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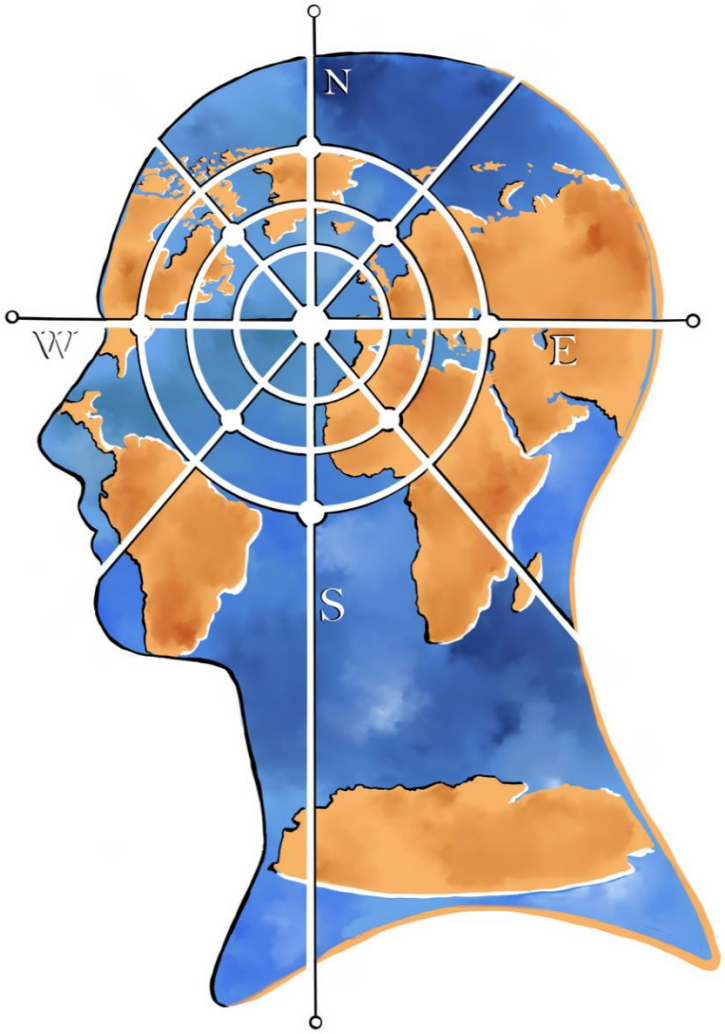

Research Institute for **European** and **American Studies – RIEAS**
Department of **Security** and **Intelligence Studies – Coastal Carolina University**

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How the Taliban Mobilized Popular Support to Survive the United States' War in Afghanistan

Irfan Yar

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Abstract

After fighting for nearly two decades and investing an enormous amount of blood and treasure, why could the U.S. and its allies not defeat the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan? While most of the literature attributes the Taliban's success to foreign support, according to this paper, foreign support was insufficient; the insurgency mobilized domestic support that played a critical role in its survival. More importantly, the research focuses on and explains how the Taliban mobilized popular support during the insurgency period. Based on primary and secondary data, it is found that the Taliban gained domestic support with the help of an overarching discourse that has four key themes: Islam, Pashtun identity, nationalism, and the incompetence of the Afghan government. The research explains that the Taliban's discourse was effective because the descriptions that the Taliban used widely resonated in the lives of the Afghan people.

Introduction

Immediately after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. intervened in Afghanistan and wiped out the Taliban regime established in 1996 (Sidky 2007, 852). The regime's collapse was swift and brutal; an estimated 20% of the Taliban military force (8,000-12,000) perished in the war in a few weeks, and many Taliban commanders and leaders escaped to Pakistan (Giustozzi 2019, 18). The Taliban regime, officially known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), ceased to exist as a physical entity by the end of 2001. It

was difficult to imagine that the Taliban would come back. Within a few years, however, the Taliban reorganized themselves as a tough insurgency. They mounted a resilient challenge to the most powerful military alliance on the earth—the U.S. and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Between 2009 and 2013, the U.S. and its allies (including the Afghan government) marched over 400,000 soldiers against the Taliban, whose number were estimated to only be in the thousands (Giustozzi 2019,1-2). Compared to the Taliban —a poorly equipped group that primarily relied on military technology from the 1950s— the coalition forces had immense superiority in military technology and other resources (ibid). Following the Doha peace agreement,[1] by August 31, 2021, the U.S. completed the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban established full control over the entire territory of the country. So, after fighting for nearly two decades and investing an enormous amount of blood and treasure, why could the U.S. and its allies not defeat the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan? While most of the literature attributes the Taliban's success to foreign support, this paper focuses on the domestic aspect of the Taliban and explains how the group mobilized popular support to survive the US war in Afghanistan.

Literature Review

The literature review of this paper consists of two main discussions. First, building on the existing research, I argue that even though foreign support plays a crucial role in the conflict, it is not sufficient to ensure victory for the insurgents. I contend that the domestic support to the Taliban was a significant factor contributing to the Taliban's survival of the US-led war in Afghanistan. In the second part of the literature review, I will evaluate the current key arguments that explain how the Taliban mobilized domestic support. The concluding part of this section will summarize the existing explanations and identify the research gap this paper intends to fill.

One of the most dominant theories that explain the success of insurgencies is related to external support. It states that an insurgency that manages more foreign support is more likely to defeat its enemy. The enormous aid provided to North Vietnam (by the Soviet Union and China) and the Afghan Mujahideen (by the U.S.) in their successful wars highlight the significance of foreign support to insurgent groups (Jardine 2014, 33-35). If insurgents are to succeed, they must receive external assistance unless the state is extremely fragile (O'Neill 1990, 111). Scholars (Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham 2011, 716) argue that an insurgent group's resource base is significantly augmented when foreign countries provide arms, money, safe heavens, training, and other support. This is evident in Afghanistan's Islamist movements from the 1960s onward. During

[1] Official agreement of the US-Taliban "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America" Accessed Jan 15, 2021. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf

that period, insurgent movements did not become strong forces until foreign actors trained and equipped them (Stenersen 2010, 14). In line with the theory is Pakistan and Iran's role as foreign actors that have played an instrumental role in supporting the Taliban. For instance, Pakistan tolerated the insurgents on its territory and helped the rebel group with training, advising, military equipment and intelligence. Many Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, also provided colossal wealth to the Taliban (Stenersen 2010, 13). Also, Iran provided logistics and arms; its annual help to the Taliban started at $30 million in 2006 and reached up to $190 million by 2013 (Giustozzi 2019, 210). Non-state foreign actors also contributed to the strength of the Taliban. The most frequently cited such actors are Al-Qaida, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (ibid).

Irrefutably, foreign support has influenced the outcome of the US-Taliban conflict, yet informed by literature, this paper argues that the victory of the Taliban would not have been possible without popular support. Existing research acknowledges the importance of foreign aid to insurgency; however, it emphasizes that no insurgent organization can achieve significant progress without internal popular support. As Emmanuel Okla put it, "without a broad popular-based support, the insurgency cannot attain the comprehensive scope that revolution or civil war can attain, but it can continue to operate for extended periods, especially if it receives assistance from foreign powers to supplement a relative scarcity of domestic resources."[2]

Scholars (Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham 2009, 717) claim that foreign support can sometimes cause insurgents groups to lose legitimacy at their home country because they may be seen as pawns of foreign countries. For example, the Iranian insurgency, the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many people in Iran because the rebel group allied with Iraq, an enemy of Iran (Goulka, Hansell, Wilke, and Larson 2009, 4). Studies also indicate that groups that cannot mobilize popular support usually cannot achieve their goals or cannot preserve what they have achieved (Jardine 2014). For instance, Al-Qaida attempted to establish a legitimate base for its organization by mobilizing the Muslim world against the U.S., but it failed. Its pan-Islamist rhetoric could not generate mass mobilization in Muslim countries, in part, because of its indiscriminate violence against its fellow Muslims (Garges 2011, 104-127). Consequently, Al-Qaida's ardent objective to build an idealistic vision of the Islamic Caliphate now seems more distant than ever (ibid). It is worth mentioning that there have been cases where insurgency groups were defeated despite having some extent of popular support. For example, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and some popular-based groups in the civil war in Bashar al-Assad's Syria (Kepel 2002, 225).

[2] Lecture by Dr Emmanuel S. Okla, Edo University Iyamho, p.5. Accessed March 2, 2021. https://www.edouniversity.edu.ng/oerrepository/articles/insurgency_and_counter_insurgency.pdf

The vital role of internal support is also reflected in the history of Afghanistan. During the republic of Mohammad Daoud Khan (1973–1978) and later during the Soviet-Afghan conflict, insurgent leaders such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Masoud and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, besides receiving external support, focused on mobilizing people against the regime (Rashid 2002). Foreign support provided to the Afghan communist regimes (especially by the Soviet Union) was much larger than the foreign support provided to the Mujahedeen (Oliker 2011, 3-18). However, the Mujahedeen enjoyed more popular support than the communist rulers did. The rebels who later came to be known as the Mujahedeen were able to mobilize Afghan people and overthrow the communist rulers. Later, as Jihad against the Red Army ended, the Mujahedeen turned their guns against each other and dragged the country into a bloody civil war. The Mujahedeen groups lost their popularity, mainly due to their violence and power politics, and the people started supporting the emerging movement of the Taliban, who offered reassurance and a promise of a just and safe society where Afghans would live peacefully (Sinno 2009, 64-78). In the early 1990s, while many Mujaheddin groups were still receiving foreign support (for example, Pakistan and Saudi Arabian aid to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar), the Taliban defeated virtually all the Mujahedeen groups. Although the Taliban also had foreign support, none of the Mujahedeen groups achieved as much success as the Taliban did, mostly due to the Taliban's popularity among the people (Sinno 2009, 80-85). Besides foreign aid, the Taliban also received domestic support from Afghans (Giustozzi 2019). A former government official has admitted that people are now more willing to support the Taliban than the government. "Unfortunately, our people are still providing food and protection to the Taliban," the governor of Kandahar said in an interview.[3] Also, internal support has provided the Taliban legitimacy and support; around half of the Taliban's budget comes from domestic sources, and most of their fighters are recruited locally (Giustozzi 2019, 73-89).

In this section, I analyze the current explanations about the mechanism through which the Taliban mobilized popular support. According to Sinno (2009), the Taliban were able to gain support from the people mainly because they represented themselves as guardians of Pashtuns. The author claims that the Taliban's success lies in their Pashtun identity. He attributes the Taliban's success of the 1990s to the group's ability to mobilize Pashtuns (60-63). "If history is any guide, whoever mobilizes the Pashtuns, rules Afghanistan, and Afghanistan cannot be ruled without their consent" (59). While Sinno's argument that the Taliban's Pashtun identity and their knowledge of Pashtun culture have contributed to the Taliban's success is convincing, it was not the only factor for the group's success during the 1990s and the insurgency period. In reality, during the 1990s, the Taliban offered a promise of peace and the rule of law to all Afghans and

[3] See ATN News Interview with the governor of Kandahar, Accessed January 25, 2021. Dari language. https://fb.watch/4G4dR8jCa2/

not just to Pashtuns (Johnson 2019). Also, during the insurgency period, as will be explained later, the Taliban used Islam, nationalism and other narratives that Sinno fails to acknowledge.

Giustozzi's (2009, 2010, 2012, 2019) works are of much importance when it comes to the Taliban's strategies, including mobilizing internal support. His works suggest that the Pashtun's marginalization played a significant role in the Taliban's resistance. For instance, he writes that many Pashtun communities were targeted in counterinsurgency operations, especially during Karzai's government in Southern Afghanistan, which pushed them to align with the Taliban. The Taliban did not altogether neglect the civilian aspect of power, and to gain legitimacy from the people, the group created a shadow government (Giustozzi 2012, 71-72). He also talks about Islam as a tool through which the Taliban attempted to drum up domestic support. For instance, he contends that the ideology of the insurgents, whom he calls the Neo-Taliban, is a combination of conservative Islam and Deobandi doctrine. The Deobandi influence in the Taliban has added to the specific rural culture closely allied with Islam, where village mullahs (religious leaders) play an influential role. While Giustozzi explains that Islam, the Taliban shadow government and the marginalization of Pashtuns contributed to the Taliban's ability to beat up domestic support, he does not talk about the Taliban's nationalism as a tool of the Taliban. Giustozzi's work (2008) also implies that he disagrees that Pashtunwali played an essential role in the Taliban mobilization of domestic support. For instance, he claims (12-13) that many neo-Taliban oppose Pashtunwali because of their radical ideology. This view of Giustozzi is in contrast with Sinno (2009) and Johnson (2016), who argue that the Taliban gave more importance to Pashtunwali. I will show later in more detail that Pashtunwali was a significant component of the Taliban discourse to gather support domestically.

Thomas H. Johnson's study (2018) of the Taliban narratives is more inclusive. According to him, the Taliban gained domestic support by targeting three social identities that all Afghans share. These are religious, political and cultural identities. Johnson claims that the Taliban used Islam as the primary vehicle and utilized specific language to target a wide variety of audiences, including local, regional, international, and non-Muslim communities (23). He writes: "undoubtedly, the Taliban have been able to manipulate religion, and have used this manipulation as a powerful weapon in their jihad against the Afghan government and its international allies." While Johnson's narratives of the Taliban are significant, they are not used in the context of the Taliban survival. Also, a portion of his study contains some flaws. For instance, while talking about the cultural narrative, he writes (2017, 28) that "the Taliban regularly played on notions of Pashtunwali in their messaging as an effort to invoke certain tribal mores." This argument is not consistent with his claim that all Afghans share the three identities. It is a well-established fact that while some aspects of Pashtunwali may be extended to

non-Pashtun Afghans, Pashtunwali is explicitly a Pashtuns code of conduct, and all Afghans do not share it. He also mixes nationalist narratives, such as sovereignty and Afghanistan's freedom, in the section of culture narratives (28-35). While he does talk about the Afghan government's incompetence, it is not one of his three themes. Thus, I build on his work (2017) and add more factors to the context of the Taliban's survival (2000-2021).

Marsden (2008) and Kamel (2015) linked the Taliban's success only to Pashtun identity and Islam. According to Marsden, in many rural areas of Afghanistan, people perceived the Taliban resistance as a war to defend Islam from the U.S. invasion (66). Kamel writes that the Taliban mobilized people with their Pashtun and Islam-centric policies (69). "Islamic terminology involving warfare and social relations are closely interwoven with Pashtun customs and social more, the Taliban have successfully managed to integrate Islam and Pashtunwali" (Kamel 2015, 77). Both scholars describe the issue in detail; however, they have strictly restricted themselves to Pashtun-nationalism and Islam; they do not talk about other narratives that the Taliban literature mentions.

Stritzel and Chang (2015) explain the Taliban mobilized popular support from the lenses of securitization—a process through which a matter is reconceptualized as a security issue. They write that after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the U.S. securitized the issue and portrayed the Taliban (and Al-Qaida) as an existential threat to U.S. national security (554). According to them, securitizing the issue allowed the U.S. to remove the Taliban from power. They say that in its war, the U.S. did not engage with the Afghan people to cooperate with them (ibid). This failure created an opportunity for the Taliban to include the Afghan people as their key audiences (ibid). To respond to U.S. securitization, the Taliban pushed forward a comprehensive counter-securitization campaign using their local knowledge. According to the authors, the group advocated that the U.S. was a serious threat to Islam, Afghan people, and their culture. Stritzel and Chang agree that the Taliban welcomed those Pashtun communities which were discriminated against by the post-Taliban government (55-57). They talk about Islam, Pashtuns' alienation' and the Afghan people's culture; however, they exclude the two themes which the Taliban also used to rally popular support: the Afghan government's weakness and the Taliban's nationalist narrative.

In summary, different scholars suggest different factors through which the Taliban have mobilized people. While some scholars (i.e., Sinno 2009) put emphasis on one factor (e.g., Pashtun) and implicitly reject other factors, other authors (e.g., Johnson 2016; Marsden 2008; Kamel 2015) argue that Afghan culture and Islam were the key narratives of the Taliban. Despite a certain level of disagreement, the existing literature shows that the Taliban mobilized people with the help of two main narratives: Pashtun identity and Islam. Overall, there are two main problems in the existing literature; first,

most of the authors focus on either on one or two of these components as the driving forces of the support. They do not talk about nationalism and the Afghan government's incompetence as a part of the Taliban's discourse. Second, the literature does not appear convincing in explaining why the Taliban's discourse appealed to the people.

Research Method

The key research question of this paper is "How did the Taliban mobilize popular support during the insurgency period?" I hypothesize that the Taliban mobilized domestic support with the help of four key narratives: (1) Islam, (2) Pashtun identity, (3) nationalism and (4) the incompetence of the Afghan government.

To answer the question, I looked for the Taliban's narratives, themes, statements, stories and other evidence that directly or indirectly talked about Islam, the Pashtuns' marginalization, nationalism or the weakness of the Afghan government in a context that was used to justify their struggle or call on people to support the movement. By analyzing the Taliban contents and providing evidence, I argued that it was not just Islam and the "Pashtun-card" but also nationalism and the Afghan government's flaws that the Taliban used to gain domestic support.

I relied on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data, which consisted mainly of the Taliban's narratives, is derived from the Taliban's official website titled "The Voice of Jihad" (https://alemarahpashto.com/). To be more specific, I analyzed several Taliban podcasts and the following three (monthly and quarterly) magazines that the Taliban published during 2018 and 2019: *Srak* (Light Beam), *Shahamat* (Courage), and *Morchal* (Trench). While the Taliban published in many languages, I chose the ones published in Pashto and Dari (and then translated them to English). I selected these languages because Pashto and Dari are the national languages of Afghanistan, meaning their targeted audiences are Afghans (domestic). Also, these documents were originally published in printed form; however, I obtained the copies from the Taliban's official website (publicly accessible). I also used non-Taliban sources for confirmation.

According to my personal experience in Afghanistan and my past exposure to the Taliban's Information Operations, in rural areas the Taliban inculcate their message mostly through non-written means, for example, through mullahs, preachers, poetry, chanting, mosques, gatherings and person-to-person communications. After comparing the Taliban's written and oral content, I found that both the literature and oral content (e.g., verbal communication) had almost the same meanings, messages, narratives and themes; for example, in both written and oral communication, the Taliban talked about Islam, Pashtunwali, and other similar stories. Thus, even though most of the Afghans do

not read the Taliban literature (mainly because the literacy rate in Afghanistan is below 50 percent)[4], the (literature) data is still reliable.

Moreover, I explained why the Taliban discourse was effective. The concept of resonance is relevant to the problem of the effectiveness of mobilizing support (Snow & Benford 1988). To determine the effectiveness of the narratives, I depended on the extent to which these narratives are resonating in the lives of Afghans. Thus, I assume that the more resonant a narrative is, the more effective and appealing it will be for people. For instance, in this paper I described the role, status, or historical importance of my independent variables —Islam, the Pashtun's identity, nationalism and the incompetence of the Afghan government; describing the background of these variables provides an indicator of how much the values related to these variables are reflected in Afghans' lives. For this data, I primarily relied on secondary sources, including scholarly, policy and journalistic sources.

It is important to note that the term "popular support" in this paper implies any assistance (active or passive) that comes from people directly or indirectly. Phrases such as "people's support", "domestic support", "public support" and other synonyms are loosely used to serve the same purpose. The Taliban's survival, or victory, or success, means that the group was not defeated. As Jeffrey Record and Beating Goliath (2009) state, the insurgents win the war simply by not losing it. The following sections explain how the Taliban mobilized people by using four narratives, and why these narratives helped muster widespread support.

The Islamic Narrative

The Taliban literature contains a vast number of religious contents used to justify their struggle and gain support from people. More than 99.5% of Afghans are Muslims.[5] Religion dominates all aspects of life for most Afghans, and Islam has become an inextricable part of the Afghan people. For instance, religion can be easily noticed in Afghans' dress code, food, language, ceremonies, business and other events and daily activities. Even the Non-Muslin Afghans (e.g., Sikhs) would slip Islamic phrases in their casual conversation.[6] Generally, Afghans take great pride in considering themselves as the "best" Muslims in the world.[7]

[4] UNESCO Report on Afghanistan 2020. Accessed Sept 2021 https://uil.unesco.org/interview-literacy-rate-afghanistan-increased-43-cent
[5] "Afghan Culture - Religion," Cultural Atlas, accessed February 14, 2021. http://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/afghan-culture/afghan-culture-religion.
[6] Ibid
[7] Thomas Barfield's lecture "Tribal and Religious Identity in Afghanistan" University of Pittsburgh, November 17, 2012. Accessed December, 20, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WF3Rkt42wPY

My analysis of the Taliban's literature (2018-2019) reveals that the Islam narrative used by the Taliban mobilize people revolved around the following four sub-narratives:

"The Taliban saved Islam from the American invasion."[8]

The Taliban argue that the U.S. hates Muslims. They give examples of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Stenersen 2010, 49). The group has frequently said that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was an invasion of Islam. Mullah Mohammad Omar stated in 2002 that the U.S. did not invade Afghanistan to take revenge for the September 11 attacks; rather, it invaded Afghanistan to destroy the Islamic State because it was Islamic.[9] The Taliban writes that the Americans and their supporters have bombed madrasas and mosques.[10]

A portion of the Taliban content targets specifically Afghan youths. The group advocates that the U.S. is trying to weaken Muslim youth—the backbone of society. In one of the commentaries titled "The Importance of Youth in a Muslim Society," the Taliban write that, in the name of freedom, civilization and human rights, the Westerners have exploited the Muslim youth and have detached them from their Muslim identity and religious duties.[11]

"Jihad against the Americans and its allies in Afghanistan is a religious duty of Afghans."[12]

Among the religious themes, the Taliban have put much weight on the narrative of Jihad. The concept of Jihad is an intensely controversial subject, and has a complex set of meanings. For some scholars, Jihad is solely a spiritual and peaceful struggle, while others believe that Jihad means to wage war against your enemy in defence of Islam. Whether Jihad implies violence, justice, self-defence or improving oneself spiritually depends on its interpretations. As Esposito (2010, 85) writes, Jihad has been used and abused throughout the history of Islam. The Taliban's interpretation of Jihad, however, involves violence. The group has used Islamic piety, based loosely on the strict dogmatic Deobandi interpretation of Islam, to construct a Jihadist image that evokes righteousness and justification to their violent anti-government campaign (Rasheed 2002).

The Taliban literature is full of Jihad and the glorification of martyrs. They proliferate ballads and poetry to venerate suicide bombers and eulogize those killed on the battlefields. The suicide bombers have been one of the most efficient weapons of the

[8] "To save culture and history is our responsibility" The voice of Jihad. Accessed April 10, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=206821

[9] Mullah Omar, "Support, oh people of Islam [in Arabic] cited by Anne Stenersen 2015, "The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan – organization, leadership and worldview"

[10] "What is Happning to the beloved county" [Pashto], Morchal, April 2019,p.17. volume 128. Accessed Jan 14, 2021. http://mujali.net/ https://alemarahpashto.com/

[11] "The Importance of Youth in a Muslim Society" [Pashto] Srak, January 2020. Vol 109. Accessed March 1, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/

[12] Mulawi Shamsullah "Legitimacy and reasons for the Ongoing Jihad" (2018) The voice of Jihad, Accessed April 9, 2021 https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=126280

Taliban as they have wreaked havoc on the collation and Afghan forces (Giustozzi 2019). The insurgents use Hadiths (the saying and deeds of the Prophet Mohamed) to urge people for Jihad. For instance, they quote the following Hadith: "Wage Jihad against the infidels with your wealth, your-self (physical), and tongue (words)."[13] They narrate Hadiths or verses of the Quran and then interpret and describe them with more details that are consistent with support for their movement.

The Taliban had a part-time Jihad policy for those willing to wage Jihad but cannot do so full-time. The Taliban advocate that there is no need to leave one's home; Islam has flexibility and allows Jihad from the places where one lives (Morchal 2018, 7-8). This flexible strategy of the Taliban is highly effective; they have deployed tens of thousands of part-time fighters at the local level (Giustizzi, 2019, 278). Besides other advantages, this method reduces financial strain on the insurgents. The Taliban derives the legitimacy of "part-time Jihad" from the Islamic narrative, such as the following Hadiths: "Prophet Mohammad said: Going to Jihad for part-time is better than the whole world and the things that the world contains."[14]

Jihad and *Shahadat* (martyrdom) or *Shaheed* (martyr) are held in high esteem in Islam in general and in rural Afghanistan in particular due to their significance in the Quran and Hadiths. Given its high virtue, many Muslims believe that Jihad is the sixth pillar of Islam (Esposito 2002, 1). Based on the belief that when foreigners invade your country, people or religion, one must wage Jihad, many Afghans, especially those in rural areas, think that Jihad is obligatory on all Afghans in the current circumstances. Islamic classical jurists argue that Muslims who disagree with any verse of the Quran or (authentic) Hadiths lose their faith and become Kafir (infidels [Cook 2005]). This notion further strengthens the Taliban's leverage over the will of people regarding Jihad. Thus, given their lack of formal Islamic knowledge and strong religious beliefs, people in rural Afghanistan become more susceptible to joining the cause. As Johnson (2017, 25) states, religious leaders hold a near-monopoly of power over religion in rural areas, and they instruct people about what is right or wrong.

A call for a Muslim's duty to protect their religion is a powerful inspiration among rural Afghans. The Taliban appeal to Afghans to re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the tutelage of Islam. Johnson notes, "undoubtedly, the Taliban have been able to manipulate religion and have used this manipulation as a powerful weapon in their Jihad against the Afghan government and its international allies" (ibid).

[13] "Jihad" Shahamat, [Dari/Pashto], January 2020. Accessed Jan 3, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/
[14] Morchal, 2018. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/ . See original source; Sahih Muslim, Book 20: Hadith Number 4639. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://www.iium.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim/020_smt.html

"The Taliban are the guardians of Islam"

Since its early inception, Islam has been the *raison d'être* of the Taliban movement. The late Mullah Omar was considered a divine figure by many Afghans. What enhanced Omar's religious authority more was when, on April 4, 1996, he addressed a crowd from a mosque's roof in Kandahar and wore the most sacred religious symbol of Afghanistan—the cloak of the Prophet Mohammad.[15] The delirious crowd swore allegiance to him and cheered his designation as Amir-ul-Momineen (the leader of the faithful). Informed by history, the Taliban insurgency understands the uncompromising religious nature of Afghans. The group has used religion as an instrument to cripple its adversaries (Johnson 2017, 25).

The Taliban's understanding of the concept of democracy seems to be very limited. For instance, in their literature, instead of the political and social context, they used the terms democracy in a religious context. The group has often compared democracy and Islam and portrayed democracy as an anti-Islam concept (Srak 2019, 13). They claim that democracy and secularism are threats to their religion and that this Western concept has been imposed on Afghans. Thus, to defend their religion, they have taken arms (ibid.,14). Below is an example of how the Taliban justified their war.

> Afghanistan is one of the few societies which has properly implemented Islam. Afghans have always preferred Islam as their way of life. Due to this, many non-Muslim world powers have tried to occupy Afghanistan and destroy our religion. While the West has many conspiracies to strip Afghans of Islam, one notable attempt is under the name of democracy, a concept being imposed on Afghans by a small group of pro-western Afghan puppets. [16]

In 2002, the Taliban started recruiting those people who were previously not affiliated with the Taliban. One of their *modus operandi* was to co-opt the village-level Mullahs for recruiting fighters (Giustozzi 2019). The Taliban would approach them, telling them about their religious agenda for an Islamic country where clergy would have more voice. Mosques in rural areas became attractive centers for the Taliban to invite people for Jihad (Johnson 2017, 268-270).

The Taliban's Pashtun Narrative

Not all the people support the insurgency for religious causes; many have joined the Taliban's ranks and files as a pragmatic decision rather than an ideological or religious goal. Capitalizing on their sophisticated knowledge of indigenous culture, the Taliban touted themselves as guardians of the Pashtun people (Stenersen 2010). Unlike their religious

[15] "A Tale of the Mullah and Muhammad's Amazing Cloak" The New York Times, 2001. Accessed January 29, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/19/international/asia/a-tale-of-the-mullah-and-muhammads-amazing-cloak.html
[16] "Democracy and Islam" A Taliban's Podcast, [Pashto]. Accessed December 22, 2020. http://www.taraani.com/

rhetoric, the Taliban do not often use the terms "Pashtun" or "Pashtunwali" explicitly in their literature. This appears to be for two main reasons. First, to avoid public blame that the Taliban are exclusively a Pashtun movement. Second, as will be shown later, when the Taliban juxtapose Pashtuns with non-Pashtuns in a negative or "bad" context, instead of general ethnic statements, the Taliban refer specifically to political parties or leaders who are dominated by non-Pashtuns; for example, the Northern Alliance, Jamiat Islami and Hizb-e-Wahadat party. According to Qazi (2010), the Taliban have implicitly played the "Pashtun-card" to beef up support for their resistance. For instance, the fact that the Taliban is a Pashtun-centric movement and almost all the Taliban high-ranking leaders are Pashtuns, suggests that they represent many Pashtuns. Although the group has recently incorporated more non-Pashtuns into its movement, the majority of the Taliban fighters —perhaps up to 95 percent— remain Pashtuns (Cathell 2009, 5). The Taliban Pashtun narrative includes three main interrelated yet distinct themes, as follows:

"The Taliban Protect Pashtun traditions"

The Taliban have advertised themselves as the protectors of Afghan tradition and culture in general and that of the Pashtuns in particular. The traditions of the Pashtuns are closely linked with Pashtunwali—a traditional social code of Pashtuns that include principles like Badall (revenge), Namous (women honour), Nang and Ghirate (courage and honour), Melmastya (Hospitality), Nanawate (Asylum), Wafadari (loyalty) and Jirga, an assembly of elders that resolve disputes by consensus and according to Pashtunwali (Goodson 2001:15–16; Khan 2015, 3-6). Although the Taliban claims that Sharia (Islamic Law) always supersedes ethnic politics, in truth the Taliban's idiosyncratic version of Sharia has incorporated many tenets of Pashtunwali. A survey found that while Islamic law holds a higher status, in practice, it is the local customary law that dominates these decisions (Khan 2015, 1). Most Pashtuns assume that their practices are in conformity with Islam, in part because they self-identify as Muslims (Khan, 2015,4-5). In many aspects, Islam and Pashtunwali diverge. For example, Islam creates the boundaries of one's individual relationship with God and offers a path to one's individual moral extent, while Pashtunwali associates a person's honor with the collective society (ibid). Similarly, while Islam discourages bride price and lavish dowries, many Pashtun tribes bypass this Islamic command and prefer their customs of imposing expensive dowries.[17]

The insurgents hold that the coalition forces have no respect for indigenous culture. This contemptuous conduct was more visible in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan; the foreign troops would often raid homes in villages and violate the Afghan women's privacy by searching their bodies (Giustozzi 2019, 135). The forces would beat, arrest or kill the suspected men in front of their women and neighbours (Jhonson 2017, 274). For Afghans, mostly rural Pashtuns, it is an extreme dishonour and humiliation if men, especially

[17] "Afghanistan: Marriage" Report, 2011. Accessed, March 11, 2021. https://www.landinfo.no/asset/ 1852/1/1852_1.pdf

outsiders, forcibly enter their homes. Any misbehaviour or activity that transgresses one's *nang* (honour) provokes a call for an unequivocal act of revenge (237). To regain the "honour" in the community, they must avenge or die while trying it (ibid).

Consequently, any instances of improper trespassing into villages and households during break-ins, or the touching of Afghan women and shackling of men in front of their families, became sources of Taliban propaganda that resonated with those realities (Cathell 2009, 9). As Johnson (2014) notes, the Taliban have astutely utilized the codes of Pashtunwali—the principal values and the driving forces behind individual and collective actions in Pashtun society. Many offended families or tribes would deliberately take up arms against the governments that consistently harassed people intentionally or unintentionally (Johnson 2014). The Taliban have frequently crafted such grievances in their interaction with local people and tapped into the wellspring of supporters for their strategic objectives (Ibid). The Taliban have won the hearts and minds of many Pashtuns because they seem to be protecting the indigenous culture (Sinno 2009, 80-81).

To highlight the significance of *Badall*, a concept narrowly tied to Pashtuns, there is an adage that says, "avenging after a hundred years is still a premature act."[18] It means that revenge must be taken no matter how long it takes. Interestingly, in Helmand province, the Taliban gained significant support from locals merely by presenting the idea that the British (based in Helmand) were the Pashtuns' old enemies. They have come not only to re-occupy their land, but to get their revenge for the Battle of Maiwand —a key battle of the Second Anglo-Afghan War fought in Greater Kandahar, a Pashtun dominated region, in 1880 (Hussain 2008, 13-15). To provoke Badal, the Taliban say:

> The invaders and their slaves must understand the fact that dozens of Afghans will join the battlefield to take revenge for every single brother that is killed. They will not give up fighting, nor will they return to their homes until they take revenge of their loved ones.[19]

"Protecting Pashtuns' political rights"

A part of the Taliban narrative focuses on the marginalized Pashtuns. There is increasingly common discourse according to which Pashtuns have been politically and economically isolated in the post-Taliban era (Ahady 1995). "The collapse of the Najibullah regime in Kabul in April 1992 not only ended the communist era in Afghanistan, but also heralded the end of Pashtun dominance in Afghan politics." (ibid.,1)

[18] "Pashto Proverbs" [Pashto e-book]. Accessed March 20, 2021. http://www.afghandata.org:8080/ xmlui/handle/ azu/7698

[19] "Americans claim that killing and torturing civilians is a part of their military doctrine" Voice of Jihad.2018. Accessed January 22, 2021. http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=29183

The Northern Alliance, a multi-ethnic coalition dominated by Tajiks, helped the U.S. remove the Taliban from power. As a reward, the alliance obtained the lion's share in the post-Taliban government. For instance, Mohammad Qasim Fahim was the defence minister, Younus Qanooni was the interior minister, Abdullah Abdullah was the minister of foreign affairs, and Muhammad Arif Sarwari was the head of the directorate of National Security.[20] This small group of people exclusively came from one party and belonged to one province—Panjshir.[21] The Taliban said:

> Younus Qanooni and other members of the Northern Alliance who are the residents of Panjshir province have a long history of enmity with the Taliban. They said that peace with the Taliban is impossible; thus, they will never want us to come to the negotiation table.[22]

Among the disgruntled Pashtuns, the most notable were Ghilji Pashtuns, especially in Southern Afghanistan. Ghilji tribe is the largest tribe of Pashtuns (Qazi 2010). Most of the Taliban, including the late Mullah Omar, hailed from the Ghilji tribe of Pashtuns. Conversely, Hamid Karzai, who replaced the Taliban leader, came from the Durani Tribe of Pashtun (Johnson 2007, 279). Traditionally, Ghilji and Durani tribes are seen to be political rivals who fought for ruling Afghanistan. Upon the fall of the Taliban, many Ghilji Pashtuns in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan sided with the Taliban insurgency (Ruttig, 2010). The Taliban note, "In the initial years of occupation, the Americans gave power and dollars to the Northern Alliance members, warlords and other war criminals so that the Americans can use them against the Taliban."[23]

Unfair practices in the process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) favoured groups that had won the war and then selectively targeted those who were considered to be Taliban or their sympathizers (Stritzel and Chang 2010, 555). Such practices infuriated many Pashtuns, mainly within the Ghilji tribes, who felt marginalized in the post-Taliban period. They, therefore, decided to rethink their relationship with Kabul. Subsequently, the victors' post-Taliban government, headed by Hamid Karzai, pushed many disillusioned tribes to remain with or join the Taliban movement (Ruttig 2010-14-16). In the initial years of the insurgency, counterinsurgency operations, which were mostly comprised of non-Pashtun militias and foreign forces, deliberately abused those Pashtuns who at one point had supported the Taliban or sympathized with them (Qazi 2010, 490-491). State harassment compelled many Pashtuns to look for an alternative. The Taliban aptly filled this void; they embraced those shunned by the central government.

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[20] "Afghan biographies" Acessed January 28, 2021. http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option= com_afghan bios&id=1392&task=view&total=2234&start=1557&Itemid=2

[21] Tolo News Interview with Younus Qanooni. [Dari]. Accessed Jan, 14 2021. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=205479011039708

[22] The contractor of the High Peace Council", the Voice of Jihad. Accessed April 11, 2021. https:// alemarahpashto.com/?p=34449

[23] "One country and many flags" ,the voice of Jihad. Accessed 10 April 2021. https:// alemarahpashto.com/?p=77046

"Providing security to Pashtuns against indiscriminate violence"

Most airstrikes occurred in the Pashtun-dominated areas, the country's Eastern and Southern belts, as most of the Taliban strongholds are located in those areas. Logically, the victims are often Pashtuns. The use of airpower often results in civilian casualties that tend to create anger and active hostility (Jones 2008). Non-combatant casualties lead to civilians' grievances, which insurgents often exploit in their favour (ibid). There have been many incidents when drones or other forms of airpower have targeted civilian' events, including weddings, funerals, and graduation ceremonies of madrasa students, causing heavy casualties (Shortland, Sari1 and Nader 2017).

Counterinsurgent militaries can be infamously brutal because sometimes they employ tactics that target civilians indiscriminately, which dries up state support (Weinstein, 2007). The shelling of civilians by airpower strengthens the Taliban's argument; they would tell people that the Americans have come to kill and maim innocent Afghans and destroy their properties.[24] The Taliban have often provided financial and other support to those affected by airstrikes.[25]

The Taliban also refer to the early 1990s civil war period and assert that Pashtuns were brutally targeted, especially by a Hazara-dominated political party called Hizb-e-Wahdat or the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan. The group writes, "Hizb-e-Wahdat members cut off breasts of dozens of Pashtun women and sent them to Abdul Rasul Sayyaf as gifts."[26] Elsewhere, the Taliban write as follows:

> Commander Shafi (a Hazara ethnic) raided homes, looted people and jailed women. He would gang-rape women, drive nails in men's heads. He would set fire to prisoners and call the agony of the burned prisoners the dance of the dead. These barbarities of Commander Shafi were often [perpetrated] against the Pashtun people.[27]

Also, barring Badakhshan, most of the illicit poppy is produced in Pashtun-dominated provinces of Afghanistan. Poppy production is a highly labour-intensive industry in the country; it has provided more than 0.5 million full-time jobs and hundreds of thousands of seasonal jobs to Afghans (SIGAR, 2019). Since poppy production occurred mainly in Pashtun-dominated areas, Pashtun farmers suffered the most from poppy-eradication

[24] See the Taliban commission for prevention of Civilian causalities report 2018. Voice of Jihad,. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/, http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=29183#
[25] Department for the Affairs of Needy, Orphans and Disables, Voice of Jihad. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/?cat=757
[26] The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan established a centralized authority" The voice of Jihad. Accessed April 11, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=169630
[27] "How and Why the Taliban emerged", The voice of Jihad. Accessed April 9, 2021 https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=183592#

programs. Thus, to put food on the table, many Pashtun farmers side with the Taliban, who protect the poppy field from government encroachment and ensure it is processed and traded (ibid).

Nationalist Narrative

The Taliban nationalist narrative resonates with the values held dear by all ethnic groups and not just Pashtuns. In this context, nationalism is used broadly. It does not mean religious or ethnic nationalism. The Taliban's nationalist or patriotic narrative has diverse audiences, and their activities are reflected on the national level. The Taliban sought to establish a legitimate emirate. For this purpose, the insurgents simultaneously attempted to bypass sectarianism and ethnolinguistic politics by using Islam and nationalism as unifying factors for all Afghans. For instance, the Taliban state:

> There was no sign (of linguistic and ethnic) discrimination in Afghanistan. All Afghans, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara, were peacefully coexisting under Islamic brotherhood. But in the last few decades, foreign occupiers cultivated the seeds of hatred and disunity among us under their policy of divide and rule.[28]

The group has projected itself as a national and more inclusive organization by incorporating more non-Pashtuns and ensuring the rights of minorities in their statements. The Taliban's efforts to mobilize people on a national level include three main sub-narratives as follows:

"The Islamic Emirate's first priority is to save the country from the invaders."[29]

The Taliban assert that the U.S. has violated Afghanistan's sovereignty by toppling the Taliban regime. The group has attempted to present themselves as freedom fighters who strive to liberate all Afghans from "systematic oppression." In their literature, the Taliban have often referred to the U.S. as "Eshghalgar" (occupying force) and compared it to the Soviet Union and British invasions of Afghanistan.[30] By nationalizing its resistance, the Taliban bid for mobilizing Afghans irrespective of their ethnic or religious background.

> War in our beloved homeland has been initiated by America, and she has reached for every imaginable terror, duplicity, and deception to keep the conflict going.

[28] "Let's get identify discrimination and get rid of it" The voice of Jihad. Accessed April, 12, 2020 https://alemarah pashto.com/?p=95963
[29] "Nicholson's Election and the peculiar process of Registration"The voice of Jihad. Accessed December 28, 2020. http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=27838
[30] Srak, march 2019, vol 110.the Voice of Jihad Accessed http://mujali.net/.

> Afghans have not entered America to wage war; rather, it is America that has invaded Afghanistan [...].The Afghan resistance under the leadership of the Islamic Emirate is but a reaction to the American invasion. The invasion not only brought down all our values it also ignited the flames of war. Unless the occupation ceased, the war will not see an end.[31]

"The Afghan government is not legitimate"

The Taliban insurgency has put significant efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the post-Taliban governments. They argue that the foundation of the post-Taliban order was laid down, not by the people but by the U.S. and those few Afghans who supported the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. It frequently referred to the fact that the post-Taliban Karzai government was dominated by one particular group—the Northern Alliance. They also referred to the massively rigged presidential and parliamentary elections and claimed that people did not elect the government; rather, it was enforced on the people. According to Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission, out of the 9.6 million registered voters, only 1.1 million cast their votes in the 2019 presidential elections.[32]

"The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan can save Afghanistan."

On the one hand, the Taliban undermine the Afghan government's legitimacy. On the other hand, they projects themselves as a viable alternative to the central government. After 2003, the Taliban started investing greater resources in their shadow government, called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Giustozzi 2012, 2). One of their objectives was to demonstrate to people that they are not just a Pashtun militant group, but a capable governing body. To demonstrate that the Taliban are a stable and "people-oriented" organization, they often referred to their administrative bodies, which deal with people's affairs.[33] For instance, they would talk about the Taliban's commission for Agriculture, Commission for Livestock, Ushr and Zakat (the Islamic tax system), Commission for Financial Affairs, Commission for Training Learning and Higher Education, Department for the Affairs of Needy, Orphans and Disables, and Commission for Prevention of Civilian Causalities (Giustozzi 2019).

The Taliban firmly support the national integrity of Afghanistan. Despite their strong opposition to the previous governments, the Taliban have never raised any secession questions. They have strongly criticized and threatened those elements that may want to

[31] "Occupation and Ceasefire" The voice of Jihad. 2019. Accessed, February 2, 2021 http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=31064

[32] "2019 Election" Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission. Accessed Janury 3, 2021. https://www.iec.org.af/en/elections/2019-elections-en/archive

[33] See the Taliban annual report for their each commissions 2019. Accessed April 12, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/?cat=757

disintegrate the country. Mullah Omar stated: "Some internal and external enemies are now speaking of the disintegration of the beloved country. They should know that the patriotic countrymen and the Islamic Emirate will never allow anyone to put into practice their wicked plan."[34]

Although the Taliban have unremittingly attempted to terrorize the hub of Afghanistan's political and administrative authority, they have simultaneously endeavoured to re-brand themselves as a kinder, softer, more inclusive organization in the eyes of the Afghan people. The Taliban says that they are committed to protecting the rights of all citizens, including minorities. They contended that "the Kabul administration" has neither the ability nor the will to serve the Afghan nation, but its sole aim is to serve the agenda of foreigners who, in return, use the regime for their interest.[35] The Taliban writes, "the Kabul administration's reason for survival is not its popularity among the people, but the fact that it serves the interest of its foreign sponsors. If the Western occupiers cut their support, the fall of the Kabul administration will be quick and imminent."[36] Unlike the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the insurgents argue that the Taliban's policies are in line with Afghan traditions.[37] The group has encouraged the Afghans' enduring desire to preserve time-honoured traditions of local governance and tribal justice systems, in an effort to delegitimize the Afghan government and augment support for the Taliban.

The Taliban judicial system has earned the group much popularity. In rural areas, the Taliban have established their Sharia-based mobile courts, which were faster than state courts and offer services free of charge, whereas government courts had an unpopular image (Johnson 2017). For example, in Herat (a non-Pashtun-dominated province), the Taliban were able to end a longtime enmity between the two groups (Pashtun and Tajiks).[38] These kinds of activities boosted the Taliban's supporter morale; the latter claim that, unlike the Afghan government, the Taliban can provide justice to the people.

Afghanistan's situation just prior to the country's takeover by the Taliban (in August 2021) indicated that the Afghan government and international sponsors had failed to provide security even to the people living in the heavily guarded capital. Target killings, looting, and robbery had become the order of the day, especially in big cities, such as Kabul and Jalalabad.[39] The Commission for Prohibiting Civilian Causalities, a part of

[34] Mullah Omar Eid messages, 16 November 2010, cited by Johnson 2017, 32.
[35] "Is the Kabul Administration trustworthy?" The Voice of Jihad. Accessed April 9, 2021 https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=141877
[36] The Kabul administration have lost its trust on International level" The voice of Jihad . Accessed April 10, 2021 https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=204184
[37] [37] Shahamat, 2018. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/
[38] The Taliban resolved conflicts between two groups" The voice of Jihad, Accessed April 11, 2021 https://alemarahpashto.com/?p=31174
[39] Srak, 2018. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/

the Taliban's shadow government, reported that in 2019 there were 8707 civilian casualties, of which U.S. forces and the Afghan government caused 96 percent.[40] While these figures might be exaggerated to allow the Taliban to avoid public blame, many non-Taliban sources also confirm heavy civilian casualties.[41]

Corruption and the incompetence of the Afghan government

Rampant corruption has also strengthened the Taliban's narrative. The group has repeatedly argued that the Afghan government is full of corruption. After 19 years of development programs, access to basic amenities of life (e.g., sanitization, drinking water, health, electricity, education) remains a distant dream for most Afghans.[42] The insurgents exploited such failures and shortcomings of the Afghan government. For instance, below is an example of how the Taliban portrays the Afghan government's incompetence in its propaganda:

> Those at the helm of power in Kabul have been filling their pockets and looting the public treasury, making Afghanistan in the top three most corrupt governments in the world. The warlords supported by foreigners, the mafias, and other senior officials are merciless looters sucking Afghans' blood and looting their wealth as the country is being plunged into darkness. During the past 19 years, the influx of billions of dollars has made no significant impact on the lives of ordinary Afghans [...]. more than half of the people of Afghanistan live below the poverty line [...]. The small circle of corrupt regime heads and their officials are trying to hijack peace talks for their own personal gains and looting national wealth.[43]

Johnson (2017) rightly states that corruption impedes economic development, puts a disproportionate burden on the poor, undermines the rule of law, and damages state legitimacy. As a result, people started to look for alternatives, which in this case, were provided by the Taliban. The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reports that corruption has drastically undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the start. It maintains that corruption has cut across all aspects of the reconstruction effort, jeopardized progress made in security, the rule of law, governance, and economic development.[44] The group tries to gnaw trust in the government and diverts social support to its movement by displaying its weakness. As the Taliban write:

[40] See the Taliban commission for prevention of Civilian causalities report 2018. Voice of Jihad, Accessed March 20, 2021. https://alemarahpashto.com/
[41] Watson Institute, Accessed Sept 20, 2021. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan
[42] World Bank report on Afghanistan. Accessed Oct 11, 2021 https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/publication/poverty-reduction-in-afghanistan-despite-economic-growth-widening-inequality
[43] "The massive corruption of the corrupt Kabul administration" Voice of Jihad, Accessed January 27, 2021. https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42044
[44] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2016 https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/sigar-16-58-ll.pdf

> Those occupying the seat of power of the Kabul administration are so shameless that they even stole foreign funds for the relief of Coronavirus victims and smuggled the money to have comfortable lives for their families and relatives outside of Afghanistan. The life-saving machines such as ventilators were sold in black markets while patients continued dying because of disease."[45]

Conclusion

I argued that the Taliban used four key narratives to garner internal support. First, the Taliban used a religious narrative that sent a message to the people that the Americans have come to Afghanistan to fight Islam and not just the Taliban. The group advocated that Jihad against foreign forces was obligatory on every Afghan. The Taliban portrayed Americans as the enemies of Islam and presented themselves as the guardian of Islam. Since Islam is highly resonated in Afghan people's lives, the religious rhetoric was more appealing for the Afghan people. For example, the group's call for an essential religious duty—Jihad, was well-responded to. Second, the Taliban used the "ethnic card" and represented itself as the guardian of the Pashtun people. Some coalition forces' policies, such as searching Afghans' homes and the violation of *parda* (veil) of Afghan women by the troops, were highly offensive for Pashtuns. The Taliban exploited those incidents and presented them to the people as evidence that the foreign forces disrespect the indigenous culture. The Taliban also embraced those Pashtuns who felt alienated in a post-Taliban government dominated by a particular group—the Northern Alliance. Furthermore, the civilian casualties of Pashtuns further-pushed many Pashtun communities to join the Taliban.

The third narrative found in the Taliban literature is nationalism. Besides Islamic and Pashtun-centric narratives, the literature suggests that the Taliban is a national and more inclusive organization that concerns all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. They presented national narratives; for instance, they asserted that the U.S. has violated Afghanistan's sovereignty and occupied its people. The fourth narrative was corruption and the Afghan government's incompetence. The group presented the government's weaknesses to Afghans and propagated that the government serves the interest of foreigners, elites and warlords. The group construed its narratives in a way that was reflected in the lives of Afghans. For example, they advocated that the Afghan officials led a life full of luxuries while an average Afghan les a hand-to-mouth life. The Taliban published the stories and conditions of impoverished Afghans and linked them to the government's inabilities. Major flaws (e.g. Immense corruption, weak central authority and leadership) in the government significant increased the chances of the Taliban comeback.

[45] "The massive corruption of the corrupt Kabul administration" Voice of Jihad, Accessed January 27, 202. https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42044

By not engaging and coordinating with the Afghan people, in Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. walked on thin ice in Afghanistan (Stritzel and Chang 2015, 549). While the U.S. later initiated many programs to engage with local people, it did not achieve significant results (ibid., 555-559). The two-decade-long failed war indicated that it was significantly less likely to defeat the Taliban with an iron fist policy. The Taliban are more than just a foreign-backed militant group. They are an integral part of the Afghan society with a strong base among many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns. Past events and this research conclude that people in rural Afghanistan are the center of gravity. Those who engage with people at the grass-root level are in a better position to mobilize popular support. While the Taliban have now established absolute control over Afghanistan, they are susceptible to security (ISIS) and economic challenges. Only a stable government can ensure a stable Afghanistan. And for the Taliban to establish a stable rule, they must cooperate with the international community, guarantee human rights, particularly women's rights, promote strong and modern institutions, eradicate warlordism and corruption and in the long term, provide equal political opportunities to every Afghan.

This study is not free from shortcomings. First, the author collected only a tiny portion of the primary data from the vast amount of the Taliban literature. Thus, the interpretation and findings of the paper may only be valid for the latest period of insurgency. It should be recognized, however, that, during the 20 years of the insurgency, the Taliban's power, structure and relations with the U.S. fluctuated. Therefore, further research is required to determine whether there are more narratives and variations among them during the insurgency period. In Afghanistan, religion and culture went hand-in-hand. They developed a unique tradition that makes it challenging to separate Islam from culture, thus leading to the problem of overlapping among the narratives. Nevertheless, this research lays the ground for a comparative study of the issue; it would be interesting to compare the Taliban's mechanisms of mobilizing popular support with other insurgent groups in other regions.

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