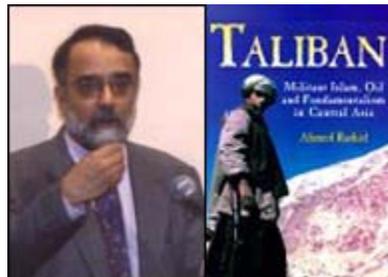


## Behind the Headlines: Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Rise of Militant Islam

Ahmed Rashid , Joanne J. Myers

December 17, 2001



Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia

- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the Carnegie Council has hosted several distinguished speakers who have given us their perspectives on both the events leading up to that tragic day and the ensuing consequences which have been felt throughout the world, but none have had the deep familiarity or first-hand experience in the region as our guest this morning, Ahmed Rashid.

For the past 23 years, as a journalist based in Pakistan, Ahmed has been writing about the brutal and tragic conflict in Afghanistan. Therefore, from the moment the military campaign began in that country, I knew that there was one journalist above all whose viewpoint I most wanted to hear. It is not simply the insights which he has gained from his extraordinary access to Afghanistan that is compelling, but more that he has brought the world of the Taliban, militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia into electrifyingly sharp focus, making it accessible to us all.

Along with his incredibly perceptive reporting and fearlessness in tracking down and interviewing members of the Taliban, Ahmed's eloquent prose is invariably supplemented by a keen intelligence and a deep compassion for the Afghan people. As an eyewitness to history, he has observed some of the most important moments in Afghanistan's recent past. He was there when the 1978 coup took place. This event, by all accounts, was the catalyst for Afghanistan's ensuing disintegration. A year after that epochal moment, he saw the first Soviet tanks roll into the country, initiating the devastating war that claimed millions of Afghan lives. Nine years later, he covered the Geneva talks that led to the withdrawal of the Soviet Army. And finally, he was in Kabul when the city fell to the *mujahideen*, which propelled the meteoric rise of the Taliban.

In the course of covering Afghanistan for *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Nation*, Mr. Rashid has earned a reputation for courage for his valiant reporting about the corruption and hypocrisy in that part of the world. In recognition of his work, earlier this year the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan awarded him the Nisar Osmani Prize for courage in journalism.

His authoritative accounts always provide the details journalists, political leaders, and the public need in order to realistically assess and address Afghanistan's threat to its neighbors and to global security.

In addition to his book, [The Taliban](#), which reached number one on The New York Times Best-Seller List and has been translated into more than 25 languages, selling over 300,000 copies, he is the author of several monographs and the book *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam and Nationalism*. He is also the co-author of *Fundamentalism Reborn: Afghanistan and the Taliban*. His new book, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, will be published in February.

Recently, he has been seen and heard on "ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings," "Ted Koppel's Nightline," CNN, NPR, the BBC, and, after today, CSPAN.

We are very fortunate to have as our guest a man who has traveled a great distance to be with us, from Pakistan by way of London, Berlin, Rome, Washington, D.C., and now New York.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to Ahmed Rashid.

### Remarks

**AHMED RASHID:** Thank you very much. I was here two years ago, and it was a great audience then, and I thank you for inviting me back.

Let me start very briefly with my assessment of the new government in Kabul and where I see things going, and then we can perhaps expand that into Pakistan, Central Asia, and other parts of the region.

I am very optimistic about what the UN has achieved in Bonn, for several reasons. This will be the first peaceful transfer of power since 1973, or probably even earlier, that has taken place in Afghanistan's history. It will be the first time in 23 years of war that politicians have actually come to the forefront instead of warlords and generals. Here Hamed Karzai is not a warlord, and, on the other side, the Northern Alliance leaders are better known as politicians than warlords. This is the first time in 23 years that you have leaders with a national vision rather than a merely regional, ethnic, or parochial vision.

This is the first agreement where there seems to be a consensus amongst the neighboring states. For the United Nations and Ambassador Brahimi that has been the most important and significant achievement, and it has had much to do with U.S. pressure on these states. But to have had all the neighboring ambassadors in Bonn cooperating with, rather than undermining, the UN, as for the last ten years, has been phenomenal progress. We are talking about countries with very deep-seated conflicting interests—Iran versus Pakistan, Russia versus Pakistan.

So these are the plus points.

On the ground there are going to be enormous problems. After December 22nd, I envisage a daily crisis. With the support of the UN, we will have a new, Kabul-based government. I was in Kabul two weeks ago, and the city is like an island at the moment. It's very stable and secure, but 25 miles outside of town is dangerous.

This new government has to extend its authority, starting outside Kabul and then going right across the country, and this may take several months. But most significantly of all, it will occur through a process of negotiation, not through submission and warfare.

And on the other side, I don't see any warlord right now being in a position to resist the central government through military force, because of this enormous kind of international weight that is backing the central government; secondly, because the warlords know that the population is now totally exhausted, nobody is willing to fight. So if General Dostum in the north or Ismael Khan in the west or anyone else wants to try to resist, they will not find the manpower to put up a physical resistance. This will be a dramatic change, that for the first time these warlords have to negotiate with a central government on the terms of their surrender, the surrender of heavy weapons, then light weapons, followed by political authority to a central government. The process will pick up steam very fast after December 22nd.

The diplomatic presence will put pressure on the central government and the warlords to show results. All the Western governments are opening up their embassies. The American embassy opened up today. Many of the European countries are already there.

Another factor which is absolutely vital to any solution and future stability in Afghanistan is reconstruction funds. I've been advocating this, along with a group of friends and experts, like Barnett Rubin and Ashal Ganni, for the last five years, that there can be no settlement without an incentive to make the Afghans see the benefits of peace rather than war.

After the tragedy of September 11th, the world has woken up to the reality that the UN attempts over the last ten years to try to negotiate an end were totally stymied by their having nothing to offer the Afghans because the international community was not prepared to give anything.

You have now the chances of a reconstruction fund, which I hope will get at least a billion dollars a year for the next three to five years. We are essentially talking about a political bribe to the warlords, to the factions. I was in Washington last week, advocating very strongly that the Americans and the UN use the reconstruction fund as the most important political tool, to reward those who comply with the UN and the central government, and punish those who don't.

In the intervening period, we will see the rise of civil society, Afghan NGOs, women's groups, Afghan people, tribal leaders, demanding that the warlords comply with the central government in order to get the benefits of those funds. I see a rise in participation by Afghans, first starting in the cities. In Kabul I cannot tell you the kind of enthusiasm and expectations of people, despite the horrendous economic conditions that everyone is in right now—starvation, no water, drought. Everyone is waiting for the UN to arrive and for the reconstruction effort to start, not as a kind of "hand me out," but wanting to participate.

The week I was there, the World Food Program wanted to hire 2,400 women to distribute wheat for ten days, and 10,000 women turned up. They were in the streets, singing and laughing. Many said to me, "We just want to take

part in the rebuilding of our country." After five years of having seen what the Taliban has done to Afghan women, it was just a heart-warming experience—to see this complete U-turn in literally a matter of days.

I predict strong participation by women's groups in the UN programs and the reconstruction effort. The NGOs and the UN will probably hire more women than men, purely because of the enthusiasm and the kind of work that the women are going to do.

The last reason for my optimism is that the Afghans themselves are now ready to participate in a stable society and rebuilding it, and it is they who will bring enormous pressure on these warlords. Civil society is going to make sure that the warlords limit their disruption politics against the central government.

Everyone is still questioning whether the international community is going to stay committed to Afghanistan. Many people have pointed out to me that the American attention span is basically about 15 minutes. And what happens if the Americans go into Somalia or Iraq or something else; does that mean that the whole CNN syndrome moves out of Afghanistan, the American public gets bored, and then it's all over.

It's very important that the Administration here, but more importantly, think-tanks, people with influence, insist that this time the Americans really cannot afford to walk away, not just because of September 11th, but because there is an enormous expectancy that this region now is, after the Middle East perhaps, the second-most-unstable region in the world. It's not just a question of terrorism returning to set up a base in Afghanistan. It's a question of economic viability now of Iran, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, all of whom face very similar problems of Islamic radicalism, poverty, collapsing state structures, and, until September 11th, isolation from the mainstream world community, investment and international concern.

The Americans must make a serious up-front commitment for a least a year in the short term, for three or four years in the long term. Immediate intense commitment will be needed for this phased government formation process that the UN has spelled out.

The second major part is a donor commitment for this reconstruction fund. There is a lot of debate going on right now in Washington and other capitals as to what shape this will take. Many of us are very keen that this be a single trust fund, managed by some of the largest donors, and perhaps the World Bank and the UNDP.

Unless this is well coordinated by Master Brahimi, if everybody is going to sponsor his own effort, we will see a rehash of the past, where everybody has his favorite warlord or politician or aid program.

We must ensure that this tool, used by the UN, is not exploited by the Afghans. They are past masters at this. They will play UNHCR against WFP; UNICEF against WHO. They give concessions to one and harass the other, to make sure that the one they are harassing also gives them more money or concessions.

If there are several reconstruction funds under separate command and control, as the Americans say, this would be very disturbing to the process and reduce the potency of this as a tool to expand the national reconciliation and the strength of the political government.

The third issue, which is a spin-off of these two, is that the problem of foreign interference has to be addressed largely by the Americans. Officials in Germany and Italy said to me, "Look, if the Americans are not there, we cannot persuade our parliaments and our ruling parties to carry on," meaning paying attention to Afghanistan. If the Americans move out, the Europeans will follow.

Although the neighboring countries have come to some agreement at Bonn, at least to let the central government take shape and not to interfere with its formation, there is no way that the neighboring states will stop interfering in the future, and it is vital that the Americans be there to back up the UN in the process. It's absolutely vital that the Americans literally sit on Russia, Iran, Pakistan, India, the Central Asian republics, Saudi Arabia to ensure that they do not extend their recognition of the new government into once again trying to set up proxies inside Afghanistan to fulfill their own limited agendas, and that everyone plays by the rules.

A couple of wider issues now.

I was asked to speak by someone on this whole concept of global *jihad* and what this has meant and what the future may hold. The concept of global *jihad*, which I write about in my book quite extensively, is a new phenomenon in the Sunni Muslim world, an outcrop not of the Iranian revolution but more of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, of which Osama bin Ladin was a part and of which the Taliban subsequently became a part.

Clearly, this has taken a major blow with the defeat of Al Qaida and the Taliban. But there are several cautions here.

The first factor is that this new Sunni *jihadi* ideology really originated in Pakistan, in the religious schools which took root there during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, and subsequently blossomed because of state

patronage from various Gulf states. This ideology helped create the Taliban.

The Taliban, if you remember, were living in Pakistan, based in refugee camps in Pakistan, and then went into Afghanistan. In a sense, the idea of global *jihad* has actually come back now to its home territory in Pakistan. Right now, there are several thousand Afghan Taliban who have escaped Afghanistan to take up refuge in Pakistan. There are hundreds of Arab and other Al Qaida militants who have also taken refuge in Pakistan, who are fleeing to other countries also, but largely to Pakistan.

Then, you have the issue of perhaps 8,000 to 10,000 Pakistani Taliban who fought in Afghanistan. Many of them have been killed, defeated, but they have also come back. Once the Taliban leadership, Mullah Omar and bin Laden are found, the real focus of concern is going to be Pakistan and how to contain all these new arrivals.

There has been a massive defeat of this whole concept of global jihad, and to my mind many of the balloons that they had hoisted have been pricked very severely, such as:

- the balloon that thousands of Americans will die, that this will be an Armageddon for the Americans.
- the balloon of global *jihad*—that this will be a war for centuries to come, where the Americans will be bogged down like the Russians.
- the balloon that the Afghan Pashtuns are invincible, that they are the best fighters in the world.
- the balloon that this is an impossible terrain that no one can conquer.

There has been an enormous amount of balloon-pricking in the last few months which has led to a huge demoralization, but it also to enormous anger, the frustration that American troops were not on the ground, there were hardly any American casualties; that this bombing has killed many civilians and militants.

Many of these people are coming back to Pakistan demoralized, angry, and bitter. What I envisage is that there will be a process of restructuring their whole *raison d'être*, their ideology. They are going to be re-strategizing. These guys are not going to become good democrats tomorrow just because they have been defeated.

What General Musharaff does is very important—the role he continues to play, as he has done since September 11th, the kind of backing the international community gives Pakistan also at the same time, and what role India plays in the situation.

The attack on Parliament two days ago is an enormous setback to India-Pakistan relations. I don't think that this attack was state-sponsored in any way by Pakistan. It was a sign by the militant groups to Musharaff and to their own ranks that, "Yes, you guys, we are all very demoralized, but look what we can do to raise your spirits and morale. We can attack the Indian Parliament and kill six people." It's a signal to Musharaff that "don't try to mess with us now in Kashmir," and also an attempt to be a morale-raiser, because of this demoralization that has set in.

My next book actually is coming out in February. It's going to be on Central Asia, and was given to Yale Press well before the September 11th. It's something that I have been working on for many years, the rise of militant movements in Central Asia. I've tried to draw on the similarities in Afghanistan and the role of bin Laden and others in helping foster the Central Asian movement.

Now, the issues in Central Asia are very critical because this is a region which has made very little progress in the last ten years since the breakup of the Soviet Union. There are enormous economic and democracy programs there, they are all ruled by extremely repressive governments, and there is enormous danger that if the American alliance with the Central Asian states is not seen to be pushing these regimes towards some kind of market reform, democratic reform, and opening up of their societies, the United States is certainly going to get lumped as once again "the Ugly American backing horrible dictatorships in the Third World," as in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these states could face an implosion—very much like the Shah of Iran, for example—a couple of years down the road, which would certainly not only create enormous instability but reinforce this 1979 image.

In this strategic alliance against terrorism, we have seen almost every state making progress and opening up more. Pakistan does a complete U-turn on support for the Taliban; the Saudis, the Gulf States, open up, for the first time tighten up their financial systems, pledge that they are going to limit all the charities and contributions to *jihad*. But we have seen absolutely no progress in three months in Central Asia, no prisoners have been released, no amnesty, no attempt to open up the economy, no deregulation of currency, no idea of democratic reforms. There are American troops sitting in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and probably in Kirgistan also, and if these bases are going to be there for some time to come, not only during the war but even in the post-war scenario, it's going to be extremely dangerous for the United States if these governments are not shifted, because

the basic thesis about Central Asia is, yes, there is a threat of militant Islam, but far more of a threat to stability in Central Asia is the repressive regimes which are creating the underground threat of militant Islam because there is no other expression of political dissent.

So what naturally happens is that the most militant people go underground, where they become radicalized, which means militant Islam in this part of the world.

I see Central Asia as a potential flash point. Many of these militants have been killed in the war because they were fighting for the Taliban and Al Qaida. Some of their leaders have been killed too. But this problem is not going to go away, and I don't see Central Asia stabilizing at all, even as a result of the end of this war, until there is relaxation by these regimes, and that means international pressure.

Under certain conditions, similar kinds of aid and investment packages are available for Central Asia, which is a message the West should be giving them. We're not prepared to back you wholeheartedly without some really visible changes being made in your regimes.

The second issue is that all these regimes in Central Asia are now being ruled by the same people as in the 1980s under the Communist system. And, more importantly, there has been no preparation for succession in any of these states. First of all, there is no democratic institution which would allow succession. People are talking now about setting up dynasties, their sons and daughters coming in as the next presidents, which is a frightening kind prospect. So what is needed is institutions to allow succession, because these leaders will not be there forever, and once they do go, there will be huge power struggles and turf battles which could also lead to explosions.

One of the main themes of my book, and my criticism of the American policy on Afghanistan, is that there was no strategic vision during the Clinton era. There has to be a post-war strategic vision here, not just in Afghanistan, but in what I call all the unstable regions—the western borders of Pakistan, the eastern borders of Iran, the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. This is all one region of enormous instability, and the aid, reconstruction, and investment that goes into Afghanistan, has to look at the possible spin-offs that can take place in the wider region. Thank you very much.

## Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Ahmed, for that comprehensive, insightful, vibrating talk. You have raised some heavy issues and attempted to address many of them, but I would like to go to the first half of your presentation. Certainly it's gratifying to someone from the UN to hear such warm praise of what the UN has been able to achieve, and we've been lucky that Lakhdar Brahimi, who has worked on this issue, was able to put together the administration in Bonn. Your optimism is, of course, extremely encouraging.

The one concern that some of us have had is that we hear already that some cynics, at least in the Anglophone press in Pakistan, are already dubbing this an "abroad-based government" rather than a "broad-based government." And the fear is, of course, that in a country where, as you correctly point out, so much is going to be needed from the international community, so much support to just keep the place functioning, but also to induce others to cooperate, in a country which at the same time is legendary for its xenophobia and its mistrust of foreigners, how does this administration overcome the tint, as it were, of being seen as sponsored from abroad?

**AHMED RASHID:** In Kabul I met many Pashtun delegations who had been bombed to bits by the Americans in the last two weeks from southern Afghanistan. They were up in Kabul to meet the Northern Alliance. I said to them, "You must hate the Americans." They said, "No, we don't hate the Americans. We needed the Americans to drive out the Taliban. But we know now that we have no choice but to talk to the Americans, because they are going to be the most important powerful factor in this country." Many of these Pashtuns actually had lost family members and tribal members in the bombing.

Much of this propaganda is going to come from cynics in Pakistan and inside Afghanistan who consider themselves anti the central government. But Afghans are very pragmatic, very practical, when they see the benefits of this. It has to be done at a discreet, diplomatic, sensible level. Whatever influence you bring to bear, you are not going to become the viceroy of Afghanistan and the British Ambassador the governor general of Afghanistan. That is certainly not what I am advocating.

Amongst ordinary Afghans, once the benefits of this government—i.e., the food, the humanitarian, the reconstruction, the peace, security, et cetera—comes in, I don't see this as a major problem. It will be a problem for the spoilers, but how long are the spoilers going to be able to spoil?

**QUESTION:** Ahmed, I want to go to the second part of your fantastic presentation, which is the future of global *jihad*. You made the important point that whatever has happened in Afghanistan, the repercussions, the aftershocks, will keep rippling through the region. We've been discovering over the past two to three months how these groups are maintaining and activating themselves. Is that the kind of malleable structure which will rise again in these other areas? Will it take different shapes? Are we really talking about, as Washington keeps saying,

a war that will go from one place to another for months and years to come?

**AHMED RASHID:** I have always seen Al Qaida in two halves. I have studied one half, but haven't really looked at the other.

The first half, which is of my interest, is the fighting forces that have fought in Afghanistan for the Taliban, the foot soldiers of Al Qaida. They are composed of many militants, from many countries, but the Arab world in particular.

The second half is the international aspect—militants, more educated, middle-class people from the Arab world who came into Afghanistan, did training courses for two-three-six months, and may have even fought for the Taliban for two months, and then disappeared back to the West, or wherever they were, to set up their cells.

Clearly, what we have seen in this war is that the Taliban half has been physically demolished, although there will be remnants of it who will escape. What you have not been demolished is the second half—the sleeper cells, the whole network abroad. They will be affected because the central leadership and funding will not be there. Many of these cells are semi-autonomous—they can operate on their own, raise money on their own—and I don't see them becoming less ideological or less committed just because Osama might be killed tomorrow. In fact, they will probably be more motivated to carry out some kind of actions there.

What I fear is a re-formation of a center, possibly in Pakistan, not of Al Qaida, but of Pakistani militant groups who are more in Kashmir perhaps right now, or in supporting the Taliban, but who don't have such a big international agenda.

Before this reconstruction of the ideology and strategy takes place in the next six months, it's very important that all the neighboring states or the Western states exert pressure. Whether you are ex-Al Qaida or ex-Afghan Taliban or Pakistani Taliban, there is going to be a process of restructuring.

**QUESTION:** I would like your thoughts on justice in two forms. One is reconstruction of the Afghan justice system and how that might be accomplished; and secondly, justice for some of the war crimes and crimes against humanity of the past, both with respect to the Taliban commanders who may now be hard-core Al Qaida, and also with respect to Northern Alliance commanders. Thank you.

**AHMED RASHID:** This is a very complicated problem.

Very briefly, the warlords coming to the fore are people in northern and southern Afghanistan with horrendous records. The kind of processes I have outlined, if successful, are going to bypass these warlords—the political, the reconstruction, the extension of the Kabul government. It would be extremely beneficial for the Afghan people to see these warlords bypassed through these other political processes, number one.

Number two, an education of the Afghan people simultaneously on human rights abuses would also be useful. We know that the Bonn agreement has actually set up an independent human rights commission for Afghanistan, which we hope will be supported and funded by people like Sydney and Amnesty and other groups. Then there will be a program for educating people, and particularly the new government, assistance in constitutional building and including human rights laws in the new constitution, and legal aid given by Western organizations like Human Rights Watch.

But what I am extremely nervous about—and the United Nations is probably feeling the same way—is that the political process, at least in the first six months, has to be paramount. For example, if General Dostum is denounced tomorrow as a war criminal who has to be brought to The Hague for war crimes, but General Dostum is at the moment commanding seven provinces in northern Afghanistan and has about 300 tanks and 600 pieces of artillery, this is not someone you want to mess with in a direct confrontation, but rather someone to try to bypass in all these other processes that I have outlined.

The human rights groups must strike a balance in the short term, possibly compromising their own principles. This is a very difficult thing to do. I have worked very closely with Human Rights Watch for many years on many issues, but the political process is very fragile in the initial months. Certainly, there is a great deal of work to be done before actually war criminals are labeled as such and then condemned: documentation, lists should be drawn up, aid should be given to the Afghanistan-based human rights organizations. I am convinced that you will see the demise of many of these butchers and killers within six to nine months.

**QUESTION:** Let's assume that the United States gets reasonable information that Iraq has or is developing a nuclear weapon, and let's assume that other countries are not too impressed. Should the United States proceed unilaterally on this information militarily? Let's also assume that we simultaneously find that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon.

**AHMED RASHID:** This is about the scariest scenario that I can possibly imagine, war on three fronts.

I really can't say anything about the nuclear weapons scenario, but clearly to go after Somalia or Iraq or to

extend the war against terrorism right now would detract from a U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and settling this part of the world, which should be a primary concern and strategic interest for everyone.

But secondly, if this Administration goes after another Muslim country, the Muslim world is going to erupt in very serious confrontation with the West, unless it can be justified in a very serious way. With the present tensions in the Middle East, and the potential for trouble even still in Afghanistan, extreme caution has to be exercised.

**QUESTION:** Two questions. This was, of course, a fascinating presentation, but I was missing the element of multinational force in the short term, which the Security Council is now considering. What role do you think such a force could have?

The second question relates to the future of Pakistan. President Musharaff has promised elections for October 2002. Will these elections will take place, and what is the likely scenario?

**AHMED RASHID:** The security force is absolutely vital as part of the whole reconstruction and peace process, and my impression is that 90 percent of the population would welcome this. The voices of disapproval you are getting from inside Afghanistan are coming from the potential spoilers and warlords who would feel very nervous. Many of the sensible leaders in the Northern Alliance and Pashtun groups realize that if they want to build a national army and police force, some kind of international security force is essential.

I was just very critical of the way in which the West has approached this. The real nature of this force has to be: yes, it will provide security to the international aid agencies in some of the major cities; but much more important than that, it will serve to rebuild infrastructure immediately to get the aid flowing fast.

This force has to be heavily on the officer side—training programs for police and a new army under the United Nations, because this is the way to chip away at the warlords' prestige. You will be inducing some of these warlords' fighters to come into new training programs to set up a national army. The Afghans are not xenophobic about this, and people are in such a desperate situation that they know that aid will come only with a security force there. On Pakistan, it's the \$64,000 question. General Musharaff has said he will h

ave elections. I am very strongly in favor of holding elections now, as soon as possible, because one thing which is very important is how the extremist parties are going to react. This is a time when Pakistan should be capitalizing on what has happened. In an early election right now, the extremist groups would get very few votes, and this could be a watershed for the whole of Pakistan's history in the years to come. You would have a military regime which has cut its umbilical cord with radical Islamic parties and groups, and you would have a military regime saying, "Here they are, they've got 2 percent of the vote; this does not represent mainstream Pakistani public opinion." This would be a critical way to marginalize the extremists in a democratic and political fashion, rather than through crackdowns and mass arrests.

**QUESTION:** Today's *New York Times* has a letter commenting on Tom Friedman's recent column about a letter to a Saudi sheik. He says: "Tom Friedman implies that Islam is not a tolerant and peaceful faith by telling the Saudi minister that "We need you to interpret Islam in ways that sanctify religious tolerance and a peaceful strategy of faith." The writer says: "Islam is inherently a religion of tolerance and peace and does not need to be interpreted by a Saudi sheik to prove that. If, as the Bush Administration has repeatedly said, the war on terrorism is not a war on Islam, why does Mr. Friedman want Islam to rectify itself?"

There is a deep concern now about the nature of Islam. What do you tell an American audience about Islam after September 11th?

**AHMED RASHID:** The interpretation of Islam which has been set out by the Taliban or Al Qaida is a complete distortion. It's a minority view of a very few people, the result of the experiences of 23 years of war.

American audiences have been very confused over the last three months about the kind of protest that we've seen in the Muslim world. Many Muslims at the moment are very anti-American because of U.S. policies in the Middle East. Until we see a rectification of a more balanced and equitable policy in that region, you will continue to have a very angry Muslim world.

Now, the anti-Americanism of perhaps 80 percent of Pakistanis does not translate into support for Taliban or Al Qaida. So you're talking about a huge middle ground here which is very critical of American policy, but it is very anti-bin Laden and Mullah Omar at the same time. It has been simplified here to the extent that either you're a liberal Muslim who is in favor of the West; or you are a hard-lined Muslim who is putting his fist up for bin Laden. But this middle ground is very important.

My comment on the bin Laden tapes was that they would not convince hard-liners; but they will play an important role in convincing this middle ground, making them even more skeptical of bin Laden. The American media should be a little more sophisticated in defining this middle ground.

**QUESTION:** Early in your presentation, I was happy to hear you say that there are great opportunities for

non-governmental organizations, and indeed we have been in Afghanistan since August, and as recently as November 12th, immunizing 5 million children against polio, and we will continue to focus on Afghan children in a very large way with UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

My question is the other two O's, how will they affect governments in the short and medium term, the two O's being opium and oil?

**AHMED RASHID:** The poppy-planting season was in November, and poppies have been replanted in a massive way in Afghanistan. Because of the anarchy and the on-going war, nobody was stopping anyone. The farmers had the seeds which they have replanted. As you know, Mullah Omar and the Taliban had actually banned poppy cultivation for two years running, which had been very successful. So poppy is back, and will be a major problem.

The first task of this whole UN-led operation has to be the rehabilitation of agriculture, because what you have in Afghanistan is a situation where a self-sufficient agricultural country had turned its back on food growing to become a poppy-growing country. The whole agricultural system has been reversed over the last ten years, and now it's up to the aid community to help it revert back. With one or two crops, you could actually bring Afghanistan back into mainstream food production, but it will require investment in water, seed, fertilizer, irrigation, and de-mining. Rehabilitation of agriculture, which will provide tens of thousands of jobs, will help de-mobilize these warlords' armies and send them back into the fields to become farmers.

As for oil, I'm sure that everyone realizes that geography has not changed, and that Afghanistan still is the shortest route to the Gulf from Central Asia. It is still the most economical route for pipelines from Central Asia to cross through Afghanistan, to feed the huge markets of India and Pakistan, and then ship out to the Gulf.

After having got burned so badly in the mid-1990s, the oil companies will not come in blind this time. There has to be stability, some kind of acceptance by all the warlords of this central government, and reconstruction of infrastructure. But they must return at some point, because the whole grid of infrastructure that a pipeline brings with it is going to be vital for the reconstruction effort. I would much rather that the oil companies come in as part of a UN exercise, not in competition with each other but perhaps in cooperation, to make a common consortium of Russian, American, Chinese companies to build a pipeline that would be linked with the UN and the World Bank program for reconstruction. It would not be something that would be offering Afghan warlords and other people payoffs to spoil the reconstruction process, but would be part of the process.

Explaining this to oil companies is very difficult. I am perhaps totally naïve, but it's essential that the oil companies act responsibly in Afghanistan to avoid creating a huge mess when they do come in.

**QUESTION:** Pakistan today, the entire geopolitical scenario, has changed with the defeat of the Taliban; how do you see the stability of General Musharaff's leadership and government, sandwiched as it now is between two neighbors—the new Afghanistan government and India?

**AHMED RASHID:** Very briefly, the decision that the military regime took on September 11th to do the U-turn on the Taliban also requires that you follow through on that logic, which means two other things: to de-link the military from radical Islamic parties and deal with the problem of radical Islamic Pakistan, which can only occur through a process of development, education, and job creation; and, secondly, come to a solution with India on Kashmir. You can put up roadblocks in the way, you can delay certain things, but the international community will not accept that Pakistan take one part of that decision but not follow through with the other parts. I am hopeful that Musharaff, despite a lot of pressure, will follow through.

Copyright © 2011 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs