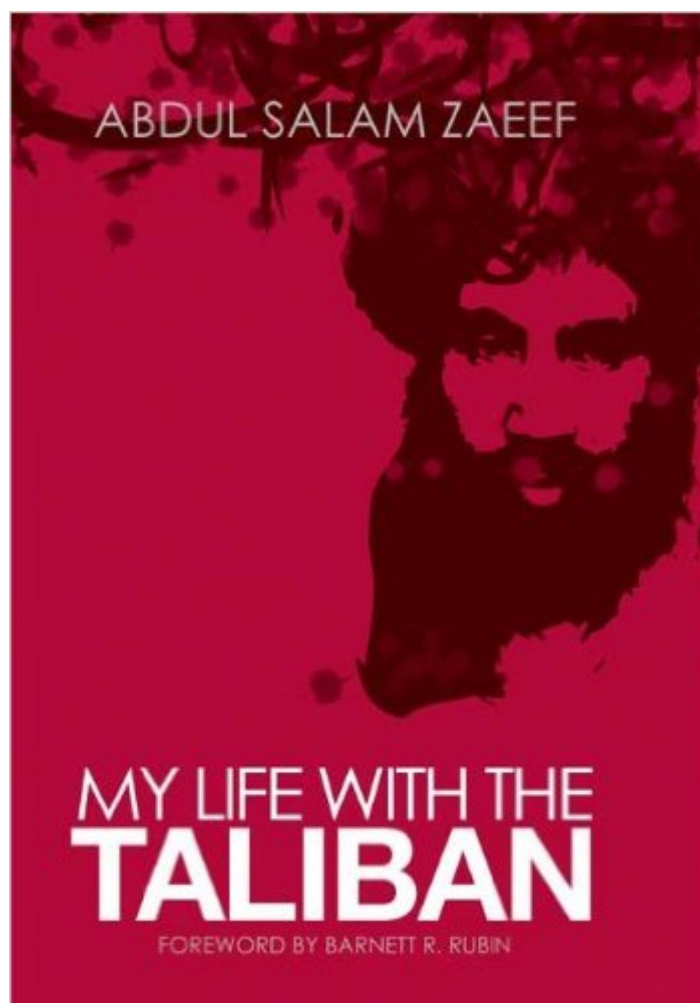


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My Life With The Taliban (Columbia/Hurst)



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

"My Life with the Taliban" may not be for everybody -- only for those who seek to truly understand the movement in its historical context. Those who insist on remaining mired in prejudice, who prefer demonization of the Taliban to a closer examination of their motivations and goals, should skip this book. Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef's account of his early years as a struggling Taliban official gives us a deeper and more realistic view of a group that has been branded with all of the sins of Afghanistan and none of its virtues. Readers who say that Zaeef's version of events is self-serving are undoubtedly correct -- this is a personal memoir, not a cold historical treatise. But it gives us an invaluable glimpse of a man and his time, it draws back the curtain on a period about which we have very little real information. Some people will be made uncomfortable by Zaeef's account of his treatment at the hands of the Americans following the Taliban's ouster -- it is much more difficult to justify cruelty towards those we do not know. But, again, Zaeef and his editors perform a valuable service in introducing us to Guantanamo from the point of view of one of its inmates. Most readers will be moved to anger and outrage -- Zaeef was a diplomat, not a fighter -- but, again, sympathy with the Taliban is not an emotion everyone can handle. "My Life with the Taliban" should become standard reading for anyone who wants to study Afghanistan today. Jean MacKenzie, Afghanistan-based journalist.

The entire world wants to understand the Taliban these days, it seems, as the war in Afghanistan becomes the topic of the moment. Precious few people can tell the inside story of the shadowy movement, however, which makes Mullah Zaeef's autobiography an incredibly important book. If your government sends soldiers to Afghanistan, you must read this. By revealing the inner workings of the Taliban from the early days of the movement, Zaeef challenges the accepted wisdom about the insurgency now facing international troops. By the time you're finished reading, you might not sympathize with the Taliban - but you will know them as people, not monsters.

This book is unfairly maligned as being a work of Taliban apologetics. It is that, to a certain extent, but it is an important counter-narrative to the dominant "Taliban=evil" one. Mullah Zaeef writes of how and why he chose to join the movement and work toward its end; just as upsetting, perhaps, to an American audience, is his description of how we treated prisoners at Guantanamo - even

legitimate ones like former regime officials. Does this book maybe go too far toward excusing the Taliban's activities? Yes. But don't blame the translators for that (they are just that - translators). Just as we give our own disgraced politicians the chance to explain themselves through memoir, so should we do that for Zaeef, especially when understanding the justification of our enemies is so vitally important. Joshua Foust[...]

This book may outrage some, but it is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the country where the US and NATO-led war costs more lives every day. There is no pretence here - Zaeef is an opponent of the West's intervention in his country and continues to consider himself a Talib, if he is no longer an active member. Zaeef does not claim to be a historian - this is an autobiography, a form making no claims to 'objectivity'. But historians will view this as an important source, telling a side of the story that has been completely absent in English-language accounts of the Afghan conflict so far. Reading this book with all its references to belief and scripture leaves the impression of a passionate Afghan nationalist who believes the Pashtuns are disenfranchised and who hates the Americans and the Pakistani ISI in equal measure. The section about Guantanamo should be read for itself alone by anyone who feels the West is more 'civilized' than the Afghans. It is also impressive to read of Zaeef's attempt as ambassador in Pakistan to obtain the release of the Taliban prisoners in the Kunduz area who were subsequently massacred. On the other hand, Zaeef's account contains frustrating silences, as one might expect from a memoir. There is no mention, for example, of the Taliban's alleged use of opium money, or the use of suicide bombs and the civilian casualties they have caused. You may end up disagreeing with both reviewers and book, but you should still read it. If you end up, like us, with a sense of respect for Zaeef, who comes across as an honest and committed man - is that really so appalling?

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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