

Islamic Factor in the Emergence and the Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract: The article analyses the impact of Islamic elements on the formation and evolution of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. It examines the influence of Islam on Afghan spiritual society and the factors contributing to the rise of diverse extremist and fundamentalist ideologies in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, mullah, mawlawi, mufti, “Muslim Brotherhood”, “Muslim Youth” (Javonon-e Muslim), Deobandism, Bacha-ye Saaq, “Society of Islamic Scholars” (Jamiyat-e ulamoi islam), Wahhabism, religious syncretism.

INTRODUCTION

The religious-military group that emerged in Afghanistan in 1994, known as the “Taliban”, was not first seen as a noteworthy entity in international politics. Nonetheless, its swift ascent (1996–2001) to establish a formidable and arranged organisational structure, together with its acquisition of the Kabul government, began to surprise numerous observers. Since that time, the term “Taliban” has emerged as a prevalent subject of discourse among statesmen engaged in Afghanistan, especially politicians specializing in Afghan studies. Following the resurgence of this movement in Afghanistan in 2021, there has been a marked increase in interest in the comprehensive study of the “Taliban”. As a result, it has become urgent for experts and scholars to conduct a series of scientific and practical studies on the roots, causes, and development of the Taliban movement.

Who are the Taliban, and how did they achieve the level of power they (re)gained in Afghanistan? Can the Taliban be considered an independent entity in a context where major and regional power centres have strategic interests in Afghanistan and consider it their sphere of influence? While objectively answering these issues is challenging, it is feasible to reach essential ideas and conclusions by analysing the factors that led to the birth of the Taliban movement. In this regard, it is appropriate to first examine religious reasons.

METHODS

The study of the article applied a historical-comparative approach.

RESULTS

Afghanistan has historically been a place where different religions, sects, tribes, and people lived. Sometimes they lived in peace; sometimes they experienced various conflicts and wars, not getting

along with each other. Unfortunately, armed conflicts and wars in Afghanistan have lasted longer than periods of peace. Such a specificity requires the study of the Islamic factor associated with the emergence of the “Taliban” movement in Afghanistan.

Islam constitutes not merely a lifestyle for Afghans but also their ultimate fate. For a devoted Afghan Muslim, Islam is a matter of vital importance. Professor A. Haydarov, a renowned diplomat, observed that the Islamic component significantly impacts the decision-making processes of Afghanistan’s political leadership (Haydarov, 1991, p.10). Religious figures hold high esteem in Afghan society. It is worth noting that mullahs, mawlawis, muftis, and other religious figures of this kind are considered more respected than the head of state in Afghan society. In this regard, Afghan scholars and mullahs have always influenced the thinking of their people. For average Afghans, the village mullah served as a commentator on sociopolitical news, a source of information, and—above all—an advisor who accompanied his fellow villagers from birth to death while simply adhering to their orders. The religious leaders listed above, however, have also made their own “contribution” to the political and social crises in Afghanistan. Angus Hamilton, a member of the Royal Geographical Society of London and a prominent English scholar who travelled to Afghanistan during the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan, concludes in his fundamental work entitled “Afghanistan”, assessing the destructive role of religious figures in the Afghan state and society, that “the mullahs are the only source of the rise of rebellious elements” (Hamilton, 1906, p. 480). Thus, it is not surprising that Afghan folklore sometimes associates mullahs with cunning and deceitful people. It is enough to mention the following satirical anecdote in this

regard: "One day, a neighbour came to Mulla Nasreddin¹ and asked him to lend him his donkey. Mulla did not want to do this and said, "Unfortunately, my donkey died yesterday." At that moment, the sound of a donkey braying began to be heard from the stable. "What is this?" the neighbour asked in surprise. "Mulla, you said that my donkey was dead, but I can still hear its braying." Mulla Nasreddin replied, "Who do you believe – the mullah or the donkey?"

In Afghan society, religion and politics are inseparable. The Islamic factor is the only religious ideology that unites all Afghans. As the Afghan writer Nabi Misdaq wrote, by any Islamic standard, Afghans are devout and conservative Muslims. For centuries, Islam has served as a unifying force in all aspects of Afghan society, especially against external aggression (Nabi, 2006, p. 32). However, in the past, external forces have tried to introduce socialism, Islamism², liberalism, and other similar ideologies into Afghan society from the outside, but none of them have shown any results and have not brought peace to the Afghan people. Based on this, it is appropriate to study the processes of the politicization of Islam in Afghanistan, including the activation of opposition Islamic groups, by dividing them into three groups.

The first group is formed by a group of supporters of Islamism, formed under the influence of the ideology of the "Muslim Brotherhood" in Egypt. The "Muslim Brotherhood" is considered the first religious and political organization in the Middle East and the Muslim world that preferred the use of force, including armed terror, as a means of achieving its political goals (Yovqochev, 2008, p. 138). Experts associate the period of the religious and political views of the "Muslim Brotherhood" entering Afghanistan with the 1960s. According to Major General Viktor Spolnikov, head of the KGB office in Afghanistan (1980-1982), the first Islamic fundamentalist organization in Afghanistan was formed in 1969. In 1965, a closed circle was established at the initiative of the dean of the

Faculty of Theology of Kabul University, "Professor" (*ustod*) Ghulam Muhammad Niyazi. Members discussed Islam's "awakening", the state's future, and the socio-political order based on Islamic requirements. Another similar fundamentalist group was also formed at the Faculty of Engineering, consisting of Gulbiddin Hikmatyar, Sayfiddin Nusratyar, and Habib Rahmon. At the initiative of the students of the Faculty of Engineering, the activities of the two groups were combined in order to "fight together", and at its first meeting in 1969, the first fundamentalist organisation in Afghanistan, the "Muslim Youth" (*Javonon-e Muslim*), was founded (Spolnikov, 1990, pp. 15-16). It is notable that the "Muslim Youth" adopted the ideology of the Egyptian "Muslim Brotherhood" organisation as the main model for its activities. This is due to the fact that Afghan religious figures like Ghulam Muhammad Niazi, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Sibghatullah Mujaddadi, who studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo during the 1950s and 60s, were influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood upon their return to Afghanistan. French Islamic scholar Olivier Roux observes that the emergence of opposition Islamic movements in Afghanistan is intricately connected to the Islamic Society (*Tahrik-e Islami* or *Nihzat-e Islami*), established in 1958. The faction led by the movement's spiritual head, Sibghatullah Mujaddadi, primarily focused on vigorous propaganda efforts targeting students. The Islamic Society was influenced by extreme figures from the Muslim Brotherhood, notably Said Qutb, and aimed to apply their religious doctrines and pedagogical approaches in Afghanistan as a contemporary interpretation of Islam. The inaugural translation of Said Qutb's work was released by Mawlawi Kholis in the 1960s, titled "Islam and Social Justice" (Olivier, 1990, p. 70).

The second group consists of religious organizations in Pakistan that follow the idea of "Deobandism". According to the distinguished diplomat, orientalist, and Afghan scholar A. Haydarov, there were formerly no madrasas recognized as higher religious institutions in Afghanistan. Consequently, the predominant number of Afghan youngsters pursuing further religious studies primarily migrated to Pakistan and Iran, with a lesser proportion venturing to Arab nations. Individuals educated in Pakistan returned to their homeland possessing a robust worldview that embodies the beliefs and perspectives of the Deobandi Islamic school,

¹ Afghan form of Khoja Nasreddin or Nasreddin Efendi

² Islamism (political Islam) is a religious and political ideology that believes that any conflict between the state and society in Muslim-majority areas, as well as interstate relations, should be resolved solely on the basis of Sharia law. Islamism is the main ideology of extremist and terrorist organizations formed in a number of Muslim countries. For this reason, the concepts of Islam and Islamism are fundamentally different from each other.

which predominates in most madrasas across the country. Deobandiism has profound origins in South and Southwest Asia and is recognised as one of the most radical movements within Islam. A multitude of individuals associated with the “Taliban” are alumni of these madrasas (Haydarov, 2020, p. 756). Especially with the increasing influence of the Soviets in Afghanistan, these religious madrasas began to become more active. According to Larry Hudson, a professor at the American University in Cairo, who has been to several areas under Taliban control, “most of the ‘Taliban’ were teachers and students of religious schools who fought against the Soviet troops” (Sikoev, 2004, p.24). The Mujahideen lost their anti-Soviet “jihad” prestige as they fought small groups for power. Thomas Barfield, a historian and researcher on Afghanistan, notes that this allowed the “Taliban” to create discontent in two ways. First, the “Taliban” attracted young people who had participated in the anti-Soviet war, giving them the opportunity to participate in a new type of “jihad”—the “true form” of Islam in Afghanistan. The adherents of the “Taliban” way of Islam imagine their religious views as the only way of life for Afghans, as they are students of religious schools outside of Afghan society. Second, the “Taliban” have chosen the disaffected population living in the widely scattered areas of Afghanistan as the main focus of their ideological regime (Barfield, 2010, pp. 256-257).

Deobandiism is founded on the teachings of hadith and the legal traditions of the Hanafi school. The basis of this movement is closely connected to the endeavours of the Dar ul-Ilm madrasa, established in Deoband in 1866/67. Academics attribute the founding of the movement to Muhammad Qasim Nanatawi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi. Deobandiism sought to reform and unify Muslim society within a colonial context devoid of a Muslim sovereign. Deobandi madrasas significantly contributed to the extensive propagation of their ideologies across South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan. In 1879, India had 12 Deobandi madrasas, which increased to 9,000 in South Asia by the 1960s (Boboqulov, 2021, p.87). The ideology of Deobandiism began to exert influence in Afghanistan significantly earlier than the radical Islamic ideas introduced by the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1960s. The administration led by Bacha-ye Saqa³, later known as Habibullah

Kulakoni, which seized Kabul in January 1929, represents the inaugural fundamentalist movement in the history of independent Afghanistan. During Habibullah Kulakoni’s brief rule, lasting less than one year, he repealed all reforms from the Amanullah Khan era and instituted Sharia law. He systematically closed all women’s and secular schools, destroyed libraries, and incinerated rare books and manuscripts. Following the re-establishment of the Sharia courts, individuals associated with Habibullah Kulakoni commenced the looting of the nation. The emir’s decree mandated that women must don the burqa and refrain from leaving their homes without a male relative. The emir mandated that men cultivate beards and forbade the wearing of any attire other than traditional Afghan garments, specifically excluding European clothing (Kicha, 2023, p. 201). From the outset, Bacha-ye Saqa did not present himself as a national leader representing the Afghan Tajiks; rather, he identified as a Muslim ruler. In this context, Bacha-ye Saqa sought to broaden his authority and impact, reaching beyond the Afghan populace to encompass the entirety of the ummah, which included India and Soviet Central Asia. In his work “In the History of Afghanistan”, Afghan historian Mir Ghulam Muhammad Gubor presents notable insights regarding Habibulla Kulakoni’s call to the Afghan people to engage in the struggle for the liberation of Bukhara. Kulakoni harboured ambitions to claim the throne of the Emir of Bukhara and sought to transport the sandalwood gate, revered as sacred by Muslims in India, to Afghanistan (میر غلام محمد غبار، ص. ۸۲۷). Experts assert that British special services facilitated the rise of Bacha-ye Saqa to power. He maintained ongoing communication with the British ambassador to Afghanistan, Humphreys. In 1929, the Daily Mail stated, “Humphreys is providing strong support for Bacha-ye Saqa to be in power” (Kassis, Kolosov, 1981, p.220). Olivier Roux, an Islamic scholar, contends that Bacha-ye Saqa’s authority was influenced by Deobandi concepts, facilitating the shift from fundamentalism to Islamism in Afghanistan (Olivier, 1990, p. 68). The conclusion drawn by historian Viktor Gilinsen has garnered significant attention within the scientific community: “The real truth is that Amanullah Khan was overthrown from power by radical Islamists—the spiritual leaders of the modern ‘Taliban’ movement” (Boyko, 2010, pp. 141–142).

³ Bacha-ye Saqa - Son of a water carrier. Ethnically, he is of Tajik origin.

The religious and ideological foundation of the “Taliban” movement is clearly rooted in the principles of Deobandi thought. The formation of the “Taliban” can be attributed to the ideas propagated through religious education in madrasas in Pakistan, alongside the influence of various religious and political parties that arose in this context. Following the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, there was a notable emergence of Deobandi madrasas in Afghanistan. Professor I. Boboqulov indicates that post-1947, the perspectives and methods of this school experienced significant dissemination, particularly within the Pashtun areas. Furthermore, the establishment of the primary Deobandi madrasas in the regions of independent tribes can be attributed to the initiatives taken by Maulana Fazlur Rehman and the “Society of Islamic Scholars” (Jamiyat-e Ulemai Islam) led by Samiul Haq. Without question, the most renowned and expansive of these institutions is Samiul Haq’s “Dar ul-ilm Haqqaniyya” madrasa located in Akora Khattak, within the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The prominent figures of the Afghan mujahideen, including Yunus Khalis, Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, Jalaluddin Haqqani, among others, are alumni of this madrasa. In 1999, eight ministers from the Taliban government, along with numerous governors, judges, and military commanders, were alumni of the Haqqaniyya madrasas. For many years, these madrasas have served as vital educational institutions for Afghan refugees, offering complimentary education, nourishment, and accommodation. Their students, referred to as “Talibs”, constituted a foundational social base for the mujahideen during the 1980s and subsequently for the “Taliban” movement in the 1990s (Boboqulov, 2021, p.88). As of December 1994, a cohort of 12,000 young students from Afghanistan and Pakistan, affiliated with the “Islamic Scholars’ Society”, had aligned themselves with the “Taliban” in Kandahar (Rashid, 2000, p.29). Another religious organization, Jamaat-e-Islami, also played a significant role in shaping the ideology of the Taliban. Founded in British India in 1941, the party was founded by Abul A’la al-Mawdudi, who is known as one of the founders of the ideas of Islamism (political Islam) along with the religious teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood. Peter Marsden, a renowned expert on the Middle East, Islam, and Afghanistan, who worked for 13 years as an information coordinator in the Afghan branch of the British intelligence service (MI6), explains how al-Mawdudi’s Islamist ideas greatly

influenced the religious motives of the Taliban: “The influence of Mawdudi can be clearly seen in the main goals and objectives set by the Taliban movement. Mawdudi’s teachings inspired the Taliban’s deep conviction that there could be no compromise with Western values, but rather that the West should respect and adapt to the value system the Taliban had adopted for itself. Mawdudi’s extremely conservative views, especially regarding the exclusion of women from public life, served as the basis for the ideological principles used by the Taliban” (Marsden, 2002, pp. 81-82). Pakistani professor Ahmad Hasan Doni is convinced that the “Taliban” were educated in religious madrasas in Pakistan, where young students were trained to wage “jihad” against those who did not adhere to the moral precepts of Islam (Matinuddin, 1999, p.22). Naturally, the fact that the “Taliban” were mostly orphaned children of the socially disadvantaged in Afghanistan also had an impact on the development of radical ideological fodder in them. As described in the book “Taliban: From Madrasa to Power”, “The Afghan ‘Taliban’ were ordinary village boys who had never seen ‘neither Pakistan nor Qom’”. Consequently, madrasas offered food and accommodation to the “Talibans”, with education serving as their primary means of subsistence. These circumstances compelled them to withstand physical and ethical adversities during their academic years, in addition to undergoing military training. Consequently, the “Talibans” conviction in their ideology compelled them to initiate a “holy war” against those who opposed their religious and political beliefs (Belokrenitsky, Sikoev, 2014, pp. 18-19).

The third group. The aforementioned information confirms that the foundational principles of the “Taliban” movement are derived from the teachings of the Deobandi Madrasas; however, it can be posited that Wahhabism, regarded as the political ideology of Saudi Arabia, has also partially shaped the religious convictions of the “Taliban”. Prior to the incursion of Soviet forces into Afghanistan, this practice significantly escalated. The ideology of Wahhabism was initially a theory imparted to the Afghan mujahideen; however, components of Deobandiism and Wahhabism converged, evolving into a distinct Salafi movement propagated to the “Taliban”. The “Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan”, established in Peshawar by Abdulrab Rasul Sayyaf with Saudi Arabian backing in 1982, exemplified sacrifice in the

extensive dissemination of Wahhabi ideologies in Afghanistan. It is well known that Abdulrab Rasul Sayyaf is a Salafist enthusiast. A notable 1984 report by the Saudi envoy to Pakistan claims that the ambassador “gifted” \$10 million to Abdulrab Rasul Sayyaf on behalf of Prince Abdullah, the prime minister of Saudi Arabia (Washington Post, 1987). The academic analysis by Soumya Awasthi, a security specialist at the Vivekananda International Foundation, a think tank with headquarters in New Delhi, is particularly noteworthy. According to Awasthi, “the Indian version of Deobandi is classical, while the Afghan and Pakistani versions are neo-Deobandi”. The scholar explains the reason for this name, saying, “because it deviates from the true principles of Islam and reflects elements of Wahhabism.” Ahmed Rashid, a prominent Pakistani scholar who studies the Taliban, also spoke about the “Afghan Wahhabis”, who call themselves Salafis, and noted in his work that their ideology did not spread widely throughout Afghanistan due to the fact that ordinary Afghans did not like it (Rashid, 2010, p. 85). Despite the fact that the majority of Taliban officials do not identify their religious convictions with the Wahhabi movement, their actual policies and actions suggest otherwise. In some ways, the prohibition of all contemporary innovations, such as listening to music, radio, and television, as heresies, such as the Wahhabi beliefs; the bombing of the ancient Buddhist temple in Bamiyan; intolerance for Hazara Shiites; and close ties with the international terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, all support the aforementioned ideas.

DISCUSSION

The historical origins of the Taliban movement are evident, prompting scholarly discussions regarding the potential influences of radical religious ideologies, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Deobandiism, and Wahhabism. From our perspective, the foundational religious and ideological principles that gave rise to the Taliban movement can be traced back to the teachings of Deobandiism. The remaining radical perspectives, shaped by external influences, merely functioned as a supplement to the “Taliban” ideology. We agree with the conclusion reached by Russian Afghan scholar Ruslan Sikoyev regarding the origins of religious radical groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban movement. Sikoyev posits that the religious ideology of the Taliban, which incorporates elements of Deobandism, Sufism, and

various Islamic extremist movements, particularly Wahhabism, represents a syncretic⁴ form of Islam that integrates aspects of radical fundamentalism and ethnic identity (Sikoyev, 2004, p.68).

In general, the acute socio-political crisis that has arisen in Afghanistan over the past period, as well as the lack of opportunities for the development of purely Islamic higher education in this land and the influence of external forces, have led to the development of a “Taliban” model of Islam that contradicts the traditional Islamic values of Afghan society.

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⁴ Religious syncretism - a combination of different religious teachings and views.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Buranov, S. "Islamic Factor in the Emergence and the Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan." *Sarcouncil journal of Arts humanities and social sciences* 4.4 (2025): pp 31-36.