

Is the Taliban regime best characterized as a movement of global Islamism or as a Pashtun ethno-nationalist group?

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Resumen: Este artículo estudia el movimiento Talibán de Afganistán desde su establecimiento formal en 1994, hasta los atentados del 11 de septiembre de 2001. Habitualmente, se les suele presentar como una organización islamista internacional, o bien como “etno-nacionalistas” pastunes. Trato de matizar estas posiciones a través del análisis, por un lado, de la relación entre los talibanes y el nacionalismo tradicional pastún y la actitud del régimen hacia demás etnias afganas y, por otro lado, de la particular interpretación del Islam de los Talibán y de sus conexiones con los movimientos islamistas internacionales. La conclusión será que los Talibán son un movimiento nacionalista restringido a las fronteras de Afganistán, de carácter conservador e inspirado en una mezcla entre el Islam y los usos tradicionales de los pastunes de las montañas, con conexiones en su área cultural y geográfica próxima, pero sin proyección internacional ni una política étnica definida. Las principales fuentes primarias utilizadas son la autobiografía de Abdul Salam Zaeef, embajador de Afganistan en Pakistán y, de hecho, el único representante exterior de los Talibán; y los informes y denuncias de la Asociación de Mujeres Revolucionarias de Afganistán (RAWA por sus siglas en inglés).

Palabras clave: Afganistán, Talibán, Pastún, Islamismo Internacional.

Abstract: This article studies the Taliban regime starting in 1994, when the Taliban movement was formally established and began fighting for the control of the Government, and the terrorist attacks of the eleventh of September of 2001. It is usually said that the Taliban are an ethno-nationalist group or that they belong to an International Islamist network; I'll try to refute these claims. Firstly, I will analyze the relationship between the Taliban and Pashtun communities, and the evidence for and against of considering them an ethno-nationalist movement. Secondly, I will look at the links of the Taliban with the

international pan-Islamism and the particular characteristics of their interpretation of Islam. The conclusion will be that the Taliban are a nationalist movement limited to the boundaries of Afghanistan, without an international project or a defined ethnic policy. Their ideology is a conservative mix between Islam and traditional Pashtun customs and habits. The main primary sources I use are the autobiography of Abdul Salam Zaeef and the reports of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Pashtun, International Islamism.

Introduction

Trying to analyze and study the Taliban movement of Afghanistan is a difficult task. First of all, they never published a program or manifesto and never attended the media properly, hence it is difficult to understand clearly their ideological principles. At the same time, the secondary sources have a varying quality (due to the recentness of the historic events), and often offer simplistic conclusions (some of them characterize the Taliban as a mere creation of the Pakistan secret services¹ —ISI—, others as a “Pashtun fundamentalism”² or as a retrograde movement of illiterate shepherds)³. This is why we must contrast and compare a large number of them in order to have a wide picture of the Taliban. However, there are two very interesting primary sources: a direct example of the Taliban’s thought which is the autobiography of Abdul Salam Zaeef⁴, the former ambassador in Pakistan during the Taliban,; and the reports, photographs and articles of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which show the Taliban’s actions⁵.

Abdul Salam Zaeef could be considered the “prototypical” Talib: he belongs to a traditional Pashtun family, spent his childhood as a refugee in Pakistan, took part in the jihad against the

¹ Sreedhar, “Taliban Arrives”, in Idem (et al.), *Taliban and the Afghan turmoil*, New Delhi, Himalayan Books, 1997, pp. 21-40.

² Rashid, Ahmed, “The Taliban: Exporting Extremism”, in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, 6 (1999), p. 29.

³ Khalilzad, Zalmay, “Afghanistan in 1994: Civil War and Disintegration”, in *Asian Survey*, vol. 35, 2, part II (1995), pp. 147-152.

⁴ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life with the Taliban*, London, Hurst&Co, 2010.

⁵ Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), <http://www.RAWA.org>. A brief history of the organization can be found at <http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>. Their activities are detailed in <http://www.rawa.org/s.html> [Seen on 19th May 2013].

Soviets and was present in the Taliban movement since its very beginning. Furthermore he was regarded by a very capable man by Omar and Rabbani⁶ (the highest Taliban authorities), who put him in charge of important positions in the administration. Since 1999 he was ambassador to Pakistan, in fact the only diplomatic contact of the Taliban regime. He was eventually imprisoned in Guantánamo, and after being released, he wrote his memories, published with the title *My life with the Taliban*. It is a very interesting source because it is the only description of the Taliban movement from the inside available in English, showing the ideas and motivations behind some of their acts and policies. However, he is biased and tries to sweeten the State Terrorism that, in fact, the Taliban regime applied. Fortunately, we can find a detailed account of the suffering of the Afghan people during the Taliban years in the documents, the reports and the pictures made public by the RAWA.

The RAWA was founded in 1977 by a group of "Afghan woman intellectuals" who tried to "involve an increasing number of Afghan women in social and political activities aimed at acquiring women's human rights and contributing to the struggle for the establishment of a government based on democratic and secular values in Afghanistan". During the war with the Soviets they were actively involved in the resistance movement, helping the refugees instead of fighting. Its leader, Meena, was killed in 1987. Since then, they have continued working with refugee families in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They combined their humanitarian work with some publications in Pashtun, Urdu and English, and demonstrations against the Soviets and the mujahideen, and later against the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and the NATO. According to them, their political stance ("pro-democracy, pro-secularist and anti-fundamentalist") has denied them international recognition and help. Apart from their political and humanitarian activities, RAWA have conducted an excellent attempt to document war crimes and civil violations committed since 1992 with scarce material resources. Their extensive archives are freely available on their website, a reference for everyone who is interested in Afghanistan. For these reasons, I consider these reports to be a very reliable source, even if they do not fulfill the academic standards, because, they show a perspective from within, as I told before. RAWA members are not academic or exiled women, but activists who have been on the ground for decades. They depict the Taliban as a totalitarian movement, which imposed their rule by fear. Given all these facts, I will try to demonstrate that the Taliban have a religious and non-ethnic inspiration, although their objectives are not international but seem to be limited to the State of Afghanistan.

⁶ Mohammad Rabbani. He should not be confused with Burhanuddin Rabbani, the president of Afghanistan deposed by the Taliban in 1996.

1. Are the Taliban a Pashtun movement?

There are significant facts that enable us to think of the Taliban as an ethno-nationalist Pashtun movement. The popularity of the movement among the rural Pashtuns in the 90s, and the initial military success and spreading in the ethnically homogeneous Pashtun areas of Southern Afghanistan can be related with the desire of many Pashtuns of regaining political power, which had been in the hands of Tajiks and other ethnic minorities in the previous decades⁷. Meanwhile, the retrograde and reactionary conceptions of society that the Taliban maintained (prohibition of music, cinema and photographs)⁸ can be seen as a revenge of the conservative and traditional rural Pashtuns to the sophisticated and ethnically diverse urban population. Moreover, certain events during the civil war point in that direction. For example, hundreds of Tajiks and Panjshiris were executed when the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996⁹. Another instance is the occupation of the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif in 1998, in which they slaughtered most of the male population in fighting age on the basis of ethnic ascription. Similar actions took part in 2001 in the Uzbek village of Zari and the Hazara town of Yakaolang¹⁰.

Despite all these evidence, there are important reasons for not considering the Taliban an ethno-nationalist movement. First of all, as Nasreen Ghufuran points out¹¹, the connection between the Taliban and the traditional nationalist Pashtun groups that operated in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA was very bad. These groups had secular objectives (inspired in the non-violent KKM)¹² and did not share the Taliban interpretation of Islam. Zaeef also claims this conflict with the nationalist parties: “The only party which never got on with us and opposed us up to the end was the Pashtunkwa Party of Mahmud Khan”¹³. The former predominant Pashtun parties in Southern and Central Afghanistan (Mahaz, Jebhe, Ettehad, Harakat-I Enqelab, Hezb-I Islami) disappeared by 1995, when the Taliban took control of the southern half of the country¹⁴. Furthermore, the Taliban never claimed to be representatives of the Pashtun interests, and they were open to all Muslims (the large number of Pakistani and Arabs¹⁵ who collaborated in the Taliban fronts during the war against the Soviets and the Civil War proves it).

⁷ Dorronsoro, Gilles, “The Taliban”, in Idem, *Revolution unending. Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*, Hurst&Co, 2005, p. 267.

⁸ Sinha, Rakesh, “Taliban as I saw it”, in Sreedhar, *Taliban and the Afghan... op. cit.*, pp. 41-56.

⁹ “Hundreds rounded up by Taliban”, in *The Frontier Post*, 11th November 1996. <<http://www.rawa.org/reports3.html>> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

¹⁰ Dorronsoro, Gilles, “The Taliban...” *op. cit.*, p. 270.

¹¹ Ghufuran, Nareen, “Pashtun Ethnonationalism and the Taliban Insurgency in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan”, in *Asian Survey*, vol. 49, 6 (2009), pp. 1092-1114.

¹² The Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) Movement, founded in 1929, which had links with the Indian National Congress and was opposed to the Partition.

¹³ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁴ Dorronsoro, Gilles, “The Taliban...” *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹⁵ Rashid, Ahmed, “The Taliban: Exporting...” *op. cit.*, pp. 22-35.

The long years of conflict (with thousands of refugees and displaced people) had altered the traditional ethnic structures, regarded by many Taliban as something negative. In Zaeef words, "Tribal clashes and feuds, large or small, have cost many Afghan lives". According to him:

"Many Taliban belonged to the same ethnic group, and often people get confused by this and say that tribal heritage was important to the movement. In reality, it was purely incidental; the movement started in the birthplace of the tribe, but even though the tribe assisted in its rise never played a role later on"¹⁶.

The leadership of the Taliban also had representatives of non-Pashtun origin, as Ghaysuddin Agha, who came from Badakhshan¹⁷. Besides, during the Civil War the objective of all the actors involved was taking control of the State, without federalist pretensions because there were no clear ethnic, cultural or geographical frontiers. According to Gilles Dorronsoro, the "ethnicization of the conflict" was for the Taliban an unintended consequence of the regionalization and stabilization of the war fronts by 1995¹⁸.

In spite of the incidents related above, that is, ethnical killings in Mazar-I Sharif and other locations, once the Taliban reached power, they did not follow a clear ethnic policy, as there were no forced movements of population or attempts of ethnic cleansing¹⁹. As Zaeef points out along his book and further interviews²⁰, the Taliban emerged as an answer to the moral degradation and chaos imposed by the ex-mujahideen warlords, and their objectives were the security and welfare of Afghanistan through an Islamic Emirate guided by the Sharia. Any formal ethnic policy was established during their rule. The short period of their regime prevents us from knowing if they followed an educational policy favorable to Pashtun interests. As far as we know, the remaining madrasas taught the main Afghan languages (depending on the location) and the classic Islamic ones, such as Arab and Persian. With the exception of teachers of governmental schools, regarded as leftist²¹, most of male public servants retained their jobs when the Taliban took the power as there was a lack of qualified personnel, and any language was promoted as administrative language²². Nevertheless, Harold Schiffman notes that due to the lack of knowledge of Dari of most of the Taliban leaders (unlike the educated urban Pashtuns), Pashtun became *de facto* the only language of interdepartmental correspondence,

¹⁶ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Dorronsoro, Gilles, "The Taliban..." *op. cit.*, p. 267.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 257-258.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 271-272.

²⁰ Carlstrom, Gregg, "5 minutes with... Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef", video interview, Doha, Al Jazeera Forum, 24th May 2010. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEzerGZrW9c>> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

²¹ Straziuso, Jason, "New Taliban Rules Target Afghan Teachers", in *The Guardian*, 9th December 2006. <<http://www.rawa.org/talibanrule.htm>> [Seen on 31st October 2013].

²² Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, pp. 81-91.

a fact that was seen as discriminatory for other ethnicities²³. In my opinion, this is an example of the limitations that the Taliban had, rather than an evidence of ethno-nationalism. It is a religious movement with intellectual shallowness, composed mostly of “pious”, ascetic, rural, semi-illiterate Pashtun fighters whose values are nothing but an adaptation of the traditional conservative Pashtun popular religiosity. On this basis we must discuss their relationship and implications with international Islamist movements.

2. Global jihadism? International connections of the Taliban.

The Islamic character of the Taliban movement is undoubtedly clear. In Zaeef words:

“The Taliban were a group of religious scholars and students with different backgrounds, transcending the normal coalitions and factions... Allah was their only reason for being there, unlike many other mujahedeen who fought for money or land. [...] The Shari’a would be our guiding law and would be implemented by us. We would prosecute vice and foster virtue, and would stop those who were bleeding the land”²⁴.

Nevertheless, to what extent did they belong to a wider pan-Islamic movement? The influence of foreign religious groups is evident in the creation of the first Taliban groups during the years of jihad against the Soviet. These groups emerged mostly around a number of students in Deobandi and Barelvi madrasas in the south of Afghanistan and the refugee camps of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP)²⁵. According to some sources they were informally arranged as branches of Hezb-i Islami²⁶; furthermore, one third of the madrasas in the NWFP belonged to the Jamaat-i Islami Pakistan²⁷. They received financial aid from private donors of all over the Muslim world (specially from Arabia Saudi and Pakistan)²⁸ and military support and training from the ISI²⁹, but there was no real ideological or doctrinal influence. Most of the Taliban were from an uneducated background and their madrasas usually had very scarce

²³ Schiffman, Harold, *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, p. 49.

²⁴ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, pp. 22 and 65.

²⁵ Barfield, Thomas, “Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century: State and society in conflict”, in *Afghanistan: A cultural and political History*, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 265.

²⁶ Akhtar, Nasreen, “Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban”, in *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 25, 4 (2008), pp. 49-73.

²⁷ Dorronsoro, Gilles, “The Taliban...” *op. cit.*, p. 277.

²⁸ Rashid, Ahmed, “Back with a Vengeance: Proxy War in Afghanistan”, in *The World Today*, vol. 52, 3 (1996), pp. 60-63.

²⁹ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 31-38.

sources, apart from some copies of the Dars-i Nizamiyya³⁰. We should not overestimate the dimension of the movement in the period before 1994. On the other hand, the Taliban welcomed many international volunteers during the jihad years, mostly from Pakistan and Arab-speaking countries, and it is possible that their traditional Pashtun conservative beliefs were influenced by other doctrines such as the radical jihadism Bin Laden stood up for. However, when the movement was formally established in 1994 and started fighting for the political power it was mainly organized around southern-Afghan elements, without evident external interferences³¹.

A common mistake is to describe the Taliban as a wahhabist movement³². On the contrary, the Taliban (as well as most of the Afghan Muslims) belonged to the Deobandi school, which began spreading around 1880. Despite its rejection of some the Western ideas, the Deobandis have a modernizing perspective. They reformed the religious educational system and are considered a "successful example of the bureaucratization of traditional religious institutions that has made them effective in the modern world"³³. In its origins, the Deobandi school adopted some of the educative methods brought by the Westerns (formal written exams, segregation by age), even though they only taught Islamic tradition. The Taliban adopted without problems modern military tactics and economics as well. However, there are three reasons for not considering the Taliban movement a Deobandi branch. In the first place, the Deobandis (as a formal religious movement) have never tried to take control of the state, neither in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh³⁴. Then, the madrasas where the Taliban were educated were small and peripheral to the Darul Uloom Deoband. Some prominent Taliban were Bareilvi ulamas, and there were no signs of doctrinal divisions³⁵. Additionally, they failed in creating a legal framework for their interpretation of Sharia. Unlike the neighboring Islamic states of Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan did not have a formal system of Islamic judges and trials, and most of the actions conducted by Taliban soldiers have been depicted as non-Islamic by foreign religious authorities. The RAWA reports are full of examples of arbitrary violence³⁶. The Taliban doctrine is reactionary and retrograde on social issues, but they do not reject modernity.

Once the Taliban reached power, their policy seemed to follow "national interests" and did not have a clear pan-Islamic approach, (their objective was first to secure the control of all the country and fight the Northern Alliance). They had cordial relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Nevertheless, during the regime years of the Taliban, many terrorist and

³⁰ Dorronsoro, Gilles, "The Taliban..." *op. cit.*, p. 276.

³¹ Zaeef, Abdul Salam. *My life... op. cit.*, pp 57-80.

³² Kampeas, Ron, "Fundamentalist wahhabism comes to U.S.", in *The Washington Post*, 10th December 2001. <<http://culteducation.com/group/994-islamic-fundamentalists/10473-fundamentalist-wahhabism-comes-to-us.html>> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

³³ Metcalf, Barbara, "The Madrasa at Deoband: a model for Religious Education in Modern India", in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 12, 1 (1978), p. 134.

³⁴ For a detailed description of the origins, methods and ideas of the Deobandi school I suggest to take a look at Barbara Metcalf's works. A good introduction to the Deobandi movement is Metcalf, Barbara, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002.

³⁵ The rivalry between Deobandi and Bareilvi schools has taken sometimes a very violent form.

³⁶ "News from 1997-2002". <<http://www.rawa.org/recent4.htm>> [Seen on 21st May 2014].

insurgent Islamic groups acting in the surrounding countries, such as Iran, China, Uzbekistan, and so on, sought shelter in Afghanistan³⁷. We still must not confuse this passive attitude with an actual and effective support for those groups. The “Osama Issue” is a good example of this diffuse relationship. Western media, especially after September 11th, tend to accuse the Taliban regime of being a “sanctuary” of international terrorists. However, Zaeef offers a good explanation of their regime attitude towards Bin Laden: Afghanistan did not have an extradition agreement with the United States, and they did not feel obligated to hand over Bin Laden. Although they tried to find alternative solutions to the problem (a trial in Afghanistan, any other Islamic country or even the International Tribunal of Le Hague), the US did not yield on their intentions³⁸.

The relationship between the Taliban and terrorist groups like Al Qaeda is less clear, although it would seem that the Taliban merely allow free movement and activities of these terrorists within Afghan territories, without actually engaging with them or creating any kind of international network or support. The lack of consistence of the movement on a regional level, the absence of a defined program and the organization around *mullah* Omar, who did not talk with the media, are difficult obstacles if we want to reach conclusions that are not merely speculative. However, the Taliban barely managed to fund the public services, and they had not enough money to repair infrastructure or revive the industry (as Zaeef tells in chapters 9 and 10 of his book), therefore it is hard to believe that they were funding them, despite what some authors may say³⁹. The Taliban felt unfairly treated and isolated by the international community, specially by the Pakistan of Musharraf⁴⁰.

The political rhetoric of the Taliban was clearly pan-Islamic and there were close and recognized links with groups and political parties that were “established in the name of *jihād* or who supported it”⁴¹, but these groups were operating on a regional scale and were generally legal parties or associations⁴². Zaeef claims that all their international activities were “[...] within the law. None of them were directed against a person or a country”. There are indeed terrorist groups operating in the North-West border of Pakistan with the name Taliban, for instance, the Tehreek-e-Taliban, but these were formed after the NATO intervention⁴³. The Taliban regime employed policies which can be called State terrorism⁴⁴; however, they were not an international terrorist organization. Their external influence was limited to Pakistan and India, and they did not target the Western world.

³⁷ Rashid, Ahmed, “The Taliban: Exporting...” *op. cit.*, pp. 22-35.

³⁸ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, pp. 131-140.

³⁹ Sreedhar, *Taliban Arrives... op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁴¹ Barfield, Thomas, *Afghanistan in the... op. cit.*, p. 266.

⁴² These groups are Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam of Fazal Rahman, Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam of Mawlana Sami ul-Haq, Jamaat-e Islami of Qazi Hussein Ahmad and other parties.

⁴³ “Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)”. <http://www.satp.org/satporgt/p/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/ttp.htm> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

⁴⁴ “Taliban impose new code for non-Muslim Afghans”. <http://www.rawa.org/hindu.htm> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

Due to the short duration of their regime and their international isolation, it is difficult to know to what extent their foreign policy would have answered to pan-Islamic claims or to purely pragmatic and national interests. The negotiations with Unocal and Bidas, a north-American and an Argentinian oil company, respectively, suggest that the focus would have been on the development of the country, rather than following an aggressive pan-Islamic policy⁴⁵. Again, the lack of primary sources in English prevents us from making a more accurate picture.

It is also important to note that their interpretation of Islam has specific characteristics, which correspond to traditional rural Pashtun uses in many cases, that is, *burqa*, strict seclusion of women⁴⁶, shuras or tribunals of elder men for juridical purposes. More than regarding this as an ethno-nationalist doctrine, it seems to me the result of educational poverty of the Taliban. Other ethnical or tribal habits (part of the Pashtunwali, the Pashtun honor code), like vendettas between different families, were banned by the Taliban and a "fair revenge system" based on the Quran was established⁴⁷. However, most of their decisions, as banning public bath houses, have been contested by Islamic scholars in Pakistan, who say that their laws reflect tribal traditions more than Islamic tenets⁴⁸. The austere and strict way of life of the Taliban could be related to the stiffness of fascist movements. Their obsession with controlling every aspect of the daily life of the Afghans, and brutal punishments, have more of a totalitarian movement than of a revivalist Islamic movement. They also banned Labor Day (1st May) because it was a "communist holiday" and forced the non-Muslim minorities to stitch a yellow cloth onto their dresses⁴⁹. The RAWA qualifies the Taliban government as "religious fascism"⁵⁰.

3. Conclusions

The Taliban movement, which Rashid defines as Pashtun fundamentalism, has no affiliation with the traditional Pashtun nationalism. Likewise, they were not affiliated to a global jihadist network. I would say that the Taliban are a national conservative movement, whose values are a confusing mix between Islam and the traditional Pushtun habits. Zaeef claims that the Taliban were pursuing unity for Afghanistan: "Unity means that the interests of the nation

⁴⁵ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

⁴⁶ Habits that are not common in all the regions and ethnicities of Afghanistan. For further information, Barfield, Thomas, *Afghanistan in the... op. cit.*; Dorronsoro, Gilles, "The Taliban..." *op. cit.*; and reports from the RAWA.

⁴⁷ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ Shah, Amir, "Taliban rulers close bath houses". <<http://www.rawa.org/bath.htm>> [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

⁴⁹ "Some of the restrictions imposed by Taliban in Afghanistan". <<http://www.rawa.org/rules.htm>> [Seen on 31st October 2013].

⁵⁰ "Taliban impose religious fascism". <<http://www.rawa.org/fascism.htm>> [Seen on 21st May 2014].

are the center of all decisions. The needs of the country should take priority or the name of jihad and the mujahedeen who have become famous for integrity and virtue will be defamed”⁵¹.

Depicting the Taliban as a strictly religious movement is not totally accurate. Since it was created, their main target was to control the State. Once they had control over the government, the Taliban pursued to create a state of fear among the population. An aggressive pan-Islamic international agenda was dismissed of their intentions, as they needed to focus on finishing the war with the Northern Alliance. They supported political parties and religious groups in Pakistan which were in line with their ideas, and allowed various terrorist groups free movement, but this does not mean that they actually engaged on a global jihad.

The Taliban are not mere anti-technological priests, as Zaeef explains. He was in charge of the banking system in Herat and served as minister of defense, communications, industry and ambassador to Pakistan. Even though his lack of training in anything else than exegesis of medieval texts and commanding military units, Zaeef was aware of the responsibility of the successive positions and always tried to implement “modern” economic policies, such as the nationalization of the transportation sector with the idea of privatizing it once the sector was sanitized, fierce anti-communism and the defense of “free trade”. The role he carried out in the Afghan Embassy in Pakistan also demonstrates the Taliban attempts of remaining independent. Despite being rural men without a wider political experience, they had a modern vision of economic and geopolitical reality. They knew, in my opinion, that the social reality of Afghanistan had changed since the Soviet invasion, and they intended to (and still intend to) impose a morality and some values inspired in the traditional piety of rural areas to establish what they understood as a true Islamic emirate. However, the Taliban tried to impose their values by means of extreme violence; their coercion was based on fear, not on law or legitimacy. They were unable to establish a functional Islamic legal system and their sentences were punishments. Although being inspired by the Sharia⁵², they were indiscriminate: they attacked weddings, bookshops, women who were covered but not wearing burqa and so on, and did not follow the formal procedures for a trial. The Taliban also eliminated all possible dissidents⁵³, and their executions were made in public, so that the crowd was forced to watch, in most of the cases. These elements, along with the particularities of their interpretation of Sharia and their focus on the Nation, make me think of Taliban as a primitive totalitarian movement, which use Islam and some Pushtun tenets as their identity markers.

⁵¹ Zaeef, Abdul Salam, *My life... op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁵² “Taliban Islamise Afghan constitution, laws”. <http://www.rawa.org/Islimise.htm>. [Seen on 22nd May 2014].

⁵³ “Death of a young freedom-fighter under Taliban’s torture”. <http://www.rawa.org/karim.htm> [Seen on 20th May 2014].