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## The Role of Islam in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan

In the aftermath of the attacks against the United States on September 11 and the resulting conflict in Afghanistan, Western analysts and the media have referred extensively to Islamic notions such as *shura*, *fatwa*, *shari'a*, *madrasa*, and *jihad* in their reports on the region.



Mazar-I-Sharif-Mosque

Little information has been made available, however, on the meaning of these concepts and their actual political significance in Central Asia, more particularly in Afghanistan. **As many analysts seek to distinguish the religion of Islam from the ideology behind the terror attacks, essential Islamic aspects of Afghan society and politics have been cast aside and remain misunderstood**, limiting our understanding of the origins of political Islam in the region and our ability to relate to these key aspects of contemporary Afghan society.

**Afghanistan is considered one of the “most Islamic” countries in the world if one appreciates the extent to which Islam underpins many of the customs and tribal codes that condition numerous aspects of political and social life in the country.** Islam, therefore, has a profound influence on the identity and social structure of the rural Afghans who compose an overwhelming majority of the population. With the exodus of the intellectual elite over the past 20 years and the demise of the more secular education that was previously available to most urban communities, Islamic education at *madrasa*, or religious schools, and local mosques have become the primary sources of education within the country and in most refugee camps.

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## FOCUS ON

**Madrasa** (see also related links)

**Madrasa** is a religious school found primarily in rural areas. Studies focus on fiqh (the science of understanding Islamic law) but include the study of Islamic religious texts, classical writings, Arabic language and grammar, and often other secular subjects such as basic mathematics. Madrasas are founded by and normally, built next to mosques. Madrasas also serve as welfare institutions, providing boarding and education for the children of the poor. They are run by Muslim clerics as private charitable institutions

**There is little doubt in this context that Islam will continue to play a key role in shaping the future of Afghanistan.** For this reason, it is critically important that key Islamic concepts be better understood as a basis for informing policymakers who are developing strategies for the rehabilitation of Afghan society and institutions. As history has shown, to ignore the religious aspects of Afghan society risks the establishment of illegitimate institutions, antagonizing the Afghan population and generating resilient opposition against modern reforms.

**The purpose of this policy brief is to offer basic information and analysis on the present and future role of Islam in Afghanistan and provide simple axioms through which an appropriate Islamic perspective can be brought to bear in planning recovery and rehabilitation programs in Afghanistan.** The aim is to outline key political and social aspects of the Islamic tradition in the country and to provide links to additional sources of information for policy makers.

### Islam in Afghanistan: a 1000-year old tradition

Islam emerged from the Arabian Peninsula over fourteen hundred years ago and through trade, commerce and conquest reached Central Asia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Since then Islam has come to influence all aspects of life and society in Central Asia – including law, politics, morality, art and science. Reciprocally, Central Asian peoples have also had a major influence on other Muslim societies, with Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan in acting as early centers of learning within the Muslim world.

Most of the fundamental concepts of Islam are contained in the Qur'an, the Islamic Holy Book. Several institutions have also been developed over centuries through the elaboration of various interpretative traditions throughout the Islamic world. Islam's two main doctrinal denominations are *Sunni* and *Shi'a*.

## Related Links

**For more information on Madrassah Schools, see:**

[Jamia Binoria \(Pakistan\)](#)

[Al-Mawrid - Institute of Islamic Sciences \(Pakistan\)](#)

[Al-Azhar University](#)

[New York Times – Inside Jihad U: The Education of a Holy Warrior, June 25, 2000](#)

[Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Suba Chandran - Madrassas: A brief overview, January 25, 2000](#)

[Rediff.com - Myth and reality of a Pakistani madrasa, August 21, 2001](#)

### Qur'an Sites

[Holy Qur'an Resources, Professor Mohamed Elmasry - What is the Koran? A View from Within](#)

[University of Michigan – The Koran](#)

[Islam101.com – What is the Quran?](#)

[Click here to see map of Central Asia](#)

**For more information on Bukhara and Samarkand, see:**

[University of Kansas, Richard Frye - Narshaki's The History of Bukhara](#)

[Advantour – Bukhara](#)

[Advantour – Samarkand](#)

[tashkent.org – Samarkand](#)

**Islam has occupied an important role within Afghan culture and identity since the early phases of the religion's existence and has provided the country with a sense of unity.** It anchored the society's fundamental values during the invasions by the Persians, the Turkic Ghaznavids, and the Mongols (led by Genghis Khan). It remained a uniting factor throughout the period of domination by India's Moghul dynasty at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The overall majority of Afghans (84%) are *Sunni* Muslims, while a significant minority are *Shi'a* (15%), principally related to the Hazara ethnic group which has traditionally inhabited the central highlands, including the Bamian Province.

### FOCUS ON

#### Islam's two main doctrines: *Sunna* & *Shi'a*

Islam's two main doctrinal denominations are *Sunni* and *Shi'a*. Both maintain that the Qur'an and the *hadiths* (collections of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions) are the principal sources for religious prescriptions. However, because of differences of opinion on the leadership of the community after Prophet Muhammad's death, the *Sunni* and *Shi'a* developed different approaches to jurisprudence. Historically, the *Sunni* have relied on a community of scholars (the *'ulama*) trained in scripture to determine acceptable interpretations of Quranic law or *Shari'a*, while the *Shi'a* invest religious authority in the divinely-guided leadership of a line of *Imams* who trace their lineage to the Prophet. The *Sunni* constitute the vast majority of Muslims, and have developed a number of distinct but equally valid interpretations of Islamic law over the centuries. The majority of *Shi'a* have now also come to rely on scholars for religious guidance because of their belief that the *Imam* is in occultation and will return to dispense perfect order and justice.

**Afghanistan might be characterized as one of the most conservative Islamic societies in the world. Much of the interpretations of Islam that affect Afghan communities, especially in rural areas, derive from the "Hanafi" school of thought. Islamic scholars argue that the Hanafi school permits to some extent the incorporation of pre-Islamic local custom and tradition in deriving legal rules. The intricate connection between the Hanafi jurisprudence and local tribal codes such as Pushtunwali has been a powerful source of conservatism in Afghanistan.** More recently, the repression of Afghan clerics under the Communist regime and their isolation from advanced Islamic teachings and scholarship has resulted in a generation of less educated and more conservative clerics who rely substantially on local customs rather than Islamic prescriptions to interpret *shari'a* law. At a local level, the tribal codes regulating these close-knit communities for centuries have had a great impact on defining roles of honor, community and women. However, *Shari'a* law and local customs have not been formally distinguished or differentiated and thus tend to be understood within a common framework of norms and judicial processes. In recent decades, aspects of "*Wahabi*" thinking, derived from a more puritanical school of thought originating in Saudi Arabia, have emerged, as a result of the influence of Arabs who took part alongside Afghans in the anti-Soviet resistance of the late 1970s and 1980s.

#### Basic Islamic Teachings

[Emory International Law Review - Religious Human Rights and the Qur'an, Spring 1996](#)

[Islamic Gateway - The Anatomy of Islam](#)

[USC – The Religion of Islam](#)

[Whyislam.org – Islam Explained](#)

**For more information on Sunni and Shi'a, see:**

[Saint Martins College – Sunni Tradition](#)

[Islam for Today, Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin - The Origins of the Sunni/Shia split in Islam](#)

[Saint Martins College – Shia Tradition](#)

#### History of Afghanistan

[CountryWatch.com – Afghanistan History](#)

[Afghanistan Online - Contemporary Afghanistan: The Last Sixty Years \(1919-1979\), 1984](#)

[Afghan-info.com - Political History of Afghanistan](#)

[Sabawoon Online – The Afghan Civil War](#)

**For more information on Hanafi, see:**

[Cyber Islam, Maida Malik - The Life of Imam Abu Hanifah](#)

[Saint Martins College – Hanafiyyah: History](#)

[Imam Ahmed Raza Academy - The Imams of the Four Schools of Fiqh](#)

## Islam in Afghan Political History

### *Islam in early Afghan tribal history (17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century)*

Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam and Islamic clerics had an important but subsidiary role in Afghan politics. Though **King Ahmad Shah Durrani** conquered the country and gave it political identity in 1747, the state nevertheless remained largely decentralized, with most power remaining in the hands of tribal leaders governing through a mix of customary codes and Islamic laws. **Both Durrani and his successors sought to legitimize their rule through the uniquely Pushtun tribal council known as the *loya jirga*, which secured the important role of tribal leaders – and the traditions that they stood for – in national politics. Though other rulers had tried to use Islam as a means of transcending the grip of tribal politics (for instance, by adopting the title of *Amîr al-Mu'munîn*, or “Commander of the Faithful”), it was only with the reign of King Abdur Rahman in 1880 that this approach succeeded.** He strengthened the central government through authoritarian policies, legitimized by Islam as a nationally unifying force.

#### FOCUS ON

#### Loya Jirga

**Loya Jirga**, or literally in Pushtu a “Grand Assembly”, are traditional gatherings, which draw upon a history of collective decision making in Afghanistan. A Loya Jirga can be requested by the leader or the people, gathering together tribal representatives, religious scholars, khans, and government officials. Traditionally, they have been the institutional mechanism through which local tribal leaders exerted influence over central authorities. These assemblies are often called upon to choose a new leader, establish legislation, or decide appropriate actions in a time of crisis. The importance of these councils has been demonstrated by their frequent use by national rulers in Afghanistan throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Islam as a national unifier (19<sup>th</sup> century)*

Under King Abdur Rahman, the role of Islam changed dramatically. King Abdur Rahman consolidated his power by undermining local traditions and imposing a centrally defined Islamic agenda. He claimed divine sanction for his rule, rather than relying on the sanction of the tribes through the *loya jirga*. He used Islam to mobilize tribal forces against two hostile non-Muslim empires – the British (in India) to the south and the Russian to the north. He also used the doctrine of *jihâd* to justify his colonial ambitions in the north, while successive leaders associated *jihâd* with anti-colonial militancy in British India and Ottoman Turkey.

For more information on King Durrani, see:

[Afghan Network - Ahmad Shah Durrani](#)

[Sabawoon Online - The Durrani dynasty](#)

[Aghan Voice, Altafullah - Afghan Legends](#)

For more information on Loya Jirga, see:

[Institute for Afghan Studies, G. Rauf Roashan - Loya Jirga: One of the Last Political Tools for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan](#)

[Institute for Afghan Studies, Noorullah Khan - Afghan Loya Jirga](#)

[Institute for Afghan Studies, Juma Khan Sufi - Tradition Versus Ideology in Afghanistan](#)

[Loya Jirga – A Grand Assembly Democratically Unifying Afghanistan](#)

For more information on King Abdur Rahman see:

[PageWise - Abdur Rahman Khan, amir of Afghanistan](#)

[Afghan Network - Amir Abdur Rahman Khan](#)

[UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs - Report of the DHA mission to Afghanistan \(Historical Background\)](#)

Internally, King Abdur Rahman used Islam to develop and codify the Afghan legal system, insisting on the consistent application of *shari'a* principles, often at the expense of tribal codes and local interpretations. He further centralized the administration of justice, which until then had focused on local *jirgas*, by creating a national supreme court in Kabul and appointing judges centrally. Significantly, he also sought to take control of the system of *madrassa* and standardized the curriculum. Moreover, Abdur Rahman established an Examination Commission to set standards for local religious leaders in the Sunni orthodoxy of the *Hanafi* school, and created a state infrastructure to publish religious handbooks and pamphlets, enforce standardized practices of the faith across the country and supervise the moral behavior of individuals through the public office of the *muhtasib*, in effect the precursor of the Taliban's Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

## FOCUS ON

### Pustunwalii

**Pushtunwalii** merges a code of honor with local interpretations of Islamic law. Much like the *shari'a*, daily practices and legal cases among the Pushtun are decided according to the Pustunwalii. While it often runs parallel to the *shari'a*, the two systems diverge on issues involving the honor of the individual or one's family. Some argue that Pushtunwalii and *shari'a* are at variance on matters such as the proof of adultery. Under Islamic Law, or *shari'a law*, four male eyewitnesses are required to maintain an accusation of adultery which runs the death sentence, making the case particularly difficult to prosecute. Under Pushtunwalii code, hearsay evidence is said to be sufficient as the honor of the family is at stake as well as the stability of the community.

### ***Attempts at political and social liberalization of Afghanistan (early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century)***

**The 1920s in Afghanistan were marked by attempts to modernize and liberalize the country, along consciously more European lines. King Amanullah** had received support from young modernizers in his bid for the throne, and in return promulgated the country's first formal constitution, along with a range of liberal reforms. Just as Abdur Rahman had tried to transcend tribal politics by harnessing Islam, Amanullah sought to transcend Islam by appealing to notions of popular sovereignty that would allow him to develop and modernize the country. Understanding the practical aspects of tribal politics, he convened successive *loya jirgas* to discuss his reforms. Since many of these reforms ran counter to deep-seated notions of religion and tribal tradition, a backlash ensued that eventually led to chaos and his abdication. Subsequent attempts at liberalization were modest, and a range of concessions was made to tribal and religious leaders to ensure their loyalty to the regime. This was manifest in the new constitution of 1931, which effectively struck a balance between gradual reform, while acknowledging the formal role of religious and tribal leaders in the government, thus ushering in a period of relative stability.



Abdur Rahman and his son Habibullah

For more information on Pustunwalii, see:

[Amnesty International - Afghanistan: The human rights of minorities](#)

[UNESCO – Refugee Education: More Afghan Girls in School](#)

[American University, Mary Elizabeth Rhoads - A Study of Afghanistan: The Case for Taliban Legitimacy and US Responsibility](#)

For more information on King Amanullah, click on the following links:

[University College, Cork - A Background Briefing on the crisis in Afghanistan \(Early History\)](#)

[Sabawoon Online - Amanollah Khan](#)

[Afghanistan Online - Biography: Amanullah Khan](#)

To see the text of the constitution, click here: [1923 Constitution](#)

**During the 1940s and 1950s, the focus was primarily on the economic development of the country. Any religious and tribal disaffection was effectively contained by the co-operation of the religious establishment in the main cities.** The development of urban centers had the effect of creating an urban, educated middle class, which perceived the authoritarian political structure as an anachronism and for whom neither tribal politics nor Islam had much immediate relevance. By 1960, the growing middle class put pressure on King Zahir Shah to promulgate the country's third constitution, which effectively created a democratic state in Afghanistan. The party politics, however, resulted in deep differences between leftists on the one hand, who wanted further liberalization, and Islamists, who resented the secularization of the state. **Although they constituted the majority of the population, most rural communities remained unaffected by the reform program.**

#### ***Authoritarianism and religious repression (1950 to 1979)***

**A coup in 1973 led by the King's cousin, Sardar Mohammad Daoud, overthrew the monarchy and established the first republic in Afghanistan. The country's fourth constitution of 1976, had strong socialist elements that further secularized the state,** reformed the composition of the *loya jirga* from the traditional tribal leadership to loyalists of the government, and created an authoritarian state with a single political party. **The result was the silencing of religious movements in order to promote a more socialist ideology, which was in the interests of some of the urban middle class.** In 1978, a military coup successfully installed a communist government in Kabul under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) whose avowed goal was to create a modern Afghanistan, using the Soviet Union as their principal model. Fighting within the PDPA, severe political repression, and a series of hasty reforms exacerbated the existing rifts between the urban elite and the more conservative rural population and resulted in a series of uprisings across the country. Civil war broke out in 1978, and the Soviet Union invaded a year later in order to save the communist regime in Kabul.

#### ***Islam unifies opposition to Soviet occupation (1980 – 1988)***

In the face of the Soviet invasion, both the rural population and sectors of disenchanted urban technocrats rallied around the call for a *jihād*, similar to those which had been invoked in response to earlier colonial invasions. In effect, modernization and reform were seen as a form of colonialism, against which the values of tradition and religion were pitched..

Click here to see the text of the constitution: [1963 Constitution](#)

**Formore information on King Zahir Shah, click on the following links:**

[Institute for Afghan Studies - Statement by H. M. Mohammad Zaher, the former King of Afghanistan, September 19, 2001](#)

[Afghan Network - King Zahir Shah, July 18, 1999](#)

[Institute for Afghan Studies, Dr. G. Rauf Roashan - Loya Jirga: One of the last political tools for bringing peace to Afghanistan, July 30, 2001](#)

[Institute for Afghan Studies - List of the executive committee for the Loya Jirga](#)

[Far Eastern Economic Review, Ahmed Rashid - A Call for the Former King, October 4, 2001](#)

[Omaid Weekly - Former King explains his peace project, May 15, 2000](#)

Click here to see the text of the [1976 Constitution](#):

**Secularism was portrayed as the hidden goal of the leftist intellectuals in power. The emancipation of women, used by the Communist authorities as a key objective of social reforms, was particularly perceived as an occupation ideology. In many rural areas, for example, the emancipated Afghan women were referred to as “the Russians”.**

In response to this, a new group of Islamists emerged, many of whom were educated in urban schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan but whom resented the reformist agenda of the left, which was seen as foreign in inspiration. **As rural religious leaders urged a return to legal processes in accordance with the *shari’a*, as had been the case until the 1960 constitution, the new Islamists developed more extensive ambitions for the role of Islam.** They saw Islam as providing answers to not only domestic private issues, but to all issues of political organization and the creation of a national society. The Islamists, the core of the *Mujâhidîn* movement, were thus also urban revolutionaries who sought to recast the state in a more Islamic mold, rejecting both Western-style democracy and communism as alien and unnecessary.

## FOCUS ON

### Jihâd

**Jihâd** Literally means exertion or struggle. Often misunderstood as “holy war,” *jihâd* means to struggle or strive in the name of Islam. This may entail a personal or collective struggle, against evil thoughts or external threats. *Jihâd* connotes a religious commitment to protect Islam from outside invaders, and during the medieval period prompted a campaign to spread Islam to other countries. While the expansion of Islam has been tied to war, war itself is expressed in Arabic as *harb* or *qital*. These terms appear separately from *jihâd* in the Qur’an.

### ***Islamists prevail as Soviets withdraw (1989-1992).***

Benefiting from the military support of Western allies and conservative Muslim countries, the *Mujâhidîn* managed to prevail over the conservative local clerics and rallied the rural population in a bitter and costly campaign to resist Soviet occupation. **The *Mujâhidîn* remained a loose coalition of forces, united only in their struggle against a common enemy, with a shared rhetorical inspiration in Islam.** The Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988 and, contrary to expectations, the government of President Najibullah maintained effective power in the main urban centers, with significant external backing, for four more years. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, however, reduced the last support enjoyed by the Najibullah regime, and in 1992, 20,000 *Mujâhidîn* entered Kabul, establishing an Islamic State headed by an *Islamic Jihâd Council* formed from the seven Pakistan-based opposition factions, then scheduled elections.

For more information on Mujâhidîn, see:

[BBC News – Afghanistan: 20 years of bloodshed, April 26, 1998](#)

[International Relations and Security Network – Afghanistan: A brief history](#)

[National Security Caucus Foundation - Whither Afghanistan? The History and Politics of the Afghan War After the Soviet Withdrawal and Some Thoughts on the Future](#)

For more information on Jihad, see:

[USC – Islamic Glossary Term: Jihad](#)

[ITC-Douglas E. Streusand - What Does Jihad Mean? September, 1997](#)

[University of Northumbria - Jihad Explained](#)

For more information on Islamic Jihad Council, click [here](#)

The first decrees of the new governing Council implemented a strict Islamic code based on a narrow interpretation of *shari'a*, including banning music, closing theaters, enforcing compulsory prayer, requiring women to veil themselves and hindering their access to the workplace, as a precursor for subsequent policies enforced by the Taliban regime. Differences emerged almost immediately between the Afghan President, Burhanuddin Rabbani and his Prime Minister, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, resulting in serious fighting in the capital, Kabul, and the effective disintegration of the new Islamic Republic.

### ***The Mujâhidîn disintegrate and the Taliban take control (1993-1997)***

The fall of the *Mujâhidîn* coalition illustrated the extent to which Islam had been used as much as a rhetorical device around which to mobilize opposition against Soviet occupation and socialist reforms, as the basis of a truly Islamic agenda. **As with the Taliban regime that succeeded the Mujâhidîn in Kabul after four years, there were limits on the extent to which their Islamic discourse could be translated into a coherent political and social program for the country.** Within a year of the establishment of the “interim” government in Kabul, the opposing factions attempted to exert their control over parts of the capital, resulting in previously unseen levels of violence and lawlessness.

While traditional tribal leaders were able re-assert control in some rural areas which had been the domain of warlords, inter-factional fighting prevailed in many provinces, such that travel became dangerous, given the extent of harassment and extortion by the various warlords. In 1994, the *Taliban* (Islamic students) emerged when they took the southern city of Kandahar from a diverse range of factions who limited the movement of trade on the main roads. The Taliban initially purported to limit their goals to the restoration of peace and security, through the imposition of a strict Islamic order. After a remarkable series of military advances north from Kandahar over the next two years, the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 and had taken control of two-thirds of the country by 1997.

#### **FOCUS ON**

#### ***Shari'a* (or Islamic Law)**

***Shari'a*** Literally means the water source, the way, the path. In Islamic theology and law, it is the path or way given by God to human beings, the path by which human beings search for God's will. Usually translated as “Islamic law,” *Shari'a* encompasses a much broader conception of law than most Western notion. The *Shari'a* guides all aspects of life and is not restricted to positive law per se but includes as well moral and ethical values and the jurisprudential process itself.

For more information on President Rabbani, click on the following links:

[Afghan Info - Burrhan ul-Din Rabani](#)

[Afgha.com – Biography: Rabbani, Burhanuddin](#)

For more information on the Taliban, click [here](#)

Click here to see [WFP map of Afghanistan in 1997](#)

For more information on Islamic law, click [here](#)

### ***The Taliban harness Islam to consolidate their power (1997-2001)***

Many of the approaches adopted by the Taliban show remarkable similarities to those of previous regimes in Afghanistan. In April 1996, when it seemed clear that the Taliban would rule an Islamic Afghan State, Mullah Mohammad Omar was designated in front of thousands of *mullahs* and religious students as the *Amîr al-Mu'munîn*, or “Leader of the Faithful”, in a similar manner to that seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when King Abdur Rahman asserted his divine right to rule. In much the same way as in those earlier times, the Taliban continue to operate a body of consultation that includes appointed representatives from each of the regions, similar to the traditional format of the *loya jirga*. In parallel with these “reforms”, the Taliban have sought to introduce standardized forms of Islamic practice across the country, many of which imitate the first decrees of the Mujâhidîn Council in 1992, including the traditional head-to-toe burqa dress for women. In line with the practice introduced by King Abdur Rahman, a Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice has been re-established to oversee and enforce moral behavior by the civilian population.

#### **FOCUS ON**

#### ***Wahhabism***

*Wahhabism* merges the conservative scripturalism of the *Hanbali* school of *Sunni* Islam with a political outlook that requires active participation of the ulama (religious scholars) in legitimizing the governing regime and overseeing legislation. The combination results in stringent conservatism. On matters of law, *Wahhabis* tend to reject innovations that are not securely grounded in text; politically, the need for the approval of the ulama leads to only the most cautious and measured reforms. *Wahhabism* traces its origins to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when Muhammad bin Abdi al-Wahhab made a pact with Muhammad Saud. The pact included the fact that al-Wahhab’s followers would support the Saud rulers in their wars of expansion in the Arabian Peninsula exchange for the promotion of al-Wahhab’s interpretation of Islam. Wahhabism remains the legal and political doctrine of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, more severe interpretations of Islam underlie the range of prohibitions that have been put in place by the Taliban, including rules governing the length of male beards, the prohibition of kite-flying and the use of television, VCRs and the Internet. These have, at times, been justified by the Taliban as necessary in order to achieve internal security and stability through a “cleansing” of evil practices. **While obviously intrusive to the lives of many Afghan families, particularly in urban centers, many of these prohibitions were not initially felt to be a great source of concern among civilians, many of whom openly expressed their wish for order to address the earlier chaos in the country.** It was this sentiment that contributed to the Taliban’s consolidation of military and political power in rural provinces.



Afghan woman in a *Burqa*  
Photo: A. Raffaele Ciriello

For more information on Wahhabism, click here:

[Encyclopedia of the Orient - Wahhabism / Muwahhidun](#)

[Islamic Gateway, Ayyub Sabri Pasha – The Beginning and Spreading of Wahhabism](#)

[BBC News - The threat from Islamic militancy, August 25, 1999](#)

[Radio Free Europe, Paul Goble - Russia: Analysis From Washington - Aiming At The Wrong Target, July 28, 2000](#)

In terms of relations with the outside world and foreign policy, the approach of the Taliban mirrors to some degree that of King Abdur Rahman, as they use Islam as a rallying-cry for the Afghan population at large in the face of external threats. It is in this context that the Taliban leadership justifies the provision of hospitality and refuge to the Saudi millionaire Osama Bin Laden, who had supported the *jihād* during the 1980's, but subsequently became engaged in a campaign to remove the U.S. military presence from Saudi Arabia. Through his financial and strategic association with the Taliban, Bin Laden doubtless contributed to the more belligerent foreign policy approach of the Taliban, particularly toward the West.

**The sustainability of the Taliban's approach, however, is questionable. The history of Afghanistan has shown that, when Islam has been used in a similarly strict and repressive way, resistance has emerged from within, either through the liberal urban elite, or through traditional tribal leaders who wish to re-assert control over rural communities. In the absence of an organized or motivated urban elite, many of whom are in exile, and with the customary role of traditional tribal leaders undermined by the impact of the conflict and displacement, the Taliban's structures have remained mostly unchallenged by the civilian population over the past five years.** Given the links that have been made between the Taliban and the network allegedly controlled by Osama bin Laden, in the aftermath of the attacks on the United States on September 11 the challenge is now an external one, as is manifest in the ongoing strikes against the regime in Afghanistan.

## FOCUS ON

### *Shura*

The word **shura** is an Arabic term for "consultation." It means consultative body, consultation and advice. While there is consensus on its meaning, the application of the word in Islamic society is disputed. The Qur'an has several verses about the principle of shura that are interpreted differently. In one verse (3:159) the text says ". . . and consult with them on the matter." Traditional interpretation of this verse suggests that leaders have an obligation to consult with others when making decisions. In contrast, those who emphasize the fact that "those who conduct their affairs by counsel" (43:38) are worthy of praise say that consultation is favorable but not obligatory. Nor is there consensus on the institutional forms consultation should take or on whether the leader is required to follow the suggestions of the consultative body. In some early Muslim discourses, accusing a leader

To see biography of Osama bin Laden, click here:

[Anti-Defamation League – Osama bin Laden](#)

[BBC News – Who is Osama Bin Laden? September 18, 2001](#)

[PBS/Frontline – A Biography of Osama Bin Laden](#)

For more information on Shura, click on the following links:

[Al-Hewar Center, Sadek Jawad Sulaiman – The Shura Principle in Islam](#)

[Ijtihad, M. A. Muqtedar Khan – Shura and Democracy](#)

[University of London: Centre of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law, Chibli Mallat - On Islam and Democracy](#)

## Observations and Recommendations

The following observations aim to set out some of the major implications of this analysis on efforts to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

**1. Islam has been pivotal in the evolution of contemporary Afghan society and will remain a key factor in the rehabilitation of political and social institutions in the country.**

Islam has been part of the Afghan political history for more than a thousand years and represents the main framework of reference of Afghan domestic politics and civilian social life. If many disagree with some of the most severe interpretations of Islam by the Taliban, most Afghans remain profoundly conservative in their way of life as Muslims. Indeed, the difficulty of bringing conservative rural communities into the mainstream through development is one that has faced a succession of Afghan leaders. Given the current weakness of standing government infrastructures and in the absence of a class of intellectuals in Afghanistan through whom reforms could be articulated, religious conservatism is likely to prevail, and will need to be taken into account in efforts to reconstruct the country.

**2. Islam constitutes a critical factor in legitimizing Afghan national leadership and institutions, and establishing a robust central governing infrastructure.**

Until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prevailing political model in Afghanistan was one of decentralized power in the hands of local, tribal leaders. Throughout history, however, Afghanistan's national rulers have sought to diversify the sources of their authority in order to expand their power. Thus, many rulers have claimed divine sanction for their rule (for instance, by taking the title *Amîr al-Mu'munîn*) in order to suggest that obedience was a matter of religious conviction rather than simply political necessity or tribal loyalty. Nonetheless, pragmatic politics always required tribal leaders to be involved in important national decisions, including selecting leaders, as evidenced by the continued use of *loya jirgas* well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although democratic institutions were established in the 1964 constitution, national institutions still have to balance carefully the need for tribal leaders and the religious establishment to be a part of the national governing apparatus.

### **3. Islam remains an essential force in preserving the unity and independence of Afghanistan, and will be an important determinant in the planning of its future development.**

Islam is the principal unifying force of Afghanistan's heterogeneous society. It transcends ethnic, geographic, and tribal differences, and provides a common vocabulary, history, and ethical framework for the nation. Politically, Islam has been used in efforts alternately to promote internal stability and to mobilize society against external threats. In this context, Islam can play a valuable role in supporting development programs as initiatives promoting the stability of institutions and good governance. If, on the contrary, development programs disturb local power structures and are perceived as imposing foreign values over traditional settings, Islam is likely to play a key role in the articulation of the suspicions of Afghan people. Recent administrations in the country, including the Taliban, have capitalized on these suspicions as a way of promoting an autarchic nationalistic and Islamic vision of the country.

In this context, political and social factors will arguably present as formidable a challenge in reconstructing Afghanistan as logistical or financial issues. Important lessons have been learned by aid agencies through efforts to involve these communities in a range of development initiatives affecting rural communities, and it will be important to draw on these as part of any process of national recovery and reconstruction. The significance of Islam in helping to unite a war-damaged society and support the process of recovery is, therefore, crucial.

#### Recommendations

- *Major efforts should be devoted to develop adequate strategies to address the root causes of instability in Afghanistan. In developing any recovery plan for Afghanistan, it will be vital to take account of the experience of earlier processes of "reform", and the ethnic, social and economic dimensions of these.*
- *The challenge of ensuring the emergence of a legitimate central authority in Afghanistan is to find an appropriate balance between the claims of traditional local authority, religious convictions and democratic sentiment, so that they can co-exist within national governance institutions.*
- *Islamic traditions may offer valuable opportunities to engage a wide cross-section of Afghan society in the process of recovery.*
- *Regardless of the extensive damage that has been done to Afghan social structures during the long conflict, it is vital that the contemporary role of Islamic and tribal leaders within Afghan communities be acknowledged in development processes.*
- *Future investments in the recovery of Afghanistan should ensure that physical change (in terms of infrastructure improvements, for example) are matched by the re-building of appropriate governance structures that are perceived as legitimate. Not only will this ensure the more lasting impact of the physical investments, but may well ensure a wider degree of participation by ordinary Afghan men and women in the process, bearing in mind the social legacy of the war and the systematic dismantling of administrative structures by successive regimes since the early 1990s.*

- *International standards, remaining an important point of departure for the overall goals of international assistance in the country, should not be used as an obstacle to a culturally sensitive approach that draws upon the history and traditions of the country. In this context, it seems important that attempts to preserve local identities and traditions should not be punished by withdrawing essential development aid to children and other vulnerable groups.*
- *The international community should refrain from engaging in the development of a UN civil administration for Afghanistan which relies only on ethnic and popular support, as such an administration is likely to be resisted in some important quarters. To ensure a sufficient level of stability in the country, such an administration will need to engage Islamic clerics in a path of common reforms that will consolidate the power of the new State.*
- *It will be vital that an emerging administration be provided with support to engage on reforms both on secular issues and on Islamic issues. Serious efforts will be required to modernize Islamic teaching and scholarship in Afghanistan by promoting contacts between Afghan scholars and students with other communities in the Islamic world.*
- *Those supporting the process of recovery in Afghanistan should be aware of the risks of launching reform programs without a clear understanding of the values and expectations of the majority of Afghans. It will be important to ensure a thorough process of consultation takes place, taking account of the Islamic and tribal heritage of rural Afghan political entities, as much as the perspectives of the exiled Afghan elites. Without such a range of participation, reforms may simply recreate the oligarchic, urban and authoritarian system that governed Afghanistan for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief aims at providing basic information on the role of Islam in Afghanistan. For more information on issues presented in this brief, the readers are invited to consult the links attached to the documents or to contact the Program as indicated on the cover page. Those who have contributed to this brief include Claude Bruderlein, Khalil Shariff, Jolyon Leslie, Adeel Ahmed, Timea Szabo and the research team of the Harvard Program. Special thanks are due to Professor Frank Vogel of the Islamic Legal Studies Program at the Harvard Law School for his thoughtful comments.

The Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research is a research and policy program based at the Harvard School of Public Health in Cambridge, MA. The Program is engaged in research and advisory services on humanitarian operations and the protection of civilians in conflict areas. The Program advises organizations such as the United Nations, governments and non-governmental actors and focuses on the protection of vulnerable groups, conflict prevention, strategic planning for human security, and the role of information technology in emergency response. The Program was established in August 2000 with the support of the Government of Switzerland and in cooperation with the United Nations.