



The Taliban Gain Ground in Islam's Battle of Ideas

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September 2, 2021

The image of the last U.S. soldier leaving Kabul might have marked the end of America's 20-year presence in Afghanistan. But it also begins a new chapter in an older story: the contest between Muslims who believe they must embrace Western ideas, at least in part, to succeed, and those who seek Islamic renewal by shunning the West in favor of what they view as a pure form of their faith.

The chaos in Afghanistan presents this contrast starkly. The U.S.-educated President Ashraf Ghani fled in panic as Taliban zealots closed in on Kabul. But the effects of the Taliban's triumph on the battle of ideas within Islam will be felt far beyond Afghanistan's borders. "This will energize Islamists all around the world," says Mustafa Akyol, an expert on Islam at the Cato Institute, referring to Muslims who seek to order the state and society by Shariah, or Islamic law. "I already see it happening."

In South Asia, where the austere brand of Islam the Taliban espouses was born more than 150 years ago, the aftershocks are likely to be especially powerful. In Pakistan the Taliban triumph could inspire a fresh wave of violence by their cousins in the Tehreek-e-Taliban, also called the Pakistani Taliban, and by violent anti-Shiite groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba. More broadly, working women, Westernized elites, and Shiite and Sufi Muslims in Pakistan should brace for a fundamentalist Sunni resurgence.

Indians have reason to fear an uptick of violence in the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir, where soldiers have battled an insurgency for three decades. The Taliban victory may also

strengthen the appeal of both homegrown Islamic fundamentalists, as well as Hindu nationalists who view India's 200 million Muslims with suspicion. In recent years, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have sustained terrorist attacks linked to Islamic State. A fundamentalist surge in the region is bad news for them, too.

To contrast Muslim approaches to the West, scholars sometimes cite two towns in northern India as examples: Deoband and Aligarh. In 1857-58, the British cemented their pre-eminence in the subcontinent by brutally suppressing a native revolt and extinguishing the remnants of the Mughal Empire. Ten years later, traditionalist clerics established a humble madrassa under a pomegranate tree in Deoband, in today's Uttar Pradesh. In the words of the historian Barbara Metcalf, it represented an effort "to preserve the religious heritage" of the clerics' forebears and "to disseminate instruction in authentic religious practice and belief."

In 1877, a contrasting Muslim response to political defeat arose in the town of Aligarh, about 125 miles south of Deoband. There the British Viceroy Lord Lytton laid the foundation stone of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, brainchild of the Muslim reformer and Empire loyalist Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Khan tailored his faith to Victorian sensibilities. He hoped, according to Ms. Metcalf, that the new college's "accommodation to British social and political institutions would . . . go hand-in-hand with a true understanding of Islam." The Aligarh thesis: "The Muslims of British India had been rulers [and] could, through English education and Islam, once again be great."

Both Deoband and Aligarh sought a revival of Muslim fortunes against the backdrop of Western military and cultural pre-eminence. Both adopted modern methods of education such as fixed curriculums, formal exams and permanent teaching staff. But the similarities ended there.

Deoband was inward-looking and focused on Sunni religious scholarship, emphasizing lessons from the life of the prophet Muhammad. Aligarh engaged deeply with colonial authorities, educated Sunni and Shiite alike, and sought to equip high-born Muslim men with a mastery of European arts, sciences and manners. Aligarh wasn't irreligious—quite the contrary—but it sought, unlike Deoband, to reconcile Islamic religiosity with modernity.

Why does all this matter today? First the caveats: Most Deobandis have nothing to do with the Taliban, and South Asia's fundamentalism problem cannot be attributed purely to Deobandism. Nor is it the only strictly scriptural form of Sunni Islam in the subcontinent associated with violence. The Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami has spawned the terrorist group Hizbul Mujahideen. Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, sprang from the Ahl-e-Hadith movement, closely related to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism.

The Bareilvis, a rival school of Sunni Islam, are at the forefront of protests in Pakistan demanding the death penalty for blasphemy. State support, whether with Saudi petrodollars for jihad or from the Pakistan army's Inter-Services Intelligence, has also turbocharged the problem.

The Taliban nonetheless represent an extreme version of Deobandism, spawned in large part in radical madrassas that sprang up in Pakistan following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, and received an injection of Saudi funds during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s. Deobandi Islam evolved differently across the region, points out Javad Hashmi, a scholar of Islam at Harvard. In India, the Deobandis have no hope of claiming power and remain quietist. In Pakistan, where they face few restrictions, they have spawned several radical groups, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Kashmir-focused Jaish-e-Mohammed, and the anti-Shia Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. In Afghanistan, they now hold power.

The jury is still out on how rough Taliban 2.0 will be with working women, Shiite Muslims and pro-West Afghans. The portents for the world aren't good. "It's like giving Islamism steroids," says Mr. Hashmi of the Taliban's triumph. "This shows them that perseverance in the way of Allah, jihad in the way of Allah, bears fruit. The route to success is not by aping the West."