

Ideological Transition of the Afghan Taliban

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Abstract: The Afghan Taliban (hereafter termed the Taliban) has returned to power in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of US troops from the country. However, acquiring political legitimacy at home and winning international recognition abroad remain daunting tasks for the Taliban, which will largely hinge on the group's transition away from its previously radical ideology. The ideology of the Taliban can be categorized as a brand of traditional Islamism blended with unique Afghan characteristics, which incorporates a variety of elements ranging from Deobandism, Pashtun rural and tribal cultures, Wahhabism, and Salafism to political Islam and carries a combination of many attributes. For instance, it emphasizes religious legitimacy stemming from the outward display of piety but overlooks the importance of political legitimacy. Moreover, it pursues Pashtun supremacy and practices sectarianism. However, driven by the needs of successive resistance and governance, the ideology of the Taliban has been undergoing a transition in recent years. Notably, pragmatism has begun to emerge, along with pluralism and religious inclusion; the emphasis on outward manifestations of piety has been reduced; efforts have been made to seek integration into the international system; and there appears to be a willingness to follow international norms. Despite all that, the core of the Taliban ideology remains intact, which still falls within the ambit of Islamism, as evidenced by the theocratic regime it has established in Afghanistan and its governing philosophies that advocate mullahs running the country. The Taliban has been shifting its ideology toward modern Islamism, which lacks successful governance practice. As an armed religious group, the Taliban faces tough challenges in governing the country, which include, but are not limited to, conservative mindsets

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and skill deficits. To tackle the challenges effectively, the Taliban should continue to focus on political legitimacy and advance the transition of its ideology.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Islamism, Deobandism, Pashtunism

The Taliban seized control of the capital, Kabul, on August 15, 2021, re-establishing its rule over Afghanistan for the first time in 20 years. The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan signified the return of the country's sovereignty to its people. This has set the stage for a political reconstruction process dominated and owned by Afghans and offered the hope of stability and development for this war-torn country. However, given the radical domestic and foreign policies the Taliban adopted the last time it ruled Afghanistan, bitter controversies remain regarding its return. Admittedly, the Taliban has exhibited signs of change and transition in the periods both before and after it retook Afghanistan, as illustrated by its official statements, policies, decrees, and governing measures, which have been received positively by the international community. Nevertheless, widespread suspicion and concern persist around the authenticity and sustainability of the transition. There is still a high degree of uncertainty over whether all these changes are only intended as an expedient or a symbol of the ideological transition of the Taliban. After all, there are widespread reports of the Taliban restricting women's rights and engaging in violence. Distinguishing fake news from facts is always difficult, not to mention some of the statements made by Taliban officials, which have been vague and often lacking in details. Hence, the outside world has encountered difficulties in evaluating the purported ideological transition of the Taliban. Furthermore, the interim government the Taliban has formed falls short in terms of openness and inclusivity. It is almost a reworking of the existing organizational structure of the Taliban: the top-level cabinet positions are all male; many of them are staffed by Taliban loyalists who had positions in the old regime, including the leaders of some radical factions; and the cabinet announced is overwhelmingly dominated by Pashtuns, except for a very few appointments of ethnic minorities.¹ The Taliban has assured the international

¹ Martine van Bijlert, "The Taleban's Caretaker Cabinet and Other Senior Appointments," Afghanistan Analysts Network, October 7, 2021.

community that no one will be allowed to carry out terror activities on Afghan soil. However, whether the Taliban can sever its links with Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups remains in question. How real the Taliban's transition is and how far it can go have become key factors for the group to acquire political legitimacy at home and win international recognition abroad. The Taliban is an armed group based on religious belief. A close examination of the ideology of the Taliban—its nature and the direction of its transition—will provide important insights for understanding its policy orientation and the prospects of the country it rules. This paper aims to analyze the composition and nature of the ideology of the Taliban, with a focus on the direction of its transition and the implications for the political development of Afghanistan.

Nature of the Taliban's Ideology

The ideological transition of the Taliban has been in question mainly because of the radical ideology it exhibited during its first regime. Although the group's previous rule ended years of wars between Afghan warlords and produced a unified country, it enforced radical national policies and an Islamization agenda on the society. The Taliban advanced social reforms in a top-down manner. It enforced strict *hudud* punishments and imposed harsh restrictions on Afghan society via religious policing based on its interpretation of *Sharia*, or Islamic law. For example, girls aged eight and above were prevented from attending school; women were banned from working; women could not leave their homes unless accompanied by their husbands or male relatives and wearing the *burqa*, the traditional dress that covers the entire body. The Taliban imposed a strict dress code for men as well: men were forbidden to trim their hair or beard, and they were required to wear traditional Afghan clothing. During its first rule of Afghanistan, which lasted from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban banned entertainment, art, and recreational activities and publicly inflicted brutal punishments such as beheading, stoning, and the amputation of hands. The Taliban was also condemned for its sectarian policies, notably its discrimination against Hazara Shias. Moreover, the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and its long-term practice of sheltering Al-Qaida met with strong condemnation from the

international community. The aforementioned radical, extremist policies and practices sparked widespread protests both within and outside Afghanistan, eventually leading to the collapse of the old Taliban regime.

The governance practices of the Taliban mentioned above were based on the group's unique interpretation of Islamic tenets, implementing an epistemology borrowed from Pashtun tribal cultures and a methodology of building a regime and governing the country by *Sharia*. In terms of epistemology, the Taliban advocated a combination of traditional Islamism and Pashtun rural and tribal cultures. It used early Islam and Pashtun tribal cultures as yardsticks for viewing the state, society, and way of life. Furthermore, outward manifestations of piety spanning religious rituals, appearance, and dress were prioritized over national governance. In terms of methodology, the Taliban established a regime in imitation of the first caliphs of the Islamic community and enforced the policies of Islamization of state, society, and way of life in a top-down manner based on its narrow understanding of *Sharia*, especially the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. Additionally, Deobandism, Wahhabism, and Pashtun rural and tribal cultures have all made their mark on the Taliban, jointly shaping the ideology of the group,¹ whose nature can be summarized as follows.

The first element shaping the ideology of the Taliban is traditional Islamism based on Deobandism. Thus far, most researchers believe that many of the early Taliban had been born in Pakistani refugee camps and educated in Pakistan-based religious schools.² If that is the case—which means it was from outside Afghanistan that the Taliban movement emerged—the group's ideology is alien to the country. However, according to research by the American scholar Anand Gopal and others, the majority of Taliban founding leaders originated from Kandahar and the surrounding areas of southern Afghanistan and the Pashtun tribal areas of eastern Afghanistan; at least 60 percent of the leaders received a significant proportion of their education inside Afghanistan; and nearly 50 percent had been educated in *hujras*, boarding rooms or annexes of

¹ Yan Wei, "The Historical Logic of the Resurgence of the Afghan Taliban," *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 8 (2021): 3.

² Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2010), 23.

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Pashtun village mosques. These *hujras* featured a curriculum that was far more eclectic and irregular than the Deobandi curriculum found in the major Afghan and Pakistani madrassas. Moreover, the *hujras* curriculum included elements of Sufism. Indeed, more than half of the Taliban's early leadership were born before 1965,¹ which means that they had completed their religious education inside Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion. Therefore, one can infer that the traditional Islamic beliefs indigenous to Afghanistan, which incorporate the deep-rooted traditions of Sufism, constitute the main body of the ideology of the Taliban.

The faith and religious education systems in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been deeply influenced by the Islamic reformist ideology of the Deobandis. A high proportion of the Taliban leadership received teachings from the Deobandi school of Islam; the number of students who have studied in Deobandi madrassas is even higher among middle- or low-ranking Taliban members. Deobandi Islam is an Islamic education and social movement formed during the latter half of the nineteenth century in South Asia. Proclaiming themselves the "Sunni majority," the Deobandis emphasize adherence to the practices and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. They also seek all guidance and interpretations in the matter of religion following the *Quran* and *Hadith*. "Deoband is an orthodox institution that strongly believes in theological puritanism. It is against shrine-based Sufi Islam and opposes Western ideas and values."² It is worth noting, however, that Deobandi Islam is not a new school of jurisprudence or Islamic theology. In terms of Islamic jurisprudence, it adheres to the Hanafi school, while, in terms of Islamic theology, it follows the Maturidi school. The influence of Deobandi Islam mainly derives from its vast religious education system and a great academic reputation. Deobandi madrassas are present throughout South Asia and beyond, making them the world's second-largest Islamic education system, after the Al-Azhar University in Egypt. However, the Taliban and the original Deobandi madrassas have far

¹ Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban," Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2017, 11–12.

² Tabereh Ahmed Neyazi, "Darul Uloom Deoband's Approach to Social Issues: Image, Reality, and Perception," in Robin Jeffrey and Sen Ronojoy eds., *Being Muslim in South Asia: Diversity and Daily Life* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 184.

less contact now, as evidenced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Taliban members have never studied at the Darul Uloom Islamic madrassa where the Deobandi Islamic movement began, nor visited the town Deoband where the madrassa is located. The Darul Uloom Deoband has repeatedly denied being the ideological source of the Taliban. Nevertheless, Deobandi thought has been spread via a system of religious schools and a network of mosques to Pakistan and the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, which constitutes important ingredients of the ideology of the Taliban. Although the Taliban does not inherit the academic traditions of Deobandi Islam, it has selectively absorbed the ideology of the religious school, especially in terms of pious belief, spiritual practice, and religious education. Moreover, the Taliban has blended Deobandi ideology with the indigenous cultures of Afghanistan and, consequently, appeared more inclined to adopt violent means and demonstrated more distinctive sectarian affiliations.¹

Radical religious reformism. The Deobandi brand of Islam advocates a return to orthodox Islamism. It seeks, through radical measures, to purify beliefs and eradicate *bid'ahs* (impure “innovations”) brought about by non-Islamic cultures, such as Western culture and Hinduism. Deobandi Islam has a very strict and conservative interpretation of *Sharia*, as evidenced by its issuance of roughly 250,000 *fatwas* (legal pronouncements), which restrict followers in terms of faith, life, and many other aspects.² The rigidity of Deobandi Islam makes this school of Islamic thought a conservative religious movement, one that assigns great importance to social rituals. It adheres to orthodox Islamism, with a strong focus on appearance, dress, and rituals as important ways to shape identity. The radical social reforms the Taliban enforced and its strict requirement for the outward manifestations of piety are mostly attributable to the religious conservatism of the Deobandi school. For instance, the Taliban has issued a great number of *fatwas*—in the same way that the Deobandis emphasize their religious orthodoxy—on the religious compliance of political and social matters, to subject all policies and governance behaviors to the

¹ Joshua T. White, “Understanding the Taliban: Assessing Religious Categories of Analysis,” Religion and Violence Papers, Danish Institute for International Studies, February 2012, 4.

² U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps, “Deobandi Islam: The Religion of the Taliban,” October 15, 2001, 4.

constraints of *Sharia*.

Hanafi school in a narrow sense. The Deobandis have been influenced by the South Asian Ahl-e-Hadith movement and adhered to a narrower kind of Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. The Deobandis lay stress on the foundational role of the *Hadith* and downplay the referee role of rational reasoning. They follow such principles strictly as complying with the *Quran* and *Hadith* and adopting stricter standards. Therefore, the Deobandis are less flexible than Hanafis and more akin to the followers of the Hanbali school, which is considered the most rigid of the four major traditional Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Influenced by Deobandi Islam, the Taliban enforces a strict interpretation of *Sharia*; and influenced by Pashtun cultural conservatism, the Taliban seeks a so-called return to the orthodoxy and tends to make harsh and narrow-minded judgments, as evidenced by its attitude toward modernity and foreign cultures. In practice, the Taliban emphasizes the compliance of policies with *Sharia* and enforces harsh punishments.

Sectarian tendencies. The sectarian affiliations of Deobandi Islam are manifested in its competition with the Bareilvi movement and its criticism over the Shias. However, different from the Wahhabi (also known as the Salafi) school, Deobandi Islam partly draws inspiration from Sufism and, therefore, does not oppose Sufism. Indeed, the Deobandis view Sufism as an important component of the mental life of Muslims. What they criticize are the traditional Sufi practices such as visiting and venerating the tombs of Sufi saints, celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, and seeking help from him, which they deem *shirk* (polytheistic).¹ The Deobandis indeed advocate *jihads*, which, in practice, are primarily targeted against foreign invaders; they do not support *takfir* (accusing another Muslim of apostasy or declaring another Muslim as infidel) or *jihad* against Muslim minority groups. In the case of the Taliban, its policies toward Muslim minority groups carry sectarian affiliations, which can be deemed as the direct successor of the sectarianism practiced by Deobandis. Specifically, the Taliban criticizes Shias severely; in the case of Sufis, what the Taliban rejects is limited to certain practices.

¹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 181–182.

The second element shaping the ideology of the Taliban is Pashtun nationalism. The nationalism of the Taliban is reflected in three respects.

Afghan nationalism. The Taliban used to provide shelter for Al-Qaida and support for Islamic extremist groups in neighboring Central Asia. It hence carries certain degrees of Pan-Islamic affiliation. However, in terms of military activities and political goals, the Taliban has mainly focused on Afghanistan—that is, to achieve Afghan unity and national independence. By contrast, political Islam, Wahhabism, and Salafism are all transnational Islamic movements, which are characterized by explicit Pan-Islamic agendas and goals.

Pashtun nationalism. The nationalism pursued by the Taliban is a kind of Pashtun chauvinism, which advocates Pashtun supremacy, opposes pluralism, and refuses to share power with ethnic minority groups. Accordingly, Pashtun mullahs and tribal leaders hold positions of absolute dominance in the power structure of Afghanistan. During its previous rule, the Taliban spread Pashtun culture and customs nationwide, demanding that ethnic minorities such as Tajiks and Hazaras should likewise follow and practice. Such demands were met with strong opposition.

Religious nationalism. The vehicle or means that the Taliban uses for nationalist mobilization has been Islam; the purpose behind its endeavors toward national unity and independence is to run Afghanistan by *Sharia*, that is, to achieve the Islamization of state and society. During the process of armed struggle, the Taliban used Islamic concepts such as *jihad* as the main tool for political mobilization in its fight against foreign invasion.

Rather than simply and mechanically imitating the political and social practices of early Islam, the Taliban has always retained strong native cultural features. Pashtun rural and tribal cultures constitute an important component of the ideology of the Taliban; honor and other values that are highly regarded by Pashtun society have shaped the values of the Taliban. Pashtun tribal law, known as *Pashtunwali*, is a localized system of norms stipulating customs and practices that gradually form during the long-term production and life of Pashtuns and closely relate to their daily lives. The mandatory power of *Pashtunwali* is established via tribal organizations, which guarantee the enforcement of *Pashtunwali* in the Pashtun areas and tribes, notably to mediate

internal and external relations. *Pashtunwali* represents more than the ideal way of life for Pashtuns; it is a kind of social system and a unique cultural tradition that embodies the spiritual pursuits, behavioral patterns, and collective personalities peculiar to Pashtuns.¹ The *layeha* or “codes of conduct” issued by the Taliban contain many rules from *Pashtunwali*.² For example, the Taliban restricts women’s mobility and behavior, a practice known as *pardah*, which is an important component of *Pashtunwali*.³ The women in *pardah* are required to live in seclusion; they are not allowed to work or to be educated; they are completely segregated from men; and they are allowed to leave their house only when accompanied by a *mahram* (a close male relative). From the age of eight, girls are required to wear a *burqa* to cover their bodies at all times in public. The Taliban’s dress code for men also originates from *Pashtunwali*, which deems wearing a beard and having long hair as a *Sunnah* of the Holy Prophet Muhammad. The oft-repeated criticism is that the Taliban’s rules concerning social management are the source of oppression of women. However, it has been neglected that the root of these rules—*Pashtunwali*—is widely obeyed across Pashtun regions and supported by Pashtun women. During its invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union attempted to abolish *Pashtunwali* to empower women and increase their access to education. Such measures were met with strong resistance from the Pashtun tribes. After 2001, a Western-style political system was established in Afghanistan, which reflected the expectations of foreign political powers but ran counter to the traditional values advocated by *Pashtunwali*. Consequently, this system failed to win universal approbation among Pashtuns.

The third element shaping the ideology of the Taliban is Islamism with premodern features. The Taliban was originally a local grassroots social movement, with no intention of unifying the country or establishing a regime. The majority of the core leadership of the early Taliban came from middle- and

¹ He Jie, “A Preliminary Study on Pashtunwali,” *International Study Reference*, No. 8 (2017): 12.

² “Code of Conduct for the Mujahedeen,” in Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn ed., *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics in their Own Words* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 325–340.

³ Seth G. Jones, “Afghanistan’s Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, Issue 11, November/December 2020, 2.

lower-class mullahs, who, rather than receiving modern education, had studied in village madrassas. Their mastery of Islamic religious knowledge was also far from profound, falling short of a systematic religious or political philosophy. During its first rule of Afghanistan, the Taliban regarded the Islamization of Afghan society as the ultimate goal, prioritizing the building of a society that worships *Allah* sincerely and follows the Islamic way of life strictly above all secular considerations. As a result, the Taliban put far more emphasis on social and cultural governance than on economic development, improvement of people's livelihood, expansion of foreign relations, and many other issues that are crucial to the governance of a modern state. Moreover, it overlooked the importance of political legitimacy that derives from the effectiveness of its governance. The fact that only three countries formally recognized its control over the country did not receive due attention from the previous Taliban government. To ensure the purity of religion, the Taliban dynamited the famous Buddhas of Bamiyan, which provoked universal opposition from the international community. Ultimately, the old Taliban regime was overthrown due to its practice of providing a haven for Osama bin Laden. The discussions above show that the Taliban lacked pragmatism and flexibility and emphasized religious legitimacy alone. In this sense, the Islamism advocated by the Taliban bore distinctive premodern features, which was different from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other Islamic political movements. The Muslim Brotherhood is a Muslim intellectual movement emanating from modern education, characterized by ideologues, theorists, and systematic political doctrines. Modern Islamism aims for political power, whereas the political activities of the Taliban targeted the religion of Islam itself. The Taliban government banned the books of Salafists in the 1990s, a prime example that indicated its opposition to modern Islamic ideologies.¹

The fourth element shaping the ideology of the Taliban is Jihadism-driven radicalism. The ideology of the Taliban has been influenced by a combination of Wahhabism, Salafism, and political Islam, but significant differences remain between it and the abovementioned schools of Islamism. The ideology of the

¹ Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban," 37.

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Taliban displays many similarities with Wahhabism and Salafism in terms of emphasizing *tawhid* (unity of God), eradicating *bid'ahs*, opposing Shias, criticizing certain religious rituals followed by the Sufis, restoring a caliphate, and waging *jihads* against enemies. During the Soviet–Afghan War, Saudi Arabia offered financial support to Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan, which paved the way for such Wahhabi doctrines as *takfir* and *jihad* to infiltrate the Deobandi system of religious education and contributed to the tendency of Deobandi madrassas to become more sectarian, radical, and violent. However, the Taliban has not accepted Wahhabism in its entirety. In terms of Islamic theology, the Taliban follows the Maturidi school, whereas Wahhabism is generally considered a branch of Salafism. In terms of Islamic jurisprudence, the Taliban adheres to the Hanafi school, whereas Wahhabism follows Hanbali jurisprudence. Moreover, they have different attitudes toward Islamic minorities. For instance, the Taliban agrees with Sufism, only advocating correcting certain religious rituals common among Sufis. By contrast, the Wahhabis condemn Sufism in its entirety as a “heterodoxy.” Furthermore, Wahhabism is part of the Pan-Islamic movement, whereas the Taliban has confined its struggle within the territory of Afghanistan.

The Soviet–Afghan War provided a prime opportunity for radical Islamists from Arab countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia to cooperate. The outbreak of the war in 1979 was followed immediately by the influx of large numbers of Islamists coming from Arab countries and volunteering for the Afghan *jihad*. By 1992, when the Najibullah government collapsed, an estimated 5,000 Arab mujaheddin were fighting in eastern Afghanistan.¹ During this period, radical Islamism from Egypt began to integrate with the neo-Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, which culminated in the emergence of Al-Qaida and its call for global Salafi Jihadism. From its very beginnings, Al-Qaida has maintained close ties with the Taliban. Many of the Taliban’s founding members were the mujaheddin that had fought in the anti-Soviet war. Moreover, all Al-Qaida’s leaders have pledged loyalty to the Taliban leadership. Some Taliban factions, influenced by

¹ Barnett R. Rubin, “Arab Islamists in Afghanistan,” in John L. Esposito ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 197.

the doctrines of Jihadi-Salafism such as *takfir* and *jihad*, have viewed those with different faiths as infidels.¹ These factions have also adopted the theories of Jihadi-Salafism on offensive *jihad*, regarding *jihad* as the obligation for every Muslim. This differs from the mainstream opinion of Sunnis that deems *jihad* a collective obligation.² Meanwhile, although the Taliban has frequently launched suicide attacks, it is committed to a domestic *jihad*, which mainly targets foreign invaders and their allies, instead of the global *jihad* called for by Jihadi-Salafists.

Ideological Transition of the Taliban toward Modern Islamism

The Taliban has experienced dramatic changes since 2001: it shifted from governing to insurgency; it negotiated with the US and managed a peace agreement; and ultimately, it regained power in Afghanistan during the withdrawal of US troops from the country. It has not been long since the Taliban retook Afghanistan. Therefore, it is too early to assess to what extent its ideology has transitioned. Nevertheless, the fact that the ideology of the Taliban is undergoing a transition is undeniable. On the one hand, the Taliban has drawn lessons from the failure of its last rule and managed to make some tactical adjustments on the grounds of pragmatism or opportunism to acquire political legitimacy at home and international recognition abroad. On the other hand, the Taliban has broadened its horizons and learned novel concepts during its engagement and interaction with the outside world. The changes in the international environment have played a positive role, to some extent, in shaping the ideology of the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban benefited from the peace negotiations with the US, which has helped make the group more moderate.³ Of course, it should be borne in mind that the ideology of the

¹ Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 80.

² Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," 2.

³ Jillian Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderate: Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis," *World Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2011): 347–376.

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Taliban, characterized by stubbornness, still falls within the ambit of Islamism and any substantive changes to the core of this ideology will prove impossible in the short term. For all that, the Taliban has opened a process of modernization of its ideology, which has been transitioning from traditional Islamism toward modern Islamism (political Islam).

First, the Taliban has been shifting from religious idealism toward political pragmatism. Driven by the needs of the armed struggle and now the rule of Afghanistan, the Taliban has given up its religious ideal of building a utopian “Islamic state.” Instead, it has been focusing on pursuing and maintaining political power on the grounds of political pragmatism and exhibiting a considerable degree of flexibility in terms of ideology. Rather than continue to view religious orthodoxy as the sole source of legitimacy, the Taliban is beginning to seek some combination of political and religious legitimacy and showing an inclination to prioritize political orientations over religious ones. Significantly, the Taliban has adopted multiple measures to enlarge its political foundation and increase its political legitimacy. Consequently, the social composition of the Taliban has become increasingly diverse and exceeded the traditional groups of mullahs.¹ To expand its source of recruitment, the Taliban has absorbed a great number of men with no background of religious education. It was estimated that during the years of the armed struggle, nearly a quarter of Taliban shadow governors lacked a religious education.² Moreover, the study of Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten on the ideology of the Taliban insurgency found “in a 14-man Kandahar-based Taliban unit (a *delgai*) that one of the authors met with in 2008, only one individual had religious training.”³ In this sense, the Taliban has become less of an “army of religious students.” The Taliban emphasized the development of the economy and the improvement of people’s livelihood in areas it controlled, dedicated to restoring security and order, protecting agricultural production and commercial activities, and providing public services for local communities. Deeming easing the hardships

¹ Yan Wei, “The Historical Logic of the Resurgence of the Afghan Taliban,” 2.

² Michael Semple, “Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement,” *Peaceworks*, No. 102 (2014): 22.

³ Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, “Ideology in the Afghan Taliban,” 41.

of grassroots farmers and herdsmen and realizing social justice as important means of political mobilization, the Taliban has increased its popularity among the populace by setting up courts to safeguard judicial justice. Upon regaining power, the Taliban declared an amnesty for former Afghan government employees, calling on them to return to their posts. Moreover, the Taliban has taken various measures to stabilize the Afghan economy. All such moves have revealed an awareness of the need to run Afghanistan as a modern country.

Second, the Taliban has demonstrated a certain degree of pluralism, that is, the tendency to become more inclusive and less sectarian. Out of consideration for the needs of the armed struggle, the Taliban downplayed its Pashtun identity to accommodate different ethnicities and sects with the help of religious nationalism, attempting to project itself as a nationwide patriotic movement. The propaganda of the Taliban called on all ethnic groups in Afghanistan to stand shoulder to shoulder against the foreign invasion, referring to ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, and other minority groups as “brethren.”¹ After retaking Afghanistan, high-ranking officials of the Taliban have repeatedly emphasized “national equality,” appealing to all Afghans to contribute to the construction of the country. There are signs that the Pashtun chauvinism and sectarianism of the Taliban have decreased, as evidenced by the fact that the leaders of the Taliban and members of the interim government are no longer exclusively Pashtun. For instance, there are two Tajiks (Acting Minister for Borders and Tribal Affairs and Acting Economy Minister) and one Uzbek (Acting Deputy Prime Minister) in the interim government declared by the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban now allows the Shia Hazara community to celebrate *Ashura*, one of the holiest days of the Shia calendar. The Taliban sent troops to help maintain order on *Ashura* day; one of the Taliban local officials even turned up at relevant commemorations. This indicates a change in the ideology of the Taliban, that is, for the sake of its rule, the Taliban has been reducing the discrimination against Shias. In terms of *Sharia*, the Taliban has been adopting an increasingly loose and pluralistic interpretation by taking into consideration the opinions of other legal schools in verdicts on some political or social behaviors. This is in stark

¹ “Taliban Question and Answer Online Forum,” Taliban Sources Project Archive, March 21, 2012.

contrast to its previous tradition of banning legal schools other than the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and illustrates a new gesture of inclusivity in its interpretation of *Sharia*.¹ For example, different Islamic schools could not agree on whether non-Muslims should be deemed a source of help in the armed struggle. Instead of laying down a hard and fast rule on this issue in its military field manuals, the Taliban left the decision to the discretion of its commanders and soldiers. Importantly, the use of brutal punishments such as beheading or stoning to death and amputation of limbs has become rare in judicial practice.

Third, the Taliban has reduced its emphasis on the outward display of piety. When the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan, it used such manifestations as an important means of controlling Afghan society and judging the loyalty of residents to its regime in non-Pashtun regions. It was during the armed struggle that the Taliban came to realize that political loyalty matters more than an outward show of piety and hence began to emphasize internal piety and political attitudes among the populace—their support for the Taliban regime, loyalty to the *Amir*, etc. Thereafter, only those who cooperated with foreign troops or the Afghan government would be deemed as “apostates.” Photography and television are no longer banned in Taliban-controlled areas; commonplace usage of scientific and technological products such as smartphones and social media is allowed now; these media per se are not interdicted; and what the Taliban emphasizes is that the content conveyed by these media should comply with *Sharia*. Indeed, the Taliban has frequently used smartphones and the Internet for communication and publicity purposes. After regaining power, the Taliban has pledged that women’s rights to education and employment will be respected “within the limits of Islam.” “This time around, Taliban officials have not decreed the *burqa* as mandatory—only *hijab*, or modest Islamic dress including a head covering and non-revealing clothing.”² In recent years, the Taliban has supported religious education for women and significantly reduced attacks on schools and other educational institutions. Regaining power, the Taliban has issued a special decree regarding women’s rights. According to

¹ Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, “Taliban Views on a Future State,” NYU Center on International Cooperation, July 2016.

² Marcus Yam, “As Afghans Try to Figure Out Taliban’s New Rules, Burqas Are Barometer of Sorts,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 2021.

the decree, women's consent to marriage is necessary; women should not be considered "property"; and "no one can give her to anyone in exchange for a peace deal and/or to end animosity."¹ The Taliban has not imposed a dress code in areas it controls; some Taliban soldiers even shave their beards. When asked about the revival of the Department of Vice and Virtue, the Taliban leadership stressed that "this time its procedures and methods will be completely reviewed. In a softer way, the people will be persuaded toward the establishment of virtue. Likewise, they will be prevented from vice with wisdom. In this connection, the use of unnecessary force will be avoided."²

Fourth, the Taliban has exhibited a certain degree of openness. During its first rule of Afghanistan, the Taliban merely focused on social management within the country. It did not pursue international recognition, nor did it care about being isolated by the international community. This eventually led to the collapse of the old Taliban regime. In recent years, by contrast, the group has begun to seek integration into the international system, aiming to build friendly relations with countries that have different ideologies and political systems. Moreover, it has shown awareness of the need to follow international norms and keep a close watch on international affairs. Notably, the Taliban has repeatedly issued statements on regional affairs. For example, in a statement addressed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the group expressed its expectation of developing "good and positive relations with all neighbors."³ In 2013, the Taliban opened a political office in Doha, Qatar, and started negotiations with the US, which culminated with a peace deal on February 20, 2020. On the eve of this deal, Sirajuddin Haqqani, a member of the Taliban leadership and the leader of the Haqqani Network, wrote an article that appeared in the *New York Times*. In it, he promised that, after the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban would stop violence, build an inclusive government, protect women's rights to education and employment based on Islamic principles, and become a responsible member of the international community.⁴

¹ Raja Furqan Ahmed, "Taliban Supreme Leader Decrees Afghan Women's Rights Must Be 'Enforced'," *Pakistan Daily*, December 3, 2021.

² Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban," 39.

³ *Ibid*, 41.

⁴ Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

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In the period immediately preceding the US military withdrawal, Abdul Ghani Baradar, political chief of the Taliban, led delegations to Iran, Russia, and China. Such moves indicate that the group intends to integrate into the international community. Since returning to power, the Taliban has expressed its willingness to develop friendships with countries all over the world, including the US, as evidenced by its frequent contact with global and regional powers. For example, top Taliban officials have held talks in Doha with representatives from 14 countries, including China and the US. Moreover, the group has sent high-level delegations to countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Furthermore, rather than adopting anti-American or anti-Western policies, it provided support for the safe withdrawal of Western troops and the evacuation of their nationals. It is thus clear that the foreign policies of the Taliban are becoming increasingly pragmatic and moderate; something characterized by engagement in all directions, instead of delimitation along ideological lines, is beginning to take shape. To win international recognition, the Taliban has kept its distance from extremist groups under the peace agreement it signed with the US. Furthermore, it has cracked down on Jihadi-Salafi groups such as the Islamic State (IS) affiliate, known as IS-Khorasan Province; shut down groups, mosques, and religious schools that have radical tendencies in 16 provinces, such as the Salafi organization Jamiat Ihyaa Minhaaj al-Sunnah; and detained over 600 IS militants.¹ Although further scrutiny is needed regarding the policy of the Taliban toward Al-Qaida, dissociating itself from terrorist organizations will be the logical trend, given the need to ensure the survival of the Taliban regime and acquire international recognition.

Modernizing the ideology of the Taliban does not necessarily lead to secularism or other modern political concepts. On the contrary, the Taliban leadership has made it clear that there will be no democratic system, considering Western-style elections inapplicable to the creation of an Islamic government.² Therefore, the most possible and realistic scenario will be the ideology of the Taliban transitioning toward modern Islamism within the wider framework of Islamism. The last time it ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban heavily

¹ “Taliban Capture 600 IS Fighters,” NPR, November 11, 2021.

² “Council May Rule Afghanistan, Taliban to Reach Out to Soldiers & Pilots -Senior Member,” Reuters, August 18, 2021.

criticized Islamic political parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Party in Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. With the commonplace usage of the Internet and social media, the Taliban members are having greater access to and increasingly embracing modern Islamic concepts. Moreover, the Taliban has established close ties with countries from the camp of political Islam, notably Turkey and Qatar, which has contributed to the convergence of their ideologies. Via the political office in Doha, Taliban leaders have acquainted themselves with the concepts of political Islam by socializing with Islamic scholars and activists. For example, Turkey and Qatar have made suggestions to the Taliban on women's rights. During his meeting with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban-appointed foreign minister, Turkey's foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu shared some recommendations on the subjects of educating women and women joining the workforce.¹ Judging from the distribution of its political powers, its emphasis on the economy, diplomacy, and other national governance areas, the diversification of its composition, and various practical signs, notably the downplaying of religious sects and outward display of piety, the Taliban has been transitioning from traditional Islamism toward modern Islamism represented by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

Prospects for the Ideological Transition of the Taliban

Having demonstrated some initial traits of modernity, the ideology of the Taliban, in its entirety, stays within the ambit of Islamism. It remains conservative and still, as ever, sets great store by religious legitimacy. The theocratic political system the Taliban has established in Afghanistan and its governance philosophies such as mullahs running the country in accordance with *Sharia* are prime examples in this regard. The direction of the Taliban's ideological transition is toward modern Islamism, which, nevertheless, has not registered success in the political practices of Arab countries. Therefore, the road ahead will not be smooth for the Taliban as it sets out to rule Afghanistan once again.

¹ Suzan Fraser and Kathy Gannon, "Afghan Taliban Delegation in Turkey for High-Level Talks," AP News, October 14, 2021.

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First, the Taliban still clings to its original ideas about building a regime and governing the country. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the formal name of the country under the Taliban's last rule, has been retained this time around. This name carries deep religious connotations, highlighting the Islamic nature of the Taliban's regime, which indicates that the Taliban will install a theocratic Islamic state in imitation of a caliphate. In the perspective of the Taliban regarding the state, *Amir al-Mu'minin*, or the caliph who rules Afghanistan on behalf of *Allah*, is the supreme religious and political leader of the country. The *Amir*, to whom all Afghans must pledge loyalty, will rule Afghanistan in conformity with *Sharia*. This kind of political system stresses the religious legitimacy of the regime and the compliance of government decisions with *Sharia*. However, governing a country is such a complex systemic project that it is both one-sided and unrealistic to seek governance resources from a religion. Meanwhile, taking *Sharia* compliance as the first and foremost requirement for governance runs counter to the call of the times for the modernization of national governance. Furthermore, *Sharia* per se is faced with grave challenges from modernization. The practices of the Taliban that cling to the original texts of the *Quran* and *Hadith* and object to the use of considered reasoning to arrive at legal decisions cannot respond to the diversified needs of modern society.

Second, the Taliban still sticks to the philosophy of mullahs running the country, which foregrounds the conservativeness of its political mindset. From the announced interim government's makeup, the top authority of the Taliban administration and heads of ministries are all clergy members, a situation unchanged compared with the first time the Taliban ruled. Political powers being monopolized by clergy members who lack professional knowledge proves that the Taliban remains politically conservative and adheres to the philosophy of mullahs running Afghanistan in conformity with *Sharia*. However, mullahs governing Afghanistan is a system alien to the country and is incompatible with the political tradition of Afghan tribes that favors consultation. The system of mullahs governing Afghanistan indicates that other groups in Afghan society, such as technocrats, tribal leaders, and urban elites will be marginalized. This will lead to insufficient inclusiveness in the new regime, taking a toll on the effectiveness of its governance and the political stability and state-building

in Afghanistan. Afghan society can be characterized as a traditional tribal society where tribal consultation forms the mainstream political mechanism and tribal leaders play an important role in political affairs. Over the past two decades, the number of urban elites that have received a modern education is steadily growing in Afghanistan. The majority of these elites are proponents of secularism, disapproving of such political systems as mullahs running the country. As a country run by mullahs, the Taliban-led Afghanistan is different from a “Sunni version of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹ The Islamic regime in Iran is based on the religious hierarchical system peculiar to the Shias and the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist). Moreover, the administrative system in Iran carries the attribute of modernity, as evidenced by the presidential election and the occupation of high-ranking posts by technocrats. By comparison, the political system in Iran enjoys stronger religious and political legitimacy than that established by the Taliban and is, accordingly, more efficient in terms of governance capability.

Third, the ideological transition of the Taliban will encounter significant internal resistance. The Taliban is a loosely organized social movement with a horizontal, umbrella-like organizational structure. The neo-Taliban is composed of multiple centers of power, that is, different *shuras* (factions) are independent of and competing with one another.² Admittedly, the Taliban has become more organized than it was previously. Nevertheless, different factions persist with varying ideologies. Furthermore, sharp disagreements exist in terms of ideology within the Taliban leadership as well as between the leadership and the middle- or low-ranking Taliban members. Some Taliban factions have long maintained close ties, or even fought shoulder to shoulder, with extremist groups such as Al-Qaida. Deeply influenced by Jihadi-Salafism, these factions have different attitudes, compared with the mainstream Taliban, toward foreign jihadists, minority groups such as the Shias and the Sufis, Western countries led by the US, Russia, and Iran. Looking forward, the Taliban may face a backlash from these factions in its efforts to sever relations with Al-Qaida. Indeed, foreign

¹ Seth G. Jones, “Afghanistan’s Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan,” 2.

² Yan Wei, “The Historical Logic of the Resurgence of the Afghan Taliban,” 2.

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fighters account for a considerable proportion of Taliban troops. For example, one in three Taliban soldiers who captured Taloqan in 2000 was a foreign national.¹ A UN report indicated that in 2019, Al-Qaida was covertly active in more than ten Afghan provinces.² Conceivably, there were disagreements within the Taliban about the “wisdom and specifics of peace negotiations” with the US.³ The approach of pursuing armed struggle in parallel with political negotiations led to the emergence of both moderates and hardliners within the Taliban. After retaking Afghanistan, divisions may arise within the Taliban regime between the localist groups and those returning from overseas. Additionally, the middle- or low-ranking Taliban members do not fully buy into the ideological transition the top leadership has been advocating. This presages the serious difficulties awaiting the ideological transition of the Taliban, which may end up in schisms.

Fourth, political Islam can scarcely provide a feasible alternative for the development of Afghanistan. Political Islam is a modern political ideology based upon Islam. It is the product of modernity but, at the same time, a reaction against and criticism of modernity. It does not represent progressive political forces due to the “retrospective” historicism it advocates. Olivier Roy, a French scholar, opined that political Islam of today is still the Third Worldism of the 1960s, with similarly dim prospects of success.⁴ As the opposition, political Islam managed to create a positive image—pious, incorruptible, and charitable—among the general public via propaganda, education, and philanthropy. After coming to power, however, political Islam must face up to a long list of tests concerning its governance effectiveness. Religious teachings can regulate economic activities only in terms of morality and ethics; they cannot provide, by any means, ready-made schemes to help economic

¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), 74–75.

² “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan,” the United Nations, May 27, 2020, 12.

³ Seth G. Jones, “Afghanistan’s Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan,” 2.

⁴ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.

development. Therefore, as a religio-political movement based upon faith, morality, and culture, political Islam is incapable of producing systematic economic theories or programs. Even if there are any fragmented discourses, they mostly focus on such aspects of people's economic life as religion, morality, and society from the perspective of social justice. Hence, as an American scholar Roger Owen pointed out,

Two somewhat contradictory implications follow. One is the fact that...the religious actors share, and want to seem to share, many of the same vocabularies and types of organizational structures with the more secular politicians within the same political arena...The second implication is that, for all their engagement with modernity, men with a basically religious world view find it difficult to translate their theological principals [sic] into concrete programmes for creating institutional structures markedly different from those of the secular nation state.¹

The governance performance of political Islam has qualified it to be a powerful opposition, a successful social movement, but a suboptimal governor. The practice of Islamists to religionize and moralize politics proves unhelpful for national governance. Political Islam rose simultaneously in a group of countries in the wake of the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, these regimes were successively overthrown or defeated in elections in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco. Meanwhile, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey is in disarray in terms of economic governance. All such instances indicate that political Islam cannot provide feasible solutions for the governance of Afghanistan.

Conclusions

The ideology of the Taliban can be deemed as a blend of multiple Islamic ideologies with native Afghan faiths and rural tribal cultures, formed in the closed geographical environment and conservative socio-cultural atmosphere of Afghanistan and the context of long-lasting wars and foreign aggressions.

¹ Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Routledge, 2004), 155.

It exhibits traditional Islamic characteristics. Schools of Islamic thought such as Deobandism, Wahhabism, and political Islam all belong to the categories of Islamism—in the broad sense—and cultural conservatism. They share many similarities with the ideology of the Taliban in terms of their tenets that emphasize *tawhid*, eradicate *bid'ahs*, and oppose foreign cultural influence and their code for social behaviors, ranging from gender segregation to dress. However, it would be wrong to simply equate the ideology of the Taliban with any of the abovementioned schools.

The return of the Taliban has restored the sovereignty and unity of Afghanistan and afforded the country a historical opportunity for stability and development. Meanwhile, the ideology of the Taliban has been transitioning from traditional Islamism toward modern Islamism, which is becoming increasingly modern and moderate. Overall, this will help promote intra-Afghan unity and cohesion among different ethnic and religious groups and improve the international environment confronting Afghanistan. However, in a war-torn country with the national economy on the brink of collapse, the Taliban will encounter unprecedented challenges to its governance. Moreover, as an armed group, it lacks both governance capabilities and skills. Even worse is the conservativeness of its mindset concerning building a regime and governing the country, which will render tackling the above challenges extremely difficult. As the direction in which the ideology of the Taliban has been transitioning, modern Islamism can scarcely provide a constructive scheme for governing Afghanistan. Besides, the ideological transition of the Taliban has been a long process lasting over the past two decades. Returning to Afghanistan, the Taliban still faces daunting tasks in modernizing its ideology. Whether its ideology can successfully transition has a direct bearing on the future and destiny of Afghanistan and its people. While carrying out relevant evaluations, we should proceed from the reality that Afghanistan is a religious nation and the Taliban is a religious organization. Meanwhile, we should take into account the reshaping effects of the international environment on both Afghanistan and the Taliban. Only in this way can we acquire a better understanding of, or even contribute to, the modernization of the ideology of the Taliban and the moderation of its domestic and foreign policies.