

III. Book Reviews

Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (Eds.). *Poetry of the Taliban*.

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Reviewed by Richard Phelps

For all the attention that the Taliban and other Islamist movements have attracted, a core element of their output has been repeatedly overlooked: poetry. Islamist websites across the spectrum are replete with poetry and the reasons for its neglect are obvious: poetry does not enjoy a status in European or North American culture comparable with its role in Asian societies and poetry in Arabic, Persian, Pashtu and Dari is significantly more challenging than prose writing for non-natives to understand. Into this vacuum comes the third work to be published by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, which offers an illuminating insight into priorities and concerns of the Afghan Taliban movement through a review of its published poetry. Sampled from the Taliban's own website, the book will be of interest to scholars of the Taliban and comparative literature, and it is hoped that it will open the door for further studies of Islamist poetry.

The publication of this collection generated significant media attention, particularly since it coincided with the publication of *Heroes*, a collection of poems composed by serving members of the British armed forces. However such 'controversy' appears populist and contrived. The poetry in this collection had already been published online; this volume simply makes it accessible to a Western readership through translation. Furthermore, although the book 'gives a voice' to the Taliban, concerns that it may depict a sympathetic or skewed picture of the movement are unfounded. On the contrary, many of the poems reflect a side to the Taliban that few will find attractive, as one poet writes "*We will eradicate all the Christians, this is our undertaking;/ We depend on God, not on tools and equipment*" (p.140).

In this way, much of the picture of the Afghan Taliban that emerges from its poetry is unsurprising. The poets see themselves foremost as Afghan patriots, seek to free their country from foreign occupation and are deeply rooted in the simple piety of Afghan rural life. They also project a romanticised image of Afghanistan's countryside and of Afghan life. When one Taliban poet writes "*I don't know who has plotted against our freedom*" (p.178) readers may wonder which freedom he is referring to. The frequency of references to villages being burned and women being seized from their families arguably reflect the poets' anxieties and sense of humiliation more than the prevalence of such practices.

The self-awareness displayed by the Taliban poets is remarkable. One writes "*we love these dusty and muddy houses;/ We love the dusty deserts of this country*" (p. 182), and this self-awareness is particularly manifested in the poets' fondness for the Taliban's austere rural lifestyle. Another poet writes "*People say that Afghans have an uncouth appearance;/ Don't strike us down for this fault, for our characters./ We are simple*", whilst another writes "*I acknowledge we may not be gentlemen,/ But, we didn't run away from the foreigners*". Such

hostility towards foreigners is also recurrent theme, as another poet writes “*I am an Afghan living in the valleys./ I don’t like anybody else’s places*” (p. 178).

Elsewhere, the poets’ self-awareness takes a political angle, as one Talib regrets the American destruction of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate following the 9/11 attacks as follows: “*They turned my wishes to dust. It’s a pity that we are wandering as vagrants,/ We did this all to ourselves*” (p. 185). Nowhere is the contrast between the Taliban’s rural simplicity and NATO’s technological superiority seen more than in the description of NATO jets by one poet as “*steel birds*” (p. 205).

Afghanistan’s history of resistance to foreign intervention is legendary. Still, the poets’ frequent recall of the British campaigns of the nineteenth century will surprise many readers. One poet writes of NATO today “*They’ve come to take revenge of the murders of Macnaghten and Brydon*” (p.204) – invoking names that will not be familiar even to most British readers, but whose legacies are clearly well-remembered in Afghanistan.

For literary critics, the book offers an intriguing insight into the poetic conventions of the Afghan Taliban. Certain conventions may surprise, for example references to being drunk or smoking hashish. On the other hand, the poets’ recurrent romantic sensibility (“*Every flower is smiling/ Every blossom laughs*” (p.61)) will likely strike as unsophisticated. For readers interested in the Afghan Taliban, repetition of the poems’ motifs emphasises the movement’s concerns and self-perception. Though the poems do not fundamentally change how the Taliban is understood, the paucity of references to Mullah Omar, Americans, or even “the Taliban” is still noteworthy. Likewise, for all that many perceive the Afghan Taliban to be a reactionary movement (“*O time! Don’t eliminate our culture/ Don’t destroy our traditions*” (p. 123)), the poets’ repeated description of their agenda as being “revolutionary” is particularly striking: “*Cruel man! Don’t spread your dollars around,/ I have a revolutionary religion*” (p. 141).

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