

Borhan Osman

## Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism

### *Afghanistan's new generation of Islamic activists*

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Not all Afghan youth who are politically active and who want to change the status quo fit into the often simplified categories of being either progressive and educated, or uneducated and subversive. There is an often-overlooked segment of Afghanistan's youth that is educated and engages in modern political debates and activities, while at the same time aiming to replace the current democratic order with a sharia-based government and to reverse many of the freedoms that emerged after 2001. This paper explores their ideologies and activities.

The research has focused on four radical Islamist trends in Afghanistan that appear to have significant appeal and a growing following among educated youth. These are Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks a caliphate that encompasses the whole Muslim world and uses anti-nation state, clandestine political activism; Jamiat-e Eslah, the Afghan affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, which operates as a well-organised and grassroots-oriented organisation; the younger generation of Hezb-e Islami, which seeks to revive the ideological cause of the party it inherited from the anti-Soviet jihad era; and a re-energised Salafism, which seems to become increasingly accepted as part of religious orthodoxy. The four groups reveal a snapshot of what appears to be a broader Islamic trend among segments of Afghan youth.

While all four groups use religion as the primary mobilisation tool, with a specific focus on mosques as convenient platforms to reach out to local

communities, they also all strongly lean on educational institutions. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been a predominantly campus-born group effective at spreading its message among students (and teachers and lecturers). Eslah organises large, dedicated programmes, such as free seasonal courses for school children and religious competitions with attractive awards for the winners. Eslah also runs its own high schools, universities and teacher-training institutes. Hezbi youth have their own university branches in major universities. Modern media, from TV stations to YouTube channels and from highly circulated brochures to slick magazines, are utilised by all four groups to propagate their message, again in different ways. Among the four groups, Eslah has built the largest media network, with FM radio airing in several provinces and a TV channel in Herat. Hizb ut-Tahrir publishes a glossy bi-weekly magazine, sends out press releases on current affairs, and has a vibrant social media presence. Salafis use existing media, including the state radio and television channels of RTA and the private Tolo TV, to promote their message, but it also took over a private TV channel (temporarily) and a private FM radio in Nangarhar. Some have additionally introduced large-scale religious gatherings; Eslah and the Salafis have organised mass public gatherings where thousands of people come to listen to religious lectures.

Demonstrations have been the Islamic activists' most attention-grabbing activity. All of the four

studied groups, except the Salafis, frequently hold protests. In one instance, hundreds of women from Eslah held a demonstration in Kabul in 2013 against the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women condemning the freedoms envisaged in the law as a plot by the West to strip Muslim women of their Islamic dignity. The most remarkable protests, however, came from a more belligerent strand of students on campuses such as Nangarhar and Khost, where rampant protest activism subsided only after authorities shut down the dormitories in 2013.

Ideologically, all four groups state that their aim is to fully bring Islam back into every field of life, but they differ on the details of what such an Islamic revival would look like and how it should be achieved. Hizb ut-Tahrir considers *khilafa* (a Muslim caliphate ruling over all Muslim lands) as the only true Islamic polity and its members generally consider all current governments in Muslim lands as *kufri* (heretic). Eslah and Hezbi youth, on the other hand, look at Muhammad Morsi's short-lived presidency in Egypt and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rule in Turkey as possible inspiring models of modern Islamic government. None consider the Taliban's previous Islamic Emirate regime as an example of a viable or desirable Islamic state. Salafis and Hizb ut-Tahrir consider democracy and multi-party politics as anti-Islamic. The Islamic activists' views on women's education and work differ widely, even within each group (often depending on how conservative an individual's home area is, rather than on which group he or she belongs to).

The diversity in their Islamic trends, in terms of message, level of organisation and political aims, means that there is a variety of 'flavours' on offer, allowing these groups to accommodate audiences with different types of religious dispositions. The appeal of these groups is partly fed by a widespread frustration with a government seen as corrupt, partisan and too dependent on the West, something that has led segments of the educated and entitled-feeling youth to turn to Islamic

activism as an alternative to the current socio-political system. The groups' appeal indicates that the historically unsuccessful Islamic governments of the mujahedin and the Taliban have not necessarily discredited the search for an 'Islamic solution' in Afghanistan.

Politically, the Islamic groups have, so far, managed to walk a tightrope between, on the one hand, the government, which they often criticise, and on the other, the Taliban insurgency with which they are often in undeclared competition. They have also managed to preserve their religious credibility among both pro- and anti-state segments of society and have, so far, not suffered the same violent targeting that has hit a large number of pro-government *ulama*, tribal elders and officials.

Looking ahead, all four groups seem poised to grow at a steady pace, both in numbers and influence within public institutions, and to become an influential part of the country's political landscape. This is especially the case with the three groups that have political ambitions and that are, in different ways, seeking to increase their influence within the government: Eslah through recruiting sympathisers from within government institutions, Hizb ut-Tahrir through infiltration of institutions and Hezb-e Islami youth through the patronage of its older generation already in government. Because Islamic activism is a movement in transition, predicting its future behaviour is difficult. The shape the different strands take and whether they develop into violent extremism, or not, will depend on various factors, including the prevalent political environment in Afghanistan and the fate of other Islamic groups internationally, from both jihadist and political spectrums, in their projects of establishing an Islamic order. But how to accommodate these Islamist groups with other growing, and possibly conflicting, trends such as the 'secularists' will become a pressing question as Afghanistan seeks to move to self-reliance.

## **ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK (AAN)**

The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is a non-profit, independent policy research organisation. It aims to bring together the knowledge and experience of a large number of experts to inform policy and increase the understanding of Afghan realities.

The institutional structure of AAN includes a team of analysts and a network of regular contributors with expertise in the fields of Afghan politics, governance, rule of law and security. AAN regularly publishes in-depth thematic reports, policy briefings and comments.

The main channel for dissemination of the reports is the AAN website. For further information, please visit <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org>.

## **QUALITY CONTROL OF AAN'S PUBLICATIONS**

The opinions expressed in publications by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) do not necessarily reflect those of AAN. Publications by AAN are, however, subjected to academic style review and peer review to ensure the quality of the research and the reliability of the analysis. AAN thematic reports and briefing papers are read by at least two internal and two external reviewers, discussion papers by at least two internal reviewers and dispatches by at least one internal reviewer. For further information about the quality control and the review process of AAN's publications, please contact AAN at [info@afghanistanalysts.org](mailto:info@afghanistanalysts.org).

## **AUTHOR BIO**

Borhan Osman is a researcher with the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), he is based in Afghanistan. His areas of interest include Taleban, youth radicalisation, jihadism and political Islam. He has worked as a journalist with Afghan and international media from 2003 to 2012. He is trained in Islamic studies at both madrasa and university level (BA). He speaks Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to extend special thanks to AAN co-director Martine van Bijlert whose advice and support throughout the research and writing process were invaluable. Martine's assistance proved to be essential for completing this paper.

AAN also wishes to thank the peer reviewers for their comments and input.