



THE ISLAMIC FACTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF UZBEK-AFGHAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article examines the Islamic factor in the context of the prospects for Uzbek-Afghan bilateral relations, focusing on aspects and trends that could have a destabilizing effect, taking into account the priorities of the Republic of Uzbekistan's Foreign Security Concept.

Keywords: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Pashtuns, the Taliban.

Introduction

The late 20th and early 21st centuries were marked by the emergence, on the border with the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the sole control of the military-political movement 'the Taliban', whose original concept envisaged the formation and mobilisation of young, nationalist-oriented Pashtun groups of the orthodox Islamic persuasion in exile for an armed struggle against a limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Never in history have the Pashtuns dominated northern Afghanistan on their own, where the local elites have traditionally been represented by Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras, who formed the so-called security buffer zone. The deployment of US-led NATO forces following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 merely delayed, for a couple of decades, the establishment of Taliban rule as far as the border with Uzbekistan, which would have marked the emergence of a mono-confessional landscape under the rule of a single ethnic group.

Religion has traditionally been one of the dominant cultural, social and political forces in the history of Afghanistan. Historically, various interpretations of Islam spread across the country's diverse geographical



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landscape; the country subsequently acquired its current name, reflecting the ethnic diversity of its population through equally diverse forms of religious practice. In the present era, these numerous versions of Islam have served as powerful socio-political resources, providing an ideology and framework for both state and opposition mobilisation. Even though religion has been used as the national backbone of the Islamic Republic—and now of the multi-ethnic emirate under Taliban rule—Islam has retained both constructive and destabilising potential within a heterogeneous society. However, despite the widespread recognition of Islam’s central role in historical retrospect, insufficient academic attention often leads to a reductive, one-dimensional perception of Islam in Afghanistan.

Apart from a few monographs focusing on specific aspects or movements (primarily the mujahideen and the Taliban), there is no overview of the development of religiosity in Afghanistan throughout history. Research on the period prior to the Soviet invasion of 1979 is fragmentary, making it difficult to situate the fundamentalist movements of the 1980s within the context of earlier patterns of religious activity, both local and transnational. To fill this gap, it is important to draw on the work of international scholars specialising in different periods, regions and languages, which can provide a more complete, comparative and evolving picture of Islam in Afghanistan from the 8th century to the present day. The aim is to provide an in-depth, critical and comprehensive overview of the major events and transformations of Islam from the early Middle Ages to the present day in the territories that today constitute Afghanistan. Given the diversity of sources and languages required for such a project—Persian, Pashto and Uzbek, as well as Arabic and Urdu—it is appropriate to select authors on the basis of their previous research utilising oral and written evidence in these languages. As the authors are specialists in different periods and movements, their thematic studies of various forms of the Muslim faith will enable us to see, beyond the unifying rhetoric of Islam, its diverse and even fractured manifestations.

It is precisely for this reason that it is appropriate to consider ‘versions of Islam’ in the social-scientific plural, rather than in the theological singular. In part, this use of the term represents an attempt to move beyond simplistic and emic



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notions of the uniqueness and unity of Islam. Moving beyond such internal debates facilitates the analytical recognition of religious differences, which have so often been a source or justification for social discord and violence. This pluralistic approach also allows us to acknowledge the cultural diversity of Afghanistan's rich religious heritage. The aim, therefore, is to strike a balance between critical detachment and empathetic recognition of a religious history that has been a source of both solace and oppression for different groups. Undoubtedly, the use of the term 'Afghanistan' to encompass research into both the medieval and modern periods presents certain difficulties. As a nation state, Afghanistan only took on its current form and name between the late 18th and 19th centuries. It appears that this name was not officially adopted in the region itself until the 1870s. Previously, this region was understood as a collection of various territories, such as Khorasan and Turkestan, which were sometimes ruled by a single ruler, but more often divided amongst different rulers. Nevertheless, the collective national name 'Afghanistan' helps us to visualise the geographical area in question and to focus on its religious transformations over time. As the research findings show, the later multi-ethnic state of Afghanistan inherited the religious institutions, authorities and practices that had emerged in its former fragmented parts.

Another reason for using the phrase 'Islam of Afghanistan' rather than the shorter 'Afghan Islam' is that many of the Muslim peoples did not identify themselves as Afghans. Indeed, until the early 20th century, when the term 'Afghan' became an official state bureaucratic term denoting a general national identity, it had for centuries denoted a narrower ethnic identity, equivalent to what we now call the Pashtuns (or Patan). Even today, the term 'Afghan' is highly contentious amongst the citizens of Afghanistan. For these reasons, our use of the more inclusive term 'Islam of Afghanistan' is intended to bring together (but not conflate) the diverse Muslim traditions shaped by the various peoples who inherited the territories that subsequently formed the nation-state of Afghanistan. This dual meaning – encompassing both diversity and heritage – is significant as it enables us to understand the relationships – be they coexistence or conflict, continuity or change – between different religious forms within the same geographical space. Through both competition and



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compromise, religious institutions, practices, authorities and traditions established in earlier periods were passed on to later eras, giving rise to various versions of Islam which Muslims in the region we now call Afghanistan subsequently chose to embrace or reject.

From this perspective, a retrospective overview of Islam in Afghanistan and a summary of existing academic works on this topic are relevant. A comparative review of existing expert knowledge on Afghan Islam should include a general overview of the history and anthropology of Islam in Afghanistan, drawing on all sources currently available, structured chronologically, tracing the emergence, spread and diversification of various forms of Islam in Afghanistan from the 8th to the 21st century. This helps both to navigate the more specialised aspects of the subject under consideration, as covered in specific studies, and to highlight gaps in the existing body of expert knowledge.

As part of the overall objective of this study – to provide an overview of Islam in Afghanistan from the perspective of its relations with neighbouring states— an attempt has been made to concisely summarise existing academic research in chronological order, reflecting the emergence, spread and diversification of various forms of Islam in Afghanistan over the course of thirteen centuries. Emphasis is placed on providing a detailed account of the authorities, institutions and practices of different periods. This synthesis of half a century’s research on Islam in Afghanistan, spanning both the humanities and the social sciences, demonstrates both the scope and the limitations of expert knowledge regarding what is known and what remains unknown about the religious history of Afghanistan, covering the period from the country’s initial conversion to Islam through to the emergence of stable institutions in the medieval period and the later religious programmes of the Mujahideen and the Taliban.

Some sections focus on historical and literary studies of periods up to the mid-20th century, shifting to the social sciences to discuss research devoted to later decades. This dichotomy broadly reflects the nature, on the one hand, of textual and art-historical studies, which have formed the basis of our understanding of Afghanistan’s religious history up to the 21st century, and, on the other hand, of anthropological and political science studies, which have shaped our



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understanding of religiosity in the present day. The extent to which the issue has been academically explored. Despite all the attention paid to Afghanistan by the media and the military, the fact remains that we still know far less about its religious heritage than we do about the history of Islam in almost all neighbouring countries of the Middle East and South Asia. Although the scholarly understanding of religiosity in Afghanistan was largely shaped by scholars and administrators working during the colonial period of British and Russian rule over neighbouring India and Turkestan, one reason for their neglect is that such works — for example, those by the British scholar Henry Raverty (1825–1906), the Frenchman Jacques Darmesteter (1849–94) and the German Bernhard Dorn (1805–81) – are already far better known than the works of more professional scholars, many of whom had access to a much wider range of sources. But the reason also lies in the fact that, regardless of their intrinsic value, studies of the colonial era have already exerted a far greater influence than they deserve. To a large extent, this exaggerated influence is due to the easy availability of these works, partly thanks to frequent reprints, which has led many self-styled experts to rely on them rather than on more reliable and up-to-date works published in less accessible journals. In an attempt to move beyond this dubious collusion between colonial Orientalism and contemporary journalism, the focus is placed on a body of lesser-known scholarly works. At the same time, the aim is to provide an objective picture of the limits of expert knowledge, based on what has and has not been researched.

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