

Taliban.by James Fergusson

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James Fergusson is a freelance journalist and foreign correspondent for many publications including the Independent, The Times and the Daily Telegraph. He is a regular visitor to Afghanistan having reported from or written about the country for the past 14 years. His previous book 'A Million Bullets' was an account of the British Army's battle with the Taliban in Helmand province during 2006. In that book he argued that negotiation with the Taliban might be a better option than fighting them. He tested that personal conviction by arranging a meeting with the Taliban leadership in the province and that experience was the starting point for this book.

To understand events in Afghanistan it is necessary to have knowledge of the politics of the region and the stresses between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Fergusson describes how Pakistan was concerned by India's support for the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan tribes with the possibility of encirclement. He suggests that this fear was the driving influence for Pakistan's ISI to support and assist the fledgling Taliban. The ISI sponsored the Islamic revolution that was supposed to be contained within Afghanistan but it moved eastwards across the porous Durand Line into Pakistan.

In the first part of his book Fergusson documents the rise of the Taliban from 1994 when Afghanistan was in a worse state than immediately after the Russians had departed and the mujahideen were fighting viciously amongst themselves. The Taliban were a militia of only 200 young religious students from the majority Pashtun warrior tribe led then as now by a one-eyed and illiterate village mullah - Mullah Omar. Their aims were simple and limited: to achieve security by disarming the population and to establish a theocracy based on Sharia law. As the movement grew, the Afghans welcomed these tribal fighters because initially they brought security and a measure of harsh law.

The Pashtuns number 42 million people (25 million live in Pakistan) comprising 60 tribes; they are the largest tribal grouping in the world. The Pashtunwali code embraces their culture and ideology and it is to that strict behavioural code that the Taliban adhere. It encompasses the following obligations: to seek revenge, to show hospitality (to those who come unarmed), to uphold the honour of women, and the offering of sanctuary. It was the code of offering sanctuary that led to the Taliban hosting al-Qaida. However, as Fergusson is at pains to point out, this was not a sharing of ideology but mainly about money. Ultimately, al-Qaida ignored the original agreement with Omar that no acts of terrorism should be launched from within

Afghanistan; they effectively hijacked the Taliban and there was little that Omar could do about it.

In the second part of his book Fergusson records his return to Kabul to meet again the high profile Afghans he had met previously in the Taliban who were now "reconciled", although their loyalties still seem to be with their former comrades. It is a fact of Afghan life that loyalties are very fluid and tribal leaders as well as high profile individuals, are noted for changing their allegiance - often more than once. Fergusson's purpose was to see whether a deal with the Taliban was possible and if so, as to what form it might take.

It rapidly became obvious to him that, despite the history of the British in Afghanistan, the British are seen by the Afghans as the key to persuading the US to change their strategy. However, Fergusson notes that a number of British initiatives have either been rebuffed or ignored by the US. It is the US who are seen almost unanimously by influential Afghans as being the main obstacle to political progress. It is not that the insurgents reject the West so much as the presence of infidel troops attempting to impose their Western political and social standards. The Afghan view is that the US is supporting a corrupt and ineffective regime that includes warlords and criminals that the Taliban had removed. Indeed, it can be argued that during their time in power the Taliban dealt with lawlessness, corruption and the poppy problem more effectively than the West and the Karzai government has since 2001.

The US conduct of the counter-insurgency has made things worse by invading homes with the infamous night raids, detaining the wrong people and treating them with contempt. As Fergusson discovered these injustices are not just seen as an attack on Muslims but as a violation of the Pashtun honour that cannot go unanswered. The Pashtuns have little faith in President Karzai who is seen as a US stooge after the Transitional Authority handed the majority of ministries to the Northern Alliance. This followed the important Bonn meeting in 2002 to establish proper governance from Kabul from which the US excluded the Taliban. The disastrous Presidential election held in 2009 that was cynically manipulated by Karzai showed him as a man more interested in power than in democracy.

From Fergusson's narrative there is evidence of opinion within Afghanistan that the way forward is a negotiated settlement and that view is gaining some support in the West. Any negotiation would have to be with Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership in Quetta that would inevitably marginalise Karzai's influence. What then has Fergusson identified as the key elements of such a settlement?

As General Petraeus said in a speech in November 2009 the US is in Afghanistan, 'to ensure that this country cannot once again become a sanctuary for al-Qaida'. The reality is that for the US this war is all about their security and little else; there was little mention of democratisation, development or reform. Therefore, for the US the critical issue would be a guarantee that the Taliban would not allow al-Qaida to return to Afghanistan. But can Omar be trusted to deliver

given that the Taliban and al-Qaida are currently allies of convenience in Pakistan, although there is minimal common ground between them? It is unlikely that Omar would repeat his earlier mistake of giving them sanctuary, particularly as bin Laden was the singular cause of the Taliban being ousted from power by the West in 2001. However, as time goes on, there are indications that the Taliban is becoming fractured and beyond Omar's control; also that younger members are becoming more radicalised having been exposed to the international jihad in Pakistan.

For the Taliban the main issues would be the withdrawal of all foreign troops and a return to political power. However, there are many within Afghanistan who would regard the return of the Taliban to power as a betrayal of those brave enough to vote for a different future. The Taliban support within the Pashtun community is much less than previously and to some they are regarded as mercenaries controlled by Pakistani paymasters. But on one point in particular the West should be clear. The Taliban has no foreign policy; theirs is a domestic agenda. They have never exported terrorism; they are not our real enemy - that is al-Qaida.

Fergusson's book endeavours to offer an informed insight into the Taliban, their culture, ideology and aspirations. In this he has succeeded but some would say with justification that he has glossed over the less attractive aspects of Taliban rule. His theme is that no insurgency throughout history has ever been concluded successfully without dialogue with the enemy. Over the 9 years that the West has been engaged in Afghanistan the evidence would suggest that the Western leadership, both military and political, has comprehensively misunderstood the nature of the Taliban.

Yet, as he points out quite forcibly, throughout this time the West has never made contact with Mullah Omar. In his text on the Art of War, Sun Tzu emphasised that a fundamental precept of successful warfare is to "know your enemy". Fergusson contends that Western leaders have singularly failed to "know" the Taliban and that this has been the cause of their successive failures in the fight against the insurgency. General Petraeus has branded Mullah Omar and his Taliban leadership as "irreconcilables", but has he ever asked them?

If negotiation does not take place then there is a danger that this war could escalate. If that happens many Afghans, irrespective of tribal loyalties, will no longer see the Taliban as extremists, and the insurgency will become a jihad authorised by the ulema - the supreme religious council in Afghanistan.