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Masood Farivar. *Confessions of a Mullah Warrior*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009. Pp. 322. ISBN 978-0-87113-982-5.

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As the war in Afghanistan enters its tenth year, a book by a former mujahideen fighter could help the White House avoid the mistakes the Kremlin made during the USSR's invasion of that troubled country. *Confessions of a Mullah Warrior* tells the fascinating story of Masood Farivar's journey from the heart of the Islamic world to the halls of Harvard; from jihadist to journalist. Born in 1969 in Sheberghan, the capital of Jowzjan Province in northern Afghanistan, Farivar fought in the anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s before attending Harvard. His degree in history and politics paved the way for a career in journalism. His work has appeared in publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Soldier of Fortune*, and an article in the *Village Voice* forms the basis of *Confessions*.¹ He has returned to his native land to take up a position at Internews and work for Salam Watandar ("Hello Countrymen"), a radio production organization with shows airing on forty-two stations.

A child when Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union invaded his homeland, Farivar fled with his parents to neighboring Pakistan. He came of age as a refugee studying in Peshawar's madrassas, but yearned to return to Afghanistan and join the jihad against the occupiers. At eighteen, against his family's wishes, he left for Tora Bora and life as a mujahid. But infighting among local warlords dashed any hopes of freedom after the Soviets withdrew and the author soon found his way to an American prep school (Lawrenceville) and then the Ivy League.

Farivar's transition from AK-47s to 7-Elevens is an engrossing tale of cultural adaptation, offering unprecedented insights into the collision of militant Islam and the liberal West generally, and specifically into the cultural and ethnic fault lines that have fractured Afghanistan during its most recent generation of bloodletting.

In 1999, a decade after his emigration, Farivar made his first trip back to Afghanistan—a profoundly disillusioning experience: "The Taliban were in Afghanistan to stay, and I had no choice but to settle down in America. I liked the peace the Taliban had restored, but I wished they were not religious extremists. I also wished they would renounce their alliance with foreign terrorists. But such thoughts were absurd. Without their extremist views and foreign support, the Taliban would not have been the Taliban. I felt there was little hope for my country" (273).

In his memoir, Farivar observes the fear of townsfolk as "columns of Soviet military transport trucks and tanks" passed through Sheberghan (56), but does not highlight the savage persecution of Afghans by Red Army conscripts that ultimately thwarted Soviet goals.² Such ill-treatment is, needless to say, in deep contrast with American rules of engagement.³ This failure to discuss the counterinsurgency and the repression that drove a third of the population into exile is surprising, since Farivar was one of those refugees. Moreover, this crucial omission makes it more difficult to put coalition efforts into proper perspective.

Reports of human rights abuses have underscored the plight of the rural population. The Soviet strategy of destroying homes and crops terrorized villagers and made them too afraid to assist what Moscow called "rebels." Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin have written that "The MIG-25 jet fighter-bomber, the MI-24 Hind

1. "Fire on the Mountain: Tales of Life and Death in Tora Bora," *Village Voice* (1 Jan 2002) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1104.htm>.

2. See Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009) 104, 166, 168, on the counterproductive brutality of Soviet troops toward Afghan civilians.

3. Cf. Michael Crowley, "How Not to Wage a Counterinsurgency, USSR Edition," *New Republic* (1 Sep 2009): "If America succeeds where the Soviets failed, our determination to protect, not persecute, Afghan civilians will be a main reason why" <www.miwsr.com/rd/1105.htm>.

armored helicopter, and the Grad BM-13 mortar [became] as familiar to the Afghan villager as the bullocks that pull his plow.” Soviet devastation of property was so systematic as to prompt comparison with Genghis Khan. And the bombardment of rural areas was matched by the “Sovietization” of urban areas.⁴

Farivar rightly notes the roles of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in providing financial and logistical support to the Islamic jihad against godless communists during the 1980s. But he does not fully grasp the pre-9/11 extent of Arab influence in Afghanistan. “Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Arab volunteer program never gained significant critical mass.... The inbred Afghan suspicion of foreigners kept their numbers relatively small” (177–78). Yes, but the critical fact is that the seed of “Arabization” was firmly planted in never-before-colonized Afghan soil at this time. As veteran journalist Roy Gutman puts it, “The central fact of Arabization was that militant foreigners were becoming a dominant influence in Taliban Afghanistan.”⁵ Although foreign fighters constituted 20–25 percent of Taliban combat strength on the eve of the 9/11 attacks, Farivar elects not to explore the part played by either Abdullah Azzam, the spiritual mentor of the “Afghan Arabs,” or his protégé, Osama bin Laden.

To conclude that “Afghanistan fell victim to an ill-conceived, ill-timed, and ill-executed Iraq plan,” leaves the reader feeling shortchanged, since Farivar himself concedes that this is “accepted wisdom” (314). Even such supporters of the Iraq War as UK-based American foreign policy experts Timothy Lynch and Robert Singh are cognizant of the criticism that waging “war on Saddam ... deflected attention from Afghanistan.”⁶ Yet to claim, as Gregory Feifer does, that the “invasion of Iraq ... has provided one of the biggest obstacles to any measure of success in Afghanistan” is problematic given changing circumstances in Washington, Baghdad, and Kabul.⁷

Gen. David Petraeus, in his 2006 revision of the *US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual*, has stressed the strategic value of living among the population and winning hearts and minds. The “Surge” not only transformed tactics in Iraq, but also provided the American military with a blueprint for success in Afghanistan. David Kilcullen, former adviser to General Petraeus, contends that President Obama can stabilize Afghanistan by emulating the Bush administration’s combination of political and military power in Iraq. The right strategy is to remove “accidental” combatants from the battlefield through negotiation and/or empowerment.⁸ The Village Stabilization Program, analogous to the Sunni Awakening movement (a.k.a. Sons of Iraq), is just one example.⁹

Iraq is, admittedly, not perfectly comparable to Afghanistan, and the significance of the Surge is often miscalculated.¹⁰ But, notwithstanding Farivar’s skepticism about increases in US troop strength in Afghanistan, the lessons learned have been applied to good effect. Anthony Lord writes that “The Taleban is at breaking point and an Iraq-style watershed, when momentum is shifting in a [sic] favour of the NATO coalition, may be nigh.”¹¹ Moreover, as military officials play down President Obama’s original July 2011 deadline for starting troop withdrawals and play up a December 2014 handover date, Afghans may be more likely to support the government as an alternative to warring.

4. *Tears, Blood and, Cries: Human Rights in Afghanistan since the Invasion, 1979–1984* (NY: U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, 1984) 26, 82, 5.

5. *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan* (Washington: US Inst of Peace, 2008) 241.

6. *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008) 175.

7. Note 2 above, 290.

8. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2009). See also his *Counterinsurgency* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010).

9. Drew Brown, “U.S. Encouraged by Afghans Banding Together to Protect Villages,” *Stars and Stripes* (9 Jul 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1106.htm>.

10. See Olivia Ward, “Troop Surge No Guarantee of Success,” *Toronto Star* (26 Nov 2009) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1107.htm>.

11. “Taleban on Verge of Collapse after Surge Success, Allies Insist,” *The Times* [London] (8 Oct 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1108.htm>.

The story of Farivar's maturation offers a novel understanding of Afghans—their faith, fantasies, family. The book does have deficiencies, including a sometimes rather pedestrian writing style,¹² the absence of illustrations, a mystifying lack of information about the author's admission to Harvard, and, more damaging, inadequate treatment of Afghanistan's post-9/11 history. It is, nonetheless, a highly informative and digestible firsthand account of a complex nation during its most turbulent period, one that will appeal to a wide general readership already familiar with Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.¹³ Those with serious interests in policy making, however, will learn more from Ed Husain's *The Islamist*, a better written memoir that exposes much, much more about the radicalization of Muslim youth.¹⁴

12. Extending even to occasional grammatical errors: see 83, 215, and 223.

13. NY: Riverhead, 2003.

14. Subtitle: *Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left* (NY: Penguin, 2007).