

WHO SPEAKS FOR ISLAM?

Muslim Grassroots Leaders and Popular Preachers in South Asia

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Despite considerable chatter in recent years about the globalization of religious authority in the Muslim world and the importance of transnational networks, public opinion polls conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2006 suggest that the vast majority of Muslims worldwide, including 46% in Pakistan, turn first and foremost to local religious leaders for guidance in matters relating to Islam. This would suggest that in trying to understand “who speaks for Islam” in any particular setting, we would do well to pay close attention to the voices shaping the immediate environments inhabited by Muslims. This NBR Special Report, “Who Speaks for Islam? Muslim Grassroots Leaders and Popular Preachers in South Asia,” explores the changing dynamics of religious order in three key national settings: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The authors of the three studies that comprise this report are all noted experts on their respective countries, having spent considerable time on the ground observing first hand the production and circulation of religious knowledge at the popular level.

Reading across the three cases, several key themes of crosscutting significance seem to emerge. First is the fact that because the nations in question are all ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, deeply embedded sectarian differences and social segmentation has ensued, as Dietrich Reetz points out, such that effective national religious leaderships or state-controlled religion have never emerged (despite the best efforts of certain countries, such as Pakistan). Second, as in much of the Muslim world today, in South Asia the emergence of a wide range of new, nontraditional voices of religious authority is occurring. Where the production of religious knowledge was once the sole preserve of classically trained religious scholars (*ulema*), there is now a new generation of lay preachers—whose educational backgrounds are often in the medical and scientific fields—rising to the fore. The Mumbai-based preacher Zakir Naik, phenomenally popular in recent years, is a clear case in point. Third, and related to this last point, has been the important role played by new media. The Internet is certainly important here, but in the context of South Asia, satellite television and mobile phone messaging (SMS) have been the main drivers. This use of new media, it is important to note, is by no means confined to the new class of religious voices. More traditional religious scholars have also been quick to seize on the potential of the new tools to reach ever wider audiences. Finally, and here we come squarely to the realm of politics, it is clear that local or provincial religious leaders—and especially some of the traditional *pirs*, or classical scholars, of the Sufi orders—serve as important interlocutors between society and the state. Here they can have an impact on both formal politics, as in the case of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), the Pakistani political party affiliated with Deobandi scholars, and informally as regional kingmakers or in alliance with tribal leaders, as in the case of some of the madrasah-based networks in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

Unique in coverage, this Special Report represents the first systematic inventorying of contemporary religious leadership in South Asia. This report is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand how religious opinion and world-views are shaped in the region today.

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Media-Based Preachers and the Creation of New Muslim Publics in Pakistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines four emerging popular Muslim religious leaders in Pakistan, their use of new media, and their impact on traditional religious authority.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Pakistan's emerging religious authorities use their familiarity with modern disciplines, in addition to their knowledge of traditional sources of Islamic scholarship, to reach a wider audience and to distinguish themselves from the traditionally educated *ulema*.
- The so-called media revolution in Pakistan has enabled nontraditional Islamic religious leaders to reach audiences throughout Pakistan and abroad, especially in the major urban centers.
- Though Pakistan's emerging religious leaders are non-political in their television broadcasts, they are trying to create a Muslim public of their own and to influence Pakistani Muslims' perspective on Islam.
- Nontraditional Islamic religious leaders have been quite successful in establishing a considerable following among the Pakistani communities abroad, especially in Europe and North America, due to the transmission of broadcasts through satellite and cable channels and frequent visits abroad.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- As the Pakistani government and other powerful social institutions have formally renounced jihad as a principal instrument of foreign policy, nontraditional Islamic religious leaders have been tolerated, and also in many ways promoted, by the state.
- In some instances, the emergence of new Islamic religious authorities and the use of new electronic media have allowed Pakistanis to engage in free and uninhibited debate on sensitive religious and socio-political issues.
- Pakistan's new popular Islamic religious leaders have been able to spread their influence to groups previously alienated by more traditional religious authorities, particularly the middle classes and educated women.

This essay will examine the ideas of four Pakistani Islamic scholars who have extensively used the electronic media to disseminate their ideas during the past two decades: Javed Ahmad Ghamidi of Al-Mawarid, Farhat Hashmi of Al-Huda, Israr Ahmad of Tanzim-e-Islami, and Tahirul Qadri of Tehrik Minhaj-ul-Quran. It is difficult to describe these scholars in conventional categories of modern Muslim religio-intellectual thought, given the nuances and interpenetrative dimensions of their ideas and their tendencies to frequently cross ideological boundaries. Generally speaking, however, one can describe Ghamidi as a neo-Islamic liberal, Hashmi as a Salafi, Ahmad as an Islamist-revivalist, and Qadri as a populist-revivalist.¹

Although all four of these scholars started their *dawa* (call to Islam) activities by traditional means—writing pamphlets and books, organizing groups of followers and disciples, addressing small and large gatherings, conducting study circles around the country, and establishing schools, *madaris* (Islamic schools, plural of *madrasah*), and Islamic study centers—during the past two decades, their primary medium for propagating their messages and ideas at the popular level has been electronic technology (cassettes, videos, CDs, DVDs, and television channels).

Israr Ahmad, Farhat Hashmi, and Tahirul Qadri have their own sophisticated audio and video recording, production, and marketing facilities and are regularly aired on religious channels. Javed Ahmad Ghamidi appears both on regular government and on independent channels, especially on the religious programs of the GEO and ARY channels. Since moving to Canada, Hashmi has been less visible on religious channels, although her cassettes, CDs, and DVDs are widely available in Pakistan and are most popular in the religious gatherings of upper- and middle-class urban women. Qadri has also moved to Canada from where his lectures and sermons are daily broadcast on QTV, a channel that is available on cable and satellite in most Muslim countries and the West.

With the exception of Qadri, none of these scholars have received traditional Islamic education in the madrasah system: Ghamidi received a BA (Honors) degree in English from Government College in Lahore, Ahmad is a graduate of King Edward Medical College in Lahore (although he practiced medicine only for a short while), and Farhat Hashmi received her PhD in Islamic Studies from Glasgow University in Scotland. Qadri, after pursuing madrasah education and having served as a *khatib* (preacher) in a mosque in Lahore, obtained MA, LLB, and PhD degrees in Islamic Studies from the University of Punjab.

In addition to claims of religious authority based on their knowledge of traditional sources of Islamic scholarship, all four of these scholars highlight, directly or indirectly, their access to and familiarity with modern disciplines to reach a wider audience and to distinguish themselves from the traditionally educated *ulema*. With the exception of Ghamidi, all others possess considerable facility with the English language and deliver their lectures in English before mixed audiences. Qadri is the only one among them who speaks Urdu, English, and Arabic with equal facility.

In addition to their regular and extensive audience in Pakistan, Ahmad, Qadri, and Hashmi have all been quite successful in establishing a considerable following among Pakistani communities abroad, especially in Europe and North America, owing to the transmission of their broadcasts through satellite and cable channels and their frequent visits abroad. Ahmad has been a pioneer in this regard: he has been visiting North America since the mid-1970s and was the first to establish the North American branches of his three organizations (Markazi Anjuman Khuddam-ul-Quran, Tanzeem-e-Islami, and Tahreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan). Ahmad also has a large number of admirers and followers among the Pakistani communities in the Gulf region.

¹ These categories will be defined later in the sections devoted to individual scholars-preachers.

Qadri, a scholar of Brelvi persuasion, has a “natural” constituency among the Pakistanis in Britain who have migrated mostly from the rural areas of Punjab and Azad Kashmir. Qadri’s more than 70 lectures in English on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government’s television channel during 1992–93 on different aspects of Islam, the basic teachings of the Quran, and the life and mission of the Prophet have earned him a great deal of popularity in the Gulf region as well. He also has a sizeable following among Pakistanis in Scandinavian countries.²

Hashmi reached Pakistani and Indian Muslim women in the West first through her cassettes and CDs during the 1990s and then through her Quran study circles organized around her lectures and videos. She has recently built a huge Al-Huda complex near Toronto to teach Muslim women from all over North America courses of various durations in Quranic and Islamic Studies.

Ghamidi has rarely, if ever, traveled to the West, although his television appearances on different Islamic programs on the GEO, PTV, and AAJ channels are watched with interest by educated Pakistanis in Western countries. A few of his young followers who came to the United States for higher Islamic studies in recent years seem to have moved away from their mentor’s ideas.

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi

Ghamidi’s understanding of the message of the Quran is heavily influenced by Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi, Maulana Hamiduddin Farahi, and Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, in that order. Ghamidi is arguably one of the most prominent nontraditionalist Islamic scholars today in Pakistan. In the broader categories of contemporary Islamic intellectual-ideological thought, he can be described as a “neo-Islamic liberal.”

Neo-Islamic liberalism is meant here as an intellectual trend that seeks to interpret Islamic texts in their historical context, and makes a clear distinction between the eternal/universal theological-moral teachings of the Quran, on the one hand, and the historically specific socio-institutional and legal injunctions that are amenable to changes in accordance with the new circumstances, on the other. Neo-Islamic liberalism also differentiates between the literal *hadith* (narrative) and the *sunnah* (teachings and way of living) of the Prophet, looks with askance at the historical institutional forms of Islam, does not regard the theological and legal formulations of early and medieval Islamic scholars as sacrosanct, and opens the “doors of ijtihad” (independent reasoning). Where neo-Islamic liberalism differs from earlier Islamic liberalism/modernism is in its primary reliance on, and inspiration from, the Quran and the sunnah, rather than on modern Western intellectual and social thought.

Religious Education and Influence

Born in 1951 in a rural Punjab family, Ghamidi initially pursued a modern education, obtaining a BA (Honors) degree in English from the elite Government College in Lahore in 1972.³ Alongside his modern education, Ghamidi received private tutoring in Arabic, Persian, and the Quranic exegesis in his hometown. After acquiring some degree of proficiency in Arabic, Ghamidi

² In 2008 an affiliate group of Qadri’s Tehrik Minhaj-ul-Quran in Norway was awarded the prestigious “Oslo Award” both for its efforts toward building bridges between different religious and ethnic communities and for serving the cause of peace in the world.

³ This author first met Ghamidi in 1974 in Lahore. Even at this young age of 23, Ghamidi had acquired considerable reputation as an enlightened and thoughtful Islamic scholar among a sizeable group of college students in Lahore and had started mentoring them in Islamic sciences. Interestingly, by 1974 his young disciples had already started calling him as “Allama” (the great scholar), an honorific title usually reserved for very senior scholars, such as Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the great poet-philosopher of the subcontinent.

embarked, single-mindedly, on a path of carefully structured reading of the classical and medieval Islamic exegetical hadith and juristic texts on his own.

An extremely disciplined and avid reader with a well-conceived plan to educate himself in Islamic religious literature, Ghamidi soon came under the influence of Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami and one of the most important systematic thinkers and ideologues of Islamic revivalism in the twentieth century. At the same time, Ghamidi started attending *dars-e-Quran* (Quranic studies) sessions conducted by Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi. Islahi was one of the few prominent ulema who had joined the Jamaat-e-Islami in the early 1940s but left in 1957 due to differences with Maulana Maududi over Jamaat's decision to participate in electoral politics. Through Maulana Islahi, Ghamidi was introduced to the Quranic exegesis methodology of Maulana Hamiduddin Farahi, one of the most original commentators of the Quran in the early decades of the twentieth century, who based his commentary on the idea of a structural and textual coherence in the Quran.

By the time Ghamidi came under the influence of Maulana Maududi in the early 1970s, he had already acquired a reputation as an Islamic scholar in his own right in Lahore. Although he had joined the Jamaat in 1974 as a *rukhn* (full member), for all practical purposes he remained an outsider as far as the Jamaat's party discipline and strict adherence to its ideological positions were concerned.⁴ Throughout his association with the Jamaat as a member, the rank and file of the party continued to harbor serious doubts about his loyalty to the ideas and programs of the Jamaat and generally considered him as an Islamic snob.

Nevertheless, Ghamidi's association with the Jamaat and Maulana Maududi for about eight or nine years during the 1970s left an important mark in the formative phase of his religio-intellectual career. He learned from Maududi—as well as from Islahi—to take a more systematic view of the Quranic message, identifying coherent thematic structures in individual *suras* (chapters of the Quran) and interpreting individual *ayats* (verses) of the Quran not in isolation but within the totality of the Quranic message and world-view. Although Ghamidi and his associates have long repudiated the core ideas of Maulana Maududi, especially the idea of the establishment of an Islamic state as the primary objective of Islamic *dawa*, the way these scholars articulate their arguments, build internally coherent and systematic structures of thought, and use instrumental rationality is clearly evocative of Maududi's writings.

Modern Media and Religious Authority

Ghamidi's audience and readership consists mainly of educated, urban-based middle-class men between the ages of 20–35. Many of his close associates and disciples as well as followers have come to him through some previous religious experiences or affiliations. Like Ghamidi, many of his associates were initially influenced by the writings of Maulana Maududi and, in some cases, were regular members (*rukhn*) of the Jamaat. Farooq Khan of Mardan (North-West Frontier Province, NWFP), for example, who is one of Ghamidi's most prominent disciples and popular interpreters, was a member of the *shura* (consultative council) of the NWFP Jamaat.

Ghamidi's television audience, however, is more diverse: it includes not only modern educated youth but also lay Islamic intellectuals and professionals who are aware of the contemporary Islamic controversies as well as the issues related to the relevance of Islamic laws in the modern

⁴ Many senior Jamaat members resented both Ghamidi's occasional disagreements with Maulana Maududi on some religious interpretations as well as claims attributed to Ghamidi that Maududi sought his opinion when faced with some difficult issues of theology and law.

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Muslim Grassroots Leaders in India: National Issues and Local Leadership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines recent trends in the evolution of traditional and nontraditional forms of Muslim leadership and association in India marked by wide diversity and a notable absence of national leaders.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Traditional and historical Muslim networks in India, such as the Sunni *madrakah* traditions of the Deobandis and Barelwis, some reforming sects (Ahmadiyya), Shia groups, and modern Muslim schools, have adopted new leadership formats. These include utilizing new forms of communication, pursuing non-religious agendas focused on education and development, and networking traditional religious schools with secular and female education.
- Religious mobilization follows the north-south divide in Indian society. Although the historical Muslim networks are centered in north India, many groups in the south and east Indian states pursue their own local agendas.
- The modernization of Muslim leadership has led to new bodies and institutions that are separate from established sectarian religious associations. These modern organizations can be divided into those related to religious issues and those related to the welfare of the community. Caste and class factors continue to exert an important impact here.
- Religious activism among Indian Muslims is focused on two major sets of issues: (1) securing religious lifestyles in matters of law, family, and gender segregation and (2) raising the social, economic, and educational standards of the Indian Muslim community, which is perceived as backward and neglected.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- India needs to address the issues of social and political marginalization that Muslims face in Indian society. Social and political rights, primarily the affordable access to quality education and employment, are key.
- Muslim leaders in India should be given a full chance to participate in public life. They should be encouraged to become part of mainstream society and invited to assume social and political responsibilities, as well as act in a transparent and public manner.
- Indian public institutions need to reverse the trend of viewing Muslims as a potential threat and security risk. Occasional discrimination of Muslim citizens must be checked more resolutely. State attempts to regulate religious institutions (e.g., *madaris*, law boards, and shrines) have produced little result apart from a growing sense of alienation among Muslim activists.

Although media-savvy preachers of Islam such as Zakir Naik (born in 1965) from Mumbai have attracted the attention of the mainstream media in India and in the West, their growing popularity is no immediate reflection of current Muslim grassroots leadership in India. Because India's Muslim population remains strongly divided along social, cultural, linguistic, sectarian, and geographic lines, Muslim activists in India cannot easily speak for the Indian Muslim community at large.

This essay will begin with an introduction to the historical context of Muslim India from which current popular leaders emerged. Three subsequent sections will discuss traditional, local, and modern leadership, which are three categories into which Islam in India can be conditionally divided, keeping in mind that these areas also overlap. A final section on Zakir Naik examines important new trends in media and social and political activism that are emerging across India's Muslim leadership

Historical Formation of Popular Muslim Leadership

After the Indian subcontinent was divided in 1947 as a result of the Pakistani independence movement, Islamic groups and Muslim leaders who remained in India faced a fundamental dilemma. In order to gain legitimacy with the Indian government and their major ally, the Indian National Congress, the remaining Indian Muslim groups and leaders needed to renounce politics. They wanted to distance themselves from the nightmare legacy of partition that had rendered millions victim to communal rioting in the process of the population transfers between the young states of India and Pakistan. Yet partition had created a paradox for Muslim leadership in South Asia: the centers of Islamic learning, theological guidance, and culture and tradition remained in India and were largely absent from the new Muslim state of Pakistan.

This inherent contradiction shaped the emergence of Muslim leadership in India and also affected the emergence of new popular Muslim leaders and their grassroots politics today in several ways. First, although no national Muslim political party has established itself in the electoral system of India, the Muslim vote as a potential constituency continues to influence a substantial number of seats in parliament.¹ Second, Muslim religious leaders remained devoted to the traditional conditions and forms of the practice of Islam while demonstrating little to no political ambition of their own. Third, national issues of Muslim politics have been taken up more by mainstream political parties than by religious organizations. The Congress Party and regional parties became prime movers in the public arena to articulate the concerns of Indian Muslims, joined by a number of clerics and public Muslim intellectuals, many of whom claimed the newly emerging constituency of "secular Muslims."

The emergence of Muslim leadership in independent India can be roughly divided into three phases. During the first phase, immediately after partition, Indian Muslims had to grapple with the fact that despite the emergence of Pakistan as a state of Muslim majority provinces, in the independent state of India the issue of Muslim minority rights remained unresolved politically, socially, and culturally. Muslims retained a significant share in India's population (13.4% in 2001),²

¹ According to a 1993 study, Muslims constitute more than 50% in ten constituencies for the federal parliament and a decisive 30%–40% in another ten. Omar Khalidi, "Muslims in Indian Political Process: Group Goals and Alternative Strategies," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 1/2 (January 2–9, 1993): 43–47, 49–54.

² For the population figures, see the official website of the Census of India, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 2001, http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/religion.aspx.

and exerted influence in a number of regions. At approximately 150 million people, India's Muslim population is on par with that of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Yet, the Indian Muslim community also remained deeply divided, with the vast majority living in the Gangetic plains of north India, the historical areas of Muslim civilization in the subcontinent, and a small but very active and much more developed minority residing in the southern states, where Dravidian languages and cultures dominated. During this first phase, Indian Muslim leaders deliberately renounced political ambitions and focused on rebuilding the religious and cultural identity of the community.

A second phase was introduced by socio-economic and political changes that arrived with the modernization processes of the 1970s, triggering the emergence of radical politics and regional, cultural, and ethnic conflict. Religious actors and groups with Hindu, Sikh, and also Muslim backgrounds became part of the identity politics of a new generation of mainly student activists. In the 1980s and 1990s, Muslim groups in India shared in the rising religious consciousness across the Muslim world and expanded religious institutions at a significant pace, not lagging much behind Pakistan or Bangladesh, albeit with very little political drive.

Globalization and development marked the third phase of the leaders' evolving emergence. In this phase, Muslim activism in India intensely refocused on the status and development of the Indian Muslim community, especially general education, the schooling of girls, and professional, technical, and computer education. At the same time, leadership initiatives largely remained in the hands of upper-class and upper-caste Ashraf Muslims. The Muslim community was seen as lagging behind other communities in India and as not equally sharing in the fruits of the continuous development upsurge since the 1990s. This was most recently confirmed by the 2006 Sachar Committee formed by the Indian government.³ Muslim groups and leaders felt the need and desire to network globally much more intensely than before. Using the new opportunities their global cooperation related not only to religious issues but also reflected social, cultural, and political concerns. As demonstrated by the Deobandis or Tablighis, the historical centers of religious Muslim networks in India regained some of their significance in the process. Their followers were joined by diverse activists from across India, some of whom followed a more local orientation while others were more modernist.

Traditional Muslim Networks and New Leadership Formats

With the absence of a recognized national Muslim leadership, most religious-minded Indian Muslims continue to look for guidance to their local *imams*. Those include their elders in mosques, *madaris* (plural of *madrasah*, or Islamic school), and religious associations. These activists should be considered when looking for new trends in Muslim grassroots politics. Though still strongly divided by old sectarian differences, these local leaders adapt their modes of operation to new trends of communication. And they pay much more attention than previously to non-religious issues such as general education and development aimed at the social status of the Muslim community. They thus encourage networks of interrelated institutions that link the traditional religious associations

³ Rajindar Sachar et al., "Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report," Government of India, New Delhi, November 2006, http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/newsite/sachar/sachar_comm.pdf; and "Summarised Sachar Report on Status of Indian Muslims," *Milli Gazette*, December 14, 2006, http://www.milligazette.com/dailyupdate/2006/200612141_Sachar_Report_Status_Indian_Muslims.htm. The committee studied quota demands for Muslims in general and for *Dalit* (low-class) Muslims in particular, on which no agreement could be achieved. The committee confirmed a less than average performance of Muslims in literacy and educational achievements; lower Muslim representation among the professional and managerial classes; less availability of loans; less educational, rural, and urban civic infrastructure; and fewer income and state service opportunities for Muslims.

with *madaris*, modern Muslim schools with a secular curriculum, and *madaris* for girls with other modern girls' schools. These schools are operated through Muslim NGOs that have expanded all over India. Often these institutions are cross-linked and coordinated by activists who bridge the religious and the secular realms effortlessly, as they are also engaged in business with, invest in, or direct some of the new Muslim media.

Over the years many centers of religious learning have built impressive websites containing a large amount of information. A prominent example is the traditional seminary of Deoband featuring information regarding curriculum, the history of the seminary, magazines in Urdu (Darul Ulum) and Arabic (al-Dai), ordering information for their books in Urdu and English, an online service for religious verdicts (*fatawa*), and a photo gallery.⁴ The other orthodox seminary of North India, Nadwatul Ulama, has taken a similar approach in its website, which also provides easy connections with the seminary's many Indian branches.⁵ The Deobandi-dominated association of Islamic clerics, Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind (JUH), has modernized its web presentation, which introduces the association's social and religious projects.⁶

Adherents of the Barelwi tradition of Sufi-oriented Islam, although their institutions and associations are less organized, use modern media to connect to each other. Internet blogs such as Sunni News not only help to circulate news and theological concepts but also promote sectarian debate.⁷ The youthful missionary movement of this tradition, Sunni Dawat-e Islami,⁸ which formed after the model of the Tablighi Jamaat, also possesses a modern web presence, offering podcasts, an e-journal, and e-books.

In the Indian context, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (founded in 1973) acquired importance as a reference institution, and more so with a freshly renovated website.⁹ Run by religious scholars (*ulema*), the board's decisions have a fatwa-like status, as it tries to reconcile different Sunni legal opinions. The board's members also intervene in the making and reformation of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) on issues of marriage or divorce, sometimes causing much public controversy. MPL evolved under British rule when the courts started to make a selective reference to Islamic law while hearing civil cases involving Muslims and promoting legislation on its partial application. Today, the board is an interface of religious scholars with the Indian state and public Muslim intellectuals in legal matters arising from the dictates of Islam. The group's chairman has often been vocal in public Indian discourse. Repeatedly the chairman has come from the Nadwa school; the previous chair was the famous Sayyid Ali Hasan Nadwi. The current chairman is Syed Mohammad Rabe Hasani.¹⁰ But the board's authority is not unchallenged, as dissenting scholars with a Shia background and women activists formed rival boards.

In addition, individual scholars attract public attention through their participation in religious and political debates. Among the Deobandis, Maulana Nadeem ul-Wajidi is a typical example. A graduate of the Darul Ulum Deoband, he is a member of the working committee of the seminary's alumni association. He is also president of the provincial organization of Deobandi *ulema* for

⁴ For information on the Deoband, see the Deoband seminary's website at <http://www.darululoom-deoband.com/>.

⁵ For information on Nadwatul Ulama and its branches, see the seminary's official website at <http://nadwatululama.org/>.

⁶ For the official website of the Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind, see <http://jamiatulama.org/>.

⁷ See, for example, the internet blog Sunni News at <http://sunninews.wordpress.com/>.

⁸ For the official website of the Sunni Dawat-e Islami movement, see <http://www.sunnidawateislami.net>.

⁹ For the official website of the All India Muslim Law Board, see <http://www.aimplboard.org/>.

¹⁰ "Presidents," All India Muslim Personal Law Board, <http://www.aimplboard.org/president4.html>.

Religious Figures, Insurgency, and Jihad in Southern Afghanistan

Thomas H. Johnson

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NOTE The views expressed in this essay should not be construed as an official position or policy of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, or Naval Postgraduate School. This article would have been virtually impossible to complete had it not been for the generous data supplied to the author by a colleague and Kandahar City resident under the pseudonym Conrad Jennings. His data, based on observations and interviews conducted over the last three years in Loy Kandahar, complemented much of the author’s own data gathered in Kandahar and Helmand in August–September 2008 and May–June 2009. The author would also like to thank Matthew Dearing, Matthew Dupee, M. Chris Mason, Wali Ahmed Shaaker, Ahmad Waheed, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the social and political roles of religious figures in southern Afghanistan in an attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of the present insurgency.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Islamic groups and Afghan *mullahs* play a critical role in politics in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban, Deobandis, Sufis, and Tablighi Jamaat are the most important religious groups and influences in southern Afghanistan.
- Religion and politics are blurred as religious authorities frequently shift between religious and political roles. The West has had a tendency to misunderstand the relevance and implications of these roles.
- Jihad is an important feature of Islamic life in southern Afghanistan. Large numbers of southern insurgents are waging jihad for the implementation of *sharia* (Islamic law). Several predominant religious figures and influences tend to advocate jihad. The West has underestimated the role of jihad in the present Taliban movement.
- The *ulema* council in southern Afghanistan represents a sector of the clergy that has remained relatively un-radicalized by war. Insurgents and jihadists have frequently assassinated members of this council because it offers legitimate opposition to the Taliban's radicalization of young madrasah students and unemployed villagers.
- The political activities of two Islamic groups that represent a large number of rural and poor Afghans are misunderstood. Some Sufi groups in Kandahar have allied with insurgents since 2003 and have promoted rural resistance to secular authority. The Tablighi Jamaat, though avowedly apolitical and detached from the insurgency, has a relationship with the *mujahedeen* who regularly attend this group's meetings.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Political and military strategies aimed at countering the Taliban insurgency while ignoring the Taliban jihad are ill-founded and will probably not succeed.
- Currently there is very little contact between NATO or ISAF and the *ulema* of southern Afghanistan. Rather than stereotype all religious leaders and institutions as militant fundamentalist, policies that incorporate certain religious groups into civil society should be considered.
- There is a critical need to fix the corrupt justice system in Afghanistan. A central component of the Taliban's strategy to win the trust and confidence of the Afghan population is based on the role of Taliban *mullahs* as arbitrators of individual and community disputes. This "shadow" justice system is proving very popular.

*The more we stress Islam as a unit of analysis, the more we face the dangers of abstraction and unwarranted generalization. Islam keeps us mired in debates about normativity, where an emphasis on Muslims allows us to appreciate the dynamic nature of Islam as a lived experience.*¹

Religious authorities play a critical role in the present conflict in Afghanistan.² Consider, for example, the fact that virtually all Taliban leaders, from the senior regional leadership down to subcommanders at the district level, are mullahs³ (religious leaders).⁴ Indeed it is reasonable to argue that the present conflict in Afghanistan represents a classic insurgency wrapped in the religious narratives of jihad.⁵ Although a broad majority of the foot soldiers in this insurgency might be “accidental guerrillas,”⁶ the leaders are for the most part committed Afghan religious figures.⁷ Hence, to understand this conflict and its nuances, it is important to attempt to understand the religious figures and phenomena in Afghanistan as well as their societal roles.⁸

The role of religious figures in insurgencies and jihads has been a mainstay of Afghanistan’s history. David Edwards argues that Afghan religious personalities are central to the moral authority as well as to the “contradictions” of Afghan society. These contradictions together with the “artificiality of the Afghan nation-state” reflect critical, historical components of the “deep structure” of Afghan conflict.⁹ Regimes ranging from Hamid Karzai’s to the era of Amanullah Khan (1919–29) have been existentially threatened by, and have had difficulties in subduing, rural religious conservative insurgencies. This has especially been the case when Afghan state authority has been perceived to challenge or offend traditional Islamic values. The national political dominance in Afghan politics of organized religious groups compared to dynastic monarchical groups, however, is a rather new phenomenon.¹⁰ Historically, the degree of regime success in subduing an Afghan insurgency has largely been a function of the extent to which the regime is viewed as legitimate in the eyes of the population. Critical here is the fact that since the time of the Achaemenids and the Parthians history has demonstrated that the legitimacy of Afghan governance is derived from two immutable sources: dynastic sources, usually in the

¹ Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 20.

² Unless otherwise specified, the term “religious figures of authority” extends to include the Taliban as well as other figures who would not necessarily identify themselves as such or who work together with the government.

³ Author’s interview with senior State Department and Department of Defense analysts and officials, Washington, D.C., March 2009. It should be noted, however, that there are many cases where a Taliban commander will adopt (or be given) the title “mullah”—still implicitly suggesting the importance of religious figures in this insurgency/jihad.

⁴ Traditionally mullahs have served as village spiritual advisors as well as elementary teachers and are paid by donations from the community, often supplementing their income through farming or a trade. Mullahs vary considerably by educational background from being illiterate to having some *madrasah* (Islamic school) education.

⁵ For a discussion of Taliban narratives, see Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 317–44.

⁶ On “accidental guerrillas,” see David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Kilcullen argues that an accidental guerrilla is an individual motivated to fight due to an encroachment on the local social network or way of life.

⁷ Some observers argue that the social changes made during the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war are what gave power to religious leaders and village mullahs. See, for example, Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier,” *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 70. It is also important to note that millions of Afghan refugees settled in Pakistan during the anti-Soviet jihad and were indoctrinated by Islamist mullahs in these camps. Many of these refugees eventually returned to Afghanistan as committed Islamists.

⁸ See generally, Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁹ David Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1–32.

¹⁰ William Maley, “Introduction: Interpreting the Taliban,” in *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. William Maley (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 8. Until the rise of the Taliban mullahs, overt religious figures never held political power nationally in Afghanistan.

form of monarchies and tribal patriarchies, and religious sources.¹¹ This problem of legitimacy is especially acute at the local and village level of rural Pashtun society, for whom dynastic and religious authority has been paramount for over a thousand years.¹²

The objective of this essay is to briefly address issues of Islam, politics, and the dynamics of religious authority in southern Afghanistan—the traditional spiritual center of the country and a significant focus of Taliban insurgent activity.¹³ In doing so, this essay will examine the following topics: the cultural and religious mores and tropes of Loy Kandahar, the *ulema shura*¹⁴ of southern Afghanistan, the role that the Afghan media plays in legitimizing figures of religious authority and how certain religious figures manipulate this media attention, the Taliban's strategic use of symbols and the media to gain legitimacy, and the Tablighi Jamaat and Sufis in southern Afghanistan. These extremely complex topics will be addressed using anecdotal experience and evidence, interviews conducted in the region over the last few years, and other data gathered, in part, in greater southern Afghanistan.

The fundamental question that this paper seeks to address is that of Islam's public persona: who speaks for Islam in Afghanistan? The extent of the historical and cultural tradition of these religious figures' political involvement is then examined, for where there is religious influence there is also bound to be some element of power play. Subsidiary questions look into what the sources of these religious figures' influence are, how these sources are changing, and what the fundamental factors of this influence are—i.e. the base societal conditions in southern Afghanistan and how they shape the way religious figures can operate.

Southern Afghanistan is an interesting case study in part because so little has been written on the exact dynamics of the interaction between religion and politics, even for a group as prominent as the Taliban. The area of “greater Kandahar” remains the spiritual and strategic heart of the present conflict, and as such an increased understanding of the religious dimension can help prevent mistakes borne of ignorance and impoverished assumptions. There is no doubt that religious figures have, are, and will continue to play a central role in militant mobilizations in Afghanistan. Understanding such mobilizations is ultimately the goal of this essay.

Cultural and Religious Influences in Southern Afghanistan

Nearly all Afghans are Muslim, with Islam serving as a common frame of reference and key cognitive driver for the vast majority of the population. Undoubtedly, Islam is the only characteristic that nearly all Afghans have in common. Yet popular Islamic ideas and beliefs are rooted in a mix of culture, self-interpreted religious views, tribal values, money, influence, and personal connections. Although religion has clearly helped to shape Afghan values systems and codes of behavior for generations, it would nevertheless be wrong to infer that this fact results in unanimity of opinion concerning all things Muslim. Islam is not a monolithic entity in Afghanistan just as

¹¹ On Afghan governance during this period, see Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹² See Thomas H. Johnson and W. Chris Mason, “Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” *Military Review* (November–December 2009): 4–5; and Dupree, *Afghanistan*. For an excellent review of political legitimacy in Afghanistan, see Thomas Barfield, “Problems of Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004): 263–69; and Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics) (forthcoming, 2010).

¹³ It is important to note that the terms “Taliban” and “Talib” are not used here as a blanket term for anyone opposed to the Afghan government but rather as a term meaning religious students educated in *madaris* (Islamic schools, plural of *madrasah*).

¹⁴ *Ulema* is a collective term for doctors of Islamic sciences and graduates of Islamic studies or private studies with an *alim* (one who possesses the quality of *lim* or knowledge of Islamic law, theology, and traditions). A *shura* is a council or consultative body.

Christianity is not a monolithic entity in the United States or Europe. Afghan Islam encompasses a wide range of opinions—including reformists, foreign-educated progressives, ascetics, radicals, Salafists, Deobandis, Talibs, and conservative judicial scholars, among others. All of these can be pro-government or anti-government (and sometimes both), West-loving or West-hating; there is no uniformity of opinion. Moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that all southern political, economic, and social behavior is driven merely by religious dynamics. A variety of intervening variables such as the urban-rural divide, geography, culture, and *quams*¹⁵ and affinity groups are also important influences that must be recognized.¹⁶ These intervening variables of influence will be the next topic of assessment and discussion.

Rural Population Distribution

The most important and relevant division within southern Afghan society, the divide between urban and rural populations, is often glossed over by Western analysts. Cleavages between the urban and rural populations of Loy (Greater) Kandahar¹⁷ have long been a driving force of southern politics, social interactions, and conflicts as well as aspects of Islamic practice.

Population statistics dating back to 2004 (the best and most recent data available) demonstrate that only 12% of southern Afghans belong to urban communities in Loy Kandahar; rural society makes up 88% of the population (see **Figure 1**). When you look outside Kandahar Province, the figures become even starker with only 5%, 2%, and 4% for the residents of Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul provinces respectively living in urban environments. The south is primarily a rural environment and this fact is important when we consider the role religious figures play in southern Afghanistan. There is no question that urban and rural Afghanistan have distinct cultures.¹⁸ These cultures in turn play a significant role in determining how a particular person or group of people will behave and respond to certain types of authority figures—be they religious or political, or conservative, moderate, or radical.

Attempts to modernize the south (and the never-ending conflict between the traditional and the modern) are central concerns of the area's ideological battleground. Attempts to institute modern political or social agendas have not necessarily been met with enthusiasm in Loy Kandahar. Consider, for example, how the south responded to the recent “democratic” elections held in Afghanistan. While the vast majority of Afghan provinces had registered voter turnout rates for the 2005 provincial elections of 60%–70%, the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul had rates of 25.3%, 36.8%, 23.4%, and 20% respectively.¹⁹ Interviews conducted this past summer among village elders and leaders in Kandahari districts suggest that there was little interest in the 2009 presidential election or local provincial and district elections in the south.²⁰ In fact, it was further posited during these interviews that the Taliban were not overly interested in attempting to disrupt these elections because of the apparent apathy of the Kandaharis toward

¹⁵ *Quams* refers to a communal group whose sociological basis may vary; it may be a clan—in tribal zones—a village, an ethnic group, an extended family, or a professional group.

¹⁶ Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 242.

¹⁷ Loy Kandahar refers to the geographical area encompassing Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul provinces.

¹⁸ Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 10–29.

¹⁹ Sean M. Maloney, “A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 205.

²⁰ Personal interviews of district and village elders, Kandahar City, May–June 2009.