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Ideology in the Afghan Taliban

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Taliban's ideology is historically rooted in the world of the pre-1979, southern Pashtun village. The village contains various and competing ethical traditions, one of which laid the basis for the future Taliban movement. Key features of Taliban repression, such as restrictions on women or banning music, have their antecedents in the southern Pashtun countryside.

More than half of the Taliban senior leadership – including nearly all the key ideological influencers – were born before 1965, which means that they received their primary education and formative childhood experiences prior to the 1979 upheaval.

The classic theory of the Taliban states that the movement is the product of extremist Pakistani madrassas, but data presented here suggests that at least 60 per cent of the leadership received a significant portion of their education inside Afghanistan.

The education of the core of the senior leadership took place in hujras, informal guestrooms in village mosques, and featured a curriculum that was far more eclectic and irregular than the Deobandi curriculum found in major Afghan and Pakistani madrassas.

Through links to Deobandism and indigenous religious practice, the Taliban leadership,

particularly supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, were deeply influenced by Sufism.

The Taliban's ideology has transformed over the past two decades. While the movement once typified a 'traditionalist' Islam – that is, it sought to articulate and defend a particular conception of Islam found in the southern Pashtun village – it is now, during its insurgency phase, closer to the form of political Islam espoused in the Arab world. This does not mean that the Taliban are less conservative or less authoritarian, but rather that the objects of their repression, and the way they frame their mission, have shifted in important ways.

The Taliban's ideology is based on a particular epistemology, a theory of knowledge, in their case, religious knowledge. In the past, this epistemology was intimately linked to certain rural Pashtun traditions of virtue, but in the present, it is more similar to the 'modern' type of Islamist reasoning found in groups ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to al Qaeda. This shift is largely a reflection of the pragmatic concerns of statecraft and especially of running an insurgency. A study of the foundations of this epistemology suggest that the group's beliefs and practices were never simply a mechanical imitation of a literalist reading of texts or a blind attempt to recreate the early days of Prophet Muhammad, but rather were the result of a

sophisticated internal logic that was deeply tied to notions of honour, virtue and repressive power among Pashtun villagers.

The key transformation of Taleban ideology was a shift from an emphasis on exterior states— through the knowledge of rites, bodily comportment, the Prophetic lifestyle, prayer techniques and schedules, and other aspects of everyday ritual— to one that today emphasises interior states of belief and loyalty. The distinction is between act and

intent as the objects of Taleban repression. This shift, which is strongest in sections of the leadership, helps explain the movement's embrace of once-forbidden items such as film and photography. The pragmatic exigencies of waging an insurgency spurred this ideological shift.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An enduring feature of Afghan politics over decades of war are the frequent fissures, reconfigurations and shifting alliances that have plagued the political spectrum. All significant parties of the anti-Soviet insurgency have undergone splits; some have faded in importance while others have stayed relevant only by radically recalibrating their political position: in just a decade, for example, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e Islami went from supporting the progenitors of al Qaeda to supporting the US intervention to oust al Qaeda. Amid this perpetual flux, the Taliban stand as a remarkably consistent force in Afghan political life. Until recently, the group had suffered no significant splits, and many of the same individuals who led the 1990s government are today leading the insurgency. Despite arrests, battlefield retreats and the deaths of thousands of its rank-and-file and dozens of senior cadre – including supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar – the group appears well poised to remain the most significant and influential single political force within Afghanistan for many years to come.

What accounts for the Taliban's longevity? For many years, there were no easy answers. When in power, the group was notoriously secretive and shunned outsiders—as ruler, Mullah Muhammad Omar travelled to Kabul, his putative capital, only once; as an insurgent movement, interactions with the group carry great peril for the outsider. Still, in recent years, scholars and researchers have begun to piece together accounts of the movement's appeal to a particular segment of the population. They have shown that the Taliban's organisational capacity vis-à-vis other Pashtun groups, and the repressive nature of US forces and the Afghan government, have helped ensure that the group continues to have a hearing in certain communities.¹

A crucial piece of this puzzle, one that has not received adequate attention, is ideology: merely harbouring grievances is not sufficient for individuals to join a movement. Rather, organisations must articulate those grievances in a way that speaks to hearts and minds. To mobilise individuals and communities, the Taliban must be able to present a worldview that links not just to

questions of power, but to the emotional and the practical, the other-worldly and the mundane.

This study aims to analyse the Taliban's ideology and how it has changed over the past three decades. The mainstream view of Taliban ideology is perhaps best suggested by the following passage, from Ahmed Rashid's influential and seminal work *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*:²

*"Many of [the Taliban] had been born in Pakistani refugee camps, educated in Pakistani madrassas and had learnt their fighting skills from Mujaheddin parties based in Pakistan. As such the younger Taliban barely knew their own country or history, but from their madrassas they learnt about the ideal Islamic society created by the Prophet Mohammed 1,400 years ago and this is what they wanted to emulate."*³

The implication is that the Taliban are, in essence, a phenomenon alien to Afghan society. Their vision articulates an ideal found in Pakistani madrassas, not in the southern Pashtun village. They are a result of the politicisation and radicalisation of Islam under Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq and Saudi patronage. This strand of thought has found a wide echo in academia and the policy sphere. Some authors link the Taliban to Wahhabism, the austere version of Islam in Saudi Arabia that seeks to strip the religion of 'innovation' (*bid'a*) and return it to the (imagined) practice of the time of the Prophet. Indeed, the identification of the Taliban with Wahhabism is perhaps the most enduring characterisation of Taliban ideology in policy research and the media.⁴

It turns out that both of these and many other widely-held conceptions are false. To take one example: if most Taliban were born in Pakistani refugee camps—which only came into existence in 1979—it would mean that they would have been between the ages of 14 and 20, at most, during the period of rule of the Islamic Emirate (the Taliban's

² Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Boston, Yale University Press 2010.

³ Rashid, *Taliban*, [see FN 2], 23.

⁴ See, as examples of this: Zachary Laub, 'Backgrounder: The Taliban in Afghanistan', New York, Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/taliban-afghanistan/p10551>. Agence France Press, 'Taliban religious doctrine inspired by Saudi Wahhabism,' 24 September 2001. <http://afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2001/sep/er/sep24w2001.html>.

¹ Abdulkader H Sinno, *Organizations At War in Afghanistan and Beyond*, Cornell University Press 2009, Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithica, Cornell University Press 2014. Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, New York, Picador 2015.

name for their government). While this may have been true for foot soldiers, it was unlikely the case for commanders, and was certainly not the case for the Taleban leadership. Of course, given the group's obscurantist nature and the dearth of historical records, it is understandable that Rashid and other pioneers in Taleban studies could have drawn different conclusions. Today, however, a growing body of primary source material and the increasing availability of key Taleban figures for interview allows us to critically re-examine much of the prevailing narrative.

This study uses a host of new data to reassess received wisdom on the Taleban's ideology. The first data set is from the Taliban Sources Project, a collaborative effort to collect and curate Taleban newspapers, magazines, books and night letters, from the inception of the movement in 1994 to the present.⁵ The bulk of this material has never before been made available in English and includes 1990s-era publications such as: *Shariat*, the Taleban government's flagship newspaper; *Tolo-ye Afghan*, a Kandahar-based newspaper that served as a key conduit for the regime; the cultural magazines *Anis* and *Hewad*; and the Taleban Ministry of Defence newspaper *Sangar*. Also in the collection are post-2001 insurgent publications, including the complete run of *al-Somood*, the movement's bimonthly magazine, and key items from the group's network of websites that expound on matters of theology and jihad. Outside of this collection, our study also uses a number of memoirs written by Taleban figures or key participants in the anti-Soviet jihad in southern Afghanistan. We combined these primary sources with extensive interviews conducted over the course of a number of years spent living and working in Afghanistan. In particular, interviews conducted in southern Afghanistan, Pakistan and Qatar with key Taleban figures have yielded new data on the educational and biographical backgrounds of the Taleban leadership. It has also produced insights into their thought and practice during the 1980s jihad, and clarified the conditions under which they came of age as young religious students in the Pashtun countryside. These sources were rounded out with a variety of non-Taleban

sources, including ethnographic studies of pre-1979 and civil war-era Afghanistan.

Taken together, the evidence suggests three important clarifications and amendments to our understanding of the Taleban, which are the three overarching themes of this study:

- First, for many years, the Taleban's ideology was rooted in the world of the pre-1979, southern Pashtun village. Although this worldview would become amplified and distorted in some important ways due to the years of jihad and civil war, it was not the case that the Taleban's ideology was an alien phenomenon, or solely a product of extremist Pakistani madrassas.

- Second, the Taleban's ideology has changed over the past two decades. While the movement once typified a 'traditionalist' Islam—that is, it sought to articulate and defend a particular conception of Islam found in the southern Pashtun village—it is now, during its insurgency phase, closer to the form of political Islam espoused in the Arab world. This does not mean that the Taleban are necessarily less conservative or less authoritarian, but rather that the objects of their repression, and the way they frame their mission, have shifted in important ways.

- Third, the Taleban's ideology is based on a particular epistemology, a theory of knowledge, in their case, religious knowledge. In the past, this epistemology was intimately linked to certain rural Pashtun traditions of virtue, but in the present, it is more similar to the "modern" type of Islamist reasoning found in groups ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to al Qaeda. This shift is largely a reflection of the pragmatic concerns of statecraft and especially of running an insurgency. A study of the foundations of this epistemology suggest that the group's beliefs and practices were never simply a mechanical imitation of a literalist reading of texts or a blind attempt to recreate the early days of Prophet Muhammad, but rather were the result of a sophisticated internal logic that was deeply tied to notions of honour, virtue and repressive power among Pashtun villagers.

To be sure, these shifts and trends are uneven throughout the movement; they more accurately describe the evolution of the leadership than the rank-and-file, which in some cases may still be espousing traditionalist viewpoints. The shift in the Taleban's epistemology is similarly uneven—suggesting that the movement is *in the process* of "modernising," but a long road ahead remains. In this sense, the transformations this paper explores describes the *trajectory* of the evolution in the Taleban's thinking, and is not meant to suggest a completed or homogenous process.

⁵ The Taliban Sources Project is a joint effort by Anand Gopal, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (in conjunction with Thesigers) to collate, digitise and translate primary source documents associated with the Afghan Taleban movement. More information can be found at talibansourcesproject.com. Night letters or shabnameh refer to letters sent by the Taleban to individuals to warn them away from their work with the government, for example.

In what follows, we will first clarify our guiding premises and the terms we use in this paper, particularly “political Islam,” “traditionalism,” “modernism,” and “ideology,” and “Taleban.” Then, in section one, we attempt to reconstruct some key social practices, village norms, and ethical concerns of the pre-1979 southern Pashtun village. Section two examines the effect of the 1980s jihad on southern rural social organisation and the thought of future Taleban members. Section three explores the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s government and attempts to chart the contradictions of “traditionalism” as a method of rule. Section four describes the post-2001 Taleban insurgency, showing how, through first decade of this war, the movement’s thought and practice changed considerably from the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for how to use this study’s findings to analyse what we fear will be the coming years of the Afghan conflict.

Preliminaries

Before we begin, it will help to clarify our guiding premises. The first is that the Taleban as a political category is rooted in a centuries-old social category of village-based religious students and mullahs. This social phenomenon, like any other, has undergone changes large and small over the centuries, but two are particularly of interest as direct antecedents to the present. The first occurred because of the Soviet occupation and anti-Soviet jihad, which thrust poor religious students and young mullahs in southern Afghanistan onto the front lines. For the purposes of this paper, we denote these mullahs and students as “taleban.” The second transformation occurred with the uprising of Kandahar-based taleban led by mullah Muhammad Omar against local warlords, which culminated in the formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. We refer to the formal political group produced by this process as the “Taleban.” The continuity between these groups is high; the core of the taleban mujahedin, who in southern Afghanistan were organised into semi-autonomous bands called ‘taleban fronts’, would go on to lead the Taleban movement and subsequently the Taleban insurgency.⁶ For this

⁶ For more on the taleban fronts, see: Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*, London, Hurst Publishers 2012; Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life With the Taliban*, London, Hurst 2010; Sayyed Mohammad Akbar Agha, *I Am Akbar Agha: Memories of the Afghan Jihad and the Taliban*, Berlin, First Draft Publishing 2014, Olivier Roy, ‘Die Taliban-Bewegung in Afghanistan’, *Mahfel*, 1995, 45, 8-10.

reason, no study of the ideology of the Taleban is complete without tracing the group’s thought to these pre-Emirate days. It was in the quiet piety of pre-1979 village life, the bone-rattling life in the trenches of the anti-Soviet struggle, and the dissolute chaos of the civil war that the Taleban’s identity was forged, and its ideology coalesced.

The second guiding premise is that political Islam comes in many varieties, and that the distinction within it that is most helpful to understand (in the Afghan context) is between “traditionalist” and “modernist” political Islam. To get a better grip of this distinction, and why it is relevant for our purposes, it will be useful to briefly describe the early history of political Islam.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and the rise of Western imperialism in the Middle East and South Asia pushed Arab and Muslim intellectuals to articulate a response. Many of the leading figures of this early movement, like Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, were deeply influenced by nationalist movements in India and Egypt. The leading secular nationalists were often deeply critical of the backwardness of their own communities, and in particular of Islam, vis-à-vis the colonisers. In response, al-Afghani argued that the problem lay not with Islam itself, but with the myriad local traditions through which Islam was practiced, which bred conservatism and soiled Muslim practice with tribal and cultural mores. The answer, al-Afghani contended, was to strip Islam of its local particularities and eccentric innovations and return it to its essence, which could serve to bind the entire Muslim *umma*—which, in imitation of the secularists, he described as a “nation.” Al-Afghani thus used the new Western idea of nationalism—an imagined community of shared language and culture that has existed, in the minds of its proponents, from time immemorial—to reinvigorate Islam.⁷

To al-Afghani and his acolytes, it was global Islam’s patchwork nature, mired with the defects of local cultures, traditionalism and superstition, that had produced so many “innovations”—that is, departures from Islam’s (imagined) essence. These departures, they believed, had brought the once glorious Muslim societies into decline, allowing the West to catapult in development and subjugate the East. In the Muslim world at that time, local clerics produced rulings in emulation (*taqlid*) of their forbears, and held that Muslims should follow these rulings without proof or justification. The modernists like al-Afghani, on the other hand,

⁷ In Afghani’s case, the shared language was Islam, not the ethnic tongues of secular nationalism.

argued for the rational interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the Quran's true meaning.⁸ The implication was to epistemologically privilege reason; if there was a contradiction between modern science and Islam, it was the latter that should be reinterpreted⁹ to better align with the former. All this was, in the end, in large part an attempt to formulate a defence against Western domination. But this was not merely a case of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, because these reformists insisted that the source of their ideas could be found in Islamic history itself. As Talal Asad has said:¹⁰

"We can regard the contemporary Islamic revival as consisting of attempts at articulating Islamic traditions that are adequate to the modern condition experienced in the Muslim world, but also attempts at formulating encounters with Western as well as Islamic history."

As Nikki Keddie writes, ultimately the goal was that pan-Islam and Islamic reform were "two sides of a programme of strengthening the Muslim world and defeating imperialism."¹¹ It is for this reason that we say that al-Afghani and his successors inaugurated a *political* Islam—an Islam concerned with, but not limited to, questions of oppression and political power. This political Islam uses modern concepts of statehood, sovereignty and nationalism; it rejects *taqlid*, favours rationalism, repudiates localism, spurns "tradition" in the abstract or cultural sense, embraces Western-style bureaucratic-legal norms—all in an attempt to address the fundamental imbalance in political power between East and West.

The terms "traditionalism" and "modernist political Islam" are ideal types; in practice the categories bleed into each other, so we should imagine a spectrum.¹² Still, it offers a useful lens with which

to view Afghanistan. There, "traditionalist Islam" is a type of religious practice oriented toward rural culture. It concerns itself with issues of virtue, dispute resolution, ritual, and, in times of strife, defence of the proper ways of living—proper, in this context, being the idealised life of the past, the imagined way in which things have always been. Historically, the traditionalists—embodied in Afghanistan in the rural *ulema*, mullahs, and their students—did not seek to revolutionise society but to preserve it, to defend and deepen those practices and rituals of the everyday experience of Islam.

"Modernist political Islam," on the other hand, was articulated by urban-based, Afghan intellectuals in the 1960s and 70s. Influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Afghan political Islam sought to revolutionise society, overturning old social relations while emphasising social justice.¹³ The leading proponents—men like Ghulam Muhammad Niazi and Burhanuddin Rabbani—had studied in al-Azhar in Cairo and were close to the Muslim Brotherhood. (Rabbani, a future mujahedin leader, is believed to be the first to have translated Sayyid Qutb from Arabic into Persian).¹⁴ Historian Hassan Kakar writes that "In an early 1970s pamphlet published by *Jam'iyyat* [Jamiat-e-Islami], 'Who Are We and What Do We Want?' it was stated that the movement was nothing but an attempt to liberate the people of Afghanistan from the clutches of tyranny and to bring about a renaissance in religion."¹⁵ Thus, the Afghan Islamists were animated by very similar concerns as their rivals, the communists: overcoming the country's perceived "backwardness," fostering technological and institutional progress, and levelling social inequalities. This meant that for the Afghan Islamists, the nature of society was, as Olivier Roy writes, "predetermined by the nature

⁸ This did not make them democrats, however. Like Plato and the long tradition of Western philosophers, the modernists (and their antecedents like Ibn Taymiyya) believed that the task of the rational divination of the Qur'an rested with the *ulema* and other elites.

⁹ In the case of such contradiction, it was not Islam itself that was incorrect, but the interpretations of Islam that required updating.

¹⁰ Talal Asad, 'Interview with Talal Asad: Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions,' *SEHR*, Volume 5, Issue 1: Contested Politics, 27 February 1996.

¹¹ Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī"*. California, University of California Press 1983, 43.

¹² For Weber, an ideal type is a theorist's construction that can aid in the study of social phenomenon, rather than a typology that necessarily inheres in social reality itself. In our case, the categories of traditionalism and

modernism are starkly delineated prior to 1979, but blurred to some extent in the 1980s (as urban Islamists made alliances with rural clergy and tribal elites) only to re-establish itself more starkly again in the 1990s on a global scale.

¹³ The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were the most prominent proponents of modernist political Islam, and it was through an acquaintance with their ideas—not directly with earlier theorists like al-Afghani—that Afghan political Islamists developed their views.

¹⁴ Adnan Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism*, Praeger 2005, 172; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York, Penguin 2005, Kindle location 2299.

¹⁵ Mohammed Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, University of California Press 1997.

of the state.”¹⁶ Their task was to lay claim to the state machinery and put it to the service of all Afghans—which, they believed, could only be done through Islam.

For the Afghan traditionalists, on the other hand, the nature of the state was predetermined by the nature of society—which meant they placed a heavy emphasis on ritual and lifestyle. To be sure, modernist political Islamists were also concerned with aspects of ritual and lifestyle—particularly in the domain of gender—but what distinguished the traditionalists was their emphasis on lifestyle to the exclusion of other concerns like egalitarianism or economic modernisation. In short, while the Islamists sought to revolutionise sociocultural practice by managing the state, the traditionalists looked to preserve that practice by managing society. The sociologist Charles Kurzman explains that:¹⁷

“Islamists maintain that there are multiple ways of being modern, and that modernity is not limited to Western culture. Islamists may ally themselves on occasion with traditionalist Islamic movements, and they may share certain symbols of piety, but they are quite distinct in sociological terms. Traditionalists such as the Taliban of Afghanistan, by contrast with Islamists such as Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network, draw on less educated sectors of society, believe in mystical and personal authority, and are skeptical of modern organizational forms.”

This paper will show that prior to 1979 and during the anti-Soviet jihad, those who later became the Taleban were traditionalists, but that by 2015 they have come to behave, in many respects, like a modernist Islamist movement. The period of the Emirate marked a transition, in which the group sought to regulate ritual and personal cultivation on the one hand, and manage the exigencies of modern statecraft on the other—a contradiction that had no ready solution.

The third guiding premise of this study is related to our use of “ideology.” The term is often applied pejoratively as a way of describing (usually other people’s) self-interested belief. It is typically contrasted to “knowledge,” which is usually taken to mean belief that is both true and justified through reason or empirical data. Finally, it is usually understood as a deliberate, all-encompassing worldview that references or espouses a political programme.

These usual approaches have a number of problems: first, by viewing ideology as simply a misperception or failure to reason, these views emphasise psychological states at the expense of the conditions that enable people to hold the views in question. In the policy world, for example, studies of Islamic groups tend to portray actors’ beliefs as a fixed or essentialised doctrines.¹⁸ Second, counting only those views that one disagrees with as ideological runs the risk of missing the important biases and assumptions that colour one’s own view of the subjects under study, thereby misapprehending the subtleties of their thought. Third, restricting ideology to a formal political programme risks missing a variety of behaviour that could be fruitfully analysed as ideological.

In this paper, we follow the approach of Terry Eagleton, who offered a definition of ideology as a “complex of empirical and normative elements, within which the nature and organisation of the former is ultimately determined by the latter.”¹⁹ At its core, ideology is a moral interpretation of the world, a set of beliefs about how people *ought* to behave and how society *ought* to be organised. This framing is powerful enough to shape the way individuals perceive how the world *is*. Ultimately, beliefs about how society ought to be organised are rooted in an individual’s social position, her class, and how embedded she is in particular networks—so studying ideology requires grounding a movement’s thought and practice in power relations, material conditions, and historical circumstances. Seen in this light, practicing “tradition,” is as ideological an exercise as attempts to break from it to create a new order. Therefore, in order to properly describe and understand the Taleban’s ideology, we take the historical approach and begin in the bygone era of pre-1979 Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press 1990.

¹⁷ Charles Kurzman, ‘Who Are the Radical Islamists?’ In Goodwin, J. and Jaspers Social Movements Reader.

¹⁸ Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How the Experts Invented Terrorism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2013.

¹⁹ Eagleton offers this definition in the first of successive refinements, which introduce questions of class and the dominant power. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London, Verso Books 1991, 28.

THE AFGHAN WORLD BEFORE 1979

In Data about pre-1979 village life is difficult to come by, although here and there we find clues of the type of world first-generation Talibs like mullah Omar must have grown up in. Figure 1 depicts the distribution of birth years among the leadership of the Islamic Emirate. The data comes from the

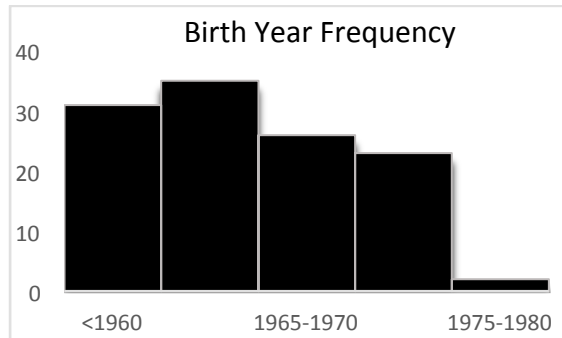


Figure 1: Birth Year Frequency of Taleban Leadership

United Nations Taleban sanctions list pursuant to Resolution 1988.²⁰ The accuracy of the dates is unclear; however, for a subset of about fifty individuals we were able to confirm that the UN-listed birth years were generally precise to within one to four years. Bearing in mind that birth years in Afghanistan, where there are few formal records, are subject to mis-remembrances, Figure 2 suggests that more than half of the Taleban senior leadership were born before 1965—which means that they received their primary education and formative childhood experiences prior to the 1979 upheaval.

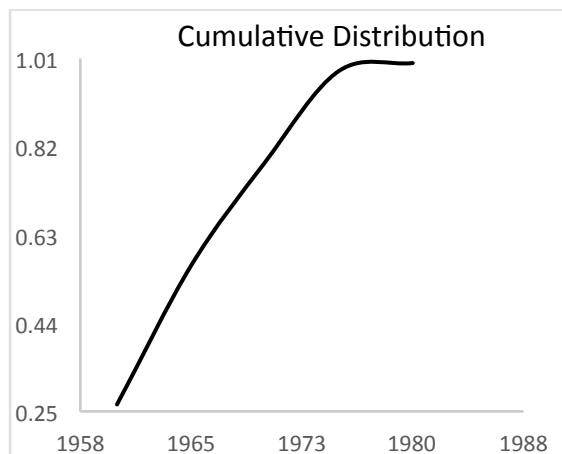


Figure 2: Cumulative Distribution of Birth Year

(Note: In a cumulative distribution graph, the y axis gives the percentage of data points lying at or below the corresponding

²⁰ United Nations, “The List established and maintained by the 1988 (2011) Committee.” <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/1988.htm> (accessed 11 April 2016).

point on the x axis. For example, the graph shows that about 75% of individuals were born at or before 1970.)

This is even clearer when we examine the birth years of the individuals regarded as the key ideological influencers in the movement (Figure 3). The world these men grew up in was radically different from that confronted by subsequent generations of Taleban.

Rural Afghanistan was traditionally the domain of an eclectic form of Islam, which mixed tribal practice with elements of Sufism, Deobandism, and indigenous folklore—the very type of parochial traditionalism that reformers and modernising Islamists rail against.²¹ In the southeast, villagers usually settled disputes through tribal councils, whereas in the south, tribal law (under the preponderant influence of *khans*) competed with various forms of locally-flavoured religious law. In the 1880s, Afghan ruler Amir Abdur Rahman began the process of rationalising the instruments of state authority by imposing *sharia* as the uniform, formal legal code of the land and employing *ulama* to administer religious jurisprudence in his name. Islam, in other words, became a tool for modernisation and state formation.²² Like something from the future Taleban government’s rule book, the Iron Amir mandated that thieves’ hands should be severed, adulterers stoned, and those who missed prayers given a fine and subjected to corporal punishment. It is unclear to what extent these regulations were carried out, especially in the hinterlands where the state had little presence, but it points to the extent that the punitive aspects of this interpretation of *sharia* were a part of mainstream political discourse. The use of Islam in rationalising social life had the positive effect of allowing for fairer dispute resolution, but it also served as a vehicle for exercising exploitative state control.²³ State-issued religious credentialing brought thousands of mullahs onto the government payroll, and the amir frequently pressed the *ulama* to sanction his military ambitions as ‘jihad’ and cast his enemies as infidels.²⁴ He dispatched roving mullahs to the countryside to educate villagers and decree that *zakat* and other religious tithes belonged to the state. He specified that religious observances on Fridays should be only held in sanctioned city mosques, part of his intention to “put a stop to the

²¹ Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, [see FN16].

²² Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, Routledge, 1995.

²³ E.g., Ashraf Ghani, ‘Disputes in a Court of Sharia, Kunar Valley, Afghanistan, 1885-1890’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 15(03), 1983, 353-67.

²⁴ Previous leaders, such as Dost Muhammad, also made use of ‘jihad’ to legitimise their military ambitions.

gatherings of the people at large villages,” according to a report at the time, “so as to lessen the opportunities for discussion.”²⁵

outside the direct reach of the Crown, mullahs continued to administer a type of Islam heavily attuned to local needs, through a mix of customary

	Birth Year	Position	Source
Mullah Muhammad Omar	1960	Supreme Leader	Taliban Biography
Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi	1940s	Kandahar Fatwa Office	Interviews
Mawlawi Pasanai Sahib	1940s	Kandahar Fatwa Office	Interviews
Mawlawi Muhammad Wali	1968	Minister of Vice and Virtue	Taliban Biography
Mullah Nuruddin Turabi	1959	Minister of Justice	Interviews

Figure 3: Taliban Ideological Influencers

The increased presence of the state in villagers’ lives was frequently met with resistance—not because of some preternatural or timeless antagonism between the Afghan state and society, but because, as in early modern Europe, state intervention was often deeply exploitative, amounting at times to little more than the discriminatory extraction of taxes or conscription of able-bodied men for war.²⁶ Yet at the same time, state patronage to rural *khans* and *maleks* was a key organising feature of country life, as those local elites relied on government largesse to accrue followers and dispense favours to supplicants. This dual dynamic of resistance and patronage shaped the dominant discourses of the era. The idea of a rationalised, state-legitimated ‘Islam,’ which was new to the nineteenth century Afghanistan, existed alongside—and, sometimes, in competition with—popular and home-grown rituals, practices and beliefs collectively thought of as Islam. The distinction here is not simply one of form, but also, as Olivier Roy notes, a difference in the way “religion structures everyday life, the way it constitutes a language, a meaningful experience, a cultural identity.”²⁷

From the late nineteenth century on, government madrassas produced *ulema* whose primary role was to legitimise state rule. But in the countryside,

practices and Sufism.²⁸ Most children who received an education did not attend state-sanctioned madrassas—of which there were fewer than a dozen countrywide—but rather were educated in *hujras*, boarding rooms or annexes of village mosques.²⁹ These were informal, eclectic schools that functioned as the main form of education in the countryside. As late as the 1970s, secular, Western-style education was limited to the cities. Typically, a child studied for a few years before leaving school to help on the farm, but some families—particularly the poorer ones—would allow one son to continue studies. The most industrious *hujra* students took part in *halaqat-e daira*, or educational circles, in which they learned at the feet of local *mawlawis* and Sufi sheikhs. Instructors depended on donations to operate, often leaving their students behind and relocating to a new village when alms ran dry. Similarly, students could move from one instructor to the next.³⁰ An official Taliban biography of mullah Muhammad Rabbani, former deputy leader of the Islamic Emirate, describes the arrangement this way:

²⁸ Olesen, *Islam and Politics*, [see FN 23].

²⁹ Pia Karlsson and Amir Mansory, ‘Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan: Conflictual or Complementary?’, *Institute of International Education, Stockholm University*, 2008, http://www.netreed.uio.no/articles/Papers_final/Karlsson_Mansory.pdf.

³⁰ The description of *hujras* are from interviews with Taliban figures in Kabul and Kandahar in 2013-14, and the unpublished memoir of a Taliban member, which contains a chapter on *hujras*.

²⁵ Quoted from: Mohammad Hassan Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Abd Al-Rahman Khan (Modern Middle East Series, No. 5)*, University of Texas Press 1979.

²⁶ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics)*, Princeton University Press 2012, chapter 4.

²⁷ Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, [see FN 16], 31.

Effectively, the pursuit of Shari'ah learning in Afghanistan was not taught in government schools, rather it was sought from sheikhs of Shari'ah knowledge in their circles in the local mosques or schools far from government supervision. The students would gather around a sheikh or sheikhs who would instruct them on rote knowledge such as grammar, syntax, rhetoric and semantics. Then they are taught the Shari'ah sciences, such as tafseer, Hadith, jurisprudence and its roots, 'Aqidah and others.

This method had been accepted since the year 202H [817 CE] when it was started by eminent scholars of Khorasan [the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran region], such as Imam AbuDaud al Sajistani, Sheikhu-Islam Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Bakral-Khalmi and Imam Abu al-Leith al-Samarqandi al-Balkhi. Even though this method of propagating shari'ah sciences had not attracted the attention of governments in recent centuries, it still retained its importance in producing pious scholars and extraordinary leaders of the Mujahideen who played a worthy part in spreading Shari'ah knowledge and leading Jihadist movements throughout the history of Afghanistan.³¹

In southern Afghanistan, *hujra* students--known in Pashto as *taleban*--and their teachers were deeply woven into village life, from the Friday sermon to their collection of alms from the community to their weekly Sufi-inspired drumming circles. The *hujra* talebs formed tight-knit, itinerant circles and, upon graduating as mullahs, functioned almost as a professional caste.³²

It is from this network of *hujras* that the modern Taleban movement emerged. Figures 4 and 5 list

³¹ Ahmed Mukhtar, 'Men Who Made History: Mullah Mohammed Rabbani,' *al-Somood*, Issue 39, September 2009: <https://archive.org/details/Al-Somood-39-PDF> (original) and

<https://ugandi.wordpress.com/2011/01/27/men-who-made-history-mullah-muhammad-rabbani/> (translation).

³² This was common elsewhere in the Islamic world; anthropologist Dale Eickelman writes of *talebs* in Morocco that, "[t]he Quranic teachers, like their predecessors, were already clustered into informal networks of trust and cooperation, and had a wide knowledge of the regions in which they worked... Many students simply drifted from encampment to encampment [similar to *hujras*], much as was the pattern in medieval Europe, living in a picaresque existence and remaining wherever there was sufficient largesse to maintain them. To join an encampment, a student approached a mosque at which a *faqih* [Quranic teacher] was conducting lessons and asked for permission to join them. Hospitality would almost always be offered." Dale F Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, Princeton University 1985, 69.

the educational background of the leadership of the Islamic Emirate, defined here as those who held (a) a ministerial or deputy-ministerial position in the Taliban government's 20 ministries (105 individuals) (b) a judicial position at the "chief justice" or deputy level (9 individuals) (c) a position in or associated with the office of supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar (15 individuals) and (d) a military post at the level of zone commander or higher (16 individuals, a "zone" being roughly

Taliban Leadership Education	Total	Percent
Afghanistan - hujra	71	48.97%
Afghanistan - madrassa	11	7.59%
Afghanistan - maktab	3	2.07%
Pakistan - refugee camp	8	5.52%
Pakistan - madrassa	35	24.14%
Pakistan - secular	1	0.69%
India	2	1.38%
Saudi Arabia	1	0.69%
None	3	2.07%
Unknown	9	6.21%

Figure 4: Taleban Leadership Education Tally

(Place of education, defined as site where majority of education took place. Those individuals who split time in a *hujra* and Pakistan are coded as being educated in Pakistan.)

equivalent to a U.S. army corps in size).³³ In the figure, the "*dar ul-ulum*" category refers to those individuals whose primary educational experience was at a major Pakistani madrassa, an "institute for the *sharia* sciences" in the local argot. Successfully completing education in these institutes amounted to something akin to a post-graduate degree, with the title of *mawlawi* awarded, which conferred the ability to interpret the *hadith* and issue *fatwas*. Examples of leadership in this category include the majority of the Emirate's *ulema shura* and its supreme court. Some individuals split time in both countries, attending *hujras* until the jihad, after which they moved to Pakistan for higher study (during the 1989-94 period). Examples in this category include Mawlawi Akhtar Muhammad Osmani, an important frontline commander who later became one of the leaders of the insurgency, and mullah Muhammad Hassan Rahmani, who served on the leadership council of the Emirate.

But by far the most important category, in terms of influence, comprised those whose education primarily took place in Afghan *hujras* and on the

³³ This data was compiled from interviews, memoirs, Taleban biographies, and other sources, and is described more fully in Anand Gopal, 'Rents, Patronage, and Defection: State-building and Insurgency in Afghanistan', PhD diss, Columbia University, 2017.

front lines of the anti-Soviet jihad—at least 60% of the leadership, according to Figure 4. To be sure, some of these individuals sometimes travelled to Pakistani schools, but the centre of their educational activities remained in Afghanistan.³⁴

the Taliban, but closer inspection suggests that the link is far more complicated than usually portrayed. Historically, the directors of the famous Dar ul-Ulum madrassa in Deoband, India, sought to cultivate a middle path between government-run

	Role	Influence	Education	Source
Mullah Muhammad Omar	Supreme Leader	Ideological, Military	<i>hujras</i>	interviews
Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi	Kandahar Fatwa Office	Ideological	Dar ul-Uloom Deoband (India)	interviews
Mawlawi Pasanaï Sahib	Kandahar Fatwa Office	Ideological, Historical	Nur ul-Madaris (Ghazni)	Interviews
Mawlawi Muhammad Wali	Vice and Virtue Minister	Ideological	<i>hujras</i> ; Dar ul-Uloom Haqqania post Soviet	Taliban Biography
Mullah Nuruddin Turabi	Justice Minister	Ideological	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews
Mullah Beradar	Deputy Defense Minister	Military	Madrassa – Kandahar City	Interviews
Mullah Obaidullah	Defense Minister	Military	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews; memoir
Mullah Dadullah	Commnder	Military	<i>hujras</i> ; in Pakistan post-Soviet under Mawlawi Deobandi	Taliban Biography
Mulla Fazl Akhund	Commnder	Military	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews
Mullah Muhammad Sadiq	<i>taliban</i> Front Commander	Historical	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews
Failzullah Akhundzada	<i>taliban</i> Front Commander	Historical	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews
Mullah Hajji Muhammad	<i>taliban</i> Front Commander	Historical	<i>hujras</i>	Interviews

Figure 5: Educational Background of Key Taliban Influencers

This suggest that the oft-repeated story of the Taliban as simply a product of madrassas in Pakistani refugee camps is inaccurate. More importantly, it casts doubt on the thesis that the Taliban leadership were alien to Afghan village life. It is true that, after 1994, the Taliban's ranks swelled with fresh recruits from such camps, but these individuals rarely reached positions of influence.

Much has been made of the influence of Deobandism (particularly its Pakistani variety) on

educational institutes and the informal *hujras* prevalent throughout the subcontinent by formalising the curriculum, accrediting instructors and holding entrance exams, while remaining independent of state power.³⁵ By contrast, in the typical Afghan *hujra* there was no formalised system of entry or exit, no official, state-sanctioned granting of credentials, only an informal process which culminated (usually in about ten years) with a turban-tying ceremony that marked the student's graduation to a *mullah*, a type of village-based imam who can teach students of his own and

³⁴ As one reviewer remarked, "Taliban leaders whose education included a stint or two in Pakistan with a chosen teacher were still very much rooted in the Kandahar village milieu".

³⁵ Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900 (Princeton Legacy Library)*, Princeton University Press 1982.

administer liturgical services. The Deobandi curriculum included jurisprudence, logic, *tafsir* (interpretation of the Quran), and *tajwid* (Quranic pronunciation and recitation). The *hujra* curriculum, which differed widely from one school to the next, could include some of these elements but usually incorporated a wide variety of other subjects, from poetry to human anatomy to herbal medicine to instruction on sexual mores and taboos. The Dal ul-Ulum Deoband curriculum took eight years to complete, with the final year devoted to the study of the *hadith*, particularly collections from early Islamic history. In *hujras*, on the other hand, there was no set schedule, and students' progress towards completion was measured by the number of books they had mastered; since many worked part time (or, during the jihad, interrupted their studies to fight), it could take a taleb ten years or longer to complete his study. The books in question were not restricted to the early thinkers favoured by the Deoband, but included a broader retinue of hadithic scholars. It was, in fact, the state-linked madrassas and major regional seminaries, like the Nur al-Madares in Andar, Ghazni, that most closely followed the Deoband model—and much of the country's official *ulema*, including the head of the royal madrasa in Kabul, had studied at the Dar ul-Ulum Deoband itself.³⁶

When local *hujras* eclectically borrowed from Deobandi curriculum, it was not because of mechanical ideological imitation, but because certain features of the school resonated with the pre-existing logic of cultural practice within Afghanistan. First, Deobandism's intimate link with Sufism (see box below), which emphasised the personal, vertical relationship between the worshipper and God, was similar to traditions of Islamic worship indigenous to Afghanistan.

Second, the Deobandi emphasis on the *hadith* captured a key element of traditionalist Islam's epistemology. Deobandi scholars had expanded the *dars-e nezami*, the traditional curriculum, by emphasising the *hadith*, and by doing so, argued for the incorporation of questions of ritual, dress and everyday behaviour into the notion of *sharia*. To Western eyes, the traditional rural Afghan view of ritual, dress and everyday behaviour may have appeared as an intransigent, mechanical application of religion, but in the local context, there was in fact a sophisticated internal logic at work. This becomes clearer when comparing it to the history of western Christianity. As Talal Asad and others have suggested, today in Western Christianity the acceptance of Christ is a

precondition to achieving knowledge of moral and cosmic ontologies—that is, you must have faith in Christ in order to know how to act, to gain knowledge of good and evil and apprehend existential truths. Faith in Christ is the precondition to all other knowledge. This means that the epistemological emphasis is on the primacy of our interior state, and the role it plays in guiding our exterior states. In medieval Christendom, however, this formula was precisely reversed: knowledge of how to act—through ritualistic practice—was a *prerequisite* for belief. Thus when Pascal made his famous wager—it is always better to believe in a God that might not exist than not believe in one that does exist—it was based on the notion that one should *act* in such a way as to bring about belief. The philosopher Ian Hacking writes that “If you go along with pious people, give up bad habits, follow a life of ‘holy water and sacraments’ intended to ‘stupefy one’ into belief, you will become a believer.” Similarly, when critics of Pascal's wager argued that one cannot simply choose to believe in God, that one must first have faith, Pascal retorted: “Kneel and pray and you will believe!”³⁷

If in modern Western Christianity belief produces knowledge, in pre-war, rural, southern Afghanistan knowledge produced belief. “Knowledge” in this case was the knowledge of rites, bodily comportment, the Prophetic lifestyle, prayer techniques and schedules and other aspects of everyday ritual. Because attaining belief inhered in ritualistic practice itself, virtue was (and continues to be) linked to personal dress, grooming and other everyday behaviour. Ritualistic practice was a way of cultivating moral dispositions, a way of attaining truth. In mainstream, modern, Western epistemology, the mental state determines actions; in the Islam of southern Afghanistan actions *constituted* the mental state.

Knowledge of ritual was a means of forming a virtuous self, and therefore it was also a form of cultural capital, which religious students and their

³⁷ Žižek argues that this means that we must possess representations of the world before being aware of them. Belief is already present in an individual through the influence of “ideological state apparatuses”—institutions such as the family or the church which serve to legitimate the social order. Cf Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, London, Verso Books 2012. In effect, the distinction is between *act* and *intent*. Some authors (eg Michael Foucault) have argued that the shift to modernity accompanied a shift in the object of surveillance and control from the act to the intent. Social acts could be monitored, whereas intent could not be monitored without the development of a host of social and physical technologies.

³⁶ Kakar, *Government*, [see FN 26].

teachers converted into livelihoods through the provision of liturgical services, the dispensation of amulets, and, importantly, the adjudication of disputes. As a provider of such services, the mullah usually occupied a low position in society, but the notions of virtue he embodied were linked to the wider ethical discourse of the community. In this context, virtue was not merely related to self-actualisation or addressing existential issues, but was directly linked to community norms. These norms, as in any society, were themselves intimately tied to questions of power: who authorises certain practices as ethical or virtuous, and proscribes others. In urban centres, it was the institutions of the state—often speaking through the *ulema*—which played a preponderant role, but in the countryside this role was taken up by *khans*, *maleks* and, to a much smaller extent, the rural clergy. With this multiplicity of power there were competing normative frameworks, such as the Pashtuns' tribal code of honour, *pashtunwali*, on the one hand, and *sharia* on the other.³⁸ Usually, tribal norms dominated, but this depended on time and geography: in areas where tribal systems were hierarchical, and the rule of the khans more predatory or biased—such as southern Afghanistan—rural clergy enjoyed greater appeal.³⁹

To summarise this discussion, there are three important points that will help explain the Taleban's subsequent trajectory: first, the epistemology of belief in traditionalist Afghan Islam emphasises ritualistic practice, bodily disposition, and the cultivation of personal mores as a means of producing virtue; second, this notion of virtue existed alongside competing conceptions of virtue (such as tribal), all of which counted as examples of *authentic* ethical practices in village life; and third, like norms anywhere else, the norms guiding this conception of virtue were rooted in material conditions and power relations.

This last point becomes clearer when we consider the position of women at the time. The Pashtun belt typifies a 'culture of honour,' a system of practices emphasising, among other things, generosity, retribution and gender segregation—which is common to rugged, Spartan areas

³⁸ Cf. Barth, Fredrik. *Political Leadership Among Swat Pathans*, London, Athlone Press 1959.

³⁹ Therefore there is a direct link between rural state integration and the rise of the Taleban: those areas where tribal structures were "vertically integrated," such as Kandahar or Zurmat district of Paktia, were a natural constituency for the Taleban. Compare to the rest of Paktia, which featured egalitarian tribal structures and little state integration, and did not have a strong taleban history.

worldwide where the state has little reach.⁴⁰ The social control of women was, and still is, indissolubly linked to rural notions of the virtue and the maintenance of an ethical order—not only for young talebs, but for village society in general. While intellectuals and activists succeeded in winning women's rights reforms in the twentieth century, these gains were mostly restricted to Kabul. An American nurse visiting northern Baghlan province in the early 1970s wrote:

*Few women go outside the compound wall without the chadri [burqa](...) and fewer still shop in the bazaar. Afghan men are very jealous of their womenfolk. In most cases permission from the husband is necessary before the woman, or the older daughters, may go outside the compound for any purpose.*⁴¹

Attempts to spread reform to the countryside were frequently met with fierce resistance, such as the 1959 Kandahar riots that were, at least in part, a response to rumours of a government decree banning veiling.⁴² (Rioters, possibly including the followers of a leading Sufi *pir*, burned down the city's only cinema.⁴³) Women's education hardly existed in the southern countryside, and when the Hafizullah Amin government attempted to introduce the notion in 1979, villagers reacted angrily. One study interviewed a resident of a Kandahar village who recalled at the time:

No, we don't have a girls' school in this village. Salih Mohammad from Kulchabad... hurled Eng. Zarif [a government official] out by a sandal when he suggested a girls' school for the villagers. Then Eng. Zarif killed 60 or 70 elders of this village but these villagers still didn't accept his suggestion. Finally, the government didn't let our villagers go to the bazaar so they had to travel to the city by other roads. The Government came after Salih Mohammad with their tanks but when they arrested him their tanks were not allowed to move. Then the officials let Salih Mohammad go. The next

⁴⁰ Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South (New Directions in Social Psychology)*, Westview Press 1996.

⁴¹ Mary Simpson, 'With the Peace Corps, Half a World Away,' *The American Journal of Nursing*, August 1974, 74-8, 1464-66, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/4495289>

⁴² There is evidence, however, that at root this was an anti-tax riot. See W. K. Fraser-Tytler, , *Afghanistan: a Study of Political Developments in Central and Southeastern Asia*, London, Oxford University Press, 45.

⁴³ Bette Dam, 'Death of a Sahebzada: A Story of Different Strands of Thought in the Taleban Movement', 2014, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/death-of-a-sahebzada-a-story-of-different-strands-of-thought-in-the-taleban-movement/>.

day a helicopter landed near to Salih Mohammad's home and took him and until now he is lost. So no one accepts girls' schools in this village.⁴⁴

Music, too, was an object of much controversy. While Kabul and certain provincial centres like Herat were home to vibrant musician communities, music nonetheless contained a hint of subversion—and perhaps perversion. “There is a commonly held belief among Heratis of all classes that music was wrong from the religious point of view,” wrote ethnomusicologist John Baily about the 1970s.⁴⁵ “Music might be described as *bad* or *bad kar*, (“bad”), *ghalat* (“wrong”) or *haram* (“forbidden”). It was often said that *musiqigonah dare* (“music incurs sin”). The words *dam* and *dalak* referred to groups of low social status, like barbers, but were also applied to musicians and entertainers. In large part, this was because the ethical discourse of village life linked music to such corrupting activities as drinking and adultery. Writing in 1976, ethnomusicologist Lorraine Sakata describes a performance theatre in Herat:

The male singers... are all Tajik and considered amateur musicians. The females are quite another matter. Although I did not receive any specific information concerning them, they are all considered prostitutes. The fact that they sing, dance and act in public for a primarily male audience is reason enough. They dress in a flashy manner in brocade or sequined dresses and Pakistani-style bloomers with wide ankle cuffs, wear no veil, and often have a cosmetic gold tooth. Outside the theater, they wear the modest chaderi like other women.

And of the town's other theatre, she writes:

No woman worked at the theater and women's parts were played by males. Following Kabul's example and in an effort to improve the status of women in music, dance and theater, the Herat Information and Culture Department introduced female actresses, singers and dancers, with the result that they became the main attraction. The talents of these females were questionable and the

*theater became an advertising arena for local prostitutes.*⁴⁶

Music's status was not a result simply of a literal reading of Islam—after all, there exist *hadiths* both approving and forbidding music, so the question would be *why* certain interpretations or *hadiths* were favoured over others. Norms concerning music helped enforce—and justify—the prevailing forms of social organisation concerning gender. Controlling music was, in large part, ultimately about controlling women. As we will see, the issues of music, gender segregation, and women's oppression would become acute during the intra-*mujahedin* civil war of the 1990s.

The purpose of this tour of the pre-1979 socio-religious landscape is to help reconstruct the cognitive world of the taleb. For the young religious student of the southern Pashtun countryside of the 1960s and 1970s studying in informal educational circles and local *hujras*, virtue was attained through everyday ritualistic practice, through active cultivation of certain dispositions and through imitation of the *sunna*. It is important to emphasise that, as a mode of virtue, these were ideals that were rarely met in practice. Even as music was widely agreed in rural society to be sinful, for example, it could simultaneously be enjoyed as a guilty pleasure. Similarly, the particular form of ritual and personal cultivation that represented a village ideal coexisted alongside competing norms, such as tribal etiquette. The point, nonetheless, is twofold. First, the practices for which the Taleban became notorious—the rigid monitoring and enforcement of outward appearance (including styles of dress and beard length), the proscription of music and television, the stipulations demanding that women remain in the private sphere and the monitoring and regulation of daily religious life (such as enforcing the five-times daily prayer)—all have roots in pre-1979 village norms. Second, these norms were linked to a particular epistemology that links outward behaviour to inward belief, and which regulates the *act* over the *intent*. Yet even with their pre-1979 origin, however, these practices would undergo profound shifts during the coming tumult of revolution, occupation, and civil war.

⁴⁴ Adam Pain, ‘Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories: Evidence From Kandahar,’ 2010, <http://areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1010E-Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories - Evidence from Kandahar CS 2010.pdf>.

⁴⁵ John Baily, *Music of Afghanistan: Professional Musicians in the City of Herat (Cambridge Studies in Ethnomusicology)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989.

⁴⁶ Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan*, Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press 2002.

The Taleban and Sufism

Although press commentators usually link the Taleban to Wahhabism, in reality the group holds a deep relationship with one of the Wahhabis' targets of ire, Sufi Islam. This connection arises from three factors. First, Sufism is a key facet of the southern Afghan cultural heritage, linked to traditions of poetry and folklore, and embodied in a rural shrine network that stretches across the border into Pakistani Baluchistan. Traditionally in Kandahar, Taleban drum circles would gather on Fridays, the students sometimes whirling themselves into a dancing frenzy—often the only form of entertainment for the poor madrassa student. It was common for rural Afghans to draw insight on matters as diverse as wedding arrangements to warfare to eschatology from their dreams; mullah Muhammad Omar was famously guided by his dreams, in the manner of Sufi *pirs*.⁴⁷ In fact, as a child, mullah Muhammad Omar received education from Sufi teachers such as Haji Baba; later, as the Taleban's supreme leader, he would visit his old teacher's grave almost weekly.⁴⁸ Bette Dam, in describing the relationship between mullah Muhammad Omar and a prominent Sufi *pir*, writes

When [Omar] was in power, he also did not prohibit most of the Sufi traditions he grew up with—something considered un-Islamic, for example, in Salafism. Like so many Afghans, Mullah Omar grew up with these habits in Afghan Islam, including the belief in taw [amulets or tiny scrolls containing Koranic verses] or visiting graves to pray for the dead. Until days before the U.S. and British bombings started on 7 October 2001, as a reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Mullah Omar continued to visit shrines in Kandahar. But he was against what he saw as a misuse of them—like selling tawiz [a kind of protective amulet].⁴⁹

The Sufi themes of the dreamworld and mysticism would remain Taleban preoccupations throughout the Emirate period. The following is an example from an interview forum (almost like a Taleban advice column) with the influential Taleban 'alim Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi, one of mullah Omar's most trusted ideological advisers on the question of the intercession of saints:

[Question] How about people who say that holy persons are present and watching us. Do holy

personages hear us and are aware of everything we do?

[Answer] O' Bab Sahib or Paw Mikh or Padshah Agha [Important Kandahari Sufi Saints]. When one uses these kinds of expressions it is because they are of the belief that holy personages are present and will help him. They are dead and can't be present. But you can pray to them and ask them to help you with blessing of the prophets and solve your problems.⁵⁰

Second, the *pir-murid* (teacher-follower) relationship, and the preponderance of Sufi holy men, mendicants, and itinerant preachers, meant that everyday religious practice in the countryside was deeply intertwined with Sufi rites and beliefs. In southern Afghanistan, these rites continued unabated during Taleban rule.

Third, Sufism is itself an integral part of the Deobandi heritage. As Barbara Metcalf outlines in her study on the subject, Sufi *pirs* were among the founders of Dar ul-Ulum Deoband.⁵¹ The theology of *tasawuf* (ie, 'doing Sufism') was key to the early curriculum, and books like the *panj ketab*, a mainstay of the education imparted to smaller madrassas across Afghanistan and Pakistan, were replete with Sufi philosophy and literature. Decades after the school's founding, conservatives launched a backlash against this Sufi tendency, but the original curricula and system survived in Afghanistan and other areas far from Deoband.⁵²

Within the Taleban, a number of first-generation leaders belong to Sufi orders. Mullah Muhammad Omar is believed to have headed a Naqshbandi group, according to two former colleagues, and other top figures had once been *pirs* or *murids*. Mullah Abdul Salam Zaif, a founding Taleban member, was a *murid* in the early 1990s in Zabul and Kandahar.⁵³ The pivotal moment in Taleban lore, when mullah Muhammad Omar held aloft the cloak believed to have belonged to Prophet Muhammad to a crowd in Kandahar, consecrating his position as Commander of the Faithful, is steeped in Sufi iconography—the *kherqa*, a long-

⁵⁰ Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi, 'The way of deliverance: Answers Prepared by Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi', Tolo-ye Afghan newspaper, 17 September 1997. (Taliban Sources Project Collection).

⁵¹ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, [see FN 36].

⁵² See also Kenneth P. Lizzio, *Embattled Saints: My Year With the Sufis of Afghanistan*, Quest Books 2014.

⁵³ This was not recounted in his autobiography *My Life With the Taleban* out of a belief that any religious blessings accrued through such activity would be voided if boasted about.

⁴⁷ Ian R. Edgar, 'The 'true dream' in contemporary Islamic/Jihadist dreamwork: a case study of the dreams of Taleban leader Mullah Omar,' *Contemporary South Asia*, 15(3), September 2006, 263–72.

⁴⁸ Dam, 'Death of a Sahebzada', [see FN 44].

⁴⁹ Dam, 'Death of a Sahebzada', [see FN 44].

standing Sufi symbol, appears often in mystical poetry.⁵⁴

During the Emirate, one of the most significant points of discord between the Taleban and al Qaeda was the question of Sufi shrines—the latter believing that grave worship was an un-Islamic “innovation” and an affront to their Wahhabi sensibilities. The issue proved contentious enough that al Qaeda ideologues Yusuf al-Ayiri and Abu Musab al-Suri were compelled to address the issue publicly in the late 1990s in their writings (later compiled together as a report entitled “Are the Taleban from Ahl as-Sunnah?”), selectively using anecdotes and anti-Sufi quotes attributed to Pakistan-educated *ulema*. Nonetheless, the issue remained a consistent critique in al Qaeda circles.⁵⁵

THE ANTI-SOVIET 'JIHAD'

The early years of the jihad marked a staggering disjuncture in the rural way of life, as the Communist government imprisoned and executed thousands of local notables. Millions were displaced to Pakistani and Iranian refugee camps and further abroad, and entire villages vanished overnight. The invasion and jihad overturned generations of social relations: *khans* were killed or fled, *maleks* were forcibly disappeared and, as the state effectively declared war on the countryside (where the mujahedin had strongholds), agricultural production plummeted and long-standing migratory and settlement patterns became severely disrupted.⁵⁶ In southern Afghanistan, the tribal hierarchy was upended practically overnight; the aristocratic tribes like the Popalzais and Barakzais, which had owned the choice land and government posts in the *ancien regime*, were greatly weakened. The period marked the rise of “achieved status” notables, individuals of low social rank who climbed to prominence through their ability to secure CIA and ISI patronage for weapons and funding.

⁵⁴ See also, Bette Dam and Fabrizio Foschini, ‘Under the Cloak of History: The Kherqa-Ye Sharif From Faizabad to Kandahar,’ 2014, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/under-the-cloak-of-history-the-kherqa-sharif-from-faizabad-to-kandahar/>.

⁵⁵ Van Linschoten et al, *An Enemy*, [see FN 6], chapter 6.

⁵⁶ Van Linschoten et al, *An Enemy*, [see FN 6], 44-48. Afghanistan Justice Project. *War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: 1978-2001 (Documentation and analysis of major patterns of abuse in the war in Afghanistan)*. Online, 2005, 41ff. United Nations, *Mapping Report*, Online, 2010, 119, <http://www.flagrancy.net/salvage/UNMappingReportAfghanistan.pdf>.

In this context, ethical life also shifted. Certain norms, such as those linked to tribe and state, declined in importance. In their place, ritualistic practice based on the *sunna* began to monopolise ethical discourse. Ayman Sabri al-Faraj, an Egyptian who fought in Kandahar during the 1980s, recounted in his memoir the following:

*In reality, the Afghans and especially the Kandahar population respected the Sunna to the farthest extent. Therefore, everything around them was either “Sunnat” or “non-Sunnat”. They thus wore white pants whose width in the middle should be equal to the width of their open arms. That is Sunnat. Even the special rope in the pants had particular standards that should be respected to be Sunnat. The turbans should be seven meters long and the tail of the turban five inches long. The turban should be completely black while black turbans with thin white stripes are rejected oddities only worn by the neglecting youth... As for the shirt which they called kamiis like in Arabic, it was different in Kandahar than in all the other cities of Afghanistan. Outside of Kandahar, it reached the knees and the openings on the sides reached up to the thighs. This according to the people of Kandahar is not Sunnat and is also shameful. As for the Sunnat kamiis in Kandahar, it reached the middle of the leg if not lower and its side openings were no longer than one inch. They wore a vest [waistcoat] which they called sari and was also different from the one worn in all the other states. Indeed, this vest was always thick and dark since they preferred to wear dark colours at all times.*⁵⁷

As with any other ethical injunctions, it was not the case that most *mujahedin* followed this code, but rather that ritual and the *sunna* became a widely agreed upon means of attaining virtue (though it was rarely achieved in practice). In the *mujahedin* spectrum, the one type of fighter that came closest to acting upon this conception in practice was the taleb. Following 1979, they interrupted their *hujra* studies to take part in the insurgency, but instead of joining the established *mujahedin* parties as individuals, many opted instead to form closely-knit ‘taleban fronts’—in effect continuing the close-knit collectivities that had defined their pre-1979 *hujra* existence. These groups were nominally aligned to established parties (usually Hezb-e Islami Khales or the clerically-influenced Harakat-e Inqelab-e Islami) but operated with a distinct identity and set of practices. See Figure 6 for a list of prominent taleban fronts and the individuals associated with them.

⁵⁷ Ayman Sabri Faraj, *Dhikrayat Arabi Afghani (Abu Jafar Al-Misri Al-Qandahari) [Memoirs of an Arab Afghani]*, Dar al-Shuruq 2002.

In a world of upheaval, the traditionalist taleban were guardians of ritualistic knowledge. As defenders of the *sunna*, they carved out a definitive space in the Kandahari moral universe, earning the taleban fronts esteem—even if their ability to attract funding, and therefore their military prowess, paled in comparison to the official *mujahedin* parties. Through a programme of self-discipline, they sought to cultivate certain dispositions—humility, asceticism, learnedness, etc.—which brought them moral status on the frontlines. Mullah Zaif, who fought in mullah

Muhammad Sadeq Akhund's front in Pashmul, Kandahar, writes that:

[F]ighting alongside the Taliban meant more than just being a mujahed. The Taliban followed a strict routine in which everyone who fought alongside us had to participate, without exception. We woke before sunrise to perform the fajr or morning prayer in the mosque, and afterwards sat together before returning to the camp. We would recite Surat Yasin Sharif every morning in case we were martyred that day. Some would then leave to strengthen some front or other, or to carry out a

Front	Location	Prominent Members	IEA Position
Lala Malang	Arghandab / Pashmul	Mullah Muhammad Hassan Rahmani	Kandahar Governor; Supreme Council
		Mawlawi Muhammad Wali	Minister of Vice and Virtue
		Mullah Abdul Razaq Akbar Agha	Minister of Commerce None
		Mullah Dadullah	Commander
		Mullah Nuruddin Turabi	Minister of Justice
Mullah Faizullah Akhundzada	Sangesar	Mullah Muhammad Omar	Supreme Leader
		Mullah Beradar	Deputy Minister of Defence
		Gul Agha	Treasurer, Mullah Omar Office
		Mawlawi Muhammad Wali	Minister of Vice and Virtue
		Hafez Majid	Kandahar Chief of Police
Mullah Hajji Muhammad Akhund	Pashmul	Mawlawi Ahmadullah Muti "Nanai"	Minister of Telecommunication
		Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund	Kandahar Governor; Supreme Council
		Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur	Minister of Civil Aviation
		Mullah Muhammad Abbas Akhund	Minister of Public Health
		Mullah Burjan Akhund	Commander
Abdul Raziq	Arghestan	Sani Mullah Samad	Head of Kandahar Bank
		Mullah Muhammad Rabbani	Prime Minister
		Mullah Muhammad Ghaus	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Mullah Muhammad Sadiq	Nelgham	Mullah Khaksar Akhund	Head of Security - Interior Ministry
		Yar Muhammad Akhund	Governor of Herat
		Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef	Ambassador to Pakistan
Mullah Madad	Zabul	Mullah Obaidullah	Minister of Defence
		Amir Khan Haqqani	Commander
		Ehsanullah Ehsan	Governor of Central Bank

Figure 6: Taleban Fronts in the 1980s

raid, while others would tend to prisoners, the wounded or spend some time studying. Even though a large number of common people took part in the jihad along the Taliban's front, all had to follow the group's basic principles. Apart from dire emergencies during operations or enemy assaults, they were engaged in study.

Senior Taliban members would teach the younger seekers, and the senior mawlawi would instruct other older Taliban members. In this way, a common and illiterate mujahed could become a talib within two or three years. I carried out both duties on the front; I would learn from my instructor and I would teach others the basics of reading and writing.⁵⁸

Such behaviour was a far cry from many other, 'free-wheeling' mujahedin groups locally, who were rapidly transforming under the flood of CIA and ISI-sourced weapons and funds.⁵⁹ Akbar Agha, who fought in a taleban front in Arghandab, Kandahar, under mullah Akhtar Muhammad Agha, and later on his own with the renowned Lala Malang, recalls in his memoir that:

We tried our best to keep some sort of order to our front and to our daily duties. We registered all the weapons that we distributed to the mujahedeen and tried to keep them in good shape. Everyone was responsible for their own weapon... We organised a schedule of duties. Mujahedeen were required to pray their five prayers each day and anybody who violated this was assigned an additional two-hours of work or duties. Nobody was allowed to fire a single shot without the expressed and prior permission of the commander or head of the front. Violations were subject to punishment. We consulted each other for any decision that needed to be made concerning the front, major or minor. We had a meeting to calculate our accounts at the end of each month and helped the families of the mujahedeen who were extremely poor if we could... The use of drugs was completely banned for our front. Teenagers weren't able to be part of our front, either. No mujahed was able to travel into the city (or to stay there) without our prior permission.⁶⁰

These self-appraisals are undeniably self-serving and selective, but non-taleban observers from the period corroborate that the themes of asceticism

and ritual purity dominated the fronts.⁶¹ The bonds formed through study and fighting were profound and enduring—the tight-knit solidarity networks marking the future Taleban government were the result of life in the trenches during jihad, not because of attendance in Pakistani madrassas.

The taleban role as ritual guardians in a world of upheaval endowed them with cultural capital, particularly as it related to the crucial arena of dispute resolution. The erosion in tribal authority because of the Communist campaign against local notables and the infusion of CIA patronage sparked a breakdown in law and order. As a result, *sharia* became the favoured method of dispute resolution, both for squabbling *mujahedin* and for the public at large; as purveyors of *sharia*-based knowledge, the *taleban* and their teachers became the main providers of justice in Kandahar and surrounding areas. In the 1980s, there were dozens of taleban courts throughout Kandahar (see Figure 7). These courts banned music, drugs and pederasty, among other vices, and were widely respected even in popular circles outside the *mujahedin*. The most respected (and feared) of these, in all of southern Afghanistan, was the court of Mawlawi Pasanai Saheb.⁶² He enjoyed a moral authority nearly unparalleled in Kandahar during the jihad, one that transcended tribal and regional divisions.⁶³ In large part, this was because his court seemingly adjudicated disputes fairly and solely on *sharia*, without bias or deference to political factions or personalities.⁶⁴ In 1984, for example, Pasanai ordered *Turan* (Captain) Mir Alam, a well-known Hezb-e Islami commander, to be stoned to death on charges of adultery.⁶⁵ The Kandahar Shura, a council of leading *mujahedin* commanders acting as a sort of shadow guerrilla government

⁶¹ For example, Faraj. *Dhikrayat Arabi Afghani*, [see FN 58] Also interviews, Kandahar, 2006-10.

⁶² Mawlawi Pasanai, from Ghazni, is believed to have studied in Nur ul-Madares. He was enormously influential in Kandahar generally and in particular with the future taleban. The group sought his imprimatur before starting their movement, and later he worked in the Kandahar *fatwa* office during the Islamic Emirate. His relationship with mullah Muhammad Omar is believed to have frayed over the years, however, and the supreme leader preferred the rulings of Mawlawi Deobandi (see below) over Pasanai. He died sometime shortly after the fall of the Taleban (following a brief imprisonment by foreign forces).

⁶³ Interviews, Kandahar, 2008-10; See also, for example, UNHCR Background Report, Kandahar Province, 1989, <http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/3480>.

⁶⁴ In particular, this was *sharia* as understood in the Hanafi legal tradition.

⁶⁵ TLO Panjwayi District Profile (Kandahar province), December 2009 (unpublished – author copy).

⁵⁸ Zaeef, *My Life*, [see FN 6].

⁵⁹ The marked differences between taleban and other mujahedin seen in greater Kandahar may have been specific to that area. Other groups elsewhere, for example some Hezb-e Islami units, also had strict routines, including religious study, during this period.

⁶⁰ Agha, *Memories of the Jihad*, [see FN 6].

(which did not include any talebs), referred almost all serious cases to the Pasanai court.⁶⁶ (Many of the commanders who relied heavily on the taleban courts, like Haji Latif and his son Gul Agha Sherzai, would later side with the Americans against the Taleban, indicating that post-2001 divisions had less to do with ideological or normative differences and more to do with power and resources.)

The rise of the courts fitted neatly with the taleban's role as guardians of ritualistic knowledge, and it would mark the first step in rationalising that

- 1 The pig itself
- 2 Pork
- 3 Pig fat
- 4 Objects made of human hair
- 5 Natural human hair
- 6 Dish Antennas
- 7 Sets for Cinematography and sound recording projectors
- 8 Sets for Microphotography, in case it is used in the cinema
- 9 All instruments which themselves produce music, such as the Piano, the Harmonium, the Flute, the Tabla, the Tanbur, the Sarang
- 10 Billiard tables and their accessories
- 11 Chess boards
- 12 Carom boards
- 13 Playing cards
- 14 Masks
- 15 Any alcoholic beverage
- 16 All audio cassettes, video cassettes, computers and television which include sex and music
- 17 Fermented drinks (possibly referring to energy drinks)
- 18 Lobsters*
- 19 Nail polish
- 20 Fire Crackers

- 21 Fireworks (for children)
- 22 All kinds of cinematographic films, even though they may be sent abroad
- 23 All statues of animate beings in general
- 24 All sewing catalogues which have photos of animate beings
- 25 Published tableaus (photos)
- 26 Christmas cards
- 27 Greeting cards bearing images of living things
- 28 Neckties
- 29 Bow ties
- 30 Necktie pins

source: The Official Gazette, Sept. 4 2001, Vol. 799. p. 80

Figure 7: Prohibited Items in the Islamic Emirate

(* Editorial remark: This is a typo, as was confirmed to AAN by a former Taleban official involved in the drafting of the list. It should have been "lipstick".)

knowledge in the development of systematic disciplinary practices. Jurisprudence would take its place alongside asceticism and self-regulation as essential to the taleb's ideal self, and, as we shall see below, would underlie the contradictions inherent in their understanding of political Islam.

In summary, the anti-Soviet jihad caused shifts in power at the village level, which produced important changes in the system of norms and mores: questions of right and wrong, of the proper way to conduct one's life, of the correct guidelines with which to adjudicate disputes. In these areas, state and tribal norms diminished in importance. In their place, norms related to the ethical life as conceived in the Pashtun village—an emphasis on outward acts, behaviour and dress and the rituals associated with them—grew in significance. This included an emphasis on the prophetic lifestyle, as understood through the *sunna* and *hadith*. As we have seen, ritual-based frameworks for an ethical life have always existed in rural Afghanistan; what the jihad did was amplify these frameworks at the expense of other, competing systems of virtue like tribal mores. The social group that was most well-placed to articulate this shift in greater Kandahar were the taleban fronts, and for the same reason, they would be the most well-placed to stand above the chaos of post-Soviet Afghanistan and install a new order.

⁶⁶ UNHCR Background Report, Kandahar Province, 1989: <http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/3480>.

THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

The Civil War and the Roots of

Authenticity

Many Taleban fronts continued to operate following the Soviet retreat, taking part in significant battles throughout Kandahar and in neighbouring provinces like Zabul.⁶⁷ When the communist government in Kandahar fell in 1992, the *mujahedin* groups captured and distributed the important spoils among themselves, including key military and government installations, but awarded the taleban the relatively unimportant old Soviet family barracks on the edge of town.⁶⁸ Uninterested in state power, the talebs retreated to their home villages or moved to Pakistan to continue their studies.⁶⁹ As the province descended into internecine bloodshed, they remained neutral. The old ways of life appeared gone forever, and the country was plunging into moral collapse. The markers were apparent not only in the behaviour of checkpoint commanders—who robbed travellers, raped women and boys, and generally terrorised the roads of Kandahar—but also by their very appearance. Zaif, for instance, recalls when

[A]t Meel bridge we arrived at Shah Baran's checkpoint. He was an infamous thief and conman, and Meel bridge was where all the thieves from Zangal refugee camp had come together under Shah Baran's banner to rob travellers and merchants. They looked rough—even not quite human—with long unwashed hair falling across their faces, black with dirt and their thick brown lips and teeth stained from tobacco, hashish and snuff. Enveloped in huge woollen cloaks, they squatted in the road with a large chelam [pipe for smoking hashish]. Each would take his turn, walking over to the pipe to take long deep drags. Their gaze would lose focus and they soon started to talk gibberish.

We had stopped directly in front of the checkpoint, but his men did not notice us at first. None of my fellow passengers in the car dared to get out and let them know that we were waiting. There was hardly any traffic so we sat in the car anxiously watching the men smoking and chatting. It took

them more than fifteen minutes to notice us. Shah Baran looked over at our car and then at his men.

"Go and allow these husbands of our mothers to go!" he told his men. We had been very lucky. Often Shah Baran and his men would pull passengers out of their cars, shave their beards or make them break their fast. At times they would even kidnap young boys.⁷⁰

Notice here the link between personal cultivation ("long unwashed hair falling from their faces", "thick brown lips and teeth stained from tobacco"), bodily disposition ("squatting in the road with a large *chelam*") and the lack of virtue. The checkpoint commanders' outer appearance and their apparent disdain for ritual ("his men would pull passengers out of their cars, shave their beards or make them break their fast") was linked to their inner state—precisely the epistemological linking inherent in the traditionalist Islam of the Kandahari countryside. It was common at the time, in fact, for stories to circulate of armed gangs forcibly shaving travellers, an act of emasculation that was simultaneously a form of sexual power (the clean-shaven were thus symbolically transformed into young boys, objects of sexual control) and an affront to a form of virtue in traditional society.

Importantly, it was not only the taleban who took offence at this state of affairs, but village society in general. Among the non-taleb *mujahedin*, too, there were prominent commanders who reacted strongly to the breakdown in society and sought to restore virtue. For instance, the 'district governor' of Panjwayi, a *mujahedin* commander named Ma'alimFeda Muhammad, succeeded in eliminating thieves and pederasts in his area by monopolising force and enacting harsh judicial measures.⁷¹ In Arghandab, a journalist visiting the territory of mullah Naqib, a major non-taleb commander, wrote that

In an indication of what may unfold in Afghanistan, two elderly maulavi judges appointed by the mujaheddin have sent out edicts to rebel commanders urging them to exercise more control over civilians by curbing such excesses as 'the playing of tape-recorded music.' Music, like murder and theft, is 'un-Islamic.' One rebel commander in

⁶⁷ Agha, *Memories of the Jihad*. Zaef, *My Life*, [see FN 6].

⁶⁸ Zaef, *My Life*. Agha, *Memories of the Jihad*, [see FN 6].

⁶⁹ Van Linschoten et al, *An Enemy*, [see FN 6], 87.

⁷⁰ Zaef, *My Life*, [see FN 6], 59.

⁷¹ Interviews with tribal elders in Panjwayi, 2010; see also Zaef and Agha, [see FN 6].

*Helmand province seized more than 700 tape recorders and radios and destroyed them.*⁷²

The years of jihad had blurred the pre-1979 distinctions of Islamist and traditionalist; university-educated Islamists forged alliances with tribal elites and rural *ulema*, resulting in traditionalist ideas increasingly popping up in Islamist circles. During the societal breakdown of the civil war, some Islamist forces sought to restore virtue by linking outer cultivation to inner moral cultivation. For instance, John Baily, who visited Herat in 1994 during the civil war, recounts life under Ismail Khan, a prominent Islamist (and soon to be anti-Taleban) *mujahedin* commander:

*Herat under Ismail Khan was a city in a state of deep austerity, although the economy was booming with the return of wealthy businessmen from exile in Iran. Senior religious figures had an important say in how the city was run, and an 'Office for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice' was established. Various edicts affecting the day to day lives of ordinary people were issued. For example, Heratis were keen pigeon fanciers and many men kept pigeon lofts on the roofs of their houses in the old city and would fly their flocks of birds as a hobby, catching them again with large nets. This activity was banned, on the grounds that it could lead to men spying into the courtyards of their neighbours' houses and observing their womenfolk unveiled. When the ban was announced on local television the point was emphasised by several pigeons having their necks wrung in front of the camera: a warning of what would happen to the birds of anyone apprehended indulging in this illicit sport. Likewise, there was a ban on flying kites from the rooftops in case young men were on the lookout for girls.*⁷³

Herat authorities significantly curtailed the performance of music. Baily writes that:

[A] great deal of... music, such as love songs and music for dancing, could not be performed. The license also stipulated that musicians must play without amplification... Music could be performed by male musicians at private parties indoors, but professional women musicians were forbidden to perform and several were briefly imprisoned for transgressing this regulation. Whilst male musicians were technically allowed to play at

⁷² Jon Anderson, 'Menace of Mullahs Who Hate Music and Mercy', *The Sunday Times*, 12 February 1989.

⁷³ John Baily, 'Music and Censorship in Afghanistan, 1973-2003' in *Music and the Power of Play in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*, eds by Nooshin Laudan, London, Ashgate 2009.

*wedding parties, often in such cases agents of the Office for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice would arrive to break up the party.*⁷⁴

The Office for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice mentioned here also existed in Kabul, where it was established by the regime of Burhanuddin Rabbani. It was linked to the Supreme Court, which decreed:

*Women are not to leave their homes at all, unless absolutely necessary, in which case they are to cover themselves completely; are not to wear attractive clothing and decorative accessories; are not to wear perfume or jewellery that makes any noise; are not to walk gracefully or with pride in the middle of the sidewalk; are not to talk to strangers; are not to speak loudly or laugh in public; and they must always ask their husbands' permission to leave the home.*⁷⁵

In Badakhshan (the only province to completely evade Taleban takeover during the Emirate), the scene was similar to Herat—to the point where Bruce Koepke, visiting in 1998, could write:

*[A] general trend towards conservative Islam is noticeable in Badakhshan among the local population and commanders alike. In direct response to this religious orthodoxy, expressive traditions, such as music performances, occur rarely and have been driven underground. Prior to the civil war, Badakhshan's leading musicians were able to travel freely throughout the main cities in Afghanistan. Some were even selected for appearances on Kabul television. Currently, entertainment, either private or public, occurs only if the local commander or community leader condones such non-religious performances. However, upon hearing of my research, local musicians in more remote regions of Badakhshan would not infrequently arrive unannounced at my residence and proudly display their instruments, being delighted to perform if the situation allowed. With the strict interpretation of sharia, the profession of musician seems to have virtually disappeared. Every performer I interviewed is now primarily occupied as a subsistence farmer, working on either private or leased land.*⁷⁶

The major Afghan Islamist writings of the early seventies (or their Egyptian counterparts) did not

⁷⁴ Baily, "Music and Censorship", [see FN 74].

⁷⁵ Gopal, *No Good Men*, [see FN 1], 59.

⁷⁶ Bruce Koepke, 'Researching Performing Arts in Badakhshan,' *ISIM Newsletter* no. 5, Leiden, 2000.

focus so obsessively on outward appearance of men or on ritual. This is not to say, however, that modernists are unconcerned with these questions, especially as it pertained to women. Instead, they weighed those concerns with others, such as economic advancement and political equality. Kurzman writes

*Western bias tends to lump Khomeini's Iran and the Taliban's Afghanistan in the same category, and indeed both claimed to be building an Islamic state. However, one is a modern state and the other was not. Perhaps the most vivid distinction involved gender. While the Taliban barred girls from attending school, the Islamic Republic of Iran more than doubled girls' education from pre-revolutionary levels. While the Taliban barred women from working at most jobs, Iranian women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers, as television anchors, parliamentary deputies, government typists, and sales clerks—even while dressed in headscarves and long coats. Iranian leaders were as outspoken as Western feminists in condemning Taliban policies on gender and other subjects and felt the Taliban were giving Islam a bad name. The Taliban reintroduced tradition; Khomeini and other Islamists reinvented it.*⁷⁷

In other words, the desire to police certain moral and social behaviour of others is not unique to traditionalism; it is found, in various guises, in many religious and non-religious political movements. What distinguishes traditionalism from political Islam as an ideal type is 1) the way in which the latter easily subordinates or enmeshes such policing within the larger goals of bureaucratic state rule and economic development and 2) the way in which modernists use outward appearance and behaviour as a window into inner belief and loyalty. When such outward behaviour is instead understood to *constitute* belief, the strict and—from the point of view of outsiders—bizarre strictures of the Islamic Emirate take root.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Charles Kurzman, 'Who are the radical Islamists?', in *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, eds by Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, London, John Wiley and Sons 2014.

⁷⁸ Even the Islamic State, the most draconian of Islamist movements, does not come close to the Islamic Emirate in its attempts to regulate behaviour. For example, the IS's *hisba*, or religious police, regulate women's and men's appearances, and outlaw cigarettes and alcohol. But the variety of other banned items on *purely religious grounds*, such as television, computers, images containing the human form, or pigeon flying, would likely strike even the Islamic State rulers as nonsensical. See, for example, Rasha Al Aqeedi, *Hisba in Mosul: Systematic Oppression in the Name of Virtue*, Occasional

The Islamic Emirate and the Restoration of Virtue

In the autumn of 1994, taleban groups mobilised against the chaos of what was called the rule of the *pataks*, or checkpoints, where armed men would prey on travellers. Beginning locally in Kandahar, the Taleban movement rapidly started spreading across the desperate, war-weary country. The rallying cry was peace, security, and Islam. Whereas for much of southern Afghanistan the anti-Soviet jihad had been a defence of the traditional ways of life from an external threat, the threat people now felt was from within Afghan society itself. Thus the nascent Taleban movement faced the task of *reconstructing* tradition, of returning virtue to a land of anomie. An early Taleban editorial stated:

*[O]ur downfall started from the day when the Muslims started to take their faith and their religious obligations lightly. It started when the Muslims loosened around the rope of their Islamic faith. Our downfall started when Muslims starting ignoring their duties and didn't take their faith seriously any longer.*⁷⁹

There were, of course, multiple traditions and competing ethnical frameworks (eg, tribe, state) in pre-1979 rural life; the Taleban's appeal to tradition was an appeal to *Islamic* tradition, which they imagined to be closely attuned to Islamic essence as practiced from the time of prophet onwards.⁸⁰ As a result, in the Taleban (and popular) imagination the prophetic lifestyle was in fact an authentic traditional lifestyle. In other words, they believed that the religious traditions of the Pashtun village were in fact an imitation of the life and times of the Prophet. By contrast, when Salafists call for a return to the Islam of the Prophet, they believe that the traditions of the

Paper, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, February 2016.

⁷⁹ *Tolo-ye Afghan*, 4 Jawza 1374 (25 May 1995). [Taliban Sources Project archive].

⁸⁰ Because the Taleban were not alone in this appeal—tribal leaders appealed to tribal tradition, for example—we cannot look to the Taleban's ideology as an explanation for their success in 1994-96. Instead, organisational factors appear to have been key. See, for example, the descriptions of the Taleban's rise in Helmand province in Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, Hurst Publishers 2014; Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier*, Oxford University Press 2013. See also Sinno's argument that on the Taleban's capacity to mobilise: Sinno, *Organizations*, [see FN 1].

village are far removed from those in place during the time of the Prophet; they therefore call for a return to the 'Prophetic tradition' by *breaking* from the village tradition. The Taleban believed that their society had always lived in accordance to the Prophetic lifestyle, until the interruption of the Soviet invasion. Here, for example, is an excerpt of an interview with Taleban minister of higher education Qari Din Muhammad:

[Q] *You have set certain standards for men's appearance, like a beard, for example. Is this appearance one of your conditions for admission to universities?*

[Hanif] *We have an Islamic system. We seek to apply Islam. Growing a beard is a confirmed practice by prophets and our Prophet Muhammad and his companions. We order growing beards. Besides, all Afghans are Muslims. Growing a beard has been a tradition in the Muslim Afghan society for a long time. Most Afghans are bearded.*

[Q] *Do you have a concept of observing religion based on appearance? Or do you have a specific philosophy?*

[Hanif] *I have told you that Afghans are bearded. Our demand now is to emulate the Prophet's manners. Afghans have emulated the manners of the prophet, God's peace and blessings be upon him, in all aspects.*⁸¹

Similarly, an early decree from mullah Muhammad Omar stated:

The tradition and custom of the Taleban and the scholars of Islam for centuries have been that their attire, morality and deeds were in accordance with the Sharia of Prophet Mohammad (May Allah's peace be upon him) both in terms of appearance and behaviour. Even if lewd people were to bring a new custom, they [the Taleban and scholars] would refrain from it. However, it is regrettable that now some of the Taleban and members of the general public fasten the turbans, like the lewd people, in such a way that not only is it hated by the Taleban and Mullahs, but also by the public. Therefore, my recommendation to you is this—adapt yourselves in terms of appearance and behaviour to the sacred Sharia of Prophet (May Allah's peace be upon him), and do not fasten your turban in any

⁸¹ 'Taleban Minister Comments on Education Situation, Ties With U.S. Colleges,' *Al-Watan*, 15 March 2001.

*other manner lest you should resemble lewd people, which Allah forbids.*⁸²

To enforce the restitution of tradition, David Edwards writes that the Taleban

*consistently downplayed tribal or regional identities in favor of what might be called 'village identity' . . . In identifying purist culture and tradition with the Islam of the village, the Taliban were indirectly condemning the Islam of the parties since most of the party leaders were products of Kabul University or had worked for state-sponsored institutions. They were also putting themselves on a par with the people whose support they had to enlist if their movement was going to be successful.*⁸³

The Taleban's programme to rescue tradition had three components: epistemological, disciplinary and strategic. We will examine each of these components in turn. Epistemologically, for the Taleban the act constituted belief, so it was outward behaviour—ritual, dress etc—which became the objects of state surveillance. This was enforced through public spectacles of discipline—the notorious whip-wielding religious police, the public executions, the jailing of individuals for inadequate beard length.

The Taleban epistemology is one of the key reasons why the group reacted so strongly against modernist political Islam—often going to absurd lengths to limit the influence of "Wahhabism" and Salafism.⁸⁴ Wahid Muzhda, who worked in the Emirate's foreign ministry, recalls in his memoir the following story:

One day I referred to the secretariat of the chief justice to resolve a matter. There was a person there who was begging a secretary to allow him to see the judge with a long letter of claim in hand. He needed a fatwa (religious decree) concerning a visit to a dentist. He wanted a ruling on dental fillings.

⁸² The Official Gazette, Sept. 4, 2001. Vol. 799, 54. (Taliban Sources Project archive).

⁸³ Quoted in Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, Harvard University Press 2009, 76.

⁸⁴ One interviewee recalls how the fledgling Afghan jihadi groupings (in the late 1970s) gathering in Pakistan even had separate sub-groups devoted to "anti-Wahhabi" preaching. Other interviewees from within the Kandahari taliban and mujahedin frequently used the word "sensitive" to describe their relationship with "Wahhabi ideas" (Interviews, Kandahar / Kabul, summer 2012).

The petitioner said, "I asked an expert spiritual leader about filling teeth. He said there is no problem with it. But later, the Imam of our mosque, who is a Taliban, told me it will make my prayers and ablutions invalid. I asked the dentist to pull my filled teeth. The doctor said he will only do so if I bring him a religious decree from the judiciary."

The secretary asked the man: "Who gave you the fatwa to fill your teeth?" The applicant answered: "A man who is a friend of the doctor and is a religious expert educated in Egypt."

The secretary answered: "You have acted upon the fatwa of a Wahabi or member of the Muslim Brotherhood and drowned your self!" He then turned to two Maulana Sahibs that were in the office and asked for their opinions. They too agreed with him. The applicant begged and pleaded with the secretary to write his opinion on a piece of paper so he could get his money back from the dentist. He answered: "One cannot write these kinds of fatwas on paper, because they will cause quarrels among Muslims."⁸⁵

Beyond the absurd, anti-Islamism-permeated, Taleban decision-making in the fields of education and propaganda. Muzhda writes that:

*All the Taleban leaders believed that Rabbani, Sayyaf and Hekmatyar, who were influenced by the ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Maudoodi [an influential South Asian Islamist] were misled and the product of their aberration was the chaotic post communist authority and the situation it created in Afghanistan. I was invited to a meeting held by the Ministry of Information and Culture convened to decide on the prohibition of certain books entering Afghanistan. My assumption was that the list of banned books would include those that contradicted Islamic teachings but the list went beyond the limits I presumed. In the first stage all books by Abu-l-AlaMaudoodi and the Muslim Brotherhood were on the list. These volumes were subsequently absolutely prohibited in Afghanistan.*⁸⁶

And:

There's also an interesting story about the book Halal and Haramby [leading Islamist] Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi. The book was on sale in Kabul bookstores for a long time until one day a friend of

*Mullah Nuruddin Turabi, minister of justice, noticed in a page of the book that Qaradawi had confessed he was not a follower of a particular school of thought. He brought the point to Mullah Turabi's attention with his own interpretation and explanation. Turabi issued an order for all copies of the book to be collected and burned. The issue intensified and was discussed in the Council of Ministers. The council successfully beseeched Turabi to dispense with the burning of the book but it did become prohibited.*⁸⁷

The book in question, by a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, one of the Arab world's most influential Islamist preachers, details items and acts which the author considers lawful and prohibited in Islam. A modern and state-oriented work, it differs from Taleban thought in four important ways. First is the pervasive concern with political oppression, a result of the secular dictatorships that gave rise to modern Arab Islamism. Thus Qaradawi argues that one reason why women should dress conservatively is that moral laxity aids those in power – "it is the way of rulers to keep people preoccupied with their personal desires and lusts so that they have no time to think about public affairs."⁸⁸ Taleban decrees rarely mentioned political oppression in this way; rather, instead of a focus solely on communist elites, the emphasis was on the malaise of vice that had infected all of Afghan society during the civil war, including those *mujahedin* who had fought in the name of Islam against the Soviets. It was internal corruption, not external oppression, that was the Taleban's focus.

The second key difference is the overarching concern with social justice and equality found in Qaradawi. In discussing a prohibition against men wearing gold and silk, for example, Qaradawi includes as justification, "From the Quranic point of view, luxurious living leads to weakness among nations and to their eventual downfall; the existence of luxury is also an expression of social injustice, as only a few can afford luxurious items at the expense of the deprived masses of people."⁸⁹ On the other hand, Taleban condemnations of luxury often focused on its inherent corrupting quality, irrespective of its distribution in society. "Expensive and needless parties are given in the Islamic Emirate," a typical decree went, "which by itself is extravagant and

⁸⁵ Wahid Muzhda, *Afghanistan wa Panj Sal-e Sultah-e Taleban [Afghanistan and the Five Years of Taleban Rule]*, Kabul, Unknown publisher 2003.

⁸⁶ Muzhda, *Afghanistan*, [see FN 87].

⁸⁷ Muzhda, *Afghanistan*, [see FN 87].

⁸⁸ Yousuf A. Qaradawi, *Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam [the Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam]*, Islamic Book Service, 1982.

⁸⁹ Qaradawi, *Al-Halal*, [see FN 90].

unlawful according to the Sharia. Everyone in the future shall avoid doing so.”⁹⁰

Third, Qaradawi’s epistemology overlaps with Western scientific forms of reasoning, so that while he ultimately supports his guidelines by drawing examples from the Hadiths and the Quran, he also frequently buttresses his arguments with reasoning *external* to the logic of Prophetic imitation – sometimes even with examples from scientific research. (He cites, for instance, a German scientist’s research claiming that dogs are especially prone to carrying worms as a partial explanation for Hadithic injunctions against keeping them as pets.) While Taleban newspapers like *Shariat* and *Tolo-ye Afghan* frequently discussed prohibitions, they relied far less on extra-hadithic and extra-Qur’anic justification—except for the notable case of invoking Afghan culture or tradition.

Fourth, and perhaps most important in practice, is Qaradawi’s epistemology of belief, which is closer to Western Christian understanding than the Taleban’s. Regarding photography and art, for example, he writes that strictly prohibited figures and drawings are those “which are not meant to be worshipped but which are intended to imitate Allah’s creation. If the artist claims that he originates and creates as Allah does, he is an unbeliever. *This matter pertains solely to the intention of the artist*” (emphasis added).⁹¹ It is the artist’s interior state, his or her belief, that is subject to regulation. The Taleban, on the other hand, devote their authority to the *act*, which they understand to constitute belief. Hence all photography and artistic renderings of the human and animal form were categorically banned, irrespective of the intent of the artist:

The Ordinance of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about the ban on printing of animals’ pictures, cross or sacred verses on the industrial products of the country:

(1) Hadith: According to Abdullah bin Masud, he heard from the Prophet of God saying, “The artist (picture maker) will under the most intensive punishment of God.” (2) According to Ibn Abbas, once he heard from the Prophet of God saying that every picture designer would be in hell. He will be punished for every created picture. Ibn Abbas said “If you cannot avoid the creation of picture then create the picture of a tree or some inanimate

*thing.” (3) With reference to Ibn Abbas, the Prophet said on the day of judgement that person would be under the severest punishment that kills a prophet, or is himself killed by a prophet, or he who kills one of his parents. Picture designers and those scholars who do not utilise their knowledge would also be included in this category.*⁹²

The distinction here between intent and act is not a trivial one, because for the Taleban it was precisely the latter that was the object of surveillance and discipline. Unlike in Islamism or Western liberalism, interior states were largely irrelevant under the Islamic Emirate; instead, the jurisdiction of Taleban discipline was the exterior state, the act—and the public spectacle of discipline was itself a performative act, a way (in the minds of the Taleban) of collectively reconstructing virtue for an entire society. When the agents in charge of restoring tradition were also the agents with the monopoly of force, it became very easy, as Juan Cole argues, for this disciplinary programme to also be a way of projecting state power:

Sharia does not require, and perhaps even discourages, punishment as spectacle. The Taliban were not merely affirming their piety or their implementation of Islamic law as they saw it by their...[public executions] at the stadium; they were engaged in “staged publicity” that ritually affirmed their power and legitimacy. For this reason, watching the spectacles of punishment was not voluntary, and was even a family affair that exposed young children to the brutality. A young woman memoirist, Zoya, reports, “Near the stadium, we saw their patrols ordering shopkeepers to close down and go watch the ritual. I was surprised to see women taking their children with them, but [my friend] Zeba explained, ‘They want their children to realise what will happen to them if they ever steal anything. They think scaring them is a good way to educate them.’”⁹³

The third component of Taleban thought was that, in determining whether to regulate an act, the imperative was to minimise the risk of the worst case scenario. Such an attitude appeared to be a direct reaction to the horrors of the civil war, a return to anomie and societal collapse. In game theory, this strategy is known as the ‘the Minimax Imperative’. Acting in a way to avoid the worst possible outcome means that if an object—say, a chess board—could be used for sin (gambling),

⁹⁰ The Official Gazette, Sept. 4, 2001. Vol. 799, 45. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

⁹¹ Qaradawi, *Al-Halal*, [see FN 90].

⁹² Rasmi Jarida 799, decree 9. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

⁹³ Crews et al, *Taliban*, [see FN 85], 129.

then the prudent course for the state is to prohibit it. Like the recovering addict, for whom the safest course is total abstinence, not moderation, the society emerging from complete moral collapse should act to minimise the possibility of the worst case scenario—a return to anomie. Figure 8 lists some prohibited objects under the Taleban regime; the majority of these items are associated with practices that had long been morally controversial in the countryside. Wahid Muzhda recounts in his memoir that:

Mullah [Rabbani] Akhund as prime minister would get extremely agitated at the sight of newspapers thrown on the ground and (for him) disrespected. He believed that the act would drive the country towards destruction. On one holiday when I visited him, he was very upset that pages of the newspapers Hewad and Anis were used in wrapping bakery-made cakes. He also noted that after the holiday when he went to Kandahar, he would discuss the banning of newspaper printing with Mullah Omar.

According to him with the majority of Afghans being illiterate, the Voice of Sharia radio served them well enough. He also observed, “All my life I have not read even one newspaper article. Instead of wasting my time at that I read pages of the Quran.” In the same gathering someone said he had read in a book that disrespecting letters of the alphabet was in fact dishonouring the Quran because Quranic verses were written in alphabets. That statement was made in affirmation of Mullah Hassan’s opinion.⁹⁴

In a country that had barely survived a terrifying descent into Hobbesian anarchy, the Taleban believed their role was to not only eliminate vice, but to eliminate the *enabling conditions* of vice. If a page bearing the words of the Quran *could be* misused, and if the *act*, not the intent, was the subject of discipline, then it followed that the most just and safest course was to remove the conditions under which the act could occur—by banning newspapers altogether.

Contradictions

The paradox of the Taleban is that they were not a revolutionary movement but were forced to take revolutionary action in claiming state power. Whereas founders of the progenitor organisations to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had spent years organising, plotting, scheming and dreaming of an Islamic

society, there was no such Taleban pre-history. To be sure, the Deobandi-Sufi networks that talebs were embedded in featured a long history of ulema activism—especially in Pakistan, where clerics have played a role in anti-colonial struggles. Some prominent Pakistani Deobandi scholars, such as Mufti Rasheed, had attempted to articulate the outlines of an ideal Islamic state. Moreover, the mainstream mujahedin parties that the taleban fronts were linked to had also plotted and theorised an Islamic state.⁹⁵ But among talebs there was little organised or formal thinking about an Islamic state beyond the barest outlines—and many talebs in fact expected a return of the king after the end of the jihad.⁹⁶ As a result, in overthrowing the old order and forging a new state, the Taleban was not only confronted with new problems but were thrust into a process pushing far beyond their earlier conceptions. The exigencies of state-making would begin to shift Taleban thinking away from a traditionalist, ritual-oriented ideology towards modernist Islamism, which is primarily concerned with the state—a shift that began in the Islamic Emirate and continues to this day.

The most immediate challenge the new government faced in attempting to reconstruct tradition was: which tradition? Islamic tradition as experienced and practiced in the southern Pashtun village was a world removed from urban centres or other parts of Afghanistan. While opposition to the Taleban had more to do with their oppressive disciplinary programme and reluctance to share power, counter-narratives of tradition also played an important role. Even in southern Afghanistan, the Taleban sidelined traditional elites, excluding them from state office and limiting their influence in governance—thereby minimising authentic, village-based, ethical frameworks linked to tribe. This meant that certain long-practiced tribal customs, such as *baad* (giving women to an enemy family to end a blood feud) or the use of *khans* to adjudicate disputes were proscribed. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a 1997 radio address of Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi:

[Question] Can someone contrary to the wishes of a widow marry her to someone else or not?

[Answer] She as a widow is of some age. But not even a young girl can be married to someone by

⁹⁵ This is according to interviews with numerous taleban and non-taleban mujahedin. It is perhaps for this reason that they did not engage in the bitter power struggle that ensued after the Soviet withdrawal.

⁹⁶ Interviews in Kandahar with nearly a dozen participants of the taleban fronts, 2011-14.

⁹⁴ Muzhda, *Afghanistan*, [see FN 87].

*her father without her wishes. A woman came to the Prophet Mohammad, May Allah blessing be upon him, and she said to him, O' Prophet of Allah my father has married me to someone without asking me. He did not consult me and I also do not like that household. The Prophet, May Allah's blessing be upon him, said this marriage is void. It is not correct if you are not happy with it; your father cannot marry you.*⁹⁷

Moreover, only those customs specific to southern Afghanistan tended to receive official imprimatur. Taleban ideologues often viewed those from further afield, such as the north or east, as contradictory to Islam:

[Question] In our society it is the custom, when an illness of patient continues, that they bring the heart or the dust of the nest of a bird, wash it in water and give the water to the patient. They say, if he is to recover may he get well and if he is dying then may he die. What does Islam say about such a custom?

*[Deobandi] Some customs and habits that are left to us from long ago are very wrong and are not wholesome. These customs and tradition belongs to other people, it is part of the customs of foreigners, which has no place in Islam or an Islamic society. When someone loses his mind they use some means which is un-natural like bringing a piece of green cloth and placing the deranged person on it. They are of opinion that such a person will quickly die. If this person really dies, then the Muslim who practiced this tradition will have taken part in killing the person and will have to answer for it. In the same way the nest or heart of the bird cannot either make one better or can kill by itself. Those who say if they eat dust that will cure them, this is completely wrong as the eating of dust is haram. This has been forbidden by the prophet, peace and blessing be upon him. But some ulema have said, that the dust should be washed in a pot and when the dust settles in the pot, then the water can be given to the sick person and with the kindness of God All Mighty, the sick person may get better. In this way the nest of the bird or the soil giving it to the sick person is of no use.*⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi, 'The way of deliverance: Answers Prepared by Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi', *Tolo-ye Afghan*, 12 October 1997. (Taliban Sources Project Collection).

⁹⁸ Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi, "The way of deliverance: Answers Prepared by Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi", *Tolo-ye Afghan* newspaper, 20 August 1997. (Taliban Sources Project Collection).

The question of which tradition qualified as authentic became acute in urban areas like Kabul or in culturally distinct areas like Hazarajat or Loya Paktia. It was in the latter region, for example, that the Taleban's prohibition of the locally-popular egg-fighting game (a regional new year custom which could involve gambling) led to a local, short-lived uprising.⁹⁹

The challenge of multiple traditions was intimately related to the Taleban's use of coercion. The primary apparatus of internal control, the vice and virtue police, did not even operate in most of rural southern Afghanistan—it was only in the north and in urban centres where its members arrested or beat locals. The following are excerpts of interviews with women from Helmand province from a 1999 Mercy Corps report, one of the few studies of rural life under the Taleban:

"[We have restrictions] because of our culture and tradition in the village. In Afghanistan you can see different cultures in the city and rural areas." — Azmat

"[Since the Taleban's arrival, life] is the same in the village but in the city it is more difficult now. Life in the village and life in the city is very different. [Purdah] is strict in our culture in the village... [I wore] a burqa when I was young or when I go out of the village, a chadar [head scarf] now." — Nadia

"The situation is very bad. Everybody says no rights for women, but even before the war we had the same condition for women in the village. [What is] different from before is that restrictions are for women in the cities too." — Nadira

The report added:

Punishments regarding inappropriate dress are rumoured about but very few in the south, who were spoken to, have been subject to any disciplinary action in this regard. In the few cases that women had heard of someone being reprimanded by the Taliban's Department (later Ministry) for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, it was the male relatives of a woman not deemed

⁹⁹ David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad*, University of California Press 2002, 299. Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights From the Afghan Field*. London, Hurst 2009, 73. Crews et al, *Taliban*, [see FN 85], 265.

*appropriately dressed, who were punished, not the woman herself.*¹⁰⁰

But the story was very different in the north and in cities—and because these areas were most prone to resisting Taleban rule, the programme of restoring virtue became inexorably linked with extending state power. The power of the whip soon became a logic unto itself, as the well-staffed Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and Protection of Vice and Ministry of Justice transformed into the two most important ministries in the country. The heads of these ministries, and particularly mullah Nuruddin Turabi, the justice minister, were actually frequently at odds with mullah Muhammad Omar and the Kandahar-based leadership. Many of the actions of the religious police had no sanction in either *sharia* or local tradition—the idea of publicly beating women on the street, or jailing religious transgressors without trial, was an anathema to mullah Muhammad Omar. Kabir Mohabbat, who as a temporary envoy from the United States spent a considerable amount of time with the leadership, recalled that:

I had hoped that I hadn't been in the country long enough to draw Torabi's attention. But - there was my refusal to grow a beard!... [Mullah Akhtar] Osmani leaned over and grinned at my look of distress, "We took your complaint, that he was personally lashing people on the streets, very seriously. We went to Mullah Omar and told him that the Vice and Virtue Police were too forceful; people are starting to hate us because of them." Osmani smiled at me, but I wasn't sure what that smile meant.

"Last December Mullah Omar warned the ministry to stop beating people on the spot. He warned them, one more complaint and the minister would be summoned to Kandahar. Sometime in February 2001, Mullah Omar called Torabi to Kandahar, gave him a tongue lashing and ordered him to sit at home for the next three months."

Apparently Torabi had been ordered to relax his zealous distribution of the law (a true understatement) and to stop hitting people in public. Of course Islam calls for public punishment, but that should be rendered by a judge. Mullah Omar told Torabi, "The job of the Ministry of Vice and Virtue is to implement the law and take offenders to the nearest police station so they can

¹⁰⁰ Anna M. Pont, *Blind Chickens & Social Animals: Creating Spaces for Afghan Women's Narratives Under the Taliban*, Mercy Corps, 2001.

*be put before a judge. If the judge decides that they require public punishment, then so be it." It was a start. Hitting people in the streets, for whatever reason, had to stop. I nodded my approval, but realised that it would take years of public relations work to change the negative worldwide images that the Taliban had created.*¹⁰¹

But despite repeated attempts, the supreme leader was unable to sway Turabi or dislodge him from his post, because Turabi had built an independent power base among police linked to the Ministry of Justice.¹⁰² (Turabi, for his part, had a fraught history with mullah Muhammad Omar; Bette Dam reports that Turabi pressed Omar to negotiate with the Northern Alliance during the 1995 siege of Kabul; when Omar refused, Turabi attempted to have the supreme leader removed).¹⁰³

The result of this impasse and the sweeping independent power of the religious police was that the Taleban's disciplinary programme increasingly strayed from widely accepted (in southern Afghanistan) attempts to restore Islamic tradition to one that was subject to the whims of the whip. The religious police became not only a means to enforce and regulate outward appearance, but a way to control rebellious individuals and populations.¹⁰⁴ In this context, the Taleban increasingly used *ex post facto* justifications and reinterpretations of their original mandate. Juan Cole relays that

*Despite Taliban claims, the public exercise of violence by the Taliban had more to do with power than with piety. Punishments were applied quite apart from the requirements of Islamic law. Latifa, a young Afghan woman, saw a group of women in long black veils being beaten bloody by Taliban in the street. Bewildered, she later made inquiries. "They were beaten because they were wearing white socks. . . . That is the color of the Taliban flag, and women do not have the right to wear white. It means they are defiling the flag."*¹⁰⁵

Religious policing was, in effect, an integral part of state building, where the state projected its

¹⁰¹ M. Kabir Mohabbat and L.R. McInnis. *Delivering Osama*, Google Books, 2011, 163.

¹⁰² Interviews with Taliban Political Committee member, 2015.

¹⁰³ Dam, 'Death of a Sahebzada', [see FN 44].

¹⁰⁴ The religious police also became a powerful (and corrupt) entity in their own right, causing frequent tensions between the ministry and mullah Omar.

¹⁰⁵ Juan R.I.Cole, "The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Space," in Crews et al., *Taliban*, [see FN 85], 130.

authority into the daily lives of citizens, as this excerpt from interviews with Human Rights Watch in the 1990s suggest:

The Taliban asked my customers, "Why are you going to her house. Are you going to gather and make plans against us?" I had a board outside which read, "Tailoring for women and children." Three times they came and warned me, and I told them, "I am a widow, what should I do?" The third time they took my board down and said that if I do not stop this work they will kill me. They accused me of making plans against the Taliban. They said, "Everyone should sew their own clothes; our wives sew their own clothes. God will assist you, if you do everything as God wishes." It was the Religious Police, and I was forced to close four months ago and leave for Pakistan.

In addition to the repressive might of the religious police, the regime deployed soft power: in a series of faltering steps, the Taleban began to reimagine their role as leaders of the Afghan nation, an imagined community in which members were bound not only by religion, but by their geographic location within a territorially-defined unit. Like all nationalisms, this imagined community stretched far back into the past, thereby binding Afghans in time as well as space. The group increasingly appealed to Afghan history—as distinct from village tradition—as a means of legitimising their rule. At key political junctures, in particular, the regime harkened back to motifs of Afghan history; for example, when mullah Muhammad Omar crowned himself *amir ul-mumenin*, or Commander of the Faithful—a title that led many outsiders to believe he was proclaiming himself as the next caliph—it was in fact a nod to a form of legitimacy with precedent in Afghan history. Christine Noelle writes about 19th century Afghan ruler Dost Muhammad Khan:

The son of Mir Wa'iz placed two or three blades of grass in [Dost Muhammad's] turban, proclaimed him padshah [king] with the title Amir al-Muminin, and exhorted those present to contribute to the planned jihad against the Sikhs... Despite his attempt to hark back to the beginnings of Afghan statehood, Dost Muhammad Khan departed from Ahmad Shah's example in choosing the title Amir al-Muminin. His allegiance to Sabir Shah notwithstanding, Ahmad Shah was given the title of durr-i darn, 'pearl of the age'. Rather than giving religious legitimacy, this title reflected his claims to royal leadership among his fellow tribesmen, who, henceforth assuming the name 'Durrani', were transformed into a state supporting elite. Dost Muhammad Khan, on the other hand, desperately

*needed the support of the ulama of Kabul in his attempt to secure his rule and widen his material base of support*¹⁰⁶

Similarly, when Omar hoisted aloft the cloak of Prophet Muhammad to a delirious Kandahar crowd, he was following a precedent first set by King Amanullah, who did the same to rally Kandaharis to back his attempt to recapture the throne in 1929.¹⁰⁷ The regime even justified the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, as naked as an attempt to erase a bit of local heritage as one could imagine, with an appeal to Afghan history—the history of smashing idols:

*These statues would have been considered sacred during their time. They must have been worshiped. But Islam considers all types of infidelity, polytheism and signs of idol worship disgusting and illegal. All prophets have fought against it... Probably the destruction of statues alone will not scrub out all of our historical record. We have many other things which belong to our ancestors. These things have not only a historical background but they are the symbols of our pride. One of these symbols is the tradition of destruction of idols. For example, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi is still remembered as an iconoclast.*¹⁰⁸ Alongside such a re-conceptualisation, the Taleban were forced to confront the prosaic realities of statecraft. What, for example, was to be done with tax collection? Was it distinct from *zakat* and *ushr*, religious tithes? And if so, did this render secular taxation illegitimate? A senior Taleban figure writes in an unpublished history of the Taleban that "Most of the *ulema* believed that customs and their revenues are gratuitous finance (and so are illegitimate) but others regarded the collection of customs taxes—and spending that money on security—as a service to the people and therefore legitimate."¹⁰⁹ The regime fell before this issue could be resolved, although in practice, the government regularly collected customs duties and various forms of "excise taxes" on cars and other such luxuries; in 2001, for example, the Nangarhar

¹⁰⁶ Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)*, Routledge 1997, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Bette Dam and Fabrizio Foschini, 'Under the Cloak of History: The Kherqa-Ye Sharif From Faizabad to Kandahar', 2014, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/under-the-cloak-of-history-the-kherqa-sharif-from-faizabad-to-kandahar/>.

¹⁰⁸ 'Is the Preservation of Idols Necessary?' *Shariat*, 2 February 2001. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹⁰⁹ Authors' copy.

tax office reported a revenue of 148 billion Afghanis.¹¹⁰

Similarly, the regime initially took a hardline stance against modern banking, which it branded as usury. Modernist Islamists had long since

addressed the issue, ruling in favour of banking—ideologues as early as the Salafist Muhammad Abduh argued for the permissibility of interest—and the Taleban’s Central Bank gradually took to interest, although only through loopholes.

Ideologues of the Islamic Emirate – Biographies

Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi

Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi was born in the 1940s and educated at Dar ul-Ulum Deoband (India). Though he didn’t have a formal position in the Taleban government, he was one of mullah Muhammed Omar’s most trusted ideological advisors. He hosted a popular radio programme during the Emirate, and was known for dispensing advice on the most intimate matters—like sex—in a public forum. After 2001, he is believed to have fled to Pakistan, where he died of natural causes.

Mawlawi Muhammad Wali Haqqani

Mawlawi Muhammad Wali Haqqani (born 1968, Alizai by tribe) was originally from Siachoy village, Panjwayi district of Kandahar province. He was educated in *hujras* prior to and during the 1980s, when he also fought on taleban fronts in Kandahar, including those of Lala Malang, Akbar Agha, and mullah Faizullah Akhundzada—where he came to know mullah Muhammad Omar. After the jihad he studied in the Dar ul-Uloom Haqqania, returning to Afghanistan during the rise of the Taleban. He served as Minister for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and reportedly earned the ire of mullah Omar at various times due to his harsh measures. He reportedly quit the Taleban in 2001, but shortly thereafter died in a U.S. bombing.

Mawlawi Pasanai Saheb

Mawlawi Pasanai Saheb (born in the 1940s, Ismaelkhel by tribe) was the senior-most taleb judge in the jihad following the death of Mawlawi Nazar Muhammad. Originally from Shah Juy, Zabul, he was educated at Nur ul-Madaris in Ghazni. Despite his stature during the jihad, he did not have a high position during the Emirate—he worked in the Kandahar *fatwa* office—reportedly due to differences he had with the regime. Nonetheless, he remained the most well-known and respected of the older generation of Taleban judges. After 2001, he was reportedly detained by U.S. forces, until Gul Agha Sherzai convinced the Americans to release him. He died not long after, most likely of natural causes.

Mullah Nuruddin Turabi

Mullah Nuruddin Turabi (Achezkai by tribe) was originally from TirinKot, Uruzgan and fought as a commander of a small taleban front in Kandahar in the 1980s. He was educated entirely in *hujras*. Outside of mullah Omar, Turabi perhaps had the largest day-to-day ideological influence on the Taleban movement, by virtue of his appointment as Minister of Justice. After 2001, he surrendered to the Afghan government and attempted to switch sides, but was forced to flee to Pakistan under American threats. Later, he was arrested by Pakistan for a number of years. He is now released and is reportedly living in Pakistan.

Mullah Muhammad Omar

Mullah Muhammad Omar (Hotak by tribe) was born in Kandahar but grew up in Deh Rawud, Uruzgan. His family hails from Zabul province. He was educated entirely in *hujras*. During the anti-Soviet jihad, he fought in a taleban front under mullah Faizullah Akhundzada, before separating and forming his own group towards the very end of the 1980s. He was reportedly selected as head of the Taleban movement due to his piety and lack of ties to outside forces. Omar’s religious credentials were not strong; he did not finish his studies, although there are reports that he attended to this after 2001. Nonetheless, his position as supreme leader and “Commander of the Faithful” gave him immense ideological sway over the movement. He died in 2013.

¹¹⁰ ‘Nangarhar tax department revenue increased’, *Tolo-ye Afghan*, 9 May 2001. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

The point, however, is not whether the Taliban pursued this or that aspect of modern statecraft, but rather that the nature of the state took an increasing importance in Taliban deliberations.¹¹¹ In their internal and external dealings, in their strive for legitimacy, and in their quest to maintain power, the Taliban were increasingly operating from the abstract prerogatives of state-making, drawing upon Islam as system of meanings and signifiers to interpret and legitimise these prerogatives.

But at no point did they fully abandon traditionalism. Their adherence to ritualistic practice and traditionalism was increasingly difficult to accommodate within the modern state system, and challenges to legitimacy cropped up with growing frequency. Under fire from abroad, facing drought and disaffection at home, the regime took increasingly hardline measures, including the Buddha destruction and the arrest of Christian missionaries in 2001. Perhaps the most grievous move was to ban opium, which plunged millions of farmers into penury. It was in this context that mullah Muhammad Omar refused to surrender Osama bin Laden, precipitating the downfall of his regime.

THE ANTI-AMERICAN 'JIHAD'

Downfall and Crisis

The Taliban proved incapable of ruling their country. It was not only resistance in the north, but growing anger within their base—over conscription, the ban on opium cultivation, and drought—that allowed for the group's rapid downfall in the face of US bombs. Very few were willing to defend the regime, and most Afghans welcomed the coming of the new order with open arms. Taliban cadres witnessing their country turn against them plunged into crisis and self doubt. Mawlawi Muhammad Haqqani, a deputy minister during the Emirate, recalled:

My father, brother, and family were at Mansehra [a town in northwestern Pakistan that is home to several Afghan refugee camps]. But I realized it wouldn't be wise to move in with them. Too many people knew who I was, and some had no love for the Taliban. Instead I found a place to stay at a mosque nearby. I had to sneak over at midnight just to see my kids, like a thief. When I was visiting my daughter one night, she asked me about our Kabul home, why we didn't have a car

¹¹¹ It should be noted that the Taliban inherited the bare-bone infrastructure of a state from the PDPA apparatus, including a rudimentary civil service in Kabul.

*anymore. She complained that it was too hot in the refugee camp, and that she wanted to move back to the cool climate of Kabul. I couldn't answer her. But she could tell from my eyes how sad I was. I was a wreck—nervous, worried, and almost panic-stricken.*¹¹²

For many Taliban leaders, these events would help accelerate a process that had begun during the Emirate. Over the next decade, restoring tradition or regulating ritual and personal cultivation would no longer be the principal preoccupation of the movement. Instead, Taliban thinking began to focus heavily on questions of sovereignty and nationalism, and sought Islam as a way of achieving these ends. While they would never completely abandon their roots in village Islam, they would begin to draw close to the standard concerns of modernist Islamism (recall Nikki Keddie's description of the phenomenon: "a programme of strengthening the Muslim world and defeating imperialism").

There were many reasons for the accelerating changes. When the Taliban mobilised as an insurgency in 2003-2004, they did so for very different reasons compared with their initial mobilisation ten years earlier. They were no longer faced with the total breakdown of society from within or a shocking descent into anomie. In other words, unlike the 1990s, the threat was no longer internal; it was exogenous to Afghan society. In this sense, the position seemed, on the surface, similar to the Soviet occupation. But in fact, beneath this surface similarity lay a world of difference. The Soviet invasion was the culmination of a revolutionary process dating to the communist *coup d'état* of 1978 and opposition politics prior to that. PDPA cadres sought a violent and radical break from Afghan tradition, aiming to thoroughly revolutionise society and its social relations, down to the village level. This included such controversial moves as attempting to enforce women's education in the countryside, mandatory literacy programmes (in which elders were made, humiliatingly, to attend classes with children), blatant atheism (in the very early stages after the putsch, at least) and a fiercely repressive policy against the *ulama*, *maleks* and *khans*. In this context, defence against this external threat was intimately tied to internal well-being; thus the Taliban fronts were guardians of tradition in a world of profound upheaval.

¹¹² Sami Yousafzai, 'The Taliban's Oral History of the Afghanistan War', *Newsweek*, 26 September 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/talibans-oral-history-afghanistan-war-79553>.

The US occupation differed in that it was, at its essence, an intervention aimed not at revolutionising Afghan society but reversing it to the status quo ante Taleban. To be sure, there were attempts to introduce women's rights and other liberal reforms, but this unfolded gradually and in such a way as to not profoundly alter the social order of the village. There was no attempt to combat Islam and no repressive actions taken against the *ulama* as a group. What the American intervention *did* affect, however, was the distribution of power at the district level and higher; American- and state-directed violence in the 2001-04 period was limited to particular communities and conducted along specific lines of patronage and exclusion; those who enjoyed access to the foreign forces held the power, and those who lacked such access were liable to be targeted. As a result, certain communities were winners in the post-2001 order, and certain communities predated upon. For example, a systematic campaign of the U.S. and Kandahar governor Gul Agha Sherzai to target leading figures of the Ishaqzai tribe in western Kandahar resulted in the majority of that community being effectively excluded from the post-2001 order. Similarly, American targeting (with strongmen Mir Wali and Amir Dado) in central and northern Helmand forced the exclusion of subsets of the Alizai communities of Kajaki and Baghran districts, and the Ishaqzai community in Sangin.¹¹³

In these latter communities, the Taleban began to reorganise and recruit. If the main village grievance of the 1980s was the overwhelming Soviet repression and the communist attempt to erase the traditional way of life, and in the 1990s it was the internal collapse of society, in the 2000s, the grievance in these same communities was US repression and the corruption and brutality of their proxies, the commanders whom the Americans had returned to power. The Taleban's solution was to recapture Afghan sovereignty by combatting the repression of the foreign forces and resisting the corruption of the Afghan state. To be sure, in the eyes of the Taleban, the Western imperialists were trampling on Afghan culture and tradition and aiming to destroy the country's Islamic system, but defending tradition in this case meant, in effect, defending national sovereignty and resisting the abusive 'puppet' regime. One study of insurgents and their constituents in Wardak and Kandahar provinces, for instance, determined that

Many respondents talked of a western 'crusade' against Islam and Afghan traditions – with religion

*and culture presented as complementary and interdependent. Religious messages therefore did have resonance for the majority. However, our assessment is that this is primarily because they were couched in terms of respondents' two more pragmatic grievances: the corruption of the state and the occupation by foreign forces. The way in which religion was frequently enfolded into one or both of these deeper grievances is reflected in the words of a Hizb-i Islami commander: 'This is not an ordinary war, it is a holy war (jihad) – it started in defence of our cultural values, our national identity and our liberty. So if it costs our development, even our blood, we will continue fighting it'. Jihad, in the sense used here, is not about fighting an infidel enemy simply because he is an infidel but rather to regain and retrieve something that the enemy has denigrated and taken away, i.e. the values/identity of Afghan citizens and the country's liberty and sovereignty. This message had mass appeal, whether respondents were particularly religious or not.'*¹¹⁴

In effect, post-2001 Taleban ideology was structured around the grievances of the group's constituents. This is why the dichotomy of those Taleban who joined for "pragmatic reasons" — in the Western imagination, the so-called ten-dollar Taleb, among Afghans—and those who joined for "ideological" reasons is a false one. Taleban responded to real-world events, such as the abusive and exclusionary nature of the post-2001 regime, by picking up the gun; they gave meaning to this decision, however, by drawing upon the prevailing repertoire of social critique: Islam, jihad, anti-Imperialism. Therefore "pragmatic" concerns could leave insurgents with the conclusion that they had no option but to fight and yet simultaneously lead them to believe that the fight was a divinely-ordained 'jihad.'

Alongside the reorientation away from the reconstruction of virtue to the defence of Islamic and national sovereignty, the Taleban underwent a number of profound sociological changes in the post-2001 years. First, this period marked an era in which Afghan horizons were broadened like no other. While television had little impact outside of major urban centres, the advent of mobile phones and the internet exposed a larger percentage of Afghans to foreign ideas, including foreign Islamic ideas, than ever before. At the same time, massive

¹¹³ Martin, *An Intimate War*, [see FN82]; Gopal, *No Good Men*, [see FN1].

¹¹⁴ Sarah Ladbury, 'Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Afghanistan: Why Do Men Join the Taliban and Hizb-I Islami? How Much Do Communities Support Them?', 2009, <http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/23852819/1968355965/name/Drivers%20of%20Radicalisation%20in%20Afghanistan%20Sep%2009.pdf>.

demographic shifts, with millions returning home after time as refugees abroad, helped break down some of the parochialism and insularity that had ruled the villages of pre-1979 Afghanistan. The Taliban and their supporters were not immune from these changes.

Second, the Afghan insurgency developed under the influence of developments in post-2003 Iraq. The methods and rhetoric of the Iraqi insurgency introduced a new set of conceptual categories for global Islamist militancy.¹¹⁵ This included the veneration of martyrdom to heights not seen in pre-2001 Afghanistan. (Although 1980s *mujahedin* often spoke of their yearning for martyrdom, it was only after 2003 that suicide bombing came into regular use by Afghan insurgents; as we will see below, an entire system of justifications sprung into place to theorise suicide attacks, which further marks the evolution in the group's thought away from traditionalism.)¹¹⁶

Third, the post-2001 years marked the first time in the lives of most Taliban leaders that they lived outside Afghanistan. One study, which interviewed individuals in and associated with the Taliban insurgency's political committee, stated that:

*Interpretations borne out of a rudimentary understanding of their religion [i.e., hujra education] and the traditional strictures of village life have been challenged by the relatively cosmopolitan world of Pakistan and the Gulf, and the relative breadth of religious reasoning and debate found in these areas. For example, many of the interviewees have in recent years been exposed to alternative Islamist discourses for the first time, and they often have found this literature rich and well argued. In the words of [a political committee-affiliated Taleb]: "The environment of the [1990s] Emirate was typically one which was tightly closed. There used to be very little or no close interactions with non-jihadi Islamist groups. The ideological debates were only revolving around what some Deobandi ulema wrote or said. Beyond that, ideologies of Islamic groups doing political struggle, such as [the Pakistan-based] Jamaat-e Islami, were classified as unorthodox." Thus in the 1990s the Taliban took a harsh view towards groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami.*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Strictly speaking, we should say that the Iraq war, and the 9-11 attacks, popularised a latent discourse in a fringe element of the Islamist movement.

¹¹⁶ The suicide bomb tactic was controversial among the Taliban leadership, however. See below.

¹¹⁷ Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, 'Taliban Views on a Future State,' Center on International Cooperation, New York University, 2017.

Almost no members of the Islamic Emirate leadership apart from the supreme court and *ulema* council had completed their madrassa educations; mullah Muhammad Omar had never properly earned the title *mullah*, while those who briefly attended Pakistan-based seminaries like Mawlawi Muhammad Wali, chief of the religious police, had their studies cut short by the emergence of the Taliban. This, and the generally cloistered nature of pre-2001 Afghanistan, meant that Taliban had little exposure to other forms of Islamism or other interpretations of Islam. The study continues:

*[A Pakistan-based insurgent leader] explained some of the factors behind the evolution: "This is partly due to the embracing [by many Taliban] of information technology and the free media. Now, most of the educated members of the movement read, hear and discuss about the plights of Hamas and of the Muslim Brotherhood; and the statements of Munawwar Hassan [leader of Jamaat-e Islami 2013-14] and ideas of Qaradawi, Zakir Naik [Indian comparative religion scholar and orator] and even Salafi and Sunni Iranian scholars. The circulation of the diverse ideas is made possible by CDs, televisions, newspapers and internet." He said those in Pakistan, whether they were there for a winter recess or based permanently, had much better access to the media outlets, books, and the internet, and had more time for ideological discussions, which has inevitably opened them up to the non-Deobandi schools of thoughts.*¹¹⁸

During the Islamic Emirate, books based on non-Hanafi jurisprudence were banned; in today's insurgency religious reasoning draws from a variety of schools.¹¹⁹ The following is from a series of guidelines for proper conduct in jihad:

Seeking infidels' help during jihad:

In the renowned books "Fateh al Qadeer, 4/327, Kashaf al Qinaa 3/48 and Ibn al Aabdeen 3/235" Hanafi and Hanbali scholars have mentioned that when it is necessary during a war the seeking help from non-Muslims is permissible. The scholars of Shafi'i school put some conditions for seeking this kind of assistance. They say that the Muslim leader must be satisfied that the infidels will not deceive them. Second that the Muslims must maintain sufficient power. In case the assisting infidels join the enemy lines the Muslims must be able to maintain the balance of power and carry on their resistance. The scholars of Maliki school also

¹¹⁸ Osman and Gopal, Taliban Views, [see FN 119].

¹¹⁹ Despite the ban, influential individuals sometimes cited Hanbali scholars in public pronouncements, although this was rare.

*consider that seeking help from non-Muslims is permissible provided they consent.*¹²⁰

Although Shafii and Hanafi scholars offer different guidelines on the question, the authors do not instruct the reader on which to follow or which is permissible, suggesting that individuals are free to choose. The majority of the jihad guidelines are presented in this way, drawing from a number of schools.¹²¹

Whereas the movement had once banned books by Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood, it now actively promoted works from these sources and regularly defended Islamist groups within the general context of anti-Imperialism. Issues such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine, to which they had previously paid little more than perfunctory notice, now became part of a general *kufr*-Muslim struggle that the Taleban saw themselves as part of.¹²² Following the Muslim Brotherhood electoral victory in Egypt, for example, an official Taleban statement declared:

*Egypt has a pivotal role in the Middle East and the election of Dr. Muhammad Mursi, the candidate of the Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen [Muslim Brotherhood] as the president is a great change on the Middle Eastern level and generally on the international level which carry the hopes of positive changes for the Islamic Emirate. The success of the Islamic Government in Egypt is considered to be the strongest blow in the Middle East and the whole world to the American and Zionist expansionism. May the Muslim Nation of Egypt and their newly elected government take good advantage of this important occasion and historical victory in the defense and achievement of the interests of the Islamic Ummah.*¹²³

¹²⁰ Abu Mohammad Haqqani, 'Requesting Help from infidels for the sake of jihad,' *Taliban jihad portal*, 11 April 2014. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹²¹ This may be borne out of necessity, as the Taleban insurgency contains a small number of foreigners in its ranks.

¹²² Al-Somood magazine frequently publishes articles relating to Palestine. See, for example, the article entitled 'What is happening to Al-Aqsa?' published on 19 January 2007, or the editorial entitled 'Support of the Palestinian cause is a religious duty and an Islamic responsibility' published on 28 December 2008.

¹²³ 'Declaration of the Islamic Emirate Regarding the Success of the Candidate of the 'Ikhwan ul-Muslimeen'' Alrahmah.com, 30 June 2012, <http://www.arahmah.com/read/2012/06/30/21311-declaration-of-the-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-success-of-the-candidate-of-the-ikhwan-ul-muslimeen.html>. That the Taleban saw themselves within the broader context of Western domination and Islamist resistance does not mean, however, that their

The Consequences of Islamism

With Islamic sovereignty moving to the forefront of the Taleban's preoccupations, a series of ideological transformations took place that would carry the group closer to the world of modern Islamism. To be sure, these transformations are uneven within the movement—particularly when considering the differences between rank-and-file and the leadership. Moreover, these transformations are nowhere near complete. In this sense, the transformations we explore below describe the *trajectory* of the evolution in the Taleban's thinking, and is not meant to suggest a completed or homogenous process.

The ideological evolution becomes clear when analysing the Taleban's evolution with respect to the three components of its programme outlined above: epistemological, disciplinary and strategic. Recall that in pre-2001 Taleban epistemology, the outward state, the act, constituted the inner belief. In the insurgency, inner belief and intentionality took overwhelming importance: for example, an editorial entitled "The Importance of Intention in Jihad" stated

*In jihad for the right reasons, for the pure of heart. The purpose of actions is for the higher moral target of jihad...If someone wants to join jihad with ill intentions it means his struggle is not for the sake of Almighty Allah, but he is fighting for the sake of plunder, glory and revenge. He will achieve the worldly gains but he will not receive any moral reward in the life after death.*¹²⁴

In emphasising the intent over the act, certain activities that had been prominently banned under the Emirate could be re-examined—such as photography or moving images, where the artists' intent (as expressed through its content) now determined whether the material was permitted or proscribed. The shift was a way to endow meaning to the pragmatic adaptation to the need for recruitment: The insurgency regularly uses video in its propaganda, and it has no compunctions against publishing photographs of its fighters. In fact, the movement has taken pains to try to rewrite its past history to keep in line with this new state of affairs. *Al-Somood*, the group's flagship publication, offered this revisionist account as an explanation for the television ban on the 1990s:

strategic orientation was international. As we will see below, unlike al Qaeda and other transnational Islamist groups, the Taleban defended a form of Islamic nationalism.

¹²⁴ Mawlawi Ahmad Gul Rayyan, 'The Importance of Intention in Jihad,' *Taliban Jihad portal*, 3 January 2015. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

*In regard to the non-existence of television channels, it was due to many problems and crises that prevented the opening of such channels at the time. There was for example the jurisprudential dispute between the scholars of the region and the unavailability of specialists and technicians, because the Taliban – as we have previously mentioned – was composed of students from schools located in the sub-continent, and these schools did not teach the needed subjects. Therefore, the students did not have any media background and did not know how to produce TV shows, not to mention the lack of tools and equipment used by television networks. In the meantime, the world was not helping the Islamic Emirate at this level, rather placing obstacles to prevent its progress and keep it in the corner, far away from the world, in the hope that these difficulties and this isolation will push it to abandon its Islamic roots and its rulings that are drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunna. Apart from that, the Islamic Emirate regulations stress the importance of the media and its efficient role in spreading Islam, serving the communities and building a great Islamic edifice. However, the circumstances made it focus on the available means, as it could not open or equip international channels, such as television among others, in order to air its shows.*¹²⁵

During the creation of the Emirate, the Taleban determined whether an individual adhered to Islam by judging his or her outward behaviour—beginning with the person's role in the jihad and civil war, but more generally with the set of signifiers that linked the outer to the inner: grooming, adherence to prayer schedules and so on. This meant that these signifiers became, in effect, proxies for political allegiance to the regime, and as such they became objects of discipline. After 2001, however, such signifiers were insufficient to establish political allegiance—and therefore, in Taleban eyes, insufficient to demonstrate virtue.¹²⁶ In southern Afghanistan,

¹²⁵ Shahabuddin Ghaznawi, 'Correcting the Concepts,' *Al-Somood*(19), 7 February 2008. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹²⁶ Like the other ideological changes, the roots of this shift lie in the Islamic Emirate period, although it took the shock of the post-2001 years for the tendency to reach full expression. A 2000 book published by the Pakistani cleric Mufti Rasheed (head of the Rasheed trust), which was reportedly favoured by mullah Muhammad Omar, contained the following: "Obey the amir. Do hijrat and do jihad in the path of god. He who strays from the congregation/community even the distance of a hand-span, he has cast off the yoke of Islam from his neck until such time as he having repented returns. And he who has raised the slogans of barbarism, for example tribalism or factionalism, then he is from the

local elites who sided with the Americans or the new regime adhered to the very same outward signifiers as those in opposition. In this context, the subject of Taleban discipline shifted from the outer to the inner—to political allegiance as an internal state, a form of Islamic belief. The following is from a question-answer forum on the Taleban website with a spokesman:

[Question]: The Taleban's treatment of civil-service government employees in Wardak province is very bad; they address them with the title 'infidel.' Mr. Mujahed, in your opinion, is this kind of treatment not against humanitarian and Islamic principles? Looking forward to your reply - Hamdard Wardak

[Answer]: Dear brother, all those people who serve in the present government are in fact active against our religion, people, values and national interests. As a result of their work and employment the duration of occupation prolongs further and benefit the foreign invaders. For this very reason their salaries are paid by the budget of the foreign invaders. The foreigners are not insane to give money to someone without any objectives. In fact they want to achieve their negative objectives. All the senior and junior employees have been appointed by the foreigners. So these people are unforgivable whether they work in one particular branch of Kabul administration. You also must not plead their case. However, as usual the mujahidin [the Taleban] are busy in fight against the armed forces, they don't bother to waste their time and take action against the civilian employees. But it does not mean that these civil employees are innocent. As the prophet of Islam says: when someone increase the number a particular group he is counted part of it.

*In the light of the aforementioned Hadith, if someone works with Kabul administration or directly with the occupying forces, in fact he increase the number of the enemies of Islam and country. So by default he is also reckoned to be an enemy. I hope you will not seek innocence for this kind of people.*¹²⁷

Civil-service employees were judged to be working "against Islam" by sole virtue of the fact of their employment with a state backed by foreigners. Of course, even under the Islamic Emirate politically

groups going to hell. Someone asked, *Even if he is attentive to his prayers and fasting?* A Reply: *Even so he will be from the groups going to hell*" emphasis added. From Obedience to the Amir: Exploration of an early text on the Afghan Taliban by Mufti Rasheed,' translated and edited by Michael Semple and Yameema Mitha, Berlin, First Draft Publishing 2016.

¹²⁷ Taliban Question and Answer Online Forum, 7 April 2012. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

opposing the Taleban could mean death, but the group also dealt with uprisings in Khost and elsewhere through concessions (in Pashtun areas, at least). Rather, resistance was greatest in areas most dissimilar to the southern Pashtun countryside, so disciplining outward behaviour and appearance—that is, punishing those practices most dissimilar to ‘authentic Islam’ of the Pashtun village—became (from the Taleban’s view) the most effective form of population control. Now, with the object of Taleban discipline shifted inwards, their repressive reach went much further—countless *ulema* and tribal elders have been assassinated by the Taleban for the sole reason that they politically supported the government, even if they did not draw an official pay check or have a civil service job. Virtue here is almost completely decoupled from any outward signifier, and instead is linked to political allegiance and other “matters of the heart.”

Figure 8 lists local notables—*khans*, *maleks* and tribal elders—from Dehrawud and Maiwand districts who have been assassinated by the insurgency since 2001. Many were killed because of their membership on the government-sanctioned district shura, but some lost their lives simply for having met government officials or having cordial relations with them. To take one example, Muhammad Faqir, a prominent Nurzai elder from the Garmabak region of Maiwand, had been a sub-commander of the key Taleban financier Haji Bashar. As such, he was a prominent local supporter of the Islamic Emirate. After 2001, when the US and Kandahar government drove Haji Bashar from Maiwand, Faqir Muhammad retired to his home. By many accounts he was a pious man, an image befitting his role as prominent *mujahed* and Taleban supporter. But he took to informally meeting with government officials and soon lost his life because of it.

At its extreme, this ideology verges on *takfirism*, the labelling of other Muslims with the wrong political loyalties as apostates. This was the case even if those Muslims openly profess their faith in Islam, and therefore religiously sanctioned to kill them, as the following excerpt from a Taleban article suggests:

The unworthy lady, Fatima Gilani, divorced two husbands and now lives with her third husband, Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi, who is an American citizen. How is it possible for Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi, the chairman of Afghanistan Bank, to trust this lady who has exchanged her piety for secularism and is also the holder of American citizenship? If tomorrow she is fed up with Ahadi she will easily get divorce from him too. This lady, who has disregarded her spiritual position, is the cause of

*evil deeds. If she claims that she divorced her former husband because he had become an apostate, we will not give any value to this claim of her. Rather we believe that Fatima and Ahadi both are apostates, because both of them are included in the American loyalty list [emphasis added].*¹²⁸

The new epistemology is linked to the disciplinary programme through a strategy—but it is not the Minimax approach of old. Instead, the group decrees actions and objects as *haram* or *halal* solely with respect to whether they aid the fight against the Americans and the Afghan government. This is reminiscent of Olivier Roy’s conceptualisation of modernist political Islam, in which Islamists used relevant passages from the Quran and the hadiths to imbue their political ambitions with meaning.¹²⁹ For example, after Iraqi insurgents’ successful use of suicide bombing, the practice began spreading to Afghanistan. At first, the issue proved contentious among Taleban leadership. Mullah Muhammad Omar was reportedly initially opposed, and Islam contains prohibitions against suicide. But others, including prominent commander mullah Dadullah, defended the tactic as crucial in a fight in which their side was clearly outgunned. Eventually, the movement made virtue of necessity, going so far as to attack government-backed *ulema* who opposed the tactic on religious grounds. It was not long before the Taleban’s *ulema* council issued a fatwa declaring that “there are frequent proofs in favour of martyrdom attacks in the Holy Quran, traditions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), [and] sayings and deeds of the holy companions. Various books have been written on this topic.”¹³⁰ The statement goes on to cite a number scholars from the Arab world, from hardline Salafists to Yusuf Qaradawi—whose books the Taleban government had banned in the 1990s. The evidence itself was often flimsy, with ambiguous Quranic passages pressed into service to justify a stance borne of the exigencies of asymmetric conflict: *Abu Dardaa tells that the Prophet said, “Allah loves three kind of persons and gives them the auger of success. First: when someone’s comrades flee the battle but he stays back and continues to fight against the enemy. Allah will help and protect him from the*

¹²⁸ Tor Luwang Suleimankhel, ‘Woman in Islam,’ *Da Mujahed Zhag*, 1383 (2), 17 June 2004. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹²⁹ We do not mean to imply that Taleban strategies for regaining power exist independently of religious reasoning. Rather, it is the case that *whichtypes* of religious reasoning the Taleban used was dependent on its political goals.

¹³⁰ *Ittehad Ulema Afghanistan*, Fatwa, 7 July 2013. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

enemy, or he will become a martyr. All will admire his patience. Second: Suppose a man has a beautiful wife and a comfortable bed, but in the middle of the night he gets up and worships Allah and does not bother about lust and sleeping. Third: Suppose there is a man who travels with a group of other travellers, and after covering a long distance

Explanation

The above mentioned three points prove that the loss of life is the best part of jihad.¹³¹

To be sure, some of the new modes of thought have antecedents in Afghan history. The Taleban came close to labelling political opponents as

		Tribe	Islamic Emirate allegiance	Post-2001 activities
Deh Rawud	Malek Abdullah Jan	Nurzai	Neutral	District Shura
	Majeed	Nurzai	Neutral	Met with government
	Hajji Janan Aka	Nurzai	Neutral	Met with government
	Malek Ismail	Nurzai	Neutral	District Shura
	Malek Jilani	Nurzai	Neutral	District Shura
	Muhammad Akbar Khan	Nurzai	Neutral	District Shura
	Hamkar	Nurzai	Neutral	ANP
	Mamoor Mir Jan	Babozai	Opposed	District Government
	Hajji Payind Aka	Nurzai	Supported, then opposed	District Shura
	Malek Kalandar Aka	Nurzai	Opposed	District Shura
	Hajji Bahadar	Popalzai	Opposed	District Shura
	Hajji Ahmad Khan	Popalzai	Supporter	District Shura
	Hajji Muhammad Naeem Aka	Popalzai	Supporter	District Shura
	Malek Bari Gul	Nurzai	Neutral	Met with government
Maiwand	Hajji Sanam Gul	Ishaqzai	Supporter	District Shura
	Hajji Landu	Nurzai	Neutral	District Shura
	Agha Shah	Barakzai	Opposed	Sherzai Militia
	Hajji Abdul Wali	Achekzai	Opposed	Sherzai Militia
	Khiru Aka	Nurzai	Neutral	Met with government
	Muhammad Faqir	Nurzai	Supporter	Met with government

Figure 8: Local elites killed by Taleban, 2001-14, Deh Rawud and Maiwand

they find a place and sleep. But while the rest are asleep he gets up and worships Allah in the later part of the night.

apostates, for example, when they branded their Northern Alliance opponents “sharwafisad” (evil and corruption); and in the 1980s jihad, mujahedin

¹³¹ Abu Abdullah Mukhlis, ‘Suicidal attacks and Sharia (part 2),’ *Taliban Jihad portal*, 2 November 2014. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

groups across the spectrum had labelled Afghan Muslims who worked with the Soviet army or the government (such as Afghan army recruits) as apostates.¹³² Certainly, the taleban fronts of the 1980s would have agreed with this characterisation, but it was not at that time the key factor configuring taleban self-identity; instead, it was the fronts' roles as islands of tradition in a sea of upheaval, where young taleban continued their studies while spending time in the trenches, that proved to be essential to the notion of a taleb. But today's fighters look very different from their predecessors. Gone are the days of enforced asceticism and ritual purity on the frontline—the involvement with criminal networks, the opium trade, extortion and kidnapping that marks the current insurgency would have been unthinkable in the self-disciplined 1980s taleban fronts. To be a member of a taleban front at that time meant a commitment to study alongside jihad; even unschooled and illiterate *mujahedin* received instruction when joining the taleban ranks. Mullah Za'if writes of the taleban fronts:

*I would learn from my instructor and I would teach others the basics of reading and writing. We all studied, and so I was able to continue my religious education. People who did not want to study went to fight under other commanders. Not all the fronts worked this in this manner, but we were Taliban and this was our way. We wanted to stay clean, to avoid sinning, and to regulate our behaviour.*¹³³

By contrast, in today's "Taleban fronts"—local insurgent groups fighting under the Taleban banner—fighters do not engage in study, and very often they do not have religious education at all. In Michael Semple's study of the rhetoric and organisation of the Taleban insurgency, he found that about a quarter of Taleban shadow governors at a particular moment lacked a religious education.¹³⁴ This too would have been unthinkable during the Emirate, where there is no record of a provincial-level figure without some level of religious training. The trend undoubtedly intensifies as one goes further down the ranks; in a 14-man Kandahar-based Taleban unit (a *delgai*) that one of the authors met with in 2008, only one individual had religious training.

Islamist Nationalism

In recent years, the Taleban has tried to distance itself from its most notorious practices of the 1990s. The following example is from the question forum on the Taleban website:

[Question]: My question is that if the Islamic Emirate once again forms its government in Afghanistan, will it revive the department of vice and virtue? If yes, will it again implement its orders by force?

Regards. Long live the mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate!

*[Answer]: Peace be upon you! The Islamic government will form the country with all its essential departments. The department of vice and virtue is an essential part of an Islamic government and it is obligatory on all Muslims to follow its instructions. However, this time its procedures and methods will completely reviewed. In a softer way the people will persuaded towards the establishment of virtue and likewise they will prevented from vice with wisdom. In this connection the use of unnecessary force will be avoided.*¹³⁵

Similarly, a study of the Taleban leadership contains the following interview excerpt:

*I met [ex-Minister of Justice Nuruddin] Turabi in Pakistan last year. He was wittily making fun of his past extreme behaviors. In retrospect of practices such as stopping people in public to check their beard for trimming and violently crushing music tape cassettes on streets of Kabul, Turabi asked: 'wasn't it so dumb of us to engage in such trivial acts?' I was amazed how he had realised his mistakes [given his character as a stubborn person in the past]. He said the prison [for several years in Pakistan] taught him a lot about the erroneous behaviors of the Taliban and made him realize the extreme harsh practices were not only in accordance to Sharia, but also the main source of people's negative perception of the Emirate.*¹³⁶

¹³² United Nations. *Mapping Report*. Online, 2010, 172-6. <http://www.flagrancy.net/salvage/UNMappingReportAfghanistan.pdf>.

¹³³ Zaeef, *My Life*, 27, [see FN 6].

¹³⁴ Michael Semple, 'Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement,' United States Institute of Peace, *Peaceworks* No. 102, 2014.

¹³⁵ Taliban Question and Answer Online Forum (4 April 2012). [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹³⁶ Osman and Gopal, *Taliban Views*, [see FN 118].

In the same vein, the new epistemology and its associated disciplinary strategies have recast the controversial objects of years past; there do not appear to be significant attempts to enforce a particular authentic tradition (Islam of the

To say all this is not to claim that the Taleban have grown less authoritarian or repressive, however.

Rather, to speak of the Taleban's journey from traditionalism towards a form of modernist

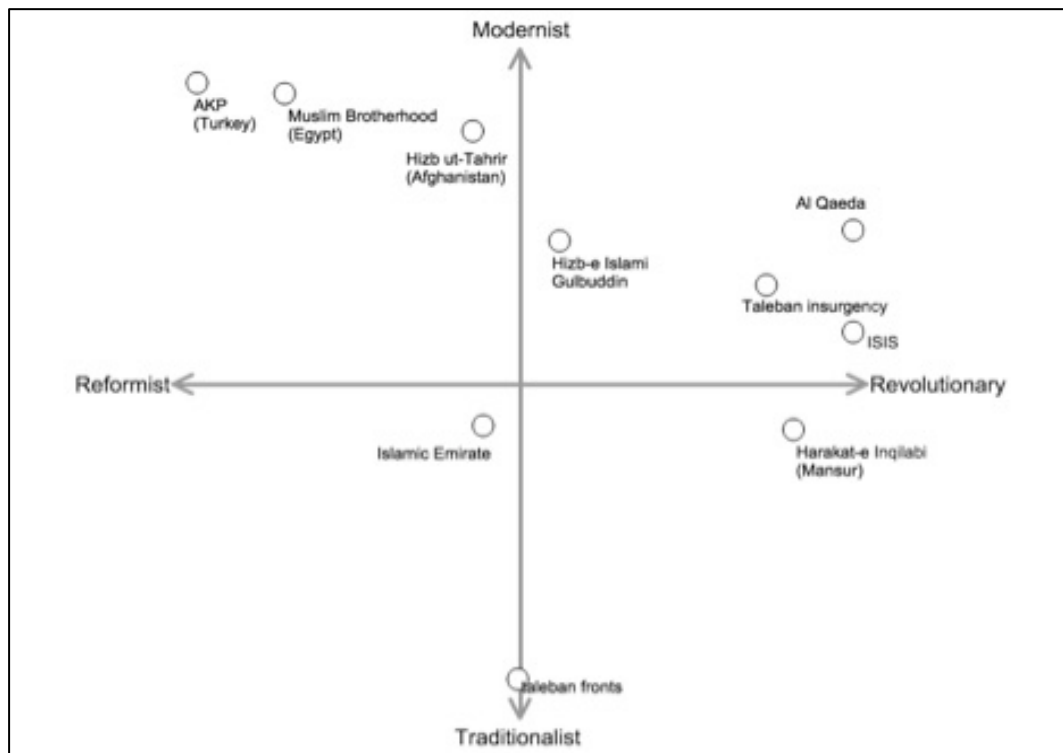


Figure 9: Ideological variations among different groups

southern Pashtun village) on other communities, which accounts for the remarkably varied experience of Taleban discipline in this regard countrywide; when one of the authors visited insurgent-held villages in Wardak province in 2008, for example, the majority of Taleban kept short beards or none at all, and prayer schedules were irregular.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Antonio Giustozzi, *Nation-Building Is Not For All: The Politics of Education in Afghanistan*, Kabul, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/AAN-Politics-of-Education.pdf>; Antonio Giustozzi, and Claudio Franco, *The Ongoing Battle for Education: Uprisings, Negotiations and Taleban Tactics*, 2013, Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/20130610_AAN_Taleban_and_Schools_FINAL.pdf; Michael Semple, Theo Farrell, Anatol Lieven and Rudra Chaudhuri, *Taleban Perspectives on Reconciliation*, London, Royal United Services Institute, 2012, https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Taleban_Perspectives_on_Reconciliation.pdf.

Islamism is to highlight the changing ways in which a Taleb imagines himself and Islam in relation to power. The group's widely-noted conservatism has not diminished; rather, the shift lies in the ways this conservatism is expressed and in the displacement of the very object of discipline. It suggests a change from punctilious attention of outward actions to directly regulating the inner moral life of Afghans. In most cases, this collapses to standard cultural conservatism. Whereas before, the Taleban banned television *en toto*, now they expend much effort decrying the specific content of television and advocating that the medium be put to proper Islamic usage. Thus when the following *al-Somood* editorial lambasts Western influences in television, it sounds reminiscent of cultural conservatism the world over, Islamic or otherwise:

[A]mong the social repercussions is the public display of prohibited acts without any regard for whether or not the others are looking and can see what the person is doing. This phenomenon is increasing by the day and whoever is close to the youth can detect it first-hand. Indeed, the signs are seen on various levels, since the youth are

*becoming accustomed to smoking cigarettes because they are seeing that on TV. Moreover, deviant trends and behaviours are starting to emerge in the way they dress, and you will also notice their inclination to have prohibited relations. They are thus establishing companies to catch whoever they can and practice obscene activities, thus emulating the hundreds of scenes they have been watching and have made them constantly aroused and seeking their pleasure by any means necessary.*¹³⁸

This all suggests that the standard metrics for mapping Islamic movements is inadequate. Instead of the usual conception of a single axis which ranges from “extremist” to “moderate,” or “fundamentalist” to “modernist,” it is perhaps better to reconceptualise Islamic politics along two dimensions. Figure 9 is a schematic, rough first attempt to map groups along these axes.

Revolutionary groups seek to overthrow the existing order, while reformist groups aim to gradually transform the state (and society) through capturing its institutions through elections or other peaceful means. The Taleban movement is not likely to remain stationary on this map, because tendencies within the organisation can exert a pull to keep it within the revolutionary camp or gradually move it to the reformist camp (which is, in the current context, a reality only in the event of a negotiated settlement).

Even in such an event, however, revolutionary Islamism does not necessarily mean transnational jihad. In fact, what continues to unite all wings of the Taleban movement is a commitment to Afghan sovereignty—which is, in effect, a form of nationalism.

There are three important features of the Taleban’s nationalism. First, their particular form of Islamist nationalism might seem like a contradiction in terms because nationalism is normally a secular phenomenon. However, as William Cavanaugh and others have pointed out, the distinction between the secular and the religious is a modern western one, and in secular countries, nationalism takes on functions previously performed by religion, for it enables “a country’s citizens to inscribe their existence in a totality that transcends them”—a timeless nation, an imagined community of shared practices and origin.¹³⁹ Afghanistan, like all nations, is a modern

¹³⁸ Zubair Safi, ‘The American intellectual invasion of Afghan society and its devastating impact,’ *Al-Somood*, 28 November 2008. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹³⁹ Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory*, London, Verso 2013. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular*

invention, but it is imagined by the Taleban and others as extending into the distant past, tested time and again by various invaders.

The Taleban reject the validity of non-Sharia-based normative systems, but have not rejected coexistence with those systems in the international state system. For example, in a 2009 statement addressed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a body led by China and Russia, the group said:

*The IEA wants to have good and positive relations with all neighbours based on mutual respect, and to open a new chapter of good neighbourliness of mutual cooperation and economic development... The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as per its peaceful policy, wants constructive interaction with Shanghai forum members, for permanent stability and economic development in the region on the basis of mutual respect.*¹⁴⁰

It is instructive to compare this sort of Islamist nationalism to a group like the Islamic State. Even if such statements were mere rhetoric, the fact that the Taleban seek to portray themselves in this way is a stark difference with the IS, who openly flout the international order, broadcasting their crimes and denouncing all nation states. The Taleban has never carried out an attack outside its borders. In comparison, the Islamic State rejects the current international order, particularly the Sykes-Picot partitioning of the Middle East and the prospect of coexistence with non-sharia normative frameworks.

The Taleban’s imagined community is limited to Afghans. Although the group literature frequently mentions the *umma* (the global community of Muslims), in practice, the group is only concerned with events inside Afghanistan. The roots of this phenomenon in fact date to the inception of the Islamic Emirate and the demands of running a national state and have developed to their full expression in the current insurgency period. Consider the following decree from mullah Muhammad Omar in 2000:

Peace and blessings be upon you! Since the last more than six years the Islamic Emirate has ordered the faithful people of the country to grow their beards according to the way the Prophet. Though, most of the righteous people have grown their beards in accordance with Shari’s, unfortunately a minority of people are still being

Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Open Letter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the Shanghai Summit,’ www.shahamat-english.com, 14 October 2009 (author’s copy).

witnessed in towns and villages who trim their beards and on many occasion even argue with the personnel of vice and virtue department. Inside the country the Emirate's officials are responsible not to settle at all, except in some very exceptional circumstance, the matters of those who have trimmed their beards against the way of Shari'a, so as all the people grow their beards properly then our Sharia responsibility will be fulfilled. However, foreigners, even Muslims, are exempted of this order.¹⁴¹ [Emphasis added]

In the current period, insurgent propaganda often emphasises patriotism and nationalist credentials. Here is an official Taleban response to charges that the movement is too close to Pakistan:

*I want to appeal to all the sensible Afghans not to pay any attention to this kind of propaganda. The Taliban is a patriotic, independent movement and loves sovereignty. They have their own free Islamic ideology. It is a mistake to think otherwise about the Taliban. The Taliban must be completely understood. Their spirit for the pursuit of freedom must be comprehended.*¹⁴²

Official propaganda goes to great lengths to portray the movement as national:

Brother, we should try to make a unity among all sections of our nations for the sake of an Islamic system and our national interest. Like in the past, today also every ethnic groups participate in the ongoing jihad. We are witness to the Mujahidin attacks which take place in the east, west, north and south of the country. All ethnic groups of the nation participate in these operations. In Sar e Pul, Jozjan, Samangan and Faryab despite all problems and difficulties, our Uzbek and Turkmen brothers shoulder to shoulder with their Pashtun brothers take part in Jihad. They have offered a lot of sacrifices. Time and again they participate in suicidal attacks. In Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz and Baghlan our Tajik brothers together with their Pashtun brothers participate in the process of Jihad. Despite all their local problems and difficulties they offer so many sacrifices. Our Hazara brothers too, in accordance to their capacity, despite all local problems, participate in Jihad in the provinces of Bamyan and Herat and other areas. I don't think that Jihad is waged only by one particular ethnic group, though most of most of the operations take place in Pashtun populated areas, because of the presence of better

¹⁴¹ Mullah Muhammad Omar, 'The Ordinance of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about the ban on the settlement of trimmed beards,' *Rasm Ijarida*, 9 February 2001 [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹⁴² Taliban Question and Answer Online Forum, 27 January 2012. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

*circumstances for Jihad in these areas. Hopefully the whole nation will participate in our Jihad. All the people will come forward to support their brother in the fight against the common enemy.*¹⁴³

The Islamic State's imagined community, on the other hand, is the entire (Sunni) *umma*, and its goal is to recreate a caliphate that explicitly rejects the Westphalian order, and with it, any national identity. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claims the mantle of *amir ul-mumenin*, he does so as purported leader of the world's Sunnis. Compare the following exchange in 1996, in an Arabic publication:

[Al Majallah]: You appointed Mohammad Omar as amir of the believers. Is this only for Afghanistan or for all Muslims?

*[Foreign Minister Mullah Muttawakkil]: This is only for Afghanistan.*¹⁴⁴

From the Emirate onwards, only the virtue of Afghans was a legitimate object of discipline. After 2001, when discipline turned inwards, it was the loyalty of Afghans that was under scrutiny. Thus the object of the Taleban's political aims, and the subject of their imagined community, is all Afghans, regardless of tribe or ethnicity.

The second important feature of the Taleban's Islamic nationalism is that it is distinct from Pashtun nationalism. The latter is a secular and largely urban phenomenon that is explicitly ethnocentric. Pashtun nationalism today is weak in Afghanistan and has a stronger expression across the border in Pakistan. The Taleban's Islamic nationalism bears a stronger similarity to that of Hamas in Palestine or Ahrar al-Sham in Syria—both of which are focused on the goal of 'national liberation'—than it does to any ideology in Afghanistan.

Third, the Taleban's nationalism is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, it is perhaps the most potent nationalist ideology on offer in Afghanistan at the moment. On the other, it is constrained by the extremely weak formal institutions that mark Afghan politics. Due to institutional underdevelopment and failures in state building, Afghanistan largely lacks formalised political parties of the type that exist in the West. Instead, Afghan politics is marked by "neopatrimonialism," which Africanist Christopher Clapham aptly describes as "a form of organisation

¹⁴³ Taliban Question and Answer Online Forum, 21 March 2012. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹⁴⁴ BBC Monitoring, 'London Arabic magazine interviews Taleban spokesman on aims, philosophy,' (Al-Majallah, 23 October 1996. (Authors' copy).

in which relationships of a broadly patrimonial type [i.e., patron-client based] pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines."¹⁴⁵ This means that, whatever the intentions of political actors might be, the institutional poverty of the Afghan political scene forces individuals to rely on patronage and trust as the means through which solidarity is achieved. Therefore, despite Taleban aspirations for a national movement, Taleban solidarity *in practice* is mediated by kinship, clientship, tribe and personal loyalties (so-called *andiwāl* networks). (This is not limited to the Taleban, but the case for Afghans, generally.) Moreover, the ruinous consequences of the US occupation and war have been limited (largely) to Pashtun communities. These two facts together explain why, despite the Taleban's imagined solidarity encompassing all Afghans, it is still the case that most Taleban are Pashtuns, and most Taleban leaders hail from southern Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

If and when US troops depart, it would seem that one of the key planks of Taleban ideology—reclaiming Afghan sovereignty—should dissolve. Yet over the years the Taleban have proven remarkably adaptable to the changing circumstances, and the same underlying logic that drove their transformation to Islamism—the exigencies of seeking and holding power—will continue to operate.

This view fits within the Taleban's preoccupation with the "near enemy" (a standard term used by Islamists around the world) that they have developed over the past decade. Taleban *ulema* have declared Afghanistan *dar ul-harb*, or "house of war," a hadithic term referring to a territory where Muslims are unable to practice openly. Most Islamic scholars have interpreted the phrase to mean a country where Muslims are oppressed and cannot pray or celebrate Eid openly, but Salafist interpretations go much further by pinning the designation on the *political* nature of the regime in power. For many Salafists, such a regime could be Muslim in all formal aspects—that is, by outward appearance, by its adherence to Islamic ritualistic norms—but based on its *political* allegiance (allies with the United States, for example) or its *political* acts (such as acts of repression), it would not be considered Islamic at all. (Notice here the parallel with the epistemology of modernist Islamism.) For this reason, some

Salafist currents even consider Saudi Arabia as *dar ul-harb* on the grounds that it is a member of the United Nations—a body that does not use sharia as a source of its guidelines—and is allied with the US. A less extreme version of Salafism admits Saudi Arabia and similar countries into *darul-Islam* but excludes countries run by rulers who, in the Salafists' view, are Muslim in name only—like the late Qaddafi's Libya. The Taleban's use of the term is similar to the latter interpretation; one editorial in *De Mujahed Ghag* (The Voice of the Mujahed) stated:

*In fact Afghanistan is a dar ul-harb because the whole administration is in the hands of the infidels... you must have heard from radios and sources of mass media that the Khalq and Parcham parties of Uloomi and Jalili have been registered by the Ministry of Justice. The members of these parties are explicitly infidels. They are the killers of one and half million martyrs. How can we call this an Islamic government?*¹⁴⁶

Justifications of Afghanistan as *dar ul-harb* in the Taleban propaganda go beyond the question of troop presence, which suggests one implication of this view: the Kabul regime can remain a 'puppet state' long after the puppet master's troops have departed. Therefore, Taleban ideology is ready and capable of accommodating the fight in the case of an actual withdrawal.

Nonetheless, the shifts in the Taleban's ideology over the past two decades do allow for tentative steps towards engagement. Their de-emphasising of certain norms of the southern Pashtun village and the displacement of the object of discipline to interior life means that some of the most notorious practices of the Islamic Emirate are unlikely to be repeated. These include the deployment of aggressive religious police, the curtailing of television and film or the enforcement of certain aspects of personal appearance. Moreover, with the Minimax principle no longer guiding Taleban decision-making, it is unlikely that shock-therapy approaches like banning all female education or proscribing games would ever make a comeback. In fact, Taleban efforts to support girls' religious education have increased in recent years, and more generally, attacks on educational facilities have declined.¹⁴⁷ It is unlikely that the Taleban will ever again attempt to force the entire country to follow, in excruciating detail, the normative

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction*, University of Wisconsin Press 1985, 48.

¹⁴⁶ Author unknown (2004), 'A Question and a Decree,' *Da Mujahed Zhag*, 1383 (3), July 18. [Taliban Sources Project archive].

¹⁴⁷ See Giustozzi and Franco, 'The Ongoing Battle for Education,' [see FN 139].

framework of Islam as it is found in the southern Pashtun village.

On the other hand, the Taleban's current manifestation as an Islamist organisation means that there is little hope that it would ever respect individual liberties or the rights of women—if only because few Islamist groups ever do. With the decline in the formalistic aspects of Taleban discipline, the group may no longer stand out as appearing uniquely oppressive towards women and may simply blend into the panoply of authoritarian, anti-women's rights forces in Afghanistan, from elements of the Afghan government to the old mujahedin commanders to tribal leaders in the countryside. In the end, the best hope may be that changes in the Taleban make it possible, in the event of a negotiated settlement, for the group to evolve into a direction that can peacefully coexist with more liberal forces. But the challenges ahead mean that such a day is still far from reality.

In the end, the three overarching themes of this study can help serve as guideposts in future attempts to make sense of, and possibly reconcile with, the insurgency. The first theme is that, despite attempts by political opponents and detractors to paint the group as a foreign phenomenon, the Taleban movement is ultimately an Afghan phenomenon. This is reflected in the local roots of its belief system: nearly all the practices that have brought the Taleban such ill repute have antecedents in Afghan history. The Taleban's worldview is that of an Islam as it was practiced and idealised in the southern Pashtun village, albeit one that was amplified and standardised through a decade of horrific Soviet repression and cynical US and Pakistani manipulation through patronage of the Islamist mujahedin. The Taleban belief system is rooted in one among many competing normative frameworks that are genuine and authentic to local tradition, from tribal to urban to the many subcultures found throughout this remarkably diverse country—each of which is as quintessentially Afghan as the next.

Second, Taleban ideology (like any ideology) is not fixed, but a living and breathing set of practices and mental schemas that are in constant interaction with the social and political environment. Thus the Taleban no longer adhere strictly or obsessively to the conception of Islam as found in the pre-1979 southern Pashtun village—their views have broadened and morphed into an ideology that appears much closer, for better or worse, to mainstream Islamism (like the Palestinian Hamas or the Tunisian al-Nahda) in the Arab world.

Third, the Taleban's former traditionalist ideology, or their current Islamist ideology, is not simply a mechanical, literalist take on Islam that is advocated unthinkingly by zealous ideologues. Rather, it is the result of a sophisticated internal logic, a rich epistemology that has parallels in the history of Western Christianity, which maintains that faith spreads through good deeds and proper ritual. The point of drawing attention to this internal logic is not to mitigate any aspect of the ideology—which ultimately served deeply repressive ends—but to explain why such a belief system could lay hold of the imagination of the many who formed the backbone of the Taleban movement over the years. As a phenomenon, the Taleban will remain a fixture of the scene for years to come, and coming to terms with the lessons implied by these three themes will be necessary, though perhaps far from sufficient, for helping bring the Taleban into the political process.

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