Religion, Power, and Conflict: The Instrumentalization of Islam in Afghanistan's Political and Social Transformation

Irfan Yar

Abstract

This paper examines how religion has been instrumentalized for political purposes in Afghanistan and how this process has contributed to patterns of radicalization and violence over time. The study approaches religion as a socially embedded and politically mediated resource mobilized by state actors, foreign powers, religious authorities, and militant movements across different historical contexts.

Adopting a historically informed and selective analytical approach, the paper draws on key periods in Afghan history not to provide a comprehensive historical account, but to identify recurring mechanisms in the political use of religion. While earlier periods, including the Islamization of Afghanistan and state building and modernization efforts under rulers such as Abdur Rahman Khan, Amanullah Khan, and Daoud Khan, are important and discussed to provide historical context, the main focus is on the Soviet-Afghan War, the mujahideen period, the rise of the Taliban, the post-2001 insurgency, and the Taliban's return to power.These periods are treated as especially significant because they mark the point at which religion became increasingly tied to political mobilization, armed conflict, and competing claims to legitimacy.

The analysis demonstrates that religion has functioned as a powerful tool of political legitimation, social regulation, and mobilization, particularly when religious narratives are framed in ways that resonate with local identities, grievances, and moral expectations. A central argument of the study is that the effectiveness of religious instrumentalization is shaped not only by political conditions but also by the social transmission of religious knowledge. In Afghanistan, where religious understanding has often been mediated through clerics, local leaders, stories, and informal institutions, religious meaning becomes adaptable and susceptible to reinterpretation in political contexts.

By examining key historical phases, the paper identifies three recurring patterns: the use of religion to legitimize authority, the external shaping of religious ideologies for geopolitical purposes, and the mobilization of violence through religious narratives such as jihad and moral duty.

The paper concludes that religion in Afghanistan remains a deeply rooted source of social cohesion and moral order, but its repeated political instrumentalization has transformed it into a contested terrain of power, contributing to enduring cycles of conflict. By focusing on the mechanisms through which religion is used rather than assuming its inherent nature, the study contributes to broader debates on religion and conflict and offers insights relevant to peacebuilding and policy in deeply religious societies.

Keywords:
Religion; Political Instrumentalization; Afghanistan; Radicalization; Political Violence; Social Mediation; Insurgency

1. Introduction

Afghanistan's contemporary crisis of insecurity, insurgency, and political instability cannot be adequately understood without examining how religion has been used within political struggle across different periods of its history (Rubin, 2002). Islam has long been central to Afghan society—shaping identity, social norms, authority, and everyday life—providing moral guidance and structuring community relations (Barfield, 2010). However, its role in conflict has not been fixed or uniform; rather, religion has been interpreted, mobilized, and reshaped in response to changing struggles over power, legitimacy, and resistance (Roy, 1990; Haider, 2014). In this sense, the Afghan case is not simply about the presence of religion in politics, but about the repeated political use of religion by competing actors seeking to justify authority, mobilize support, and frame conflict in morally compelling terms (Sultana, 2018; Nojumi, 2002).

Existing research consistently highlights religion's dual role as a source of communal identity and a catalyst for mobilization; however, the mechanism of social mediation remains under-theorized. By treating religion as a dynamic political resource rather than a static doctrine, we can better understand how specific narratives are curated to resonate with localized grievances and moral expectations. While these approaches offer important insights, they do not fully capture the Afghan experience. In Afghanistan, religion has not functioned as an autonomous cause of violence. Instead, it has repeatedly been instrumentalized—strategically invoked, framed, and disseminated by political actors to pursue objectives such as state legitimation, resistance to foreign intervention, and the mobilization of armed conflict, resistance to the state, or other interests. This perspective shifts the focus from what religion is to how it is used, understood, and embedded within political processes (Haynes, 1997; Fox, 2018).

This process has involved a wide range of actors across different historical periods. The rulers of the land that constitutes current Afghanistan have invoked Islam to strengthen political authority and manage opposition. Foreign powers, including the United States, have supported specific religious ideologies and networks in pursuit of geopolitical interests (Lowenstein, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 1979; Coll, 2004). Armed movements, most notably the Mujahideen and the Taliban, have framed violence in religious terms to recruit support, justify sacrifice, and construct legitimacy (Khan et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2023; However, religious instrumentalization has not operated simply as a top-down imposition. Its effectiveness has depended on whether religious narratives resonate with the lived realities of Afghan society, including local grievances, social hierarchies, and historically embedded forms of authority.

A crucial dimension of this process lies in the social mediation of religious knowledge. In Afghanistan, religious understanding has often been shaped through clerics, mosque networks, madrasa systems, and local intermediaries rather than through individual interpretation of religious texts. These actors play an important role in interpreting religion, conveying moral

guidance, and shaping how political events are understood within local communities. As a result, religious narratives often gain influence not simply because of their doctrinal content, but because they are transmitted through trusted social structures. This helps explain why religion has often been an effective tool of political mobilization, particularly when linked to experiences of injustice, foreign intervention, and social grievance (Sultana, 2018; Haider, 2014; Ramel et al., 2015)

This dynamic did not emerge suddenly during the contemporary period. Its foundations can be traced to earlier phases of Afghan history, including the politicization of religion during state-building efforts and the rise of Islamist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These developments created the ideological and institutional conditions that later enabled the large-scale mobilization of religion during the anti-Soviet jihad and subsequent conflicts.

The post-2001 Taliban insurgency provides a particularly important example of how religious instrumentalization operates in practice. While external support and regional dynamics were important, the Taliban's resilience cannot be explained through material factors alone. Their ability to embed religious narratives within local grievances, identity, and claims to justice helped them construct a form of legitimacy that resonated with segments of Afghan society (Johnson, 2017).

This study examines selected historical periods from early Islamization to the present in order to trace recurring mechanisms of religious instrumentalization across Afghan history. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive historical account, it focuses on key moments in which religion became closely tied to struggles over authority, legitimacy, resistance, and political order. By tracing these developments across time, the study highlights how religion has been used by different actors to legitimize authority, mobilize support, justify violence, and shape political conflict in changing historical contexts.

Ultimately, the paper argues that religion in Afghanistan should not be understood as an inherent source of violence, but as a socially embedded and politically mediated resource whose effects depend on how it is interpreted, transmitted, and mobilized. Recognizing this distinction is essential for understanding patterns of conflict and political legitimacy in Afghanistan, as well as for developing more grounded approaches to policy and peacebuilding.

1.1. Research Question and Objectives

The main research question this paper aims to answer is: how has religion been instrumentalized for political purposes in Afghanistan, and through what mechanisms has this contributed to patterns of radicalization and violence over time?

This paper has four main objectives. First, it examines how religion has been used by different actors—including state authorities, foreign powers, religious institutions, and militant organizations—across key historical periods in Afghanistan.

Second, it identifies the main mechanisms through which religious instrumentalization operates, including political legitimation, mass mobilization, social regulation, and the justification of violence.

Third, it analyzes the social conditions that make such instrumentalization effective, with particular attention to the central place of religion in Afghan society and the role of mediated religious authority in shaping how religious ideas are interpreted, transmitted, and acted upon.

Fourth, it assesses how these processes have contributed to long-term patterns of radicalization, conflict reproduction, and political violence, while also recognizing that religion continues to function as a source of social cohesion, moral guidance, and communal identity.

Taken together, these objectives move the paper beyond descriptive historical narration. The purpose is not simply to demonstrate the presence of religion in Afghan politics, but to explain how, why, and with what consequences it has repeatedly been transformed into a political instrument across changing historical contexts.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between religion, politics, and violence has been widely examined across disciplines such as political science, sociology, and international relations. Within this broad field, scholars have adopted competing conceptual lenses. Stein (2011) usefully distinguishes three dominant political science perspectives: primordialism, which treats religious identity as a deep, relatively fixed source of conflict; instrumentalism, which views religion as a resource strategically deployed by political actors; and constructivism, which emphasizes how religious meaning is socially produced and continuously negotiated. Each perspective generates distinct analytical expectations and policy implications. This paper is situated primarily within the instrumentalist tradition, while drawing on constructivist insights regarding the social production and mediation of religious meaning.

Comparative research across these perspectives shows that the political use of religion is not limited to any single tradition or region. Religious narratives have been mobilized in diverse contexts—including conflicts involving Christianity, Hindu nationalism, and other traditions—particularly where religion intersects with identity, state power, and perceived threat (Fox, 2018; Haynes, 1997). The Syrian conflict provides a particularly instructive parallel to Afghanistan. Khatib (2015) demonstrates that the prominence of Islamic rhetoric in Syria does not owe to specific features of the Islamic religion and culture but rather to the exploitation of religion in mobilization, contestation, and outbidding processes by both state and insurgent actors. This finding reinforces an important baseline that applies across Muslim-majority contexts: religion itself is not inherently violent, but becomes politically significant depending on how it is interpreted and deployed within specific conditions. Quantitative evidence supports this conclusion. Karakaya (2013), in a systematic cross-national analysis, finds that neither religious fractionalization nor Islam as such promotes political violence once socio-economic and political factors—including lower GDP per capita, oil dependency, state repression, autocracy, and youth bulges—are taken into account. Muslim-plurality states are indeed disproportionately involved in domestic armed conflict, but the drivers are structural rather than doctrinal. These studies

establish that explanations centred on the inherent nature of Islam are empirically unsupported; the analytical task is instead to understand the conditions and mechanisms through which religion becomes politically activated.

The literature relevant to this study can be organized around six main bodies of scholarship, each contributing important but partial insights. Reviewing these strands together reveals both the strengths of existing work and the specific gaps this paper seeks to address.

2.1 Religious Ideology and Political Islam

A significant body of work focuses on religious ideology and political Islam, emphasizing the role of doctrinal ideas in shaping political movements. Thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Maududi have profoundly influenced scholarly understandings of Islamist activism, particularly regarding the relationship between religion and governance (Ayoob, 2007). In the Afghan context, this ideological perspective has been central to explaining the emergence of Islamist movements and the doctrinal foundations of groups such as the Taliban. Rashid's (2002) widely read account of the Taliban, while invaluable as a journalistic and historical synthesis, is primarily descriptive and does not employ a systematic theoretical framework for analysing how religious ideas are strategically adapted in response to political circumstances. Similarly, Esposito (2015) examines the relationship between Islam and political violence by tracing the roots, causes, ideology, and agenda of global jihadist movements, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS, but his analysis is oriented toward doctrinal and historical explanation rather than the mechanisms of political instrumentalization. While the ideological approach highlights the importance of ideas, it often treats ideology as relatively fixed and self-explanatory, and underestimates how religious narratives are reframed, adapted, and strategically deployed in response to changing political conditions. This limitation is particularly evident in the Afghan case, where the same religious concepts—such as jihad, Sharia, and Islamic governance—have been interpreted in vastly different ways by competing actors across different historical periods.

2.2 Religion and Violence

A second strand of literature examines the relationship between religion and violence more directly. Some scholars argue that religion can intensify conflict by framing struggles in absolute moral terms, sacralizing violence, and legitimizing extreme actions. Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) develops the concept of “cosmic war” to explain how religious actors reinterpret earthly political conflicts as transcendent spiritual battles, thereby raising the stakes of violence beyond negotiation. Mohammed M. Hafez (2003) similarly examines how repression and perceived injustice generate religiously framed rebellion in Muslim-majority contexts. Others adopt a more contextual approach, suggesting that religion becomes associated with violence only under specific political and social conditions (Fox, 2018; Ramel et al., 2015). Hide (2014) argues that religion functions as a legitimizing instrument of political violence, becoming effective not through its doctrinal content alone but through its capacity to provide moral justification within particular socio-political environments.

While this debate provides important insights, it does not fully explain how religion is mobilized by political actors in specific contexts. In Afghanistan, religion has been used to justify both state

authority and armed resistance, depending on who controls its interpretation and under what conditions. This suggests that the key question is not whether religion cause

2.3 External Intervention and Geopolitical Dynamics

A third body of research highlights the role of external intervention and geopolitical dynamics in shaping religious discourse. In the Afghan case, scholars have shown how foreign actors, including the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia supported Islamist groups and promoted religious narratives as part of broader strategic objectives, especially during the Soviet-Afghan war. Coll (2004) provides a detailed account of how the CIA, working through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, channelled resources to Afghan mujahideen factions in ways that favoured more ideologically rigid Islamist groups. Khan et al. (2023) examine how the Afghan factor contributed to the entrenchment of religious militancy in Pakistan itself, demonstrating the cross-border consequences of externally supported religious mobilization. (Nahavandi , 2001), in a comparative study of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, argues that Islam has historically served as the primary link between populations and political authority, functioning as a powerful weapon for both rulers and opposition movements. This comparative perspective is significant because it situates the Afghan experience within broader patterns of religious instrumentalization across Muslim-majority states that have undergone political upheaval.

This literature demonstrates that religious discourse can be shaped and amplified by external actors. However, its emphasis on international dynamics often overlooks how these narratives are received and adapted within local communities. Understanding why some externally promoted religious framings resonate more than others requires attention to the local social structures through which religious authority is communicated and maintained.

2.4 Insurgency, Governance, and Local Mobilization

More recent scholarship has focused on insurgency, governance, and local mobilization, offering important insights into the conditions under which armed groups sustain legitimacy. Research in this area emphasizes that insurgent organizations must establish authority among local populations in order to maintain long-term support (Salehyan et al., 2011; Weinstein, 2007). In Afghanistan, scholars such as Giustozzi (2019) and Johnson (2017) have shown how governance failures, corruption, civilian casualties caused by international military operations, and local grievances contributed significantly to Taliban support during the post-2001 insurgency.

Terpstra (2020), in a longitudinal analysis of three phases of Taliban rule, provides a particularly nuanced account of how rebel legitimacy shifts over time. He finds that moral forms of legitimacy grounded in religious and ethical claims resonated most strongly during periods of external intervention, whereas pragmatic forms of legitimacy, based on service delivery and dispute resolution, became more relevant after the withdrawal of foreign forces and during periods of the government's ineffective governance. This distinction between moral and pragmatic legitimacy is directly relevant to the present study, as it suggests that religious framing is not uniformly effective but is most powerful when it aligns with a population's experience of foreign presence and perceived injustice.

Sinno (2020) further advances this line of inquiry by examining the strategic use of Islam across Afghan conflicts from the 1980s to the present. He argues that not all Afghan political actors can effectively leverage religious language; only those who transcend divisions within a local, tribal, sectarian, ethnic, or national space and do not have a history of behaviour considered un-Islamic can benefit from its strategic advantages. Those who lack such Islamic legitimacy such as the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (1965-1992) and the post-2001 governments of Karzai and Ghanihave been forced to react defensively to the religious claims of their opponents, often by making symbolic gestures or accommodating religious demands. This asymmetry in the capacity to instrumentalize religion is an important analytical point that has received insufficient attention in the broader literature.

While these studies provide important insights into insurgency and local legitimacy, they often treat religion as one factor among many rather than examining how religious narratives interact with grievances, governance failures, and local identities to strengthen political mobilization.

2.5 The Transformation of Afghanistan's Religious Landscape

A related body of scholarship examines how decades of conflict have fundamentally transformed the religious landscape in Afghanistan itself. Borchgrevink and Harpviken (2010) identify three distinct types of politically active religious movements fundamentalists, Islamists, and neo-fundamentalists that have emerged to challenge traditional expressions of Islam. They argue that Afghanistan's religious landscape has become more variegated than ever before, and that the different attitudes of these movements toward questions of religious authority, political process, and state-building need to be carefully distinguished. This internal diversification of the religious field is significant because it demonstrates that religious instrumentalization does not operate within a monolithic religious environment. Rather, it takes place within a contested terrain where multiple religious currents compete for authority and public allegiance.

Nawabi (2025) extends this analysis by examining how generational radicalization has been shaped by the hybridization of Hanafi-Deobandi and Wahhabi-Salafi influences, contributing to ideological fragmentation within Afghanistan's Islamist factions. The expansion of madrasas, the sidelining of moderate Islamic ideologies, and the political isolation of Afghanistan have collectively deepened the entrenchment of radical religious interpretations. This generational dimension shows that religious instrumentalization is not driven only by political elites. Over time, it can also reshape religious identity, authority, and the broader religious environment in ways that make future mobilization easier.

Ghani (1978), in a foundational study of Islam and state-building under Abdur Rahman Khan demonstrates that the incorporation of Islam into the state apparatus was a deliberate strategy for extending central authority over tribal populations whose customary codes (Pashtunwali) did not inherently enforce allegiance to monarchs. This historical precedent is significant for the present study because it reveals that the strategic use of religion in Afghan politics predates the contemporary period by more than a century, establishing institutional and cultural patterns that later actors would inherit and adapt.

2.6 Religious Instrumentalization as an Explicit Framework

A smaller but increasingly important body of work focuses explicitly on the instrumentalization of religion as an analytical framework. This literature argues that political actors use religion strategically to legitimize authority, mobilize populations, and frame conflict in ways that advance their interests (Haynes, 1997; Sultana, 2018; Haider, 2014). In the Afghan and regional context, this perspective has been applied to state-led Islamization, militant recruitment, and the use of religious discourse in conflict settings. Joya and Rahimi (2023) propose a theory of religious grievance specific to the Afghan conflict, arguing that individuals resort to insurgency in response to perceptions of discrimination, political exclusion, and threats to religious sovereignty. Their framework explains how and when religious grievance transforms into political grievance, generating conflict in societies where a political interpretation of religion is dominant. This contribution is valuable because it links the micro-level experience of grievance to the macro-level pattern of religious mobilization.

More recently, Cui and Pu (2026) have developed a Religious Legitimacy Trap framework to explain the Taliban's governance behaviour since 2021. They argue that external pressure including international sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and non-recognition has reinforced theological rigidity and the centralization of clerical power rather than inducing moderation. Their analysis identifies a self-reinforcing feedback loop between external exclusion and the internal sacralization of authority, a dynamic that has important implications for understanding how religious instrumentalization operates not only during insurgency but also during governance. This recent scholarship updates the literature on Taliban rule and demonstrates that religious instrumentalization continues to evolve in the post-2021 context.

While this literature is closely aligned with the focus of the present paper, many studies remain limited to specific time periods or dimensions of religious instrumentalization. Less attention has been given to how these patterns evolve across different historical periods and interact with broader processes of legitimacy, mobilization, and political change.

2.7 Identifying the Gaps

Taken together, the literature provides valuable insights but leaves several important gaps that the present study seeks to address. First, many studies focus either on ideology or on structural conditions without fully explaining how religion is actively framed and used as a political tool. Ideological approaches often treat religious ideas as self-explanatory, while structural approaches tend to reduce religion to one factor among many. Neither perspective fully captures the interaction between religious ideas, political strategy, and social context in Afghanistan.

Second, the literature is often temporally fragmented, with different studies focusing on specific conflicts or political periods in isolation. This makes it difficult to identify longer-term continuities in how religion has been used across Afghan history. Patterns of religious legitimation, mobilization, and authority have evolved over time, but they have also shown important historical continuities across different political eras.

Third, there is insufficient attention to the mechanisms through which religious narratives become effective in practice. Existing studies often identify religion as an important factor in conflict, but pay less attention to how religious claims gain authority, resonate with local

grievances, and translate into political action. Understanding why the same religious concepts produce different outcomes in different contexts requires greater attention to framing, legitimacy, and the social structures through which religious meaning is transmitted.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining how religion has been instrumentalized across different periods of Afghan history. Rather than focusing on a single conflict or political actor, it traces how religious narratives have been used to legitimize authority, mobilize support, justify violence, and shape political order in changing historical contexts. In doing so, the study offers a more integrated explanation of how religion has contributed to conflict and political transformation in Afghanistan over time.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on scholarship from political science, sociology, and international relations to examine religion as a political resource. Rather than treating religion as an inherently violent or static force, the framework focuses on the conditions under which religious ideas become politically influential. It first explains how religion can function as a political resource and then examines four key mechanisms through which this occurs: legitimation, framing, social mediation, and the justification of violence. Together, these concepts provide the analytical basis for examining Afghanistan's historical experience.

3.1 Religion as a Political Resource

This paper approaches religion not as a fixed or inherently causal force, but as a resource that can be mobilized by different actors under specific conditions. This perspective draws on scholarship in political science and international relations that emphasizes the strategic use of religion to pursue power, legitimacy, and influence (Haynes, 1997; Fox, 2018).Within this framework, religion is understood not only as a system of belief, but also as a source of symbolic authority, moral language, and social organization. These features make it useful for actors seeking to justify actions, frame conflicts, and mobilize support. Religious instrumentalization refers to the selective interpretation and deployment of religious ideas in ways that serve particular political goals (Sultana, 2018; Haider, 2014).

This approach distinguishes between religion as faith and religion as political practice. While core beliefs may remain relatively stable, their political meaning often changes according to context, actors, and strategic interests. In Afghanistan, religion has been used in different ways over time, including to legitimize authority, mobilize resistance, and support geopolitical agendas.

3.2 Religious Legitimation and Political Authority

A central mechanism through which religion operates politically is the legitimation of authority. Drawing on Max Weber's concept of legitimacy, political rule is more stable when it is perceived as morally justified rather than relying solely on coercion (Weber, 1978). In many Muslim-majority contexts, including Afghanistan, such legitimacy is often grounded in religious claims. Political actors may present themselves as defenders of Islam, align governance with

religious law, or seek endorsement from clerics and religious institutions (Haynes, 1997; Akram, 2024). However, religious legitimacy is rarely uncontested. Competing actors frequently challenge one another by advancing alternative interpretations of religion, leading to struggles over who represents "authentic" Islam, for example, the Taliban's Jihad against the Mujaheddin, in the 1990s, or Al-Qaida and ISIS.

This dynamic can lead to what scholars describe as religious outbidding, where actors adopt increasingly rigid or assertive religious positions to maintain credibility and attract support (Sandal, 2021). In such contexts, political competition becomes closely intertwined with religious authority, increasing the potential for ideological escalation and, in some cases, radicalization.

3.3 Religion, Framing, and Mobilization

Beyond legitimacy, religion plays a critical role in mobilizing individuals and communities. This can be understood through the concept of framing, developed in social movement theory (Snow & Benford, 1988). Framing refers to the process through which actors construct meanings and narratives that shape how people interpret events and decide to act.Religious narratives can be especially powerful because they draw on shared beliefs, moral values, and emotional commitments. When conflicts are framed in religious terms, they can become more compelling and more difficult to challenge.

In conflict settings, this often involves invoking concepts such as jihad, martyrdom, sacrifice, and moral obligation. These ideas can transform participation in conflict from a political decision into a perceived religious duty, lowering barriers to mobilization and sustaining long-term engagement (Hafez, 2003; Juergensmeyer, 2003). However, framing alone does not guarantee mobilization. Religious narratives are most effective when they connect with existing grievances, identities, and social expectations. In Afghanistan, appeals framed around injustice, foreign intervention, and moral obligation have often proven especially powerful because they resonate with widely shared experiences.

3.4 Social Mediation of Religion

Social mediation is a central mechanism through which religious instrumentalization operates in Afghanistan. Religious knowledge is often accessed through intermediaries, including clerics mosque networks, madrasa systems, and local community leaders. These actors influence how religious texts are interpreted, how moral guidance is conveyed, and how political events are understood within local communities.

Religious meaning is therefore shaped not only by texts, but also by the networks through which those texts are interpreted and communicated. Actors who influence these networks are often able to shape how religion is understood and applied in practice. These conditions make religious narratives more responsive to political influence. When religious intermediaries align with political actors, religion can be used to support specific agendas and forms of mobilization. This perspective helps explain why similar religious concepts can produce different outcomes across

contexts. In Afghanistan, strong religious identity and mediated authority have created conditions in which religious instrumentalization can be particularly effective.

3.5 Religion and the Justification of Violence

The final component of this framework examines how religion becomes linked to violence. Rather than assuming an inherent connection, this paper treats violence as the outcome of specific political and social processes. Religion contributes to the justification and normalization of violence when it is used to frame conflict as a moral or religious obligation, legitimize the use of force, delegitimize opponents as enemies of faith, and reduce the perceived space for compromise (Ramel et al., 2015; Fox, 2018). These processes are most effective when combined with strong framing and social mediation. When violence is both morally justified and reinforced through trusted social networks, it becomes easier to sustain and reproduce over time.

In Afghanistan, repeated cycles of conflict and political instability have reinforced these dynamics over time. Religious narratives linked to duty, sacrifice, resistance, and identity have often helped normalize violence toward certain groups for various reasons and sustain long-term conflict.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historically informed analytical approach to examine how religion has been instrumentalized for political purposes in Afghanistan and how this has shaped patterns of radicalization and violence. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive historical account, the paper draws selectively on key periods in Afghanistan's modern history to identify recurring patterns and underlying mechanisms.

The research is based on a historical-analytical design, combining elements of process tracing and interpretive analysis. This approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive narration and instead focus on identifying causal mechanisms, such as legitimation, framing, and social mediation, through which religion has been used as a political tool.

The selection of historical periods is guided by their relevance to moments where the political use of religion became particularly visible or consequential. These include: Early Islamization (as a foundational reference point); state modernization and reform efforts; the Soviet-Afghan war and jihad mobilization; the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban; post-2001 intervention and insurgency; and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. These periods are not treated as exhaustive coverage of Afghan history, but as analytical cases that help trace patterns over time.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources. Most of the analysis is based on academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, institutional publications, briefing papers, and historical studies on Afghanistan, political Islam, conflict, and religion. These sources provide the broader theoretical, historical, and political context for the study.

Only a limited portion of the paper, particularly the sections on the Taliban insurgency and post-2001 period, draws on primary material. This consisted mainly of Taliban-produced media and publications obtained from the Taliban's official website, *Voice of Jihad* (Alemarah), prior to the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The material was originally published in Pashto and Dari and focused mainly on content produced in 2018 and 2019, including Taliban publications, statements, and media outputs. These materials were translated into English for analysis.

The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier and focuses on identifying three key dimensions of religious instrumentalization: legitimation, mobilization, and social mediation. Legitimation refers to the ways in which political actors use religion to justify authority and political power. Mobilization focuses on how religious narratives are used to recruit, motivate, and sustain participation in political or violent movements. Social mediation refers to the ways in which religious ideas are transmitted through local clerics, religious institutions, and community networks.

Given the breadth of Afghanistan's history, this study adopts a **selective analytical scope**. It focuses on key periods and patterns rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive chronological account. As a result, some historical complexities and regional variations are not explored in detail. In addition, while the study highlights the role of mediated religious authority, it does not claim that individuals passively accept religious interpretations. Instead, it emphasizes structural conditions that make certain forms of religious influence more likely.

5. Historical Analysis

This section examines how religion became increasingly intertwined with political authority, conflict, and violence across different periods of Afghan history. Instead of viewing religion as a fixed or autonomous factor, this section examines how its meaning and political role shifted across different historical periods. It focuses on the ways political actors adapted religious language and symbols to justify authority, build support, challenge rivals, and shape systems of rule.

The section proceeds chronologically, beginning with the early embedding of Islam in Afghan society and moving through state-building, modernization, jihad, civil war, Taliban rule, and the post-2001 insurgency. Across these periods, religion remained socially significant, but its political function changed over time. In some periods it was used primarily to reinforce legitimacy and social cohesion; in others, it became a tool of mobilization, resistance, and political control.

5.1 Early Islamization and Foundations of Religious Authority

The early Islamization of Afghanistan provides an important historical backdrop for understanding the later political use of religion, though it is not the central focus of this study. Rather than examining this period in detail, it is used here to highlight the long-term embedding of Islam within Afghan society, which later enabled its political instrumentalization.

From the early centuries of Islamic expansion, Islam became deeply integrated into social organization, legal practices, and systems of authority across the region. Over time, Afghanistan developed into an important center of Islamic learning, with cities such as Ghazni and Herat contributing to religious scholarship and the spread of Islamic traditions (Barfield, 2010; Rashid, 2002). Religious institutions—including mosques, madrasas, and networks of scholars (ulama)—played a central role in shaping both moral life and social order. These institutions often interacted closely with political authority, providing legitimacy to rulers while also influencing public norms and expectations.

Importantly, for much of this historical period, Islam functioned primarily as a source of social cohesion, ethical guidance, and communal identity rather than as a driver of organized violence. Religious traditions were diverse and often shaped by localized practices, including Sufi influences, which emphasized spirituality, moral conduct, and social harmony (Barfield, 2010). This distinction is significant, as it demonstrates that the later association between religion and conflict in Afghanistan is historically contingent rather than inherent.

A defining feature of this period was the mediated nature of religious authority. Religious knowledge was not uniformly distributed but was transmitted through scholars, clerics, and local leaders who interpreted religious teachings and communicated them to wider society. These intermediaries played a crucial role in shaping how religion was understood in everyday life, embedding it deeply within social structures.

This pattern of mediated authority is important for understanding later developments. Because religious meaning was often transmitted through trusted intermediaries rather than individual interpretation, it became adaptable to political framing. Political actors could engage with religious networks or align themselves with clerical authority to shape how religion was interpreted in specific contexts (Ramel et al., 2015). At this stage, religion functioned primarily as a source of legitimacy and social cohesion. However, the institutional and social foundations established during this period created the conditions that later made it possible for religion to be mobilized more explicitly for political and military purposes.

5.2 State Formation, Modernization, and the Politicization of Religion

In the modern period, particularly from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Afghan rulers sought to centralize authority and modernize the state, yet these efforts consistently unfolded within an Islamic sociopolitical framework. Religion was not external to politics; rather, it constituted the central language through which both authority and resistance were articulated. As a result, processes of reform, contestation, and state-building were continuously negotiated through competing interpretations of Islam.

Under Abdur Rahman Khan, religion was actively incorporated into state-building strategies, with political authority closely aligned with Islamic legitimacy to consolidate centralized rule (Barfield, 2010). In this phase, Islam functioned primarily as a tool of legitimation, reinforcing state authority rather than challenging it. However, this alignment did not eliminate the political potential of religion; instead, it established a precedent in which Islam became the primary reference point through which power could be both justified and contested.

This dynamic became more visibly contested under King Amanullah Khan's ((1919–1929) modernization efforts in the early twentieth century. His reforms—targeting education, legal systems, and social practices, including women's increased and empowered roles—were framed by opponents as violations of Islamic values and traditions (Rashid, 2002). Importantly, this resistance emerged largely from within Afghan society, rather than being driven by external intervention. Religious scholars, clerics, and local leaders mobilized opposition by presenting modernization not merely as political change, but as a threat to Islam itself. In this context, Islam became the central framework through which social change was evaluated, resisted, and delegitimized. The conflict was therefore not between religion and politics, but between competing interpretations of Islam in relation to state reform.

A similar pattern persisted during the republican period under President Mohammad Daoud Khan (1973-1978). His modernization policies, including relatively greater social freedoms for women and efforts to reduce the overt role of religious authority in governance, were again interpreted by emerging Islamist actors as deviations from Islamic principles. Although these reforms were not uniformly anti-religious, they were perceived and framed by Islamist groups as incompatible with Sharia, reinforcing the pattern in which Islam served as the primary lens for political contestation.

It was during this period that organized Islamist movements began to take clearer institutional form. Figures such as Burhanuddin Rabbani and other members of the Jamiat-e-Islami political party articulated opposition to the state explicitly through Islamic discourse, presenting themselves as defenders of authentic Islam against a regime seen as drifting from religious values (Rashid, 2002; Giustozzi, 2019). Islam, in this phase, evolved from a source of legitimacy into a structured political ideology capable of mobilizing organized opposition. Importantly, this transformation was not purely doctrinal; it was embedded in social networks, educational institutions, and emerging political organizations, allowing religious narratives to gain traction within Afghan society.

The repression of Islamist actors under Daoud Khan marked a critical turning point, as many of these figures were forced into exile in Pakistan. This relocation transformed what had been primarily a domestic ideological contest into a regional and geopolitical dynamic. Pakistan, recognizing the strategic value of these Islamist actors, provided support, resources, and institutional space for their development. This support was framed in religious terms but was closely tied to Pakistan's national interests, particularly its desire to influence Afghanistan's political trajectory and counter competing regional forces (Coll, 2004; Khan et al., 2023).

In this context, Islam became not only a domestic political resource but also a transnational instrument shaped by external actors. Pakistani support did not create Islamist movements from scratch, but it amplified and institutionalized them, linking religious discourse with geopolitical strategy. As a result, the political use of Islam expanded beyond internal contestation and became embedded within regional power dynamics.

Overall, this period represents a critical transitional phase in which all major political developments—state-building, modernization, opposition, and external intervention—were articulated through Islamic frameworks. From Amanullah Khan's reforms to Daoud Khan's

policies, and from Islamist mobilization to Pakistani involvement, Islam remained the central reference point through which legitimacy, resistance, and political strategy were constructed. By the late 1970s, these dynamics had laid the foundation for the large-scale mobilization of religion during the jihad period, demonstrating that the instrumentalization of Islam in Afghanistan was not a sudden outcome of war, but the result of a gradual and historically embedded process

5.3 Soviet-Afghan War and the Transformation of Jihad

The Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) marks the decisive turning point in the political instrumentalization of religion in modern Afghanistan. During this period, religion moved beyond its earlier role as a source of legitimacy, moral order, and social cohesion and became a central instrument of mass mobilization, transnational ideological production, and organized violence. While Islamic resistance to foreign invasion had historical precedent in Afghanistan, the anti-Soviet jihad differed in both scale and structure. It did not simply mobilize existing religious sentiment. It institutionalized, internationalized, and militarized religious discourse in ways that permanently reshaped the relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Afghanistan and beyond.

Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, resistance to the Afghan communist regime and Soviet military presence was rapidly framed in religious terms. Afghan resistance groups, later known collectively as the mujahideen, presented the conflict as a defense of Islam against atheist foreign occupation and an anti-religious domestic regime (Rashid, 2002; Barfield, 2010). This framing was politically powerful because it transformed participation in war from a political preference into a moral and religious obligation. Fighting was no longer presented simply as resistance to a foreign army, but as a duty tied to faith, honor, and the defense of the Muslim community—jihad against the “Godless and atheist- Soviet Union”.

Yet this transformation cannot be understood solely as a spontaneous Afghan reaction to Soviet intervention. It was also the product of ideological and institutional developments that predated the invasion. Afghan Islamist leaders who had fled to Pakistan in the 1970s entered a political environment already shaped by Islamist movements such as Jamaat-e-Islami. Influenced by Sayyid Qutb, Maududi, and broader Muslim Brotherhood thought, these networks provided Afghan exiles with both ideological vocabulary and organizational support. As a result, by the time Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, an important strand of Afghan Islamist activism had already begun to interpret politics through an explicitly Islamic revolutionary framework rather than through nationalism alone (Haider, 2014; Khan et al., 2023; Sultana, 2018).

Pakistan played a particularly important role in turning this ideological orientation into an institutional reality. Under the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan pursued a strategy that combined geopolitical calculation with Islamification. Through the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, Pakistan became the main channel through which international aid was distributed to Afghan resistance factions. This support was selective rather than neutral, favoring groups more closely aligned with Islamabad’s ideological preferences and long-term strategic interests in Afghanistan (Coll, 2004; Khan et al., 2023; Haider, 2014).

The United States and its allies also played a major role in shaping the anti-Soviet jihad. Within the broader Cold War context, support for the mujahideen was driven less by concern for Afghanistan itself than by the strategic objective of weakening Soviet influence. Through cooperation with Pakistan, the United States provided large-scale funding, weapons, training, and intelligence to Afghan resistance groups. Saudi Arabia and other regional actors also contributed financial and ideological support. Afghanistan thus became a major Cold War battleground in which global powers pursued their geopolitical interests through local actors.

Although the Soviet withdrawal was widely seen in the West as a strategic victory, it came at an enormous cost for Afghanistan. Afghan civilians and fighters bore the burden of a prolonged and devastating war. In many respects, the Soviet Union was weakened through Afghan sacrifice and bloodshed. However, the consequences extended far beyond Afghanistan. The war contributed to the spread of transnational jihadist networks, normalized militant interpretations of Islam, and created ideological and organizational patterns that would later influence conflicts across the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond.

This selective patronage had lasting consequences. It empowered Islamist factions over alternative political currents and linked access to weapons, training, and funding with particular ideological orientations. In this sense, the Afghan jihad was not only militarized; it was also ideologically curated. The Islam that became politically dominant in the resistance was increasingly filtered through institutions, doctrines, and networks supported by regional and international actors.

A key site of this transformation was the madrasa system that expanded along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Many Afghan refugees, especially boys from poor and displaced families, entered educational environments where religious study was combined with narratives of jihad, sacrifice, and anti-communist struggle. These institutions often functioned as more than schools. They became spaces of ideological formation, socialization, and recruitment. In refugee camps and border regions, religion was transmitted through teachers, clerics, preachers, and local authority figures who interpreted world events through a militant Islamic lens. Jihad therefore became more than a slogan used by commanders; it became part of a broader social and educational environment in which political conflict was understood in religious terms (Haider, 2014; Khan et al., 2023).

Existing religious networks also helped translate jihadist narratives into local settings, making religious mobilization more credible and effective. The resonance of jihad also depended on the broader moral and cultural environment. The communist regime's reforms, especially those relating to secularization, land redistribution, and women's public role, were perceived in many rural areas not simply as state policy but as a direct violation of religious and social norms. In this context, the framing of war as a defense of Islam fused faith, morality, and political resistance into a powerful mobilizing narrative.

Saudi Arabia's role further deepened this process. Saudi funding, charitable networks, and ideological influence helped spread more rigid interpretations of Islam, including tendencies less compatible with Afghanistan's historically plural and often Sufi-influenced religious landscape. This external influence did not simply support jihad materially. It also reshaped the religious

field by privileging harder and more exclusionary forms of Islamic discourse. Over time, this contributed to the weakening of older religious traditions that might otherwise have acted as moderating forces (Haider, 2014; Khan et al., 2023).

The long-term consequences were profound. The anti-Soviet jihad normalized violence framed in explicitly religious language. It gave organized armed struggle a sacred vocabulary, strengthened clerical and militant authority, and created transnational networks of fighters, ideas, and institutions. It also embedded the idea that religion could be used not only to defend society but to reorganize political order through force. At the same time, the war fragmented religious authority. Different mujahideen factions claimed Islamic legitimacy while competing for resources, foreign backing, and political influence. Religion remained central, but it increasingly became a contested resource within political competition itself.

The Soviet-Afghan War therefore stands as the foundational moment in the modern large-scale weaponization of religion in Afghanistan. It fused local religious structures with transnational ideological networks, embedded jihad within refugee and educational institutions, and made armed struggle in the name of Islam both politically useful and socially legitimate. The patterns established during this period would later shape the civil war, the rise of the Taliban, the post-2001 insurgency, and broader forms of Islamic radicalism beyond Afghanistan.

5.4 Civil War and the Emergence of the Taliban

The period following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 marked a major transformation in the political use of religion in Afghanistan. What had previously been framed as a broadly unified jihad against foreign occupation gave way to internal fragmentation among the mujahideen. Although these factions had mobilized under the banner of Islam, their subsequent struggles over power, territory, and resources exposed the fragility of religious unity when the common enemy disappeared (Barfield, 2010; Rashid, 2002). Religion remained present in political discourse, but it was increasingly invoked in conflicting and contradictory ways.

During the civil war of the early 1990s, rival factions continued to justify their actions through Islamic language. Yet rather than producing legitimacy, these claims often deepened public disillusionment. The gap between religious rhetoric and political behavior became difficult to ignore. Commanders who had once presented themselves as defenders of faith became associated with looting, factional violence, ethnic rivalry, and lawlessness. In urban centers such as Kabul, civilians experienced religiously justified politics not as moral order but as chaos and predation (Barfield, 2010; Rashid, 2002). This weakened the authority of the mujahideen and created a crisis not only of governance but of religious credibility.

The emergence of the Taliban must be understood in relation to this crisis. The Taliban did not rise simply because they were religious. They rose because they were able to present themselves as a religious alternative to a political order that had discredited itself. Their message did not primarily revolve around abstract theological innovation. Instead, it combined moral purity, anti-corruption rhetoric, and the promise of order. In that sense, the Taliban represented a new phase of religious instrumentalization, one in which religion was used not simply to mobilize

resistance, but to reconstruct authority in the aftermath of social collapse (Rashid, 2002; Giustozzi, 2019).

The movement's social base and religious formation are central to understanding its rise. Many Taliban members were products of madrasa systems in Pakistan that had expanded during the jihad years, especially among Afghan refugee populations. These institutions were not identical, nor were they all uniformly militant, but many promoted rigid understandings of Sharia, strong moral discipline, and a worldview shaped by war, displacement, and male-only institutional life. For many students, religion was experienced less as a historically layered tradition and more as a text-centered, purified, and disciplinary code that promised certainty in a world of disorder (; Rashid, 2002). This mattered politically because it produced a cadre of actors for whom restoring order through religious rule seemed both morally obvious and socially necessary.

The Taliban gained support in part because they promised to restore order after years of civil war. In many communities, insecurity, looting, roadblocks, and arbitrary violence had become part of everyday life. The movement's emphasis on discipline, justice, and the enforcement of Islamic law appealed to populations seeking predictability and dispute resolution. Unlike many mujahideen factions, the Taliban were often perceived as more unified, less corrupt, and more capable of imposing order (Giustozzi, 2019; Barfield, 2010).

Religious symbolism also played an important role in consolidating authority. Leadership around Mullah Omar was surrounded by narratives of piety, sacrifice, and divine guidance, and the movement cultivated an image of itself as morally distinct from the corrupt factionalism of the mujahideen era. These narratives strengthened the Taliban's claim to moral authority and helped distinguish them from rival factions associated with corruption and disorder.

Pakistan remained important in this phase as well. Although the Taliban were not simply a foreign creation, their rise was facilitated by cross-border networks, logistical support, and institutional environments shaped by earlier Pakistani policies. The infrastructure of madrasas, refugee camps, and ideological channels established during the Zia period did not disappear after the Soviet war. Instead, it became one of the conditions that made Taliban recruitment, organization, and expansion possible. Support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia strengthened the movement materially, but the Taliban also benefited from their ability to present themselves as a respo nse to disorder, corruption, and insecurity inside Afghanistan.

At the same time, the Taliban's use of religion was profoundly restrictive. Their claim to represent authentic Islam left little room for competing interpretations, local pluralism, or the diversity of Afghan religious practice. Once in power, they used religion not only to legitimate rule but to discipline society, regulate public behavior, and define the boundaries of acceptable life. Women and minorities were especially affected, as the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic order became a mechanism of exclusion and control (Rashid, 2002; Hassan et al., 2025). This marked a shift from using religion primarily to mobilize resistance toward using it to regulate society and consolidate political control.

This period therefore marks a major evolution in the political role of religion in Afghanistan. The anti-Soviet jihad had shown how religion could mobilize armed resistance. The rise of the

Taliban showed how religion could also be used to centralize authority, define moral order, and impose an exclusionary vision of governance. In both cases, religion functioned as a political instrument, but the objectives were different. In the first, it was primarily a tool of mobilization against an external enemy. In the second, it became a framework for internal rule.

The legacy of this transformation was immense. The Taliban's fusion of religious authority, coercive governance, and claims of moral purification established a model that would later reappear during the post-2001 insurgency. It also narrowed the space for alternative religious voices and further entrenched the association between religion and political force.

5.5 Post-2001 Insurgency and Taliban Mobilization

The post-2001 period represents the most fully developed phase of religious instrumentalization in Afghanistan. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, the international intervention introduced a new political order centered on state-building, elections, rights discourse, and security sector reform. Yet despite overwhelming military superiority on the part of the United States and its allies, the Taliban were able to reconstitute themselves and sustain a prolonged insurgency. This outcome cannot be explained by material support alone. It requires close attention to how the Taliban rebuilt legitimacy and mobilized support through religiously framed narratives that were deeply embedded in Afghan social realities.

At the core of the Taliban's strategy was not religion in the abstract, but religion linked to grievance, identity, justice, and resistance. The movement framed its insurgency as a continuation of jihad, portraying foreign military presence as occupation and presenting resistance as a religious duty. This framing elevated the conflict above the level of ordinary politics. To support the Taliban was not merely to oppose a government or foreign army; it was to participate in a morally meaningful struggle. Religion thus operated as a legitimizing language that sacralized political resistance and made violence appear ethically defensible.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy depended on more than rhetoric. The Taliban's narratives were persuasive because they were connected to everyday experiences. Corruption, abusive officials, civilian casualties, failed justice mechanisms, and weak governance were incorporated into a broader moral story in which the state and its international backers appeared not merely ineffective, but illegitimate. By linking these grievances to Islamic language, the Taliban transformed frustration into a sense of collective moral injury. This was not just propaganda. It was a structured process of framing through which political and social discontent was interpreted in religious terms (Snow & Benford, 1988; Johnson, 2017).

Social mediation was again central. Religious narratives did not circulate only through official Taliban channels. They moved through clerics, village leaders, kinship ties, informal networks, and religious spaces that retained credibility in local communities. In many parts of rural Afghanistan, mosque-based authority and local mullahs remained more socially meaningful than distant state institutions. This gave Taliban messaging a major advantage. When religious discourse was conveyed by figures already embedded in local life, it became harder to dismiss as mere insurgent propaganda.

The educational dimension is especially important here. Afghanistan's educational infrastructure remained weak after 2001, particularly in rural areas, and access to formal schooling was uneven. In many communities, madrasas and religious institutions continued to serve as basic sites of literacy, socialization, and moral instruction. Historically, madrasas in Afghanistan had not been inherently extremist, but decades of war, displacement, ideological influence from Pakistan, and the spread of Salafi and Wahhabi-oriented teachings altered parts of this landscape. The result was that some religious educational spaces became more closely associated with narrow, politicized, and militant interpretations of Islam. In this environment, the Taliban benefited from preexisting institutional patterns rather than having to build a support base from nothing.

Cross-border dynamics were also crucial. The structures created during the Soviet jihad did not disappear after 2001. Madrasa networks, ideological channels, refugee linkages, and personal relationships that had formed over previous decades continued to shape the insurgency. Pakistan's frontier regions remained socially and institutionally connected to Afghanistan in ways that blurred the line between domestic and external influences. These continuities meant that the Taliban's religious mobilization was sustained by networks already familiar with jihadist idioms, clerical authority, and militant forms of Islamic activism (Khan et al., 2023; Ibrahimi, 2023).

The Taliban also demonstrated strategic flexibility in the way they communicated. They used sermons, night letters, printed materials, poetry, local gatherings, and later digital platforms to circulate messages that retained a consistent moral core: religious duty, sacrifice, justice, honor, and resistance. These messages were not static. They were adjusted according to military developments, local grievances, and shifts in public mood. This adaptability mattered because it allowed the Taliban to maintain ideological coherence while speaking to varied audiences.

The concept of resonance helps explain why this strategy worked. The Taliban's narratives were effective not simply because they invoked Islam, but because they aligned with lived realities. In communities where state institutions were weak, predatory, or absent, Taliban claims about justice and moral order carried weight. In areas affected by military raids, air strikes, or abusive local power holders, the framing of the conflict as a defense of faith, dignity, and community became even more persuasive (Johnson, 2017; Wahab, 2023). This demonstrates that religious instrumentalization works best when it intersects with social experience rather than remaining doctrinally abstract.

At the same time, Taliban support was never universal. Many Afghans rejected the movement's ideology and methods. Its influence varied by region, class, ethnicity, and local political context. But religious instrumentalization does not require total acceptance. It requires sufficient credibility, enough social embedding, and enough narrative power to sustain political relevance over time. The Taliban achieved that by constructing a religiously framed insurgency that was simultaneously ideological and practical.

Overall, the post-2001 insurgency represents the most sophisticated form of religious instrumentalization in Afghanistan. Religion was used not only to justify violence or mobilize recruits, but to construct an integrated political narrative linking faith, identity, grievance, and

order. The Taliban's resilience lay in their ability to operationalize this narrative through socially embedded institutions, cross-border continuities, and adaptive strategies of communication. Their eventual return to power in 2021 was therefore not simply a military outcome. It was also the result of a long-term struggle over legitimacy in which religion played a central political role.

5.6 Taliban Return to Power and the Reassertion of Religious Governance

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 was not an abrupt rupture, but the outcome of a longer process shaped by political fragmentation, institutional weakness, and the gradual consolidation of insurgent legitimacy. While the withdrawal of international forces created the immediate conditions for the collapse of the previous government, the foundations of this transition had been established during the preceding years of insurgency. In particular, the Taliban's ability to frame their struggle in moral and religious terms, and to embed these narratives within Afghan social structures, contributed significantly to their capacity to sustain influence and ultimately reassert control.

Since 2021, the Taliban have governed Afghanistan as the de facto authorities, grounding their rule primarily in their interpretation of Islamic principles rather than in electoral or constitutional forms of legitimacy (UNAMA, 2023). This reflects a continuation of a broader historical pattern identified throughout this study: the use of religion not only as a tool of mobilization, but also as a central basis for political authority and governance.

However, to fully understand this phase, it is important to recognize that religion in Afghan society is not simply a political instrument. It is a deeply embedded and socially meaningful framework that shapes everyday life, moral conduct, family structures, and community relations. Religious practices provide a sense of continuity, identity, and ethical orientation. They inform values such as respect for elders, social responsibility, charity, and communal solidarity—elements that structure social life in ways that are often less visible in more secularized contexts. In many communities, religion is not experienced as ideology, but as lived tradition, guiding personal behavior and collective expectations.

This social centrality helps explain why religion remains a powerful source of legitimacy. When political authority is articulated through religious language, it draws on existing moral frameworks that are already widely understood and trusted. At the same time, this also makes religion particularly susceptible to political interpretation and instrumentalization. The same structures that give religion its social strength—its embeddedness in community life and its mediation through clerics and local institutions—also make it possible for political actors to shape how religious principles are understood and applied.

A defining feature of the current phase is the institutionalization of religious justification within governance. Policies concerning public conduct, social norms, and access to education—particularly for women—have been framed in religious terms and presented as consistent with Islamic values (UN Women, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). In this context, religion functions as the primary language through which authority is articulated, justified, and maintained. However, it is important to emphasize that these policies reflect a specific

interpretation of Islam, rather than a universally accepted or uncontested understanding within Afghan society or the broader Muslim world.

Analytically, this phase represents a shift in the function of religious instrumentalization. During the insurgency, religious narratives were used primarily to mobilize support, justify resistance, and delegitimize external actors and the former government. Following the return to power, these narratives have been redirected toward governance, regulation, and the consolidation of authority. Religion remains central, but its role has shifted from mobilizing opposition to structuring rule and social order.

At the same time, the broader context of international intervention remains important for understanding how these dynamics evolved. External state-building efforts after 2001 introduced formal institutions that often struggled to gain legitimacy at the local level, particularly where they were perceived as disconnected from existing social structures, cultural norms, and religious values (Barfield, 2010; Giustozzi, 2019). In some cases, these efforts prioritized institutional design over social integration, limiting their ability to resonate with local populations.

This does not suggest that international intervention was the primary cause of subsequent developments, but it does highlight an important dynamic. Where governance structures are perceived as externally imposed or misaligned with local moral frameworks, alternative actors can more easily present themselves as legitimate. The Taliban's narratives gained traction in part because they positioned themselves as more closely aligned with Afghan religious and social values, even as their interpretations remained contested.

It is also important to recognize that global and regional power politics have consistently shaped the environment in which religious narratives are mobilized. During the Soviet-Afghan War, external actors supported and structured jihad in ways that amplified religious framing. In the post-2001 period, the broader geopolitical context—including the priorities of the United States and its allies—continued to influence the trajectory of the conflict. While these actors pursued their own strategic objectives, the interaction between external agendas and local social realities often produced unintended consequences, including the strengthening of religiously framed opposition narratives.

The continued importance of social mediation is also evident in this phase. Religious authority in Afghanistan is not derived solely from formal doctrine, but is reinforced through networks of clerics, local leaders, and socially embedded institutions. These intermediaries play a central role in shaping how religious policies are communicated, interpreted, and normalized within society. As a result, the effectiveness of religiously framed governance depends not only on official policy, but also on how it is received, adapted, and reinforced at the local level.

At the same time, this period highlights the limits of religious instrumentalization as a governing strategy. While religion can provide a powerful source of legitimacy and social cohesion, governing a complex and diverse society involves challenges that extend beyond ideological coherence. Economic constraints, social diversity, and changing expectations create tensions that cannot always be resolved through religious framing alone. These tensions do not negate the role of religion, but they demonstrate that its political effectiveness remains context-dependent.

From a broader perspective, the post-2021 order reflects both continuity and transformation. Religion remains central to political life in Afghanistan, but its function continues to evolve. It is no longer primarily a tool of insurgency; it has become a framework for governance, authority, and social regulation. At the same time, its legitimacy continues to depend on how it is interpreted, mediated, and aligned with the lived realities of Afghan society.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how religion has been instrumentalized for political purposes in Afghanistan and how this process has shaped patterns of radicalization and violence over time. The analysis demonstrates that religion has not functioned as an independent cause of conflict. Rather, it has operated as a flexible and context-dependent political resource, mobilized by different actors across changing historical conditions.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that religion in Afghan society cannot be reduced to its political uses. Across all periods examined, religion has remained a central part of everyday life, shaping moral values, social relations, and communal identity. It provides ethical guidance, reinforces family structures, encourages social responsibility, and fosters a sense of belonging and continuity. In many respects, these functions contribute to social cohesion and stability, offering sources of meaning and resilience in contexts marked by prolonged conflict and uncertainty.

This dual character of religion—as both a deeply rooted social framework and a politically mobilized resource—is central to understanding its role in Afghanistan. The same features that give religion its positive social significance—its embeddedness in daily life, its moral authority, and its transmission through trusted intermediaries—also make it particularly effective when used for political purposes. Religion becomes influential not simply because it is invoked, but because it is already meaningful.

Across the historical periods analyzed, a consistent pattern emerges. Religion has been used to legitimize authority, mobilize support, and structure political and social order. However, the effectiveness of this process has depended on specific mechanisms. Interpretive framing allows political actors to present conflicts as moral or religious obligations. Social mediation ensures that these narratives are transmitted through trusted networks, increasing their credibility. Resonance ensures that these narratives align with lived experiences, making them compelling and actionable.

The study also highlights the role of external actors in shaping these dynamics. Foreign intervention has repeatedly interacted with local religious and social structures in ways that have amplified the political use of religion. During the Soviet-Afghan War, external support helped institutionalize jihad. In the post-2001 period, international efforts to rebuild the Afghan state often struggled to fully engage with local cultural and religious contexts. While these efforts were driven by broader strategic and political objectives, their limited alignment with local realities contributed to environments in which alternative, religiously framed narratives could gain traction.

It is therefore not sufficient to analyze religious mobilization in isolation. It must be understood within a broader framework that includes political competition, social structure, and international dynamics. Religion becomes politically significant not because it inherently produces violence, but because it can be integrated into strategies of power, legitimacy, and resistance.

Another important finding is the shift over time in how religion is used. Earlier phases of conflict demonstrate the use of religion primarily for mobilization and resistance. Later phases, particularly under Taliban rule, show its use in governance, regulation, and institutional control. This shift reflects adaptation rather than transformation. Religion remains central, but its function evolves in response to changing political needs.

Taken together, these findings contribute to broader debates on religion and conflict by moving beyond essentialist explanations. Rather than asking whether religion causes violence, the analysis shows that the key question is how religion is interpreted, mediated, and mobilized within specific contexts. The Afghan case illustrates that religion can support both social cohesion and political conflict, depending on how it is used.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how religion has been instrumentalized for political purposes in Afghanistan and how this process has shaped patterns of radicalization and violence over time. By adopting a historically grounded and analytically focused approach, the study has shown that religion is neither an inherently violent force nor a simple explanatory variable. Instead, it functions as a flexible and context-dependent resource that can be mobilized in different ways by political actors.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that religion in Afghan society is fundamentally more than a political tool. It remains a central element of social life, shaping values, relationships, and moral expectations. It provides a framework for meaning, reinforces family and community structures, and offers a sense of continuity across generations. These positive dimensions are critical to understanding why religion carries such influence and why it can be mobilized so effectively.

The analysis demonstrates that the impact of religion depends on identifiable mechanisms. Framing transforms political conflict into moral obligation. Social mediation embeds religious ideas within trusted networks. Resonance aligns narratives with lived experience. Together, these processes explain how religion becomes a powerful force in shaping political behavior.

The study also highlights the role of broader political and international dynamics. External actors, including major powers, have at times contributed to the conditions under which religious narratives are amplified, often in pursuit of strategic objectives. These interactions do not determine outcomes, but they shape the environment in which local actors operate.

The findings of this study also have broader implications beyond Afghanistan. In many fragile and conflict-affected societies, religion remains one of the few institutions that retains social credibility when state institutions weaken or collapse. Under such conditions, religious authority

can become an important source of order, legitimacy, and social support. However, this also creates opportunities for political actors to use religion strategically in order to justify power, mobilize followers, and marginalize opponents. Afghanistan illustrates how these processes can become deeply entrenched when religious authority, political competition, external intervention, and prolonged conflict interact over long periods.

Afghanistan can also be compared with other cases in which religion has been politically instrumentalized during periods of state weakness, foreign intervention, and social fragmentation. Similar dynamics have been visible in contexts such as Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and parts of the Balkans, where religious identity has been used to legitimize authority, mobilize violence, and sharpen political divisions. However, the Afghan case is distinctive because of the unusually long duration of conflict, the depth of foreign involvement, and the central role of clerics, mosques, madrasas, and informal community structures in mediating religious authority. These features have made the political use of religion especially persistent and deeply embedded across multiple generations.

Ultimately, the case of Afghanistan shows that religion becomes politically significant not because of its intrinsic properties, but because of how it is interpreted and used. It can support social cohesion, provide moral guidance, and strengthen communities. At the same time, it can be mobilized to justify conflict, legitimize authority, and structure power.

Understanding this distinction is essential. Approaches that ignore the social and positive dimensions of religion risk misunderstanding its role, while approaches that reduce conflict to religion alone overlook the political and structural factors that shape its use. A more nuanced perspective—one that recognizes both the social significance of religion and its potential for instrumentalization—is necessary for analyzing conflict and developing more effective responses.

The paper therefore suggests that efforts to reduce violence and build more sustainable forms of political legitimacy cannot rely only on military or institutional solutions. They must also take seriously the social role of religion and the local actors through whom religious authority is mediated. Policies that ignore religion altogether, or that treat it only as a security problem, are unlikely to succeed. More effective approaches require engagement with diverse religious voices, support for inclusive forms of religious authority, and greater attention to the social conditions that make exclusionary and militant narratives persuasive.

In this sense, Afghanistan does not represent an exception, but a particularly clear example of a broader pattern: religion matters not because of what it is in isolation, but because of how it is embedded within society and mobilized within politics.

8. References

Akbarzadeh, S., & Saeed, A. (2008). *Islam and political legitimacy*. Routledge.

Alemarah. (2018–2019). Taliban official media publications and podcasts.

Amnesty International. (2023). *The Taliban's war on women: The crime against humanity of gender persecution in Afghanistan*.

Ayoob, M. (2007). *The many faces of political Islam: Religion and politics in the Muslim world*. University of Michigan Press.

Barfield, T. (2010). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press.

Borchgrevink, K., & Harpviken, K. B. (2010). *Afghanistan's religious landscape: Politically active religious actors*. Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre.

Coll, S. (2004). *Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden*. Penguin Press.

Cui, J., & Pu, Z. (2026). The religious legitimacy trap: The Taliban's theocratic governance and the logic of religious policy after 2021. *African and Asian Studies*.

Esposito, J. L. (2015). *Islam and politics* (5th ed.). Syracuse University Press.

Fox, J. (2018). *An introduction to religion and politics: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Ghani, A. (1978). Islam and state-building in a tribal society: Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. *Modern Asian Studies, 12*(2), 269–284.

Giustozzi, A. (2019). *The Taliban at war: 2001–2018*. Oxford University Press.

Golishnikov, A. (2025). Afghanistan: Taliban's second chance and RED strategy. *Journal of Strategic Security, 18*(2). https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.18.2.2424

Hafez, M. M. (2003). *Why Muslims rebel: Repression and resistance in the Islamic world*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Haider, M. (2014). *The specter of intolerance: Understanding religious violence in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.

Hassan, S. R., Ahmed, T., & Khan, M. (2025). Rise of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Dynamics and consequences. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*. https://doi.org/10.59075/6bbb8x27

Haynes, J. (1997). *Religion in global politics*. Longman.

Hide, F. (2014). Religion as a legitimizing instrument of political violence. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 5*(13), 184–191. https://doi.org/10.5901/MJSS.2014.V5N13P184

Ibrahimi, N. (2023). A violent nexus: Ethnonationalism, religious fundamentalism, and the Taliban. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2235809

Jalali, A. A. (2025). Afghanistan: Consolidation of power under the Taliban. *Journal of Strategic Security, 18*(2). https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.18.2.2452

Johnson, T. H. (2017). Taliban narratives: The use and power of stories in the Afghanistan conflict. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.437

Joya, O., & Rahimi, L. (2023). A theory of religious grievance: Understanding the conflict in Afghanistan. *Politics and Religion Journal, 17*(1), 161–179. https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1701161j

Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence* (3rd ed.). University of California Press.

Khan, M. A., Ahmed, R., & Ullah, S. (2023). Afghan factor and religious militancy in Pakistan: A discursive analysis. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences, 4*(4), 57–69. https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2023(4-IV)57

Khatib, L. (2015). The political uses of religion in Syria. In J. Haynes (Ed.), *Religion and international relations*. Routledge.

Lowenstein, A. (2016). *Disaster capitalism: Making a killing out of catastrophe*. Verso.

Mandaville, P. (2007). Global political Islam and religious authority. *The Muslim World, 97*(2), 289–306.

Nahavandi, F. (2001). *Afghanistan*. Brussels: University of Brussels.

Nawabi, Z. (2025). *Unhealthy obsessions: The rapid deterioration in women's physical and mental health in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, 2021–25*. London: LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

Nojumi, N. (2002). *The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass mobilization, civil war, and the future of the region*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Qassem, A. S. (2023). Unpacking the Taliban: A hybrid of delinquent sanctimony. *Politics and Religion Journal, 17*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1701025q

Ramel, F., Cumin, D., Mathieu, J., & Patte, M. (2015). Religion and violence in international relations. *Les Champs de Mars, 26*, 10–26.

Rashid, A. (2002). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.

Roy, O. (1990). *Islam and resistance in Afghanistan* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Rubin, B. R. (2002). *The fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.

Salehyan, I., Hendrix, C. S., Hamner, J., Case, C., Linebarger, C., Stull, E., & Williams, J. (2012). Social conflict in Africa: A new database. *International Interactions, 38*(4), 503–511.

Sandal, N. A. (2021). *Religious leaders and conflict transformation: Northern Ireland and beyond*. Cambridge University Press.

Sinno, A. H. (2020). The Taliban's strategy for managing its intelligence network and information environment. In A. Giustozzi (Ed.), *The Taliban at war: 2001–2021*. Oxford University Press.

Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1988). Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization. In B. Klandermans, H. Kriesi, & S. Tarrow (Eds.), *From structure to action: Comparing social movement research across cultures* (pp. 197–217). JAI Press.

Sultana, A. (2018). Geopolitics of Afghanistan and the role of neighboring states. *Journal of South Asian Studies, 6*(3), 145–159.

Terpstra, N. (2020). Rebel governance, rebel legitimacy, and external intervention: Assessing three phases of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. *Small Wars & Insurgencies, 31*(6), 1143–1173. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1757916

UNAMA. (2023). *Human rights situation in Afghanistan: Annual report 2023*.

UN Women. (2023). *Afghanistan gender alert: Restrictions on women and girls under Taliban rule*.

U.S. Department of State. (1979). *Foreign relations of the United States: Soviet invasion and Afghanistan policy documents*.

Verma, R., Sharma, P., & Khan, S. (2023). The global pulse: Assessing counter-terrorism efficacy in post-2021 Afghanistan. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence, 36*(2), 210–235.

Volpi, F., & Turner, B. S. (2007). Making Islamic authority matter. *Theory, Culture & Society, 24*(2), 1–19.

Wahab, S. (2023). *A brief history of Afghanistan* (3rd ed.). Infobase Publishing.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. University of California Press.

Weinstein, J. M. (2007). *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. Cambridge University Press.