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Taliban and Al-Qaida: What Role does Religion Play?

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The aim of this brief is to provide insights into the question of the role religion plays for the Taliban and al-Qaida in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. Even though this may seem a simple and straightforward question, it is not an easy one to answer, as we unfortunately know very little about the role religion plays in practice for these groups and their members, even ten years after 9/11. This brief will not seek to explain the behaviour of the Taliban and al-Qaida through an ideological or religious framework, but rather it will examine the issue in a more practical way by highlighting some of the challenges researchers face in studying this issue. These challenges can be divided into three categories: the first concerns typology and the differences and distinctions between the groups we wish to examine; the second highlights the complexity of the motivations that drive various actors; and the third discusses the implications associated with choosing an analytical approach and of how the role of religion differs at different levels of analysis.

TYOLOGY AND GROUP CONSIDERATIONS

The most significant challenge impeding our understanding of militant groups in this region is their analytical homogenization and the lack of

distinctions that are made between them. This is understandable on a certain level, as the sheer number of Taliban factions and militant groups active in Afghanistan and Pakistan is overwhelming, especially when one considers that most of these groups have their own histories, views on religion and (often) localized priorities.

OBJECTIVES, GEOGRAPHIC DISTINCTIONS AND TARGETING PREFERENCES

To break these landscapes down and derive useful insights about religious differences between militant actors, a useful starting point is to examine the different objectives and geographical and targeting distinctions between groups. For example, based upon these factors, Afghanistan's and Pakistan's militant landscapes can be divided into five main group clusters.¹ In the current context, the primary and most helpful dividing line is that between those attacking US/NATO forces in Afghanistan (i.e. the Afghan Taliban) and those waging war or violent jihad against Pakistan and its security forces (i.e. factions of the Pakistani Taliban to varying degrees).² One challenge in studying this issue, however, is that this geographical distinction is not fixed and the organizational priorities of and boundaries between groups fighting on either side

of the border are often blurred, as Pakistani Taliban fighters sometimes operate with Afghan Taliban units west of the Durand Line.³ Challenging matters further is the fact that the logistical and financial infrastructure that sustains the insurgency in Afghanistan is at least partially integrated between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban elements in places like North and South Waziristan.⁴ Thus, it is often quite difficult to draw firm distinctions between organizations and to discover how well, if at all, activities are integrated across groups and group clusters. Similar lines, as others have noted, can be drawn between those militant groups that have historically focused on liberating Kashmir from Indian rule (i.e. Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Harakat ul-Mujahidin, etc.), those that are more sectarian in nature (i.e. Sipah-e-Sahaba), and transnational groups like al-Qaida that view attacking the United States and its western allies (both in local theaters and abroad) as their immediate priority.⁵ These fundamental distinctions, while useful, are also limiting, as they imply that militant groups in the region (and their priorities and interests) can be contained as one target or to one geographical locale when the reality can be considerably more complicated.⁶

The dividing line between the Afghan and Pakistani jihads does have religious dimensions, as one would expect, but at its core this distinction is fundamentally a difference of opinion regarding which conflict should take precedence, given different local conditions and other environmental factors. In the case of the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaida and other fighting units active in Afghanistan, it is clear that the members of these organizations perceive their activism (at least in general terms) as a defensive jihad; a religious obligation to wage a 'holy war' against the 'infidel' forces which are physically occupying Muslim lands. Attacks against the Afghan government and its security forces are similarly viewed as being justified, given the Karzai regime's role in enabling foreign occupation and concerns about the composition, Islamic basis and practices (i.e. corruption) of that government. In other words, it is the belief of the Afghan Taliban that they cannot ignore the presence of Western troops in their country, and so their main priority is to fight the actual occupation of Afghanistan.⁷

Across the border in Pakistan, the conflict being waged by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP or

Pakistani Taliban) – a loose and complex conglomeration of tribal militant sub-groupings – against the Pakistani state is justified in similar, but also different terms.⁸ Given the structure of the TTP and its diverse composition, there is a considerable amount of variation amongst TTP factions regarding how they view and prioritize their struggle (and under what conditions) against the Pakistani state.⁹ With this issue in mind, the TTP can be thought of as a spectrum of actors divided into two main groupings.

I. The Pragmatic

The more pragmatic category includes those individuals or TTP sub-groups who are more conservative and/or pragmatic in their approach to fighting the Pakistani Army and the Frontier Corps.¹⁰ These factions are typified by Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Mullah Nazir, two TTP commanders who usually engage in anti-state violence in more of a defensive manner, either: 1) in response to specific, local military actions taken by the Pakistani government against them or their allies, or 2) to resist state encroachment into territory where they hold sway.¹¹ These two TTP factions view the Pakistani regime as a pliable US client state and are in part motivated by the US drone campaign. Yet, these two factions are mainly seeking to defend themselves and maintain their autonomy and ability to operate in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). As a result, these factions have been more conciliatory and have usually taken a more constrained approach to their operations against Pakistani targets.¹² When able, it appears that these factions prioritize supporting the jihad in Afghanistan to carrying out more offensive operations against the Pakistani government.

II. The Dogmatic

The second and more dogmatic camp, which is dominated by the Mehsud faction of the TTP, similarly views the Pakistani state as an enemy due to its actions in FATA and its relationship with the United States. Entities like the Mehsud faction also fight the Pakistani Army and Frontier Corps in response to specific operations, to maintain their autonomy and to resist state encroachment. Despite these areas of overlap, a key distinction between the pragmatic and dogmatic groupings can be explained by their approach, as the Mehsud faction of the TTP appears to be less constrained in its targeting, whereby its actions could be character-

ized as not just defensive, but also more aggressive and offensively oriented.¹³ Although difficult to establish with certainty, the Mehsud faction of the TTP also appears to be driven more by ideological considerations and sectarian issues (i.e. showing an interest in targeting other Muslim sects), with its operations against Pakistani military and government targets being aimed at overthrowing (what it views as) a local apostate regime. This is not to say that other TTP factions do not have similar beliefs or harbour such sympathies, but rather that they have decided to pursue a more flexible (and less dogmatic) approach towards the government of Pakistan.¹⁴

Perhaps the most important lesson of these geographical and targeting distinctions is that, despite them, the Afghan and Pakistani factions of the Taliban have been able to wage campaigns of violence simultaneously on both sides of the border and to do so consistently since 2008. These dynamics tell us a lot about the potency of each Taliban faction as movements, or at least their ability to sustain their operational capability and campaigns of violence on both sides of the Durand Line.

CONTEXT AND HISTORY

To derive additional insights into the differences between groups and the role religion plays for each of them, it is imperative that efforts also be made to situate and understand each actor in relation to its context, organizational history and changing conditions. A useful starting point is to embrace the complexity associated with Afghan and Pakistani Taliban clusters and break these entities into their constituent parts, thus understanding how these organizations operate as both formal alliances and discrete elements.¹⁵ Secondly, it is important to consider the geographical, tribal, cultural and ideological differences between various militant groups and sub-factions. Thirdly, it is also necessary to pay attention to changing conditions and external influences, such as the eliding of boundaries between organizations given counterterrorism pressures, the co-location of militants, and operational inter-mingling between groups in certain areas (i.e. the FATA).

Not understanding the context and history of actors can have serious implications. The lack of attention paid to publicly available primary source data have

led some to conclude that it was the Afghan Taliban, or the ‘Kandahari’ Taliban from Afghanistan’s south, that primarily hosted and contributed to the local development of al-Qaida in Afghanistan during the late 1990s. Today, neglected primary sources have told us that the Haqqani network (a semi-autonomous, regional component of the Afghan Taliban that was historically led by Jalaluddin Haqqani) actually had a stronger relationship with al-Qaida and played a more active role in the latter’s development than the Kandahari Taliban.¹⁶ One potential explanation for this view lies in the different behaviours of the Kandahari Taliban and Haqqani network in the late 1990s and how these actions were viewed. In some ways the behaviour of the Afghan Taliban in the south was outwardly more ‘radical’ than those of the Haqqani network during this period, as after coming to power, Taliban leaders closed music and television shops, shut down girls’ schools and (eventually) pressured non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into leaving Afghanistan.¹⁷ Unlike other elements of the Taliban, however, Jalaluddin Haqqani allowed NGOs to continue to operate and girls to go to school in Afghanistan’s southeast, where Jalaluddin and his network of fighters have long been the dominant military and diplomatic force.¹⁸ It appears that such behaviour, which could reasonably be interpreted as being more socially moderate than some of the actions taken by the Taliban in the south, obscured other important dynamics. Specifically, while Jalaluddin Haqqani might have been more moderate than the Kandahari Taliban in some regards, he was decisively less moderate in terms of his support for al-Qaida during this period.¹⁹

EXTERNAL SHOCKS AND CHANGING CONDITIONS

The dynamics associated with Pakistan’s militant landscape can serve as an example of how important it is to devote attention to changing conditions and external shocks in the interests of analysis. Since 9/11 there has been a greater intermingling between militant groups on the Pakistani side of the border due to the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, Pakistani military operations and other counterterrorism pressures, and the US drone campaign.²⁰ These externalities have affected Pakistan’s militant landscape considerably, and during the post-9/11 period two key changes can be observed. First, these dynamics have further blurred

the organizational boundaries between groups, making the distinctions between them more fluid and (arguably) even less relevant than they were in the past. The second major observable change is ideological hybridization, especially between local and global groups, such as the TTP and al-Qaida.²¹ As a result, a higher percentage of militant groups active in Pakistan's tribal areas now describe their campaigns in terms that are ideologically similar to al-Qaida's. These dynamics are hard to trace, but they are essential to understanding how various groups and the threats they pose have evolved and continue to change.

MULTIPLE INTERTWINED MOTIVATIONS

A related challenge lies in teasing apart – or weighing the influence of the multiple, intertwined motivations that animate militant groups in the region. This is not to say that religious motivations do not play a strong role for the Taliban or al-Qaida – they do – but rather that the drivers of conflict for these groups and their fighters are multi-faceted and are usually not defined by religion alone. Other important motivational factors include the following:²²

Economic and Financial

Economic considerations play a key role in motivating insurgents and in civil wars more broadly.²³ Today, most factions in the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan are engaged in some form of illicit activity to diversify their income streams and sustain their operations.²⁴ This activity usually takes the form of extortion, kidnapping or the smuggling and processing of narcotics.²⁵ As one might expect, militant groups seek to distance themselves from these kinds of activities because it challenges the perception that they wish to cultivate of themselves as religiously or ideologically 'pure' holy warriors.

Personal and Group Dynamics

Personal issues and group dynamics can also be important motivators. For example, an individual could be driven to engage in violence or participate in jihad to seek revenge for personal loss or to avenge familial or tribal honour. Local notions of solidarity can similarly play a role in motivating individuals to act on behalf of a group or a community which they represent.

Security, Governance and Other Related Grievances

A government's inability to provide basic services and security, avoid civilian casualties and administer justice in an efficient manner can also function as important motivators. The role that these issues play for militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be seen in the attention they give to these issues (and other common grievances like corruption) in their recruiting material and narratives about the conflict.²⁶

A useful case to illustrate the role played by multiply intertwined motivations and the blending of religious and other drivers are the narratives used to explain the Haqqani network's ties to al-Qaida. A predominant narrative used to explain the connections between the two groups before 2001 was that Jalaluddin Haqqani's group sought such a close relationship out of economic or pragmatic considerations. There is some basis for these claims, as both before and after 9/11 Jalaluddin Haqqani proved skilled at diversifying his income streams and seeking out and capitalizing from new financial opportunities, during periods of both war and peace. This line of reasoning suggests that Jalaluddin Haqqani supported the development of al-Qaida and other training camps in Afghanistan's southeast during the 1990s because it was a growth industry and another way to make money and consolidate power. The challenge to this explanation is that there is not much evidence that Jalaluddin Haqqani actually made a lot of money from these training camps. Nor is there much insight into what Jalaluddin Haqqani spent his money on.

A second view suggests that Jalaluddin Haqqani supported al-Qaida due to his personal connections to Bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders, and his personal respect for these individuals and the sacrifices they had made during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1990s. This explanation intuitively makes sense, especially since personal dynamics have strong explanatory power in the Afghan context, and indeed are likely to have played some role. Another view suggests that the Haqqani network's ties to al-Qaida and its activities can be explained in terms of Jalaluddin's religious views and ideological outlook. This line of reasoning holds that the Haqqani network's relations with al-Qaida were not just personal, pragmatic or profit-motivated, but that they were also driven by Jalaluddin Haqqani's religious views and support for al-Qaida

and its goals. Magazines produced by Jalaluddin Haqqani and other evidence lend credence to this view and show that the Afghan commander's support for al-Qaida during the late 1990s was not just a pragmatic decision, but that his support was driven by ideological motivations as well.²⁷

The conclusion drawn from this discussion is that none of these explanations can sufficiently explain the Haqqani network and its historical relationship with al-Qaida, since they all played a role. The challenge for researchers therefore lies in analysing these (and potentially other) motivations and assessing how each should be weighed in relation to the others.

RELIGION AND DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Understanding the role that religion plays for the Taliban and al-Qaida also depends upon one's analytical approach. An important distinction in this regard is whether the role of religion is approached through the individual or organizational level of analysis.²⁸ For example, what religion has to do with the Taliban and al-Qaida will be understood differently if viewed from the lens of the individual fighter versus the organization(s) to which that person is affiliated. At the individual level, especially when death or martyrdom is a near certainty, religion is often a strong motivational factor. At the organizational level, however, religion can be viewed rather as a part of the organization's strategic calculus, a tool used instrumentally to influence a group's basis and identity, its goals and visions, its methods, and the narratives and justifications it uses to perpetrate violence. Obviously an overlap exists between the two levels, and additional distinctions can be made within each of these categories. These basic distinctions, however, may help the researcher to develop additional insights regarding religion and its multiple roles.

CONCLUSION

As this brief has highlighted, there is still a lot we do not know about the role religion plays for entities like al-Qaida and the Taliban in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. To improve our understanding of this issue, it is crucial to embrace some of the challenges outlined above and to develop analytical methods to deal with them conceptually.

Such efforts would ideally be grounded in a more nuanced approach that makes use of multiple lenses to explain the behaviour of groups in the region, their histories and the complex web of motivations that drive them.

1. Ashley Tellis, 'U.S.-Pakistan Relations: Assassination, Instability, and the Future of U.S. Policy,' Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 16 January 2008; Jayshree Bajoria, 'Pakistan's New Generation of Terrorists,' Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 9 December 2011, www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistans-new-generation-terrorists/p15422.
2. As others have noted, not all actors operating in Afghanistan can be captured by the label 'Taliban.' For example, see Thomas Ruttig, 'The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to Talks,' Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=114>; see also Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2009).
3. The 2010 assault against Bagram airfield by a mixed fighting unit is a good example of this type of integration. For background, see Yassin Musharbash, 'Al-Qaida Fighter from Bonn Believed Dead,' *Der Spiegel*, 19 January 2011, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,740326,00.html; Liam Stack, 'Bagram Attack Kills U.S. Contractor, Wounds Nine NATO Soldiers,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 May 2010, www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0519/Bagram-attack-kills-US-contractor-wounds-nine-NATO-soldiers.
4. The circumstances surrounding the kidnapping and detention of journalist David Rohde speaks to these dynamics. David Rohde, '7 Months, 10 Days in Captivity,' *New York Times*, 17 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/world/asia/18hostage.html>.
5. Tellis, Bajoria, op. cit.
6. Cooperation between the Pakistani Taliban and Jaish-e-Muhammad or Lashkar-e-Jhangvi or the Haqqani network and al-Qa'ida speaks to these dynamics.
7. Some factions of the Pakistani Taliban and members of al-Qa'ida also appear to hold this view. See Sailab Mehsud, 'Taliban Groups Regroup to Fight US Forces,' *Dawn*, 3 January 2012, www.dawn.com/2012/01/03/al-qaida-taliban-ask-pakistani-militants-for-help.html.
8. For background and an overview of the TTP and its various components, see Mona Kanwal Sheikh, 'Disaggregating the Pakistani Taliban: Does the Good, the Bad and the Ugly Represent a Failed Policy,' *DIIS Brief*, September 2009, www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Briefs2009/Disaggregating_Pakistani_Taliban.pdf; Qandeel Siddique, 'Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: An Attempt to Deconstruct the Umbrella Organization and the Reasons for its Growth,' *DIIS Report* 2010:12, www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Reports2010/RP2010-12-Tehrik-e-Taliban_web.pdf; Claudio Franco, 'The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan,' in Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, pp. 269-293. A number of other Pakistani militant groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad

are also waging war against the Pakistani state.

9. Indeed, efforts that have been made to reorient the direction of TTP violence away from Pakistan and towards the jihad in Afghanistan illustrate that there is dissonance within the TTP regarding the group's geographical focus and targeting priorities. The creation of two alliance groups – the Shura Ittihad-ul-Mujahidin (SIM) in 2009 (now defunct) and the Shura-e-Muraqaba in late 2011 – serve as two important case studies. For background on the SIM, see Anand Gopal, Mansur Khan Mahsud and Brian Fishman, 'The Battle for Pakistan: North Waziristan,' Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, 19 April 2010; for background on Shura-e-Muraqaba, see Sailab Mehsud, 'Taliban Groups Regroup to Fight US Forces,' *Dawn*, 3 January 2012; for a review of the TTP's ideological interests and other goals, see Qandeel Siddique, pp. 21-28.
10. Some researchers have labelled these TTP components as 'pro-government' or 'soft' factions.
11. For a period these commanders led the Muqami Tehrik-e-Taliban (Local Taliban) alliance group. See Sadia Sulaiman, 'Hafiz Gul Bahadur: A Profile of the Leader of the North Waziristan Taliban,' *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 7, Iss. 9, 10 April 2009.
12. For background, see Gopal, Mahsud and Fishman, op. cit.
13. For an interesting view of al-Qaida's concerns regarding the TTP's indiscriminate targeting of Muslim civilians and public markets and religious places of worship, see Harmony documents SOCOM-2012-0000007 and SOCOM-2012-0000004. Both are available from the Combating Terrorism Center's website at www.ctc.usma.edu.
14. Given that the Mehsud faction leads the TTP, it is not known to what extent this approach represents the interests or actual priorities of other TTP factions, or whether those factions that can be considered more pragmatic are supporting more offensive operations against Islamabad, whether actively themselves or indirectly.
15. For example, such an approach would seek to understand how the Afghan Taliban functions as a broad political alliance with central command and control, as well as being a disaggregated entity that operates more autonomously based on the actions of regional or sub-regional fighting groups.
16. Don Ressler and Vahid Brown, 'The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qa'ida,' Combating Terrorism Center, 14 July 2011, www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-haqqani-nexus-and-the-evolution-of-al-qaida.
17. Zaheeruddin Abdullah, Foreign Aid Workers Leave Afghanistan, *Associated Press*, 21 July 1998.
18. I thank Vahid Brown for shaping my thoughts about this issue. See Vahid Brown and Don Ressler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2010* (Hurst: London, 2012), forthcoming; for background on Jalaluddin's liberal policies, see State Department cable from Islamabad to SecState, 'Afghanistan: Jalaluddin Haqqani's Emergence as a Key Taliban Commander,' January 1997, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB295/doc05.pdf; Marc Kaufman, 'Schooling of Afghan Girls Goes Ahead,' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 February 1997; Anand Gopal, Mansur Khan Mahsud and Brian Fishman, 'The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in North Waziristan,' *New America Foundation*, April 2010, pp. 7f.
19. Ressler and Brown, op. cit.
20. For an overview of Pakistani military campaigns in the tribal areas, see C. Christine Fair and Seth G. Jones, 'Pakistan's War Within,' *Survival*, vol. 51, no. 6, December 2009-January 2010, pp. 161-188.
21. As Thomas Hegghammer notes, ideological hybridization is not a new phenomenon. See Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 9, 18 November 2009, www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-ideological-hybridization-of-jihadi-groups.
22. The author recognizes that this is not an exhaustive list.
23. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War,' *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (August 2004), 563-595; James Fearon, 'Why do Some Civil Wars Last so Much Longer than Others?,' *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004), 275-301.
24. For background on this topic, see Gretchen Peters, 'Crime and Insurgency in the Tribal Areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan,' Combating Terrorism Center, 14 October 2010, www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/crime-and-insurgency-in-the-tribal-areas-of-afghanistan-and-pakistan; Declan Walsh, 'Taliban Gaining More Resources from Kidnapping,' *New York Times*, 19 February 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/world/asia/pakistani-taliban-turn-to-kidnapping-to-finance-operations.html?pagewanted=all.
25. Peters, op. cit.
26. *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?*, Asia Report no. 158 (Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2008); Derek I. Schmeck, 'Taliban Information Strategy: How are the Taliban Directing their Information Strategy Towards the Population of Afghanistan?,' Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, December 2009.
27. Ressler and Brown, op. cit. For additional background, see their forthcoming book, Vahid Brown and Don Ressler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2010* (Hurst: London, 2012).
28. An environmental or situational approach can also be adopted.

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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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