

Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad, David B. Edwards, Berkeley: University of California, 2002, ISBN 0-520-22859-6, xxii+354 pp., 3 maps, 15 photographs, list of Significant Persons and Parties, Index.
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Once in a while a work appears that so effectively presents its case that it becomes a new basis of argument and discussion for the next generation of scholars. With respect to studies of Afghanistan Louis Dupree's *Afghanistan* became the point of departure for the empirical reports of the 1970s, just as Olivier Roy's *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* was the authoritative start for those trying to make sense out of the confusing crosscurrents of the Communist-Mujahedin war of the 1980s. This work, David Edwards's second examination of the Pushtun culture in the period of the 1980s and 1990s, will likely enjoy comparable importance, not merely because it brings new material to light on Pushtun society but because of the authority and conviction with which he presents it.

His agenda is to provide a nuanced understanding of the war in Afghanistan by presenting the life stories of three Afghan leaders who played important roles at key junctures in the Afghan conflict, and to give a sense of how leaders viewed themselves and the conflict they were involved in at different stages and how they attempted to mediate the longstanding problem of realizing present opportunities without abandoning the past. The lives of the three leaders are vehicles for examining the competing social constructions at work in the period leading up to the fateful collapse of the social order in the 1990s, which set the stage for the rise of the Taliban. Because each was a key player, Edwards treats each leader as a significant agent shaping the course of affairs and as a participant in larger social currents that turned in directions none of them envisioned.

Organization

The three leaders were Nur Muhammad Taraki, Wakil Samiullah Safi, and Qazi Muhammad Amin Waqad. Taraki was one of the founders of the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and leader of the Khalqi faction after the split with the Parchami faction in mid-1960s. Taraki played a pivotal role in initiating the revolutionary political culture that took form in the 1950s among progressive young people hankering for change and opportunity in a society they resented for its resistance to change. In 1978 he led the Khalqi Communist coup d'état that removed President Muhammad Daud and established a new regime whose social reforms were ill-considered and widely resented among the rural populations. The other two leaders came of age at least a decade after Taraki, during the 1960s. The movements they were involved in were reactions to the Communist movement. Samiullah Safi, a local notable in the Pech valley of Kunar, was a key figure in one of the first tribal uprisings against the Communist regime; it was an ill-fated rebellion mainly driven by the Safi tribe's alarm over a government plan to change the rules by which it conscripted tribesmen into the army [103]. Qazi Amin Waqad was a cleric who had been involved in the Islamist movement in Kabul in the 1960s and later became deputy amir of the Hizb-I Islami party, which, along with several other Islamist parties, became prominent in the anti-government activities and effectively Islamicized the resistance.

Edwards's recounting of each life exposes particular patterns of development and social engagement among the eastern Pushtun of Afghanistan. Taraki, from a Ghilzai

tribe, represented those urban educated progressives who, impatient with the policies of their government, turned to radical solutions such as Communism. Safi represented the tribal young men caught in changes that would reshape the relations of their people to the wider world. Qazi Amin Waqad, from Nangarhar, represented the Islamists who were alarmed by the secular trend in the country, agitated against the government and the Communists as early as the 1960s, and came to dominate the movement against the Communists in the 1980s. These men "helped shape events of their time, [but] also got caught up in and eventually pulled down in the backwash of those events. They all failed in their purposes. The revolution [of Taraki], uprising [of Safi], and jihad [of Amin] ultimately collapsed. But it is because of this failure that [Edwards finds] their stories useful to tell, for ultimately the story of the war in Afghanistan is not the story of success. [It] is rather the story of a series of ill-conceived, though fateful, attempts to define what Afghanistan stood for and to make Afghanistan cohere as a nation in ways different from the ways it had cohered in the past. [19]

Structure of the book

The book is organized into three similarly structured sections. After the first chapter in each part traces the life of a particular individual, there is a chapter on the claims to legitimacy and authority (always disputed of course) that were operative in the movements they were involved in. The chapter following Taraki's life looks at how the Khalqi government attempted to reinvent the relationship between ruler and ruled [57]. The chapter following Samiullah Safi's life traces the anatomy of the Safi tribal uprising early in 1979, less than a year after the Khalqi coup d'état. The chapter following Qazi Amin Waqad's life examines the several ideological and social currents at work among the anti-Communist who were fighting a jihad. To each of these three sections a coda is appended about a particular death that exposed fractures in the movement. The coda to the section on Taraki and the Communist movement was about Taraki's own murder, an event that brought to light the falsity of the cult constructed by the Khalqi regime around Taraki. The coda to the section on Samiullah Safi and the tribal rebellion recounts the stoning of a Safi girl, an affair that embarrassed Safi and revealed the new influence of the radicalized clerics among the tribal Pushtun. The coda after the life of Qazi Amin Waqad and the anti-Communist currents analyzes the implications of the assassination of Sayyed Bahauddin Majruh, who sought to mediate between the warring factions, as his ancestors had done, an act [= **murder**] that exposed the implacable differences among the "holy warriors".

His method of presentation

Edwards presents his material as a series of texts with commentary. Some of the texts come from published sources such as (regarding Taraki) the Kabul Times, but most of them are from interviews, often with important players in the affairs he describes. Samiullah Safi provided the most extensive material, but those with Qazi Ahmad and other leaders of the Peshawar parties were good enough to produce a convincing picture of the events they recount. The texts shape the presentation. The Kabul Times and other official publications of the Khalqi regime provide plenty of fodder for Edwards's examination of their ideology. Safi's interviews are rich and nuanced. Qazi Amin's are restrained. In commenting on these texts Edwards situates them in their immediate context and then explicates their significance by comparing the behavior of the actors with those of other prominent figures in Afghanistan history. The recounting of

historical precedents enables him to explain conventions that the Afghanistan populace understood and expected without falling into the totalizing statements that are all-too-easy in cultural studies (although a few slipped through: "In Afghan culture, people believed [35]; " in Pakhtun society the assumption is " [70]). His generous reference to historical precedents enables him to reveal in concrete terms how the actions of his characters compared with established conventions. Taraki's attempts to legitimize his position by appealing to socialist values had no salience among the Afghan populace, as Edwards effectively shows by reference to the grounds of authority claimed by previous rulers. As he effectively demonstrates, the past cast a shadow over the affairs he recounts.

One of the more creative devices Edwards uses to develop his ideas about individual historical figures is the interpretive examination of photographs. Tiny details in pictures -- of Amir Abdul Rahman's darbar; Amanullah's costume ball; Habibullah's darbar; Amanullah in a meeting; Muhammad Daud in Persepolis; Nur M. Taraki in a doctored photograph seeming to preside over a meeting; Qazi Amin in poses from four periods in his life -- provide him with fodder to chew on. Subtleties in these pictures are taken to be features of Afghan cultural life or of individual personality. Speculative as this is, it works. Also, Edwards brackets the body of this text with reflections on the film *Naim and Jabar*. In the Introduction he refers to the film to describe the modernizing trend gathering force among Afghan young people in the 1950s and 1960s. In the Epilogue he returns to the film to note how much has changed in the Afghan moral imagination.

The most enduring material in this book will be the interviews, for they are entirely unique. They enable the reader to feel close to the raw experience on which the book is based. That feature of the presentation makes the book an authoritative source to which subsequent generations will resort. Edwards's interpretive comments are effective and will be useful and no doubt influential, and they seem to me well reasoned and generally correct, but they will provide the issues that the next generation of scholars will likely reexamine. Did the Khalqis really destroy the appeal of royalty [54]? Was the loss of the two Niazis, Ghulam Muhammad and Abdur Rahim, as great as he makes out [273]? Was Sibghatullah Mujaddidi actually in the position to exert leadership over the whole Islamic resistance [257]? But generally his opinions will hold up well, for Edwards's grasp of Afghanistan culture history is formidable.

The title and its relevance

Most of this book was written before the shock of 9/11 but that event clearly gave it a new urgency and significance. Edwards explains that the ruptures in the resistance movement, eventuating in the decay of the social order of the 1990s, created the conditions for the later triumph of the Taliban. The result was a loss for all three of Edwards's heroes, for they were committed (although in different ways) to the ideal of progress -- the opposite of what the Taliban came to represent.

This is a terrific book. It reflects the best of the anthropological craft, written for the most part with clarity, economy and grace. It is not, however, exactly about Afghanistan, as its focus is social movements among the eastern Pushtun. The author pretends nothing more; there is little on the Durrani Pushtuns, although he does examine the diffidence of Zaher Shah; and nothing on the non-Pushtun peoples of the country who now have a new prominence. Even so, his focus on these particular leaders and the movements associated with them drew him close to the center of the crises that

gripped Afghanistan during the civil war period between 1978 and 1994 -- that is, Before Taliban. The Taliban were of course a different kind of Pushtun, raised in the camps of Pakistan, educated in madrassas; a comparable study of their leaders and that movement would be another story entirely.