

The Buddhas of Bamiyan

The Buddhas of Bamiyan looked over the Bamiyan Valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan for fifteen centuries. The two statues were carved into the side of a sandstone cliff at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains of central Afghanistan in 507 and 554 CE in the valley 140 miles northwest of Kabul. The Taliban destroyed them in March 2001—



One of the Bamiyan Buddhas before and after destruction.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/01dzgw>.

six months before the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City—in an attempt to cleanse the country of idolatry.¹

Afghanistan is home to pre-Islamic historic treasures from its days as a key stop on the Silk Roads and a strategic battleground for conquerors dating back to Alexander the Great and before. Despite appeals from the international

community for their preservation, the Taliban destroyed the statues—considered by the world to be masterpieces—because of “an interpretation of the Muslim faith that is not recognized anywhere else in the world,” said Koichiro Matsuura, chief of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).² Matsuura had convened an emergency meeting of members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in February 2001 to try to stop their destruction by the Taliban government.

The Taliban, a movement of Sunni Pashtun religious students educated and trained in Pakistan, seized Kabul in 1996 and imposed strict Sharia law on citizens. The government, headed by the group’s spiritual and military leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, rigidly enforced laws influenced by Islam and Afghan tribal customs. They also provided refuge for Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and similar Islamic militant groups. ■

Learn More about the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the History of the Region

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The Boy Who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Phil Grabsby, Director (2003). Seventh Art Productions. DVD. 96 minutes. See also *The Boy Mir, Ten Years in Afghanistan*. Phil Grabsby, Director (2011). Seventh Art Productions. DVD. 90 minutes. <http://www.the-boymir.com/>. This film catches up with Mir ten years after the original movie. Both movies have won numerous international film awards.

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NOTES

1. Barbara Crossette, “Taliban Explains Buddha Demolition,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2001, accessed June 13, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/NFO5Dg>.
2. “Afghan Taliban Begin Destruction of Ancient Buddha Statues,” *Common Dreams*, March 1, 2001, accessed June 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/GpY7D>.

THE TALIBAN

Important Points for Teachers and Students

By V. Yoga Jyotsna

1. The term “Taliban” means “students” in Pashto; the organization originated in Qandahar in the early 1990s; most members were Pashtu; they ruled over the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1995–2001).
2. The Taliban emerged victorious in the civil war conflict with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan between 1992 and 1995, with military support of Pakistan and funding from Saudi Arabia.
3. The Taliban won control of Kabul and southern Afghanistan, and their numbers increased because of the transfer of 15,000 madrassa-educated youth from Pakistan, which aspired regional domination.¹
4. Between 1996 and 2001, the al-Qaeda organization became a state within the Taliban state.
5. Toward the end of 2000, one faction in the Taliban was supportive of Osama bin Laden, and another appears to have developed reservations about continuing the alliance with al-Qaeda, mainly because of the latter’s transnational activities, especially the bombings of American Embassies in African countries.
6. The 9/11 attacks brought NATO forces and American armies to the Afghan theater. The Taliban was displaced after 2001, chiefly for failing to shut down terrorist training camps on the Pak-Afghan border and for refusal to disassociate with al-Qaeda and deliver Osama to the US.²
7. Pakistan believed that the Taliban would help them prevent the establishment of a pro-Indian government in Kabul and that the Taliban would attack India and others in the name of Islam. Support for the Taliban regime made Pakistan suspect in the eyes of most of the Afghan governments that succeeded them.³
8. Both the US and the deposed Taliban showed their tenacity between 2005 and 2012. The Taliban is now operating via the Quetta Shura from Quetta in Pakistan.⁴ It appears that commoners prefer the Taliban to the Afghan government, mainly because they are seen to be more committed and less corrupt than the government. Tribal communities are divided between support of the government and the Taliban.
9. Simultaneous attacks in April 2012 in Kabul indicated the strength and tenacity of the Taliban even after Osama’s elimination at Abbottabad in 2011. A very uncertain future exists in Afghanistan.
10. Many instances demonstrate that the Taliban have attempted to refine the Pashtu tribal law for the benefit of women, against the popular perception that they were harsh to women.⁵ If the international community and the Afghan government fail to restore normalcy in Afghanistan, a society tired of internecine wars might swing toward the Taliban once again. ■

NOTES

1. Sajit Gandhi, ed., “The Taliban File,” *The September 11 Source Books Volume VII, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 97*, September 11, 2003, George Washington University, accessed March 19, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/4i2qhw>.
2. Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Boston: Cambridge University Press), 195.
3. Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). See also Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil, and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale, Nota Bene Books, 2001).
4. James Mazol, “The Quetta Shura Taliban: An Overlooked Problem,” *International Affairs Review*, November 11, 2003, last accessed March 19, 2012, <http://www.iar-gwu.org/node/106>.
5. Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending. Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

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