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# Policy Report

The religious ideology  
of the Taliban and its  
impact on the regional  
socio–political situation  
in Central Asia

Author:

ABDUSAMAT KHAYDAROV

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## **The religious ideology of the Taliban and its impact on the regional socio-political situation in Central Asia**

### **Introduction**

Islam and the Muslim clergy have played an extremely important role in the history of Afghanistan. Only in the last three centuries since the creation of the Afghan state, Islam has played a consolidating role in the fight against British attempts at armed intervention. In the mid-70s of the twentieth century Islam was also used during an armed insurrection against M. Daoud, in which young leaders of the country's religious class played a key role. A few years later in 1979 political parties created by the young leaders of the clergy came out as a united front against the Soviet invasion and the pro-Soviet regime.

The invasion of Soviet troops in Afghanistan served as a catalyst for the formation of the Afghan armed Islamic opposition, which declared jihad against Soviet troops and the "godless" government of the DRA. In 1992, the Islamic opposition was at the top of power in Afghanistan, but the struggle for power on ethnic and confessional basis between various mujahideen groups turned into an intensification of the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban movement.

In 1996 The Taliban was able to seize power in the country and establish a tough regime, which was removed by the troops of the international coalition after the events of September 11, 2001. In August 2021 the Taliban again comes to power in Afghanistan and proclaims the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Since coming the Taliban to power the current Constitution of the Republic of 2004 was abolished and the partial use of the 1964 Constitution and the abolition of provisions contrary to Sharia norms were announced.

## **The origins and current state of the Taliban ideology**

The influence of the Deobandi school of the Hanafi school on the formation of the ideological views of the Taliban movement is a generally recognized fact. Many Taliban leaders are graduates of the Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqaniya Madrasa, which is a key part of the Deobandi school system in Pakistan. The main concept of this school is the revival of Islam based on Sharia law and purified of any innovations, as well as the creation of a unified Islamic state. It was these basic provisions of the Deobandi school that formed the basis of the ideology of the Taliban, but adapted to the conditions of Afghanistan and meeting the interests of the dominant ethnic group - the Pashtuns. In particular, the Pashtunwali - code of conduct of Pashtuns, which regulates behaviour of members of society both in everyday life and in extreme situations, has become an integrated and inherent part of the ideology of the movement. The inclusion of the provisions of this code of conduct into the Taliban doctrine affected the radicalization of the movement and the formulation of its following main tasks.

The task of reviving Islam or in other words establishing a Sharia form of governance was and remains central both in the first and second coming of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The appeal to Islamic dogma was conditioned by the need to consolidate all forces to establish order and stability in the country. "Sharia will be our law ..." <sup>1</sup> noted Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, one of the prominent representatives of the Taliban, the former Ambassador of the Taliban administration in Islamabad at the initial stage of the Movement's formation. At the same time, only the Koran was recognized as the main source of Sharia.

The Taliban's negative attitude to any innovations has led to criticism of traditional Islam and its other branches. This approach led to a certain cooling of relations with the leaders of Sufi orders of Afghanistan, who played a prominent role in the 1980s during the fight against the invasion of the Soviet troops. This also led to the denial of the Jafari Mazhab, the school of Islamic law of the Shiites of Afghanistan and the aggravation of relations with the Shiite population of the country. However, the Taliban have never talked about protecting the rights of minorities in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Zaeef.A.S. My life with the Taliban. London: C. Hurst & Co, 2010.

The idea of creating an Islamic state was one of the key tasks of the movement both in the 1990s and during the confrontation with the republican regime in 2002-2021. This task was implemented under the slogan of jihad against the "infidels", which included foreign troops and the republican government. This approach enabled the movement to mobilize and unite not only Pashtuns, but also representatives of other ethnic groups of the country to achieve their goals. At the same time, all the activities of the Taliban were based on two principles: strict adherence to the Koran and the instructions of the Supreme Leader of the movement, bearing the title Amir al - mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), who has full political, military and religious authority.

In order to give legitimacy to the fighting of the Taliban fighters, Mullah Omar in 2006 developed and published "Loyha" - peculiar rules of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan for the Mujahideen. In 2009 and 2010 Loyha was expanded and republished. In fact, this document is a set of Mullah Omar's guidelines based on the synthesis of certain provisions of the Afghan code of conduct Pashtunwali and the provisions of Islamic law, which guided the Taliban fighters during the confrontation with the republican government.

In 2016 (1438 according to the Islamic calendar), Haibatullah Akhunzada, the current leader of the Taliban, published a new guide for the mujahideen - "Rohnamudhoe Amir al-mu'minin baroye mujahedin"<sup>2</sup> (Amir al-mu'minin Guide for the Mujahideen). This guide regulates the behavior of the mujahideen, prescribes obedience to the Amir, explains the goals of jihad, establishes rules for intimidating infidels, as well as rules for the treatment of prisoners, explains the need for unity and cohesion of the mujahideen, requests listening to the needs of mujahideen and shahids families, explains the value and importance of the Islamic government. In fact, this guide is an expanded version of the Loyha published during the lifetime of Mullah Omar. At the same time, it should be noted that both of these guides more reflected the traditions of the Pashtun ethnic group and corresponded to the period of open struggle with the republican government.

At the same time, from the moment of his election in 2016 as the Supreme Leader of «Taliban», until he came to power in August 2021, Haibatullah Akhunzada issued decrees, orders and instructions on various issues of daily life of the Taliban, which, in many cases, echoed the above-mentioned guidance for mujahideen. Since coming the Taliban to power in 2021, significance of the Loyha and the Guide for the mujahideen

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<sup>2</sup> رهنمودهای امیرالمؤمنین حفظه الله برای مجاهدين. سال چاپ : ۱۴۳۸ ه.ق. ۲

have dropped a little, and now the new authority is engaged in the issues of state-building on the basis of Sharia and the decrees of the current leader of the Taliban Haibatullah Akhunzada.

Over the past two years, over hundred such documents have been issued. Among them are the " Order on Prohibition of Distribution of Lands to Individuals without the Permission of the Leadership " of 24 October, 2021, " Decree on Women's Rights " of 2 December, 2021, " Decree on Distinction of Ministries and Departments of Offices of Prime Minister's Deputies Based on the Nature of their Work " of 9 May, 2022, " Decree on Balancing Salaries of Military Forces " of 17 May, 2022, " Decree on Registration and Appointment of *Mujahedin* Security Organs" of 17 May, 2022, " Decree on Prohibition of Hashish Cultivation "<sup>3</sup> of 18 March, 2023, and a number of others. This category of prescriptive documents continues to play a significant role in the information and ideological policy of the Taliban.

IPA leader G. Hekmatyar is also trying to contribute to the process of Islamization of the country, thus in his message on Eid al-Adha day (June 28, 2023) proposing to develop unified programs for secular schools and madrassas with the inclusion of additional religious disciplines. The same approach was announced by acting Prime Minister Kabir at a meeting with representatives of the Kabul madrassas on July 2, 2023.

Haibatullah Akhunzada himself enjoys the full religious, political and military power and seeks to reduce the scope of powers of the ministers of security forces, in particular Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Mohammad Yaqoob, the Minister of Defense. Apparently, this is due to his desire to weaken the positions of the most powerful representatives of the Taliban, who could claim for supreme authority. However, in Kandahar, where the residence of Haybatullah Akhunzada is located, a military unit has been established to ensure the security of the Supreme Leader.

In addition, to strengthen his authority, Haibatullah Akhunzada appoints members of the interim government, provincial governors, and heads of provincial ulema councils from among his trusted and loyal people, mostly of the clergy. His office made extensive use of social media, particularly Twitter, to quickly inform the public. At the same time, the dogma of Islam is used as an ideological tool capable of maintaining unity in the movement itself and preventing possible pockets of instability and entrenching the

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Islamic form of governance in the country. Failure to comply with the Supreme Leader's decrees is considered a violation of Islam and the Shariah.

The heads of ministries and departments of the country try to adapt to the style of work of the Supreme Leader by issuing their own orders and recommendations. Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a circular note dated 9 July 2023, instructed its diplomatic missions abroad to ensure that the appearance of diplomats was in accordance with the Shariah norms and obligatory performance of prayers during working hours.

Representatives of the Supreme Leader of the Taliban have been appointed to all ministries without exception to monitor the activities of the country's state bodies. In all provinces of the country, the former ulama councils have been dissolved and created new ones, which are directly subordinate to Haibatullah Akhundzada. In almost all provinces, the operating madrassas have been turned into an ideological forge of personnel rigidly focused on conducting constant information work with the population. Imams of mosques are given instructions for conducting sermons aimed at strict observance of Sharia. Mosques, the number of which, according to estimates, is close to two hundred thousand, are a key element in the ideological component of state power. Mosques are the main mechanism of information and ideological work of the Taliban with the population of the country.

Sharia courts, which played an important role in bringing the population to their side during the confrontation with the republican government, are also an important part of the ideological system of the new interim government. At the same time, all Islamic institutions of the country are built into a single hierarchical structure, subordinate to a single centre in the person of the Taliban leader.

In spring 2022 was published the book intitled "The Islamic Emirate and its System" by Abdul Hakim Haqqani, the Supreme Judge of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The book is a kind of Taliban manifesto, revealing the purpose of the Islamic Taliban movement, the role of the political institutions of the Islamic Emirate, the sources of Sharia, as well as the principles of politics. This book is the most significant source of the Taliban, which allows to judge the ideology of the Taliban and now is known mostly to the Taliban leadership and elite clergy of the country supporting the current government.

The clergy of Afghanistan, whose number significantly exceeds the number of the country's armed forces, despite the lack of homogeneity due to differences on ethnic and confessional grounds, as a whole remains the main ideological tool, and the rural population is the main social base of the Taliban. A significant part of the clergy supporting the Taliban and being the bearer of the basic values of the Taliban is skilfully used to inculcate the ideology of the Taliban throughout the country.

It should be noted that the norms and values inculcated by the Taliban are shared by a significant part of the clergy and the population, which means that the social base of the current government is much broader compared to the republican government in Afghanistan had in 2002-2021. Having squeezed out of the country almost all the political parties that officially operated in Afghanistan until August 2021, the Taliban essentially completed the fight against the carriers of the former "anti-Islamic" ideology.

In general, the current process of state-building based on strengthening the role of Islam and Islamic institutions has outlined the framework of society and individual life, which to some extent resemble the system of power created in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 and partly the system of power of the Persian Gulf monarchies. The very activity of the current authorities to build an Islamic state is still sporadic and is generally based on the decrees of the Supreme Leader. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that the authorities will make efforts to create a new Constitution that will give legitimacy to their domestic and foreign policy. So far, this construction process has not met with strong resistance, as it still enjoys support of a significant part of the clergy - the most conservative stratum of Afghan society, as well as a significant part of the Pashtun ethnic group, which regained its former dominant position with the coming to power of the Taliban. However, further development of the situation in Afghanistan in the medium term remains largely unpredictable for a number of reasons that require separate consideration.

### **Possible impact of the situation in Afghanistan on Central Asia**

Islam remains a magnet for believers in Central Asia, where the role and influence of Islam has increased significantly over the years of independence. Various Islamic organizations and movements have appeared and are operating, brought from outside and alien to traditional forms of Islam in the republics of Central Asia.

Today, according to various estimates, there are more than a dozen and a half different Islamic movements and organizations operating in Central Asian countries, most of which are banned. Those organizations included Tablighi Jamaat, Hezb-ut Tahrir, as well as Salafia, Takfirizm and others. The closest to the Taliban in its ideological platform is Tablighi Jamaat. Many preachers of this organization, which is banned in all Central Asian countries except Kyrgyzstan, are graduates of the Deoband Islamic educational system of Pakistan.

However, the presence of these organizations and trends in the region does not mean that this will contribute to the rapid expansion of the influence of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the region. On the contrary, attempts to expand it may encounter opposition from these organizations and movements that already have their niches in the republics of Central Asia. Moreover, this influence will be limited due to very limited financial opportunities, unlike those organizations and movements already operating since the 1990s that reflect the geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan and other leading countries of the Muslim world.

Indeed, the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the creation of second theocratic state on the borders of the region was a new factor affecting the religious situation in Central Asia. However, the degree of influence on the mindset of believers requires a balanced consideration in the country context. Thus, the visits of the Taliban delegations to the republics of Central Asia showed a different degree of perception of the Taliban representatives and the current situation in Afghanistan in general by believers. A warmer reception and interest in representatives of the Taliban during visits to mosques was manifested in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where historically the religion of Islam has played an important role.

Less interest in the Taliban was shown in the rest of the Central Asian republics. According to some experts, the attractive side of the Taliban for the believers of the Central Asian republics was the fact of the success of the creation of the Islamic state. However, the majority of believers could not answer the question of what is Islamic state and how it differs from a secular one. Moreover, most of these believers did not have objective information about the methods of establishing new Islamic orders, about the existing interethnic and confessional problems in the neighbouring country.

Nevertheless, the most favourable area of possible influence of events in Afghanistan may be the Fergana Valley, where Islam has played and plays an important role, and

today the valley is a part of three Central Asian republics - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The first Islamist movements and organizations appeared here in the early 1990s. Most foreign experts believe that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the centre of radicalism and extremism in Central Asia. Now banned the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), whose goal was to create an Islamic state, tried to expand their activities in these republics. The shattered remnants of the IMU and the former IRPT still continue to cooperate with terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and maintain relations with the Taliban.

According to some experts, Tashkent's new non-forceful approaches to persons who have joined radical Islamist organizations, while maintaining and using forceful methods, if necessary, make it possible to narrow the activities of radical movements and maintain stable control over the religious situation in the country with active support of traditional Islamic institutions. The noticeable economic growth of the republic, which began in 2017, a certain increase in the standard of living of the population and the success of the reform of the education system also contribute to eliminating the causes that lead believers into the bosom of radical ideologies.

The situation in Tajikistan is somewhat different from the situation in other Central Asian republics. The population of this republic still remembers the echoes of the civil war, in which the supporters of the IRPT took an active part. At the initial stage of its activity, this party advocated the creation of an Islamic state in Tajikistan. Subsequently, as a result of the agreements reached with the government, the IRPT received one third of seats in state authorities. However, later for a number of reasons, this party was banned and deprived of representation in the country's government system. Nevertheless, according to some experts, there are still IRPT sympathizers in the republic and underground madrassas are functioning. Tajik authorities are more often trying to control the situation in the religious sphere through restrictions and prohibitions, widely using the power structures, but this does not mean a solution to the problem. Along with this, the Government seeks to inform the population about the infringement of the rights of Tajiks in Afghanistan, which also reduces the attractiveness of Taliban's Afghanistan. When it comes to the use of force to solve the problem, it should be noted that in some cases they have the opposite effect and contribute to the growing popularity of the Islamic form of governance and the advocates of this path of development see as justice.

Islam is not as deeply rooted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, where the population moved to a sedentary lifestyle relatively later than in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Today in these republics, it seems that tribal relations, which were "reanimated" during the period of independence, have begun to play a significant role in socio-political life, temporarily pushing the issues of religious identity and manifestations of Islamism into the background.

In particular, seven regions of Kyrgyzstan have their own tribal isolation and non-traditional Islamic movements have already been entrenched in these regions since 1990s. In this regard, potential preachers of the Afghan versions of development are likely to experience resistance from Islamic organizations and movements that had previously established themselves in these regions. Nevertheless, the developments of recent years in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan and part of the Ferghana Valley of Kyrgyzstan indicate about relative stability in certain regions of these republics, which opens up opportunities for the activation of various radical ideas and views.

The current situation in Turkmenistan seems much more prosaic. The authorities seek to fully control the religious situation, therefore the "attractiveness" of the Islamic form of governance in Afghanistan can hardly find fertile ground in this republic. However, even in this republic, only forceful methods, along with certain unresolved socio-economic problems, can contribute to the growth of the popularity of the Islamic form of government and the expansion of the social base of protest.

## **Conclusion**

In general, speaking about the degree of influence of current events in Afghanistan on the republics of Central Asia, it should be noted that the second Taliban takeover served as an "inspiring" impulse for radical and extremist elements in Central Asia and was perceived as a victory over the "infidels".

However, nowadays the principles of justice, the fight against corruption, and the advantages of the Islamic form of government based on Sharia, which are often perceived by certain groups of believers in the republics of Central Asia as the most correct approaches to the development of Muslim states, may pose a greater danger.

Given the weakness of high-quality coverage of today's events in the neighbouring country, and in some republics - its actual absence, the current situation in Afghanistan poses a certain latent challenge for the secular states of the region.