Influences that Shaped Taliban Ideology

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Discuss the Religious and Cultural Influences that Shaped the Taliban's Ideology

The emergence of the Taliban, a previously unknown group comprised mainly of young madrassa students lead by young veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad, in the Southern Afghan province of Kandahar in 1994 marked the beginning of a series of events that eventually lead to the September 11th attacks, and the subsequent US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The question of who these men were and what drove them has become a common question among Western citizens as newspaper columns continue to publish articles relating how this apparently defeated force continues to kill NATO soldiers a full decade after the initial invasion. The Taliban's ideology has been variously described as Pashtun nationalism, as well as an intrinsic part of an international fundamentalist Islamic insurgency epitomised by Al-Qaeda. What this essay will attempt to achieve is to identify the various cultural and religious factors that influenced (and continue to influence) the Taliban's ideology, if indeed there is a discernable ideology. It is important to note that this essay focuses solely on the Afghan Taliban, and whilst similarities inevitable exist between this and its Pakistani sibling, examples of the specific influences on the latter would represent an unnecessary divergence. For the context of the religious and cultural origins of the Taliban to be properly understood, it is first necessary to briefly recount the history of Afghanistan from the watershed year of 1979 until their fateful emergence in 1994.

On the 27th April 1978, Afghan army and air force officers engineered a bloody coup and the long serving royal minister and republican president Daoud Khan was assassinated. Power was transferred to Nur Mohammad Taraki, who established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. In 1979, Nur Mohammad Taraki was arrested by his deputy, Hafizullah Amin, and executed. As instability gripped the country, Soviet forces invaded on Christmas Eve. On 27th December, Soviet Special Forces and KGB stormed the presidential palace, killing Hafizullah Amin, and installing Babrak Karmal as president.[1] The ensuing Jihad launched by the rural Afghan population (supported by very small numbers of foreigners such as Pakistanis and Arabs) was to see the birth of Al Qaeda and were to sow the seeds for the emergence of the Taliban in later years. The incredibly violent methods used by the Soviets in an effort to suppress the insurgency resulted in millions of refugees fleeing Afghanistan for Iran and Pakistan; it was from this latter group that the initial corps of Taliban fighters was drawn. Aside from the tremendous physical damage caused by the fighting the traditional power structures of Afghanistan were all but destroyed; those that survived continued to be eroded during the following civil war.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Afghan regime managed to defy expectations of an early collapse and was able to limp on (with foreign aid) until 1992, when support from the newly created and financially ailing Russian federation was withdrawn. Once the communist regime had disintegrated, the common enemy uniting the various Mujahedeen parties was removed. As such, the period between the Soviet withdrawal and the American invasion was one marked by near constant civil war as the different groupings of Mujahedeen carved out their own fiefdoms. It was into this situation that the Taliban emerged.

The Taliban (Taliban is the Persian and Pashtu plural of the Arabic Talib or religious student[2]) originally emerged out of the sheer disgust felt by especially pious former mujahedeen living in Pakistan, who felt it their duty to punish their erstwhile comrades whom they viewed as morally bankrupt, and simultaneously enforce sharia law. One of the reasons the Taliban were able to secure popular support in the early months of their campaign was that they asked

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for no reward for their services, and whilst being firm, they were seen as fair. There is myriad evidence to show that the Taliban received extensive support from the Pakistani state in their early years; however, this represents a strategic concern to secure 'strategic depth' in relation to India more than it does a religious or cultural undertaking. Pakistan has a long history of allying itself to militant Islamists in order to serve its own aims, but its influence on their ideologies, despite its considerable financial support, has been minimal.

Despite evidence of diversification, it is impossible to deny the Taliban's roots in the Pashtun ethnic group. Understanding the part of the Pashtuns is vital to understanding the geo-political situation of modern Afghanistan. Despite the variety of names by which these people are known, in the cause of simplicity, for the rest of this essay, they shall be referred to as Pashtuns. Although it is worthy of note that the discrepancy over the correct name for this demographic grouping is with good reason; John C. Griffiths argues that to call them all Pashtuns is misleading, as this denotes they all speak Pashtu, which is not the case. He chooses instead to use the Indian term 'Pathan', which transcends any notion of linguistic affiliation.[3] The Pashtuns, aside from compromising the single largest ethnic grouping, between 40-45% of the total population, have long been the militarily and politically dominant caste.

Pashtunistan, that is the geographical area in which Pashtun tribes form the overwhelming majority, straddles the border between Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush and the North-Western provinces of Pakistan. The population of Pashtunistan is over forty million, with roughly 12-15 million of those residing in Afghanistan and the rest, roughly 28 million, in Pakistan.[4] Those living in Pakistan are concentrated along its Western border, mostly in the Federally administered tribal areas (FATA) of the North West frontier province (NWFP), which crucially enjoy a great deal of autonomy from the rest of Pakistan's three provinces of Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan. The cultural ties of the Pashtun community across the Durand line play a vital part in facilitating the logistical capacity of the Taliban (both its Afghan and Pakistani branches).

The Pashtuns themselves can be further categorised into myriad tribes and sub-tribes, the most dominant of the former being the Abdalis (usually referred to as the Durranis, the Abdalis are predominant in the Afghan South and are usually more prosperous due to engagement in farming and government) and the Ghiljais (predominant in the mountainous East, nearly all militarily successful Pashtun are Ghiljais).[5] However the issue that unites the Pashtuns is a strict observance of the Pashtunwali- 'a legal and moral code that determines social order and responsibilities and governs such key components as honour, solidarity, hospitality, mutual support, shame, and revenge.'[6] Added to this is the concept of 'tor' (literally black) which corresponds to the protection of woman's honour, a concept roughly equivalent to that of 'ird' in Arab society.[7] Islam, whilst one of the few aspects that unifies Afghanistan, has never played an overwhelming role in Pashtun society. Indeed, as Thomas Barfield observes:

In rural areas… there is such melding of their (the Pashtun) tribal law (the pashtunwali) with Islamic religious law that the two are often viewed as inseparable and mutually supportive.[8]

Another, often overlooked, cultural influence of the Taliban was in terms of rural versus urban. Antonio Giustozzi:

It is tempting to see the Taliban as an expression of rural-urban conflict in Afghanistan, but it is important to stress that they were the expression of a specific rural culture, that of village mullahs, and stood in opposition to the tribal codex of pashtunwali, often ruling against its application.[9]

However, Giustozzi does identify that the Taliban do attempt to recruit outside the Pashtun:

The Taliban were ready to accept anybody who shared their views and accepted their rules, regardless of ethnicity or tribe… Clearly, the Taliban did not want to present themselves as aligned with a particular tribe or community. This made it easier for them to move across tribal territories without antagonising the locals, but at the same time was also a way of advertising the movement as above inter-community rivalry.[10]

Whilst the Taliban's overwhelming Pashtun character is irrefutable, the nature of its creation perhaps dilutes its importance. As nearly all Taliban recruits were drawn from the huge Afghan refugee population resident in the NWFP, not only are they physically removed from their home territory, but they are also removed from their cultural

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base. 'Therefore [they were] basically rootless and receptive to the ideological influences to which they were exposed in the madrasas of Pakistan.'[11] Due to the destitute condition of the Afghan refugees (of course there were thousands of orphans created during the decade and a half of war), the only option for an education was in the madrasas of the frontier.

These madrasas adhere to the Deobandi and Wahhabi[12] schools of Sunni Islam and are funded mainly by Saudi Arabia as well as by wealthy individuals. This lingering Saudi influence dated from the anti-Soviet jihad, during which Saudi Arabia matched the USA in funding for the mujahedeen. These madrasas were run by the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islami (JUI), a Pakistani religious-turned-political party 'characterised by its fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, its opposition to ijtihad (innovation in adapting to new conditions), its injunctions against any meaningful role for women outside their homes, and its opposition to feudal and tribal structures.'[13]

Historically Islam in Afghanistan had never been dogmatic; due to the poor state of education (religious and otherwise), Sufi Islam had tended to predominate, accompanied by the veneration of saints and their tombs. Islam in Afghanistan had what Barfield calls an 'eclectic flavour.'[14] As such, the education received by the young refugees was markedly different from the religious norms of their homeland. After remarking on the similarities between this strict Deobandi curriculum and the Salafi ideals espoused by the Wahhabi branch, Mandaville concludes that the refugees' education was 'highly conservative, very literalist, and quite categorical in its moral logic.'[15] This narrow-minded perspective produced in the young men whom would make up the Taliban an inability to reason or compromise. Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani reporter and profligate writer on Afghan and Pakistani affairs, observes:

The Taliban have clearly debased the Deobandi tradition of learning and reform [through its dilution by Wahhabi influences], with their rigidity, accepting no concept of doubt except as sin and considering debate as little more than heresy… The Taliban are poorly tutored in Islamic and Afghan history, knowledge of the Sharia and the Koran and the political and theoretical developments in the Muslim world during the twentieth century. While Islamic radicalism in the twentieth century has a long history of scholarly writing and debate, the Taliban have no such historical perspective or tradition. There is no Taliban Islamic manifesto or scholarly analysis of Islamic or Afghan history. Their exposure to the radical Islamic debate around the world is minimal, their sense of their own history even less. This has created an obscurantism which allows no room for debate even with fellow Muslims.[16]

Mandaville puts forward a rather drastic view of the effect this clash of culture and religion had on these young men:

This was an Islam stripped of local cultural, ethnic, or tribal custom. The socialization of these students… was hence fundamentally different from what they would have experienced back home in Afghanistan, where ethnic and tribal identity is everything. These were somehow de-Pashtunized Pashtuns whose sole sense of public identity derived from a very puritanical breed of Islam.[17]

Barfield however accredits many of the Taliban's religious policies to poorly-veiled Pashtun custom. Claiming that many religious 'interpretations were often idiosyncratic and tended to dress local custom in the guise of religion.'[18] He then goes on to claim that the more extreme examples of Islamic fundamentalism displayed by the Taliban did not at all reflect Afghan custom, but instead provide evidence of the influence of Wahhabism, in which the young Pashtun had been trained in the madrasas. As examples he provides the ban on entertainment, the seclusion of women, enforced beard codes and the harsh Islamic punishments dealt out to criminals.[19] This final point represents a major departure from Pashtun tribal code, in which a blood debt can be repaid financially if a tribal shura can negotiate adequate terms, thus ending the spiral of revenge.[20] Instead, the Taliban introduced the strictest of Sharia punishments, for example enforcing the death penalty for murder, with the role of executioner being played by a direct blood relative of the deceased.[21]

The Taliban seemingly evolved their own hybrid Islamist credo, for example adopting the conservative social policies of the Wahhabi without implementing its inherent state building properties.[22] Importantly this is reflective of the lack of Islamic qualification among the Taliban leadership, a similarity they share with the vast majority of Islamic fundamentalist groups around the world.[23]

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Unwittingly or otherwise, the Taliban reflected the politico-Islamist principles advocated by Sayyid Abdu'l-A'la Mawdudi through their exposure to the political party he founded in 1941, the already mentioned JUI. The writings of Mawdudi almost mirror the laze-fair style of governance adopted during the Taliban's five years in power, he writes:

No one should be allowed to pass orders or make commands *in his own right* and no one ought to accept the obligation to carry out such commands and obey such orders. None is entitled to make laws on his own authority and none is obliged to abide by them.[24]

This in turn reflects the Salafi doctrine of the Wahhabi. He goes on to claim that an Islamic state 'cannot tolerate any class divisions based on distinctions of birth and social position.'[25] It can safely be assumed that this 'fundamental point' was in turn imparted to the students of the madrassas by his successors in the JUI, and, as such, the young Pashtun refugees were taught to disregard the tribal hierarchy of their homeland. This may go some way to explaining the emergency of Mullah Omar as the leader of the Taliban, despite his inconsequential tribal background. In practice, this lead to the Taliban's total lack of a political framework for the governance of what they declared 'The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. 'Politics … was reduced to the demand of an orthodox application of the sharia, based on a rigid interpretation of the sunna.'[26]

Possibly the most vicious aberration from Afghan culture in favour of a blinkered religious outlook is apparent in the Taliban's actions against the Shia Hazara. The Taliban deliberately targeted the Hazara minority due to the Deobandi belief that Shia are not Muslim, killing them in their tens of thousands.[27]

One final evolution in the Taliban's ideological outlook occurred in the aftermath of Al-Qaeda's relocation to Afghanistan from Sudan. The principle of international jihad, itself the product of two centuries of ideological evolution, preached by Al-Qaeda began to infiltrate Taliban rhetoric in the final period of its rule. These claims of Taliban-Al-Qaeda solidarity continued right up until the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001/02. This fits well into the story of the Taliban's creation and maintenance by foreign influences. Practically, however, the Taliban's ability to conduct jihad on an international scale was non-existent, and the likelihood that this rhetoric represents as deep seated an influence as the madrasas and Pashtun heritage is negligible. Although the financial support provided by Al-Qaeda allowed the Taliban more freedom of action in relation to its erstwhile sponsor Pakistan, eventually culminating in the creation of Pakistan's own domestic Taliban.[28]

To conclude, while their pedigree as a largely Pashtun movement is visible in many of their policies, the Taliban's ideology remains mainly based in religious factors – although, it must be noted, not to the extent argued by the orientalist historical school epitomised by Samuel Huntington, who in his book *The Clash of Civilisations* disregards the intricacies of localised culture in favour of a grand all-encompassing 'Islamic civilisation'.[29] Due to the unique geo-political circumstances surrounding their emergence, the Taliban's brand of Islam is unique. It has combined the most conservative aspects of the Deobandi and Wahhabi schools whilst simultaneously eliminating the progressive debate-based culture inherent in political Islam. When this is seen in contrast to the liberal attitude taken toward Islam in Afghanistan before 1979, and the culture of the Shura and the Jirga upon which much of rural society was based, it is clear how far removed from their own culture the Taliban have become. This absorption of foreign ideals is deeply un-Afghani: the Afghans are a notoriously proud and isolationist people, none more so than the Pashtuns. However, as has been noted, the Taliban were never able to completely divest themselves of their Pashtun heritage. In large part this was due to the movement's birth in exile; many of the Madrasa students had been born in Pakistan during the Soviet jihad and as such had never seen their homeland. Therefore, they were susceptible to a somewhat nostalgic view of Afghanistan through their religious education as a land that, as it was liberated by God's soldiers, must represent the perfect Muslim society. Through these eyes it would be very difficult to distinguish between religious and tribal/ethnic influences. In support of this is the Taliban's relatively easy expansion into the Pashtun South and East compared to their much harder fought campaigns in the non-Pashtun North and West. This adds credence to the influence of the Taliban's Pashtun credentials. Leading Barfield to state: 'For non-Pashtuns, the Taliban were just turbaned chauvinists seeking to regain a Pashtun political hegemony that they had lost during the Soviet war.'[30] Perhaps under the surface the Taliban do fit the description of 'peeved Pashtun nationalists'[31] that is beginning to gain traction in the West, but their own unique brand of Islam and its corruption of Pashtun ideals makes their religious ideology too dangerous a factor to ignore.

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[5] Chayes, Sarah. *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban.* Penguin Books; Reprint edition (26 Jun 2007). P. 94. See Giustozzi *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop* pp. 47 for a breakdown of the Taliban leaderships tribal affiliation in the years 2003 and 2004.

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[12] The defining feature of Wahhabi thought is a strict adherence to the concept of tawhid, 'a term that refers to the ''oneness'' and uniqueness of God, and also the unity of all thing within the divine.' In practice this translates as a total intolerance toward anything that may detract from dedication to God, ranging from perceived idols through to political parties. This of cause immediately results in a clash between Wahhabism and Sufi and Tribal norms in Afghanistan. Mandaville, Peter *Global Political Islam* Routledge; 1 edition (9 Oct 2007) pp. 152-153

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