ARTICLES

The Taliban's New Target

Losing Faith in Pakistan's Future

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By Gerhard Spörl in Lahore, Pakistan

Long a home to Pakistan's intellectual elite, the tolerant city of Lahore has become a favorite target of the Taliban. The development is causing the country's leading writer, Ahmed Rashid, whose books are required reading in the West's military academies, to lose his optimism that the Islamist militants can be defeated.

The small photo hanging on the wall in his office depicts a serious-looking man with a long, black beard, dressed entirely in white. The man is one of those Afghan warlords who have made life hell for would-be conquerors from the East and West for centuries. Ahmed Rashid, standing next to him, stares at the camera with the same blank expression on his face.

The man in white is Jalaluddin Haqqani, the leader of a clan in eastern Afghanistan. The picture was taken 22 years ago. At the time, Haqqani was still poking fun at the Taliban, who he saw as uneducated hicks, born in Pakistani refugee camps, indoctrinated in Islamic religious schools and led by zealots from Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At that time, the Taliban still had to learn how to wage war, and it made many mistakes. Its leaders were constantly losing an eye, an arm or a leg.

The Taliban fighters were uneducated and unaware. The history of their Pashtun people was unknown to them, they were unfamiliar with the history of their country, and they had never lived in a real city. Haqqani, on the other hand, was a warlord for his clan and was well-traveled. He once met with former US President Ronald Reagan in Washington. Haqqani, now 60, was a real Afghan. That was the way he saw himself, and it was how Afghanistan saw him.

Rashid chuckles quietly as he rocks back and forth in his desk chair, his hands behind his head. He is a friendly, 62-year-old man with the booming voice of a storyteller. A man without pretentions, the Pakistani intellectual has become the chronicler of this part of the world.

Both men were wrong at the time. The warlord firmly believed that important Afghan warriors had to be like him. His mistake was that he didn't take the Taliban seriously. And Rashid underestimated the immense power that lies in the simple faith of the Taliban. Its members have no problem with death, and they turn it into a political weapon. They have since learned how to wage war, and waging war has become their life. They are also not the puppets of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, but rather a deadly threat in their own right.

Experiencing History at First Hand

Rashid has made many trips to Afghanistan in the last 30 years. He has acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of this part of the world, and he is a singular figure, because he not only describes history but has also experienced it himself.

Rashid happened to be in Kabul in 1979 when Soviet tanks invaded the country. He was in Kandahar in 1994 when the Taliban captured the city, creating a bloodbath in the process. He became a firsthand witness to a tragedy in this strange, remote part of the world, and he had already written his books by the time it occurred to the rest of the world to turn its attention to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.

The West first learned about the origins of the jihadists and their mentors from Rashid's books. And Rashid was the first to write about the things the West now knows about Afghanistan's warlords -- the Haqqanis in the east, the Dostums in the north and the Khans in the west --, and about their conflicting alliances with the Pakistani, Turkish and Iranian intelligence agencies. "Taliban," his most famous book, is still required reading

for officers in British and American military academies.

Rashid wrote it in 1999, two years before the 9/11 attacks. He described who the Taliban were, how they interpreted Islam, who their influences were and what role bin Laden and his Arabs played. It made the Pakistani intellectual into a world-renowned figure. Suddenly he had acquired a monopoly on explaining and interpreting a new phenomenon in world politics. A million and a half copies of "Taliban" were sold in the Anglo-American world alone, and it was translated into 26 languages.

Read in the White House

Rashid has been a sensation since then. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the White House ordered 28 copies of his book. Then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met with him to discuss his opinions, and Rashid was showered with invitations from the likes of neocon luminary Paul Wolfowitz and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. President Barack Obama invited him to dinner before his inauguration, at a time when Obama himself was apparently not very well informed about the situation in Afghanistan.

Hardly any other intellectual enjoys a comparable level of authority. Given his fame, Rashid could almost be forgiven for being conceited.

In Germany, the writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger was similarly influential, but unlike Rashid, Enzensberger wasn't interested in being an adviser to political leaders. In France, Bernard-Henri Lévy has taken on the role of the public intellectual, a role in which he has both rendered great service and demonstrated his need for admiration. The British prefer serious scholars like Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash.

Tolerance Under Attack

But Rashid doesn't live in Munich, Paris or London. Instead, he lives in Lahore, Pakistan, a country plagued by constant unrest and danger. The Taliban, a group he has written about extensively, has expanded its efforts beyond what it sees as the national liberation struggle in Afghanistan. It is now in Pakistan, and it is in Lahore, a place filled with many of the things that it hates and wants to destroy.

Lahore is still a beautiful city, a Pakistani jewel, with its Badshahi Mosque, its Shalimar Gardens and its landmark fortress behind imposing walls. The British left behind a large number of schools and universities. It is a city where mopeds overloaded with people dominate street traffic. But it also has its fair share of old-fashioned donkey carts.

On the surface, Lahore, a city of 10 million, is still a refreshing exception among Asia's big cities, cleaner and less overheated than New Delhi, Karachi or Bangkok. It also seems more open-minded. The city's most popular talk show host is a transvestite. At the same time, Lahore is a place where open-mindedness has now come under attack.

How Lahore Is Changing Its Ways

The view of the large bank buildings in the city's downtown is oddly obstructed by large billboards. Behind them, heavy sandbags have been placed as a protection against firebombs.

Female students, their heads tightly wrapped in headscarves, are streaming from the King Edward Medical University, a magnificent white structure from the colonial era. Organized Islamists recently attacked a group of girls who were not wearing headscarves, together with the young men who were accompanying them. When a foreign organization wants to host an event -- like when Germany's Heinrich Böll Foundation wanted to hold a farewell party for its director -- it has to apply for a permit. The permit comes with conditions: no speeches with political overtones, no criticism of the government, and women are not permitted to dance.

Lahore is treading warily and changing its ways. The city government is desperate to provide the Taliban with as few potential targets as possible. The city has been in shock since it was rocked by a recent series of bombings and suicide attacks. European and Asian corporations are leaving the city, a move that could be disastrous for Pakistan, which has only managed to struggle through an ongoing economic crisis thanks to international investment and billions in aid from the United States.

More than 90 people died in a double bombing of two mosques in late May. Everything changed after the attack, which marked a turning point for Lahore. It served as final proof that a Pakistani Taliban does indeed exist. It cooperates with the Afghan Taliban and with bin Laden's al-Qaida, and it is now waging a war on two fronts, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. For the Taliban, Pakistan has more to offer than Afghanistan: an entire arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Out of Place

Rashid lives in an upper middle-class neighborhood where many security precautions have been taken. Drivers are forced to slowly negotiate their way around a series of barriers installed on the wide arterial roadway that passes through the neighborhood, while soldiers wielding submachine guns calmly examine the drivers and vehicles. The neighborhood, which is called Cantt, is a residential area for members of the military and the intelligence services. They live in large houses behind high walls, along streets patrolled by security guards and police cars.

Rashid seems out of place in this environment. In his books, he describes how the army and the Pakistani intelligence service nurtured and protected the Taliban and other terrorist groups from the very beginning, in the belief that they could manipulate them. But the strategy never works in the long run, because the groups eventually start playing their own game. Ironically, Rashid and his family now live in relative safety in a neighborhood of which Rashid has a relatively low opinion -- just as it has a low opinion of him.

His office is in an addition to his house, a large room with bookcases lining the walls. Hamid Karzai once sat on his sofa, before he became Afghanistan's president, and discussed whether he should return to Afghanistan, and what he could expect to find there. The sound is turned off on the TV set in the corner, just as US General David Petraeus, who Washington has now sent to Afghanistan to set things straight, is talking about how he set things straight in Iraq. Rashid turns up the volume as Petraeus explains that he has a difficult job ahead of him, and that it's a tough situation, but that he's there to win the war. He says it in a stoic and determined voice. America is coming to its senses, says Rashid, but it's too late, much too late. Iraq was more important to the Americans.

Double Perspective

Rashid sees the world from two perspectives, as both a Pakistani and a Briton. He was born in Pakistan, and now he has made Pakistan his home. But he spent his formative years in England, from elementary school to university (he studied at Cambridge). His father was an engineer, a product of British colonialism, which had a knack for fostering local talent. After the establishment of Pakistan, the family moved to London.

Rashid thinks in Western terms, and he knows how the West thinks. He makes the strategists in the West uneasy, because he draws their attention to how things work in this part of Asia. And he doesn't make it easy for them, because it isn't easy.

In "Descent Into Chaos," his best book to date, Rashid describes the decline Pakistan and Afghanistan have experienced since Sept. 11, 2001. The work represents the sum of his experiences, and it is much more pessimistic in tone than his earlier books.

Always a Step Ahead

The conditions in this part of the world are maddeningly complex. Every country is seeking to exert influence on every other country. All the countries in the region share borders with each other. Anyone who considers Afghanistan must also consider Pakistan, because the Pakistani military and intelligence service are determined to exert their influence in Kabul when the Americans withdraw.

Anyone who considers Pakistan certainly has to take India into account, because of the mutual paranoia that the two countries share. Anyone who considers neighboring Iran cannot forget the country's conflict with the United States over its nuclear program. Iran, for its part, suspects that the United States could use its bases in Afghanistan for conventional attacks after a nuclear strike. And if the United States decides to remain in Afghanistan for longer than anticipated, neither China nor Russia will be amused.

The secret US military documents about the mission in Afghanistan uncovered by WikiLeaks, excerpts of which were published last week by SPIEGEL, The Guardian and the New York Times, merely confirm what Rashid has already written: that the Pakistani intelligence service supports the Taliban. Rashid, always a step ahead, says that, just a few months ago, Karzai would still have been pleased about that kind of leak. But, he adds, because Karzai senses that the Americans will not defeat the Taliban, and that talks with the Taliban will also be unsuccessful, he is now seeking to improve ties with Pakistan and Iran. And perhaps, says Rashid, Karzai even hopes to strike a ceasefire and power-sharing deal in Afghanistan without the Americans.

Despairing of the West

Rashid has been invited to a lunch with Asma Jahangir, an impressive woman who is very well known in Pakistan. She is a lawyer and advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Attorneys like Jahangir and the Supreme Court justices form Pakistan's civil society, because the country's civilian politicians are weak, corrupt or both. The members of the liberal intelligentsia are a thorn in the side of the religious fanatics, and as a result must constantly fear for their lives.

The guests assemble in a room with paneled walls reminiscent of a British club. Most are women in saris, all very self-confident and cosmopolitan. They exchange pleasantries and discuss their opinions about Obama, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and General Petraeus, as if they were guests on a morning talk show on US television. They have all spent years in London, New York and elsewhere in the West. They are pinning their hopes on the West, and yet they are also despairing of the West.

They are part of the Rashid generation, born shortly before or after Pakistan's independence. They are privileged, they have lived in the West, and they can leave the country at any time if things become too dangerous. But they are deprived of the one thing that members of the intelligentsia in other countries that call themselves democracies have come to expect: the opportunity to share in political power.

Controlled by the Army

Pakistan is in fact an army that controls a country. The country itself was born in 1947, out of blood and violence, when a large share of the Muslims living in what was to become India emigrated to the future Pakistan, while the Hindus in Pakistan went to India, with both sides committing horrible massacres against one another. For the past 63 years, Pakistan has been governed by an alternating succession of unstable military leaders and unstable civilian governments.

Both civilian governments and the military determine what the national interest should be. Pakistan's military leaders are against reforms. Instead, they want to add even more nuclear weapons to their arsenal, in their determination to be prepared for the worst-case scenario, a nuclear clash with India.

After 9/11, the Rashid generation was more hopeful than ever that Pakistan would either come to its senses or be forced to do so by the Americans. And the United States is very active, pumping untold billions into the country. But when push comes to shove, American presidents are more apt to strengthen the Pakistani military, which they see as the last stronghold of rationality.

Wild Past

The day is coming to an end. Spain is about to defeat Germany in the World Cup semifinal. Rashid is married to a Spanish woman, and the house is starting to fill up with guests. Rashid is in good spirits after having finished a successful interview with a daily newspaper. He still has one wild story up his sleeve. This time it's about him, about his early years as a chronicler of his part of the world. There was a period in Rashid's life that preceded his transformation into a public intellectual, a revolutionary phase that was no game.

It was 1968, and Rashid was a student at Cambridge. The student revolts of the late 1960s were in their infancy, and Rashid was the Pakistani version of his generation. They read Mao, Trotsky and Lenin, and Ché Guevara was their hero. They were caught up in the great flow of emotions of the time, which derived its energy from an abhorrence for the Vietnam War.

Rashid was one of four Pakistanis who called themselves the "London Group," a name that sounded important to them. They wanted to do more than read and attend protests. They wanted to change their country, change it in revolutionary ways. They began by flying to Beirut to attend a training camp, where they completed a basic course in guerilla tactics and learned how to use weapons.

Taking to the Mountains

When they returned to Pakistan, the country was in the midst of one of the more difficult of its many difficult existential crises. After its 1971 war for independence, East Pakistan had seceded and renamed itself Bangladesh. The entire country, already an artificial construct, seemed to be on the verge of disintegration. The establishment was weaker than it had been in a long time. As Rashid and his compatriots saw it, they had been presented with an enormous opportunity to change the country.

But where would their revolution begin? Ché, their idol had fought his way out of the mountains and into the cities. Pakistan was their Cuba. And their mountains were in Balochistan, a poor province where the mountain tribes, as tested by war as their Afghan counterparts, had been fighting for independence, or at least autonomy, for years.

The four men established contact with the tribal leaders in the mountains. They immersed themselves in a world that was as foreign to them as the moon. They called themselves commanders, suggested ways to improve the farmers' harvests and addressed problems of medical care. They published newspapers and taught children. Rashid wrote poetry and short stories in his spare time, fancying himself a writer in a revolution.

The Pakistani army sent 100,000 soldiers into the mountains. The ensuing war claimed many lives, but it must have been a strange conflict, with the army attacking in the summer and the guerillas striking back in the winter. It dragged on in this fashion for 10 years. When life in the mountains became intolerable for the women and children, Rashid was put in charge of resettling them in Afghanistan.

Priceless Material

That was how he first came to Afghanistan, where he entered into negotiations with local clan leaders and warlords to determine where the families from Balochistan should be allowed to settle. He went on to Kabul on foot, and so it transpired that he was in Kabul in the winter of 1979/1980, when the Russians marched into the city. He had the good fortune that most historians never have.

The new situation in Afghanistan also affected the interests of the Pakistani army. Anxious to rid itself of the pointless war in Balochistan, it signed a ceasefire agreement with the tribes and offered the four revolutionaries the opportunity to return to the cities, promising them amnesty.

Rashid traveled to London to visit his parents and attend to his health. He saw a dentist, sought treatment for back pain and recuperated after years of physical exhaustion. Then he joined forces with a French photographer who had taken pictures of the Soviet tanks in Kabul, and the two men started knocking on doors at British newspapers. Of course, Rashid was interested in writing about the struggle for freedom in Balochistan, but the editors at the papers' foreign desks only pricked up their ears when they discovered that the two men had priceless material on the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. And so Rashid ended up writing his first major article about Afghanistan and the superpower that had invaded the country to change conditions there.

Losing His Optimism

Was it worth it, spending almost 10 years masquerading as revolutionaries in the mountains? Rashid laughs and shrugs his shoulders. At least something new came of it, he says.

He could just as easily have died in Balochistan, and then he would indeed have become a minor Pakistani version of Ché Guevara. Instead, he began to travel and tried to understand what was happening in this complicated world into which he had been born. He became a historian, with a constant awareness that one day the conflict that had been raging in Afghanistan for years could spill over into Pakistan.

That day has come. For the Taliban, Lahore is Pakistan's New York. Ahmed Rashid, who has always been an optimist, is slowly losing his optimism.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan