

Interview

Exporting Jihad

The following are the excerpts of an interview by Chantal De Rudder of *Le Nouvel Observateur* with Ahmed Rashid, collaborator of *Guardian* and *Eastern Review* and author of the book *Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* recently published by I.B. Tauris.

Le Nouvel Observateur (N.O.): In your book that has just been published in the U.S.A. and Great Britain, you have drawn attention on the destabilization that the Afghan regime is triggering off in the entire Central Asian region.

Ahmed Rashid (A.R.): In fact, I am under the impression that we have not yet taken the full measure of the danger posed by the Taliban to their neighbours in this oil and gas producing region that is made up of authoritarian regimes where there is no democratic opposition and where ultra-radical Islam is becoming the shelter for all the Islamist rebels guilty of recent terrorist attacks against Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Kirghyzistan, Pakistan... Rebels who have a symbiotic relation with the Taliban: rebels of the neighbouring countries are helping them in the Afghan civil war: in exchange the Taliban are allowing them to set up their support bases in the Afghan territory. It is only in 1996 that this new international Islamist network has started. We can already see the results today!

N.O: Everywhere, from Iran to Algeria, Islamism is receding, except in Afghanistan where the Taliban who are continuing with their war of conquest are now in control of more than 80% of the territory. How do you explain the fearful success of what is undoubtedly the most fundamentalist Islamist movement of the world?

A.R.: The present success of the Taliban is mainly due to their capability to utilize the emergence of the ethnic Pashtoon nationalism after the capture of Kabul in 1992 by a coalition led by the Tajiks, one of the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan. Divided until now, the Pashtoons find themselves all of a sudden together in their wish to re-conquer a capital that they used to control for the last three centuries. And the Taliban movement (consisting of) Pashtoon (who constitute) more than 90% finds in this context the occasion to control under its authority all the small leaders of the Pashtoon war and to rally to its cause the Pakistani Pashtoons. From 1994, when the Taliban conquered again the southern Afghanistan, the population welcomed them as saviours.

N.O. Have the Pashtoons not been scared by the type of the society that the Taliban used to praise?

A.R. No, because until the capture of Kabul the Taliban had no intention to govern Afghanistan. It was a modest missionary movement, which had no other aim than to clean society that they used to judge as corrupt. And it was! They became politically ambitious when they conquered Kabul in 1996, a date when the Islamist Saudi multi-millionaire Osama bin Laden's influence became determinant. He puts his money, his networks and his charisma in the services of the Taliban and

incites them to become a transnational revolutionary movement. From there, a fresh version of Islamism is born, even more dangerous than the Muslims fundamentalism that we know till now.

N.O. What is new in the Taliban's Islamism?

A.R. More or less, in the other regions of the world, and even in Afghanistan all the Islamist movements share the Muslim Brother's ideology. Born from anti-colonialism, structured theoretically, entered in an enormous literary corpus, the Muslim Brothers' ideology seems modern, even moderate, compared to the Taliban's! They are so primitive that they don't even have a manifesto, nor a programme, or even the slightest understanding of Islamic history, but a rustic, native vision of Islam, a product of illiterate mullahs, besides being corrupted by the Pashtoon tribal code. They want to re-create the 7th century Arab society! Their madrasas – Koranic schools – fully crowded by youngsters entrusted to them by poor parents, who find a means to ensure food for their children, are only machines to make warriors for whom the initiation into manliness can only be achieved through holy wars. These new Islamists have no concern for the public, no idea whatsoever about a State Jihad is their unique legitimacy!

N.O.: Why did the Taliban movement appear so late in Afghanistan, after the Soviets' departure?

A.R. The creation of Taliban has nothing Islamic. It is a pure product of Pakistan's internal policy that we owe to that woman additionally labelled liberal: Benazir Bhutto! In 1981, the agreement concluded between Americans and the general Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistani dictator, entrusted the entire control of the Afghan war to the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the Pakistani secret services. The ISI led an Afghan policy while backing the Jamaat-I-Islami (JIP), an Islamist movement styled Muslim Brothers, which therefore became very important in Pakistan and is known to be an enemy of the Bhutto family. In 1993 advised by his Home Minister, General Nasrullah Babar, Benazir Bhutto, who came back to power, decided to help another group, the Jamaat Ulema-I-Islami (JUI), and to back it in order to counterbalance the JIP's influence, which threatened to destabilize it. JUI is a puritan and fanatic ultra-fundamentalist group, devoid of a political project and only worried about the restoration of the moral order by the strict application of Sharia. Strong with this new financial help, JUI madrasas started producing Taliban-students in thousands.

N.O.: Is it the ISI, and therefore Pakistan, which today control the Afghan Taliban?

A.R.: It is no longer the case. Since the Taliban can themselves finance the war, we can see, on the contrary, a talibanisation of the Pakistan policy! Thanks to the drugs and the contraband, the Taliban have enjoyed enormous money! They encourage the farmers to import manure from Pakistan and to re-build the irrigation system in order to produce better quality of poppy harvests. At Herat, in western Afghanistan, they have even installed a pattern farm where the best techniques for poppy harvesting are taught. Moreover, since they hold the major part of the territory, the heroin yield has kept increasing! The dealers pay back a 20% tax. The ancient silk route crossing the valleys is crowded by coloured lorries loaded with Russian refrigerators and tyres, Iranian petrol, and foodstuff from Pakistan. Nearly everything is from contraband and is sent everywhere in Central Asia, once the customs tax is paid to the Taliban. The carriers pay willingly: instead of being attacked by fifty different groups as it used to be the case earlier,

smugglers dealers have the advantage, thanks to the Taliban, of much safer route. The lorry mafia and the big drug families are supporting and sponsoring them.

N.O.: Does it mean that they have the means to defeat Masood and control Afghanistan totally?

A.R.: May be not since some time, Taliban are very much divided among themselves. There is now a more moderate faction, which would like to see the war ending. The casualties have been enormous. The moderates want to stop the compulsory youth conscription, which has already resulted in dozen bloody revolts this year. Today, they seem convinced that it is impossible to defeat commander Masood and are inclined to negotiate with him. As for Bin Laden, they would willingly get rid of him in order to improve the relations with the United States. These moderates are found among the Taliban who hold Kabul. Officially, it is here that the Taliban government is located, with which totally unaware of the internal realities and of the international problems. Umar, who is under Bin Laden's influence, keeps saying no to everything. He has become an ordinary dictator.

N.O.: A price has been put on the head of Osama Bin Laden by the United States, Which has not hesitated to bombard the camp where he was supposedly hiding in Afghanistan..

A.R.: The United States have an enormous responsibility of having neglected this part of the world since the end of the cold war and have delegated their Afghan policy to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Today, they are obsessed by Bin Laden. But now, there are hundreds of Bin Laden in Afghanistan! Washington should now put a stop to all these small tactical movements, and adopt a coherent political strategy in Central Asia and try to put an end to the war in Afghanistan before this region becomes even more dangerous. All the pipelines that the West wants to construct go through potential or active Volcanoes. The United States have the capability to settle this issue, but they do not seem to have the Political will.

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