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Eschatological Narratives, Taliban and the Dangers of Millenarian Thinking

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Morning in Kabul. A false dawn for Afghanistan and the Muslim world after the recent Taliban takeover?
Photo by Mohammad Rahmani on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

The Taliban takeover of Kabul ignited online interest in the group, including in the form of eschatological (or end-times) narratives. Such narratives encourage millenarian thinking among uninformed Muslims and may have violent implications, especially when exploited by extremist groups and individuals.

COMMENTARY

The Taliban takeover of Kabul and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2021 drew split responses from international observers. Major international news outlets voiced concerns over the group's violent actions, history of atrocities and suppression of the rights and freedoms of women and vulnerable communities, as well as its notorious role as a sanctuary for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) from the 1990s to 2000s. Months into the group's de facto rule of Afghanistan, the country continues to be plagued by worsening economic and humanitarian crises.

Since seizing the country, the Taliban has tried to reassure the world that it would not repeat the horrors of the past. Yet, it has continued to insist on the establishment of its understanding of the Shari'a. The rule of law and proper legal processes remain lacking.

The group's initial statements about the position of women and minority groups in post-takeover Afghan society seemingly helped paint a more digestible image. In addition, the careful approaches taken towards the Taliban by Qatar, China, Turkey, Pakistan, Russia and even the United States have had the effect of casting the group in a far less ominous light than the self-styled Islamic State (IS) movement and AQ. This contrast has given a false sense of a "good" Taliban. Prominent voices in Southeast Asia that echo a positive perception of the Taliban include former Indonesian vice-president Jusuf Kalla, who recently argued that the group has undergone "moderation" and changed from its old ways of two decades ago.

Worryingly, there are segments of Muslims whose views seem to only focus on the so-called "victory" of the Taliban. Included among those who reify this victory are, on one end, terrorist groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Caucasus Emirate, and on the other hand, moderate Sunnis in Southeast Asia. The latter are drawn to the victory narrative because the Taliban represents a Muslim grassroots force that managed to overcome a Western superpower for the second time. That the Taliban now comprises traditionalist Muslims — as opposed to Salafi or Wahhabi elements — further embellishes this "victory". Its reported adherence to the Maturidi school of Islamic theology and Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence seems to negate the image of savagery that is usually associated with and expounded by Salafist-jihadist groups.

In Malaysia, popular preacher Dr Rozaimi Ramle, in a [video](#) dated 13 September, said that "Muslims should give some time before coming to conclusions about the Taliban as the new Taliban is different from the old Taliban", and that Muslims should, as a principle, "have loyalty towards fellow Muslims and hatred towards non-Muslim countries that occupy Muslim lands". Similarly, in a [video](#) dated 2 September, another prominent preacher, Azhar Idrus, said that Muslims in Malaysia should share in celebrating the "liberation" of Afghanistan, especially since the "[new] Taliban are Maturidi in faith and Hanafi [in school of jurisprudence]".

As a consequence of portrayals of the Taliban takeover as a positive development for Islam, a growing number of Muslims in Southeast Asia have begun to interpret the situation through the lens of eschatology or end-of-times theology. These vain efforts

to portray the Taliban as a prelude to the end of time are intent on painting what could in reality be a tragedy for Afghanistan as being instead divinely designed. As if we were witness to a “special” Taliban, or in the [snide words](#) of the Turkish journalist Mustafa Akyol, “the chosen few at the apex of history”.

Eschatological Narratives

Parallel to news reports on political developments in Afghanistan, preachers in Southeast Asia were asked to comment on the religious implications of the Taliban takeover. Against this backdrop, so-called religious scholars who peddled conspiracy theories exploited their growing audience. They misused eschatological resources to satiate the curiosity of their followers. In Indonesia, two prominent preachers known for their focus on Islamic eschatology, Rahmat Baequni and Zulkifli Ali, [claimed](#) that the Taliban was the foretold “army of al-Mahdi [an end-times messianic figure]”. Rahmat Baequni further [argued](#), albeit nonsensically, that this development augurs the emergence of other messianic forces such as the “Thoifah Mansurah” (Victorious Sect) from Indonesia and “Bani Tamim” (Tamim Tribe) from Qatar. Zulkifli predicted that the Taliban would usher in the liberation of Jerusalem and the Caliphate of the end-times. He encouraged his mostly Indonesian audience to prepare themselves physically for his predicted eschatological battles.

Their videos garnered millions of views and thousands of comments from Malaysians and Indonesians, who were in praise of the Taliban and claimed that they were ready to join the supposed army of the Mahdi and partake in the so-called eschatological “jihad”. Preachers like the two men tend to exploit the prophetic narration that says: “When you see them, then pledge your allegiance to them even if you have to crawl over the snow, for that is the Caliph of God, Mahdi” (Sunan ibn Majah 4084). The result is an implied encouragement to join the Taliban, which is reminiscent of international participation in jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s that gave birth to various terrorist groups.

Millenarian Thinking

Millenarian thinking, or an apocalyptic mode of thought, is neither new nor exclusive to Islam. Martha F. Lee has claimed, in *Millennial Visions: Essays on Twentieth-Century Millenarianism*, that it may be traceable to as far back as 1500 BCE in the teachings of Zoroaster, which influenced other religious traditions that followed. Millenarian thinking understands the world to be in a state of conflict between good and evil, which would be resolved with the triumph of good and result in a reborn world, free of conflict. Some millenarian groups encourage their followers to await the triumph of good in a state of passive piety. However, there have been groups that exhort their members to participate in violence that would “immanentise the eschaton” or accelerate the coming of final history. Such violence may be internally directed, as in mass suicides, or externally directed, such as through terrorist attacks conducted by groups such as Aum Shinrikyo, AQ and IS.

Michael Barkun, in *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, has argued that it is difficult to predict which millenarian group or individual across all religions or ideologies would perpetrate violence. Usually, the eschatological narratives of terrorist groups are analysed in hindsight. According to Jessica Stern and

J. M. Berger, writing in *ISIS: The State of Terror*, most religious movements that emphasise apocalyptic prophecies are not violent. Nevertheless, they warn that “the deliberate inculcation of apocalyptic fears often precedes violence”.

In 2004, Abu Musab al-Suri incorporated apocalyptic narratives in his writings to attract lay Muslims to commit acts of terrorism such that his book, *A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance*, became a terrorist guidebook for “individual jihad”. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi — founder of AQ in Iraq, which later became IS — followed through on al-Suri’s specific apocalyptic predictions. Zarqawi’s successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later took these writings to a more horrific level, such as through the capture of the Syrian towns of Dabiq and Kobane, and made IS and end-times narratives synonymous.

With this in perspective, the irresponsible use of Islamic eschatology can have unpredictable effects. Gullible Muslims may on the one hand be simply attracted to such stories, as are people to fantasy and conspiracy theories. On the other hand, they may choose to act upon the so-called prophecies to bring them to reality. Such end-times narratives become dangerous when they make an enemy out of governments, societies and communities. For instance, in October, Malaysian preacher Syakir Nasoha used an end-times prophetic saying to [vilify Hindus and Buddhists in Malaysia as enemies of Muslims bent on destroying Malaysian Muslims](#).

In the case of the narratives brandishing the Taliban as an end-times portent, the call to violence is not explicit, but the undertones are of concern. At one level, it is a callback to the jihadist apocalyptic milieu that insists that the Muslim world is at war with the “evil” West, with militant groups like the Taliban being seen as the forces of salvation. At another level, it encourages asinine patterns of thinking that reduce Islam to conspiracies and logical fallacies.

Implications

Muslim eschatological narratives need to be approached and studied using a proper framework. The above groups and personalities have cherry-picked excerpts from Islamic sources to pursue their agendas or to interpret the present based on their own narrow understandings. The existence of eschatological narratives in Islam cannot be denied; they form part of Islam’s core theological beliefs. However, the process of interpreting eschatological narratives should not nullify core Islamic values and virtues that promote the rule of law, respect towards established customs, justice, tolerance and mercy, as well as ethnic and religious inclusivism.

In Southeast Asia, Muslim attitudes towards people of other faiths, or of other sects within Islam and attitudes towards women are vastly different from the sort of Islam that the Taliban has yet to grow out of. While the Taliban may have snatched political power in Afghanistan and is now able to establish laws it deems to be Islamic, Muslims in this region should not be swayed. Rather than perpetuate hallucinations of end-times based on egregious interpretations of eschatological narratives, religious scholars in Southeast Asia should focus on continual improvement of inter-religious relations and societal progress by contextualising religious resources to fit our multi-ethnic and multireligious contexts. At the same time, erroneous ideas that encourage ethnic or religious conflict must be resoundingly repudiated and not be left to percolate

in the minds of laypersons, only to be leveraged by violent extremists of the present and future.

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