

# Attractive ideas of the Taliban vs. real men with guns

With two years in Pakistan before his deportation, award-winning alumnus author explains the realities of fighting the Taliban INTERVIEW BY COLLEEN DIXON



Freelance writer Nicholas Schmidle ('01) writes about cultural, political, religious and security issues facing the developing world. He arrived in Pakistan in 2006 on a writing fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs in Washington, D.C. For two years Schmidle lived in and reported on Pakistan before being deported in 2008. He received the 2008 Kurt Schork Award for freelance journalism based on his work in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Schmidle is the author of *To Live or To Perish Forever: Two Tumultuous Years Inside Pakistan* and is a fellow at the New America Foundation. He regularly contributes to *The New York Times Magazine*, *Slate*, *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Smithsonian* and other publications.

Based on his expertise in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Schmidle responded to questions on current events in that part of the world. His answers also include links to a variety of recent articles he has written about this region.

**Madison:** Will the resurgent Taliban continue to increase its influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan? Wasn't the leader of the Pakistani Taliban recently killed?



**Schmidle:** Does Baitullah Mehsud's death mean the end of the Pakistani Taliban? Not by a long shot. The Taliban are a regenerative militia; historically, the death of one Taliban member has only spurred others to avenge the fallen one's death. Several commanders are waiting to take over from Mehsud, including Qari Hussain, Mehsud's ruthless deputy, who is thought to be most responsible for training suicide bombers. Whether Hussain or another lieutenant takes over, they'll be hoping to strike back.

Now the hard part begins. Since the CIA has demonstrated its ability to pinpoint "high-level targets," it will want to go after other top Taliban leaders in Pakistan, such as Maulvi Nazir in South Waziristan and Jalaluddin Haqqani in North Waziristan. But Pakistan's military and security establishment perceives both men, who focus their fighting in Afghanistan and not in Pakistan, as national security assets more than threats. And there's no magic drone strike to fix that.

I go in depth on this topic in my Aug. 7, 2009, article published by

**Before being deported for reporting inside prohibited regions under Taliban control, journalist Nicholas Schmidle ('01) lived in Pakistan for two years on a writing fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs in Washington, D.C. He has also traveled in Afghanistan and writes extensively about the region. (Above): Schmidle talks to children outside the Great Mosque in Herat, Afghanistan.**

*Slate* magazine. Read “After Mehsud: The rest of the Pakistani Taliban won’t be such easy targets” at [www.slate.com/id/2224668](http://www.slate.com/id/2224668).

**Madison:** How is Taliban leadership changing in the borderlands of Pakistan?

**Schmidle:** In the past five years, the Taliban has killed more than 150 pro-government maliks, or tribal elders. Oftentimes, the Taliban would dump the bodies by the side of the road for passers-by to see, with a note, written in Pashto, pinned to the corpse’s chest, damning the dead man as an American spy.

While in Pakistan, I got to meet one of its most influential politicians Maulana Fazlur Rehman. “When the jihad in Afghanistan started,” Rehman told me, “the maliks and the old tribal system in Afghanistan ended; a new leadership arose, based on jihad. Similar is the case here in the tribal areas. The old tribal system is being relegated to the background and a new leadership, composed of these young militants, has emerged.” He added, “This is something natural.”

Though Rehman describes the emergence of the local Taliban in evolutionary terms, he explains it as a result of a leadership crisis in Pakistan. He respects the secular-minded people who created Pakistan but insists that social and religious changes over the past two decades have made such leaders much less relevant: “We have to adjust to reality, and that demands new leaders with new visions.”

I asked if he considered himself such a new leader with a new vision.

“I don’t consider myself as someone extraordinary,” Rehman replied. “I have the same feelings as everyone else in the current age: If the weather is warm, everyone feels warm; if it is cold, everyone feels cold. The difference between me and other people is in our responsibilities.” He took a long breath of the fresh, fall air, continued rubbing his prayer beads and leaned over the chair to

spit. “That’s why I am so careful, because my decisions can affect many, many people. I am trying to bring people back from the fire, not push them toward it.” Rehman once seemed ready to introduce Taliban-style rule in Pakistan. Now he is trying to preserve democracy from being destroyed by ruthless militants. If he can’t succeed, can anyone?

I got more in depth with Maulana

**‘Any leader who resolves to bomb the Taliban into submission will be discredited domestically as an American stooge.’**

Fazlur Rehman in a *New York Times* interview at [www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/magazine/06PAKISTAN-t.html?pagewanted=7](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/magazine/06PAKISTAN-t.html?pagewanted=7).

**Madison:** Could you explain the relationship between the American and Pakistani governments, and how the latter’s commitment to fighting the Taliban plays into that?

**Schmidle:** Pakistani leaders know that nothing pleases the Americans, or keeps their dollars coming, like a dose of anti-Taliban realism. The Bush administration gave Musharraf more than \$10 billion for help in the war on terrorism. The Obama administration has called for billions more, albeit spread more evenly among economic and civilian institutions than Bush-era funds.

Yet herein lies the fundamental quandary of the U.S.-Pakistan alliance: Any leader who resolves to bomb the Taliban into submission will be discredited domestically as an American stooge. And no Pakistani politician can lead a counterinsurgency against the Taliban without popular support. If the experiences of Musharraf, Bhutto and Zardari over the past eight years are any indication, Sharif’s very willingness to play ball with the Americans could undo the support he’s amassed. Perhaps the very fact that we’re starting to feel comfortable with him should make us nervous.

Read more in my *New Republic* article, “Can we trust Nawaz Sharif?” at [www.tnr.com/article/back-pak](http://www.tnr.com/article/back-pak).

**Madison:** Where do you see Pakistan heading in the next decade?

**Schmidle:** Pakistan is embroiled in at least two major battles. One features helicopters,

unmanned drones and artillery in the mountains of Swat and the tribal areas. The other involves tens of millions of Pakistanis around the country, working within the context that has determined their lives for so long and trying to reconcile what are seen as the attractive ideas of the Taliban with the not-so-appealing realities of the actual men with the guns.

Pakistani and U.S. governments are central to both conflicts. Tactical and operational victories, such as the drone attack that killed Baitullah Mehsud or the operation to clear the Swat Valley of militants, can only be sustained if the appeal of the Taliban is diminished. The Obama administration can assist by channeling its aid away from purely military support and building the capacity of rural courts and police forces in villages like Bangla Acha. When the “rule of law” rests on the whim of one feudal lord, as in the case of someone like Mazari, extremists can more easily offer a simplified, uniform alternative — sharia law — and inject their demands into the public debate.

I invite alumni who are more interested about my two years in Pakistan to read my article, “Talibanistan: The Talibs at Home,” published in the fall 2009 issue of *World Affairs: a Journal of Ideas and Debate* at [www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2009%20-%20Fall/full-Schmidle-Fall-2009.html](http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2009%20-%20Fall/full-Schmidle-Fall-2009.html).

**Madison:** If sharia law is the “uniform alternative,” justice should not be subject to the whim of a tribal leader, correct? So, is there another piece? Are tribal leaders just as ruthless as the Taliban and thus it’s a wash?

**Schmidle:** It’s true that there are two judicial systems that co-exist today in the region straddling the Pakistan-Afghanistan border: The Pashtun tribal system, known as Pash-tunwali, and sharia or Islamic law. Historically, tribal laws have also superseded Islamic ones in Pashtun culture. But over the past few decades — following the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and during the 1980s and the rise of the Taliban during the 1990s — that’s begun to change. Tribal law, in and of itself, like Islamic law, in and of itself, isn’t necessarily ruthless. There may be some tribal leaders who interpret aspects of Pash-tunwali in a way that could be seen as ruthless, just as the Taliban have taken aspects of Islamic law to the extreme.

Learn more about Schmidle at [www.nicholasschmidle.com/](http://www.nicholasschmidle.com/), and read more about his book, *To Live or to Perish Forever: Two Tumultuous Years in Pakistan*, in the Mixed Media section of this magazine. **MI**

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