

**ARIAN SHARIFI**

Email: arian.sharifi@gmail.com

Islamist Groups in Afghanistan and the Strategic Choice of Violence

Summary

- Islamist groups behave much like all other social movement organizations when making strategic choices to contest the power of the state. The decision to use violence is most often the result of rational cost-benefit calculations rather than ideological fanaticism.
- A group chooses violence as a strategy only when it is motivated and capable of doing so. Motivations and capabilities are in turn determined by three factors: relative access to political power; the nature of government repression; and its access to war-making resources.
- In Afghanistan, the circumstances suggest a two-pronged reconciliation strategy: to simultaneously reduce safe havens and other support from outside Afghanistan and to increase opportunities for groups sympathetic to the Taliban to hold positions of political power.

“The decision to use violence is most often the result of rational cost-benefit calculations rather than ideological fanaticism.”

Introduction

A fundamental issue in the study of Islamism as a political movement is the question of why some groups engage in violence and others use nonviolence. What causes established nonviolent groups to turn into violent organizations, and what leads organized violent groups to shun violence, even temporarily, and work within established political systems?

Islamist groups fall into three categories: purists, politics, and jihadis.¹ Purists are apolitical, focused on preaching social norms in line with their version of Islam. They not only shun violence but also refrain from political acts. The transnational Tablighi Jama'at is one such group.² Politics engage in political action but refrain from violence. Jihadis use violence as their main mode of contention; al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Taliban, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Boko Haram are examples.

Many Islamist groups have shifted between violence and nonviolence. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its many splinter groups worldwide have done so several times.³

Social movement theory argues that an Islamist group's choice of a method of contention is a function of its motivation and capabilities. These in turn are determined by the convergence of three independent variables: the group's relative access to political power, the nature of government repression of the group, and its level of access to war-making resources. A combination of these variables puts a group in one of four situations: motivated but incapable of fighting, unmotivated and incapable of fighting, unmotivated but capable of fighting, and motivated and capable of fighting.

An Islamist group will likely engage in antistate violence only in the fourth scenario; the other three are most likely to lead to nonviolent contention. In this regard, Islamist groups are rational actors, making strategic choices based on cost-benefit calculations, not ideology-driven, fanatic, or irrational actors (which the Islamic exceptionalism argument maintains).

Since the late 1960s, at least seventeen Islamist groups have operated in Afghanistan. The variation in their repertoires of contention along the violent-nonviolent spectrum is substantial. This brief looks at the Muslim Youth Organization (MYO) in the 1960s and 1970s, the various Afghan mujahideen groups of the 1980s, and the Taliban after the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan.

Nonviolence and the Monarchy (1963–1973)

The first sparks of political Islam in Afghanistan came in the late 1950s with the return of the first wave of Egyptian-educated Afghans. Intellectuals such as Ghulam Mohammad Niazi, Burhanuddeen Rabbani, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, and others were the forerunners of the first Islamist movement in Afghanistan.⁴ They organized into a loosely knit group—by no means an organized political party—and chose Ghulam Mohammad Niazi as its leader.⁵ Its main objective was to promote political Islam as a competing force against two emerging ideological trends: liberal-democratic reforms being slowly introduced by the state, and socialist ideals promoted by some Afghans, including Noor Mohammad Taraki, Babrak Karmal, and Mir Akbar Khyber, as well as a small cadre of Soviet-educated army officers.

They chose an entirely nonviolent approach, recruiting members in schools and universities, participating in ideological debates against liberals and socialists in public, and distributing translated texts of some of the leading Islamist ideologues.⁶ Even if Islamists at this time did not have much direct influence over public policy, doors were beginning to open as the Afghan monarchy introduced new reform measures.⁷ The group had neither the motivation nor the capabilities to embark on a violent campaign against the state.

Violence and Daoud's Presidency (1973–1978)

In response to mass public dissatisfaction and growing political polarization in the late 1960s, Islamists began organizing themselves in a much more structured way. In 1969, they established the MYO, which quickly attracted followers across Kabul University, including a younger generation of recruits, among whom were Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Abdul Rahim Niazi, Habib Rahman Wahdatyar, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Mohammad Omar, Ghulam Rabbani Ateesh, Saifuddeen Nasratyar, Noorullah Emad, and Ahmad Shah Masood.⁸

The 1973 coup d'état by former prime minister Mohammad Daoud Khan, however, effectively turned Afghanistan into a single-party state. Islamists came under particular repression and were systematically stripped of any influence in the government. Eventually, orders were given to arrest all prominent MYO figures, forcing them to flee to Pakistan.⁹

The MYO cadres' migration to Pakistan in 1974 put them in direct touch with Pakistani Islamists and the Pakistani government.¹⁰ This network not only further firmed up their resolve to organize behind an antistate strategy, but also provided the means to organize into an effective antigovernment force. According to some accounts, Pakistan trained approximately five thousand Afghan militants between 1973 and 1977 and deployed them to Afghanistan to destabilize the country.¹¹ In one incident, the MYO directly challenged the Daoud regime with a coup in several northern provinces. The effort failed miserably. In response, the government launched a systematic campaign of arrests, nearly decimating the MYO.

The MYO was motivated to antistate violence by having too little access to political power and being subject to targeted state repression (both a prolonged campaign and a swift, harsh operation to cripple the group). It found itself capable of engaging in violence after gaining access to “war-making resources”—funds, weapons, training, sanctuaries, and so on—via Pakistan.

Violence and the PDPA (1978–1992)

After the People’s Democratic Party in Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in the 1978 Saur Revolution, Islamist and other political parties were once again expelled from the political scene. In many parts of the country, feudal landlords joined forces with religious and tribal leaders, most of whom had been stripped of power in their communities under the new reform agenda, and actively encouraged rebellion against the government. Islamists were at the forefront of antigovernment agitation, framing the conflict as a struggle between Islam and disbelief.¹²

The initial antistate uprisings were a natural outflow of being denied—as Islamists—any part in the government, stripped of any social influence, and relentlessly repressed by government security forces through arrests, assassinations, and executions. Motivation to violence was high. Uprisings, however, were effectively crushed in a rapid, harsh government campaign. Even before the Soviet intervention, then, Afghan state repression was approaching the necessary threshold needed to fully suppress Islamists and take them out of any government contest.

The Soviet Army’s march into Afghanistan in the 1980s ultimately boosted the Islamists’ capabilities by making available the war-making resources the Islamists needed to revamp their violent campaign. The invasion also prompted several million Afghans to migrate to Pakistan and Iran, settling in large refugee camps, which became a fertile source of recruitment. Later, tens of thousands of foreign fighters joined the Afghan mujahideen in their struggle. The Soviet invasion also drew world attention to Afghanistan, leading to a generous flow of weapons and funds into Pakistan to aid the mujahideen against the Soviets. The Islamists had a unique opportunity to revive, realign, and resume their violent campaign at an unprecedented level. Gaining the upper hand in the mid-1990s, they held power in Afghanistan until 2001.

The Current State and Taliban Violence

Within a few years of its defeat in 2001 by the U.S.-backed coalition, however, the Taliban managed to regroup, rearm, secure sanctuaries, and make a dramatic comeback. By late 2005, it was both motivated and capable of acting against the government. It commenced an increasingly bloody campaign of terrorism and insurgency that continues to wreak havoc and devastate the country.

More than eighty former and current Taliban fighters were interviewed for this brief. Almost all told stories that suggest exclusion from political influence and government repression were the main motivation for fighting in this new phase of insurgency. In 2001, the Americans installed a government composed of Western-educated technocrats and commanders from northern Afghanistan who had fought the Taliban for the previous seven years. No offer was made to the Taliban to join the new government. The new Afghan state’s strict exclusionary stance and harsh repression campaign against the Taliban, backed by the international military coalition, motivated the group’s leadership to embark on a violent campaign against the new government and its American supporters.

Although many factors, including the drug industry, organized crime, donations from the Persian Gulf region, and others contribute to the fighting capabilities of the Taliban, their single most important enabler is Pakistan. This country continues its clandestine support of the Taliban and associated Afghan militant groups such as the Haqqani network and the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin by providing

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Based primarily on in-depth interviews and primary source documents and funded by the United States Institute of Peace, this Peace Brief explains how Islamist groups make strategic choices about the use of violence to contest government authority. Arian Sharifi is a PhD candidate at Tufts University and director of Strategic Threat Assessment at Afghanistan's Office of the National Security Council.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

www.usip.org

eISBN: 978-1-60127-632-2

USIP provides the analysis, training, and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability, and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding.

For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725.

them with sanctuaries as well as financial, logistical, medical, and intelligence support.¹³ Many Afghans perceive in this strategy an attempt to keep Afghanistan weak and fragmented and to prevent it from having an independent foreign policy that might contradict Pakistan's interests after American forces eventually leave the country.

Conclusion

The current Afghan political environment has brought its government to a junction. On the one hand, the government must preserve the democratic progress accomplished at such cost over the last fifteen years. On the other, it must find a way to end the relentless violence through a peace deal with the insurgents, which most certainly requires accommodating some nondemocratic demands.

Striking that balance, however, is tricky, as proven by the numerous failed peace overtures.

The Afghan government and its international partners should therefore strategically focus their efforts on two fronts. First, they need to weaken the Taliban's resolve on the military front by not only engaging them on the battlefield, but also restricting their access to war-making resources. Second, they need to find creative ways to accommodate some of the Taliban's demands and to include the Taliban at an appropriate level of the political structure. Although easier said than done, this path is the only way out of the current quagmire toward a potentially stable future.

Notes

1. For a full explanation of this typology, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207–39.
2. Khalid Hassan, "Tableeghi Jamaat: All That You Know and Don't," *Daily Times*, August 13, 2006, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006\08\13\story_13-8-2006_pg3_4.
3. For a Large-N cross national statistical analysis of militant groups shifting between violence and nonviolence, see Benjamin Acosta, "From Bombs to Ballots: When Militant Organizations Transition to Political Parties," *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (2014): 666–83, doi:10.1017/S0022381614000188.
4. For background, see Sina Research Group, [Afghanistan in the Last Three Decades] (Tehran: Qum Publication Center, 2002), 180.
5. *Ibid.*, 188.
6. *Ibid.*, 190–91.
7. Peter R. Blood, "The King Reigns: The Last Decade of the Monarchy, 1963–73," in *Afghanistan: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2001).
8. Sina Research, Afghanistan, 81, 188–89.
9. *Ibid.*, 195–200, 199.
10. *Ibid.*, 205.
11. Paul S. Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 113.
12. Muftī, Muhammad Rafī, Usmānī, Jihad in Afghanistan Against Communism (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat, 2003), 13.
13. Seth G. Jones, "Pakistan's Dangerous Game," *Survival* 49, no. 1 (2007): 17–19; Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship Between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents," Crisis States work-papers series no. 2, no. 18 (London: London School of Economics, June 2010).