Central Asia

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Transnational Islamist Debates about the Taliban

In 1995, many Islamists seemed torn about the policies and practices of the emerging Taliban in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the Taliban could be seen as freedom fighters struggling against infidels (and foreign intervention) to create an Islamic society governed according to strict adherence to Islamic law, or *shariᶜa*. On the other hand, Taliban leaders were implementing extremely repressive measures not only against the Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs – that had long coexisted with Afghanistan's majority Muslims – but also against Afghani Muslims. Why did the Taliban create such uneasiness among Islamists? The following examines transnational dialogues among Islamists as they debated whether or not to support the Taliban.

The late 20th century was marked by a wide range of Islamist frames – incorporating anti-colonialist, anti-leftist, integrativist, revolutionary, and even Marxist ideas – that sometimes competed and sometimes accommodated each other. The integrativist frame, which focuses on working within existing political structures to realize a more Islamist society, dates back at least to Hassan al-Banna in the 1920s. Those who adopted and developed these ideas have been characterized as integrativist because the norms of dialogue, debate, and consensus are embraced as key mechanisms for achieving social change. When, by the mid-1980s, a number of Arab regimes were faced with economic and other crises that brought increasing political dissent, many opted for limited liberalization as a mechanism for channelling dissent into controllable institutions. A number of Islamist groups, many with affinities for Banna's integrativist thinking, opted to enter into these political systems and contest public elections for state offices. They formed political parties, created civil society organizations, and formulated party platforms. Over the next two decades, a distinct public sphere emerged around the dialogue among these integrativists, with such widely heard and engaged voices as those of Rashid Ghanoushi, Hassan Turabi, and Abd al-Karim Soroush.

Within this transnational Islamist public sphere, a consensus began to emerge around the central norms of this integrativist frame. Innumerable voices weighed in on the question of Islam and democracy, while newly formed Islamist political parties shared their experiences, both successes and failures. The late 1990s also saw the emergence of a network of Islamist research institutes, many of which are open to foreign and non-Muslim researchers in an effort to demonstrate their integrativism in practice. Along with mechanisms such as the internet, these research institutes have begun to play a significant role in shaping the content of the transnational dialogues through their conferences and reciprocal invitations to sister institutions in other countries. With such exchanges, transnational debates emerge around 'hot' topics such as civil society, the role of women, local governance, and the environment.

By the time the Taliban emerged in September 1994, integrativist voices were widely heard within transnational Islamist debates. While the dialogue focused on the most appropriate means of bringing about an Islamic society, integrativist arguments demonstrated a significant level of accommodation. Armed struggle, for example, remained acceptable in anti-colonialist and authoritarian settings. When Islamists are not given the opportunity to work within the system, they reasoned, they have no alternative but to struggle against that system. Thus integrativist Islamists have no difficulty justifying the political violence, for example, of Hamas and Hizbollah against Israel (an occupying force), or of the FIS and its many militant offshoots in their struggles against Algeria's repressive military regime.

The problem for integrativist Islamists was not that their strategies directly conflicted with the policies of the Taliban since the contexts of each political struggle were quite different. Rather, difficulties arose around the boundaries of justifiable behaviour. Working through democratic institutions, even if it entails accepting the right of secular or leftist groups to coexist, is justifiable in terms of the Islamic norms of consultation and consensus; political violence is justifiable in contexts in which such opportunities are not available. The contention around the Taliban arose not because of the Taliban's armed struggle to establish a state, but because of its highly repressive domestic policies toward Afghani Muslims. In this regard, three issues of contention stand out as significant in integrativist debates about the Taliban: the role of women, pluralism, and beards.

Women under the Taliban regime

A decree issued in November 1996 by the Taliban's religious police, for example, placed the following restrictions on women:

> *Women, you should not step outside your residence. If you go outside the house, you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing much cosmetics.*[1]

Women have been subjected to virtual house arrest, and movement in public is highly restricted, even when wearing the mandatory head-to-toe *burkha*. Women are forbidden to visit tailors, and tailors are likewise forbidden to take the measurements of female customers. Girls' schools have been closed entirely, as were many boys' schools following the prohibition of female teachers in male classrooms. And of course, women are forbidden not only from political participation, but also from even voicing issues within the public sphere.

This treatment of women has been be extremely problematic for integrativist Islamists not because they hold liberal views toward women, but because they have sought to extend the norms of participation, consensus, and consultation to include the voices of women, who make up half of the Islamic community, or *ummah*. In this regard, the education of women is widely viewed as desirable. While the question of women's political participation is somewhat more contested, the policies of the Taliban toward women are simply not justifiable for integrativists on either strategic or Islamic grounds. While the Qur'an does state that no woman can lead the community, it also praises women whose efforts had been integral to the survival of the first Muslims. Such debates have unfolded in transnational Islamist public spheres including on the internet, at conferences and workshops, and in a range of publications available across national borders. Numerous Islamist web sites, for example, circulated petitions and declarations condemning the Taliban's repressive policies toward women. 'This is not true Islam', they declared to an audience of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Pluralism within transnational Islamist debates

The question of women is related to another contentious issue: pluralism. The current integrativist frame was shaped partly in response to the opportunities that opened to Islamist groups beginning in the 1980s. As these 'moderates' deliberated over when and to what extent an Islamist programme can be reconciled with the norms of liberal democracy, they focused on such Islamic notions as consensus (*ijmaᶜ*) and consultation (*shura*). In the process, the norm of a plurality of voices became central to the integrativist Islamist frame. Of course, all of society should be Islamic, but within such confines a plurality of voices is both desirable and necessary.

Although 90% of Afghanis belong to the Sunni Hanafi sect, Afghani society has always been marked by the presence of numerous minority groups, including Shi'i Muslims, several Pashtun tribes, Tajik clans, Ismaelis, Bukharan Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs. Integrativists' contextual reading of Islam not only allows for a diversity of Muslim voices, but calls for actively engaging other voices in the public sphere. The Taliban, in contrast, are extremely intolerant of even alternative frames within Muslim dialogues. While the debate about the limits and meaning of pluralism has long been prominent within transnational Islamist debates, the issue here is that integrativists have highlighted the desirability of a plurality of voices in a manner that makes the Taliban's repression of such voices difficult to accept.

> *'Growing a beard is the tradition of Islam's Prophet Muhammad that must be followed by Muslims. Men without a beard [at least a fist in length] will not be considered for jobs or services.'*
> Mullah Mohammad Omar,
> Leader of the Taliban[2]

What is Islamic about a beard?

Perhaps the issue that has drawn the most outrage from integrative Islamists concerns the Taliban's demand that men grow their beards. In a decree issued in December 1996, the Taliban declared that men are not only forbidden to shave their beards, but that their beards must be at least a fist in length. To further enforce this regulation, any man who shaves and/or cuts his beard within less than a one-and-a-half-month interval should be arrested and imprisoned until his beard becomes bushy.[3]

For integrativist Islamists, many of whom are clean shaven and/or wear Western-style suits, the beard mandate is patently absurd. Muhammad Zabara, an integrativist Islamist member of Yemen's Islah Party (who sports a trim moustache and no beard), expressed bewilderment with respect to the decree:

> *I don't understand it. What is Islamic about a beard? Yes, the Prophet Muhammad wore a beard, but what are non-Arab Muslims to do? Does this mean that the Muslims of Indonesia are infidels? It must mean that I am not a good Muslim.*[4]

One might have concluded that because these policies of the Taliban clearly conflict with the central integrativist norms, the debate among integrativists within transnational Islamist public spheres would have quickly moved to condemn the Taliban. However puzzling it may be, they did not. Over the course of several years, a consensus did emerge over the idea that many Taliban practices violated the tolerant spirit of Islam, particularly through the contributions of prominent thinkers to the debate. The voice of Rashid Ghounoushi, for example, has been central to debates around the issue of reconciling the norms of an Islamic frame with the norms of liberal democracy. Within transnational debates condemning Taliban practices, his voice has been among the most prominent. Yet early responses to the Taliban were indecisive precisely because the integrativist frame had no clearly articulated position on what policies of a ruling Muslim regime were too extreme for its Muslim citizenry.

As an Islamist group struggling to realize an Islamic society in Afghanistan, the Taliban was welcomed by the broader transnational Islamic community. Only when its policies towards its own Muslim citizenry seemed to violate the central norms of integrativist Islamists did criticism of the Taliban emerge. Personal ties have exacerbated these tensions, as many Islamist groups have members who were trained in Afghanistan in the 1980s (though those connections do not necessarily remain strong). There may also be issues of iconography at work, in that integrativists initially found it difficult to condemn any group that was struggling for Islam in the face of foreign domination, secularism, and general adversity. Yet as the Taliban received considerable attention within international public spheres of debate, integrativists recognized that they faced the challenge of distinguishing themselves from the Taliban in their ultimate social objectives. By 1997, just two years after transnational Islamist debates about the Taliban emerged, integrativists seemed to have agreed that Taliban policies did not reflect, in their view, the true spirit of Islam.

Notes

1. Ahmed Rashid (2000), *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 217.
2. Decree reported by Reuters, 6 November 2000.
3. Cited in Rashid (2000), p. 219.
4. Interview with author, 29 May 1997, Sanaᶜa.

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