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## The 1980s mujahideen, the Taliban and the shifting idea of jihad

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Nineteen years ago, Afghanistan's mujahideen defeated the Red Army. How do they compare with the Taliban who followed?

28 April marks the 19th anniversary of the mujahideen's victory over the Red Army forces in Afghanistan. The original mujahideen of the 1980s and today's Taliban may use the same language of holy war, but their understanding of jihad is worlds apart. The key difference between the original mujahideen and the Taliban is that the former waged a traditional type of jihad. In a traditional jihad, if waged locally, a contest over control of resources takes place between rival strongmen who each run their own private armies. In this scenario, the ultimate legitimacy to rule draws upon military strength, but the contest itself is called jihad simply because Islam is the sole language of political legitimacy.

Crucially, in a traditional jihad, the victorious party has an unspoken right to pillage, rape and loot the conquered population. This is because militia fighters are not paid soldiers in a regular army and hence looting is the material reward they receive for fighting. The original mujahideen followed this traditional pattern of jihad upon coming to power in 1992. Since competition over resources rather than ideology is key to traditional jihad, the mujahideen's war focused on Kabul where the nation's wealth and the foreign embassies, another potential source of funding, were to be found.

Judging by a historical account from the 1920s, back then the women and girls of the conquered populations also belonged to the pillage package offered to militia jihadis. Hence, in the diaries of court chronicler Katib Hazara on the siege of Kabul in 1929, we read that the victorious mujahideen of the time had demanded to see the list of girls registered at a Kabul school so as to allocate female students to militia fighters.

Katib's account might be exaggerated, but the story still reveals that there was an unspoken rule that women and girls were part of the conquest package. As such, the mujahideen's struggle over Kabul was a continuation of traditional jihad complete with internal rivalries, pillage and looting. The mujahideen were part of the realm of traditional politics in which a conquered region is a turf that can be exploited by strongmen, who call themselves mujahideen so as to appear respectable.

The Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan in 1996, by contrast, strayed from the path of tradition. In a striking breach of precedence, the Taliban militia did not make use of their unspoken right to pillage and loot. They searched the conquered populations' homes, but only to confiscate weapons and so ensure a monopoly of violence for their state.

In a comical incident that features in Sabour Bradley's documentary series *The Extreme Tourist*, the Taliban saw a poster of Rambo with a machine-gun in the home of an Afghan bodybuilder fan of the Hollywood star Sylvester Stallone. Ignorant of the world beyond the sharia law, the Taliban assumed that Rambo was a family member and told the bodybuilder: "Tell your cousin that he must hand over his machine gun to us." The bodybuilder's protestation that the poster depicted a fictional Hollywood hero fell flat with the Taliban, who subsequently imprisoned the man.

The Taliban were exceedingly ignorant – which made them cruel – but there's no doubt that they saw jihad as a means to establish a state rather than legitimacy to pillage a conquered territory. Building a state was of utmost importance to the Taliban because without it the sharia law could not be enforced. If the mujahideen struggled over resources, the Taliban were concerned with religiosity.

The Taliban's choice of their capital city, Kandahar, was further evidence of their radically new approach to conquest. As already mentioned, historically Kabul drew its importance from the fact that the nation's wealth and the foreign embassies were concentrated there. The mujahideen's vicious fight over the city, which resulted in thousands of dead, and their disregard for public buildings, which they indiscriminately destroyed in rocket attacks, was rooted in the view that the capital city was there to be pillaged by whichever party that came out victorious.

The Taliban, in contrast, disregarded Kabul, moving their capital to the much poorer city of Kandahar. Accounts of Afghans who met Taliban officials all reveal a lack of interest in material goods or symbols of social hierarchy. Meetings would be held seated on the floor in a circle, erasing all signs of hierarchy that traditionally has been part of Afghan court etiquette.

Ironically, such egalitarianism was what the communists had dreamed of in 1978. But in such a deeply religious society, it is not surprising that egalitarianism had to come as part of a religious

doctrine. With the Taliban, rural Afghans came to power, ruling over the more sophisticated urban populations. This, too, was a breach of precedence.

Fighting for resources in a traditional fashion complete with looting and pillaging versus fighting for a state that would enforce sharia law even to the point of an obsessive preoccupation with the correct length of young men's pubic hair is what distinguishes the original mujahideen from their Taliban nemesis.

Both parties use the same language of legitimacy – Islam, jihad, and mujahideen – which adds to the confusion, but their similarities are skin-deep.