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## The Nexus of Religious Extremism and Pakhtun Culture: Myths and Realities

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### Abstract:

After the end of cold war, the ascendancy of Taliban in Afghanistan, the rise of religious extremism in frontier regions of Pakistan and Pashtun nationalism has become one of the hotly debated issues. The Pashtun identity, its historical evolution and relationship with religion can be depicted from a statement of Khan Abdul Wali Khan which he gave during 1980s that whether he was a Pashtun first, a Pakistani or a muslim. His famous reply was that he had been a Pashtun for last three thousand years, a muslim for thirteen hundred years and a Pakistani for only twenty five years. This statement shows a complicated nature of Pashtun nationalism especially in wake of post 9/11 world, in which a rise of Taliban phenomenon has overshadowed many of its original foundations. Many scholars in the west and from within the country attribute the rise of talibanization in Pashtun society to the culture of pashtuns. To them, Pashtun culture has many aspects that help promote radical ideas. For example the overwhelming majority of Pashtun population adheres to deobandi school of thought unlike in Punjab which follows brelvi school of thought. Similarly, the rise of talibanization is also cited as an evidence for their claim that Pashtun culture is very conducive for promotion of radical ideas. Thus, these scholars draw close relationship between Pashtun nationalism and talibanization and make them appear as two faces of same coin. However, there are others who approached this issue from a completely different perspective. They try to prove that the two phenomena of Pashtun culture and religious fundamentalism like Talibanization are two completely separate issues which have nothing to do with each other. They resist all those "false notions" that create a link between Pashtun culture, identity and traditions with that of talibanization. This article is an attempt to unpack the contemporary debate by exploring various angles of Pashtun culture in order to understand the true nature of actual debate, and finally come to the conclusion with better understanding of the issue.

### Talibanization as Pashtun Culture:

A number of scholars and critics believe that talibanization is expression and manifestation of Pashtun culture and nationalism. Robert D Kaplan argues that "the

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Taliban constitutes merely the latest incarnation of Pashtun nationalism"(1). Another writer Michael J Totten writes:

"Almost all areas that are either Taliban controlled or Taliban influenced are Pashtun. . . the Taliban are more than an expression of Pashtun nationalism of course. They represent a reactionary movement that idealizes the simplicity and extreme conservatism of 7<sup>th</sup> century Islam. By burnishing this ideology, the Taliban is able, absurdly, to attract support beyond its Pashtun base . . . the ethnic component, though, is a formidable one. It all but guaranteed a certain degree of success by the Taliban in all of "Pashtunistan", in Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan. Yet all the while, the ethnic map imposes constraints, if not limits, on how far the Taliban can expand"(2).

This view that pashtuns are taliban has strong supporters in US scholarship. They try to emphasize a strong link between Pashtun ethnicity and religious fundamentalism. And due to this close relation, they argue that a fight against Taliban is unwinnable because of the ethnic dimension. This view is also propagated by Selig Harrison. He writes:

"To American eyes the struggle raging in Pakistan with the Taliban is about religious fanaticism but in Pakistan it is about an explosive fusion of islamist zeal and simmering ethnic tensions that have been exacerbated by US pressures for military action against the Taliban and its Al-Qaeda allies. Understanding the ethnic dimension of the conflict is the key to a successful strategy for separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda and stabilizing multi-ethnic Pakistan politically"(3).

In Afghanistan, the threat to Pashtun nationalism from rival ethnic groups like the Tajiks is the basis of the Pashtun support for the Taliban insurgency. Tajiks hold key posts in the afghan government, which breeds resentment among the Pashtun, the largest single ethnic group in Afghanistan. In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pashtun population appears to be in a state of tension with the state dominated by a competing ethnic formation.

The potential outcome of this fear is that Pashtun in both Afghanistan and Pakistan might unite across the Durand line (which is often seen as line of hatred that divides brothers). The threat is that a unified "pashtunistan" would be led by a radical islamist leadership as the Taliban would be likely to capture the leadership of Pashtun nationalism. However, another writer Adnan R. Khan draws parallel from practices of Taliban and Pashtun culture. He argues that Pashtuns believe that there are many things that are common in both Islam and taliban for example hospitality, taking revenge, veiling of women, dress code etc"(4).

However, in reality the relationship between Pashtun culture and Talibanization is much more complex and goes beyond ethnicity alone. In the initial two decades of creation of Pakistan, the Pashtun nationalism was much stronger. However, later on, the Pashtun nationalist parties renounced confrontational politics with state oppressive structure and started to integrate itself in the political economy

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of the state. The first problem in this regard happened when the secular Awami National Party (ANP) joined hands with the religious right wing parties of Pakistan in order to remove the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This ultimately resulted in the military coupe of 1977 by General Zia. This period was a great setback to nationalist parties as in this period the seeds of militancy was sown in Pashtun society.

Another complex phenomenon is the differentiation between Afghan and Pakistani taliban. Afghan Taliban used religion to maintain their dominance in relation to the non-pashtun Northern Alliance while Pakistani Taliban actively sought to transform the state and society in Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban manifested their aspiration to change the state and indeed the entire ideological make up of Pakistan. In other words, the Pakistani Pashtun Taliban have acted as a centralist rather than a separatist ideological force, notwithstanding their temporary takeover of certain tribal areas. This shows how much Pashtun nationalism has weakened over the last thirty years.(5). In fact, the nature of Pashtun nationalism has considerably changed during last few decades. The change has happened from secular nature to a more religious version of nationalism.

### **The divide between Pashtun Culture and religious extremism:**

The mainstream intelligentsia seems to be divided about the nature of Pashtun nationalism. One group sees talibanization very much compatible with Pashtun culture. To them, confinement of women to homes, compulsory wearing of burqa, ban on female mobility in public sphere, ban on girls education, ban on music, compulsory beard, killing people by slitting their throats, preference of madrassa over school education, punishment for not saying prayer and above all going mad in revenge and eliminate innocent and perceived enemies without discrimination, all are Pashtun culture. But on other hand, the second group of intellectuals argue completely oppose this viewpoint. This second group of intellectuals hold that Talibanization is very different from Pashtun culture. It has nothing to do with the age long code of Pashtunwali. In fact both talibanization and Pashtunwali stand opposed to each other.

The first problem arises from the stereotyping of Pashtun into very simplistic terms. People tend to take Pashtuns as a very homogeneous population which they are not. They are depicted as monolith identities having no difference between them. They are hard, brave and brutal. British called them Martial race in order to bring them into royal army. Pashtuns are often depicted as blood thirsty for badal (revenge) which they must take at any price. These all are stereotypes and a very simplistic view to see a culture. Most of the social scientists will disagree that each and every Pashtun would take to violent means in the name of revenge. Agreed that revenge is an important notion of the code of Pashtunwali, but nevertheless, this is a notion. When put to a practice it may take different forms, not necessarily the violent form. It

is wrong to portrayal Pashtuns as "savage and uncivilized" who can be so blinded by revenge that they do not differentiate between the innocent and guilty. This process of revenge is strictly governed by a tribal code of Pashtunwali. There is nothing in the code of Pashtunwali than sanctions or even justifies indiscriminate use of violence in revenge. Revenge is a qualified notion in the code. There are clear limits to who can be targeted for revenge. Such limits are not respected by the Taliban. Innocent people, women and children (even from the enemy's family) are never the targets of revenge killing according to the code of Pakhtunwali"(6).

This ancient code of Pashtunwali has not been respected but replaced by Taliban who has killed indiscriminately elderly, women and children.

Secondly, the Pashtuns are as diverse a social and cultural group as any other ethnic formation. It is necessary to acknowledge the multiplicity of Pashtun culture as well as the fact that their religiosity can sometimes be overrated by outsiders. It is fact that most pashtuns have deep respect for the religion Islam. But at the same time they have worldly pursuits in life that are very important to them. Whether they would give up their worldly pursuits for the sake of religion as interpreted by their fellow Pakhtun Taliban at the gunpoint is a big question mark. An example with make this statement clear. Many Pashtun businessmen are notorious for taking heavy interest on the loans they make to people. This is clearly forbidden in Islam but this practice is rampant in Pashtun businessmen. Similar is the case for inheritance to female children. Islam strictly sanctions and give female offspring right to inherit property from their parents. However, in Pashtun culture, it is rarely seen that female would get their share of inherited property.

Another element of Pashtun culture which is not tolerated and forbidden by Taliban is various forms of art. Art has been an integral part and has played a very important role in Pashtun culture. Pashtuns are fond of Attan (traditional dance), singing and other art forms. However, since the Taliban's occupation of the area, these age-long traditions have been banned. Hence, only outsiders who are not well informed would think that the local people would be supporting the occupiers who have replaced their melodious Pashto music with jihadi anthems that are played loudly throughout the region."(7). before the rise of the Taliban no one ever heard of attacks on musicians and music shops. There have always been men with and without beard among the Pashtuns. Those with beard never forced the others to grow beard. There have always been Pashtun who were regular in saying daily prayers and those were not so regular and even those who hardly say any prayers for years and years. Before the Taliban, it was unheard of that those who are regular in saying daily prayers would force the other to be regular in prayers too.

Another thing which is tolerated by Pashtun culture is the sectarian diversity among the pashtuns but it is violated by Taliban. Most Pashtuns are Sunni muslims but there is significant minority which belongs to Shia sect. For centuries the two sects lived in peace until the Taliban came on scene and tried to impose their

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Wahabi-Deobandi brand of religion on all other sects. Many Sunni Pashtuns would participate in Ashura ceremonies and helped in their arrangements. But the Taliban consider Shia sect as kafirs (infidels) who are liable to be murdered. Taliban particularly singled out Shiite soldiers of Pakistan army for beheading when they were captured. However, it is important to note here that "for major part, Shia Sunni rivalries did not exist, instead what one witnessed was tribal rivalries which came to be cloaked in sectarian garb in the heat of the moment."(8).

Another Pashtun value that the Taliban have violently insulted is the reverence for the Jirga (the council of tribal elders). Evolved over centuries of Pashtun history, the institution of Jirga has always been respected by Pashtun in all circumstances. Parties long engaged in a blood feud would temporarily cease hostilities during Jirga proceedings and on the instructions of the Jirga. The Taliban have attacked with suicide bombings at least two grand Jirgas, one in Darra Adam Khel and the other in Orakzai agency, killing the entire tribal leadership of these areas. Taliban have even been attacking funeral ceremonies which are indeed a very inhumane act in any culture. These practices have nothing to do with Pashtun culture. Taliban basically draw their inspiration from a distorted view of Wahabism while Pashtun nationalism seems to spring from the ancient Pashtunwali code.

The Taliban are accused of violating another set of Pashtun values that have been held dear for centuries. These are family values that are defined and articulated within the Pashtunwali code. For example a woman's appearance and mobility in the public sphere were matters that were adjudicated by the family, which alone had a right and privilege in these matters. With the coming of Taliban, the control over the women's clothing and movement has passed out of the hands of family members to unrelated Taliban who forces women to wear burqa or determine their movement in the public arena. There are many areas where Taliban have forbidden women from going shopping or stepping out of their homes with threats. They have even publically executed a woman on charges of adultery or prostitution.

The Pashtun culture is not only internally diverse but also constructed as flexible and adaptable in response to social and historical change. In other words, like all cultures it is dynamic and evolving. This is a quality of culture that the Taliban, influenced by a historical fundamentalist vision, are unable and unwilling to grasp. The Pashtun culture is not static but still changing like any other culture. For example "shuttlecock burqa" once perceived as a part of Pashtun customs, has been discarded in several Pashtun communities. The universal norm is now "Chadar" the length of which varies across the communities. Similarly, more and more Pashtuns are giving priority to female education. Taliban are violently destroying girls' educational institutions because they do not conform to the Taliban world view. Before the rise of Taliban, no one had heard of violent reactions to Pashtun women who had transgressed the boundaries and confinement of their homes.

In this regard Escobar writes:

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Islamic extremism or what they mistakenly call Talibanization in the west is directly opposed to Pashtun nationalism. It is eroding Pashtun nationalism in a big way. The most favorite targets of the Taliban include symbols of Pashtun nationalism like the tomb of saint poet Rehman Baba, which they have bombed out as well as schools artists' houses etc"(9).

## **CONCLUSION:**

The conclusion can be drawn from the debate that Pashtun nationalism and Pashtunwali has nothing to do with the extremist religious ideology of Wahabism which is popularly known as Talibanization. Before 1979, Islam played a supplementary and secondary role in the articulation of Pashtun nationalism. It was after the soviet invasion of Afghanistan that radical forms of Islam began to replace the secular nature of Pashtun nationalism. Nationalism tends to bind territory, identity and citizenship into the sense of nationhood that is shared by all members of the nation. And according to Olaf Caroe, the Governor of NWFP "the Pathans were from almost every point of view, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, historical different even from the muslims of the Punjab."(10). Taliban do not represent Pashtun nationalism. They do not draw their inspiration from Pashtun culture, identity or history. Their ideology has been imported for them from the real basis of pan and political Islam across the indus. This ideology has more to do with the regional ambitions during General Zia period of rule. Pashtuns have in fact greatly suffered at the hands of Taliban. One can mention thousands of innocent girls in Swat and FATA who have been deprived of education through intimidation and destruction of their schools not to mention thousands of them that have been displaced.

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