

Review - An Enemy We Created

Written by Christian Dennys

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CHRISTIAN DENNYS, APR 20 2012

An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban / Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010

By Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn

C Hurst & Company, 2012



'An Enemy We Created' is a useful addition to the body of work on the current conflict in Afghanistan. Whilst its stated aim is to break the myth of a symbiotic relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the book also has wider resonance. Through the preparatory work for the book several significant texts have been translated from Arabic into English and the authors usefully add clarity for Western audiences regarding the differences between radical Islamist jihadists and the much more broadly supported desire for Islamic governance.

These are important contributions to the debate and reinforce the message that for the most part the Taliban are nationalists interested in protecting their supporters and, in their view, the wider population from the predations of the Afghan government and international military forces. This has been consistently misunderstood by policy makers, though commanders on the ground attest to the fact that ISAF is itself a key driver of the violent reaction to the Afghan government.

Tracing the evolution of both the international jihadists in Afghanistan and Afghan Taliban in Kandahar 'An Enemy' provides an excellent history of the groups and demonstrates clearly the different ideological positions and cultural dissonance between their leaders despite sharing Islamic faith. By bringing in material from the Arab world – in

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particular the writings of Sayyid Qutb – and linking the development of a number of jihadist groups across the Middle East, they argue powerfully that the political milieu that created the international jihadists from the 1960's onwards differed markedly from the Afghan Taliban fighting against the Soviets in the 1980's.

The breadth of this commentary is important and more could be said specifically on the varieties of Islamic jurisprudence that have emerged as a result of the conflicts in Afghanistan since 1979. While the Afghan Taliban adhere to a Hanifi interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, Jihadist groups have employed both Wahhabi and Deobandi inspired jurisprudence in Afghanistan. This has often been at odds with Afghan Islamic practice as well as Afghan cultural norms, particularly Pashtunwali which is still used in Pashtun areas. Communities have picked elements of different schools of Islamic jurisprudence and mixed them with cultural norms adding another facet to the conflicts in the country. Although it is beyond the strict focus of the book on the Afghan Taliban, an exploration of jurisprudence would add context to the complexity of Afghan Islamic practice and help expound the multifaceted nature of the links between Afghan mujahideen (including the Taliban) and international jihadists.

The relevance of the other Afghan mujahideen groups is important because, as the book argues, the links between the southern Afghan insurgency and international jihadists has been at a much lower level than in some other areas of the country. The material covers the Taliban insurgency directed by the Quetta shura in southern Afghanistan, however this then omits to explore the acknowledged links between the Haqqani network (who sit on the Taliban leadership council) and international jihadist groups or the position of Hizb-I Islami. This is particularly important because the other jihadist groups, the Haqqani network and Hizb-I Islami have more complex relationships to international jihadist ideology and groups. The book therefore does not fully explore debates surrounding the state of international jihadists in Afghanistan. As the authors note this is an issue which urgently needs to be understood as foreign policy makers have dismally failed in explaining the complex differences between the range of Afghan resistance groups and the international jihadists they are avowedly fighting. The authors have offered their work and the translated Arab materials as the start of a research framework and discussion, which is commendable. More work is now necessary on the international jihadist networks affecting other parts of Afghanistan, particularly the Kunar valley where Salafists with international jihadist ideology are allegedly operating;^[1] as well as the activities of purported IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) operatives in northern Afghanistan.^[2] Much less is known about these groups who form important, if less high profile, roles in the constellation of jihadist groups operating in Afghanistan. (p.200)

The authors also make prescient analysis of the mistakes the international community has made, and continues to make, about the nature of Islam, Islamists and radical jihadists. As they point out, these are not immutable constructs or groups and they change in response to Western policies; we are much at fault in failing to realise our own clumsiness in this regard. They rightly criticise the military policy to 'decapitate' the Taliban mid-level leadership which is in the process of creating an even more complex security environment that Afghanistan will have to cope with once the ISAF mission ends in 2014. However it is too easy to blame the military in this regard – they have been given room to develop this strategy by weak political leaders in the West who should have recognised that a counter-insurgency campaign is primarily a political process and should be under civilian, not military, leadership – a fact that is widely acknowledged in military doctrine. They also rightly conclude that the tactics of the West may be creating the conditions for the merger of Afghan and international jihadist groups – this is particularly dangerous not only for the West but also for the wider region.

The authors in part blame an intelligence failure for the conflation of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda – however again it would seem that the primary failure has come from Western political leaders in not recognising the difference between a political movement with grievances (the Taliban leadership) and those who pose a direct threat to Western societies (international Jihadists including Al-Qaeda). This occurred in part because of President Bush's dictum 'you are either for us or against us' when in fact there are a whole host of political positions in-between which could address the actual threat posed by international terrorists. The difference has been clear for some time to many of us working in Afghanistan and the wider region, however it the failure of Western political leaders to articulate this to their electorates has contributed not only to the confusion amongst Western populations regarding the point of the conflict in Afghanistan, but has also provided the military with incoherent direction in prosecuting a counter-insurgency (contributing to the development of a failing strategy).

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The book's detailed accounts of the early development of the international jihadists and the Taliban are excellent. As the narrative moves to the current period the detail subsides, which is a shame but this is somewhat inevitable until more time has passed so that those in a position to give insights into the relationships between the relevant groups can talk more freely. The text is not as accessible as it might be for a broader audience, as some Islamic and Afghan concepts are introduced assuming a degree of specialised knowledge. Let us hope that a deserved second edition can expand in these areas and open up 'An Enemy' to the larger readership it surely merits.

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Christian Dennys is a PhD researcher at Cranfield University and is currently in Helmand reviewing transition. He has worked in Afghanistan for much of the last ten years after completing his first degree in Arabic and Persian. He was formerly an advisor to the Office of National Security Council in Kabul and has worked on reintegration policy for the British Embassy in Kabul. He has carried out several research and monitoring programmes on insurgent dynamics, reintegration and human security based on thousands of interviews across a dozen provinces in Afghanistan. Previously he worked for Oxfam and Amnesty International as their leads on research and policy work in Afghanistan

[1]Roggio, B. (2012) Statement from Kunar-based Salafi Group on joining Taliban, The Long War Journal, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2010/01/statement_from_kunarbased_sala.php accessed April 20th 2012

[2] Siddique, A., In Afghanistan, IMU-Taliban Alliance Chips Away At The Stone, Radio Free Europe, http://www.rferl.org/content/in_afghanistan_imu_taliban_alliance_chips_away_at_the_stone/24230127.html accessed April 20th 2012

About the author:

Christian Dennys has a PhD from Cranfield University, his book based on his thesis has recently been published by Routledge; Military Intervention, Stabilisation and Peace: The search for stability. He will be giving talks and seminars at universities in the autumn on his research in to stabilisation. He is also currently working at the UK's Stabilisation Unit.