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Looking beyond stereotypes:
A critical reflection of popular narratives about the Taliban

I. Introduction

One of the most discussed topics after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in mid-August 2021 was whether and to what extent the Taliban have changed from when they first ruled between 1996 and 2001. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan symbolised mainly repressive rule and barbaric measures. Most infamously, the Taliban cut off hands as a criminal punishment for thieves, the regime sanctioned the stoning to death of women in public and banned women and girls from education and independent public appearance. Further measures included the prohibition of music, the Ministry of Vice and Virtue's harsh implementation of dress codes and wearing of long beards, the strict observation of prayer rules upon threat of punishment by beating, and forced mosque attendance.

From the late 1990s until today, Western policymakers, military outfits, the media and the public have conceived of and portrayed the Taliban as a group with evil intentions. They ascribed to the Taliban movement terrorist motives, shared agendas with Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, the expansion of the drug economy and the purposeful disregard of universal human rights, especially regarding the rights of women and minorities. This demonisation of the Taliban legitimised the United States' refusal to include the Taliban in the 2001 Bonn Conference and discouragement of the Afghan government from entering into reconciliation talks with the Taliban from the early years of the government of Hamid Karzai onwards. Only when the Western military powers could no longer deny the realisation that they were unable to resolve the Afghan conflict by military means did the US-administration of Donald Trump start direct bilateral talks with representatives of the Taliban movement in Doha in 2018, excluding the Afghan government.

Ever since 2001 and even beforehand, the Taliban have been highly consistent in their key demands. They rejected foreign troops on Afghan soil, all outside interference in internal affairs by neighbouring states and, in general, the imposition of ideas and external determination of the Afghan government and society. Before and after 2001 – up to the present day – the Taliban have stressed that their ambition to rule is confined to the territorial borders of Afghanistan in line with a nationalist Afghan identity.[1] They have vied for international recognition of their aim to establish an Islamic social order and an Islamic form of government according to their ideological principles then and now in accordance with the principle of respect for mutual recognition of sovereignty within the international system.

In this article, I do not aim to whitewash the Taliban movement in any way, nor to judge the trajectories that the international military and civilian intervention and Afghan governments have pursued since 2001. However, from the perspective of a long-time academic observer of developments in Afghanistan, especially from within the country, I have noticed the reiteration and unchecked permanent repetition of essentialist features ascribed to "the Taliban". I argue that this narrow perception of the Taliban movement

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[1] Cf. Mullah Omar's letter to President Clinton in September 1999 announcing that the Taliban's political ambition is confined within state territory, representing no threat to the US and the international political system, in: Murshed, *Afghanistan*, 2006, 31. See also: Ruttig, *How tribal are the Taleban?*, 2010.

has prevented and is still hindering effective policy-making towards Afghanistan. In the following, I will disentangle nine popular narratives – myths – about the Taliban that relate to the origins of the movement, its conduct and ideology as well as its situatedness in the global Islamist landscape. My aim is to nuance the mainstream picture of the Taliban; the acknowledgement of their agenda, agency and legitimacy seem to be a good starting point for Western policymakers, the media and the public to talk to and engage with the Taliban along the principles of agonistic[2] international relations.

II. Origin and membership of the Taliban[3]

In this first section, I will look into the origin of and membership in the Taliban movement in order to deconstruct three popular narratives: first, that the Taliban are a product of Pakistani refugee camps; second, that the Pakistani intelligence agency InterServices Intelligence (ISI) is responsible for the creation of "the Taliban," and third, that the Taliban are an exclusively ethnic Pashtun movement. Depending on the level of analytical scrutiny and meticulousness, one might find shreds of evidence in all three mainstream perceptions, although at an intolerably generalised level if at all. I argue that due diligence and accuracy in researching, analysing and reflecting on resources that have become available about the Taliban movement over the last twenty years should have at least identified the Taliban's agency and legitimacy. With agency, I mean their capacity to act independently based on their own agenda and evidence of – albeit maybe naïve – earnestness about the motives of the

founding generation of Taliban members. The idea of foreign involvement in the creation of the Taliban has prevented the Western perception from accepting that "the Taliban" have genuine objectives and legitimacy, denying them recognition as a legitimate movement even though they always enjoyed certain levels of legitimacy among Afghans of all ethnic and tribal backgrounds across the country.

Contrary to the popular claim suggesting that the Taliban appeared out of Pakistani refugee camps in 1994, according to which the Pakistani intelligence and security apparatus played a role in indoctrinating and radicalising young refugee boys in fundamentalist Islamic schools (*madrassas*), research shows that a "Taliban" network already existed before that time and had constituted itself inside Afghanistan in the area around Kandahar.[4] Its key members had fought against the Soviet occupation and the Marxist Kabul government in the 1980s.[5] Even back then, as fighters in one of the so-called *mujahedin* factions, some shared a common identity as students (literally: *taliban*) of Islamic religion. After an initial group from this Taliban network of mainly mullahs and religious scholars around Kandahar had decided to arm itself and fight not only to end the terror that local warlords were inflicting on civilians but also the criminal activities of commanders in the districts west of Kandahar, other groups formed and followed suit. Among their members were people of different backgrounds who felt that the civil war, which had unfolded after the communist government was toppled in 1992, betrayed everything they had fought for during the jihad – the armed resistance against communism and Soviet occupation from 1979

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[2] The idea of "agonism" in international relations entails that dissent, critique and contestation are constitutive of politics and that mutual acceptance of adversaries as representatives of legitimate interests nullify traditional realist friend-enemy distinctions. Cf., Mouffe, *The return of the political*, 1993.

[3] In this article, I use "Taliban" and "Taliban movement" simultaneously, the former as shorthand for the latter. The designation of "the Taliban" as a movement instead of organisation stems from the largely uninstitutionalised and dynamic character of their setup over time, in which mission always shaped organisational structures.

[4] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *Taliban Reader*, 2018, Part 1.

[5] Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban*, 2010.

to 1989. In their view, the mutual killing among the formerly unified mujahedin factions was untenable, as was the corruption and greed among the factions' leaders. Legitimised by their initial success of putting an end to the perceived anarchy, and based upon the ordinary population's support and show of enthusiasm, the Taliban-led groups advanced to other provinces. After capturing Kabul in the autumn of 1996, they proclaimed their government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The role of the Pakistani intelligence and security authorities in this military advance and its continuation – the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif was only conquered in 1998; other parts in the northeast had never come under Taliban rule before 2001 – remains opaque. It is likely that Pakistan delivered money and weapons to the Taliban. This, however, does not mean that their origin and financing was necessarily all Pakistan-based, but possibly from other supporters.[6] Pakistan's often cited interest in supporting the Taliban revolves around the idea of strategic depth in the Pakistani political establishment's obsession with the threat of another war with India. Accordingly, Pakistan is eager to have a friendly regime along its western border to prevent India from opening a double-front war against Pakistan. However, this is different to the popular claim that the ISI created the Taliban by setting up roving bands of indoctrinated *madrassa* students who – as mere Pakistani foot soldiers – were nothing but puppets and disposable any time.

It is worth mentioning that many Western powers, including the US and Germany, supported the Taliban in the intial years. International companies like Union Oil Company of California (Unocal) Corporation

put great hope in the Taliban's ability to pacify the country and be the catalyst of their oil and gas pipeline dreams.[7] A Taliban delegation visited Germany in 1995 to hold talks with representatives of potential investment companies.[8] If we look at support patterns of actors in the Afghan conflict from the late 1970s more generally, the path dependencies of international support for Afghan non-state armed factions in the Cold War proxy fight against the Soviet-backed Kabul regime exist to this day. They are tangible in the channels financing military and religious projects in Afghanistan through non-state actors, for example, such as Islamic charities in different Gulf countries. These countries also played a central role in creating jihadi-Salafism in Afghanistan in the 1980s[9] following their missionary ideologist radicalisation of Islam in the Wahhabi and Salafi tradition and their facilitation of the arrival of Islamist fighters from all over the world.

The third perception related to the origin of the Taliban movement, i.e. the portrayal of all Taliban as Pashtuns, has to be rejected. It is indeed the case that the great majority of the movement's members and followers were and are Pashtuns because the districts around Kandahar, from where the movement originated, represents a main settlement area of ethnic Pashtuns in Afghanistan. However, as Pashtuns constitute the majority of the Afghan population and the Taliban themselves have neither rhetorically nor practically excluded non-Pashtuns on purpose from their leadership or regular membership, the portrayal deserves correction. Prominent Tajik religious scholars were part of the first Taliban government. The advance of Taliban forces to the north in the late 1990s saw many ordinary village elders of different ethnic backgrounds, e.g. Tajiks, Uzbeks or Turkmen, pledge allegiance and support to the Taliban

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[6] Giustozzi, *Taliban at War*, 2019, 6-7.
[7] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 2004, 301-307; Rashid, *Taliban*, 2001.
[8] Ruttig, *Taleban-Delegation*, 1995.
[9] Kepel, *Jihad*, 2006, 219-220.

– and thus "become" Taliban[10] – to save their constituencies from violence and pillage. As part of the increasing "Talibanisation" during the insurgency after 2001, even Afghans from the Shiite Hazara group became military commanders of the Taliban.[11] In their self-representation, the Taliban have not been exclusive at all but stated that they would welcome every Afghan, no matter his ethnic or sectarian background.[12]

III. Conduct and ideology of the Taliban

The last point is closely connected with two of the following three popular narratives related to the Taliban movement's conduct and ideological interpretation of religion. These are, first, the claim that the Taliban strongly oppose and persecute other Islamic currents than their own, e.g. Shiism and Sufism, and, second, that the Taliban are a homogenous group of ultra-radical Islamists. The third narrative discussed in this section refers to the myth that the Taliban aim to establish a Stone Age-type of Islam heavily influenced by Wahhabism that follows a rigid essentialist interpretation of Islam in all spheres of life, including the justice system.

To start with the Taliban's ideological orientation, it is noteworthy that the Taliban, just as the Afghan Sunni population, follow the Hanafi school of Islam, one of the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence. In its approach, Hanafism does not solely rely on the Quran and Sunnah (*hadiths*, i.e. sayings and experiences ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad) as sources for jurisdiction but also allows for independent reason and argumentation (*ijtihad*). This means that any interpretation of Quranic texts and Sunnah can be adapted to the present context and living circumstances – and speaks against the idea of a rigid image of lived Islamic social order, at least in theory. Due to the expanding influence of Deobandi Islam during the 1980s,[13] with its Wahhabi and Salafi elements, Afghan refugees and fighters exposed to Islamic education in Pakistan's *madrassas* have internalised certain jihadist interpretations, for example the claim that offensive jihad (armed fighting) against non-believers is every Muslim's obligation. However, while it has been observed that Wahhabi ideas have gained more ground in Afghanistan since the 1980s, the Taliban have remained sensitised to the threat of Wahhabi thought transforming their Afghan version of value-conservative Islam.[14] Moreover, the Taliban made every effort to distance themselves from the so-called Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), a group of radical Salafists that pledged their oath to the leader of ISIS in the Middle East, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, from 2015 onwards. Sympathisers of IS-K among the Taliban were subjected to purges and the Taliban emphasised their difference, e.g. by condemning the cruel acts of violence that IS-K exhibited against the population and clarifying that they consider Afghan Hazara as Muslim brothers, whereas IS-K declared Shiites as non-Muslims, thereby legitimating their persecution.[15]

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[10] Then and now, there is a difference between Afghans in the conquered territories who actively embrace Taliban rule versus those who do not oppose it actively in order to endure and survive, fearing oppression or due to their mere disregard of and possibly seclusion from politics.

[11] Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, 2007, 119.

[12] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *Taliban Reader*, 2018, 11, 64, 290.

[13] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn urge scholars and the interested public to understand Deobandism from the Taliban's own perspective and socialisation, cf. Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *Taliban Reader*, 2018, 6.

[14] Gopal and Strick van Linschoten, *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban*, 2017, 24.

[15] Salafists adhere to the principle of excommunication (*takfir*) based on their reference to Sunnah and the Quran as sole basis of jurisprudence and formation of their worldview. According to Rashid, Taliban Deobandism similarly alienated the Hazara population in the 1990s, thus pointing towards a pro-Shiite shift in Taliban ideology after 2001. Cf. Rashid, *Tribe and State*, 2002, 177.

This said, we have strong evidence that the jihadi and religious landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has transformed considerably in the last decades and remains dynamic. Sufism reportedly inspired the initial Taliban and their leader Mullah Omar, who is said to have visited Sufi shrines around Kandahar until at least 2001 on a regular basis.[16] The senior leadership of the Taliban which formed the government between 1996 and 2001 received their education inside Afghanistan before 1979. The worldview and lifestyle prevalent among Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan before the outbreak of large-scale war in 1979/80 strongly influenced the ideology of the first-generation Taliban. It contained elements of folk Islam and the Pashtun tribal code of conduct (*pashtunwali*). Disentangled from the Islamist currents and related intellectual discussions among Muslim scholars, the initial Taliban followed their own value-conservative, rural worldview. However, despite its underlying anti-modern morality that banned women in urban public spaces, music, kite-flying, etc., it was rooted more in rural norms than Wahhabi Islamist thought. The latter has only come to play a greater role and link to putatively pure Islamic principles with the generation of Taliban who received their education at the Deobandist Darul Uloom Haqqania, a higher religious school with a strong bias towards Wahhabi thought.

The evidence of different "generations" of Taliban is a first indicator of potential conflict among them. It allows for scrutiny of the myth that the Taliban movement constitutes a homogeneous group of radical Islamists. Given the insurgent trajectory of the Taliban's expansion of influence and control across the Afghan countryside from 2003 onwards, the movement has shown signs of fragmentation and disintegration, e.g. when local commanders joined and left the Taliban in an almost opportunistic fashion in the context of reconciliation programmes launched by the High Peace Council between 2010 and 2016.[17] More significantly, several splits and changes of allegiance have occurred within the Taliban movement itself, specifically after the revelation in 2015 that Mullah Omar had died two years previously.[18] These internal splits were able to be ensnarled to some extent because they fit in with the movement's polycentric pattern of organisation, which relied on diverse power centres, such as the Quetta, Peshawar, Miram Shah and Mashhad Shuras.[19] In addition, several other – more radical – Islamist groups on Afghan territory have challenged Taliban domination and sometimes caused temporary, sometimes permanent splits, for example the changing allegiances of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or the establishment of IS-K.

IV. Localisation and transnational links of the Taliban in the global Islamist landscape

This section scrutinises three commonly held perceptions about the Taliban related to their transnational links with other Islamist networks. These refer, first, to the narrative that the Taliban have close ties to Al Qaeda, even dominating the Taliban at times. A second popular narrative holds that the Afghan Taliban share an ideological and political agenda with the Pakistani Taliban movement (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, TTP). Each of these popular claims suggests that the Taliban share a global terrorist agenda. This, however, is incorrect. Conversely, the third narrative refers to the Taliban's complete independent existence from IS-K, asserting that IS-K is a purposefully founded branch of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland by the direct intervention of IS from Raqqa.

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[16] Gopal and Strick van Linschoten, *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban*, 2017, 16.
[17] The UNDP-financed Afghanistan Peace and Reconstruction Programme (APRP) ran from 2010-16 but was unable to convince Taliban forces to defect.
[18] Dam, *Looking for the enemy*, 2021.
[19] Giustozzi, *Taliban at War*, 2019.

IS-K formed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland as a reaction to the expansion and seeming success of IS. The constituting members of IS-K were mainly Pakistani Taliban and former Afghan Taliban who had strayed from the Taliban due to the ambition of IS to establish a global caliphate. Even though the rhetorical endorsement by IS from Raqqa for the foundation of IS-K was meant to create the impression that direct links existed between IS in Syria and Iraq and Khorasan, research conducted in 2016 on the evolution, organisation, representation and statehood ambitions of IS-K produced little evidence of direct linkages beyond symbolism.[20] Rather, IS-K came into existence as a splinter of the Taliban with a very limited territorial outreach. Outside of IS-K's main territorial base, i.e. few districts in Nangarhar province at that time, IS-K followership was a localised phenomenon, context-specific and dependent in its manifestation on local political dynamics and historical path dependencies. In the years since 2015-16, the Taliban have oppressed IS-K wherever possible, sometimes even in conjunction with the US and Afghan military. The relationship between IS-K and the Taliban can best be described as simultaneous appeal and rivalry. To prove its more "human face" and care for fellow Afghans, the Taliban allowed, for example, opium poppy cultivation in the eastern districts contested between them and IS-K to give farmers, sharecroppers and day labourers economic perspectives as IS-K had reportedly cracked down on any form of poppy cultivation in the districts controlled by them.

As for Afghan Taliban and TTP relations, the claim of shared objectives is wrong, even though both groups supported each other logistically with refuge on each other's territory. The TTP established itself as an umbrella organisation of several jihadist groups in the Pakistani tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan in 2007. It encompassed Islamist groups with different jihadist objectives, the common denominator being their rejection of the Pakistani state and security establishment, while some also aspired to a global Islamic state. Military operations of the Pakistani army against TTP caused many groups to recede and seek refuge on Afghan territory. Likewise, when the Afghan Taliban were under great pressure from Afghan and international forces, they went across the border into Pakistan.[21] In contrast to the TTP, the Afghan Taliban, who operated their headquarters in Quetta in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, have never taken a stance against Pakistani authorities. Their military focus was solely directed at US, NATO and Afghan forces inside Afghanistan, a fact that likely lent them clandestine support from official and societal actors in Pakistan. Up to the present day, the Taliban have been consistent in their stance on limiting their power to the national territory of Afghanistan and entertaining normal political relations with the outside world. For example, in 2007, some time after Taliban commander Mansour Dadullah had publicly announced that he would send suicide attackers to Western countries, the Taliban excluded him from their ranks.[22]

This nationalist outlook of the Taliban is also one of the main criteria that distinguishes them from Al Qaeda. The Afghan Taliban have always categorically rejected any organisational and ideological ties with and rumours of domination by Al Qaeda. These surfaced when the first Taliban government refused to hand over Bin Laden to the US after the 1998 attacks on US targets in Kenya and Tanzania. After the US did not accept the Taliban's suggestion to hand him over to a court in another Muslim country, the continued hosting of Bin Laden turned into a heavy liability for the Taliban given the US and UN sanctions that followed. After the 9/11

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[20] Cf. Mielke, *Making sense of Daesh*, 2017.
[21] Cf. Fishman, *The Taliban in Pakistan*, 2013, 351-52, on the misleading distinction between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban that gave the Pakistani government and security establishment a reason to support the "good" Afghan and fight the "bad" Pakistani Taliban.
[22] Stenersen, *Are the Afghan Taliban*, 2009, 2.

attacks in New York and Washington, the Taliban were bombed from power by the US because they had hosted Bin Laden. It is still contested whether the Taliban leadership knew of Bin Laden's plans and activities.[23]

The Taliban have always emphasised their independence from outsiders and other Islamist groups, their ideologies and practices. Along this line, Taliban commanders have reportedly asked Arab fighters in Paktia and Nangarhar province to leave their areas.[24] However, the leader of Al Qaeda on the Indian subcontinent was reportedly killed in Taliban-controlled Helmand province in September 2019.[25] Moreover, organisational overlaps with Al Qaeda can be detected in several of the Taliban's temporary subgroups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan until 2015-16, or the Haqqani network.[26] Sirajuddin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani network and interim Minister of the Interior, has become the most criticised constituent of the Taliban government as he is sought worldwide for a bounty of USD 10m on international terrorism charges by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation. Given this personnel overlap between Al Qaeda and Taliban, the link cannot be denied. However, the relationship is at best ambivalent[27] and it is uncertain to what extent the Taliban are ideologically approaching Al Qaeda's jihadist worldview.

V. Outlook

This article deconstructed nine popular mainstream narratives that have considerably contributed to the uneasy relation of Western policymakers, media and public with the Taliban movement and a broad mis-

characterisation of their cause and ambitions from the 1990s onwards. The evidence about consistencies but also ongoing transformations within the Taliban and their ideological outlook demands a more informed reflection on the possibilities to find a working relationship with the Taliban interim government for the sake of preventing a humanitarian catastrophe and an economic collapse in the country. At the time of writing, too many factors are uncertain. Besides managing the economic and humanitarian challenges, there are also concerns about how the Taliban leadership will handle internal conflicts, which significance they will attribute to certain ideological principles in their political conduct, and the duration of the interim government. As intervention options for outside actors are limited, they must instead exercise patience and accustom themselves to the idea of according the Taliban basic legitimacy as argued above. This would involve speaking to each other and leaving the friend-enemy distinction behind as a basis for acceptance. Given that Western countries are not ready to recognise the Taliban government diplomatically, a practical alternative would be to try to open up channels of communication and exchange platforms with Taliban representatives (and others with non-Taliban representatives, plus mixed forums) via non-state actors, such as the German political foundations. They could offer to moderate exchanges that identify common values, e.g. interfaith norms like peace, human rights, human development and justice. Leaving antagonistic policy-making behind would be a crucial step forward to avoid renewed self-isolation and the risk of repression against the population that we witnessed before 2001.

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[23] Taliban sources categorically reject this, cf. Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *Taliban Reader*, 2018, 235. For a detailed discussion on why the putative connection between Al Qaeda and the Taliban should not be linked to the 9/11 attacks and how the Taliban leadership differed in its approach to Bin Laden, see Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy we Created*, 2012, 191ff.

[24] In 2020, several reports emerged suggesting that the links between the Taliban and Al Qaeda had never been cut. Cf. UNSC, *Eleventh report*, 2019.

[25] Cf. Roggio, *Afghan Intelligence*, 2019.

[26] Fishman, *The Taliban in Pakistan*, 2013, 360.

[27] This ambivalence is also reflected in Al Qaeda's reaction to the Taliban's renewed takeover of power in Kabul in 2021; while Al Qaeda congratulated the Taliban on the military victory, it also condemned the Taliban's talks with Western governments.

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