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THE FAILURE OF JIHAD AS STATE-BUILDING: ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY AND THE REPRODUCTION OF TRADITIONAL SEGMENTATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the structural limits of political Islam as a state-building project through a critical engagement with Olivier Roy's theory of Islamist failure in Afghanistan. Drawing on Roy's analysis of the Afghan jihad (1979–1992), the study investigates why Islamist movements reproduced rather than transformed Afghanistan's tribal, ethnic and patronage-based social structures. Through historical-comparative analysis and process tracing, the article demonstrates how Islamist actors became embedded within pre-existing networks of power, failing to construct autonomous political institutions. This study extends Roy's framework by tracing the diffusion of "Islamized segmentation" into post-Soviet Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan, and its influence on later transnational militant networks, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The findings argue that jihad's failure as a state-building project was not merely military or organizational but fundamentally ideological: Islamist political imagination, centered on the umma and moral legitimacy, proved structurally insufficient for building durable territorial and bureaucratic authority. Evidence from the Taliban's second emirate confirms the continued relevance of this argument. Political Islam in Afghanistan remains more effective as a legitimizing framework for fragmented power than as a model for modern state formation.

Keywords: Political Islam, Afghanistan, state-building, segmentary society, jihad, qawm, Central Asia, Taliban.

Introduction. The resurgence of the Taliban in August 2021 and the subsequent establishment of the "Islamic Emirate" revived a long-standing debate among scholars of International Relations and Comparative Politics: can political Islam serve as a viable framework for state-building, or does it inevitably dissolve into the traditional social structures it claims to transcend? This question is not new. In his landmark 1994 study The Failure of Political Islam, Olivier Roy advanced a provocative and counter-intuitive thesis: the Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation (1979–1989) and the subsequent civil war (1989–1992) did not produce a new Islamic state or even a coherent Islamist political structure; instead, it "reproduced traditional segmentation" by reconstituting tribal and ethnic solidarities under an Islamic veneer (Roy 1994, 165).

Roy's starting point is deceptively simple. The major resistance parties – the Jamaat-i Islami, the two factions of Hizb-i Islami, and the Shiite parties were organizationally Islamist, suggesting that the jihad had created the conditions for a genuinely new political order. Yet this apparent Islamization of the resistance masked a deeper continuity. Islam's ideological dominance over the Afghan resistance was total, that's why no nationalist or secular alternative could have established itself in its place (Roy 1994, 147). But ideological dominance did not translate into structural innovation. On the contrary, the jihadist parties operated within a social landscape defined by what anthropologists call segmentary

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organization – what Afghans know as qawm and were ultimately absorbed by it rather than transforming it.

Roy's argument has generated significant scholarly debate. Some, like Gilles Kepel (2002) and François Burgat (2003), share his scepticism about Islamism's transformative capacity, identifying a broader pattern of ideological overreach across the Muslim world. Others contest his framework: Peter Mandaville (2007) argues that Roy underestimates the adaptive and transnational dimensions of Islamist politics, while Roy himself, in his later work Globalised Islam (2004), substantially revised his position to account for deterritorialized forms of Muslim identity that operate outside the state-building paradigm altogether. What remains underexplored, however, is the mechanism through which traditional segmentation reproduces itself under Islamist conditions – and whether this mechanism travelled beyond Afghanistan into the post-Soviet space.

This article revisits Roy's thesis with three objectives. First, it systematizes Roy's empirical analysis of the Afghan resistance to show precisely how and why Islamist ideology failed to generate new political structures. Second, it situates Roy's argument within broader theoretical debates on state-building, segmentary societies and the Islamic political imagination. Third, it extends the Afghan case to Central Asia, arguing that the "transfer of traditional segmentations" Roy identified in Afghanistan (Roy 1994, 166) provided a template for post-Soviet Islamist mobilization in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – a transfer made possible by shared patterns of qawm-based solidarity, cross-border kinship networks and the organizational infrastructure of the Afghan jihad itself.

The central research question is therefore: how did the Islamist ideological project of jihad in Afghanistan (1979–1992) reproduce, rather than overcome, traditional social segmentation and what does this reveal about the structural limits of political Islam as a state-building force? The article argues that this failure was not contingent – attributable to Soviet military superiority, Pakistani interference or American disengagement, but structurally determined, rooted in the epistemological mismatch between the Islamic political imagination and the institutional imperatives of modern statehood: territorial sovereignty, bureaucratic extraction and the monopoly over legitimate violence.

Theoretical Framework: Segmentary Society, the Islamic Political Imagination, and the State

The Segmentary Society and the Qawm

To understand Roy's analysis, one must first grasp the concept of the segmentary society as it applies to Afghanistan. Roy defines qawm as solidarity groups whose sociological boundaries are fluid and context-dependent – encompassing tribal clans, endogamous professional groups, village or valley communities, ethnic subgroups, extended families, or patronage networks formed around an influential khan (Roy 1994, 152). These groups, Roy emphasizes, determine every Afghan's primary allegiance and constitute the foundational unit of social identity.

The qawm is not merely a tribal unit in the narrow sense. As Nazif Shahrani (1986) has demonstrated in his ethnographic work on the Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan, qawm operates as a flexible, nested identity that expands or contracts depending on context – lineage at one level, village at another, ethnic group at yet another. The critical feature is that loyalty is horizontal and personal, not vertical and institutional. A structurally analogous dynamic has been theorized by James C. Scott (2009) in his comparative study of highland Southeast Asia: segmentary societies resist state incorporation precisely by maintaining multiple, overlapping sovereignties that frustrate centralized extraction and administrative legibility. While Scott's framework was developed for a geographically distinct context, its core insight – that segmentary organization functions as structural resistance to state penetration, applies with equal force to the Afghan case Roy describes.

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Roy's crucial observation is that the Afghan jihad did not dissolve these solidarities but reconstituted them in new institutional forms. The "new qawm" emerging from the war, he notes, were organized around poles of power and the distribution of external resources rather than inherited genealogical ties (Roy 1994, 166). The form was modern – political parties, military commands, international aid networks – but the content remained traditional: patronage, nepotism and the redistribution of goods to sustain loyalty. This is the paradox at the heart of Roy's argument: Islamist modernity as the vehicle for pre-political continuity.

The Islamic Political Imagination: Umma vs. Qawm

Roy's analysis of the Afghan jihad must be understood within his broader critique of what he calls the "Islamic political imagination". Islamist movements, Roy contends, conceive of politics through the paradigm of the original community of believers – the umma – in which there is no separation between religious, legal and political spheres, and no autonomous political space governed by its own institutional logic (Roy 1994, 20–21). This imagination is preoccupied with the state yet structurally incapable of theorizing it as a modern institution.

This argument finds significant support in Wael Hallaq's The Impossible State (2013), which argues from a different angle that the sharia-based political order is not merely different from the modern state but structurally incompatible with it. Where the modern state demands sovereignty, legal uniformity and bureaucratic impersonality, the Islamic political imagination – as both Roy and Hallaq suggest – rests on ethical legitimation, personal authority and the diffuse sovereignty of the umma. The tension between umma and qawm is therefore not incidental to the Afghan case but constitutive of it.

Jihad, as Roy defines it, was theoretically designed to produce exactly this rupture: by appealing to the umma, it addressed each Muslim as an individual believer rather than as a member of a corporate group, directly challenging the logic of qawm-based solidarity. In practice, however, as Roy demonstrates, two centuries of Afghan history show that the tactics of jihad have consistently followed those of tribal war (Roy 1994, 153). The universalist discourse of the umma was instrumentalized to serve the particularist logic of the qawm. Islamist ideology provided the idiom; traditional segmentation provided the structure.

State-Building and Its Absence

The literature on state-building in Afghanistan provides a crucial backdrop to Roy's argument. Antonio Giustozzi's work has traced two related phenomena: the historical pattern of "negotiated statehood" in which power was distributed among multiple actors rather than concentrated in a bureaucratic center (2000), and the way in which post-jihad warlordism actively prevented the reconstitution of central authority (2008). Barnett R. Rubin (2002) argues that the destruction of the Afghan state during the anti-Soviet war created a political marketplace in which armed factions competed for external rents rather than building internal capacity – a rentier dynamic that made external patronage structurally preferable to domestic institution-building. Amin Saikal (2004) emphasizes that Afghan modernity has historically been fragile, undermined by the persistence of micro-societies governed by custom rather than law.

Roy's contribution to this literature is to specify the ideological mechanism behind this failure. The mujahidin did not lack opportunity. They lacked an ideological framework that conceived of the state as a legitimate objective. Jihad, as Roy argues, recognizes no bounded political space and no institutional state: its horizon is the umma, and the state (dawla) figures only as a provisional and ultimately secondary incarnation of the Muslim community (milla), never as an end in itself (Roy 1994, 154). The ethical model at the heart of jihad actively forecloses the kind of impersonal, rule-bound institution-building that modern statehood requires.

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Taken together, these three dimensions – the resilience of qawm-based solidarity, the ethical rather than institutional logic of the Islamic political imagination, and the historical absence of bureaucratic state capacity – constitute the analytical architecture through which Roy's argument and this article's extension of it, must be understood. It is the intersection of these three factors, not any one of them in isolation that explains why the Afghan jihad reproduced rather than transformed the social order it sought to supersede.

Methods

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining close textual analysis, historical-comparative analysis and process tracing. The primary analytical object is Roy's ninth chapter, "Afghanistan: Jihad and Traditional Society", in The Failure of Political Islam (1994, 147–167), read in conjunction with the book's theoretical introduction. This chapter is selected not because it represents the totality of Roy's argument which extends across the full volume, but because it constitutes his most sustained and empirically grounded engagement with the mechanisms through which Islamist ideology interacts with pre-political social structure. Close reading of this text allows for a systematic reconstruction of Roy's causal logic, distinguishing his empirical claims from his theoretical propositions and identifying the points at which his framework requires updating or extension.

The historical-comparative component situates Roy's claims within the broader secondary literature on Afghan political history, Islamist movements and post-Soviet Central Asian security. Roy's propositions are cross-referenced with the historical record of the Afghan resistance (1979–1992) and evaluated against subsequent scholarly assessments – including those that contest or revise his conclusions. The comparisons are structured rather than illustrative: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are selected as extension cases not arbitrarily but because they share the specific combination of factors Roy identifies as constitutive of "Islamized segmentation" – pre-existing qawm-type solidarity structures, exposure to the Afghan jihad's organizational networks and post-Soviet state weakness that created conditions for Islamist mobilization.

Process tracing is employed to identify the causal mechanisms through which traditional segmentation reproduced itself under Islamist conditions – specifically, the sequence by which jihadist parties appropriated, rather than dismantled, existing patronage networks. Following Beach and Pedersen (2013), the goal is not to test a hypothesis against a large-N dataset but to trace the within-case causal pathway: how did the ideological project of jihad, despite its universalist ambitions, generate outcomes structurally indistinguishable from pre-Islamic tribal politics? This within-case logic is then applied comparatively to the Central Asian cases to assess whether the same mechanism operated across different institutional contexts.

The article does not generate new primary data. Its contribution is theoretical and synthetic: to reconstruct Roy's framework with greater analytical precision, to situate it within contemporary debates on state-building and political Islam and to extend its explanatory reach into a post-Soviet regional context that Roy himself did not systematically address. The principal limitation of this approach is its dependence on secondary sources and on a single theoretical interlocutor. Future research employing fieldwork-based primary data, particularly oral histories from Afghan and Central Asian Islamist actors, would significantly strengthen the empirical foundations of the argument advanced here.

Results and Analysis: The Reproduction of Segmentation in the Afghan Jihad

The Politicization of the Resistance: Three Parameters

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Roy identifies three interconnected parameters that defined the political organization of the Afghan resistance – parameters that, taken together, reveal the structural logic through which Islamist ideology was simultaneously adopted and subverted by traditional social forces (Roy 1994, 149).

The first is the ideologization of political life: confronted with Soviet-backed Marxism, Islam was reconceived not merely as a religious framework but as a comprehensive political ideology capable of mobilizing mass resistance. The second is the organizational imperative: obtaining weapons and external funding required affiliation with one of the Pakistan-based resistance parties, creating new patronage dependencies between foreign-based party leaderships and local field commanders. The third and analytically most significant, is the persistence of traditional solidarities – tribal brotherhoods, ethnic networks, clan loyalties and patronage relationships, beneath the surface of these modern political forms.

What makes these three parameters analytically powerful is not each one individually but their interaction. The ideologization of Islam provided the legitimating idiom; the party system provided the organizational shell; but traditional solidarities provided the actual social content. The result was a form of political modernity that was modern in appearance, party congresses, ideological programs, international connections, yet reproduced pre-political loyalties in its internal logic. This is the central paradox Roy identifies and the one this article seeks to extend: Islamist organizational modernity as the vehicle for traditional social continuity.

The evidence for this paradox is visible in the geography of party affiliation itself. Rather than cutting across existing ethnic and regional boundaries, as a genuinely ideological mass movement might be expected to do, the major resistance parties mapped closely onto pre-existing solidarity networks. Hizb-i Islami under Gulbuddin Hekmatyar drew its core constituency disproportionately from Pashtun Ghilzai networks, reproducing the ethnic and sub-ethnic geography of qawm loyalty under an Islamist banner. Jamiat-i Islami under Burhanuddin Rabbani was similarly anchored in Tajik ethnic solidarity, particularly in the Panjshir Valley and the northeast. The parties did not transcend segmentation, they provided a new institutional vocabulary for its expression and crucially, a new mechanism for its external funding.

Tribal War vs. Jihad: The Continuity of Tactics

Roy's most striking empirical claim concerns the tactical continuity between tribal war and jihad. He distinguishes two traditional Afghan models of conflict: tribal war, which operates within the framework of ordinary society – localized, temporally bounded, oriented toward plunder and prestige rather than territorial conquest – and jihad, which theoretically demands a radical break with these logics by subordinating group interest to divine command (Roy 1994, 152–153).

In practice, however, the distinction collapsed. Across two centuries of Afghan history, the tactics of jihad have followed those of tribal war: temporal discontinuity, relative restraint toward civilians, preference for demonstration over annihilation and rivalry among qawm chiefs (Roy 1994, 153). The conclusion Roy draws is among his most incisive: jihad produced no tactical or strategic innovation, only a new register of legitimation. The Islamist parties fought like tribal militias but justified their actions in the language of divine command.

This finding deserves emphasis beyond Roy's own formulation. The legitimation function was not trivial, it allowed new elites, particularly educated Islamist intellectuals without traditional khan status, to claim authority over men who would not otherwise have followed them. But legitimation without institution-building is precisely what distinguished the Afghan jihad from successful revolutionary state-building projects elsewhere. Where the Vietnamese NLF or the Chinese Communist Party used ideological mobilization to construct new administrative and military hierarchies, the Afghan mujahidin used Islamic legitimation to occupy existing social hierarchies

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without transforming them. The ideological energy of jihad was absorbed by the qawm rather than displacing it.

The structural consequence was what Roy describes as the resistance's "strategic immobility" (Roy 1994, 155), an inability to translate military presence into political authority. The destruction of state apparatus in liberated zones was less a strategic objective than a symbolic act; the reassertion of solidarity space against an alien modernity, rather than the construction of an alternative political order.

The Refusal of the State: Military Bases as Reconstituted Qawm

The markaz, the mujahidin military base, offers perhaps the most revealing evidence for Roy's argument. In organizational terms, the markaz appeared to represent a genuinely new institution, a fortified camp with specialized functions, external supply lines and a command hierarchy that cut across village-level social organization. Roy, however, identifies its deeper social logic as the reconstitution of qawm solidarity around a new type of chief (Roy 1994, 159).

The commanders who led these bases, formerly students and young intellectuals without traditional prestige, reproduced the behavioral repertoire of the khan, open hospitality, redistribution of resources, personal loyalty networks. The title khan itself migrated to attach to their names. What had changed was the social origin of the elite; what had not changed was the political grammar through which authority was exercised and legitimated. This is a crucial distinction. It means that even where new men rose through the jihad, they did so by conforming to traditional authority structures rather than by creating new ones.

The implications for state-building are direct. A modern state requires impersonal bureaucratic authority, rule-governed institutions that function independently of the personal qualities of their occupants. The markaz produced precisely the opposite, hyper-personalized authority structures in which loyalty was owed to the commander as an individual, not to an office or an institution. There was no mujahidin administration, no civilian enrollment, no alternative economy. The private economy functioned without significant interference from the resistance (Roy 1994, 159). The professional soldier was devalued in favor of the volunteer believer, a cultural preference that was simultaneously a structural barrier to the standing armies and bureaucratic extractive capacity that state formation requires.

Masud's Exception and Its Limits

Roy acknowledges one partial exception to this pattern – Ahmad Shah Masud. Among the several hundred Afghan mujahidin commanders, Masud alone attempted to develop a genuinely modern military strategy, specializing his troops, creating a strike force recruited independently of qawm networks and establishing collective institutions, including the Northern Supervisory Council (shura-ye nazar) in 1985, with functional commissions for culture, health, finance and legal affairs (Roy 1994, 161–163). These commissions, Roy suggests, represented the embryo of future ministries, the closest the resistance came to proto-state institution-building.

Yet Masud's experiment reveals the ceiling as much as the possibility of modernization within the Afghan context. At the village level, traditional structures were left entirely intact, local chiefs' prerogatives were respected as a condition of Masud's own authority. More fundamentally, his army remained an ethnically Tajik force, with minimal Pashtun participation (Roy 1994, 163). Masud could build modern military institutions within an ethnic solidarity framework, he could not transcend that framework. As Roy observes, ethnicity proved to be not merely a residual limit on modernization but potentially a product of it, the more rationalized the military organization, the more sharply its ethnic boundaries were drawn.

This finding has broader theoretical significance. It suggests that the obstacle to state-building in Afghanistan was not simply the absence of capable leadership or organizational vision. Masud

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possessed both. The obstacle was structural. The qawm logic was not an external constraint that a sufficiently skilled leader could overcome, but a constitutive feature of the social landscape within which any political project had to operate. Partial modernization was possible, systemic transformation was not.

New Segmentations: War Entrepreneurs and the Foundations of Regional Diffusion

The Soviet withdrawal in February 1989 did not resolve the tensions Roy had identified; it intensified them. The post-withdrawal period saw the decline of the traditional Pashtun aristocracy and the consolidation of a new elite, Islamist intellectuals, small warlords, mullahs and neofundamentalist emigrant intellectuals, whose power derived entirely from the war economy rather than from inherited social position (Roy 1994, 164). These figures became war entrepreneurs, actors for whom the continuation of conflict was not merely a political preference but an economic necessity.

Critically, these new elites did not construct a new state. They constructed new segmentations. The Islamist party structure had been superimposed on traditional qawm organization not to replace it but to provide it with new resources and a new legitimating language. The outcome, as Roy formulates it, was not the imposition of political modernity but the transfer of traditional segmentation and power into a new institutional system (Roy 1994, 165). The new qawm were organized around the distribution of arms, subsidies, humanitarian aid and eventually narcotics, currencies of loyalty that were supplied, ultimately, by external patrons rather than generated by domestic institution-building.

This "internationalization" of the jihad economy is the analytical bridge between Roy's Afghan case and the Central Asian developments this article addresses in the following section. The organizational networks, legitimating ideologies and patronage structures that the Afghan jihad had constructed did not dissolve with the Soviet withdrawal. They became available for export. The IMU and the Tajik Islamist opposition did not emerge from nowhere; they emerged from a regional environment that had been thoroughly restructured by a decade of "Islamized segmentation", a term that captures precisely the hybrid form Roy identifies: traditional social logic in an Islamist institutional frame. It is to this diffusion that the article now turns.

Discussion: From Afghanistan to Central Asia and Beyond

Roy's Thesis Revisited: The Taliban Then and Now

Roy completed his analysis before the Taliban's first emirate (1996–2001) and long before their return to power in August 2021. The predictive power of his framework across this temporal distance is itself analytically significant – it suggests that what he identified was not a contingent feature of a particular moment in Afghan politics but a structural characteristic of the social landscape within which any political project in Afghanistan must operate.

The Taliban's first regime confirmed Roy's diagnosis with almost schematic clarity. Ahmed Rashid (2000) documented how the "Islamic Emirate" of 1996–2001 was less a state than a coalition of madrasa-educated Pashtun commanders who administered justice through a mobile, personalistic system rather than a bureaucratic one. Tax collection was irregular and locally negotiated; judicial authority depended on the personal reputation of individual commanders rather than on any codified institutional procedure; and the movement's internal cohesion rested on personal loyalty to Mullah Omar rather than on shared ideological conviction expressed through institutional channels. This was Roy's markaz writ large – a solidarity network with Islamic legitimation and no state.

The Taliban's second emirate has demonstrated greater pragmatism in certain domains, seeking international diplomatic recognition, attempting to centralize customs revenue and maintaining a more coherent foreign policy posture than their predecessors. Yet the fundamental segmentary structure persists. The movement's internal power distribution remains organized around semi-autonomous factional networks, the Haqqani Network, the Kandahar shura, the Paktia commanders, each

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functioning as a qawm-like solidarity bloc bound by personal loyalty rather than institutional subordination to a central authority. The repeated failures of revenue centralization, documented by UN monitoring reports, reflect precisely the dynamic Roy identified, external resources are captured and redistributed through personal networks rather than channeled into impersonal state institutions. The Taliban have not transcended segmentation, they have transferred it into a new system that now seeks, with only partial success, to acquire the formal attributes of international statehood.

The Central Asian Repercussion: Tajikistan and the IMU

Roy's framework extends naturally beyond Afghanistan's borders. He himself noted that the restructuring of politics through new segmentation was not unique to the Afghan case, the same pattern was visible in post-Soviet Tajikistan (Roy 1994, 166). The Tajik civil war (1992–1997) demonstrated a structurally analogous dynamic. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and its armed wing, despite their Islamist ideological program, were deeply embedded in regional and clan solidarities. The conflict's actual fault lines, Gharmi and Karategini populations against Kulabi and Khujandi, were not ideological but territorial and genealogical. As Adeeb Khalid (2007) has shown, Central Asian Islamism was never a unified transnational movement but a series of regionally specific responses to Soviet collapse, each shaped by pre-existing local configurations of power that Islamist ideology could mobilize but not transcend.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan represents the most direct institutional transfer of the Afghan model into the post-Soviet space. Founded by Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldashev in the late 1990s, trained in Afghan camps, and financed through the transnational networks, arms, narcotics, international patronage, that Roy had identified as constitutive of the Afghan war economy, the IMU attempted to replicate the Afghan jihad in the Ferghana Valley. The replication, however, extended to the Afghan model's structural limitations as well as its organizational features. The IMU could not transcend Uzbekistan's own segmentary landscape, divided between regional networks rooted in Samarkand, Tashkent and Ferghana, Soviet-era institutional elites, and post-independence security structures that had inherited the KGB's capacity for divide-and-rule. The Uzbek state, as Martha Brill Olcott (2005) and Bakhtiyar Babadjanov (2002) have documented, successfully instrumentalized these divisions to neutralize the movement – employing against the IMU the same logic of segmentary manipulation that the Afghan communist regime had used to survive a decade of mujahidin pressure.

The IMU's failure thus illuminates Roy's mechanism from the other direction. In Afghanistan, segmentation neutralized Islamist state-building from within, by absorbing the jihadist parties into existing solidarity networks. In Uzbekistan, segmentation neutralized Islamist mobilization from without, by preventing the movement from constructing the cross-regional solidarity it needed to challenge a consolidated, if authoritarian, state. In both cases, the qawm logic proved more durable than the Islamist project. The difference lay not in the ideology but in the institutional context into which that ideology was inserted.

Theoretical Implications: Is Political Islam Incompatible with State-Building?

The comparative evidence examined in this article points toward a theoretical conclusion that Roy himself cautiously approached but did not fully articulate. The relationship between political Islam and state-building is not determined by theological content but conditioned by social structure. Islamist ideology does not carry within itself either a capacity for or an incapacity for state-building. What determines the outcome is the social infrastructure into which it is inserted.

This conclusion has significant implications for how we theorize political Islam comparatively. The cases in which Islamist movements have contributed to durable state structures, post-revolutionary Iran, the AKP's consolidation of administrative capacity in Turkey, the Malaysian developmental state, share a common feature, an urban, literate and at least partially bureaucratized

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social base that provided the human and institutional infrastructure for state-building independent of any particular ideology. Islamist ideology in these contexts served as a legitimating framework for state power that was constructed through other means. Where that infrastructure was absent, as in Afghanistan, as in the Tajik periphery, as in the Ferghana Valley, Islamist ideology could mobilize solidarity networks but could not generate the impersonal, rule-governed institutions that modern statehood requires.

This is the deeper significance of Roy's concept of "Islamized segmentation". It is not simply a description of a particular Afghan pathology. It names a general mechanism. The process by which Islamist organizational forms are adopted by segmentary societies not as vehicles for transformation but as new registers for the expression of existing social logics. The mechanism operates wherever three conditions are simultaneously present, weak or absent state infrastructure, strong sub-state solidarity networks and an Islamist ideological project seeking to harness existing solidarities for political mobilization. Afghanistan under the mujahidin, Tajikistan during the civil war and the Ferghana Valley in the 1990s all met these conditions. The result in each case was structurally similar, Islamist legitimation of segmentary power, not Islamist transcendence of it.

Roy's original diagnosis thus retains its analytical force more than three decades after its formulation, not because the empirical landscape has remained static, but because the structural conditions he identified have proven remarkably persistent. The theoretical challenge for future research is to specify more precisely the threshold conditions under which Islamist movements can escape this dynamic. The point at which social infrastructure is sufficiently developed and state capacity sufficiently consolidated, to allow Islamist ideology to function as a genuinely transformative rather than merely legitimating force.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Afghan jihad (1979–1992) failed as a state-building project not because of external intervention, military defeat or ideological insincerity, but because of a structural mismatch between the Islamic political imagination and the social organization of Afghan society. Through a systematic reconstruction and extension of Olivier Roy's analysis, the article has demonstrated that Islamist ideology in Afghanistan functioned not as a transformative force but as a legitimating framework, providing new elites with the discursive resources to claim authority while leaving the underlying logic of qawm-based solidarity intact.

Roy's concept of "Islamized segmentation" names the mechanism precisely. Islamist organizational forms – parties, military bases, international aid networks, were adopted by segmentary societies not as vehicles for social transformation but as new institutional registers for the expression of existing solidarity logics. The result was a political order that was modern in appearance and traditional in content, Islamic in legitimation, segmentary in structure.

This article's contribution to Roy's original framework is threefold. First, it extends his analysis to the post-Soviet Central Asian context, demonstrating that the same mechanism operated in Tajikistan's civil war and in the IMU's failed mobilization in the Ferghana Valley, where Islamist ideology could harness existing solidarity networks but could not generate the cross-regional solidarity necessary for either revolutionary state capture or durable insurgency. Second, it specifies the structural conditions under which "Islamized segmentation" tends to reproduce itself, weak or absent state infrastructure, strong sub-state solidarity networks and an Islamist project that is organizationally dependent on those networks for its own survival. Third, it updates Roy's diagnosis through the lens of the Taliban's second emirate, demonstrating that three decades of additional evidence have confirmed rather than refuted his core argument.

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The Taliban's return to power in 2021 is the most telling test case. Despite controlling the entire territory of Afghanistan, possessing modern weapons systems and seeking international diplomatic recognition, the Taliban have not constructed a bureaucratic territorial state in any meaningful institutional sense. They have constructed a segmentary coalition with Islamic legitimation, distributing resources through personal networks, maintaining cohesion through factional negotiation rather than institutional subordination and governing through the sharia as ethical framework while the qawm continues to provide the actual social structure. Roy's diagnosis of the first jihad applies, with remarkable fidelity, to the second emirate.

The theoretical implication extends beyond Afghanistan. The relationship between political Islam and state-building is not determined by theological content, there is nothing in Islamic political thought that structurally precludes modern statehood, as the cases of post-revolutionary Iran, AKP-era Turkey and developmental Malaysia suggest. What determines the outcome is the social infrastructure into which Islamist ideology is inserted. Where bureaucratic capacity, urban literacy and impersonal institutional frameworks already exist, Islamist ideology can serve as a legitimating resource for state power constructed through other means. Where these conditions are absent, as in Afghanistan, as in the Tajik periphery, as in the Ferghana Valley of the 1990s, Islamist ideology encounters a social landscape that absorbs and redirects its transformative ambitions rather than being reshaped by them.

Roy's framework thus remains analytically productive not as a fixed diagnosis but as a set of theoretical tools for understanding the interaction between ideology and social structure in Muslim-majority contexts. Future research would benefit from extending this framework through primary fieldwork, oral histories from Afghan and Central Asian Islamist actors, ethnographic work on qawm dynamics under Taliban governance and comparative institutional analysis of revenue extraction across different Islamist regimes. Such research would allow the mechanisms Roy identified to be tested against evidence he could not have anticipated and would bring greater empirical precision to the structural argument this article has sought to formalize.

What the Afghan case ultimately demonstrates is that the limits of political Islam as a state-building project are not limits of faith or doctrine but limits of fit. The Islamic political imagination, oriented toward ethical community and divine legitimation, is not inherently incompatible with modern statehood, but it cannot generate statehood where the social preconditions for it do not exist. In Afghanistan, those preconditions remain absent. Until they change, political Islam will continue to perform the function Roy identified at the close of his analysis, not the construction of a new political order, but the legitimation, in an Islamic idiom, of a very old one.

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