Chapter 14

The Rise of Religious Extremism in Afghanistan[1]

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Introduction

Religion has historically served as one of the most powerful forces shaping human civilization. Beyond its spiritual functions, it has played a foundational role in lawmaking, moral development, governance, and the formation of collective identity. In the early stages of human society, religious institutions were often the primary custodians of knowledge and ethics, guiding people through eras marked by tribalism, conflict, and limited access to formal education. Figures such as Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), Jesus of Nazareth, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced doctrines not only to bridge the human-divine relationship but to reform corrupt and unjust societies.

However, religion's civilizational mission has been frequently distorted. Across history, religious doctrines have been appropriated by political powers to justify conquest, suppress dissent, and assert ideological dominance. This instrumentalization of religion has manifested across the Abrahamic faiths. For example, Christianity saw the call to the First Crusade by Pope Urban II in 1095 as a divinely sanctioned military endeavor—offering absolution to those who fought under the banner of faith (Tyerman, 2007; Claster, 2009). In Islam, early expansions under the Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphates were couched in religious language, but also served strategic and imperial objectives (Christie, 2020). Even Judaism's foundational texts recount conquest narratives used to claim and justify territorial control (Sirgy et al., 2019).

Despite theological differences, the historical record shows that all three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have been used to legitimize violence in service of state-building and empire. This is not unique to any one tradition but a function of how religious authority can be co-opted for political ends (Jamieson, 2006; Chevedden, 2011).

In the modern world, Islam has become the most scrutinized religion in discussions of extremism. This is due in part to global events such as 9/11, the rise of ISIS, and the Taliban insurgency, but also due to the deliberate use of Islamic symbolism by political actors in conflict zones. However,

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portraying Islam as inherently violent obscures the broader historical pattern: religious extremism arises when political, social, and ideological crises intersect, and when religion is manipulated as a tool of legitimacy, resistance, or hegemony (Tyerman, 2007; Christie, 2020).

Afghanistan presents a compelling and urgent case of this phenomenon. Religion—specifically Islam—has long been central to Afghan identity and national cohesion. Historically, it has played a unifying role in resisting foreign domination, from British and Soviet invasions to NATO's intervention post-2001. But in recent decades, the country has witnessed an intensification of religious extremism, fueled by both internal fractures and external manipulation.

Despite billions spent on democratization, state-building, and civil society by Western powers, Afghanistan has remained largely immune to secular and liberal democratic reforms. Instead, religious extremism has become increasingly institutionalized and fragmented. Multiple actors—ranging from political elites to militant groups—have exploited religious ideology to claim legitimacy, suppress opposition, and mobilize support. In this context, extremism is not simply a doctrinal deviation but a strategic weapon in a highly contested political and ideological battlefield.

Therefore, to understand the persistence and evolution of extremism in Afghanistan, one must investigate how religion—once a moral compass—has been turned into a political instrument. This chapter begins with this broader historical backdrop to religion's dual role before examining its specific manifestation in Afghanistan's ideological and security crises.

Islamization of Afghanistan: From Sacred Identity to Strategic Ideology

The Islamization of Afghanistan was neither abrupt nor uniform—it was the outcome of centuries of cultural diffusion, imperial consolidation, and political negotiation. Islam first entered the region during the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century, but its penetration into the mountainous and ethnically diverse terrain of what is now Afghanistan was slow and fragmented. The region, then known as Khurasan, was a rich mosaic of Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Hindu, and animist beliefs. It was not until the advent of regional Muslim dynasties—such as the Saffarids, Ghaznavids, and Ghurids—that Islam achieved dominance as both faith and civilizational framework (Green, 2016).

The Ghaznavid Empire (977–1186), under rulers like Mahmud of Ghazni, was instrumental in fusing religion with imperial ambition. While patronizing Islamic institutions, Ghaznavid rulers also launched military campaigns into India under the banner of jihad, blending religious justification with economic plunder and territorial conquest. Similarly, the Ghurids spread a Persianized form of Sunni Islam into Central and South Asia, using religion not merely for devotion but as an organizing principle of governance and legitimacy. Through these dynasties, Islam in Afghanistan came to embody both sacred meaning and political power—an arrangement that foreshadowed later forms of religious instrumentalization (Hassan, 2024).

This Islamic golden age saw cities like Herat and Balkh emerge as vibrant centers of Sufi thought, jurisprudence, and philosophy. Sufism in particular—through figures such as Khwaja Abdullah Ansari—advocated tolerance, inner reform, and spiritual depth. For centuries, Islam in Afghanistan was thus characterized not by militancy but by mysticism and moral pedagogy.

Yet over time, these theological traditions were subordinated to state-centered political projects. The first systematic use of Islam as a tool for political consolidation came under Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901). In his attempt to centralize authority, the Amir co-opted the ulema, brought religious institutions under state control, and used Islam to suppress tribal autonomy. In return, clerics were granted legitimacy and access to power—laying the groundwork for a clerical-state alliance that would become increasingly consequential in the 20th century (Green, 2016; Kohistani, 2009).

This politicization of religion became more pronounced during moments of reform. When King Amanullah Khan (r. 1919–1929) attempted to modernize Afghanistan along secular lines—abolishing veiling, expanding female education, and reducing clerical power—he encountered fierce resistance. Religious leaders accused him of betraying Islam and incited mass revolts. Their success in overthrowing Amanullah and briefly installing the traditionalist Habibullah Kalakani represented a watershed: it proved that Islam, when framed as being under threat, could serve as a powerful populist tool of political mobilization (Hassan, 2024; Baqai & Wasi, 2021).

Throughout the 20th century, Afghan rulers sought a careful balance between modern state-building and religious conservatism. King Zahir Shah's 1931 Constitution enshrined Hanafi Islam as the state religion but maintained a dual legal system, accommodating both Sharia and civil codes. Later, the 1964 constitution emphasized secularism while maintaining Islam's sanctity. This tension between modernist and traditionalist impulses came to a head during the 1970s with the rise of leftist movements.

As the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) pursued radical secularization and aligned itself with Soviet communism, it alienated the religious rural majority. The regime's crackdown on religious figures, closure of madrasas, and forced literacy programs (especially for women) were perceived as direct assaults on Islam. This triggered widespread revolt and gave rise to the Mujahideen—a constellation of Islamist factions who rebranded jihad as resistance not only against communism but against modernity itself (Green, 2016).

Here, the role of Islam underwent a decisive transformation: no longer a unifying cultural identity or moral guide, it became a vehicle for insurgency. Fueled by international funding from Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Pakistan, Afghan Islamism adopted increasingly radical tones, shaped by Wahhabi and Salafist ideologies foreign to Afghanistan's Sufi and Hanafi traditions. Over time, religious authority was decoupled from traditional clerics and redefined by militant ideologues and paramilitary commanders.

This period laid the groundwork for the Taliban's rise in the 1990s and the global entrenchment of jihadist extremism. Islam was not the cause of violence; rather, its instrumentalization—first by monarchs, then by communists, and finally by insurgents and international actors—turned it into a battleground of legitimacy, power, and ideological warfare.

The Muslim Youth Organization: From Religious Activism to Political Extremism

By the late 1960s, Afghanistan's academic and political arenas reflected a broader global ideological polarization. Communism was rapidly gaining ground in Kabul University, as leftist

students organized rallies, published manifestos, and aligned themselves with the Soviet-inspired revolutionary movements sweeping across the developing world. In response to this ideological incursion, conservative and religiously devout students—particularly those at the Faculty of Sharia—began to mobilize around a different vision: an Islamic response to secular materialism.

Among these students was Abdur Rahim Niazi, who began organizing informal gatherings in university dormitories. These meetings, rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, focused on the incompatibility of Islam with communism. Niazi and his peers argued that Islam was not only spiritually superior but also politically viable—capable of offering just and moral solutions to Afghanistan's mounting crises. What began as small study circles evolved into an organized movement: the Sazman-i Jawanan-i Musulman (Organization of Muslim Youth), formally established around 1969.

While the group initially emphasized Islamic revivalism, it quickly took on a more political and confrontational posture. The organization's central objective became the establishment of an Islamic state governed strictly by Sharia law, rejecting both communism and secularism as alien imports. This ideological rigidity was nurtured by transnational currents. Key members, including Ghulam Mohammad Niazi and Burhanuddin Rabbani, were deeply influenced by their exposure to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood during postgraduate studies at Al-Azhar University. Rabbani in particular translated the writings of Sayyid Qutb—a leading ideologue of militant Islamism—into Dari, thus importing radical thought into Afghan discourse (Fishman, 2009).

These ideas had a profound impact. Sayyid Qutb's notion of *jahiliyya*—a state of pre-Islamic ignorance that supposedly characterized modern secular societies—was used to frame the Afghan monarchy and its left-leaning elite as religiously illegitimate. This conceptual shift gave theological justification for resisting the state, and even for violent action, under the banner of *jihad*. Here, religion was no longer just a matter of personal piety or communal identity—it became a political doctrine of confrontation and revolution.

The transformation from revivalist to militant ideology became evident in the early 1970s. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an engineering student from Kunduz province, emerged as the most radical figure within the Muslim Youth. His leadership marked the shift from ideological debate to violent activism. In 1972, a confrontation at Kabul University over a professor's remark questioning Islam's economic vision escalated into deadly violence: a Maoist student was killed, allegedly by Islamist students affiliated with the Muslim Youth. Shortly afterward, a similar incident occurred at Kabul's Ibn Sina High School, where another leftist student was murdered. These episodes revealed the extent to which Islamic ideology had been reconfigured to justify physical violence in defense of "true Islam."

The state responded with arrests, including that of Hekmatyar. However, this only deepened the group's resolve. They began organizing mass protests not just against communism, but also against what they perceived as the monarchy's secular complacency. The Muslim Youth Organization had, by the early 1970s, transformed from a campus-based religious society into a proto-Islamist insurgent network, committed to reshaping Afghan society through ideological and, increasingly, violent means.

In 1972, the Muslim Youth formally transitioned into a political entity with the founding of Jamiat-e Islami Afghanistan, led by Rabbani. It attracted charismatic and ideologically committed members such as Ahmad Shah Massoud, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and Hekmatyar. Though initially united in their Islamist vision, these figures would later diverge—fueling rival factions in the Mujahideen movement.

The following year, Daoud Khan's 1973 coup ended the monarchy and introduced a republican regime with strong Soviet leanings. The Islamists, seeing this as a betrayal of Islam, plotted a rebellion. When their plans were uncovered, many were imprisoned, while key leaders—including Rabbani, Sayyaf, and Hekmatyar—fled to Pakistan, where they received ideological and logistical support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and began preparing for armed jihad.

This phase marked a decisive transformation: religion became fully weaponized, no longer only a system of moral resistance but a blueprint for violent revolution. The Muslim Youth, initially formed to oppose leftist ideology, had laid the ideological and structural foundation of Afghanistan's modern Islamist insurgency.

The trajectory of the Muslim Youth Organization demonstrates how religion, when married to perceived existential threats, can evolve from spiritual doctrine into a doctrine of militant resistance. The ideological shift from peaceful proselytism to violent confrontation was not a theological necessity, but a political adaptation. Figures like Rabbani and Hekmatyar selectively interpreted Islamic texts—often under the influence of Qutbist thought—to legitimate violence against the state, leftist rivals, and even fellow Muslims.

This ideological shift turned Islam from a source of societal cohesion into a polarizing force of extremism, enabling subsequent decades of war. The seeds of Afghanistan's post-Soviet civil wars and Taliban insurgency were planted in these formative years—when Islamic activism first became radicalized, militarized, and internationalized.

The rise of 'Mujahedeen' 1970-1994

After fleeing to Pakistan in the early 1970s, Afghan Islamist leaders—mainly from Jamiat-e-Islami, the successor of the Muslim Youth Organization—were welcomed by Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami. This ideological kinship was grounded in shared admiration for thinkers like Sayyid Qutb and Maulana Maududi, whose ideas inspired visions of a global Islamic order (Edwards, 2002). Both movements viewed Afghanistan not only as a battleground for Sharia but as a stepping stone for regional Islamic revolutions, including potential uprisings among Soviet Central Asia's Muslim populations (Haqqani, 2005).

In Lahore, Jamaat-e-Islami established *Darul Fikr*, a think tank that published narratives of communist oppression and the global duty of Muslims to resist. Publications like *Urdu Digest* popularized the idea of Afghanistan as the frontline in a civilizational conflict, aligning the mujahedeen's cause with broader pan-Islamic and anti-communist narratives (Coll, 2005).

Simultaneously, tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan deepened. President Daoud Khan challenged the legitimacy of the Durand Line and supported Pashtun nationalists in Pakistan. In

response, Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and the ISI began supporting Islamist insurgents against Kabul, providing weapons and training to leaders like Burhanuddin Rabbani. Strategic jockeying among Afghan factions led to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar breaking from Rabbani to form Hezb-e-Islami in 1976. Hekmatyar's uncompromising militancy, Pashtun identity, and pro-Pakistan stance made him an ideal asset for Islamabad's long-term ambitions in Afghanistan (Abbas, 2015).

The 1978 Saur Revolution, led by the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), overthrew Daoud's government. The PDPA's reforms—particularly land redistribution and policies promoting gender equality—alienated rural populations and the religious establishment. Women were encouraged to seek education and employment, clashing with traditional Afghan norms. These tensions, compounded by the PDPA's lack of grassroots legitimacy, triggered uprisings that rapidly spread (Yousaf & Adkin, 2001).

When Hafizullah Amin seized power from President Nur Muhammad Taraki, Moscow grew alarmed. Fearing a strategic collapse, the Soviet Union invoked a friendship treaty and invaded in December 1979 to support the faltering regime (Coll, 2005). The Soviet occupation transformed Afghanistan into a Cold War battleground. Iran had just undergone an Islamic revolution, and Pakistan emerged as a pivotal frontline state in the West's containment strategy.

General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime in Pakistan, combining anti-communism with Islamic zeal, seized the opportunity to align with the United States. With backing from the CIA, Zia and his ISI chief General Akhtar Abdul Rahman launched a massive covert war against the Soviets. They envisioned Afghanistan as a "second Vietnam" for the USSR—an opportunity to undermine Moscow while asserting Pakistan's leadership in the Muslim world (Wright, 2006). The strategy also provided Zia with political legitimacy, regional clout, and American aid.

Zia's Islamist worldview shaped Pakistan's handling of the jihad. According to Mahmud Arif, Zia clashed ideologically with Taraki in their 1978 meeting, emphasizing Islamic ownership of land over socialist redistribution. Despite diplomatic overtures, Zia remained committed to supporting the Islamists fighting against Kabul (Haqqani, 2005).

Between 1980 and 1989, Pakistan became the global hub of jihad. The Deobandi network and Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam helped manage billions in Saudi donations, setting up madrassas and mosques that recruited Afghan refugees and indoctrinated them with jihadist ideology. Refugee camps became recruitment centers, and Pakistan's education programs for Afghans prioritized religious militancy over secular learning (Abbas, 2015).

Foreign fighters also arrived. Among them was Palestinian cleric Abdullah Azzam, who moved to Peshawar in the early 1980s and founded the *Maktab al-Khidamat* to coordinate international mujahideen. His fatwa in 1984 called upon Muslims globally to join the Afghan struggle. Osama bin Laden responded, funding and fighting alongside Arab volunteers in what became the nucleus of future transnational jihadism (Wright, 2006).

To manage inter-factional competition, the ISI officially recognized seven Afghan resistance parties. To receive aid or food, Afghan refugees had to affiliate with one of them. The two largest

factions—Hezb-e-Islami under Hekmatyar and Jamiat-e-Islami under Rabbani—each controlled hundreds of thousands of refugees in Peshawar. Saudi Arabia, seeking to protect its ideological interests, sponsored Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Wahhabi-oriented Ittihad-e-Islami, later backed privately by bin Laden. Sayyaf's views clashed with Afghanistan's historically Sufi tradition but were endorsed by Saudi intelligence, which contributed $350–$500 million annually to the jihad (Edwards, 2002; Coll, 2005).

By the time the Soviets withdrew in 1989, over 80,000 mujahideen had been trained in Pakistani camps. However, ideological unity gave way to internal fragmentation. Najibullah's regime collapsed in 1992, and an interim Islamic State was formed under Rabbani through the Peshawar Accord. Yet the jihad-era factions quickly descended into a brutal civil war. Hekmatyar, refusing to accept power-sharing, shelled Kabul. Competing mujahideen leaders prioritized ethnic and political dominance over Islamic unity. Foreign support had enriched but also corrupted the leadership. Once idealistic foot soldiers of jihad now found themselves trapped in a cycle of factionalism and violence.

The failure of the mujahideen to govern collectively and ethically disillusioned many Afghans. The post-Soviet chaos and warlordism paved the way for a new force—drawn from the same refugee madrasas and shaped by the same Saudi-Wahhabi funding—to rise with the promise of restoring order: the Taliban.

The Genesis of the Taliban: Reaction, Religion, and the Collapse of the Mujahedeen Order (1990–1996)

The disintegration of Afghanistan's post-Soviet order in the early 1990s created a political vacuum ripe for new forms of power. The mujahedeen, once celebrated as Islamic resistance fighters, devolved into warlords whose battles for territory and influence reduced much of the country—especially Kabul—to ruins. Civilian casualties mounted, infrastructure crumbled, and the hopes ignited by the Soviet withdrawal were extinguished in a brutal power struggle marked more by ethnic rivalry than any unifying national or religious agenda. It was in this atmosphere of betrayal and exhaustion that the Taliban emerged.

Rooted in Deobandi madrasa networks in Pakistan and composed largely of young, impoverished Afghan refugees, the Taliban presented themselves as a purifying force. Their leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, had fought against the Soviets and later taught in a village madrasa in Kandahar. Disgusted by the lawlessness that followed the mujahedeen's ascension, Omar envisioned a new order based on Islamic discipline. According to accounts circulated by supporters, Omar had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad instructed him to bring justice to Afghanistan. With this perceived divine mandate, Omar began mobilizing students from neighboring madrasas (Rashid, 2001).

In late 1994, the Taliban made their first decisive move by capturing Maiwand district. They quickly gained popular support by rescuing two girls from a local warlord and executing him—an act that signaled both moral authority and practical capability. The symbolism resonated deeply with a population that had been brutalized by the very leaders they once revered. Within weeks,

thousands had joined their ranks. Many former fighters defected, tired of shifting alliances and disillusioned with their previous commanders (Abbas, 2015).

The Taliban's early appeal stemmed from their promise of *adalah* (justice) and *nizam* (order). Unlike the mujahedeen factions, which had splintered into tribal and ethnic fiefdoms, the Taliban presented a unified ideological identity. They adopted the name "Taliban" to emphasize their break from party politics and to present themselves as religious reformers rather than power-seekers. Their goal, they claimed, was to restore the Islamic character of the Afghan state by enforcing *Sharia* and purging corruption (Edwards, 2002).

In 1996, after a swift campaign across southern and central Afghanistan, the Taliban entered Kabul and declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Mullah Omar—by then a revered spiritual figure—was proclaimed *Amir-ul-Momineen*(Leader of the Faithful) after publicly donning the Prophet's cloak at a Kandahar mosque. This act electrified supporters and solidified Omar's authority in both religious and political terms. For many Afghans, especially rural Pashtuns, the Taliban were not invaders but restorers of divine order (Coll, 2005).

Their rise was neither accidental nor entirely organic. The Pakistani military, particularly its ISI, provided critical support in logistics, intelligence, and funding. Islamabad viewed the Taliban as a means of securing "strategic depth" against India and stabilizing trade routes through Central Asia. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, although more secular in orientation, acquiesced to military policy and provided diplomatic cover. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, aligned with the Taliban's puritanical interpretation of Islam, offered both ideological and financial backing, channeling funds through Gulf charities and private donors (Haqqani, 2005).

Much of the Taliban's leadership and ideological worldview were forged in the madrasa system that proliferated during General Zia-ul-Haq's rule in Pakistan. These madrasas—funded by Saudi Arabia and managed by Deobandi clerics—sheltered thousands of Afghan refugee children during the 1980s and 1990s. Separated from their communities, raised in rigid gender-segregated environments, and taught to glorify *jihad*, these boys were primed to see themselves as the next generation of Islamic warriors. Six months after taking Kandahar, the Taliban had over 12,000 fighters; that number doubled again within half a year (Edwards, 2002; Abbas, 2015).

Yet, the utopia promised by the Taliban soon revealed itself as one of the most repressive regimes in modern history. Women were banned from public life entirely—barred from education, employment, and even healthcare without a male guardian. An extreme form of *purdah*, enforced by the compulsory *chadari* (burqa), became mandatory. Public executions and amputations were normalized. Television, music, photography, dancing, and even kite flying were banned as "un-Islamic." Non-Sunni Muslims, particularly the Hazara Shia community, faced brutal repression, and centuries-old cultural sites, such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, were destroyed in acts of ideological iconoclasm (Rashid, 2001).

Though often perceived in the West as a medieval throwback, the Taliban understood the importance of narrative and symbolism. They offered a vision—however flawed—of Afghan self-determination, untainted by foreign influence or mujahedeen corruption. In a country broken by

war, the Taliban's rigid consistency initially won over many who were desperate for stability, even if it came at the cost of personal freedom and pluralism.

After the Taliban took Kabul, the opposition consolidated in the north under the Northern Alliance, an ethnically diverse coalition of mujahedeen remnants, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. While the Taliban controlled over 90% of Afghan territory by 2001, the seeds of resistance had already been sown, especially in regions and communities marginalized by their Pashtun-centric rule.

The Taliban's sanctuary to al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, a former ally from the anti-Soviet jihad, would ultimately bring about their downfall. Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom, toppling the Taliban regime with the help of the Northern Alliance and international coalition forces.

Despite their collapse, the Taliban left behind a powerful ideological and symbolic legacy. Ironically, many former mujahedeen leaders—some of whom had initially empowered extremist narratives—returned to power in the post-Taliban state. April 28, the anniversary of Najibullah's fall in 1992, is still celebrated as "Mujahedeen Day" in Kabul. While the current political elite publicly advocate moderation, the language of *jihad* remains embedded in national memory and political legitimacy (Yar, 2017).

Extremism in Post 2001 Afghanistan: Education, Ideology, and Structural Failure

Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan entered a complex period of state-building backed by the international community. However, efforts to reconstruct the country were uneven and often lacked strategic coherence. Among the most glaring shortcomings was the failure to prioritize education as a means of fostering civic identity and countering extremist narratives. Between 2002 and 2011, while the U.S. allocated billions toward security and infrastructure, only around 5% of USAID's total spending in Afghanistan was devoted to education (USAID, 2011). Although nearly 5,000 schools were constructed during this period, nearly 40% of Afghan children remained out of school—particularly in rural areas, where insurgent influence was strongest.

This educational vacuum was exploited by a network of religious seminaries—*madrasas*—many of which were informal, unregulated, and ideologically radical. While madrasas have existed in Afghanistan since the 10th century and have historically played a vital role in literacy and religious instruction, the post-2001 landscape saw a proliferation of foreign-influenced institutions, particularly those affiliated with Salafi and Wahhabi currents. These theological frameworks, imported mainly via Pakistani-trained Afghan returnees, promoted a rigid, literalist interpretation of Islam that clashed with Afghanistan's traditionally Sufi-influenced religious culture (Choudhury, 2017).

The Taliban's original leadership was itself a product of this transformation. Educated in Pakistan's Gulf-funded Deobandi madrasas during the 1980s and 1990s, many of the Taliban's mid-level cadres returned to Afghanistan after 2001 and reestablished local *madrasas* in provinces such as Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan. These eastern regions became epicenters of resurgent militancy, fueled not only by ideology but also by state failure, poverty, and deep political alienation. By 2014, approximately 700 government-recognized and at least 18 private madrasas were registered,

though the true number of unregulated institutions was believed to be several times higher—often eclipsing the number of functioning public schools (AREU, 2016).

During Hamid Karzai's presidency, reforms were introduced to integrate secular subjects into public madrasa curricula, including English, mathematics, and history. However, these efforts were poorly enforced and largely absent in the unofficial sector. Many clerics (*mullahs*) continued to propagate exclusivist doctrines that delegitimized not only the Afghan government but also non-Sunni sects, women's education, and democracy itself. The state's limited ability to project authority into rural areas allowed such clerics to function as de facto community leaders, often eclipsing the influence of elected officials or teachers (Choudhury, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2014).

Compounding the problem, many Afghans—especially in rural areas—possess only a ritualistic understanding of Islam. Few read the Quran in their native language, and religious knowledge is often mediated entirely through local clerics, whose authority is rarely questioned. This context creates fertile ground for ideological manipulation. Islamist commanders may fight for political power or personal gain, but the rank-and-file "foot soldiers" are often driven by sincere, if misinformed, religious zeal (Edwards, 2002). As a result, the misuse of Islamic terms—especially *jihad*—remains prevalent. While the classical Islamic tradition defines *jihad* primarily as an internal struggle for moral excellence, extremist groups have hijacked the term to justify violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The persistence of ultra-conservative and radical religious education continues to hinder Afghanistan's broader development. A society where the majority of religious leaders are ideologically rigid will inevitably struggle with democratic governance, gender equality, and pluralism. As multiple studies have shown, societies with low literacy rates and poor civic education are more vulnerable to political extremism, especially when traditional religious authority goes unchallenged (Borchgrevink, 2013).

Conclusion

Across Afghanistan's modern history, religious identity has been inseparable from political legitimacy. From the rebellion of Habibullah Kalakani in 1929 against King Amanullah's secular reforms, to the formation of the Muslim Youth in the 1960s, to the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, nearly every major sociopolitical upheaval in Afghanistan has passed through a religious lens. What persists is not merely the presence of Islam in Afghan life, but the politicization of religious sentiment to legitimize conflict and resist reform.

Afghanistan is deeply religious, yet paradoxically, much of the population lacks access to basic Islamic education beyond rote memorization and ritual. A small fraction of Afghans can read the Quran in Arabic or understand classical Islamic jurisprudence. Instead, religious knowledge is inherited as custom and interpreted by clerics whose own education may be narrow or ideologically skewed. This leaves the population vulnerable to radicalization, especially when political grievances, economic desperation, and foreign intervention converge with religious messaging.

Extremism in Afghanistan is not born of Islam itself, but of a toxic mix of social stagnation, institutional failure, external manipulation, and theological distortion. Islamist movements in Afghanistan have consistently leveraged the emotional power of religious symbols like *jihad* while discarding the theological constraints that traditional Islamic law places on violence. This manipulation is often effective because it taps into genuine faith—but redirects it toward political ends.

To address the roots of extremism, policy must shift from reaction to prevention. First, religious institutions must be brought under meaningful regulatory oversight. The Afghan government should develop national criteria for the accreditation of imams and religious teachers, ensuring that state-trained clergy are available across rural and urban areas. Curricula in madrasas should be modernized to include science, critical thinking, and comparative ethics.

Second, Afghanistan must invest in domestic Islamic scholarship. By building Islamic higher education institutions rooted in Afghan tradition, the country can cultivate religious leaders who reflect the nation's values rather than foreign ideologies. This also lessens the incentive for students to study abroad, where they risk exposure to radicalizing influences.

Third, secular education must become the national priority. Rural communities need schools that offer not just literacy, but citizenship, history, and civic engagement. Exposure to the modern world, including digital access and international media, can disrupt insular thinking and foster more tolerant perspectives.

Finally, peace must be more than the cessation of war. Afghanistan needs "positive peace"—a condition where justice, dignity, and opportunity prevent the resurgence of violence. Islam must be decoupled from its instrumental use in politics. In the 21st century, theocratic absolutism is neither viable nor defensible. Only through the promotion of moderate Islam—grounded in compassion, legality, and coexistence—can Afghanistan begin to secure a stable and pluralistic future.

If these reforms remain ignored, Afghanistan risks repeating a grim cycle—where ignorance and ideology are weaponized, and peace is forever postponed in the name of purity.

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