps one of the few

regions in the

Muslim world

where there was no anti-Americanism, simply because

the people there

had no

experience of America. They had no knowledge of

American culture or

American

power or anything like that.

Now these Islamic movements have always been very fringe movements. I mean, they have largely been in exile, living in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran or other Central Asian states. They have always had a minimum of support. But clearly, the fact that, you know, these states and these regimes have become more authoritarian may well increase support for Islamic fundamentalism because whatever you don't have in Central Asia, you don't have a democratic, secular opposition. These regimes have not allowed democratic parties to exist, which means that there is a political vacuum there, and that vacuum could well

increasingly be filled by militant fundamentalists.

GROSS: Who would be very anti-American.

Mr. RASHID: Who would be very anti-American and would want to topple the regimes, who would want to link--you know, would like to link up their movements with the aim of overthrowing the regimes and also, you know, link themselves up with al-Qaeda and other such groups.

GROSS: My guest is journalist Ahmed Rashid. His latest book is "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia." He's also the author of the best seller "Taliban." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is journalist Ahmed Rashid. He is

based in Pakistan. He reports on Pakistan,
Afghanistan and Central
Asia for the
Far Eastern Economic Review and the London Daily
Telegraph.

You regularly travel through parts of the world
where terrorism is
an
everyday occurrence. What's it like to be in the
United States
during
a high
alert?

Mr. RASHID: It's very strange. As you can
imagine, I'm on this
book
tour and
I've been to a dozen cities, and I am searched
about four times more
than anyone
else at the airports. And it seems very strange, I
mean, to have to
go--I mean,
I've been very patient, I haven't objected, but the
way I look, I
suppose, and
this and that, my name and everything, you know, my

ticket is
instantly marked
with--I don't know--all sorts of scratches and
numbers which means
that every
person who glances at my boarding pass has to
search me about three
times over.
So it's quite nerve-racking and very, very strange.

GROSS: And do you feel tolerant of that, like,
'Oh, well, I
understand. You
know, it's unfortunate, but I understand why
they're doing it'? Or
are you
angry about that and feel like...

Mr. RASHID: No, I'm tolerant about it. I mean, I
do understand
why
they're
doing it. You know, I just wish there was a way
that my publishers
could have,
in fact, sent out a message saying, you know, 'He's
OK and he's with
Penguin
and, you know, you don't have to search him three

times.'

GROSS: Right. 'He's the guy we're inviting here to help explain what's happening.'

Mr. RASHID: Exactly, you know.

GROSS: I hate to ask you to speculate and look into a crystal ball on all of that, but I'd really like to know what your best guess is about what happens next.

Mr. RASHID: Well, Terry, I think in the best-case scenario, which is that America invades Iraq, Saddam is toppled, the war is short, Saddam is killed, you will then have the whole process of reconstructing Iraq. And I think that is going to be incredibly complicated. And I really

don't know whether this administration has the patience, has the humility, has the conciliatory kind of politics that will be needed to really build a government of consensus in Iraq which could actually stabilize Iraq. And then you will be faced with upsurges in the Muslim world and, most critically, the Palestinian-Israeli problem. And will this administration be willing to put pressure on Israel to meet the Palestinians halfway? I doubt it very much. So, you know, I think, you know, very difficult times are up ahead.

GROSS: Wait a minute. That was your best-case scenario, right?

Mr. RASHID: That is my best-case scenario, exactly.

GROSS: Yeah, well, what's the not-best-case scenario? What if it's not a short war?

Mr. RASHID: I think, you know, if it's not a short war and the war goes on even for, say, six to eight weeks, for example, which in these days and with this kind of technology and all for America is a long war, I think we would see much greater acts of terrorism worldwide by Islamic groups, attacks against American targets, you know, right across the world, in Europe, in America. And I think there would be a reaction in the street; I mean, that would allow a street reaction to build up. And then you would have real problems faced by

many of the regimes which are Western allies in the Muslim world.

GROSS: Do you think there's any chance that this war won't happen?

Mr. RASHID: No. I think the administration is absolutely determined to have a war, come what may. And clearly the kind of preparations that are going on now have been quite extraordinary and really, I mean, seem to be pitting us, you know, right at the edge there of a war.

GROSS: Well, Ahmed Rashid, I wish you safe travels and I thank you very much for talking with us.

Mr. RASHID: Thank you very much, indeed.

GROSS: Journalist Ahmed Rashid covers Afghanistan, Central Asia and his

country Pakistan for the Far Eastern Economic Review and the London Daily Telegraph. His latest book, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," has just been published in paperback.