

## Article

# Exploring Social Identity Theory: A Case Study of the Taliban in Afghanistan

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## Abstract

The motivations behind terrorism have emerged from debates on armed conflict. This article seeks to explore the membership status of the Taliban that maintained a positive social identity as an in-group to fight vigorously against the international community and seize Afghanistan in August 2021. With a range of semi-structured interviews with key security and justice stakeholders and civil society groups in Kabul from 2010 to 2016, opinions are based on efforts that engaged with Security Sector Reform (SSR) and fighting the resilience of the Taliban. It was found that the Taliban continued its fight and growth in membership and partial civic support due to its strong social identity (as an in-group) fighting an undesired, illegitimate, and corrupt state, judiciary, and police force supported by the international community. As part of social identity theory, poverty, unemployment, corruption and immorality are seen to serve a strategic and tactical purpose in aiding the socioeconomic, political and religious motives for recruitment towards the Taliban. However, after reseizing power, sanctions, a reduction in international aid, poverty and civic discontent with strict governance have resulted in other rival terrorist and resistance groups posing a threat to the Taliban, losing its positive social identity.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Taliban; social identity theory; terrorism; corruption; poverty



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## 1. Introduction

Violence aimed at intimidating populations and inspiring fear is not a new phenomenon. Extremism is feared worldwide, including in democracies such as the public in European and North American states (Poushter, 2017). The term ‘terrorism’ has had a long history that constitutes a subject of debate among scholars and government agencies, all of whom have found it problematic to arrive at a universally agreed-upon definition. This establishes a subject of controversy. However, the underlying reasons why group membership and identity are strong in terrorism, insurgent and extremist groups are also of importance. Using Henri Tajfel’s social identity approach, the social categorization of a distinct group that has established honor, prestige and status, along with a strong sense of social identification and comparison, explains how individuals within a group preserve a positive social identity. This article utilizes social identity theory to explain how Taliban combatants maintained their loyalty to the group. Loyalty rested on strong solidarity, honor and motivation in fighting the international community and supported the Afghan government from 2001 to 2021.

There are many drivers and root causes of terrorism, but the connection between these drivers and social purposes that form a strong sense of social identity requires further investigation. Several studies have sought to explore the causes of terrorism. Most

findings have situated terrorism within the context of poverty, unemployment, political motivation and a lack of education (Adelaja & Penar, 2018). However, others have asserted contrary views that neither poverty nor a low level of education plays a role in terrorism (Krueger & Malečková, 2003; Berrebi, 2007). These debates on the key drivers are worthy of further exploration, especially within the context of the active Taliban in Afghanistan from late 2001 to 2021 and in the aftermath once the group reseeded power. The article approaches these motivations from a case study on the Taliban in Afghanistan as a means of exploring perceptions around the drivers from elites, ministerial workers and civil society groups. Exploring such perceptions is useful in understanding how a strong sense of social identity is promoted and manifested. This can be useful for informing, understanding and improving counterterrorism initiatives sharing similar context(s).

The article is composed of seven parts. The initial section provides an overview of social identity theory and the notion of an in-group status that can result in strong membership. This is followed by an exploration of the socioeconomic, political and religious perspectives of terrorism to explain strong solidarity, motivation and recruitment for terrorist, extremist and/or armed opposition groups. The subsequent section provides the research methods used for the study. The methods include semi-structured interviews with a range of ministerial workers, human rights and advocacy groups, civil society watchdogs, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kabul, 2010–2016.

The results are reported with a thematic analysis of the three drivers of terrorism (socioeconomic, political and religious) and social identity theory, which emanates from the analyzed data. The discussion comprises identifying the drivers of terrorism, but with a greater emphasis on social identity theory relevant to the Taliban as the case study. It is exhibited that the motivation and resilience of the Taliban were based on socioeconomic, political and religious purposes via an internal code of conduct (Layha), resulting in a strong social identity to fight Afghan governmental security forces and international armed forces, ultimately regaining power on 15 August 2021. Finally, the article draws on how understanding social identity theory in insurgent and/or ruling alleged rogue regimes informs a better understanding of conflicts, such as Afghanistan, to assist with counterterrorism initiatives.

## 2. Literature Review and Methods

The literature review is divided into a few sub-headings that commence with social identity theory, which strengthens the in-group status and recruitment of an insurgency that is fighting for socioeconomic, political and religious motivations. This is followed by some definitions of terrorism and the socioeconomic, political and religious drivers of it. It is these three purposes that appear in much of the literature as the principal drivers of terrorism, and thus, they are investigated as purposes related to strong in-group dynamics and social identity. This is followed by research methods of semi-structured interviews conducted in Kabul.

### 2.1. Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory focuses on the ways in which people identify themselves, which is based on group memberships. Individuals crave enhancing self-esteem by defining themselves within in-groups that are different and distinguishable from often undesirable out-groups. Individuals prefer and favor people who belong to or identify with their distinct group, which can form group prejudice, favoritism and/or stereotyping. From a social psychological perspective, social identity theory results in people categorizing into separate social groups. Based on promoting self-concept, individuals align with a perceived

respected, strong and/or accessible in-group and compare it positively to out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Identifying in a group can offer individuals a sense of belonging to provide unity, connectivity and comfort with similar experiences and viewpoints. Social identity groups share purposes and objectives that steer loyal group membership, solidarity and the recruitment of additional members due to the group's purposes. Once a person or people categorize themselves with a group, social categorization commences. People may share common characteristics such as tribes, factions, clans, race, nationality, social class, occupation, patron–client relations and/or religion, etc. Intergroup behavior is thus formed cognitively. In this way, group membership holds significance in behavior and relations within a group. Group membership and group interaction result in competition between groups that socially construct the reality of the world people live in (Tajfel, 2010, p. 100). Stereotypes are subsequently internalized, and norms are established to favor the construed status of the in-group that is relative to the out-group's differences. This process is referred to as self-enhancement to self-categorize the identity of an individual and their behavior collectively as part of a group to depersonalize individual identity (Hogg et al., 1995, pp. 260–261). The categorization of people within groups of belonging can contrast them with rival groups, resulting in stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination due to sharing incomparable identities and different characteristics as the in-group (Spears, 2011).

When individuals associate within a group, it can boost their self-esteem and self-image (whether positive or negative, moral or immoral, satisfied or dissatisfied, collective pride or shame) that is dependent on accomplishments of an in-group and comparison with out-groups (other groups) (Paul, 2009, pp. 113–121). Within a group, people are recognizable with mutual goals, values and/or traits. These aspects of social identity theory can relate to terrorist traits of group characteristics that produce and preserve support. Social identity theory is not a direct theory to explain terrorism, but instead offers a theorization of relations between individuals and a particular group(s) by focusing on how group membership shapes the behavior and manifestations of individual(s) belonging to the group(s). From this social psychological perspective, social identity theory studies intergroup conflict that rests on prejudice and discrimination between in- and out-groups.

When people become engaged and join a group, they accept the group's identity, behaviors and norms. As a result, individuals feel a sense of belonging to social groups, coupled with some value and emotional magnitude arising from such group membership (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Once individuals make obligations toward group membership, groups are compared to those that form biased manifestations in favoring the in-group (us) over other out-groups (them). Individuals may thus be neutral or hostile toward other group(s) to heighten their self-image. This form of prejudice is part of two or more (competing) rival groups vying to preserve self-esteem. The competition between identities can impact job opportunities, access to resources, basic treatment, racism and even genocide. For instance, in-group favoritism can result in individuals distributing more resources to individuals from the same in-group over people from out-groups. A positive group and self-esteem generate the perception that one's particular group is distinct, different or even superior to other significant out-groups. To provide one of many examples, in India, a Muslim might identify themselves with fellow Muslims (in-group) and may construe Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jainists as outgroups to Muslims. Tajfel (2010, p. 105) also contended that Muslim and Hindu groups have historically demonstrated bias for their in-groups. Social identity theory is thus versatile to deliberate a variety of perspectives of experiences, culture and history within armed conflicts to better understand the causes of intergroup conflict and mitigation (Strindberg & Wärn, 2011, pp. 64–65).

Current social identity theory research on violent extremism (especially empirical studies in Muslim-majority conflict zones) helps harness an understanding of how socioeconomic, political and religious factors integrate with social identity theory. A study comparing extremist organizations in America and Germany found that social identity can be manipulated from extremist groups (including terrorist, insurgent and far-right movements) through favoring an in-group and derogating out-groups as a threat to influence radicalization (Dugassa Gobena, 2021). Al Raffie (2013, pp. 67–68) reveals that radicals have the competence to provide “a distinctive reality” and interpret religion that infuses the radical with moral and spiritual wisdom over the remainder of society and thus “successfully joins an imaginary elite social group” and demonizes society existing “outside the group”. It is through religion that the radicals extend the belief of the West attacking Islam and Muslim-communities that can be met with violence from some in-groups (Al Raffie, 2013, p. 68).

Intergroup social identity favoring an in-group over alleged wrong, immoral and/or corrupt out-groups has resulted in protracted identity conflicts globally. In the context of decades of fighting between Israel and Palestine, the conflicting groups reciprocate violence that is narrated with in- and out-group social identity dynamics to rationalize actions by the in-group and demonizes alleged failures by the out-group (Felly, 2019, pp. 19–20). In this conflict, Israeli groups have perceived themselves as part of a nation-state, whilst Palestinian groups manifest their movements of liberation. Both sides aim to restore lost honor, and terrorist groups narrate America’s continual aid, diplomatic and military support for Israel to challenge the humiliation, shame and suffering for many Muslim and Arab communities (Glazzard, 2017). Barakat (1987, pp. 136–137) has argued that the narrative of the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) has been dehumanized as terrorists from Israel to the West to forget the far-right Zionist Irgun bombing against the British prior to its status as a recognized country in 1948.

Social identity theory is thus useful for identifying the objectives, purposes, unity and sense of belonging of political and social movements that may be involved in radicalization and further recruitment to fight for social, political, economic and/or religious causes against an alleged failing government, regime or corrupt state. In relation to the characteristics, norms and objectives of a group, these can be mentioned for the Taliban and later tested with the socioeconomic, political and religious purposes (drivers of terrorism).

## 2.2. Terrorism

It is a well-established fact that the term ‘terrorism’ lacks a definition that is universally accepted (Khurshid & Hassan, 2020). Attempts to define terrorism have often revolved around political definitions, which often undermine the religious underpinnings of some terrorist groups in the pursuit of their political goals (Hoffman, 1998, p. 40). Cronin (2002, p. xi) has defined terrorism as violence committed by a group or individuals against a government and/or its citizens (as a greater foe) with the objective to dislocate ordinary functions by propagating fear and intimidation to form change in policy or intervention that promotes political or social perspectives of the terrorists. This definition of terrorism is fraught with criticism as it undermines the role of religion. Carlile (2007, p. 24) argued for the need to include religious motivations in the definition of terrorism as the most dangerous forms of ideology emerge from those “dedicated to violence and legal jihad”. This emphasizes Islamic motivations above other forms of terrorism. Such inclusion is often manifested as problematic and has been argued to raise concern due to its expressed discrimination against certain groups (Khan, 2009). Richards (2014) contended that the impediment posed by the lack of an agreed definition leaves a vacuum for both state and non-state actors to define terrorism from the perspective that serves their own strategic and

political interests. Such a shortcoming might also have an impact on the ways in which perceptions towards terrorism and its root causes are understood.

For the purpose of this article, the definition coined by the [United States Department of Defense](#) (2017, p. 236) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.” This definition serves a useful purpose in exploring terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, which are not only politically driven but also seek to use religion in their ideological constructs and affiliation with Salafi-jihadism. The Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) defines terrorism as the threat or actual use of illicit force and violence conducted by a non-state actor to achieve a political or religious objective via fear, intimidation or coercion. [START](#) (2019, p. 6) also places socioeconomic, political and religious motivations within their definition and criteria of terrorism. Taking this into consideration, these three-fold themes require further exploration to test within specific contexts. With this test, the article takes the socioeconomic, political and religious drivers of terrorism further by intertwining them with the social identity theory of terrorism, extremist and/or Western labelled illegitimate governments.

The Taliban in Afghanistan was framed as a terrorist group once it was ousted from power in late 2001. When the Taliban reseeded Kabul in August 2021, the group was perceived as an illegitimate de facto government. The social purposes of the socioeconomic, political and religious drivers (of terrorism) remain relevant for the Taliban, as a group, when discussing social identity theory. The strong identity of the Taliban rested on recruitment and a code of conduct (Layha) that opposed a corrupt state, judiciary and an irreligious police force. It is the drivers of terrorism that also function as the social purposes that enhance the solidarity, strength, self-concept, pride and social categorization (social identity theory).

### 2.3. Drivers of Terrorism

There are a variety of motivations that drive terrorist, extremist or insurgent activity. A range of literature has engaged in poverty, political regimes and distinct religious and/or ethnic identities that can exacerbate the support and recruitment of terrorism.

#### (1) Socioeconomic

There is a range of studies to corroborate the notion that poverty and other related socioeconomic problems are linked to terrorism. The work of [Lozada](#) (2005) identifies that conflict and terrorism result in poverty. After the 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks (hereinafter 9/11), former American President [Bush](#) (2002) claimed that poverty is prevalent in failed states, which become havens for terrorists. The war against terrorism rested on the combat against poverty due to the lack of economic and social development. This intensifies political extremism and incites instability. The work of [Ayegba](#) (2015, pp. 96–98) identifies that both poverty and unemployment are mutual causes of terror. Poverty, unemployment and inequality are general debates related to the causes of terrorism due to poor levels of social justice that may intensify Islamic militancy ([Hamelin et al.](#), 2010).

The relative deprivation thesis provides that a strain and failure to obtain commodities that are believed to be attainable result in both discontent and violence as a response to grievance. Poverty, social exclusion and inequality provide conditions for terrorism to emerge and sustain. A large-scale study conducted by [Krieger and Meierrieks](#) (2011) found that states with greater levels of economic disparity, namely income inequality, held higher chances for terrorism. Frustration with poverty can motivate poor people to join terrorist movements, which is more likely in failed states ([Coggins](#), 2015, p. 458). By way of illustration, prevalent unemployment and poverty in northern Nigeria and Somalia have



resulted in the manipulation of young, angry people to join Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, respectively (Ayegba, 2015, p. 98). In Pakistan, unemployment is a main contributor to terrorism (Syed et al., 2015).

A quantitative study conducted by Bagchi and Paul (2018) on counting terrorist incidents from 1998 to 2012 found that unemployed youth upsurge terrorism in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Middle Eastern North African states. Tisdall (2019) reports that young, angry, unemployed men protest against inequality in the Arab Spring states and Asia, which leaves them hostile towards a government that fails to provide job opportunities. In these cases, terrorist organizations find it easier to appeal to and recruit poor out-of-work people, and this strategy is generally cost-effective. Therefore, unemployment can lead to grievance, particularly amongst young people, to emerging political violence.

Despite the viability of the rooted-in-poverty thesis, Abadie (2004) used aggregated data to measure the risk of terrorism and found that the roots of terrorism are not significantly higher in poorer states due to poverty and other socioeconomic grievances. In addition, Piazza (2006, pp. 169–170) finds no link between poverty and unemployment that can be solely attributed to terrorism due to other factors. The methodology adopts a regression analysis on 96 states from 1986 to 2002 on terrorist incidents. Piazza (2006) finds that this socioeconomic rooted-in-poverty hypothesis (considering poverty, inequality, malnutrition, poor economic growth and inflation) cannot be singularly supported. Instead, the political explanations of ethnic and religious diversity, state oppression and the structure of a political system are significant causes of terrorism (Piazza, 2006). To provide one example, Piazza (2006, p. 160) shows that India is ranked highly for terrorist incidents from 1986 to 2002. However, India is not impoverished and thus these incidents likely constitute ethno-religious diversity, geographic location and state repression. Piazza's (2007) later large-scale aggregated datasets from 1972 to 2003 in Middle East terrorist incidents similarly find no causal link between low income, poverty, unemployment and terrorism. Piazza (2006, 2007) does not discredit poverty as an explanation of terrorism but instead argues that there are other important factors that include political reasons and the dynamics of ethnicity and religion within a state.

Despite this popular criticism against the socioeconomic causes of terrorism, Krieger and Meierrieks (2011, p. 10) are more pragmatic in arguing that these causes may be combined with other factors, namely economic and political participation, to explain some motivations of terrorism. Other political and cultural conditions may provide better explanations for the motivations of terrorism than linear socioeconomic reasons. For instance, migration shifts can result in poor living conditions for certain ethnic and social groups, causing terrorism. In Indonesia, these issues, coupled with poverty, increasing income inequality and shortages of water and access to basic healthcare, result in grievance (Newman, 2006, p. 752). When socioeconomic conditions deteriorate, particularly in the Middle East, as Mohammad (2005, p. 108) emphasizes, it leads to terrorism by adding to the frustrations with modernization and Western foreign policies. A study conducted by Fearon and Laitin (2003) of 127 civil wars within the 1945–1999 timeframe found that poverty is a main cause of conflict, but religious and ethnic motivations are not significant. Irrespective of agreement with these studies, it is viable to argue that economically deprived civilians will accrue some sort of grievance(s) that make them more susceptible to violence to address their destitution or seek reparations to be claimed by family members. Hence, it is not entirely helpful to fully dismiss key socioeconomic factors that clearly result in some grievances and factors related to the motivations of terrorism.

These studies on supporting and/or undermining the socioeconomic motivations of terrorism and the recruitment to join belligerent groups are useful. However, they do not engage with the elements of group memberships that rest on strength; solidarity;

the idea of self-concept; intergroup relations; group behavior and a sense of belonging, social categorization for the enhancement of self-esteem, and opposition toward out-group(s) (social identity theory). The political and religious motivations of terrorism are now examined.

## (2) Political

Failed state syndrome can cause terrorism. It has been contended that if a government and political institutions are weak and fail to provide civil liberties during civil wars, terrorism is likely to occur (Adelaja & Penar, 2018, p. 39). The denial of basic civil, social and political rights forms a sense of injustice that is a driver of armed conflict (Hoffman, 1998, p. 75). Within a conflict, terrorism is more likely to occur and further protract the intensity of violence. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI, 2019, pp. 3, 5), which analyses the impact of terrorism in 163 countries, supports this notion insofar as the longevity of terrorism shares an inextricable link with armed conflicts that can last up to 17 years when insurgents did not commence as terrorists but 33 years for the reverse. To provide a few examples, Basque separatists in Spain and Hamas in the Gaza Strip are aggrieved groups that have fought against national governments in response to poor social conditions and political injustices. Failed states that are undergoing violence and political instability are much more susceptible to state terrorism even if intra- and inter-state conflict has been controlled (Coggins, 2015, p. 477). It could be argued that the failed state syndrome, which may or may not have a clear correlation with terrorism, does increase governmental failure to provide basic rights. This contains corrupt public institutions and political collapse to further a myriad of frustrations.

In relation to the type of political regime that best fosters terrorism, it is neither a state with high political freedoms nor an authoritarian one that best links to the motivations behind terrorism. Instead, it is transition states or states that rest in the middle of political freedoms that are more likely to foster terrorism (Abadie, 2004). It may be difficult for democracies to annihilate terrorists due to the political system advocating civil liberties and protections for all that constrain security forces from formulating better conditions for the planning of terrorist attacks. Krieger and Meierriecks (2011, p. 7) stress that terrorist organizations can promote their ideals within political vacuums to promote political change. Political vacuums may appear more likely in states undergoing democratic transformations and instability. This, in turn, creates a political vacuum of uncertainty because security forces and other organs of the state are undergoing internationally driven training. Rapid political changes amplify terrorist behavior and their education and training of further recruits. However, the type of political regime proves a difficult predictor or suppressor of terrorism.

The role of law enforcement can also be a driver of terrorism or at least serve to support the ideology of a terrorist movement. The poor competence of law enforcement to administer regulations, the inability to combat crime and weak efforts to fight an insurgency provide a playing field for the activity of terrorists. This point was also presented as the main cause of terrorism in Pakistan (Syed et al., 2015, p. 7). Urban Moroccans have addressed the problems of endemic corruption and weakness of the judiciary sentencing prolific cases, as well as a disengaged youth, which contributes to the attraction of political violence (Hamelin et al., 2010). When countries are inherently corrupt and have weak political institutions, poor political integration and are undergoing protracted civil war, they are more susceptible to experiencing terrorism (Coggins, 2015, p. 457).

Terrorists acknowledge the importance of public opinion and perceptions that play a major role when coordinating attacks, and the frequency, location and targets of terrorist incidents are intended to influence such manifestations (Sharvit et al., 2015). The rationality of terrorism can be related to grievance, which includes ethnic discrimination. A study

conducted by [Piazza \(2011, p. 348\)](#) contended that ethnic discrimination experienced by minority groups made them more susceptible to engaging in domestic terrorism. This study can be supported by the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009). It entailed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by Velupillai Prabhakaran, seeking arms as a separatist militant movement to fight against ethnic and linguistic discrimination from the Sinhalese government to achieve an independent northern territory. From a social identity perspective, the recruitment, following and sense of belonging toward a guerrilla, extremist and/or terrorist group may engage in bad or immoral activity that in-group members may acknowledge. Yet, the underlying political reasons of grievance resting on corruption, state crime and ethnic discrimination can form support to challenge a government and its agencies (as an out-group).

### (3) Religious

Radical groups can emphasize their differences within an identity that clashes with other civilizations to form conflict between distinct identities, religions or groups within a state ([Huntington, 1996](#)). The work of [Henne \(2013\)](#) has shown that terrorism is rooted in religious motives. Terrorists can reduce moral and legal constraints to strengthen terrorist organizations by representing an alleged true religion and/or ethnic identity of faith to encourage cost-effective radicalization ([Bernholz, 2006](#)). For instance, terrorists may link their ideology to global jihad Salafism to call for the end of foreign occupation, Western influence and a political and legal system that disregards tenets of Islam. From a social identity theory perspective, this can form strong characteristics, a self-concept of pride, honor and morality, and enhance self-esteem as part of the social categorization of in-groups.

Al-Qaeda has been termed as the global Salafi jihad and is part of Sunni Islam that strives for a strict and fundamental adaptation of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths. In opposition to purists, the jihadist sect of Salafism focuses on violence for revolutionary causes, notably against infidels that include women and children ([Rajan, 2015, p. 303](#)). With the aim of overthrowing un-Islamic governments, political Islam is central to al-Qaeda ([Al Raffie, 2013, p. 71](#)). Al-Qaeda noticed the internal jihadist failures of defeating Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s and shifted its agenda to transnational jihadism to target the 'far enemy' occupying and corrupting Islamic life in Middle Eastern states. Osama bin Laden issued two fatwās in 1996 and 1998 to condemn Western intervention (or support of it) in Saudi Arabia and a range of other occupied countries (including "Jews and Crusaders") with the instruction to kill intervening soldiers (namely, the US) and their civilians ([Ingram, 2016, p. 184](#)). In short, al-Qaeda fights for regime change and not independence. However, ideologies need backing from grievances to hold significant causes of violence, so al-Qaeda needed to combine them. Global Salafist jihad movements attract appeal by criticizing foreign military occupation and democracies that fail to provide the benefits of modernization to Muslims and threaten Islamic culture and identity ([Freeman, 2008, p. 43](#)). Therefore, there is a combination of political, socioeconomic and religious motivations for global Salafist extremism (such as al-Qaeda), which permits the use of violence.

This terrorist claim of sharing an identity that opposes other identities facilitates bonding for financial support and further recruitment ([Krieger & Meierrieks, 2011, p. 8](#)). From a social identity theory perspective, the in-group status of a group intending to fight against out-groups that are doing wrong or have acted in ways to undermine the quality of life of the in-group strengthens self-esteem, self-concept and belonging.

New sectarian ideologies and movements have arisen. These movements were prominent after the call for democratic peace had overwhelmed the Middle East with the 2010–2011 Arab Spring. A gulf of Middle Eastern states called for an end to authoritarianism from Tunisia, Egypt and eventually Syria. In Syria, the Arab Spring rebellions



(from later fragmented Islamist and secular groups with different objectives) had spread due to technological advances in news and media that sparked dissent against President Bashar al-Assad's totalitarian rulership (Singh & Dukhan, 2025, p. 201). Protests for desired neo-liberalist advantages of a democracy attempted to eradicate economic despair and attain status and identity within the ethnicized armed forces and intelligence services.

Despite these movements from within the state, religious terrorism (in the form of radical Salafist thought) promoted a jihad against intervening interests and both secular and corrupt Islamic regimes (Young & Kent, 2020, p. 643). Sectarian groups emerged in these contexts, which formed Daesh (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)), fighting on alleged religious grounds for a regional caliphate. Frustration grew out of economic inequality from Daesh and related insurgencies, but later voiced clear religious motivations of terrorism. This ideology that advocates political violence promotes vehemence to endorse a religious faith. Violence based on a particular faith will be rewarded in a stated paradise after their demise for a religious and fruitful cause (Martin, 2017, p. 8).

Daesh were nearly defeated in Iraq and Syria. However, since 2014–2015, branches have merged into the Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State, which is mainly active in eastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. This segment of Daesh has particularly clashed with the Taliban and disrupted its governance. The ideology of Daesh differs from the Taliban because the former is fighting for a regional caliphate centered within a particular Islamic region rather than governing one state as an Islamic Emirate. The clash of this ideology has resulted in skirmishes between Daesh and the Taliban. In addition, the Taliban were keen to be rid of an estimated 14,000 international troops via the clauses mentioned in the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan (Doha Agreement) signed between America and the Taliban in Doha on 29 February 2020. United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad, of Donald Trump's initial administration, negotiated with the Taliban without involving the Afghan government. The Doha Agreement provided a deal for the United States and all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to withdraw from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban to sever ties with al-Qaeda. The United States immediately withdrew thousands of troops and promised to cease economic sanctions in the hope that the Taliban would not engage in terrorist activity with the support of al-Qaeda. Despite the Taliban negotiating with the United States to bring an end to the tiresome war, attacks orchestrated from the Khorasan Chapter posed an obstacle to an eventual peace deal between both parties (BBC News, 2020; Wells, 2022, p. 22).

Religion is part of the manifesto of both the Taliban and rival Daesh to do good, which serves as a strong recruitment strategy. Terrorism thus remains linked to utilitarian and altruistic political motivations. Ideological extremism intends to defend or sponsor the greater good. Religion can, in fact, be secondary to secular cultural and social identity to build solidarity as a motive for terrorism (Martin, 2017, p. 9). Religious causes of terrorism are likely to remain a source of sectarian movements for primarily secular motivations based on socioeconomic and/or political grievances. From a social identity theory viewpoint, it is the religious aspect that strengthens the ideology, self-esteem, pride and honor of an in-group, through social categorization, to oppose the 'evils' of out-groups imposing on its culture, history, way of life and governance.

#### 2.4. Interconnected Drivers

Linear explanations of the motivations of terrorism may be problematic. Modernization has overly promoted liberalist capitalist ideology for the good life, which has left groups in both richer nations and poorer countries as economic losers. These frustrations can be intertwined with unstable democracies or states that have newly called for democracies, which has resulted in the inception of sectarian groups and their faith-based violence.

The prey of sectarian movements or other religious-based anti-government movements comprises angry young unemployed males and their brothers that lack the economic capital to marry, respect patrilineality and found a family (Hudson & Matfess, 2017, p. 11). An insurgency can thus appeal as a means of status for either ideological and/or economic means if the state fails to provide employment or if the public sector pays dire wages. The latter has a relationship with petty forms of corruption that can encourage a religious in-group to wage a war against a corrupt entity of the state and an alleged illegitimate government (the out-group).

Other studies have similarly revealed that these three drivers of terrorism (socioeconomic, political and religious) are interrelated. A study on the causes of terrorism in Pakistan conducted by Syed et al. (2015) suggests that there are multifaceted grievances related to economic frustrations, namely poverty and unemployment, and political drivers pointing at foreign involvement and the war on terror. Regression analysis on data from 1980 to 2010 in five Pakistani provinces similarly provides multifaceted causes of terrorism (Syed et al., 2015). The results indicate that poverty does not explain terrorism in Pakistan, but higher forms of inequality heighten terrorism. More investment in welfare can cause grievance by increasing inequality among groups, including ethnic fractionalization, who are not beneficiaries and are not integrated with the state (Syed et al., 2015, p. 200). Bagchi and Paul (2018, p. 19) also found that alongside unemployed youth, religious fractionalization and freedom of the press serve as a media platform for terrorist communications in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Middle Eastern North African states.

The criminal model of terrorism can also be applied to explain the economic motivations of terrorism that are linked to political motives. Some terrorist organizations sustain themselves by engaging in transnational illicit criminal enterprises such as drug, arms and resource trafficking (Ridley, 2012, p. 177). Collier and Hoeffler (2000) suggest that political violence within civil wars is linked to opportunities for insurgents to fund their activity and appoint members instead of challenging grievances or poor socioeconomic circumstances. The context of an armed guerrilla movement in Colombia can also be brought into context. Although declared dissolved from June 2017, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia fought to overthrow the government and fight for rural interests and generated revenue from drug cultivation and trafficking, kidnapping and illicit gold mining (which included taxing illegal miners) (Williams & Felbab-Brown, 2012, pp. 41–42). Therefore, the drivers of terrorism may be politically and/or religiously motivated, but an element of socioeconomic drivers is imminent so that an insurgency can self-sustain rather than solely rely on external sources of financing.

The socioeconomic, political and religious drivers and social identity theory are intertwined and part of the analytical framework. The appeal of the three drivers rests on an alternative group addressing poverty, high levels of unemployment, access to education, corruption and failing Western-influenced governance. Consequently, civilians lose faith in the host government and the services it provides. This means that civilians seek alternative in-groups and may consider a failing government and its institutions as an out-group. At the same time, the social identity of such extremist groups that attempt to address these issues, even if in rhetoric or later changes in their manifesto, strengthens with increased recruitment from civilians pursuing a sense of self-esteem and pride.

## 2.5. Methods

Social identity theory and the blended three drivers of terrorism have been presented, which is mapped to the context of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Prior to this, a short overview of the research methods is provided.

The article employs a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The participants for the study were recruited from Afghanistan. Several semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with ministries, government agencies, human rights and rule of law groups, NGOs, civil society groups, and research advocacy groups in Kabul between 2010 and 2016. University alumni from British universities were located by the researcher as gatekeepers to gain access to an array of NGOs working in the Afghan security and justice sectors. Overall, 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with ministries, judges and organizations engaged in security, justice, human rights and development. Security Sector Reform (SSR) was explored in earlier research; however, the surplus data from the interview respondents were related to Taliban resilience and terrorism, which are relevant for the purpose of this article. A snowball strategy was adopted to establish additional contacts at the end of the interviews. Focus groups were also conducted with citizens within local communities to gain access to further organizations. After establishing primary contacts, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) Contacts pamphlet was consulted to obtain the names, email addresses and telephone numbers of the targeted security, justice, human rights and civil society groups. These agencies were contacted in an office that was located within the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) in Kabul.

The field research within Afghanistan (a country undergoing armed conflict and terrorism) was pivotal because most of the literature on terrorism is provided by individuals “who have never actually spent time on the ground in the areas most affected by these conflicts” (Silke, 2007, p. 77). Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the respective higher education institutions of Afghanistan.

Thematic analysis from a social constructionist theoretical position was adopted as a means of data analysis, and the six-step procedure enunciated by Braun and Clarke (2013) was adopted to analyze the data. Based on the analysis, the following main themes emerged. These are religious undertones, political underpinning and the implicit link between socioeconomic factors and terrorism. These formed the purposes that related to the Taliban’s group strength, ideas, objectives, strong social identity and social categorization of an in-group with self-esteem fighting against a failing Afghan government and infidel international forces.

### 3. Results

Using thematic analysis, the results reflect on the interviewee responses and relevant literature and are compiled into the three themes of socioeconomic, political and religious drivers of terrorism. These findings also intertwine the drivers with social identity theory.

#### *Case of Afghanistan: The Taliban*

##### (1) Socioeconomic

Bagchi and Paul (2018, p. 19) show in a study, which includes Afghanistan, that there is a positive correlation between youth unemployment and domestic terrorism due to the discontent of relative deprivation from poor economic opportunities and disintegration that motivates extremism and terrorist attacks. A manager of an NGO coordinating agency argued that “there are no jobs, no job creation and so people have to side or war against the Afghan government so that’s why they go to the Taliban but if you work with what has been promised with the people, then they would work for you.”<sup>1</sup> During the period of international invasion and a supported Afghan government (late 2021–2021), economic opportunities for young people were scarce and overly urbanized in areas like Kabul, which left the younger generation in the countryside vulnerable to Taliban recruitment. A

worker for the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock stressed that he had the opportunity to work in Kabul, but,

“[M]y homeland is mainly mountainous with few areas of land which leaves even the educated without work or other economic opportunities. Men need to feed their families, so they join the insurgency, not for ideology as the Western media suggests, but for economic survival. If I had no work and my kids were hungry, I would do the same. Anyone would. After 2005, the insurgency increased because most opportunities are urbanized, mainly in Kabul. The rural areas suffer economically, and the Taliban insurgency will keep growing because the government and international actors have failed to thoroughly address this. The main issue is poverty.”<sup>2</sup>

Poverty impacted the lack of alternative livelihoods for farmers. Since the late 1990s, the Taliban in Afghanistan have been engaged in taxing farmers for poppy cultivation within control zones and road exports as part of protection rackets, permitting heroin and arms smuggling via truckers to Pakistan and Iran (Peters, 2009, pp. 12, 18, 21; Felbab-Brown, 2017, p. 5). The lack of economic opportunities and engagement of farmers cultivating the poppy crop resulted in the fight against international drug interdiction policy for financial, rather than ideological reasons:

“If we have good facilities in remote areas; if we have job facilities for the jobless people, I believe most of the ordinary Taliban will join the government. They will go to a factory, school and university. There are not enough facilities for these people. Most of them are jobless. For example, in Helmand, now the farmers want to have poppy. When the government wants to eradicate the poppy, the young people of those villages come and fight against the government and the police. They try to join Taliban to have guns to fight against the police when the police go to areas to eradicate the poppies. If there had been jobs facilities for these people, they would not [have] to join the Taliban or other opposition groups.”<sup>3</sup>

The political economy of insurgency in Afghanistan was crucial to the rise of the Taliban. The Taliban’s taxation policy on the opium economy provided a high source of funding, but most funding derived from external “state and non-state actors in Pakistan and the Gulf states” (Cramer & Goodhand, 2011). The international drug interdiction strategy directed local populations to the Taliban to protect their livelihood. Poppy eradication policies also intensified poverty and dragged more civilians into poverty to repel Afghan peasants from the Afghan government and closer to the Taliban (Cramer & Goodhand, 2011). State actors were also involved in the drug trade and engaged in corrupt policies. Police officers purchased periodical posts in high poppy-cultivating locations for drug-related corruption and criminality and sent a stipend of bribes extracted to their appointers (Rubin, 2013, p. 174). Moreover, the former President Kazai’s late half-brother, Ahmad Wali, was selected as governor of Kandahar. However, it was alleged that Ahmad Wali was “involved in drugs and corruption in Kandahar” and was one of the “biggest drug traffickers in Afghanistan.”<sup>4</sup>

The Taliban opium ban in 2024 included replacing poppy with mainly low-value wheat that is likely to aggravate dissatisfaction (Byrd, 2024, p. 3). The poppy crop is drought-resistant and generates 17 times the revenue of wheat. Since the opium ban, poppy cultivation has reduced in once high-producing south-western provinces that inflated opium prices but then shifted to northern provinces, such as Badakhshan and the neighboring Balochistan in Pakistan (Khoruk, 2025). As part of economic reform, the Taliban have claimed that drug cultivation has ceased, but opium production soared by 32 per cent since

April 2022 ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022](#)). In addition, factions within the Taliban continue with the narcotics trade, and some notorious drug traffickers remain in governmental posts; thus, the opium ban provided political recognition and soured opium prices for economic sustenance ([Azizi, 2024](#)). Furthermore, Afghans retain private methamphetamine production due to the lack of economic alternatives. The Taliban has thus placed emphasis on rebuilding its fragmented economy for ordinary Afghans as its socioeconomic purpose to retain its contemporary and wavering support. This discontent and pushing Afghan peasantry into poverty was the outcome of the previous Afghan governments under the administrations of Karzai and Ghani. The same fate is now experienced from the Taliban, and thus it is debatable that the group is losing the strong social identity that it held during its fight against the American-supported Afghan government.

Low pay is another major socioeconomic problem that Afghanistan has faced. During the years of US and NATO-led intervention backing the Afghan government from late 2001 to 2021, corruption remained problematic. Even if Afghans were employed for a state service, corruption was frequently the outcome of low pay. During this period, a judge working for the Supreme Court in Kabul underlined that despite pay reform, prosecutors earned very low salaries that formed “weakness points” for “economic reasons.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Afghan police were low-paid and retention levels were poor, which exacerbated survival-based corruption, which was expressed by several interviewee respondents.<sup>6</sup> A study conducted by [Singh \(2019, p. 370\)](#) revealed that low pay motivated police corruption, and despite pay rises, as part of phased pay reform, the living costs outweighed the increments in pay, leaving a deficit of earnings to cater for living costs and rent that intensified bribery and extortion “for economic necessity”. The Taliban paid almost double the salaries of Afghan security forces prior to pay reforms in 2006–2009 and allegedly earned slightly more ([Ackerman, 2010](#)). An Afghan ministerial worker claimed that the Afghan police “get peanuts that hardly caters for their food”, so they must do other things, and some may join the insurgency part-time or other clientelistic networks. The police earned around 70 Afghanis a day (an estimated US \$1.45 at the time), and most were illiterate with minimal training despite funding from international donors.<sup>7</sup> An Afghan legal chairman argued that wages required restructuring in the Afghan police and judiciary to reduce bribery and petty corruption.<sup>8</sup> Although there were pay reforms, they were slowly staggered over several years for judges, but “with pay reform, at least you have hope.”<sup>9</sup> A Legal Consultant stressed that it costs “not less than US \$400” to rent a house in Afghanistan, and the wages of police officers and prosecutors were lower than 50 per cent of this figure.<sup>10</sup> If the security forces and judiciary were paid higher, it could have pledged economic security for housing, living and catering for family costs to enhance state loyalty and restrain corruption and the growing Taliban.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, when a police officer or prosecutor “does not have enough money to pay the rent of his house; they will take bribes [and thus] higher salaries are another resolution” to deter this.<sup>12</sup> Wages remained low, and thus the services of both the police and judicial sectors remained highly corrupt, which repelled Afghan peasantry support for the government that was subsequently perceived as an out-group. This is one reason why the Afghan government and the fleeing state security forces could not deter the Taliban offensive to re seize Kabul in August 2021.

After the Taliban regained Afghanistan, they engaged in the forced recruitment of child soldiers but opted to issue a decree to prohibit this due to international pressure on the Taliban regime ([United Kingdom Government, 2025](#)). Rather than engage in forced recruitment, the Taliban wanted to build an army of 300,000–350,000 soldiers voluntarily and with the inclusion of disbanded security personnel under the auspices of the Taliban defense and interior ministries ([European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022, p. 26](#)). This does not include trained Afghan security forces under the previous internationally backed



regime, who were trained by international occupiers (Rehman, 2021). However, boys remain active in combat and support-based roles (United Kingdom Government, 2025). This was due to concerns of rival Daesh fighters after the international troop withdrawal. Daesh have approximately 4000 combatants residing in rural parts of Nangarhar and Kunar provinces and smaller hidden cells located in the north (Wallen, 2022). Due to the dire economic position of the Taliban re-governing Afghanistan, Daesh (ISIS-K) has promised 35,000 Afghanis (USD \$503.60) as a salary to every fighter as a recruitment strategy that has also appealed to some unhappy Taliban members in Samangan province (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022, pp. 190–191). The failure of the Taliban to secure loyal combatants from Daesh competition is based on the dire economic situation in Afghanistan. Despite the socioeconomic advantages of Daesh with the recruitment of fighters, Afghan civilians are not substituting the Taliban from an in- to an out-group due to joining Daesh as an in-group because the political ideology and violence of the latter is undesirable for many Afghans.

Since the return to Taliban power, numerous sanctions have been placed on the Taliban, and humanitarian aid has been reduced, resulting in an economic crisis. Similar to the late 1990s, sanctions have internationally isolated the Taliban, which has consequently harmed Afghan civilians and intensified opposition (Strand & Suhrke, 2021, p. 44). Sanctions against Taliban senior leaders on US and UN watchlists have included two members serving at the Central Bank of Afghanistan, meaning that many overseas banks and financial institutions lack trust and thus block or restrict transactions that include Afghan bank accounts (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The Taliban caretaker cabinet includes many individuals on the United Nations sanctions lists. Sirajuddin Haqqani was wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation but has been placed as the interior minister (Graham-Harrison & Makoi, 2021).

The Taliban's Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, has urged the international community to recognize Taliban governance and lift sanctions on Afghanistan's banking sector and the leaders of the Taliban, which is negatively impacting ordinary civilians. Alongside economic dearth, the cost of living has sharply risen, and Kabul's banking sector has collapsed. There are current legal debates regarding America's freezing of Afghanistan's financial assets. The United States has blocked over USD 7 billion of Afghanistan's foreign currency reserves within the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, which was reversed by the 11 February 2022, executive order to make USD 3.5 billion available for Afghans via Da Afghanistan Bank, but not the Taliban, to deal with the prevalent humanitarian crisis and extending economic collapse (Byrd, 2022). This strategy has failed and has resulted in poverty (Limaye, 2022). As is evident with the multiple sanctions placed on the Ba'ath Party in Iraq during the 1990s to impact the political elite, many civilians starved (Singh, 2024, p. 190); thus, it can be argued that sanctions against the Taliban not only impact the targeted regime and its governance, but ordinary Afghan civilians who may not support such governance also suffer.

Over half of the Afghan population now lives "below" the United States "\$1.95 poverty line" children suffer from acute malnutrition, and some families are forced to sell their children for food (Verma, 2022). Alongside families selling their children to survive, they are also forced to sell their organs, which is largely due to increased inflation, widespread impoverishment and prevalent drought impacting agricultural livelihoods (Limaye, 2022). Consequently, Afghanistan has been confronted with unprecedented levels of hunger. According to the World Food Program (WFP), an estimated 90 per cent of Afghan civilians suffer from food consumption deficiency (WFP, 2022b, p. 1). After ten months of Taliban governance, international sanctions and the sudden cessation of most foreign aid have added to the lack of healthcare facilities for children to access free paracetamol and measles treatment in cold mid-winter temperatures for many sleeping in tents with minimal food

(Crawford, 2022). Based on growing food insecurity, two-thirds of Afghanistan's population requires humanitarian assistance. In the period June–November 2022, WFP has reported that almost half the Afghan population (18.9 million civilians) were “acutely food insecure”, and 3.9 million children were “acutely malnourished” (WFP, 2022a). Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product has declined by approximately 35 percent, an estimated 75 percent of civilian income is spent solely on food and unemployment has risen by 40 per cent (Alakbarov, 2023). Food insecurity, impoverishment and a declining economy have plunged Afghanistan into an economic and humanitarian crisis that has been further exacerbated by sanctions.

Hence, there were a myriad of socioeconomic drivers of the Taliban. These ranged from high unemployment and protection of poppy cultivation for opium and heroin production to source farmers, the Taliban and police officers. Moreover, low pay for law enforcement personnel intensified survival-based corruption or working for the Taliban group. From a social identity theory position, the Taliban reinvigorated their socioeconomic purposes by providing poorly paid Afghan police officers and unemployed males an alternative livelihood by joining the group—not necessarily for ideological reasons, but for economic survival. The economic purpose of an insurgency (such as the Taliban at this period) played a significant factor in the social categorization of a strong in-group providing money for new recruits against the undesired failing Afghan government, corrupt officials and police officers (out-groups). The Taliban grew in strength, and public support was waning for the Afghan government. The Afghan security forces often deserted their posts (unlike the Taliban) when fighting the Taliban, and thus morale was low.<sup>13</sup> Once the Taliban reseeded power in August 2021 after the United States withdrew its final troops from Bagram Airbase, the Afghan security forces fled from fighting. This demonstrated that the Afghan government and its security sector had failed as out-groups.

The Taliban pursued recruitment once in power. The Taliban continues to use the services of children for labor and fighting drills. Due to the dire socioeconomic situation in Afghanistan, the Taliban has been unable to provide basic medicines and food security for the impoverished peasantry. Like the Taliban during foreign occupation and the Hamid Karzai and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai supported governments, Daesh have offered salaries for poor unemployed males to increase the self-esteem of individuals joining the insurgency. Therefore, from a socioeconomic perspective, the Taliban are losing some public support, and Daesh is rising with foreign fighters and the hope for recruiting poor Afghans to enhance its in-group status.

## (2) Political

The event of 9/11 resulted in the reshaping of counterinsurgency strategy to concentrate on black hole states that provide safe havens or sanctuaries for terrorists to train, recruit and plan attacks (Phillips & Kamen, 2014, p. 41). Afghanistan is deemed a black hole state that was headed by the Taliban and held a sanctuary for al-Qaeda (Felbab-Brown, 2017, p. 2). Failed states provide terrorist groups with a breeding ground to plan attacks and resupply.

After the forced removal of the Taliban in late 2001, Western powers supported Hamid Karzai. A 30-member Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) was chaired by Karzai, which later attained support from the Emergency Loya Jirga on 11 June 2002. Karzai further cemented his circles and power politics with corruption and patronage to secure victory and serve two terms. Consequently, rival warlordism and factional competition formed instability and a breeding space for terrorism (Phillips & Kamen, 2014, p. 43). The Northern Alliance (anti-Taliban warlords) were subsequently brought “back into power” from the international community, “which disappointed people,” but “different areas support[ed] different people as their leaders such as General [Abdul Rashid] Dostum and Marshal [Mohammad Qasim]

Fahim.”<sup>14</sup> The Karzai administration (2001–2014) provided security across the mountainous country with payoffs in the form of appointments to local powerbrokers that included Dostum, Fahim and Mohammad Ismail Khan.

To combat patronage relations, the successive Afghan President (Ghani) reduced the layers in political reform to bring better governmental efficiency at the expense of a thinner clique of supporters. However, parliamentarians and local warlords were supported by the National Unity Government to generate votes in exchange for avoiding prosecution for human rights violations from a variety of anti-corruption units. Therefore, Afghanistan still held an inherently corrupt government that became part of an institutionalized legacy of patronage relations, and foreign aid had further cemented corrupt relationships to survive in Afghan politics.

During the Taliban’s fight to reclaim Afghanistan from late 2001 to August 2021), they were deemed a terrorist and extremist group, particularly by the West and many Afghans. The Taliban’s identity can be described with its cognitive thinking, relational comparisons, constitutive norms and social purposes (Teeuwen, 2014). The latter held significant appeal for further recruitment and support of the Taliban by retaining the self-esteem of group members. The social identity and self-esteem of the Taliban were supported with several codes of conduct to justify the actions and desires of the Taliban as an in-group. The Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Layha [Rules] for the Mujahideen, published in 2006, 2009 and 2010 editions, offered valuable insights into their organizational principles, strategies, and objectives within Afghanistan. It emphasized the necessity of a robust chain of command, the importance of securing public support, and the need for sufficient manpower for combat operations. In addition, the Layha addressed various issues, including the treatment of civilians, the avoidance of killing minors, rules of engagement, and the significance of adhering to Islamic principles. Although Prisoners of War (POWs) should not be mistreated, they were potentially culpable for the death penalty or other ta’zir (deterrence and penalty) authorizations.

The key positions of the Taliban’s Layha rest on several factors. The Layha intended to maintain a robust chain of command with a cohesive and disciplined fighting force, which helped to prevent the fragmentation of the movement. The Taliban applied a winning hearts and minds strategy (much better than NATO forces did with stabilization missions). The 2010 Layha edition categorized the Afghan armed forces, the national police and other officials. If a commander of the Afghan National Army (ANA) was captured, a district chief, a high-ranked official or a foreign Muslim person, followed by the Imam, a deputy or provincial qadi would decide on the punishment to be undertaken. The sanctions included ta’zir or execution.

The Layha respects Islamic principles and integrates Islamic law and jurisprudence into its regulations, but reinterprets these principles in a strict way that is not always compliant with the principles. The Taliban’s reference to the Mujahideen Layha contains many discrepancies when linked with Islamic law and the provision of religious sanctions that undermine bringing the hearts of Muslims nearer to them (Munir, 2011, p. 102). However, the Taliban still garnered public support by positioning themselves as a legitimate alternative to the Afghan government and formal judicial and security services. The Layha also requires adequate manpower to promote and retain the recruitment of fighters, offers amnesty to those who join the resistance, and seeks to prevent the poaching of fighters from other factions. In relation to the rules of engagement, Section 57 of the Layha (29 May 2010, edition) delineates rules for combat, which include minimizing civilian casualties and addressing concerns such as the use of landmines and suicide attacks (Munir, 2011, p. 82).

Layha mentions the provision for humanitarian access, education, and healthcare for civilians, while also addressing the military occupation of medical facilities. From

an economic perspective, the Layha provides guidance on governance, tax collection and resource management. Under the Layha, the Taliban included measures to combat corruption and the exploitation of jihad for personal gain, including prohibitions against confiscating property, the sale of arms and exchanging hostages for monetary gain. These principles harnessed further support and a stronger social identity as an in-group fighting against the alleged injustices and corruption from the Afghan state and judicial services. The Layha can be applied to the Taliban's notion of self-concept, and its religious police and fighting corruption as positive self-esteem that members promote and maintain. This social identity for in-group membership becomes stronger with the social purposes of socioeconomic, political and religious factors.

Singh (2014, p. 627; 2019, pp. 9, 24) has identified that the Taliban have deemed the Afghan police, judiciary and state as being immoral and irreligious and thus addressed their religious interpretations on Shari'a law via their Layha code of conduct for public support. The Layha blamed the Afghan government for functioning as an "Anglo-American puppet" for the purpose of recruitment, training, accountability and command structures (Shah, 2011, p. 107). Based on Afghan culture and the Taliban's interpretation of Shari'a, the aim of the Layha was to discredit the Afghan government and enhance good relations with local civilians. These political grievances corroborate Coggins' (2015, p. 457) assertion that corrupt states undergoing armed conflict that have weak political institutions are more vulnerable to experiencing terrorism. Geroges (2005, p. 273) similarly suggests that opposition to political corruption creates movements to provide alternative services, resembling those of the state, based on religious ideology to the laws of God (Shari'a). The social identity concepts of the Afghan government and its alleged illegitimacy, declared by the Taliban, resulted in further civilian perceptions of the state and its services becoming an out-group. At the same time, the Taliban appealed with religious and moral claims to enhance the self-esteem of members and manifest themselves as an in-group fighting for social justice. The social purposes of the Taliban align with the socioeconomic, political and religious drivers of terrorism to form a strong social identity for the group, which is based around their Mujahideen code of conduct. This example resembles the narrative between Israel and Palestine, reciprocating violence between in- and out-group social identity dynamics that rationalizes violent actions by the in-group whilst demonizing the immoral and failing out-group (Feltz, 2019, pp. 19–20). This is how the strategy of the Layha code of conduct operated in Taliban recruitment, resilience and legitimacy. Felbab-Brown (2017, p. 8) further contends that most of the Taliban's strength and resilience derived from outperforming the weak and corrupt governance of the Afghan state and its aligned powerbrokers to suppress corruption and predatory crime. The Taliban held a strong social identity and pride (in-group) that was similar to the Mujahideen regime rather than the corrupt Afghan police force that lacked pride (out-group).

"The Taliban...that has been radicalized by Mullah Omar since 1995 [is an] insurgency [that] fights constantly with little remuneration. In the 1990s, the police under the Mujahideen had higher officials engaged in corruption but the lower were not engaged in corruption because they worked for a mandate; to protect people and have national pride for Afghanistan. Now, this has been lost as the police do not have any pride and do not know what they are working for."<sup>15</sup>

The Taliban preyed on state institutions failing to provide services, which included cronyism hindering the Afghan judicial system. A Senior Advisor for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) claimed that the Afghan courts operated to serve the interests of criminals or political aides with powerful connections because of bribery or fear, threats and intimidation.<sup>16</sup> He specifically argued that,

“The culture of impunity that exists today where powerful people aren’t held accountable and the people who languish in prison will be the guy driving the car with the narcotics but not the drug-lord who’s profiting from that and because the driver doesn’t have any political connections whereas the drug-lord can bribe his way out or threaten his way from being held accountable.”<sup>17</sup>

A senior member of the Afghan human rights commission stated that impunity remained “due to weak judicial organs that fail to prosecute various criminals, warlords and notorious drug traders.”<sup>18</sup> If these notorious figures are caught, afterwards “they are released on the same day by police due to a bribe or fear; if not by the police then by the Attorney-General, primary court and if not the Supreme Court would release them otherwise the prison will be issued a decree to release these notorious people.”<sup>19</sup> Judicial cases were thus influenced by bribery and/or political connections to circumvent accountability.

Embedded corruption and inaccessibility of justice also hindered the Afghan justice sector. The justice sector in Afghanistan was largely centralized and distrusted. “It is true that traditional justice systems are accessible. These are supported by the Taliban which is linked to guarantee justice in places where formal systems are absent.”<sup>20</sup> The formal justice sector was deemed as corrupt and ineffective, and the Taliban allegedly provided better justice and shadow governance.<sup>21</sup> Pre-existing political grievances of patronage, corruption and lawlessness were part of the Taliban’s recruitment policy and public support for alternative justice and shadow governance in Afghanistan. To comply with the postulation of [Krieger and Meierrieks \(2011, p. 7\)](#) resting on terrorist organizations promoting their agenda within political vacuums (especially in democratic transformations and role of international trainers in the area), the security and judicial vacuums in an overly centralized approach from the Afghan government and international community strengthened group opposition from the Taliban ([Singh, 2015](#), pp. 234–235). Therefore, the lack of perceived legitimate access to corrupt judicial services formed an appealing opposition from the Taliban to function and gain further support with shadow courts and governance ([Nathan, 2009](#), p. 35; [Felbab-Brown, 2017](#), p. 9).

“Nowadays, the Taliban justice system is more active than the Afghan government. During a mission in Wardak Province in Jalrez District, there was a problem between two brothers in a village over land. Three months passed and papers were pending at the sub-governor’s desk. He was requested to wait for a few weeks more, so he went to seek Taliban justice, and they solved his problem by taking back the land from his brother in three days.”<sup>22</sup>

Hence, the Taliban adjudicated land and water disputes and combatted crime. Despite harshly dispensed judgements against women,<sup>23</sup> the public were relatively pleased with Taliban services because they were accessible, affordable, easy to understand and allegedly corruption-free.<sup>24</sup> For example, in Helmand, over 99 per cent of disputes were solved in informal justice. “The Taliban have got great support in providing informal dispute resolutions with the community and the judicial relationship between the state and community eroded.”<sup>25</sup>

Other forms of entrenched corruption and infiltration of investigative institutions were evident in Afghanistan. The Anti-Corruption Justice Centre replaced the former High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption (HOOAC) but failed to try a major case. A HOOAC Advisor stressed that political cronies affiliated with the Afghan President influenced the alteration of legal inquiries, judicial processes and anti-corruption efforts to preserve their authority in the system of allocating benefits.<sup>26</sup> These corrupt practices were commonly endorsed throughout main institutions due to the political and economic bargaining powers of the bribe’s bases and receivers. Afghanistan held fragile governmental institutions,



and investigative units remained captured from political influence that challenged their independence (Singh, 2015, p. 241). A Director of a rights-based organization contended that the Afghan administration did not desire “a truly independent judiciary or anti-corruption agencies.”<sup>27</sup> Due to political interference serving the interests of criminals, the heads of anti-corruption agencies applied their flexibility, discretionary powers and “left cases on the shelf” to safeguard powerful individuals with political acquaintances to evade accountability.<sup>28</sup> Hence, cronyism was prevalent, which hindered anti-corruption and investigative efforts.

The remaining conditions of a neopatrimonial, weak, corrupt and ethnically fragmented Afghan state (built on patronage networks) strengthened the Taliban appeal fighting against grievances. Despite Ghani’s efforts to fight prevalent nepotism and corruption within an overly centralized administration, nepotism, corruption, terrorism and “high unemployment rates” remained (Singh, 2020, p. 137). Nepotism and corruption based on ethnicity or tribe are factors that impede Western-influenced state institutions in Afghanistan. A Director for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) contended that “Afghanistan is a tribal society, and everyone is related to someone. It’s a community collective group obligation and is selected by the ends of people that are corrupt.”<sup>29</sup> A Transitional Research Officer of an independent research think-tank highlighted that if the Afghan police “were formerly loyal to an ex-commander in the north, they were probably still more loyal to that commander than they are to the central government.”<sup>30</sup> These forms of loyalty were typically ingrained on ethnic lines. A patrolman in Kabul argued that Tajiks remained overrepresented in the Afghan National Police, specifically in the senior ranks.<sup>31</sup> This, in turn, provoked rivalry between competing networks and positions were traded due to the manipulation of accrued state resources. Like investigative units and the judiciary, ethnic fragmentation and competition eroded civilian confidence in the state and its institutions to become undesired out-groups. The rights-based organizations and think-tanks (including those that were interviewed) were deemed as alternative in-groups, but they could only raise issues with accountability and justice rather than formulate major changes with the eroding state institutions. The Afghan investigative, judicial and state shortcomings provided alternative and predictable Taliban support to Afghans, irrespective of its brutality, to present resilience to the insurgency. These factors resulted in the social categorization of a strong, moral and righteous Taliban in-group fighting against the corruption and discrimination of the Afghan government, its police forces and judicial services and their support from international armed forces (out-groups).

Despite tantamount efforts from the international community to defeat the Taliban, the Taliban gained momentum from late 2005 to 2006 with a series of attacks against international military forces and kidnappings of aid workers to demonstrate the failure of the Afghan government to protect physical security. In the latter part of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, attacks were ongoing. During the final quarter of 2019 and the onset of 2020, the Taliban conducted a record 8204 coordinated attacks that formed harder US military retaliation at any instance within the previous decade (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2020, p. 68). As part of political extremism, the Taliban targeted Afghan security forces. In late March 2020, a Taliban ambush with inside assistance from Afghan security forces killed 24 Afghan police officers and soldiers located in Zabul province, southern Afghanistan, to add to the several attacks on government and security outposts since the signing of the peace deal in Doha (Zucchini & Abed, 2020). Despite a partial lockdown due to the outbreak of coronavirus and Taliban public health campaigning, several further coordinated Taliban attacks commenced across several northern provinces in protest of Ghani failing to release Taliban detainees as part of the peace deal (Mashal & Rahim, 2020). These incidents demonstrated that the Taliban continued to fight. It

was evident that patronage, warlordism and corruption constituted the illegitimacy of the Afghan government and its main institutions for civilians to follow alternative in-groups. Overly centralized justice and security politically motivated the purposes of the Taliban group identity to fill the judicial, security and political vacuum. This promoted its resurgence and violence against the failing Afghan government and affiliated international security forces.

After the Taliban regained Afghanistan, the politics of aid and natural disasters (with little international funds provided) have crippled the economy and the confidence in the peasantry in the Taliban. On 22 June 2022, an earthquake hit southeast Afghanistan, namely Paktika, resulting in over 1000 fatalities and a minimum of 1500 injuries ([Sands & Cursino, 2022](#)). On 7 October 2023, an earthquake of 6.3 magnitude struck Herat province, western Afghanistan, killing an estimated 2053 people, over 1240 were injured, and 1320 houses were destroyed during “a time of deep economic crisis” ([Popalzai & Chen, 2023](#)). On 31 August 2025, an earthquake of 6.0 magnitude hit Kunar and Nangarhar provinces in eastern Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, killing over 1400 civilians ([Aggarwal, 2025](#)). US President Trump and the United States Department have decided to withdraw all aid and humanitarian assistance provided to Afghanistan through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (USD 223 million) and the WFP (USD 567 million) ([Clark, 2025](#)). With Taliban foreign funds being frozen since Ghani fled from power, declining international support and the cessation of humanitarian aid from powerful countries, the Afghan economy and support for impoverished Afghans, disaster management, and humanitarian aid have been weakened. Politically, the Taliban are under civic unpopularity.

The Taliban acted as the resistance against international occupiers favoring Karzai and Ghani to govern Afghanistan (out-groups), and now that the Taliban have regained power, a resistance is fighting against them. Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (known as the Lion of Panjshir) led a resistance force against the Soviets and the Taliban until his assassination on 9 September 2001, by al-Qaeda suicide bombers disguised in camera equipment ([France 24, 2021](#)). The National Resistance Front is led by Massoud’s son. Massoud has claimed that Afghan civilians have increasingly desired the resistance against the Taliban and “no regime can survive without popular support. . .and change. . .will inevitably come” ([Afghanistan International, 2025](#)). The National Resistance Front have been seriously undermined with the killing of 40 resistance fighters in the Panjshir Valley, northeast Afghanistan ([Gul, 2022](#)), and many others have been hunted by the Taliban. Despite Taliban oppression, Massoud controls 5000 soldiers that conduct regular anti-Taliban operations ([Bergen, 2024](#)). On 31 July 2024, the Taliban imposed the ‘Morality Law’ to restrict dress codes, the role of women and the enforcement of Shari’a, prohibiting women from traveling certain distances or accessing services without an accompanying male relative ([European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024](#), pp. 34, 100). Massoud has contended that the Taliban appear to be supported by Afghans from the fear of their guns rather than extremist ideology that excludes and marginalizes women from education, work and the public ([Bergen, 2024](#)).

The Taliban are becoming less favored as an in-group with its new ‘Morality Law’ and are being replaced as an undesired out-group by rival Afghan political leaders of the National Resistance Front (in-groups). If the Taliban fails to revoke international sanctions, attract further foreign allies, attract humanitarian aid, provide employment opportunities and a private market, and liberalize the rules over women in work and education, then the Taliban will lose its social identity status as an in-group, which was similar to the previous Afghan administrations.

### (3) Religious

Domestic terrorism in the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan region increases in a weak democracy (that provides civil liberties and freedoms on the press and assembly) and a state of religious or ethnic fractionalization (Bagchi & Paul, 2018, p. 19). In other words, a free press in a state that has some groups feeling aggrieved provides an environment suited to plot terrorist attacks. Terrorism, and particularly 9/11, is a threat to Western democracies, and thus the war on terror was based on freedoms within democracies to expand. However, democracies that advocate the economic and political dimensions of globalization result in some economic losers who form grievances with Western governments, particularly for ethnic and social minorities within these states. Freeman (2008, pp. 40–41) convincingly argues that the promises of democracies to mitigate socioeconomic and political despair will further threaten Islamic culture and identity, are unlikely to curb economic injustices and are doubtful to provide a more legitimate state than a government that is based on religious law. In secularized Western democracies, some Muslims may feel excluded and turn to furthering religion to reaffirm the perception of threats to self-identity (Al Raffie, 2013, p. 73). Consequently, people turn to international jihad to solve further disparate economic, political and social turmoil in non-democratic matters due to democratic failures (Windsor, 2003). Therefore, the spread of democracy breeds al-Qaeda and global jihadist movements. Democracy was forcefully imposed by Western policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, which increased terrorism (Freeman, 2008, p. 44). Similar to the Taliban aiming to rid Afghanistan of foreign interests, Gause (2005) argues that al-Qaeda detest democracy.

Al-Qaeda financially and militarily (with training and equipment) supported the Taliban in Afghanistan in exchange for a safe haven during Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban is not a Salafist group, but has certainly been sympathetic to al-Qaeda to coordinate and train combatants. Although the Taliban have mainly political motives to rid themselves of foreign intervention and return to a state respecting pure Islamic principles, they (like al-Qaeda) are against corrupt administrations and thus promote a return to a legitimate state with Shari'a principles. The Taliban were fighting internally as part of domestic terrorism, whilst al-Qaeda combatted the 'far enemy' (the US and the West) as part of transnational terrorism. Despite these differences, both groups intended to unsettle the Afghan state, fight foreign occupation and return to Shari'a law to rid themselves of the US 'puppet' administration that also posed a threat to Islamic cultural identity. In terms of training, the "Hanafi School of Islam" was "quite clear" with "Mullahs" but "after the jihad, the Taliban and Salafis created a sense of conflicted ideas."<sup>32</sup> The difference between al-Qaeda and the Taliban rests on the former promoting an ideology and supporting terrorist and/or insurgent groups fighting to remove Western influence from Islamic territories, and the latter desires to govern Afghanistan as an Islamic Emirate. The governance rests on reestablishing strict interpretations of Shari'a law.

Radicalization, religious schools and training were adopted in Pakistan. Problems rested on "Madrassas and religious schools in Pakistan" that "started the Taliban" and continued to function as "factories which produce extremists" such as the "Taliban and Haqqani [Network]" that needed targeting from America if they "really want[ed] the war on terror to be successful."<sup>33</sup> In addition, Afghans grew "distant from the [Afghan] government and international forces" due to "civilian casualties in the provinces" that "really strengthen[ed] the Taliban ranks."<sup>34</sup> These grievances related to political and linked religious motivations. This made the jihadist ideology more meaningful and enticing for the Taliban to promote its purposes and strengthen its social identity as a self-esteeming in-group fighting against the Afghan governmental, security and foreign forces (out-groups).

The greatest appeal to the Taliban and al-Qaeda can derive from Islamic identity coming under Western threat from democratic ideals and consumerist lifestyles. Islam can

be related to a devout distinct identity to interpret faith and practice a just lifestyle. It is Islam as an identity (rather than faith) that motivates extremism and violence as part of the Taliban's social identity appeal. Based on this premise, it can be argued that cultural imperialism from Western democracies imposed a risk to Islamic identity, particularly emphasized by Salafists or higher Taliban ideals of a Shari'a-based state.

#### 4. Discussion

The Taliban have engaged in a variety of political causes of terrorism. Most attacks led by the Taliban in Afghanistan primarily targeted the Afghan police, army and then civilians (GTI, 2019, pp. 3, 15). This strategy was to destabilize the 'near enemy' rather than the 'far enemy' that differs from global Salafist jihadism, i.e., al-Qaeda. Domestic terrorism commenced within an armed conflict that made it last longer (GTI, 2019, p. 5).

The Taliban is against democratization and successfully pursued a Shari'a-based Islamic Emirate. During the conflict (2001–2021), the Afghan government did not liaise with the Taliban. Under the auspices of the United Nations, the international community established the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn agreement) in early December 2001. In the meeting at Bonn, 25 respected Afghans proposed the governance for Afghanistan. The Bonn Agreement also envisioned the establishment of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help secure Kabul during statebuilding. Khalilzad supported the selection of Karzai, which increased Karzai's public image as "an American puppet" (Sprague, 2024, p. 101). The Bonn Agreement sought the creation of a new Afghan Constitution, SSR and the adoption of human rights. Moreover, the establishment of an independent judiciary and transparent, free and fair elections would ensue (Singh, 2020, pp. 97–99). The Bonn Agreement was heavily influenced by the United States, which empowered several key anti-Taliban warlords in the countryside to develop patron-client relations. The warlords included 17 Northern Alliance members out of 29 cabinet seats (Sprague, 2024, p. 101). The disposed Taliban in opposition was largely financed by taxation on poppy cultivation from farmers, mining of minerals and valuable stones. The Taliban also received foreign funding from transnational terrorist organizations (such as al-Qaeda), but promised to cut ties with them after signing the Doha Agreement in late February 2020 with America. However, the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, was found and assassinated by a US drone strike in Kabul housing on 31 July 2022 to demonstrate that links between both groups have not entirely severed (Liptak et al., 2022). It can be argued that the Taliban may appear less involved with al-Qaeda to appease the international community, but they acknowledge that they may need to rely on the financial and military backing as they did in the late 1990s.

Religious motivations can be raised. The Taliban spearheaded the objective of destroying immoral and irreligious Afghan security forces and governance to appeal to dissatisfied civilians against the corrupt state (Singh, 2019, p. 24). Salafists argued that these shortcomings of the modern society were due to corrupt "apostate" leaders (Freeman, 2008, pp. 50–52). These form the religious underpinnings of terrorism. The Taliban encouraged greater appeal to the public for the support of alternative shadow governance and services with the social categorization of a proud, honorable, moral and righteous (even if brutal) in-group to berate the undesirable out-groups: the Afghan government and their services. After the Taliban re seized power in August 2021, they reestablished the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice with religious police enforcing strict interpretations of Islamic values. This was like the Taliban's conquest of Kabul in September 1996.

Similarly, the political and socioeconomic problems motivated support for the Taliban. The interviewees clearly stressed that the Afghan state, as well as the police and judicial sectors, were engaged in prevalent corruption. In addition, the lack of economic opportunities for young males appealed to the insurgency. This was also identified by the nationwide civil society perception report conducted by [Integrity Watch Afghanistan \(2018\)](#). The Taliban filled the political and security vacuums due to highly perceived corrupt, inaccessible and incompetent state services. Afghanistan can be deemed a failed state, and the country was a transition state from 2001 to 2021, which, according to [Abadie's \(2004\)](#) thesis, was more prone to terrorism.

There are other interrelated socioeconomic, political and religious drivers of terrorism that can be brought to attention. In relation to Pakistan, [Syed et al. \(2015\)](#) stress that there are no singular causes of terrorism, but they are economically and politically interconnected. Aggregated data from [Krieger and Meierrieks \(2011, p. 24\)](#) find that political underdevelopment and weak socioeconomic conditions may be linked with terrorism, but not singularly due to the complexity of reducing terrorism to a unilateral variable. These multifaceted explanations on the motivations of terrorism are applicable to the Taliban fighting the Afghan government and international military forces from 2001 to 2021, which served as the social purposes, characteristics, self-esteem, pride, solidarity, sense of belonging and honor of the group.

It could be contended that the Taliban was motivated by secular economic and political interests and adopted religious-based rhetoric to appeal to frustrated unemployed civilians and disavow the Karzai and successive Ghani governments due to prevalent corruption. Therefore, the socioeconomic, political and religious motivations for terrorism formed strong opposition against the Afghan government, police and army and foreign armed forces to cement more robust prestige, honor and integrity for the Taliban as a social identity. Simultaneously, Afghan civilians lost their faith and trust in the Afghan government, weakening the state's social identity as an in-group. This, in turn, increased recruitment and support for the Taliban to rebuild resilience and fight the government, security forces and international armed opposition to re seize the state once the United States armed forces and aerial support at Bagram Airbase left to honor the Doha Agreement.

Individuals were not necessarily motivated to join non-terrorist groups such as illicit criminal enterprises, political parties, civil society groups and other non-violent groups. This was because criminal groups often engaged in state capture by permeating main institutions of the state by enticing political elites in drug and arms trafficking, which closed access to joining such groups. Likewise, Afghan peasantry had no access to join political parties in senior roles and were reluctant to join political parties that did not serve their tribal, ethnic and/or provincial interests. Although civil society groups held appeals for young, angry and frustrated civilians with few employment opportunities, the groups did not hold any financial incentives for increasing recruitment. Alternatively, with other violent terror groups, civilians did not opt to join ISIS-K over the Taliban due to their ideology of fighting for a regional caliphate rather than an Islamic Emirate. Despite ISIS-K recruiting fighters in parts of rural Afghanistan for money that has preyed on the dire Afghan economy under Taliban re-governance to increase its in-group status for socioeconomic reasons, the ideology is not one that most Afghans con scribe to. Moreover, the National Resistance Front is active, but its leader (Massoud) is in exile in Central Asia, and the operations have not severely undermined Taliban governance. Therefore, social identity theory explains why an Afghan individual chose, and still chooses, to be part of the Taliban (in-group) instead of these alternatives.

This study extends social identity theory. The in-groups and out-groups changed over time due, in part, to the interrelatedness of and evolving nature of the socioeconomic,



political, and religious drivers. After the invasion of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, the international community, local Northern Alliance militias and other anti-Taliban warlords functioned as the in-groups. These groups appealed to the Afghan public with the support and financial resources provided principally by America. In addition, the anti-Taliban warlords, which included the Tajik staple of Northern Alliance leaders, entered Hamid Karzai's initial cabinet. Honor, prestige, strong solidarity and status had been affirmed with political leverage, and Afghan peasants supported them in the hope of ousting the Taliban from power and hosting a new government that would be financially aided by America and international allies. USAID did provide hope, as seen from the researcher's observations in Kabul from 2010 to 2016, with posters providing information on development initiatives from the American people. From this socioeconomic perspective, the new interim government, the subsequent elected government and local anti-Taliban resistance were supported by the Afghan peasantry due to the international financial resources attached to enhance development and rebuild the war-torn state. Whilst in power from September 1996, the Taliban dispensed harsh punishments, strict adherence to Shari'a Law and excluded women from work and education. It was clear that the Taliban had become an undesired out-group and thus were hunted by international armed forces, local warlords and militias. Therefore, the political and socioeconomic drivers were intertwined with social identity theory that promoted the new Afghan government, anti-Taliban warlords (including their militias) and international armed forces as in-groups pitted against the Taliban as the unsought out-group.

However, after a few years of new Afghan governmental rule and a system of neopatrimonialism and warlordism, corruption within state institutions, the police force and the judiciary intensified. This was largely due to the overcentralization of state resources, services and inaccessible courthouses that left greater opportunities for public, security and judicial workers to engage in grand and petty corruption. In addition, factional competition for resources and opportunities intensified between Afghan peasants on ethnic grounds, which fragmented society and undermined faith in the government. Alongside public discontent with the Afghan government, international armed forces were increasingly criticized for excessive civilian casualties when conducting their operations. The Afghan police force and judiciary remained on low pay and were thus vulnerable to engaging in corruption for economic survival. Civil society groups and international think-tanks from liberal, centrist and conservative perspectives (even if supporting the intervention) criticized the strategies endorsed and endemic corruption within the Afghan state structure. Consequently, due to these political and socioeconomic factors, the Afghan government and international armed forces started to evolve into out-groups.

At the same time, the Taliban offered its shadow governance, local security for farmers cultivating the poppy crop and accessible community-based dispute resolution processes to hear cases without the payment of bribes. Moreover, the Taliban professed the Layha that was built on religious undertones to fight the corrupt and irreligious Afghan police force and state. The Taliban had thus evolved as a desirable in-group that had attained a strong sense of social identity, prestige and honor. However, after the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, international aid was drastically cut, foreign reserves were seized, and Afghanistan fell into further impoverishment. The humanitarian crisis alongside natural disasters and the growth of oppositional terrorist groups have undermined the strength of the Taliban's in-group status, which is rivalled by resistance groups.

## 5. Conclusions

The famous quantitative regression analysis study conducted by [Piazza \(2006\)](#) credibly disproves the socioeconomic rooted-in-poverty hypothesis as the sole cause of terrorism. [Piazza \(2007, 2011\)](#) subsequently points to political aspects, namely religious and ethnic diversity, and state subjugation, which posit substantial drivers of terrorism. This study is viable, but the qualitative study in Afghanistan indicates that poverty, inequality and other socioeconomic grievances are linked with political and religious motivations of terrorism. Qualitative data must return to the forefront of critical terrorism studies to better explain and understand the causes and motivations that drive terrorism and political violence. [Newman \(2006, p. 770\)](#) does acknowledge that qualitative cases can enable a better explanation of the root causes of conflict, rather than solely terrorism, if complemented with other multifaceted precipitators. The main precipitator highlighted in this qualitative study is the social identity theory that helped the Taliban to obtain and retain strength based on economic opportunity, morality, legitimacy and religion to oppose the Afghan government, security forces and international military forces. The strength of this in-group factor comprised an estimated 80,000 Taliban combatants (fighting under the encouragement of the Mujahideen Layha) that defeated two decades of international support and an estimated USD 2.3 trillion of rebuilding Afghanistan and training of the Afghan armed and police forces (over 307,000) in under 10 days.

Based on this observation and the empirical case of Afghanistan in this article, the qualitative element has revealed that there is a combination of interrelated socioeconomic, political and religious motivations for terrorism that is combined with several precipitant factors, with the main one being social identity theory. One pivotal aspect includes politically and/or religiously motivated violent extremism to fight against several socioeconomic grievances in a quest to attain public support. This is the case even if it is for selfish rationalist, rather than utilitarian, profit-making and secular motives. This research has shown that it is the combination of grievances that best explains the drivers of terrorism (particularly within a conflict) that also counters the disproved linear, poverty-rooted thesis. In 2019, Afghanistan ranked highest in the total number of deaths related to terrorism at 46 per cent ([GTI, 2019, p. 13](#)). Although Daesh has been significantly suppressed by Western powers since its peak of violence in 2014, it has merely defragmented into several groups that have dispersed. The Khorasan Chapter, which includes the Pakistani Taliban having most success in eastern Afghan provinces, northern Pakistan and a portion of India, follow Salafist jihadism to rid of foreign influence but wage war for an Islamic Province in these areas. The National Resistance Front does not have sufficient combatants and operations now to rival the Taliban, but the social identity of the Taliban is weakening from such opposition. This is similar to the Taliban manifesto fighting the international community and supporting corrupt Afghan governments (and their security and judicial sectors), and now the same is evident against the Taliban with its strict Afghan rulership, a weak economy and growing impoverishment. The strong sense of social identity as an in-group factor for the Taliban is dwindling, and Afghanistan is a country that has held a variety of regimes that have not remained. With the Taliban in power, terrorism in Afghanistan continues from extremist groups such as ISIS-K and fighting from the opposition of the National Resistance Front. The latter is attempting to dehumanize the Taliban as a terrorist group that is failing to govern the Afghans. This article has demonstrated that the socioeconomic, political and religious drivers (of terrorism) are interrelated with social identity theory that has explained how the in-groups and out-groups evolved from the intervention to date. Social identity theory is extended to the framework of these drivers that influence the changes in support with the Afghan government, international armed

forces, Northern Alliance and local Afghan warlords, the Taliban, civil society groups, rival terrorist organizations and resistance groups.

The international community is far from winning the fight against terrorism and political extremism in Afghanistan due to new groups emerging that are vying for complex socioeconomic, political and religious motivations. The democratic peace theory that prescribes rapid democratization and economic liberalization will fail to combat economic losers. This Western strategy will also pose a threat to Islamic culture, identity and religion and thus will fail to mitigate terrorism that grows out of multifaceted socioeconomic, political and religious motivations. Seeking comprehension of the drivers of terrorism that strengthen the social identity of a group within a particular context can provide a better understanding of conflict, which in turn can inform national and international policy initiatives aimed at countering terrorism.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent for participation was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** There are no conflicts of interest for the author to report.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Interview, Deputy Director for the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development, 31 May 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview, Worker for Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock: Accelerating Sustainable Program, 25 May 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview, Justice Sector Support Program Legal Consultant of the Attorney General's Office, 29 May 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview, Access to Justice Manager of The Asia Foundation, 26 May 2012.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview, Member of Afghan Supreme Court, 22 April 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Interviews, Country Director of Flag International Afghanistan, 26 May 2010; Project Coordinator of Centre for Policy and Human Development (CPHD), 27 May 2010; Peacebuilding and Public Relations Manager of the Afghanistan Civil Society Forum organization (ACSFo), 1 June 2012.
- <sup>7</sup> See Note 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview, Chairman of Afghanistan Human Rights Organization (AHRO), 31 May 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview, Team Leader of Afghanistan Rule of Law Project (ARoLP), United States Embassy, 3 June 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview, Justice Sector Support Program (JSSP) Legal Consultant to the Attorney General's Office (AGO), 29 May 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> Interviews, the Peacebuilding and Public Relations Manager of ACSFo, 1 June 2012; Advisor of the HOOAC, 4 June 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview, JSSP Legal Consultant to the AGO, 29 May 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview, Country Director of Flag International Afghanistan, 26 May 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview, Research Officer: Transitional Justice for Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), 26 May 2010.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview, Director of the Post-War Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU), York, 3 February 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview, Senior Rule of Law Advisor for USIP, 30 May 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview, Deputy Chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), 27 May 2012.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview, Deputy Chair of AIHRC, 27 May 2012.
- <sup>19</sup> See Note 18.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview, Head of Transitional Justice for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA): Human Rights Unit, 1 June 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Interviews, Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 3 June 2010; Operations Officer for the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, 5 June 2010.

- 22 Interview, International Security Assistance Force translator, 23 May 2016.
- 23 Interview, Deputy Country Coordinator and Legal Researcher of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, 27 May 2012.
- 24 Interview, Attaché for Justice, Rule of Law and Human Rights of the European Union Delegation, 6 June 2012.
- 25 Interview, Department for International Development Justice Advisor: United Kingdom Aid, 6 June 2010.
- 26 Interview, Advisor of the HOOAC, 4 June 2012.
- 27 Interview, Country Director of Global Rights-Partners for Justice, 3 June 2010.
- 28 See Note 26.
- 29 Interview, Resident Director for Elections of NDI, 3 June 2012.
- 30 See Note 14.
- 31 Interview, Patrolman, 10 January 2012.
- 32 Interview, Director of American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, 26 May 2010.
- 33 Interview, Finance Director of Institute for war & peace reporting, 31 May 2012.
- 34 See Note 33.

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