Revisiting the Clash of Civilizations Thesis After 9/11

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This is an excerpt from Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan: A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach. An E-IR Open Access Book by Deepshikha Shahi.

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The spectre of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West has frequently loomed after 9/11 and the subsequent US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies asked: "is it surprising that many in the West see today's war on terrorism as the prelude to a renewed clash of civilizations? The question is in every newspaper and magazine. It did not need the right-wing American political scientist Huntington to pose the question – the idea has never actually gone away."[1] William Kristol and Robert Kagan declared that post-9/11 Afghanistan was going to resemble the clash of civilizations everyone had hoped to avoid.[2] This view gained strength when the perpetrators themselves presented the 9/11 attacks as 'jihad', or Islamic holy war, against Christians and Jews,[3] and the then US President George W. Bush reiterated the same spirit by using the word 'crusade' with its connotations of a Christian holy war against Muslims.[4] The war in Afghanistan still continues. After the completion of Operation Neptune Spear in 2011, which caused the demise of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, US President Barack Obama announced that his country would never be at war with Islam.[5] Despite this, outraged Islamic organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat-ud-Dawah declared Osama bin Laden as a 'Martyr of Islam' and called upon Muslims to rise up against the US.

The portrayal of post-9/11 Afghanistan as a venue for a clash of civilizations should not be based on casual political rhetoric, but on serious historical analysis. This chapter aims to reveal the specific historical factors that refute the applicability of Huntington's thesis to 9/11 and the subsequent US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. However, the theoretical inapplicability of Huntington's thesis does not automatically imply the absence of Huntington's popularity in Afghanistan. How do Huntington's ideas win psychological receptivity amongst the Afghans and what implications does it have on their political lives? The chapter goes further to examine the general history of 'political reception' in Afghan politics, thereby facilitating an assessment of the impact of Huntington's ideas on the politics of post-9/11 Afghanistan. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a historical background to 9/11. The second section highlights the anti-Huntingtonian nature of 9/11 and its aftermath. The third section uncovers the psychological mechanism that grant political receptivity to Huntington's ideas in Afghanistan, thereby exposing its harmful impact on post-9/11 Afghan politics.

Historical Background of 9/11

Commenting on the violent history of Afghanistan, Martin Ewans wrote:

If there has been an overriding feature of their history, it is that it has been a history of conflict – of invasion, battles and sieges, of vendettas, assassinations and massacres, of tribal feuding, dynastic strife and civil war. Rarely have the Afghans allowed themselves, or have allowed others with whom they have come into contact, to lead out their lives in peace.[6]

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While ethnic conflicts have largely shaped their domestic disputes, the interference of foreign powers has often elevated the status of domestic ethnic conflicts to actual, or potential, international wars. The 9/11 attacks that triggered the global war on terrorism can be understood in the light of this historical trend.

The snow-covered mountains, barren deserts and rolling steppes of Afghanistan accommodates approximately 30 million people who are divided into more than twenty ethnic groups. Of these ethnic groups, the prominent ones are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Nuristanis. These groups tell distinct stories about their historical origins, reside in distinct regions, speak distinct languages and practice distinct professions. The unequal power relations between these groups has historically acted as a source of conflict. In fact, none of the ethnic groups share the dominant position – and disposition – of their Pashtun compatriots. Pashtuns, who account for approximately 42 percent of the country's population, have their own code of conduct called 'Pashtunwali' which includes obligations not only of hospitality and honour, but also of revenge. Disputes over the questions of honour and revenge have been endemic features of Pashtun life. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Nuristanis have only barely or begrudgingly accepted control from a central administration in Kabul, dominated by the Pashtuns, and this link has been exposed throughout Afghanistan's history with various internal conflicts, uprisings, and inter-ethnic clashes.[7]

In addition to ethnic cleavages, there is a religious divide between the Shia Hazara population and the predominant Sunni population of the rest of Afghanistan. If Hazaras constitute a minority group on religious grounds, the more alienated are the Nuristanis who were known as 'kafirs', or infidels, before being converted to Islam. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Nuristanis typically consider Pashtuns as oppressors.[8] However, they are not united in their struggle against Pashtuns and share mutually conflictive relations. Even within ethnic and religious boundaries, the regional divides are crucial in germinating conflicts. The enmities and bitter struggles amongst the people of Afghanistan spring from tribal, sub-tribal, and regional differences which escape definition in terms of modern political theories.[9]

Despite the bonds of Islam, which was introduced in Afghanistan as early as 652 A.D., the sense of national unity has always been weak and the state has never been strong enough to exercise effective control over the country which is fragmented along ethnic lines. While Islamic tribunals have proved useful in resolving inter-ethnic disputes pertaining to petty theft and other divisions of booty, they have not been instrumental in bringing an end to the struggle for dominance amongst the gangs, or the tribal wrangles which constitute a tradition that antedates Islam.[10]

Commenting on the ineffectiveness of Islam in producing national unity, Gilbret Achcar wrote:

Islam has not been perceived in the twentieth century as the ideological cement of an outmoded feudal or semi-feudal class structure in Muslim societies. It has been seen instead as a basic element of national identity jeered at by the foreign Christian (or even atheist) oppressor.[11]

The Islamic element in Afghan national identity has been pointed out not just by foreign oppressors, but also by the oppressed Afghans themselves. Fred Halliday opined:

The very condition of being oppressed…is likely to produce its own distorted forms of perception…Nationalism has illustrated this often enough…Myths of nationalism is a part of struggle, employed by both those who wish to remain in power and those who aspire to attain power.[12]

The Islamic underpinning of Afghan nationalism has been historically evoked less for fostering unity amongst the various ethnic groups, than for mobilising them against foreign intruders. One can witness a comparative togetherness amongst the Afghans when the country is threatened by a foreign enemy. The determination to remain free from foreign domination is a part of Afghan tradition.[13] But, at the same time, foreign attempts to acquire influence in world politics by manipulating the internal affairs of the country are a part of Afghan history. The 'Great Game'[14] between the Soviet Union and the US during Cold War can be viewed as a classic example of this trend. The Soviet-backed Saur Revolt in Afghanistan in 1978 established a new pattern that was to dominate Afghan politics for next decade and a half – a pattern of dependence on the Soviet Union.[15] The Soviet-influenced Afghan Communist Party, known as People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), seized power and Babrak Karmal was established as the head. The newly established Karmal regime became an irritant for both the Afghans and the

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Americans. The Afghans who were intolerant of foreign interference viewed Karmal as a Soviet puppet and stooge. They began to organise themselves against Karmal and initiated what became popularly known as the 'Mujahideen movement'. The Mujahideen, overwhelmingly composed of Afghans with diverse ethnic backgrounds, were split between Shia and Sunni groups, Islamic radicals, and moderates. The only unifying factor was their opposition to the regime of Karmal and the Soviet presence.[16]

To tackle the Mujahideen threat, the Soviets replaced Karmal with Najibullah, a Pashtun, in 1986.[17] But before the situation could be pacified, American aid began to reach the Mujahideen as the struggle became embroiled in Cold War politics. In order to counter the Soviet influence in Afghanistan, the US supplied stinger missiles to Mujahideen forces and trained them so that they could defeat Soviet airpower and helicopter gunships.[18] The Soviets began to realise that they were involved in a war that they could not win. In 1987, the Soviet-backed Najibullah government tried to negotiate a ceasefire but the US-backed Mujahideen refused to negotiate. The Soviet troops departed from Afghanistan on 15 February 1989 – leaving the Najibullah government to its own devices. Najibullah was forced to resign in 1992, and an 'Islamic' state of Afghanistan was established by the Mujahideen coalition government comprised of seven Sunni groups based in Pakistan. It included supporters of Karmal, Tajiks under Rabbani backed by Massoud, Uzbeks under Dostum and the Islamic faction of Nadari. It excluded Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a Pashtun, who was an agent of Pakistan and who had unsuccessfully bombarded Rabbani's regime during the 1992-95 period.[19]

However, the unity amongst Afghans under the aegis of the Mujahideen proved to be short lived. The Mujahideen, which emerged as a response to the conflict between foreign forces, began to crumble with the withdrawal of those foreign forces from Afghanistan. By the mid-1990s, when the Cold War had come to an end and consequently the US support for the Mujahideen was declining, the legitimacy of the Mujahideen coalition government became eroded by internal fragmentation along ethno-linguistic, tribal, sectarian and personality lines.[20] The net result was a civil war and Afghanistan was once again transformed into a state of chaos and anarchy. Meanwhile Russia and the US appeared content to see the internecine ethnic rivalry continue, as they feared that a stable Islamic Afghanistan could damage their interests in the Central and South Asian regions.

Amid the chaos generated by the civil war, Afghanistan saw the rise of the Taliban movement. It emerged in 1994 in the Kandahar province. In the Taliban movement, Pashtuns of Kandahar were joined by a few Mujahideen leaders like Mullah Mohammad Omar, commanders from other Pashtun parties, Khalq PDPA members and students from madrasas that had sprung up along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border following the 1978 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. These madrasas were run by Sunni Muslims of the Deobandi sect. The Deobandi madrasas proved popular since they combined the traditional tenets of Islam with the strict Pashtunwali code which was practiced by most Pashtuns in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.[21] The Pashtun-dominated Taliban attempted to restore peace by disarming civilians and implementing Sharia law – thereby demonstrating a strong tendency towards theocracy. They recruited foreign fighters from Arab countries, Chechnya and Pakistan – many of whom were also part of al-Qaida,[22] the organisation that was to be held responsible for the 9/11 attacks. They were influenced by the Pakistani movement called 'Jamait-i-Ulama-i-Islam' which followed the rules of the Hanaafi Sunni branch and disseminated anti-Shiite feelings. They were also inspired by Wahhabism, which emanated from Saudi Arabia.

The Taliban reflected a transnational outlook not only in terms of its membership composition and ideational inspiration, but also in terms of political ambition. Although the Taliban's immediate concern in 1996 was the consolidation of power in Afghanistan, the regime, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, also began to extensively support militant Islamic groups around the world.[23] Besides providing a base for al-Qaida and its leader Osama bin Laden, the Taliban offered both overt and tacit support to a variety of terrorist organisations involved in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines. The goal was to bring back honour, not only to Afghans, but also to the larger Pan-Islamic society which was considered to have been humiliated by Western nations led by the US.[24] Since the West was held responsible for many of the ills that had befallen Muslim society and for the failure of Muslim culture to live by the rules set out in the Quran, the revenge on the West and the indoctrination of Sharia in all cultures were viewed as a means to rectify all wrongs. Osama bin Laden issued several 'fatwas', or Islamic rulings, calling for all Muslims to kill Americans and their allies, civilian and military, as an individual duty. The International Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, which Osama bin Laden had

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set up in Afghanistan in 1998, began to serve as a 'clearing house' and coordinating body for many terrorist groups worldwide.[25]

By 1997, the Taliban controlled about 90 percent of the country with the anti-Taliban force of Ahmad Shah Massoud holding only a small area in the Panjsheer valley.[26] Later on, Massoud was assassinated by Arabs who were thought to be associated with al-Qaida. This event compelled Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan – the only three out of the total 53 Muslim states that recognised the Taliban – to withdraw their recognition of the Taliban regime which was already under severe international condemnation on grounds of human rights abuses, destruction of pre-Islamic heritage[27] and involvement in the international drug trade. Despite the diminishing support from the international community, the Taliban and al-Qaida continued to claim open responsibility for terrorist acts in the 1990s and 2000s, 9/11 being one of them. 9/11 ironically demonstrated how the world's only superpower was not immune from the dangers and fragility of the current international system. As a reaction against 9/11, the US declared a global war on terrorism with the objective of overthrowing the Taliban, destroying al-Qaida, capturing Osama bin Laden and establishing an anti-Taliban regime in Afghanistan led by the Northern Alliance. Some in the US foreign-policy-shaping circles viewed 9/11 as an attractive opportunity for declaring war. This opportunity was quickly seized by the US as the US-led war on terrorism was most likely to acquire global legitimacy in the wake of 9/11. After a decade of military engagement in Afghanistan, the rule of the Taliban had been replaced with a 'democratic' regime. However, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan continues.

The 9/11 attacks seemed to capture the civilizational anguish embedded in the ideological orientation and political mission of the Taliban and al-Qaida. Even the reactionary US-led global war on terrorism appeared to reinforce the theme of civilizational antagonism. However, a historical analysis of the series of events that culminated in 9/11 and shaped its aftermath suggest that any intellectual attempt to allegorise them as a clash of civilizations is misleading.

9/11 and its Aftermath: Refuting Huntington

Prior to 9/11, Afghanistan was trapped in a civil war which was essentially an 'intra-civilizational' rather than 'inter-civilizational' conflict. The rival ethnic groups of Afghanistan – chiefly Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara – were trying to powerfully assert themselves over the others. Though Huntington's thesis admitted the possibility of 'intra-civilizational' conflict, it clearly ruled out the probability of its global escalation. Huntington wrote: 'Local politics is the politics of ethnicity…global politics is the politics of civilizations'.[28]

He claimed that only the violence between states and groups from different 'civilizations' carried with it the potential of global escalation, as other states and groups belonging to these 'civilizations' rally in support of their kin countries. However, his assertion proved mistaken in the context of Afghanistan as it was the domestically unchecked ambitions of ethnic Pashtuns – the majority of whom were initially organised under the Mujahideen, and later on under the Taliban and al-Qaida – coupled with the historic support that they gained not only from the Muslim world (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan) but also from the Christian world (US and UK) that enabled them to technically develop their capabilities to such an extent that they successfully committed 9/11.

In this context, Lansford and Covarrubias argued:

The United States, in its efforts to contain Soviet expansion, developed a policy habit in which Washington tended to abandon the client when the Soviet threat was no longer pertinent. Afghanistan was no exception to this…Once great power interest in the country ended, the different factions within the Mujahideen were left out without the leadership necessary for the transition to a broad-based national government. This allowed the Taliban [and al-Qaida] to gain ascendency.[29]

In fact, one of the factors behind the manifestation of 9/11 was the half-done strategic manipulation of an 'intra-civilizational' conflict that backfired and in turn provoked an escalated global war on terrorism, thereby questioning the theoretical propositions of Huntington.

The US and UK held al-Qaida responsible for 9/11 on the basis of the video tape released by Osama bin Laden,

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whereby he welcomed the attacks. His gesture was believable as he had previously called for aggressive action against the Americans through his declarations. Though the declarations made by Osama bin Laden possessed religious overtones, they indicated that his basic grievance was not religious/cultural/civilizational, but 'political'. His sense of historic injustice towards Muslim society did not emanate from the unfair religious maxims of Christianity or Judaism in general, but from the unjust foreign policies of the US and its allies. His 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places' (1996) and 'Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders' (1998) opened with the phrase 'Praise be to Allah/God', thereby emitting strong religious hints.

However, his religious provocation was motivated by the political purpose of mobilising the masses in Muslim society against the political wrongs committed by the Americans – their illegal occupation of Islamic holy lands, their unbalanced pro-Israel stance in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and their dubious policy of supporting authoritarian regimes in Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia – while claiming to promote democratic regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.[30] He wrote:

No one argues today about three facts that are known to everyone…First, for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam…plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbours…Second, despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people,…the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres…Third, if the Americans' aims behind these wars are religious and economic, the aim is also to serve the Jews' petty state… The crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger and Muslims.[31]

A careful reading of Osama bin Laden's statements reflects his confused stance on the 'religious' motivations behind American political moves. At one point, he sceptically wondered: '*If* the Americans' aims behind these wars are religious…,' whereas at another point he asserted: 'The crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a *clear* declaration of war on God…' Though Osama bin Laden seemed confused about the religious motivations of the Americans, he was certain about the need to take violent action against their unjust political behaviour. Utilising religion as a tool to evoke revengeful sentiments among Muslims, he appealed: 'The ulema have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is the individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries.'[32]

Like Osama bin Laden, the rhetoric of 'civilizations' repeatedly crept into the language of former US President George W. Bush. While addressing a joint session of Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001, Bush outlined his vision for the war on terrorism by declaring – 'this is civilization's fight'.[33] However, while speaking to the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2004, he stated: 'There is no clash of civilizations'.[34] Though he chose to attack Afghanistan as the first of a series of attacks which he vowed to undertake as he waged a global war on terrorism, his policy was not driven by any religious motive of annexing the Muslim country, but by the political goals of hunting Osama bin Laden, crushing al-Qaida and replacing the Taliban with a pro-US regime. These declared political goals were accompanied by the hidden geo-strategic ambition of securing a long-term entry in the internal affairs of Central and South Asia. The statement made by James L. Jones, the US President's national security adviser, confirms this line of thinking. While speaking on CNN's 'State of the Union', he indicated the possibility of a long stay of US troops in Afghanistan. He said: 'We have strategic interests in South Asia that should not be measured in terms of finite times…We are going to be in the region for a long time'.[35]

Both al-Qaida and the Bush administration pretended to speak on behalf of their respective 'civilizations', but none could be considered as a core representative in the absence of unanimous backing from the entire 'civilization' to which they belonged. After 9/11, al-Qaida was denounced by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. On the night of 9/11, Iranians gathered outside the US embassy to offer their sympathy. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammad made it difficult for Malaysian jihadists to travel to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban and al-Qaida. In Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf criticised the terrorists for giving Islam a bad name. The Organization of the Islamic Conference condemned Osama bin Laden's terrorism, but did not condemn the US response.[36] Appalled by the terrorists' methods and the loss of so many innocent lives, most religious leaders in Islamic societies condemned the attacks as un-Islamic. A section of Muslim society not only ridiculed the attacks but also went a step further to participate in the war against the perpetrators. The US-led campaign in Afghanistan acquired significant support not only from Christians but also from Muslims living both within and outside of the

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country. Besides the support of anti-Taliban forces residing in Afghanistan, the US-led war on terrorism was contributed to by the military forces of Turkey, Uzbekistan and Pakistan.

While the idea of a post-9/11 war on terrorism in Afghanistan was appreciated by a fraction of Muslim society, it was severely criticised by a large section of Christians in Western Europe and America. On 29 September 2001, as many as 20,000 people demonstrated in Washington DC denouncing the impending invasion of Afghanistan.[37] Demonstrations were also held in the Netherlands, Spain and Greece. Over 10,000 people filled Amsterdam's central square for an open-air meeting with 'Justice, Not Revenge' as a slogan of the protest.[38] In Scotland, around 1,500 people gathered in Glasgow for a rally against the military action. In Australia, thousands of people demonstrated in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide.[39] In Germany, more than 25,000 protesters took to the streets in cities across the country. In Berlin, the largest demonstration drew 15,000 people to the central square in a rally that followed several marches throughout the city under the banner 'No War – Stand Up for Peace'.[40] On 18 November 2001, a large crowd – police estimated 15,000, organisers estimated 100,000 – took part in a march in London to demonstrate against the war in Afghanistan. Many protesters waved placards reading 'Stop the War' and 'Not in My Name'. Paul Marsden told the rally:

You are sending a powerful message to Number 10 and to the White House that we are not simply going to allow the atrocities of September 11 to be replaced with further atrocities in Afghanistan.[41]

Later, some 30 million people in Western countries participated in the global anti-war rallies of 15 February 2003.[42] On 20 March 2009, thousands of Americans, some bearing mock coffins to protest war casualties, took to the streets on the sixth anniversary of the 2003 Iraq invasion to protest the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[43] The protests in response to the label 'axis of evil' that the US had assigned to a few Muslim states symbolised worldwide concern for the narrative of al-Qaida and demonstrated anti-American sentiment not only in the Muslim world, but also in the West.[44] The overall nature of political response to 9/11 refutes Huntington's principle of 'rallying behind' the countries of 'their kin'.

After ten years of incessant military campaigning in Afghanistan, the US-led Coalition Force still relied heavily on the cooperation of Afghan warlords to fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida, whereas the government of Afghanistan remains somewhat dependent upon the US-led Coalition Force for security, military and financial needs. The real threat to the government is posed not by Christians, but by the orthodox Muslim hardliners residing within Afghanistan and the frontiers of Pakistan.[45] Islam, as practiced in Afghanistan, has always been divided across softliners / moderates and hardliners / radicals who are associated with different religious schools that provide their own distinct interpretation of Islam/Quran – Sunni Hanaafi, Shia Jaafari, Mild Sufi Qadiriya, Orthodox Sufi Naqshbandi and the like.[46] The fragmented picture of Islam in Afghanistan rules out the possibility of any integrated Islamic clash with the West. While Afghan warlords affiliated with diverse religious schools fight with each other, they continue to cooperate with the US-led Coalition Force in order to win back American support for retaining control over their respective geographical territories, and for going ahead with their opium cultivation. Thus, the Muslim warlords and the Christian Coalition Force share cooperative relations despite civilizational differences.

Huntington's thesis stands discredited in the light of contradictory historical evidence drawn from 9/11 and its aftermath. Nevertheless, the intellectual explosion caused by his idea continues to capture attention in both the US and Afghanistan. Should Huntington be personally blamed for fuelling the fire of the post-9/11 Afghan war? However, the interpreters can do the damage only when their political interpretations are psychologically received by the masses. How are Huntington's ideas interpreted and received by the Afghans? And how does it affect their collective political lives? These questions can be appropriately responded to by examining the general history of 'political reception' in Afghan politics.

The Afghan History of 'Political Reception': Receiving Huntington

A wide range of opinions cropped up with regard to the popular receptivity of Huntington's thesis. An article published in *The New Criterion* (2009) stated:

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Huntington's thesis is not popular among those who believe that the best way of dealing with a clash of civilizations is to pretend that the clash does not exist. But its pertinence to the West has been glaringly evident since the morning of September 11, 2001.[47]

Acknowledging the significance of Huntington's thesis not only for the West but also for the Muslim world, Said Amir Arjomand observed: 'Huntington's thesis has been quite popular among the Islamic fundamentalists'.[48] K.P. Fabian asked, 'How does one account for the popularity of Huntington's book among the non-specialists and the unprecedented attention it has received from the specialists?'[49] Though the question raised by Fabian has been answered in many ways, Asta Olesen has provided a theoretical and, therefore, generalised understanding of the process of 'political reception'. While discussing the determinants of the reception of a political discourse, Olesen wrote: 'What determines the reception of a political discourse cannot be determined purely based on the content of the discourse in question. Circumstantial factors have a great bearing upon the receptivity and interpretation of the discourse'.[50] Olesen pointed out two determinants – first, the 'content' of the discourse as a product of intellectual 'agency'; second, the 'circumstantial factors' attending the discourse as a factor of intellectual 'structure'. The combination of agency and structure, as stressed by the humanistic-existential model of psychology in the previous chapter, can explain the general history of political reception and the history of Huntington's reception in Afghan politics. But how should the intellectual agency and structure be exercised and evoked by a political discourse to acquire receptivity amongst the Afghans?

Afghan history suggests that any political discourse is psychologically well received by the majority of Afghans if it possesses two features. First, the intellectual agency shapes the content of the discourse in such a way as to make a strong reference to 'Islam'. Second, the intellectual structure, traditionally dominated by the ethnic Pashtuns, finds the discourse politically beneficial for itself. The awakening of Islamic content to derive political benefits for Pashtuns enables any political discourse to capture the 'social imaginary' or what Arkoun calls the 'social imagery' of Afghans. Arkoun opines that any political discourse can reach the majority of the people only if integrates and articulates the most common and shared ideological elements from the popular traditions or the social imagery, representing a historical continuity outliving any political discourse.[51] Since the prevalence of Islam and the dominance of ethnic Pashtuns mark the historical continuity in Afghan politics, they remain crucial in determining Afghan social imaginary. The historic receptivity or non-receptivity of the political discourses generated by PDPA, Mujahideen and the Taliban/al-Qaida can be explained in terms of their success or failure to capture this Afghan social imaginary.

The content of PDPA discourse was essentially Marxist in character. It placed the 'class struggle' on top of its agenda, thereby initially neglecting any reference to Islam. When the PDPA found it difficult to mobilise the Afghans through an appeal to 'class consciousness', it finally began making appeals to their ethnic, tribal, and regional identities. Olesen interrogated: 'Was the appeal to Islam and tribal code by the PDPA regime in Afghanistan mere rhetoric and 'window dressing' or did it represent a real attempt at integrating Islamic and tribal elements in the regime's ideological discourse?'[52] Whatever might be the case, Oleson concluded that the PDPA discourse did not manage to command much support on its own because the personal credibility of PDPA leadership, at least as 'good Muslims', was too tainted before they could alter the picture by incorporating the Islamic content in their discourse.[53] The PDPA discourse did not only lack Islamic content, but it also held no promise for political benefit to the structurally dominant group of Pashtuns. The head of the PDPA regime, Babrak Karmal, was a non-Pashtun. Therefore, he was disliked by the Pashtun majority. The Soviets tried to correct this mistake by replacing Karmal with Najibullah, a Pashtun. However, before Najibullah could win widespread support, the PDPA was over-exposed as an organization of infidels. The PDPA regime, which managed to survive for 14 years on the basis of Soviet aid, finally collapsed in 1992 after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

The PDPA regime was followed by Mujahideen rule. In fact, the Mujahideen managed to enter into the political mainstream by exposing the atheism of PDPA and its attachment to the atheistic Soviet Union.[54] In contrast to the attempted imposition of 'Godless' Soviet-style Marxism by the PDPA regime, the Mujahideen claimed to establish an Islamic State of Afghanistan, thereby developing a religiously charged, and therefore, comparatively superior political discourse. The Mujahideen discourse was rich not only in terms of Islamic content but also in terms of its political attractiveness for ethnic Pashtuns. The Mujahideen, whose leaders were highly respected for their religious credentials,[55] were a coalition of seven Sunni groups mostly comprised of Pashtuns, along with some Tajiks,

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Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Nuristanis. Six of the seven Mujahideen organisations were dominated by Pashtuns.[56]

However, the Mujahideen failed to deliver the promise of clear political benefit to Pashtuns over and above its non-Pashtun members as the latter refused to accept the Pashtun dominance. Moreover, the Mujahideen coalition committed the blunder of excluding a major Pashtun organisation led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, thereby further breeding dissatisfaction and division amongst the Pashtun majority. The intra-Pashtun conflict prevented leaders of Pashtun-dominated organisations from taking a united political stand.[57] The moderate Islamism propagated by Mujahideen discourse proved incapable of binding the Pashtuns together, thereby lasting for a brief period of four years and paving the way for the extreme Islamism of the Taliban in 1996.

The Mujahideen's claimed Islamic rule was rapidly upstaged by the Taliban's extremist medievalism in the name of Islam.[58] Highlighting the Islamic appeal of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse as a major reason behind its immediate popularity, Olivier Roy asserted: 'The rise of the Taliban from 1994 onwards suggests that the appeal of Islam for building a new political order has not faded away.'[59] In line with Roy's assertion, Larry Goodson highlighted the 'religious piety' and 'shared Pashtun ethnicity' of the Taliban as the most telling factors behind its rise.[60] Likewise, Abdulkader H. Sinno opined that any explanation of the rise of the Taliban must explain how they mobilised the Pashtun.[61] The statements of Roy, Goodson and Sinno reveal that the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse not only successfully incorporated a radical Islamic appeal, but also proved politically promising to Pashtuns, thereby satisfying both the criteria for attaining political reception amongst the Afghans. However, what remains unclear in the observations of these scholars is the distinctiveness of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse that made its Islamic appeal more convincing for the ethnic Pashtuns, than the one presented by its predecessor, the Mujahideen. A comparative study of the 'content/agency' and 'circumstantial factors/structure' of the respective political discourses of the Mujahideen and the Taliban/al-Qaida can contribute some light in this regard.

A comparison of the contents of these discourses discloses the following points of departure. First, the Islamic appeal of the Mujahideen discourse was directed against one country – the Soviet Union, whereas the Islamic appeal of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was meant not only to destroy America, but also to attack all Western countries led by the US. Thus, the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was designed to activate Islam for fighting against a larger and more powerful opposition. Second, the Mujahideen discourse presented the Soviets as kafirs/infidels/atheists who had little respect for the believers of Islam, whereas the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse projected the Western countries not just as infidels or non-believers, but also as 'Zionist-Crusaders'[62] who were the traditional enemies of the believers of Islam. Therefore, the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was framed to deal with a more dangerous opposition that was not just disrespectful, but also historically driven by the spirit of animosity against Islam. Third, the Mujahideen discourse sought to mobilise the Afghans bearing diverse ethnic affiliations, whereas the Taliban discourse contained a heavy dose of 'Pashtunwali' and reflected an 'anti-Shiite' orientation, thereby targeting only the Pashtuns, not other ethnic groups, as its potential audience. The Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was more focused and intense in terms of its capacity to attract the structurally dominant group of Pashtuns. Fourth, the Mujahideen discourse tried to direct the Afghans to oust the Soviet-backed regime and establish an Islamic state of Afghanistan, whereas the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse aimed at raising all the believers of Islam, both within and without Afghanistan, to fight for removing Western interference from the internal political affairs of all Muslim states. Unlike the Mujahideen discourse, the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was more ambitious as it was formulated to conduct a transnational project.

The circumstantial factors attending the two discourses can be compared at two levels – domestic and global. At the domestic level, the situation attending the Mujahideen discourse was marked by the weak political credentials of the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, whereas the circumstance facing the arrival of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was defined by the eroded political legitimacy of mutually warring ethnicities of Mujahideen. In contrast to the Mujahideen discourse, the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse offered greater prospect for political benefit to ethnic Pashtuns as it promised the riddance of, and victory over, not just the foreign Soviet force, but also the domestic non-Pashtun forces comprising the warring factions of Mujahideen. The Taliban/al-Qaida discourse found a ready purchase amongst the Pashtuns, also, because it ignited the hope for resolving their age-old 'Pashtunistan issue', whereby they have been demanding an independent or semi-independent statehood for themselves. In their now active and now dormant struggle for Pashtunistan, the Pashtuns have refused to accept the Durand Line laid by the British in 1893 in the middle of the lands of Eastern Pashtuns. They have demanded the return of Pashtuns living in Pakistan

to Afghanistan's control, or at least the attainment of autonomy for the claimed region of Pashtunistan. Since the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was formulated and pursued by the Pashtuns residing on both sides of the Durand Line, it successfully aroused the expectation for transforming the Pashtunistan conflict. The Durand Line has not only affected the history of Pashtuns but has also changed their social and economic conditions. So long as the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse manages to maintain the hope for concretising the dream of Pashtunistan alive, it is likely to retain its appeal amongst Afghans.

At the global level, the Mujahideen discourse emerged when the Soviet Union and its Marxist model of governance was collapsing, whereas the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse originated when the US and its capitalist model of development was being declared as triumphant.[63] While the fragile Soviet opponent of the Mujahideen discourse was already disintegrating, the robust Western enemy of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse was claiming its everlasting superiority. The comparatively weaker Soviet opponent of the Mujahideen discourse was not stimulating enough to bind the Afghans for long, whereas the hegemonic tendencies of the US has continued to remain sufficiently challenging to provoke an ongoing protest by the Taliban and al-Qaida.

Besides the provocations unleashed from the hegemonic tendencies of the US, the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism under the leadership of the Taliban and al-Qaida can be attributed to the general decline of secular modernity. Fred Halliday wrote:

The Islamist movements, although themselves determinedly committed to taking and using state power, are above all revolts against the policies – authoritarian, secular and intrusive – of the modernizing state…The inability of these (secular) states to meet either the economic expectations or the cultural aspirations of their people has provided the context in which Islamist movements have developed.[64]

Against the backdrop of the poor performance of secular states, the alternative model of an 'Islamic state' offered by the Islamist movements easily gained widespread attention. As opposed to secular states, the Islamic states consider the demand for a separation of religion and politics as 'anti-religious'. They seek to express the class war in the name of 'religion', a tendency which the Left has failed to grasp.[65] Until, and unless, the internal problems of these countries are reduced, different variants of Islamism are likely to retain their appeal. It is no wonder that the extreme vision of Islamism propagated by the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse has become immensely popular amongst the Afghans who are disillusioned by the efforts of various Afghan modernisers in uplifting their miserable living conditions.

The factors explaining the influential impact of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse also provide clues for understanding the popularity of Huntington amongst the Afghans. In fact, the discourses generated by the Taliban/al-Qaida and Huntington reflect a striking resemblance. Like the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse, which established the West as the enemy of Islam and was intended to mobilise Muslims around the world to safeguard their pious Islamic lands from Western intervention, the Huntingtonian discourse of civilizational clash inversely matched these propositions by presenting Islam as the most intolerant and aggressive civilization that posed the greatest threat to the West. Huntington advised the West to protect itself from Islamic demons by exploiting the differences between non-Western civilizations and by maintaining the superiority of the West. While the Taliban and al-Qaida appealed for Islamisation, Huntington called for Americanisation.

Both these discourses emerged around the mid-1990s, uttered the language of religious war and fed upon their mutual enmity. The common violent thrusts of both discourses continue to thrive upon their capacity to accept and reinforce each other. Huntington himself admitted this reality in an interview:

The terrorist actions of Osama bin Laden have reinvigorated civilizational identity. Just as he seeks to rally Muslims by declaring war on the West, he has given back to the West its sense of common identity in defending itself.[66]

However, it cannot and should not be overlooked that the sense of common civilizational identity has better served the interests of the US than that of the Afghans. The civilizational identity emphasised by Huntington has granted the US,

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a profound ideological-political-diplomatic gain by enabling it to subordinate the UN and to create an 'international coalition' of states, many of which are themselves guilty of practicing terrorism. It has also allowed the US to have a military-political entry in Central Asia on a depth and scale that it never before had.[67]

By contrast, the activation of civilizational identity by the Taliban and al-Qaida has not been able to deliver anything better than a war-torn inhabitancy for Afghans, where they feel insecure in all possible meanings of the term.

Those Afghans who believe in the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse are bound to succumb to the intellectual insights of Huntington's thesis which endorses the same worldview in a reverse guise. The popularity of al-Zawahiri's text, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*[68]*,* that presents a worldview comparable – but in reverse – to Huntington's thesis, supports this argument. The Afghans are trapped in a vicious cycle generated by these two destructive discourses. They have so far been unable to bring an end to their tragic state of affairs and build an alternative theoretical and political discourse for themselves. The lack of an alternative theoretical/political discourse largely accounts for the absence of an alternative and peaceful way of life for Afghans.

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