

Center for Russian and East European Studies
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Center for Russian and East European Studies panel to feature “Afghanistan—The Once and Future War”

DATE: 4 p.m. March 12, 2009

EVENT: Panel discussion “Afghanistan—The Once and Future War” with David B. Edwards, W. Van Alan Clark ‘41 Third Century Professor in the Social Sciences, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Williams College; Alessandro Monsutti, 2008–09 postdoctoral fellow, Agrarian Studies Program, Yale University, and social anthropologist, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva; and M. Nazif Shahrani, chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, and professor of anthropology, Central Asian and Middle Eastern studies, Indiana University.

During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama argued that U.S. military efforts had been misdirected into Iraq and that the center of foreign-policy attention and the main target of military action should be terrorist groups based in Afghanistan and along the Afghan/Pakistani border. The new Obama Administration is reorienting U.S. foreign and military policy in precisely this way, with increased attention to political reform efforts, foreign-aid investments, and plans for a rapidly expanded military presence, especially in parts of southern Afghanistan. As tens of thousands of American soldiers are about to pour into the region, it is particularly timely to explore the strategies being employed, the country under scrutiny, and the lessons of past interventions by Britain and the USSR that may be useful in understanding events today. Could the U.S. repeat its own mistakes in Iraq, or of earlier invaders in Afghanistan? Or are the tactics being chosen by the U.S. government today more likely to lead to successful outcomes—success, that is, defined by Afghans as well as outsiders?

Three of the world’s pre-eminent experts who have studied the interactions among Afghanistan’s major communities and the outside world will offer their insights on the social and cultural landscape of Afghanistan today. David Edwards has written two important books on the intersection of culture and politics in Afghanistan, exploring the emergence of a “moral incoherence” that, he argues, lies at the heart of the Afghan state. He has extensive experience in the Pashtun south, and has also produced a major documentary film on post-Taliban Afghanistan set in Kabul. He is now embarking on a study of the U.S. Army’s use of “Human Terrain Teams” to prosecute the Afghan War—a project he will discuss for the first time at Michigan. Nazif Shahrani has written widely about Afghan society and culture, with a particular sensitivity to the concerns and perspectives of non-Pashtun communities located in the north. His work highlights the ways previous Afghan leaders have claimed to seek a unitary, integral state, but in ways that only backfire when in reality they reproduce patterns of centralized and even colonial rule. Alessandro Monsutti has explored the world of Afghanistan’s main Shia minority, the Hazara. His book highlights the connections between this group and a wider Muslim world—particularly through the use of hawala, or informal financial networks, that reach far beyond the Afghan frontier.

PLACE: Room 1636 International Institute, 1080 South University, Ann Arbor.

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