

coloniality should therefore be effectuated not just in the broader political economy of North–South relations but also grounded in the politics of everyday life within the context of the multitudinous and dialectical realities in the Global South.

In summary, the handbook possesses a strong cross-disciplinary, transboundary and multidimensional take on decoloniality by offering its readers an incisive epistemological, contextual, sectoral, intersectional and value-based enquiry into the precarious lives in the margin. Resolutely and encouragingly, the authors also provide the readers with a sense of hope, frame of mind and course of action that will help define the paths towards collectively determined and socially desirable futures.

*John N. Ponsaran*

HASSAN ABBAS, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left*. Updated Edition. 251 pages, 2 maps, \$26.00. New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-0-30027-1195 (eBook)

Hassan Abbas's *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left* is a lucid and accessible scholarly work on Afghanistan's recent political trajectory and the Taliban's dramatic resurgence after the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021. A long-time scholar of South and Central Asia, Abbas writes in a thematically expansive fashion, weaving together multiple threads with an eye for compelling detail and an evident familiarity with Afghanistan and the region. The book offers more than a chronological recounting of the Taliban's return to power; it attempts to probe the inner texture of a movement caught between its historical roots and the exigencies of the present.

The book consists of six substantial chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. The chapters, in sequence, include an examination of the Taliban's resurgence, their governance model and challenges, internal power dynamics, ideological foundations, relationships with allies and opposition, including other militant groups, and their evolving engagement with the international community.

The volume exemplifies a genre that readers of Afghanistan scholarship will find familiar: the ambitious, "tell-all" account, sweeping in scope, descriptively rich and intermittently prescriptive. Abbas presents his narrative with journalistic flair, favouring accessible prose over academic density, which makes the book inviting to students and general readers alike. Yet, this readability comes at the cost of theoretical depth. The text often skirts questions of power, resistance and postcolonial state formation – areas crucial to understanding the deeper

stakes of the Taliban's return and Afghanistan's complex history of governance, intervention and resurgence.

The book's central thesis – that the Taliban's return marks not merely a restoration, but a “rebirth” of the group – structures its analysis. According to Abbas, the Taliban of 2021 and beyond, what he calls “Taliban 3.0”, differ in style if not always in substance from their earlier iterations. While ideologically rigid, the Taliban have been forced to adapt, Abbas argues, shaped by their prolonged encounter with the West, exposure to international diplomacy and the realities of governance. Abbas sees in their pragmatism – visible in the Doha negotiations and evolving governance models – both a transformation and a potential for engagement. Yet, this optimism, that the formal changes introduced by Taliban 3.0 may one day precipitate substantive change, remains cautiously hedged.

The book is commendably comprehensive. It surveys themes ranging from Taliban governance, the role of women, ethnic politics and the financial crisis to the group's evolving foreign relations and their ideological underpinnings. His classification of the Taliban's internal factions – moderates, the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras, field commanders, criminals and conscripted villagers – is helpful (pp. 79–80), as is his nuanced treatment of the Taliban's complex relationship with other Islamist movements (Chapter Five offers a detailed analysis of the Taliban's complex relationship with the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic State in Khorasan).

Among the book's key contributions is a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of Taliban leadership, most clearly illustrated in Chapters One and Two. There, Abbas covers the U.S.–Taliban negotiations, internal leadership disputes and the fall of Kabul, all while mapping the factional and ideological divides within the group. Abbas's treatment of the rise of Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, as the elusive and hardline Emir (the current head of state and leader of the Taliban movement), as well as biographical sketches of figures like Mullah Ghani Baradar (deputy Prime Minister and former head of the Taliban's political office in Doha) and Sirajuddin Haqqani (deputy leader, minister of interior and chief of the “Haqqani Network”) are sharp, revealing how lived experience – Pakistani incarceration, battlefield successes, theological education – shapes individual trajectories within the movement.

The book's most compelling chapter is Chapter Four, which probes the Taliban's relationship with political Islam through the lens of South Asian Islamic traditions, such as Deobandism. He contrasts the Taliban's ideological rigidity with the pluralism of Sufism and Irfan, lamenting the degeneration of Islamic theological study and the politicisation of religion. Particularly insightful is Abbas's suggestion that the Taliban's moderation may be a reactive distancing from ISIS (pp. 158–159). In this regard, *The Return of the Taliban* contributes in important ways to the discourse on Afghanistan's postcolonial ideological landscape and the Taliban's place within it.

The book is a helpful resource for the policy community. Abbas's policy recommendations advocate engagement with the Taliban but firmly distinguish this from endorsement. This pragmatic position – engagement as a pathway to leverage, not legitimisation – grounds Chapter Six on international relations. The author astutely outlines Taliban diplomacy, charting their engagements with regional powers like Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia, and notes the group's surprisingly competent performance in managing external relations since taking power. Abbas makes a strong case for engagement with the Taliban, which he is careful to qualify by saying engagement shouldn't be construed as endorsement (p. 23). Creative engagement has the potential to encourage – and incentivise – effective governance and, thus, international assistance for the “severely distressed” people of Afghanistan, whereas endorsement would imply recognition and “mutual alignment of beliefs” (p. 210). In that sense, as Abbas notes, Roger Fisher's ethos lingers: “We must not allow our stubborn attachments to the past to obstruct the goodness of tomorrow” (p. 23).

Yet, the book is not without its blind spots. Abbas's empirical richness occasionally stumbles over its own theatrical instinct. Anecdotes based on hearsay, while captivating, test the reader's credulity. The sources are heavily journalistic – BBC reports, social media activity and unnamed Afghan officials – making for vivid storytelling but at times questionable historiography. Abbas acknowledges this, noting his reliance on the Taliban's own social media projection of “self-image” (p. 21), which, while methodologically transparent, raises questions about representation and authenticity.

Furthermore, the reader is left wanting a more sustained theoretical and historically grounded engagement with the concepts of resistance, tradition and statehood. The dialectic between modernity and tradition, central to the Afghan political imagination, is insufficiently explored. Though Abbas clearly understands these dynamics, he chooses not to foreground them. In this sense, the book reflects a broader trend in Western scholarship on Afghanistan: privileging empirical saturation over conceptual clarity. Abbas remains conscious of the broader historical chronologies of Afghanistan. His historical sensibility occasionally shines through, as when he asks what Afghanistan might have looked like absent Soviet and American interventions (p. 174). These glimpses suggest the potential for a deeper, more critical engagement with Afghanistan's modern history (one defined, more than any other dynamics, by post-colonial experiments with nationalist ideologies and foreign intervention) – an opportunity missed in this work.

In sum, *The Return of the Taliban* is a valuable contribution. It provides a rich empirical overview of Afghanistan's latest political chapter, capturing the drama, complexity and contradictions of the Taliban's return. Its journalistic style makes it accessible and often compelling, but also exposes it to some of the genre's typical weaknesses: anecdotalism, descriptive overreach and theo-

retical thinness. Nevertheless, for students of Afghanistan, this book is essential reading. It critically interrogates a still-mysterious, insurgent-political movement, opens new avenues for research on the Taliban, and offers recommendations for a broader international community that is still unsure how to deal with the de facto authorities in Kabul. One hopes that in a future project Abbas will take up the research *problematique* deftly introduced in Chapter Four – an intellectual history of the Taliban and political Islam in postcolonial Afghanistan – for there lies a project with the potential to reshape how we understand not just the Taliban, but Afghanistan itself.

*Mujib Abid*

SANAA ALIMIA, *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan*. 248 pages, €50.95. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5128-2279-3

Hosting one of the world's largest refugee populations – around 1.7 million registered refugees as of late 2024, most of them from Afghanistan (UNHCR.org) – Pakistan provides the complex setting for Sanaa Alimia's work on *Refugee Cities*, a topical and compelling examination of Afghan migration into Pakistan and the ensuing socio-political transformations within Pakistan's urban spaces. The author not only explores the challenges of forced migration and displacement but also illustrates how Afghan refugees have reshaped Pakistani cities like Peshawar and Karachi, embedding themselves in urban life despite facing severe exclusions.

Moreover, the book opens the perspective more widely: it highlights shared migration challenges across South Asia and reflects on the policy frameworks that shape urban refugee lives in the region. Examining both the commonalities, divergences, and unique approaches in South Asian responses to forced migration, *Refugee Cities* adds an important layer to our understanding of migration policy and urban integration across this geopolitically complex region. Alimia's research is grounded in an ethnographic approach, emphasising direct interactions and the lived experiences of Afghan refugees. The author draws on extensive ethnographic accounts of the urban poor, Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants mainly in Karachi and Peshawar, thus effectively including refugee voices in academic discourse.

Alimia situates Afghan migration within a broader history of displacement, drawing on the Soviet-Afghan War, regional Cold War alliances, and the more recent “War on Terror” to illustrate the complex drivers behind Afghan mi-