

## Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the Specter of Wahhabism



Saqib Shah \*

Fakhar Bilal †

Pages: 186 – 191

DOI: 10.31703/gsr.2023(VIII-I).17

URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2023\(VIII-I\).17](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2023(VIII-I).17)

**Abstract:** For the past few centuries Pakhtun population had witnessed a number of internal and external challenges i.e., colonialism, tribalism and terrorism. Despite being resilient in the face of growing challenges, they have been subjugated by external forces of Power with ruthlessness. Today Pakhtuns residing on both sides of the Durand line are faced with yet another threat to their existence from religious fundamentalism; the roots of which lie in the infiltration of Wahhabism into the subcontinent in the Nineteenth century. The Specter of Wahhabism has completely altered the outlook of the Pakhtun culture and society transforming it into an Arab colony of the seventh century.

**Key Words:** Wahhabism, Culture, Terrorism, Pakhtuns, Syed Ahmad Bareilly

### Introduction

Like any other declining Nation, Race or Religious group; Muslims too have strived to revive its glorious past. Muslims of all lands with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds recognize themselves as one single Nation as had been evident in Islamic scriptures. Hundreds of reformists and revivalist movements have emerged from among the Muslim communities to revive the pristine Islamic past. These movements were centred on the idea of social purity that could only be achieved through embracing the fundamental teachings of early Islam. The fact that Islam was once an imperialist force that ruled the foreign lands of non-Arab having a complete set of colonial characteristics had long been forgotten. This religious empire emerged from Arabian Peninsula and subdued major empires and assimilated into indigenous communities with swords and scriptures. The rise of the Islamic Empire was one of the most spectacular displays of religious imperialism. With a new doctrine that blended Jewish and Christian teachings with Arabian and Zarathustrian conceptions, this new religion had a long-lasting political impact on the World (Karsh 2007). Most of the local communities embraced

Arabic culture to survive the status quo prevalent in the Arab colonies. This Islamic religious empire ruled the land and people from Spain in the west to present-day Indonesia in the east. One of the reminiscences of Arab imperialism in the modern world is the distinct Muslim identity it had left to its colonies.

Like everyone else, the Pakhtun society too witnessed the influx of Arab culture which it resisted first and later embraced due to similarities of tribal features. Many instances have been recorded where the non-Muslim Pakhtuns fought against the Muslim armies. One prime example includes the battle between the Hindu Raj Shahi and Mahmud of Ghazni. However, the later ages followed the model of Ibn Khaldun; Islamic civilization too faced decline during the course of history. The onslaught of Mongols on Baghdad in 1258, whipped up the Abbasid caliphate from the face of the earth. It also opened new centres of Islam in later history. Indian subcontinent experienced the zenith of Islamic civilization during the reign of Mughals but its subsequent downfall gave birth to various revivalist movements. One of the most important was the Wahhabi movement or Wahhabism. The first wave of Wahhabism came to

\* M.Phil. Scholar, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.



the Pakhtun lands with the fanatic Syed Ahmad Bareilvi; who was greatly influenced by the teachings of Abd ul Wahhab and fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn-Taymiyah. He declared jihad and made the then-northwest frontier region of colonial India his centre of command.

Later in 1970, Islam occupied the epicentre as a powerful political tool, affecting all sections of the population in Pakistan. The military utilized this opportunity to patronize the mosque for its own legitimacy. The second wave of Wahhabism came to Pakhtun land during the Soviet-Afghan war at the helm of petrodollars in the 1980s (Ali [2021](#)). Fighters from Arab countries influenced by the teachings of Wahhabism, Syed Qutab and Ibn Taymiyah fought hand in hand with the Afghan mujahedeen. This left a deep mark on the religious ideology of the local Pakhtun mujahedeen. The civil war in Afghanistan and the event of 9/11 highlighted the penetration of the roots of Wahhabism. Terrorism and sectarianism motivated by *Takfir* threatened the social fabric of the Pakhtun Society. The religious seminaries established during the Afghan war had become the centre of hate against anyone who subscribes to a different mindset. A look into the condition of religious minorities i.e. the Ahmadis and Shias who are targeted by hardcore militants driven by takfir. They have been the prime targets of suicide bombers and target killings for more than three decades.

## Methodology

---

This study seeks to investigate the various historical factors laying underneath the modern-day crisis faced by Pakhtuns using qualitative research techniques. It examines the rise of Wahhabism specifically in the Pakhtun population during two different time periods and its current consequences on society. Both analytical and interpretative techniques have been used to develop an understanding of the challenges faced by the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

## First Wave of Wahhabism

---

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab of Nejd (modern-day Saudi Arabia) founded Wahhabism, a reformist movement. It was developed in the 1740s and later adopted by Bedouin leader Muhammad ibn Saud. Syed Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (d 1831) is credited for bringing Wahhabism to India after returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1824 and declaring a holy war against the Sikh kingdom in order to reestablish Muslim

control. During his studies in Ramiyya Madrassa under the supervision of Shah Abdul Aziz, Syed Ahmad already embraced the Wahhabi fundamentalist theology (Brown & Algar, [2002](#)).

Abdul Wahhab, a member of the fanatical Hanbali school of thought, was vehemently anti-Sufism and anti-Shiism and owed his biases to the infamous 14<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian jurist Ibn Taymiyya. His views are recognized by every Islamist today as a true reinterpretation of jihad. Shah Wali Ullah and Abd al-Wahhab, both Sunni reformists, travelled to Makkah to study under the same tutors and absorb comparable pearls of wisdom. These lecturers clearly urged their students to follow Ibn-Taymiyya's extreme position and to see jihad as a primary Islamic duty, which both Abdul Wahhab and Shah Wali Ullah then went home to implement. On the other hand, Abdul Wahhab too did the same practice and succeeded in his mission.

In the sub-continent, the Mughal rule deteriorated further as the East India Company took over the Land Revenue system. This prompted Shah Wali Ullah's son to issue a fatwa proclaiming Hindustan as Dar al-Harb, or "Domain of Enmity," and declaring that it was now necessary for all Muslims to work to re-establish Islam in India. This fatwa served as fuel to the fire for his students, such as Syed Ahmad Bareilvi. Syed Ahmad resumed his religious studies after a brief time of military service to re-emerge as a visionary revivalist and preacher, quickly gaining disciples, including close relatives of his previous teacher. Many Muslims now recognized him as the heir to the Shah Wali Ullah's tradition, and hundreds rallied to his noble cause (Jalal [2009](#)).

## The Five Principles

---

Syed Ahmad's school of thought was based on five principles which included; "Reliance on one Supreme Being", and "Repudiation of all forms, ceremonies, and observances of the modern Muhammadan religion". "Retaining only such as are considered the pure doctrines of the Koran", "the duty of holy war for the faith jihad against infidels generally", "blind and implicit obedience to their spiritual guides; expectation of an Imam who will lead all true believers to victory over infidels". He decided to make a *Hijrat* from *Dar-ul-Harb* to a place he can make into a jihad centre which was ideally Afghanistan. In a letter to Muslim leaders, including the ruler of Bokhara, he urged them to assist his jihad—not, as it is frequently claimed, against the

British empire, but rather, to rid Hindustan of "the impurities of polytheism and the filth of dissonance." When Syed Ahmad arrived in Kabul, he discovered that he was unpopular. From there, he emerged in a frontier region where the Sikhs were looking for him. Here they were welcomed as liberators and provided with protocol. He travelled to Mardan, Swat and Buner to consolidate his position by inciting the religious sentiments of the Pashtun population against the infidel Sikhs. In the summer of 1826, Syed Ahmad called on all Muslims to join his holy cause. The Pakhtuns flocked behind him and he was publicly appointed as the movement's imam and commander of the faithful "Ameer ul Momeneen," a title that was once used by Islamic caliphs. In the spring of the next year, Skirmishes begin between the mujahedeen and the Sikhs. Syed Ahmad and his army captured the city of Peshawar in 1830 when it was under Sikh rule. In Peshawar and the neighbouring districts, he established harsh Wahhabi rules. However, the local Maliks eventually turned against the mujahedeen, forcing them to flee to Hazara. Syed Ahmad, his student Shah Ismail, and approximately 1,300 mujahedeen made their last stand against the highly prepared Sikh army on May 8, 1831, and perished valiantly.

Later, under the propagandist Wilayat Ali, Wahhabism continued to thrive and was transformed to form a cult that was based on the idea of a concealed imam or Mahdism. Wilayat Ali came up with a story of Syed Ahmad being concealed in the mountains preparing to resume jihad. The Wahhabi threat persisted until the 1870s, with high-profile trials. The assassination of British official John Norman as he entered the courtroom in Calcutta to head over a Wahhabi trial. Mr John Norman was stabbed by a Wahhabism-influenced Pakhtun. In the year 1873, a close relative of the cult leader appeared in Patna and urged the British administration for an official pardon which was refused on the ground that the Hindustani Fanatics (as the British used to call them) would eventually be forced to give up their activities. To this day, the struggle of Syed Ahmad is still celebrated by the people of the frontier. For some scholars, his efforts might have inspired the great tribal uprising of 1897-98. The real fire bender, a 60-year-old man from Buner known to the British authorities as Mad Fakir, returned a few years later, only to claim that Syed Ahmad had visited him and given him the

command to drive the British out of Swat and Peshawar.

### Legacy of Syed Ahmad

For the Pakhtuns of the frontier, Syed Ahmad left behind a legacy of Jihad which could be seen coming into play during the tribal uprising. The mullah-led expedition against the British is a prime example of how religion became the leading force replacing Pakhtunwali. The new Muslim identity supplemented by the Wahhabis through the export of religious teachers and muftis helped the mullah in the Pakhtun society to consolidate his position. Qasim Nanautawi and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi, two of Sayyid Nazir Husain's disciples, attempted to build their own Wahhabi "Delhites" centre in 1857. They each started their own madrasa in Deoband in May 1866. They attracted their students from the peasantry class. Children at the tender age of five were enrolled, and many stayed until maturity, thus many learned to identify with the madrasa as their primary home, and the teacher as a spiritual father. Despite being modelled after a university, the atmosphere at Deoband was that of a modern-day Madrassah. All pupils began their education by studying the Koran by heart in the original Arabic, with Urdu serving as the only language allowed for communication. Dar ul Uloom Deoband's theology was an uncompromising fundamentalism similar to Wahhabism (Allen 2009). It condemned saint worship, tomb adornment, and activities such as singing and dance; it fought a never-ending verbal war against Shias, Hindus, and Christians. Jihad was central to their doctrine because they saw it as the only way to resurrect Islam.

### Entrenchment of Wahhabism in Pakhtun Society

Historians are divided over why Pakhtun land and people formed the first clients of the Wahhabi movement in the nineteenth century. A quick glance at the history of all Jihad movements that took place in India shall answer the question. Pakhtuns have always been at the forefront of Jihadi adventures from the earliest times partly due to their Martial nature. This too came into play during the Syed Ahmad campaigns against the Sikh Empire. Other reasons include the Geostrategic position of Frontier which formed the periphery of the Sikh empire. The peripheries are always considered the weakest points of influence for any empire or state thus it might have caught the eye

of Syed Ahmad to recognize it as his center of activities. Earlier, Shah Abdul Aziz; the teacher and father-in-law of Syed Ahmad had proclaimed a fatwa; declaring Hindustan as *Dar ul Harb* due to the growing influence of European and Hindu powers in India. This left the Afghan borderland as the sole destination of *Hijrat* and *Dar ul Salam*. The third major reason lies in the hostility that existed between the Pakhtun tribes and the Sikh Empire. By the time Syed Ahmad Bareilly was descending into Peshawar Valley, the Sikh army had just tamed the revolting Barakzai and Yousafzai tribes. A deep sense of resentment existed among the Pakhtun population which was an ideal time for launching the jihad movement. Another major factor that might have played a significant role in widely publicizing the Wahhabi movement in Pakhtun land was the religious conservatism combined with economic deprivation of the Pakhtun population that led them to perceive Syed Ahmad as their saviour. The idea of overthrowing the Sikh rule and setting up Khilafat might have fascinated the Muslim population.

### The Second wave of Wahabism

On the eve of Christmas in 1979, the Red Army and members of the KGB extended their helping hand to their Afghan comrades to save the fragile communist government of Afghanistan. It took the United States and its allies by surprise. They saw it as the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR. It provided them with an opportunity to avenge the failures of Vietnam. Keeping in view the Islamic orthodox nature of the Afghan population, the United States and its European and Arab allies found the philosophy of Wahhabism as the antithesis of godless Communism. Petro-dollars began to pour in to raise a militia by the name of mujahedeen. The Notorious Deoband Ulama provided hundreds of fatwas to fire up the fervour of Jihad. The United States and its Allies provided the mujahedeen with arms and Arabs supplied them with the ideology of Wahhabism and petrodollars. Political Islamic parties in Pakistan too have provided an Islamic interpretation for fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. During the Anti-Soviet campaign, the Pakhtun lands became the recruiting grounds for the mujahedeen. The entire population became radicalized to such an extent that it compromised its own identity as Pakhtuns. Though the Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan, the war left a major residue for extremism in Pakhtun lands. Almost the entire population was influenced by the jihadist ideology of Wahhabism. The Arab sheikhs like Bin Ladin and Abu Massub Al-

Zarkawi, who were imported for the propagation of hardcore Islam found in Shia and other religious group new infidels.

The subsequent rise of the Taliban from among the Pakhtun population and their terrorist activities against the Pakhtun culture which includes demolishing the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, put a question mark in the minds of Intelligentsia. It initiated a debate about growing Islamism and diminishing Pakhtun Nationalism. A rough image of Pakhtuns historical evolution can be understood from the views of Abdul Wali Khan, a Pakhtun political leader; who was asked about his identity. To which Wali Khan replied that he has been a Pakhtun for the last four thousand years, a Muslim for the last thirteen hundred years and a Pakistani for just 25 years. This highlights the complicated nature of the Pakhtun identity. Some scholars attribute the rise of the Taliban to the tribal culture of Pakhtun. They argue that both Arab and Pakhtun societies are tribal and religious in nature which had helped to promote radical ideas. A large number of Pakhtun populations belong to the Deobandi School of thought which easily overlaps with the Arabic Wahhabism. Thus, the Taliban are the latest incarnation of Pakhtun Nationalism. The areas under Taliban control during the war on terror were Pakhtun in population. This view which manifests that the Taliban are Pakhtuns has been greatly supported by US intelligentsia. They emphasise that extremist fundamentalism has strong links with Pakhtun ethnicity. Due to this the war on terror directed against the Taliban is unwinnable. They also claim that traditional ethnic tension between Tajiks, Uzbeks and Pakhtuns has culminated in the form of Taliban rivalry against its countrymen. Even if there was Pakhtunistan in the current situation, its leadership would be an Islamic fundamentalist and most probably the Taliban. This fact is evident from the past experiences of Pakhtun resistance against foreign invaders where a religious figure has taken over the leadership of resistance. There are others who claim that religious fundamentalism and Pakhtun culture are two distinct ideas and have nothing in common. They argue that the code of Pakhtunwali restricts the Pakhtuns from certain evil and morally ill practices. Whereas the Taliban had mercilessly and indiscriminately killed innocent children, women and the elderly but Pakhtunwali had clear direction about revenge. It has forbidden harming the innocent. Similarly, Pakhtuns are considered extremely religious which is not true due to the fact that Pakhtun businessmen are

notorious for casually taking the highest interests on loans. Such practice is against the spirit of Islamic jurisprudence. Islam has clearly forbidden interest and anything related to it but it is still common to Pakhtun society. Pakhtun businessmen are notorious for giving loans with the highest interest rates but at the same time, they would donate generously to the Jihadi organization operating in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Such kind of peak contradictions are usually ignored by the clergy as long as donation keeps flowing in. The fact that the Afghan war was entirely Washington's strategy against the Soviet communist is yet to be acknowledged by the common masses. As most of them still live with the illusion that it was a war between Islam and Godless communism. One of the most recent events was the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban and the subsequent celebrations on both sides of the border which provides a glimpse into the mindset of the Pakhtun population. Currently, Religious fundamentalism had opened a new chapter of mob lynching against those who are falsely accused of committing blasphemy against Islam. The accused are subjected to severe torture and ultimately death by beating. These too are motivated by the concept of *Takfir* as the alleged blasphemer is usually accused of exceeding the strict interpretation of religion.

## Conclusion

The idea that Wahhabism and Talibanization are the reflections of Pakhtun Nationalism had come to the

fourth front with the rise of the Taliban as a major force from the Pakhtun lands during the Afghan conflict. This view has gained momentum in the wake of constant cultural and religious assimilation between the Afghan mujahedeen who belonged to Pakhtun ethnic background and the Arab countries and central Asia. The feeling of ethnonationalism was suppressed by hardcore Wahhabi ideology that was the need of time.

Wahhabism proved fruitful in curtailing communism and forcing the USSR to retreat. However, it left a deep scar on the overall identity of Pakhtun society. Its reminiscences continued to prevail in the form of *Takfir*, Sectarianism and terrorism. The loss of lives and infrastructure in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to militancy is unprecedented. The anarchic situation caused a stunted growth of the economy forcing many to earn less than a dollar on a daily basis. In the absence of social mobility, pauperism had driven a majority of the Pakhtun population to seek refuge in religion. Thus, providing new recruits for sectarianism and terrorism. In 2021, militancy peaked inside the former FATA and other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The banned TTP targeted security forces and education institutes providing modern education which they had termed as un-Islamic and non-Muslims. Lawlessness combined with the growing threat of militancy had pushed Pakhtun land to the brink of anarchy.

## References

---

- Ali, T. (2021). *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan: A Chronicle Foretold*. Verso Books.
- Allen, C. (2009). *God's terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*. Hachette UK.
- Barfield, T. (2012). *The War for Afghanistan: A Very Brief History: From Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton University Press.
- Brown, L. C., & Algar, H. (2002). Wahhabism: A Critical Essay. *Foreign Affairs*, 81(5), 216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033330>
- Center, T. A. (2008). *Hindustani Fanatics: An 1895 British Intelligence Report*. Tribal Analysis Center.
- Coll, S. (2004). *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin.
- Delong-Bas, N. J. (2008). *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. Oxford University Press.
- Jalal, A. (2009). *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*. Harvard University Press.
- Karsh, E. (2007). *Islamic imperialism: A History*. Yale University Press.
- Khaldun, I. (2020). *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton University Press.
- Lewis, B. (2003). *The crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. Random House Trade.
- Lewis, B. (2011). *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*. Open Court.
- Rashid, A. (2012b). *Descent into Chaos: How the War against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. Penguin UK.
- Siddique, A. (2014). *The Pashtun question: the unresolved key to the future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Hurst & Company Limited.