FEATURE REVIEW

The Taliban threat

Kristian Berg Harpviken

Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban
William Maley (ed)

The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan
Peter Marsden

'Taliban' has now become a global household word. All over the world people see the Taliban as the personification of politicised Islam: primitive, repressive, with little respect for individual rights in general, and female rights in particular. It was in late 1994 that the Taliban was first heard of, after reports came of their having taken action against a local commander who had abducted, raped and killed three women in the southwestern province of Kandahar. Since then, the Taliban have gained military control over most of Afghanistan. Dethroning local warlords throughout their Pashtun core territory in the southwest, the Taliban were often seen as righteous, albeit brutal, saviours of Afghanistan. Then, once the movement started to take on areas that were already stable, or areas outside the territory populated by their main constituency of rural Pashtuns, the picture changed. Media images of the hanging of former president Najib, of soldiers beating women who were not 'properly dressed' and, more recently, of atrocities against members of the Hazara ethnic group, have crossed the globe. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have recognised the Taliban government. Undoubtedly, many Afghans are highly appreciative of the order brought about by the Taliban, while remaining critical of their gender policies, their interpretation of the sharia, and their violent enforcement of traditional rules that many used to respect voluntarily. To understand how the Taliban so rapidly managed to become the dominant force in Afghanistan, we need to acknowledge the general situation of incompetence, and the unfruitful rivalry among the parties and leaders that the movement was to replace.

The publication of these two works, Fundamentalism Reborn? and The Taliban, is to be welcomed. Despite massive international interest in the Taliban since their emergence in late 1994, there has been almost a total lack of analysis that can add depth to the media reports. Nor is this an isolated phenomenon: solid empirical research on Afghanistan and its social transformation in the past two decades of war is hard to come by. The onset of war dealt a dramatic blow to Afghanistan studies. The indigenous academic environment was hard hit by the political conflict, and foreigners found their opportunities to do fieldwork increasingly constrained. Since the Communists stepped down in April 1992, travelling and working in the country has become easier, but this

Kristian Berg Harpviken is a Research Fellow at the University of Oslo, PB 1096, Blindern, Norway.
has not stimulated a new wave of research. This is indeed regrettable, as insufficient understanding of the social and political transformation in Afghanistan during the war also impedes the search for solutions to the conflict. Afghanistan needs a debate about its future, informed by knowledge about its recent past. These two volumes do not pre-empt the Taliban as a topic for further research; rather they ought to serve as an inspiration for future work.

*Fundamentalism Reborn* consists of contributions from 12 established Afghanistan scholars. William Maley introduces the collection, followed by Amin Saikal’s analysis of the Rabbani government (1992–96). Anthony Davis inquires into how the Taliban became a military force, whereas Ahmad Rashid provides a broader picture of political, economic and societal links between Pakistan and the Taliban. US policy is the theme of Richard Mackenzie’s contribution; Anthony Hyman deals with Russia and Central Asian states; and Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady looks at the impact of the Saudi Arabia–Iran conflict on Afghanistan. Michael Keating addresses dilemmas of providing humanitarian aid and Nancy Hatch Dupree discusses the position of Afghan women under the Taliban. Bernt Glatzer assesses the likelihood of ethnic and tribal disintegration in the country. William Maley evaluates UN peace efforts and Olivier Roy asks whether Islamism has any future in Afghanistan. Finally, M Nazif Shahrani explores different forms of governance that can grant greater administrative power to local communities in Afghanistan. This is a broad canvas indeed, and the volume would have gained from a more stringent editorial vision. As it is, important elements have been left out, while there remain awkward contradictions of fact as well as of opinion between individual authors.

Marsden’s primary objective in *The Taliban* is to facilitate a process of dialogue between the Taliban and the international community by contributing to ‘an objective understanding of the current situation’ (p 2). After an introduction and a background chapter, Marsden analyses the *mujahedin* movement of the 1980s. He then moves on to the Taliban, their history and their religious and ideological foundation, together with a review of radical Islamic movements worldwide. The Taliban’s gender policy and international reactions to it get a separate chapter, as does the dialogue between the Taliban and international humanitarian agencies. This is followed up with an excursion into relations with the wider international community and a chapter on the Pakistani connection. Marsden concludes with a firm statement on the responsibility of the international community to remain engaged and to do its utmost to bring the conflict to an end. This book has the character of an introductory text; however, the author’s preoccupation with religion leads him to neglect crucial dimensions of the Taliban; this might not be the most productive approach towards nuancing the established picture of fervent single-minded religionists.

**The international dimension**

Marsden discusses the role of Pakistani, Saudi and US financial backing for the emergence of the *mujahedin* parties after the 1980 Soviet invasion. He draws particular attention to Pakistan’s role in deciding which parties would be granted permission to operate, with seven parties becoming the sole recipients of the military aid channelled through Pakistan. In violation of any humanitarian standards, Pakistan, with the silent consent of the international community, made party membership obligatory for refugee status, hence for receiving rations in Pakistan, and the camps formed ideal recruiting grounds for the parties. In his account of the more recent influence of Pakistan, however, Marsden is more vague: in fact he claims to see no clear evidence of Pakistan’s involvement with the Taliban.

Four chapters in the Maley book cover the involvement of other states in the Afghan
conflict. Ahmad Rashid provides nuances to the dominant view that Pakistan has a major influence on the Taliban. The Taliban have often acted against advice from the Pakistani side, even at an early stage of their campaign. Rashid argues that the Taliban enjoy close ties to many different players in Pakistani politics, a circumstances that has granted them substantial leverage in mobilising resources. Key players on the Pakistani side are the government, the army, the intelligence agency (ISI) and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-i Islam, the political party that operates most of the religious schools (madrasa) in the border region from which the Taliban have drawn many of their recruits. Important also is the ‘transport mafia’ of tribally based networks of truckers and smugglers operating along the Pakistani–Afghan border, which has been a major financial source for the Taliban. However, Rashid, like Marsden, is concerned that Pakistan’s own radical Islamic parties will adopt a revolutionary strategy inspired by the Taliban. He foresees fertile recruiting ground among Pakistani madrasa students, many of whom have gained fighting experience with the Taliban. The fact that several Islamic groups in Pakistan have recently shifted their political struggle away from the parliamentary arena sadly adds credibility to Rashid’s prophecies. Overall, Rashid’s analysis is exemplary in proving the inadequacy of treating any state as having one sole coherent foreign policy.

Richard Mackenzie notes that US policy moved a long way between the laudatory remarks made after the Taliban’s conquest of Kabul in September 1996 and Secretary of State Albright’s condemnation on her visit to Pakistan only one year later. The foreign policy of the ‘omnipotent’ USA is rarely consistent, but emerges from various compromises between a wide range of players. Mackenzie sees an ironic continuity in US policy on Afghanistan: even as the USA was a key financial contributor in the 1980s, policy formulation was largely subcontracted to Pakistan. After a period of disorientation over Afghanistan in 1992–94, Washington came to see the Taliban as a promising candidate. Not only did the movement appear to oppose drugs production and the hosting of international terrorists, it also seemed capable of re-establishing calm in the country, with positive effects for the whole region—the US ally Pakistan in particular. Despite US public condemnation currently, Washington’s official policy on Afghanistan remains a contested issue. In Mackenzie’s view, the private company UNOCAL, competing for the building of a pipeline linking Turkmenistan to the Gulf through western Afghanistan, has been as important in defining US policy on Afghanistan as have the State Department and the CIA.1 Since the time when Mackenzie completed his manuscript, the ‘Taliban’s ability to offer sufficient stability for a pipeline has been increasingly questioned. Current indications are that Washington is seeking to develop alternatives to the Taliban, as one step towards a so-called broad-based government, and is putting pressure on Pakistan to cut support to the movement.

Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady looks at the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as played out on the Afghan scene. The conflict dates back to the Iranian revolution of 1979, which challenged the hegemony in the Islamic world that Saudi Arabia had tried to establish since the late 1960s. Ahady sees three distinct phases in this conflict as regards Afghanistan. In the first phase, from the 1979 revolution to emergent Soviet withdrawal in 1988, Iran had only limited influence, occupied as it was with internal power struggles and with the war against Iraq. What little Iranian investment there was, was aimed solely at Shi’ite radical organisations closely associated with the new Iranian regime. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, emerged together with the USA as the major financial contributor to the Sunni resistance, deliberately emphasising the Sunni–Shi’ite divide. A second phase, from 1988 until the Communist abdication in 1992, was marked by a broadening of Iran’s engagement in the conflict, while Saudi Arabia tried to convert its influence into a majahedin government. Iran engaged in discussions with Afghanistan’s
government; Saudi Arabia favoured a military victory. The Sunni–Shi’ite divide was enforced by incompatible claims about representation in a future ruling body. By late 1991, as a result of the death of Khomeini, Iran’s foreign policy had become more pragmatic, and Iran strengthened its ties with several Sunni parties. This marks the transition to the third phase, where Iran played a key role in backing the so-called Northern Alliance which led to the downfall of Najibullah’s government in April 1992. As the Taliban’s influence grew, Iran came to see it as a major threat to its own interests, as well as to Shi’ism in general, and intensified support to the Kabul government in an ‘informal alliance’ with India and Russia. Ahady sees Iran’s desire to establish a friendly government in Kabul as one factor in its wider policy towards Central Asia. Recent years have seen renewed interest in Afghanistan as a gateway for natural resources from Central Asia, and this he views as an important obstacle to solving the conflict: ‘foreign interference ... is a major cause for the continuation of the civil war in Afghanistan’ (p 133). Ahady’s account would, however, have benefited from an analysis of the priorities of different factions within Saudi Arabia and Iran, on a par with the analysis Rashid gives us on Pakistan, or Mackenzie on the USA.

Anthony Hyman addresses how Russia and Central Asian states relate to the Taliban. In his view, perceived threats against the integrity of the new Central Asian states have been the dominant force behind the policies of these states and Russia alike. The most extreme formulation was General Lebed’s ‘domino theory’, suggesting that the Taliban would keep marching past the borders of Afghanistan, into Central Asia. Neither Hyman nor Marsden thinks that a spread of the Taliban movement could be seen as a real threat. Central Asian societies are unlikely to be receptive to the Taliban’s primitive practices, and the Taliban have credibly reassured their northern neighbours that they harbour no expansionist ambitions. A more realistic concern for the Central Asian states has been that a territorial fragmentation of Afghanistan would have implications for their own borders, yet, paradoxically, they have preferred the continued statelessness to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. A related paradox, barely touched on here, is that Russia and the Central Asian states decided to back the deposed government against the Taliban, despite its record of supporting the armed opposition in Tajikistan, and despite its being far more likely to be an attractive object of emulation for Central Asians. Finally, the Taliban threat was useful for other purposes. For Russia it could be used to legitimate a considerable military presence in Central Asia, for the authorities of Uzbekistan, to take one example, it was a convenient excuse for clamping down hard on its own Islamic opposition.

Marsden’s primary concern is how the Taliban came to stand as a ‘prime enemy’ image of Islam throughout the West, an enemy image accentuated by the recent US campaign against Osama Bin Laden, whom the Taliban host. Although Marsden makes no explicit reference to Huntington and his thesis of a clash of civilisation, this is a story of how the Huntington thesis wins out through mutual suspicion fostered by an unwillingness to see that the real world is not black and white, but of many shades. The enemy picture of Islam so dominant in the West led our media to welcome the Taliban movement, which, in its political primitiveness, brutal penal code practice and treatment of women, lived up to an ‘ideal’ picture of Islam. Marsden does not fail to point out that a similar enemy image of the West exists in parts of the Islamic world, carried forward by the Taliban and a series of other Islamic movements. He draws a grim contrast between the heroic stories of the mujahedin that appeared in the Western press in the 1980s and the negative coverage of the Taliban from late 1994 onwards. This point has not been lost on the Iranian leaders, who have recently exploited the image of the Taliban in a campaign aimed at rebuilding relations with the West, while expanding their own room for manoeuvre in regional politics. Marsden draws attention to the human
rights debate, to the gap between Western and Taliban conceptions of rights. The Western focus has been on restrictions on women's freedom of movement and right to work, whereas the Taliban feel they are not getting the credit they deserve for re-establishing law and order. The dialogue has a problematic starting point, because 'there is an unequal relationship between the West and the Islamic world based on the greater economic and political power of the former' (Marsden, p 117). The Taliban have become a symbol of the current state of global Christian-Muslim relations.

Women and international aid

Discussing Taliban policy on women, Nancy Hatch Dupree distinguishes between the situation in Pashtun rural areas and in the cities. In the countryside, Taliban restrictions are largely in line with traditional norms. Here administrators have often been flexible, and aid agencies have been able to maintain their activities through careful dialogue. In the cities, Taliban policies collide with long-established liberalised practices for women; inflexible administrators dominate, and relations between aid agencies and the Taliban have been confrontational. Marsden's account is in tune with that of Dupree, but he adds the historic disputability of gender reforms as a key to understanding the current situation. Such reforms have become a major threat to many past implementers, including the Soviet-backed Communist government. Marsden argues that the mujahedin parties used aid agencies to symbolise a threat to Afghan women, presenting them as a force potentially corrupting female honour. Taliban policies on women are indisputably excessive—with a ban on work and education for women, severe limitations on their freedom of movement, and summary punishments. These policies, suggests Dupree, are not motivated solely by ideology: the Taliban leadership is concerned about how their young fighters would react if women were granted greater freedom. Coming directly from the seclusion of the madrasa, the fighters could start questioning the wisdom of their leadership, and might also engage in activities that would dishonour the movement. Dupree believes that the only workable approach is to continue low-key programmes such as home schools, where local communities are engaging directly in a dialogue with the authorities. She gives scant hope to those who believe that the Taliban are sensitive to international threats of cuts in aid.

Michael Keating addresses dilemmas of providing humanitarian aid in conflict situations, such as the possibility that external aid allows parties to channel money from welfare to warfare, indirectly feeding into the conflict; the ethical dilemma involved in making aid conditional on political conduct; and how to relate in practical terms to a governing structure such as the Taliban administration which is severely strained as to capacity and competence, and about whose real power structure relatively little is known. The United Nations, having made Afghanistan into a test case for coordination in general, will have to face these dilemmas. Marsden looks specifically at women's engagement in aid projects. He feels that women's involvement was more easily permitted where agencies were dealing with a community body, but that problems arose where agencies found themselves dealing with commanders or political parties, for whom gender was a highly politicised issue. Experiencing a strained dialogue with the Taliban, agencies came to realise that, for the Taliban, the main priority was military victory, not the welfare services provided by the agencies. Marsden describes aid agencies as having had a closely coordinated approach to the Taliban, building on their long experience from work in the country. However, this reviewer finds Marsden's account difficult to reconcile with realities on the ground. Some agencies have gone to considerable lengths to position themselves, at the expense of other agencies. Marsden's description of the cultural sensitivity of the joint aid body in its dealing with the Taliban
is a far cry from the cowboyish mentality that at times has dominated the aid environment in Kabul.

**Searching for legitimate governance**

William Maley evaluates UN efforts at negotiating a peace in Afghanistan. He points out that short-term accommodation can have detrimental consequences in the longer term, but also acknowledges the dilemma of negotiating with non-governmental parties to a war, which inevitably serves to grant legitimacy to such parties. Nonetheless, Maley challenges the commonly held 'success view' of the Geneva negotiations that led to the Soviet withdrawal of 1989, precisely because the opposition was sidelined in the process. This created an enduring problem of trust that has remained a major obstacle to successful UN intervention. Later negotiation attempts are analysed—common denominators being an attempt to bypass established parties and an unwillingness to address the interference of neighbouring states. Maley suggests that the solution lies in turning attention from the composition of the government to the function of the state, and he foresees a loose federal structure complemented by a strong UN presence. Marsden supplements Maley here, pointing out that the Taliban tend to see the UN as an instrument of US global dominance, which severely affects its legitimacy as an impartial peacebroker. The Taliban argue—not totally without foundation—that illegitimate governments with highly dubious human rights practices have often been internationally acknowledged, given the right international connections. In the Afghan context, current international attitudes to former governments, also with a poor human rights record, can only contribute to convince the Taliban that standards are politically manipulable.

Analysing the Rabbani government (1992–96), Amin Saikal argues that its fundamental problem was a lack of legitimacy. This he traces partly to differences within the party, accentuated by increasing ethnicisation, but reflected in the conflict between its political and military branches, as well as in the tension in relations with Ismael Khan, the powerful governor of Herat. However, much of the blame goes to Pakistan, first backing the non-compliant prime minister Hekmatyar, later backing the Taliban. Saikal’s obvious preference for Jamiate mars an otherwise interesting analysis. Most problematic is his defence of Rabbani, clinging to power even after the expiry of his term as agreed in the Peshawar agreement of 1992. Saikal argues that ‘the question of what has historically constituted a legitimate government in Afghanistan is a highly academic one’ (p 39). This argument not only undermines Saikal’s own search for legitimate governance, it is also an unfortunate attack on the political rights of ordinary Afghans.

M Nazif Shahrani is also concerned with legitimate governance, but he wants to shift the focus from the central to the local level. The basic form of social organisation in Afghanistan is small communities based on a model of the extended family, where shared values and ties of patronage provide the social fabric. Shahrani holds that any future political structure must not only accommodate, but be based on, these tightly knit local communities, a form of civil society which has been strengthened through the war. He contrasts this with 150 years of a centralised extractive state in Afghanistan, the Taliban representing continuity in an obsession with centralised rule. Shahrani’s argument rests on his assessment that ‘local community-based Islamist political and military organizations worked admirably well in the context of ideological opposition to colonial occupation forces and a domestic communist regime’ (p 234). Local communities should be politically semi-autonomous, as well as sufficiently armed to resist internal power abuse or foreign threat. Although there is reason to question Shahrani’s harmony model of wartime mobilisation in Afghan local communities, he does address a level of governance that has consistently been neglected in the debate, and he introduces new
ideas. The challenge is now for Shahrani to follow up with concrete ideas on the division of authority between different levels in the hierarchy, as well as between different sectors of society—real dilemmas that are barely addressed in his contribution to the Maley volume.

Islam

Using his own distinction between fundamentalism and Islamism as a starting point, Olivier Roy claims that Islamism has been on the defensive throughout the 1990s, not only in Afghanistan but worldwide. Iran has failed to take the lead in global Islamism, Saudi Arabia has played an ambiguous role, and Islamic radicalism seems to have inherently divisive effects. The result is an Islamist movement consisting of small and marginalised networks of radicals. Many Islamist organisations have turned 'Islam-nationalist', and neo-fundamentalist movements are gaining ground. Characteristic of these is that they demand full implementation of sharia, lack a political programme for running a state, and profess their hatred of Western politics and culture. To Roy, the Taliban is a classic neo-fundamentalist movement, although its genuine rural base distinguishes it from others of the kind. Islamic unity as a political idea has been undermined in Afghanistan, because of the ethnicisation of the struggle and the proven inability of the parties to implement an Islamic policy. Furthermore, argues Roy, the Taliban is a genuine Pashtun movement—a feature which antagonises people of other ethnic backgrounds, but also carries the potential for a strong and politicised Pashtun identity. This is closely linked to the fervent anti-Shi‘ism of the Taliban, another distinction from the Islamist movements who were always eager to suppress sectarian differences. For Roy, the Taliban version of rural, ethically based fundamentalism is but another confirmation of the shortcomings of Islamism. Roy’s analysis contradicts the more commonly held view that radical Islam is gaining ground worldwide—a view shared by Maley and Marsden, among many others.

Political Islam is a key concern of Marsden; he casts a wide net in order to situate the Taliban, basically reviewing the main radical Islamic movements of the past two centuries. The comparison with Islamic movements in the Middle East and North Africa is intentionally inconclusive—Marsden believes it is too early to categorise the as-yet embryonic Taliban (p 67). Turning to Islam within the subcontinent, including Afghanistan, Marsden establishes continuities with the Deobandi school in British India, with the Jamiat-e Islami and its leading thinker Abdul Ala Maududi, as well as with the Afghan mujahedin parties of the anti-Communist war of the 1980s. Marsden’s focus here remains the role of religion as ideology, and his analysis would have benefited from paying similar attention to the institutional and organisational aspects of religion as a foundation for the Taliban. Failing to situate the appeal of religiously based ideology within its actual societal context, Marsden’s comparisons become too loose to inspire a deeper understanding of the Taliban.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is given short shrift in both those books, despite its prominence in international media as a key to understanding the Afghan conflict in the 1990s. The exception is Bernt Glatzer, whose contribution in the Maley volume addresses the potential for Afghanistan’s ethnic and tribal disintegration. After an overview of the country’s main ethnic groups, Glatzer provides a comprehensive description of the Pashtun tribal system. Tribes being sub-units of ethnic groups, they have tended to be the building blocks of political alliances. Such tribal segmentary systems not only provide opportuni-
ties for building larger alliances, at their core lies also a tendency towards segmentary division. Tribal leadership requires constant maintenance—thus the tribal system inherently imposes strong checks on power—and Glatzer sees the tribal system as a strong stabilising factor. However, his discussion falls short of addressing the interplay, or tension, between the religious networks and the tribal system that penetrates the Taliban. Nor does he discuss how the emergence of the Taliban, which can be interpreted as an encompassing Pashtun movement, has affected political organisation and identity among other ethnic groups such as the Hazara, who also constitute a religious minority. Glatzer sees little risk of ethnic fragmentation; ethnicity, he argues 'was an epiphenomenon of the Afghan war' (p 179). However, he fails to account for the cases that appear to contradict his argument, such as the ethnically motivated violence against civilians that has repeatedly scarred Kabul since 1992, the forced expulsion of Tajiks by the Taliban during the 1997 fighting, and the recent food blockade of Hazarajat. Surely, these events contribute to reinforcing ethnic boundaries, even if, as Glatzer states, ethnicity was not originally at the root of the Afghan conflict.

Social movement?

In his introduction to *Fundamentalism Reborn*, Maley establishes the basic nature of the Taliban as a social movement. He is particularly interested in how the Taliban has managed to maintain coherence despite its drawing recruits from increasingly diverse strands. Whereas the leadership considered a compromise with former Communists in the north opportune, this was unacceptable to the fighters who initiated the disarming of local forces, with fatal consequences. Unfortunately, neither this nor other questions concerning the social and organisational foundation of the Taliban receive more than scant attention here.

Davis seeks to falsify the social movement thesis in his contribution, arguing that the Taliban is more properly understood as a military organisation. According to Davis, the organisation was already militarily advanced by early 1995, with extreme flexibility, a good command structure and strong communications network. The Pakistani support is seen as crucial to its success. Davis describes the campaign that led to Taliban control over Kabul: 'in 17 years of war no Afghan force, either government or opposition, had ever carried out such a swift and complex series of operations over such a wide operation area' (p 68). Davis thinks that the early expansion of the Taliban in the South involved a great deal more fighting than hitherto acknowledged, and he rejects the assertion that the areas where the Taliban took control suffered from security and administrative problems on which the Taliban could offer much improvement. Davis laudably bases his contribution on a series of explicit references—but these also reveal his dependence on sources within the former government. Furthermore, he fails to examine recruitment and organisational issues of the Taliban, although these are real problems, as demonstrated by the failure of many a militarily advanced group without popular backing. Nonetheless, it is with excitement that we look forward to Davis's announced book on the Afghan war.

Marsden also pays comparatively little attention to social dynamics. He does point out, in his analysis of religious influences, that the major influence over the Taliban stems from the Afghan ulema, the network of Islamic scholars. The *madrasa* from which the *taliban* (religious students) initially emerged is the main arena for the ulema—this is where they teach, and where they build their networks of followers and colleagues. The analysis, however, needs to be carried further. One crucial topic is the continuity between the large settlements of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the emergence of the Taliban. Throughout the war, the *madrasa* system in Pakistan was greatly expanded and
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the schools were effectively transformed to serve as para military training camps, but in the shape of age-old, legitimate social institutions. Offering food, shelter and education free of charge, the madrasa were attractive for Afghan refugee families who had little else to give their children. Another area in need of further exploration is how the Taliban were able to transcend the fragmentary tendencies of Pashtun society, and to build a larger-scale organisation with considerable coherence. To this reviewer, it appears that it is exactly the ability to mobilise existing organisational structures for a common purpose that is the key to the mobilisation success of the Taliban.

It is still a dominant view that the emergence of the Taliban movement can largely be explained by the extensive financial, material, and strategic assistance that it received, particularly from Pakistan. However, in the Afghan case there has been a whole series of movements, such as the Soviet-backed PDPA government and the Pakistani favourite Hezb-e Islami (Hekmatyar), who failed in popular mobilisation, despite massive external assistance. I have argued elsewhere that foreign support is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition, for non-state military mobilisation to succeed. With the current state of affairs, particularly in terms of research interest, there is every reason to fear that the social roots of the Taliban will remain sparsely understood. But, as Olivier Roy points out in his contribution to the Maley book: ‘the Taliban did not, after all, come from nowhere’ (p 205). At the time of writing, the Taliban are under threat—both from within, in the form of tensions between their diverse elements, and from without, in terms of Pakistan potentially giving in to US pressure to cut assistance. A potential fragmentation of the Taliban could, for example, be triggered by cuts in external support, or by the leadership entering into alliances with opposing groups. Nevertheless, a fragmentation would not prove that the social dynamics within the movement were unimportant. Any social movement attempting to expand far beyond its primary constituent group will run the risk of fragmentation. The Taliban movement has by far overstretched its capacity, and is now under severe strain. Any dramatic change in its environment, such as a cut in external assistance, can threaten its internal balance.

Conclusion

Very few researchers have conducted real fieldwork in Afghanistan during the war. Wartime accounts therefore tend to become a recycling of the same old pieces of information. Unfortunately, neither of these two books is exempt from that criticism. They are based mainly on secondary data, and the referencing is often poor. The Maley volume suffers from an overall bias against the Taliban, and for the deposed Rabbani/Massoud government. This is hardly surprising, given the policy of this government in general, and Massoud in particular, to be relatively open to outside journalists and researchers, whereas the Taliban have been outright negative. Nonetheless, the inability of several authors to discuss the misdoings of all parties to the conflict on the basis of similar standards is a disappointment.

There are nevertheless two books that add significantly to the state of knowledge about the Taliban. The major areas of neglect are the social and organisational underpinnings of the movement, and the broader social and political context in which it emerged. Otherwise, these volumes complement each other nicely. Marsden’s book has its primary focus on the religious side of the Taliban movement, and its relationship to the international community as represented mainly by Western aid agencies, but ultimately by the media. The Maley volume covers a wider range of topics, but is particularly strong in analysing the involvement of other countries in the Afghan conflict. Identifying the lacunae in the current state of the knowledge about the Taliban, as this review has aimed at doing, can also serve as a first step towards formulating a new and
challenging research agenda for Afghanistan studies. And that is the stuff that future Afghanistan books should be made of.

Notes