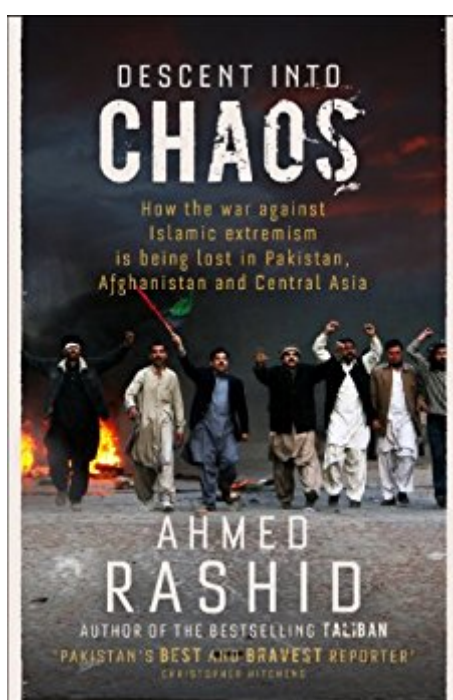


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Descent Into Chaos: How The War Against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost In Pakistan, Afghanistan And Central Asia



Synopsis

Since 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq, the West has been fighting a "War on Terror", through force and through the building of new societies in the region. In this clear and devastating account, with unparalleled access and intimate knowledge of the political players, *Descent into Chaos* chronicles our failure. Having reported from central Asia for a quarter of a century, Ahmed Rashid shows clearly why the war in Iraq is just a sideshow to the main event. Rather, it is Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian states that make up the crisis zone, for it is here that terrorism and Islamic extremism are growing stronger. Documenting with precision how intimately linked Pakistan is with the Taliban and other extremist movements, while remaining the US's main ally in the region, Rashid brings into focus the role of many regional issues in supporting extremism, from nuclear programmes to local rivalries, ineffectual peace-keeping to tyrannical rulers. For Rashid, at the heart of the failure in Iraq is the US's refusal to accept the need to build nations. Ambitious and urgent, analyzing events, policies and personalities across the largest landmass in the world, *Descent into Chaos* chronicles with chilling accuracy why Islamic extremism is now stronger than ever.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In, "Descent into Chaos", as with its predecessor, "Taliban", Ahmed Rashid demonstrates profound and intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the byzantine complexities of Central Asian cultures and politics. An understanding of this troubled region is required not only to place our current involvement in context, but also to more fully comprehend the situation in the Middle East. Rashid devotes around a third of his pages to recapitulating the history of modern Central Asia as previously recounted in "Taliban". While this may be a redundant feature for those who carefully follow Rashid's work, it is necessary background material. The majority of "Descent" adds more recent history as well as a trenchant analysis of the apparent failure of all parties: the US (indicted as the principal Western culprit), NATO (assigned secondary responsibility), Pakistan (the engine behind the Taliban) and finally, Afghani internecine conflicts, all of which contribute in near equal measure to the blossoming debacle now enfolding the entire region. The basic premise of the book is that a regional and international solution of a genuinely comprehensive nature will be required to prevent development of a potentially catastrophic "descent into chaos". Taken in order of importance: 1). Pakistan; its government, the pervasive and all-powerful security service (ISI). The long and sorry history of the State of Pakistan, embroiled in perpetual, fruitless and self-sustaining conflict with India is the prime motive force behind the Afghani farrago. An incendiary brew of pro-Islamist sentiment, anti-Indian maneuvering to efforts to "secure" a friendly (i.e., pro-Pakistani/anti-Indian) regime in Afghanistan and to secure survival of military despotism domestically have combined to support the Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Northwest Frontier Provinces. By providing logistic, military and non-military support, refuge, intelligence and political cover, Pakistan (acting via the ISI) has effectively demolished the effort to rebuild Afghanistan. By cynically and dishonestly manipulating foreign governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), aid given directly to Pakistan (well over 10 billion dollars through 2007) to combat terrorism has been diverted into pro-Islamist efforts and huge sums have been stolen. Additionally, the Pakistani government has (acting through A.Q. Kahn) proliferated nuclear weapons technology to Libya and Iran, while destabilizing missile technology has traveled in the opposite direction from North Korea to Pakistan. 2). US and NATO; a litany of bungled, misdirected efforts was catalogued in the efforts of Western governments in Central Asia. The prime culprit was identified by Rashid as the US. With a singular focus on Al Qaeda to the exclusion of the Taliban (seen as a secondary annoyance) and opium cultivation; with comprehensive disregard for Afghani governmental corruption; with cultivation of local warlords and, most importantly, with cavalier disregard of the role of Pakistan in the problem, the Western partners, especially the US have contributed to destabilization of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the

entire Central Asian region.3). Local despots: President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan is depicted as acting in connivance with the US, Russia and recently China to undermine democracy, promote "kleptocracy" and oligarchy. This regime was given prominent attention as an example of looming problems for Afghanistan's neighbors, as the issues in Uzbekistan extend to neighboring Central Asian countries. All of which have violent Islamist revolutionary groups to whom local populations, increasingly frustrated and exploited by their repressive governments are increasingly turning to violent Islamist movements as potential alternatives to existing regimes.4). The current Afghani government: Indicted as corrupt, ineffectual and uninspiring, reflecting a tribal and warlord culture, now thought to control little territory outside Kabul. The multiple failings of the current president, Hamad Karzai were catalogued in sorry detail.5). Other actors: These include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and China. All have interests in the area and none are conducive to a stable, democratic and secular regime. There are some idiosyncrasies in the book. Part of it reads like a personal travelogue. Other parts amount to a virtual "info-mertial" for the author. There are some redundancies in the text and a few glaring factual errors (such as representing on p. 324 that a group of Toyota Land Cruisers operated by drug barons was crossing the sands at "150mph"). Rashid offers no panacea for solving the mess in "the graveyard of empires", though he subscribes to the now widely held concept that the solution to Afghanistan lies in Pakistan. He provides suggestions, but the riddle of how to build a good, stable, secure government in the midst of a violent insurgency, especially when the entire region is experiencing similar problems cannot be dealt with by providing simple nostrums. It will take plenty of money (many, many billions of dollars) to improve the living conditions of the general population. It will require vast efforts to educate and provide for locals. It will need a sea-change in attitudes by governing elites regarding support for proxy warriors and their use in dealing with intra-regional conflicts. In other words, especially given the current economic situation world-wide, it appears hopeless. Unfortunately, the problems of the Central Asian region will not remain localized: given the current appeal of Islamism and the presence of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the major players (India and Pakistan) the prospect for a cataclysmic debacle appear excellent. In summary, this book is a good or perhaps excellent study of genuine Devil's Brew, one consisting of irrational religious elements, realpolitik actions by neighboring and remote nations, incompetence, poverty, tribalism, greed and ignorance; in short all the elements required for rapid and violent ignition. "...If something be not done, something will do itself one day and in a fashion that will please nobody", as Thomas Carlyle once wrote.

I am headed over to Kabul in a couple weeks to work in NATO's security assistance force. I have

been reading a ton about the region over the past several months. Ghost Wars stands alone as the best read out there, but its narrative ends abruptly on Sept 10, 2001. For me this book can serve as a worthy sequel since a great deal of it deals with events since 9/11. The author is extremely thorough and detailed, but he also manages to hold the reader's interest by addressing themes instead of providing a straight chronology, which would have been painful given everything he includes here. Be forewarned, the author is very critical of US policy in the region, and seems to frequently overstate the degree to which the US policymakers can drive reform around the world. But I will say he spreads his criticisms fairly to other quarters...such as Karzai's government, and ultimately his opinions are articulated well enough to actually add something to the book. A totally objective, unimpassioned text would have been very dry. The author is a Pakistani journalist with incredible access and sources in that part of the world, and his text includes extensive notation. It should also be said that the incoming commander of Central Command Gen David Patreaus is a fan of this book. He recently brought the author onto his 100-member strategy review team dealing with Central and South Asia. So if you want to quickly become 'well read' on the area, pick up this book. It's extremely relevant at this point and time. I'm going to bring this over with me because I'm expecting it to serve as an excellent reference for regional people and place names.

This is a disturbing piece on Central Asian relations and the potential risk to all Americans. If we are to believe the author, which arrows point that he is not opinionated in his telling, but straightforward and truthful, then the damage done by the Bush administration will take years to correct. Sadly, this book corresponds directly with that of Richard Clark; meaning it is most likely a fairly accurate depiction of what has occurred in this region.

Mr. Rashid provides a review of the recent history of a region that has known centuries of conflict. He explains why the billions spent by the Bush administration were unable to bring any measure of peace and prosperity to the peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan and why the policies pursued by Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld have produced a stronger, bolder, and more capable Taliban while doing little to enhance in-country governance. Descent into Chaos is beautifully and passionately written by an expert in the history and politics of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the larger Central Asian region and should be read by those wanting to better understand the connections between America's foreign policy and the region's continued instability and lawlessness.

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