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UNPACKING THE TALIBAN: A HYBRID OF DELINQUENT SANCTIMONY

Abstract

Since its inception in 1994 as an organised group or network with a claim on rulership of the country, the Taliban has been generally described as an “Islamic movement” committed to the implementation of sharia in Afghanistan. Such description may accord well with the group’s professed objective but reveals itself reductive at best and misleading otherwise on closer scrutiny. This article argues that the “Taliban” represents a hybrid phenomenon that deploys religious and political narratives just as it deploys organised crime in pursuit of maximum power and profit.

Keywords: Taliban, Islamic movement, sharia, organised crime, terrorism

Introduction

On 31 July 2022, the United States killed Ayman al-Zawahiri in a UAV strike in an upmarket neighbourhood of Kabul where Taliban leaders and senior officials also reside, having for the most part appropriated the residences of former government’s leaders and senior officials. Zawahiri was reportedly residing at a mansion under the protection of the Taliban. He had moved there in the wake of the Taliban’s takeover of the country which happened after two decades of a hybrid campaign of unconventional violence, diplomatic acumen, and slick propaganda that the Taliban waged against the former Afghan government and its US-led international partners.

The event may have confounded anyone with the notion that the Taliban were reformed in that they would not allow “international terrorism” to find a foothold in Afghanistan. The Taliban had negotiated an agreement with the United States in the two years preceding their takeover of the country in August 2021 where they had made a range of promises. The document euphemistically named “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” provides at the very beginning for Taliban “guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.” The Taliban also undertake a potential ceasefire and negotiations with the then Afghan government in exchange for the total withdrawal of the US and allied forces from Afghanistan.²

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2 „Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, US State Department, February 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2022).

The “classified” annexes to the agreement have remained hidden from the public, but its contents could be surmised from the way the two sides have conducted business. Although the Taliban have denied the existence of secret annexes, but most probably they provide for collaboration between the two sides in eliminating the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Khurasan (ISIS-K) in Afghanistan. Hence, the United States used its military presence in subsequent months until its total withdrawal to help the Taliban with military action against the ISIS-K especially in Konar and Nangarhar provinces.

By now it seems obvious that the agreement was but a tool for the Taliban to get the United States not only to withdraw its military forces but also to take military action against the group’s local rival before leaving the country. The question is why would the United States – and other countries following its lead – find it morally acceptable or pragmatically even workable to negotiate “peace” with the Taliban, while they cannot apparently countenance the same approach with similar other extremist groups anywhere around the world? The answer may lie in how the Taliban phenomenon has been conceptualised and cast in the US -- and more generally Western -- public and policy discourse over the years.

What follows in the sections below represent an attempt to take a fresh look at the Taliban by problematising its conceptualisation and the policy prescriptions that have ensued from it. By no means does this article represent an exhaustive account of the topic, but it will have served its purpose if it were to provide indicators for further in-depth study into various aspects of the phenomenon called “Taliban”.

Religious Movement

In popular whims, the Taliban’s claim of religious legitimacy may be traced to the mystique of its origin and the circumstances under which the group allegedly took shape in Qandahar in 1994. According to the dominant narrative, Afghanistan was enduring a Hobbesian state of nature as the mujahideen factions had turned against one another in a no-holds-barred war of all against all, where alliances were made and broken almost daily, and the people suffered greatly in the hands of all. The country was divided among various “warlords”, state resources appropriated for personal and factional purposes, and foreign relations reduced to client-patron relations of the regional hegemons with their foreign benefactors.

In this narrative, Qandahar represented a particularly telling example of the state of affairs where local strongmen harassed and abused the residents. One commonly cited instance of alleged abuse proffered after the Taliban’s capture of the province in 1994 was that some local commander had used his power to betrothal a local young boy in marriage to himself and had been audacious enough to even hold a large wedding party for the occasion. Gay relations or abuse of young boys in what is known as “bacha bazi” in Afghanistan is not novel but holding a wedding party and bringing or forcing a cleric to sanctify the relationship goes beyond the

pale.

It is in this environment that the Taliban emerged, so the narrative posits, to fight the widespread corruption, conflict, and immorality that had taken hold. As the narrative goes, Mullah Mohammad Omar, a local cleric and former mujahideen fighter, had a dream in which the Prophet Mohammad instructed him to bring peace. He gathered some 50 men, executed the immoral local commander, and overrun the border town of Spin Boldak, seizing more weapons and earning revenues from transit trade.

The narrative was told in varying versions to any visitors in Kandahar at the time, which may well be more myth than history, as noted by one reporter.³ What is important, however, is that the veracity of this and other such claims was never investigated and the Taliban leader's further moves to shroud himself literally and figuratively in cloaks of legend and mystique made it even more difficult to access the truth.

By 1996, when Omar wanted to relaunch the Taliban's campaign for the capture of Kabul after a humiliating defeat of their first attempt in 1995, he used the supposed cloak of the Prophet Mohammad from the local shrine to create an aura of holiness around himself and mobilize supporters. Along with his group, he took the attire from the shrine, went atop a mosque, waved it at people, then wore it and declared himself *Amir-ul-Mumeneen* (Leader of the Faithful).⁴ Such carefully constructed mystique of holiness and legend has been a constant theme about successive Taliban leaderships, and the secrecy around it has helped to maintain it. Mullah Omar remained a "recluse" and largely inaccessible to the media and public even during the years when the group was in power. There is no footage of Mullah Omar. The only audio message attributed to him appeared in 2006, but even that was reportedly leaked and not meant for publication.⁵ In the audio, he warns that a regime supported by American troops will have no authority over the countryside and it will eventually fall, as did the former Soviet-supported regime before it. The remarks eventually proved prescient, largely due to distorted optics, wrong strategy, and ill-advised policies pursued by the United States and their allies over the years.⁶ But they also reveal Omar as mediocre with no distinction in terms of oratory skills or inspirational leadership.⁷ There is also a dreary image of a one-eyed middle-aged man in public domain, but the Taliban's media have consistently promoted another purported image of the man in younger age with stereotypical visuals of a pious Muslim radiating with glow signatures of faith and piety.⁸

3 Emily MacFarquhar, The rise of Taliban, *U.S. News & World Report*, Vol. 118, No. 9, 1995, p. 64.

4 "A Tale of the Mullah and Muhammad's Amazing Cloak", *New York Times*, December 19, 2001. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/19/international/asia/a-tale-of-the-mullah-and-muhammads-amazing-cloak.html> (accessed August 6, 2022).

5 "Profile: Mullah Mohammed Omar", *BBC News*, July 29, 2015. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13501233> (accessed August 7, 2022).

6 Ahmad Shayeq Qassem, Afghanistan: Imperatives of Stability Misperceived, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2009, pp. 247-274.

7 Hamid Mir, "Audio of Mullah Mohammad Omar", *AP Archive*, Islamabad, June 25, 2006. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVRmNm-vyRk&t=20s> (accessed August 7, 2022).

8 The notion that a pious Muslim would radiate with 'noor' or light is widespread in Afghanistan. The image of a person with clear

After the US invasion, Omar went into hiding and reportedly died of natural causes in April 2013. He allegedly plotted and led the Taliban's resurgence from his hideout, the account of which remains unverified by independent investigation. What cannot be disputed, however, is that even after Omar had died, statements and decrees were issued in his name urging the Taliban to continue their "jihad" against the Afghan government and its international supporters. The pretence continued for over two years until August 2015 when the Taliban first rejected and then admitted to the Afghan intelligence agency's announcement that Omar had died.⁹ Unsurprisingly, the Taliban issued a statement to supply purported religious legitimacy to this unprecedented feat of a deception which had sent thousands of group members and supporters to their deaths based on religious decrees issued on behalf of a deceased person. The statement said that "key members" of the Taliban leadership council and "authentic religious scholars" had decided to "keep this secret limited to the very few colleagues".¹⁰

The legend of Taliban leadership does not end with Omar's recluse and dreams. Other Taliban leaders have also used these methods and means to inspire followership, as they likely appreciate that mystery instils awe and familiarity breeds contempt in ordinary people. Omar's successors remained hidden in Pakistan until the Taliban's takeover of the government in the wake of the US withdrawal, but the current leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, who now has a known location for his office and residence in Kandahar, has continued with the tradition to remain out of public sight.

In his first known public appearance in Afghanistan and another unprecedented event in Muslim religious practice, Akhundzada hid his face and turned his back to the congregation in delivering the *Eid-ul-Fitr* sermon in Kandahar.¹¹ Two months later, he reportedly appeared in the closed gathering of Taliban clerics in Kabul and a live audio attributed to him was broadcast by the Taliban-run state media. However, no footage or image of the person was disseminated anywhere nor were other media allowed to the event, leaving the friendly media to put out the unverified and overused image of a congenial-looking bearded man on their reports as Akhundzada.¹²

Meanwhile, the tradition of using claims of personal dreams to send out key messages of legitimacy has continued among other Taliban leaders. In December 2021, as he grappled with doubts and resentment from Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and his supporters about his appointment as Taliban's prime minister, Mullah Mohammad Hasan sent out a recorded message suggesting that Prophet Mohammad

features and complexion is the usual representation of a pious person among the Afghans and Muslims in general.

9 "Taliban Admit Covering up Death of Mullah Omar", *BBC News*, August 31, 2015. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-34105565> (accessed August 7, 2022).

10 *Ibidem*.

11 "Taliban Supremo Hails 'Security' In Rare Appearance to Mark Eid", *Dawn*, May 2, 2022. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1687828> (accessed August 7, 2022)

12 "Taliban Supreme Leader Addresses Major Gathering in Kabul", *Aljazeera*, July 1, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/1/taliban-supreme-leader-addresses-gathering> (accessed August 7, 2022).

had blessed him over Baradar who had long aspired for the position. In the available record, Hasan claims that he is talking on behalf of Prophet Mohammad: "On behalf of the Blessed Prophet Peace Be Upon Him, whom I have seen in my dream, I convey his worries, as he is worried about the entire Ummah. He told me to 'convey this message to my ummah'". Further in the message, Hasan assumes the higher moral ground to advise Baradar to remain true to the tradition of the Prophet Mohammad and aspirations of the Taliban martyrs in their engagements with "infidels" and "hypocrites"¹³.

"I send this message especially to Mullah Baradar Akhund and other provinces and ministers that you ought to have piety and do not indulge in personal desires. ... People have betrayed my friends. I seek recompense from none, but the Creator. ... I do not need anyone's money, nor do I need any worldly possessions, grandeur, and positions. ... For the sake of God, look at the situation of Muslims. The entire infidel world has taken to enmity against you, and I put faith in God that all infidels will fail in it. Do not make wrong decisions with the infidels, do not trample upon the rights of the people, widows, and martyrs who have suffered destruction and devastation. O Mullah Baradar Akhund! I tell you specifically. It is not that I have enmity against anyone. I tell you for the sake of God to deal with the infidels and the hypocrites as did the Messenger of God Mohammad Peace Be Upon Him. ... The hypocrites of the world have started the 72 sects against the one sect. The one sect will be victorious. No one can defeat it". And he concludes the message with the reminder that he spoke on behalf of the Prophet: "I have seen it in dream in the Ka'ba of God. I have seen the Messenger Mohammad Peace Be Upon Him in my dream. Abu Bakr Seddiq and Hazrat Omar Farooq are witness to my words".

Similarly, there is the record of Taliban interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani narrating the dreams of suicide bombers in an address to a large gathering of their relatives to claim that Prophet Mohammad planned a suicide bombing mission and personally led the suicide bomber team that attacked Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel in January 2018. Haqqani invokes the dreams of other suicide bombers to claim that the Prophet had: appeared in the likeness of one of them; told another that he approved of the path they followed; wrote certificates that they are the "best of the believers"; and gave sweets and wrote "dwellers of the Heaven" on the foreheads of other suicide bombers.¹⁴ In this way, myths, enigma, and dreams seem to play an important role as instruments of legitimacy and inspirational leadership for the Taliban.

13 "Taliban Prime Minister Says, He Saw Prophet Mohammad in Dream", *Sky Media*, December 28, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ntHbHIWzSw> (accessed August 15, 2022).

14 "Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani: Emergence of Islam is the Result of the Blood of Martyrs", *Ministry of Interior Affairs*, October 20, 2021. Available at: <https://twitter.com/moi/afghanistan/status/1450798442436075523> (accessed August 15, 2022).

Denominational Posture

I am using the term “denominational posture” for want of better term to grasp the hybrid nature of the Taliban as it does not lend itself to historically familiar typology of Muslim religious subcategories. The Taliban leaders and ranks are predominantly Sunni Muslims, but this is hardly insightful as the leaders and members of most other political and military organisations in Afghanistan are also Sunni Muslims. Taliban leaders subscribe rhetorically to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence which has always enjoyed official status in Afghanistan anyway.

In terms of their factional affiliation among the mujahideen groups of the 1980s, the Taliban represent the legacy of the “traditional” against the “intellectual” or “modernist” mujahideen parties in Afghanistan. The group largely emerged from the remnants of the clerical mujahideen factions *Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami* Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi and *Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan* Mohammad Younus Khales. These mujahideen factions represented the forces of the traditional madrasa system and clerical counterparts of the mujahideen factions that emerged from the modern educational system and used Islamic rhetoric as primary means of mobilising public support, including *Jamiat-e Islami* Burhanuddin Rabbani, *Hezb-e Islamic* Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and *Ittihad-e Islami* Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf.¹⁵

In Pakistan, the early emergence of the Taliban tied the group to the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* factions under cleric-politician Maulana Fazl Rahman and cleric-politician Maulana Sami-ul-Haq whose *Darul Uloom Haqqania* seminary in Pakistan has arguably provided training to most Taliban leaders. These figures and their parties represented the power of the traditional madrasa educational system and clerical counterpart of the more modernist *Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan* party which used religious rhetoric for political mobilisation.

In terms of their sectarian inclinations, the Taliban have gained wide notoriety for their anti-Shiite measures. Taliban regime has nullified the official status of the Jafari school of jurisprudence which had enjoyed applicability for the Shiite population during the decade prior to the group’s return to power in August 2021.

During the later years of their campaign against the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) and its US-led international supporters, the Taliban employed a Shiite commander who eventually became chief of intelligence for the Shiite-dominated Bamian Province. However, he was soon alienated and the Taliban killed him as he tried to reach Iran. Elsewhere, the Taliban regime has also sought to reach out to the Shiite population by appointing a deputy minister and holding several meetings with Shiite clerics in the country.

Taliban seem to have enjoyed good relations and possibly received support from Iran against the United States over the years. Since the group’s re-takeover of the country, the Iranian government and officials have continued to act and talk

¹⁵ For typology of Afghan mujahideen factions in the 1980s, see: Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 69 – 83.

in ways that could only be interpreted as evidence of support to the Taliban administration. In brief, one may say cautiously that the Taliban leadership's default official position may not be overtly anti-Shiite, but anti-Shiite prejudice and bigotry may be widespread in the ranks due to madrasa education and collaboration with anti-Shiite parties and elements in Pakistan. Similarly, the Taliban's relations with international organisations with the claim of struggle for Islam are complex. The group enjoys organic ties with Al-Qaeda whose leaders including Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri swore allegiance to successive Taliban leaderships. Over the years, the Taliban have benefited from Al-Qaeda's standing to shore up their radical credentials, which in turn has helped them with foreign recruitment, funding, and strategic communication among the broader extremist discourse within the global Muslim populations.

During 1996 – 2002, Al-Qaeda provided the most effective component of the Taliban's fighting militias against the United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan (UIFSA) or Northern Alliance as international media called it. In September 2001, the assassination of UIFSA military chief Ahmad Shah Massoud in the first ever recorded instance of a suicide bombing in Afghanistan presented an inescapable display of Al-Qaeda's effective support to the Taliban. The organic ties and mutual support between Al-Qaeda and Taliban continued throughout the US-led international coalition's military campaign in Afghanistan, despite the Taliban's claims to the contrary. By late 2015, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were running a 30 square mile joint training camp in Afghanistan, which may well have been the largest Al-Qaeda training camp anywhere in the world.¹⁶ The financial rewards of Taliban's ties with Al-Qaeda in private annual donations from the Arab Gulf countries was estimated around \$500 million in 2020.¹⁷ That the group provided a safe mansion house in Kabul for Zawahiri, contrary to the terms of their peace agreement with the United States, should not have come as a surprise.

The Taliban's relations with the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ISIS have also been complex. In 2015 when the ISIS was at its peak after overrunning major regions in Iraq and Syria, some Taliban fighters saw an opportunity to join the new group which had the financial clout and ambition to recruit in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fearing that their monopoly of "jihad" was loosening with the emergence of the new group, the Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansur appealed in an open letter to the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to refrain from dividing their ranks.¹⁸ Observers largely interpreted the letter as Taliban's warning to ISIS to refrain from

16 Dan Lamothe, "Probably the largest' al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, October 30, 2015. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/> (accessed August 16, 2022).

17 Dawood Azami, "Afghanistan: How do the Taliban make money?", BBC News, 28 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-46554097> (accessed August 16, 2022).

18 "Letter of the Head of Islamic Emirate's Leadership Council to Esteemed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi", *Voice of Jihad*, June 16, 2015. Available at: <http://alemara1.org/?p=17042> (accessed June 16, 2015). Since the link for the *Voice of Jihad* does not work anymore, a copy of the letter in Pashto can be obtained from <https://justpaste.it/lso>, (accessed August 18, 2022).

“interference” in Afghanistan.¹⁹ But missing in this observation is the fact that before petitioning against interference, the letter attempts to establish the common religious ground between the Taliban and ISIS. After acknowledging al-Baghdadi’s leadership of “mujahideen” against “American occupation” of Iraq, the letter refers to “international heroes of jihad in contemporary era” including Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Suwaylim as “proud students of Afghanistan’s jihadi madrasa.” It refers to “renowned Islamic scholars of jurisprudence such as Hamoud al-Aqla al-Shu’aybi” and “renowned jihadi leaders such as Sheikh Osama” as authoritative figures whose approval confers global Islamic legitimacy on the Taliban’s “Islamic Emirate.”²⁰ There is no hint whatsoever of any ideological schism between the Taliban and ISIS or “Salafists” as most of the above figures could arguably be described if one were to apply the largely simplistic notion of the term in popular usage. On the contrary, the letter places the Taliban’s “jihad” in the global context of “jihad” against the forces of “global disbelief” and even claims that Taliban have eliminated “all innovation and superstition” in what appears to be an attempt at virtue-signalling toward Salafi puritanism.

The deployment of suicide attacks (suicide bombing) as an instrument of extreme violence is another common ideological thread that binds the Taliban and international Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the same book. The Taliban have simply adopted the terminology and exegetical positions of global extremist organisations to justify the method, although the group may be aware that it is highly controversial even among extremist ideologues and impermissible in scripture and orthodox jurisprudence.²¹ Extremist organisations rely on spurious analogy and speculative appropriation of scripture and historic narratives to work around definitive Quranic prohibition of suicidal operations.²²

The Taliban have co-opted Salafi clerics where it serves their purpose, but at the same time allowed a significant measure of anti-Salafi rhetoric and taken violent action against perceived Salafi madrasas, clerics, and other personalities in Afghanistan. The case of Mujiburrahman Ansari, a prominent Herati cleric with rabid anti-Shiite views and some study qualifications from Saudi Arabia, is an example of a hard-line Salafi figure the Taliban embraced and used for consolidating power in Herat Province. He was killed in an unclaimed suicide bombing as he prepared to deliver Friday sermon after meeting with the Taliban’s visiting deputy prime minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in September 2022. Ansari had used these sermons and other public occasions – including his last public speech at the presence of Baradar – to condemn the opponents of the Taliban as anti-Islam.

19 “Taliban urge Islamic State to stop ‘interference’ in Afghanistan”, *Reuters*, June 14, 2015. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamicstate-idUSKBN00W19220150616> (accessed August 18, 2022).

20 “Letter of the Head of Islamic Emirate’s Leadership Council to Esteemed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, *Voice of Jihad*, June 16, 2015.

21 Mufti Abdullah Reshad Afghani, “*De Afghanistan Ma’aser Jihad De Shariat La Nazara*” [Afghanistan’s Contemporary Jihad from Perspective of Sharia], *Voice of Jihad*, December 18, 2018.

22 Muhammad Haniff Hassan, A Rebuttal of Al-Qaeda and IS’ Theological Justification of Suicide Bombing, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 9, No. 7, 2017.

A notable example of the Taliban's anti-Salafi rhetoric is found in the prominent Taliban ideologue Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani's lectures at his madrasa in Pakistan, which he later moved to Kabul under the Taliban regime. In these lectures, Haqqani shows no qualms in dubbing the Salafis as "mushrik" (idolator) and "kafir" (unbeliever) because, as he claims, they anthropomorphise and assign abode to God.²³ Similarly, since taking over the government, the Taliban have waged a "deadly crackdown" on perceived Salafis across the country. Reports, anecdotes, and multimedia materials abound about the regime's violent actions and suppression of alleged Salafis.²⁴

The Taliban's rhetoric and actions against alleged Salafis seem fit for the purpose of winning favours with the United States. The US military has admitted in the past that the Taliban operations against the ISIS's main base in eastern Afghanistan benefited from US airstrikes.²⁵ The airstrikes in support of the Taliban against ISIS came in the wake of the US-Taliban peace agreement, which includes classified annexes that may provide the basis for such collaboration.²⁶

Despite allowing for high level anti-Salafi rhetoric, the Taliban have also co-opted the notional Salafis, including any ISIS elements who swore allegiance to the group's leadership. Public statements and events in support of the Taliban by other notional Salafi organisations including Hizb-ul-Tahrir and Jamiat-e Eslah indicate that the group may have no reservations about the operations of such organisations if they serve its purposes. Furthermore, despite the Taliban's ideological inspiration from and organic collaboration with Al-Qaeda and a plethora of other violent extremist organisations particularly in South Asia and Central Asia, there is a tendency in policy circles and public domain to treat the group with a curious measure of legitimacy. Such treatment may come from the interplay of lobbying, policy convenience, and misunderstanding, going back to the early times of the group making its debut for power. The following extract from Zalmay Khalilzad, a US Government functionary who has long exercised major influence in shaping American policy towards Afghanistan, may bring home the point: "The group upholds a mix of traditional Pashtun values and an orthodox interpretation of Islam. The departure of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi financier of various anti-U.S. terrorist groups, from

23 Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, "Allah Pa A'rsh Kay Di Ka Na: Mudallal Bayan" [Is Allah on A'rsh Or Not: Reasoned Speech], *Ahl Sunna Wal Jama'at-ul-A'lemi*, October 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=VicBwK6lItK&fbclid=IwAR3U-AGwBHuskOCjIMTtAaMe-kIXVIMTuvvZgBAsnJVvda674jEzwsJESijY> (accessed September 12, 2022).

24 "Afghanistan: Taliban Execute, 'Disappear' Alleged Militants", *Human Rights Watch*, June 27, 2022. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-execute-disappear-alleged-militants> (accessed September 12, 2022). Also see: Abubakar Siddique, "Taliban Wages Deadly Crackdown on Afghan Salafists as War With IS-K Intensifies", *RFE/RL's Radio Azadi*, October 22, 2021. Available at: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-crackdown-salafis-islamic-state-khorasan/31524687.html> (accessed September 12, 2022).

25 Joseph Trevithick, "The U.S. Military Says It Has Supported the Taliban in Fighting ISIS In Afghanistan", *The War Zone*, March 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/32534/the-u-s-military-says-it-has-supported-the-taliban-in-fighting-isis-in-afghanistan> (accessed September 12, 2022).

26 David E. Sanger et al, "A Secret Accord With the Taliban: When and How the U.S. Would Leave Afghanistan", *New York Times*, March 8, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/08/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-annexes-peace-agreement.html> (accessed September 12, 2022).

Afghanistan indicates some common interest between the United States and the Taliban”.²⁷

The article in Washington Post urged the US Government to engage with the Taliban soon after the group had captured Kabul in 1996, but it is hard to overemphasise the naivety of its insights. Nearly three decades past, but the group’s conduct has disproved every premise and proposition in the extract and the larger article. The notion of “traditional Pashtun values” is fraught with questions. Never has there been an objective study in the light of history or empirical data of the importance or distinctiveness of values generally assigned in Western academia to the culture or cultures of the Pashtuns. The late American diplomat and scholar Louis Dupree attempted a composite definition of *Pashtunwali* based on his personal impressions.²⁸ Even if it held true and were distinctive to Pashtuns as a cultural monolith, however, there is abundant evidence that the Taliban have violated its key elements numerous times. Similarly, the Taliban’s alleged adherence to “orthodox interpretation of Islam” is questionable. Suicidal attacks which the Taliban imported to the country and made extensive use of over the years cannot be rounded up with the orthodox interpretation of Islam.²⁹ The assertion that Bin Laden had departed Afghanistan, which is then presented as constitutive of “common interest” between the Taliban and United States, was patently untrue for which the United States and Afghanistan paid significant costs subsequently.

The United States and others following its lead seem to have found it convenient for policy purposes to distinguish between the Taliban and other terrorist organisations purely based on their declared theatre of operations rather than the ideological narrative and methods employed to attain their objectives. Unlike other extremist organisations that allegedly espouse wider regional aspirations, the Taliban have professed to limit violence within Afghanistan. Hence, extensive terrorist violence the group has claimed against Afghans and foreign nationals in Afghanistan is not enough, apparently, to make the United States, Russia, China, and other countries desist from diplomatic interactions with the group. “Experts” likely with various degrees of vested interest in peace advocacy with the Taliban may have influenced this double standard treatment which also allows the United States and others to make deals with the group.³⁰

Negotiation with the Taliban as a violent extremist group may present a moral dilemma for any interlocutor, but likely more so for the United States which has often presented its hard-headed realist foreign policy approach in moralist terms.

27 Zalmay Khalilzad, “Afghanistan: Time to Reengage”, *Washington Post*, October 7, 1996.

28 Lous Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 126-127.

29 Muhammad Haniff Hassan, A Rebuttal of Al-Qaeda and IS’ Theological Justification of Suicide Bombing, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 9, No. 7, 2017.

30 Peter Bergen, “Biden’s Afghanistan Exit Decision Looks Even Worse a Year Later”, *CNN Opinion*, August 12, 2022. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/09/opinions/afghanistan-exit-a-year-later-bergen/index.html> (accessed September 12, 2022). Also see: Shivan Mahendrarajah, “Pashtun Ethno-Nationalism and the Collapse of Afghanistan”, *Middle East Reports: Uncensored. Unafraid. Un-PC*, October 1, 2021. Available at: <https://mereports.substack.com/p/pashtun-ethno-nationalism-and-the-collapse-of-afghanistan> (accessed September 12, 2022).

The notion that the Taliban represent “orthodox” Islam and Pashtun “tradition” may have partly eased the moral dilemma, but it can happen only in disregard, deliberate or otherwise, of the transformative effect the group’s association with other extremist organisations has exercised on it.

Dichotomised Education

I am using the term to refer to bifurcation of the educational system where “modern” education as represented by schools and universities is separate from “religious” education as represented by madrasa and *dar-ul-uloom* seminaries. In Afghanistan, as in most other countries with experience of direct or indirect colonial domination, modern education came along with or as a by-product of the colonial rule.

The colonial domination of Central Asia and South Asia had endogenous and exogenous effects on Afghanistan’s educational system. Internally, the introduction of modern school education happened in a way that it left the traditional madrasa system impoverished literally and pedagogically. Rather than reforming and brining the madrasa system up to date, the state decided to establish a parallel modern system modelled on the European school system. The modern system enjoyed state sponsorship, infrastructure, imported teachers, and curricula that included empirical sciences, mathematics, and humanities. The study of religion as part of humanities was restricted to Islamic studies, but adherents of other faiths such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews were afforded the right to opt out of these subjects.

Afghanistan’s first modern school was established in 1903 during the reign of Emir Habibullah, a ruler whose reign was beholden to colonial Britain’s support and subsidies. The Habibia High School, named after the Emir, exemplified all these characteristics. Equipped with purpose-built classrooms and furniture, it had imported teachers and curricula from India which under the British rule had experienced its own reactionary Muslim struggle against modern educational system. In contrast, the madrasa system - which had inspired the European college education system in the first place but had remained largely dormant in the lands of its origins – was left to the goodwill of local communities for funding and the clerical class to manage.³¹ It was left with centuries old curricula and little infrastructure other than local mosques to provide “religious” education to pupils who received no state sponsorship for their studies. By the middle of the century, the Afghan state had established *Madrasa-e Abu Hanifa* and *Dar-ul-Uloom-e Arabi Kabul* as a secondary schools and Faculty of Sharia within Kabul University as the highest institution of tertiary education in religious studies. These institutions served to supply judges and other state functionaries for the judiciary, but their graduate numbers, which hardly ever exceeded two-digit figures annually, paled in significance compared to

31 Syed Farid Alatas, From Jamī’ah to University: Multiculturalism and Christian-Muslim Dialogue, *Current Sociology*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2006, pp. 122-125.

graduate figures coming out of thousands of traditional madrasas in the country. Their teachers until many years later when Afghan graduates of foreign universities such as the al-Azhar University of Egypt returned home to assume lectureship positions were recruited from the traditional madrasas. Their curricula are still largely shaped around the curricula of the madrasas with little or no critical reassessment. In this way, although the numbers of state sponsored madrasas and institutions of tertiary education have increased to several dozen by now, but they have made little dint against the anachronistic conceptions of religious outlook and practices as they largely rehash the old curricula in a seemingly modern setting.

The exogenous effect of colonial domination of the region was no less devastating for madrasa education in the country. Afghanistan's madrasa education had for centuries looked up to Bukhara in Central Asia as one of the greatest centres of learning in Muslim majority lands for teaching and pedagogical emulation. Bukhara as the centre of religious learning was held in such sacrosanct esteem in Afghanistan that the name was rarely mentioned without the honorary suffix "*Sharif*" or "noble" in popular usage. But the tzarist colonial and later Soviet communist subjugation of Central Asia not only obliterated the status of *Bukhara-e Sharif* as the preeminent centre of religious learning in the region; it also cut off Afghanistan from it by erecting a near impenetrable border in the heart of Central Asia largely along the route that now constitutes the southern borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Similarly, the British colonial rule in India affected the state of religious education. First, it obliterated the status of Persian language as the preeminent medium of state bureaucracy and learning under the Mughal rule which itself had historic ties with Central Asia and Afghanistan. Persian language lost its status in India under the British rule, just as it lost its status under the Tzarist and later Soviet communist rule in Central Asia. Second, the divided response of Muslims in India to the British rule laid the foundations for reactionary conception of religious learning in the subcontinent.

The Indian uprising of 1857 – 1859 under the titular leadership of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar against the British rule had repercussions not only for the Indian Muslims' relations with the British colonial authority, it also prompted them to derive opposing conclusions about the state of their education and its ability to cope with the colonial authority's superior capacities and cultural influence. The Indian Muslims were divided along two opposing movements in the wake of the defeat of the uprising and the final annulment of the Muslim imperial authority in the subcontinent. One group led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated the adoption of Western style modern education and another group led by clerics Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, Muhammad Abid Husayn and others advocated the return to a puritanical teaching of religion and rejection of modern education to strengthen religious faith against colonial influences. The Aligarh Movement finally led to the establishment of Aligarh Muslim University and the Deobandi Movement resulted in the establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband.

The Deobandi leaders condemned Syed Ahmad Khan and even made efforts to declare him out of the fold of Islam.³²

With Bukhara becoming relegated and inaccessible under colonial and communist rule, clerics from Afghanistan looked up to Darul Uloom Deoband as the ultimate destination in the region where they could buttress their scholastic credentials. Time spent in Deoband became a badge of honour for clerics in Afghanistan. For obvious reasons of geographic proximity and deep historic, cultural, and commercial ties with India, Pashtun clerics who attended Darul Uloom Deoband were presumably more numerous than clerics from other ethnic groups.

The partition of British India proved another seminal event for the spread of radicalism in the region. Due to its Pashtun ethnonationalist state-building policy, the Afghan state developed irredentist claims against the territorial integrity of the newly created Pakistan. Pakistan's policy of mixing religion and tribal forces to advance its objectives in the region was discernible from its deployment of Pashtun irregulars for "jihad" in Kashmir soon after the partition, but it was honed to a high degree in the following decades to counter the influence of Pakistani Pashtun ethnonationalists who profited from clientele links with the Afghan state.

As the Afghan state increasingly fell prey to the influence of pro-Soviet communists due to the wider implications of continued tensions with Pakistan in the context of the Cold War, its persecution of the nascent "Islamic movement" which had carved a space for itself in the academic and clerical circles of Kabul presented an opportunity for Pakistan to repay Afghanistan's policy of sabotage and sedition in kind. Pakistan provided refuge to the leaders of Afghanistan's Islamist movement who escaped persecution. More importantly, Pakistan used its main Islamist parties including *Jamaat-e-Islami* and both factions of *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam*, to provide moral and material patronage to the leaders of Afghanistan's Islamist movement. Befittingly, all three Islamist parties of Pakistan were led by Pashtun figures, providing a potent mix of Pashtun demography infused with Islamist ideology to counter Afghanistan's longstanding policy of patronising ethnonationalists to advance irredentist claims.

The Afghan Islamists had negligible success in instigating popular uprising to topple the Afghan regime, but the pro-communist coup d'état of 1978 followed by the Soviet Union's invasion of the country opened the floodgates of opportunities for "mujahideen" recruitment and access to material resources that the United States, UK, Europe, and their Arab allies provided to the "Afghan jihad" of the 1980s. The Afghan jihad coincided with the Pakistani military ruler General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's "Islamisation" policies in Pakistan. General Zia's policies complemented the US and Arab allies' support for infusion of radical Islamist literature not only into

32 Mohammad Imteyaz, "Indo-Muslim Religious Thought in 19th Century: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Critics", Doctoral dissertation, Aligarh Muslim University, India, 2008, pp. 167 – 173. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144511512.pdf> (accessed September 25, 2022). Also see: Muhammad Asim and Syed Raheem Abbas Shah, A Socio-Political Conflict between Religious Conservatism and Liberalism in Pakistan: A Comparative Study of Aligarh and Deoband School of Thought, *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2014, pp. 1408-1418.

madrasa curricula but also the schools that catered for the Afghan refugees. Arab “mujahideen” who flocked to Pakistan and Afghanistan in pursuit of “jihad” brought along their own agendas and propagated for the most part the most radical reading of Islamic scripture and history shaped in the reactionary experiences of their home societies to colonial and post-colonial events.

In such context, the madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan largely abandoned the rich heritage of Islamic Persian literature and ethics on which the system had thrived for centuries and replaced it with a literalist reading of the scripture and prophetic tradition. The transformation of madrasa curricula did away with Central Asia’s legacy of religious moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity in favour of a narrowly defined, belligerent, and politicised presentation of the scripture and history.

After overthrowing the Afghan regime in 1992, the mujahideen’s Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) replaced the curricula of Afghanistan’s state school system with the curricula of the schools they had run for refugees in Pakistan. The new curricula increased the number of Islamic studies subjects from the single “*Deniat*” – principles of faith and exegesis of the Quran in general -- to five. They included *Tafsir* (exegesis of the Quran), *Hadith* (statements and traditions attributed to Prophet Mohammad), *Aqayed* (doctrine of faith), *Feqh* (jurisprudence), and Arabic in schools. The ISA also introduced the study of Islamic Culture as mandatory subject for universities and tertiary education. The Taliban’s first “Islamic Emirate” (1996 – 2001) and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2002 – 2021) continued with these subjects in schools and tertiary education. Notwithstanding this well-established status of Islamic studies as mandatory subjects in the educational system, the Taliban’s return to power also marks the triumph of “madrasa” system over the “school” system. Creation of madrasas and imposition of restrictions over schools – i.e., limiting female education and cancelling some subjects, and testing the religious knowledge of schoolteachers and replacing them with clerics – had been the standard Taliban practice for many years in areas they came to control. With the return of the group to power, however, the practice has become state policy.

The second “Islamic Emirate” seems to hold up the *Darul Uloom Haqqania* as key model to emulate for “Islamising” Afghanistan’s educational system. One notable madrasa called *Afghan Darul Uloom* seemingly modelled on *Darul Uloom Haqqania* was established in Kabul by Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, years before Taliban’s return to power. Its programmes and curricula may offer a useful guide on the subjects and style of other main madrasas that the Taliban will establish.³³

In line with the policy, the “Islamic Emirate” has a plan to establish one main new madrasa in each of the 34 provinces, where each madrasa will provide education to 1000 students. The major provincial madrasas will serve to guide the 12000 madrasas that the ministry of education already runs in the country. A year since returning to power, the Taliban’s ministry of education has recruited 20,000 addition-

33 See: <https://www.facebook.com/afghandarululoom/photos/1844895379033699> (accessed October 1, 2022).

al madrasa teachers, majority of whom will have presumably come from Pakistani madrasas. This is in addition to the 38400 madrasa teachers providing instruction to over a million registered madrasa students in the country.³⁴

In July 2022, a Pakistani clerical delegation led by Muhammad Taqi Usmani visited Kabul. The delegation held meetings with Taliban prime minister and other leaders.³⁵ The main takeaway from the visit was an undertaking by the Taliban ministry of higher education to give official accreditation to academic qualifications of Pakistani madrasa graduates. The measure will streamline recruitment of not only teachers into the education sector, but also that of officials into civil service whose senior echelons are reserved for Taliban members with clerical education. In this way, Afghanistan's education system is likely to become a subsidiary of Pakistan's madrasa education system and the state bureaucracy will become the largest job market for it.

Pashtun Ethnonationalism

The foregone section fleetingly referred to the role of Pashtun ethnonationalism in the origin of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the latter's support of Islamists as countermeasure against it. Given Pakistan's well-documented support of the Taliban, Pashtun ethnonationalism does not seem to make sense in a formulaic or essentialist cast of the group's identity and outlook. But it is difficult to escape the influence, conscious or otherwise, of Pashtun ethnonationalism in the group's conduct. To understand the phenomenon, it may be necessary to first identify what constitutes Pashtun ethnonationalism both in theory and practice. Based on research and careful observation, one may safely suggest that Pashtun ethnonationalism stands on the three pod of Pashtun nationhood, victimhood, and supremacy/hegemonism. These interrelated themes may be more emotive than rational, as might be the case in most nationalist orientations, but the focus here is to mirror the Taliban's conduct against these notions rather than an assessment of their rationality in the light of any empirical data.

The notion that they form a single nation seems widespread among the Pashtun population. In this narrative, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has cut across the heart of a single nation, causing much suffering to people on both sides. The Afghan state's rejection of the legitimacy of the border – called "Durand Line" or "imaginary Durand Line" in official statements – partly rests on its assertion of Pashtun nationhood.³⁶

34 "World Teachers Day: Hanafi Says Big Madrasas Will be Established in All Provinces", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, October 5, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twZ3F0nd8qg> (accessed October 7, 2022). Also see: "Remarks of Abdul Salam Hanafi to Workers", *Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) Dari*, September 20, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCUxZ4X0wM> (accessed October 1, 2022).

35 "Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund Met with Pakistani Clerical Delegation", *ARG*, July 27, 2022. Available at: https://twitter.com/arg_1880/status/1552350447293370368?s=46&t=RVS9q6SW80ZIBrhLr8W00Q (accessed October 2, 2022).

36 Shayeq Qassem, Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations: Border Controversies as Counter-Terrorist Impediments, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2007, pp. 65-80.

The alleged victimhood of the Pashtuns in the hands of external and internal forces is interrelated to the notion of their nationhood. In this perspective, external forces including the imperial Mughals, British colonial authority, and “Punjabis” have all tried to divide and subjugate the Pashtuns. In the modern era of nation states, the British drew the “Durand Line” to keep the Pashtuns divided, and since the creation of Pakistan and following the footsteps of their erstwhile colonial masters, the “Punjabis” have continued to undermine the Pashtuns in both countries. An internal element to the notion of victimhood, which may not have existed as strongly in historic past, has found increasing expression in the rhetoric of ethnonationalist Pashtuns especially in the past two decades. It holds that the leaders and organised entities of other major ethnic groups including Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras conspired with foreign countries to undermine Pashtun power in the centre and victimise Pashtun population in the countryside. The countries that allegedly helped these ethnic groups at various times may be the United States, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. There is also a notion of cultural victimhood in the narrative which holds that Pashto language and “national culture” are under attack from Farsi-speaking intellectuals.

The United States by virtue of its power and influence, and Iran for reasons of its cultural commonalities with Afghanistan’s Farsi-speaking majority population, come in for particular criticism. The narrative claims to find in various real or imagined events a vindication of the perspective, especially during the US-led international military coalition’s presence (2001 – 2021) in the country. The remedial measures that the ethnonationalists have weaved into their proposed narrative of stability call for political, military, economic, and cultural empowerment of the Pashtuns in a centralised political system in which the Pashtun segment as a whole assumes the role of a hegemon. It calls for the restoration of the erstwhile tiered system where the Pashtuns lead followed by Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and others. Alternative proposals deemed to challenge Pashtun supremacy is treated with labels of sabotage and sedition.

Two papers, one in English and another in Pashtu, may have proved particularly influential in pushing the narrative. The known author of the peer-reviewed article decrying the “decline of Pashtuns” and the alleged author of the pejoratively titled “*Doyoma Saqawi*” treatise which proposes ethnic cleansing of non-Pashtuns from key regions held important positions and exercised significant influence in Afghanistan’s politics over the past two decades, and they may continue to do so with the Taliban’s second “Islamic Emirate”.³⁷ As an entity professing commitment to “Islamic” political system, the Taliban cannot afford to openly subscribe to Pashtun ethnona-

37 Ahady Anwar-ul-Haq, The Decline of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 7, 1995, pp. 621-634. Samsur Afghan, *Duyoma Saqawi*, Afghanistan Cultural Development Society, 2001, available at: <https://ketabton.com/bookfile/12889> (accessed October 3, 2022). *Duyoma Saqawi* may be rendered as “Second Rule of Water Carriers” in context. The treatise refers to the rule of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992 – 1996) as the second time that Afghanistan’s central government fell to the dominant rule of the Tajiks since 1747, first time being the brief rule of Emir Habibullah Kalakani during 1929. Kalakani came from a humble rural background, where his father is reported to have made a living as a water carrier. Hence, the label “*Saqawi*” is used as a metonym to underline his alleged ignoble status and undeserved rule in contrast to the rule of the Pashtun nobility that he toppled in 1929. Mohammad Ismael Yun is widely believed to have ghost-authored the treatise under the penname Samsur Afghan.

tionalism. Their conduct, however, seems consistent with its constituent elements. Pashtuns exercise preponderant position of power and influence in the second Islamic Emirate, including the supreme leader, prime minister, chief justice, key deputy prime ministers for economic and political affairs, and key ministers of defence, interior, intelligence, finance, and foreign affairs. The coercive power of the defence and security establishment is predominantly manned and commanded by Pashtun Taliban who can use it almost at will to suppress dissent and exact obedience from other ethnic groups. A number of key Tajik and Uzbek Taliban commanders who played instrumental rule in the group's takeover of the northern provinces have been relegated to positions of near irrelevance far away from their powerbases. Instead, units of Pashtun Taliban from other provinces have been deployed to serve as rapid reaction forces in the north.³⁸

The Pashtun monopoly of all levers of real power in the centre may also be due to intra-Pashtun factional dynamics within the Taliban. The intra-Taliban Pashtun factions vying for power and state resources are: Mullah Baradar loyalists (Noorzais from greater Kandahar); Mansoori loyalists (Ishaqzais from greater Kandahar); Haqqani loyalists (greater Paktya, Logar, Wardak and Pashtuns from northern regions); and there may be also personal loyalists of defence minister Mullah Ya-qoob (greater Kandahar region). The Taliban leadership's focus so far seems to have been on maintaining intra-Pashtun cohesion through careful distribution of power among these factions, thereby leaving little for others. The Taliban leadership will increasingly face the dilemma of whether to continue with their current policy of putting all their focus on intra-Pashtun cohesion or allow for wider distribution of real power with non-Pashtun Taliban and risk intra-Pashtun tensions to spill over in the open.

The Taliban have thrived on propagation of victimhood throughout their existence as an organised group. The group's official rhetoric and publications are replete with stories of the victimhood of its adherents during the 20-year presence of the US-led international military coalition and before it. The standard narrative, highlighted briefly in foregone sections, holds that the Taliban emerged in response to widespread chaos and suffering of common people during the rule of Islamic State of Afghanistan. The group deploys the pejorative terms such as "warlords" and "stooges" to deprive the erstwhile Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara leaders, and their organisational entities of legitimacy in public discourse. It claims to have salvaged Afghanistan from the imminent risk of disintegration which the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara powerbrokers and their organisational entities had supposedly plotted. The second Islamic Emirate also seems to have sanctioned a campaign of replacing Farsi with Pashto signs and terms in universities and other state institutions especially in Kabul,

38 They are: Fasihuddin Fetrat, a Tajik from Badakhshan Province, appointed as chief of staff of the army in Kabul; Amanuddin Mansoor, Tajik from Badakhshan, appointed as air force chief in Kabul and returned after a year as Badakhshan governor to counter increasing anti-Taliban local resistance; Najibullah Raghi-Badakhshi, Tajik from Badakhshan, appointed as police chief for Laghman Province; Sayed Makhdoom Alem, Uzbek from Faryab Province, appointed as police chief for Ghazni Province; Salahuddin Ayubi, Uzbek from Faryab Province, appointed as deputy minister of rural rehabilitation and development.

Herat, Balkh, and other provinces where Farsi speakers form the majority.

Finally, the Islamic Emirate's position about the status of the border with Pakistan corresponds completely with the position of the ethnonationalists, which as explained above, derives from the notion that Pashtuns form a single nation. Zabiullah Mujahid, Taliban chief spokesman and deputy minister of information and culture, made it clear in the following words: "Durand Line is an imaginary line. We regard it imaginary, and it cannot be resolved by the government. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan does not arrogate to itself the right to respond and take position about such national issues by itself. This is an issue on which our nation should decide. ... Our nation should come together and decide about it just as the nation decided about it in the past. ... It is a national issue and belongs to the nation".³⁹

Notwithstanding these measures, however, many Pashtun intellectuals and activists have expressed their opposition to the Taliban's restrictive policies and their disrespect to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's tricolour flag which has evolved over time to become an important symbol of "national unity" as conceived by ethnonationalists and Pashtuns in general.

Organised Crime

The hybrid nature of the Taliban presents an illustrative case for the "crime-terror continuum" analysis on the conduct of transnational nonstate actors posing security threats to states and regions. The analysis posits that nonstate actors that espouse ideological precepts at the origin may transform over time to become purely profit-driven crime syndicates. From the other end of the continuum, criminal organisations that are purely profit-driven at origin may transform over time to profess political or religious ideologies as a means of justifying their actions and taking over the state. The study suggests that many transnational terrorist and criminal organisations that challenged state authority in the post-Cold War era without the patronage of rival great powers underwent such transformations in order to remain viable socially and financially.⁴⁰

As mentioned before, the moral narrative of the Taliban's emergence as an organised military group is shrouded in reiterated myths and possible disinformation. Set against the moral narrative, however, are informed reports that Mullah Omar's original enterprise received sponsorship from the trucking industry's "smuggling mafia" across Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The name Haji Bashir Noorzai attracts particular attention, who reportedly donated \$250,000 along with half a dozen pickup trucks and weapons for the launch of the group.⁴¹

39 "Exclusive interview with IEA Spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid", *Ariana News TV*, October 11, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1Z7bAEZs0w> (accessed October 3, 2022).

40 Tamara Makarenko, *The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism*, *Global Crime*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2004, pp. 129–145.

41 Matthew C. DuPée, "The Narcotics Emirate of Afghanistan: Examining Armed Polities and Their Roles in Illicit Drug Production and Conflict in Afghanistan 1980-2010", *The NPS Institutional Archive*, Calhoun, 2010, p. 57. Available at: <https://www.nps.edu/documents/105988371/107571254/DuPeeNarcoticsEmirateThesis.pdf/0f5fde7e-41bc-47c7-ae66-86cdef1019f9> (accessed October 9, 2022).

Noorzai's network remained a major sponsor of the Taliban's first regime until its fall in late 2001, after which he reportedly developed collaborative ties with the US government agencies.⁴² He was lured to the United States, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of drug smuggling, but his release always remained a persistent demand of the Taliban in negotiations with the United States. Finally, the Taliban's second regime secured his release in exchange for the release of an American civil engineer the group had abducted. Taliban leaders received Noorzai with fanfare in September 2022, where the regime's foreign minister termed his release a "great pride and achievement" for the "Islamic Emirate." Typical of the group's use of ideological rhetoric and symbolism to inculcate legitimacy, the Taliban foreign ministry and state-run media portrayed Bashir's release as "Freedom of the Last Remaining Prisoner from the Guantánamo Bay Prison", notably disregarding the fact that he was found guilty by a jury in a civilian court and imprisoned in New York.⁴³ The misinformation in this case is likely deliberate to portray the convicted drug smuggler as a religiously motivated freedom fighter who served illegal detention in an infamous detention facility by the United States.⁴⁴ It is illustrative of Makarenko's finding in the "crime-terror continuum" study that terrorist groups interested in criminal profits use political rhetoric as a facade for perpetrating criminal activities.⁴⁵

Beyond this illustrative case, the Taliban's involvement in organised crime is well documented. A UN report in 2020, put the upper range of Taliban's total revenue figures from organised crime to upwards of \$1.5 billion per annum and another report commissioned by NATO put the total for the year at \$1.6 billion.⁴⁶ In 2019, the group reportedly earned around \$464 million from illegal mining, \$416 million from narcotics, \$240 million from foreign donations, another \$240 million from illegal exports, \$160 million from extortive levies, and \$80 million from real estate.⁴⁷ The Taliban's involvement in illicit narcotics encompasses all aspects of the drug economy including cultivation, processing, and trafficking. While in power, twice have the group's leaders issued decrees prohibiting the production and trade of illicit narcotics, but the purport and effectiveness of these decrees appear dubious. In both

42 Ruchi Kumar, "Why America Just Set Free the 'Pablo Escobar of Afghanistan'", *The Daily Beast*, October 8, 2022. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-america-released-bashir-noorzai-the-pablo-escobar-of-afghanistan> (accessed October 11, 2022).

43 "Foreign Ministry's Press Conference on the Freedom of the Last Remaining Prisoner from the Guantánamo Bay Prison", *Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA)*, September 19, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=WocEtJy93ug> (accessed October 9, 2022).

44 "Top Taliban Associate and Former Mujahideen Warlord Sentenced to Life in Prison on Heroin Trafficking Charges", *United States Attorney Southern District of New York*, April 30, 2009. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/nys/pressreleases/April09/noorzaibashirsentencingpr.pdf> (accessed October 9, 2022).

45 Tamara Makarenko, *The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism*, *Global Crime*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2004, p. 135.

46 "UN Security Council, Letter S/2020/415", May 27, 2020, pp. 14-16. Available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_415_e.pdf (accessed October 16, 2020). Also see: Frud Bezhani, "Exclusive: Taliban's Expanding 'Financial Power' Could Make It 'Impervious' to Pressure Confidential Report Warns", September 16, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/exclusive-taliban-s-expanding-financial-power-could-make-it-impervious-to-pressure-secret-nato-report-warns/30842570.html> (accessed October 16, 2020); Dawood Azami, "Afghanistan: How do the Taliban make money?", *BBC News*, August 28, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-46554097> (accessed August 16, 2022).

47 Ibidem.

cases, and another little noticed ban on ephedra in December 2021, the decrees seem to have been carefully calibrated to protect the harvested crops, affect prices, and win international recognition.⁴⁸

In April 2022, the regime's supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada issued a "decree" banning the production and trade of narcotics.⁴⁹ Akhundzada's decree came days after the visits of high-level Chinese and Russian delegations to Kabul and Russia's accreditation of Taliban diplomatic representation in Moscow.⁵⁰ It may have provided the credence of a symbolic achievement for Russian diplomacy which has long remained focused on counternarcotics in Afghanistan. In reality, however, drug trade is reported to have boomed and become more lucrative under the second Islamic Emirate due to increased share of domestic processing into higher end products such as methamphetamine and heroine.⁵¹ Similarly, the Taliban and their financial sponsors in the narcotics trade reportedly made "tremendous profit" from Mullah Omar's ban on opium cultivation in the year 2000.⁵² Omar reportedly issued the ban to win international recognition and removal of UN sanctions on the first Islamic Emirate. The ban drastically reduced opium cultivation in the following year but shot up its price from an all-time low of \$28/kg to about \$400/kg in the country. The Taliban used the advanced knowledge of the ban to stockpile massive amounts of opium and sell them at prices 14 times higher.⁵³

The Taliban leaders, spokesmen, and supporters often present Omar's reduction of opium output as evidence of their commitment to Islam which prohibits all types of intoxicants and harmful substances. They have frequently rejected out of hand the UN and other reports deemed to present the group in an unfavourable light and highlighted the reports from same sources where they are deemed to have vindicated its narratives.

It must be said that from a religious perspective, the Taliban leaders may not view as illicit some of the revenue generating measures they have implemented. They may contend, for example, that they have every right to tax the mining sector or transport sector for raising revenues to wage "jihad" against "foreign occupation" and for restoration of Islamic rule. The irony, however, is that the group received extortion money even from the US military for the escort and safe passage of their

48 Secunder Kermani, "Meth and Heroin Fuel Afghanistan Drugs Boom", *BBC News*, December 12, 2021.

49 "Decree of the Supreme Leader of IEA on Prohibition of Poppy Cultivation and All Kinds of Narcotics", *Tolo News*, April 3, 2022. Available at: <https://twitter.com/TOLOnews/status/1510527326962036737/photo/1> (accessed October 11, 2022).

50 Ayaz Gul, "Chinese Foreign Minister, Russian Envoy Visit Taliban-ruled Afghanistan", *VOA*, March 24, 2022. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-foreign-minister-russian-envoy-visit-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-/6499403.html> (accessed October 11, 2022).

51 Rupert Stone, "Afghanistan's Drug Trade Is Booming Under Taliban Rule", *Atlantic Council*, August 24, 2022. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/afghanistans-drug-trade-is-booming-under-taliban-rule/#:~:text=True%2C%20the%20Taliban%20movement%20managed,attempts%20to%20stop%20opium%20cultivation> (accessed October 11, 2022).

52 "Top Taliban Associate and Former Mujahideen Warlord Sentenced to Life in Prison on Heroin Trafficking Charges", *United States Attorney Southern District of New York*, April 30, 2009. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/nys/pressreleases/April09/noorzaibashirsentencingpr.pdf> (accessed October 9, 2022).

53 Gretchen Peters, "How Opium Profits the Taliban", *United States Institute of Peace*, 2006, p. 14. Available at: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/taliban_opium_1.pdf (accessed October 12, 2022).

logistical supplies on the country's roads.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding its religious rhetoric, however, the group's return to power may present a perfect illustration of the "black hole" thesis at the fulcrum of the "crime-terror continuum" analysis. The group seems to have long morphed into a hybrid entity with fully functional inhouse capabilities to sustain itself through simultaneous and mutually reinforcing ideological rhetoric and profit seeking activities. Finally, it has succeeded in taking over the state and imposing itself as 'de facto authority' in the country for international interlocuters.

Conclusion

Since its emergence as an organised group on Afghanistan's political and military horizons, the Taliban has been variously labelled with descriptive terms such as "traditional", "extremist", "terrorist", "radical", "Deobandi", "Salafi", "Pashtun", and "criminal". None of these labels alone is enough, however, to grasp sufficiently the hybrid nature of the Taliban. It is because the Taliban have displayed all these features with varying degrees of emphasis at different times, depending on what could be most conveniently instrumentalised at a given moment in pursuit of power and profit. The Taliban's embrace of extremist rhetoric and unconventional violence are rooted in Salafi ideology and contrary to orthodox Islam and Afghanistan's cultural traditions. They have collaborated and developed organic ties with extremist groups, but also allowed for anti-Salafi rhetoric at the highest levels of their ideological leadership and cracked down on them in pursuit of power, economic resources, and international recognition.

As an "Islamic movement" the Taliban may profess commitment to egalitarian notions of justice, equality, and non-discrimination, but there is ample evidence to suggest that they subscribe to ethnonationalist notions of Pashtun supremacy in governance. Islam clearly forbids the production and trade in narcotics and other harmful substances other than for medicinal purposes, but illicit narcotics and other organised crimes have long formed the backbone of Taliban revenues. Myths, mystery, and instrumentalization of religion seem to have played a very significant role in developing a narrative of legitimacy for the Taliban which may otherwise be conceived as a crime syndicate.

The Taliban phenomenon is a self-contradictory outcome of radicalised religion, dichotomized education, organised crime, anachronism, ethnonationalist hegemonism, and longstanding tensions in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The failure to appreciate the hybrid nature of the Taliban and likely deliberate oversight of it due to vested interests have confounded policy prescriptions for as long as the group has operated. The Taliban's return to power represents the "black hole" of the crime-terror nexus phenomenon. It has commandeered state resources and forced the world to deal with it as "de facto authority" for Afghanistan.

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РАСПАКИВАЊЕ ТАЛИБАНА: ХИБРИД ДЕЛИКВЕНТНЕ ПОБОЖНОСТИ

Сажетак

Још од својих почетака 1994. као организована група или мрежа са идејом да влада земљом, Талибани су били описивани као „исламски покрет” који је посвећен имплементацији шеријата у Авганистану. Иако се овакав опис може довести у везу са циљевима групе, он није ништа друго до редукциниостички и погрешан. У овом чланку се аргументује да Талибани представљају хибридни феномен који користи верске и политичке наративе исто као што користи ориганизовани криминал у циљу достизања моћи и профита.

Кључне речи: Талибани, исламски покрет, шеријат, организовани криминал, тероризам