In 1995, many Islamists seemed torn about the policies and practices of the emerging Taliban in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the Taliban could be seen as freedom fighters (in opposition to Western intervention) to create an Islamic society gov-
erned according to strict adherence to Islamic law, or on the other hand, Taliban leaders were implementing extremely repressive measures not only against the Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs – that had long coexisted with Afghanistan’s majority Muslims – but also against Muslims. Why did they create such uneasiness among Islamists? The follow-
ing examines transnational dialogues among Islamists as they debated whether or not to support the Taliban.

The late 20th century was marked by a wide range of political and societal reforms and changes that have redefined the world of Islam. This period saw the emergence of a network of Islamist research institutes, the formation of newly formed Islamist political parties, and a range of publications available across national borders. Numerous Islamist web sites, for example, circulated petitions and decla-
rations condemning the Taliban’s repressive policies toward women. ‘This is not true Islam’, they declared to an audience of Mus-
lims and non-Muslims alike.

Pluralism within transnational Islamist debates

The problem for integrativist Islamists was not that their strategies directly conflicted with the policies of the Taliban since the contexts of each political struggle were quite different. Rather, difficulties arose around the boundaries of justifiable behav-

iour. Working through democratic institu-
tions, even if it entails accepting the right of secular parties to participate in government. When, by the mid-
1980s, a number of Arab regimes were faced with economic and other crises that brought increasing political dissent, many opted for limited liberalization as a mecha-
nism for channelling dissent into control-
able institutions. A number of Islamist groups, with affiliations for Banna’s in-
tegrativist thinking, opted to enter into these political systems and contest public elections for state offices. They formed po-
litical parties, created civil society organiza-
tions, and formulated party platforms. Over the next two decades, a distinct public sphere emerged around the dialogue among these integrativists, with such wide-
ly heard and engaged voices as those of Rashid Ghannouchi, Hassoub Tuibi, and Abl-
ak Karim Soroush.

Within this transnational Islamist public sphere, debates began to emerge around the central norms of this integra-
tivist frame. Innumerable voices weighed in on the question of Islam and democracy, while newly formed Islamist political parties shared their experiences, both successes and failures. The late 1990s also saw the emergence of a network of Islamist research institutes, many of which are open to for-
geiin and non-Muslim researchers in an ef-
fort to demonstrate their integrativist in-
practice. Along with mechanisms such as the internet, these research institutes have
praises women whose efforts had been inte-
corporate into the Islamic norms of consul-
tation and consensus; political violence is justifiable in contexts in which such oppor-

tunities are not available. The experiences around the Taliban arose not because of the Talib-

an’s armed struggle to establish a state, but because the Taliban’s demand that men grow their beards and beards.

Women under the Taliban regime

A decree issued in November 1996 by the Talib-

ani’s religious police, for example, placed the following restrictions on women:

Women, you should not step outside your residence.

You go outside the house, you should not be like other women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing much cosmetics.

Women have been subjected to virtual house arrest, and movement in public is highly restricted, even when wearing the obligatory headscarf. Working women must be forbidden to leave their homes, and tailors are like-
wise forbidden to take the measurements of female customers. Girls’ schools have been closed entirely, as were many boys’ schools following the prohibition of female teachers in male classrooms. And of course, women are forbidden to participate in political and religious activities, but also from even voicing issues within the public sphere. This treatment of women has been ex-
tremely problematic for integrativist Islamists, but because of its highly repressive domes-
tic policies toward Afghan Muslims. In this regard, three issues of contention stand out as significant in integrativist debates about the Taliban: the role of women, pluralism, and beards.

What is Islamic about a beard?

Perhaps the issue that has drawn the most outrage from integrativist Islamists concerns the Taliban’s demand that men grow their beards. In a decree issued in December 1996, the Taliban declared that men are not only forbidden to shave their beards, but that their beards must be at least a fist in length. To further enforce this regulation, any man who shaves or/and cuts his beard within less than one-and-a-half-month in-
terval should be arrested and imprisoned until his beard becomes bushy.

For integrativist Islamists, many of whom are clean shaven to serve as an example, debates have unfolded in transnational Is-
lamist public spheres including on the internet, at conferences and workshops, and in a

range of publications available across na-
tional borders. Numerous Islamist web sites, for example, circulated petitions and decla-
rations condemning the Taliban’s repressive policies toward women. ‘This is not true Islam’, they declared to an audience of Mus-
lins and non-Muslims alike.

Notes


2. Decline reported by Reuters, 6 November 2000.


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