

# GOD'S TERRORISTS

The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden  
Roots of Modern Jihad

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## *Introduction: 'Am I not a Pakhtun?'*

When the Pathan is a child his mother tells him, 'The coward dies but his shrieks live long after,' and so he learns not to shriek. He is shown dozens of things dearer than life so that he will not mind either dying or killing. He is forbidden colourful clothes or exotic music, for they weaken the arm and soften the eye. He is taught to look at the hawk and forget the nightingale. He is asked to kill his beloved to save the soul of her children. It is a perpetual surrender – an eternal giving up of man to man and to their wise follies.

Ghani Khan, *The Pathans*, 1947

A few years ago, while researching an episode of British imperial history, I made a brief journey to Kabul by way of the Khyber Pass, that notorious defile which opens on to the plains of India. Ever since men first learned to march under one banner this fatal chink in the mountain ranges guarding the Indian sub-continent's north-western approaches has been a zone of conflict. Down through this rocky pass wave after wave of invaders have picked

their way, intent on securing for themselves the three traditional prizes of the plunderer: *zan*, *zar*, *zamin* – women, gold and land. Among those invaders are the present incumbents of Afghanistan's eastern and Pakistan's western borders, a group of some two dozen tribes, large and small. While each clings fiercely to its own territory and tribal identity, they refer to themselves collectively as the *Pakhtuna* or *Pashtuna*, better known to the West as the Pathans. All claim descent from one or other of the three sons of their putative ancestor, Qais bin Rashid, who went from Gor in Afghanistan to Arabia and was there converted to Islam by the Prophet Muhammad himself. Although Sunni Muslims, they follow their own code of ethics, known as *Pakhtunwali*, which by tradition takes precedence even over the Islamic code of law known as *sharia*. There is a common Pathan proverb which states, 'Obey the mullah's teachings but do not go by what he does.'

Almost everyone I met on this journey was a Pathan, as was my guide and mentor Rahimullah Yusufzai, a gentle, scholarly journalist based in Peshawar, the ancient frontier town which an early British administrator long ago termed the 'Piccadilly of Central Asia'. When I came knocking on his door Rahimullah was already well known among journalists and foreign correspondents – and is even better known today. Because he broadcast for the BBC World Service in Pashtu, the Pathan language, his voice was familiar on both sides of the border – so much so that the mere sound of it was enough to bring a group of panicky guards to their senses after they had begun poking Kalashnikovs through our car windows at a check-post: 'Ah, Rahimullah Yusufzai,' they cried, shouldering their weapons and beaming at us. 'Come inside and have a cup of tea!'

Rahimullah Yusufzai had been covering the fighting in Afghanistan since before the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the civil war that raged thereafter as the *mujahedeen* ('those who engage in struggle for the Faith', but most often interpreted as 'holy warriors') who had liberated their country from the infidel

Russians turned on each other and transformed an already war-torn region into Mad Max country, where warlord fought warlord and both terrorised the civil population.

Rahimullah's contacts were legendary, so it was only to be expected that when a new phenomenon appeared on the Afghan scene in the autumn of 1994 he was the first journalist to note it and the first to appreciate its significance. This new phenomenon came in the form of earnest, unsmiling young men with untrimmed black beards who wore black turbans and black waistcoats, and who almost invariably carried either Kalashnikov automatic rifles or grenade launchers. They called themselves *Taliban* or 'seekers of knowledge' and they expressed allegiance not to a general or a tribal leader but to a one-eyed cleric by the name of Mullah Muhammad Omar.

Rahimullah Yusefzai and BBC correspondent David Loyn were on hand to cover the swift advance of these new insurgents northwards from Kandahar. They followed them as they fought their way through the gorges carved in the mountains by the Kabul River and observed how they combined military incompetence with extraordinary valour, charging the enemy without a thought to tactics or personal safety, secure in the belief that their death in *jihad* (the struggle against forces opposed to Islam) would win them the status of *shahid* (the martyr who goes straight to Paradise). It was this religious madness that vanquished their opponents, causing large numbers to switch sides. Of their leader, Mullah Omar, little was known other than that he had lost an eye fighting the Russians, and that before and after taking up arms against the infidels he had spent years studying the faith in a number of *madrassahs*, or religious schools, across the border in Pakistan. Some said that he had returned to the struggle after the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to bring peace to Afghanistan; others that he had grown so disgusted by the corruption of the warlords – in particular, the very public marriage of one such warlord to his young catamite –

that he had become a willing puppet of Pakistan's secret intelligence agency, the ISI. Whatever the case, in April 1996 Mullah Omar appeared on a rooftop before a large crowd of mullahs in Kandahar, draped in the city's most precious relic: the Mantle of the Prophet Muhammad. This was in deliberate imitation of the ceremony by which the second Caliph, Omar ibn al-Khattab, had established his right to rule over all Muslims before going on to enter Jerusalem riding on a white camel in the year 637. The parallel was further reinforced when Mullah Omar was proclaimed *Amir ul-Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful), a title first used by the Caliphs in the days of Islam's golden age. In September 1996 Kabul fell to the Taliban, the Amir ul-Momineen entered the city in a minivan, the deposed former President was castrated and hanged from a lamp-post, and Afghanistan was declared an Islamic state under the divinely ordained laws of Islam (*sharia*).

Our journey to Kabul took us through country shattered by civil war and the depredations of the warlords. Every foot of the road had been fought over and the roadsides were littered with both buried mines and the graves of Taliban martyrs. Prominent among the latter was a whitewashed stone surrounded by green flags on poles and marked with a notice inscribed in Arabic which Rahimullah translated for me: 'Hajji Mullah Burjan, military commander of the Taliban Islamic Movement, was martyred at this spot leading an attack against the miscreant and illegal Rabani forces at the Silk Gorge, while trying to bring sharia to Afghanistan.' A year earlier Mullah Burjan had stood on this same spot being interviewed by Rahimullah and the BBC's David Loyn before leading a suicidal attack against enemy tanks blocking the road.

Wherever we went it was clear that the Taliban were the heroes of the day: they had brought peace to the land and restored the rule of law – and indeed there was a great deal to admire in them. The groups of black-clad militiamen who manned the check posts and who guarded Jellalabad's one functioning hotel were disciplined and courteous, if strict in their demands. Those who were

willing to talk to us came across as hardened campaigners, but with a naivety and a lack of curiosity about the outside world which reminded me of Red Guards I had met at the time of China's Cultural Revolution in 1966–7. Where they differed markedly from the Red Guards was in their behaviour off duty, when, as often as not, they pulled out pocket mirrors, tweezers, eyeliner and various unguents and began preening themselves.

Rahimullah's explanation was that many of the Taliban were youngsters orphaned by war, who had been brought up and educated in the hundreds of religious schools set up in Pakistan with funds from Saudi Arabia. For many thousands of young Pathan boys the madrassah had been their home and its male teachers – men like Mullah Omar – their surrogate parents. Here the bonds and shared purpose had been forged which had given these 'searchers after truth' their extraordinary aura of invincibility, for the madrassah was not so much a school as a seminary, with a curriculum made up entirely of religious instruction and the study of the Quran. Here they had spent their adolescence rocking to and fro as they learned to recite by heart an Arabic text whose meaning they did not understand but which they knew conferred on them absolute authority in all matters governing social behaviour.

Only once on our brief foray into Afghanistan did Taliban militiamen show us hostility, when we drove south from Jellalabad to the site of a famous Buddhist monastery from the centuries before the advent of Islam. Here we found unusually large numbers of armed guards, and were soon told to go back the way we had come. Only later did it become clear why: in 1996 Mullah Omar's Taliban Government had given sanctuary to a Yemen-born Saudi national who had earlier helped channel vast sums of Saudi Arabian petro-dollars into the war against the Soviets. His name was Osama bin Laden and he had recently been joined by an Egyptian doctor named Ayman al-Zawahri.

Kabul in 1997 was a city still racked by war, strewn with mines and unexploded ordnance, with entire suburbs roofless and

deserted, inhabited only by pariah dogs. We very soon returned to Peshawar, where the contrast could not have been greater, for it was almost literally bursting with humanity: a city that had numbered no more than 250,000 souls when I first came through here in the early 1970s now held ten times that number. Then, it had consisted of two quite clearly demarcated areas: the old city, squeezed within walls laid down centuries earlier; and the civil station, set down outside the city walls in expansive British Raj pattern in the mid-nineteenth century. Now there was suburban sprawl on every side, but especially north of the Grand Trunk Road linking Peshawar to Nowshera and Islamabad. The ploughed fields of twenty-five years before lay under a shantytown of corrugated iron roofs and mud walls extending far across the Vale of Peshawar. This was the Afghan Colony, home to more than two million refugees.

From Peshawar my travels took me northwards to Hoti Mardan, which stands almost at the centre of the Vale, bounded on one side by the mountain ranges of Swat and Buner and on the other by the Kabul and Indus rivers. Hoti Mardan is now the Pakistan Army's Punjab Regimental Centre, but for well over a century it was the headquarters of that most famous of British India's frontier regiments, the Queen's Own Corps of Guides Cavalry and Infantry, formed by twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant Harry Lumsden in 1847 from volunteers drawn from the surrounding tribes. The first of these irregular soldiers were Yusufzai or 'sons of Joseph', a Pathan tribe originally from Kandahar in southern Afghanistan which had conquered the Peshawar valley and the mountains to the north at about the time that King Henry VII was establishing his Tudor dynasty in England and Wales. The Yusufzai today are one of the largest of the Pathan tribes and their territories extend northwards from the Kabul River for a hundred miles into the mountain fastnesses of Swat and Buner. They are honoured among the Pathans as the purest of their number in terms of their blood-line.



The Yusufzai were of special interest to me as the first of the Pathan peoples to come into contact with the British when the East India Company pushed northwards across the Punjab in the 1840s. Because the British came to the Vale of Peshawar as conquerors of the Sikhs, who had long oppressed the Pathans, the Yusufzai greeted them as liberators when they took over from the Sikhs as governors of Peshawar city and began administering the surrounding countryside. The young British officers who came to speak to their tribal chiefs and clan leaders, the *khans* and *maliks*, were polite and friendly. Indeed, so upright and honest were they in their dealings that they were credited with a facial deformity that made it impossible for them to lie. These early political officers were also keen to know more of the ways of the Yusufzai and, moreover, they were recognised by the Pathans as *Ahl al-Kitab*, People of the Book, who shared with them the revelations of the early prophets – unlike the Sikhs, who were heathen *kaffirs* and proven enemies of Islam.

The first agent of the British East India Company to arrive in these parts was the political envoy Mountstuart Elphinstone, leading an embassy to the Amir of Kabul in 1809. He found a lot to admire in the character of the Yusufzai and the other Pathan tribes: 'They are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependents, hospitable, brave, hardy, frugal, laborious and prudent.' But Elphinstone came to Peshawar as a guest and potential ally, whereas the Britons who followed in his footsteps were agents of what is now termed imperial expansionism but was at the time called the Forward Policy, the extension of British India's frontier beyond the Indus so as to leave no political vacuum for any other imperial power – such as France or Russia – to occupy. To Harry Lumsden and his fellow politicals the Pathans were potential subjects, and their strengths and weaknesses were seen in that light. Working alongside Lumsden at Hoti Mardan for many years was Dr Henry Bellew, attached to the Corps of Guides as their surgeon. Bellew was an outstanding

linguist and got to know the Yusufzai well, later compiling an ethnographic study still regarded as a classic of its kind. Like Elphinstone before him, the doctor was impressed by the Pathans' rugged individualism. 'Each tribe under its own chief is an independent commonwealth,' he wrote, 'and collectively each is the other's rival if not enemy . . . Every man is pretty much his own master. Their khans and maliks only exercise authority on and exact revenues from the mixed population . . . They eternally boast of their descent, their prowess in arms, and their independence, and cap all by "Am I not a Pakhtun?"'

What Bellew and other British officials also discovered was that Pathan pride went hand in hand with Pathan violence. 'It would seem that the spirit of murder is latent in the heart of nearly every man in the valley,' observed Judge Elsmie when he came to write his *Notes on some of the Characteristics of Crime and Criminals in the Peshawar Division of the Punjab, 1872 to 1877*. 'Murder in all its phases: unblushing assassination in broad daylight, before a crowd of witnesses; the carefully planned secret murder of the sleeping victim at dead of night, murder by robbers, murder by rioters, murder by poisoners, murder by boys, and even by women, sword in hand . . . Crime of the worst conceivable kind is a matter of almost daily occurrence amongst a Pathan people.'

The Yusufzai settled in the Vale of Peshawar and elsewhere in the plains could be coerced into paying taxes and accepting British authority, provided it was not too heavy-handed. However, their fellow-tribesmen in the mountains took a very different view. Like all the larger Pathan tribes, the mountain Yusufzai in Swat and Buner were divided into numerous sub-tribes and clans that were constantly at each other's throats, but the moment the British so much as threatened to encroach these same sub-tribes and clans at once put aside their feuds to unite under one banner. They had united to resist the best efforts of the Great Mughal, Akbar, and they did the same with the British. There are places in those mountain strongholds overlooking the Vale of Peshawar

whose names came to resonate loud and long in the British public consciousness because of pitched battles fought and hard won, among them 'Ambeyla' and 'Malakand'.

Dr Bellew saw the mountain Yusufzai at their best and worst, and, after many years of bitter, first-hand experience, concluded that their worst was pretty awful:

The circumstances under which they live have endowed them with the most opposite qualities – an odd mixture of virtues and vices. Thus they are hardy, brave and proud; at the same time they are faithless, cunning and treacherous. Frugal in their own habits, they are hospitable to the stranger, and charitable to the beggar. The refugee they will protect and defend with their lives, but the innocent wayfarer they will plunder and slay for the pleasure of the act. Patriotic in a high degree, and full of pride of race, yet they will not scruple to betray for gold their most sacred interests or their nearest relations . . . Under no authority at home, they are constantly at feud with each other, and hostility with their neighbours. Murder and robbery are with them mere pastimes; revenge and plunder the occupation of their lives . . . Secure in the recesses of their mountains, they have from time immemorial defied the authority of all the governments that have preceded us on the frontier.

The British soon concluded that not just the Yusufzai of Swat and Buner but all the Pathans in the mountains were best left alone. Recognising them to be well-nigh ungovernable, the British Government of the Punjab devised a system that reflected the realities of the situation. British rule was deemed to extend to the foot of the mountains and this was termed the 'Settled Areas'; all the tribespeople who had their villages in this area were expected to pay their taxes and follow the Indian Penal Code,

with some minor modifications. Beyond this belt of settled land was a second strip that extended deep into the mountains to the north and west; this became known as the 'Tribal Areas'. Not until 1893 was a set frontier established between Afghanistan and British India, when the Durand Line was drawn up by a senior British official in consultation with the Amir of Kabul; today it forms the agreed frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This British legacy cuts right through Pathan territory and is arguably the most porous border in the world – and the most difficult to police. It always has been, and still is, a no-go area for outsiders.

After wandering over the battlefields of Ambeyla (not to be confused with the town of Amballa, of which more later) and Malakand I moved on westwards to the hill country of Hazara. I had said my goodbyes to Rahimullah Yusufzai and was now travelling in a vehicle provided by another authority on frontier matters and tribal history, Bashir Ahmad Khan, former political officer and diplomat, whose Yusufzai Swati ancestors had long ago crossed the Indus to claim the delightful Mansehra Valley in upper Hazara. As well as briefing me before I set out, the ever-generous Bashir Khan had also provided me with a detailed set of notes on what I was to look out for.

To get to Hazara I had to skirt the mountains of Buner, which as they approach the Indus Valley push southwards into the Vale of Peshawar to form a large spur shaped like a closed fist. This is the Mahabun Mountain: more accurately, a massif some thirty miles wide and fifteen deep made up of a jumble of mountain peaks linked by jagged ridges and riven by steep-sided valleys (see Map 2, 'The Peshawur Valley'). Before the Muslim conquests it was venerated by Buddhists as Udiyana, the Paradise Garden, and by Hindus as the Great Forest (*Mahaban*), a favourite retreat of sages and hermits. Among Muslims, too, it had come to be regarded as a place of particular sanctity, so that many *pirs* (holy men) had been drawn to settle there. 'It forms an important



and striking feature on that part of the frontier,' wrote John Adye, one of the first British officers to penetrate this mountain fastness in 1863:

Its sides for the most part are steep, bare, and rugged, the higher summits being fringed with forests of fir, and in the winter capped with snow. There are, however, occasional plateaux of cultivation and numerous small villages belonging to the tribes, and in some parts dense forest runs down almost to the plains. The roads are few and bad – in fact, mere mule-tracks between the villages. The mountain on its eastern side is very abrupt, and is divided by the Indus from our province of Hazara; while all along, at the foot of its southern slopes, lie the plains of Eusofzye.

No fewer than six Pathan tribes and sub-tribes inhabit the Mahabun Mountain: the Yusufzai Chamlawals in the north-west; the Yusufzai Khudu Khels in the west; the Gaduns in the south; the Waziri Utmanzai in the south-east; the Yusufzai Isazai in the north-east; and, lastly, the Yusufzai Amazai sandwiched between the Chamlawals and Isazai.

The south-eastern corner of the Mahabun Mountain, occupied by the Utmanzai, is the point where the Indus finally cuts through the mountains to debouch on to the plains. In the late 1960s the Government of Pakistan built the Tarbela Dam here, whose waters now extend northwards up the gorge for some miles. The road crosses the Indus just below the dam. At this point, according to Bashir Khan's notes, I was to be aware that on the left side of the gorge looking up it – that is to say, on the eastern slopes of the Mahabun Mountain, and now all but submerged under the waters of the Tarbela Lake – was Sittana, which Bashir Khan described simply as 'the site of the camp of the Hindustani Fanatics'.

The term 'Hindustani Fanatics' meant absolutely nothing to me then. But it should have rung bells, because I was already

aware from my researches that, before raising the Corps of Guides, Harry Lumsden had at the age of twenty-four led a force of three thousand Sikh infantry into northern Hazara, then nominally under Sikh control. He had faced stiff opposition from the local tribesmen, the Sayyeds of the Khagan Valley, whose resistance had been greatly strengthened by the presence of a small group of Hindustanis – not Hindus, as the word might suggest, but Muslims from Hindustan, the lands east of the Indus River. These Hindustanis, he noted in his report, had led the Sayyeds into battle and they had fought the fiercest. Several were taken prisoner and sent down under guard to Lahore, capital of the Punjab, where Harry Lumsden's chief, Henry Lawrence, made them welcome and praised them for their courage. Nearly all were found to be plainsmen from Patna, a large town on the Ganges between Benares and Calcutta, and they were led by two brothers named Ali, also from Patna: 'They begged for mercy and were permitted, under promise of future good conduct, to go to their homes in India.'

And there were other clues I had missed – one of them set down in a fascinating document written by that delightful eccentric James Abbott, the first British administrator of Hazara, giving pen-portraits of all the tribal chiefs in the area with details of their dispositions and foibles. Abbott had attached a number of notes and postscripts, and one of these read, in part: 'Khagan is important partly on account of its contact with independent states – but more, owing to the disposition of the *Hindustanee fanatics*, followers of Achmed Shah, to make it their place of arms . . . I understand that there are still some of the Hindustanees fostered there by Syud Zamin Shah, & that intercourse is maintained between the Syuds & the fanatics at Sittana.'

Tucked away among Abbott's numerous letters to Henry Lawrence in Lahore were further references to this same 'remarkable nest of Immigrants from Hindustan' that I had earlier failed to note. Abbott had become convinced that some sort of secret

supply chain had been set up, by which money, materials and men were being smuggled across the plains of India to Sittana. His men had intercepted messengers carrying letters concealed inside bamboo canes and with gold coins hidden under their waistcoats. Young Muslim men from Tonk, Rohilkhand and elsewhere in India were crossing the Indus River at Attock 'disguised as beggars and students' and then making their way north to the Mahabun Mountain, where they discarded their disguises and took up arms. At Sittana itself, large *godowns* (warehouses) were being built for the storage of grain, transported there by *kafila* (camel caravans). Over a period of four years, between 1849 and 1853, Abbott had become increasingly concerned by the growing threat these 'enthusiasts' posed to his neighbouring district of Hazara, and had asked for armed check-posts to be set up along the Indus. He had been told that there were no grounds for alarm, for 'all the enemies of the British Government have recently been defeated'.

Finally, there was the overlooked detail in the seditious letters intercepted by the authorities at Peshawar at the time of the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the so-called Indian Mutiny. As described in the Punjab *Gazetteer of the Peshawar Division*, these letters had been sent by 'Muhammadan bigots in Patna and Thanesar to soldiers of the 64th Native Infantry, revelling in the atrocities that had been committed in Hindustan on the men, women and children of the "Nazarenes" [Christians] and sending them messages from their own mothers that they should emulate these deeds, and if they fell in the attempt they would at least go to heaven, and their deaths in such a case would be pleasant news at home. These letters alluded to a long series of correspondences that had been going on, through the 64th Native Infantry, with the fanatics in Swat and Sitana.'

The fruit of my travels and researches was *Soldier Sahibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier*, published in 2000. It told the



story of a pioneering band of political officers, known collectively as 'Henry Lawrence's Young Men', young military officers who served under Lawrence on what was then the north-west frontier of the Punjab but which became the North-West Frontier Province of British India. Besides Harry Lumsden and James Abbott, these frontiersmen included Herbert Edwardes, John Nicholson, Reynell Taylor and Neville Chamberlain, all of whom carved out extraordinary reputations for themselves in their dealings with the frontier tribes – and who between themselves and the Pathans helped to create the lasting mystique of 'the Frontier'. From then on India's North-West Frontier became increasingly romanticised, as much by the political officers on the spot as by anyone else. I particularly recall the words of perhaps the last of these British frontiersmen, Sir Olaf Caroe, Governor of the North-West Frontier Province from 1946 to 1947, who described his feelings to me in the following terms:

The stage on which the Pathan lived out his life was at the same time magnificent and harsh – and the Pathan was like his background. Such a contrast was sometimes hard to bear, but perhaps it was this that put us in love with it. There was among the Pathans something that called to the Englishman or the Scotsman – partly that the people looked you straight in the eye, that there was no equivocation and that you couldn't browbeat them even if you wanted to. When we crossed the bridge at Attock we felt we'd come home.

Exactly the same attitude came into being in Britain's dealings with the desert tribes of Arabia. Early adventurers such as Doughty, Burton and Palgrave and later politicals such as St John Philby and T. E. Lawrence unwittingly conspired to create a romance of a stark landscape sparsely populated by manly *Badawin*, better known today as Bedouin, whose harsh moral code

mirrored that of the Pathans in almost every respect. It may be going too far to say that the tendency to view these two regions and their two peoples through rose-tinted preconceptions had fatal consequences, but it most certainly blurred the realities.

The first British officer to attach this aura of romance to the Pathans was Herbert Edwardes, in *A Year on the Punjab Frontier*, published in 1851. Yet Edwardes recognised that many of the qualities he admired in the Pathans were double-edged: their individualism and manliness was accompanied by intense egoism and vengefulness; strong clan identity meant intense inter-clan enmity; codes of friendship and hospitality were matched by deceit and betrayal. But perhaps the most striking paradox was that the Pathans' much-vaunted independent nature was accompanied by an extraordinary degree of religious dependence. Edwardes was a devout Christian evangelical, brought up to regard his own values as the benchmark of modern civilisation, as demonstrated by the conspicuous success of the British Empire. He had no time for what he saw as the Pathans' religious credulity, which in his opinion made them prey to exploitation by the many categories of persons known collectively as *ulema*, or 'those learned in the ways of Islam', the Muslim clergy. 'The Moolah and the Kazee, the Peer and the Syud descended on the smiling vale,' wrote Herbert Edwardes of the Waziri tribes south of Peshawar,

armed with a panoply of spectacles and owl-like looks, miraculous rosaries, infallible amulets, and tables of descent from the Prophet Muhommud. Each newcomer, like St Peter, held the keys of heaven; and the whole, like Irish beggars, were equally prepared to bless or curse to all eternity him who gave or him who withheld . . . To be cursed in Arabic, or anything that sounded like it; to be told that the blessed Prophet had put a black mark against his soul, for not giving his best field to one of the Prophet's

own posterity; to have the saliva of a disappointed saint left in anger on his doorpost; or behold a Hajee, who had gone three times to Mecca, deliberately sit down and enchant his camels with the itch, and his sheep with the rot: these were things which made the dagger drop out of the hand of the awe-stricken savage, his knees knock together, his liver turn to water, and his parched tongue to be scarce able to articulate a full and complete concession of the blasphemous demand.

The Corps of Guides surgeon Dr Henry Bellew also noted this same propensity for religious subservience among the Yusufzai. 'They are', he declared, 'entirely controlled by their priests, and are at all times ready for a *jahad* [jihad], be the infidels black or white . . . An inordinate reverence for saints and the religious classes generally is universal, and their absurdly impossible and contradictory dicta are received and acted upon with eager credulity.' Half a century later Winston Churchill, then a junior officer with the 4th Hussars, came to exactly the same conclusion. 'Their superstition', he wrote of the Pathans, 'exposes them to the rapacity and tyranny of a numerous priesthood – *Mullahs, Sahibzadas, Akhundzadas, Fakirs* – and a host of wandering *Talib-ul-ulms*, who correspond with the theological students in Turkey, and live free at the expense of the people.'

When Dr Bellew came to set down his *General Report on the Yusufzais* in 1864, he singled out two groups of clergy as having particular influence over the Pathans. The first were the Saiyyeds, of Arab extraction and believed to be the direct descendants of Caliph Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet: 'Their origin being from so holy a source, they are, of course, esteemed as uncommonly holy persons. Their bold, obtrusive, and continual publication of their sacred character and descent draws from the ignorant a reverential and awful respect, and at the same time gives them great influence over the mass of the population they

dwell among. They use this to their own advantage and manage to get from the Afghans [i.e., Pathans] considerable tracts of land in gift as a perpetual and hereditary possession.'

Bellew's second group provided the most active portion of the clergy. Every mosque had its *imam*, who led the congregation in prayers, supported in the larger mosques by a number of religious teachers, known variously as *mullahs*, *maulvis* or *maulanas*: 'They call the *azan* [summons to prayer], and perform the prayers and other duties of the Imam in his absence. They are mostly occupied in teaching the *Talib-ul-ulm* the Kuran [Quran], the forms of prayer, and the doctrines of Islam, and the village children how to repeat their "belief" and say their prayers.' Dr Bellew's 'Talib-ul-ulm' were more correctly *taliban-ul-ulm*, literally 'seekers of knowledge', or religious students. He categorised them as 'a mixed class of vagrants and idlers, who, under the pretence of devoting themselves to religion, wander from country to country; and, on the whole, lead an agreeable and easy life. Wherever they go they find shelter in the mosques, and can always get a sufficiency of food for the mere asking. As a rule, they are very ignorant and remarkably bigoted.'

Edwardes, Bellew and the British officers who came after them loathed these sayyeds, imams, mullahs, maulvis, maulanas and taliban in equal measure. They saw the ulema, because of their influence over their flocks, as a threat to British authority and their influence on the tribespeople as wholly negative. That loathing was returned in equal if not greater measure by the sayyeds, mullahs, maulvis, maulanas and taliban, who considered the British not merely a threat to *their* authority but also a threat to their religion. In 1847 a would-be assassin caught and disarmed by Herbert Edwardes' guards was found to have been acting on the instructions of a mullah. In 1853 John Nicholson shot a man advancing on him with a sword, an assailant whom he later described as 'religiously mad'. This man, too, had been put up to it by what Nicholson described as a 'religious instructor'. As the

gravestones in the Christian cemeteries of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and elsewhere on the Frontier testify, scores of acts of violence against individual Britons were perpetrated over the next century.

My youngest daughter has a beautiful gold-threaded scarf that once belonged to an English doctor named Flora Butcher. Miss Butcher wanted to be a doctor at a time in Britain when women were not allowed to enter the profession, so she went to Belgium to study. After qualifying, she had hoped to practise in India but was refused permission to do so by the British authorities. Undaunted, she proceeded up the Khyber Pass, to set up a medical mission in tribal territory, where she and a small band of devoted Indians ministered with great success to the local tribespeople. Towards the end of 1927 her friends became concerned by the non-appearance of the pack ponies that kept her supplied, enquiries were made, and it was discovered that Miss Butcher and most of her staff had been murdered. She was only one of a number of doctors targeted and assassinated on the Frontier at that time by what the British termed 'fanatics'.

In *Soldier Sahibs* I interpreted these killings by tribesmen as part and parcel of the Pathans' traditional propensity for violence and their antipathy to outside interference. I was quite wrong. What I had missed was something infinitely more serious: a series of insurgencies and assassinations increasingly directed by a movement whose adherents saw themselves as engaging in a great religious struggle in defence of Islam but who were (as they still are) profoundly at odds with that same religion; a movement dedicated not simply to protecting Islam, as its adherents protested (and still protest), but to the destruction of all interpretations of religion other than its own; a movement that worked time and time again to bring the people of the Frontier out in armed revolt, and which in 1857 played an unacknowledged part in the struggle to overthrow British rule in India; a movement brought to the verge of extinction many times over but whose

ideology was always kept alive – and which today is not only back in business but whose appeal and authority is greater than it has ever been.

The founder of this movement saw himself as a reformer and described those who followed his teachings as *Al-Muwahhidun*, or the Unitarians. But to their many enemies they became known, after their movement's founder, as *Al-Wahhabi* – the Wahhabi. One of the many curious features of their subsequent history is that the Wahhabis were very well known to people of my great-grandparents' generation. Indeed, one of my great-grandfathers was standing beside Lord Mayo, the then Viceroy of India, when he was knifed by what was almost certainly a Wahhabi-directed assassin in 1871. To the British authorities in India in the nineteenth century these Wahhabis were best known as the Hindustani Fanatics, and their fighting base in the mountains was always spoken of as the 'Fanatic Camp'. A generation later, in my grandparents' time, the same movement reappeared in Arabia, revitalised and now calling itself *Al-Ikhwān* – the Brotherhood. Meanwhile, on the Indian sub-continent Wahhabism had mutated into a more respectable form, now rebranding its religious ideology *Salafī*, or 'following the forefathers'. Then in our own times these two streams, re-energised by new political ideologies associated with nationalism, separatism and pan-Islamism, converged and cross-infected on the Afghanistan–Pakistan fault line. Out of this coming-together emerged two very different bodies, one tight-knit and localised, the other loose-knit and with global aspirations: the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Wahhabism is declared by its defenders to be no more than Islam in its purest, original form, and without links to either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. A number of serious academics and political observers have taken the same view, representing Wahhabism as little more than a puritanical reformist teaching within Islam which still has political clout in Saudi Arabia but little relevance to modern-day events elsewhere, particularly when it comes to the

driving ideologies of men like the Yemeni Osama bin Laden, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahri, the Afghan Mullah Omar and the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and others who use terror in the name of Islam as a political weapon.

The founder of Wahhabism saw himself as a reformer and revivalist reacting against corruptions inside Islam. He declared holy war on those corruptions and took that war to his fellow Muslims. But his Wahhabism very quickly developed its own militant politico-religious ideology built around an authority figure who was both a temporal and spiritual leader. It became, in essence, a cult.

Wahhabism of itself never enjoyed mass support. Its ideology always was and remains rooted in violent intolerance, which has few charms for most people. It would have gone the way of all extremist cults but for the fact that it appeared as a champion of faith at a time when the world community of Islam, the *umma*, began to question why it was that the triumph of Islam was not proceeding as ordained.

Islam's first great crisis of faith occurred at the time of the eruption of the Mongols in the late twelfth century, but a second and more serious crisis began with the rise of Western capitalism. At the time of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent the Ottoman Empire appeared invincible: a world of shared faith under one central authority, the *khalifa*, and one rule of law, sharia, governing all aspects of Muslim behaviour. This was the civilisation of *dar ul-Islam*, the 'domain of Islam', inhabited by those who had submitted to the will of God, surrounded on all sides by *dar ul-harb*, the 'domain of enmity', inhabited by unbelievers who would all finally convert to Islam and become subject to sharia. But with the failure of the siege of Vienna in 1663 the Ottomans began a long, slow retreat before the advance of Christian Europe. That advance was much more than brute imperialism: it was all-enveloping, neatly summed up in the triumphalist words of the British missionary doctor Dr Theodore Pennell when he wrote in

1909 that 'The Old Islam, the old Hinduism, are already doomed, not by the efforts of the missionaries, but by the contact of the West, by the growth of commerce, by the spread of education, by the thirst for wealth and luxury which the West has implanted in the East.'

The questions 'How can this be?' and 'What can we do?' came to be asked with increasing concern by ordinary Muslims. By tradition it was the local ruler, the amir and the nawab, who defended Islam in the name of the Caliphate, but these secular leaders were giving way to Christian governors. In their absence it was the ulema who increasingly came forward with the answers that people wanted to hear. One response was Islamic revivalism, which continues today under the generic term of 'pan-Islamism', a movement for reshaping the world along Islamic lines, to which many disparate individuals and groups turned (and continue to turn) for comfort and salvation. This remains a perfectly legitimate ideal, no different from Christians wishing to see all non-Christians saved – until it is subsumed by the employment of compulsion, violence and terror as instruments to achieve that ideal. What made this terrorising not merely acceptable but a religious duty was the ideology articulated in Wahhabism.

Now it is the West's turn to ask the questions. Since 9/11 immense efforts have been made to understand the phenomenon of Islamist extremism. An entire industry of think-tanks and defence centres has sprung up to satisfy the demand for explanations. Most of this attention has been focused on recent events, with correspondingly little notice being taken of origins. Wahhabism is only part of the answer, but it is an important part, and one aspect of Wahhabism in particular has been all but ignored. Here I have tried to make good that gap in our understanding.