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# How Religious Diplomacy and Pan-Islamic Organizations Can Help Stabilize Afghanistan

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## Summary

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was followed by a surprisingly quick takeover by the Taliban, the predominantly Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist group that had initially been ousted in 2001. Their triumphant return to power 20 years has raised numerous questions about what led to the US and Western failure in Afghanistan, the implications for regional and global security, and the policy options now available to Europe and the United States.

As of now, the West has no plans to engage with the Taliban government, but continued inaction could result in dire consequences for Afghan citizens as well as for Western interests at large. A severe humanitarian crisis has gripped Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, pushing nearly 20 million people to the verge of famine. The United Nations Development Programme fears Afghanistan will face near "universal poverty" by the end of 2022 with 97 percent of the population living below the international poverty line.

There is also a growing threat that a Taliban regime could enable terrorist organizations to operate more openly on Afghan soil, paving the way for new, aggravated threats to regional and global security. The withdrawal has also compelled Europe to re-evaluate their partnership with the United States on Afghanistan and to fear that the fallout from the Taliban's resurgence will be most severe for Europe, including more immediately with social and economic costs of dealing with more refugees.

There is widespread agreement in the West that engagement in Afghanistan needs to continue but not the way it was done in the past. To explore what that reimagining Western engagement can look like, this paper presents an analysis of

a foreign policy approach that has largely remained absent from the discussion: religious diplomacy.

This form of Track Two diplomacy is deeply rooted in religious texts, practices, and traditions, and it is oriented toward the active role of faith leaders in politics, conflict resolution, and peace-building. In Afghanistan, where the sociocultural and political realities have historically remained deeply intertwined with it, an insufficient understanding of religion has led some to argue this was a major blind spot in the Western foreign policy approach. There is a need to revisit religion's centrality to the war and how religious diplomacy offers an underappreciated peace-building framework that can be operationalized through faith-based organizations that share existing relationships with Afghanistan, a common religious language and cultural affinities with its people, and moral capital to draw from.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Muslim World League, in particular, are two highly influential pan-Islamic nongovernmental organizations, that have leveraged their religious legitimacy and moderate interpretations of Islamic teachings to provide a counter narrative to radical ideas that promote violent extremism, to facilitate dialogue, to mediate conflicts, and to initiate peace-building in previous and ongoing conflicts in the Muslim world. Drawing on their experience, this paper argues that creative religious diplomacy through them can be an effective policy option for the Europe and the United States for a sustainable future engagement in Afghanistan. The paper therefore offers recommendations that flesh out the form this could take.

## Introduction

The United States' rapid departure from Afghanistan has drawn widespread criticism. By the Pentagon's admission, the speed with which Afghanistan's US-backed government then collapsed took Washington "by surprise."<sup>1</sup> This has left the West with a growing realization that its efforts at state-building in the country have failed and the US military blindsided in fighting terrorism in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

The last two decades of US counterterrorism have been successful from a tactical perspective by managing to avert major attacks on the soil of the United States and, largely, of its allies. However, they have produced little success from a strategic standpoint. According to the former acting director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, the country's database of known or suspected terrorists has grown by a factor of 20 since 2001.<sup>3</sup>

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan therefore raises numerous questions about the effectiveness of political-military interventions, the implications of the failure of the transatlantic community in Afghanistan and the West, and more importantly the policy options that a Taliban-led Afghanistan now presents the United States and its allies. Afghanistan sits on the brink of humanitarian crisis and societal collapse, with potentially grave ramifications for regional and international security and stability.

The crisis has also compelled European leaders and analysts to re-evaluate their partnership with the United States when it comes to Afghanistan, with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell referring to the withdrawal as "a game changer for international relations."<sup>4</sup> There is concern that in the West, it is Europe and not the United States that will face the worst of the fallout from Afghanistan and the Taliban's resur-

gence. For Europe, there are two areas of deep concern: the future of its dependency on the United States for its security apparatus and the socioeconomic repercussions of another potential refugee crisis. With the EU agreeing to resettle as many as 40,000 Afghan refugees<sup>5</sup> and many more estimated to make their way to the continent as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, the question of the impact on European politics looms. The situation also has policy-makers on edge when counting the social and economic costs likely to be incurred.<sup>6</sup>

As of now, the West has no plans to engage with the Taliban government. But, as time goes by, the situation becomes more precarious in Afghanistan, and the more difficult it becomes for the United States and its allies to advance their interests in the region—including their continued focus on counterterrorism and growing concerns about an ambitious China promoting its strategic interests thanks to its Belt and Road Initiative.

### *There is a need for a discussion of the place of religion in the previous policy interventions of the West.*

Immediate action is needed but it cannot be taken without due consideration of the West's failure in Afghanistan—particularly that of its vision to transform the country into a democratic state while grossly overlooking the deeply diverse ethno-religious realities that shape Afghan society. That oversight played a consequential role in paving the way for the Taliban's rebirth following their collapse in 2001 and was one of the key factors for the West's failure in Afghanistan.

There is a need for a discussion of the place of religion in the previous policy interventions of the West. This must include a detailed exposition of religion's historical and evolutionary manifestation in Afghanistan, which not only makes the line of demarcation between religion and culture difficult to comprehend but also informs the totality of

1 Phil Stewart and Patricia Zengerle, "[Afghan Army Collapse 'Took Us All By Surprise, U.S. Defense Secretary Says'](#)", Reuters, September 29, 2021.

2 Michael Hirsh, "[U.S. Military Leaders Say They're Not Prepared for 'Over the Horizon' in Afghanistan](#)", Foreign Policy, September 30, 2021.

3 Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "[Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities](#)", November 8, 2019.

4 Jen Kirby, "[NATO Allies Are Preparing For a Future Without America's 'Forever Wars'](#)", Vox, August 31, 2021.

5 Aljazeera, "[EU Countries Agree To Take In 40,000 Afghan Refugees](#)", December 9, 2021.

6 Amelia Gentleman, "[Home Office Criticised For Not Housing Asylum Seekers Properly As Hotel Costs Mount](#)", The Guardian, February 3, 2022.

Afghan society, from its politics to the various shades of conflict it has found itself in over the last three decades. This reality went largely underappreciated in the West's engagement and operations in Afghanistan.

It is important not just to better understand the mistakes of the past but to formulate improved policy, which would include challenging the religious credentials the Taliban use to gain legitimacy and that inform their ideology as well as using influential, more moderate voices in the Muslim and Western world. This paper argues that the West needs to revitalize and reimagine its efforts by engaging the religious and faith-based sector in its engagement in Afghanistan. It first looks at the concept of religious diplomacy and then reviews the centrality of religion in Afghanistan in its sociocultural manifestation and as part of the long-drawn conflict in the country. The paper then reviews the scant presence of religion in Western peace-building efforts in the country. It then looks at the Taliban's use of religion and the potential role of pan-Islamic organizations in peace-building in Afghanistan with a focus on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Muslim World Congress. The paper concludes with recommendations for how to include religious actors and faith-based organizations in peace-building and conflict resolution in the country.

At a time when the Taliban government is seeking legitimacy, money, and stability, there is an invaluable opportunity for the West to engage with the Muslim world, including its leading scholars, to engage the Taliban government through voices it will be willing to listen to.

## Religious Diplomacy

Religion is often blamed for conflicts within or between nations, and inaccurate stereotypes about faith lead too many policymakers to assume that religious actors are unworthy partners. This bias is especially unfortunate when it prevents the international community from building relationships and developing trust in areas where the threat of conflict is high. In these areas, collaboration with relevant mediators is inevitable, and religious actors frequently play vital roles in promoting peace, defusing conflict, and mobilizing and delivering lifesaving assistance in emergencies.

As the US analyst David Smock put it, "with so much emphasis on religion as a source of conflict, the role of religion as a force in peacemaking is usually overlooked."<sup>7</sup> Throughout the world, as demonstrated by Pew polling in the past, religious affiliation informs the attitudes, perspectives, and priorities of a significant portion of the world. According to Pew, this accounted for 84 percent of the global population in 2012.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is a trend that is expected to continue well into the future.<sup>9</sup> For that reason alone, the moral authority of faith leaders gives them tremendous communal influence,<sup>10</sup> including in preventing or resolving conflict.

Religious diplomacy can be defined as

a state activity consisting of the use of a religious factor in foreign policy; that is, the whole set of mechanisms for state cooperation with religious associations in the pursuit of pragmatically defined national interest, use of the international activity of religious institutions, ideas and religious symbols (appropriately interpreted to comply with current political aims) and so on.<sup>11</sup>

This form of Track Two diplomacy is deeply rooted in religious texts, practices, and traditions, and it is oriented toward the active role of faith leaders in politics, conflict resolution, and peace-building.

Religious diplomacy proposes reconciliation to heal societies, nations, and communities wounded by religious, ethnic, and racial conflicts and injustices committed by political elites, nationalists, and extremists. Faith diplomats also articulate how the traditional Western diplomatic players have failed to understand the role of religion in building relations and extending cooperation to stabilize the global

7 David Smock, [Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace](#), United States Institute of Peace, 2008.

8 Pew Research Center, [The Global Religious Landscape](#), December 18, 2012.

9 Pew Research Center, [The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050](#), April 2, 2015.

10 Sara Silvestri and James Mayall, [The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-Building](#), British Academy, September 2015.

11 Alicja Curanović, [The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation](#), Institut français des relations internationales, June 2021.

system, and they offer religious traditions as a new political possibility in statecraft and conflict resolution.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, faith leaders and institutions can be a great source of mediation and facilitation, serving as a communication link between warring parties in conflict.<sup>13</sup> Below are two examples of religious peace-building initiatives that have served as rare, but necessary and meaningful breakthroughs in communication between parties involved in conflict with religious dynamics.

In 2001, Chief Rabbi Menachem Froman of Tekoa, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and a prominent religious peace-builder,<sup>14</sup> approached the United States Institute of Peace to initiate religious peace-building efforts between Israelis and Palestinians. With the help of Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, the head of the Church of England, a conference was convened in Alexandria, Egypt, where senior Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders came together to endorse the Alexandria Declaration.<sup>15</sup> This breakthrough agreement affirmed the sanctity of the Holy Land for the three Abrahamic faiths, represented by the religious leaders involved who also committed to use their moral and religious authority to seek an end to violence and the resumption of the peace process. The Alexandria process brought together a network of religious leaders whose efforts have continued since. With regular interfaith meetings held in Jerusalem under the guidance of Rabbi Michael Melchior, Israel's former deputy minister of foreign affairs, and, until his death, Sheikh Talal Sidr, minister of state for the Palestinian Authority.

Another example of religious diplomacy is the role Pope Francis and the Vatican played in reopening the channels of communication between Cuba and the United States in 2014.

This included 18 months-long secret talks between the two countries, facilitated by the good offices of the Vatican. Pope Francis wrote personal letters to Presidents Raul Castro and Barack Obama, urging them to normalize relations. As a result, Cuba released, as a good will gesture, the US citizen Alan Gross, who had been arrested on allegations of spying and trying to overthrow the government. These efforts culminated in the full restoration of diplomatic relations, symbolized by the reopening of the US embassy in Havana for the first time in more than half a century.<sup>16</sup>

The ability of such efforts to convene competing voices and sustain long-term engagement is not only necessary for the painstaking work of conflict avoidance and resolution but establishes the credibility needed when more immediate responses are called for.

## Religion's Centrality to Afghanistan

Over the last 13 centuries, religion in Afghanistan has passed through stages of emergence, expansion, and diversification. Islam first found its way into Afghanistan through the military expeditions and conquests of Arab generals,<sup>17</sup> supporting the Rashidun Caliphs and the Umayyad dynasty (632-750) in spreading their supremacy in the region. Although Kabul was ruled by the Umayyads from 671, it was not until 900 that Muslims proclaimed political and military control over the region's local population and main cities.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghan emirs decided to forge a European-inspired nation-state by revamping the old imperial structures. Heavily inspired by the idea of a "motherland" with a central language, state, and religion, the emirs saw Islam as an instrument of the state—not just one of many religions coexisting alongside it. For the first time in the state's history, jihad was used to crush the aspirations of rebellious actors and sharia was proclaimed the supreme law of the land.

12 Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott, "[Faith Based Diplomacy: An Ancient Idea Newly Emergent](#)," *The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs*, April 27, 2010.

13 Markus A. Weingardt, *Religion als Friedensressource: Potenziale und Hindernisse, Wissenschaft und Frieden [Religion as a Resource for Peace: Potential and Obstacles, Science and Peace]*, 2008.

14 Benjamin Schvarcz and Miriam Bilig, *The Froman Peace Campaign: Pluralism in Judeo-Islamic Theology and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, March 1, 2022.

15 United States Institute of Peace, [The Alexandria Declaration](#), November 2002.

16 Peter Baker, "[U.S. to Restore Full Relations With Cuba, Erasing a Last Trace of Cold War Hostility](#)," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2014.

17 Nile Green, *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, University of California Press, December 2016.

The population was not literate enough and had little recourse to understand the Quran because it was written in Arabic. The latitude to interpret the Quran was therefore limited and in the hands of religious clerics,<sup>18</sup> who saw their power increase and monopolized it accordingly. Religious scholars issued fatwas (religious decrees) to vindicate the state's violent persecution campaign against minorities, leading to ethnic cleansing and genocide, such as that of the Hazara tribes.<sup>19</sup>

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The overwhelmingly majority of the Muslim population in Afghanistan adheres to the Sunni interpretation of Islam, following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, one of the four established branches. As a result, the 1931 and 1964 constitutions reflected the influence of the Hanafi interpretation of Islam. But, while Islam has acted as a great unifier for Afghans, there are differences in how urban and rural centers have approached it and integrated it into Afghan culture.

The majority rural Afghans disapprove of the urban elites, in particular their seeking to expand centralized authority. That is because this stands in direct opposition to the traditional social values and order of the rural population. Conversely, the latter's rigidity and reluctance to modernize governance is seen as a hurdle by urban Afghans. Both sides consist of Muslims but there are stark differences between them as to how to interpret Islam.

Not only does this reflect Islam's inherent makeup and disposition to accommodate local belief systems so as to gain a stronger connection with those involved, it also reflects the tumultuous ride Islam has had in Afghanistan. The religion

had to contend with preceding faith systems and a population that resisted complete compliance to hold on to identities drawn along regional, ethnic, and cultural divides.

It also explains the continued Pashtun supremacy. It is not simply a matter of this ethnic group forming a significant majority in Afghanistan, but also that the Pashtuns claim their common ancestor, Qaiz, to be a contemporary to the Prophet Muhammad, directly converted by him. This drives them to assume superiority over other ethnic groups. It is also often said that many Pashtuns "half use Quran and half use Pukhtunwali" (the customary law based on the concept of honor, hospitality, and revenge followed by Pashtuns) as a guide. This shows the deep interconnectedness of culture, tradition, and Islam and its continued application in Afghan politics and society.

As a result, Islam in Afghanistan has had to contend with competing customary laws, with kinship, ethnicity, and religion forming the base of group loyalties and instrumental to manage social disruptions and external threats.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, external forces further challenged and shaped Islam in Afghanistan. While the occupying Soviet Union completely dismissed the role of religion in state affairs, the United States invested greatly in the reinterpretation of jihad to suit the Cold War narrative, including positioning its ideological primacy to counter "infidels" like the Soviet troops,<sup>21</sup> and supported the Mujahideen. The United States was heavily criticized for simply walking away from Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet Union, and thus opening the door for the Taliban and radical Islam.<sup>22</sup> Arab volunteers who waged jihad against the Soviets used the same arms provided to them by the United States to engage in a terrorist war with the West,<sup>23</sup> which paid a hefty price for this.

The merging of Islam with Afghan culture, customs, and traditions deeply impacted society, but more importantly the politics of Afghanistan. The Taliban were well aware of

18 Ken Guest, "[Dynamic Interplay between Religion and Armed Conflict in Afghanistan](#)," International Review of the Red Cross, December 2010.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Scott Shane, "[Saudis and Extremism: 'Both the Arsonists and the Fire-fighters'](#)", The New York Times, August 25, 2016.

22 Michael Rubin, "[Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?](#)" The Washington Institute, March 1, 2002.

23 Ibid.

religion's stature in the country and manipulated notions of combative radicalism and political Islam to extend their rule. Afghans who were always committed to their faith fell prey to the radical interpretation of Islam propagated by Taliban-sponsored mullahs. The latter deployed religious obligations to consolidate their power, persecute minorities, restrict women from education and work, and enforce a social and political hegemony.

In essence, the combination of local and the international forces appropriating Islam for their strategic gains and the proliferation of complicated, more radical interpretations of Islam fueled a steady and complex process of making religion central in politics, war, and in the everyday life of Afghans. This reality is impossible to ignore when discussing Western actions in Afghanistan.

## Religion and Western Engagement

For two decades, NATO members and partner countries deployed forces to Afghanistan, with the initial intention to punish the perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks but also to ensure that the country never again became a safe haven for international terrorists. However, the strategic goal expanded to include nation-building as early as 2002, when the administration of President George W. Bush announced that its objectives in Afghanistan included ridding the country of “evil” and fostering a “better place” for people to live.<sup>24</sup> This tied Western security interests in the country with the success of its government and governance.

The assumption that Afghanistan—one of the least institutionalized countries in the world and with a significant dependency on aid—could become a self-sustaining economy with capabilities to support its security and public services through foreign military engagement and funding alone resulted in the formulation of an ambitious and broad policy framework.

Part of the problem was in the expectation that a military intervention could include social and political engineering, when military organizations are neither trained nor equipped

to engage in such civilian-centered missions.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, an even bigger factor was the absence of consideration of religion as an important force shaping the conflict (other than as an instigator), as a reality that significantly defined the sociocultural fabric, and by extension as a crucial potential means of peace-building.

This is not surprising as religion was hardly seen in Europe and the United States as mattering in international affairs, least of all as a policy tool for conflict resolution.

After having experienced centuries of religious wars, some European states positioned themselves as the avant-garde of secularism around the world from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They concluded that religion's role in international politics would only decline over time. One consequence is that the EU institutions in their formative stage developed little to no mechanism addressing or dealing with religious issues.<sup>26</sup> It was not until 2013 that the EU published guidelines for mainstreaming its approach to freedom of religion and belief. Three years later, it appointed its first special envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion outside of the EU in a sign of the budding institutionalization of religion in its external affairs.

In the United States, although Bush had established in 2001 a team in the White House that focused on engagement with the faith sector, it was during the Obama administration that engagement with this sector in foreign policy—including for development, human rights, and peace-building—became more formal and strategic.<sup>27</sup> This was made clear with the creation of the Religion and Foreign Policy working group in 2011 and of an Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the Department of State in 2013.

The 2010s saw the beginning of an increase in interest from European countries and the United States in religion and religious communities and their engagement with

24 National Security Archive, [Afghanistan 20/20: The Twenty Year War in 20 Documents](#), August 19, 2021

25 Jonathan Monten, “[Intervention and State-Building: Comparative Lessons from Japan, Iraq, and Afghanistan](#),” *The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November 2014.

26 Philippe Perchoc, [Religion and the EU's External Policies](#), European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2020.

27 Peter Mandavilla and Melissa Nozell, [Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism](#), United States Institute of Peace, August 2017.

international affairs. This was a recognition of the fact that a majority of people around the world identified as being religious and that a significant shift in global religious demographics was underway.<sup>28</sup>

This change occurred almost simultaneously as a shift in focus within the interest in the religion-foreign policy nexus from counterterrorism to the social factors that lead individuals and small groups to support militant ideologies.<sup>29</sup> Although, the latter focus was not entirely new, this shift from 2015 was more extensive and systematic than at any point since 2001, when attention to religion became more pronounced in counterterrorism and peace-building.

The late recognition of religion and its role in international affairs also explains why in the extensive literature on Western failures in Afghanistan there is little nuanced analysis on the prominent role religion has and continues to play there, beyond being casually referred to as a source of the problem—though religion’s role in conflicts is often multifaceted and never linear. There has since been a growing recognition of the role religion and religious actors play in conflicts, not just as instigators but also as preventers. As a result, religious diplomacy is gaining prominence in the international arena, with religious actors getting involved in issues from climate change to peace-building across the globe.

In Europe and the United States, the utility of religion in countering violent extremism, mitigating conflict, and promoting peace-building became more apparent at almost the same time and in the same stages. Perhaps this did not gain greater prominence in Western policy toward Afghanistan in part because the recognition of religion as a tool for counterterrorism or peace-building emerged more or less at the same time as the policy was becoming more about retreating from the country altogether.

The Western allies first started factoring in religious actors in their Afghanistan policy in 2017–2018, much too late in the war, and religious diplomacy was not necessarily seen as a formal foreign policy approach until later. Coupled with the still underdeveloped domain of religion’s role in peace-

building, this meant that Western efforts were scant and that the limited success they had as a result never had a chance to ferment in the long run.

In 2018, General John W. Nicholson, who was leading the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, discussed launching a multipronged strategy against the Taliban. Beyond the use of political and social pressure, the alliance had also to use “religious” pressure to dissuade the Taliban. He spoke of applying religious pressure against the Taliban together “with the ulemas<sup>30</sup> hosted in Indonesia and elsewhere to strip away the religious legitimacy for jihad in Afghanistan.”<sup>31</sup>

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There were also concerted efforts at the national level in Afghanistan. This included a 2018 international conference convened in Kabul by President Ashraf Ghani’s government to call on religious scholars to help strip away the Taliban of their “religious decree.”<sup>32</sup> Some 3,000 of Afghanistan’s most senior religious scholars issued a fatwa refuting the religion-based justification the Taliban has used for waging the war in Afghanistan. More importantly, they unequivocally rejected the use of suicide attacks as a justified means of waging war under Islam.

Around the same time, there was also greater recognition by NATO of other initiatives undertaken by Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Pakistan and of organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to convene ulemas and religious scholars to counteract

28 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

29 Georgia Holmer, [Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective](#), United States Institute of Peace, September 2013.

30 Ulema is the Arabic word for a body of Muslim religious scholars with specialized knowledge in Islamic law and theology.

31 Ayesha Tanzeem, [“Nicholson: US Planning Religious, Diplomatic, Military and Social Pressure on Taliban”](#), Voice of America, March 19, 2018.

32 Ahmad Bilal Khalil, [“The Rise of Taliban Diplomacy”](#), *The Diplomat*, January 3, 2017.



the radical ideological framework used by Taliban to justify violent extremism.<sup>33</sup>

There were issues with these national-level and international-level religious engagements. First, they began much too late in the war. Given the recent understanding of religion's role in counterterrorism and peace-building and its still nascent admission into Western foreign policy framework, such engagement was kept on the periphery of a still largely military solution pursued by the West in Afghanistan. This meant that the potential of religious diplomacy remained largely untapped. Second, they were not inclusive, engaging largely pro-government ulemas and actors and keeping out armed opposition groups.<sup>34</sup> Third, local ulemas were not always well connected or did not have the institutional capacity to ferment a more regular pursuit of religious diplomacy, especially as the Western allies were drawing down their support and presence entirely.

The nascent use of religious diplomacy nevertheless resulted in the emergence of new arena of partnership between NATO and certain Muslim-majority countries and organizations that could bring their greater understanding of religion to advance the alliance's interests.

Although religious diplomacy was enacted too late in the war in Afghanistan and much is left to understand of its effectiveness, exploring the religious dimension of the conflict and its absence from Western policy can lead to a more robust understanding of that policy and why it remained weak, how this could have it contributed to Western failure in Afghanistan, and what lessons can be drawn from it.

## Blindsided in Afghanistan

The European and US vision for transforming Afghanistan into a democratic state grossly overlooked the deeply diverse and interconnected religious and cultural realities that shape Afghan society. This played a consequential role in paving the way for the Taliban's rebirth following their collapse in 2001.

According to the 2021 report of the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, the United States' ignorance of the country's social, cultural, and political contexts, and how they are deeply interlinked with religion, contributed significantly to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.<sup>35</sup> Nowhere was this clearer than in the wide-ranging legal framework established for the country by the United States that conflicted with Afghan traditions and was insensitive to local norms, particularly to the tenets of sharia law.

Criticism of the United States for this was widespread, emanating from clerics in Afghanistan's hinterlands to parliamentarians in Kabul. For example, critics called for replacing the Western-sponsored banking system with an Islamic version. Western advisors' insufficient grasp of sharia also prevented them from effectively responding to sharia-related objections to the international community's economic programs.

Scott Edmondson, a US expert on cultural and regional studies, writes about the "dangerous assumption" of the West in thinking it could build a state and military in Afghanistan "in its own image" without adequately understanding the sociocultural realities of the country. In this analysis, Afghanistan falling again under the control of the Taliban is not due to any "intelligence failure" as many foresaw it "as the inevitable result of the truth that those who know the culture have the advantage."<sup>36</sup>

The deeply ahistorical nature of the US policy in Afghanistan was often criticized<sup>37</sup> but this was rarely adequately reflected in policy discussions. As the US and Western political objectives became more and more elusive,<sup>38</sup> the push to impose a modern democratic state ending up cutting

33 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [Press Conference by Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen. John W. Nicholson](#), June 11, 2018.

34 Reza Kazemi, [The Challenge of Effectiveness: 'Pro-Peace' Ulama in Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan Analysis Network, July 16, 2012.

35 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, [Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan](#), February 2021.

36 Scott Edmondson, "[Not Just Regarding Afghanistan: Dangerous Assumptions, Cultural \(In\)competence – and Weak Reflexivity](#)", Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, August 23, 2021.

37 Benjamin Hopkins, [America's Shocking Ignorance of Afghanistan](#), Wilson Center, June 5, 2015.

38 Henry A. Kissinger, "[In Afghanistan, America Needs a Strategy, Not an Alibi](#)", International Herald Tribune, June 25, 2010.

deeply against the geographical and ethnoreligious realities of the country.

The combination of heavy-handed imposition and lack of cultural awareness made social projects on, for instance, gender equality difficult to execute. By 2018, the United States realized its efforts required “a nuanced understanding of gender roles and relations to the Afghan cultural context”<sup>39</sup> without which it could risk “provoking” a backlash that can undermine or undo reforms. However well-meaning, these efforts were operationalized on the assumption that the US model of progress would work in Afghanistan even if Afghans themselves remained less sanguine about the ideas involved. This assumption ignored realities of Afghanistan that were deeply influenced by culture and religion, contributing to the overall US failure.

A key deficiency in European and US analysis of Afghanistan’s sociopolitical landscape centered on the question of representation. US policymakers engaged almost exclusively with urban-based elites and leaders—like Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and Ashraf Ghani—deferring to their knowledge and expertise of Afghan society. They failed to appreciate the complexities and diversity of Afghan culture, almost three-quarters of which is rural.<sup>40</sup> Most Afghans live in tribal, frontier settings, far from cities like Kandahar and Kabul, the domiciles of those who have historically interacted with and advised US officials. This limited scope of contact distorted the lens through which the United States perceived Afghanistan to the detriment of developing beneficial policies. When their primary domestic interlocutors have at best a partial understanding of most of the country in question, it is hardly a surprise that foreign policymakers lack sufficient and precise comprehension of the conditions on the ground.

While the dissonance between urban elites and a predominantly rural population is one important factor in examining a country like Afghanistan’s culture, it is not the only one. Every society has a culture unique to itself and often it is established with an underlying ideological ethos that guides its moral, ethical, political, and legal parameters.

Many countries, including ones that now see themselves as having secular societies, have strong religious traditions undergirding their cultural identities and orientations. The United States, for example, despite its official separation of church and state, is a culturally Christian nation, owing to its demographics, including a majority Christian population whose cultural specificities dominate.<sup>41</sup>

Afghanistan is no exception to this phenomenon. It is almost entirely Muslim (99.7 percent). Irrespective of government policies, its civil society will operate in a manner that is at the very least culturally Muslim, as a reflection of the population. And, given the large rural component of society, it is hardly a surprise that the country’s dominant culture is traditional and a manifestation long-standing customs and values. These may combine religion and culture in a way that makes the line of demarcation between the two difficult to perceive. In other words, the country’s social reality may be seen as Afghan culturally but it is also intrinsically Islamic as it exists within a nearly entirely Muslim ecosystem.

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Instead of making the effort to assess the relationship between religion and culture in Afghanistan, US policymakers chose to typecast its society as primitive, backward, and obsessed with religion. Many regarded Islam as being hostile to and incompatible with democracy, despite the presence of millions of Muslims in the United States who are politically engaged in the democratic process there.<sup>42</sup> Afghans have a long history of representative government, even if it may not resemble a Jeffersonian democracy. The institution of the loya jirga, a tribal council, has been a reliable, culturally

39 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Support for Gender Equality.

40 The World Bank, [Urban Population \(% of total population\) – Afghanistan](#), 2018.

41 Liam Stack, “[Is Christmas a Religious Holiday? A Growing Number of Americans Say No](#)”, The New York Times, December 13, 2017.

42 Arab News, “[Poll Reveals Record Muslim Vote in US Elections](#)”, November 4, 2020

compatible body that has addressed Afghan social and political issues for generations. However, US policymakers failed to comprehend its history, dynamics, and modalities, which would have enabled addressing the needs of Afghans on their own terms. The Taliban were well aware of this gap in comprehension and exploited it for their political gains.

## The Taliban's Use of Religion

The Taliban have been able to mobilize Islamic doctrine and identity to legitimize their religious ideology, scriptural interpretation, and implementation of Islamic law. Moreover, they are able to present their religious views as a viable means of sociopolitical organization. To understand how they have managed to do this, it is useful to define the religious ideological framework most members of the Taliban adhere to and implement in Afghanistan.

To assess how the religious ideology of the Taliban earlier gained political traction and how they are currently attempting to reestablish its position as a viable basis for governance, one must consider several factors: the political and economic realities in Afghanistan, theological arguments, and how the Taliban have acted as identity entrepreneurs<sup>43</sup> for the Afghan people.

The Taliban doctrine, derived from the Deobandi denomination of Islam, is rooted in the Hanafi school of jurisprudence that most of Afghanistan's population follows. It has seen much evolution through exposure to global jihadi groups and interaction with clergy in the Middle East and South Asia. Thus, the doctrine the Taliban espouse today incorporates threads of Salafism, political jihad, and local tribal customs.<sup>44</sup>

Through this, the Taliban have been able to project an image of pious, "village" Muslim Afghans who embody lofty ideals of tribal simplicity and morality.<sup>45</sup> It is one that they have worked to establish as the sole national identity, with

themselves as its gatekeepers of their comprehension of an Islamic state.

There is no single definition for an Islamic state, and its implementation is even more ambiguous, making the concept subjective and susceptible to even the most extreme forms of fashioning. However, the Taliban have referred to an Islamic state as one that upholds the values of Islam—or at least a particular reading of its jurisprudence and traditions.<sup>46</sup> It is implied that such a state, as it is governed by divine ordinance, would ensure the rights and welfare of its citizenry. This is because the state and those who govern it are the executors of God's will on Earth, thereby ensuring its success.

Historically, Islamist groups like the Taliban have projected themselves, and an Islamic state, as a stand against Western-inspired cultural debauchery that Muslims have been exposed to through modern technology and US soft power. In essence, they claim to be the guardians of morality working for prosperity, which can only be accomplished if the nation is free from immorality and the state rejects Western political institutions and constructs.

This is not unique to the Taliban as many Islamist factions have sought to reject—to varying degrees—modern political constructs imposed during colonial rule, including parliamentary democracy, capitalism, and sometimes even state borders as seen in the case of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.<sup>47</sup> The political apparatus inherited by Afghanistan, the Taliban claim, has failed. It is incapable of generating prosperity for the country's people. Historically, Afghanistan's levels of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, alongside the lack of rule of law, have created a political void that not only lessens the appeal of the current political system but also leaves room for religious institutions and groups to fill the vacuum to provide social services. The Taliban opportunistically capitalized on this absence of effective governance.

Western effort to establish a centralized government and a regulated state judiciary often ignored the networks of power that had been established regionally through local

43 Phil Williams, [Violent Non-state Actors and National and International Security](#), International Relations and Security Network, November 25, 2008.

44 Ron Synovitz, "[Taliban 'Tribal Version': Shari'a Is Not The Same Everywhere](#)", Gandara, October 2, 2021.

45 Prakhar Sharma, "[Who is an Afghan?](#)", The Diplomat, April 16, 2020.

46 Anand Gopal, Borhan Osama, and Barnett R. Rubin, [Taliban Views on a Future State](#), Center on International Cooperation, July 2016.

47 International Crisis Group, [Understanding Islamism](#), March 2, 2005.

governance and tribal alliances. The Taliban, on the other hand, adapted to these realities, establishing local governance and courts. A good example of this is their use of a religiously informed “rough and ready”<sup>48</sup> justice system that helped them garner the kind of widespread trust and support from local Afghans that later the US-backed government failed to accrue. This earned the Taliban popularity in the 1990s as they were able to address local grievances and root out corruption more effectively than the central government with their harsh means of trial and punishment.<sup>49</sup> Another explanation for this popularity can be that a large segment of the population supported a sharia-based constitution with a role for religious leaders in writing the country’s legislation, even up to 2010.<sup>50</sup>

However, there is evidence to suggest that the level of support the Taliban enjoyed has significantly diminished in the last decade, even among their Pashtun and rural bases. For example, in 2019, a survey found that only 13.4 percent of Afghans sympathized with the Taliban—a stark difference from the 50 percent that reported support for them in 2009.<sup>51</sup>

From all of the above, it can be concluded that providing a religious-political counterweight to the Taliban and their doctrine should involve empowering actors who are able to navigate Hanafi jurisprudence and local customs. It would also require a viable ideological alternative—of which there are several. This would accommodate the religious sentiments of the Afghan people, while giving the ability to human rights groups, nongovernmental organizations, academics, and other civil society actors to work to improve the lives of Afghans—a matter that has gained utmost urgency given the humanitarian crisis currently unfolding in Afghanistan.

## A Role for Pan-Islamic Organizations

The importance of religious diplomacy may be no more immediately relevant than in Afghanistan, which is facing “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.”<sup>52</sup> With 20 million Afghans on the verge of famine, the consequences of inaction would be dire. The United Nations Development Programme has estimated that this year Afghanistan could face a condition of “universal poverty,” with 97 percent of population living below the World Bank’s designated international poverty line of \$1.90 a day.<sup>53</sup> The humanitarian, geopolitical, and security implications of a resulting state collapse are not hard to imagine, considering Afghanistan’s tumultuous history and the wide-ranging global impacts of that history.

Considering its role, and the dangers of inaction, the West must take the lead in confronting this crisis and devising sustainable responses. Action on its part, however, will require a far more nuanced appreciation of the role of religious actors, ideas, and institutions in the country than it previously displayed. The United States, in particular, must revitalize and simultaneously reimagine the efforts first institutionalized during the Obama administration.<sup>54</sup> Inviting Afghan religious actors to join in the process of peace-building and development. This is easier said than done, however.

As the analyst Kaja Borchgrevink notes, Western leaders have been slow to understand the importance and relevance of faith leaders for the sustainable development of Afghan society.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, she points out, “actors within modern Afghan civil society”—including the Kabul-based as well as the “elitist”—show far greater willingness in involving religious leaders in vital peace-building work. That willingness undoubtedly emerges from their greater understanding of the foundational role religion plays in their society.

48 Shadi Hamid, [Americans Never Understood Afghanistan Like the Taliban Did](#), Brookings Institution, August 23, 2021.

49 Arwa Ibrahim, “[Explainer: The Taliban and Islamic law in Afghanistan](#)”, *Aljazeera*, August 23, 2021

50 Gallup, *Afghanistan: How Afghans Would Negotiate Their Own Peace*, 2010.

51 Lindsay Maizland, [The Taliban in Afghanistan](#), *Council of Foreign Relations*, September 15, 2021.

52 Jane Ferguson, “[Afghanistan Has Become The World’s Largest Humanitarian Crisis](#)”, *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2022.

53 Alex Mauthe, [Universal Poverty in Afghanistan](#), The Borgen Project, December 20, 2021.

54 Mandavilla and Nozell, [Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism](#).

55 Kaja Borchgrevink, [Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: The Role of Religious Civil Society](#), London School of Economics, September 5, 2018.

The United States and other Western powers must stabilize Afghanistan, but they cannot do so without the help of trusted partners and intermediaries. Two American academics note that peace-building proceeds best when “trusted communication networks” are used to “draw on, rather than combat, existing cultural predispositions.”<sup>56</sup> At a time when the Taliban government is seeking legitimacy, revenue, and stability, and when Afghanistan confronts an existential crisis, the United States and the West have no choice but to engage trusted local religious interlocutors.

This endeavor should include Muslims leaders in the West as well as religious organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The MWL and the OIC share a religious language and cultural affinities with Afghan actors, and they also have decades of relationships and moral capital in the country that can be drawn upon. Given their demonstrated record of religious moderation, interfaith engagement, and peace-building, these two organizations are partners the West can trust. The ethical commitments of the MWL and the OIC do not only offer the international community a language to advance shared and universal values through locally plausible language and policies; they also underscore that faith and faith-based actors are not obstacles to peace, but essential partners on the path to coexistence, development, and prosperity. The MWL and OIC can also mobilize the leadership of Muslims in the West to engage in interfaith and intercultural dialogue that they can support.

## The Organization of Islamic Cooperation

Since its inception in 1969, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has commanded great respect in the Islamic world thanks to its efforts for interfaith and intercultural harmony, and to its continued role in conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance in the Muslim world. Adding to its influence is its sheer size and presence around the world. As the second-largest intergovernmental organization in the world

and the only one of such scale in the Muslim world, it has played a key role in resolving several conflicts involving or emerging in the Muslim world, including mediation efforts in Thailand and the Philippines, the settlement of the conflict between Jordan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, bridge-building between Bangladesh and Pakistan after the war of 1971, and reform activities in Somalia. These and many other notable OIC interventions highlight its acceptance and potential as an able representative voice in the wider Muslim world, and they show its persistence and long-term engagement with conflicts and their parties. Below are examples of the many mediatory efforts undertaken under the OIC’s banner.

### *The Philippines*

The conflict in the south of the Philippines can be traced back to 1935 when the islands of Mindanao and Sulu were added to the Philippines Commonwealth territory. This resulted in the marginalization of the local population.<sup>57</sup> By 1969, there were open hostilities between the government and the Moro Muslim rebel groups, which led the country’s Muslim community to call for self-determination. In the following years, the Moro National Liberal Front (MNLF) splintered into various groups or Moro Fronts, one being the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Their primary aim was to create an Islamic state within the Philippines.

In 1972, the OIC sent its first fact-finding mission to the Philippines. It then used the resulting report to appeal to the government and the MNLF to take part in negotiations and to carve out a peaceful solution to the crisis without jeopardizing the sovereignty of the country or its territorial integrity.<sup>58</sup> The MNLF was also granted observer status in the organization. The MNLF gaining such support from the OIC led the government to believe that the latter was possibly the only institution that could pressurize the MNLF into negotiations.

Throughout the process, the OIC rigorously adhered to the principles of international law and to respecting the terri-

56 Abbas Barzegar and Shawn Powers, “[Muslim NGO Could Help Counter Violent Extremism](#),” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2015.

57 Eric Gutierrez and Saturnino Borrás, *The Moro conflict: Landlessness and Misdirected State Policies*, East-West Center, 2004.

58 Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, *The Islamic World in the New Century: The Organization of the Islamic Conference*, Columbia University Press, November 9, 2010.

torial integrity of the Philippines. One of the reasons why Mindanao did not secede was the OIC's ability to convince the Moro Fronts to put aside their calls for secession and to work for autonomy within the state.<sup>59</sup> This posited the OIC as an honest mediator in the eyes of all the parties.

Intensive mediation efforts resulted in the OIC bringing the government and the MNLF to reach a peace agreement in 1996. This emphasized the general framework for peace in the south and nominated the MNLF leader Nur Misuari to be governor of the autonomous southern region. However, the parliament did not ratify the agreement, putting a pause to the peace efforts.

Nonetheless, the OIC's mediatory efforts continued, showing its high degree of perseverance and commitment to a long-term engagement with the conflict and its parties. In 2007, the OIC re-engaged the parties involved in the conflict to identify hurdles to the implementation of the 1996 peace agreement and to offer recommendations to improve its prospects. To that end, the OIC, in coordination with the Islamic Development Bank, has donated nearly \$16 million to the MNLF for poverty alleviation and the reconstruction of infrastructure in the southern Mindanao region.

Five joint working groups have been established on sharia and the judiciary, the political system and representation, education, natural resources, and issues of economic development. Their task is to supervise the implementation of the peace agreement and provide recommendations to aid the peace process.<sup>60</sup>

The OIC's support for the peace process encouraged the government and the Moro groups to keep negotiating. Finally, in 2019 the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao was formally established, bringing to an end nearly five decades of conflict between the government and Moro groups.

## Thailand

Insurgency in Thailand is predominantly present in the Muslim-majority provinces in the south.<sup>61</sup> When Thailand annexed Pattani in 1903, it also took in the areas of Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkhla that comprised about 1.8 million Muslims, which gave birth to the insurgency.<sup>62</sup> In 2014, the insurgency reached new heights and turned outright violent after army and police units were attacked and nearly 80 young Muslims were suffocated while in detention. Consequently, Thailand imposed martial law in most Muslim areas.<sup>63</sup>

Most of the Muslim world saw the conflict as a dispute between an oppressive Thai Buddhist state and its Muslim minority that called for the development of an autonomous government and the recognition of its culture and language as well as control over its resources and development.<sup>64</sup>

The OIC got involved in the conflict as a mediator because of Thailand's observer status in the organization but more importantly because the Thai government requested it to do so. It focused on reviewing the conditions of Thailand's Muslim minority communities in the south and primarily relied on mediation anchored by its diplomatic leverage with the government and its credibility within the Muslim community.

The OIC's efforts resulted in some easing of the conflict and eventually in eliminating some of the obstacles in negotiations. By 2006, the acts of violence and oppression experienced by Muslims had decreased dramatically following the OIC's efforts. Parties in the conflict were now ready to reframe their approach and lean instead on negotiation and dialogue, especially after interim Prime Minister Sarayud Chulanont apologized to the Muslims in the south that

59 Rizal G. Buendia, "The GRP-MNLF peace talks: Quo Vadis?", Southeast Asian Affairs, 2004.

60 Samir Al-Saadi, "IDB to Give \$16m for Moro Uplift", Arab News, November 13, 2007.

61 Anthony Smith, "Trouble in Thailand's Muslim South: Separatism, not Global Terrorism," Asia-Pacific Security Studies, December 2004.

62 International Crisis Group, [Southern Thailand: Insurgency, not Jihad](#), May 18, 2005.

63 Neil John Melvin, [Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, violence and the State in the Patani Insurgency](#), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, September 2007.

64 Imtiyaz Yusuf, "The Southern Thailand Conflict and The Muslim World," Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, September 18, 2007.

same year.<sup>65</sup> He even went as far as proposing setting up a special development zone incorporating the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla, and Satun, and hinted at the possibility of implementing sharia law in the south.

According to the OIC, its efforts were focused on reducing the obstacles facing negotiations on allowing Thai Muslims to enjoy their acquired rights as citizens. It would also aim at halting security authorities' acts of violence and oppression against them, so as to support the efforts to enthrone peace and stability in Thailand, within the framework of respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

A key achievement of the OIC in Thailand pertained to discrediting stereotypes that create unnecessary barriers to dialogue and resolution. In doing so, the OIC mission found that the unrest in Thailand was neither a result of religious discrimination nor necessarily the result of religion itself. Instead, the historical and cultural neglect of the south was more of a driver of the urgency.<sup>66</sup>

## Afghanistan

The most encouraging validations of the OIC's existing clout in Afghanistan are the facts that it has been physically present in the country with a dedicated office since 2011 and is currently engaging with various international agencies in delivering assistance that millions of Afghans need.

Most importantly, as an umbrella organization for the Muslim world, the OIC's mandate and actions are more acceptable to the Afghans. This is evident from the various initiative it has undertaken in recent years aimed at bridging the division among the country's civil and religious elite. Of note is the 2018 ulema conference co-hosted by the OIC and Saudi Arabia, moderated by the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the grand mufti of Egypt. This was part of the OIC's efforts to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan and to condemn terrorism and violent extremism within the framework of the true teachings of Islam.

In 2021, the OIC hosted an extraordinary session of its Council of Foreign Ministers<sup>67</sup> in Pakistan where member states discussed aid for the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. They pledged to make an effort to "unlock the financial and banking channels to resume liquidity and flow of financial and humanitarian assistance" in the country.<sup>68</sup> They also committed to providing assistance in the first quarter of 2022 through the Islamic Development Bank—a decision that was lauded by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as a great example of "our collective determination and action to help those most in need."

Not only does the OIC have the clout, the sensitivity, and the concern to spearhead real reforms in Afghanistan, it also has the right arsenal in the shape of a true understanding of Islam and its message of peace. In Islam, resolving conflicts between Muslims is considered one of the highest forms of worship. If there is one thing that can make the Taliban put aside their propensity to engage in conflict, provide havens to ill-intending militant outfits, and resist reforms, it is the religion that they keep closer to their heart more than anything else. It is this peaceful, progressive, and true teaching of Islam that needs to be retold to inspire Afghans to unite for their country, their people, and their future. The OIC is one narrator that they would be truly willing to listen to.

## Peace and Security Architecture

The OIC has a peace and security architecture that aids its efforts for mediation and conflict resolution. This flows from Article 1(6) of the OIC Charter, which aims at prompting interstate relations based on justice, mutual response, and good neighborliness to ensure global peace, security, and harmony. It reflects the commitment of member states to resolve their disputes through peaceful means and to refrain from the use or the threat of use of force in their relations.

65 Imtiaz Yusuf, "The Role of the Chularajmontri (Shaykh al-IslOEm) in Resolving Ethnoreligious Conflict in Southern Thailand." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, January 1, 2020.

66 Bangkok Post, "Bid to Keep South Off the OIC Agenda", June 2005.

67 The Council of Foreign Ministers is the main decision-making body of the OIC where representatives, usually the foreign ministers, from each of the 57 member states come together to deliberate recommendations and adopt policies around OIC activities. Extraordinary summits of the council, such as the one hosted in Pakistan, are for the specific purpose of addressing human rights violations in the Muslim world.

68 The News, "US Thanks Pakistan For Hosting 'Vital' OIC Session on Afghanistan", December 22, 2021.

Under the direct supervision of the secretary general, the OIC's Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit has as its main objective to strengthen the organization's role in mediation and preventive diplomacy as instruments of conflict prevention and resolution. It functions as a support unit within the OIC, primarily aimed at providing recommendations on different conflicts through scholarly and strategic analyses provided through its networks of think tanks. It is also focused on counterterrorism and serving as the secretariat for the Wise Persons Council and the special envoys of the secretary general.<sup>69</sup>

The OIC has a mandate for convening eminent persons from the Muslim world for advisory purposes and hence has immense influence through the Wise Persons Council. This body usually consists of persons having wide recognition in the Muslim world as leaders and who are respected for their wisdom, experience, knowledge, impartiality, and ability to provide guidance. The Wise Persons Council draws on Islamic principles on the importance of settling individual, societal, and interreligious conflicts. It takes inspiration from traditional and Islamic practices of engaging a third party to act as an arbiter for conflict resolution. In the Muslim world, in most cases when a body like the Wise Persons Council is engaged by conflicting parties, it becomes a moral obligation to abide by its arbitration.

Equally important are the special envoys of the secretary general, who can be tasked with identifying the root causes of conflicts as well as supporting and collaborating with regional and international organizations and their special envoys in mediation, reconciliation, and peace-making initiatives.

The OIC also has a permanent delegation in the EU and hosts a special envoy from the United States, and the influence it commands and its overarching presence in the Islamic world is a key indicator of the major role it can play toward stabilizing Afghanistan and its reconciliation with the rest of the world. The organization's long history of mediation, its peace and security architecture, its established good offices, and its Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit make it

well-suited for religious diplomacy and peace-building in the case of Afghanistan.

## The Muslim World League

For decades, the Muslim World League, which was founded in 1962, has been at the forefront of crisis response and providing humanitarian aid in the Muslim world and beyond. It has worked extensively to alleviate the suffering of millions of people in war, conflict, and disaster-hit areas.

The MWL has spearheaded several high-profile initiatives around the globe, projecting and promoting the true tolerant message of Islam as well as building bridges between cultures and communities through dialogue and cooperation. One unique initiative it has undertaken in recent years is using Islamic scholars as messengers of peace and utilizing their influence and reach to counter ideas calling for extremism, violence, and exclusion. The MWL has played an integral role in countering prejudice, religious discrimination, and the sectarian cacophony often associated with the Muslim world. It has reached out to prominent Jewish and Christian leaders around the globe to accentuate the message of inclusiveness, interfaith dialogue, and religious acceptance. In January 2022, the MWL's secretary general, Mohammad Al Issa, attended the commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, where he reiterated the league's mission of promoting tolerance and peace.<sup>70</sup>

The MWL has collaborated with the UN and made significant contributions to its Refugee Zakat Fund. It was among the few organizations that issued groundbreaking fatwas endorsing the use of zakat—the annual alms tax that Muslims are expected to pay as a religious duty—for refugees and internally displaced people through United Nations High Commission for Refugees.<sup>71</sup> Between \$200 billion and \$1 trillion of zakat is raised each year,<sup>72</sup> making it one of the largest forms of wealth transfer to the poor and destitute in the world. A lack of clerical consensus on the

69 Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, [Achieving Peace and Security in a World of Turmoil: An Arduous Challenge for the OIC](#), January 2019.

70 Donna Rachel Edmunds, [“Interfaith Prayers Led at Auschwitz by Most Senior Muslim to Visit to Date”](#), The Jerusalem Post, January 23, 2020.

71 The UN Refugee Agency, [Muslim World League, KSA, 2021](#).

72 Aamir Rehman and Francine Pickup, [Zakat for the SDGs](#), United Nations Development Programme, September 7, 2018.



permissibility to dole out zakat to secular or non-Muslim institutions remains a leading barrier for Muslim donors in channeling those funds to institutions such as the UN. The MWL's endorsement therefore a breakthrough for engagement between philanthropy rooted in Islamic traditions and secular institutions. It creates a significant ideological justification for Islamic principles on philanthropy to be mapped on the global humanitarian agenda.

Such actions indicate how the MWL has emerged as one of the leading humanitarian assistance providers in the world with an increased focus on holistic peace-building, international collaboration, and conflict resolution—particularly in Muslim-majority countries.

One of the significant achievements of the MWL is the 2019 Charter of Makkah, which supports religious and cultural diversity, anti-extremism, and legislation against hate and violence.<sup>73</sup> Conceptualized by the MWL and backed by over 1,000 religious scholars representing 128 countries, the charter promotes the equality of people regardless of their ethnicity, race, and nationality; shuns conflict based on religious and cultural divides; and promotes positive partnerships and effective interaction. It also lays great stress on women's empowerment, stating that women "should not be undermined by marginalizing their role, disrespecting their dignity, reducing their status, or impeding their opportunities, whether in religious, academic, political or social affairs. Their rights include equality of wages and opportunity."

The charter has become a guide for the MWL's operations around the world and helped it utilize its influence for broader cross-cultural, interreligious, and intra-religious bridge building. It has also elevated the MWL's stature as a global peacemaker. The organization has won international recognition for its rebuilding and rehabilitation work worldwide, with substantial contributions in the Muslim world.

While international donor organizations and the West are struggling to provide timely humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and to win over the trust and support of its people, the MWL has had a sustained presence in the region through its impressive services in the religious and social-uplift spheres. In the last five to six years, its efforts

have managed to reach close to 9.4 million Afghans in the form of social services, education, health care, community development, humanitarian aid, and emergency relief.<sup>74</sup>

This circle of MWL influence could be an excellent catalyst for reforms as well as bring real change in Afghanistan. As it has done on several occasions, the MWL can work with religious scholars to promote the actual, moderate teachings of Islam among the Taliban regime to encourage them to move away from their radical stances. Guided by the Charter of Makkah, it can utilize religious leaders in Afghanistan and work with the Taliban to alter their rigid perspectives that have so far discouraged the West from engaging with them. For example, one of the key areas of concern for the world is the treatment of women under the regime. As noted above, the charter clearly lays down the rights of women, and the MWL can use its good offices and religious influence as well as associations to relay this message to the Taliban and encourage them to respect women's rights.

*The MWL has emerged as one of the leading humanitarian assistance providers in the world with an increased focus on holistic peace-building, international collaboration, and conflict resolution—particularly in Muslim-majority countries.*

Peace-building in Afghanistan is imperative for regional stability and Pakistan's support is key to making it a success. In 2021, the MWL leveraged its network of religious leaders to promote a faith-based dialogue across the two countries, using its moral credentials and capital to weaken religious extremism, sectarianism, and militancy in these countries. The organization arranged a special conference of some 1,200 religious scholars from Afghanistan and Pakistan to discuss a path toward peace in the region.<sup>75</sup> This underlines how the MWL commands influence in both the countries

<sup>73</sup> Muslim World League, [Charter of Makkah](#), July 4, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Muslim World League, [The Muslim World League Relief Initiatives](#), June 16, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Arabiya News, ["Muslim World League Commends Truce Between Afghan Government, Taliban"](#), June 21, 2018.

and can act as a mediator at the state level, along with facilitating engagement between the religious elites.

The MWL has a good reputation in the West, especially with the US government. In its 2019 Country Reports on Terrorism, the Department of State commended MWL Secretary General Issa for his efforts in pressing for “a message of interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and peaceful coexistence with global religious authorities, including Muslim imams outside the Arab world”.<sup>76</sup>

There is scope for the MWL to utilize its network to share the lessons drawn from its engagement in Afghanistan, as in the conference mentioned above. This network can be the bridge that the world needs to engage the Taliban and initiate dialogue with them on reforms, security, and human rights. With the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan getting worse by the day, the sooner this bridge is arrived at, the better.

The OIC and the MWL (which has observer status in the former) present case studies of two different but interconnected actors that the West can use to engage with the Taliban regime and the people in Afghanistan. Whereas the OIC is the world’s second-largest intergovernmental organization with a mandate that represents the national interest of nearly all Muslim-majority countries in the world, spanning North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, the MWL is an international Islamic nongovernmental organization with a focus on advancing the moderate values of Islam within the same geographical region and beyond. Their values, systems and objectives make them natural partners for Europe and the United States in their engagement in Afghanistan. Their unique operations and strengths show not only their relevancy and shared objectives with the West in the country, but also the breadth of possibilities such pan-Islamic organizations present for the West to establish productive engagement there.

## Challenges to Religious Diplomacy in Afghanistan

Faith-based organizations can act as a catalyst for engaging political actors and religious leaders for diplomatic cooperation and peace-building interventions. They can also provide critical links for nongovernmental organizations, international donor agencies and the Western world to reach out to local faith communities and civil society for timely humanitarian assistance.

Pan-Islamic faith-based organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Muslim World League can potentially revive pathways of political cooperation between Afghanistan and the West to resolve political, economic, and security challenges that emerge from religion. However, these organizations can be stalled by certain limitations in terms of pursuing religious diplomacy to engage with the Taliban regime.

In Afghanistan, the traditional institutions (local councils such as the Shura and the Loya Jirga) and religious ones (madrassas and ulemas) legitimize political authority and shape the moral values, collective practices, and political beliefs of the local population. Despite performing numerous civil society functions, religious leaders lack autonomy and often have a one-directional relationship<sup>77</sup> with the government and other development actors, who use their voice to gain political legitimacy and direct access to project beneficiaries.

The government makes limited efforts to sanction an autonomous role to these religious leaders for facilitating dialogue and supporting peace-building operations. The latter express frustration that their advice is only sought when the government needs to garner support for its policies.

Another challenge is a lack of familiarity of international donor agencies with the political sensitivities and ethnoreligious realities in the countries they operate in.<sup>78</sup> This partly explains the lack of engagement between religious leaders and the international community, which tends to deem them militant fundamentalists and exporters of terrorism. This

76 US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, [Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Saudi Arabia](#), 2019.

77 Kaja Borchgrevink, [Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan](#), International Peace Research Institute, November 2007.

78 Ibid.

stereotyping of religious entities such as the Taliban and radical madrassas in Afghanistan makes it difficult to engage them as valuable partners in the political and diplomatic realm—further limiting their participation in civil society.

Over the last decade, the international donor community has increased its involvement in areas marred by political instability and conflict.<sup>79</sup> A thorough analysis of local civil society organizations shows that many of them lack the infrastructural facilities, human resources, and financial backing to successfully operate in conflict zones around the globe. By contrast, faith-based organizations like the OIC have a robust infrastructure with several regional offices and an extensive experience in different areas of conflict resolution, diplomacy, and peace-building. Similarly, the MWL has emerged as one of the leading nongovernmental Islamic organizations in the world. It provides humanitarian assistance, mobilizes monetary support from donor countries, and fosters dialogue and cooperation across the Western and Muslim worlds to fight violence and ensure peaceful coexistence. These organizations are acquainted with the ethnoreligious realities of Afghanistan and adept at employing the kind of religious diplomacy needed to engage with the Taliban in the context of peacemaking and the looming humanitarian crisis.

The return of the Taliban has naturally resulted in a new pattern of distrust among Afghans, who are reluctant to put their faith in Western actors that they deem at odds with the internal dynamics of the country. However, these faith-based organizations do not perceive religion in black and white terms, unlike international donor agencies, and they can win over the trust and support of the local communities.

In helping Afghanistan come out of its conundrum, faith-based organizations and the international community have a crucial role to play together. With the help of the United States and European countries, the OIC and the MWL can pursue religious diplomacy in the context of conflict resolution in Afghanistan, along with providing a robust framework for the rebuilding process and future engagement with the Taliban.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The politicization of religion and the erratic nature of conflict have redefined the conventional notions of diplomacy in confronting ongoing disputes. This opens new doors for religious actors and faith-based organizations to actively participate in peace-building and conflict resolution. Religious diplomacy accentuates how identities are constructed in the context of ethnoreligious factors and how religion empowers political behaviors and opinions, particularly in the Muslim world. Therefore, religion can play a meaningful role by providing opportunities for engagement and by motivating actors, especially ideologically driven ones, into action. Given religion's significance in Afghanistan as a source of conflict and of peace-building, it is unfortunate that the Europe and the United States have been ill-equipped to manage religious issues and communicating to religious actors in the country.

Analysts agree that Western engagement in Afghanistan needs to continue but that it needs to be reimagined. Europe and United States will need to revitalize their efforts to engage formally the religious sector in peace-building, conflict mitigation and counterterrorism. However, to make progress in this, they will need to be receptive to collaborative action and alternative methods of conflict resolution.

As Europe and the United States consider how best to promote their interests in Afghanistan, when military intervention is not an option and recognition of the Taliban is still off the table, they should look into religious diplomacy through pan-Islamic organizations as a long-term solution. The historical impact and growing potential of organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Muslim World League provides a very clear starting point for such an endeavor.

Europe and the United States must develop a multifaceted framework that includes Track Two religious diplomacy, on-the-ground action and initiatives that prioritize moderate, more tolerant values of Islam in Afghanistan. The following recommendations provide general guidelines as to how this might be successfully achieved.

- Create a network of religious leaders and institutions that can be engaged throughout the complete conflict

<sup>79</sup> World Bank, [Engaging Civil Society Organizations in Conflict-Affected and Fragile States: Three African Country Case Studies](#), 2005.

resolution cycle, starting from conflict prevention and mediation. These can serve as a communication link between opposing sides and initiate peace-building.

- Initiate consultations with pan-Islamic organizations and religious community leaders to develop a concrete engagement plan with the Taliban and important actors in neighboring countries. Make use of these organizations' networks and outreach in Afghanistan with local actors, especially sister faith-based and nongovernmental organizations, to expedite conflict prevention and peace-building efforts for truly localized impact.
- Keeping in mind the simmering humanitarian crisis, significantly bolster the means, mechanism and resources of pan-Islamic organizations already involved in large-scale relief and development aid in the Muslim world to be directed toward Afghanistan.
- Engage a network of diverse sectarian and ethnic religious scholars within various pan-Islamic organizations to exercise their religious language, moral authority, and spiritual legitimacy to dissuade the use of violence against unarmed civilians, especially individuals from minority or marginalized groups most susceptible to such attacks in Afghanistan.
- Special emphasis should be placed on moderate religious leaders and organizations. Their role has been widely acknowledged to be crucial and effective during conflicts. Europe and the United States should support such leaders, who should be positioned as partners in dialogue and cooperation to counteract fundamentalist actors fueling the conflict.
- Ensure that this network's objectives and operations are developed in full awareness of an inclusive peace-building framework where special consideration and representation is allotted to communities marginalized along gender, ethnic, and tribal lines.
- Religious leaders from different denominations in Islam should jointly identify and share core texts from the Quran as well as prominent theological writings and pedagogical materials that could be utilized to reject radical ideologies supporting violent extremism, and that promote the safeguarding of human rights,

the promotion of peace, and the primacy of negotiations and diplomacy over coercion.

- Establish training programs for religious leaders and actors on intercultural and interreligious communication so as to better understand religious, ethnic, and tribal differences as well as their consequences. They should also be trained on the use of traditional and new media.
- Establish a rapid-response expert group to be comprised of local clergy and other religious leaders (including women and youth who play leadership roles in their religious communities), which can be deployed to ensure an on-the-ground, immediate response to the eruption of violence. This may require training in conflict resolution and mediation so that they are better able to help contain violence.
- Establish a fund that can support the deployment of technical and human resources for greater outreach and networking, human rights monitoring, conflict prevention and reconciliation.

Creative religious diplomacy can be an effective policy option for the transatlantic alliance in Afghanistan. Operationalizing the recommendations above could start through something as simple as utilizing existing transatlantic forums to integrate religious leaders in helping fill the gaps previously experienced by the West and in paving the way for future engagement in Afghanistan.

In retrospect, and to quote Henry Kissinger, "it was not possible to turn Afghanistan into a modern democracy, but a degree of creative diplomacy might have worked better in overcoming terrorism."<sup>80</sup> It may not be too late to follow that advice when new, more formidable challenges lie ahead, as evident from the implications of the West's exit from Afghanistan, the rise of China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A thoughtful reimagination of European and US efforts is required.

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80 Henry Kissinger, "[Henry Kissinger on why America failed in Afghanistan](#)", *The Economist*, August 25, 2021.

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