

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 Taleban'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 Taleban 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 Taleban 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth in post-2001 Afghanistan are often described in generalised terms and classified as either educated urbanites with progressive ideas on the one hand, or uneducated rural cohorts with anti-modern tendencies on the other. International actors and many press reports, keen to show the positive face of post-Taleban Afghanistan, often paint a picture of a new generation that readily embraces democratic values, pointing to developments such as more children going to school and university, civic activism and the vigorous discourse about human rights and freedoms among the younger population. This view sees, at the other end of the spectrum, the violent extremists, the likes of the Taleban, who tend to be treated as the country's default Islamist force and are looked at mainly through the lens of the security threats they pose.

This binary classification is simplistic and probably rooted in the limited study of current trends in society, particularly among youth. More diversity exists among Afghan youth than the dichotomy of disruptive militants versus progressive

modernisers. This diversity includes politically active youth, both urban and rural, who advocate *against* democracy, struggle non-violently to establish a sharia-based government and talk of reversing existing freedoms. These youths are themselves diverse and follow various ideologies, but they generally have enjoyed a modern education (some have been educated in the West), engage in what are recognisably modern political debates and use modern methods of mobilisation and recruitment, such as demonstrations, rallies, electronic media and well-defined and well-followed membership procedures. They might also share the narrative of the traditional Taliban, calling the government a “puppet of the West” and international troops “occupying forces.” However, many are professionals, a sizeable minority are women and these youths are generally well connected to their peers in the broader Muslim world. Groups that use religion as their primary mobilisation tool already constitute an important segment of Afghan youth and seem well-poised to become an integral and influential part of the country’s future political landscape.

Such trends among youth activists have received little, if any, public attention, partly because of the current focus in media and research on military groups that are an immediate threat to the security of society. This is short-sighted. But the security-centric outlook can also be misleading, as it is increasingly drawing attention to the Iraq and Syria-based Islamic State (IS) and its presumed and currently over-stated presence in Afghanistan. The obsession with movements who are fighting in the name of Islam risks obscuring other trends that have no immediate security relevance, including Afghanistan’s growing non-violent Islamic activist groups.

Understanding these trends is important. As Afghanistan seeks to transition to a sustainable democracy, and hopefully a viable peace, the question of how the country can accommodate political groups espousing disparate schools of thought, from Islamism to secularism, will become increasingly pressing. Ideological battles currently fought in the margins may well be pushed to the centre of the political and civic struggle. A poor understanding of conflicting ideological currents, especially those based in religion, could result in ill-advised approaches by the state and political groups. This paper therefore seeks to contribute to the greater understanding of Islamic activist groups. A few recent studies and reports have tackled the topic, but this paper takes those initial

inquiries a step further by digging deeper into the phenomenon and with added focus.¹

This paper, which offers a snapshot of the present landscape of Islamic activism in Afghanistan, is based exclusively on fieldwork and focuses on four groups. The first group is a newcomer to the Afghan scene: Hizb ut-Tahrir, a primarily Europe-based, pan-Islamic organisation with explicit global ambitions; it seeks a caliphate that encompasses the entire Muslim world through anti-nation state, political activism. The second group is the Afghan affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamiat-e Eslah, which builds upon a ‘failure of the mujahedin’ narrative and a legacy it claims from the first Afghan political Islamist movement from the 1960s Nuhzat-e Islami. Inspired by two major non-violent Islamist groups in the region (Jamaat-e Islami in the Indian subcontinent and the Muslim Brotherhood of the Arab world), Jamiat-e Eslah operates as a modern, well-organised, grassroots-oriented organisation with a major focus on the youth. The third group is the younger generation of Hezb-e Islami, the only mujahedin faction that has managed to maintain its ideological character and still enjoy an active youth base. This new generation of Hezb-e Islami lives in symbiosis with both the anti-government insurgent camp and the pro-government political party. Lastly, there are networks of young Salafists. Afghanistan is seeing a re-energised Salafism which seems to be increasingly accepted as part of religious orthodoxy in Afghanistan and to be better connected to peers in the wider world. A small portion of the Salafist youth, only, are leaning towards global jihadism, particularly following the rise of similar trends in the Middle East manifested by the Islamic State group.

¹ Two studies published in recent years are worth mentioning for their inclusion of or focus on Islamist trends among the youth. They are *Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student politics in Afghanistan* by Antonio Giustozzi, AREU 2010 and *Trends in Student Radicalization across University Campuses in Afghanistan* by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014. The scope of both these studies is limited to university campuses. They examine various trends, with a focus on the general nature of radicalism rather than explaining ‘who’s who’ within the various groups. In addition to the two reports, a few press articles have reported on radical currents. These include “Despite West’s Efforts, Afghan Youths Cling to Traditional Ways” by Azam Ahmed and Habib Zahori, *New York Times*, 31 July 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/01/world/asia/despite-west-efforts-afghan-youths-cling-to-traditional-ways.html> (accessed May 2015) and “Afghanistan’s New Fundamentalist Players” by Fazelminalah Qazizai and Chris Sands, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/afghanistan-s-new-fundamentalist-players> (accessed May 2015).

The paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two offers a brief history of the evolution, ideology, organisational structure and main constituencies of the four groups. Section three explores the recruitment tactics and activities of the groups and discusses their relative influence. Section four provides insight into their practical goals and message. Section five presents two cases of contentious politics –that is, the use of disruptive techniques to make a political point – at Nangarhar and Khost universities. Section six presents general conclusions about Islamic activism in Afghanistan.

Methodology

The core of the fieldwork for this research consists of more than 50 semi-structured, key informant interviews with members of the studied groups, at both senior and junior levels, as well as former members and other people who were in a position to provide relevant insights and detailed information. Most of the interviews were conducted between September and December 2013 in Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Balkh, Kandahar, Khost, Herat, Nangarhar and Kabul. Additional interviews were carried out in September and December 2014 after the initial draft of the paper was written in order to fill in the research gaps. The Kabul interviews included a range of interlocutors based in different provinces. The author gathered further information through personal communications with relevant sources, material distributed by the studied groups, previously unused notes, direct observation, and a literature study of relevant papers and reports.²

² The author's study included dozens of papers and books regarding Islamic activism from other contexts, as well as the Afghan context, to better understand the overall nature of the phenomenon and to gain background insight into the topic. Some of the notable works the author read during this research are: *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* by David Edwards, 2002; *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* by Asta Olesen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995; *Afghanistan's Religious Landscape: Politicising the sacred* by Kaja Borchgrevink and Kristian Berg Harpviken, Noref, 2010; *Islam and Islamism in Afghanistan* by Kristin Mendoza, graduate research dissertation, Islamic Legal Studies Program, Harvard Law School, 2004 (unpublished); Giustozzi, "Between Patronage..." [see FN 1]; *Islamic Activism: A social movement theory* by (ed) Quintan Wiktorowicz, Indiana University Press, 2004; "Islamic Mobilisation: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood" by Ziad Munson, *The Sociological Quarterly* 42 (4): 1–44, 2002; *Social Movement Theory and the Radical Islamic Activism* by Thomas Olesen, Aarhus University, 2009; and, among non-English sources, موسوعة الحركات الإسلامية في الوطن

The paper focuses on the Sunni currents only; it does not cover Shia politico-religious trends, which would need a separate study. All respondents to this study were male, but efforts were made to include information on female members and activists. Finally, this paper relied on how members described the groups, how they function and what they stand for. The findings of the research may, for that reason, be discrepant with official narratives of the studied groups, or what their leaders preach about themselves. The official accounts and publications of these groups, although the author is aware of their contents, have not been relied upon for the findings of this research.

Key Concepts

Islamic activism – which is the focus of this paper – is defined here as the organised or semi-organised struggle to make the Islamic sharia the foundation of social, political and personal life. The paper deliberately avoids the term *fundamentalism*, which is taken from American Protestantism of the 19th century and is often misleadingly also used to describe trends in other cultures, especially Islam, and usually carries judgemental overtones. The use of another common term, *Islamism*, is minimised due to its ambivalence, as it often lumps together a broad variety of ideologies to include any group with *any* sort of Islamic message: groups at the two extremes of the spectrum, such as the violent jihadist group al-Qaeda on one hand and the inherently peaceful and traditionalist Tablighi Jamaat of the Indian sub-continent on the other hand, are often painted with the same brush. Where this paper does use the term *Islamism*, it refers to movements or trends with a prominent focus on the political aspect of Islam, which is a narrower concept than Islamic activism. The paper uses *radical extremism* to refer to ideologies that seek to bring a fundamental and immediate change to existing social or political systems whether through violent or non-violent means.

2. CURRENT TRENDS IN ISLAMIC ACTIVISM

This section gives an overview of the current landscape of Islamic trends of the Sunni sect in Afghanistan by focusing on four specific groups: the largely clandestine Hizb ut-Tahrir, the large and openly operating Jamiat-e Eslah, the youth of

العربي وإيران وتركيا [Encyclopedia of Islamic Movements in the Arab World, Iran and Turkey] by Dr Ahmad Moussalli, Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2005.

Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan and the loosely organised Salafi networks. Two of the four groups, Jamiat-e Eslah and Hizb ut-Tahrir, are well-organised and have a hierarchical structure and rigorous process of membership, while the Hezb-e Islami youth and Salafis represent looser organisations and are basically networks bound by common ideology, symbols and leaders. This study singles Salafism out from among other religious groups lacking an explicit political agenda, for its religious rigidity and capacity to affect other Islamic trends. Young Salafis, moreover, tend to be more susceptible to radical extremism.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, Mobilising Afghans for a Global Caliphate

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a transnational political organisation that seeks global Islamic unity and the restoration of the *khilafa* or caliphate: a single state encompassing all Muslim lands following the perceived model of the Prophet and his four immediate successors. Founded by a Palestinian jurist, Taqiuddin Nabahani, in 1953, Hizb ut-Tahrir can be found in many Muslim-majority and Western countries. The group is well organised, has a strongly hierarchical structure and a rigorous process of membership and recruitment. Hizb ut-Tahrir members and associates in Afghanistan are predominantly found among the youth.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is one of the most radical non-violent groups recruiting among educated Afghan youth in that it seeks to radically change the country's status quo, both in terms of its political and economic systems, as well as the personal freedoms of its subjects. The group uses public universities and student hostels as its epicentre of recruitment and mobilisation, its main activities revolving around dissemination of its message through literature, private meetings, seminars and demonstrations. Ideologically, it divides the path towards a caliphate into three phases: (1) recruitment during which outreach and ideological training lead to a solid membership base; (2) propagation to the wider masses during which the caliphate is introduced as an alternative to what is perceived to be the dominant non-Islamic political system; and (3) taking power with the support of officials within the government or the army. Although Hizb ut-Tahrir is not violent in its principles and does not advocate violence to achieve its goals, many of its Afghan members in interviews expressed support for the Taliban's

'jihad' against foreign forces, as a complementing effort to their caliphate project in Afghanistan.³

The precise time of Hizb ut-Tahrir's arrival to Afghanistan as an official cell is not clear; sources mentioned dates that ranged from 2003 to 2007. The group's visibility started to grow in 2007, and by 2008 it was actively operating in a number of provinces, starting in Kabul and Kapisa – these emerged as the hub for Hizb ut-Tahrir's activities and propaganda from which it spread northward to neighbouring Parwan and Panjsher provinces. Hizb ut-Tahrir's current strongholds in Afghanistan are Badakhshan, Takhar, Kapisa, Kabul and Herat. Who Hizb ut-Tahrir's pioneers in Afghanistan were is unclear. They may have come from the region, either Central Asia or Pakistan where the group already had an active presence, although the group's senior members reject that notion. Observers and former Hizb ut-Tahrir associates have suggested that the first Afghan cell may have been mentored by Afghans living in Europe, some of whom travelled to Afghanistan for weeks to supervise Hizb ut-Tahrir activities.⁴

Fearing a government crackdown, Hizb ut-Tahrir operates largely underground, although members' precautions vary from place to place according to the vigilance of local authorities. While the government has not spelled out its policy on the group, it has occasionally arrested some of its members. In July 2009, for instance, in the run up to the presidential election, Afghan National Security Forces detained as many as 30 Hizb ut-Tahrir members and supporters during a crackdown against the organisation in Kabul, Kapisa and Badakhshan, triggered by the group's anti-election campaigning in which democracy and electoral politics were denounced as non-Islamic and *haram*. Those detained during the raids faced charges of posing a threat to the country's internal and external security; some were given prison sentences of up to two years.⁵

The group's clandestine nature makes it difficult to get a clear picture of the organisational structure. The hierarchy appears to be pyramidal, whereby lower-ranking members and associates are kept in the dark about the structure above the basic cell

³ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member in Badakhshan, September 2013, and senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member in Kabul, September 2014.

⁴ Interview with a former Hizb ut-Tahrir associates in Badakhshan; interview with an independent observer and human rights activist, Takhar, September 2013.

⁵ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, September 2014.

(*halqa*) level.⁶ The *halqas*, tailored to different levels of membership, meet on a regular basis to study the organisation's ideology following a curriculum that is the same across all countries and that has been translated into Dari and Pashto. Members can move up in the hierarchy based on their commitment to the teachings of the curriculum, digestion of the *fikra* (ideology) and development of an Islamic *shakhsieya* (personality). Official membership, granted based on the assessment of the *halqa* convener, can take between a few months and a few years.⁷ Information on sources of funding was not freely available. Members claimed that the organisation is largely funded through members' contributions (who provide a specific percentage of their salaries) and donations from supporters, but did not provide supporting details.⁸

Although Hizb ut-Tahrir has expanded into various sections of society, universities still make up its largest recruiting ground. Public universities where Hizb ut-Tahrir is strongly present are Kabul University, Al-Biruni University in Kapisa, Faizabad University in Badakhshan, Takhar University in Taloqan and Herat University in Herat city. Its influence was also growing in 2014 in Kandahar University. Hizb ut-Tahrir runs its cells on these campuses as a semi-clandestine network with different levels of secrecy. In Faizabad University, where the group is strongest, Hizb ut-Tahrir associates do not hide their organisational identity and use any opportunity, from class debates to campus chats, to promote their message. In Badakhshan, Hizb ut-Tahrir is publicly visible in some districts, such as Baharak and Ishkashim, where it is seen as the most prominent youth group.⁹ Members hold their *halqas* openly and invite mullahs and tribal elders to their meetings. In Kabul, on the other hand, where the group is wary of a security crackdown, Hizb ut-Tahrir associates keep a lower profile and abstain from engaging in public debates.

Members claim to have sympathisers in the security sector, including the police and army, in some provinces who, they say, are helpful in preventing crackdowns on group members and activities. Hizb ut-Tahrir interlocutors categorised

all supporters who work in the security sector as "sympathisers" who can not join the group while in service. Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir are banned by the organisation from holding senior positions in the judiciary, legislative and executive, but in their case because these roles involve implementing and formulating non-sharia policies and human-made laws. Members also may not hold positions in the Afghan security forces, because of their dependence on foreign funding.¹⁰ This is in contrast to most other Muslim countries, where Hizb ut-Tahrir actively tries to recruit from the security sector and, most desirably, the military, as these are essential for their vision of the third and final stage in the change in power when authority is surrendered to them, so the state can be run by a caliph. In the current situation in Afghanistan, however, Hizb ut-Tahrir members argue it cannot yet enter its third stage, since there is no independent army.¹¹

Hizb ut-Tahrir members are present in government, holding 'non-authoritative' positions. Two senior members, for instance, have worked at the National Security Council in administrative or technical capacities. Hizb ut-Tahrir has attracted well-educated youth, some with post-graduate degrees from Western universities, who have fared well in securing jobs with international non-governmental organisations and in the private sector. Other constituencies include media people, school students, university and schoolteachers and mullahs. The organisation's influence could not be quantified concretely; due to the secret nature of the organisation, members treated issues of structure and influence as confidential. Senior members, however, claimed that Hizb ut-Tahrir enjoys a high rate of growth, with the number of its members and associates in Afghanistan tripling between 2009 and 2014 and having at least one *halqa* in all but a few provinces.¹² Estimates by former members and other interlocutors put the number of Hizb ut-Tahrir members and associates for Kabul and Badakhshan in the hundreds for each.

⁶ Interviews with two former Hizb ut-Tahrir associates in Kunduz, September 2013, Kabul, December 2013; and members in Kabul and Faizabad, September–December 2013.

⁷ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, September 2014.

⁸ Interviews with two senior Hizb ut-Tahrir members, Herat, October 2013 and Kabul, December 2013.

⁹ Interview with a civil society activist, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁰ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹¹ Interview with Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, September 2014. According to this senior member, this is currently part of the organisational doctrine in Afghanistan.

¹² Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, September 2014.

Jamiat-e Eslah, in the Footsteps of the Muslim Brotherhood

Jamiat-e Eslah wa Enkeshaf-e Ejtmayi-e Afghanistan – or the Society for Reform and Social Development of Afghanistan – is usually known as Jamiat-e Eslah or just Eslah. It is principally modelled after and inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, but is also influenced by Jamaat-e Islami of Pakistan.¹³ It struggles for the Islamisation of all fields of life, from the person to the state, through three gradual phases: reforming the individual, reforming the family, and reforming society. The term 'reform' (*eslah*) is used by members as an equivalent for Islamisation.

Eslah appears to be Afghanistan's largest and fastest expanding Islamist organisation with a predominantly youth following. It operates openly and is officially registered. Since it started activities in Afghanistan in 2003, it has extended its presence to most provinces. By summer 2014, it had local branches in more than 20 provinces with over 1,000 official members and a few thousand active supporters, mostly in the process of becoming members.¹⁴ Eslah is particularly strong in Kabul, Nangarhar, Herat and Kunduz where the provincial branches even run their own universities, schools and radio or television channels. In all these four provinces, Eslah has its FM radio stations; Kabul and Kunduz host two of its university campuses; in Herat it runs a TV channel: all this makes Eslah the widest-reaching and most ambitious of the four Islamic groups. In Herat and Kabul, it also has active women's sections that organise major events (such as courses and seminars) and hold their own *halqas*.

The organisation is well networked. Eslah members hold low-visibility positions in the government, private sector and independent organisations, but the organisation bans its members from holding the most senior executive posts, such as governors and ministers. A member who defied the rules and accepted an offer as governor of a province was

¹³ Eslah's members do not explicitly say that the organisation is a Muslim Brotherhood branch, but this can be understood from the organisation's rhetoric and publications. Its members' slogans reflect the famous motto of the Brotherhood's Egyptian founder, Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), that Islam is both a religion and a state (*deen wa dawla*). The organisation's name is also in line with Brotherhood chapters in other countries, such as Kuwait (Jamiat al-Eslah al-Ijtimayi), Yemen (Jamiat al-Eslah) and the recently outlawed Jamiat al-Eslah wa Tawjih al-Ijtimayi of the United Arab Emirates. Former members have also indicated that Eslah is affiliated with the Egypt-based international Islamic organisation.

¹⁴ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2014.

dissociated in 2008.¹⁵ Eslah had two members in parliament during the 2005–10 period,¹⁶ but banned members from running in the subsequent parliamentary election. With the expanding insurgency and rising unpopularity of the government, Eslah apparently feared that having members in the legislative or senior executive positions would endorse the legitimacy of the state, which it believed it did not have, and would harm its own standing among the more conservative segments of society.¹⁷ During fieldwork, Eslah's members were found to be overwhelmingly made up of educated people, most of them early and mid-career. Members came from a variety of professions, from lawyers to doctors and from engineers to imams. A couple of dozen Eslah members have small businesses.

One of Eslah's largest departments is its youth wing, which has evolved into a stand-alone, but subordinate, organisation. In 2012, it was registered as *Nehad-e Jawanan-e Musalman* (Foundation of Young Muslims) abbreviated as *Najm* (meaning star). Najm leaders in late 2014 boasted of as many as 1,200 active members across Afghanistan.¹⁸ This growth rate is higher than the main organisation (Eslah), and is partially linked to the loosening of membership criteria. The youth branch organises its own publications and events and reports directly to the director of Jamiat-e Eslah.

Eslah is most visible through its frequent large public gatherings and Islamic lectures that draw thousands of people. In Nangarhar and Herat, open lectures and competitions are held in rural areas, exposing the organisation's activities to diverse strata of common people. It has also occasionally held demonstrations in response to political issues in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Eslah is the only Islamist organisation in Afghanistan that engages in charity and social activities in a significant way. Registered as a social organisation, Eslah pretty much acts as a socio-political movement with a political message. Its members often use the word Islamic movement (*Islami harakat* and *Islami tahrik* in Pashto, *harakat-e Islami* in Dari) to imply that they are the extension and rightful inheritors of the Islamic

¹⁵ That member was Hazrat Din Nur, who served for a short time as the governor of Nuristan before dying in a traffic incident.

¹⁶ The MPs were Mawlawi Sayed Rahman in the Wolesi Jirga from Laghman and Muhammad Naser Atayee in the Meshrano Jirga from Herat.

¹⁷ Interview with a former Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹⁸ Interview with a senior Najm member, Kabul, December 2014.

movement (*Nuhzat-e Islami*) that was developed around the Sharia Faculty of Kabul University in the 1960s (see Box 1).¹⁹

Box 1

Jamiat-e Eslah's Afghan Roots

What is called Jamiat-e Eslah in Afghanistan today has its roots in the *Markaz-e Farhangi-e Islami-e Afghanistan* (the Cultural Islamic Centre of Afghanistan) established in Peshawar, Pakistan, around 1990. The founders of Markaz were mid-level members of several mujahedin *tanzims* (factions) who were living in Pakistan as refugees and were unhappy with the way the factions were acting. Their main objection against the *tanzims* was the lack of 'real *tarbiyat*' (Islamic inculcation), lack of discipline, absence of strategy for the Islamic project and the leaders' obsession with power at the cost of ideology. Dubbed later by outsiders as 'Markazis', the dissidents mostly came from Hezb-e Islami, Ittihad-e Islami and Jamiat-e Islami.²⁰ Most Markaz founders had received ideological training from or were in close interaction with Kamal Helbawy, a prominent Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood member residing in Pakistan, and Jamaat-e Islami leaders, such as Professor Anis Ahmad. The Markaz started to recruit youth and organise them into *halqas* or training cells, where members would study the Brotherhood and Jamaat's essential ideology books, often translated into Dari and Pashto. They also organised cultural events, published two magazines, *Paigham* and *Eslah* and later established a branch for women. They founded the centre with the aim of returning to what they saw

as the 'original' methodology of *the* Islamic movement²¹ of the 1960s and 70s.²²

During the Taleban's Emirate, the Markazis opened an office and a library in Jalalabad, but were banned in 1998 on suspicion of promoting Ikhwanī (ie Muslim Brotherhood) and Hezb-e Islami ideology and trying to stir opposition to the Emirate's rule. The organisation continued its operation underground and expanded to other provinces, such as Wardak and Kabul.²³ After the collapse of the Taleban, Markaz publicly launched its activities inside Afghanistan, opening its first office in Kabul in 2003 and registering with the government as a social organisation under its current name *Jamiat-e Eslah wa Enkishaf-e Ejtmayi-e Afghanistan*. Eslah's Herat branch is called *Anjuman-e Akhlaq wa Marifat* (the Society for Morals and Knowledge). Initially an independent organisation, the Herat branch merged with Eslah around 2006 and kept its name, while also using Eslah's name interchangeably.

Eslah's formative years in Pakistan, where the Muslim Brotherhood's Arabs worked in close coordination with Jamaat-e Islami of Pakistan to organise the Afghan 'Islamic movement', have added a peculiar character to Jamiat-e Eslah. The methods of the two supporting sister organisations, Pakistan's Jamaat-e Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, have affected both Eslah's modus operandi and its ideological literature, with works by ideologues from both organisations being taught in its *halqas*. That makes Jamiat-e Eslah look in two directions for inspiration: Pakistan and the Arab world.

Jamiat Eslah has borrowed the organisational terms used by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, such as *usra* (Arabic for family) for circle or cell (the normal word would be *halqa*), *shuba* for subdivision of town or province branches (usually consisting of a cluster of *halqas*) and *naqib* for the head of the *halqa*.²⁴ The internal structure is

¹⁹ Eslah's use of the term *harakat-e Islami* instead of *nuhzat-e islami*, however, indicates a reshaping of the expression along the lines of its Arabic usage (al-haraka al-islamiya), whereas *nuhzat*, the term used in the 1960s and 70s, was simply an indigenous rendering for the same concept. Some members in Pashto, especially in the east, use *Islami tahrik*, which is identical in Urdu and seems to denote an adopted term from Jamaat-e Islami literature.

²⁰ The founders included Sifatullah Qanit (Hezb-e Islami), Fazl Hadi Wazin (Hezb-e Islami), Naser Shafiq (Hezb-e Islami Khalis), Mutiullah Tayeb (Jamiat-e Islami) and, at a later stage, Sayed Habib Shakir and Muhammad Yunus Ibrahimi (Ittihad-e Islami). Among prominent Afghan political figures of that time, Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai and Sayed Nurullah Emad were members of the board of trustees of which Helbawy and Anis Ahmad were the leading figures. Ahmadzai was then a deputy to Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf after working as a close associate of Burhanuddin Rabbani. Emad was then the deputy of Jamiat-e Islami.

²¹ The Islamic movement here refers to the *Nuhzat-e Islami* of the 1960s and 70s, which was initiated, among others, by Ghulam Muhammad Niazi, a professor of the Sharia Faculty of Kabul University, who was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood during his studies in Egypt in the 1950s.

²² Interview with one of the founders of the Markaz, who is no longer a member of Eslah, Kabul, September 2014.

²³ Personal communication with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, summer 2012.

²⁴ *Shuba* is an Arabic word which means branch. In Afghanistan, the term is usually used in Dari and Pashto to refer to a (government) department or sub-department within an office. In this sense, it is used for a

strictly hierarchical, with three major assemblies: the Shura-ye Markazi (Central Council), an elected body of forty or so members, which meets twice a year and makes policies and rules; the Majles-e Tanfezi (Executive Council), which oversees the day-to-day operation of the organisation; and the Majma'a-e Umumi (General Assembly), which is called in exceptional cases to endorse a major change to the organisation. The head of the Central Council is the *de facto* leader of the organisation, although publicly, the head of the Executive Office is presented as the general leader. Operationally, Eslah runs its activities through different departments: *Dawa* and *Irshad* (invitation and guidance), for public affairs, including media and publications; Youth and Social Services for charity work, including medical and emergency aid; *Tarbiat* (teaching) for recruitment; the Sisters Department for the recruitment of women; and Finance for fundraising.

Membership of Jamiat-e Eslah follows a rigorous process of assessment, which can take two to five years. The framework through which would-be members advance is membership of a study circle (*usra* or *halqa*) where five to eight people meet regularly to study, discuss and inculcate ideology following a specified curriculum. Would-be members must advance through two stages of *usra* and can then become members of the third level upon swearing allegiance to the organisation. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood uses the same three-stage recruitment system. The yardstick for membership is an understanding and practice of the ideology, participation in the organisation's activities and personal piety. Although Eslah is not exclusively made up of youth, its grassroots membership is overwhelmingly under 30 years of age. The leadership, however, tends to be in their 40s or older.

Jamiat-e Eslah's funding is one of the organisation's closely guarded secrets. Its members say the organisation's extensive activities are funded through monthly contributions (3 per cent of each member's personal income), as well as extra donations by members and wealthy supporters. Some sources suggest that the

physical office. In Eslah's usage, however, it means a sub-division of a provincial or city branch consisting of a certain number of *halqas* – in the same geographical divisional sense that the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt uses it. See also *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Future of Political Islam in Egypt* by Ashraf El-Sherif, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mb_future_egypt1.pdf (accessed May 2015); and *Religious Determinism: Unlocking the Ideology of Muslim Brothers* by Hazem Kandil, University of California, Los Angeles, undated.

organisation also receives generous donations from rich supporters of the global Muslim Brotherhood outside the country, mainly from the Gulf countries.²⁵ Domestically, the organisation fundraises through events such as *iftars* during Ramadan where rich sympathisers and businesspeople are encouraged to donate through a combination of sermons and PowerPoint presentations of the organisation's activities.

Hezb-e Islami Youth, Inherited Ideology

While the officially registered branch of Hezb-e Islami – the Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (HIA) – has toned down its ideological connotations, the youth wing of the party, and those aligned with it, have retained an overtly radical stance.²⁶ An example of such hard-line dissent was the response by the Hezb-e Islami youth to the Strategic Partnership Agreement and Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States.²⁷

Box 2

Hezb-e Islami's Background

Ideologically, Hezb-e Islami is similar to Jamiat-e Eslah, as it shares the same sources of inspiration – the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami – and seeks to establish an Islamic system through conventional political means. The two organisations however follow very different approaches, with Eslah's dynamism and diversity of activities resulting in a much broader and faster growing constituency. Hezb-e Islami itself emerged as an offshoot of the *Jawanan-e Musalman* (Muslim Youth) organisation, which was involved in public confrontations with leftists on the Kabul University campus in the first half of the 1970s and failed attempts of armed rebellion in 1975. During

²⁵ Interview with a former Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

²⁶ When discussing Hezb-e Islami youth, this paper includes all youth who identify with the Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (HIA), regardless of their formal membership status. The youth linked to the militant part of the party – Hezb-e Islami-ye Gulbudin (HIG) – are however treated separately. Although on the ground the two are sometimes indistinguishable, they follow separate structures which are separate at higher levels and use different tactics.

²⁷ Interview with a senior HIA official, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with an HIA youth department member, Jalalabad, November 2013. The youth department head and members were actively campaigning *against* the signing of the agreement considering it as a "continuation of the American occupation" while the senior party members were publicly advocating *for* the agreement.

the armed resistance against the 1978 communist coup and later the Soviet invasion, Hezb-e Islami emerged as arguably the most powerful, well-organised and aggressive Islamist faction. After Kabul fell to the mujahedin in 1992, Hezb-e Islami was one of the key factions engaged in a brutal power struggle among the factions. When the Taliban advanced from Kandahar towards Kabul, considerable numbers of Hezb-e Islami's local fighters and commanders switched to the Taliban, while others laid down their weapons with little resistance. While the Taliban ruled, Hezb-e Islami as a group was largely in a state of dormancy. Its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, lived in exile in Iran while other senior members lived in Pakistan or were scattered inside Afghanistan and other countries. After the intervention of the US-led coalition forces in late 2001, Hezb-e Islami members started following different trajectories. Hekmatyar and his closer circle rejected the intervention and the political process laid out in Bonn and continues to pursue a jihad against the foreign troops and the government, although followers of his military efforts have apparently been shrinking in recent years.²⁸ Others joined the government and launched their own parties in Kabul. The most influential and the only party to use the same name is Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (HIA), currently led by Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal; it registered as a party in September 2005 and has emerged in the eyes of many as the inheritor or alternative to the mother organisation. Given its influence, the faction became the strongest recruiter among the Hezb-e Islami youth, especially the educated and urban.

Hezbi youth is the official youth section of Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan; it was set up in 2007, but only became fully active in 2012.²⁹ The establishment of the youth section was a response to a decade of decay within the party's youth base. Most of Hezbi youths' activism in the decade after the fall of the Taliban centred on campuses; there were a couple of attempts to organise these scattered youth into student groups, but they did not last long. Additionally, these students often tilted towards militancy. The Hezb-e Islami youth department is in charge of mobilising the younger Hezb-e Islami generation (mainly the children of old Hezb-e Islami members), as well as recruiting

interested new people. The youth section has three councils: a 20-member council of the founders, a 15-member executive council (including the head and the deputy of the youth section) and a high council comprised of provincial representatives plus the executive council. The executive council has four committees: guidance and coordination, cultural affairs, financial and administrative affairs, and political affairs. Members of the youth department go through three stages: *uzwa* (basic member), *multazim* (committed member) and *rukn* (official or advanced member), based on training received in the weekly *halqas* (study circles), meetings of 10 people supervised by a *rukn*. Passing each stage takes at least one year. At the end of each year, would-be members are assessed on their participation in activities and *halqas*.³⁰ The HIA youth department, however, does not encompass all Hezbi youth, as there is a much wider circle of sympathisers which identifies with Hezb-e Islami.

Senior members of the HIA youth department claimed that the number of Hezbi youth – active and inactive – was in the tens of thousands. In Nangarhar, the province with the strongest HIA influence, however, the number of Hezbi youth did not exceed 1,500 and half of those were students from other provinces. Only one third of these participated in regular activities, such as the *halqas* or Friday meetings.³¹ The annual meeting of HIA youth in Kabul in 2013 was attended by 700 members from various provinces, almost the same number as in the previous year. From the four public universities of Kabul, about 200 students regularly attended *halqas* and other programmes.³² Other provinces where HIA youth were said to be active include Badakhshan, Takhar and Kandahar, again mainly around the universities.

A common problem in quantifying HIA youth membership is that, compared with all who are considered 'Hezbi' because of their family background, only a small number actively participate in activities. Affiliates can, however, be mobilised. In Badakhshan and Takhar, for instance, the number of Hezbi youth who would turn out in an election campaign was much higher – in the hundreds in both towns – than those who participated in *halqas* at the universities in Faizabad and Taloqan. Across the whole country,

²⁸ Those belonging to or identifying with Hekmatyar's jihad will be referred as HIG – Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin in the paper – in contrast to the non-military offshoots of Hezb-e Islami.

²⁹ Interview with a senior HIA official, Kabul, December 2013.

³⁰ Interview with the head of the HIA youth department, Kabul, December 2013.

³¹ Interview with members of the provincial youth department and Hezbi students in Nangarhar, Jalalabad, November 2013.

³² Interview with the head of the Hezb-e Islami youth department, Kabul, December, 2013.

there were only 50 *rukn* (members at the third stage) among the HIA youth. The head of the youth section said his department was still too new and too small to effectively organise the much larger number of 'ready Hezbis' – those who identify with Hezb-e Islami, but are not formally members.³³

The main activities of the HIA youth include organising *halqas* for members, convening internal conferences on spirituality and political issues and joining other Islamic groups in demonstrations for common cultural or religious causes. HIA youth were most active in Nangarhar, Kabul and Badakhshan among the provinces covered in this research. They are also active in Farah, Khost and Wardak.

Salafis, Leaping towards Orthodoxy

Salafism here refers to the religious movement founded in the eighteenth century in Saudi Arabia by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, which is also sometimes referred to as Wahhabism (a term followers generally find derogatory). Salafis in Afghanistan prefer to call themselves *Muwahhidin*, or those upholding the doctrine of *tawhid*. They also call themselves *Ahl-e Hadith*, or followers of hadith. The movement proposes a return to an idealised Islamic past through the reassertion of monotheism and reliance on the Quran and hadith, while rejecting classical interpretations of Islam and jurisprudence. They emphasise the doctrine of *tawhid* (monotheism) in a narrow sense and strictly oppose popular cults of saints and shrines, terming them as idolatry. They also consider most Shias as unbelievers. Afghan Salafis, however, have traditionally been more tolerant of Shias and reluctant to use *takfir* (the declaration of other Muslims as unbelievers) against Shias. In Afghanistan, Salafis are very much in the minority; the vast majority of Afghan Sunnis belong to the Hanafi school of Islam.

The Afghan Salafis are not centrally organised, but are rather a loose constellation of networks scattered around the country, usually centred around madrassas and mosques run by local, influential mullahs. With propagation of their beliefs as the key concern, the main activities of Salafi networks are preaching, running their own madrassas and disseminating their ideas through media, publications and open public courses on religious subjects. There is no central organisation to which local networks can relate, but they do cooperate and support each other, not as

³³ Interview with the head of Hezb-e Islami youth department, Kabul, December 2013.

members of a single organisation, but rather as a religious fraternity.

The history of Salafism in Afghanistan can be traced to the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s when the government of Saudi Arabia and related groups invested heavily in the Salafisation of the Afghan mujahedin, both materially and intellectually. Salafism was preached rigorously; books were translated and distributed among the Afghan mujahedin and Afghan students were provided scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia – many returned home having embraced the Salafi doctrine. These efforts resulted in the formation of a few groups with a distinct Salafi ideology, the most prominent being Mawlawi Hussain's (aka Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman) Jamaat ud-Dawah based in eastern Afghanistan.³⁴ Given the current hype about the rise of Salafi-jihadism in the Middle East, it is worth mentioning that, arguably, Salafi-style Islamic states first materialised in Afghanistan in the late 1980s in Afghanistan, although with a very limited scope. In the late years of the Afghan anti-Soviet jihad, three Salafi groups declared mini-Islamic states, each in their own province: Mawlawi Hussain in Kunar, Mawlawi Afzal in Nuristan and Mawlawi Shariqi in Badakhshan. None of these states was sustained for long. Neither were they able to extend to other areas.³⁵

One influential leader of the mujahedin, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, head of the Ittihad-e Islami mujahedin faction adopted some obviously Salafi ideas, although he never embraced the doctrine wholeheartedly. Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman was assassinated in Kunar, but his group and influence continued to thrive in the east. In many parts of Kunar and Nangarhar province, Salafism remains an integral part of the religious landscape.

Another factor that brought Salafism to Afghanistan was the training of Afghan religious students in Pakistani madrassas run by Salafis, in particular between the early 1980s and the end of the Taliban era in 2001, a period in which most religious students went to Pakistan for education. (Pakistan is still one of the main destinations for such students, but they now have also increased access to other countries, such as those in the

³⁴ Mawlawi Hussain was from Pech Dara of Kunar and studied in Pakistan's Panjpir madrassa, which has been the alma mater of many Afghan Salafis. He formed his own party, Jamaat ud-Dawa ila al-Quran wa as-Sunna Afghanistan in 1980 after splitting off from Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin. He opened an independent military front and welcomed many of the Arab volunteers who began arriving in the mid-1980s to participate in the Afghan jihad. See David Edwards, *Before Taliban...* [see FN 2].

³⁵ See *The Failure of Political Islam* by Olivier Roy, p 119.

Gulf.) Students often returned home with a mission to spread the Salafi interpretation of Islam in their local communities. In the past, such trained clerics and sheikhs often failed to establish a visible foothold, as they were scattered across Afghanistan and often faced a backlash from local communities. In Badakhshan, however, Salafis seamlessly integrated into local communities, thanks to the large numbers of returning students. Moreover, over the past 13 years, with more freedoms for religious groups in Afghanistan, the influence of Salafis has increased elsewhere.

One of the few Salafi circles that turned itself into an official organisation is the *Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat* (Assembly for Reviving the Sunna), which was registered with the Ministry of Justice in 2006 by known Salafi sheikhs in Kabul, Mawlawi Abu Obaidullah Mutawakkil and Mawlawi Jan Muhammad Mustafa. They had been preaching in mosques and running a madrassa in the capital since 2004. The sheikhs' decision to register with the government came because police and intelligence service so frequently summoned them on suspicion of militant links, apparently on tips from local residents who did not like Salafism. Registration relieved them of scrutiny. The organisation has since gained in influence and funding. Over the past ten years, according to one of its leaders, the organisation has raised around 11 million Afghanis (about 230,000 USD) mainly used on organising mass religious lessons in mosques.³⁶ The source of the funding, according to the organisation's members, are rich Afghans sympathetic to Salafism, but independent observers suspected money was also coming from Gulf countries. Another Salafi network is the *Talim ul-Quran wa Sunna* madrassa, commonly known as the *Naranj Bagh* madrassa in Jalalabad and the most prominent Salafi institution in Nangarhar. The central figures of the madrassa are Sheikh Ahmad Shah and Sardar Wali Saqib, both in their early 40s.

Generally, Salafis are strong in Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Kabul and Herat, with a small, but growing group in Kandahar. They run their own madrassas in all these places, as well as in Kunduz. Many Salafis have worked as imams and lecturers of Islamic subjects in universities. While a sizeable number of Salafis attended madrassas and are mullahs by profession, others only attended courses (such as teaching the Quran and life of the prophet) by Salafi sheikhs in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Increasingly, students and professionals from non-madrassa backgrounds are adopting

³⁶ Interview with a Salafi sheikh from *Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat*, Kabul, September 2014.

Salafism. Many younger Salafis are not linked to a particular network. A possible indication of the spread of Salafism is an observed increase in the sale of books and CDs of lectures by known Salafi sheikhs in urban centres. Books are written in Pashto and Dari, and also translated into the two languages.³⁷

In recent years, Salafis from different parts of the country have attended annual meetings. The first was in Kunar in 2011 and was attended by more than 3,000 people. However, two subsequent ones, Kandahar in 2012 and Jalalabad in 2013, attracted fewer participants. Local networks hosted the events, with participants paying for their own trips.³⁸

The country's pioneer Salafi movement, the one founded by Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman (ie *Jamaat ud-Dawah ila al Quran was-Sunna Afghanistan*) still exists, but without tangible religious activities. *Jamaat ud-Dawah* in the past decade has birthed two offshoots, a jihadi group fighting in Kunar (initially independently and in 2010 merging with the Taleban) and a not-very-active political party registered with the government under the same name. The political party is led by an old friend of Sheikh Jamil ur-Rahman, Mawlawi Samiullah Najibi, and has a limited number of active members, mostly old-generation Salafis. From the jihadi group, one leader, Haji Ruhullah Wakil, was imprisoned and later released from Guantanamo; some key commanders were killed in US-led military operations and others remain inactive.

A growing Salafi-jihadist fringe of younger Salafis do not identify with specific local networks. They are often preoccupied with politics and enforcing sharia, including through violent means – which is not the mainstream thinking among Salafi networks in Afghanistan. Disconnected from society, in terms of not having a stable job or profession and not being a member of a madrassa or identifiable religious community, some of them are developing increasingly jihadist tendencies. Already, militant groups of Salafis like *Jamaat ud-Dawah* have been operating in Nangarhar and Kunar, although they tend to keep a low ideological profile and have been long integrated into the Taleban insurgency. More recently, Salafis have been reasserting old dreams of establishing an Islamic state, along the lines of the Syria and Iraq-based Islamic State movement.

³⁷ Interview with a bookseller in Kabul, December 2013. Interview with bookseller in Herat, October 2013.

³⁸ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Kandahar, October 2013. Interview with a Salafi activist, Kabul, September 2014.

Other Groups

Other relevant Sunni Islamic groups in Afghanistan include Tablighi Jamaat, Sufis, Islamic intellectuals and 'Emaratis'. They will not be discussed in much detail because the first three have limited political relevance at present, and the fourth is an extension of the Taleban phenomenon, its military character removing it from the focus of this paper. However, a brief description of these four groups provided below is necessary to complete the picture of the country's range of Sunni Islamic activism.

Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat started in India in 1927 as an offshoot of the Deobandi movement. It exclusively focuses on pietism and strictly eschews mundane matters such as politics. Rather, its message revolves around six principles: having a stronger faith in God, observing the five daily prayers, remembering God, respecting fellow Muslims, having sincere intentions for the sake of God and preaching the faith. Its followers are encouraged to go on preaching missions, usually in teams of ten, for three, ten or forty days, inviting people to come to preaching sessions in their local mosques. Tablighi Jamaat is, by various accounts, the largest religious movement in the Indian subcontinent, and has extended its presence to most of the world.³⁹

In Afghanistan, the movement's members say it started its tours in the late 1960s, but its activities were hampered by the subsequent wars; Tablighi missions, though, became popular for the first time among Afghan refugees in Pakistan as the movement started training missionaries among them.⁴⁰ Under the Taleban, it could, in principle, operate freely, but was often not favourably viewed by officials, notably in the south. In post-2001 Afghanistan, the group grew conspicuously, most visibly in its congregations of up to tens of thousands of people, for example in Kunar and Khost in 2012.⁴¹ These gatherings have mostly

³⁹ See for example "Tablighi Jama'at: A transnational movement of Islamic faith regeneration," by Jan A. Ali, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, 2010, <http://ejeps.fatih.edu.tr/docs/articles/67.pdf>; and *Migrants, Mujahidin, Madrassa Students: The Diversity of transnational Islam in Pakistan* by Dietrich Reetz, National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Project Report, 2009, https://www.academia.edu/3036049/Migrants_Mujahidin_Madrassa_Students_The_Diversity_of_Transnational_Islam_in_Pakistan

⁴⁰ Phone interview with two veteran Tablighi preachers, April 2015.

⁴¹ Personal communication with local journalists in Kunar and Khost, September 2014. Also, see these reports in

gone unreported; staying away from the media is a typical habit of Tablighi Jamaat. Preaching tours have also observably increased in many parts of the country.

According to a report by the Afghan media in 2013, the group runs 18 centres or hubs in various provinces.⁴² Its Afghanistan, its headquarters are in Nangarhar, where the group is particularly popular. Its Kabul centre is near the grand mosque of Eidgah. The popularity of the group also means that hundreds of Afghans have travelled in recent years to Pakistan's Raiwind or India's Bhopal to attend the million-strong annual *ijtima* (congregation) where *tablighis* (Tablighi preachers) come together from around the world.

Sufis

The growth of political Islam and puritanical trends in Afghanistan has come at the cost of a decline in Sufism and other traditional forms of religion that centred on the purification of the inner self and were largely ideology-free. However, with traditional Sufism fading, space has opened up for groups of young people, including *ulama* (religious scholars) to present a new form of Sufism which combines an emphasis on spirituality and communal gatherings of *zikr* (remembering God) with public activism.

A case in point is *Anjuman-e Dini Farhangi-e Imam Ghazali* (the Religio-Cultural Society of Imam Ghazali), founded in 2010 in Herat by a young *alim* (scholar of religion), Ismail Mohib, who trained in a Deobandi-leaning madrassa in Karachi and is referred to by his followers as *Sheikh al-Hadith* (scholar of Hadith). The society has grown rapidly, extending its activities to Badghis and Ghor. In the summer of 2014, it was running several madrassas, organising public contests in religious subjects, running Ghazali Radio, an FM station airing in Herat and Badghis, and building a grand religious training centre just outside Herat city in Injil district. The society's annual weeklong public lectures on *seerah* (study of the life of the Prophet) attracted thousands of participants to Herat's provincial stadium. The society's programmes emphasise both the Sufi heritage and the need for

local press: د کونړ ټېلېوېزيوني اجتماع په هېواد کې د ټلېوېزيوني سولې په دعا: Khanwali Salarzai, Pajhwok Afghan News, April 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1HwHlHv>; and خوست ولايت کې: by Asadullah Nasrat, Rohi, 3 November 2012, <http://rohi.af/mobile/fullstory.php?id=22387> (both links accessed in May 2015).

⁴² مراکز جماعت دعوت و تبلیغ در افغانستان افزایش یافته است, Radio Azadi website <http://da.azadiradio.org/content/article/25151570.html>, 16 October 2013 (accessed 10 December 2014).

a Muslim awakening to revive Islamic civilisation. This trend can be described as Neo-Sufism.

Islamic intellectualists

Under the rubric 'Islamic intellectualists' comes a scattered category of youth who are religious but do not favour political Islam or conservative interpretations of the religion and who are influenced by the literature of contemporary Muslim thinkers, known for their reformist and intellectual religious discourse. Two Iranian thinkers, Abdul Karim Soroush and Ali Shariati, arguably have the largest following, among both Sunni and Shia religious intellectuals. In recent years, Soroush's books have become more popular, possibly at the expense of Shariati.⁴³ Turkish scholar Fethullah Gulen's books, which promote education, altruism and democracy, are other sources of inspiration for this spectrum of youth. Gulen's books, such as *Nur-e Jawedan* (Eternal Light) and *Pursish-haye shegeftangez-e asr* (The Amazing Questions of the Time) have been translated into Dari and Pashto. His ideas are promoted by several private schools in different parts of Afghanistan run by his followers who have come to the country.

Emaratis

Students aligned with the Taleban are usually called Emaratis by other students; a reference to their open support of the Taleban's Islamic *Emirate* (Pashto: Emarat). They have no known organisation on the national level, but other students, including Hezb-e Islami-ye Gulbudin (HIG) affiliates, assume that they do have campus-level structures, given the obvious coordination in their activities, such as demonstrations. The pro-Taleban students were mainly active at Nangarhar, Khost, Kabul and Kandahar universities. See also section five, for a discussion of their role in student militancy at Nangarhar and Khost universities.

3. ACTIVITIES AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

All of the researched Islamic groups refer to their activities and efforts as *dawa* (call to faith) or part of the broader *dawa* project. While *dawa* in the

⁴³ Some of Shariati's most popular books are *Padar madar ma mutahimim* (Father and Mother! We Are Accused), *Abuzar* (Abuzar), *Fatima Fatima ast* (Fatima Is Fatima) and *Hussein waris-e adam* (Hussein the Heir to Adam); Soroush's most popular are *Awsaf-e parsayan* (Attributes of the Pious), *Qabz va bast-e tiorik-e shariat* (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Sharia) and *Qemar-e asheqana* (Amorous Gamble).

traditional sense is done mainly through preaching and teaching, modern Islamic organisations now use the term to point to any non-violent promotion of faith. Among the four Islamist groups studied, Salafism activities were closest to the original meaning of *dawa*, while the Hezb-e Islami youth had the least visible involvement in *dawa*.

Religious Institutions, the Easy Platforms

Mosques, previously the prerogative of mullahs and imams, are favourable and highly sought after platforms for all Islamic groups. The importance of the mosque stems from its role as a community centre that has already netted the religion-practicing and therefore *dawa*-friendly segment of society. The effectiveness of the mosque as a platform for religious recruitment has been well proven by Tablighi Jamaat, which relied solely on mosques before any other group came to use them. The new organisations are now targeting the same audience, but preaching a radically different message and using different tactics.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, Eslah and the Salafis act in similar ways when trying to secure a foothold in a particular mosque. They usually first try to befriend the imam of the mosque to invite him to their cause. If attempts to court him do not succeed, they will simply seek permission to hold a brief sermon to promote their message and call worshippers to the public activities of their organisation.⁴⁴ If a particular mosque is deemed important, Eslah and the Salafis may try to replace the imam with their own affiliates through influence in the local community or the departments of the Ministry of Hajj wa Awqaf which hires imams in urban centres.

If a mosque is run by a mullah affiliated with one of the groups, he can use the place of worship to preach according to the group's ideological lines and instructions, especially during the crowded Friday sermons.⁴⁵ For example, when Eslah had a public rally in solidarity with the Palestinians in 2012, an imam in the west of Kabul dedicated the whole *khutba* to persuade worshippers to take part in the rally.⁴⁶ Given the known success of Tablighis in using the mosque, not only to enlist

⁴⁴ Interview with a mullah-imam, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with a Najm member, Faizabad, September 2013.

⁴⁵ Although the Ministry of Hajj wa Awqaf assigns imams specific topics to preach on each Friday, they are usually not taken very seriously. The imam's ideological affiliation is one reason he may not listen to Hajj and Awqaf instructions.

⁴⁶ Interview with a pro-Eslah imam, Kunduz, September 2013.

common worshippers but also to publicise their annual congregations, Salafis have also tried the same tactic. Adapting their message to resemble that of Tablighi Jamaat and cater to its followers, Salafis toured mosques in Kandahar and Jalalabad in 2012 and 2013 to call worshippers to participate in their public gathering.⁴⁷

Additionally the Salafis and Eslah run their own, free-of-charge or minimally-charging, madrassas.⁴⁸ Eslah runs several madrassas in Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar where they train more than 2,000 religious students.⁴⁹ The Salafis have several madrassas in Jalalabad, Badakhshan and Herat, and one in Kunduz. Since these Salafi madrassas are inter-connected, there are crossovers of students, so the total number cannot be assessed for certain; however, it is probably also in the thousands. While the majority of the students are boys, female students also learn in dedicated madrassas or in different shifts with both Eslah and the Salafis. As the Salafis have a longer history in Afghanistan than Eslah, they generally have a much higher number of madrassas.

Where the Salafis generally focus on teaching *hadith* and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Quran) in their madrasa curriculum,⁵⁰ Eslah mixes traditional and new subjects, such as the status of Muslims in the modern world, as their aim is to promote a revivalist reading of Islam that can address contemporary issues. The Eslah curriculum leans subtly towards Salafism in *aqida* (theology), but is overwhelmingly Hanafi in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The stated aim of the Eslah madrassas is to train and present to the society a generation of *ulama* well-versed in the 'Islamic sciences' and able to respond to contemporary issues facing Muslim life.⁵¹

Educational Institutions as Primary Hubs

Educational institutions are an important source of recruits for all four groups, although in different ways. Hizb ut-Tahrir has always been a

predominantly campus-born group, although it has now broadened its recruitment base to include secondary schools (starting from grade 7). Many interlocutors said they were exposed to Hizb ut-Tahrir ideology during their later school years through word of mouth, usually a teacher or classmate, or written materials (leaflets, the organisation's manifesto or magazines). Members and associates are actively encouraged to seek out jobs as teachers in schools for the sake of the mission. While it has less competition over schools as recruitment bases, universities tend to see more intense rivalry from other groups. Hizb ut-Tahrir's main focus is on students of higher education. The practice of dissemination is the same – word of mouth and print materials – complemented by audio-visual materials, such as CDs. Overall, more than half of Hizb ut-Tahrir members are said to be either active students or were students when they joined the organisation.⁵²

Eslah has also turned to campuses as a fertile recruitment base. It manages its activities on university campuses mainly through its youth department, Najm, which draws a high number of its members and associates from students. To recruit primary and high school students, in addition to using the same methods as Hizb ut-Tahrir (word of mouth, printed materials), Eslah organises large, dedicated programmes. Almost every year over the past five years (2009–2014), the youth branch of Eslah has held free seasonal courses for older school children (usually sixth grade and up) in its major centres of influence, such as Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad. These month-long or shorter courses featured lectures on various subjects relating to Muslim life, faith and history.⁵³ Eslah also holds competitions in Islamic and general school subjects with attractive awards for winners. For example, in 2010, Eslah's youth branch in Kabul organised a massive *seerah* competition, in which 3,000 boys and 700 girls participated. Awards included laptops and *umrah* (pilgrimage to the holy places in Saudi Arabia). A similar quiz in 2013 was contested by 6,000 students, both boys and girls.⁵⁴

Eslah was even more active in universities, where members organised their own *halqas*, distributed the organisation's publications and held public conferences on religious occasions in coordination with the university administration. Usually, faculty

⁴⁷ Interview with a Salafi student, Jalalabad, November 2013. Interview with lecturer at Sharia Faculty, Kandahar University, Kandahar, November 2013.

⁴⁸ By madrasa, this paper means a seminary with a stand-alone building and at least a few dozen students. This excludes seminaries that have fewer than a dozen students and use mosques as madrassas, as they are small, numerous and usually do not last very long.

⁴⁹ [انجازات الجمعية خلال عام 2011 م](http://eslahonline.net/arabic/?p=13), <http://eslahonline.net/arabic/?p=13> (accessed 7 November 2013).

⁵⁰ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Faizabad, September 2013.

⁵¹ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Jalalabad, November 2013.

⁵² Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2014.

⁵³ Interview with an Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with an Eslah member, Herat, October 2013.

⁵⁴ Interview with an Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

members affiliated with Eslah supervised the recruitment process in liaison with the youth section. Members and associates publicly and proudly identified with the organisation, inviting students to join.⁵⁵ Seminars and competitions were also held for students, often focussing on a specific university, in a way similar to those in schools.

Eslah additionally, and importantly, runs its own high schools, universities and teacher-training institutes as commercial institutions. The aim is manifold: funding its activities, engaging with the community and raising its profile and, of course, recruiting new members. Eslah's educational institutions are in Herat, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Farah, Kandahar and Kabul; there are also female-only teacher training institutes in Kabul and Jalalabad and the private Salam University in Kabul with a campus in Kunduz.⁵⁶ These institutions were generally seen as providing a high quality of education.⁵⁷ The schools and madrassas run by Eslah had, in 2011, more than 7,500 students, more than 2,000 of them religious students. While running a school or madrassa does not guarantee that the organisation has an automatic grasp on the students, it does expose them directly to its influence.⁵⁸ Eslah is additionally influential among students and teachers at regular universities, particularly in Nangarhar, Herat, Kabul and Kandahar.⁵⁹

The Salafis largely seek work in universities and schools as lecturers to spread their message. Most teach Islamic Studies, a compulsory subject in all disciplines. The Salafist organisation *Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat* has members in all major public and private universities of the capital and

⁵⁵ Interview with the Eslah head for Herat, October 2013. Interview with an Eslah member, Jalalabad, November 2013.

⁵⁶ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁵⁷ Interview with a student of Salam University, Kunduz, September 2013; interview with a Salam University student, Kabul, December 2013.

⁵⁸ إنجازات الجمعية خلال عام 2011 م, <http://eslahonline.net/arabic/?p=13> (accessed 7 November 2013).

⁵⁹ Eslah's campus activism spans four public universities in Kabul, two in Jalalabad and one in Kandahar and Herat each. The number of students participating in Eslah's recruitment-oriented events is thought to be a few hundred in each of these cities, except in Kandahar, where it can hardly be 100, which is probably still bigger than any other organised campus group with an ideology there. The number of teachers affiliated with Eslah in Jalalabad was 50 in December 2013, according to one member, a bit less than in Kabul and a bit more than Herat and Kandahar. The influence of these students and faculty members come from their commitment and organised activism rather than numbers, however.

members are encouraged to lecture in as many universities as possible for the sake of *dawa*.⁶⁰ Additionally, in Jalalabad, where the Salafis' campus activities were stronger than elsewhere, Salafi sheikhs held free courses in *seerah* and Quran interpretation for students of Nangarhar University. In 2013, hundreds of students attended month-long courses held twice that year on campus. The students attending were not necessarily all Salafis; they included an equal number of non-Salafis, among them Hezbis and Eslahis (members or associates of Eslah).⁶¹ Salafis also had a narrow presence in universities of Kabul, Faizabad and Herat, but they were not running on-campus organised activities, possibly because they did not have active student cells there. The research did not find much activity in the primary and high schools. However, in one instance, the Nangarhar Salafis of Naranj Bagh held summer courses on religious subjects for a group of boy students, but that was outside the schools.⁶² The Salafis apparently are focusing on madrassas rather than regular schools.

Hezbis, on the other hand, try to mobilise students for collective action, mainly publicising their ideas on campuses through publications and personal contact. The HIA youth, like Eslah, has its own university branches in places where it is strong, such as Nangarhar University and Kabul University. Students affiliated with HIA hold internal *halqas*, attend conferences and other programmes organised by the youth department at the HIA provincial offices and distribute brochures published by the youth department in Kabul. HIA youth's most visible campus activism tends to be the organisation of demonstrations, which is not their monopoly but is often a joint effort with HIG, pro-Taleban students and others. HIA also supplied young teachers to universities, such as Nangarhar, Faizabad, Khost and, to some extent, Kabul University.

Mobilising the Masses Mass Public Gatherings

Afghanistan is now witnessing regular large-scale religious gatherings. Eslah, the Salafis and the neo-Sufi organisation *Anjuman-e Dini Farhangi-e Imam Ghazali* have all organised mass public gatherings where thousands of participants listen to religious lectures for consecutive days. Eslah, inspired by

⁶⁰ Interview with a *Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat* leader, Kabul, September 2014.

⁶¹ Interview with a Salafi student, Nangarhar University, November 2013.

⁶² Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Naranj Bagh madrassa, Jalalabad, November 2013.

Jamaat-e Islami's similar programmes in Pakistan, started holding such gatherings around 2008 from Jalalabad.⁶³ Then, it spread the initiative to other provinces such as Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Balkh, Logar and Ghazni. In 2011, Eslah held as many as 40 such gatherings; according to some estimates, the largest one was held during Ramadan in Herat and was attended by up to 20,000 participants, both men and women.⁶⁴ Salafis and Sufis have sought to follow Eslah's impressive example, putting up posters throughout the city, distributing leaflets and preaching in mosques to encourage people to attend.

Eslah's most common theme is *Fahm-e Quran* (understanding the Quran), in a weeklong series of lectures featuring topics such as Islamic ethics, Muslim family life, hijab, social customs antithetic to Islam and the evilness of nationalism. Although titled 'Understanding the Quran,' these lectures are not Quran lessons, but rather commentaries about various topics from a religious viewpoint.⁶⁵ Presenters and preachers usually call for sharia-based rule, criticise the government for being corrupt and submissive to the foreigners and attack the West's 'anti-Islam policies.'⁶⁶

Salafis run religious courses and lectures throughout the year, but attract bigger crowds during Ramadan, mainly teaching Quran and *seerah*. Thousands usually attend the two courses run by the Naranj Bagh madrasa sheikhs in the Gomrak Mosque of Jalalabad.⁶⁷ Similar courses were run by the Kabul Salafis of Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat in Abdullah Azzam Mosque during Ramadan.⁶⁸ Unlike Eslahis, Salafis rarely go into politics in their lectures and teaching.

A surprising mass gathering was that of the Sufi organisation, *Anjuman-e Dini Farhangi-e Imam Ghazali*, which attracted as huge a crowd as that of the relatively well-established Eslah. Media reports estimated the number of participants at its 2014 *Ihyay-e Sunnat* (Reviving Sunnah) series of lectures in Herat to be around 20,000.⁶⁹ The same kind of

the weeklong series of lectures were held the two previous years with topics mainly on piety and spirituality. Lecturers sometimes burst into political rhetoric, mainly on the political reasons of the fall of the Muslim world.⁷⁰

Demonstrations

Several Islamist group have organised and participated in demonstrations in response to current political developments. Hizb ut-Tahrir and Hezbi youth have been key initiators of the protests on university campuses, including demonstrations against an American film mocking Islam in 2012 (Kabul and Jalalabad), the law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) in May 2013 (Kabul) and a 'blasphemous' article by an Afghan newspaper in 2014 (Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat). Almost all student demonstrations in Kabul and Jalalabad were organised by two separate student bodies, both called the Mosque Council, made up of members of different Islamic activist groups.⁷¹

In 2012 alone, the Nangarhar students held nine demonstrations, blocking the Jalalabad-Kabul Highway for hours in most of the rallies, while the Kabul students held five rallies.⁷² Regardless of who were the key organisers, Hizb ut-Tahrir students in Kabul and Hezbi and Emarati students in Nangarhar dominated the rallies with their banners and slogans. Most demonstrations aimed at keeping the government and its Western supporters under pressure with regard to issues of religious and national values.⁷³ Not all participants were students, as the rallies were often intended to be open to anyone wanting to join. Only Eslah

⁷⁰ Interview with a senior member of Anjuman, Herat, October 2013.

⁷¹ The councils were named after the mosque where decisions would be announced after the congregational prayers. In Nangarhar, the council was made up of Hezbi (HIA and HIG, working as a single entity), Emaratis and students affiliated with non-violent groups. Eslah students were part of this council around 2010, but later withdrew due to the dominance of Hezbi and Taleban supporters. Hizb ut-Tahrir members, from 2011 on, were present in the demonstrations, but were not part of the council. In Kabul, Hezbi and Taleban sympathisers were most influential around 2008. Eslah and Hizb ut-Tahrir-affiliated students, as well as students with no known group affiliation, played a stronger role in later years. (Interviews with an Emarati student from Baghlan, Jalalabad, November 2013; a Hizb ut-Tahrir senior member, Kabul, December 2013; a Hezbi (HIA) student from Kabul university, Jalalabad, November 2013.)

⁷² Interview with a former student of Nangarhar University (currently a lecturer at Laghman University), Kabul, December 2013.

⁷³ Interview with a Hezbi student with mixed loyalties to HIA and HIG, Nangarhar University, November 2013.

⁶³ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁶⁴ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Herat, October 2013.

⁶⁵ Interview with a youth activist at Eslah, Jalalabad, November 2013.

⁶⁶ Interview with a frequent participant at Eslah's religious lectures, Herat, October 2013.

⁶⁷ Interview with a known Salafi sheikh, Jalalabad, November 2013.

⁶⁸ Interview with a prominent Salafi sheikh, Kabul, September 2014.

⁶⁹ Ufuq News, 5 May 2014, www.ufuqnews.com/archives/4766 (accessed 22 December 2014).

kept tight control over its rallies, making sure participants were exclusively its own affiliates. Demonstrations organised by Eslah included rallies against NATO civilian casualties in summer 2011 and against a controversial anti-Islam film in October 2012.⁷⁴ Eslah's women's department in Kabul also held a separate demonstration against the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Hundreds of women clad in *abayas* (a full-length loose over-garment, essentially a black robe-like dress, more popular in the Arab world) and *niqabs* (a veil that covers all of a woman's face apart from the eyes), most drawn from Eslah's various educational institutions, participated in the protest, raising placards that termed the freedoms given in the ERAW law as a plot by the West to strip Muslim women of their Islamic dignity.

Conferences

Another frequent tool to raise their political profile is the organisation of conferences. Even Hizb ut-Tahrir, despite trying to work clandestinely, held several conferences in Kabul, Takhar and Faizabad between 2011 and 2013. A conference in Kabul in April 2012 on 'fundamental solutions to corruption' was attended by dozens of people, including politicians, writers and former mujahedin leaders.⁷⁵ A conference in Takhar province in August 2013 was held in the hall of the information and culture department of the province. The conference aimed at addressing uncertainties looming over the Middle East after the overthrow of Egypt's president Muhammad Morsi. In this event too, the organisers presented *khilafa* as the only way out of the mess in the Muslim world.⁷⁶

Hizb ut-Tahrir members have also utilised conferences provided by other entities to distribute their flagship *Khilafa* magazine. They sometimes used more drastic methods. For example, in Faizabad in September 2013, Hizb ut-Tahrir members disrupted a seminar organised by the Independent Election Commission to discuss ways in which the *ulama* could encourage people

⁷⁴ Eslah was a major contributor to the rally organised by the Front of National Unity and Opposition to Permanent American Bases, an alliance of Islamist and former mujahedin figures, of which Eslah was a founding member. Eslah and Hezb-e Islami (from both HIA and HIG youth wings) contributed members to a rally against the ousting of the Islamist Egyptian president, Muhammad Morsi, in September 2013 in Kabul. (Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.)

⁷⁵ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁷⁶ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Taloqan, September 2013. Interview with a human rights activist, Taloqan, September 2013.

to participate in the upcoming elections. The *ulama* found themselves in a tough theological debate with several young radicals over the Islamic legitimacy of elections.⁷⁷

Eslah is the most prolific organiser of conferences on political developments, with subjects revolving around major issues of the day, such as corruption, ethnic nationalism, historic days and anniversaries. Eslah emphasises commemorating days related to the anti-Soviet jihad era, a conference theme it shares with the HIA youth.⁷⁸ It has established a *hafta-e shuhada-e Nuhzat-e Islami* (week of the martyrs of the Islamic movement) in June, which commemorates the arrest and subsequent killing of dozens of Islamic movement leaders and members in 1975 after their botched attempt at staging a popular uprising against the Daud government. These efforts at reviving memories of the mid-1970s are attempts to show Eslah as the true inheritor of Afghanistan's early Islamic movement, *Nuhzat-e Islami*.

Going Digital: Using Media and Publications

Afghanistan's Islamic groups use all modern media to propagate their message: from TV stations to YouTube channels and from highly-circulated brochures to glitzy magazines. All four groups run official and active websites and Facebook pages and all, except HIA youth, have dedicated YouTube channels.

Among them, Eslah has built the largest media network. Its FM radio broadcasts in several provinces, with sub-stations in Jalalabad, Kunduz and Jawzjan. It has a local television channel in Herat and a centrally-run weekly magazine, both named *Eslah*. *Payam-e Eslah*, the monthly brochure published by the youth branch, Eslah's Najm, had in 2013 a free circulation of over 100,000, a rare high rate in Afghanistan.⁷⁹ Hizb ut-Tahrir is the second-most media-savvy organisation publishing a slick magazine published every two weeks and another every three months named *Khilafat* and supplying stickers bearing Hizb ut-Tahrir slogans to hand out and regular press

⁷⁷ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with a member of the *ulama* council of Badakhshan, Faizabad, September 2013.

⁷⁸ Days that both Eslah and Hezbis commemorate with dedicated activities include the Soviet invasion in December 1979 and the victory of the mujahedin in April 1992. Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁷⁹ Interview with a Najm member, Kabul, December 2013.

releases sent to the media on current political issues. Recent examples of press statements include comments on the Afghan government's statement in support of Saudi Arabia's military involvement in the Yemen in April 2015, President Ashraf Ghani's speech to the American Congress in March 2015 and First Lady Rula Ghani's comments about the French ban on *niqab* in November 2014. HIA's flagship is its *Shahadat* weekly, run mostly by its youth activists.⁸⁰ Additionally, HIA's youth department occasionally publishes brochures. Both the Najm and HIA brochures mostly feature ideological and inspirational content and target youth exclusively. All three organisations – Hizb ut-Tahrir, Eslah and the Hezbi youth – use their media not only for propagating their message, but also publicising their stances on current political developments in Afghanistan and the Muslim world. Their members then spread these declared stances on social media.

Salafis generally prefer cooperating with existing media to promote their message. For example, in 2007 a Kabul-based Salafi sheikh, Mawlawi Jan Muhammad Mustafa, presented religious programmes (preaching and questions and answers) on the government's RTA channel and independent channels Tolo TV and Shamshad TV.⁸¹ A particularly productive period for the Salafis' televangelism was the last six months in the life of private channel Emroz, before it was sold and renamed Mitra TV in summer 2013. The channel had taken a U-turn, from a station of uncensored Western music shows to a purely Islamic platform run voluntarily by the sheikhs of Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat.⁸² A similar change of mind turned a private radio station in Nangarhar over to Salafi sheikhs in 2012; and, in late 2013, FM station Abasin became known as Salafi Radio and no longer aired music or entertainment programmes.⁸³

The Salafis also widely circulate posters on various religious and cultural occasions, such as *Nawroz* (the Afghan new year, starting 21 March) to warn people against celebrating, Ashura (again, to warn people against what the Salafis consider superstitious and un-Islamic practices commonly observed by Shias on this day) and Eids (on how to celebrate the two religious feasts). An initiative of the Nangarhar Salafis of the Naranj Bagh madrasa

involved distributing 35,000 leaflets via the loose Salafi networks, even in provinces with no known Salafi presence, such as Bamyan and Sar-e Pul.⁸⁴ In addition, the Nangarhar Salafis run a periodical magazine, *Adal* (justice), while Kabul Salafi sheikhs (as well as known Afghan Salafi sheikhs in Pakistan) distribute audios and videos of their madrasa lessons and public lectures on CDs.

All four groups cater to the book-reading community, with Eslah, again, being the most productive. Through its series *Eslah-e Afkar* (Reform of Ideas), Eslah has published more than 100 books, most translated works by writers linked to the Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e Islami. Hizb ut-Tahrir has published 18 books, all of them Pashto or Dari translations of the core literature of the international organisation. These books are not available in public bookstores, but are privately distributed and can be downloaded as e-books from the website. For Hezb-e Islami, Hekmatyar's works have been feeding many youths' minds, regardless of their immediate affiliation. Hekmatyar produced a range of books over the past 13 years that are hotly sought after by Hezbi youth and that are hard to find in common bookstores.⁸⁵ Apart from Hekmatyar's books, neither HIA nor HIG have had any notable book production.

Salafist books are mainly written by well-known Afghan Salafi *sheikhs* based in Pakistan, such as Abdul Salam Rustami and Aminullah Peshawri. Their books are widely available in Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Faizabad and Kunduz.⁸⁶ Both sheikhs are originally from Kunar and run their network of madrasahs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan. Many of Afghanistan's current Salafi sheikhs have been under their tutelage.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Interview with a Salafi sheikh from Naranj Bagh madrasa, Jalalabad, November 2013.

⁸⁵ Hekmatyar's recent books include *The Islamic jihad against America*, *Afghanistan America's other Vietnam*, *Bush the King of Liars*, *The Bible in the Light of the Quran* and a series of *tafsir* (exegesis of Quran) in Pashto and Dari. The two latter books were also famous and widely read in non-Hezbi Islamic circles. The *tafsir* books, in addition to exegesis, contain partisan comments about on-going and recent conflicts in Afghanistan and the Muslim world, while *The Bible in the Light of Quran* includes harsh criticisms of the West.

⁸⁶ Interview with a bookseller of religious books, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with bookseller, Herat, October 2013.

⁸⁷ Both are known for being non-compromising preachers of Salafism with a harsh stance on *shirk*. Sheikh Aminullah runs the Ganj Madrasa in Peshawar and was placed on the United Nations Sanctions Committee's list of "individuals and entities associated with al-Qaeda" in 2009.

⁸⁰ The militant Hezb faction also runs a newspaper, *Shahadat*, circulated only in and around Peshawar.

⁸¹ RTA stopped the show after few months, reportedly on the orders of government officials. Interview with Mawlawi Mustafa, a founding member of the Majma'a-e Ihyay-e Sunnat, Kabul, September 2014.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Jalalabad, November 2013.

Broadening the Recruitment Base: Women, Unions and Charity

Eslah has an active women's department headed by a female member of the Central Council. The Sisters' Section (*Bakhsh-e Khwaharan*) holds its own *halqas* for all stages of membership in places with an active female constituency, such as Kabul and Herat. The three-stage membership process for women is usually achieved more quickly than for men, as the membership criteria have been relaxed to allow more women to join. The women's department organises separate seminars, conferences and courses for women on subjects such as the virtues of an Islamic family, modesty and raising children according to Islamic teachings. Eslah, with the help of the youth department, also organises competitions for girls with written tests on subjects such as the biographies of the Prophet's wives, *seerah* and *fiqh*.

Eslah has sought to branch out into charity, which seems to underscore the organisation's ambition to present itself as a holistic Islamic movement that cares about the physical wellbeing of believers and is not confined to preaching. Instances in which Eslah distributed aid include food to flood victims in Sarobi in spring 2012 (led by the youth section) and the 'Small Donation, Big Reward' campaign in Kabul and Jalalabad in 2012 during which aid was collected from rich people and distributed to the poor during Ramadan.⁸⁸ In late 2013, Eslah upgraded its social services department and turned it into a non-governmental charity organisation called the Ehsan Foundation. The foundation reflects Eslah's efforts to cater to rich members and entities who want to outsource the distribution of aid to poor and catastrophe-stricken communities and to make its fundraising more transparent.⁸⁹ More recently, Eslah raised funds and distributed aid worth four million Afghanis (70,000 USD) to 3,000 families that fell victim to the landslide in Badakhshan and the flash floods in Jawzjan, Samangan and Balkh in May 2014. UK and US-based Islamic organisations, Afghans residing in Canada and local people in various provinces provided most of these funds.⁹⁰

By 2008, Eslah had set up a professional association of doctors, and members said they were trying to build a similar association for engineers. The doctors' association, Afghanistan

Islamic Medical Association (AIMA),⁹¹ has a few dozen members, including active doctors in the public and private health sector, medical students and trained doctors occupying jobs outside their profession. All AIMA members are also members or associates of Eslah and participate in its *halqas*. AIMA's activities in 2013 and 2014 included free medical camps (including one for the landslide victims in Badakhshan in May 2014) and training workshops on Islamic medical ethics.⁹² AIMA's biggest achievement has been the establishment of a private hospital in the west of Kabul in 2012 which is meant as a model hospital based on Islamic medical ethics, with business as only a secondary goal.⁹³ Al Hayat hospital offers discounted and, in some cases, free treatment to the poor.⁹⁴ The initiative was partially inspired by the medical and humanitarian services of Pakistan's Jamaat-e Islami, which runs a series of hospitals under its humanitarian wing, the Al Khidmat Foundation, which is well known to Afghans who lived in refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s.

The other organisations have so far not followed Eslah's example of branching out into organised women's recruitment and socio-economic activities through organised charity and medical services.

4. THE ISLAMIST MESSAGE, DISPARITIES OF INTERPRETATION

When exploring the Islamist messages, two sets of recurrent themes illustrate the ideological differences between and within the studied groups: the overall cause that defines the goals of Islamic activism and day-to-day concerns such as preserving Islamic morality. Hizb ut-Tahrir members were generally very clear on what they wanted and how they meant to achieve it. Members at different levels stuck to the official lines of the organisation and generally presented consistent answers on these issues. On other subjects, such as women's work and education, however, members had different and sometimes even contradictory answers. Eslah's members

⁸⁸ Interview with an Eslah member, Jalalabad, December 2013.

⁸⁹ Interview with an Eslah leader, Kabul, December 2013.

⁹⁰ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, September 2014.

⁹¹ AIMA in both its name and nature follows in the footsteps of other chapters in an international network: each carries the concerned country's initial, eg PIMA for Pakistan Islamic Medical Association and SIMA for Sudanese Islamic Medical Association.

⁹² Interview with a member of AIMA, Kabul, December 2013.

⁹³ Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

generally matched Hizb ut-Tahrir in clarity of thought and consistency, although differed in opinion about membership levels. Those active in Salafi networks and Hezbi youth were generally vague, especially on how to achieve their goals, which is not surprising given the lack of a hierarchical structure and unified training, particularly in the case of the Salafis.

How to Achieve Islamic Revival?

All four groups' stated aim was to fully bring Islam back into every field of life, as part of a worldwide revivalist movement, but they differed in their analysis of what problems exactly needed to be solved. At Eslah, the general thinking was that Muslims in recent times have suffered a double setback: the dominance of local traditions that have warped Islam and the 'planned secularisation' by the West and its puppet rulers or related elites in the Muslim world. A recurrent theme was how most Muslims today are *rewaji* believers (based on local traditions, rather than faith) and need to become *sho'aori* (conscious).⁹⁵ Most Eslahis thought the West had an intentional campaign to secularise Afghan society and that this was manifested in the decreased place, or total absence, of religion from official statements and institutions, laws, higher education and the mainstream media.⁹⁶ They believed Islam needed to be introduced into all fields of life and society (including politics, economy, sciences, history) and that Eslah, as an organisation, would play a central role in effecting this change, based on the nineteenth and twentieth century teachings by Sayed Jamaluddin al Afghani, Hassan al-Banna and Abu al-Ala Mawdudi.⁹⁷ One Eslahi described their methodology as "a complete package for the Islamisation of everything."⁹⁸

Hizb ut-Tahrir members and associates pointed to the absence of a 'truly Islamic' rule that preserves Islamic law in all sectors of life, combined with a negligence of the political element of Islam, as the key problem. They saw Afghanistan's problems as organically connected to the larger problem of Muslims across the world. They believed that since all Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, are ruled by *kufri* (un-Islamic) systems Muslims have little idea of an Islamic polity, Muslim societies are leading a life alien to their faith, economically

subdued by global capitalism and politically pushed towards the end of the line among the nations so that they have become humiliated and oppressed.⁹⁹ Religious revival then involves the restoration of the *khilafa*, which would automatically liberate them from the dominance of *taghoot* (a Quranic term referring to a non-Godly force that has rebelled from the divine path, and that is interpreted by Hizb ut-Tahrir members as the varieties of un-Islamic rules and systems).¹⁰⁰

For Salafis, Islamic reformism was a gradual process, with the paramount and first phase being the restoration of *tawhid* (monotheism) in the life of individuals and the purging of traditions unsubstantiated by the prime sources of Islam.¹⁰¹ Though most agreed that the ultimate phase would be the resurrection of an Islamic state, views differed on what the other important steps after *tawhid* should be. Some even stopped here, saying *tawhid* was the first and the last goal, beyond which no other ends remain to achieve.¹⁰² Others counted the Islamisation of the economy, education, arts and, most importantly, social customs as the next steps after individual *tawhid*.¹⁰³ Other key themes included the importance of Islamic teaching through educational institutions dedicated to *dawa* and the missionary call to all non-Muslims in the world.¹⁰⁴ According to many Salafis, the main problem with current Muslims, especially Afghans, is that they are stuck in a version of Islam that has blended pure faith with superstitions and hearsay-based practices. A Salafi sheikh argued that any effective Islamic revivalism should have the return to the prime scriptural sources of Islam (Quran and Sunnah) as a chief component.¹⁰⁵

The Hezb-e Islami youth imitated Eslahis in their conception of Islamic revival, but were generally less well-versed in decoding it. Several members suggested that Islam has been divorced from social and political affairs and that Islamic revival involves a long-term struggle to restore the role of religion in these fields, culminating in the establishment of

⁹⁵ Interview with Eslah members in Nangarhar, Kunduz and Kabul, September 2013, November 2013.

⁹⁶ Interview with a Najm member, Herat, October 2013.

⁹⁷ Interviews with Eslah members in Badakhshan and Kabul, September, November 2013.

⁹⁸ Interview with an Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013.

⁹⁹ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Taloqan, September 2013. Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Badakhshan, September 2013, Kabul September 2014.

¹⁰¹ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with a Salafi activist, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁰² Interview with a Salafi student, Herat, October 2013.

¹⁰³ Interview with a Salafi imam and madrassa teacher, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Kabul, December 2013.

an Islamic government.¹⁰⁶ A number of Hezbi interlocutors believed the absence of an Islamic polity in Afghanistan was to be blamed for the broader backwardness of the country. Some pointed to the secular rule during the *Musahiban* dynasty (1929–78 spanning the reigns of Nader Khan, Zahir Shah and Daud Khan) that preserved its power at the cost of disenfranchising its people and shielding them from progress. If it had been an Islamic government, they argued, it would have used the long era of peace to educate the population and cultivate a strong Islamic and national identity.¹⁰⁷

Conceptions of an Islamic State

The general consensus was that all activities, grouped under the concept of *dawa*, would lay the groundwork for establishing an Islamic state, but opinions differed on where to place the actual struggle for an Islamic state in the order of priorities, how to achieve it and what it would exactly entail. Common characteristics of an Islamic government, as described by most, included enforcement of *hudood* (the sharia penal code severely punishing crimes such as adultery, fornication, transgression, robbery, and theft and possibly including the public execution of a murderer by the victim's family and the amputation of a thief's hand), effective prohibition of alcohol, a ban of *reba* (usury), promotion of religious education and culture, a ban or limit on the free mixing of genders, a ban on unveiled women in public, a ban on co-education, and a ban on the establishment of churches on its soil. Most interlocutors, with the possible exception of HIA youth, described their efforts as part of a continued struggle to actively replace the current government.

For most Hizb ut-Tahrir associates only a *khilafa* that fully enforces sharia, unifies all Muslim countries and nullifies all man-made laws, could be considered a truly Islamic polity. They categorised all current governments, including those in all Muslim countries, as *kufri* for ruling by man-made laws (versus revealed law i.e sharia) regardless of whether some laws were Islamic.¹⁰⁸ They considered the Taliban's pre-2001 Islamic Emirate a national state, rather than an Islamic one, that tied itself to existing borders and sought

¹⁰⁶ Interview with a Hezbi youth section leader, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with a Hezbi lecturer at Nangarhar University from Wardak, Kabul, September 2014. Interview with a Hezbi youth section activist, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member from Panjsher, Kabul, December 2013.

recognition from other countries and international *kufri* bodies, such as the United Nations.¹⁰⁹ The *khilafa* is to be established through public political activism and greater public awareness among Muslims by a core movement whose struggle will culminate in taking official power in the Muslim world. Although armed struggle was not seen as a route to the creation of its *khilafa*,¹¹⁰ this did not preclude members from participating in jihad. Hizb ut-Tahrir associates pointed out that members are participating in jihad in Syria, while others discussed 'defensive jihad' in Afghanistan as permissible or even compulsory, for instance when an individual's home (area) is under attack¹¹¹ or in states where Hizb ut-Tahrir followers are killed or thrown in prison.¹¹² Many agreed that the status of foreign troops in Afghanistan make the soldiers *muharib* (liable to be killed) and the status of the Taliban, or whoever is killing them, is *mujahid* (one who makes holy war), involved in a 'defensive jihad'. For Hizb ut-Tahrir members, no living example of a fully Islamic state could be found in recent memory, although they considered the Ottoman Empire, abolished in 1924, a nominal, though not ideal, representation of such a state.

For Eslah members, an Islamic state is a state that enforces sharia and promotes Islamic values through the *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar* principle (fostering virtue and preventing evil). Most members said the enforcement of sharia should not involve harsh methods, but rather a softer approach. The Taliban's Emirate was therefore not seen as a true Islamic state, particularly given its "very narrow interpretation" of sharia that made it cling to trivial issues, such as a man's clothing and beard.¹¹³ Some said that Islamisation under the Islamic state should include, not only reform of the laws and courts, but also of foreign relations, media and cultural institutions and school and university syllabuses, so that all old traditions contradicting Islam's teachings comply with sharia. The government, in this view, should be a tool to promote Islam. They considered the current government a puppet of the West, run by

¹⁰⁹ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Taloqan, September 2013.

¹¹⁰ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, student of social sciences, Takhar University, September 2013. Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Herat, October 2013.

¹¹¹ Personal communication with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, September 2014.

¹¹² Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir senior member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹¹³ Interview with a member of Eslah, university lecturer, Kabul, September 2014.

impious and westernised people who have no sense of sovereignty.¹¹⁴

Views differed within Eslah on how to create the envisioned Islamic state. While all agreed that *dawa* is an integral part of the struggle and that the grassroots need to be trained to propel 'the Islamic movement' to power, disagreement reigned over the political tools to gain this power. Senior members often stressed that only peaceful means are allowed, preferably through political activism and elections, provided they are free (all elections since 2004 are seen as having taken place under the occupation of foreign forces). They saw the democratic system, customised to Islamic values and Afghan traditions, as an acceptable method for the transition of power.¹¹⁵ Others said an assembly of *ahl al-hal wa'l-aqd* (religious scholars and influential pious members of the community who, in classical Islamic political theories, were qualified to choose the best person as the leader) could also be used to bring about a legitimate Islamic state.¹¹⁶ Among younger members, views were more diverse. Some preferred electoral politics; others favoured a combination of elections and the infiltration of state institutions, and a third minority group argued that peaceful options could not guarantee the Islamic movement's victory and that they should be ready for jihad to achieve victory if needed.¹¹⁷ This view may have developed in response to the ousting of Egypt's Islamist president, Muhammad Morsi, in July 2013. Examples of relatively inspiring models of Islamic government cited by Eslah members were Muhammad Morsi's short-lived presidency, the botched rule of Turkey's Necmettin Erbakan (leader of the Milli Görüş movement toppled in 1997) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's more than decade-long (2002–14) rule in Turkey. Eslahis hailed the Turkish Islamists' modern outlook, their economic success and their discrete rise to power through popular election.

The Hezb-e Islami youth generally said the current government of Afghanistan is not far from becoming an Islamic polity. In their view, Hezbi politicians are working from inside the state to reform and Islamise it. The stances of MP Abdul Sattar Khawasi in the Wolesi Jirga against night

raids by foreign troops and the EAW law were mentioned as examples of how Hezbis are already bringing Islamic reform to the state from the inside.¹¹⁸ Hezbis said the current government needs to implement *hudood* punishments (those seen as mandated by the Quran), clamp down on media freedoms to comply with sharia and end *reba* (interest on debt) in order to become Islamic. They generally considered the Taleban's Islamic Emirate a militarist government that implemented a harsh form of sharia, lacked political skills and was blindly prejudiced against anti-Soviet mujahedin leaders – which disqualified it from being an example of an Islamic state.¹¹⁹ They generally agreed that an Islamic government should normally be created peacefully, through simultaneous *dawa* and political activism, and that democracy is in principle compatible with Islam. Views differed on when jihad could legitimately achieve an Islamic state. Most HIA youth said that while jihad against foreign troops is not illegitimate, political efforts from inside state institutions are generally more effective. Others said political and military efforts should go hand in hand.¹²⁰ Hezbis agreed somewhat with Eslahis on approximate models of Islamic states: Morsi's presidency before it could embark on the needed Islamic reforms and the Erdogan government.

Salafis generally lacked a consistent, clear view on what a modern Islamic state should look like and how it should be created. Several were not prepared or did not want to discuss the political aspects of Islam, especially in the Afghan context. A common view was that an Islamic government should rule by the Quran and Sunna (sharia, but not based on a particular *fiqh* school) and follow the footprints of the *khulafa-e rashidin* (the four 'rightly guided', immediate successors to the Prophet). In practice, it was argued, that means a government run by or under close supervision of pious *ulama*, with all the characteristics cited earlier, such as enforcement of *hudood*, as well as the strict segregation of women in public life.¹²¹ They saw no example in recent memory that could be taken as a model for Islamic government, as all governments in Muslim countries either ruled through inherited power, dictatorship or election,

¹¹⁴ Interview with an Eslah member, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹¹⁵ Interview senior an Eslah member Herat, Oct 2013. Personal communication an Eslah member, Kabul, 2012.

¹¹⁶ Interview with a Najm member, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹¹⁷ Interviews with young Eslah members and associates: Kabul, December 2013; Jalalabad, November 2013 and Herat, October 2013.

¹¹⁸ Interview with a senior youth section member of Hezb-e Islami, Kabul, September 2014.

¹¹⁹ Interview with a Hezbi lecturer, Kabul, September 2014.

¹²⁰ Interview with a Hezbi student from Baghlan, Nangrhar University, November 2013. Interview with a Hezbi lecturer at Laghman University, Kabul, December 2013.

¹²¹ Interview with a Salafi mullah, Faizabad, September 2013.

which most considered *haram*. The Taleban government was also not considered fully Islamic, since it was not informed by the Quran and Sunna, but by a mixture of local tradition and *Hanafi madhab* (one of the four major schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam and predominant in Afghanistan). Apart from that, however, for many Salafis, the Taleban's enforcement of principles such as *hudood* and the ban on music does bring the group close to an Islamic polity.

Many young Salafis believed the form of Islamic government must be a global *khilafa*,¹²² while others believed that if a global caliphate could not be established, a mini-*khilafa* or national state, modelled after *khulafa-e rashidin* could also qualify as an Islamic state.¹²³ The head of the Islamic state, who could also be called *imam* or *amir*, should be appointed by an assembly of *ahl al-hal wa'l-aqd*. The way to create such an Islamic polity, in the view of some young Salafi sheikhs, is to direct the whole community to true Islam, which will then naturally produce righteous politicians. For almost all Salafis, democracy is considered non-Islamic and having faith in it risks lapsing into heresy.¹²⁴ Views on the permissibility of political parties varied, with a few labelling them as legal and others considering them *haram*.

A growing view among younger followers of Salafism seems to be that jihad, after *dawa*, is an integral part of the struggle to establish an Islamic polity. They argued that whereas *dawa* could reform (Islamise) society, peaceful means would not bring down an existing political system. In the late summer of 2014, many young Salafis supported the announcement of *khilafa* by the Islamic State (IS) group that had taken large swaths in Iraq and Syria, most of them rejecting reports of IS brutality in the Western and Arab media as baseless.¹²⁵ Many argued that under an Islamic state *shirk* (polytheism)¹²⁶ must be annihilated by letting *mushrikeen* (polytheists) choose between conversion to pure Islam or death.¹²⁷ Although not explicitly stated, the implication is that most Shias

¹²² Interview with young Salafis in December 2013 and September 2014, Kabul.

¹²³ Interview with a Salafi madrassa student, Jalalabd, November 2013.

¹²⁴ Interview with a senior Salafi preacher, Kabul, September 2014.

¹²⁵ Interviews with three young Salafi activists, Kabul, September 2014.

¹²⁶ Salafis have an extremely strict interpretation of polytheism, deeming many practicing Muslims as *mushrikeen* or ones who do *shirk*.

¹²⁷ Interview with a Salafi sheikh in Kabul, November 2013. Interview with a young Salafi in Herat, October 2013.

and some Sunnis who continue to stick to what the Salafis consider '*shirk* practices' (such as revering saints, seeking help from the dead or worshipping at a shrine) would come under this category.

On Women and Criminal Punishment

Education, Work and Hijab

While respondents were unanimous on the impermissibility both of women traveling without a *mahram* (close relative) and of co-education, views on education and work for women differed widely, even among followers of the same organisation. Although Salafis held a favourable view of religious education for women, non-religious education was discouraged as unnecessary and a 'gateway to deviance' in society. Only education that enables a woman to become a doctor or teacher at a school or madrassa was categorised as permissible.¹²⁸ Jobs that expose a woman to a male-dominated environment were considered *haram*.¹²⁹ Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Kabul said women could study what they wanted, provided the education environment was Islamic, but her job must not involve sinful activities (such as public singing, dancing, or work in the fashion industry or appearance in commercial advertisements), trips to the field or close interaction with non-*mahram* men.¹³⁰ Members in Takhar and Badakhshan, however, often expressed views closer to the Salafis, with the caveat that women could, under special circumstances, also engage in media-related jobs that promoted the truth, such as spokeswomen or TV presenters.¹³¹ Eslahis showed a similar division between progressive and conservative, with the more 'progressive' saying women could study social sciences, medicine, economy, public administration, and even go to business school. They could also, in principle, work in public offices, academia and the private sector, provided the working environment was decent – this freedom to work is, however, not yet to be actually practiced by female members of Eslah, given that the existing conditions in most public offices are not considered appropriate. 'Conservative' members felt that women's higher

¹²⁸ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Herat, October 2013. Interview with a Salafi madrassa student, Kunduz, September 2013.

¹²⁹ Interview with a Salafi sheikh and teacher, Kabul, December 2013.

¹³⁰ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹³¹ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member university student, Taloqan, September 2013.

education in any field that is not of direct relevance to motherhood, teaching, *dawa* or medicine could range from unnecessary to *haram*. Hezbis echoed to a large extent the difference of views found in Eslah, with one difference: 'progressive' Hezbis said women's freedom of work could be practically exercised in the current conditions, with no serious reservations. They said women from Hezb-e Islami are currently serving in legislative and government offices.¹³²

Opinion on *hijab* varied among Salafis. Some said a woman's face is not *awra* (must be covered) and women could interact with men while seeking religious education (such as in a madrassa or mosque) or meeting humanitarian needs.¹³³ Others said a woman's face is *awra* and the *niqab* or *burqa* was the only acceptable Islamic *hijab*.¹³⁴ Hizb ut-Tahrir members showed a similar division. For Kabuli members, a woman's face as a norm is not *awra* and she may work in an office occupied by both men and women, preferably in separate spaces inside the room.¹³⁵ Many interlocutors in Badakhshan and Takhar argued that if a woman is young or attractive enough to cause *fitna* (perversion), she must cover her face from non-*mahram* men.¹³⁶ Eslahis also held differing views, largely according to cultural setting, age and rank within the organisation. Young Eslahis in Kandahar, Nangarhar University and Badakhshan said that women in Afghanistan need the full head-to-toe veil (*niqab* or *burqa*) in the current situation (the rule could be different for women in other Muslim countries).¹³⁷ Others in Herat and Kabul, and more-senior members in Nangarhar and Badakhshan, said a woman does not need to veil her face.¹³⁸ Hezbis echoed to large extent the difference of views in Eslah along the same cultural and seniority lines.

¹³² Interview with senior members at Hezb youth section, Kabul, September 2014; Nangarhar, November 2013.

¹³³ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Kabul, September 2014.

¹³⁴ Interview with a Salafi activist, Kandahar, November 2013.

¹³⁵ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, December 2013.

¹³⁶ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member university student, Taloqan, September 2013.

¹³⁷ Interview with a Najm member from Nangarhar University, November 2013. Interview with a Faizabad University student member at Eslah, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with a young Eslahi from Kandahar, Kabul, September 2014.

¹³⁸ Interviews with senior Eslah members, Kabul, December 2013; Herat, October 2013; Nangarhar, November 2013; Faizabad, September 2013.

Respondents from all four groups suggested that Afghan women would be better off under an Islamic government in terms of inheritance and marriage rights. They believed that only an Islamic system could effectively end various harmful customary laws regarding women, such as those depriving them of inheritance, allowing early, forced and *baad* marriages (giving a girl or woman in marriage as a blood price to settle a revenge conflict over murder or perceived affront to honour) and preventing divorce.

Islamic Criminal Law and the Prevention of Evil Deeds

Interviewees from all groups agreed sharia's criminal law and *hudood* punishments could not be revoked and that the Quranic principle of fostering virtue and preventing evil (*amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar*) must be enforced as part of any Islamic group's mission. They, however, offered varied opinions on how this was to be done.

On implementing *hudood* punishments, almost all agreed that it is the job of a legitimate government to enforce Islamic criminal law, including the severance of one hand of a convicted robber, and *qisas*, the right of the family of a murder victim to kill the convicted murderer. The few Salafi youth who took exception said if the government did not rule by sharia, the local community with the help of its *ulama* and informal judges could implement *hudood*.¹³⁹ There was no universal interpretation on how the *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar* principle should be implemented. Roughly three views prevailed. Most associates from Hizb ut-Tahrir and Eslah, a number of Hezbis and some Salafis said that individuals are responsible for discouraging evil deeds and promoting virtue through non-violent and non-coercive methods (preaching, writing, modern publicity and media). A second view, held by many Salafis, and some within other groups, was that coercive power to stop evil acts and promote virtue is permissible, sometimes even compulsory, based on the principle of 'mandate'. According to this interpretation, the *wali al-amr* or *qayyem* (one who has legal authority or mandate over another) – who could be a village elder, influential mullah, chieftain of a closely-knitted tribe, head of the household, director of an organisation, or principal of a madrassa – has the right, and according to some respondents the responsibility, to forbid his people from doing evil deeds and order them to comply with sharia, even if that involves coercive

¹³⁹ Interview with a young Salafi activist, Herat, October 2013. Interview with a young Salafi teacher, Kabul, September 2014.

means.¹⁴⁰ The third view was that coercive means could be used for *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar* by anyone, with no need for a mandate, and that the only deterrent was whether these coercive means would cause a more serious sin or harm, such as murder or mass fighting, or breaking apart a family. In this reading, even a stranger on the street, for example, would be allowed to force a woman to wear *hijab*.¹⁴¹ This view was held exclusively by minorities of the youth (ie no senior members) in all the groups, except Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The Outside Threat to Islam

The perceived imminent threat from outside – in the form of a cultural invasion, a Western conspiracy to destroy Islam or a religio-political campaign by Iran to advance Shi'ism – was central to Islamist messaging among members of all four groups. There were, however, differences in emphasis. Hizb ut-Tahrir members focused overwhelmingly on the 'Western threat' that they said could strip Afghan society of its traditional Islamic values, while Salafis tended to emphasise the Shia and, by implication, Iranian threat.

For Salafis and most Hezbi youth, the threat from the West was mainly seen as a 'cultural invasion,' a term most frequently used by Eslahis. They referred to TV channels that broadcast programmes that they believe promote and normalise *bi-hijabi* (women being unveiled), such as Turkish and Hindi TV serials dubbed into local languages, and entertainment programmes and music videos featuring unveiled women.¹⁴² They also often mentioned the phone-in and entertainment programmes on FM radio stations and TV channels that feature young presenters from opposite sexes chatting freely with each other and the audience, describing them as an attempt to promote free relationships between girls and boys.¹⁴³ Hizb ut-Tahrir, Eslah and HIA

¹⁴⁰ Interviews with a Salafi sheikh, Badakhshan, September 2013; Hezbi activist, Kabul, September 2014; Najm member, Jalalabad, November 2013; Hizb ut-Tahrir associate Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁴¹ Interviews with an Eslah associate, Kandahar, November 2013; Salafi student, Jalalabad, November 2013; Hezbi activist from Wardak, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁴² Interview with a Hezbi lecturer at Khost University, Khost, October 2013. Interview with Salafi sheikh, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁴³ Interview with an Eslah member, Jalalabad, November 2013. Interview with Hizb ut-Tahrir associate, Kunduz, September 2013. An Eslah (Najm) member believed the West wanted to reshape relationships between Afghan girls and boys according to the Western 'free style' and undermine the value of the marriage contract. He described Indian serials which "taught

members said the West was trying to replace the Islamic dress code of *hijab* and *burqa* with Western clothes that deliberately seek to attract male attention. Some believed Western non-governmental organisations are paying young girls to roam the streets of Kabul in tight jeans and no, or revealing, headscarves to embolden other Afghan girls to do the same,¹⁴⁴ while others pointed out that the TV channels that air 'seducing programmes' are funded and encouraged by Western organisations and embassies.¹⁴⁵ Some Eslahis and Hezbis referred to the calls for more freedoms for women by 'sinister' civil society organisations as another attempt to Westernise Afghan society.¹⁴⁶

Hizb ut-Tahrir and some Eslahis generally saw the threat of the West as more than cultural, referring to what they saw as the intentional installation of pro-Western or Western-educated officials in the government as an attempt to ensure that the policies and laws of Afghanistan would comply with Western values and freedoms.¹⁴⁷ According to members of Eslah, the Constitution's statement that no law could contradict Islam is only paid lip service. The fact that a man who was arrested in 2006 for converting to Christianity was allowed to flee unpunished was seen as proof of how ineffectively Islamic the Afghan Constitution and other laws really were.^{148, 149} Hizb ut-Tahrir and Eslah members also accused the West of trying to establish its economic hegemony in Afghanistan and the region and of robbing Muslim lands of

people Hinduism" as part of a Western plot to de-Islamise Afghans. Interview in Kabul, December 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with a Nangarhar University lecturer, Kabul, September 2014. Interview with an Eslah activist in Kabul University, Kabul, December 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Interviews with a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Herat, October 2013 and Najm member, Kunduz, September 2013. The Najm member singled out the American embassy as a provider of funding for shows such as the Afghan Star singing contest at private broadcasters Tolo TV and Yak TV.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with a Hezbi student from Khost University, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with an Eslah member, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrir associate from Herat University, Herat, October 2013. Interview with Eslah member, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with an Eslah member, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁴⁹ The man, Abdul Rahman, was arrested in February 2006 and threatened with the death penalty for his conversion, but released a month later under heavy pressure from foreign governments. He left to Italy where he was granted asylum. For more details, see for example: "Afghan Convert 'Arrives in Italy'," BBC, 29 March 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4856748.stm.

their natural resources.¹⁵⁰ Hizb ut-Tahrir members were particularly vocal about the West's political and economic ambitions, denouncing the Western economic and political concepts of capitalism, free market economy, materialism, liberalism and democracy.¹⁵¹

Several Eslahis in Herat and Kabul used the term *gharbzadagi* to refer to Afghans who had been educated or spent considerable time in the West (and influenced by Western lifestyle and liberal views), such as some of the technocrat ministers in the post-Taliban administration.¹⁵²

On the perceived threat from Shi'ism, members of all four groups expressed concern about what they perceived as Iran's efforts to use and promote Shi'ism for its strategic goals. Salafis and Eslah members were most vocal. When prompted, respondents from all four groups distinguished between Shi'ism as an indigenous Islamic sect and as a political tool influenced by the Islamic revolution of Iran, describing the former as acceptable and the latter as problematic. Some Salafis, however, believed that the freedoms currently given to Shias in Afghanistan are a problem *per se*, as these increase Shias' influence and could pose a threat to Afghanistan's identity as a 'Sunni country.' They pointed to the recognition of the Shia family law (known as Shia Personal Status Law) in Afghan courts and the inclusion of Jafari *fiqh* in schoolbooks as manifestations of increasing Shia influence.¹⁵³ Some Hezbis pointed to the grand Shia educational institutions (Khatamun Nabiyeen University run by Ayatollah Asef Mohseni) and TV channels owned by Shia personalities (Tamadon TV run by Mohseni, Rah-e Farda TV that belongs to Vice CEO, Muhammad Mohaqiq, Negah TV that belongs to former Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili) as "increasing Shia encroachment" on Afghan society.¹⁵⁴

Other unacceptable manifestations, they said, were the widespread representation of Shias in government institutions, media and education

sectors. They also criticised the Nawroz celebration, as an un-Islamic feast, and the increasingly spectacular Ashura convoys and processions, installations (the so-called black gates across Kabul) and distribution of flags and banners, seen to be bankrolled by Iran.¹⁵⁵

Salafis excoriated both Iran and the post-2001 Afghan government, Iran for interfering in Afghanistan in favour of Shias and the government for giving Iran a free hand and Afghan Shias too much freedom.¹⁵⁶ Some Eslahis and Hezbis, on the other hand, blamed the West for what they saw as a planned empowerment of Shias to play up a minority-versus-majority divide in a Muslim country and to favour those "who are more loyal to its interests."¹⁵⁷ Hizb ut-Tahrir members, while acknowledging "followers of true Shi'ism" could be found in Afghanistan and the region, described Shias who practice 'pagan practices' as theologically non-Muslims who should pay *jezya* (a tax on non-Muslim citizens to be exempt from military service) under the *khilafa*.¹⁵⁸ Some described Iran's efforts to mobilise Shias under the name of the sect in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria as a plot to serve American interests. This view on Iran, as a strategic ally of the United States, was not confined to Hizb ut-Tahrir: Hezbi youth and Eslahis also saw Iran as a tacit friend of the US and even of Israel, working for a common purpose to undermine Sunni Islam in the region.¹⁵⁹ Some Eslahis warned that 'Shia awakening' activism is spurring Sunni youth and *ulama* to develop a sect-conscious identity, leading many to increasingly see political and religious issues through a sectarian prism.¹⁶⁰

Some Salafi and Eslah interlocutors, without being prompted, also mentioned Sufism as a long-standing threat to 'true Islam'. They described *tasawwuf* (Sufism), or rather 'distorted *tasawwuf*', as a problem that causes most of the erosion of

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Faizabad, September 2013.

¹⁵² Interview with a university lecturer member of Eslah, Herat, October 2013. Interview with a senior Eslah member, Kabul, December 2013. The term *gharbzadagi* (born of the West) refers to Afghans who have internalised Western thinking and *modus vivendi*, at the cost of Islamic mores. It was first used in Iran to describe a similar phenomenon, with some Iranian writers coining the term 'Westoxification' in English.

¹⁵³ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with a young Hezbi lecturer from Wardak, in Nagarhar University, November 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with a Salafi madrassa teacher, Kabul, December 2013. Interview with Eslah associate, Herat, October 2013.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. also interview with a Salafi student from Parwan, Kabul, December 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with a young Hezbi teacher, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with an Eslah member, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with a senior Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with a Najm member, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with a young Hezbi activist in Kabul University, Kabul, September 2014.

¹⁶⁰ Personal communication with an Eslah member, November 2013.

true Islam in Afghan society, long before other threats come into play.¹⁶¹

5. STUDENTS' CONTENTIOUS POLITICS, TWO CASE STUDIES

The activities of Afghanistan's non-violent Islamic groups have rarely been the subject of media reporting and are therefore often overlooked. Activities of unarmed Islamic activist youth that have drawn public attention have often centred on contentious or agitational politics by student groups. Defined as the use of disruptive techniques to make a political point or influence government policy, contentious political activities, in this case, include demonstrations by students and other youths chanting Islamic slogans. Therefore, knowing who is behind the noisiest and news-making activities on campuses and the ideological currents they represent is important. Whereas many of Afghanistan's universities have militant-minded students involved in contentious politics, Nangarhar and Khost Universities have the most active and vibrant groups – so much so that the university management at some point decided to close the dormitories to better control the students.

At Nangarhar University, hard-line groups, despite being a minority and less popular than the non-militant Islamic groups, were openly belligerent. These groups' most spectacular activities were demonstrations against incidents perceived as a threat to Islamic or national values that would often paralyse the campus or block the Jalalabad-Kabul highway.¹⁶² During the peak of their activism (between 2008 and 2012) the demonstrators were divided roughly equally between Hezbis from the militant branch (HIG) and the Taleban or 'Emaratis,' with the two groups competing for support.

When planning protests, the radicals used the availability of students in the dormitories to their full advantage. They went from room to room, holding long discussions, designing banners and coordinating their collective efforts, usually during the night. They would then pour onto the Jalalabad-Kabul highway, block the road and, sometimes, burn effigies and flags belonging to the United States, Israel or other countries that were

targets of their rage. Reasons for demonstrating included protesting civilian casualties by international troops, demanding the death sentence for Afghans who converted or were perceived to have insulted Islam, and showing outrage over various reports of the desecration of the Quran. The demonstrators usually did not hide their affiliation, carrying green flags that represented the Hezbis, white flags for the 'Emaratis' and black flags that students said represented al-Qaeda affiliates.¹⁶³ The banners and slogans usually called for jihad against foreign troops and their puppets.¹⁶⁴ The demonstrations often also served as an internal show of force, in which the various groups competed for dominance.¹⁶⁵

Taleban and HIG propaganda material was freely available on campus, including brochures, books, magazines and night letters.¹⁶⁶ HIG students ran a

¹⁶³ It is difficult to corroborate the presence of students identifying with al-Qaeda in these demonstrations. It is also difficult to know for sure whom the students with black flags represented given its usage by various groups. Generally, black flags with an inscription of the *shahda*, or statement of faith in Islam, previously mainly associated with al-Qaeda, are nowadays increasingly associated with the Islamic State (IS). Such flags have also been used by Hizb ut-Tahrir, as well as several violent jihadi groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. During the demonstrations described here (between 2008 and 2012) IS had however not yet been heard of in Afghanistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir did not have a strong enough presence at Nangarhar University to be a regular contributor to the demonstrations.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with an alumnus of Nangarhar University, leading member of the Hezbi students, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁶⁵ One Hezbi student recalled that in one demonstration, the Emaratis tried to hang their banner on the first vehicle of the queue, which was reserved for Hezb-e Islami's flag. This turned into a row. Such standoffs would not always remain non-violent. The same student recalled with some pride how the Hezbi boys beat an Emarati in the dormitory, after he insulted Hekmatyar: "The Hezbi boys beat him and broke his ribs, which caused many other Emaratis to come to the scene. Through intervention by some neutral students, the dispute was stopped from evolving into a mass fight." Interview with alumnus of Nangarhar University, leading member of the Hezbi students, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁶⁶ Material included the Taleban's Tora Bora Front magazine and the elegantly designed Eid messages of Mullah Muhammad Omar. According to one student, the Taleban's magazines were so widely available on the campus that "they could be found in every room." Interviews with a former student of literature, a law student in his last year and an Arabic Department student from Laghman, all at Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁶¹ Interview with a Salafi sheikh, Faizabad, September 2013. Interview with senior Eslah member, Herat, October 2013.

¹⁶² Interview with a former Hezbi (militant branch) student leader, Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, November 2013.

dormitory room—turned library with publications by Hekmatyar that was also used as a venue for meetings and oratory exercises. Most discussions revolved around jihad and the formation of an Islamic state.¹⁶⁷ Militant students occasionally even acted as religious police, checking the morality of the faculty and students. In one instance in 2011, the head of the Pashto Literature Department was warned by Emaratis after a female provincial council member had been seen visiting him in his office. They threatened that if she was seen there again, both would be captured and beaten by a mob. In another example, the dean of the English Department received death threats from HIG students for “harassing students for not wearing trousers and jackets.” His reported pushing of students to adopt Western style dressing was perceived as promoting secularism.¹⁶⁸

Militant-minded students were said to go fighting during their vacations, although the estimated numbers of those who had died fighting between 2010 and 2013 did not exceed half a dozen.¹⁶⁹ Other militant students were said to provide intelligence on an *ad hoc* basis to their regional networks. The scope of the militant students’ activism never seemed to amount to the presence of an operational Taliban or HIG cell and most students within this militant-minded category were simply ideologically aligned with the two insurgent groups. The police and the intelligence service, National Directorate of Security (NDS), did keep a close eye on the students and occasionally arrested suspects. At least twelve students were arrested in 2011, five in 2012 (in one incident) and 25 in 2013. Most arrests happened off campus, often while the students were on vacation in their home provinces.¹⁷⁰ The 2011 arrests, which involved a raid on the campus and detention of students just outside, prompted a series of protests. Although they were organised by the radicals, other students also participated for the sake of student rights. The demonstrations for the students’ release continued for almost a week and student representatives, most of them with militant

¹⁶⁷ Interview with an Arabic Department student from Laghman, Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with an alumna of the Pashto literature department of Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with an administrative staff person of Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, December 2013. Interview with a HIG-affiliated student, Jalalabad, December 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with a pro-Taliban student, Jalalabad, December 2013. Interview with an administrative staff person of Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, December 2013.

tendencies, met both the governor of Nangarhar and President Karzai to make their case. This emboldened the students, and security forces found it more difficult to act after that.¹⁷¹

Similarly, at Sheikh Zayed University in Khost, radical students, although a minority, aggressively overwhelmed the campus environment, coercing other students to comply with their demands. For instance, radicals would cancel classes for several days to protest the arrest and detention of a militant classmate or lecturer or organise noisy demonstrations with overtly jihadist slogans. During protests, many wore white and green headbands that reminded people of the Taliban and HIG.¹⁷² Militant students would hold *fatiha* (vigil) ceremonies in the dormitory mosque for students killed fighting foreign and Afghan troops and pictures of the ‘martyred’ students would be posted in all departments and on the mosque’s door. The *fatiha* rites often featured sermons calling for “jihad against the Crusaders.”¹⁷³

The trend has since somewhat reversed. In late 2011, the provincial government of Khost sought to counter the dominance of the militant-minded students, who largely hailed from other provinces (mainly Wardak, Ghazni and Nangarhar), by appealing to tribal sentiments of the local students, with some success.¹⁷⁴

University campuses have also been the scene of targeted attacks, including the relatively recent assassination of the deputy governor of Kandahar province, Abdul Qadim Patyal, who was killed inside his classroom in Kandahar University in early November 2014. Security officials and independent observers, pointing to the long-standing presence of Taliban-affiliated students on campus, believe the assassin was probably a student of the

¹⁷¹ Interview with an administrative staff person of Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, December 2013; interview with an alumna of Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, November 2013.

¹⁷² Interview with a fourth-year law student from Khost, Khost, October 2013.

¹⁷³ Interview with a lecturer of Sheikh Zayed University, Khost, October 2013.

¹⁷⁴ Deputy governor of Khost, Tahir Khan Sabari, himself a Khosti, called on the Khosti students to “rein in the handful of irresponsible students, who want to hijack a university Khostis built with their household savings.” The appeal in the deeply tribal Khost community did not go in vain. The radical students at the time were boycotting the annual exam, to demand the release of a teacher with a HIG background. They were overpowered by the Khosti students who were in the majority and, supported by the university administration, and the exam went ahead. Interview with an alumna of Sheikh Zayed University, Khost, October 2013.

university.¹⁷⁵ In Kabul, a professor and two students from the Kabul Medical University were arrested in October 2011 on suspicion of plotting the assassination of then President Hamid Karzai. Officials claimed they were part of a six-member group linked to al-Qaeda.¹⁷⁶ Nangarhar University campus also saw two security incidents in 2013 involving, respectively, a bomb attached to the motorbike of a student who was also an NDS informant and a bomb attached to the parked car of the university dean. At least 10 people, including two teachers, were wounded in these two incidents. The involvement of students has, however, not been proven.

6. CONCLUSION

The four Islamic activist groups discussed in this paper show similarities in their major goals and messages, but have significantly divergent interpretations and approaches when it comes to detail, in particular with regard to the relationship between Islamic aims and political means. Where Eslah and Hezb-e Islami youth may envision engaging in politics as conventional political parties (Hezb is registered as a political party and Eslah is considering it), most Salafis proscribe party politicking. And, whereas an election-based political system is considered fully compatible with Islam by most Eslah and Hezb-e Islami youth, it is generally seen as un-Islamic by Hizb ut-Tahrir. Views also diverge considerably *within* the various trends. Members of a group who are from conservative or remote provinces, for instance, tend to hold harsher and more rigid opinions on certain cultural issues, like woman's education, compared to members from metropolitan areas. This diversity means that a variety of 'flavours' is on offer, allowing the new brands of Islamism to reach audiences having a variety of dispositions.

All four groups, and the trends they represent, are likely to grow in strength. While they will likely continue to compete to grab the attention of potential audiences, they may also cooperate, as seen in the past. Three of the four groups are actively seeking a greater political role through recruitment, mass mobilisation and infiltration of

¹⁷⁵ Interview with a police official, Kandahar, December 2014. Interview with the head of a youth political party, which has a campus watch programme, Kandahar, December 2014. Interview with a recent alumnus of Kandahar University, Kandahar, December 2014.

¹⁷⁶ "Professor, Students Accused of Plot to Kill Karzai," Associated Press, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44789404/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/t/professor-students-accused-plot-kill-karzai/ (accessed 29 December 2014).

the government. Their aim is ultimately, to differing extents, change the political system.

Keeping a Foot on Each Side

Islamic activist groups have been walking a political and religious tightrope between the government, which they often criticise, and the Taliban insurgency, with which they are often in undeclared competition (although their followers may cooperate with Emaratis and appear to blend with them on the ground). All four groups have preserved their religious credibility among both pro-state and anti-state segments of society. Although these groups at their core tend not to agree with the Taliban's violent *modus operandi* and its interpretation of Islam, they have not come out strongly against the movement and its actions – not only to avoid attracting threats, but also for fear of alienating the Taliban's constituency. Criticism of the insurgency usually remains internal among members and supporters.

The Islamic groups, as a result, have largely remained safe from the assassination campaign that has targeted *ulama*, tribal elders and politicians over the years. The Salafi networks have done this by avoiding any political role under the current government (as well as an anti-Taliban stand), while the anti-state and anti-West messages of the other three groups have largely insulated them against the insurgents' wrath. At the same time, these groups have combined rhetoric critical of the state with careful adherence to the boundaries of freedom of expression by eschewing violence, refraining from openly threatening the government and, in the case of Eslah and Hezb-e Islami, registering with the government. This has given them the freedom to use available political space and to have a foot in each side of the political-military divide.

Potential for Clashes with the Traditional Religious Establishment

Organised Islamic groups in present Afghanistan have bloomed because a central religious institution is absent and decades of conflict and politicisation of the sacred realm have undermined local *ulama's* traditional hegemony. This has allowed modern Islamic groups to establish themselves as popular voices of faith and for these young and emerging groups to challenge the position of traditional religious powers. Although all four groups prefer to woo imams and *ulama* instead of confronting them, their discontent with traditional religious actors is evident. Each group finds fault with the performance of mullahs (not to

speak of other religious actors such as *pirs* and *sayyids*) as religious leaders. Salafis, who typically see their conception of *tawhid* (monotheism) as the only version that can save souls, accuse traditional mullahs of failing to deliver a true message of salvation, thus challenging their position as credible faith leaders. Hizb ut-Tahrir and Eslah, and Hezb-e Islami youth to a lesser extent, are critical of mullahs who avoid Islamic political activism. They usually blame mullahs and imams for using their positions merely as a means of livelihood. So far, however, this has been a largely hidden rivalry, and only in rare cases has open conflict or a backlash from mullahs occurred. The new generation of more-cosmopolitan mullahs seem more open to affiliating with Islamic activist groups, especially in urban areas, and the perceived threat to the common social status of both traditional and 'modern' religious actors may bring them closer together.¹⁷⁷ The nature of the relationship between the two will also depend on the stances towards the traditional *ulama* that the various strands of the youth groups make public.

Drivers and Attractions

The factors contributing to the momentum of Islamic activist groups need further investigation, but some predictable drivers are already hard to overlook. An important factor is disillusionment with the present government and its ruling elite. Frustration with a government seen widely as corrupt, partisan and too dependent on the West is a key reason some educated and ambitious youth, who feel entitled and competent to hold public authority, turn to Islamic activism. They see flaws in the broader political system that has produced this government and are looking for alternatives, which can be found in the discourse of modern Islamic groups whose messages include immutable elements of justice, equity and sovereignty. Despite the disaffection among large parts of the population towards the historically unsuccessful Islamic experiments of both the mujahedin and the Taleban, the new version of Islamic activism seems to hold a clear appeal, particularly among segments of the younger population. The persistence of the appeal for an 'Islamic solution' emanates partly from the new groups' ability to project themselves as being

different from their predecessors and, indeed, they do follow different methods. For example, Hizb ut-Tahrir distinguishes itself from past Islamic actors in Afghanistan by its global agenda and clarity of vision. Eslah distinguishes itself from the Taleban and mujahedin by a bottom-up and incremental approach to effecting change that combines its spiritual message with social entrepreneurship. Both Eslah and Hizb ut-Tahrir might diverge from previous Islamic groups by embracing modern organisational structures against a patronage system common to the mujahedin and Taleban. Also, Hezbi youth and Salafis support a gradual process of change rather than confrontational methods. The appeal of Salafism stands out for the scripturalist and theological foci in its message.

The growth of the Islamic groups has not only been driven by what went wrong in post-Taleban Afghanistan, but also by what went right. Three major gains of the past decade – increased educational opportunities, political liberalisation and technological advances – have been key to the Islamic groups' unabated growth. Unprecedented freedom to express views and engage in civic activism, which came with the international intervention, increased opportunities for religious organisations, and all social or political groups, to recruit and mobilise. Under the Taleban, all four Islamic groups were banned or despised; Eslah and Hezb-e Islami were actively suppressed. The unprecedented technological and communication possibilities that opened Afghanistan to the broader world after 2001 have also made the exchange and spread of ideas easier than at any time in the past. Afghan Islamic activists can now easily connect to their peers in the wider world and among themselves, as well as reaching out to potential new recruits.

The Islamic groups' strategies of influence-building are a source of their strength. Their pragmatism in using state structures – educational institutions and civil administration – without patronising the state enables them to advance their influence in official quarters, without being tainted by the government's reputation. The Islamic groups further seek to be well connected among influential community leaders and political heavyweights with religious backgrounds, and they are well positioned to approach Afghan communities through the convenient constituencies provided by mosque and madrasa – something not easily accessible by other civic or political groups. To gain influence and bolster their image in society, all four groups – to a differing extent – play on the fears and perceptions that the Western intervention and some freedoms that came with it entail a threat to religion and

¹⁷⁷ See for instance the case of the killing of Farkhunda in March 2015, which could have split the traditional *ulama* and the younger Islamic activists, but instead brought them closer, particularly in their condemnation of the 'secularists'. More at *The Killing of Farkhunda (2): Mullahs, feminists and a gap in the debate* by Borhan Osman, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 29 April 2015.

morality. The Islamic groups bank on this perception by presenting themselves as preservers of religious values in the face of that threat.

Prospects for Growth

All four groups seem poised to grow at a steady pace, both in terms of numbers and influence within public institutions, especially in the educational sector. They will likely continue to make inroads in religious institutions by co-opting or establishing mosques and madrassas. The three groups with clear political ambitions are following different routes to increase their influence in the government. Hezb-e Islami is already participating as a political party in branches of the state, with elder members in senior positions and younger members seemingly following suit. Members of Jamiat-e Eslah are discussing launching a political party, and the organisation is keen to have a presence within government, although so far it has prevented members from holding high-profile positions. Hizb ut-Tahrir members boast that they already have infiltrated the security sector, although formally their organisation does not want its members to hold positions in what they consider an un-Islamic government. So far, the Islamic groups have eschewed overly active engagement in formal politics largely for practical reasons: it risks both attracting threats from insurgents that imperil their security, and losing the support of segments in society that see politicking under the presence of Western troops as support for the 'occupation'.

Key areas of recruitment include young and, increasingly, educated urban women. Eslah and Salafis, in particular, seem to be in a relatively good position to widen their female support base. Eslah has already been actively mobilising women, while the many girls studying in Salafi-leaning madrassas

may also join the ranks of the Islamic activists. Effective use of media and organised recruitment practices, in particular by Eslah and Hizb ut-Tahrir, are likely to help consolidate both their reach and organisation.

Hizb ut-Tahrir and to a lesser extent of Eslah emphasise the global Islamic fraternity; this may bring them into confrontation with Afghan youth trends that entertain a strong nationalistic rhetoric. The two groups' frequent display of solidarity with outside Islamist groups and their passionate responses to political developments in other parts of the Muslim world have already stirred heated reactions in the mainstream and social media. At the same time, connection to an internationalist movement can strengthen the appeal, resources and organisational capacity of these groups.

All four Islamic groups represent movements in transition. Not only are most of their activists young, but the organisations are too and they have been largely shaped during an era of relatively extensive freedoms, an era which itself symbolises transition. Since these groups are yet to ripen, predictions of their future behaviour are problematic. Some of these groups, or segments of their followers, could potentially become radicalised into violent extremism, but this will depend on various factors, including the prevalent political environment, which is still in flux. While a pluralistic political atmosphere could decrease the likelihood of radicalisation, repression could contribute to it. The future inclinations of young Islamic activists also hinge on how Islamic groups in other countries, of both jihadist and political strands, fare in their own projects of establishing an Islamic order. These dynamics could be a source of inspiration or learning for the Afghan Islamic groups at home.

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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.

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