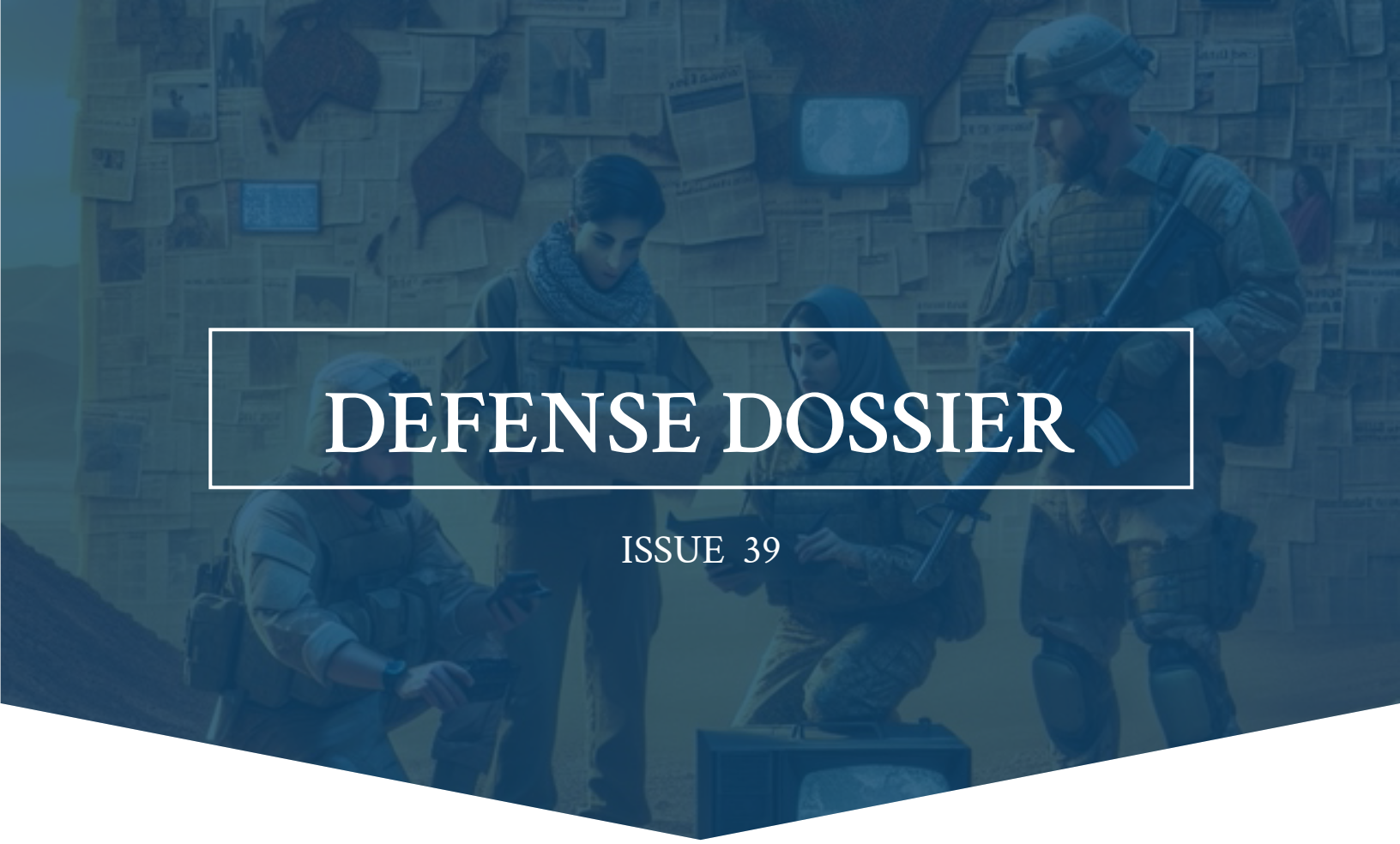


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NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS
Alberto M. Fernandez

SHOWING UP IN THE NEW BATTLE OF IDEAS
Brian Katulis

A CHANGED CHINESE APPROACH TO THE MIDDLE EAST
Ilan Berman

THE TALIBAN'S THIRD ACT
Davood Moradian

RETHINKING AMERICA'S ROLE IN THE WAR OF IDEAS
Colin P. Clarke

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

The Taliban's Third Act

Davood Moradian

Since their emergence out of Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, the Taliban have occupied a significant place in Afghan, regional and global politics. The February 2020 peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban paved the way for the movement's third incarnation as the ruling authority of Afghanistan, following its first reign (1996-2001) and subsequent successful insurgency phase (2002-2021).

Numerous studies have been published over the years about various aspects of the Taliban's two previous incarnations. By contrast, world attention—and opinion—regarding the group's third phase is still evolving. Indeed, even the terminology differs; while the Taliban refer to themselves as 'The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," the UN has labelled them as "the de facto authorities" of Afghanistan, while various governments describe the movement interchangeably as "the Taliban regime," "the Taliban government," "the Taliban militias" and "the occupying Taliban."

But what is the group, really? And what does it stand for today, in its third iteration? The Taliban's organizational and ideological origins are rooted in historical Islamist uprisings against foreign occupation, secular governments and Western modernity. These responses have been encapsulated in four key Islamic concepts—Jihad[1] , *Sharia*[2] , *Jahilliya*[3] and *Ummah-Caliphate*[4]—which collectively animate the Taliban's new order.

GENDER APARTHEID...

While every culture, religion and tradition is contaminated by some kind of misogyny, the Taliban can be said to have won this inglorious contest. Leading international lawyers and Western officials describe Taliban's gender policy as the world's first gender apartheid,[5] and a manifestation of crimes against humanity.[6] The Taliban's views and treatment of women, in turn, are shaped by three entrenched misogynistic traditions: Islamic law's discriminatory provisions, Pashtun society's deeply misogynistic cultural norms, and Islamist anti-Western beliefs.

First, while far more progressive than its preceding monotheistic religions, women in Islam are not accorded equal rights in many respects. Any Islamic government is therefore institutionally discriminatory, particularly in public and political spheres.

Second, the Taliban's cultural and ethnic basis is Pashtun, one of Afghanistan's main ethnic groups. The place of women in Pashtun culture has been comparatively robust, with females occupying a prominent place in the public sphere, alongside various ethnic groups. Nevertheless, misogynistic practices remain entrenched and widespread, particularly in rural communities. For instance, protecting the chastity of women is a top Pashtun cultural norm, meaning as a practical matter that women must be excluded from the public eye and shielded from exposure. Thus, even the most cosmopolitan Pashtun politicians, such as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, chose to hide their highly educated wives from public eyes.[7]

Finally, the anti-Western beliefs of Islamists underpin the Taliban's systematic discrimination against women. Islamists view Western support for women rights as part of a project to weaken Islamic values and heritage. Accordingly, one of the Taliban's early and symbolic acts upon their return to power in Kabul was

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to replace Afghanistan's Ministry of Women Affairs with their notorious Ministry of Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice.[8]

…AND ETHNIC RULE

The Taliban today also operates on a clearly ethno-centric basis. The Pashtuns are one of Afghanistan and Pakistan's main ethnic groups, and the Taliban are essentially a Pashtun movement and phenomenon. They arose from Pashtun-dominated regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that character has remained. According to the UN, "Taliban governance structures remain highly exclusionary, Pashtun-centred and repressive towards all forms of opposition. The majority of de facto ministers are Pashtun (there are five non-Pashtun ministers). Among provincial governors there is a similarly high Pashtun representation (25 out of 34), reflecting the Taliban's Pashtunization strategy of the 1990s, although there is more variation at the district level."[9]

The Taliban's presence in non-Pashtun areas, meanwhile, is seen as an occupation – one reinforced by acts such as the group's systematic eradication of Persian language and cultural symbols.[10] This has had the effect of further deepening Afghanistan's century-old ethnic and linguistic fault lines.

Indeed, among the country's political class, Afghanistan has become a de facto partitioned polity, divided between the Pashtuns and Persian-speaking communities (Farsiwans). The Taliban's response and strategy has been the forceful oppression and assimilation of non-Pashtun communities. Taliban ambitions to build a Pashtun-centric polity bring them closer to ethno-nationalist Pashtuns. This shared political objective explains why both previous Pashtun presidents of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, refused to mobilize their respective Pashtun bases against the Taliban. Many Western observers and policymakers, however, were blind to the ethnic driver of the Afghan conflict.

EXCLUSIONARY RELIGION

Another important feature of the Taliban's governing system and political identity is their sectarian nature. The Taliban are entirely comprised of Sunni Muslims. The exclusion of non-Sunni communities from power is not confined to political power, moreover. Such communities now face legal discrimination under Taliban rule.

It was not always this way. The previous constitutional order recognized Shia jurisprudence, enabling the country's Shia Muslims to conduct their personal and religious affairs according to their own sectarian principles. By contrast, the Taliban's refusal to recognize Shia jurisprudence has deprived a quarter of Afghan citizens of their religious rights.

Nor is it only the Shia communities that now live under the Taliban's Sunni dictatorship. The Taliban have also banned other religious sects and groups in the country, such as the Salafi, the Sufi, and the Hizb Tahrir activists whose conduct and doctrines do not fall strictly in line with the Taliban's rigid Deobandi precepts.[11]

ENSHRINING IDEOLOGY

The Taliban emerged from Afghanistan and Pakistan's religious Madaris (the plural of *madrassa*, or Islamic religious school) in the 1990s. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the elevated role of Madaris and mullahs under the Taliban's reign. The entire leadership of all Taliban-run units, including at the district level, are mullahs.

This, it should be noted, is a modern innovation. Historically, mullahs belonged to the lower class of society and state across the Islamic world. The Islamic Revolution in Iran elevated the socio-political status

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and power of Shia mullahs for the first time in history. Similarly, the Taliban's ascendence to political power is unprecedented in Sunni Islam. The Taliban's monopoly on state power and structures has enabled them to begin a nationwide campaign to build religious Madaris across the country. The Taliban's ministry of education has recently boasted of enrolling close to one million students in religious Madaris, out of Afghanistan's 35 million person population.[12] By way of comparison, in Pakistan (population 230 million) there are 2.5 million madrassa students. And in Turkey, the Islamic-leaning government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not yet achieved its ambition of recruiting 120,000 religious mullahs.[13]

The exponential growth of Madaris under the Taliban will have far reaching consequences for the fabric of Afghan society, for regional stability and indeed for global security. The Taliban view the Madaris as their political backbone and their main source of recruitment. The movement presently relies on former fighters to maintain its grip on power. However, these cadres are struggling to transition from insurgency into civilian and bureaucratic roles. Madari graduates will soon replace the current manpower. And, consistent with the Taliban's overall belligerent ideological identity and objectives, their Madaris will reflect the vision and strengthen the functioning of the Taliban's totalitarian regime. Similar to the way communist dictatorships relied on a specific class—workers, in the case of the Soviet Union, and peasants in the case of Maoist China — the Taliban and Madaris/mullahs will have a mutually beneficial strategic partnership.

THE LESSON FOR OTHER ISLAMISTS

The Taliban's relations with their fellow militant Islamist movements can be looked at from two angles: political/inspirational and operational. The former dimension is far more important and consequential than the latter, as "ideas" are the driving forces behind terrorist acts. If Berlin was at the heart of the Cold War, symbolically and strategically, Kabul has held that role for the Islamist global war against the West. Afghanistan was the first place where militant Islamists defeated an infidel global empire, the Soviet Union. But the victorious mujahideen groups failed to sustain their initial victory by building an Islamist polity and society. That failure has now been corrected. By signing the 2020 Doha peace agreement, the Taliban achieved their three objectives: imposing a humiliating defeat on the U.S. and its Western allies; establishing their "Islamic Caliphate," and; initiating the process of Islamization of Afghan society.

It was therefore not surprising to see the jubilation of various Islamist movements at the Taliban victory. The shared, decades-old struggle to establish a Sharia-enforcing Islamic state had born fruit. Osama Bin Laden and Abu Bakr Baghdadi may have received overwhelming global attention, but those ideologues had failed to achieve such a goal. The Taliban had now succeeded.

The significance of the Taliban's victory to the Islamist ecosystem can be best symbolized by the erection of a replica of the Dome of the Rock on the top of Kabul's tallest hill, overlooking the former U.S. Embassy. The monument was built by a Turkish company,[14] and engendered a congratulatory message from the Iranian embassy. Moreover, since the start of the ongoing violence in Gaza, there have been numerous meetings between the head of Taliban's political office in Doha with his fellow Qatari guest, the representative of Hamas.[15] Taliban flags are now

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appearing at pro-Palestinian demonstrations around the world, including in Jerusalem.

Nor is the Taliban's victory confined to the symbolic. The Taliban have developed a strategy of the "management of terrorism," which includes cooperation, co-optation, containment, and concealment of different terrorist groups.[16] This policy has paid abundant dividends. The Taliban present themselves as "good terrorists," capable of fighting "bad" ones—such as the Islamic State's Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K.

AMERICA'S FLAWED APPROACH

U.S. -Taliban relations can be said to defy conventional wisdom. America's war with the Taliban was its longest war—one that, as one scholar opined, ended up being "The war that destroyed America."[17] It was waged as the first and central battle of global war on terrorism, but strangely the U.S. has refused to put the Taliban on its proscribed list of terrorist organizations. And indeed, just few days after the collapse of the U.S.-supported constitutional order in Kabul and the Taliban's occupation of the U.S. Embassy, CIA director William Burns quietly visited the Afghan capital to meet with its new rulers.[18]

This engagement has continued. In addition to America's role as the main financial contributor to Afghanistan's Taliban-run economic and financial sectors, Washington continues to provide diplomatic and political support by maintaining regular diplomatic and intelligence contacts with the movement while actively discouraging any serious and armed resistance to it.

Overall, one can describe the current U.S. view of the Taliban as that of a "frenemy"—morally repugnant, but strategically useful and financially affordable. On the Taliban side, however, the U.S. undoubtedly remains "the great Satan." Nevertheless, the Taliban's sense of victory has given them the confidence to flirt with it. The Taliban are convinced they have outsmarted the West, and treat their American counterparts as "useful idiots," capitalizing on the West's desperation, distraction, ignorance, apathy, opportunism and cyclical politics. The end result is a new chapter in Afghanistan's long-running tragedy and America's entanglement in it.

ENDNOTES

[1] The doctrine of *Jihad* is as old as Islam itself. The prophet Mohammed is reported to have led nearly thirty military expeditions during his 10 year rule over Medina. Ever since, *Jihad* has been a permanent feature of the Islamic world, used to give religious legitimacy to nationalist/liberation movements. In the case of the Taliban, whose ideological roots date back to the Deobandi movement of the late 19 century, it has been weaponized to the liberation of Muslim lands and the (re)Islamization of society.

[2] If *Jihad* is the military-political strategy for the Islamist movements, enforcing *Sharia* is the conceptual and unifying framework for an Islamic polity/order. The word does not appear in the Koran, however, nor is it included in the five pillars of the core beliefs and practices of Islam. Rather, the term is one invented by medieval Muslim jurists to help organize the personal and social obligations of Muslims per Islam's ethical basis. But if *Sharia* is a contested legal and theocratic term, it is a very powerful political and ideological framework for mobilising and unifying for social and political movements.

[3] The third term, *Jahiliya*, is also a historic concept, one which has been transfigured by modern Islamist movements to advance their totalitarian ends. *Jahiliya* is the state of ignorance understood to have characterised Arabian society prior to Islam. Upon his

conquest of Mecca, the Prophet Mohammed began a number of acts to remove from the newly Islamized society its pre-Islamic character and appearance, such as banning polytheism and the destruction of idols that were worshipped by the Meccan tribes. In much the same way, modern Islamists have acted violently to suppress acts, symbols and practices deemed at variance with their interpretation of the correct interpretation of Islam.

[4] If the institution of nation-state is the key to the Westphalian system, the concept of *Ummah* [the community of believers] and its twin concept of *Caliphate* can be characterized as the Islamic equivalent. This explains why all Islamist movements, including the Taliban, are pan-Islamist in scope, and their inherent difficulty in aligning with the secular concept/institution of nation-state.

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