

Review essay

Peace in Afghanistan

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The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the new central Asian jihad. By Antonio Giustozzi. London: Hurst. 2018. 296pp. £27.00. ISBN 978 1 84904 964 1. Available as e-book.

In their own words: understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. By C. Christine Fair. London: Hurst. 2018. 256pp. £30.00. ISBN 978 1 84904 572 8. Available as e-book.

Interpretations of jihad in south Asia: an intellectual history. By Tariq Rahman. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. 2018. 336pp. £72.50. ISBN 978 3 11055 027 6. Available as e-book.

The US is engaged in negotiations with the Taliban to conclude a peace deal that would allow American troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. Despite multiple rounds of discussions in Doha, there is still a lack of clarity on many issues, the foremost being the capacity of the Taliban leadership to deliver peace. There are three critical questions that will determine which way the winds of change blow, if they do at all. The first pertains to the ability of the leadership to convince its cadres to agree to a deal with the United States. Despite the fact that the Taliban leaders gathered at Doha give the impression of being cohesive, it's unclear whether they can ensure discipline, especially as the Taliban have been divided into several factions as a result of the American war. The second relates to whether the influence and military power of the Taliban are sufficient to compete against other militant groups that occupy southern portions of the country, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. It may not be easy for the Taliban to rid Afghanistan of the ultra-hawkish violent extremists like Islamic State that attract the younger generation of militants even from among the Taliban. Third, can conflict in Afghanistan end if the ideological roots of jihad are popular in society? The potency of religious ideology should not be underestimated. Three recently published books—Antonio Giustozzi's *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, C. Christine Fair's *In their own words* and Tariq Rahman's *Interpretations of jihad in south Asia*—may shed light on these issues.

The jihad landscape of Afghanistan is extremely diverse and complex. While the US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad expects the Taliban to guarantee

peace and stability in those parts of Afghanistan that they control, it is questionable whether they could do so considering that they are not the only game in town. Antonio Giustozzi draws attention to Daesh or the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), a lethal amalgamation of many smaller groups. In nine chapters, Giustozzi provides a sense of what challenges the Taliban will encounter if they try to rid the area of IS-K.

IS-K emerged in Afghanistan around 2014–15, created from various breakaway groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan that were in need of an alternative leadership following the end of the Taliban emirate in the wake of the American ‘war on terror’. South Asian militant groups including the Taliban were invited to fight in Syria in 2012, even before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally set up ISIS. According to the author, Pakistan’s Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was the first to contribute jihadis. Initially, even Sirajudin Haqqani of the Haqqani network (HQN) contributed some men to the Middle Eastern war. Other groups included breakaway factions of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Lashkare Jhangavi (LeJ). IS-K was finally proclaimed in January 2015 and depended on three key groups: TTP, Tehreek-e-Khilafat Khorasan (TKK) and the Azizullah Haqqani group that was part of HQN. The author suggests that despite initial support from Sirajudin Haqqani in the war in Syria, he was not on board for the formation of IS-K. In fact, almost ten commanders of the HQN crossed over to IS-K behind Sirajudin Haqqani’s back. Later, Azizullah Haqqani also took another 150 militants from HQN.

From Giustozzi’s account it seems that Al-Baghdadi did not rush to establish tight control over IS-K. This was probably not doable. Unlike ISIS, IS-K could not entirely impose its Salafi ideology because the predominant religious influence in Afghanistan was Hanafi. There was also a difference in aims and strategy, which Giustozzi elaborates on in detail in chapter two. There were also points of difference with the Taliban. Unlike the Taliban, IS-K was ready to wage a war against China and thus recruited Chinese Uighurs and it also targeted Iran and Shi’as. Its leadership believed that the Taliban were beholden to Pakistan.

IS-K’s and the Taliban’s varied aims did not necessarily lead to friction, at least in the earlier years. This was probably because of their shared goal of pushing foreign forces out of Afghanistan and establishing a shari’a-based system. But differences grew with time, leading IS-K to attack the Taliban. From the perspective of individual militants or smaller groups, the tactical differences were even more pronounced. IS-K had greater resources, provided better training, gave remuneration to its soldiers and had a superior organizational structure and strategy as compared to the Taliban. In 2015, for instance, it spent about US\$95 million on logistics alone. Its superior financial situation helped the organization maintain a comparatively better image than the Taliban. As detailed in chapters three and four, IS-K militants had an elaborate organizational system that comprised various departments: a military council, shari’a council, shari’a courts, a propaganda office and a martyrdom department. It outsourced procurement to private contractors and paid villagers for supplies, which not only created goodwill but also established a political economy of its own.

These differences may not be what led to the growing friction between IS–K and the Taliban. Giustozzi is of the view that the Islamic State–Central had always aimed to eventually overpower all other players in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. This, the author believes, is because IS–K was key to Islamic State–Central’s strategic thinking. However, he does not adequately explain the reason for IS–K’s outsize role. Although IS–K operated in Afghanistan, Khorasan was defined as Afghanistan, parts of northern India, Iran and Pakistan. The area derives its significance from the concept of apocalypse in Islam. It is a fundamental belief that the end of the world will be marked by a battle between Islam and evil, in which forces from Khorasan will assist the Mahdi and Christ, who will be reborn at that time, to defeat the forces of evil. The final battle will be fought in the Middle East—an area that includes Syria and Palestine (Jean-Pierre Filliu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Although Giustozzi concludes that IS–K has not been able to attain its strategic objectives in Afghanistan and faces numerous issues, it is worth wondering if the power of ideology will keep Walayat-e-Khorasan relevant in years to come.

Giustozzi’s use of security studies and counterterrorism perspectives explains his lack of attention to key religious-cultural factors that have the potential to sustain militancy and extremism in Afghanistan and make peace difficult to achieve. There are other issues as well on which the book appears deficient. The author seems to have scant knowledge of Pakistani jihadist groups. For instance, he categorizes the Pakistan-based Jaishe Muhammad (JeM), which was involved in the February attack in Pulwama in Indian-administered Kashmir, as a breakaway faction of the TTP. Though there were rumours of JeM breaking up and its men joining the TTP, the stories stem from a decade before the IS–K was formed. The organization was well under control and dedicated to the mission in Kashmir.

Although Giustozzi enumerates the Pakistani groups that joined IS–K, there is no mention of the presence of Lashkare Khurasan (LeK) in Pakistan in 2014. Though not the same as IS–K, the group shares a similar ideology. LeK was formed in Pakistan around the same time as ISIS announced itself as a global caliphate. LeK’s headquarters were located in South Punjab, which is also the source of numerous other Pakistan-based groups, including LeJ and JeM. Punjab’s counterterrorism department (CTD) reported links between LeK and hawkish clerics, some of whom even worked for the government of Pakistan. Interestingly, Pakistan’s intelligence agencies kept ignoring IS–K until 2016. Later on, Muslim Dost, who was a leader of the TKK and was removed from his position as a key IS–K representative, openly accused the latter of working for Pakistan. The ideological linkage between the Salafi elements in Pakistan and the IS–K was far deeper than is acknowledged in the book. The influence of Pakistan and the attitude of its intelligence agencies towards militant organizations, including the Taliban, is a potential hindrance to peace in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan is not the only country with links to the Taliban, it benefits from relations with diverse groups. The historic tension with India and the unsettled Kashmir dispute continue to be a justification for the presence of jihadist organizations in Pakistan.

With respect to the Taliban vs IS–K conflict, much will depend on sustaining a wave of pragmatism among varied militant groups, which can allow them to negotiate peace. The newer generation of Taliban and other militants are more rabid than the older generation of leaders. The two decades of the ‘war on terror’ have fragmented the Taliban, both organizationally and ideologically. More important, the decades of interaction with Arab warriors or engagement with some of the region’s hardline clerics have produced a new generation that may continue to pursue jihad as a primary goal until the entire world converts to Islam. Notwithstanding that availability of material resources and power politics are important factors, no analysis of jihad should overlook its ideological aspects. Here Tariq Rahman’s book, explaining the intellectual history of jihad in south Asia, is a good resource.

An unending jihad?

Rahman examines the history of the interpretation of jihad in Muslim thought in south Asia. The eleven chapters provide the essential intellectual connection between Islamic thought in south Asia and west Asia. Rahman’s book is richer than previous works on the subject (see e.g. Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), in explaining the concept according to the Islamic holy text and its interpretation by numerous Muslim scholars. The work’s other comparative distinction is that Rahman does not adopt an apologetic attitude towards the subject or hide it under the argument that jihad is limited to a moral battle of the believer against the self. He uses Koranic hermeneutics to explain the concept of jihad and all its nuances.

The book is also methodologically far more elaborate than other existing studies. In chapter two, Rahman lays out the framework for understanding the concept of jihad, based on interpretation of the Koranic text and *hadith* (the words of the Prophet). He begins by introducing the basic methodology for writing the Koranic exegesis that is the source of any interpretation. Indeed, the first exegeses started to be written around AD 727. These works draw on the text, with each writer using his own perception of rationality. The traditional works, like the *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* and *al-Tabari*, were based on a medieval and magical world-view. The larger point that the author makes is that Islamic exegesis is ‘anchored into the cosmology’ that reflects the bias of its age. The intellectual bent of the scholar influences the manner in which he interprets Koranic language, which is deemed to be unchangeable. Historically, the authenticity of an exegesis is based on a system of abrogation, meaning the mapping of a technical register of sources which is then used to prove the authenticity of an interpretation. Since the Prophet Muhammad introduced the community of believers to divine revelation in the form of the Koran, his words and explanations are critical. However, the Prophet’s words have to come from an authentic source.

Having laid out the methodology for interpreting the holy text, chapter three deals with the history of exegesis writing in south Asia. The first significant name

is Shah Waliullah (1703–62), a Hanafi scholar, who left behind complete exegeses that included an explanation of jihad. Though Waliullah is considered an important ideological source for Hanafi jihadist groups that include the Taliban, the scholar used traditional interpretation of jihad in which the Muslim ruler played an important role. He argued that an insurgency would only be allowed in case of a defensive war in which the state or centre of authority is under attack. However, the emphasis in Waliullah's understanding is on establishing an Islamic state and a relevant system of governance in which there was a difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. Jihad was considered as a tool to enforce the system of governance if it faced a threat internally or externally. But, as Rahman explains, Waliullah was not the pioneer of aggressive jihad as practised by some later Deobandi scholars. The book is remarkable in clearly laying out the nuances of various interpretations, certainly clarifying a lot of misconceptions about jihad, usually attributed to Waliullah's position on the issue. According to Rahman's understanding, even Waliullah's son Shah Abdul Aziz, who issued a fatwa to fight against the British colonial state, did not really encourage his followers to fight the colonial powers. In fact, he argues that despite Abdul Aziz's fatwa that declared India as *Darul Harb* (a house of evil), it did not necessarily make it imperative for Muslims to migrate from where they lived to Afghanistan, which was historically seen as a source of Muslim power.

Jihad in the Indian subcontinent dominated the religious discourse as part of the anti-colonial resistance. Although the colonial modernists among the exegetes tried to draw out theological nuances in the work of Shah Waliullah and Ubaidullah Sindhi, they also inspired the four major anti-colonial resistance movements: the Faraidi movement of Bengal in 1857, the Wahhabi movements in two different parts of India and the Deobandi Silk Letters conspiracy. Although the mutiny against the British of 1857 was quite widespread, it was the two Wahhabi movements—ending in the Wahhabi trials of 1860—that drew attention to the issue of whether a British-governed India was *Darul Harb* (house of evil) or *Darul Islam* (house of Islam). It seems that opinion in the country was divided on the issue, with the north Indian *ulama* considering India as an abode of Islam. But in reality, the most potent jihadist movement was the Silk Letters conspiracy that revolved around Indian Muslims seeking help from Afghan leaders to rescue them from British rule. This is the period when the argument built up for jihad being mandatory or *fard-ul-aen* for Muslims. The anti-colonial struggle also gave rise to fatwas that encouraged jihad. (Incidentally, this coincided with the rise of Indian nationalism.) These fatwas emphasized the status of India as an abode of evil to justify jihad. Several struggles emerged, especially in tribal areas of the frontier, that were not just led by those akin to the rabid jihadists of today but pirs, fakirs and mullahs, people who in modern times represent Sufi institutions.

Interestingly, it is much later in the book that the term *taghut* is first mentioned—meaning anything that is against the fundamentals of Islam or involves rebellion against God's laws. This is an important concept from which much of the jihad literature has evolved. It means that jihad must be waged against any force

opposing the spirit of Islam. The concept makes war a never-ending phenomenon. Although *taghut* was used by many *ulama* of that time, Rahman focuses on Maulana Abu A'la Mawdudi, who is considered the most influential Islamic thinker of the subcontinent. Mawdudi's definition of an ideal Islamic world influenced the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's leader Syed Qutb's conceptualization of an Islamic system of governance. Mawdudi's work is comparatively more sophisticated, as it cautions against civil strife. Theoretically, a Muslim state or society could also be involved in *taghut*, that would justify an internal battle as proposed by Fazlullah of the TTP or the IS–K. But Mawdudi's treatise on just war also leaves space for the conclusion of peace treaties which ought not to be broken. In fact, Mawdudi argues that the presence of treaties between India and Pakistan is an impediment to the justification of Pakistan's jihad in Kashmir.

Aside from critiques by various Bareilvi scholars of Mawdudi's perspective or those of hardline clerics, Rahman has not explored other south Asian scholars who have developed the concept of an offensive war. Since he mainly refers to literature published in Urdu and English, the book excludes many religious scholars from Punjab and Sindh. But these two areas have contributed jihadists to the wars in Kashmir, Afghanistan and other parts of the world. Also, in his discussion of the Arab influence on south Asia through the writings of Muslim Brotherhood leaders Syed Qutb and Hassan al-Banna, the author does not explore the fact that the evolution of ideas on religion in general and jihad in particular in the Middle East and south Asia was part of an interactive process. Actually, little work has been done on south Asian scholars who have influenced religious thinking in the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the south Asian impact dates back to a period before Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. One of Wahhab's main intellectual influences was his teacher Hayyat ibn Ibraheem al-Sindhi, who introduced him to the works of the Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah.¹ Similarly, one of the key scholars who influenced the siege of Mecca in 1979 was from south Asia.² The 1979 incident marked the beginning of a new era of religious extremism spearheaded first by Al-Qaeda and later by ISIS. The impact of south Asian scholars on the Arab world deserves greater attention and could provide insight into the role of IS–K in south Asia.

The other issues that deserve greater attention are the concepts of the coming of the Mahdi, the reincarnation of Jesus and the army from Khorasan. These connect all Muslim scholars, including those whom Rahman has cited as arguing against jihad. While the civilizational tension that is mentioned in the literature is one dimension of jihad, the other important factor pertains to the conceptualization of the end of the world which, according to various Muslim scholars, will be marked by the final battle between Islam and evil. This is the ultimate commitment to fighting *taghut* that most scholars do not renounce. In fact, scholars like Tahirul Qadri, who is quoted in the book as a significant critic of Salafi and

¹ Basheer M. Nafi, 'A teacher of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: Muhammad Hayāt al-Sindī and the revival of Ahāb al-Hadīth's methodology', *Islamic Law and Society* 13: 2, 2006, pp. 208–41.

² Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: the story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi revisited', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39: 1, 2007, pp. 103–22.

Deobandi jihad, share beliefs on the coming of the Mahdi and the final battle between Islam and evil fought with the help of the army from Khorasan. This idea is so central across the sectarian spectrum that it makes Qadri's 600-page fatwa against terrorism and suicide bombing immaterial. Rahman's discussion does not review Qadri's thoughts on the issue, nor does it fully explore the idea. It is worth reiterating that the concept of the day of judgement is so tied to the idea of a final battle between civilizations that rationalizing jihad as denoting an inner struggle becomes impossible.

Taming jihad and jihadists

If an inter-civilizational war is central to the idea of Islam, then is it possible for the Taliban to eliminate conflict? Or should the international community seek to achieve its goals of securing peace and ending conflict in Afghanistan through appealing to that part of Islamic theology which denounces internal conflict as dangerous for society? There are many examples of the latter, such as the Pakistan-based militant group LeT. The Ahl-hadith³ militant group does not propagate jihad in Pakistan. Assessing LeT's literature in detail, Christine Fair concludes that the group believes that jihad is only meant to be waged against non-Muslims outside the country. The concept of just war is limited to fighting for the rights of Muslims in places governed by non-Muslims. Kashmir, hence, is one of the main fronts where the group fights its battles. The organization's literature, which Fair explores in her book, demonstrates an aversion to *takfir*, excommunicating a Muslim. This is despite the fact that LeT literature criticizes those belonging to the Sufi sect or going to shrines. For the LeT Ahl-hadith the Sufi and Barelvi Muslims are comparable to Christians and Hindus, who are criticized for being polytheist. However, there is relative silence about Shi'as and Ahmediyas. Shi'as seem to be spared because of LeT's concern for the Pakistani state's aversion to sectarian violence. Fair is less illuminating on LeT's silence regarding Ahmediyas, who were excommunicated by the state in 1974, and there is a general consensus among Muslims in south Asia and the world in general that this group is non-Muslim. It would have been helpful to refer to the wider Ahl-hadith literature, which includes fatwas regarding the Ahmediya.

Fair does not analyse this wider literature. Her book's title, *In their own words*, refers to 918 biographies of LeT martyrs and a limited number of other writings. Only two chapters draw on the literature of this Ahl-hadith jihadi group. The book gives the sense of being two distinct works—one which examines the religious discourse and another that is written from a security paradigm. The bulk of the book does not use LeT's narrative but examines the militant outfit from the stand-point of Pakistan's conflict with India in which the organization is used as a proxy. Unlike Samina Yasmeen's book *Jihad and Dawah* (London: Hurst, 2017), which lays out in greater detail the evolution of the militant group and examines its several layers through the lens of its own narrative, Fair's book evaluates LeT's

³ Ahl-hadith represents a south Asian version of Salafism or Saudi Wahhabism.

structure as a tool of state policy. In this respect, she seems less trusting of the LeT's organizational narrative than Yasmeen.

Fair's main argument is that Pakistan tends to treat Lashkar-e-Tayyiba as a weapon interchangeable with nuclear deterrence. The work is far more daring than Stephen Tankel's *Storming the world stage* (London: Hurst, 2010), the first ever to be written on LeT. While Tankel's book was the initial exploratory work that timidly touched on the relationship between the militant outfit and the Pakistani state, Fair doesn't pull her punches, arguing that Lashkar-e-Tayyiba is essentially controlled by the Pakistani state. In the process, the book explains the organization's structural details, its recruitment pattern, training methodology, financing and societal support base. More importantly, in south Asia LeT represents an additional layer of violence that connects the state with the non-state.

The element of state control does alert the reader to the possibility of this model being replicated in Afghanistan, to the extent that the government in Kabul is able to control the jihadists. But what works in Pakistan may not apply in Afghanistan, as these elements are more powerful there and there are fewer actors that have the capacity to rein them in when desired. Furthermore, since the Afghan militants have caused greater damage internally, it would be a challenge to get civil society to agree to the restoration of some power to the Taliban. Peace may remain illusory in Afghanistan and south Asia more broadly.