



By Fateh Sami, Independent Researcher and Academic

23 November 2025

Talibanism: Origins, Evolution, and Contemporary Characteristics

Abstract

This article examines the historical origins, ideological evolution, and contemporary manifestations of Talibanism in Afghanistan. Drawing upon historical, social, and political analyses, it explores the role of Deobandi madrasas, Pakistan's involvement, and the influence of Pashtunwali in shaping Taliban ideology. The study also investigates Taliban governance, internal divisions, and the socio-political consequences of their policies, particularly regarding women, ethnic minorities, and economic management. Finally, it assesses the future of Talibanism in the context of domestic challenges and global pressures, highlighting the likelihood of either adaptation or gradual decline. This research underscores the complex interplay between ideology, culture, and geopolitics in the persistence and transformation of Talibanism.

Introduction

Talibanism has emerged as a defining political and ideological force in Afghanistan over the past three decades. Understanding its development requires examining the country's turbulent history, including the fall of monarchy, communist rule, Soviet intervention, civil wars, and mass migration. These events created the socio-political conditions in which Talibanism could take root, particularly among Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Talibanism, tracing its historical roots, ideological formation, and political behaviour, while also assessing its societal and economic

consequences. By situating Talibanism within its cultural, tribal, and religious contexts, this study seeks to elucidate why the movement has persisted despite international opposition and internal challenges.

1. Historical and Social Background

Talibanism cannot be understood apart from Afghanistan's socio-political developments in the latter half of the twentieth century. The overthrow of King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1973), the communist coup (1978), the Soviet intervention (1979–1989), and the subsequent civil war profoundly transformed the country's social and political structures. Millions of Afghans, particularly from the southern and eastern regions, migrated to Pakistan and received education in religious schools influenced by the Deobandi tradition.

Despite the large-scale migration of Afghans to Iran, Talibanism did not emerge there. Differences in educational, religious, and political structures, along with stricter governmental oversight of religious schools in Iran, were key factors.

The generation that later came to be known as the “Talibs” grew up amid statelessness, lawlessness, and an identity crisis. Faced with public fatigue from the mujahideen civil wars, this generation formed the basis for the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s (Hassani, 2017).

2. The Role of Deobandi Religious Schools and Ideological Formation

Talibanism emerged from thousands of Deobandi schools in Pakistan. While these schools were based on Hanafi jurisprudence, they deviated significantly from its moderate principles, particularly concerning women's rights. The Taliban, however, implemented strict policies contrary to these teachings.

Within these schools, the world was dichotomized into “right” and “wrong.” Engagement with Western governments, art, music, girls' education, or social change was perceived as a threat to religion. Over time, students developed a shared ideological identity grounded in unquestioning obedience, loyalty to the leader, continuous jihad, and hostility toward modernity (Samadi, 2018).

3. Pakistan's Role and Nasrullah Babar

Pakistan played a pivotal role in shaping Talibanism:

1. Educational: Deobandi schools operated under religious parties with state support.

2. Political-Security: The Taliban served as instruments for Pakistan's strategic influence in Afghanistan.

3. Military-Logistical: Many Taliban commanders received training supported by Pakistani security agencies.

Nasrullah Babar, Interior Minister under Benazir Bhutto, helped establish the early Taliban structure and is often referred to as the "Father of the Taliban." Pakistani backing enabled the Taliban to emerge as a cohesive and organized force (AISS, 2022).

4. The Influence of Pashtunwali and Tribal Culture

The Taliban interpret Sharia through the lens of *Pashtunwali*. Consequently, many of their rulings are justified by tribal customs rather than religious law alone. Tribal values such as honour, revenge, obedience to elders, and restrictive views of women are deeply embedded in Taliban ideology. This fusion of tribalism and religiosity has produced a movement shaped by "tribalized Islam" (Independent Persian, 2021).

Ideological Evolution and Political Behaviour of the Taliban

5. Early Period of Rule (1996–2001)

Emerging amid post-mujahideen chaos, the Taliban established a regime characterized by strict enforcement, public punishments, prohibition of girls' education, destruction of cultural artifacts, and media censorship. The presence of Al-Qaeda and Mullah Omar's alliance further aligned the Taliban with global jihadist movements (Hassani, 2017).

6. Guerrilla Warfare Period (2001–2021)

After their regime collapsed, the Taliban transformed into an insurgent movement. With support from Pakistan, Talibanism evolved significantly:

- **Military and Organizational Transformation:** Adoption of guerrilla tactics, explosives, and suicide operations.
- **Propaganda Expansion:** Use of social media and satellite networks, often facilitated by ISI.
- **Ideological Intensification:** A hybrid ideology combining Deobandi orthodoxy, Pashtunwali, and Jihadi Salafism (Revayataf, 2020).

7. Return to Power (2021–Present)

Following the collapse of the Afghan republic, the Taliban regained control:

- Centralization of Power: Authority concentrated under the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, with decision-making centred in Kandahar.
- Anti-Women Policies: Bans on girls' secondary/higher education, restrictions on movement, and exclusion from public life.
- Control of Media: Strict censorship and suppression of cultural expression.
- Haqqani Network Influence: Control over the Ministry of Interior and key security institutions (AISS, 2022).

8. Political Legitimacy

The Taliban derive legitimacy from the practice of *Bayat*, which they regard as inherently Islamic. Yet after years of rule, their leader Mullah Hibatullah remains entirely unseen—contrary to Islamic historical norms. Rejecting elections and popular sovereignty, the Taliban treat the state as the private property of the ruling group (Samadi, 2018).

Challenges, Consequences, and the Future of Talibanism

9. Status of Women

Under Taliban rule, women have been excluded from public life and placed under restrictive policies grounded in tribal ideology. These measures have devastated social development and isolated Afghanistan internationally (Independent Persian, 2021).

10. Treatment of Non-Pashtun Ethnic Groups

The Taliban's governance is predominantly Pashtun-centric. Non-Pashtun groups face limited, controlled participation, exacerbating ethnic divisions and prolonging conflict (AISS, 2022).

11. Economic and Administrative Challenges

The Taliban lack a coherent economic plan and rely heavily on traditional revenue sources, irregular taxation, narcotics trade, and illegal mining (Hassani, 2017).

12. Internal Divisions

Tensions between the Kandahari faction and the Haqqani Network continue to deepen, creating long-term risks for Taliban cohesion and governance (Revayataf, 2020).

13. The Future of Talibanism

The future depends on several factors: international pressure, resistance from women and youth, economic crises, and internal divisions. Failure to adapt to modern realities increases the likelihood of collapse or forced transformation (Samadi, 2018). Given their entrenched worldview and limited understanding of Islam, significant reform appears unlikely, making eventual decline probable.

Conclusion

Talibanism represents a unique blend of ideological rigidity, tribal customs, and political pragmatism. Its transformation from a grassroots movement to a government, then to an insurgency, and back to a government demonstrates both flexibility and deep conservatism. While its policies—especially regarding women and minorities—have produced severe consequences, external pressures and internal divisions pose challenges to its long-term survival. Unless the Taliban adapt their ideology to the realities of modern governance, the sustainability of their rule remains doubtful.

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