

Points de mire



Islam and the Afghanistan Campaign

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A major challenge facing NATO is identifying and challenging the religious ideas that are fuelling the insurgency in Afghanistan and along Pakistan's tribal frontier. This is in part because of NATO's fear of blowback by Islamic states, the generally secular nature of its organization which inhibits directly engaging in a religious debate, and the difficulty of justifying such a policy to the largely Christian constituencies that make up NATO. The result is that many of the public opinion surveys collected in Afghanistan sidestep the important cultural and religious issues that are driving the insurgency. NATO's Islamic strategy should be to offer patronage, in the form of governmental responsibilities and funding, to both the primarily-urban Hanafi Sunni ulema, and selectively to the assortment of Sufi tariqa in Afghanistan. Patronage has a role because Islam in South Asia is far more malleable than is often suggested.

Deobandism and the Taliban Idea

The Afghan insurgency at the microcosmic level is driven by Pakhtunwali, the honour code of the Pashtun tribes, who form the core of the Taliban, and the peculiarly decentralized nature of Pashtun society that permits the rapid creation of lashkars, or raiding parties. However, the Taliban leadership, particularly the Quetta Shura, base their legitimacy on the Deobandi tradition. Mullah Mohamad Omar, its leader, was appointed by a Shura rather than a tribal Loya Jirga. The Taliban were chosen by the ISI for support because they were an expedient surrogate, with about 80,000 talibs under arms.

The Taliban was created by imams (prayer leaders) inspired by the Deobandi evangelizing by the Jamaat-i-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) party. JUI's strength was in its government-sanctioned access to the three million Afghan refugees in camps in the NWFP and Baluchistan, encouraged by Pakistan to educate them in madrassahs. Deobandism was founded in 1867 in response to the failure of the 1831 Jihad of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilvi, and the 1857 Great Mutiny against the British East India Company, and became popular among the Pashtun at the beginning of the 20th Century. Deobandism is the culmination of an Islamic reaction to the erosion of Mughal power in the

18th century and with it the Islamic ulema as Hindus reasserted themselves, and the rise of European colonialism in the 19th century. The dilemma facing all Muslims was how to recapture the greatness of their community.

The Deoband have their origins in the Faradiyah movement founded by Mawlawi Sahri'atullah of Delhi in 1802 after his return from Mecca. Unable to adapt the Wahhabi movement to South Asia, because of its Hanbali fiqh (or juridical tradition), which emphasizes the strict derivation of Islamic legal code exclusively from the Koran and rejection of ijthihad (legal reasoning), he proposed a Hanafi-consistent approach emphasizing a focus on the Koran and the Hadith, but stripped of its compromises with Hindu culture. He also emphasized the activist political role of Islam. He in turn inspired the famous 19th century reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, whose student, Muhammad Abduh, reformed the al Azhar University in Cairo and propagated the salafist tradition, a Hanafi variant of Wahhabism, with its emphasis on returning to the stricter Islamic code of the Arab Abbasid Caliphate, free of Sufism and Persian influence. Sayyid Qutb was a student of Abduh's teachings, and was to be the doctrinal source for Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and of the later JUI's promotion of Deoband among the salafist Taliban.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Mujahideen

The Islam of the Taliban is however quite different in some respects from those of the mujahedeen who fought the Kabul government and the Soviet Union in the 1970s through to the 1990s. Sayyid Qutb was also closely tied with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, and while at al Azhar, had a profound influence on Gulam Mohammad Niazi, the founder of Afghanistan's Jamiat-i-Islamia in 1965. Qutb argued that many Islamic states had drifted into a state of jahiliya, or pre-Islamic law, and there was therefore an obligation to overthrow them. Niazi's student Rabbani, in turn, helped organize students at Kabul University, including Hekmatyar, Yunus Khalis, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Sibghatullah Mojaddedi (who was a descendent of a Sufi family). An Islamist revolt organized by them in 1975, with the support of the Pakistanis, failed, with hundreds of Islamist militants jailed and executed, and Islamist refugees fleeing to the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). The group then split along ethnic lines, with the Tajiks (Rabbani and Massoud) and

the Gilzhai Pashtun (Hekmatyar) moving into loosely hostile factions, the former evolving into the contemporary Northern Alliance and the latter backed by the Pakistanis until the rise of the Taliban in 1994. The key principles to be drawn from this are that the Afghan Islamist movement is both Tajik and Pashtun, that the Northern Alliance has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood, and that al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, also has his origins with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt.

Sufi Islam and Afghanistan

Most Sunni Afghans, rural and urban, supplement their obedience to Sharia law with participation in Sufi movements and the veneration of local shrines, many of which predate Islam. These traditions are typically discouraged by formal Islam, but are widespread because they complement the legalistic approach of the ulema with a spiritual component and address the need for contact with God through pir (saint) worship. They have their distant origins in Persian and Turkic adaptations of Islam, and are generally less compatible with stricter Arabian spiritual and juridical traditions.

Three Sufi tariqas (orders) are prominent in Afghanistan and have a half-millennium of local tradition: the Naqshbandiya (especially Kabul), the Qadiriya (eastern Pashtun and Kandahar), and the Chistis. From the standpoint of legal tradition (fiqh), Afghans are Hanafi, which means their ulema place an emphasis on ijtiḥād (legal speculation) and ijma (consensus), and marginalize the Hadith (sayings of the prophet). Its primary rival is the strict Hanbali tradition of the Arabian peninsula, which accepts a constrained ijtiḥād focusing on the Koran, but rejects Ijma. This is crucial since ijtiḥād and ijma are crucial primary means of adaptation of Islam in South Asia, with its profound Buddhist and Hindu influences. Deobandism, though couched in a Hanafi salafist form, shares with the Hanbali fiqh a hostility to Sufism. It is for this reason that the Ahl-i-Hadith, South Asia's primary Hanbali movement, has had so little proselytising success. Its followers number no more than a handful million in both India and Pakistan. While Deobandi principles appeal to the austere lifestyles of Pashtun refugees and rural Afghan tribes, their rejection of Sufism and the spiritual dimension of Islam undermines their long-term viability. One stark example is that while the Taliban have rejected the veneration of saints as apostasy, graveyards of fallen Taliban warriors have come to be venerated by local Afghans hoping that the martyred souls would intercede with Allah on behalf of the worshippers' prayers.

Despite the presence of Islam in Afghanistan for the last twelve hundred years, Islam has had until recently a superficial adherence in Afghanistan: it was not until the end of the 19th century that Abdur Rah-

man Khan replaced customary Pashtun family law with Sharia, and not until 1931 that Nadir Shah legalized the Hanafi fiqh. Though initially hostile to the idea of endorsing religious groups in South Asia, in the 19th century the British quickly copied the Mughal practice of patronizing the local Sufi shrines as an effective method of winning the support of rural leaders. This co-optation of rural religious networks permitted the British to counterbalance Deobandi sentiment with formal Islamic movements such as the Muslim League and the Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh. Paradoxically it was through the Muslim League in conjunction with the Sufi tariqas, widely viewed as pro-British, despite almost universal hostility from the Islamic ulema (including Jamiat-i-Islami), that Pakistan was created.

This does not mean that Sufi tariqa are inert and easy to manipulate. It was Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik follower of the Naqshbandiya tariqa, which led the Jihad that overthrew the Kabul regime in 1929. Mawlana Faizani, a descendent of pirs of the Qadiriya tariqa, was an important opponent of the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) in the 1970s. Many of the Sufi orders, including the Naqshbandi and Chisti, emphasize the importance of tabligh, or the active propagation of Islam, which will inevitably clash with some of NATO's secular development programs.

The Ideo-Religious Front

In both India and Pakistan the primary counterbalance to the Deobandi movement is the majority Bareilvi tradition, itself emerging out of the late-19th century. Its founders are Pir Jamaat Ali Shah, originally a Qadiri tariqa pir who then joined the Naqshbandi, and Imam Ahmad Reza. They both saw the decline of Islam and believed that it could be strengthened by transmitting the Hanafi Sharia of the ulema through Sufism. It has been involved in a determined fight with the Deoband and the Hanbali Ahl-i-Hadith over the control of mosques, occasionally resulting in fatalities. Pakistan could be involved through a promotion of Bareilvi traditions within Afghanistan. India could be invited to sponsor the Chisti tradition, already strong in Afghanistan. NATO should subsidize, in the Mughal and British traditions, local Sufi pir families and their shrines, to counterbalance the salafist movements, including Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, the Quetta Shura, and at its base, the Deoband JUI that legitimizes the Taliban.

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