

# EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE  
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

**The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance**  
**Der Fall Kabuls 2021: Hintergründe, Effekte, Resonanzen**

Volume 24 Issue 1 | 2022

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Who are 'the' Taliban? Life Worlds between Pashtun  
Traditions, Islamism, and Globalisation

Ethnoscripts 2022 24 (1): 62-80

eISSN 2199-7942

## Abstract

This article deals with the social background and the life worlds of the followers of the Taliban movement. It begins with an analysis of the essential social structures of Pashtun tribal society. It argues that both the Afghan wars, which are ongoing since 1979, and the consequent mass exodus had a tremendous impact on the everyday life of Pashtun society. They resulted in a contextualised confluence of values and norms, rooted in tribal culture on the one side and militant Islam on the other. The policy of the Taliban movement anticipated such normative changes within Pashtun society. Particularly the everlasting reference to Islam, the defence of local autonomy, and the emphasis on social justice emerged as key elements of the self-perception of the Taliban movement. Accordingly, my key argument is that the restoration and maintenance of (idealised) local social orders have been the driving force for the success of the Taliban movement. However, this tendency of preserving an (idealised) local order in the name of Islam is not unique to the Taliban but can be found across the Islamic world and can be regarded as a current phenomenon of globalisation.

## Publisher:

Universität Hamburg  
Institut für Ethnologie  
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)  
D-20146 Hamburg  
Tel.: 040 42838 4182  
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de  
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



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## Who are 'the' Taliban? Life Worlds between Pashtun Traditions, Islamism, and Globalisation

Conrad Schetter

### Introduction

Twenty-five years ago – in October 1997, one year after the Taliban movement had conquered Kabul for the first time – I was travelling across Afghanistan. I was unexpectedly confronted with an image of the Taliban that did not correspond to the portrayal of 'stone-age fundamentalists' as propagated in Western media. The minibus I was travelling with from the Pakistani border city of Torkham to Kabul transported about fifteen Pakistani students from the Punjab region. They were going to the front line of the war in northern Afghanistan to fight on the side of the Taliban, to shoot around, and, above all, to drive tanks. They were middle- and upper-class kids, certainly religious but not fanatical. They had decided not to spend the semester break at home watching television or with relatives in London but to go to jihad – in their own words, to fight the 'holy war'.

This example may already reveal that the term *Taliban* hardly applies to a uniform worldview but includes numerous manifold facets of identities. Since the emergence of the movement in 1994, not only have different factions and political groupings developed within the Taliban but multifaceted *Lebenswelten* (life worlds) (Schütz and Luckmann [1969] 2017) have emerged associated with the term *Taliban*. Taliban life worlds can be overall regarded as heterogeneous and diverse, and it will need intensive future research to understand the varied motivations, identities, and aspirations of the movement's followers. Against this background, this article is only a starting point to understanding the various life worlds of the Taliban cosmos. Accordingly, I focus on one facet only, namely the interface between Pashtun tribal traditions and Islamism. My intention here is to shed light on one particular cultural framing of the Taliban, which arguably is strongly interwoven with the life worlds of many Taliban fighters and supporters. Although the Taliban movement has successfully managed to gain supporters amongst various ethnic minorities of Afghanistan (especially Uzbeks, Tajiks, Nuristani) in the last fifteen years (Giustozzi 2019), most of the Taliban followers are Pashtuns from rural regions in southern and eastern Afghanistan and from the Pakistan borderlands of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. The unpacking of Pashtun tribal culture is thus essential for understanding Taliban

life worlds. Unlike, for example, in the African context, the term *tribe* (*khel*) has a positive connotation for self-representation in Afghan society. This is because a person receives legitimacy in the here and now primarily by naming their tribal ancestors. It seems important to note that this emphasis on Pashtun tribal traditions initially stood in the way of the dissemination of orthodox Islamist ideologies since the beginning of the Afghan wars in 1979 (Caron 2012; Hartung 2021; see the timetable in the appendix to this issue for an overview of the phases of violence since 1979). Thus, it is due to a very specific context of war and forced displacement and to core Islamic patterns of legitimacy that ideas of jihadism could percolate into Pashtun culture.

One must note that the life worlds of Taliban followers are probably not so much of a social exception within Afghan society as they represent large parts of the Afghan population, particularly in rural areas. If one follows NATO statements, the Taliban were initially a few thousand militant Islamists (Bergen 2006) who operated out of the Pakistan-Afghan border area, received only marginal support from the local population, and aspired to establish a reign of terror in the name of Islam (Cordesman 2007). In this context, reference has often been made to annual public opinion polls (conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the German ARD, and British Broadcasting Corporation, amongst others), according to which the Taliban had hardly any support amongst the Afghan population. However, anyone who has ever conducted standardised surveys in Afghanistan will question such data. The cultural values of politeness and hospitality demand that answers be given that do not upset the guest, which means, the interviewer. At the same time, the largely non-violent reconquest of Afghanistan by the Taliban in the summer of 2021 demonstrated that many Afghans – especially in rural areas – preferred the rule of the Taliban to a never-ending war in which the distinction between good and bad had become obsolete. Therefore, the argument presented here is that the Taliban movement does not represent an ‘external body’ to Afghan society. Its norms and values correspond far more closely with those of Afghanistan’s rural population than with the policies offered by the international community or the Afghan government since 2001. Moreover, the term *Taliban* has changed frequently and has become increasingly fuzzy and uncoupled from the political movement during the last decades (Caron 2012). Thus it refers not solely to militant Islamists who follow the orthodox Islamist school of Deoband but its use is inflationary in nature.

Finally, it is worth noting that academic knowledge of the Taliban is sketchy. It is based largely on second- or third-hand information. In-depth empirical fieldwork and systematic interviews with members of the Taliban movement were hardly possible because of the conditions of war. The seminal book by journalist Ahmed Rashid (2000) became the authoritative source for political analyses of the Taliban until today. Reliance on Rashid’s work overlooks, however, that several studies on the Taliban emerged during

the last two decades which provide a more differentiated picture. Particularly the writings of Antonio Giustozzi (2008, 2009, 2019) and Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2012a) provide insight into the organisational and political structures of the Taliban. Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012b, 2018) also edited several original documents, stories, and poetries related to the Taliban and their followers. In addition, the work of David Edwards (2002), Thomas Johnson (2017), Jan-Peter Hartung (2020, 2021, 2022), and David Caron (2012) contributes to a better understanding of the ideational world of the Taliban at the interface of Islamic and Pashtun norms and values. Such recent research is based mainly on analysis of video and radio messages and the movement's internet presence as well as on historical documents, official statements, programmes, and political manifestos (for example, *layha*).

This article is organised in the following way. The point of departure for my argumentation is local tribal culture, as it has for centuries been dominant amongst Pashtuns. I introduce Pashtun tribal traditions and the role of Islam from a historical perspective, and discuss the cultural transformation that has taken place during the Afghan wars since 1979. In the second part of the article, I discuss specific characteristics of Taliban life worlds and their repercussions for the political movement of the Taliban. My key argument is that the restoration and maintenance of (idealised) local social orders have been the driving force for the movement's success. However, this tendency of preserving an (idealised) local order in the name of Islam is not unique to the Taliban movement but can be found across the Islamic world and can be regarded as a current phenomenon of globalisation.

### Pashtun tribal culture

Knowledge about Pashtun culture is strongly based on Western anthropological research (Nichols 2015) dating back to the seminal work of Mountstuart Elphinstone in the early nineteenth century (Hanifi 2019). Therefore the description of Pashtun society in academic literature has been marked by the peril of 'othering', which also holds true for the analysis of the Taliban movement (Barkawi and Stanski 2012). Against this background one must be cautious about romanticisations or demonisations of Pashtun society.

Pashtun society is held together by a shared language (Pashtu), which is 'not only an idiom, but a distinct framework of communal norms and values' (Hartung 2020: 174). Pashtuns also share the belief in a common history. Thus, the term *Afghan* is the Persian synonym for 'Pashtun'. This reflects that historiography emphasises the continuous dominance of Pashtuns over the country, which dates to the rules of Mir Wais (1673–1715) and Ahmad Shah Durrani (1720–1772) as well as to the mystic progenitor of all Pashtuns, Qais Abdur Rashid. However, the tribal Pashtun order is strongly character-

ised by fractures, contradictions, and heterogeneities (Glatzer 1977; Ruttig 2012). Particular local differences can be observed between the more feudal organised tribes with land-controlling elites (*khans*) in the countryside of the south (Loy Qandahar) and the more egalitarian organised ones in the rural eastern borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Loya Paktia, for example). Therefore, it is not so much the proper tribal kinship structure or the socio-economic condition that constitutes the crucial divide between tribe and ‘modern’ society but rather the underlying value and norm system. It is worthy to note that the concrete interplay of norms and values is highly dependent on the local context, as expressed in the following Pashtun saying: ‘Pashtun is whoever does Pashto’ (Rzehak 2011). Against this background, the *pashtunwali*, a codex of norms and values of all Pashtuns, must be understood as a flexible vessel that can be filled with multiple meanings.

The following description of important roots of Pashtun society must be considered as the construction of a prototype, which is based on a sound review of the anthropological literature, but is not able to pay justice to all local and social differences. The main argument made in anthropological research of the 1970s is that Pashtun society is a ‘man’s world’ (Ahmed 1976: xviii): The basis of the Pashtun value system is that the existence of the individual man, the family unit, and the clan is under constant threat and must be defended against external enemies (Chioventa 2020). To be able to assert himself, each male member of the tribe must protect his autonomy from perceived encroachment (Janata and Hassas 1975: 85). Assaults are repaid in kind, what is called *badal*. If a man does not defend himself in this way, he risks losing his social prestige. *Badal* could be compared to the Old Testament’s ‘eye for an eye’. It entails feuds and acts of blood revenge that are fought over generations (Knudsen 2009), as captured in the proverb ‘If someone commits *badal* after a hundred years, he has made haste’. Against this background, many Taliban saw the stationing of British NATO troops close to the southern city of Maiwand in 2006 as *badal* of the British, for it was in Maiwand that the British had suffered a stinging defeat at the hands of the Afghans in the Great Game on 27 July 1880. In accordance with Pashtun tribal imagination, the British have been seeking revenge ever since.

This view of the world as often hostile forms the framework within which each male tribal member operates to defend his autonomy (Chioventa 2020). For it he must be economically independent, thus at least having enough land to feed his family. He must also distinguish himself by certain qualities of masculinity, such as *nang* (maintaining one’s honour) and *turah* (bravery, intrepidity, battle-testedness) (Janata and Hassas 1975; Steul 1981). To attain *nang*, a tribal member must defend his property, that is, the women, land, house, and possessions that he is entrusted with, captured in the popular saying ‘*zan, zar, zamin*’ (woman, gold, land).

In this concept of honour, *namus* plays a crucial role. *Namus* refers to the integrity of the female members that must be preserved under all circumstances. According to this patriarchal ideal, women are considered the property of men. Their behaviour can endanger the honour of the men and expose the latter to shame (*sham*); women thus represent the weak point in the concept of *nang* (Barth 1969: 122). All signs that a man is unable to protect the women entrusted to him from other men – even if it is only their gaze – are perceived as a violation of honour and must be punished. Otherwise, the man loses his honour.

To comply with the notion of *nang*, a tribal member must also provide protection to those who request his help. This exercise of protection is called *nanawat*. However, asking for *nanawat* means admitting one's own weakness. Within the frame in which high value is placed on male autonomy, the supplicant thus forfeits his status as a full member of the tribe and subordinates himself.

These rural tribal principles – which aim at individual male autonomy – explain why any external influence that threatens to change Pashtun tribal society has usually been met with strong resistance. In this, every tribesman fights for himself and does not subordinate himself to a leader, to preserve his own autonomy (Haroon 2007). Accordingly, conquerors and invaders were confronted with the fact that tribal alliances and tribal rivalries were in constant flux – a nightmare for the 'indirect rule' policy of the British Empire. The aspiration for local autonomy framed the often mythically transfigured resistance of Pashtun tribes to outside influence – whether the Indian Mughals and Persian Safavids in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the British Empire in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the Soviets in the 1980s or the United States (US) during the last twenty years. This also determined that the emerging statehood of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the twentieth century was marked by the conflict of 'tribe versus state' (Tapper 1983) and prevented statehood from taking root in the tribal areas, especially along the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands (Anderson 1983; Haroon 2007). It goes without saying that the territories of many tribes extend across the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan. To date, the tribes enjoy – partly formally, partly informally – an autonomous status (Schetter 2013).

### Traditional role of Islam in Pashtun society

In addition to ethnic and tribal references, Islam is an ideational frame of reference for all social affairs of Pashtun society. From a functional point of view, Islamic values and legal concepts serve to overcome tribal fragmentation and prevailing practices (for example, blood feud and incest). However, Hartung (2021: 149) is correct when he criticises the bipolar dichotomy drawn between tribal culture and Islam and emphasises that 'we would be

well advised to distinguish between normative universalistic claims, local contexts and the pragmatics necessary to negotiate both'. Accordingly, in everyday practices Islam and tribal culture are not perceived as ideational frames that exclude each other; inconsistencies and contradictions between them are ignored, downplayed, or brushed away (Steul 1981; Rzehak 2011).

For centuries Pashtuns have predominantly followed the Sunni-Hanafi school of law, which is considered 'moderate'. This allows a certain flexibility and contemporary adaptation in jurisprudence through argumentation and derivation from a compendium of legal rulings. The Hanafi legal tradition is, therefore, complementary to pre-Islamic and tribal traditions and was hardly subject to external influences in Afghanistan. With their ability to absorb obvious deviations and contradictions, mystical Sufi currents dominated Islamic faith and practices until the late 1970s (Wieland-Karimi 1998). In general, Islam plays a central role in all aspects of Pashtun everyday life. To this day, Islam is the valid cosmos through which interpretations, argumentations, and legitimations take place. However, knowledge about Islam in Pashtun society is rudimentary; until recently, reading and writing remained the preserve of the elite. Thus, the focus has been less on the interpretation of scripture than on the spiritual experience with God. The interpretation of dreams, pilgrimages to shrines, or the wearing of amulets are important religious practices in everyday life. In this popular belief, the veneration of saints is still a widespread practice, as is the worship of Sufi orders (Einzmann 1977; Wieland-Karimi 1998). Religious dignitaries who place their origin close to the Prophet – such as the prestigious Gilani or Mojaddedi families – enjoy a high reputation amongst Pashtuns, for whom genealogical derivation strongly influences social positioning.

In contrast to religious dignitaries who occupied a prominent social position due to their origin or spiritual abilities, the mullah (also *maulawi* or *maulana*) did not enjoy a particularly high social standing in Pashtun tribal society before the outbreak of the Afghan wars in 1979. The mullah is employed by the community and thus depends on its goodwill and alms. His role is limited to teaching children the Koran and how to pray, and to performing religious rituals. Before the Afghan wars, mullahs stood outside the tribal order in Pashtun tribal contexts. Therefore particularly impoverished or marginalised tribal members took up this profession. Only in cases of conflict – especially when it was necessary to unite hostile tribes against an external threat – would the mullah play a political role: standing outside the tribal order he could overcome tribal divisions and forge short-term alliances. Many tribal rebellions against the British empire as well as against the Afghan and Pakistan governments were led by clerics whom the British called 'mad mullahs' (Edwards 1996; Hopkins 2013). However, before the Afghan wars, this leadership role of religious dignitaries was only situational; as soon as a conflict was over, the mullahs lost their prominent position again.

## Refugee camps as a social catalyst

The quite well-balanced relationship between Pashtun tribal identities and Islam changed drastically with the Soviet invasion in 1979. The country's occupation sparked one of the largest forced displacements since World War II, with over five million Afghan refugees – one-third of the Afghan population at the time. Whilst the bulk of the Pashtun refugees was absorbed in camps along the Pakistani side of the border, the tribal elites migrated to Pakistan's cities, Europe, or the US. This dwindled their influence on Afghanistan's tribal population. In their absence, ordinary clerics – mullahs, *maulawis* – began to take over leadership roles in the communities (Edwards 2002). An ultimate consequence of the Afghan wars was that religious dignitaries succeeded in permanently anchoring their pivotal leadership role in tribal society. This has been particularly evident in the rule of the Taliban movement since the mid-1990s. To understand this rise of Islamic dignitaries, it is necessary to look at the socio-economic disruptions caused by the protracted war.

The refugee camps emerged as the key catalyst for social change, what Richard Tapper (2013: 236) calls 'tribal plus'. The claim to leadership by religious elites could be legitimised by the fact that jihadist values had been steadily gaining influence in the refugee camps since the beginning of the 1980s (Malik 1989). For under the adverse living conditions of the refugee camps the tribal idea of honour (*nang*), as outlined earlier, was difficult to maintain. In the camps men lost their autonomy and became beneficiaries of humanitarian aid organisations. They could not live up to the ideals of *nang* and *turah* as autonomous tribal members (Edwards 1986: 320).

As compensation for maintaining a positive self-image, the Islamist resistance parties in control of the refugee camps propagated certain Islamic values which were compatible with Pashtun tribal codes. Accordingly, none other than the Prophet Mohammed became the role model for some Afghan refugees. The Prophet was portrayed as a mastermind of military strategy; and the Afghan refugee as having acted just as the Prophet had when he fled from Mecca to Medina as a muhajir – that is, as a refugee (Hartung 2020, 2022). This meant that the request for *nanawat*, that is, for shelter in the refugee camps, could be met positively with the reference to the Prophet. If a refugee joined the jihad and fought against the Soviet occupiers and communists, he became a mujahid, and thus again followed Mohammed's example when he aimed to conquer Mecca. Hartung (2022: 139) concludes:

*First, jihād becomes the permanent individual duty (farḍ 'ayn) of working selflessly on one's 'obedience (itā'at) to Islam' by all possible means. Second, this duty requires the sacrifice of everything, including wealth and even physical integrity, for the cause. It is therefore hardly surprising that all expositions on ji-*

*hād are coupled with a lengthy rhetoric of martyrdom, aimed at igniting in those who listen a desire for death, or, in other words, a qualification for the higher reality of the Hereafter.*

Thus, the concept of *mujahid* served the tribal ideal of *turah*. The jihad against the ‘godless’ communists also tied in with the idea of *badal* (Ansari 1990: 3–20), and tribal masculinity was expressed in the jihadist motifs of passionate self-sacrifice and martyrdom, which built on earlier constructions of the Talib trope (Caron 2012; Chioventa 2020).

Finally, the loss of house, farm, and land, on which tribal autonomy had been based, was catastrophic for the male tribal population and undermined the idea of tribal autonomy. In the refugee camps, this loss was compensated by the increased control of women – as the only remaining ‘good’ to be controlled by the tribesmen (Kreile 1997). The spatial confinement in the refugee camps and the constant presence of foreign men meant that women’s freedom of movement was strongly restricted. Here the Persian-Islamic concept of *pardah*, meaning the strict seclusion of women, served tribal ideas of honour. Seclusion and full-body veiling were intended to protect the *namus* of women and, thus, the *nang*, the honour of men, in the refugee camps.

	Tribal concepts		Islamic concepts
protection	<i>nanawat</i>	→	← <i>muhajir</i>
honour	<i>nang</i>	→	← <i>mujahid</i>
bravery	<i>turah</i>	→	← <i>mujahid</i>
female integrity	<i>namus</i>	→	← <i>pardah</i>
revenge	<i>badal</i>	→	← <i>jihad</i>

Table 1: Tribal and Islamic concept compensation in the context of refugee camps

In summary, under the extreme living conditions of the refugee camps, certain values which had developed in the tribal context and were based on the idea of male autonomy could be compensated by a simplified and militant understanding of jihad (see Table 1). The catalyst for the transmission of this understanding of Islam was the mushrooming of madrasas – Islamic religious schools. Since the 1980s, the Islamisation policy of the Pakistani government under the military dictator Mohamad Zia-ul-Haq led to the establishment of well over a thousand madrasas in the borderland between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Malik 1989). Although several madrasas had a moderate orientation, militant Islamist parties and Islamist currents also made targeted use of religious schools to spread their jihadi ideologies in the refugee camps. Particularly the madrasas of the Deoband school of thought dominated, a school that saw itself as the extended workbench of the jihad. Thus, the notion *Taliban* – which is generally translated as ‘students [of the Islamic religion]’

– points to the movement's origins in Deoband madrasas. Madrasas served primarily as a recruitment field for jihad: male adolescents were prepared to believe that the fight against the infidels was their future task in life. The central message was that only the mujahid who defends Islam in the jihad against the infidels and is willing to sacrifice his life as a martyr (*shahid*) can stand before the Last Judgement. Against the background of this indoctrination, the numerous suicide attacks in recent years can be explained (Edwards 2017). Accordingly, romanticisms of mujahidin became successfully welded with discourses of Pashtun honourable masculinity prominent in the genres of jihad poetry (Edwards 1993; Caron 2012: 71).

### Taliban life worlds

The emergence of the Taliban movement and its current acceptance by large parts of the population can be explained by the fusion of tribal and jihadist values and norms as outlined above – although it must be noted that in many respects this confluence has remained diffuse and vague. However, I identify three essential points of reference that connect the life worlds of the population with the movement of the Taliban which underline the legitimacy of the latter: the interpretive and legitimising power of Islam; the emphasis of the local autonomous order; and the domination of discourses of injustice.

*Islamic power of interpretation and legitimacy:* Throughout the region, arguments are validated with statements like 'As the Qur'an says' or 'As it is written in the hadith'. In this way, Islam forms the cosmos through which various decisions in Pashtun society are interpreted, communicated, and legitimised. However, this cosmos – precisely because of the largely oral nature of society – leaves a great deal of vagueness for interpretation that often deviates from written Islam (see earlier discussion). Accordingly, perceptions and imaginations which are not found in the codex of written Islam are also repeatedly coined as 'Islamic'. Although Islamic rhetoric is in the foreground of everyday practices, it would be wrong to state that an orthodox Islamist ideology completely replaced tribal connotations. One must note that ideological or religious themes play a subordinate role in the everyday life of the rural population, which is dominated by agrarian necessities. Consequently, ideas stemming from Islamic orthodoxy, popular religious belief, or tribal culture often stand abruptly next to each other. Obvious contradictions between these different worldviews are often not discussed or taken into focus, or are even fully ignored. For example, there are many eyewitness accounts of Taliban pilgrimages to Sufi shrines (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a). Or Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban movement, repeatedly encountered Allah in his dreams, in which the Prophet revealed his decisions to him (Schetter and Mielke 2022). Such mystical practices and beliefs are considered sacrilege and superstition according to an orthodox

interpretation of Islam, as they deviate from pure doctrine. Similarly, many Taliban understand the introduction of the sharia primarily as an affirmation of locally prevailing customs and not as a uniformly applied and well-thought through legal system. Thus, where sharia has been introduced in the name of the Taliban, a confluence of Islamic and customary laws can often be observed – for example, in the observance of the tribal rule of blood revenge (*badal*). Islamic rhetoric, therefore, serves above all to emphasise and reaffirm local identities and practices.

*Emphasis of the local autonomous order:* The idea of male autonomy – as a meaningful momentum of Pashtun tribal culture – decisively determines the Taliban worldview. The tribal value of masculinity is expressed in particular in the display of weapons that can be observed everywhere, as was already common in Pashtun tribal society before the war (Chiovenda 2020). The common identity of the Taliban movement is, therefore, surprisingly expressed far less in a symbolic representation of the Quran or Islamic symbols and more in the display of Kalashnikovs and other martial weapons. This image of brute violence is not only disseminated by the Western media but also corresponds to the self-perception and self-representation of the Taliban: carrying weapons is a symbol of power, authority, and coolness. This is, for example, illustrated by the images found in photo studios in Kandahar in December 2001 – shortly after the end of the first Taliban rule (1996–2001). In terms of gestures, facial expressions, and accessories, parallels between the Taliban and the US gangsta-rap culture can certainly be identified (Dworzak 2003).

The goal of many Taliban followers is to maintain local autonomy against outside influence and to protect their own population – especially their own women (Rubin 2007). Although the memory is fading away, the idealised portrait of the good social life in the countryside which existed before the Afghan wars stimulates such sentiments about an idealised local order. The announced preservation of the local order gives legitimacy to those who call themselves Taliban. In contrast, ideas such as the equality of men and women, democracy, or the separation of religion and state are seen as serious threats to rural norms and values. This was personified especially by the NATO soldiers, who were seen as infidels. But also the state is seen as hostile to local autonomy. Here, too, the opposition between tribe and state is taken up, as it already existed before the outbreak of the most recent war in Afghanistan. An Afghan interviewee paraphrased this as follows: ‘When the state is the alternative, the people even welcome the rule of bad Taliban’ (cited in Ladbury 2009: 6). This focus on the local order also represents a significant demarcation against al-Qaida, which has a different scope of aims and action. The Taliban’s sphere of action has been determined by the village, the valley, or at best by Kabul: what happens in the Gaza Strip, Saudi Arabia, or Washington lies outside their interest. In conjunction, the propaganda of

the Taliban movement has addressed the idealised national momentum of a freedom-loving country, and the failure of all intervening forces ever since Alexander the Great in ancient times.

*Social justice:* Finally, the idea of social justice plays an important role in the mobilisation of the Taliban movement. Many followers of the Taliban see themselves as victims of social inequalities and injustices. Thus, the Taliban movement made use of various social differences and conflicts that have accumulated during the protracted war. Taliban succeeded in advocating themselves as the representatives of the socially disadvantaged, the excluded, and the disenfranchised population of Afghanistan. Depending on the social context, existing rivalries between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups, between refugees and those who stayed behind, or between rural and urban populations, have been translated into partisanship for or against the Taliban movement. With the example of a folk romance between Talib Jan and an eponymous 'Pashtana', which enjoys high popularity in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan, James Caron (2012: 76–78) elaborates on the significant social distinction between an elite 'khan morality' and a 'subaltern Taliban morality'. This popular story underlines the Taliban's self-representation as the guardians of ordinary people, those who feel.

The Pakistani writer Asif Ezdi (2009), therefore, emphasises precisely the 'combination of revolutionary and religious zeal that makes the Taliban an extraordinarily powerful force'. This self-image of the Taliban as the movement of the 'little people' corresponds also with the organisation of the movement. The Taliban are not led by the ulama – religious scholars who studied at universities in Cairo or Saudi Arabia – but by ordinary mullahs such as Mullah Omar or Mullah Baradar, who received only a rudimentary education at a local madrasa. This distinguishes the Taliban from the mujahidin parties of the 1980s, which were controlled by ulama. This sense of representing the ordinary life worlds of the population is deeply rooted in Pashtun imaginations of an idealised egalitarian society (Caron 2012).

### *Taliban* – a confusing term

Considering these three components, it becomes obvious that the term *Taliban* today hardly allows for a clear attribution. Instead, it serves as a fuzzy point of reference for very different identities and life contexts that were welded together by the identification of a common threat – namely, the Afghan state and the presence of the NATO troops (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006). For example, Sami-ul-Haq, the late head of the influential Haqqaniyah madrasa where many Taliban leaders had been educated, understood jihad, first and primarily, as the violent rebellion against any form of imperialism; second, as the Pashtun struggle for national self-determination; and, third, as a basic Islamic attitude (Hippler 2008). Therefore, the use of the term *Taliban* is

less an expression of a firmly defined religious-ideological conviction than of quite different life worlds, particularly located at the interface of tribal culture and militant Islamism. In addition, the term referred not only to religious zealots but was increasingly used as self-representation by different constituencies. Therefore local commanders, youth gangs, tribal militias, criminal gangs, or drug lords frequently coined themselves as Taliban even though some of them had never seen a madrasa from the inside. This inflationary use of the term as self-representation also shows the high legitimacy and authority associated with this movement. A frequent statement heard from Taliban commanders is, 'Now that I am a Talib, people listen to me'.

Due to the inflationary use of the term *Taliban*, different references to which the term is applied have developed. An often-mentioned distinction in Afghan parlance is made between the 'good' and the 'bad' Taliban. The common understanding is that 'good Taliban' are said to attack only foreign troops and not Afghans; they are pious, come from the local area, obey the local rules, and embody social justice. In local contexts – for example in southern Afghanistan – the term does not stand for one-sided ideological assignments of 'radical Islam' versus 'Western democracy' but far more for local acceptance. Thus, one could hear the following argument: 'Even the "bad Taliban" respect our traditions and norms – they may pursue bad goals like mining roads or kidnapping, but they respect our norms. Not like coalition forces who strip-search women' (Ladbury 2009: 25).

However, the blurring of the term *Taliban* goes even further. For example, today the terms *Taliban* and *mujahidin* are used synonymously. This stands in contrast to the second half of the 1990s when the Taliban had consciously and explicitly distinguished themselves from the mujahidin, who had squandered their reputation through atrocities during the civil war (Schetter and Mielke 2022). A further categorisation of the Taliban emerged during the last two decades. For example, militias involved in the narcotics economy in southern Afghanistan were often referred to as 'Government Taliban'. Thus, contrary to what was portrayed in Western reporting, not only the Taliban but also the Afghan government was seen as the beneficiary of the drug economy. At first glance, surprising terms such as *Pakistan Taliban*, *Punjabi Taliban* or even *American Taliban* also appeared (Schetter 2012): these were used to describe those militant groups who were suspected of being financed by Islamabad or by Washington and thus obtained no support from the local communities. In addition, many Afghans subscribed to the conspiracy theory that the US have a vested interest in an unstable Afghanistan and therefore supported certain fractions of the Taliban movement. It can be said that the term *Taliban* is used much more diffusely amongst the population than in the official friend-foe attributions (Arbabzadah 2013). As a political category, the term *Taliban* has thus increasingly dissolved over the last two decades.

## The Taliban movement

This expansion of the term *Taliban* raises the question of how the political leadership of the Taliban movement deals with the different life worlds of its followers. On the one hand, the success of the Taliban movement can be explained by the fact that it fomented discourses of social injustice and social inequality and supported local autonomy efforts – unlike NATO and the Afghan government. Thus, it was precisely through the mobilisation of the rural local males that the Taliban movement was able to regain strength in the first place (Giustozzi 2019). On the other hand, such local interpretations of the Taliban constantly pose a challenge to the movement itself. In many places, commanders, tribal leaders, criminals, and drug traffickers who fought side by side with the militant Islamists against NATO troops have regained influence and power. They often pursued – in the name of the Taliban – goals that did not conform to the movement's self-image (Giustozzi 2019). In many cases, they were only interested in maintaining their local power and therefore – whilst maintaining their local autonomy – were sitting on the fence between the government and the Taliban movement (Jackson 2021). The same actor could, therefore, side with the Taliban movement at one time and show up as a government ally at another. An illustrative example is *lashkar-i Islam* (Warriors of Islam), a militia operating in the Pakistan-Afghan borderlands. As late as 2008, it provided escorts for NATO convoys in the Khyber Pass and cooperated with the Pakistani military. In 2009, it carried out attacks on police stations in Peshawar in the name of the Taliban (Schetter 2012).

In order not to be absorbed by these local structures, the Taliban movement has striven for a clearer profile and demarcation. Local elites who were not considered loyal to the movement's policy were systematically eliminated. The written enactment of a code of honour, the so-called *layha*, the appointment of their own governors and police chiefs, and the repeated mention of a tight organisational and governance structure (Giustozzi 2019) documented that the Taliban movement wanted to be more than an umbrella organisation for a loose collective of local resistance groups; instead, it was striving to establish a thoroughly structured parastate order in the name of Islam. The movement's emphasis on such parastatal structures should be interpreted less as an expression of the Taliban movement's political self-image than as a reaction to the dominance of local structures within their own ranks.

Despite all the efforts of the Taliban movement to establish uniform governance structures since its return to power on 15 August 2021, there is still the possibility that the movement itself will revert to particularised local structures. At the regional level, the Taliban movement is characterised by heterogeneity and internal fissures (for example, Quetta Shura, Peshawar Shura, Haqqani Shura, Mashhad Shura). However, even such a regional division of the Taliban movement into four to five groups remains too undifferentiated, as disputes over leadership, and local and tribal rivalries,

repeatedly cause tensions and prepare the ground for the formation of new political movements (for example, the emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan since 2015). Moreover, the Taliban leadership is highly fragmented due to competition and grudges. Every time when prominent Taliban were eliminated (for example, Mullah Dadullah or Akhtar Mohamad Mansur) or arrested (for example, Mullah Baradar), rumours arose that internal Taliban rivals had a hand in delivering competitors to the knife of the US or the Pakistani and Afghan governments (Giustozzi 2019).

### Globalising the local

Although I have taken norms and values of Pashtun tribes as the point of departure for my argumentation, the emergence of the Taliban is a blueprint for political developments that also can be observed in other regions of the world. Thus, the Taliban cannot be reduced to a tribal phenomenon, as many authors promoting the Counter-Insurgency (COIN) strategy tend to do (Johnson 2007; Kilcullen 2009). Rather, the Taliban represent a global political trend in which life worlds of local societies are combined with overarching ideological and/or religious concepts; one can therefore speak of the political globalisation of the local in the name of militant Islam. Militant political movements are successful precisely when traditional local orders can no longer be easily maintained under conditions such as protracted war, refugee situations, or rapid urbanisation. Here, militant Islamic currents offer themselves as compensation, which is understood as anti-state, anti-modern, or anti-Western.

This phenomenon of the confluence of local and militant jihadi ideas can therefore also be observed elsewhere in the world. For example, highly localised Islamist emirates emerged as early as the 1990s in Bagh-i Matal (Nuristan), Pech Valley (Kunar), or the Argo district in Badakhshan (Roy 1995: 82). Even outside Afghanistan, such as in Chechnya, Syria, Iraq, or the Rasht Valley in Tajikistan, small emirates emerged since the 1990s in which local ideas merged with Islamist ones. Similarly, the Pakistani Taliban are split into many localised fronts – for example in the Swat Valley, in Bajaur, or in Waziristan (Sayers 2007). Not only in rural areas but also in the suburbs of big cities like Karachi, Baghdad, or Mogadishu, this fusion of local autonomy and Islamism has long since arrived as a way of life for the socially disenfranchised who insist on the establishment of a localised Islamist order.

However, the confluence of local culture and militant Islamism – for example, under the term *Taliban* – appears as a threat not only to a secular society but also to orthodox Islamists such as the Islamic State (IS). The latter see any kind of tribal, ethnic, or national identities, as well as a religious derivation from orthodoxy (for example, Sufism and Shi'ism), as non-Islamic anachronisms that must be overcome and eradicated.

## Conclusion

This article focused on the social and cultural background of the Taliban. The canvas painted here departs from the general view that foregrounds the hierarchy and efficiency of the Taliban movement (Giustozzi 2019). I do not want to deny these parastate achievements of the movement during the last three decades. My point is rather to illustrate that there are countervailing tendencies. This can be summarised analytically as follows: On the one hand, the Taliban movement has been striving to monopolise its power and authority and to control its cadres. On the other hand, Taliban life worlds are shaped by the locally contextualised confluence of tribal culture and jihadism. The unifying denominator has been the rejection of external influences, whether in the form of NATO, state interference, or development programmes based on 'modernity'. The fact that the communities defended their local orders against all attempts at establishing an overarching, new social order is often seen by Western observers as chaos or anarchy. Against this backdrop, the 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan appeared to be a war of state-building conducted externally, in which local power structures were to be broken in favour of the enforcement of statehood.

It remains to be seen whether the Taliban movement, with its return to power in August 2021, will succeed in making use of state institutions and developing them further, and in controlling the local power holders. This article suggested that the Taliban movement drew a large part of its legitimacy from local resistance to external influence. It would, therefore, be logical if Kabul would remain a weak centre of power under Taliban rule in future, and if the local autonomous structures would prevail. But it is just as likely that the Taliban movement could strengthen the centralised power apparatus and gradually shed the life worlds and legitimations that have sustained the movement for almost thirty years.

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