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Jihad and Ideology in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989): How Religion Shaped Armed Resistance in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) represents a defining aspect of world geopolitics in this day and age not only because of its cold war undertones but mainly because of the influence religious ideology had on the mobilisation of the Afghan resistance. What started as a nationalist process that took part in a purely nationalist struggle in Afghanistan is now transnational and has a strong Islamic identity and a long-term impact on the world of militants.

This paper holds that religion (in this case being the Islamic ideology) was not just a benign background incentive but an engine where it provided form, authority and moral rationale to the Afghan opposition to Soviet troops. Leaders of the Afghanistan mujahideen backed by foreign volunteers and religious scholars, in turn, used jihad as more than a defensive measure but as a heavenly command. This story found many sympathizers among Muslim peoples of the whole world and turned the war into an ideological one. It also became the basis of the emergence of Islamist militant groups, which included Al-Qaeda, during the postwar era.

This study is interdisciplinary and qualitative in its methodology that aims at intertwining historical analysis of ideological critique. Speeches, fatwas, and writings of leaders of mujahideen are used as primary sources, whereas scholarly books, journal articles, and declassified intelligence reports are used as the secondary ones. Another way in which the research engages is the presence of a comparative aspect of the discourse analysis because it seeks to understand how various elements of the duty of jihad were interpreted and propagated by various parties in and outside Afghanistan during the war. Through critical analysis of the ideological structure of the Afghan resistance, the paper offers a better insight on how religion can essentially be a cohesive advantage and at the same time fosters a long-term geopolitical reformation.

Key Words: Jihad, Soviet-Afghan War, Ideology, Religion

Introduction

The Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) was not simply a proxy war of the Cold War, it was a complicated convergence of international politics and local desire and ideology. Essentially, the war saw the greatest application of religious ideology as a mobilizing factor in modern history. As the Soviet Union ventured into Afghanistan to help an ailing communist rule and to secure its grip to an area, it incidentally fuelled a violent rebellion based on Islamic ideologies. The idea of jihad that has been historically treated as a struggle on behalf of God, acquired a militant meaning and became a uniting cry of the Afghani fighters and foreign volunteers. This was a war-torn world, but the religion here



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went beyond personal belief and morality and transformed to become a super-power to identity, strategy and outcome.

Jihad started being used in this era not only as a concept that is spiritual or defensive but has been developed into a rally symbol which gave the resistance some meaning and validity. The narrative developed by the Afghan religious scholars (ulama), tribal leaders and foreign Islamist ideologues placed the Soviet invasion in the perspective of fighting not against a government but as a war against Islam itself. Such religious isation transformed the struggle to national to a pan-Islam obligation, and inspired financial, moral and military contributions by nations such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt. The world Islamic community (ummah) were asked to support their Muslim brothers in Afghanistan and this led to ingression of foreign fighters and establishment of transnational jihadism.

Ideology was also very significant in maintaining the support of the war and in developing the very identity of the Afghan mujahideen. The religious rhetoric gave a fitting explanation to the religious defense of violent resistance, which was also used as a recruitment and propaganda method. This ideological support was successful to close the ethnic and tribal breach between Afghan groups, but this was also the reason that promoted the ideological extremism in future. It is important to note that such personalities as Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden were shaped by such an ideological environment, which became the soil of worldwide jihadist networks. The religious resistance or state and non-state backed madrassa systems and militant training camps that thrived in Pakistan in this period were inseparable parts of the narrative of religious resistance.

In addition, the Soviet-Afghan War can be considered to have been among the first cases in which state actors, in this case mainly the United States via the CIA and Pakistan via its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), were using religious ideology as one of the instruments of their warfare. Through the operation Cyclone, the States directed billions to radical Islamist factions, having at heart the dedication to the jihad, dismissing political or ethnic attachments. The ideological nature of the war was even reinforced by Pakistan under the Islamization policy by General Zia-ul-Haq which propagated Sunni jihadist discourses. Though this ideological engineering was useful in defeating the Soviet troops, it has had rather long-term and unfavorable effects which may range far beyond Afghanistan boundaries and include the growth of extremist groups and even radicalization of the Muslim youth.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of jihad and Islamic ideology in the course of the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion that took place during the Soviet occupation in the 80s and both local and external influences. It will look at religious writings, political discourses and ideology propaganda to find out how religion was militarized. In that view, the study will offer a sophisticated perception of the extent to which embedded beliefs in an ideology can convert a local struggle of a conflict, into a world movement, and how the history of ideological wars has had an imprint impact on global security relations to date.

Literature Review

The wave of literature the SovietAfghan War has produced translates into political science, international relations, religious studies and security studies. Intellectuals have largely recognized that the war was not just another encounter of the cold war, it was also a revelation moment of the global Islamic crisis. One of the first and most prominent of these books was *Unholy Wars* of John Cooley (1999), which discusses how the religious



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ideology had been used by the western powers, especially the United States and Pakistan as a tool to battle out Soviet rivalry. According to Cooley, the religious nature of mujahideen was a real and also an instrumental factor on the part of foreign powers to create a perilous future in which jihad and geopolitics became intertwined. His analysis plays an important role in gaining insights on the convergence of state interests and ideological discourses.

On the same note, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (2002) by Ahmed Rashid gives a detailed analysis of how the Afghanistan war had nurtured radicalisms which were later spread to Central and south Asia. Rashid gets into the contribution of individuals such as Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam and how the war acted as a training camp of jihadist movements. He points to the activities of Islamic charities, schooling and the media in propagating jihad ideology far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The importance of Rashid is to associate the Afghanistan war with the subsequent development of world terror gangs, in particular, Al-Qaeda.

According to Gilles Kepel, in his *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (2000), the ideological development of the Islamist movements can be marked by such critical turns as the participation in the Afghan jihad. Kepel believes that even though most of the mujahideen worked under local concerns, there were foreign ideologues who offered a transnational platform which was based on Salafi-jihadist ideas. This produced a mixed movement that consisted of conventional Afghan tribal opposition and puritanical as well as militant interpretations of Islam. His study is critical in the differentiation between domestic Afghan opposition and imported extremist thoughts, and he adds much complexity into the mujahideen files.

Barnett Rubin, a prominent expert on Afghanistan, also contributes with a different plausible point of view represented in his works like *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (1995) that state about social and political background of the warfare. Rubin complains about the desire to explain the Afghan resistance with ideological concepts only and emphasizes the importance of local hierarchies, tribal relations, and warlordism. Though accepting the role that ideas about religion played in motivating warriors, Rubin believes that jihad became more mobilizing catch-phrase than commitment-driven ideology that was believed by many fighters. His observations provide a more realistic understanding of how religion functioned next to other desires such as survival, revenge or local autonomy.

Understanding Terror Networks (2004) by Marc Sageman is less politically inclined and more user-friendly psychologically and sociologically on the jihadists who also took part in the Soviet-Afghan War. He examines the life histories of foreign fighters and shows a commonality that found its origins in personal alienation, political frustration, and identity crisis, and not necessarily in religious indoctrination. The work by Sageman is especially useful when it comes to comprehending the phenomenon of foreign fighters at the time and after the events of the Afghan war, specifically how ideology was able to give these people a purpose and sense of communion.

A number of studies have also been conducted on the role of the Pakistan-based Deobandi and Salafi religious institutions. Historians like Marianna Baabar and Ayesha Jalal have highlighted the role that was played by General Zia-ul-Haq and his Islamization processes in providing an environment and support to ideological training of the mujahideen as a result of Saudi funding. These academicians demonstrate how madrassas and Islamic centers have been used as ideological factories since they not only bred fighters but also religious scholars who would infect the world with jihadist ideologies in future. These schools turned into important links in the ideological and



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logistical nexus which aided Afghan defense.

The discussion has been expanded in academic journals. To give one instance an article by Jacqueline Fitzgibbon (2011) named justifying jihad: US politics propaganda and Afghan mujahideen cast a severe eye on how jihad was glorified by western politics and media during the 1980s. Fitzgibbon believes that the ideological discourse was well packaged to both the local and global audience trying to present mujahideen as freedom fighters as opposed to warriors of religious faith. This re-categorization proved not only to impact the consciousness of the people but also to rationalize the foreign aid and military assistance and therefore strengthen this marriage between ideology and geopolitics.

Finally, direct evidence of the ideological framework of the resistance can be found within such primary sources as writings and speeches of Abdullah Azzam, who became to be known as the Father of Global Jihad. Written works such as *Join the Caravan* and *Defense of the Muslim Lands* by Azzam stress that the jihad is an individual duty (fard ayn) and their misinterpretation of the test of faith that has come because of the Soviet invasion. His rhetoric motivated thousands of international volunteers and helped develop a worldwide identity of jihadists. These readings are crucial in describing the intellectual and emotional attractiveness of the Afghan jihad among the Muslims in the world.

Research Methodology

The article uses the qualitative research design based on both historical analysis and criticism of language discourse to investigate how the ideology of religion in form of jihad concept contributed to development of armed resistance factors of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). Based on primary and secondary literature review, the study will examine the speeches, writings, fatwas, and propaganda literature created by the leaders of the Afghanistan mujahideen and mainstream Islamist intellectuals like Abdullah Azzam. These main sources give first hand sources to the roles jihad played in being framed as both a religious obligation and an equality against Soviet occupation. The academic books, journal articles, and historical accounts of such scholars as John Cooley, Ahmed Rashid, and Barnett Rubin give key background information and scholarly interpretation of the ideological background of the war. Declassified intelligence materials and retrospective journalistic scholarship are also used in the study to gain insight into how the external actors (United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, etc.) voiced and exploited Islamic ideology as part of their strategy. To be able to systematically analyze them, the research uses the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify how religious language and symbolism was deployed to encourage resistance, to create legitimacy and to instill a transnational jihadist identity. There is also the use of thematic content analysis in which there is an attempt to determine common ideological patterns in various texts and on various occasions through time. Such a globalised perspective makes it possible to see the inner workings of jihad as both an invigorating means of spiritual drive and a hugely effective weapon in a conflict that rewrote the history of militant Islam across the world.

Discussion

Jihad was very crucial in bringing various ethnic and tribal communities together on a single religious agenda. Such a spiritual justification assisted in portraying the conflict as not only a political battle but rather a compulsory religious duty, converting a regional insurgency into a trans-national sacral war. The writings used by Abdullah Azzam,



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notably, Defense of the Muslim Lands, placed jihad in the form of fard ayn (individual obligation), which made the war religiously legitimized (Azzam, 1984).

The religious system aided Afghan mujahideen to have the morale and endurance in face of a technologically advanced Army led by the Soviets. Through the call to jihad, metaphysical incentives and divine security were proclaimed unlike in the secular or nationalistic ideologies. This story did not only empower combatants at the spiritual level but also motivated millions of other people around the Muslim world to rebel against them (Kepel, 2002). Therefore, religion was not only an energizer but the ideological drive to the resistance.

Although the leaders of the native religion and tribe in Afghanistan played a major role in the mobilization of resistance, the foreigners played a major role in the ideology of the discourse. Such leaders as Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden brought Salafi-jihadist ideas to the war, a mixture of local Islamic traditions with global pan-Islamic visions (Rashid, 2002). The Afghan jihad was imbued with new transnational theological rationalizations by these transnational ideologues, and made the conflict into an icon of unity and opposition amongst Muslims world-wide.

The mediating power of the states like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was also important. ISI of Pakistan, in the Islamization policy of General Zia-ul-Haq, provided the Islamist groups with an upper hand and was able to brainwash fighters in border madrassas of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rubin, 1995). These schools turned into centers of ideas that preach jihad, not only as a religious practice, but a political and armed action in reaction to global injustice. With the help of such organisations as Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia exported its Wahhabi ideology and financed the creation of religious infrastructure that was compatible with the Salafi understanding of jihad (Cooley, 1999).

Role of the West in escalating religious discourses

One of the factors that is unpopular, but crucial in this discussion, is the presence of the west, particularly the United States, in enhancing the jihadist rhetoric in the course of the war. The U.S. directed billions of dollars' worth of weapons and assistance to Islamist organizations through Operation Cyclone, and the rules of media and politics turned mujahideen into figures of freedom fighters instead of religious jihadists (Fitzgibbon, 2011). This selective representation not only legitimized the American aid as it concealed the religious radicalization that was going on at the same time.

The American propaganda maintained Islamic rhetoric to stimulate resistance to the Soviets especially in the states that were dominated by Islam. This came in the form of finances to support religious literature, radio stations as well as madrassas which advanced Afghan jihad. It is this myopic instrumentalization of religion that made the jihadist ideology achieve international viability and legitimacy, and pave the way to subsequent extremist operations (Sageman, 2004).

The mujahideen lacked ideological cohesion despite the unifying influence of religion. The opposition had different groups, some with various understanding on jihad, governance and ideas of how the war will end. Whereas some groups considered jihad as a national warfare to liberate Afghanistan, there are others especially the foreign fighters who considered jihad as a part process of a greater world Islamic revolution (Rashid, 2002). Such internal ideological differences had become later contributors toward post-Soviet civil wars and extreme movements such as Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

This complexity makes us have simple explanations of the resistance. The motivational drivers of the various fighters were driven purely by tribal sense of loyalty, anti-communist feeling or even loss and lacked a decent religious thought process as argued



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by Rubin (1995). However, the jihadist perception of the world was superimposed massively on the expression of the movement, which was financed by foreign sources and driven by the Islamic language.

Framing Religion and Discourse Analysis

This research study applied critical discourse analysis and found that mujahideen texts, sermons, and publications used metaphors of martyrdom, divine reward, and cosmic struggle in the justifications of violence. The battlefield was to be sacralized with such terms as shaheed (martyr), kuffar (infidels), and jannah (paradise) to undermine the legitimacy of the enemy (Azzam, 1987). This kind of religious circumstantiation successfully posited a moral duality between hypothesizing on one side “believers” and on the other the complications of globally political realities into spiritual absolutes.

These rhetoric styles had a recruitment role too. The mujahideen story appealed to emotionally and ideologically vulnerable masses in the Muslim world because it also held martyrdom and jihad as the direct route to heaven. This disguise also presented the power games and political interests under a blanket of a divine mission, which enabled the warlords and the clergy to maintain spiritual supremacy.

Other important variables in this analysis include instrumental use of jihad as a political instrument. Jihad was used as a political tool by religious leaders, politicians and outside powers to gain a moral attachment. The national interests of the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to defeat the Soviets, increase the authority in the region and oppose Shiite Iran used the ideology to attain these strategic goals (Cooley, 1999). To Afghan leaders, the jihad assisted in the acquisition of money, allegiance, and international influence.

This instrumentalization caused the degradation of jihad to its spiritual nature to a political pragmatic value. It was also the gateway to the later abuse of the use of religious ideology to fight battles that did not appear to have any religious ground. The Soviet-Afghanistan war in this regard, paved the way to politicization of jihad in subsequent wars as that of Syria and Chechnya among other wars.

Legacy and Aftermath

The history of the Soviet-Afghan War in terms of ideology is immense. The withdrawal of the Soviets led to most of the foreign fighters going back to their home countries as radicalized individuals who had not only gained experience in the battlefield but also the militant view of Islam. Such an ideological and logistical network gave birth to al-Qaeda, as an example (Kepel, 2002). The proliferation of jihad in the 1980s established the normalisation of the use of religion in combat and affected the Islamist movements across the Muslim world significantly.

In addition, the war helped to breed fighters who considered armed jihad as the way to justice in the light of the divine. These members would then go on to involve themselves in violent acts of insurgency and terrorist attacks globally, ranging between the 9/11 attacks to that of ISIS. The Soviet-Afghan War was therefore a launching pad to world jihadism and an ideology was the centre point and continuing force.

Nevertheless, ideology by itself cannot be a complete answer to persistence or outcome of the Afghan resistance. Important factors included geography, tribal or tribalistic processes, foreign investment and military tactics. Nonetheless, it was ideology, an ideology that accorded the conflict with global dimension and far-reaching effects. In the absence of the religious contexts, the war would have been a local insurrection instead of a milestone event in world Islamic politics (Rubin, 1995).

It is crucial to realize such limitations to have a balanced perception. Although the



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jihadist ideology intensified the resistance and provided unity among the opposition, it has divided the population, further encouraged radical extremism, and made the post-war peacebuilding unattainable.

Conclusion

Another historical event to be identified as a milestone in the collage of religion and war in modern times is the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). Started as a geopolitical conflict in the times of the Cold War, it became a religiously motivated one, with its foundations in the ideas of Islam. As the theology of jihad, but also as an instrument capable of mobilization, recruitment, and legitimation the concept of jihad became central to the struggle in Afghanistan. The religious ideology turned the resistance into something beyond the national boundaries wherein fighters and supporters of the resistance came across the Muslim world.

As discussed by this paper, jihad as propagated by Afghan leaders and foreign preachers such as Abdullah Azzam gave the AOR a spiritual grounding and an ethical manifesto to fight using the violent means. Defeating a foreign intruder was no longer the main purpose of the war - it was re-evaluated as a sacred duty in the name of Islam itself. Other foreign players like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States became critical in propagating such an ideological discourse, therefore pursuing short-term strategic interests at the expense of promoting long-term stability. They took the part of religious-led, and thereby assisted in the spread of jihadist thoughts all around the globe which to this point continues to exist.

Critical discourse analysis and thematic review of the content indicated the systematic use of language, metaphors, and symbols by which a worldview of divine struggle was built. This brainwashing did not only consolidate the opposition, but also paved the way to broader extremes. This casting of jihad as the black and white on the moral spectrum did not allow much space to move towards a post war reconciliation or pluralism and so there was no easy way to move to a stable political situation once the Soviets left.

Finally, Afghanistan jihad in the course of the Soviet occupation demonstrates that the politicized and militarized religion can become the potent tool of both resistance and radicalization. This war has left its mark on the security situation in the world, and nowadays the researchers and policymakers alike are not likely to forget about the aftermath of such a combination of religion and military violence. The ideological aspects of the Soviet-Afghan War should be considered carefully in order to understand the origins of the modern jihad dynamics and avoid the repetition of such tendencies in the context of the global wars.

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