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The Strategic Use of Islam in Afghan Politics

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I argue in this chapter that the strategic use of religion plays an additive role in the ability of some Afghan political actors to legitimize their actions, mobilize support, undermine rivals, attract foreign aid, and control populations. Not all Afghan political actors can make use of religious language or sanction—only those who transcend divisions within a local, tribal, sectarian, ethnic or national space and do not have a history of behavior considered “un-Islamic” can benefit from its advantages within that space, but not necessarily beyond it. These actors can aggressively leverage an Islamic agenda. Examples of such actors include several mujahideen organizations in the 1980s and the Taliban during their initial rise in 1994-2001.

Others, who do not have this kind of Islamic legitimacy, have to react to the strategic use of Islam by those who do. They may choose to adopt a strongly anti-Islamic agenda (e.g. People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan before 1985), make symbolic gestures to counter the de-legitimization process (PDPA between 1985 and 1992), or be pressed to accommodate religious demands (Hamid Karzai 2004-today). In all cases, such actors are at a strong disadvantage in a very conservative and religious Muslim country.

The strategic use of religion may not be necessary for Afghan political actors to be successful and it is certainly not sufficient for them to outperform their rivals. Other factors such as foreign aid, organizational development, and strategic sophistication can be more important; but the strategic use of religious language and symbols brings additional advantages in this traditional society and may have tipped the balance in a number of the brutal and closely-contested conflicts that have plagued the country since 1979.

In addition, the different types of Islamic rhetoric and symbols used by political actors in Afghanistan provide distinct advantages and liabilities. The strategic use of traditional Muslim language facilitates mobilization better than nationalist and other symbols. The adoption of

Salafi Islamist language makes political actors more attractive to some motivated Muslim foreign sponsors but hinders mobilization. The use of a diluted common-denominator Islamic language makes the political actor more attractive to Western donors but deprives it from the other advantages of the use of religious language and symbols.

I test my argument by tracing the use of religious language and symbols by different Afghan organizations, including governments, and its effect on their ability to legitimize their actions, mobilize support, undermine rivals, attract foreign aid, and control populations in areas where they had a dominant presence.

I begin the chapter with an introduction to politics and religion in Afghanistan then discuss how different actors have used religion strategically for political legitimization, mobilization and control in the country since the communist coup of April 1978. I conclude with a discussion of the significance of these findings for Afghanistan's current conflicts.

Religion and Politics in Afghan History

Overview of history and politics in Afghanistan. Islam was introduced to Afghanistan very soon after Muslim armies left the Arabian Peninsula. Most Afghans probably became Muslims between the mid-seventh century, when Arab Muslims captured Herat, and the eleventh century when the Ghaznavid dynasty reduced non-Muslim influences on the land by conquering neighboring non-Muslim empires. With the Ghaznavids, Afghanistan became the center of a great Sunni Muslim empire, but this was not to last long. Between 1150, when Ghazni fell to the Ghorids, and the mid-eighteenth century, the populations that inhabited the boundaries of today's Afghanistan were more or less autonomous subjects of regional empires. These included the destructive non-Muslim Mongols, the Timurids, the Mughals, and the Shiism-promoting Safavids. Afghans sometimes rebelled, with their always-restive tribes, such as the Hotaki Pushtuns, even threatening powerful neighbors. Still the power, influence and sectarian identity of the empires that controlled parts of today's Afghanistan helped consolidate Afghanistan's Muslim identity. Rivalry between Sunni and Shi'a empires also influenced Afghanistan's sectarian configuration (Shahrani 1986, 26-29).

It is generally understood that Modern Afghanistan was created in the mid-18th Century when Afghan leaders chose the powerful provincial potentate Ahmad Shah Abdali (who later changed his surname to Durrani) as their king. The dynasty was consolidated under the rule of his direct descendents until the Barakzai dynasty took hold with Dost Muhammad in the 1830s. Islam, like religion elsewhere in the world, was both a cementing and divisive factor. For example, Afghan rulers used religious symbols, including artifacts purportedly connected to the Prophet Muhammad, to claim legitimacy and preempt resistance among tribes and ethnic minorities. Islam was used by the “Iron Amir” Abdul-Rahman to justify his conquest of Kafiristan (land of infidels), which was renamed as Nuristan (land of light) after its population converted to Islam. Resisting invading powers was framed in religious terms, was led by men of religion and centered on Islamic motifs. The state justified the persecution of Shi`a Hazara on the basis of their sectarian identity.

The lands that fall within Afghanistan’s current borders are unique in South and Central Asia because they were never colonized in a sustained way by Russia or Western powers. Since the founding of modern Afghanistan in the middle of the eighteenth century, Afghans have fiercely and successfully resisted attempts by foreign powers, particularly the British and Soviets, to occupy their land. Islam and its symbolic use played a major role in mobilizing support against the plans of neighboring superpowers to annex Afghanistan to their empires. Afghanistan’s lack of economic development, the presence of extensive networks of men of religion, the tribal structure and lack of urbanization have all contributed to keeping Afghanistan a particularly conservative and religious country.

In the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was pressured by the expansionist policies of Tsarist Russia and the colonial British—an imperial rivalry that was dubbed the “Great Game”. The Russians captured some Afghan territories but did not invade Afghanistan as the British feared until much later. The British, however, twice tried and failed to colonize the country (the Anglo-Afghan wars of 1839-42 and 1878-80). They were, however, successful in influencing events in Afghanistan by allying with Afghan rulers such as Abdul-Rahman and in gaining concessions over Afghanistan’s foreign policy between 1979 and 1919, when they lost the third and last Anglo-Afghan war. The British also managed to demarcate the border between Afghanistan and British Indian in 1893 (the Durand Line) on advantageous terms, thus splitting Pushtun tribes

between the two domains. The Durand line would become a source of tension between Afghanistan on one hand and British India and, later, Pakistan on the other hand.

The state has always been weak relatively to the social structure of tribe and clan in Afghanistan. This is not particularly surprising in a country that is extremely mountainous, ethnically divided, and tribal. The state did, however, experience moments of strength under leaders who benefitted from outside support, particularly Abdul-Rahman who received money and weapons from the British in return for giving up control over Afghanistan's foreign policy. He used these resources to mobilize Pushtun tribes, put down revolts in minority areas, control new areas where the state did not reach before, move populations to pacify rebellious areas, and dispose of rivals. His rule, however, was exceptional and many Afghans value local independence and do not necessarily think that a strong state is desirable.

The Barakzai dynasty ruled Afghanistan, with only short interruptions, until 1973 when King Zahir Shah (of its musahiban offshoot) was overthrown by his cousin Muhammad Daoud and his allies from the Parshami faction of the Afghan communist party (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, PDPA). The Republic lasted until April 1978 when the other faction of the PDPA, the Khalqis, overthrew the regime and created the formally Marxist Peoples Republic of Afghanistan in a coup they dubbed the "Saur Revolution".¹ The Communists had quite a few rivals in Kabul and some of the larger Afghan cities, particularly Islamists and, even, some Maoists. The Islamists fled to the countryside and to Pakistan to escape persecution and organize resistance. Those who would survive would become part of the mujahideen movement that resisted the Soviet occupation that would come in 1979.

The rural areas where most of the Afghan population lived weren't involved in any of these rivalries until the PDPA started sending its activists to the countryside to convince Afghans to become Marxists—with all the consequences this carries for economic relationships, faith and social relations. This led to impromptu revolts that threatened the regime's survival and began a series of events that led to the Soviet invasion of the country.² The Islamists who took refuge in the countryside and in Pakistan helped organize some of the revolts and ultimately coalesced into seven Sunni mujahideen parties that received aid from the United States and other sponsors, and

¹ See Rubin 2002, chapter 5, for an excellent account.

² See Roy 1990, chapters 5-6, for a more detailed account.

distributed it to thousands of field commanders to fight the Soviets. The Soviets established a client regime led by Parshamis with armed forces numbering a total of some 250,000 fighters and committed 120,000 of some of their best troops, 10,000 advisors and some of their most advanced weaponry to win this conflict. Yet, they withdrew in February 1989 after losing 35,000 soldiers and failing to achieve any gains.³ They continued to support their client regime with \$5 billion a year until late 1991 when the Soviet Union ceased to be. Najibullah's regime maintained itself within the larger cities surrounded by its defensive positions until April 1992 when its client militias and many factions defected on it to make deals with mujahideen organizations led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or to streak on their own. These factions, along with the Shi'a Hizbi-Wadat, then competed to take control over Kabul in a bloody and destructive civil war. This civil war, and the predatory and violent practices that resulted from it, only ended when an organization emerged from the Pakistani madrassas to sweep the forces of most fighting organizations and warlords, except those of Ahmad Shah Massoud—the Taliban.

The Taliban imposed a very strict version of shari'a that required restrictive "Islamic" dress, limited entertainment, reduced women's mobility and access to education and work, and severely punished transgressions. They were also able to reduce drug production at will and to provide law and order in Pushtun areas after a period of terrible chaos. The Taliban's treatment of women and minorities, and their alliance with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda caused considerable hardship in some sectors of the Afghan population and hostility from the West.

The September 2001 suicide attacks on the United States ushered in the direct involvement of the United States in Afghan conflicts. Osama bin Laden did not claim responsibility for the 9/11 attacks until well after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, probably in an attempt to protect his hosts and to diffuse U.S. energy in the pursuit of unknown attackers. There was little doubt, however, that al-Qaeda was behind the attacks, and the United States invaded Afghanistan in October and November 2001 to defeat the organization and its Taliban hosts. The invasion was executed along an innovative model (later dubbed the "Afghan" model in military circles) that

³ The Soviets under-reported their losses, with later evidence suggesting that they lost around thirty-five thousand troops. The official number of Soviet casualties was contested by several analysts during and immediately after the war. Arnold (1993, 190) and Goodson (1990, 27), for example, argue that Soviet deaths could have been as high as fifty thousand. See V. Izgarshev, "Afganskaia bol" (Afghan pain), Pravda, August 17, 1989, 6, as reported in Mendelson 1998, 26.

consisted of embedding special operations forces with Afghan allies on the ground to help direct massive air strikes to destroy Taliban defenses. The Afghan allies were expected to overrun the weakened Taliban defenses. This model reduced U.S. military losses but provided very limited control over operations. This disadvantage became obvious in Tora Bora and Shah-i Kot where less-motivated Afghan allies of the United States allowed Osama bin Laden and many al-Qaeda members to escape from the battlefield. Still, the Taliban collapsed as a centralized government and military within two months of the beginning of the U.S. attack. Its commanders fanned out across Pushtun areas of Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan to partly reorganize as an insurgent organization.

The U.S. venture in Afghanistan has been grossly mismanaged. Security in Afghanistan has degenerated to the dismal levels that once facilitated the rise of the Taliban; economic growth is driven largely by drug production and the unsustainable spending of Westerners in Kabul; the state is extremely weak and very corrupt, and many regional leaders (including some particularly brutal and predatory ones) have reestablished themselves, often with official titles and seats in parliament. Afghans have seen little improvement in their lives, health or education. Resistance to foreign occupation has increased dramatically since 2005.

The Bush administration committed itself to providing better governance for Afghanistan at the time of the invasion. It therefore organized and managed several high-profile events, mobilized some international support, and engaged in limited institution building. The United States convened a November 2001 conference in Bonn, Germany, to appoint an interim administration under Hamid Karzai, a refined Pushtun local leader with longstanding ties to the CIA. It later (2002) convened two large, but not necessarily representative, gatherings of regional representatives (dubbed *loya jirga* or grand councils) to appoint Hamid Karzai as president of a transitional administration and to develop a constitution for the country.⁴ The de facto political fragmentation of Afghanistan stands in stark contrast to the highly centralized Afghanistan described in a constitution that reflects the wishes of Hamid Karzai and the Bush Administration.⁵ The United States and the United Nations also helped organize an October 2004

⁴ For an account of the rubber-stamp quality of the *loya jirga*, see "The Afghan Transitional Administration: Prospects and Perils," International Crisis Group Afghanistan Briefing, July 30, 2002. For a historically grounded scathing critique, see Hanifi (2004).

⁵ For more details on the constitution, see "Afghanistan: The Constitutional *Loya Jirga*," Afghan Briefing, International Crisis Group, December 12, 2003.

presidential election that Hamid Karzai won with 55 percent of the vote and a subsequent parliamentary election that produced a weak parliament.

Afghanistan today: Afghanistan today has a constitution that vests strong powers in the presidency and an electoral system that discourages the formation of strong political parties in its parliament. The President, currently Hamid Karzai, appoints the governors of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and is technically the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. The constitution and the powers it confers, however, are a fantasy. Mr. Karzai has limited de facto influence, the state apparatus is deeply corrupt and hardly functional. Legal institutions and the police are feared by the population because of their corruption and abuses. Mr. Karzai has little control over the Afghan National Army which depends on the U.S. and NATO military presence for training, strategic planning, logistics, finances and operations. Local leaders have considerable autonomy and the resistance to the U.S. occupation and the regime it established is increasing quickly. Few people believe that the current government would last long if U.S. forces leave the country.

The economy of Afghanistan is in shambles and relies in great part on the production of opium. Around one in ten Afghans relies directly on this crop and many others benefit indirectly from the money it puts in circulation. Opium production contributes about half of the country's tiny GDP, is a major driver of state corruption, and helps fund the insurgency. About one million Afghans have become drug users.⁶ The other major source of economic activity is international aid.

Afghanistan today is one of the poorest countries in the world with a Gross National Income per capita of \$373 and a GDP per capita of some \$500. Its 30,000,000 or so people have dismal literacy rates—28% in 2006 with only 13% for women. Forty-five percent of Afghans are under the age of 15. The total fertility rate is 6.7 children per woman. Life expectancy is 43 years for both men and women, and one out of five children dies before reaching the age of five. About one in two Afghans lives below the poverty line and one in three children suffer from malnutrition.⁷

⁶ UNODC 2008 World Drug Report: "Opium Trade Soars in Afghanistan," 26, June 2008, available online at <http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/WDR_2008_eng_web.pdf>

⁷ Data compiled from the World Bank, Encyclopedia Britannica, and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Afghanistan Country Report.

Afghanistan doesn't have an easy way to return to good economic health. The country has limited natural resources—some deposits of gas and oil in the north, copper and gems. The agricultural sector has been suffering from deforestation, the destruction of irrigation systems and poor agricultural practices. Afghans will depend on foreign assistance for a long time before they can generate enough economic activity on their own to return to a normal economy that doesn't rely on drugs and smuggling.

Overview of the major religions and religious composition of the population: Afghans today are nearly all Muslims. Three of the four largest ethnic groups—the Pushtun (around 40% of population), the Tajiks (30%) and Uzbeks (7%)—are mostly Sunni Muslims. The Hazaras in the middle of the country and the larger cities (10-15%) and the urban Qizilbash are mostly Shi'a Muslims. About 1-2% of the population, mostly in the north, is Ismaili Muslim. The members of most of Afghanistan's smaller ethnic groups (Baluch, Turkmen, Aimaks, Nuristanis...) are Sunni Muslims. Altogether, at least eighty percent of Afghans are Hanafi Sunnis and the balance are mostly Twelver Shi'a. Afghanistan has tiny minorities of Hindus and Sikhs and a handful of Jews.

State and Religion: Islam is, and has been for centuries, the official religion of Afghanistan, the moral basis and reference for its diverse cultures, the foundation of national unity, and a hegemonic presence in every Afghan's life. Islam unifies Afghans because it emphasizes faith over ethnicity in a mostly Muslim country. Networks of highly influential men of religion become particularly powerful in times of crises such as foreign invasions and perceived threats to culture and faith. In addition to Hanafi Sunni clerics, Sufi orders (Naqshibandis and Qadiris) also played a strong mobilization role in the past. Religious schools (madrassa) in both Afghanistan and Pakistan play an important role in teaching Afghan youths, mostly Pushtun, the principles of the faith and, for some, an uncompromising version of it that requires the imposition of strict Islamic law. Networks of transnational Islamists have also helped spread understandings of Islam (Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, Iranian-style Shi'a Islamism,...) that differ from indigenously developed perspectives and lean towards the revolutionary and militant. New religious elites—more intransigent, better linked to transnational movements, more modern—replaced old religious elites during the horrific wars of the 1980s and 1990s among both Sunnis

and Shi`a.⁸ Their perspectives and ideologies have trickled down to a substantial portion of the population.

While many Westerners think of the Taliban as being particularly severe in implementing shari`a (Islamic law), they in fact do not differ much in their attitudes from many other Afghan factions and leaders once associated with the West since the 1980s. Mujahideen leaders Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Abd Rab-al-Rasul Sayyaf, and Ismail Khan, among many others, adopted and supported similar sharia-based restrictions. The regime currently in power, with U.S. and NATO's help, has also adopted strict restrictions on women's rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. These include laws that allow for marital rape and restricting a woman's access to education and mobility outside the home among the Shi`a, strict blasphemy laws, and harsh punishment for conversion. Of course, these may get reversed, but the pressure is strong from influential figures to make the law even more restrictive.⁹

Religio-political parties, and groups: Afghanistan has always had, and continues to have, a fragmented polity. Its different kings had to contend with rivals, strong independent tribes and influential local leaders. Afghanistan's only non-communist President, Muhammad Daud, had to manage his communist Parshami allies, their communist Khalqi rivals, Maoist factions, Islamist groups and the same tribal, clan and other groups that made Afghanistan a challenging country to govern and conquer before him. The Islamist groups that escaped the communist takeover in Kabul ultimately coalesced into seven large Sunni mujahideen organizations during the Jihad. These were mostly based on patronage and suffered internally from the fractiousness that affected the Afghan polity more broadly (Sinno 2008). In the Hazarajat, a number of Shi`a Islamist organizations formed during the jihad but then coalesced into the Hizbi Wahdat with Iranian encouragement in 1987 (Harpviken 1996). The end of foreign support to warring factions in Afghanistan led to the disintegration of the regime of the previously-communist Najibullah and the organizations of most of his mujahideen rivals. Those that did survive by 1994—Hekmatyar's Hizbi Islami, Hizbi Wahdat, Ahmad Shah Massoud's Shura Nazar, Dostum

⁸ See Harpviken 1996 for a study of shifting elites among the Shi`a Hazara and Edwards 2002 for a study of leadership change among Sunnis.

⁹ See, for example, "Afghan Clerics Warn Karzai Against Missionaries" *Reuters*, January 6, 2008; "Worse than the Taliban' - new law rolls back rights for Afghan women," *The Guardian*, Tuesday 31 March 2009, available online at < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/31/hamid-karzai-afghanistan-law>>.

Jumbish, and Ismail Khan's emirate—were soon ravaged by the Taliban during their meteoric rise. Only Massoud's force held some territory, about ten percent of Afghanistan, in December 2001 when the U.S. intervened to end Taliban rule. Since U.S. and NATO forces entered Afghanistan, the polity has been divided between its fractious government with its independent administrators and police commanders, powerful local leaders, Taliban and Hizbi-Islami insurgents, al-Qaeda militants, US-backed militias, and drug traffickers. Many local leaders have a seat in parliament and maintain armed groups. Their beliefs vary from Taliban-like, such as the previous mujahedeen leader Abd Rab-al-Rasul Sayyaf, to the secular ethnocentric that pays lip service to Islam, such as Abdul-Rashid Dostum.

The Strategic Use of Islam in Afghan Politics and Conflicts

The strategic use of religion plays an important role in the ability of some Afghan political actors to legitimize their actions, mobilize support, undermine rivals, attract foreign aid, and control populations. Not all Afghan political actors can make use of religious language or sanction—only those who transcend divisions within a local, tribal, sectarian, ethnic or national space and do not have a history of behavior considered “un-Islamic” can benefit from its advantages within that space, but not necessarily beyond it. Others, who do not have this kind of Islamic legitimacy, have to react to the use of Islam by those who do. They may choose to adopt a strongly anti-Islamic agenda, make symbolic gestures to counter the de-legitimization process, or be forced to accommodate religious demands. In all cases, actors who are outmatched in their Islamic credentials are at a strong disadvantage in a very conservative and religious Muslim country.

I argue elsewhere (Sinno 2008) that organizational dynamics is the most important factor that shapes the outcome of complex social conflicts. This is not to say that other factors do not matter or do not contribute an incremental or amplifying effect. I show in my statistical study, for example, that outside aid has such an amplifying effect on an organization's ability to defeat others. In this paper, I focus on the particular effect of religious credentials in Afghanistan, not to argue that they are more important than others, but to trace the processes that allow them to sometimes provide an important advantage in closely-contested conflicts. Being credibly labeled as “non-Muslim” or un-islamic (*kafir*) can be very damaging.

One historical example of how this process works in Afghanistan is that of King Amanullah (ruled 1919-29). Amanullah was a popular king early in his tenure, particularly because he

defeated the British in the Third British-Afghan War and regained control over Afghanistan's foreign affairs. Later, however, he failed to resist opposition from the tribes and other societal factions. Conflict between centralizing kings and independent-minded tribal leaders was nothing new in Afghanistan, but Amanullah was vulnerable to accusations that he was not a good Muslim because he discouraged the veiling and seclusion of women, introduced secular education, and promoted other measures inspired by the reforms of Turkey's Ataturk. Some clerics declared him to be an infidel and a picture of him on an official visit abroad with his unveiled wife was broadly circulated to make the point. The accusations deprived Amanullah of legitimacy, emboldened his rivals and weakened the resolve of his supporters.¹⁰ Amanullah left for a European exile when he saw the end coming in 1929.

This is not to say that an Afghan ruler cannot undermine the ulemas and other men of religion. The experience of Abdul Rahman in doing precisely this is enlightened when contrasted with Amanullah's. Abdul Rahman "out-Islamed" the Mullahs he sidelined by emphasizing the Muslim identity of the state, the importance of the "duty" of jihad, claiming that authority to rule was conferred to him by God, that resisting the king's will is un-Islamic, and giving the state the right to regulate religious practice (Shahrani 1986). This is exactly the point of this paper: Amir Abdul Rahman's successful attempt to centralize and strengthen the state could not be undermined by the use of the effective strategy leveled against Amanullah of questioning his Islamic credentials. The contest between the ruler and society's dense solidarity groups is always a close one and this one factor can tip the balance against the monarch.

The different types of Islamic rhetoric and symbols used by political actors in Afghanistan provide distinct advantages and liabilities. The strategic use of traditional Muslim language facilitates mobilization better than nationalist and other symbols. The adoption of Salafi Islamist language makes political actors more attractive to some motivated Muslim foreign sponsors but hinders mobilization. The use of a diluted common-denominator Islamic language makes the political actor more attractive to Western donors but deprives it from the other advantages of the use of religious language and symbols.

¹⁰ See Poullada 1973 for a thorough account.

In the following sections, I trace how the Afghan organizations and governments that had the credibility to use Islamic symbols and language benefitted from it to gain legitimacy for their actions, mobilize support, undermine rivals, attract foreign aid, and control populations.

Religion and conflict during the Soviet occupation (1979-89). The PDPA was particularly aggressive in its anti-Muslim stance after it took over state institutions in 1978. The party sent activists to the villages to teach about Marxism, imprisoned Muslim clerics and changed family laws to reflect the new ruling elites' views of women's rights (Naby 1988, Dupree 1984). The intrusiveness of the PDPA activists, along with land-ownership and other laws that challenged established rural elites, encouraged revolt in the countryside. The Islamists who took refuge from the communist coup, whether modernists or sufis, started to actively organize the revolt and liaising with Pakistani, Iranian, Gulf and other potential sponsors.

The Sunni mujahideen would consolidate into four modernist Islamist parties and three conservative pro-monarchy parties. Party leaders were generally widely respected figures that derived charisma from religious scholarship (in the case of the Islamists) or lineage (the traditionalists).¹¹ There were differences in the language and methods used by the mujahideen parties, and these differences affected their ability to mobilize support and attract aid. The traditionalists' conservative views helped them mobilize a broader swath of the population by using traditional patronage-based arrangements and sparing them from having to promote a new ideology or ways of organizing. These same views made them less attractive than the modernist Islamists in the eyes of their Pakistani and Gulf Arab benefactors who supported the modernists' readiness to form "modern" fighting organizations infused with a coherent revolutionary ideology. One modern Islamist party in particular, Hekmatyar's Hizbi Islami, struggled with mobilization because of its ideology, in spite of investing considerable resources in schooling and ideological training (Rastegar 1991). But its universal Islamist ideology allowed it to mobilize across ethnic divides among Sunnis better than other parties. Still, by virtue of being Muslim and framing this as a Muslim jihad, the mujahideen as a whole found it easy to attract support in their fight against the regime and the "atheist" Soviet superpower.

¹¹ Even the followers of "Engineer" Hekmatyar liked to point out that he wrote some forty booklets on religious matters. This number might have been an exaggeration. Some of the traditionalist leaders lost popularity when it became known that they lived a life of luxury while their commanders suffered at the front.

The regime tried to discredit the mujahideen through its media outlets by implying that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose Islamist ideology was the least attractive to Afghans, was the leader and symbol of the resistance. It also used the term “Wahhabi” to describe Hekmatyar and other mujahideen leaders. They were referring to Saudi Wahhabism, which many in Afghanistan viewed at the time as a particularly intransigent understanding of Islam that was intolerant of how they lived and practiced the religion. Some Afghans resented, for example, how some of the early volunteers (Ansar) from the Gulf region used to criticize cultural practices such as planting flags on tombs as sinful innovation. This Soviet and regime strategy may have hurt Hekmatyar but had little impact on the resistance as a whole.

When the communist regime realized the limitations it faced in its attempt to mobilize support and the risks involved in being framed as anti-Islamic, the PDPA tried to move, or to appear to move, to the political center and to escape its anti-Muslim reputation.¹² Democratic Republic of Afghanistan President Babrak Karmal, for instance, made a November 1985 public speech in which he said that the PDPA should not monopolize power, private agriculture should be encouraged, tribal self-government should be allowed, Islam should be respected, and Afghanistan should be more neutral in its foreign relations.¹³ He also changed national insignia to include Islamic symbols once more (they were removed in 1978) and began to express personal piety in public. He also accused the mujahideen of destroying Islamic sites and of using Islam for political purposes. Other regime figures, like the Shi`a Sultan Ali Kishtmand, tried to appeal to the Hazara population on the basis of both religion and ethnicity with similarly poor results (Nabi 1988). In 1987, President Najib, who succeeded Karmal in 1986, re-added "Allah" to his name, renamed the PDPA the Watan (Nation) Party, reversed unpopular reforms, proclaimed his respect for Islam and modified the constitution to say that Afghanistan is a Muslim state, declared a cease-fire and amnesty, appointed some nonparty figures to the cabinet, and did away with Communist symbols, with Moscow's blessings (Magnus and Naby 2002, 133).

These attempts by PDPA leaders to burnish their Islamic credentials had little chance of success because of the party's anti-Islamic history and past radical Marxist ideology. The PDPA regime was also defended by the presence of up to 120,000 Soviet troops and therefore could not be

¹² See Giustozzi 2000, Chapter 3, on the PDPA's growth problems.

¹³ Giustozzi 2000, 56.

dissociated from Moscow's officially atheistic ideology. The USSR, and Russia before it, are also widely understood in Afghan historical memory to have brutalized the Muslim populations they dominated in Central Asia and to have destroyed Islamic institutions there, and as therefore being de facto anti-Muslim. And as William Maley in his excellent study of the PDPA regime's legitimization strategies tells us:

[The regime's] attempt to use Islam as a rallying point has been preempted by the emergence of the Afghan mujahideen, who are able plausibly to present themselves as defenders of Islamic values in a way which the regime simply cannot. Islam has proved to be an ideology of resistance to, rather than support for, the regime, and there is virtually nothing that the regime can do to turn this situation around (Maley 1987, 717-18.)

Another way Islam affected the dynamics of the conflict was the Soviets' fear of the spread of Islamist zeal to their own Muslim-majority republics. Substantial numbers of Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Tajiks (some estimate the number of their descendants at half a million in the 1990s) fled Soviet-occupied lands to Afghanistan in the wake of the "Basmachi" revolt.¹⁴ As resistance commanders in the north of Afghanistan gained confidence, assistance from Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), and military expertise, they and the descendants of the "Basmachi" performed incursions into Soviet Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, such as the March 1987 bombing of the Soviet Tajik town of Pyandzh. Armed with weapons and Korans, the Afghans had substantial influence over their coreligionists across the border, as demonstrated by the immediate spread of Islamist activities after the Soviet collapse, particularly in Tajikistan.¹⁵ The links that the all-Union Islamic Renaissance Party (created in the former Soviet Union in 1990) developed with Afghan mujahideen a couple of years after its creation also attest to such influence.¹⁶ A leading authority on

¹⁴ "Basmachi" is a derogatory term meaning "bandit" that the Russians used to call the Muslim rebels in territories they conquered in the first forty years of the 1990s. Regrettably, this term became the standard one in reference to these groups. See Akcali (1998, 274) for the figure.

¹⁵ Afghan Tajik commanders supported the Islamists who temporarily seized power in Tajikistan, for example. Islamist parties have formed in all the newly independent ex-Soviet republics that border Afghanistan. Afghan influence even reached Chechnya, as manifest in the declarations of Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first overall leader of Chechen insurgents. See TASS, April 19, 1987, reporting about mujahideen incursions into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. See also United States Information Agency, *Afghanistan Chronology*, April 8, 1987.

¹⁶ See Akcali (1998) for a study of the links between the IRP and the Afghan mujahideen.

Soviet Central Asia in the West described the effect of a then possible Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the following way:

The effect of a complete Soviet withdrawal on Muslim society in Central Asia would be colossal. . . . It would be demonstrated [in that event] that Soviet might was not invincible and that resistance is possible. What are the Afghans for Central Asia? It is a small, wild and poor country. So then, if the Afghans could inflict (such) a military and political defeat, then that makes anything possible. And everyone in Central Asia knows that. I think that in Soviet Russia they know it too.¹⁷

And indeed they did. Public declarations by a number of Soviet officials, including Gorbachev himself, indicated that they were worried about the spread of the Islamist creed to their Muslim-majority republics.¹⁸ Soviet foreign minister Shevardnadze requested U.S. assistance in stemming the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism" when he conveyed to U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz the Soviet decision to withdraw on September 16, 1987, leaving Shultz with the belief that "he was clearly worried about the Islamic republics in the Soviet Union."¹⁹ Lesser Soviet officials were given early retirement because they implied that the Islamic resurgence would have spread to the Soviet Union if it weren't for intervention, and KGB officials publicly stated that events in Afghanistan were linked to CIA efforts to exploit Islam in Muslim Soviet republics.²⁰ Fiery statements by mujahideen leaders who declared their desire to free "the Muslim lands of Bukhara, Khiva and Khorezm" might well have fed this fear.²¹ Their threats were reinforced by statements from Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq, the leading supporter of the Afghan jihad, who told

¹⁷ The quote is by Alexander Bennigsen, Radio Liberty Research, RS 58/88, July 5, 1988, 6.

¹⁸ Bennigsen (Klass 1990, chap. 2) chronicles such declarations and indications of Islamic resurgence in Soviet republics after the start of the Afghan invasion.

¹⁹ Shultz 1993, 987.

²⁰ Garthoff (1994, 1032) and Bradsher (1985, 157).

²¹ Borovik (1990, 10) quotes Hekmatyar as saying, "If the mujahideen persistently continue to fight, the day will soon come when the occupied lands of Soviet Central Asia will be liberated." Such statements were frequent. See also Akcali (1998, 276) for more such statements by Hekmatyar and Berhanuddin Rabbani. See, inter alia, the Rogers (1992) chronology for many instances of such declarations. See Cordesman and Wagner (1990, 70-71) for examples of mujahideen attacks on USSR territory. See Yousaf (1992, chap. 12) for a thorough account of ISI-supported operations in Soviet Central Asia. He interestingly reports that demand for Korans was stronger than for ethnically based motivational propaganda prepared by the CIA. Some sources mention that the CIA was motivating Hekmatyar's operations across Soviet borders (Rubin 1995, 81).

the seasoned journalist Selig Harrison that "we took risks as a frontline state, and we won't permit it to be like it was before, with Indian and Soviet influence there and claims on our territory. It will be a real Islamic state, part of a pan-Islamic revival that will one day win over the Muslims in the Soviet Union, you will see."²² Zia ul-Haq was not a man who limited himself to empty threats, as Brigadier Mohammed Yousaf of the ISI informs us in his revealing account of ISI-supported mujahideen actions across the Amu Daria River:

The cross-border strikes were at their peak during 1986. Scores of attacks were made across the Amu from Jozjan and Badaksan Provinces. Sometimes Soviet citizens joined in these operations, or came back into Afghanistan to join the mujahideen. . . . In at least one instance some Soviet soldiers deserted to us. That we were hitting a sore spot was confirmed by the ferocity of the Soviets' reaction. Virtually every incursion provoked massive aerial bombing and gunship attacks on all villages south of the river in the vicinity of our strike.²³

The earlier Soviet withdrawal of their Central Asian troops and their replacement with Slavic ones indicates that they were concerned with the potential for fraternization across the border.²⁴ Add to that the Soviet leaders' full awareness of the explosive growth of Central Asian populations—the Uzbek and Tajik populations trebled between 1959 and 1989 while that of the USSR as a whole increased by just 36.8%—and their fears become understandable. Those fears seemed well founded during the 1992-93 period when both Massoud and Hekmatyar trained and armed thousands of Islamist Tajiks and sent them back across the Amu Daria while providing shelter for tens of thousands of Tajik refugees.²⁵

These Soviet fears of a spreading political Islam probably motivated Moscow to remain longer in Afghanistan than it would have otherwise and to continue supporting the regime in Kabul

²² Cordovez and Harrison 1995, 92. Quoted on June 29, 1988, in Islamabad.

²³ Yousaf 1992, 200. The Pakistani-sponsored attacks were halted in May 1987 after the Soviets transmitted thinly veiled threats to the Pakistani Foreign Ministry (Yousaf 1992, 205).

²⁴ Central Asian troops were mostly withdrawn in early 1980 after widespread refusal to fight, fraternization, trafficking in Korans, and other acts of sabotage of Soviet military efforts. Some Central Asian soldiers even defected to the mujahideen. See Akcali (1998, 275) for one brief account.

²⁵ See Akcali (1998, 278-82) for a more detailed account of Afghan military support to Tajik Islamists.

so long as it could do so.

Religion and politics during the Afghan civil war (1989-1994). Islam played a very minor role in the Afghan civil war that succeeded the Soviet withdrawal of February 1989. The biggest change from the years of the anti-Soviet jihad, and before the 1992 collapse of the Najibullah regime, is that this regime could claim slightly more credibly that it is not anti-Islamic. After the regime collapsed, its different factions aligned themselves with different mujahideen parties. Some khalqis joined Hekmatyar, some Parshamis joined Ahmad Shah Masoud or Dostum and some Hazara units joined Hizbi-Wahdat. The regime's Uzbek and Ismaili militias (led by Dostum and Sayyid Mansur Nadiri, respectively), as well other smaller ones, defected and became independent forces. The larger mujahideen parties largely fragmented and their field commanders became independent local leaders, some of whom engaged in predatory activities. The larger fighting forces—Hekmatyar's Hizb, Massoud's forces, Dostum's militia and the Shi`a Hizbi Wahdat fought fiercely over Kabul causing much destruction and casualties. The consequence of all this was to tarnish the reputation and Islamic credential of most mujahideen leaders and parties, particularly among the Pushtun.

Islamic ideology and sectarian identity also affected the patterns of foreign sponsorship of the different fighting factions: Hizbi Wahdat depended on support from Iran, the Salafi Abd-Rab al-Rassul Sayyaf who frequently clashed with Wahdat received considerable aid and volunteers from the Gulf, Hekmatyar was backed by Arabs and Pakistanis. To be sure, however, there were other drivers of foreign aid such as geopolitical interests and ethnic affinity (Sinno 2008, chapter 7).

The rise of the Taliban (1994-2001). Islam, obviously, played a major part in the rise and fall of the Taliban: the organization framed itself as the most Islamic of all organizations in Afghanistan, defined its goal as bringing religious law to the land, used its Islamic image to undermine rivals in Pushtun areas, and used shari`a and Islamic symbols as tools of control after it spread its influence.

The Taliban grew from a small group of idealistic religious students with some military training into a sprawling organization that dominated more than nine-tenths of Afghanistan in less than

five years.²⁶ They swept away all the warlords—petty and mighty alike, with the single exception of Massoud's organization—that had partitioned and terrorized the country to impose a nearly unified political order for the first time since 1979. I explain elsewhere (Sinno 2008, chapter 8) how the Taliban accomplished this, but I only focus here on how the strategic use of Islam helped them achieve their goals.

In Pushtun areas, the Taliban faced hundreds of armed groups and their particular hue of traditional “village” Islam facilitated their spread. The carefully calibrated image and message of the Taliban were essential components of their successful expansion across Pushtun areas, and were later tweaked, with lesser success, to win over other constituencies. The image and message of the Taliban both reduced the ability of rival commanders to rely on their followers' support in case they wanted to resist the Taliban advance and prevented different local leaders from coalescing against them the way they would have were they Soviets, British, Americans, the forces of a regime under the tutelage of a foreign power, or antitribal Islamists such as Hekmatyar.

The identity of the Taliban leaders and rank and file influenced the way they were perceived and the credibility accorded to their message, but probably not the way most observers believe it did. Some (e.g., Goodson 2001) argue that it is the Pushtun identity of the Taliban that mattered. Others suggest that the identity in question is Durrani as opposed to Ghilzai, but even this should probably be nuanced further because several Taliban leaders (including Mullah Omar) were of Ghilzai extraction.²⁷ Edwards (2002, 294), who spent considerable time among the Pushtun, probably best isolates the specific flavor of agenda-linked identity that spared the Taliban from being unacceptable to most rural Pushtun:

Another factor in explaining the Taliban's success is that they consistently downplayed tribal or regional identities in favor of what might be called "village identity." . . . In identifying purist culture and tradition with the Islam of the village, the Taliban were

²⁶ Taliban joins the Arabic noun *talib* (seeker, as in seeker of truth or knowledge) with the plural Dari and Pashto suffix "*an*." I refer to the Taliban in both the singular and plural to reflect current practice. It is more accurate to use the singular tense, however, because the Taliban is an organization with a structure and not an amorphous group of students like the name would indicate and the organization's mythology would imply.

²⁷ A list compiled by Rashid (2000, appendix 2) reveals that there were more Ghilzai than Durrani among top-tier Taliban leaders.

indirectly condemning the Islam of the parties since most of the party leaders were products of Kabul University or had worked for state-sponsored institutions. They were also putting themselves on a par with the people whose support they had to enlist if their movement was going to be successful.

Identity mattered not because of who the Taliban were but because of who they were *not*. The Taliban were not hindered in their expansion within the Pushtun areas by having urban backgrounds, being modernist Islamists with antitribal dispositions, having a long record of ambitious expansion, or being non-Pushtun. Kabuli urbanites (e.g., PDPA leaders) were perceived as wanting to expand the power of a central government and of being culturally alien to rural Pushtun. Modernist Islamists (e.g., Hekmatyar) were perceived as planning to sacrifice local political and cultural autonomy in their effort to create a centralized and modernizing Islamic state. Established organizations that had attempted past expansion (e.g., Hizb, Ismail Khan, Sayyaf) had clashed with many commanders and therefore had lost their ability to claim neutrality. Non-Pushtuns would have been seen as alien and unacceptable by the historically dominant Pushtun, but Pushtuns were not necessarily unacceptable to minority groups if they did not impose a domineering and discriminatory regime. If the Taliban's identity mattered because of who they were as opposed to who they were not, then Mullah Omar, a Ghilzai of unremarkable lineage, would not have mustered support among Durranis. In spite of his lineage, Mullah Omar was able to woo support across Pushtun areas because of the Islamic vision he and his organization articulated and their projected image as credible purveyors of this vision. The credibility of the Taliban's message and image could not be undermined because of who they were, but what really mattered were the religious message and image, not the Taliban members' ethnic, tribal, or qawm identities.

A critical component of the Taliban's image is that they were perceived as neutral in the context of ongoing Afghan conflicts. They also suggested at an earlier stage that they were not interested in wresting power for themselves. The Taliban's perceived neutrality made them acceptable neighbors and intermediaries for many commanders. The way the Taliban approached commanders also leveraged the neutral role of religious figures in Pushtun tradition:

Taliban sent religious envoys ahead to demand that local commanders disarm and dismantle roadblocks. Most duly did. Some even offered money, vehicles and weapons to

help Taliban eliminate their rivals. But then Taliban pushed aside these collaborators too.²⁸

These religious leaders also paved the way for the Taliban's expansion by communicating their message in at least some areas not yet under their control. Many were trained in the same madrassas as Taliban members and their network represented the only remaining form of organization next to those of local leaders and the Hizb in Pushtun areas.

The Taliban also leveraged cultural knowledge and norms to project an aura of invincibility. This reduced the commanders' perception of their own ability to resist them and the willingness of their fighters to follow them into battle; it also provided assurances for those who would accept surrender or co-option. There is no stronger evidence of the importance the Taliban gave to the preservation of Pushtunwali norms and Islamic solidarity than their willingness to shelter Osama bin Laden until the bitter (possible) end, the way a good Pushtun is expected to do for his guest. As one Taliban leader candidly acknowledged, Taliban leaders would have lost the respect of their followers and consequently endangered the organization's cohesion if they had given up bin Laden. With Pushtunwali came cultural assets that reduced the cost of Taliban expansion. As they expanded, the Taliban brought back collective memories of Pushtun uprisings and symbols that were enshrined in oral culture. Reputation became a valuable asset to risk, thus committing those who declared their loyalty to maintaining it. And even a certain degree of susceptibility to rumors and superstition might have contributed to Taliban victories. Rumors circulated that those who fired on the advancing religious students were miraculously stricken with fear, incapacitated by unexplained bleeding, or fell into a coma. Although there is no evidence that such rumors were decisive, no other force in Afghanistan could have inspired religious and superstitious fear in those who were inclined to believe in it more than the Taliban.²⁹

The Taliban also astutely used their knowledge of the Pushtun social landscape to decide whether to co-opt, discard, or assassinate different commanders. The Taliban co-opted local leaders who wouldn't tarnish their finely calibrated image as heralds of a better Islamic order and who could enhance their military potential. Jalaludin Haqqani, the master guerrilla leader and

²⁸ Emily MacFarquhar, "A New Force of Muslim Fighters Is Determined to Rule Afghanistan," *US News and World Report*, March 6, 1995, 64-66. See also Ghufuran 2001, 468.

²⁹ Mansur 1995, 54.

uncompromising learned Islamic scholar without independent ambitions, was the epitome of the co-optable commander. Commanders tarnished by a history of predation or loyalty to the Hizb or Jamiat were better discarded, and their followers recruited on an independent basis or disbanded. Of course, Taliban choices were not always flawless in this regard. They recruited well-trained members of the defunct Communist Khalqi faction (sixteen hundred of them, according to Hekmatyar claims) to enhance their military capabilities, but discarded them by 1998 after realizing the damage they caused to their image and found alternative sources of expertise.

Once in power, the Taliban used an extreme version of Shari`a to control the population and impose law and order. The strict dress code for men and women was a signal to all that their authority is absolute. It developed a specialized policing organization, the ‘Amr bil-Ma`rouf wal Nahi `an al-Munkar (Promotion of Virtue and Discouragement of Vice) to impose and enforce a strict moral order. This later became the dreaded department whose enforcement of extreme edicts made news in the Western press. While the zeal of ‘Amr bil-Ma`rouf led to excesses that damaged the Taliban's reputation at home and abroad, it helped to keep the rest of the Taliban in check and prevented others from committing crimes in its name.³⁰ It also became the most influential, autonomous, and powerful ministry and received independent funding from the Arab Gulf. The Taliban also enforced discipline by creating a three-tiered judicial system to enforce shari`a.³¹

The Taliban also used symbols of Islam to gain legitimacy. Taliban leader Mullah Omar took the title of Amir al Mu`minin (Commander of the Faithful), called the country “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, and appeared in front of 1,200 Pushtun religious leaders wearing the Cloak of the Prophet Muhammad, a symbol of Islamic authority (Maley 2002, 223; Rashid 2000, 42).

The Islamic ideology of the Taliban also attracted financial and military aid from like-minded Muslims in Pakistan and the Gulf. Non-Afghan troops that were valued for their advanced tactical training and tenacity, including some followers of Osama bin Laden, were organized as the 055 Brigade to win decisive battles and enforce discipline at the front.

³⁰ Gohari 2000, 55-56. For an example of the use of the morality police to enforce frontline discipline, see William Vollman, "Across the Divide," *New Yorker*, May 15, 2000. See also Rashid 2000, 106-7.

³¹ Dorransoro 2000, 307-8.

The particular Muslim identity of the Taliban also provided them with access to a network of madrassas across the border in Pakistan. These madrassas provided the Taliban with highly committed recruits that helped their war effort (Rashid 2000). The training and brotherhood of the madrassas also reduced the cost of keeping the Taliban cohesive.³² The madrassa education ensured that new organizational members had very similar worldviews, were ready to obey the leadership fanatically, and provided a thorough background check on the pupils. The Dar al-`Ulum Haqqania madrassa near Peshawar provided the elite training ground and produced much of the cohesive Taliban leadership.

It was easy for the Taliban to “out-Muslim” its Pushtun rivals in 1994-96, including Hekmatyar whose fighters simply abandoned the front when the Taliban approached because they have all been tarnished by un-Islamic behavior such as predation, the killing of civilians or naked political ambition. This factor played a much smaller role when the Taliban faced minority organizations such as the Shi`a Hizbi Wahdat, Ismail Khan’s emirate, Dostum’ Jumbish and Massoud’s Shura Nazar.

Significance for Afghanistan’s current conflicts

The Taliban and al-Qaeda did not quite disappear after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the standoff in Tora Bora. They reorganized as guerrilla movements and have been harassing U.S. and NATO forces and Karzai supporters. A third group, the rump Hizb-i Islami, also initiated insurgent activities after the return of Hekmatyar from exile in Iran. The insurgency's intensity increased in the spring of 2005, after the winter snow melted, with some fifteen hundred people estimated to die from fighting between March and November. As of May 2009, the number of casualties from the conflict is estimated to be 1050 NATO and US soldiers, some ten thousand civilians, and thousands of insurgents. The insurgents have been using a broad array of tactics, some of which have been borrowed from Iraqi insurgents. They have been ambushing U.S. and Afghan patrols, using remotely detonated explosives, attacking Afghan police posts, lobbing mortar shells at U.S. bases, attacking NGOs and Karzai administrators to reduce state penetration, assassinating state-appointed clergy, carrying out suicide attacks on ISAF and NATO troops, and reasserting control over some remote areas as bases for future operations.

³² Dorronsoro 2000, 302.

They have also been spreading their message of jihad against what they perceive to be an infidel occupier and its puppet regime by distributing leaflets (night letters) and through broadcasts of Radio Sharia. In return, the United States military has been engaging in a counterinsurgency effort that has caused many civilian deaths, mistreatment and murder of prisoners, arbitrary arrests, and the abuse of civilians by U.S. troops and their Afghan allies. News of the desecration of the Koran and of the abuse of Afghan prisoners by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Diego Garcia, and Guantanamo caused riots in protest in different parts of Afghanistan.

The U.S. and NATO are considerably disadvantaged in winning the Afghans' support for their operations and for the Karzai regime by being non-Muslim forces. Their non-Muslim identities and a history of highly-publicized anti-Muslim and negligent behavior make it very easy for their enemies to present them as anti-Afghan and anti-Muslim. These transgressions include the torture and murder of Afghans in prisons, the desecration (purported or real) of the Quran, the desecration of the bodies of Taliban fighters in October 2006, the invasion of the privacy of Afghans during search and seizure operations, the destruction of Afghan vehicles and property by armored American vehicles in Kabul, and the use of massive firepower that kills civilians and destroys homes. While Afghans, for a number of reasons I explain elsewhere (Sinno 2008, chapter 9), tolerated the US military presence for several years, goodwill has evaporated in the Pushtun areas. After so much mismanagement and so many mistakes, it is easier today for the Taliban to convince Afghans in general, and the Pushtun in particular, that the US and NATO forces are not much different from the hated Soviet and British Armies of the past.

The Taliban also have the advantage of using idioms and symbols that resonate well with Afghans (Islamic law, jihad,...) while the US uses concepts that are important and have much less meaning for a population that is suffering from poverty and insecurity such as rule of law and democracy. Even the media the Taliban use carry particular meaning for Afghan Pushtuns: Radio Shar`ia evokes a period of law and order in the south and the use of "night letters" evokes the jihad against the Soviets.

The Taliban's Islamic ideology also connects them to a network of Islamist organizations and state agencies in Pakistan that provides it with safe havens, financing, expertise and recruits. Inside of Afghanistan, today's Taliban are a more moderate and broadly-encompassing

movement than the Taliban of the past. This religious flexibility allows them to mobilize more support in their attempt to expel foreign forces and overthrow the Karzai regime.

President Karzai is in the awkward position of having to respond to the Taliban challenge and the requests of conservative elements by supporting restrictive legislation and practices while trying to appease his Western backers who are concerned about women and religious freedom. This tension forces him to flip-flop or find backdoor solutions to crises that emerge when shari`a-based laws are passed or implemented. He also gets little of the credit from conservative Afghans and much criticism from liberal Western governments that need to answer to domestic pressure groups.

In the current conflict, that Taliban enjoy several advantages in Pushtun areas: they are suitably organized, time is on their side, they know the Pushtun social landscape much better than their opponents and their finances are secure. In addition, they have outmatched the Afghan government in the area of Islamic credentials. If history is any indication, the odds are not on NATO's and Mr. Karzai's side in this conflict.

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