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Fraternity, Power, and Time in Central Asia

Robert L. Canfield

I am struck by the rustic appearance of many of the movements that arose in the early 1990s along the frontier of the collapsing Soviet Union, the Taliban being but one of them. As Yugoslavia broke apart in the 1990s, Serb militiamen fighting their Croat and Bosnian neighbors adopted the appearance and demeanor of the *hajduks*, fourteenth-century anti-Ottoman mountain brigands, bandits, and highwaymen. They wore the oval field cap and full beard of the hajduk as a deliberate pose, projecting an image of the rural against the urban, the sectarian against the secular, the communal against the civil.¹ Similarly, the anti-Russian insurgents in Chechnya appeared, at least to their enemies, to be semiliterate thugs capable of abduction and large-scale murder.² In Uzbekistan, Juma Namangani, leader of an antigovernment force, affected a Robin Hood image, reportedly holding rich hostages for ransom but paying peasants \$100 for one sheep.³ In Afghanistan the mujahedin who fought the Soviets in the 1990s

and turned against each other in the 1990s were largely rural in composition and perspective. All such movements—in the former Yugoslavia, in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, in Afghanistan and Pakistan—represented a distrust of urban society, civil institutions, and the secular world. But whatever the similarities among these movements, each was distinctive, arising out of local and particular tensions. For the activists with a Muslim background, Islam provided the vocabulary by which to answer Western culture and especially American hegemony, which was looming over them.⁴

These groups coalesced in a geopolitical context that was changing on a scale not seen since the major refiguring of political identities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the Holy Roman Empire was expiring, the “interlinked certainties” of previous centuries lost their salience, and so, in the words of Benedict Anderson, “a search was on . . . for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together.”⁵ Anderson refers to the nationalism that would rise in the nineteenth century to enthral the European political imagination. In our time a similarly grand refiguring of the political imagination has been taking place in the wake of the Soviet Union.

The declining cultural order that Anderson was referring to was one in which a concept of “fraternity” was based on religious affiliation (such as Christendom or the Muslim *umma*); on a conception of “power” in which monarchs had the right to rule “by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation”; and on a presumption of “temporality” that fused “cosmology and history.” The modern concept of the “nation” replacing the old political mentality would construe collective interest groups as localized and bonded by a sense of common history. A “nation” was a collective body that had a place, a distinguishable tradition, and an ancestry; it was a kind of “race” that

shared lifeways and traditions of thought.⁶ And it was preeminently a moral entity. Loyalty to the nation, nationalism, says Bruce Kapferer “makes the political religious . . . The nation is created as an object of devotion . . . the political is shrouded in the symbolism of a ‘higher’ purpose.”⁷ Even the most secular nations demand sacrifice—“supreme” sacrifices—for the collective good, a notion represented, for instance, in national cenotaphs and tombs to “Unknown Soldiers.”⁸ The rise of this new cultural “certainty” was paralleled by changes in the economy, specifically, Anderson claims, the rise of print capitalism, which grew as economic connections with the wider world enlarged, enabling dispersed speakers of a common language to envision a common moral bond. New imaginings were accompanied by new opportunities.

In the last couple of decades, long-established “certainties” are similarly being replaced—or at least challenged—by new conceptions of shared interest driven by a “search” for new social conventions where the old ones no longer apply—the difference in our time, though, is that, unlike the earlier transition, which was a slow process over a couple of centuries, the transition has been abrupt, marked by the sudden demise of the Soviet Union. Although it was a quiet death (a brief announcement by Gorbachev on Christmas Day 1991), the aftermath for the peoples around its frontiers (not to mention inside them) was cataclysmic. In material terms, the flow of goods and information that had nourished the great imperial community dried up. “The abolition of the convertible ruble . . . disrupted trade, while the closure of Moscow’s financing facilities drained the monetary lifeline of entire nations . . . The drawing of new borders between newly-formed countries severed ancient trade routes, blocked irrigation systems and hindered agrarian commerce.”⁹ The political consequences were no less disruptive, for the demise of the Soviet Union left a vacuum of politico-moral terms by which politi-

cal groups could identify their interests. In the previous paradigm of political oppositions, communism, or at least Marxism, had provided the world with the most trenchant response to Western capitalism. Communism was international in its claim and moral in its appeal to the oppressed peoples of the world. For half a century, communism or Marxism (in various forms) provided the analytical critique by which to reject capitalism as a way of life.

In the absence of the political rhetoric of the Cold War, the terms by which alliances could be secured were now, in the early 1990s, unclear and precipitated in the ripple of political and military contests that broke out all along the frontier of the empire. The established certainties of former times—East and West, capitalist and communist, contraries by which the world had been polarized—had vanished. The “search” for a new grand paradigm of political categories linking notions of fraternity, power, and time was now “on.” What Nazif Shahrani said about the peoples of Central Asia in the early 1990s was likewise true for all the peoples along the frontier of the former Soviet Union: they “are facing serious spiritual crises and are desperately in search of meaning and a moral compass.”¹⁰

In the early period after the collapse of the Soviet empire, nationalistic—actually, ethnonationalistic—ideologies came to prominence as various “nationalities” all along the frontier of the expiring Soviet Union began to assert themselves. In Afghanistan, when the war between Afghan communists and Afghan mujahedin finally ended, the politico-military organizations that had prosecuted the war against the Soviets fought it out among themselves, and because they had been rather loosely formed along ethnic lines—as Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, or largely as a Pashtun tribe—their struggle simply confirmed the fighting groups as ethnonationalist political bodies.¹¹ The rise of the Taliban reflected the ethnonationalist bias of the times, for

they were Pashtuns, but there were also at work other forces, international and global, that imposed upon their political situation other politico-moral demands. Western secularism would threaten established social conventions among Central Asian Muslims—in confrontations that would stimulate forces and reactions of their own. The gathering importance of the Taliban and their incorporation into a wider network of similar-minded Muslims reflected a shift in the possibilities for meaningful cultural linkage that was taking place among Muslims in the region generally.

The new politico-moral orientation that emerged among some Central Asian Muslims expressed their distinctive problem with the ineluctable advance of Western hegemony. Islamism provided the moral critique by which to reject the overwhelming infusive and expanding presence of Western culture. Rejecting the West on grounds other than Marxism or communism, the Islamist critique is nevertheless like the communist/Marxist critique in that it is a moral view that resolutely stands apart from, even rises up against, Western culture. Islamism resonates for a variety of Muslim groups because, while encompassing their specific, local, and individual problems, it presents them as particular manifestations of a general problem, enabling the various groups to envision a common problem and collectively join a common cause.

The Taliban were a cultural body that arose in particular circumstances but were gradually brought into relation to other similar groups in the Muslim world. They changed in their perspective and cultural practice as the wider geopolitical field was transforming, acquiring new cultural features through the infusion of personnel and perspectives from several groups. I here describe the transformation in the political consciousness of the Taliban as other groups joined them. I do so only speculatively—or rather, as a kind of problematic, as a set of issues ideally to be examined, if I had access to the right people. I

describe each of the groups allied with or embedded in the Taliban as a social entity marked by a particular way of defining the situation, with a particular sense of the past and a particular sense of commonality. Each, that is, had its own way of linking fraternity, power, and time. Each also had financial and material sources that enabled them to exist and expand. Somehow, there was money, there was materiel, there was moral encouragement—from sources only now becoming known. The groups that fused with the Taliban brought with them certain distinguishable features that their members shared to some degree. I examine the various groups and influences that shaped the Taliban movement in various stages, noting the changes in composition and sociopolitical ambiance that each group contributed to it. I trace these developments more or less chronologically, in the effort to disentangle the strands of influence that have made the Taliban what they are. The examination will expose an enlarging mesh of connections and influences that produced a contemporary social entity that the “original” Taliban would never have imagined.

By “original” Taliban I mean, of course, the small band that early in 1994 took up the cause against abusive commanders in Kandahar. They were acting to bring order in a time of anarchy. They knew each other and acted in response to the counsel and directives of their teacher, Mullah Muhammad Omar, and his seasoned colleagues. Sickened by the internecine fighting and inhumanity of previous years, they and most of the peoples of Afghanistan had turned away from the mujahedin leaders. Their perspective was local, their horizons were limited, and their concerns were immediate. They had no grand pretensions. Most interesting now, in retrospect, is what was *not* on their minds: they had no interest in, and perhaps no knowledge of, the hardships of the Palestinians or Kashmiris, or Muslims elsewhere. And they had no particular concern with Western culture. They were preoccupied with local problems.

To the original Taliban were soon added a body of young men from Pakistani madrasas (religious schools) eager to bring stability to the society. There was a great hunger for order, after fourteen years of civil war, and they wanted to help. These young men, perhaps more than those in the original group, had had little family life. Trained in the Deobandi tradition in schools financed by Saudi Arabia, these young men were educated to think of their participation with the Taliban as a jihad—a struggle against evil in the world—even though their opponents were other Muslims. Like the original Taliban they would have been inspired by narratives of Muhammad's struggle to bring good into the world. It was a moral cause with which devout Muslims could identify. Their horizons were presumably narrow in a different way than those of the "original Taliban": they probably had heard about the Muslim cause in Kashmir, they probably did not know much about problems in the Middle East, and they knew, Ahmed Rashid says, little about Afghanistan's past. They were, rather, better informed on the great exploits of Muslims in the first few centuries of Islam.¹²

If not along with this group, then soon after it, came Pakistani officers. We know that Pakistanis were offering military advice quite early. Two factions of Pakistani military men were represented. General Nasirullah Babar appeared in Kandahar at the behest of the recently elected prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, and represented the interests of the Deobandi madrasas where many Afghan Taliban had been educated.¹³ Representatives of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), many of whom were informally associated with the Jama'at-e-Islami party, also made contact with the Taliban. Both groups of Pakistanis brought a new perspective to the Taliban. For them Afghanistan was never the only front: there was also Kashmir, and the endless struggle with India; and there were other fronts, in Punjab, Uzbekistan, and Chechnya.¹⁴ Lieuten-

General Hamid Gul, head of the ISI, soon after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan put this perspective into words: "We are fighting a *ji-had* and this is the first Islamic international brigade in the modern era. The communists have their own brigades, the West has NATO, why can't the Muslims unite and form a common front?"¹⁵

Most of the Pashtun Islamists who joined the Taliban had participated in the war against the Soviets as members of the military organizations supported by Pakistan. As the Taliban happened to be Pashtun, it is likely that some former mujahedin joined them because of their ethnic type. These would have been men formerly associated with the anti-Soviet Pashtun organizations led by such men as Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, or Yunos Khales, warriors left over from the anti-Soviet war—left over in the sense that they were still unemployed, still available for hire. The alternatives for many former mujahedin were limited, and the Pashtuns with chauvinistic leanings had become alarmed that Kabul was under the control of non-Pashtuns (1992–1996), a circumstance scarcely known in Afghanistan history. So, in addition to the sense that this was a good religious cause, some Pashtuns were motivated by a kind of ethnonationalism. Indeed, the trend toward the formation of ethnonationalist military organizations was already established by other political parties: the Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan of the Hazaras, Jamiat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan of the Tajiks, Junbesh-e Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan of the Uzbeks. As the original Taliban were Pashtun and those young men who raced in from Pakistan were Pashtun, the movement was growing incidentally as a Pashtun movement, a fateful development.

I include in this group another kind of Pashtun about whom little is known: the former communists. We know that some communists, such as General Shahnawaz Tanai, had joined the mujahedin in March 1990, well before the collapse of the communist regime, but

many more former communists apparently joined later.¹⁶ I have heard (from reputable sources) of formerly zealous communists who became Taliban, with no fanfare: They simply put on turbans, grew beards, and joined the cause. Certainly the communists, who had been so prominent in the 1980s, vanished from the scene. Those who were not executed or had not fled the country just blended in.

In spring 1996, twelve hundred Pashtun religious leaders converged on the city of Kandahar, “the biggest gathering of mullahs and ulama that had ever taken place in modern Afghan history.”¹⁷ They had been called together at a time when the leadership of the Taliban by Mullah Muhammad Omar and his colleagues was being questioned. Affairs had not gone well for some months: after advancing quickly in many localities in the south and west, the Taliban had been unable to take Kabul from the Tajiks commanded by Ahmad Shah Masud. Some of their members wanted to negotiate with the Tajiks, some were questioning the leadership of Mullah Omar. The movement was stalling. In this context the Pashtun clergy had been invited to help broaden and firm up support for the Taliban.¹⁸

The Kandahari establishment—the elders of the city and the local religious leaders—was of course partial to their own, the founder of the Taliban. With their encouragement, in an act of spiritual daring, on April 4, 1996, Mullah Muhammad Omar entered the shrine housing the sacred cloak of Muhammad, brought the cloak to the roof of the shrine where all could see, and ceremonially wrapped himself in it. His Kandahari supporters proclaimed him “Amir al-Muminin” (Commander of the Faithful) and formally offered him their allegiance (*baiat*), setting the stage for the others also to offer allegiance.¹⁹ This public act was a claim to legitimacy, the right to lead the now-powerful organization of the Taliban, but it also entailed a broader moral claim. If this was a religious cause for the

Taliban. it was now declared a holy cause for Muslims generally, the leader being, of course, Mullah Muhammad Omar. This was the cause of God. That the Tajiks they opposed in Kabul were also Sunni Muslims was no longer significant; they were the enemy, and for the Pashtun Muslim community this was now an explicitly religious war, no less than the ones before it—but now, with ethnonational nuances.

In May, scarcely a month after this redefinition of the Taliban cause. Osama bin Laden arrived with a planeload of “Arab-Afghans.” These were old hands at jihad, and they brought with them a cosmopolitan perspective on the situation of Muslims in the world. Bin Laden and his colleagues had already been involved in what the CIA called “terrorist camps” in several countries: Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen as well as Afghanistan. Once ensconced in Afghanistan, bin Laden began to cultivate Mullah Muhammad Omar, moving to Kandahar in 1997.²⁰ It was a fateful bond.

The Arabs were Wahhabis with an agenda of their own—to overturn the Saudi government, to reestablish Wahhabi dominance in the Middle East, and eventually to reestablish the caliphate. This outlook, this new definition of the situation, markedly changed the nature of the Taliban. Historically, before the Soviet-mujahedin war, among the Afghanistan peoples there was no tradition of strident anti-Westernism (a century-old distrust of the British excepted)—nothing like the well-articulated resentments that had long moldered in the Middle East and South Asia. Of course, the war with the Soviets intensified their loyalty to customs they regarded as Islamic, but it seems to have been later, under the influence of their Arab and Pakistani colleagues, that the Taliban turned against the West. “Until [bin Laden’s] arrival the Taliban leadership had not been particularly antagonistic to the USA or the West,” says Rashid, but they became

“increasingly vociferous against Americans, the UN, the Saudis, and Muslim regimes around the world” as they came under the influence of the Arabs. “Their statements increasingly reflected the language of defiance Bin Laden has adopted and which was not an original Taliban trait.”²¹ Not Taliban, not Afghan of any sort. It is true that in the 1980s an antipathy against the non-Muslim world was taking root in the public discourse as the Afghanistan mujahedin fought the Afghan communists, but it was the Arabs who gave it a strident anti-Westernism. Now, in the 1990s, the Taliban were mouthing Islamist critiques formulated elsewhere (in Egypt by Sayyed Qutb and in South Asia by Abu’l Ala Maududi) to explain the frustrations of the peoples of Afghanistan. Islamism was now the meaningful vocabulary of fraternity, power, and time for the Taliban.²²

This was the beginning of Arab dominance in Afghanistan. Now the views of the more moderate Taliban were suppressed.²³ The Taliban became more zealous for what they considered Islamic practice, enforcing it by their newly established Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which had been modeled after the Wahhabi Mutawwin of Saudi Arabia. Taliban leaders began to present themselves to outsiders as more “official” by flourishing personal business cards.²⁴ “The Arab-Afghans had come full circle. From being mere appendages to the Afghan jihad and the Cold War in the 1980s they had taken center stage for the Afghans, neighboring countries and the West in the 1990s.”²⁵ They formalized their cause in February 1998, when they formed the “International Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” and declared war against the United States. In his announcement, Osama bin Laden situated this organization on a world scene: “The people of Islam [have] suffered from aggression, iniquity, and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist Crusaders alliance and their collaborators.” He added that “their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq” as well as in Lebanon, Tajiki-

Burma, Kashmir, the Philippines, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Indonesia.²⁶

This broadening of the Taliban's imaginative world, however, has been fostered not only by Osama bin Laden and the other Arab-Afghans but also by the Pakistan military establishment itself. As early as the 1970s Pakistan's military leaders were promoting Islam for strategic reasons, so it was no surprise that in the 1980s, when the CIA entrusted to Pakistan's ISI the management of money and materiel for anti-Soviet Afghan mujahedin, the ISI favored Islamist organizations.²⁷ As it turned out, its biases went further: the ISI supported "only those factions that were both anti-Western capitalism and anti-Soviet socialism."²⁸ When the ISI, with the concurrence of the CIA, recruited Muslim youths from all over the world for the holy war against the Soviets, the training they received had "strong anti-US overtones."²⁹ And after the Afghan-Soviet war, certain Arab-Afghans being sought by the United States government for their involvement in attacks against Americans elsewhere were protected by Pakistani officials who helped them obtain fake passports that enabled them to return to their countries of origin, where many of them continued their jihadi activities. Loretta Napoleoni claims that after the anti-Soviet war, "the ISI continued to export Islamist warriors from Pakistan to Central Asia and the Caucasus . . . A stream of covert operations was launched in Central Asia . . . [where] the ISI played a pivotal role in supporting Islamist armed insurgencies."³⁰ Bin Laden's International Islamic Front, formed in 1998, became an umbrella organization for various militant activities coordinated by Pakistan's Lashkare Taiba, an organization whose purpose, according to Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, was "to Islamize Kashmir and India, then embark on global conquest with a goal of restoring the Caliphate."³¹

Militant Islamists were active in Pakistan's military, and in 1995 a clique of Pakistani officers attempted to overturn Benazir Bhutto's government in order to install an Islamic caliphate. The coup attempt failed and the leaders were put in prison, but the tolerance for militant Islamists in high places is suggested by the way General Pervez Musharraf dealt with the coup leaders after he seized power in 1999: he released them and allowed one of them to go immediately to Afghanistan to become a close advisor to Mullah Omar. General Musharraf effectively duplicated this behavior in 2002, when—under United States pressure—he “banned” several Islamist parties but then protected their leaders. The chiefs of Lashkare Taiba, Jaishe Mohammed, and Harkatul Mujahideen (all militant Islamist organizations) “were whisked away to the safe houses of Pakistan's intelligence service” where they were supported with sizable stipends for most of the year. “Once freed in 2003, the terrorist leaders barnstormed around the country, recruiting volunteers for Jihad in Kashmir, Afghanistan and even Iraq. Some of the rallies were conducted on military property, addressing Pakistani troops . . . Hafiz Saeed [leader of Lashkare Taiba] was allowed to address a 150,000 strong rally.”³²

If anyone in a prominent military position exemplifies Pakistan's official tolerance, if not support, of militant Islamism it is Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, former head of the ISI, whose involvement with various Islamist causes has gone unchallenged over many years. Hassan Abbas describes General Gul as “a loudly religious man without a beard” whose “religious ideals robbed him of objectivity.”³³ Between 1988 and 2001 Gul was bin Laden's principal Pakistani adviser.³⁴ After the attack of September 11, 2001, he blamed Israelis and “elements within the U.S. government” for wanting “to subjugate the Muslim world and for this they needed a pretext and cause célèbre to justify their actions in Afghanistan.”³⁵ He has declared that

Islamist nuclear power would eventually form “a greater Islamic state along with a fundamentalist Saudi Arabia after the monarchy falls.”³⁶ In February 2004, he participated in a secret meeting to plan a coup d'état against President Musharraf, who would be replaced by Dr. Abdul Qayum Khan, the engineer who sold nuclear secrets to America's self-avowed enemies. Gul revealed the plot later that summer, stating that he “was assembling ‘a strong team of faithful Muslims to take control of the country to serve the nation and the Muslim world with true Islamic spirit.’”³⁷ All this without consequence. Gul is still said to be active: In April 2007, Afghan police captured a young man with a bomb strapped to his body who claimed that General Gul “was financing and supporting the project” of training and equipping suicide bombers.³⁸

It seems incredible that General Gul could be so openly involved with Islamist causes without official sanction. There is an “organic and symbiotic nexus between al-Qaeda and the Pakistani jihadist groups,” says conservative journalist Arnaud Borchgrave.³⁹ Stephen P. Cohen, the authority on Pakistan's army, says, “Radical Islam certainly has found a home in Pakistan. Radical parties are profuse, and terrorism is an oft-employed tactic.” Cohen further notes, “It has almost always been the state, especially the Pakistani army, that has allowed most radical Islamic groups to function on a wider stage—equipping and training them when necessary and providing overall political and strategic guidance for their activities.”⁴⁰

The American demand in September 2001 that Pakistan withdraw all support for the Taliban in order to have a credible involvement in the “war on terror” forced the Pakistani leadership to turn against its own well-cultivated practice. The reversal created a conflicted and contradictory leadership. Even after agreeing to American demands, the government was allowing the Taliban to be active. General Nasirullah Babar, interior minister under Benazir Bhutto,

“confided to friends that since the Taliban were becoming a menace inside Pakistan, he had decided that the only solution to the problem lay in giving the extremists their own country.”⁴¹ Pakistan wants the Taliban to survive, says a confidant of Musharraf: “I think they want a weak government [in Kabul] and want to support the Taliban without letting them win . . . We are supporting them to give the Americans a troubled time . . . All the administrators of madrassas know what our students are doing. . . . The heart of this government is with the Taliban. The tongue is not.”⁴² This is the source of extreme militant Islamism in Pakistan itself. “The strength of religious extremism till now, has been derived from state patronage rather than popular support. The groups that are currently paralyzing the country were the creation of the late and unlamented Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq.”⁴³

Does this duplicity entail a risk? Stephen P. Cohen believes not much: “Although the army has a long history of using radical and violent Islamists for political purposes, it has little interest in supporting their larger agenda of turning Pakistan into a more comprehensively Islamic state. Pakistan’s political, institutional, economic, and social decay will have to accelerate before radical groups emerge as an independent political force.” His own statements, however, give reason to wonder, for Pakistan’s policy has nourished conflicts within the country. “Today, sectarian violence rages throughout Pakistan . . . Numerous sectarian battles have broken out among Sunnis, with pitched battles between Barelvis and Deobandis, often for control over Karachi’s mosques.”⁴⁴ Tariq Ali believes the situation has become perilous: the Islamist schools that Pakistan has tolerated and fostered, he says, “were nurseries designed to produce fanatics . . . Agents from the government’s . . . ISI provided training and supervision and observed the development of the more promising students . . . who were later picked out and sent for more specialized training

secret army camps.” “The dragon seeds sown in 2,500 madrassahs [have] produced a crop of 225,000 fanatics ready to kill and die for their faith.”⁴⁵ Whatever its outcome will be, this duplicitous policy has made Pakistan the real epicenter of the war on terror.

Such were the influences that formed the Taliban as a movement in the period before 2001; several social entities came together, each bringing its particular set of concerns, contributing to a political amalgam that exerted a distinctive influence on Afghan society. This amalgam would be disrupted, of course, in 2001, when the Taliban were attacked by the Americans because of their alliance with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The success of the attack and the subsequent establishment of a new Afghan state with the support of the international community forced the Taliban offstage. Many of them were killed, the rest scattered. The leaders who survived fled into Pakistan—as did hundreds of the Pakistani military and intelligence officers who had supported them against the Americans. Even though Osama bin Laden and Mullah Muhammad Omar had not been apprehended, observers supposed they would soon be captured or killed. But since that crushing defeat their fortunes have turned. In this section I outline the conditions under which the new Taliban organization took form, from the period when they were scattered and defeated up to 2007 when they were resurgent.⁴⁶

Scarcely more than a year after their defeat, the situation had changed. Many of the best American military assets had been removed from Afghanistan, in preparation for the invasion of Iraq; the Bush administration and the rest of the world were preoccupied elsewhere. Mainly, things were not going well in Afghanistan. A new state was being established, a governmental system to replace the one that had dissipated in the course of many years of war. Prominent among the leadership of the new state were some of the command-

ers—now being called “warlords” by the expatriate community—whom the original Taliban had risen up against in 1994. Former adversaries were allied to the Americans, and some of them were flush with funds from the international community intended for the development of the country. And sometimes they labeled their enemies “Taliban” and “al-Qaeda” in order to win Americans’ help in doing away with them.

In the meantime the economy languished. There was little employment. Electric power was scarce, even in the capital. Despite much talk of aid from the capitalist world and much bluster among the Kabul diplomatic corps and the influx of foreign nongovernmental organizations, few gains were reaching the ordinary people. The police were being accused of corruption. Businessmen were kidnapped for ransom. The only part of the economy doing well was the poppy crop. Farmers had at first welcomed the arrival of the Afghan government because it rescued them from the Taliban, who had outlawed poppy, but the new administration quickly dispatched agents to destroy their crops. The continued presence of American troops, later NATO, in Afghanistan may also have galled some former Taliban; at least the zeal with which they would turn against them expressed the same deep antipathy that the mujahedin had felt for the Soviets.

Besides, the new government in Kabul was no longer essentially Pashtun. Even though Karzai was Pashtun, most of his cabinet were not; the tradition of Pashtun dominance was again compromised. At the same time the moral vision that had animated the mujahedin and the Taliban was still alive in the tribal areas, objectified in the tapes and discs being sold in the markets. Videos displayed heroic exploits against the Soviets, and also the destruction of Afghan homes by American bombs; by implication the Americans were like the Sovi-

etc. Narratives celebrating jihad against alien *kafirs* (unbelievers) declared that the holy struggle against unbelievers was not over—but now the enemy were Americans.

In this setting the Taliban began to stir. Mullah Omar had instructed his warriors to keep in touch after they returned home, and to “wait for the call.” By 2004, Taliban commanders were assessing the condition of their men: those killed, those alive, those able to fight. They excavated caches of weapons and raised funds. Indeed, funds poured in: from businessmen in Karachi, goldsmiths in Peshawar, wealthy Saudis and Kuwaitis, even sympathetic officers in the Pakistan army and intelligence corps. Mullah Omar reconstituted the leadership council and commissioned the infamous Mullah Dadullah, notorious for his massacre of Hazaras in Bamyan, to visit the madrasas of Pakistan to collect dispersed former Taliban and seek new recruits, many of whom were attracted by the videotapes of Dadullah’s brutal acts. Pashtuns disaffected by the rough treatment of civilians by the foreign forces—Americans and later NATO troops—and new recruits ready to join the struggle were gathering in the tribal areas of the North West Frontier Province. The Taliban command center was situated in Quetta, supported, according to news reports (but denied officially), by the ISI. Taliban bases in the tribal areas, mainly North Waziristan and South Waziristan, were busy.⁴⁷

Historically the Pashtun tribesmen have resisted outside encroachments, not only by the British in the nineteenth century but also by the Pakistani military in the twentieth. At the same time Pashtun hospitality is legendary. The arrival of Arab-Afghans and Taliban seeking refuge from American attacks in Afghanistan, no doubt stretched their resources. But these Pashtuns already shared many social conventions with the Taliban; as we have said, some joined the Taliban early on. Despite the strain on their hospitality, many tribal

Afghanistan with impunity. Within days cross-border attacks resumed. The U.S. military says militant attacks in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border tripled in some areas following the North Waziristan deal. NATO registered two hundred cross-border “actions” in November 2006. In the meantime, more foreign militants arrived, mainly (it was said) from Uzbekistan and Iraq.⁵⁰

By 2006 the influence of the Taliban in the tribal areas and intermittently in many communities of southern and eastern Afghanistan was secure and pervasive. Afghan news sources reported on the existence of several training camps.⁵¹ Militants from elsewhere—Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Palestine—were training recruits in the tribal areas about improvised explosive devices and suicide bombing. Afghanistan officials claimed that a system of large-scale indoctrination of suicide bombers was operative in the tribal areas. They had captured a suicide bomber wearing a vest filled with explosives who claimed to have been sent by the head of a religious school in Bajaur where as many as five hundred to six hundred students were being prepared for suicide attacks, financed by a former head of Pakistani intelligence.⁵² By the fall of 2006, insurgents in Iraq were shifting their attention to Afghanistan. According to Rotella Sebastian, “Muslim extremists aspiring to battle the West [are turning] their attention back to the symbolically important and increasingly violent turf of Afghanistan . . . An accelerating Afghan offensive by the resurgent Taliban offers a clearer battleground and a wealth of targets” for suicide bombers.⁵³

The influence of the Taliban has grown inside Afghanistan, placing many residents in untenable positions. Afghan journalists in April 2007 described a community in southern Afghanistan that was seriously riven by internal conflicts: some residents supported the Taliban, others who opposed them fled, feeling unsafe in the village.⁵⁴ Elizabeth Rubin described the experience of a person who had

worked with the Taliban. Beaten by the Afghanistan police, he was advised by the tribal elders to flee to Pakistan. There he joined the Taliban. But after a year, tired of the fighting, he accepted an offer of reconciliation by an Afghanistan general. For that he was imprisoned by the Pakistani government until he agreed to rejoin the struggle against the Americans.⁵⁵

The Taliban, at first consisting of a few religious students and their teachers, gathered force for local reasons, but the infusion of other interest groups transformed the movement, broadening its horizons and connecting it into a network of like-minded insurgent groups elsewhere. By 2007 the Taliban consisted of a loose alliance of several kinds of people: former anti-Soviet mujahedin, Pashtun clerics, Pashtun tribesmen, Arab and Pakistani Islamists, even some officials of the Pakistan government—all of them now linked into an international network of anti-Western militants. From a homogeneous Pashtun group in 1994 the Taliban had become an assemblage of diverse social and ethnic types engaged in a larger cause. They now have links to other insurgent groups. The videos being seen in Pakistan include images of the Palestinian struggle, creating the sense that the losses to the Americans in Afghanistan and the embarrassments of the Palestinians under Israel demand a fresh urgency for holy war on behalf of oppressed and occupied Muslims everywhere.⁵⁶

Their involvement with the Arab-Afghans and the Pakistani military transformed the Taliban's rhetoric to reflect the universal visions of Islamists elsewhere. Taliban leaders are as likely as any Arab Muslim organization to voice the concerns of insurgent groups in Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, or Uzbekistan—places about which the peoples of Afghanistan formerly had no knowledge or interest. Like other Islamist organizations struggling against regimes that dominate them, the Taliban perceive their ultimate struggle to be against the West, especially the United States, which they hold responsible

for the injustices they see. “We are defending the country from the infidels,” Elizabeth Rubin was told.⁵⁷ Islamism, for some frustrated people in the Middle East and Central Asia, has provided the explanation for their common predicament. We hear it in various forms. According to Loretta Napoleoni, militant Islamists in the Middle East were saying, “The victory over communism was won with weapons under the leadership of God . . . Democracy, modernization *à l’Americaine*, had nothing to do with it.”⁵⁸ A Shia militiaman favorable to Muqtada al-Sadr put it this way to John Burns of the *New York Times* in the spring of 2004: “It was God who finished Saddam, not the Americans. The Americans broke all their promises to us, and they have brought their infidel beliefs to Iraq. We hate them, and they are worse than Saddam.”⁵⁹

Especially since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, localized insurgent groups in Afghanistan have taken up the rhetoric of militant Islamism, which in Afghanistan is manifest in the broadening interest of religious leaders in Middle Eastern affairs. In Herat, Islamic authorities heading the Koran Memorization School, for instance, claimed solidarity with the global cause when they condemned the murders of Hamas leaders Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi on April 18, 2004. What was unusual about this announcement was that, given in Dari, it expressed a concern for Middle Eastern affairs to which the Afghans had hitherto been indifferent: “We urge all countries and international foundations to . . . fight against terrorism and to portray the racist regime of Israel as a symbol of government terrorism in the world.”⁶⁰ Even so, such rhetoric conceals local concerns. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the Hizb-e Islami mujahedin party, expressed his sympathy for the global Islamic struggle on April 11, 2004—that is, at a time when in Iraq supporters of the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr were clashing with American forces: he called for Afghans to rise up against the U.S.-led

coalition in Afghanistan. But his speech was made in Pashto: he was appealing to a local audience.⁶¹

In suggesting that in the late High Middle Ages the demise of old "certainties" would lead to a "search" for "a new way of linking fraternity, power and time," Benedict Anderson implies that human beings crave a grand moral frame of reference within which to imaginatively situate themselves. His wording indicates a conjunction of cultural features by which individual experience—human suffering—is given significance: by a sense of community ("fraternity"); by a recognition of authority through which dominance may be exercised ("power"); and by a cosmology situating one's past, present, and future in a meaningful frame ("time").⁶²

The concept of the "nation," as it took form in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, satisfied this need in a period when a new class, a bourgeoisie, was learning to define its collective interest. A similar "search" for such "certainties" seems to be taking form as a new social body in Greater Central Asia becomes conscious of its commonality of interests—an assemblage of frustrated, unemployed, culturally unfit, socially alienated young men. True, there have always been such in this area and elsewhere. But its scale is new: approximately half of the population in Greater Central Asia are under the age of 25 and the proportion is growing. And their predicament is ever more urgent; their demands will likely become more strident. The rising interest in Islam in recent times, especially among the young people of the Muslim world, reflects the failure of other moral idioms to provide hope, a way to respond; Islamism is, for them, a creative way to link fraternity, power, and time.

There was a time when I thought the search for a firm way to link fraternity, power, and time was still on, still alive among Muslims of the Middle East and Central Asia. In fact, for many young Pashtuns

in southern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas the search may be over. Political Islam—political and military action justified in Islamic terms and aimed toward Islamic ends—has filled the void. The Islamist reaction, they suppose, is the answer. It provides the moral critique that enables many to share a common conception of the problem and to envision a solution. It is now, for them, the articulate voice by which to escape their constraints and to oppose the ultimate source of their problems, the West, especially the one great power. So the cause is international.⁶³

These Islamists share a sense of *fraternity* as Muslims, in fact, in this case as Sunni Muslims, who desire a more just world in which Muslims have more leverage, more dignity, more hope. They share a common conception of *power* in that they grant leadership to individuals who speak in the name of God and can muster a force by which to actively confront the cultural juggernaut of the West, some of them even supposing that their martyrdom for this cause would be honorable and spiritually rewarded. They share a common sense of *time* in the sense of a cosmology and an eschatology that situates their present dilemmas in a trajectory of history. I speculate that many of them, like many Christians, suppose that this world is in its last throes—it is a notion that appeals as more people lose hope. Pierre Bourdieu, writing about the Algerian war of the 1950s, said, “To express the present state of affairs the old Algerians often say: ‘We are now in the fourteenth century.’ To them the fourteenth century is the century of the end of the world, at which time everything that was the rule will become the exception, when all that was forbidden will be now permitted.”⁶⁴ It is now several decades after the Algerian war, but the sense that this conflicted world is advancing toward a cataclysmic demise resonates with some.

That sense was alive in the summer of 2004 in Iraq, for instance, where Muqtada al-Sadr, leading an insurgency of Shiites against the

United States in Iraq, announced that the Mahdi (who, many Muslims believe, will appear at the end of the age) "would arrive any day now." In fact, according to al-Sadr, the reason the Americans attacked Iraq was because they knew that the Mahdi's arrival was imminent and they wanted to capture and kill him.⁶⁵ It was alive in Afghanistan in the 1990s. When Zoya, a young woman trapped in Kabul as the mujahedin occupied the city in 1992, told her grandmother about the terrifying acts of the mujahedin, the old woman's "eyes filled with tears, and she started praying aloud . . . She told me [says Zoya] 'It means that we are close to the Day of Judgment.'"⁶⁶ I don't know how broadly this view of the times is among the rising tide of Islamists in Greater Central Asia, but I hope that, for some of them at least, the search is still "on" for another way to link fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together.