

The Return of Peace

Review by Paula R. Newberg

Michael Semple. *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009. 104 pp. \$8.00.

More than eight years after Operation Enduring Freedom began in Afghanistan, sixteen years after the Taliban entered the country and ultimately took control of Kabul, and just over thirty years after the Soviet Union's invasion, the international community met in London, once again, to discuss the elusive prospects for peace in Afghanistan. The passage of time is disturbing and depressing: in January 2010, thirty years later, the grip of conflict remained corrosive, divisive, tenacious, and unremitting.

The years since 2001, when the Taliban were assumed, wrongly, to be routed from power, have been frustrating and dangerous. The installation and subsequent election of President Hamid Karzai, and the passage of a Constitution, led many Afghans initially to believe that opportunities for stability and security might finally be at hand. This impression was brief and misleading. Western troops, air power, and reconstruction teams did not defeat the Taliban movement. Instead, the Taliban turned the confusion of recent years into opportunities for its own renewal, and from its roosts in the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the movement has broadened its reach and, in a sense, reshaped southwest Asia. The Taliban has kept the armies of Pakistan

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and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on the defensive, forced the United States into a costly war, effectively recaptured large parts of Afghanistan's territory, and created enormous vulnerabilities in Pakistan.

But Taliban victories have also instigated a war of slow attrition: the insurgency has impoverished a weak state, undercut a weaker government, and forced perpetual insecurity upon the population. Having only recently returned to the community of nations, Afghanistan appears to have regressed to its status as a place where the contagion of revolt is born. A small resis-

form an unwilling army of the displaced and dispossessed.

Each diagnosis justifies different views of the ongoing conflict and its potential solutions. Certainly the return of the Taliban has changed the calculations of success or failure in Afghanistan, for Afghans and for the international community. Dealing with the Taliban, or at least contemplating it, raises difficult questions about the role it plays or will be allowed to play in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Everyone acknowledges, however, that the Taliban is now a politically disruptive force with which to reckon.

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tance group once thought to be rag-tag and impoverished, the Taliban has become tactically clever and strategically flexible.

What exactly is this force? Opinions differ. To some, the Taliban is simply a terrorist group that must be vanquished. To others, it is a movement that just won't go away and will wreak havoc until it is included as part of a solution to Afghanistan's—and, some would say, Pakistan's—future. Others believe it to be an ideological movement potent enough to sway a citizenry and thus is either a sworn enemy or a future partner. Some view the Taliban as the source of corruption. Still, others view it as a group of cunning leaders and underprivileged followers who

Bargains or Bribes? What does reckoning mean? This question lies at the heart of Michael Semple's slim but incisive volume, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. It is among the most troubling problems facing Afghans and the foreign forces that have been anchoring the anti-Taliban battle for many years. Indeed, the current war is a mixed metaphor: foreign troops are fighting partly on behalf of an Afghan government that has little say about the conduct of war and partly, or even more, in their own, not necessarily congruent, interests. The fraught relationship between Afghanistan's government and its military allies makes not only fighting, but also the idea of peace, complicated and puzzling. While NATO members high-

light the risk to world peace, Afghans understand all too well that the greatest risk to them is the country's future governance and, some would say, the future of their state.

Negotiation and compromise have troubled pasts in Afghanistan. Fluid politics, changing alliances, and porous borders have had a way of blurring distinctions among ideologies, interests, and intricate tribal relationships. British gazetteers detailed centuries of Afghan history typified by deal-making and failed bargains, similar to news chronicles today.¹ Tribal leaders, however, would preside over a form of collective responsibility for their communities and territory in return for retaining their autonomy and gaining access to trade.² Although Western caricatures portray Afghanistan as a place that remains immune to the blandishments of civilization and full of independent and unreliable fighters, these traditional relationships have broken in the course of thirty years of war, perhaps no more so than in the past decade.

Semple's long career among the Afghans has left him with considerable respect for the complexities of local society. His views on Afghanistan and Afghans are nuanced and sympathetic, and he locates the roots of negotiation and potential reconciliation in Afghanistan's culture as much as its political imperatives.³ His analysis of contemporary politics assumes not only intrigue but also a polity that desperately needs to repair the wounds of war. He recognizes the profound risks and uncertainties that lie at the heart of today's Afghanistan and the fallibilities of the government, insurgents, locals,

and foreigners. He is also unusually patient with duplicity. As a representative of the European Union, Semple was forced to leave Afghanistan by the Karzai government, which accused him of negotiating with the Taliban—he says he was not—while it was itself engaged in talks with insurgents.

Nonetheless, the broad contours of recent Afghan history are not encouraging. The war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s reflected divisions between urban and rural Afghans, strains between tribes and territory, and resistance to a central state. Occasionally, efforts were made to negotiate among fighters, including discussions between Kabul's communist government and western-backed mujahidin. Nevertheless, the mujahidin were rarely united except against their enemies and, even then, only when forced by their arms suppliers. The acts they committed against civilians rise to the level of war crimes in the minds of many Afghans, who fear that reconciliation would include old warlords as well as new.

Therefore, many participants and observers feared the worst when the Geneva Accords sent Soviet troops home in early 1989. The Soviet Union, with Eduard Shevardnadze speaking on behalf of Moscow, feared the chaos that became inevitable by promoting a power-sharing plan among warring mujahidin fighters. It promoted a power-sharing plan with the rump communist government that might have led to the eventual transfer of power to the mujahidin.⁴ No one wanted to bargain, and in the years between 1989 and 1994, Afghans were both witnesses and victims of stubborn power grabs among all armed groups. Anarchy gave rise to

the Taliban a few years later. This was a tragedy for Afghanistan, its region, and all the powers—Islamabad, Moscow, and Washington—whose long, deep animosities led to shortsighted decisions that resonate so loudly today. The rise of the Taliban challenged Afghanistan’s traditional societies yet again.

In the 1990s, as the Taliban seized power, negotiation took another form. Controlling much of Afghanistan by edict and enforcing its will through community structures, the movement would occasionally deal with international actors for intelligence, discussions of narcotics, or infrequent humanitarian access. Then, as now, the international community would vacillate between rejecting the Taliban and recognizing the need to work with them. Then, as now, questions would be raised about the degree to which occasional cooperation meant validating Taliban ideology. And then, as now, there was little understanding that the Taliban cared little about the opinions of others but did understand the effects of its practices on the Afghan population.

program, but according to Semple, the new government’s programs were weak and ineffective. They concentrated on civilian rather than military leaders, most of them inactive after 2001; included opposition leaders who were not involved with the Taliban; and relied on personal interventions by the government or Western allies rather than institutional, society-wide programs. Most important, reintegration ignored mid-rank insurgents and oppositionists—groups that are critical for stability. In the end, few participated, and most of these efforts stopped when fighting escalated in 2005.

Semple’s point is an important one: reintegration was intended as a first step toward ending conflict rather than as a fundamental shift in Afghanistan’s power relationships.⁶ Without that step, conflict, rather than negotiated peace, dominated the political landscape.

Ultimately, reintegration was superficial and thus unworkable. Like the demilitarization, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program fostered earlier by the international community, and the political vetting process insti-

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After 2001, the situation changed. Semple details a number of “minimalist” efforts on the part of the Afghan government to help reintegrate individuals associated with opposition.⁵ On the whole, these were intended to neutralize top leaders rather than former rank-and-file fighters. The Karzai government thought this was a manageable

tuted in anticipation of the 2004 and 2005 elections, reintegration floundered among the vast complexities of Afghanistan’s domestic and international entanglements. Semple refers to these programs as reconciliation, but his analysis demonstrates that reintegration without reconciliation was hopelessly incomplete.⁷

Reconciling Whom to Whom, and What?

If reintegration is to mean more than providing jobs to former fighters, it must rest on a firm political foundation that defines the shape of a future polity. If the Afghan government and its allies do not agree on their joint mission—that is, on what it is that peace might look like and how to achieve it—then neither the instrument of reintegration nor the broader theme of political amity makes much sense.

The glaring absence of agreement on these fundamental points slices through every element of war and governance. President Karzai came to power promising political tolerance, and his reelection, though deservedly contested, included commitments to increase contacts with the insurgency. Saudi Arabia has encouraged discussions among all parties to the conflict, although its efforts have not borne fruit. The thrust of these talks, feeble though they may be, is clear: war has gone on for too long, and all sides may have to give up something in the name of peace.

However, the United States—the major military power and dominant political influence in the region—has eschewed outright negotiation with the Taliban while at the same time increasing its military presence and encouraging reintegration. It treats the reintegration of fighters as an economic instrument that can be separated from the processes of reconciliation, undoubtedly fearing that seeking broader relationships would validate the insurgency's policies or moral authority.⁸ The Department of State's January 2010 policy paper—the result of a year's reconsideration—made no mention of reconciliation, even as the

Afghan government was pursuing more avenues for discussion with its opponents.⁹ Instead, it pursued a triple play: seeking a military solution to the war, attempting to strengthen the economy, and offering reintegration as a way to achieve both.

Afghanistan is hardly the only country to grapple with such problems. War is built on partisanships that arise from vastly different views of politics, morality, and the efficacy of violence. Effecting justice in political transition is exceptionally difficult. It becomes all the more so when no institutions exist to shepherd a transitional justice process and when only small artifacts of transition—ministries without ministers, politics without parties, a constitution but few means to protect rights—are apparent to the population.¹⁰

The country's struggle with the Taliban has divided its people since the movement first arrived in the mid-1990s. From the beginning, the Taliban used village and tribal power effectively, building on established relationships and, with time, surpassing them. In some areas, the movement remains influential even where it is not powerful, and it has been able to force local and national authorities to take account of its shadow government. Among the ironies of Karzai's government: parts of Afghanistan now rely on Taliban courts to adjudicate disputes in the absence of state institutions. Semple calls the Taliban a "vanguardist brotherhood": "They are in the vanguard in the sense that they assert moral authority over the general population, and they are a brotherhood in the sense that they have a strong awareness of identity and solidarity."¹¹

Romantic? Perhaps so. The lesson Semple draws, however, is a critical one: fifteen years of the Taliban has changed the country in ways that cannot be ignored. The movement may be singular and isolated, but it is not likely to disappear. Its direct link with terror—its own and, by extension, Al Qaeda’s—has limited the capacity of legitimate governments to deal with the Taliban. Without a political wing—unlike the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Fein, for example—its capacity to deal with government is limited, as is the Afghan government’s ability to engage directly on political matters. The latter, Semple rightly notes, is the fault of the Taliban for conceiving of itself as a military force, and of the government for failing to understand the intricacies of negotiating peace during war.¹²

This is the reason that Semple argues strenuously for a maximalist view of reconciliation “to restore relationships and create lasting peace.”¹³ Despite an articulated demand for such reconciliation in the Bonn Accords of 2001, this clearly has not been tried in Afghanistan, and according to Semple, “there is no common vision of what a reconciliation process would look like.”¹⁴ The international community drafted principles and practices in 2008 to support an Afghan government-led approach to reconciliation—about which Semple sounds a tad skeptical—but has yet to find many takers.

There are many reasons for this, but two are fundamental. First, the moral authority of the Afghan government after the 2009 presidential election has dropped dramatically; multi-faceted corruption and widely acknowledged incompetence make the well-intentioned Karzai government a

weak partner at best. For the Taliban and other fighters to reconcile with the government would mean accepting its legitimacy. That has become an increasingly difficult thing to do, even though the Taliban is itself far from legitimate in the eyes of Afghan citizens.

Second, there remains a prevailing concern among many Afghans of all political colors “that international partners might be negotiating separate peaces that run counter to the government’s view of the national interest.”¹⁵ This fear is well-founded. NATO members have been re-evaluating their commitments to prosecuting this war, and to some, striking deals is a quick route out of the Hindu Kush. Others, including the United States, have publicly announced policies that bypass the central government and pay tribes to change their affiliations. These are not separate peaces, but separate wars of convenience with hardly the bricks on which to build a firm state capable of determining Afghanistan’s political prospects.

In the end, Semple is an optimist who believes that justice can be achieved, and is confident that “most” Taliban insurgents can be persuaded to participate in a reconciliation process. But reconciling requires agreement about basic principles—not just about the reconciliation process or the need for all sides to change their minds, but about the rule-abiding, rights-protecting state that Afghanistan must become. The odds of this happening soon seem slim. In a war environment so tainted by terror, with so many outside powers involved in their country, many Afghans still believe that they are once again pawns in a global struggle that extends far beyond them. They probably aren’t wrong.

NOTES

1 *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Afghanistan and Nepal* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908), 11-20.

2 Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 15.

3 This contrasts with, for example, Major Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time* (Los Angeles, CA: Nine Sisters Imports, Inc., 2009), Intenet, blog.stevenpressfield.com (date accessed: 25 February 2010). Gant looks at Afghanistan's village culture as a means to effect western goals.

4 Ahmed Rashid, "A Deal with the Taliban?" *New York Review of Books* 57, no. 3 (25 February 2010).

5 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 29.

6 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 32.

7 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 42.

8 Some also see reconciliation as a form of appeasement for venal warlords. "Such appeasement deals give vulnerable Afghan populations little incentive to stand up to insurgents, especially if they believe those insurgents have the upper hand." See

Nick Grono and Candance Rondeaux, "Dealing with brutal Afghan warlords is a mistake," *Boston Globe*, 17 January 2010.

9 "Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy, January 2010." Council on Foreign Relations, January 2010.

10 The International Center for Transitional Justice notes that deteriorating security conditions also marginalize rights protections that are essential to fulfill the Afghan government's 2005 Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation. Sari Kouvo, "Transitional Justice in the Context of Ongoing Conflict: the Case of Afghanistan," (ICTJ Briefing, September 2009).

11 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 67.

12 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 70.

13 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 1.

14 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 87.

15 Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 75.

16 Henry McDonald, "We can persuade Taliban to be peaceful—expelled EU man," *The Guardian*, 16 February 2008.