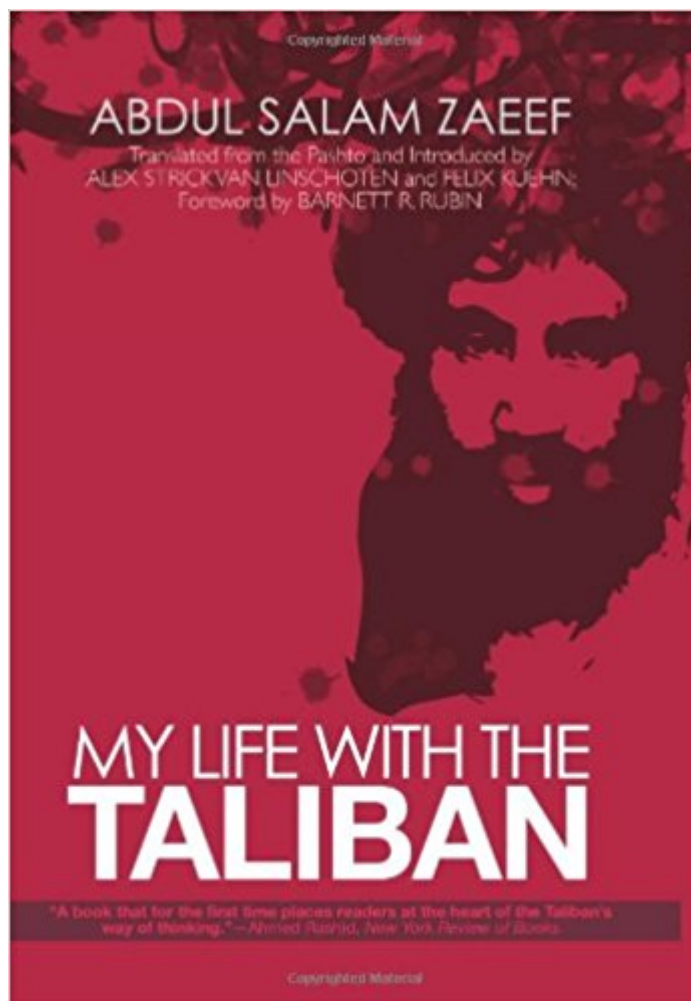


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My Life With The Taliban (Columbia/Hurst)



Synopsis

My Life with the Taliban is the autobiography of Abdul Salam Zaeef, a former senior member of Afghanistan's Taliban and a principal actor in its domestic and foreign affairs. Translated for the first time from the Pashto, Zaeef's words share more than a personal history of an unusual life. They supply a counternarrative to standard accounts of Afghanistan since 1979. Zaeef shares his experiences as a poor youth in rural Kandahar. Both his parents died when he was young, and Russia's invasion in 1979 forced Zaeef to flee to Pakistan. In 1983, Zaeef joined the jihad against the Soviets, fighting alongside several major figures of the anti-Soviet resistance, including current Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. After the war, he returned to his quiet life in Helmand, but factional conflicts soon broke out, and Zaeef, disgusted by the ensuing lawlessness, joined with other former mujahidin to form the Taliban, which assumed power in 1994. Zaeef recounts his time with the organization, first as a civil servant and then as a minister who negotiated with foreign oil companies and Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the Afghani resistance. Zaeef served as ambassador to Pakistan at the time of 9/11, and his testimony sheds light on the "phony war" that preceded the U.S.-led intervention. In 2002, Zaeef was delivered to the American forces operating in Pakistan and spent four and a half years in prison, including several years in Guantanamo, before being released without trial or charge. His reflections offer a privileged look at the communities that form the bedrock of the Taliban and the forces that motivate men like Zaeef to fight. They also provide an illuminating perspective on life in Guantanamo.

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Customer Reviews

Not perhaps since the Khmer Rouge has a movement emerged on the world stage that is as opaque to outsiders as the Taliban. Into this murk Abdul Salam Zaeef shines some much-needed light with his fascinating memoir. By virtue of his role as the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Zaeef was privy to the Taliban's decision making in the run-up to 9/11 and thereafter. His story has much to say about the nature of the gathering insurgency that NATO and the United States presently face. Those who want a window into the thinking of the Taliban today could do no better than this account. (Peter Bergen, author of *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* and *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader*) The entire world wants to understand the Taliban these days, yet precious few people can tell the inside story of this shadowy movement, which makes Abdul Salam Zaeef's autobiography an incredibly important book. By revealing the inner workings of the Taliban from its earliest days, Zaeef challenges the accepted wisdom about the insurgency now facing international troops. By the time you finish, you might not sympathize with the Taliban, but you will know them as people, not monsters. (Graeme Smith, reporter for the *Globe and Mail* and Emmy-award winning creator of *Talking to the Taliban*) This memoir is highly significant and will greatly appeal to those wanting an Islamist counter to orthodox accounts of the rise and fall of the Taliban. (Michael Semple, former EU representative in Afghanistan) Who are the Taliban? This is the question that has obsessed policymakers and the public alike. In this truly exceptional text, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Zaeef, offers an honest account of his personal world-view and a first-hand history of the Taliban movement. The remarkable editing of Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn allows non-specialists to understand fully the context and cultural references that support Zaeef's narrative. (Gilles Dorronsoro, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) *My Life with the Taliban* provides unique hindsight into the worldview of the Taliban. No other book published so far in English offers such an important historical document and captivating read. (Antonio Giustozzi, author of *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007*) A valuable addition to the literature on contemporary Afghan history. (Publishers Weekly) Invaluable.... This is a book that should be read by anybody with an interest in why Afghanistan has gone so badly wrong. (Nick Meo *The Daily Telegraph*) Full of insights on who the Taliban are and how they came about, and should be required reading for anyone with an interest in the region. (Christina Lamb *The Sunday Times (London)*) A book that for the first time places readers at the heart of the Taliban's way of thinking... beautifully translated and extensively edited for easier understanding. *The New York Review of Books* (Ahmed Rashid *The New York Review of Books*) Offer[s] important clues that

could help to answer some of the most pressing foreign policy questions now confronting the Obama administration. (David Rhode *The New Republic*) Highly recommended (*Library Journal*) As the only insider account in existence, it provides some valuable insights into the inner workings of a movement that defies easy categorisation. (*The Irish Times*) A must-reading for those American policymakers who want to understand one of the most controversial religious movements in modern times. (Ehsan Azari *The Huffington Post*) *My Life with the Taliban* offers a window into one from enemy ranks. (Kristin Ohlson *The Sunday Plain Dealer*) [*My Life with the Taliban*] offers a rare glimpse into the mind of a senior Taliban leader who remains sympathetic to the movement. (Seth G. Jones *Foreign Affairs*) "[*My Life With the Taliban*] reminded me how valuable it is to read about a movement like the Taliban from its own perspective. The real 'intelligence' in the book lies not in its details but in the texture, perspective, assumptions, and narratives that it provides from inside the Taliban leadership -- a very rare perspective. (Steve Coll *The New Yorker*) Spies, generals, and ambassadors will pounce on this book, poring over its pages for clues to a way out of the Afghan morass. (*Sunday Telegraph*) The only detailed insider account of the Taliban.... Zaeef is no spokesman for Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura. But *My Life with the Taliban* usefully shows that its leaders saw themselves as nationalists, reformers, and liberators rather than Islamist ideologues. (Jonathan Steele *London Review of Books*) Zaeef's book [is] by far the most valuable work in translation to have emerged from the Taliban and should be on the shelf of every policymaker, analyst, or commentator dealing with Afghanistan. It is literally invaluable.... Where this book is most valuable is in its evocation of the world of the Taliban: their deep rootedness in the society of rural southern Afghanistan, as worked on by the experience of war, displacement, and the Pakistani refugee camps of the 1980s. (Anatol Lieven *Current Intelligence*) an amazing look into what drives the Taliban and like-minded groups. Though Zaeef is a politician and this was a political book, it should be required reading for all foreign commanders and students of political violence. (Ryan Shaffer *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1900-01-00)

Abdul Salam Zaeef was born in southern Afghanistan in 1968 and played a role in many of his country's major events. He fought against the Soviets in the 1980s, undertook administrative positions within the Taliban in the 1990s, and became a public critic of the U.S.-backed Karzai government following his release from Guantanamo prison in 2005. He lives in Kabul. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn are researchers and writers permanently based in Kandahar. They have worked in Afghanistan since 2006, focusing on the Taliban insurgency and the history of southern Afghanistan over the past four decades. Their research extends to other Muslim countries

as well, and they are regular contributors on Afghanistan to major western news channels.

This book provides another perspective on the region and the forces at play that led to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. While clearly written from a Taliban insider, with his own associated bias, it does encourage the reader to question and examine their own perspective on Afghanistan against the people who live there and those offered by the western culture and media. A military maxim is to know your enemy as well as yourself, and this writing by Zaeef does a good job of understanding the Taliban motives and world-view. Written in a clear, practical and straightforward style, devoid of excessive diplomatic or political science jargon, I found this book difficult to put down. I would recommend it as a good primer for anyone interested in the history of the region or the present state of affairs in Afghanistan. After you read this book you will understand better why a western model of government and democracy in the region is not likely to take hold ... ever.

Anyone who wants to understand how the Taliban was created and came to be such dedicated fighters needs to read this book. Zaeef was there at the beginning and helped create the Taliban in response to the Russian and Communist take over of Afghanistan. He was a foot soldier who became a leader of the movement. If you want to know who what when and why of the Taliban, this is an essential read.

This is a decent book if you are a student of Afghanistan's history and want to dig deep into some of the cultural norms of Southern Pashtuns. Zaeef is somewhat of a moderate in the Taliban, which means instead of having the perspective of a person from the 7th century he has the perspective of someone from the 12th century. His views towards Afghanistan's future, the legitimacy of the Taliban, and the role of the international community are definitely those of a typical backwards thinking, repressive Islamist. Still, the book is interesting for the perspective and as a glimpse into the mind of a former Taliban minister.

I might have gotten more out of this book but I got the feeling that the author was just adding fluff to propaganda. There were some rather interesting parts to the book and maybe I should have given him some more credit. But having the afore mentioned feeling I marked him down while still giving him a good deal of credit for his details on some of the inner working of the Taliban.

This book offers insights from a perspective that Westerners seldom see, that of a man who was

born into war and later helped form the Taliban. Though Saeef offers insights into the birth, history and (selected) inner workings of the Taliban, most of his "facts" should be cross-checked by anyone interested in accuracy. Zaeef has written a self-serving piece of propaganda, as well as a valuable look into the mind of a religious zealot. As a student of Afghan history, I am particularly vexed by what he does NOT report, especially his treatment of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud and other mujahideen prior to and after 9/11, and his hypocritical criticisms of the US, Pakistan, and anyone else who does not buy his narrow view of the world. Good to read for its view into the mind of a fanatic, but take it with a heaping table-spoon of salt. Having said that, we should also read our own press releases and books by our own warriors with a similar dose of caution and skepticism.

Excellent book.. Would recommend reading it lots of history told by a person who saw it all and lived to tell the story...

While this is an interesting read I would caution readers from accepting it as objective truth. Not only does the author view the Taliban movement through rose tinted spectacles, which I suppose is a given, but he goes further than that and distorts history to present the Taliban in a more favorable light. One of the more glaring omissions in the book can be found (or not found) in the chapter entitled "The Beginning" where at the end of the chapter the author claims the Taliban were attacked by Ishmael Khan, the Governor of Herat Province and defacto ruler of the west. In fact the Taliban were urged to attack Herat by the Pakistani trucking mafia out of Quetta who resented the duties that IK was charging them to bring in goods from Iran. So in May of 1995 the Taliban launched a major assault on Herat only to be defeated with the loss of some 3000 men. Their most costly defeat up to that point. As they withdrew south to Kandahar in what was a disastrous rout 100s of their casualties died from lack of basic medical cover and even from lack of water as the Taliban's inability to supply and equip its men took its toll in the deserts of southern Afghanistan. My point; if the author is not able to cover this at all and omits it completely then what else is he distorting or not telling the truth about? So, as I said an interesting read but hardly a real history of the movement. The two editors, Linschoten and Kuehn have been gulled by a very credible snake oil salesman.

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