



DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-4-508-519


EDN: LSYOBP

Research article / Научная статья

## The Specificity of Afghan Identity in the Context of Globalization

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**Abstract.** The article addresses the issue of identifying a Muslim country in the context of globalization, with Afghanistan serving as a case study. For almost 20 years, Western attempts to introduce liberal democratic values into Afghan society have failed. The author highlights the fact that Afghan society has remained wary of elements of globalization for fear of losing its cultural and religious identity. Having established a theocratic regime, the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) set about restructuring the principles of Afghan nationalism in line with Islamic nationalism. The idea of Islam as a state identity implies that Islam as a comprehensive identity is capable of neutralizing ethnic differences in society. In taking steps to renew the ideological superstructure of the Afghan state, the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) put forward a new concept termed ‘Talibanism.’ The features and reasons for the shift of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s leadership away from traditional Deobandism and towards a more acceptable combination of religious-Puritan beliefs adapted to the strict precepts of Islamic law are analyzed. It is concluded that ‘Talibanism’ rejects all forms of republican government and makes a clear distinction between Islamic law and man-made laws, considering the latter to be immoral. The main trend of Kabul’s domestic policy, aimed at re-Islamisation of the insufficiently Islamized Afghan society on a voluntary or coercive basis, is shown. The concept envisages the imposition of a single Islamic identity on Afghan society, accompanied by the violation of women’s rights in employment and education. The rationale behind the Taliban’s (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) policy is the belief that Afghan society is degenerating from within and is subject to a process of external destruction that must be stopped. It is observed that the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) leaders have been influenced in changing their views by their prolonged contacts with representatives of Al-Qaeda (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) and other jihadist organizations. The study found that the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) ideology has acquired some similarities with Salafism, and that the authorities are trying to isolate the Afghan people from the processes of globalization, being ready to protect Islamic values from Western civilization by any means necessary.

**Key words:** Afghanistan, modernization, westernization, Salafism, preservation of cultural and religious identity

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**For citation:** Machitidze, G. G. (2024). The specificity of Afghan identity in the context of globalization. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 24(4), 508–519. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-4-508-519>

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## Специфика афганской идентичности в условиях глобализации

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**Аннотация.** Анализируется проблема идентификационного выбора мусульманской страны в условиях глобализации на примере Афганистана. Попытки Запада на протяжении почти 20 лет приобщить афганское общество к либерально-демократическим ценностям окончились провалом. Автор обращает внимание на то, что в афганском обществе сохранялась настороженность по отношению к элементам глобализации из-за боязни утратить свою культурно-религиозную самобытность. Установив теократический режим, талибы (запрещены в РФ) приступили к перестройке принципов афганского национализма в соответствии с исламским национализмом. Идея ислама как государственной идентичности подразумевает, что ислам как всеобъемлющая идентичность способен нейтрализовать этнические различия в обществе. Осуществляя шаги для обновления идеологической надстройки афганского государства, талибы (запрещены в РФ) выдвигают новую концепцию под названием «талибанизм». Анализируются особенности и причины отхода руководства Исламского Эмирата Афганистан от традиционного деобандизма и переход к более приемлемой комбинации религиозно-пуританских убеждений, адаптированных к строгим предписаниям исламского права. Сделан вывод, что «талибанизм» отвергает все формы республиканского правления и проводит четкое различие между исламскими законами и законами, созданными человеком, считая последние безнравственными. Показан главный тренд внутренней политики Кабула, направленный на реисламизацию недостаточно исламизированного афганского общества на добровольной или принудительной основе. Концепция предусматривает навязывание афганскому обществу единой исламской идентичности, которая сопровождается нарушением прав женщин в сфере трудоустройства и образования. Обоснованием политики талибов (запрещены в РФ) служит убеждение в том, что афганское общество деградирует изнутри и подвержено процессу внешнего разрушения, который следует остановить. Отмечается влияние на изменение взглядов лидеров движения «Талибан» (признано террористическим и запрещено в РФ) их длительного общения с представителями «Аль-Каиды» (признана террористической и запрещена в РФ) и других джихадистских организаций. По результатам исследования установлено, что идеология талибов (запрещены в РФ) приобрела некоторое сходство с салафизмом и что власти стараются изолировать афганский народ от процессов глобализации, будучи готовыми защищать исламские ценности от западной цивилизации любыми способами.

**Ключевые слова:** Афганистан, модернизация, вестернизация, салафизм, сохранение культурно-религиозной идентичности

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Для цитирования:** Мачитидзе Г. Г. Специфика афганской идентичности в условиях глобализации // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2024. Т. 24, № 4. С. 508–519. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-4-508-519>

### Introduction

An important factor in the early 21st century is the development of globalism, which imposes a unified supranational identity on all peoples, leading to the destruction of civilisational identity. In Muslim countries, where religion (Islam) plays a significant role in society, there is a desire to protect their cultural and religious traditions. In this regard, the topic

of preserving Afghan identity in the context of globalization is highly relevant.

Academic and analytical studies of domestic and foreign scholars have been involved in understanding the phenomenon of Islamic identity (Naumkin, 2014; 2020; Baranovsky & Naumkin, 2018; Korgun, 2004; Sikoev, 2002; Knyazev, 2021; Novikova, 2023; Sazhin, 2006; Kutyrrev, 2009; Flier, 2010;

Malygina, 2021; Mendel, 2010; Goldstein, 2010; Taj, 2022).

The above-mentioned studies deal with the struggle for identity concepts in the Muslim world, identity choices, the emergence of international terrorism as a result of the clash between Western and Eastern cultures, the rejection of modernization by Islamic society, ethnic identification in Afghanistan and the rejection by a significant part of Afghan society of transformations and innovations introduced from outside, the combination of Islamic law and local customs, and the strengthening of the ideological superstructure of the Afghan state by the Taliban.<sup>1</sup>

The object of the study is Afghan identity in the context of globalization; the subject of the study is the specific actions of the Afghan authorities in terms of its preservation, as well as the tools they use for this purpose. A causal relationship between the need to preserve Afghan identity and its renewal based on a pan-Afghan Islamized identity is identified. In the process of working on the article such methods of scientific research as historical and chronological, comparative analysis with gradual study of various components, synthesis, as well as induction combined with deduction are used. It is concluded that Islam in its Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) interpretation is used both to strengthen internal stability in the country and to mobilise society against external threats.

The current trends in the renewal of the Islamic identity of Afghan society, combined with the rejection of some elements of tribal culture, have not been sufficiently researched and require additional scientific understanding. Therefore, the author aims to analyse the process and reasons for the Taliban's (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia)

renewal of the Afghan Islamized identity in the context of globalization, which has both external and internal dimensions.

### **The Problem of Identity Choice**

In the era of universal globalization, the problem of maintaining national identity has become a prominent concern. As the only possible option for economic development, the West offers the world its own model of development, including mass culture as a standard to be followed. The world's information space is being filled with Western values, accompanied by the destruction of traditional values and national self-identification of people (Gerasimova & Ivakhnov, 2017). In the context of globalization, the absolutisation of liberal-democratic values and the West's focus mainly on modernization leads to the loss of autonomy of nation-states, which often deliberately delegate their powers to economic or military alliances.

Discussions about the concepts of identity are also unfolding in the Muslim world, especially regarding the compatibility of religious and democratic values. The eternal dispute is accompanied by accusations of Islamic societies in "authoritarianism, violation of human rights and lack of freedoms."<sup>2</sup> The divisions within the Islamic world are deep and sometimes uncompromising: jihadists fight against Shi'ites and moderate Sunnis, Shi'ites oppose Sunnis, and there is disunity between Muslims of different nationalities. Disagreements are accompanied by a high level of violence, which is directly related to the identification choice (Naumkin, 2014). Disunity occurs not only along religious lines, but also along ethnic lines, depending on the policies of nation-states. In other words, the inter-confessional and inter-ethnic problems related

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> Naumkin V. V. Nation-State, Civilization and Identity Crisis // Likhachev Square. May 20, 2014. (In Russian). URL: [https://www.lihachev.ru/pic/site/files/lihcht/2014\\_Sbornik/2014\\_Dokladi/2014\\_plen/2014\\_plen\\_030.pdf](https://www.lihachev.ru/pic/site/files/lihcht/2014_Sbornik/2014_Dokladi/2014_plen/2014_plen_030.pdf) (accessed: 02.04.2024).

to identity choice and state-building persist in Muslim countries.

The accelerated modernization of Muslim countries, which occurs in collision with the traditional culture, which relies on the factor of identity, leads to the emergence of more severe forms of resistance, including in the form of terrorism, which has a global character (Malygina, 2021). Earlier, V.A. Kutyrev drew attention to the clash of different cultures and the actualization of ideas of (Islamic) fundamentalism, which contributed to the emergence of international terrorism (Kutyrev, 2009). In support of this approach, A.Ya. Flier noted that “the attempt on sacral feelings of a person’s belonging to a cultural or religious tradition on the part of modernized Western society underlies a large number of terrorist actions” (Flier, 2010).

The penetration of globalization into national cultures has led to a resurgence of interest in the protection of cultural and religious traditions among the peoples of different countries. Therefore, despite the existing contradictions in the Islamic world, the overwhelming majority of Muslims are united in their rejection of the West’s foreign cultural expansion in the countries of the East. The cultural expansion of the West, which, according to supporters of civilizational identity in Muslim states, is in a state of moral decay, is negatively perceived by Muslim societies, which seek to adhere to more locally adapted development models.

A certain boundary between Western and Islamic civilizations is the attitude towards the role of religion in society and the state. In addition, Islam is much more politicized than other world religions. Islam opposes the process of gradual dissolution of one ethnos into the environment of another ethnos, the loss of language, cultural traditions and the emergence of a new assimilated identity. At the same time, religious institutions are influenced by the politics of nation-states that oppose the liberal democracy imposed by the West with its “ideals

based on authentic religious values” (Naumkin, 2020).

In the context of globalization, Muslim countries fear rapid change because of globalization processes, which could threaten the traditional identity of their societies. The elites of these states believe that the introduced Western culture may overshadow local values, in particular, lead to the loss of indigenous languages under the pressure of the English language, and to the imposition of consumerism and individualism as opposed to traditional community-oriented values. Viewing globalization as a process of increasing integration in the political, economic and cultural spheres of society, Muslim countries at the same time fear the deepening of negative trends in the economy, the emergence of serious social difficulties, and the growth of protest sentiments due to threats of loss of national sovereignty and identity. At the same time, it can be said that those countries that have not abandoned their national identity have achieved a high level of development. These include China, India, South Korea and some Muslim countries. Relying on positive foreign experience, these states have been able to preserve their own traditions and cultural values. Moreover, this process is taking place against the background of the weakening of the dominant role of the United States and the West on the global stage (Mosyakov et al., 2024).

The ongoing process of globalization, which has engulfed many areas of social life, is thus ambivalent in nature. On the one hand, with the deepening of integration processes in the world, transnational economic activities, uninterrupted communication and international organisations offer developing countries certain opportunities for development. However, on the other hand, globalization comes into conflict with national identity and national values (Zhuckova, 2006). Therefore, it is important for Muslim states to identify a viable compromise between participation in global integration and the preservation of cultural and religious traditions.

### **The Attempt to “Westernize” Afghanistan Under the Guise of Modernization**

The war in Afghanistan (2001–2021) was seen by the U.S. as part of the globalization process, which, as it later turned out, was doomed to failure. After the intervention of coalition forces in 2001, Afghanistan noticeably lost its status as an independent state, consciously delegating many functions to Western donors against the background of the U.S. and its allies' focus on imposing liberal democratic values on the backward, ruined country under the guise of modernization.

Globalization as a modernization project is linked to the concept of Westernization, which usually encompasses various aspects of the process of transforming Western values into universal values of modern civilisation. These are market economy, the rule of law, parliamentarism, political pluralism, the popularization of Anglo-American culture, the adoption of the Western way of life with its education system, the emancipation of women, mass media and stereotyped behaviour.

Following this logic, in 2003 the U.S. adopted a programme of action in Afghanistan called “Accelerating Success,” based on liberal democratic ideas of state-building, which in the conditions of foreign intervention could be used only by a part of the urban population (Novikova, 2023). State-building was understood by the West as not only rebuilding material infrastructure, but also addressing the problems of good governance, security and humanitarian aid to the many Afghan families in distress. Furthermore, the West sought to gain the support of the wider rural population by “fighting for the hearts and minds” of the Afghans.

By 2006, the country seemed to have the necessary set of democratic institutions in place: a directly elected president, a government formed by the president, a parliament elected in general elections, and a judiciary. However, the

conservative population, adhering to the religious traditions and customs of the Middle Ages, did not accept Afghan democracy. In this regard, A.A. Knyazev rightly writes of the “acute rejection by a significant part of Afghan society of the transformations brought from outside” (Knyazev, 2021). Moreover, the results achieved left much to be desired, as it was not possible to achieve a ceasefire and ensure a decent level of security. The reconstruction work was slow, also due to the unstable situation, and not in all regions of Afghanistan. Disagreements between the military, civilian structures and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) representing the interests of Western countries over the direction of activities in the provinces led to discrediting the very idea of Western-style state-building in Afghanistan (Machitidze, 2020). The situation was further complicated by the fact that there was no consensus among the Afghan political elite about the future of the country.

At the same time, modernization and westernization were unheard of not only for the Afghan villagers but also for a part of the urban population. They had a relative understanding of some of the features of globalization, such as secularism, individualism and consumerism, but feared that it could lead to a weakening of Islamic identity and a rejection of Islamic values and ethics. Afghan society's political perception of modernization was also important. Its rejection was not for reasons of value and meaning, but because it was seen as an instrument of oppression (Baranovsky & Naumkin, 2018).

It cannot be denied that the process of Westernization, which involves borrowing elements and samples of more technologically advanced states, has certain positive trends. This was the view of the participants of the Tokyo International Conference in 2012, who declared that a consensus had been reached on the establishment of democracy and political stability in Afghanistan, as well as the development of civil society. Kabul, in turn, promised to make more efforts to establish the

rule of law and fight corruption, which it has so far failed to do.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, a fairly broad section of the country's population, which was more on the side of the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia), remained wary of the cultural and religious costs that could lead to the loss of the society's identity. Indeed, a credible and transparent presidential election in Afghanistan failed in 2014. Both candidates were forced to sign a power-sharing agreement that made Ashraf Ghani president and Abdullah Abdullah head of government.<sup>4</sup> The 2019 presidential election was held with minimal voter turnout and record fraud, with the publication of the results only three months later. In the Afghan context, the building of the rule of law along Western lines did not take place. In this regard, it can be argued that a significant part of Afghan society was wary of elements of Westernization, i.e. the preservation of its socio-cultural identity (Tetushkina, 2010).

Many Muslim-majority countries base their laws on an interpretation of the principles of Islamic law, but despite this, no two countries have identical laws. Even in Afghanistan, although both the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia), who ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, and Ashraf Ghani's government claimed to adhere to Islamic law, they had different legal systems. For example, Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, which was followed by the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, included a preamble stating that the country's laws should not contradict Islam. However, the Taliban (recognized as

terrorist and banned in Russia) criticized the country's basic law for trying to reconcile Islamic principles with the liberal world order and for being written under the dictates of the West.<sup>5</sup>

In Afghanistan's historical retrospective, Islam, as a serious spiritual force, has played a significant role in the life of society. The formation of Afghan identity has been profoundly influenced by Islam, which has had a great impact on the preservation of the country's identity. Belief in this religion is evident in dress, diet, regular prayers and language. Although there are many Afghans who, due to illiteracy, have never read passages from the Qur'an and rely on those who have memorised the holy text by heart.

In Afghanistan, conservative religious groups have historically demonstrated opposition to the construction of a modern nation-state. As a result, the religious conservatism became an obstacle to the modernization of Afghanistan. Political instability has often been caused by the country's underdevelopment. The secular Afghan government's rejection of religious authority and the clerics' rejection of the secularisation of the state were important domestic political factors in the upheavals under the regimes of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Although it should be noted that the central government has tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to incorporate sharia law into the national governance framework. However, the conservative clergy retained an undisputed influence over the broad masses of the rural and partly urban population, with an absolute say in the interpretation and application of the law.

Afghanistan is an illustrative example of a tribal society, with 14 ethnic groups in the

<sup>3</sup> Conference on Afghanistan Held in Tokyo // Anadolu Agency. July 10, 2012. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/в-токио-состоялась-конференция-по-афганистану/356537> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

<sup>4</sup> Fedyakina A. The Prime Minister of Afghanistan Was Preparing to Disrupt the Inauguration of the President // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. September 29, 2014. (In Russian). URL: <https://rg.ru/2014/09/29/inauguraciya-site.html> (accessed: 13.03.2024).

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim A. Explainer: The Taliban and Islamic Law in Afghanistan // Aljazeera. August 23, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/hold-the-taliban-and-sharia-law-in-afghanistan> (accessed: 13.03.2024).

country, according to the 2004 Afghan Constitution, each with a complex tribal structure.<sup>6</sup> The largest Afghan ethnic group, the Pashtuns, are divided into four major tribal unions, whose associations, families and clans control the territories they inhabit and whose chiefs embody supreme military, political, legal and economic power. Kabul has therefore generally had to negotiate with them, including on the basis of material interests. In an attempt to preserve sovereignty and territorial integrity, the central government tended to delegate some of its powers to the tribes. This peculiar division of power between the tribes and the state meant that laws had very a limited impact on Afghan society. However, the combination of Islamic law and local traditional customs allowed Afghanistan's inherent social order to gain legitimacy (Sazhin, 2006).

It can be argued that the religious and tribal factor has become a serious obstacle to the process of Westernization of the general population. This is not surprising, given that even 100 years ago there were powerful forces in Afghan society that denied any innovations, opposed technological progress and the idea of creating a national industry in the country. Even Afghan reformers, who understood the struggle against European imperialism in their own way, tried to “combine Afghan nationalism and modernism with the concept of pan-Islamism” (Korgun, 2004). In Afghanistan, attempts to bring the spirit of liberalism into education have always been fiercely opposed by influential tribal leaders, who also opposed the removal of restrictions that made it difficult for women. Religious leaders have also strongly opposed attempts by the authorities to regulate family relations. However, Sharia (Islamic law) continued to play an unrelenting role in Afghan society. In addition, during the period of foreign occupation of Afghanistan, the central

government's cautious secularization efforts repeatedly failed.

There is another view of Afghanistan's participation in globalization. In particular, J. Mendel believes that global flows of money, weapons, goods, people and information have been crossing Afghanistan's borders in both directions at high speed for a long time with minimal state intervention. Moreover, Afghanistan's drug production and exports have kept it closely linked to the international economy, albeit in unconventional ways (Mendel, 2010). At the same time, in certain socio-political conditions of a particular Muslim state, elements of modernization can be separated from the process of Westernization. Some foreign researchers, such as W. Goldstein, believe that a developing country can modernise by avoiding Westernization, which involves secularization and democratization, while maintaining authoritarian rule (Goldstein, 2010). Iran is cited as an argument in favour of the viability of such an idea, which, even despite severe sanctions pressure, has been able to make significant progress in education and health care, as well as develop its military industry, while maintaining its cultural and religious identity.

### **The Taliban's Struggle to Renew Afghan Identity**

For Afghanistan, the problem of identification choice remains relevant today. In this regard, the discourse on Afghanistan as a national-civilisational identity is an attempt to ideologically justify its special path in confrontation with the West, and an attempt to form its own responses to the challenges of globalization based on its national-civilizational specificity.

In the process of Afghanistan's transition from a tribal society to a modern state, the historical problem of how traditional religions can fit into the modern political system has not yet been solved. In Afghanistan's recent history, religious conservatives, in favour of the

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<sup>6</sup> Dominant Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan // Deccan Herald. August 18, 2021. URL: <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/dominant-ethnic-groups-in-afghanistan-1021070.html> (accessed: 18.03.2024).

supremacy of religious authority, have used spiritual privileges to maintain the interests of tribal societies, stunted social development and blocked state-building in the vast peripheral areas of the country (Chang, Pengtao & Xiyao, 2022). The intricate relationship between Hanafi jurisprudence and the Pashtunwali tribal code has always been a potent source of conservatism in Afghanistan.

Despite the multi-ethnic nature of Afghanistan, the Afghan state's sense of self, for historical reasons, is built around a dominant Pashtun ethnic identity that is deeply rooted in the Pashtun regions of the country (Taj, 2022). However, in the 10–12 years before coming to power in 2021, the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) made efforts to expand and turn the insurgency into an all-Afghan insurgency with the involvement of non-Pashtuns. In doing so, the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) took into account the fact that members of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan had repeatedly claimed power over the past decades, which alarmed the Taliban leadership. The ethnic factor in the Afghan conflict has usually played a role as a stimulant, as ethnic groups seek to protect the interests of their tribesmen.

Fears of an ethnic split in the country were further heightened in 2021, when the anti-Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) activities of the National Resistance Front led by A. Masud intensified and pressure from the international community to form an inclusive government increased. There was a need to somehow neutralise the ethnic identity of a significant part of the population, which is mostly Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and to return to the idea of Islam as a state identity, which had already been tested in the 1990s, with some improvements. In addition, the Taliban leaders realised that if they did not fulfil their basic promise to restore the Emirate with all its attributes, their movement would lose relevance and relevance. Islam as an overarching national identity is supposed to be able to transform ethnic and tribal differences in

society into a common Afghan Islamic identity to avoid ethnic-based separatist tendencies and tribal-based contradictions.

In addition, something had to be done to counter the ideas of ISIS-Khorasan,<sup>7</sup> which had an ideological impact on a certain part of the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia). Kabul wants to demonstrate not only to the members of the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia), but also to the entire Afghan society that it is the new Taliban power, being the vanguard of true Islamic leadership in Afghanistan, that is in favour of the implementation of 'pure' Islam on Afghan soil, unlike the ISIS<sup>8</sup> group, which dreams of a global caliphate. Unlike Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who once declared himself the leader of all Sunnis in the world, Mohammad Omar was the supreme religious and political leader of Afghanistan specifically, ruling the country in the name of Allah. The same applies to the current supreme leader (amir) of the country, Haibatullah Akhundzada. This political system emphasises the conformity of government decisions to the Sharia as interpreted by the Taliban authority. The Taliban's (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) contemporary struggle against ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) is not only aimed at ensuring security in the country, but also at defending Afghan cultural and religious identity.

Recognizing the need for a purely Islamic system with a more robust ideological base, the authorities are taking steps to update the ideological superstructure of the Afghan state. Kabul, to consolidate the new authority, is

<sup>7</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.



introducing interrelated ideological initiatives: establishing a renewed Islamic ideology as the state ideology, improving the distinctive religious reputation of the Taliban authority, and transforming Afghan nationalism into Islamic nationalism.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, work is underway to transform the worldview of the Islamic Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) into a permanent ideology called ‘Talibanism,’ which means moving away from traditional Deobandism and towards a combination of religious-Puritan beliefs adapted to the strict precepts of Islamic law. Islam is supposed to demand that all aspects of daily life be carried out in a dignified manner and, as such, Afghan society, being insufficiently Islamic, needs to be re-Islamized on a voluntary or compulsory basis. ‘Talibanism’ rejects all forms of republican government and makes a clear distinction between Islamic laws and man-made laws, considering the latter as immoral.<sup>10</sup>

Under the new re-Islamization programme, the Taliban’s (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) mission is to lead a return to the past by merging Afghan nationalism with Islamic nationalism. The programme envisages imposing a unified Islamic identity on Afghan society. It also envisages reforming the educational programme, including the introduction of a unified national curriculum in line with the re-Islamisation process. A group of ultraconservative clerics, headed by the supreme leader, who, as in the 1990s, perceive the Qur’an and Sharia as the constitution, are at the head of the process of governing and spreading the ideas of

‘Talibanism’ (Sikoev, 2002, p. 72). It is they who, acting through a set of programme documents known as ‘Dastur,’ make the most important decisions in the state, including many appointments, in a narrow circle of members of the religious council (Shura).

In order to realise the ideas of Islamic identity, the Taliban government has prepared a number of regulations that infringe on human rights that affect secondary education for girls, women’s employment, dress, appearance, movement and leisure activities, especially for women in Afghanistan. Men have had to participate in the implementation of restrictive measures against women in complying with the new rules on dress, appearance and social behaviour. All private educational institutions for boys and girls from primary schools to post-secondary education have been closed, particularly in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. Many of the policies are directed primarily against the urban population, which the authorities consider to be in a state of moral decay. The Taliban’s (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) worldview is based on the view that Muslim society as a whole is degenerating from within and is subject to a process of external destruction that must be stopped.

Many Muslim countries, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states, have condemned Kabul’s policies aimed at curtailing women’s rights, including the ban on higher education.<sup>11</sup> The head of Al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, also condemned the gender policy of the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia), whose actions are influenced by extreme tribal culture. According to the Egyptian scholar of theology, the Sunni tradition does not see Islamic law as a rigid mechanism, allows for its reinterpretation and links the viability of Sharia to its willingness to engage intellectually with

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad J. The Taliban’s Religious Roadmap for Afghanistan // The Middle East Institute. January 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/talibans-religious-roadmap-afghanistan> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

<sup>10</sup> Country Guidance Afghanistan 2023: Recent Developments // European Union Agency for Asylum. January 2023. URL: <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2023/recent-developments> (accessed: 18.03.2024).

<sup>11</sup> Rana M.A. Taliban Version of Islam // DAWN. January 15, 2023. URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1731686> (accessed: 19.03.2024).

the Sunni tradition.<sup>12</sup> Even the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>13</sup> has tried to persuade the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) to adjust its gender policy that they believe could contribute to international recognition of the Taliban regime.<sup>14</sup>

A retrospective analysis of the Afghan events of 25 years ago shows that there have been certain changes in the worldview of the Taliban leaders. As a result of prolonged communication and partnership with foreign jihadists, in particular with representatives of Al-Qaeda<sup>15</sup> and other terrorist organisations, the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) began to calmly perceive the ideas of Salafism (Long, 2022).

Traditional Afghan Islam combined Islamic law with Sufi teachings and practices, “encouraging a peaceful life based on justice, compassion and tolerance.” For a long time, places of pilgrimage and worship have been the graves of famous Sufis, which were already shrines in the pre-Islamic period. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder of the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia), who studied with a Sufi teacher named Haji Baba after assuming the position of supreme

leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, visited his old teacher’s grave almost weekly. Contrary to this tradition, the modern Taliban leaders do not support the practice of visiting shrines, considering them non-Muslim in origin, and calling prayer to Sufi saints for healing and intercession sinful. In this connection, one cannot but recall that in the 1990s one of the most significant disagreements between the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) and al-Qaeda (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) was precisely the issue of Sufi shrines. Moreover, in 1996 the Taliban government even banned Salafi activities (preaching and building mosques) in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of its gradual transformation over the past two decades, Taliban ideology has become similar to Salafism, emphasising monotheism, rejecting innovation, criticising Sufi religious rituals, and waging jihad against enemies. The Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) weakened the bonds of traditionalist Islam, and at the same time the influence of tribal leaders. One could even say that the new authorities, while retaining their conservatism and rigidity, have shifted to a form of modernist Islamism with an emphasis on regulating the internal moral life of Afghans, strengthening their faith and loyalty to the regime, and reflecting the pragmatic considerations of governance.

## Conclusion

Islam has played a key role in the development of modern Afghan society, with the vast majority of Afghans remaining deeply conservative in their Muslim way of life. Islam is also a crucial factor in legitimising the Taliban regime as the main unifying force in the

<sup>12</sup> Salim A. R. The Taliban vs. Global Islam: Politics, Power, and the Public in Afghanistan // Berkley Center. November 3, 2021. URL: <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-taliban-vs-global-islam-politics-power-and-the-public-in-afghanistan> (accessed: 19.03.2024).

<sup>13</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>14</sup> Entekhabifard C. Will the Taliban Turn Afghanistan into a Base for Muslim Brotherhood? // Asharq Al-Awsat. January 18, 2023. URL: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4105166/camelia-entekhabifard/will-taliban-turn-afghanistan-base-muslim-brotherhood> (accessed: 20.03.2024).

<sup>15</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>16</sup> Semenov K. The Role and Place of the Taliban on the Global Map of Islam: Challenges and Threats // Russian International Affairs Council. September 9, 2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-role-and-place-of-the-taliban-on-the-global-map-of-islam-challenges-and-threats/> (accessed: 22.03.2024).

heterogeneous Afghan society. Politically, Islam is used both to promote internal stability and to mobilise society against external threats. In the case of imposing alien values on traditional values, Islam in its current Taliban interpretation can act as a defensive reaction of the Afghan people.

At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that Islamic identity may change under certain conditions. It is quite possible that under the influence of external and internal circumstances in the sphere of family, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations, a process of renewal of behavioural patterns in the minds of believing

Afghans may begin. This is exactly what the Taliban (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) fears, which is why they firmly insist on the restrictions that are being introduced into the social life of Afghans.

Moreover, despite Western pressure, the Taliban leaders are trying to isolate the Afghan people from the processes of globalization, using early Islam as a benchmark for their declared way of life, promoting their own religious and cultural identity, and ready to defend Islamic values against Western civilization by any means necessary.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 05.05.2024

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 31.09.2024

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 15.10.2024

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