An Analytical Assessment

The Taliban: From Theory to Practice

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Front photo: Shortly after the Taliban arrived in Kabul, the Taliban whitewashed all the previous colorful murals in Kabul city. The new murals are in black and white, featuring their flag with the Islamic statement of faith, quotes of their leaders, and statements on their victory. This reads, "With the help of God, our nation defeated America." HAS photo/Kabul.

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About the author

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The Taliban Ideology

One characteristic that distinguishes the Taliban from other Muslim extremist groups is the ambiguity of the group's theoretical foundations. The Taliban was primarily designed for militant purposes, and as such, it has made no effort to clarify its theoretical base to distinguish its ideology from other extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and others.

However, what we know about the group's ideological underpinning is a mixture of tribal values and 'Deobandism,' a highly conservative Muslim school of thought in the Indian sub-continent. The Deobandi thought had a politically passive role before Pakistan seceded from India and one of the chief characteristics of the Indian Deobandi school was the avoidance of modernity and its manifestations and crawling in the lock of traditions. It had no violent agenda, but when Pakistan was founded, religion became a fundamental element of the country's identity (Husain Haqqani, 2005). The Pakistani version of Deobandism gradually mutated, shifting from a defensive to an offensive ideology. This happened due to the Deobandi school's intellectual proximity to other fundamentalist groups such as Salafism and strategic partnership with power apparatus, namely the army and the intelligence in the newly established Pakistani state. The mix of these two factors transformed the Deobandi movement in Pakistan into a powerful religious extremist actor in Pakistan and beyond.

When the 'Jihad' or fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan started in the 1980s, the Pakistani Deobandi groups supported some of the Afghan Mujahideen factions such as the Harakat-i- Inqilab-i- Islami - a Jihadi group led by Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi. The Taliban's founder Mullah Mohammad Omar belonged to the same group. During those years, Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan provided religious, educational opportunities for thousands of poor Afghans in refugee

camps in Pakistan, and used this opportunity to promote the Deobandi version of militant Islamism that eventually resulted in the formation of the Taliban group in the 1990s.

The political circumstances in which the Taliban emerged were also significant for their ideological evolution. The Taliban emerged in the context of the civil war in Afghanistan, following the collapse of the Soviet-backed Afghan government in 1992 and the Mujahideen groups' failure to agree on a new political arrangement. However, because the Mujahideen were Muslim Afghans who had fought against the Soviet invasion, the Taliban needed religious justifications to enter a war against those groups. The legitimacy of the group's war with other Islamist groups was questionable according to traditional instructions of Islam and the Afghan society.

To justify their militant campaign, the Taliban adopted a new ideological orientation that was based on Jihadist Salafism. The Salafi ideology propagated by groups such as Al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden, divided the Muslims into 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims.' This distinction allowed the 'good Muslims' to wage war on the 'bad Muslims.' It provided an ideological ground for the Taliban's justification of their war against other Muslim groups in Afghanistan and transformed the group's ideology by making it part of the transnational Salafi Jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

Hence, theoretically, the Taliban is a combination of Pakistani Deobandism and jihadi Salafism based on 'Takfiri' orientation in Salafi Islam, which divides the Muslims into the 'right Muslims' and the apostates. This has since formed the ideological essence of the Taliban movement, providing them a strategic common ground with other groups, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with which the Taliban have little ideological difference. Their principal difference remains political, and it concerns questions of leadership and tactics.

The Taliban, therefore, is an ultraconservative group that maintains an extremely hostile view towards modernity and modern governance. In the past two decades, the Taliban rejected democracy and called it a "Western" product, and considered the former Afghan government's strategic alliance with the United States and NATO against Islamic principles and as a type of betrayal of Islam. They also rejected concepts such as human rights, freedom of expression, women's political and social participation, art, and music. From the Taliban's viewpoint, a significant part of Afghan society embracing democratic values were apostates. This strict stance brought them closer to ISIS, al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, and Boko Haram and made them essentially a 'Takfiri' group.

Calling their opponents apostates was a way of prescribing and justifying the war on the government and killing those who opposed the Taliban. The Taliban used that ideology to justify the killing of tens of thousands of Afghan government forces, employees and employees of foreign institutions, and thousands of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Their Salafi orientation attracted support from various international 'Takfiri' groups from Kashmir to Central Asia, fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan.

From insurgency to government: key challenges

Now that the Taliban is back in power in Afghanistan, a key question concerns whether the group's ideological orientation will allow them to act as a modern government. How is the Taliban ideology affecting their governance practices, and what are some of the fundamental challenges they face as they are transitioning, if at all, from a militant jihadi group to becoming a government? The following are some of the primary challenges that the group is facing where their ideological commitments can put limitations on their performance:

1. Alliance with non-Muslim countries

The first challenge the Taliban faces is justifying their relations with other countries, especially non-Muslim countries, for which they condemned the former Afghan government. Afghanistan is a country that economically depends on the help of other countries and remains highly vulnerable in terms of security. It needs to build strong relations with other countries to overcome its problems. However, establishing ties with world powers which are primarily non-Muslim countries, is problematic for the Taliban, at least in two ways:

a. There are factions within the Taliban who strictly believe in their ideological principles and oppose relationships with non-Muslim countries, particularly with Western states. The Taliban leadership fears that the hardcore members of the group could consider joining other extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) if the Taliban establish ties with the Western countries. In the eyes of the

more extremist members of the group, the normalization of relations with Western states could portray the Taliban as an opportunistic group that does not believe in their claims and uses religious slogans only to mobilize forces.

b. Balancing relationships with various powers such as China, Russia, the United States, and Europe poses a challenge for the Taliban. While this is not unique to the Taliban, because the former government faced a similar challenge, for the Taliban, it is a matter of finding a religious justification for working with big powers. For example, the Taliban maintain close relations with China and Russia, both regarded as Western adversaries. However, both are non-Muslim states. Taliban's relations with China have been particularly criticized by other Jihadi groups such as the IS-K, given China's mistreatment of Muslims in that country. Besides geopolitical challenges, Taliban's relationship with the outside players poses an ideological challenge. Which external power is a more justifiable international partner for the group is an ideological question that the group is grappling with. Disagreements on this might lead to ideological rifts within the group as it tries to figure out its ideas on international relations.

2. Compliance with international conventions

The Taliban did not recognize international conventions in the first period of their rule in the 1990s, which led to severe political isolation. This time around, they face the same challenge. If the Taliban does not adhere to international conventions, it will be difficult for the international community to lift the sanctions on the group. This will undermine the group's ability to govern Afghanistan because, without lifting these sanctions, the group cannot provide even basic public services.

The Taliban has made it clear that they will not recognize international treaties and conventions that Afghanistan became a party to under the former republic. This problem is rooted in deep conflicts between some elements of the international conventions and the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam by the Taliban. Values such as gender equality, freedom of belief, LGBTQ rights, non-Muslim citizens' rights, etc., are not compatible with the Taliban's ideology. In addition, the Taliban does not recognize the principles of human rights and freedoms and are not willing to compromise on their beliefs fearing a backlash from their followers. If the

Taliban adheres to international conventions and follows through with implementation, it will have to recognize values such as women's rights, civil and political rights, freedom of thought and expression that make up the principles of democratic governance. This would fly in the face of the Taliban's ideology and count as an endorsement of the very democratic system the group has been fighting for the last two decades.

The recognition of the international conventions by the Taliban will widen the ideological divisions in the group, which will threaten its organizational cohesion. They also fear that recognition of the international conventions would open up the public space for democratic participation and the activation of other political groups to compete with the Taliban. The Taliban lack any experience or skills in managing democratic debates and activism in the public sphere and the group's recognition of the international conventions will undermine their totalitarian control.

3. Cross-border links with extremist groups

The Taliban maintains strong links with extremist groups in the region, particularly in Pakistan. We cannot analyze the Taliban independently of the politics of religious radicalization that have been pursued by the Pakistani army and intelligence since the time of General Zia-ul-Haq. Zia-ul-Haq came to power in 1978 and developed a strategy based on creating and sponsoring fundamentalist Islamic groups against India and Afghanistan. He encouraged Arab countries to support Islamic schools in Pakistan and planted the seed of violent extremism from which the Taliban would emerge in the 1990s. The Taliban is an integral part of those cross-border networks of extremist groups created and sponsored by the Pakistani military establishment. It maintains an organic relationship with other extremist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan, and Al-Qaeda more internationally.

However, now that the Taliban is in charge of the government in Afghanistan, they face the challenge of redefining its relationship with extremist groups in the region. Should it cut ties with these groups to live up to its promises to the United States in the Doha Agreement, and if so, what will be the impact? If the Taliban cut ties with these groups, would they turn against the Taliban and undermine the group's government in Afghanistan? These are some questions that the Taliban is facing.

The relationship between the Taliban and other extremist groups is strategic as it is ideological. Besides receiving material support from those groups, the Taliban can use this relationship as a bargaining chip in their relations with the region. If the group maintains its relationship with some of these extremist groups, it will extend its influence beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The group then can use this card in some regional geopolitical games. However, at this moment, it remains to be a risky choice for the Taliban because doing so will keep them in alliance with terrorist groups, which is unacceptable for great powers. The activities of these groups will seriously harm their interests.

A key strategic concern for the Taliban is if the group will cut ties with extremist groups, particularly those based in Pakistan. This will affect their relationship with the Pakistan army, the Taliban's biggest supporter. Abandoning its ideological allies will hurt the Taliban's legitimacy and credibility among extremist groups outside Afghanistan and some of its troops. It is possible that violent Deobandi groups would use this to justify and mobilize an insurgency against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

4. National interests and the interests of the Ummah

The concept of 'Ummah' means community, and Islamic Ummah includes all Muslims worldwide, but there are different views about belonging to the Ummah and its duties. While many Muslims believe it is a moral concept that connects all human beings together without specific legal obligations, the fundamentalist Muslims, such as the Taliban, AQ, and ISIL, believe that the concept is more specific and exceptional, entailing moral responsibilities equal to any other religious obligations in Islam. They consider any negligence on the duties toward the Ummah as a sinful act. Given the centrality of the concept of Ummah for extremist groups such as the Taliban, balancing between national interests and the interests of the Ummah - the global Muslim community - constitutes a major governance challenge for the Taliban.

As a government, the Taliban will need to act based on the national interest of Afghanistan. Still, as a Muslim fundamentalist group, they will have to prioritize the interest of the Ummah, which sometimes can be in conflict. A prominent example here is the signing of the Camp David peace agreement, which extremist Muslim groups perceived as a betrayal of Islam and Islamic instructions. The signing of the Camp David peace agreement cost the Egyptian President Anwar al Sadat's life at the hands of the extremist groups. Like any other Islamic ideological group, the Taliban

have also committed to protect and act based on the interests of the Muslim Ummah. During their years of militancy, they used the endangerment of the interests of the Islamic Ummah as a pretext for their militancy and 'Jihad' against the Afghan government.

Now that the group sits at the helm, they face the challenge of choosing between the national interest and the interest of the Ummah, and it is not a straightforward decision for the group. While the people of Afghanistan expect them to base their policies on Afghanistan's national interests and strive for the happiness and prosperity of their people, their ideological commitments emphasize the interests of the Ummah. If they consider the national interests of Afghanistan, it will require them to cut ties with all fundamentalist and extremist groups in the region and the world. This would mean that the group will need to stop caring, for example, about the situation of the Uyghur Muslims in China, the Muslims in Palestine, or Mali, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Libya, and other places around the world.

Doing so will lead to a loss of trust in the Taliban among other Islamic fundamentalist groups and organizations whose ideological and material support has been instrumental in the Taliban's success. Losing their trust will sharpen the propaganda tactics of Taliban's rivals, including the IS-K and may splinter the Taliban forces.

However, if the Taliban continues to adhere to ideological slogans and stay committed to the interest of the Ummah, it will keep the Taliban as an integral part of the transnational Jihadi networks. This will continue to present the Taliban as a threat and source of concern for many countries near and far. The Taliban might state that they will prioritize Afghanistan's national interest, arguing that they will not interfere in the affairs of other countries. However, their ideological commitment is different. In theory, the group follows a rule, called "Khoda'a" (the trick), which is narrated by the prophet Mohammad, stating that "the war is the trick" (Sahih al Bukhari). All extremist Islamic groups believe in it. The Khoda'a principle allows the group to breach their promises as a tactical choice. The Taliban have used this frequently and consistently, including in their negotiations and dealings with the international community.

5. Educational system

The Taliban's views on education remain a cause for concern. The group is essentially alien to and pessimistic about modern education. This pessimism is rooted in their Deobandi thinking. According to Deobandi thoughts, the genuine and valuable sciences are classical religious knowledge, whose curriculum was designed by Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703-1762). Born in Delhi in 1703, Dehlawi was a prominent Islamic scholar and the Godfather of orthodox Sunni Muslims, especially to the Deobandi groups in India. The Deobandi Schools implemented his curriculum throughout the Indian subcontinent for two centuries. Modern knowledge is inherently of little value to Deobandism because it is not religious knowledge. Deobandis regard modern knowledge as suspicious in part because of its non-Muslim origins. They consider modern science, such as physics and biology, weakening students' religious beliefs by offering different views on the origins of life that contradict religious views.

During the first period of their rule in the late 1990s, the Taliban first closed almost all modern schools, particularly girls' schools, and promoted Deobandi-style religious schools. However, with the popular support for modern education, the group needed to adapt their policy slightly by considering the local dynamics. As a result, the Taliban closed regular schools altogether in provinces and areas where the people were more traditional and less sensitive to closing down schools. They increased the number of religious schools instead. However, in a few large cities where the level of public literacy was higher and the closure of schools led to public discontent, they kept the modern schools, except for girls' schools, open but multiplied religious education hours and reduced the number of modern subjects.

This time around, the Taliban's policy on education shows no significant progress. While they have allowed the schools and private universities to operate in the country, they banned girls from attending schools in most parts of the country. There has been a gradual return to school for girls in some provinces, but the Taliban's policy has kept changing. For example, girls' schools in Herat province were closed down after they briefly opened due to local advocacy. This shows that the Taliban's policy on education remains largely confused. The existing confusion indicates that the Taliban is battling an ideological conflict within themselves, whether to allow modern education or ban it altogether.

The reality that the Taliban faces is that as persecution of schools and university teachers increases, the brain drain will also intensify, leading to a crisis in skilled

human resources in Afghanistan. This will affect the group too, because the Taliban themselves offer no technical know-how to run a country and improve the livelihood of Afghans. Their religious education is irrelevant to modern governance and development.

Given the public opinion, the choice to ban modern education is practically impossible for the group this time around. As a result, the Taliban may seek to redesign the educational programs by increasing learning hours for religious subjects and strictly controlling modern science subjects. It is also possible that the group may consider adopting the Iranian experience after the Islamic revolution, where the regime closed down educational institutions for a year during which they revamped the entire system to reflect the regime's ideology. The Taliban is learning from the experience and views of other fundamentalist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb-ut-Tahrir who promote the idea of the Cultural Revolution in educational institutions, aiming at 'Islamization of Knowledge' (Taha J. al Alwani, 1995).

Conclusion

Contrary to the propaganda spread by the Taliban supporters abroad, the Taliban is not an indigenous movement that has an already established, practiced, and coherent ideology. Although it has recruited most of its troops from among the rural communities in certain parts of Afghanistan, as a group, it remains a product of Pakistani-sponsored extremist networks that were primarily designed for militant purposes. Therefore, the group does not offer a coherent theological and theoretical argument, and its understanding of Islam reflects a mixture of tribal values and narrow interpretation of Islam based on the Pakistani version of the Deobandi school of thought.

As a fundamentalist group, the Taliban face many challenges in running Afghanistan as a modern state. Their key challenge is how to reconcile between their extremist ideology that is based primarily on hostility towards modernity, and the need to live in and govern a society with modern needs. This will shape the future course of any development under the Taliban, and there is little certainty about the group's choices. Inherent in their Deobandi ideology, the Taliban's views and policies on some key priorities concerning the future development of Afghanistan remain essentially

conflicting, offering little opportunity for positive development in the months or years to come.

The group has a limited understanding of what is needed to govern a diverse society like Afghanistan with massive development needs. Their ideology is not representative of Afghanistan's religious history and traditions, and is not responsive to the needs of the people of Afghanistan. When a movement or organization is designed to serve people, its philosophy reflects the needs of those people, too. In contrast, the Taliban have, from the beginning, paid little interest in seeking public legitimacy and have used force to impose their ideas upon the people of Afghanistan. They have consistently rejected the interests and inclusion of other ethnic groups in their government, and chosen to govern Afghanistan by force.

As the group is trying to shift from an insurgency to a government, its ability to adapt and respond to the expectation of the Afghan population and international community is circumscribed by its ideological commitments. But if it wants to rule Afghanistan, they need to be accepted by the people of Afghanistan. Achieving such acceptance is not possible unless the Taliban moves away from its extremist ideology and reconciles with modern needs. This will require a revision in the fundamental ideological beliefs of the group and will have to recognize the diversity of people in Afghanistan, including the diverse interpretation of Islam.