

My Life with the Taliban

Abdul Salam Zaeef, Alex Strick van Linschoten (Editor), Felix Kuehn (Editor)

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This is the autobiography of Abdul Salam Zaeef, a senior former member of the Taliban. His memoirs, translated from Pashto, are more than just a personal account of his extraordinary life. "My Life with the Taliban" offers a counter-narrative to the standard accounts of Afghanistan since 1979. Zaeef describes growing up in rural poverty in Kandahar province. Both of his parents died at an early age, and the Russian invasion of 1979 forced him to flee to Pakistan. He started fighting the jihad in 1983, during which time he was associated with many major figures in the anti-Soviet resistance, including the current Taliban head Mullah Mohammad Omar. After the war Zaeef returned to a quiet life in a small village in Kandahar, but chaos soon overwhelmed Afghanistan as factional fighting erupted after the Russians pulled out. Disgusted by the lawlessness that ensued, Zaeef was one among the former mujahidin who were closely involved in the discussions that led to the emergence of the Taliban, in 1994. Zaeef then details his Taliban career as civil servant and minister who negotiated with foreign oil companies as well as with Afghanistan's own resistance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud. Zaeef was ambassador to Pakistan at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and his account discusses the strange 'phoney war' period before the US-led intervention toppled the Taliban. In early 2002 Zaeef was handed over to American forces in Pakistan, notwithstanding his diplomatic status, and spent four and a half years in prison (including several years in Guantanamo) before being released without having been tried or charged with any offence. "My Life with the Taliban" offers a personal and privileged insight into the rural Pashtun village communities that are the Taliban's bedrock. It helps to explain what drives men like Zaeef to take up arms against the foreigners who are foolish enough to invade his homeland.

My Life with the Taliban Details


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From Reader Review My Life with the Taliban for online ebook

C says

Reads very much like talking to an Afghan...slow and formal. This autobiography would be very difficult to read without prior knowledge of the history, geography and demographics of Afghanistan, as the author glances through village after village and mullah after mullah.

However, reading the perspective of "the other side," so to speak, is always complimentary to gain as complete a perspective as possible. I do not disagree with the author that some of the U.S.'s policies were poorly planned and executed, to our detriment. However, it is also clear that Mr. Zaeef's story is extremely limited and incomplete - keeping in line with most Taliban practices. Whether he purposely omits the details or simply was not privy to a great deal of strategic information, he describes a soda-straw size amount of the story. Nevertheless, worth a quick read.

Kamran syed says

.....My Life with Taliban.....

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef is one of the founding member of the Taliban. His autobiography was published soon after his release; in 2006 in Pashto. The Pashto language version was named as "The Story of Guantanamo Bay by Mullah Zaeef". Before translating to the English version; the book has already been translated into some other languages; including Urdu.

The book is very critical of what followed 9/11. It also gives an insight to the movement and how they believe, though a lot has been missed.

Mullah Zaeef was born to a humble family in Kandahar in 1968. His mother died soon after his birth while his father died when he was 11. Zaeef migrated to Quetta soon after Russian invasion in 1979. He studied in religious as well as secular schools up-to 10th grade in Pakistan. He participated in Afghan Jihad at the age of 15, in which he got injured. After Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, Zaeef returned to Afghanistan and started teaching in a local mosque in a small village near Kandahar.

Afghanistan was soon divided into fiefdom, with every warlord trying to control more; after the war. Tired of the situation, Zaeef consulted other Taliban fighters of the Jihad era; hence became one of the founder members of Taliban in April 1994. He held various important positions in the Taliban regime like, in the State Bank, ministry of Defence, Coal and Mines and finally as ambassador to Pakistan, where he was the most contacted representative of Taliban. After several sympathetic warnings from insiders of Pakistani government and ISI individual to leave the country, which Zaeef didn't; he was arrested by ISI and handed over to USA in November 2001. He was held in Guantanamo Bay for 4 years without any charges, where he was subjected to inhumane treatment. Released on 11 September 2005, Zaeef is now residing in Kabul. He still reiterates that He "was a Taliban, is a Taliban and will remain a Taliban". However denies any link with Al-Qaeda and as an obligation, accepts to not act against USA.

While the book was expected to an insight into the Taliban regime and provide justifications for what they did through their reign, including ban on education, beating of women in public, subjugating prisoners to extreme punishments, destruction of Buddha Statues, No regard for the outside world or other sects, harsh punishments for people other than Taliban, providing safe heaven to Osama bin Laden and numerous similar issues and the 9/11; the book provides negligible account.

By the virtue of being Pashtun and the one who had been brought up in the presence of Afghan people and due to the personal charisma, humbleness and humanness, I personally have deep respect for Mullah Zaeef;

who was once known as “The Smiling Mullah”. Out of the complete Taliban hierarchy, he was perhaps the one who was always readily available in Islamabad, who could be contacted on behalf of Taliban, he was also the one who knew diplomacy and the one who was not for all the hardliner acts of Taliban; like destruction of Buddha statues. In handing him over to the USA by Pakistan and the treatment meted out to him by USA is of No advantage to both the countries. Pakistan should have not handed him over to USA; but previous to that, he had been warned under hand by officials of high rank both in the government and ISI to leave for safety and the possible handover to America. Pakistan was the last to withdrew recognition of Taliban, It was left completely alone in the world, it had certain weaknesses, Zaeef should have left Pakistan else, he had also issued a Fatwa of 700 Ulema that was simply provoking people to Kill the president of Pakistan; while he still wanted to stay in Pakistan and he maintains that. In my opinion; he left No choice to Pakistan.

At one point had Zaeef never mentioned the support from Pakistan in maintaining the Taliban regime rather he seems to be always complaining even before his arrest. On the other hand, he never criticized those Taliban who turned their backs on Taliban; like Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil and so many.

Zaeef narrates the story of a Lady Doctor who wept for Taliban and donated her everything for the movement. He narrates many of such stories where he is always supported financially and physically by educated people. He should have never accepted that as they were the biggest opposers of education; but this show hollowness. Such incidents contradict their own doings. At some point I feel like he is helping Pakistan by assuring the world they are doing too much in war on terror.

Zaeef didn't discuss much of what had been happening in Taliban era; thereby leaving thousands of questions unanswered. His suggestions for revival of peace in Afghanistan are vague and lead in No direction. He seems too sympathetic to Taliban, who in my opinion cannot come back to their previous position in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a strange country. No matter how good or bad you are, the Afghans never accepts you for a second time. Though, in the future, Taliban will have a remarkable share in the government; if serious and honest talks are held.

I advise this book to all the westerners in general and US lawmakers in particular; to understand the complex situation of Pakistan, in its war against Terrorism.

(By Kamran Syed, 4 March 2016)

(kamran2513@yahoo.com)

Bisan says

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In my humble opinion the first two thirds of the book is a great read. Zaeef depicts his early life and its hardships; his father dying, his education, becoming a refugee in Pakistan, and his fights against the soviets as a teenager. It's interesting to read what happened that led him into national leadership of Afghanistan, and becoming a diplomat.

The book gets one sided in the latter third of the book, when it comes to the 9/11 attack. Zaeef defends Osama bin Laden, saying that the US had a conspiracy that framed Osama, ala a confession from an insane arab. That was wrong, as Osama bin Laden himself confessed to ordering the 9/11 attack in a published worldwide video. Zaeef definitely suffers in prison, it's interesting how he gets to prison and gets out, but I can't feel a lot of empathy for someone who supports Osama bin Laden; I felt the latter third of the book could of been less anti-America, giving opinions about Obama and the like.

Despite the slant at the end, I'd recommending reading to get an idea what it's like for the "other side".

Naeem says

As far as I know there is still no sociology or anthropology of the Taliban. I was hoping this book would offer a glimpse of the social origins of the Taliban. It doesn't really.

It is a first person account of someone who was a talib from his teenage years, someone who held various important posts when the Taliban controlled the Afghan state, someone who came to some fame as the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, and someone who was beaten and tortured in Bagram, Kandahar, and Guantanamo.

For those who don't know anything about how the Taliban came into being and their relationship with the Mujahideen, Pakistan, the Soviets, and the USA, this book can be a kind of compass or road map to events of the last 30 years. But if you have read other books on contemporary Afghanistan, there is not likely to be much new here.

Ahmed Rashid offers one sentence on the origins of the Taliban, something like that they are a movement of orphans. That is certainly the case for Abdul Salam Zaeef. Accordingly, I found the earlier parts of the book, the parts about his family life, to be the most interesting.

Who should read this book? Those who cannot conceive that the Taliban have a point of view. Because, Zaeef is proud of his life and defends it. But I am not sure there is much more here than a defense.

I do find it hard to imagine why Columbia University Press wanted to publish this book. The short forward by Barnett R. Rubin is particularly disappointing.

Sarah says

Overall I thought this book was OK (I would give it 3.5 stars). The sections of the book that I thought were most interesting were his mujahadeen days when he runs off to fight the Russians at 15 with RPGs (just crazy) and his days in Guantanamo and in American jails in Afghanistan (also crazy! And too bad these jails haven't been shut down as yet). The book is definitely one sided but it was great to get an insiders view into

growing up as an orphan in Southern Afghanistan in the 70's, being a refugee in Pakistan and then part of the Taliban government. However, I was most interested in the things Zaeef doesn't talk about: What was Bin Laden doing as a guest of the Afghan government (I still don't know the answer to this), what is his real opinion on the destroyed Buddhas and what is his real opinion on women's rights (I think he mentions his wife twice in the book but I wonder if in real life she's had a bigger impact on his life).

I was also struck by how honest the book was- he is pretty anti-American and anti-Pakistani and makes no effort to hide it. I was also struck by the complexity of tasks he tackled in his life when he barely has a high school education.

The book makes you really feel for Afghanistan and all it and its people have been through and humanizes them. You can tell he really feels for the Afghan people's fate and wonders why the rest of the world doesn't seem to care. I'm glad I read this book.

Khaled says

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Murtaza says

Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef was part of the Taliban movement from its early beginnings and has experienced all its ups and downs, rising to the heights of government and becoming Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan in the 1990's, before the 9/11 attacks and U.S. invasion led to the destruction of the Islamic Emirate and his arrest and detention in Guantanamo Bay. I was very fascinated to read this book as it offers a rare and much needed insight into the Afghan perspective on the war; specifically the perspective of the Afghans whom the United States and its allies have been fighting the conflict against for so many years.

Some of the most moving parts of the memoir are Zaeef's recollections of his early life, amid the crushing

poverty of rural Afghanistan and the bloodshed of the Soviet invasion. Zaeef was part of the resistance to the Soviets and was personally close to many of the founding members of the Taliban. Among these men were Mullah Omar himself, a man whom Zaeef clearly holds in high regard. Even before the wars life in Afghanistan was difficult, and Zaeef's father and sister, whose mutual love for each other comes across strongly in his recollections, both passed away in his youth due to disease, malnourishment and general hardship. Relative to most other rural Afghans, Zaeef was educated and gained the opportunity to become literate. His simple enjoyment of learning and teaching was very relatable and I got the impression he may have become an academic had he been born in a more prosperous place.

Zaeef's recollections of his relations with various diplomatic offices as ambassador, as well as his efforts to revive Afghanistan's economy during a stint as minister of mining, offered a great insight into how the world perceived the Taliban government during its brief period in power. It was interesting getting his take on the obstinate position the Taliban took on the issue of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the lectures he gave foreign powers that tried to intercede on their behalf. I imagine that his was a frustrating government to deal with, which explains why the Pakistanis and others seemed glad to be rid of it. Although his justified anger at the Pakistani is evident, Zaeef's recollection of the often tearful support that ordinary Pakistanis and even military officials offered him when the American onslaught began was quite touching. His condemnation of the American war effort in Afghanistan is damning, and he speaks with moral indignation about the outrages being inflicted on Afghans by their American occupiers. He is a very proud man and never compromised on what he felt to be his principles, even after years of suffering the worst that the Americans had to offer. It strikes me that if the U.S. had taken the Taliban offer to hand over Bin Laden to an impartial legal process, a lot of blood and resources could have been saved. But I believe Zaeef is correct that following the 9/11 attacks the U.S. was broadly seeking vengeance, not simply an amelioration of security threats.

The odious and unseemly aspects of Taliban rule have been well-documented and need no reiteration here. But upon reading Zaeef's memoir, I think it is still possible for someone who opposes the Taliban to be able to understand and respect the origin of his simple and fastidious morality. The Afghan Taliban were, and are, a movement of the poor and poorly-educated rural Afghans. They sought to create a sense of basic justice in a country that had been ravaged by brutal foreign invaders and rapacious warlords. Zaeef is clearly a patriot in a way that anyone who loves their country can identify with. It is perhaps even more vivid than the patriotism of global urbanites who often become alienated from their own country and come to view their presence there as incidental or transient.

His memoir offers a valuable firsthand account of how the Taliban have perceived events over the past few decades and is a welcome addition to the literature on the subject, which tends to be dominated by Americans and pro-American Afghans. After finishing the book I checked YouTube and noticed that Zaeef did a public talk with former CIA chief Robert Grenier in 2013, the man responsible for the CIA effort to overthrow his Emirate. It is interesting to see where he and other former Talibs, as well as their American adversaries, end up as the years go by and sentiments can begin to mellow.

Yash Sharma says

Abdul Salam Zaeef : One of the founding member of the taliban

This "freedom" put a proud people in chains

and turned free men into slaves
" Independence " made us weak
And slaughtered us
in the name of kindness
This is democracy by the Whip
And the fear of chains
with a whirlwind at its core

- Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef

1) My life with the taliban, is the Autobiography of mullah Abdul Salam Zaef, and the latter is the senior most member of the taliban, and also the former Ambassador of the islamic Emirate of Afganistan to pakistan.

2) Abdul Salam Zaef was born in southern afghanistan, and he was very young when his mother died. His father was a religious scholar and also a imam in the village mosque. His family was very poor, and Zaef's father worked very hard to sustain his family.

3) But his father died when he was only seven years old. And when soviets invaded Afganistan in the year 1979 at that time Zaef was only 11 years old, as the situation in his village and all over Afganistan deteriorated he and his relatives migrated to pakistan to live there as refugees.

4) After coming to Pakistan, they were allotted camps in the province of baluchistan, and the life in the refugee camp is very hard. There was always shortage of water supply, skirmishes between the children's, and other hardships in the camp.

5) In the refugee camp he joined a local madrassa, and where the mullahs taught them the importance of jihad.

6) When he was only 15 years old he suddenly disappeared from the camp and reached Afganistan to fight the soviets.

7) He tells us that he was trained by the ISI, and the latter taught him and his group how to use the rocket launchers and other modern weapons.

8) After completing his training he joined the other mujahedeens and fought along with them against the soviets. During the fighting he got injured and later when soviets left Afganistan he continued his religious education again, and later he also Became a imam like his father.

9) After defeating the soviets, the situation in Afganistan deteriorated very badly, the same mujahedeens who defeated the soviets, started looting people, raping young men and women, killing people at will, and all over in Afganistan there was complete Chaos. To stop all this, in 1994 a meeting was organized in southern Afganistan by the various talibs, and from this meeting born the movement known as 'The taliban'.

10) The Author tells us that there is a misconception that taliban was born suddenly in 1994, Infact the word taliban is the plural for of talib, meaning religious student. And the taliban fought alongside with the mujahedeens against the soviets, and after defeating them they (taliban) disappeared as they are not interested in politics, and wanted to devote their time to the religious studies.

11) Infact Zaeef was one of the founding member of the taliban. According to him initially the taliban didn't have the plan to take over whole of Afganistan, but later with the help of pakistan they captured almost 90% of Afganistan. Though Zaeef didn't mention that the taliban was helped by pakistan.

12) During the Era of taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, Zaeef worked in various ministries of Afganistan, and later he was posted to pakistan as Ambassador of islamic Emirate of Afganistan.

13) He tells us that after reaching Pakistan, the ISI, offered him money and other incentives to tell them about the internal information about the taliban, but he refused the offers of the ISI, and According to him the pakistani government and police officials are utmost corrupt and they treats the Afghan refugees as a second class citizens, the police officials of Pakistan robbed money and other precious items from the Afghan refugees with total impunity.

14) Infact I was amazed while reading this that a taliban member criticizing Pakistan very harshly. And according to him, Pakistan is a treacherous country which can get milk from a bull also, they have two tongues in one-mouth, and two heads in one face, to decieve people. And he called Pakistan as 'Majbooristan' or a stooge of America.

15) When the incident of 9/11 happened and later American invaded Afghanistan because of which the regime of the taliban falls down, and the same Pakistanis who helped taliban, started selling the important members of Taliban to America for millions of dollars.

16) When he was handed over to the Americans and later he was transferred to Guantanamo prison in Cuba, he shared his experience of Guantanamo with us. He stayed in prison for almost five years, he was beaten, tortured, kicked,by the American soldiers, and according to him many prisoners in Guantanamo became mentally ill because of the constant interrogation. Later when he was released from the prison, he said he was betrayed by Pakistan and America, and he says he is a talib not a Al-Qaeda terrorist.

17) He also talked about the issue of Osama bin laden, and the other negotiations which the taliban organized with various warlord's of Afganistan.

18) He also expressed his opinion as how to solve the Afghan crisis, and according to him the lack of unity and trust among the people of Afganistan is the real cause of problem, and he also portrayed his hatred for the American and the Pakistani government very well in the book.

19) Although he didn't talk about the various harsh measures which the taliban applied in Afganistan like banning girl education, stoning women to death and other henious acts which they committed in the name of islam, he smartly avoided all these topics from his book.

20) At last this book tells us the story of Afganistan from the viewpoint of taliban, although this book orginally written in pashto, but it was translated in English, and the language is very easy to read, and i will recommend this book only to those Readers who are interested in reading about Afganistan.

I hope you like the review, thanks for reading, Jai Hind.

My ratings : ??? (4/5)

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Kamil Salamah says

At first the author, Mr. Zaeef, comes across as an unbelievable illiterate person. As one reads on it, becomes astonishingly amazing to realize that he is a very intelligent, capable ,knowledgeable deep and shrewd thinker and politician. He is also a man of great humanistic philosophy. No wonder he was chosen, rightly so, to be his country's ambassador. It is a shame that the world did not embrace him before Afghanistan was savagely raped by the corrupt regimes.

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