Religious Figures, Insurgency, and Jihad in Southern Afghanistan

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WH SPEAKS FOR ISLAM?

Muslim Grassroots Leaders and Popular Preachers in South Asia

By Mumtaz Ahmad, Dietrich Reetz, and Thomas H. Johnson
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Religious Figures, Insurgency, and Jihad in Southern Afghanistan

Thomas H. Johnson

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NOTE The views expressed in this essay should not be construed as an official position or policy of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, or Naval Postgraduate School. This article would have been virtually impossible to complete had it not been for the generous data supplied to the author by a colleague and Kandahar City resident under the pseudonym Conrad Jennings. His data, based on observations and interviews conducted over the last three years in Loy Kandahar, complemented much of the author’s own data gathered in Kandahar and Helmand in August–September 2008 and May–June 2009. The author would also like to thank Matthew Dearing, Matthew Dupee, M. Chris Mason, Wali Ahmed Shaaker, Ahmad Waheed, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
EXEcutive Summary

This essay examines the social and political roles of religious figures in southern Afghanistan in an attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of the present insurgency.

main findings

- Islamic groups and Afghan mullahs play a critical role in politics in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban, Deobandis, Sufis, and Tablighi Jamaat are the most important religious groups and influences in southern Afghanistan.
- Religion and politics are blurred as religious authorities frequently shift between religious and political roles. The West has had a tendency to misunderstand the relevance and implications of these roles.
- Jihad is an important feature of Islamic life in southern Afghanistan. Large numbers of southern insurgents are waging jihad for the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). Several predominant religious figures and influences tend to advocate jihad. The West has underestimated the role of jihad in the present Taliban movement.
- The ulema council in southern Afghanistan represents a sector of the clergy that has remained relatively un-radicalized by war. Insurgents and jihadists have frequently assassinated members of this council because it offers legitimate opposition to the Taliban's radicalization of young madrasah students and unemployed villagers.
- The political activities of two Islamic groups that represent a large number of rural and poor Afghans are misunderstood. Some Sufi groups in Kandahar have allied with insurgents since 2003 and have promoted rural resistance to secular authority. The Tablighi Jamaat, though avowedly apolitical and detached from the insurgency, has a relationship with the mujahedeen who regularly attend this group's meetings.

policy implications

- Political and military strategies aimed at countering the Taliban insurgency while ignoring the Taliban jihad are ill-founded and will probably not succeed.
- Currently there is very little contact between NATO or ISAF and the ulema of southern Afghanistan. Rather than stereotype all religious leaders and institutions as militant fundamentalist, policies that incorporate certain religious groups into civil society should be considered.
- There is a critical need to fix the corrupt justice system in Afghanistan. A central component of the Taliban's strategy to win the trust and confidence of the Afghan population is based on the role of Taliban mullahs as arbitrators of individual and community disputes. This “shadow” justice system is proving very popular.
The more we stress Islam as a unit of analysis, the more we face the dangers of abstraction and unwarranted generalization. Islam keeps us mired in debates about normativity, where an emphasis on Muslims allows us to appreciate the dynamic nature of Islam as a lived experience.¹

Religious authorities play a critical role in the present conflict in Afghanistan.² Consider, for example, the fact that virtually all Taliban leaders, from the senior regional leadership down to subcommanders at the district level, are mullahs³ (religious leaders).⁴ Indeed it is reasonable to argue that the present conflict in Afghanistan represents a classic insurgency wrapped in the religious narratives of jihad.⁵ Although a broad majority of the foot soldiers in this insurgency might be “accidental guerrillas,”⁶ the leaders are for the most part committed Afghan religious figures.⁷ Hence, to understand this conflict and its nuances, it is important to attempt to understand the religious figures and phenomena in Afghanistan as well as their societal roles.⁸

The role of religious figures in insurgencies and jihads has been a mainstay of Afghanistan’s history. David Edwards argues that Afghan religious personalities are central to the moral authority as well as to the “contradictions” of Afghan society. These contradictions together with the “artificiality of the Afghan nation-state” reflect critical, historical components of the “deep structure” of Afghan conflict.⁹ Regimes ranging from Hamid Karzai’s to the era of Amanullah Khan (1919–29) have been existentially threatened by, and have had difficulties in subduing, rural religious conservative insurgencies. This has especially been the case when Afghan state authority has been perceived to challenge or offend traditional Islamic values. The national political dominance in Afghan politics of organized religious groups compared to dynastic monarchal groups, however, is a rather new phenomenon.¹⁰ Historically, the degree of regime success in subduing an Afghan insurgency has largely been a function of the extent to which the regime is viewed as legitimate in the eyes of the population. Critical here is the fact that since the time of the Achaemenids and the Parthians history has demonstrated that the legitimacy of Afghan governance is derived from two immutable sources: dynastic sources, usually in the time of the Achaemenids and the Parthians history has demonstrated that the legitimacy of Afghan governance is derived from two immutable sources: dynastic sources, usually in the

² Unless otherwise specified, the term “religious figures of authority” extends to include the Taliban as well as other figures who would not necessarily identify themselves as such or who work together with the government.
³ Author’s interview with senior State Department and Department of Defense analysts and officials, Washington, D.C., March 2009. It should be noted, however, that there are many cases where a Taliban commander will adopt (or be given) the title “mullah”—still implicitly suggesting the importance of religious figures in this insurgency/jihad.
⁴ Traditionally mullahs have served as village spiritual advisors as well as elementary teachers and are paid by donations from the community, often supplementing their income through farming or a trade. Mullahs vary considerably by educational background from being illiterate to necessarily identifying themselves as such or who work together with the government.
⁵ For a discussion of Taliban narratives, see Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters),” Small Wars and Insurgencies 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 317–44.
⁶ On “accidental guerrillas,” see David Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Kilcullen argues that an accidental guerrilla is an individual motivated to fight due to an encroachment on the local social network or way of life.
⁷ Some observers argue that the social changes made during the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war are what gave power to religious leaders and village mullahs. See, for example, Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontiers,” International Security 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 70. It is also important to note that millions of Afghan refugees settled in Pakistan during the anti-Soviet jihad and were indoctrinated by Islamist mullahs in these camps. Many of these refugees eventually returned to Afghanistan as committed Islamists.
form of monarchies and tribal patriarchies, and religious sources.  This problem of legitimacy is especially acute at the local and village level of rural Pashtun society, for whom dynastic and religious authority has been paramount for over a thousand years.

The objective of this essay is to briefly address issues of Islam, politics, and the dynamics of religious authority in southern Afghanistan—the traditional spiritual center of the country and a significant focus of Taliban insurgent activity.  In doing so, this essay will examine the following topics: the cultural and religious mores and tropes of Loy Kandahar, the ulema shura of southern Afghanistan, the role that the Afghan media plays in legitimizing figures of religious authority and how certain religious figures manipulate this media attention, the Taliban’s strategic use of symbols and the media to gain legitimacy, and the Tablighi Jamaat and Sufis in southern Afghanistan. These extremely complex topics will be addressed using anecdotal experience and evidence, interviews conducted in the region over the last few years, and other data gathered, in part, in greater southern Afghanistan.

The fundamental question that this paper seeks to address is that of Islam’s public persona: who speaks for Islam in Afghanistan? The extent of the historical and cultural tradition of these religious figures’ political involvement is then examined, for where there is religious influence there is also bound to be some element of power play. Subsidiary questions look into what the sources of these religious figures’ influence are, how these sources are changing, and what the fundamental factors of this influence are—i.e. the base societal conditions in southern Afghanistan and how they shape the way religious figures can operate.

Southern Afghanistan is an interesting case study in part because so little has been written on the exact dynamics of the interaction between religion and politics, even for a group as prominent as the Taliban. The area of “greater Kandahar” remains the spiritual and strategic heart of the present conflict, and as such an increased understanding of the religious dimension can help prevent mistakes borne of ignorance and impoverished assumptions. There is no doubt that religious figures have, are, and will continue to play a central role in militant mobilizations in Afghanistan. Understanding such mobilizations is ultimately the goal of this essay.

Cultural and Religious Influences in Southern Afghanistan

Nearly all Afghans are Muslim, with Islam serving as a common frame of reference and key cognitive driver for the vast majority of the population. Undoubtedly, Islam is the only characteristic that nearly all Afghans have in common. Yet popular Islamic ideas and beliefs are rooted in a mix of culture, self-interpreted religious views, tribal values, money, influence, and personal connections. Although religion has clearly helped to shape Afghan values systems and codes of behavior for generations, it would nevertheless be wrong to infer that this fact results in unanimity of opinion concerning all things Muslim. Islam is not a monolithic entity in Afghanistan just as

11 On Afghan governance during this period, see Louis Dupree, Afghanistan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).


13 It is important to note that the terms “Taliban” and “Talib” are not used here as a blanket term for anyone opposed to the Afghan government but rather as a term meaning religious students educated in madaras (Islamic schools, plural of madrasah).

14 Ulema is a collective term for doctors of Islamic sciences and graduates of Islamic studies or private studies with an alim (one who possesses the quality of lim or knowledge of Islamic law, theology, and traditions). A shura is a council or consultative body.
Christianity is not a monolithic entity in the United States or Europe. Afghan Islam encompasses a wide range of opinions—including reformists, foreign-educated progressives, ascetics, radicals, Salafists, Deobandis, Talibs, and conservative judicial scholars, among others. All of these can be pro-government or anti-government (and sometimes both), West-loving or West-hating; there is no uniformity of opinion. Moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that all southern political, economic, and social behavior is driven merely by religious dynamics. A variety of intervening variables such as the urban-rural divide, geography, culture, and quams and affinity groups are also important influences that must be recognized. These intervening variables of influence will be the next topic of assessment and discussion.

**Rural Population Distribution**

The most important and relevant division within southern Afghan society, the divide between urban and rural populations, is often glossed over by Western analysts. Cleavages between the urban and rural populations of Loy (Greater) Kandahar have long been a driving force of southern politics, social interactions, and conflicts as well as aspects of Islamic practice.

Population statistics dating back to 2004 (the best and most recent data available) demonstrate that only 12% of southern Afghans belong to urban communities in Loy Kandahar; rural society makes up 88% of the population (see Figure 1). When you look outside Kandahar Province, the figures become even starker with only 5%, 2%, and 4% for the residents of Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul provinces respectively living in urban environments. The south is primarily a rural environment, and this fact is important when we consider the role religious figures play in southern Afghanistan. There is no question that urban and rural Afghanistan have distinct cultures. These cultures in turn play a significant role in determining how a particular person or group of people will behave and respond to certain types of authority figures—be they religious or political, or conservative, moderate, or radical.

Attempts to modernize the south (and the never-ending conflict between the traditional and the modern) are central concerns of the area’s ideological battleground. Attempts to institute modern political or social agendas have not necessarily been met with enthusiasm in Loy Kandahar. Consider, for example, how the south responded to the recent “democratic” elections held in Afghanistan. While the vast majority of Afghan provinces had registered voter turnout rates for the 2005 provincial elections of 60%–70%, the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul had rates of 25.3%, 36.8%, 23.4%, and 20% respectively. Interviews conducted this past summer among village elders and leaders in Kandahari districts suggest that there was little interest in the 2009 presidential election or local provincial and district elections in the south. In fact, it was further posited during these interviews that the Taliban were not overly interested in attempting to disrupt these elections because of the apparent apathy of the Kandaharis toward

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15 Quams refers to a communal group whose sociological basis may vary; it may be a clan—in tribal zones—a village, an ethnic group, an extended family, or a professional group.


17 Loy Kandahar refers to the geographical area encompassing Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul provinces.


20 Personal interviews of district and village elders, Kandahar City, May–June 2009.
them.\textsuperscript{21} Though the day of what would ultimately turn out to be a blatantly corrupt election did see a spike in insurgent activities, it was not as intense as the Americans or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) expected.

The village continues to be a pivotal and defining institution of life in southern Afghanistan, and many villagers view Kandahar City with suspicion and disdain. For a society that—at least on one level—is as traditional as Afghanistan, the concern of much of the southern rural population is that Kandahar City is a source of corruption and iniquity. Indeed, the Taliban regularly play on this belief and consider the city as the area where infidels live. Further, the Taliban use this justification to legitimize their attacks in the city.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Geography}

The effect of Afghanistan’s geography is often underestimated as a factor that influences social behavior. In southern Afghanistan, the distances involved, high levels of insecurity, and the sometimes difficult terrain between villages have helped give rise to the “one-family-one-mosque” phenomenon, which is discussed below. In addition, isolated and fairly inaccessible locations are prevalent in the south, helping to create a culture of “traveling mullahs” who satisfy the need for figures of authority—sometimes simply to mediate local disputes. Many of these mullahs also

\textsuperscript{21} Personal interviews with district and village elders, Kandahar City, May–June 2009.

\textsuperscript{22} Personal interview with Kandahari citizen, Kandahar City, September 2008. This same interviewee told the story of a friend who was apprehended by Taliban. This person told his abductors that he was a nurse—not a government employee or official—and served all people. The Taliban replied that they had “permission” and a duty to kill all “Muslim infidels” (but not their women and children) who live in Kandahar City.
help to solidify the Taliban narrative through preaching and, indeed, encouraging and prompting individuals to join the insurgency against Kabul and the “infidels.”

The geography of irrigated lands of southern Afghanistan especially around Kandahar City has also played a role in defining certain social norms and influences. As Thomas Barfield has suggested “these rich irrigated lands... supported a hierarchical political system that required large agricultural surpluses to sustain them. It supported an elite of landowners whose tribal followers had in many cases been reduced to their economic clients.” This factor has significantly influenced the agrarian economy of southern Afghanistan as well as the development of important landowner families in the politics and social structure of the region, such as the Durrani Mohammadzais and Popalzais.

Kandahar’s typography also influences the security situation in the province. The southern half of Kandahar is dominated by sparsely inhabited deserts and a porous border with Pakistan, accenting by the large border-crossing at Spin Boldak, where both licit and illicit goods transit through every day. The northern portion of Kandahar consists of wadis (dry riverbeds) and hilly terrain and lacks reliable roadways, making the region ideal for guerilla activity and the use of improvised explosive devices. Furthermore, the rocky, inhospitable terrain of western Uruzgan Province, which borders northern Kandahar, has provided a necessary refuge for the training, resting, and cycling of Taliban foot soldiers into the southern Afghanistan provinces.

**Pashtun Society and Culture**

Pashtun society and culture is the dominant influence in southern Afghanistan, not least because Pashtuns make up the vast majority of the population and because the south has been historically the heartland of Pashtun influence in Afghanistan as a whole. Exact demographic statistics are impossible to come by, and the last accurate census was conducted decades ago, but it is safe to assume that at least 85% of the population in southern Afghanistan is ethnically Pashtun.

At the expense of overgeneralizing, Pashtuns tend to be pragmatic individuals who usually come to recognize early in their lives the core importance of their religion and relations with religious authorities. Village mullahs, whose role in rural communities has evolved over the centuries, are complemented by religious figures such as sayyeds. The family lineage of sayyeds is traced to the lineage of the Prophet, qazis, or religious law experts/shariah judges—either mawlawi, who teach at a higher level in religious schools (madaris) or pirs, who teach at Sufi madaris or at collective prayer sites where Sufis congregate.

Depending on a particular situation, people will be more or less tempered by their interactions with and the roles of local religious figures, resulting in one of the reasons that the religious make-up and identity of many southern Pashtuns is so difficult to define. For a traditional religious elder—a mullah or mawlawi, for instance—mediation and conflict resolution is an essential part of his mandate and identity, but this role also forms part of the basis of that same identity and authority. Both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan as well as in the border areas, religious elders have played this role since the early nineteenth century. Sana Haroon, for example, explores the little-understood traditional role of the rural mullah as the Pashtun equivalent of the circuit-riding judge in nineteenth century America, serving as an impartial arbiter of disputes between

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clans (khels). Even in a jirga (a village council that has legislative and judicial authority for the tribal community) the authority of the elder mullah in convoking religious legitimacy over the proceedings is greater than many appreciate, especially in the form of mediation. The implications of this authority for the present insurgency in Afghanistan are significant, and the Taliban are well aware of this and use it to their advantage. Nevertheless, in deference to the implicit implications of the role of the rural mullah, religious authority only extends as far as the people let it. The idea of near-total subservience to figures of religious authority has little basis in fact in Afghanistan. A good example of this that is little understood in the West is the obscure phenomenon of “one-family-one-mosque” that is especially prominent in southern rural areas.

**Family Culture**

Loy Kandahari villages will often consist entirely of members of a single extended family (kahol) or clan (khel). Where different families or groups coexist in one area, there will often be one mosque for each of the individual families. Though particularly prominent in the south, this has been observed in communities from Khost Province in eastern Afghanistan to Farah Province in the southwest.

Although this phenomenon is also witnessed in the Afghan environs of rich or wealthy landowners who are known to construct mosques to help improve their public standing, one would expect it to be rarer in poverty-stricken rural areas. The one-mosque-one-family concept promotes religious dynamics that are highly personal and relatively immune to rhetoric and manipulation by outside forces, and it is often difficult for mass movements and popular uprisings to significantly penetrate these mosques. For example, a prominent family will not only be responsible for physically building the mosque but also for the selection of the mosque’s mullah. During a recent research trip in southern Afghanistan, the author inquired to a prominent landowner, who had built a new mosque for his family in the village of Deh-e Bagh in the Dand District of Kandahar Province, as to what would happen if the mullah of the mosque started preaching in a way inconsistent with his family’s beliefs or political orientations. The elder responded that “this would never happen because I hired the mullah and I would fire him if such preaching occurred. He works for me and will follow my instructions concerning such matters.”

While the one-family-one-mosque concept has a tendency to insulate people from certain aspects of political Islam, the concept of jihad has the opposite effect. Historically, the connection between Islam and jihad has been extremely important for Kandahar with disenfranchised Afghans responding to the unifying call of jihad as a reaction to perceived corruption, government failure, and outside interference. In fact, jihad has traditionally represented a kind of public sphere of Kandahari Islam, where religious authority figures can command more immediate support and obedience of the public. The call of “Islam under threat” is an extremely powerful incentive for public and communal action and historically has been a consistent motivator and force for Kandaharis to stand behind.

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26 The author is indebted to M. Chris Mason for bringing this interesting point to his attention.
27 Based on the author’s discussions with and empirical observations of Conrad Jennings. The author also observed this phenomena first-hand in villages in Kandahar’s Dand District in June 2009.
28 It seems reasonable to assume that “privatizing” mosques significantly dampens the collective Islam, where the mosque serves as the meeting place for social events or for the rallying of its members to combat an injustice or perceived threat. See Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 31.
Everyday Islamic Traditions

Islam, of course, is not just about following rules. The core of Islam—as with most religions—is the provision of principles for living a moral life, and the regular daily cycle of prayers can remind the faithful of these values. It is for this reason that Kandaharis will often make reference to the idea of living a more moral life, even if they do not necessarily always follow it to its conclusion. A sampling of the key dimensions of southern Afghanistan’s Islamic traditions is presented below.

Namaz. Islam affects the everyday life of a southern Afghan in a variety of ways. The five daily prayers, namaz, for the most part, are integrated into the rhythm of the Afghan day. It is not seen as an interruption to stop what one is doing to pray. A corollary example of this is the use of a patu (patkai) on which to pray. A woolen blanket used during the day (especially during the winter) as a wrap-around cloak is taken off, put on the floor, and prayers are made there. The patu is a good indication and reflective of the effortless ubiquity of Islam in the daily life of Afghans.

Zakat. Another Islamic concept that demands mention is zakat (alms for the poor). Zakat is followed and often employed by the Taliban as a motivating force to encourage villagers to contribute funds or assets to their cause.

Sharia courts. Yet another extremely important dynamic are sharia (Islamic law) courts that represent a popular alternative to government legal institutions, which have been marred by years of corruption and inefficient legal processes. In numerous areas, especially in the rural southern Pashtun hinterlands, the Taliban are perceived as not only doing a better job of governance—via “shadow” provincial and district governments—and providing justice than Kabul; the Taliban are also seen as more legitimate than the distant and unpopular leadership in Kabul. Throughout southern Afghanistan, the Taliban have established parallel government systems including provincial and district level administrators, police chiefs, and judges; just how effective or widespread these informal power structures are is difficult to assess. But one element of the Taliban’s shadow government that has been particularly popular throughout Loy Kandahar is the alternative judicial system. Today, faced with a choice between a protracted case before an inscrutable system of state justice, in which he who can pay the highest bribes to the most people over the longest period of time invariably wins, the Pashtuns are instead turning in droves to the rapid, transparent justice of the mullahs of the Taliban. Justice and, particularly, mediation are indeed a traditional part of the mullahs’ role in the community and the Taliban have masterfully played on this reality.

Madrasah. The institution of the madrasah, too, is an important feature of the day-to-day landscape of southern Afghanistan. The role that madaris have played in the political life of southern Afghanistan has fluctuated over the years and, since the 1980s, permanently changed in character—endowing the religious clergy with political power and influence. This culminated in the “clerical revolution” (with popular backing) of the Taliban in 1994. According to Olivier Roy,

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30 At dawn (fajr), at noon (dhuhr), in the afternoon (asr), at sunset (maghrib), and at nightfall (ishaa).

31 This was a common theme among the 60 or so village elders, tribal leaders, and even some Afghan government leaders interviewed by the author in various locations in Afghanistan, August–September, 2008 and May–June 2009. It is important to note, however, that the desire of locals for Taliban court systems because of corruption and inefficiency of the government’s system. In rural communities most of the legal matters relating to land and crime would never have been legislated by the government (even in the 1970s) and as such that people go to the Taliban courts is not so surprising. For a recent discussion of the Taliban court systems, see “Afghanistan: In Search of Justice,” National Public Radio, webpage, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98121740.


the Afghan Taliban is the only contemporary Islamic movement whose basis is a network of rural madaris, effectively tapping the well of rural southern Afghan conservatism and puritanism.\textsuperscript{34} The full history of this change is beyond the scope of this short essay, but the profound effect this had on communities should not be underestimated.

\textit{Jihad and a History of Conflict}

As suggested above, jihad is another important feature of Islamic life in southern Afghanistan. In many respects waging jihad has become a cornerstone of Islamic identity for many southern Afghans, as they have assumed the struggle for the predominance of God’s will, both within oneself and between other people. Though this will be explored more fully in later sections of this paper, it is very important to understand that a large number of southern insurgents are fighting in support of jihad and the implementation of sharia among other religious and ideological positions.

In contrast with the sheer numbers who volunteered for jihad in the 1980s, however, the calls of mullah networks are perhaps a less important influence in the present conflict than the chronic unemployment and social stagnation as of 2009. In the 1980s social structures were more active and influential, creating a framework for recruitment. And while this is not necessarily the case today, it would nevertheless be imprudent to discount the importance of jihad in southern religious life. This is especially true when assessing the motivations of the local as well as regional leaders of the Taliban.

There are a variety of other factors that influence the politics and relations of Afghans in the south. Conflict itself is an important factor that since the early 1970s has had a preeminent influence on southern society. Over 30 years of conflict have given the people of the south a somewhat unpredictable nature—in part stemming from a desire for self-preservation—that sometimes can work in opposition to core cultural and societal values of Islam or Pashtunwali (the unwritten Pashtun tribal code). In the wartime atmosphere of Kandahar, Helmand, or Zabul, there is a strong feeling of polarization, that others “are either with us or against us.” This applies across the spectrum of the population’s relations with the government, tribal elders, businessmen, and the Taliban, as well as to the foreign forces operating in the south.\textsuperscript{35}

One of the very significant consequences of the Afghan’s anti-Soviet jihad of the late 1970s and 1980s was the destruction of the Pashtun temporal maliks\textsuperscript{36} and khans and their replacement by Islamist mullahs as power brokers. This became even more important when Pakistan helped push the Taliban into Afghanistan in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{37} Pakistan purposefully deconstructed the traditional tribal order in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in an effort to promote radical Islamist mullahs who could recruit for the Afghan mujahideen in their conflict against the Soviet occupiers.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Olivier Roy, "Has Islamism a Future in Afghanistan?" in Maley, \textit{Fundamentalism Reborn}, 204.

\textsuperscript{35} Personal interviews with district and village elders, Kandahar City, May–June 2009.

\textsuperscript{36} The British first introduced the maliki system, which Pakistan retained. This system was aimed at creating reliable local elite whose loyalty could be rewarded by the state through special status, financial benefits, and official recognition of influence over the tribes. It was intended to provide a single spokesman for a khel with whom the British administration could deal in an attempt to replicate the Sandeman system among the egalitarian Pashtun.

\textsuperscript{37} Ahmed Rashid delves into the evolution of Pakistan’s support for radical Islamists and the Taliban as part of a comprehensive Afghan strategy. See Ahmed Rashid, \textit{Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 183–89.

**Political and Economic Elites**

Islam should not be seen as the only influence on the lives of southern Afghans. In Kandahar City the top class of businessmen or political leadership are not necessarily the most principled group, nor are they especially religious. Money, narcotics, and influence are important factors for this group, and religion has a more limited impact on their lives as compared to other segments of society. In fact, to understand Kandahari society one needs to understand the three secular layers of influence in Kandahar: family, khel, and tribal interests; licit business relationships; and illicit business relationships. For example, today Kandahari political, economic, and social dynamics cannot be fully understood without considering the tribal relations and competitions between, for example, the Popolzai, Barakzai, Noorzai, Alikozai, and Achakzai tribal entities and respective leaders such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, Mohammad Shah, Amir Lalai, Gul Agha Sherzai, Khalid Pashtun, Tor Jan, Aref Noorzai, Haji Safullah, Haji Mirwais Noorzai, Karimullah Naqib, Haji Agha Lalai Dastageri, Khan Mohammad, Talih Agha Karimullah, Haji Kareem Khan, and Abdul Razziq. In addition, the explicit business enterprises of leading Kandahari powerbrokers such as Ahmed Wali Karzai and Razia Agha Sherzai, as well as his brother Gul Agha Sherzai, who is a former governor of Kandahar and powerbroker extraordinaire, and their patrons are of similar importance. Finally, the milieu of contracts emanating from the ISAF’s presence in southern Afghanistan and who gets what from whom are critical in mapping the Kandahari power elite.

These political and financial elites of course do not hesitate to seem more or less religious as the situation demands. Religious figures thus may not have specific temporal power; however, they often prove instrumental in certain transactions that would otherwise be problematic.

**Religion and Authority in Southern Afghanistan**

[We should regard] as political all actors and activities involved in the establishment, maintenance or contestation of particular visions of public morality (“the good”) and of social order.39

Both mullahs and formally trained Islamic legal scholars, alim (singular of ulema), are significant and influential religious figures in southern Afghanistan. While village mullahs have ideally studied Islamic traditions (hadith) and Islamic law (fiqh), their actual formal education will vary from basically none to significant madrasah training. All mullahs, however, will lead mosque prayer sessions and conduct religious rituals such as birth rites, marriage, and funeral services at the village level. They are basically “ritual practitioners,” in the words of Oliver Roy.40

Mullahs have traditionally served as spiritual advisors to village elders, jurgas, and shuras and, for the most part, have been inconsequential to village politics. It has also been suggested that mullahs serve as the custodians of the principals of pashtunwali and “use their religious authority to pass binding judgments rooted in [pashtunwali] in the area of the tribal jirga.”41 This is an important social dynamic in southern Pashtun Afghanistan.

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41 Haroon, *Frontier of Faith*, 68.
Historically the vast majority of mullahs have rarely been militant. A mullah’s basic legitimacy customarily has come from his application of sharia and defense of the Islamic community. The role of the mullah has changed drastically with the rise of the Taliban, however. Though they were once primarily apolitical, serving the role of a glorified notary public, mullahs are now the leading political and ideological figures and voices of the Afghan insurgency. The present role of many mullahs in providing narratives and information to the village population has become a critical source of their influence and is the subject of the next section of this paper.

The Roles and Authority of Mullahs in Southern Afghanistan

Who controls the flow of information is vitally important in southern Afghanistan, and the control of religious information is intimately influenced by language and the relative lack of education realized in the southern Pashtun areas. Most of the population does not understand Arabic. This results in the Muslim faithful being almost entirely dependent on the local mullah to teach and interpret the words and lessons of the Koran. In many instances, especially in the rural southern hinterland, the mullah himself has no in-depth knowledge of Arabic and thus will rely on local traditions and oral narratives in his religious teachings and lessons. This interpretive duty results in considerable power for the mullahs.

The control of information also has an impact on the role of religious figures as mediators; they are seen as being both impartial and possessing a broader perspective as well as possessing pertinent legal expertise that allows them to pass judgment on certain issues. For example, the institution of the “Friday sermon,” a speech to the gathered faithful, which often touches on political issues (remember that there is considerably less distinction between politics and religion when compared with much Western religious thought). In many respects this sermon is an extension of their authority. Mullahs now regularly pass judgment on local political or governmental personalities as well as critique political and social situations.

Mullahs gain some of this authority through the receipt of foreign aid, much in the form of zakat, particularly from Middle Eastern and South Asian sources. Some of this aid, distributed through mosques, is most certainly aimed at strengthening the authority of the religious figures. Mullahs have become a focal point of resource distribution, and as such their authority has been strengthened.

Ulema Council

This religious interpretation of the rebellion was promoted by the ulema and the mullahs, a group strongly united in their struggle against the communist authorities, who had proclaimed a jihad against the regime. Represented everywhere in the country, they constituted an informal but efficient network for the transmission of information, as the rebellion of 1929 had already shown. In instances where the uprising was coordinated, for example in Logar [sic] or in Ghazni, the ulema played the leading role. In most insurrections the sermons of the mullahs were crucial: the people often assembled at the mosque before marching on the government command post. In the mosques, the habitual scene for discussion among the villagers, the mullah would use his influence to put forward a religious exegesis of resistance to authority, and his intervention often served to convince the hesitant by removing their doubts as

to the illegitimacy of the authorities….With the proclamation of jihad by the ulema the rebellion took on a universal nature.\textsuperscript{43}

The social and political role of mullahs and ulema has been crucial throughout the past 40 years of Afghan history. Looking back even further to the past two centuries, and including the Pakistani border areas, a trend of increased influence is evident, legitimized by a wide variety of dynamics. In Kandahar, mullah networks and the ulema council\textsuperscript{44} operate side by side as of 2009, but broadly speaking they are ideologically opposed to each other. The legitimacy of both these groups is drawn from a variety of sources, but three factors are worth considering here: tribes, age, and wealth.

Regardless of what members of ulema may say in interviews, the tribe that someone comes from is an important factor in the level of respect for that person—even before graduating from a madrasah.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, age is important only in that it takes time for an alim to mature as a figure and gain respect in society. Shia ulema tend to be younger, and a younger, more active member of the Shia clergy can advance and make a name for himself—within reason. It is doubtful, however, that Afghanistan, outside of the Hazarajat, will ever be fertile ground for the Shia.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, ulema in Afghanistan tend to be older members of society.

Wealth—of paramount importance to the non-religious or tribal oligarchy—is relatively unimportant for the ulema and mullah network. Popular opinion, as well as a whole host of folklore and proverbs, considers mullahs as de facto poor. The image of the mullah asking for money from the rich man is a common stereotype in Kandahari society. In many respects, however, this is a self-created narrative. In fact, grants of land and financial contributions to the mosques, and the establishment of madaris connected to the mosques, have served to make the mullahs among the wealthiest men in some rural areas in terms of total assets.\textsuperscript{47}

In Kandahar, aside from the significant role that the religious clergy took post-1994, there was no ulema council in the form that currently exists. The traditional role of the religious clergy was to assist in religious administrative duties (all the traditional aspects that we commonly associate with the clergy), to serve as part of the Haj and Awqaf ministry, and to serve in the Ministry of Justice. The ulema council in the south (with Kandahar as the focal point) represents a sector of the religious clergy that has remained relatively unradicalized by war. For example, consider Haji Mahmoud (originally from the Khakrez District of Kandahar Province).\textsuperscript{48} He is a writer, poet, and member of the ulema council and views his role as being quite simple: encouraging those who wish for a continuation of the conflict to start interacting with society in a more peaceful manner.\textsuperscript{49}

Members of the ulema council claim a salary of around $200 each month. Aside from their general duties, one of their main activities seems to be producing a government-funded magazine—\textit{Islami Diwa}—each month. The current head of Kandahar’s ulema council is Mawlawi Sayyed Mohammad Hanafi (Alizai by tribe and originally from Helmand Province). He was selected and


\textsuperscript{44} See the appendix for the text of the Ulema Shura Declaration, Kabul, March 19, 2009. One of the author’s interviewees suggested that a number of the members in the ulema council were only elders. Author’s interview, Kandahar City, September 2008.

\textsuperscript{45} Based on numerous personal interviews, Kandahar City, August and September 2008.

\textsuperscript{46} This is not to suggest that Shia do not exist in the south. There are important pockets of Shia Pashtuns in the Loy Kandahar, but their societal and political importance is slight.

\textsuperscript{47} The author is indebted to M. Chris Mason for this point.

\textsuperscript{48} Haji Mahmoud served as a minister of parliament in Kabul during the reign of Zahir Shah.

\textsuperscript{49} Interview of Haji Mahmoud by Conrad Jennings.
appointed to that position by Asadullah Khaled, the former governor of Kandahar—a fact that helps illustrate one aspect of the relatively unclear relationship between the Afghan government and the ulema in Kandahar.

The council consists of approximately 60 or 70 clerics from within the city and 5 or 6 from every district in the province, leading to a total of 140 or 150 mullahs and mawlawis who participate in the council. Some of the clergy in the city occasionally offer advice or counsel to the Afghan government (to the governor, for example), and there is even the possibility of outreach to Kabul via the central ulema council there and its head, Shinwari Saheb (Borhanullah Shinwari, former Afghan attorney general). The council's political “face” also extends as far as appearances in the local media: members write articles for newspapers and magazines, speak regularly on radio programs, and are quite frequently invited as guests onto local television stations.

Interactions of the Afghan domestic security apparatus—for example, Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)—with the ulema in Kandahar are clouded in secrecy, and it is difficult to determine the nature of explicit relationships with any degree of certainty. It is relatively clear though that government agencies are at the very least attempting to use the ulema as their eyes and ears in the districts. With tens of thousands of agents around the country, the ulema and mullah networks around the province would be a ripe resource for domestic security services, but it is highly likely that there are a significant number of paid informants among the ulema.

Some members of the religious clergy—certain prominent families within the city, for example—use religious legitimacy as a way to enhance their personal status and business interests. This can be purely an issue of status (for example, being called into advise the governor on a regular basis) or can be financial (i.e., receiving more contracts from foreign militaries for construction projects or private and convoy security duties). There is, however, very little contact between NATO/ISAF and the ulema of southern Afghanistan. In some ways, this is regrettable:

Lack of familiarity, not knowing how to engage, and political sensitivities in donor home countries can partly explain the lack of engagement from the side of the international community. Further, stereotyping of religious leaders and institutions as militant fundamentalists—often equated with the Taliban and radical madrasas—makes it difficult politically to include religious actors and institutions as partners in civil society. Within the Afghan government and the international community, many seem to be having concerns about making religious actors more powerful by granting them formal authority and recognition.50

Assassinations and the Impact of Conflict

Afghan ulema in southern Afghanistan have been targeted by members of the insurgency on a regular basis since 2001. Approximately 24 members of the official ulema council have been killed since 2001, along with dozens of mullahs and other religious figures, including Mawlawi Mohammad Rasoul (killed outside the Qadiri Mosque in Kandahar City), Qari Ahmadullah (killed in his home on March 1, 2009), Mawlawi Abdul Qayyum (shot outside the Red Mosque in Kandahar City), and most well-known Mawlawi Fayyaz, the first president of the ulema council.

and son of Mawlawi Darab Akhundzada. Mawlawi Fayyaz famously stripped Mullah Omar of his legendary *Amir ul-Mumineen* (commander of the believers or faithful) status during a public sermon (although it is debatable whether Fayyaz actually had the religious authority to do so) and survived numerous attempts against his life before insurgent gunmen eventually succeeded in murdering him.

Afghan ulema are probably targeted because they offer a legitimate opposition to the radical mobilizations and motivations offered by the Taliban to young madrasah students and the unemployed. This is not to suggest that the insurgency is only primarily motivated by ideology or religion. Many ulema council members are actively and deliberately provocative. They write articles, make pronouncements, and issue statements arguing, for example, that suicide bombing is an illegitimate form of jihad.

It is important to recognize that Afghanistan, and especially southern Afghanistan, is a region where conflict and war have been staples of daily life for over 30 years. This changes a society. Money (and the resultant status it brings) becomes one of the most important assets—people have less opportunity to exercise the luxury of having principles. It is clear that Islam throughout Afghanistan is radicalized and further politicized by conflict. This has resulted in less room for nuance in argumentation or for an intellectually formulated opinion, and this ultimately works against the members of the ulema council. At the same time, conflict also has a tendency to reinforce the need for figures of authority like the mullahs within society.

**Media and Religious Authority**

While new arenas of religious discourse have certainly been created, this does not necessarily mean that the messages, values and norms communicated within these spaces are also new. It can be argued that in many cases traditional forms of authority and articulation work very well in new media spaces, and indeed, have used these spaces to reach out to an expanded audience base.

Southern Afghanistan is commonly viewed as a provincial backwater, a place where new trends are rare and where ancient and fixed ideas hold sway. The Taliban are supposedly a symptom of this alleged cultural and social malaise; frequently, however, the Taliban are portrayed as being the innovators and consumers of techniques and technologies of the mass media and communication. In fact, this apparent paradox does not exist outside Western analyses of structures of religious authority and their means of communication. The religious clergy are probably the leading authority and experts on nuanced communications in southern Afghanistan. For example, the clergy utilizes locally effective media, from radio to print, to transmit culturally appropriate and resonant messages to a local audience. Likewise, the Taliban in general are extremely effective communicators and run a viable, influential information campaign through

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52 For general information about the influence of conflict on Islam in Afghanistan, see Roy, *Islam and Resistance*.

53 Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*, 323.

the south of the country. Nothing that NATO or ISAF produces approaches this level of effectiveness or sophistication.\textsuperscript{55} This effective use of the media in turn strengthens the authority of the communicator. As suggested above, information is one of the most important currencies in southern Afghanistan, and a prominent voice is crucial to establishing oneself as someone who possesses such information, which is exactly the reason why the ulema shura devotes so much time to communication work. The Taliban rightly see the continuation of this work as threatening to the transmission of their messages and thus attempt to stop the work of the ulema through a strategy of assassinations.

The use of media by religious figures of authority is simultaneously targeted and diffuse.\textsuperscript{56} Television is one such method, with mullahs and mawlawis frequently being interviewed in the studio or via telephone and consulted as experts. The Taliban manufacture DVDs and video clips suitable for viewing on mobile phones that are distributed to the target audience as well as to Afghan and foreign media outlets.\textsuperscript{57} The author, for example, witnessed Taliban videos and musical propaganda being downloaded from one person’s cell phone to another through the use of Bluetooth technologies in Kandahar City in June 2009. Radio is employed to similar effect. Newspapers (or publications of a similar style with similar means of distribution) are published by most religious figures of authority. Indeed, newspapers have traditionally been used by political parties and religiously inclined groupings to publicly express their views; this practice continues to this day, in Kandahar, Kabul, and throughout the country. As suggested above, the ulema in Kandahar publish a monthly magazine.

The Internet is also used by various groups, although with a higher variance of success. Websites in Afghanistan tend to be less sophisticated than those set up by religious groups in other countries, such as Pakistan and Iran. It is perhaps understandable that Afghanistan should be somewhat behind on this, but the form is not particularly important, as the target audience, for the most part, is not Afghan. This is particularly true of the websites of the Afghan Taliban, which are not used as tools of radicalization for an Afghan target audience. Instead, these websites primarily target an international audience.

\textit{Asif Mohseni and Religious Media}

The former mujahedeen commander and highly respected Shia religious scholar Asif Mohseni (his name is usually prefixed by either Ayatollah or Sheikh) is a good example of a highly engaged and sometimes pioneering member of Afghanistan’s religious clergy who is presently proactively influencing various segments of the Afghan population through the innovative use of religious media. It is instructive to identify and compare the strategies he employs “for Afghanistan’s future” with those employed to supposedly similar effect by the Taliban. This case study is not cited with specific reference to southern Afghanistan but, rather, to compare and contrast the use of media.

\textsuperscript{55} NATO has the technological capabilities but does not have the requisite linguistic and communicative expertise the Taliban have, which reaches more than just the urban areas. Although NATO can reach an urban audience, it has much more difficulty reaching the majority rural population, over which the Taliban have a virtual monopoly of influence.

\textsuperscript{56} The use of mass media by South Asian religious figures is not a new phenomenon. Haroon, \textit{Frontier of Faith}, 68, for example, describes how Pashtun religious figures in what was then India (now the tribal areas of Pakistan) were impressed in the early years of the twentieth century by techniques employed by the Jamaat-i Mujahidin: “Association with the Jamaat-i Mujahidin also heightened the profile of the mullas who had hitherto never used sophisticated methods of self-projection like printing presses. Impressed by the methods…such as posting proclamations of \textit{jihad} on trees through Mardan, the Haji Turangzai acquired his own printing press in 1916.”

\textsuperscript{57} The methods the various groups employ often overlap. Media outlets nominally aligned with the Afghan government and the broad goals of the United States and international administration often rebroadcast these propaganda clips because they are not able to generate enough original content and are thus forced to dance to the Taliban’s tune.
employed by the Taliban, and possibly to illustrate a model for a different kind of engagement with figures of religious authority. That is, Mohseni’s vision of influence through the media offers an example that other religious figures will probably emulate in the future.

The 76-year old Mohseni, originally from Kandahar, led the Shia party Harakat-i-Islami during the 1980s against the Soviets, although he did not take a position in the mujahedeen government that formed in 1992 after the fall of Najibullah. He participated at the Bonn conference in 2001 and was a strong advocate for Shia interests to be reflected in the Afghan constitution. Mohseni receives extensive funding directly from Iran, although the exact amounts are disputed. This funding has been instrumental in the two projects that he has been busy with over the past two years—a new mega-madrassah in Kabul and a television station of his own entitled Tamadon (civilization).

Mohseni’s madrasah, reportedly built at a cost of at least $5 million and half-funded by Iran, is located in west Kabul and the campus would not look out of place in a considerably more technologically developed and modernized city such as Islamabad or Tehran:

It’s a sweeping co-ed campus, with lecture halls, science labs, and internet cafés. When the madrassa opens fully this year, the curriculum will consist of half Islamic study, half science, math and computer classes. This is, Mohseni [sic] says with a certain gruffness, “a radical break” from traditional syllabi.

Tamadon, launched in 2007, was marketed as an Islamic television channel that could function in opposition to some of the more liberal stations operating out of Kabul (such as Tolo or Aina).

We are backward in all aspects. Economically, we are in the 16th or 17th century, but our televisions air ten times sexier films (than Western countries),” said Mohseni [sic]. “This is a scandal and shame for us. We have a thousand calamities and should not be diverted,” Mohseni told Reuters.

Tamadon is staffed by competent graduates of a training program partially conducted in Iran (either independently or on secondment to Iranian media outlets). With good equipment and training, Mohseni and his staff are well on their way to achieving a level of influence across Afghanistan that would not otherwise have been possible.

Prominent Islamic Groups and Influences in Southern Afghanistan

Just as the distinctions between the religious and the political are blurred in Pashtun and Afghan culture, so do the spheres and figures of authority frequently shift from the religious to the political (and back again). These dynamics are influenced by the respective experiences and historical roles that these figures played during the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad and the ensuing civil war. Yet it is important to recognize that certain sectors of the population and influence groups prominent in other parts of the country were entirely absent in the major southern Afghan politico-religious debates of the past 30 years. For example, the Afghan Islamists of the 1970s

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61 For more on this distinction, see Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, Muslim Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
and their ideological discussions at Kabul University—Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Ahmad Shah Massoud—were not very important or influential for the Talibs of the south. Ultimately, many of these key players and parties of the anti-Soviet jihad had little influence in critical events of the region. It was the polarization of the parties along ethnic, tribal, and geographic lines that would eventually help shape the politics and narratives of the rest of the country.

**Deobandism**

Deobandism is one of the principal Islamic philosophical influences in southern Afghanistan and a prominent force in Afghan political Islam. In theory, the Deobandi school of Islam shares many of the same beliefs as Sufism; however, the two schools are not in concert on the means of achieving their similar objectives to remove corruption and materialism from Islam. Whereas Sufism was a reaction to conditions under the Umayyad Caliphate—the second of the four Islamic caliphates after the death of Mohammad—Deobandism arose as a reaction to the British colonialism in India. The two key founders of Deobandism were Hazrat Maulana Mohammad Qasim Nanautavi and Hazrat Maulana Rasheed Ahmed Gangohi, who founded the Dar ul-Ulum madrasah in Deoband, India, in the mid-nineteenth century that has shaped resistance tropes in the subcontinent ever since. There are thousands of Deoband madaris in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A paradox between Deobandism and Sufism is that many Deobandis are also members of Sufi brotherhoods.

The teachings of Deobandism focus on strict adherence to Islamic ethical codes and the independence of Muslim lands. Attacks on Muslim lands are considered attacks on Islam and worthy of jihad. According to Deobandism, a Muslim’s first obligation is to his faith and then to his country. Yet Deobandism does not recognize national boundaries per se but rather holds the boundaries of the greater Islamic community (or ummah) paramount. Muslims have an obligation and duty to wage jihad in defense of Muslims anywhere they are threatened.

Deobandism falls under the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and shares much in common with the teachings of many great Islamic reformers, such as Mawdudi in Pakistan, Sayyed Qutb in Egypt, and Ibn Taymiyyah, who all advocated Islamic statehood following the principles of sharia, though they differed on the means acceptable to bring this about. Deobandism does not focus on mysticism and asceticism in the way that Sufism does but does encourage pious practice and is a major faith throughout South Asia. Rather than representing discrete and opposing religious worldviews, however, it is perhaps more accurate to say that these schools represent different modalities for gaining and engaging religious knowledge: one more scriptural, the other more emotive.

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62 Much of this movement owed its organization and ideology to the influence of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimin) and had as its chief ideologues Ghulam Muhammad Niazi, Rabbani, Sayyid Musa Tawana, and others who studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo and later taught on the faculty of theology at Kabul University.

63 Other anti-Soviet jihadi Peshawar party political leaders such as Yunus Khalis and Mohammad Nabi Mohammdi had considerable influence over the Talibans in the south, particularly in Kandahar, during this time period. Many of the Talibans’ core from Kandahar fought under the command of Nabi Mohammdis local factions, including Mullah Omar. Khalis even helped radical elements in the eastern Afghanistan rise to power, including Jalaluddin Haqqani who single-handedly destroyed the Zadrani’s malik system after he ran Mohammad Omar Babrakzai out of Paktia, the most powerful Zadrani malik during the 1980s. Mohammad’s faction helped spread the rise of madaris in southern Afghanistan and attracted many Talibs from Kandahar such as Mullah Omar.

64 For more on the polarization, see Roy, “Has Islamism a Future in Afghanistan?” 206.


66 Dorronsoro, Revolution Unending, 50–51.

67 Ibid. 51.
Deobandis are comfortable with Sufism as expressed through pious and devotional practices but take issue with the social structure of Sufism as manifested by the tariqat (brotherhoods).

The Afghan constitution of 1931 guaranteed the right of the ulema to attend private religious schools, most of which were Deobandi, and until the Soviet invasion in 1979 the majority of the Afghan ulema were educated in these madaris.68

Tablighi Jamaat

Faizani probably enjoyed his greatest support among military officers. He used the traditional Zikr circle as an avenue not just for spiritual enlightenment but also for political organizing. In tapping into the officer corps in this way, Faizani was following a longstanding tradition of Sufi association with the military, a tradition that went back at least to the turn of the century and that had periodically generated considerable paranoia within the government.69

The involvement of religious groups in political activities is probably one of the most misunderstood and yet crucial elements in recent Afghan history. In light of this, it is instructive to briefly examine the activities of groups like the Tablighi Jamaat and Sufis. Secretive by nature, these groups represent large numbers of Afghans, yet they remain relatively less understood (and almost completely undocumented), and their role in Afghan society underappreciated. Part of the explanation for this relates to the urban-rural divide in Afghan society. Most of the members of Sufi societies as well as the Tablighi Jamaat are rural and poor and not members of the urban elite.70 This is an important reason why these groups are misunderstood by both outsiders and fellow Afghans.

Tablighi Jamaat was founded in the late 1920s by Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi, himself a prominent member and advocate of the revivalist conservative Deoband tradition. Present members are committed to dawa or “the call.” Many of their activities are dedicated to persuading and proselytizing others to join them in either conversion, or simply just reforming and becoming a “proper Muslim.” To pursue this goal, the Tablighi Jamaat has established missionaries throughout the world.71

The organization holds meetings throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan and has a proclivity for meeting in large regional centers. The annual Lahore meeting seems to be the biggest in the two countries, with hundreds of thousands of attendees. At these events the discussion revolves around religious subjects, with members of the Tablighi Jamaat projecting an avowedly apolitical stance, refusing even to talk about the situation in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. At a meeting in Kabul, however, a colleague witnessed a full lineup of almost every single significant mid-level mujahedeen commander from Nangarhar Province sitting in a circle together and discussing different interpretations of a certain hadith.72 So although politics is apparently absent from

68 Dorronsoro, Revolution Unending, 50.
70 Much of the Afghan urban elite identify with the more ideologically purist Hizb-e Islami.
72 Observation of Conrad Jennings, summer 2007.
the surface of such meetings, there is—in Afghanistan at least—some amount of networking happening at Tablighi Jamaat meetings and events.

The Tablighi Jamaat’s explicit relationship with members of the insurgency is distant and seemingly detached, and despite certain ideological similarities by virtue of their shared idolization of the culture of the village, there are no strong ties with the Taliban. A number of Kandahararis have suggested to the author that they do not like the Tablighi because “many come from Pakistan” or because they are not Kandahari and they project themselves as knowing Islam better than Kandahararis do. In fact, it was suggested that Tablighi were not welcomed in local mosques and had been even asked to leave.  

Some Western scholars have argued that the Tablighi Jamaat networks are used by al Qaeda to radicalize vulnerable sectors of society, and U.S., British, Pakistani, and Afghan governments have monitored these networks closely.

**Sufis**

The role of Sufism (Islamic mysticism, *tasawwuf*) in Afghanistan is similarly misunderstood. The so-called mystical side of Islam, Sufism, focuses on the personal relationship between the believer and God, with the believer seeking to individualize that connection through prayer, training, and discipline (*marifa*). The modalities of the transmission of religious knowledge and the nature of the piri-muridi (master-student relationship) tradition in Sufism are little understood but seemingly have important implications for the Afghan insurgency. Mullah-led militant mobilizations connected closely to Pashtun cultural mores and fraternity have a long history on the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. The piri-murdi system represents a basic reformist ideology and a mode of knowledge transmission where a teacher is inherent in the knowledge. Thus, mullahs who learn from the same teacher, or from teachers who had a common master, share the same ideology. This system has served as a kind of social institution and network that past jihadist movements in South Asia, such as the Hindustani fanatics Akhund Ghaffur, Mullah Najmuddin of Hadda, and the Faqir of Ipi, have exploited.

The Sufi mullahs and their *murids* (committed) and talibs operate a complex and mutually supportive network of insurgent religious authority. Their information operations—carried out through mosque, madrasah, and *langarkhana* (a place where food is prepared and distributed to the poor) via pedagogy—have, as suggested above, underpinned past insurgencies and jihads and presumably have helped to frame the discourse of the present Taliban jihad and insurgency. An understanding of this process is a vital starting point for any campaign to combat it.

Sufism and the majority of Afghan ulema look at Islam from two different perspectives. The ulema focus primarily on the orderly interpretation of Islamic law and doctrine, whereas the Sufis focus on the love of God through asceticism and ritual practice. This division in the interpretation

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73 Personal interviews, Kandahar City, August 2008.
74 John Walker Lindh of “American Taliban” fame was allegedly indoctrinated by Tablighi Jamaat before joining the Afghan Taliban. The UK cricket team coach murdered by assassins is thought to have been killed by Tablighi Jamaat operatives.
77 For more history on this topic, see Haroon, *Frontier of Faith*, 33–64.
78 **Tarīq** is the Sufi method of instruction.
79 For general information on this distinction, see Haroon, *Frontier of Faith*. 
of Islam through the eyes of the ulema and the Sufis became increasingly important again during the twentieth century, particularly during the formation of the Afghan state and during the anti-Soviet jihad. John Esposito describes the rise of Sufism in this way:

Reacting with disdain and dismay to the worldly seductions of imperial Islam, they were motivated by a desire to return to what they regarded as the purity and simplicity of the Prophet's time and driven by a deep devotional love of God that culminated in a quest for a direct, personal experience of the presence of God in this life.  

Sufism affects rural Muslims in southern Afghanistan in a variety of ways. For example, the prevalence of ziarats (shrines) built over the graves of alleged holy men and women can be found throughout the south, and many venerate them. In the absence of real medicine or doctors, villagers place their faith in a culture of miracles and signs instead—here Sufi mysticism plays a role. A nuanced understanding of the interplay between the religious and the political phenomena in southern Afghanistan should include an appreciation of the importance of these beliefs to the vast majority of people. This also has implications for understanding aspects of the Taliban. A recent article published on the BBC’s news with the headline “Can Sufi Islam Counter the Taliban?” described the experiences of visiting a Sufi shrine in Pakistan and talking to various experts and locals about the alleged relationship between the Taliban and Sufism. After the explosion at the tomb of Rahman Baba, the much-loved Pashtu Sufi poet, there were many more articles to this effect. Is Sufism a force, these articles asked, which can stand up against radicalism and so-called Talibanism? In the West, this has been a seductive idea for scholars and think-tanks, many of whom are familiar only with the tamer variants of Sufism. The increasing number of attacks targeting Sufi shrines throughout South Asia is of particular concern. Groups operating in the Khyber Agency of the FATA, as well as in the Swat Valley, have repeatedly attacked Sufi shrines and targeted Sufi pirs for assassination over the last two years. The shrine of Bahadur Baba, located in hills near Nowshera, east of Peshawar, was rocketed by militants in March—almost exactly one year after militants destroyed the 400-year-old shrine of Abu Saeed Baba, also near Peshawar. The attacks have been attributed to Lashkar-i-Islam, a militant group based in Khyber and led by their charismatic and vehemently anti-Sufi commander, Mangal Bagh. Demonstrations protesting the destruction of Sufi shrines have created widespread distaste for local militant factions such as Lashkar-i-Islam, prompting some Sufi elders such as Pir Samiullah to form tribal militias. Samiullah’s militia attacked Pakistani Taliban forces in the Swat Valley last year, killing approximately one hundred militants. Samiullah was killed by militants linked to the Taliban last December, who later exhumed and hanged his corpse in Mingora, the provincial capital. The bloody clashes between Samiullah’s forces and Mullah Fazlullah’s Taliban fighters in the Matta area of Swat have left hundreds dead since December.

81 Many rural Pashtuns, particularly in the Katawaz, are very superstitious. The Islam of swaths of rural Afghanistan has more in common with mysticism than is commonly supposed. The role of djins, for example, is akin to that of evil spirits. This aspect of Sufism—the fear of rural peasants of the frightening mystical powers of the Sufis—is much more powerful than the adherence to Sufi beliefs, which is negligible.
85 The author would like to thank Matthew Dupee for contributing to this analysis.
The RAND Corporation published a study in 2003 that advocated encouraging “the elements within the Islamic mix that are most compatible with global peace and the international community and that are friendly to democracy and modernity.” This study was widely rumored to be the public face of a U.S. intelligence community plan to “engage with Sufis” around the world as a strategy against Islamic radicalism. Such discussions fail to properly assess the realities of Sufism as experienced on the ground in southern Afghanistan and approach the matter as if religious practices in Afghanistan are similar to those in Pakistan. The two most important Sufi orders in Afghanistan—the Qadiri and Naqshbandi—are organized into brotherhoods. Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani heads the Qadiri order, which consists primarily of Pashtuns of southern and eastern Afghanistan. The Naqshbandi order of southern and northern Afghanistan is lead by the Mujaddidi family (Sebghatullah Mujaddidi). Additionally, the analysis of Sufism’s main ideas and practices in these discussions is derived from a reading of classical texts (mainly poetry), which, while important, fails to give a proper picture of the way Sufism interacts and has created religious networks.

Recognizing the importance of Sufism in Afghanistan, the Taliban have attempted to manipulate certain Sufi customs and traditions. Some Taliban have even sought to identify themselves as part of the Sufi tradition. This is similar to the dynamic that Bernt Glatzer describes of the “southern Pashtun tribesman seeking political leadership beyond his village” through the manipulation of networks based on locality, economy, sectarianism, Sufi orders, religious schools, political and religious parties and so on.

Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani has stated that “a majority of Taliban are Sufis, mostly followers of the Qadiri and Naqshbandi movements.” Some analysts have even alleged that Mullah Mohammad Omar, the nominal leader of the movement, is a member and local leader of the Naqshbandi order. Although many experts intensely dispute this contentious claim, Gailani states “Mullah Omar was raised as a Sufi before later embracing the more severe Wahhabi-inspired Islam.” Even a brief examination of the Taliban’s current propaganda output on its website, Al-Emarah, emphasizes that Taliban poetry and songs published in Pashtu rely strongly on the imagery, style, and forms used by the well-known classical Pashtun Sufi poets. Further, the biographies of jihadi “martyrs” posted on the website and in Taliban magazines call to mind the Sufi hagiographic traditions. Similarly, the authority of Mullah Omar’s leadership rests in part on his risky but brilliant propaganda move in 1996 of taking the khirqa (a garment that Afghans believe to be the Prophet Mohammed’s cloak) out of Kandahar’s royal mausoleum for the first time in 60 years and displaying it in a public rally.

87 Gailani ancestor Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani founded the Qadiri order.
88 The Naqshbandi order formed the base of the Jebhe-yi Nejat party at the time of the Soviet invasion. The Qadiri brotherhood formed the base of the Mahaz-i Melli party. The Naqshbandi order originated in Bukhara during the fourteenth century.
89 Interviews by Conrad Jennings in Kandahar City in 2007–08, however, suggested that the Taliban banned some Sufi activities in Kandahar during their rule (1996–2001). These interviewees suggested that the Taliban opposed Sufi groups. They argued that there was a huge contradiction between Taliban and the Sufis and that they did not like each other. These interviewees also mentioned that the Taliban did not respect the Sufi shrines and mistrusted the pirs as well.
91 Farangis Najibullah, “Can Sufis Bring Peace to Afghanistan?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 5, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Can_Sufis_Bring_Peace_to_Afghanistan/1503303.html. This article goes on to state that “One prominent Taliban figure, Abdul Hakim Mujahed … says that the ‘ Taliban’ consist of people from various backgrounds, and that while some ‘oppose’ Sufis, others have ‘great respect’ for them and are even followers.”
92 Najibullah, “Can Sufis Bring Peace to Afghanistan?”
as a way to identify himself with the Prophet.\textsuperscript{93} Mysticism similar to that practiced by Sufis has long surrounded Mullah Omar. Omar reportedly started the Taliban after a dream in which Allah came to him in the shape of a man, asking him to lead the faithful. The khirqa, for example, is believed by many Pashuns to contain supernatural and mystical powers. This action in part represented Omar’s absolute faith in his perceived divine right to rule and gave him legitimacy in his role as leader of the Afghan people ordained by Allah. After Omar showed the cloak of the Prophet Mohammad to those present and received general acceptance by public, he invited the people to accept him as their leader by raising hands.\textsuperscript{94} Whereas Omar had been a relative nonentity before this piece of religious theater, the audacious stunt catapulted him to a level of mystical power. Soon afterward, Omar was named Amir ul-Mumineen, “commander of the faithful”—not just of the Afghans but of all Muslims. He was given this title by almost 1,500 mullahs and religious scholars who were present in Kandahar.

As in Iraq, Sufi groups in Kandahar have allied themselves with the insurgency since 2003. A significant proportion of the rank-and-file members of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan (and increasingly in Pakistan) believe in the local traditions and customs that are identified as Sufi.\textsuperscript{95} Analyses of who the Taliban are and what they stand for have yet to convincingly offer an account of the movement’s popular appeal, and fail to account for apparent Sufi aspects of the movement. It seems clear that the tradition of Sufism, rather than the practice (as associated with dervishes, for example), has been important in shaping the structure of rural resistance to secular authority. The full extent of Sufi contributions, however, to the networks that make up the insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan has not been properly explored, and there is not place here for a full discussion. It should be noted, though, that this is an important cultural feature that should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

\textit{The lack of strategic innovation on the side of the international coalition is striking, and the difficulties in Afghanistan are in large part due to an intellectual failure to understand the country’s social and political dynamics.}\textsuperscript{96}

The international community and, in particular, the U.S. and NATO forces have failed to thoroughly or systematically understand the religious foundations of the Taliban insurgency and jihad. Indeed, a rigorous and methodical examination of the Islamic realities of southern Afghanistan is potentially the most important arrow missing in the foreign forces’ quiver. Although this lack of understanding has direct implications for U.S. and NATO kinetic military operations, it is even more important to the information operations. A counterinsurgency is first and foremost an information war. One critical reason why the U.S. and NATO forces are not winning in Afghanistan is because they misunderstand certain components of the information

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\textsuperscript{93} The cloak had been folded and padlocked in a series of chests in a crypt in the royal mausoleum at Kandahar; “myth had it that the padlocks to the crypt could be opened only when touched by a true Amir ul-Mumineen, a king of the Muslims.” Joseph A. Raelin, “The Myth of Charismatic Leaders,” RNET, March 2003, http://www.f Indiaarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MNT/is_3_57/ai_98901483. For a discussion of this incident, see Rashid, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism, 20.

\textsuperscript{94} Author’s interview of an eyewitness to Mullah Omar’s donning of the kharqa, Kandahar City, September 2008.

\textsuperscript{95} Based on numerous interviews of Kandahris by Conrad Jennings, 2006–09.

battlespace—most importantly those that involve religious dynamics. How can the United States and NATO protect the people of Afghanistan—the central tenet of successful counterinsurgency—if they do not understand the fundamental religious and societal drivers of the Afghan people?

Although this essay has merely scratched the surface of these extremely complex issues, it leaves no question that Islam and Islamic religious figures continue to play a critical role in the everyday life and politics of southern Afghanistan. Today, Sufism and Deobandism work together with traditional tribal mores in shaping the cognitive structures of southern Afghans. These beliefs, for the most part, influence the populations’ social, political, and economic interactions. Both government and Taliban insurgent leadership have attempted to both shape and act in accordance with these normative structures, as well as to develop narratives to achieve the support and acquiescence of the southern, mostly rural Pashtun population. Ultimately, however, the ongoing conditions of the conflict environment that grips Afghanistan will most certainly influence and mix with these beliefs and narratives to alter the fabric of Afghan society and thus will be the final determinant as to the future path of Afghanistan.
The National Council of Ulema in its regular session held from March 15–19, 2009, participated in by religious scholars from across Afghanistan passed the following Resolution after a thorough discussion of the current situation:

- The Council denounces any action that further aggravates the pains and the sufferings of the people and funnels disunity among the people of Afghanistan.

Thus, the Council calls upon all those involved to prefer the national interests and Islamic values over their personal interests.

- To ensure a full security as a key element in the country’s progress, the Council unanimously decided that the traditional Loy Jirga (Grand Assembly) be convened, where people from all circles including religious scholars, intellectuals, tribal leaders, Jihadi and political figures and representatives from both Houses of the Parliament, the Taliban and Hiz e Islami (Hekmatyar’s Islamic Party) and from the OIC and the United Nations are represented.

- The Council finds as “reasonable” to obtain the agreement and endorsement of the neighboring countries and other relevant authorities on convening the Loy Jirga. We appreciate the interest already expressed by the new U.S. administration, Canada and France. For the anti-government forces to participate with confidence in the Loy Jirga, we suggest that their names be removed from the blacklist and that the United Nations guarantee their safety.

- The Council unanimously decided that the lead role in negotiating with the Taliban be given to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. Saudi Arabia is where the Holy Kabbah is located and is where the great Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (PBUH) is laid; it is where Quran was revealed by Allah and where angels have moved in and out. We are proud of the holy land and therefore, call upon the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques to kindly accept our request of helping relieve our pains.

- The Council calls upon the Taliban to allow the closed madrassas and schools to reopen for the Muslim children of Afghanistan. Children are involved neither in war nor in politics. Let them learn to move out of obscurity into the light. Closing down schools is a grave hostility against the Muslim people of Afghanistan. It is against the Holy Quran order that has allowed education. We are hoping for a positive response as this is the voice of the Council of Ulema, Ministry of Education and the entire nation.

- The Council calls upon all the Ulema (religious scholars) to remain vigilant as they have always been against malign intentions and actions by those who seek to take advantage of an opportunity.

As several times reminded in the past, the Council once again urges the media to avoid preaching and airing prohibited and hypocrite anti-Islam programs and immoral scenes and movies. This is the duty of the government to urgently avoid if such programs are aired.

With respect,

Afghanistan National Council of Ulema
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