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## **BOOK REVIEW**

### ***My Life with the Taliban***

*Abdul Salam Zaeef\**

C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, London, 2010. 315pp. ISBN 978-1849040266

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'*My Life with the Taliban*' is the autobiography (written in 21 small chapters along with an epilogue and assisted by Character List in the beginning and a Chronology and Glossary at the end) of Abdul Salam Zaeef who was the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan in 2001 and one of the most well-known faces of the movement following the 9-11 attacks and a principal actor in its domestic and foreign affairs.. The book has been translated for the first time from the Pashto, which shares more than a personal history of an unusual life. The recent history of Afghanistan is the focus of this traumatic life story. It is an account about how a poor village boy ended up being the ambassador of Afghanistan to Pakistan, and thus being kidnapped; in defiance to all human and international conventions, and remained under arrest in Guantanamo, returning to Kabul in 2005 as a so-called reconciled Taliban to be used by the Afghan government as a conduit for talks. There he regrew his long black beard, acquired an iPhone and wrote this memoir.

This is the story of the singing, dancing Mujahid that grew into an alarming inquisition squad which ran Afghanistan for five years. It gives us a valuable sight of a man and his time; it draws back the curtain on a period about which we have a very little awareness of. The book gives answers to the very basic questions which are not identified however; like is the Taliban one group or many? How organized are they? What links do they have with Al Qaeda? Where does their money come from? Why Mullah Omar can not be found? The author's account of his early years as a struggling Taliban official offers us a deeper and more realistic view of a group that has been notorious with all sins of Afghanistan. Arguing against the conventional accounts that the Taliban emerged in the 1990s, Zaeef upholds that the movement existed as early as the 1970s. The book tells that Zaeef was born in

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\* Translated from Pashto & Edited By Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn.

1968, the son of local mullah in a poor village of Afghanistan where there was no electricity or water. Both of his parents died at an early age. When he was 11, the Soviets invaded. Like many Afghans, he and his family fled to Pakistan. There, he attended a madrassah and at 15, he ran away to join Jihad. During which time, he was linked with many key figures in the anti-soviet resistance, including the current Taliban head Mullah Omar. After the war, Zaeef turned to a quiet life in a small village in Kandhar, but a situation of turmoil and chaos soon overwhelmed Afghanistan as factional fighting erupted after the Russians pulled out. In 1988, he took parting wretched attack on the Russians at Kandhar airport, and his group lost many men. He survived to see Russians leave and describes the day Mujahideen took over in 1992, as the happiest day of his life. But soon there was anarchy in Kandhar, where local commanders set up checkpoints, shaking down villagers for bribes, rapping women and kidnapping young boys. Zaeef points out that the group already existed in Jihad and got together again in 1994 to sort out local crime. Mullah Omar was chosen as a leader by them as he was not a known figure. Disgusted by the lawlessness that ensued, Zaeef was one among the former mujahidin who were closely involved in the discussions that led to the emergence of the Taliban, in 1994. Zaeef then details his Taliban career as civil servant and minister who negotiated with foreign oil companies as well as with Afghanistan's own resistance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud. They had weapons but no money, and a motorbike. The ordinary Afghans were fed up with lawlessness but they were able to take control of Kandhar. From there, they moved on to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and eventually Kabul. Zaeef and his editors perform a valuable service in introducing us to Guantanamo from the point of view of one of its inmates. This section must be read by those who believe that West is more civilized than Afghans.

Zaeef was ambassador to Pakistan at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and his account discusses the strange 'phony war' period before the US-led intervention overthrew the Taliban. In early 2002, Zaeef was handed over to American forces in Pakistan, not enduring his diplomatic status, and spent four and a half years in prison (including several years in Guantanamo) before being released without having been tried or charged with any offence. He portrays the mental and physical torture he and his fellow prisoners suffered at the hands of American soldiers and concludes with an intense condemnation of American policy in Afghanistan. The author's attempt as ambassador in Pakistan to retain the release of Taliban prisoners in Kunduz area who were subsequently massacred. According to the author, although American commanders of the International coalition are trying to defeat Taliban yet they have been informed by their allies that there can not be military solution to the conflict. For a viable political solution, the Afghan Government, Western leaders and those they represent need to understand who Taliban are. There is all kind of intriguing detail about Taliban tactics and the methods that one can find nowhere. The reader gets a closer look at

the formation of Taliban, of which the author has great pride and trust in its members. The reader gets a glance of the operations of the Afghan Embassy in Peshawar and daily life at Guantanamo. He writes of being chained up, beaten and forcibly shaved, of prisoners, being beaten to death or paralyzed, and of American guards urinating on their Qurans. Curiously, he was frequently asked about the presence of natural minerals in Afghanistan, including uranium and gold. Despite years of imprisonment, Zaeef preserves strongly Islamist leanings. Since he returns from Guantanamo, the author has been a reconciled Taliban, who lives quietly in Kabul and at peace with the government. The author clearly roots against the US in his epilogue, as his point of view is different from US policy makers.

The book is a gleaming insight into the psyche of those who fought the Soviet corruption and accordingly tried to defend their country. Zaeef confabulates that the Taliban were a distinct group during the anti-Soviet mujahideen wars and operated as such under their own identity and leadership. While there is no doubt that the sundry madrassa students, i.e. Talib-e-ilm (plural: Taliban), were part of the Peshawar-based mujahideen groups and were also included in the fold of the field commanders like Abdul Haq and Jalaluddin Haqqani, there is no evidence that the Taliban operated then as a distinct entity. A striking surprise that comes to light in the book is that 9/11 was avoidable if the Taliban had taken action against Al Qaeda before it occurred. Had the Taliban responded conscientiously to the US's pre-emptive warning, this horrible tragedy would have never happened. Weeks before the attack, the United States ambassador to Islamabad met Zaeef and handed him an official warning. In response to the American warning the Taliban wrote back in a letter that Afghanistan had no intention to harm the United States of America then or in the future. Zaeef hints Pakistani spies as the real wrongdoers for the Taliban's indecisiveness, for they supplied Mullah Omar with ambiguous and fake information about the US's intents. Zaeef's account is explicitly and shrewdly focused on Pakistan and its military spy agency. For him, Pakistan and the agency have been the ultimate spoilers in the war on terrorism and the Afghan game. He blames Pakistan for every single wrong, the Taliban has ever committed. He portrays ISI as a global evil run by underhanded anti-Afghan thugs.

In the second half of the book, Zaeef self-indulgently descends into political preaching. He is more of the Taliban preacher. He tries to gloss over Osama's relationship with the Taliban, Taliban's misogyny and all the melancholy, they had caused in Afghanistan and beyond. He identifies Mullah Omar as a good leader and Karzai a weak one. Taliban issued another decree on beards and wearing turbans that every male must be growing a beard to a certain length. In prison, they angered him for shaving his beard twice. He fails to provide any evidence from Koran to support up this statement. Zaeef's book is well written that lays out an inside story of the Taliban from its roots up to its collapse, its changing into an

anti-Western uprising and its uncertain future. The book is a must-reading for those American policy makers who want to understand one of the most controversial religious movements in modern times.

The book offers little optimism for the current war in Afghanistan. As the author has repeatedly pointed out that Afghanistan has never been conquered by foreign forces and he claims to have warned the Americans from the start that with in 10 years they would face an embarrassing failure. It is a standard reading for the one who wants to study Afghanistan today. By the time one finishes the reading, one becomes aware of the fact that Taliban are not the monsters but people. There is no pretence here, Zaeef is an opponent of the West's intervention in his country and continues to consider himself a Talib, if he is no longer an active member. The editors must be appreciated for their work and should be required reading for any one with an interest in the region. As an ambassador, he has come to know that Osma Bin Laden was only an alleged motive that America used to go to Afghanistan. His cynical view of America worsened when he ended up in Guantanamo. He opposes the American occupation of his country. He rebukes the Obama administration (and therefore Australia and other allies) for relying "solely on force and even the so-called peace talks are accompanied by threats". Although Zaeef hardly represents a liberal face of the war-torn country, his interpretations about Afghanistan provide a valuable lesson for readers who view the nation as incapable of rising above its tribal afflictions.

The book contains certain draw backs also. As the writer has ignored the US role in Russian war until its end, and then in context of its withdrawal of support. Through the years of Taliban rule, he has written nothing about the treatment of women or the declining conditions of the country. Zaeef doesn't regret the Taliban's despotic rule that kept women in the Afghanistan community under house arrest. He is also silent about how the Taliban clamped down the medieval codes of behavior on Afghanistan. There is no mention of Taliban's alleged use of opium money, or the use of suicide bombs and the civilian casualties they have caused. There is almost nothing about his wife or children. The book tells that Taliban was formed in 1994 while Taliban were known and operating during the fight against Russians. No where does he talk about Taliban stopping girls to go to schools. He says nothing about Taliban's tyrannical attitude towards women. Zaeef makes no mention of the major international crimes committed on their watch. He does not mention, even in passing, the killing of the former president Dr. Najibullah, who was murdered by the Taliban and their handlers in utter disregard for any human, Pashtun or international conventions. That is how the Taliban rule was ushered in, in Kabul in 1996. Similarly, he skips over the genocide of the Shiite Hazaras and the ethnic cleansing of the Tajiks in Mazar-i-Sharif while remembering this much that the former Pakistani interior minister Moinuddin Haider was supposedly a Shia. Zaeef and his editors make it a point to criticise and condemn the PDPA for its land reform policy and allege that the party

systematically eliminated the traditional power brokers like the tribal chieftains, landlords and indeed the petty mullahs. In his selective amnesia, Zaeef makes no mention of a much more inhuman account of the same strategy set out by his regime, through which wholesale killing of teachers, middle class employees, politicians and tribal elders took place on both sides of the Durand Line. There is also a complete silence in the book about the finances of the Taliban regime. It does mention its diplomatic recognition by three Muslim states including the Saudis, but does not touch upon their massive financing of the Taliban regime. It fully ignores the military and technical expertise, oil and gas supplies, food items and human cannon fodder that the Taliban received from its three patrons.

Despite certain flaws, still it is a precious addition to the literature on present-day Afghan history. It is a must-reading for those American policy makers who want to understand one of the most controversial religious movements in modern times. Reading this book with all its references to belief and scripture leaves the impression of a passionate Afghan nationalist who believes the Pashtuns are disenfranchised and who hates the Americans and Pakistani ISI in equal measure. The book is very much useful for those who want to understand Taliban movement in historical context. *My Life with the Taliban* is a required reading for anyone interested in, where the Afghan conflict is heading. Though Zaeef has not pointed out the way towards a negotiated end to the fighting yet what he says that ending the atrocities could prove enormously complex, if possible at all.

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