Pre-2001 Taliban Religious Ideology – Context, Roots and Manifestations

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Abstract

This paper critically re-examines some of the prevailing narratives about the religious ideology of the early Taliban and analyses the four most common conventional concepts of it: being an oversimplified version of Islam, being born in madrasas located in Pakistan, being a local variation of Deobandism and being a Pashtun nationalist movement. The author argues that the ideology of pre-2001 Taliban is a non-static, multilayered and oversimplified interpretation of religious dogmas mixed with local tribal customs and definitely more rural fundamentalism than political Islamism. In the first section, the author provides basic definitions, such as ideology and Deobandism. The second section is a presentation of the religious context of Afghanistan and roots of the Taliban. The next section is an analysis of the Deobandi influence over Taliban religious life followed by a paragraph about Pashtunism and the Pashtunwali role in Taliban's ideology. The next paragraph concerns the practical dimension and implementation of religious rules on the policy of Afghanistan during the first emirate.

Keywords: Islam, Taliban, Afghanistan, Pashtunwali, Pashtuns, Deobandism
Słowa kluczowe: islam, talibowie, Afganistan, Pasztunwali, Pasztunowie, deobandyzm

Introduction

Defining the ideology of the Taliban[1] is a hard task given the obscurity of their movement and its lack of internal homogeneity and transparency. Moreover, when they

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[1] This article focuses exclusively on the Afghan Taliban movement – a group which arose in the Kandahar area in the mid-1990s, led by mullah Muhammad Omar. As the name of the group become a loanword in English and was widely popularised in media and science in the form 'Taliban' as a plural noun referring to the group, the author will be using this form instead of *Ṭālebān* or *Taleban*.

entered into the global spotlight conquering Kabul in 1996 and being passively in-volved in the 9/11 attacks, their repressive and brutal ways to control the society which they justified in the name of Islam were the main point for media and academic discourse and has overshadowed a deeper analysis. In the post-2001 period, the Tali-ban being part of war in Afghanistan as 'the bad one' further negatively altered the discussion, as argumentation was often unfortunately a victim of hard research con-ditions and the political climate. After a fierce 20-year campaign, they once again gained attention and again were described by generic, emotional (not to say hysteri-cal) labels such as 'medieval', 'fundamentalist' or 'Muslim terrorists'. Despite the universal recognition of the centrality of Islam to the Taliban, their exact interpreta-tion of it has attracted strikingly little study beyond the political issues, Islam-bash-ing, Islam-apology and human rights. The actual roots, beliefs, practices, internal debates, and decision-making processes have been covered by the dramatic footage of the US withdrawal followed by the soon-to-emerge issue of harsh (in)justice and abuses of women's rights.

This paper does not intend to claim authority in the interpretation of the early Taliban's ideology. Instead, it critically re-examines some of the prevailing narratives and argues that it is a non-static, multi-layered and oversimplified interpretation of religious dogmas mixed with local tribal customs and definitely more rural funda-mentalism than political Islamism. Due to the short form of this paper, the author was forced to omit some interesting issues like a comparison between the pre-2001 ideology and the current ideology.

Generally speaking, since the emergence of the Taliban movement in Afghani-stan, observers have primarily been divided over the question of whether they are more a Pashtun[2] nationalist movement or a radical Islamic movement with connec-tions to global *jihadi* organisations. The secondary discussion revolved around the topic of the source(s) of their ideology. Therefore, the article analyses four of the most common conventional concepts of early Taliban religious ideology:

(1) It is an oversimplified interpretation of Islam based mainly on a literal reading of the Quran and radical Islamism.

(2) It was born together with the movement itself in Pakistani-based madrasas or refugee camps controlled by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI, the main intelligence agency of Pakistan) and therefore represents a phenomenon extraneous to Afghan society.

(3) It represents a form of Deobandism strongly influenced by Wahhabism that stands in opposition to Sufism and other traditional religious beliefs in Af-ghan society.

(4) It is the Pashtun nationalism or 'Pashtunism' wrapped in the religious rhet-oric of Islamism.

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[2] Pashtuns are a dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, constituting approximately 40% of its popu-lation. They bore the exclusive name of Afghan before that name came to denote any native of the pre-sent land area of Afghanistan. The Pashtun are primarily united by a common language, Pashto. Other commonalities include Sunni Islam and a common social code (Pashtunwali) that governs both ethical behaviour and custom. For more information, see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pashtun.

To adequately examine these concepts, the author decided to first shed some light on Islam in Afghanistan in the third section of this article. This draws a picture of the state of Islamic education (for the general population and specialised for future clergy) and practices before the emergence of the Taliban movement; therefore, together with the sixth section (which summarises the practical implementation of religious concepts during the first Emirate), it will complete the material and will enable the reader to form a position on the subject. It will provide valuable background information regarding the first disputed concept. The second concept is widely scrutinised in the fifth and sixth sections with especially valuable information from Abu Mus'ab as-Suri. Data about the educational background of Taliban leadership included in the first section are complement to the analysis. The third concept is discussed in section 4. The fourth concept is discussed in the sixth section with important supplementary information extracted from the third section.

The main sources for the presented paper are the author's interviews and discussions with Afghan politicians, diplomats, servicemen and intellectuals from both sides of the conflict conducted between 2008 and 2021 in Afghanistan. The main conclusions are mentioned in bibliography materials and source documents. The main research method used to analyse the collected data was content analysis.

For transliteration, the author adopted the simplest system for the transliteration of Persian, Pashto and Arabic words, and has thus modified the system developed by the "International Journal of Middle East Studies", dispensing with diacritical marks, and where possible, adopting the spelling used in the mainstream media (i.e. Abdurrahman not 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Khān). Consequently, the conventional spelling of the New York Times has been followed for terms such as Shi'ism and well-known names and words, such as Abdullah, Taliban, Zia ul-Haq, etc.

Basic definitions

In this paper, the author relies on the approach proposed by A. Gopal and A. Linschoten, who offered T. Eagleton's definition of ideology as a "complex of empirical and normative elements, within which the nature and organization of the former are ultimately determined by the latter." In the adopted approach, ideology is a moral interpretation of the world, a set of beliefs about how people should behave and how society should be organised,[3] and fundamentalism here is understood as a "type of conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts."[4]

Islamism is understood as a "political ideology that posits that modern states should be reconstituted constitutionally, economically and judicially according to

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[3] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban*, Afghanistan Analyst Network, 29.06.2017, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/201705-AGopal-ASvLinschoten-TB-Ideology.pdf, p. 8 [accessed: 10.03.2022].

[4] *Fundamentalism*, see: www.britannica.com/topic/fundamentalism [accessed: 9.03.2022].

what is held as a return to authentic Islamic practice."[5] Deobandism is defined here not in connection with its Indian origin but rather as a religious and political ideology initially propagated in Pakistan as a part of general Muhammad Zia ul-Haq's attempts at the 'Islamisation' of the state policy that started in the 1970s.[6]

Afghanistan religious context and roots of the movement

Afghanistan has been an Islamic country since its emergence in the eighteenth century,[7] at least in a sense that the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants were and are Muslims. Islam was an obvious, yet gradable, part of individual and collective identity for the majority of Afghans.[8]

Initially Islam was itself not a major variable in early Afghanistan power-play as military force combined with genealogy and personal charisma was crucial. However Islamic symbolism proved to be very important for establishing the state of Afghanistan. Good example for that is as a moment when a *darwish*[9] agitating in favour of the coronation of Ahmad Shah Abdali as King of Afghanistan tipped the scales in his favour. He was able to convince Pashtun tribal chiefs to support his *protégé* since he was considered as a 'holy man' and had authority among Pashtun chiefs on the basis of religion. However, except for this notable occurrence, Islam itself and its leaders were rather side-lined in Afghan policy in the initial stages of the formation of the state.[10] Some scholars, such as A. Brahimi, claim that Islam was the main source of political power starting from the early 19th century and from 1818 onwards a series of movements which opposed the state have proclaimed Islam as their dominant symbol.[11] However, according to A. Olesen, research shows that the more extensive use of Islam in Afghan state policy can be dated back to only the last two decades of the nineteenth century in relation to the state-building project of emir Abdurrahman (1880–1091).[12] In this case, Islam was a useful mobilisation tool for

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[5] N. Megoran, *Theocracy*, [in:] *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, N.J. Thrift, R. Kitchin (eds.), Amsterdam 2009.

[6] For more details see: O. Roy, *Islamic Radicalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, p. 10, www.refworld.org/pdfid/3c6a3f7d2.pdf [accessed: 12.03.2022]; L. Puri, *The Past and Future of Deobandi Islam*, "CTC Sentinel", Nov 2009, vol. 2, no. 11, https://ctc.usma.edu/the-past-and-future-of-deobandi-islam [accessed: 12.03.2022]; S. MacLoughin, *Deobandism*, [in:] *Routledge Encyclopedia of Islamic Civilization and Religion*, I.R. Netton (ed.), London 2008, p. 145.

[7] Emergence of the state of Afghanistan is connected to Mir Wais Hotaki, a Pashtun chief who successfully rebelled against Persia and created an independent state in 1709. The state was reconquered by Persia in 1929. The state of Afghanistan that survived as a political entity was created by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1747.

[8] *The State, Religion and Ethic Politics*, A. Banuazizi, M. Weiner (eds.), Lahore 1987, pp. 8–10.

[9] Here meaning an unofficial, Sufi religious charismatic person, a "holy man".

[10] L. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton 1973, pp. 332–342.

[11] A. Brahimi, *The Taliban's Evolving Ideology*, London 2010, s. 13, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/120220/WP022010_Brahimi.pdf [accessed: 9.03.2022].

[12] Abdurrahman – ruler of Afghanistan (1880–1901), well known for unifying the country under central monarchical rule. He brutally pacified the country and consolidated his authority as a result of

the central government as its enemies were mainly Shi'a Hazaras and considered to be pagan *kafiris* ('infidels'). However, the situation soon changed and Islam became a tool for conservative tribal opposition against the centralised state and modernisation. The best example of such a course occurred in 1929 when the reformist King Amanullah (1919–1929) was overthrown under the catchphrase of defending Islam against 'corruption'. It was one of the peak points of the power struggle between the Kabul-based centre and the countryside or, to be more precise, between the state and the tribal structure, which was started by Abdurrahman. According to Brahimi, starting from period of his reign "religion became a focal point for opposition that was essentially political."[13]

Islam was also strongly represented in political symbolism: the official name of the state created in 1992 as a result of the Peshawar Accord was the 'Islamic State of Afghanistan'; the state which collapsed in August 2021 was the 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan'. Adhering state policy to the principles of the 'sacred religion of Islam' or mentioning Islam as the religion of the state was placed in every single Afghan constitution – including those implemented by communist governments.[14]

During the rule of Zahir Shah (1933–1973), the religion was marginalised by the Kabul elite but was not neglected politically. The focal point of the government was to constitute a state-approved (and state-approving) Islam.[15] The effects of this policy were rather disappointing. Since the end of the 19th century, few existing government *madrasas* have produced mullahs whose primary function has been to legitimise the state through Islam. However, in the rural areas, outside the kingdom's direct control, mullahs continued to administer a kind of Islam that was closely adapted to local needs and mindsets by mixing it with traditional tribal customs and Sufism.[16]

In 1979, the rural population consisted of 75% of the 13.5 million society. These numbers changed to 79% and 9.7 respectively in 1989, and reached 78% and 16.8 before the collapse of the first Taliban's Emirate in 2001. The overall literacy rate in 1979 was 18%[17] and one can assume that most of the literate Afghans lived in urban areas. Taking into account these numbers, the low level of infrastructure and the limited social movement, it can be concluded that rather than formal *madrasa*, it was the locally-rooted *hujra*[18] that was of key importance for religious (or any) education in Afghanistan.

Paradoxically, the importance of *hujra* after 1979, and especially after 1989, increased because the state education system was nearly completely destroyed as

internal wars against Ghilzai Pashtuns and Hazaras. See more at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Rahman-Khan [accessed: 17.11.2022].

[13] A. Brahimi, *op. cit.*; A. Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, Surrey 1995, pp. 298–303.

[14] For more details see: *The Constitutions of Afghanistan 1923–1996*, Shah M. (ed.), Kabul 2004.

[15] N. Green, *Afghanistan's Islam: A History and Its Scholarship*, [in:] *Afghanistan's Islam*, N. Green (ed.), Oakland 2017, pp. 20–21.

[16] D. Penkala-Gawęcka, *Medycyna tradycyjna w Afganistanie i jej przeobrażenia*, "Prace Etnologiczne" 1988, vol. 12, pp. 38–69.

[17] *Afghanistan Urban Population 1960–2022*, www.macrotrends.net/countries/AFG/afghanistan/urban-population [accessed: 15.03.2022].

[18] Small room annexed to village mosque, often used as a *talib's* dormitory or guesthouse.

a result of the war. Having this picture in mind, it comes as no surprise that Linscho-ten and Gupta found in the course of their research that most of the educated children before 1979 did not attend state-approved *madrasas*, but were educated in *hujras*, which were numerous in comparison to only about twelve government-supported *madrasas*. Especially in southern Afghanistan, the students and teachers of *hujras* were deeply integrated into the social fabric of the villages. Most promising or persistent *hujra talebs* ('hujra students') together with their tutors formed tight loyal circles (*halaqat-e daira*) and worked almost as a professional caste.[19]

The following table illustrates the scale of influence over early Taliban leadership made by education in *hujras*. This type of education is dominant with the number of 'graduates' being twice the number of those educated in Pakistan *madrasa*.

Table 1: Taliban Emirate Leadership Education Tally

Taliban Leadership Education	Number	Percentage
Afghanistan *hujra*	71	48.97
Afghanistan *madrasa*	11	7.59
Afghanistan *maktab*	3	2.07
Pakistan refugee camp	8	5.52
Pakistan *madrasa*	35	24.17
Pakistan secular school	1	0.69
India	2	1.38
Saudi Arabia	1	0.69
None	3	2.07
Unknown	9	6.21

Source: A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

It is noteworthy that the Pashto word for 'student', i.e. *talib*, refers primarily to a student of *hujra* and it is the network of *hujras* that the Taliban movement emerged from.[20] According to the research of Gopal and Linschoten, the often repeated story presenting the Taliban as simply a product of *madrasas* in Pakistani refugee camps is inaccurate. Indeed, some of the students split time between the Afghanistan *hujra* as the first grade and the more formal and better organised Pakistan *madrasa* for higher study. The phenomenon intensified during the 1989–1994 period, but it wasn't the case for the majority of young Afghan Pashtuns. Such a situation casts doubt on the hypothesis that the Taliban leaders were alien to Afghan village life.[21] It is true that,

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[19] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–11. For more see A. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, London 2007, pp. 43–46.

[20] Author's interview with mullah Muhammad Qazi, Kabul, 18.02.2012.

[21] For more details see: S. Fida Yunas, *Afghanistan Political Parties, Groups, Movement and Muja-hideen Alliances and Governments*, Peshawar 1997, pp. 868–878.

after 1994, the Taliban ranks were bolstered with fresh recruits from Pakistan-based refugee camps, but these individuals rarely reached positions of influence.[22] According to Gopal and Linschoten:

> Undoubtedly the jihad overturned generations of social relations. Khans and maliks[23] were killed or fled and, as the state effectively declared war on the countryside (where the mujahedin had strongholds), agricultural production plummeted and longstanding migratory and settlement patterns became severely disrupted. In this context, ethical life also shifted. Certain norms, such as those linked to tribe and state, declined in importance. In their place, ritualistic practice based on the Sunna began to monopolise ethical debate.[24]

An important argument against the opinion that the Taliban are alien to Afghan culture is a fact that even before the mobilisation of fighters under the leadership of mullah Omar, there already existed various 'student' groups i.e. informal groups of young men (*talibs*) gathering around a teacher (*mullah*) aimed at studying.[25] As David Edwards noted despite the apparent novelty of the Taliban movement, this was not the first time when religious students played an important role in political events as they were the principal sources for most of the political movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[26] After the nearly total collapse of state structures as a result of the M. Daud republican coup (1973), followed by the communist Saur (April) Revolution (1978), which caused *jihadi* struggles (1979–1989) and subsequent brutal civil wars (1989–1992 and 1992–1996) old social structures vanished in most areas due to the growing anarchy leaving only rudimentary institutions that were mainly connected to religious life. Mosques were usually the only public buildings and the sole providers of social/public services, including education. The only norms possible to implement had their source in religion and/or tribal codes of conduct, especially Pashtunwali.[27] As most of the teachers (i.e. *mullahs*) and many students were somehow involved in anti-Soviet *jihadi* struggle and weapons were easy to take, some student groups took the opportunity to defend their own local area against former *mujaheddins* turned into bandits and started to call themselves 'fronts'.[28] Such militarised religious academic groups were present in places like Zabul, Sangesar, Pashmul, Arghestan, Nelgham (in the Kandahar province), Uruzgan, Kunar and Badghis during the nineteen-eighties, which remained the cradle of the future Taliban for a decade,[29] to be replaced by Kandahar at the beginning of nineteen-nineties. Mullah Omar's students group was not the first of its kind nor was it the biggest or structurally exceptional. On the contrary,

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[22] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–11.

[23] Khan – a title of respect used in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and other countries of Asia. Usually held by persons of wealth and local authority. Malik (from Arabic 'king') – a title of respect of a chief or leader of the local community, usually a big landowner.

[24] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[25] K. Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon*, Karachi 1999, p. 13.

[26] D.B. Edwards, *Before Taliban, Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad*, Berkeley 2002, p. 291.

[27] Interview with col. Hamid Yari, Kabul, 30.03.2016.

[28] *Ibidem*.

[29] A. Kotokey, A. Borthakur, *The Ideological Trajectory within the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, "Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies" 2021, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 3.

considering its religious-study character, the group was very typical for rural south Afghanistan Pashtun and was fairly typical considering it's involvement in establishing a specific kind of law and order.[30]

Deobandi influence

As a broad, vivid socio-political movement, the Taliban cannot be reduced to doctrines. However, many commentators assume that the Taliban represent their idealised version of Islam, somehow an interpretation of Deobandism. There is no doubt that the Taliban allegedly adheres to the tradition of the Hanafi *mazhab*,[31] of which Deobandism is a local, subcontinental branch. However, they received Deobandi's teachings secondhand at schools in Pakistan, far from the original *madrasa* in India. The Pakistan network has not followed Jama'at Uleme-e-Hind's[32] lead and has evolved into a more strict and militant version of original Deobandism. It is noteworthy that the main Deobandi school in India has distanced itself from the Taliban and their violent activities in Afghanistan and has called the former Taliban regime 'un-Islamic'.[33]

Starting from the nineteen-eighties, with the beginning of the Islamisation of state policy lead by president Zia ul-Haq, the number of Deobandi seminaries and *madrasas* in Pakistan soared. The surge in the number of *madrasas* in the nineteen-eighties coincided and was coupled with the influx of Afghan refugees. Due to the complicated political and geographical nature of Durand Line[34] and the lack of a proper administrative system in Afghanistan, the exact number of refugees is impossible to identify. Most of the reliable data of UNHCR estimated it to be around 3 to 3.5 million persons.[35] Taking into account the size of the Afghan population, it is safe to assume that between 1979 and 1989, a very significant proportion of Afghans (up to 23%) were refugees or were temporally settled in Pakistan. Local permanent and temporary camp-based *madrasas* frequently provided the only available education. Thus, the knowledge provided by those was significant in shaping mindset of young

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[30] Phone interview with mawlawi Qaium Gul and mullah Ahmad Akbarzadeh, 11.04.2022.

[31] One of four Sunni *mazhab* ('school of religious law') founded in the eighth century. For more see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hanafiyah [accessed: 17.11.2022].

[32] Council of Indian Muslim Theologians – founded leading organisations of Islamic scholars in 1919 belonging to the Deobandi school of thought.

[33] S.H.H. Akhlaq, *Taliban and Salafism: A Historical and Theological Exploration*, "Open Democracy", 1.12.2013, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/taliban-and-salafism-historical-and-theological-exploration/ [accessed: 11.04.2022].

[34] Durand Line – boundary established in the Hindu Kush in 1893 running through the tribal lands between Afghanistan and British India, marking their respective spheres of influence; in modern times, it has marked the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. See: https://www.britannica.com/event/Durand-Line [accessed: 15.10.2022].

[35] R. Schoch, *Afghan Refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s: Cold War Politics and Registration Practice*, https://www.unhcr.org/uk/research/working/4868daad2/afghan-refugees-pakistan-during-1980s-cold-war-politics-registration-practice.html?query=Afghan%20refugees%20pakistan [accessed: 12.04.2022].

Afghans. Indeed, under such circumstances, radical and fundamental interpretations of Islam could spread rapidly among Afghan resistance fighters, some of whom possibly became precursors of the Taliban.

Many scholars, for example Ahmad Rashid[36] and Barbara Metcalf, believe that in this Pakistan triangle of policy, religion and education the origin of the Taliban is to be found. In particular, Madrasa Haqqaniyya, in Akora Kathak near Peshawar, trained many of the top Taliban leaders.[37] However, this fact can be misleading. Firstly, the Taliban are not a unified organisation. Haqqaniyya trained mostly former and current Taliban leaders from Loya Paktia (generally speaking, the main centre of the Haqqani[38] Network) and not the politically dominant Kandaharis.[39] The core members of the Taliban political leadership were mostly educated in Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan refugee camps and *madrasas* were a primarily a place of the indoctrination of masses and the source of recruits not for the then non-existent Taliban movement but for *mujahedin* organisations.[40] Indeed, many of the former *mujahedin* fighters joined the ranks of the Taliban, but rather after the formation of the movement and the first major successes.[41]

An opinion stating that the *mujahedin* became alienated from the Afghanistan pre-*jihad* traditions and social norms is common among experts. Indeed, most of these norms and traditions had been destroyed in brutal power struggles as the traditional social system. Such a situation created an ideological vacuum which the Taliban were able to fill over a period of a few years. However, it wasn't single-moment phenomena but a long process which can be dated back to 1979. Mehdi Karimi highlighted the important issue of a generational divide within the Afghan refugees. He stated that:

> While the first fighters […], were still firmly attached to Afghanistan, its history and its predominantly tolerant religious tradition, the younger ones lost this attachment and became radicalized accordingly […]. The ideology established at that time then formed the ideological foundation of the today's Taliban.[42]

Despite the undeniable fact that Pakistani Deobandi madrasas had a significant influence over the mindset of Afghan refugees (and by that, over a large proportion of the whole population of Afghanistan), the issue of internal division within the Afghan society is again too frequently omitted. The majority of Afghan refugees (72% in

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[36] A. Rashid, *Talibowie*, Kraków 2002, pp. 22, 152.

[37] B. Metcalf, *'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs*, p. 13, http://www.items.ssrc.org/after-september-11/traditionalist-islamic-activism-deoband-tablighis-and-talibs/ [accessed: 11.04.2022].

[38] It is significant than the founder of Haqqani Network, Jalaluddin Zadrani took his alias from the name of the madrasa. Therefore the whole group is named after the *madrasa*.

[39] S. Fida Yunas, *op. cit.*, p. 878.

[40] Interview with col. Hamid Yari, Kabul, 30.03.2016.

[41] Interview with Shafiq Ahmadzai, Kabul, 10.12.2022.

[42] K. Knipp, *Afghanistan: What is the Taliban's religious ideology?*, Deutsche Welle webportal, 2.11.2021, https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-what-is-the-talibans-religious-ideology/a-59696686 [accessed: 20.03.2022].

1986)[43] settled in the area of the North-Western Frontier Province (NWFP). This area was the main target of emigration for Pashtuns from the Karlani confederation. The area with the second largest population of refugees (24%) was Balochistan. This zone was the main target for Durrani and some Ghilzai Pashtuns. These tribes are overwhelmingly dominant in the political and ideological sphere of the early Taliban and first emirate. As Rashid observes, the aid which was distributed by Pakistan's ISI, who tended to treat Kandahar as a backwater and the Durranis with suspicion, was mostly channelled to Pashtuns' organisation which originated from Loya Paktia, Nangarhar, Uruzgan and Kunduz.[44] In line with this policy, *madrasas* in NWFP were better equipped and more stress was put on education and ideology than on recruitment.[45] Consequently, the influence of Deobandism on early Taliban was lesser in comparison to other groups and less significant than in the post-2001 period.

Regardless of their level of influence over Taliban foot soldiers, which is actually quite difficult to exactly determine, the education of Taliban commanders is a critical issue. According to the research of Gopal and Linschoten, updated by the author's query, nearly all the key ideological influencers and more than half of the Taleban senior leadership were born before 1965,

> which means that they received their primary education and formative childhood experiences prior to the 1979 upheaval. The classic theory of the Taliban states that the movement is the product of extremist Pakistani madrasas, but the data presented here suggests that at least 60 per cent of the leadership received a significant portion of their education inside Afghanistan. Through links to Deobandism and indigenous religious practice, the Taliban leadership, particularly the supreme leader, mullah Muhammad Omar, were deeply influenced by Sufism.[46]

If most Taliban were born in Pakistani refugee camps – which only came into existence in 1979 – it would mean that they would have been between the ages of 14 and 20, at the oldest during the period of rule of the (first) Islamic Emirate. While this may have been true for foot soldiers, it was unlikely the case for mid-level commanders and as it was explained before, this was certainly not the case for the Taliban leadership.

As Angana Kotokey and Anchita Borthakur observe, the ideology of the first generation members was dominated by local Kandahari culture and village norms which made it part of traditional Islam. Deobandism, which was brought from Pakistan, had more influence over the second generation of Taliban, who were children born in Pakistani refugee camps and had learned their fighting skills from *mujahedin* parties based in Pakistan.[47]

Although many scholars believe that the Taliban belief system is a hybrid of Wahhabism and Deobandism, Taliban leaders themselves argued that their movement is simple Hanafism and denied Wahhabi any influence over their thought. The same

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[43] N.H. Dupree, *Demographic Reporting on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan*, "Modern Asian Studies" 1988, vol. 22, no. 4, p. 846.

[44] A. Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[45] Interview with mullah Zahir, Kabul, 5.11.2015.

[46] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[47] A. Kotokey, A. Borthakur, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

style of denial is in use by them in the case of Sufism.[48] However, the issue of Sufism traces in Taliban ideology is more complicated as, contrary to Wahhabism, it was a part of Afghan identity for centuries[49] and many Taliban members belonged to various Sufi orders, of which Qadiriyya was the most popular.[50]

An interesting point connected to this issue was noted in 2015 in Paktia and Takhar during a survey on informal Afghan justice. One of the findings was that the main (often only) point of reference for *mullahs* determining the dictates of Islamic law is the Quran with Sunna being nearly completely omitted. Moreover, contrary to Hanafi, jurisprudence references to a body of jurist-made law were almost non-existent.[51] Although the survey was conducted in 2015, the findings can be extrapolated to an earlier period as the fundaments of informal justice have remained relatively stable since the emergence of the Taliban. This raises a question about the general awareness of Islamic law among Afghan *mullahs*. With regard to most *mullahs*, the answer would be a quote from Christina Jones-Pauly and Neamat Nojumi: "The Islam practiced in Afghanistan […] would be almost unrecognizable to a sophisticated Muslim scholar."[52]

Pashtunism

The Taliban is not exclusively a Pashtun phenomenon, although non-Pashtuns consist of only a small minority within the Taliban ranks and file. At any rate, the Taliban tried to present itself as a religious and national movement cutting across the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. There was no ethnic dimension in their demands. Although the Taliban's practice of Islam contains elements derived from Pashtun tribal customs, its version of Islam ultimately does not have full coherence with the Islam actually practiced by the Pashtuns in their traditional tribal society. Pashtuns in general claim themselves to be genuine Muslims and among the first converts to Islam, even if historical research indicates the opposite. They do not consider their traditional code of conduct to be contrary to the principles of Islam.[53]

Pashtun identity emphasises the importance of acting in accordance with the norms of Pashtunwali ('the way of the Pashtuns'). To be a Pashtun means observing Pashtunwali. This way is divided between a set of values, norms and practices

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[48] A. Borthakur, A. Kotokey, *Ethnicity or Religion? The Genesis of the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, "Asian Affairs" 2020, vol. 51, no. 4, p. 12.

[49] For more details see: S. Skalski, *Forma i znaczenie rytuału zikru we współczesnym Afganistanie*, Kraków 2020.

[50] K. Matinuddin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[51] H.M. Khan, *Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice*, March 2016, p. 5, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR363-Islamic-Law-CustomaryLaw-and-Afghan-Informal-Justice.pdf [accessed: 14.03.2022].

[52] C. Jones-Pauly, N. Nojumi, *Balancing Relations between Society and State: Legal Steps toward National Reconciliation and Reconstruction of Afghanistan*, "American Journal of Comparative Law" 2004, vol. 52, pp. 836, 849–850.

[53] Author's own research.

(*narkh*). While typically unwritten, the rules of conduct of Pashtunwali are primarily centred around the concept of honour (*nang*). Only men can accrue honour, but both men and women can lose it. Because it is not codified, however, honour can only be demonstratively proven through various social practices, such as hospitality (*melmastia*), maintaining community cohesion (by *jirga*), and observing gender boundaries (*namus* and *purdah*).[54] Pashtunwali's relationship with Islamic law is complicated and, especially with respect to women, often contradictory. Most Pashtuns simply assume their practices conform with Islamic law, in part because they self-identify as Muslims. During the reform-driven reign of Amanullah (1919–1929) the state tried to undermine the power of Pashtun tribes by declaring *inter alia* certain aspects of Pashtunwali as un-Islamic. Successive governments have continued such trends. Even the Taliban concluded that certain practices violated Islamic law and in 1998, issued decrees banning the practice of *baad*[55] and levirate marriages on the grounds that in such matters, local custom cannot be treated as permissible *urf*.[56]

As mentioned before, ritual-based frameworks for an ethical life have always existed in rural Afghanistan. What the *jihadi* struggle and war-inducted destruction did was amplify norms within these frameworks at the expense of other, competing systems of virtue like tribal mores. The social group that was most well placed to articulate this shift in greater Kandahar were Taliban fronts, and for the same reason, they would be the most well-placed to stand above the chaos of post-Soviet Afghanistan and install a new order.[57]

The order postulated by the Taliban could not omit the issue of local Pashtun culture on both ideological and political spheres. The issue of women's rights is an interesting example or argument in discussion about Taliban Pashtunism/Islamism, internal cohesion and political realism *vs.* religious ideology. Most of the first generation of Taliban leaders were rural Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan belonging to tribes that had little political influence under the monarchy or its successive regimes.[58] The first generation of Taliban had an almost exclusively rural upbringing, with a childhood and early adulthood spent in *hujras* and/or as *mujahedin* fighting the Soviet army. It is rare to find a single Taliban leader or senior member from the 1990s who had significant exposure to urban life. The puritanical ascetic rules that they formalised during the first Emirate and which were prominently seen through

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[54] F. Zahid, *Understanding Taliban through the prism of Pashtunwali Code*, "Tribune Libre" 2013, vol. 37, https://cf2r.org/tribune/understanding-taliban-through-the-prism-of-pashtunwali-code/ [accessed: 15.04.2022].

[55] *Baad* – a method of settlement and compensation whereby a female from a perpetrator's family is given to the victim's family as a servant or a bride.

[56] H.M. Khan, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–6. *Urf* – a term referring to the custom, or 'knowledge', of a given society, which can be threat as source of law.

[57] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[58] B. Rubin, *Constitutional Issues in the Afghan Peace Negotiations: Process and Substance*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report, November 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/20201116-sr_488-constitutional_issues_in_the_afghan_peace_negotiations_process_and_substance-sr.pdf, p. 5 [accessed: 20.03.2022].

the orders of the *al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf*.[59] rather than a well-thought policy formed by any systematic investigation of Shari'a.[60] The term *al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf* functioned in Afghanistan also as the common name of the office responsible for 'vice and virtue',[61] which sought to regulate people's behaviour according to the mixture of literal reading of some Quran verses, Pashtunwali and a personal perspective of officials. Such attitude can be read as a proof that Taliban members represented the ethos of their own social background and not Islamic law. It is noteworthy that Barhanuddin Rabbani[62] in Kabul and Ismail Khan[63] in Herat, both anti-Taliban opposition leaders, established similar offices in areas controlled by them.

The author's own research as well as credible reports claims that harsh rules towards women (i.e. a ban on women's education, the suppression of movement outside the house without a *mahram*,[64] mandatory *chadri*[65]) were applied to appease field commanders, mostly of a rural Pashtun background as in those areas, the cultural mores dictated a rigid seclusion of women inside the home. For these individuals, the Taliban were worth fighting for only insofar as this particular understanding of Shari'a was enforced, and as Jyotindra Nath Dixit noted, the Afghan society is 'intensely orthodox' both in religious and tribal terms.[66] This feature caused the political mechanism when decisions of ministers in Kabul were often overturned by the *Rahbari Shura*[67] or the emir himself when they were perceived to be potentially upsetting to fighters.[68]

Even military operations were planned in accordance with the specific rules of Pashtunwali. Due to the Soviet intervention and the especially subsequent civil war in Afghanistan in early 1990s, it was more ethnically fragmented than ever. In such circumstances, the Taliban tried to substitute tribal or ethnic identities in favour of a religious identity as it was in the line of the *ummah's* concept and politically justified.

[59] *Al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf* – from Arabic 'commanding what is right.' In Afghanistan, the term was also used as a name for the office of 'vice and virtue police.'

[60] S. Samim, *Who Gets to Go to School? Are Taleban Attitudes Starting to Change from Within?*, Afghanistan Analyst Network, February 2022, http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/who-gets-to-go-to-school-3-are-taleban-attitudes-starting-to-change-from-within/ [accessed: 20.03.2022].

[61] A. Gopal, A.S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[62] B. Rabbani was a revered Islamic scholar, president of Islamic State of Afghanistan and a leader of Northern Alliance. For more details see: *Obituary: Burhanuddin Rabbani*, BBC News, 20 September 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-14992226 [accessed: 10.06.2022].

[63] I. Khan, also called 'The Lion of Herat', is known as a self-styled emir of western Afghanistan and has become one of the country's most powerful men. He was one of the most important warlords in Afghanistan. For more details see: *Profile: Ismail Khan*, BBC News, 13 September 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2535261.stm [accessed: 10.06.2022].

[64] *Mahram* – a member of one's family with whom marriage would be considered haram (illegal).

[65] *Chadri* – a shroud which covers a woman's body from head to foot, in Afghanistan, often in the form of a blue *burqa*.

[66] J.N. Dixit, *An Afghan Dairy from Zahir Shah to Taliban*, New Delhi 2000, p. 481.

[67] *Rahbari Shura* – the central governing body of the Taliban chaired by the Emir. Informally called the Quetta Shura between 2001 and 2021.

[68] B. Osman, A. Gopal, *Taliban Views on a Future State*, Center for International Cooperation, July 2016, http://www.cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/taliban_future_state_final.pdf, p. 21 [accessed: 22.04.2022].

However, *qaum* ('tribe / ethnicity') and *watan* ('motherland / territory') were still categories they had to consider. Article 60 of *Layha*[69] states that the *mujahedin* should refrain from tribal / ethnic (*qaumi*), linguistic and local (*watani*) discrimination as they claim to be 'Muslims first'.

Theoretically, the ideology of the Taliban is based purely on religion and the movement always tries to portray itself to be of supra-tribal identity. However, in many instances, the outlook of a number of local commanders is sometimes in contradiction to the non-tribal character of the movement. Moreover, the element of tribalism among the Taliban is stronger in the peripheries where the authority of its central leadership is especially fragile and to some extent, dependent upon the will of the local commander / community. Additionally, as intra-tribal rivalry is a common feature of Pashtun society, even the Taliban leadership tends to recruit fighters based on tribal ties and their place of origin in a particular geographical area. The local population seems to be apprehensive about fighters coming from outside the region and have recourse to *badal*[70] in the event of any confrontation over the *nang* (honour) of the members of their own tribes. Therefore, they prefer to support the fighters belonging to the same tribe. *Layha* also instructs that the local commanders be consulted by the front commanders of the Taliban leadership before carrying out any offensive outside their area of operation.[71]

First Emirate and Practical Implementation of Ideology

A rare example of a looking-from-inside analysis of ideology of Taliban is one provided by the Al-Qa'ida strategist Umar Abd al-Hakim (*nom de guerre* Abu Musab as-Suri). He came to Afghanistan under Taliban rule to assess whether the first emirate is an Islamic country and whether as such it deserves assistance from *ummah* (i.e. Al-Qa'ida and other radical *jihadi* organisations). His pamphlet-style book significantly entitled *Afghanistan wa at-Taliban wa Marka al-Islam al-Yaum* ("Afghanistan, The Taliban and the Battle for Islam Today") provides a detailed assessment of the foundation of Taliban ideology and its manifestation.

At the top of the list of positive attributes of the Taliban, Umar Abd al-Hakim placed "their implementation of the Islamic Shari'a and their serious dedication to this since their founding" followed by providing security in general and securing transportation routes in particular. As a radical *jihadi,* he put a lot of emphasis on the Taliban struggle for purification of Islam, so he outlined that they outlawed forbidden things (i.e. *Al-amr bi-l-maruf wa an-nahy an al-munkar*). As-Suri also mentions that they "eradicated the Communist remnants and spread preaching and teaching to the people and Islamised the employment framework of the country."

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[69] A guideline book issued by the Taliban leadership, consisting of codes of conduct for its cadres and supporters.

[70] *Badal* – reciprocal revenge.

[71] A. Borthakur, A. Kotokey, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

As those remarks are significant for picturing the general and postulated founda-
tions of the Taliban ideology, Umar Abd al-Hakim's observations on religious im-
perfection and inconsequence in Taliban behaviour are much more important for the
topic of this paper. During his research trip, he concluded that the following negative
attributes are dispersed among members of the Taliban As-Suri was a fighting Wah-
habi, so at the top of his list he put the issue of accepting and spreading "Sufism in
its various forms, from its relatively acceptable thoughts to heretical and deviant."
The second claim also revolves around the specific mindset of Taliban movement
members (and the majority of the Afghan society of those days[72]) and is related to the
devotion of the Taliban to the Hanafi school. As-Suri has observed that

> most Afghans have not heard of mazhab and do not know what they are. Rank-and-file Afghans
> are ignorant of religion and the world, […], if they see something they are not familiar with,
> they think it is a heresy […]. There is a limited section of Afghanistan where the Salafist school
> is present in a limited form, such as Kunar and Nuristan,[73] and they are in great trouble with
> those around them despite Saudi support and money there.[74]

According to As-Suri, such ignorance is caused by 'Beduinism' of Kandahari Pash-
tuns, i.e. relying more on tribal bonds and customs than on Shari'a. For As-Suri, this
attitude resembles pre-Islam *jahiliyya*[75] among Arab tribes.[76]

From the religion purity point of view, it creates a serious problem, which is the
Taliban's inconsistency in enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. In
a separate paragraph, As-Suri examined the issue of cooperation with international
ummah (especially Muslim Brotherhood), the influence of Deobandi teaching and the
authority of Pakistani *ulama* over the emirate religious sphere. It is clearly indicated
that the Taliban '*shaykhs*' considered renowned Islamist ideologues such as Abu al-
-Ala al-Mawdudi, Said Qutub, and Hassan al-Banna as heretics. Their books were
forbidden to be published and distributed and were confiscated.[77]

As-Suri's remarks correspond well with findings of Gopal and Linschoten, who
stated that the intellectual environment of the first Emirate was closed and rather
meagre. "The ideological debates were only revolving around what some [Pakistan-
based] Deobandi ulema wrote or said. Beyond that, ideologies of Islamic groups
doing political struggle were classified as unorthodox." Thus the early Taliban stance
towards groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami was inimical at
best.[78] In As-Suri's words "This happened as a result of old Fatwas of the Ulama of

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[72] Author's own research.

[73] It is noteworthy to mention that the influence of Wahhabism is still strong in the mentioned area to
extent that its main stronghold of ISIS-KP.

[74] U. Abd al-Hakim, *Afghanistan, the Taliban, and the Battle for Islam Today*, Combating Terror-
ism Center at West Point, September 2013, http://www.ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/
Afghanistan-the-Taliban-and-the-Battle-for-Islam-Today-Translation.pdf, p. 30 [accessed: 23.03.2022].

[75] *Jahiliyya* – in Islam is the period preceding the revelation of the Quran. In Arabic the word means
'ignorance', or 'barbarism', For more details see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/jahiliyah.

[76] U. Abd al-Hakim, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[77] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

[78] A. Gopal, A. S. van Linschoten, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

India, Pakistan, and Sindh. These authors are respected by the Taliban and [their ban on thoughts and books] is a result of some thoughts of Al-Mawdudi […] on issues where they see them as having strayed too far from the intended meaning […]."[79]

The ideological ostracism was not reserved only to foreign individuals but also covered local religious thinkers influenced by the ideologies of the Muslim *Brotherhood* and Al-Mawdudi. Among them, one can name such famous *jihadi* leaders as Barhanuddin Rabbani, Abdulrab Rasul Sayyaf (both holders of the Al-Azhar university diploma) and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Former emirate official Wahid Mozhda claimed that the Taliban saw them as a misled product of the aberration of 'Westoxificated', secularised Muslim elites of Egypt and Syria and the situation they created in post-1989 Afghanistan is proof of them not being true believers.[80]

Conclusions

In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, i.e. the period when the Taliban Movement was formed, the level of religious knowledge of the majority of Afghan mullahs was low due to many decades of a weak education system and the peripherality of the country. As a result of the destruction of the state and most of the social system, it went even lower. Then, the existing official system of religious education was influenced by the mostly postulated state-building role of religion. From a theological point of view, the most influential current was Deobandism, but it's influence on senior members of the Taliban was very limited due to the strong influence of tribal customs, lack of participation in wider theological discourse and their rather rudimental education. Consequently, a literal reading of the Quran and neglect of the Sunna and other permissible sources of law was a clearly visible phenomena typical for Afghanistan, especially in the rural part of the country. However, a study on the foundations of early Taliban religious ideology suggests that the movement's beliefs and practices were not limited to the literalist reading of the Quran but were rather a blend of beliefs caused by a social and educational background of influential Taliban members, which were strongly attached to folk customs. Though Hanafi, mazhab accepts the opinion of jurists as well as traditional community customs as valid sources of law and the exact kind of ideology that mostly prevails at the informal and/or local level can be named tribal or even 'folk Shari'a'.

Promoted initially by Rashid and Metcalf, the widely-held conceptions of early Taliban ideology based mostly or even solely on Pakistani madrasa Deobandism and Wahhabi influence under Saudi patronage are not accurate. Due to its severity, Wahhabism has never been able to root deeply into Afghan religiosity, with a notable exception of the Nuristan area. However, one cannot deny the existence of the Deobandi influence over the Taliban. Initially, such an influence was week and rather marginal compared to traditional southern Pashtun customs. As more fighters

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[79] U. Abd al-Hakim, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
[80] Author's interview with W. Mozdah, Kabul, 30.09.2013.

educated in Pakistan were joining the ranks of the movement, it turns out that the more influential their former teacher were and the Deobandi teaching reached more Taliban ideologues. In the final days of the first emirate, it was stronger than tribal customs, but only at the highest level. Given the obscurant nature of the movement and barely measurable subject, Gopal and Linschoten disregarded Deobandism too much and gave too much attention to the very early phase of the formation of the Taliban movement and have thus drawn different conclusions. Aside from such details, research suggests that early Taliban ideology was initially rooted almost solely in the sphere of the pre-war, southern Pashtun village and later on absorbed more from Deobandism, which had been present in Afghanistan before jihad. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Taliban's ideology is not an alien phenomenon but the product of Afghan rural tradition amplified by the collapse of the state system.

As mentioned above, the Taliban movement's ideology has its origin neither directly and exclusively in the Pashtun tribal culture nor in the tradition of Deobandi Islam. The leaders of the movement tend to use both the identities as expedient, depending on political circumstances and recruitment purposes. In the majority of instances, it could be shown that the Taliban's restricted knowledge of Islam and a narrow worldview had led them to blend Pashtunwali with Islamic law; however, influences of Wahhabism over them were only marginal and more verbal than practical. Such a limited influence was mostly due to the popularity of deeply-rooted Sufism in Afghan (including Pashtun) society. Despite the pressure from Wahhabi preachers, the Taliban neither wanted to nor were able to stand in strict opposition to Sufism.

The author's research has lead to the conclusion that despite the influence of Pashtun rural traditions and specific tribal nationalism over early Taliban ideology, it is clear and undeniable that it would be an oversimplification to state that those phenomena constitute the overwhelming majority of it. More accurate is to say that the blend of tribal customs and Deobandism, i.e. 'folk Shari'a', which dominate theologically over southern Pashtuns, gave the Taliban cohesion and the possibility to at least partially subjugate tribal divisions. Such occurrences can be seen as a repetition of a nineteenth-century struggle between the 'tribalisation of Islam' and the 'Islamisation of tribes' mentioned by Borthakur and Kotokey.[81] Pashtun nationalism and a sense of community were surely an essential factor in the recruitment of fighters, war and state building efforts; however, it was not relevant from the point of view of the ideology as defined in this paper.

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