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Ethnicity as mobilization infrastructure: Pashtun identity and taliban insurgency in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Pashtun ethnicity in Taliban insurgency and post-2021 governance by conceptualizing ethnicity as mobilization infrastructure rather than as a primordial or deterministic cause of conflict. Drawing on a critical narrative review of recent scholarly and policy-oriented literature, this study analyzes how Pashtun identity operates through social networks, territorial ties, normative frameworks, and organizational continuity to enable recruitment, coordination, legitimacy, and political control. The findings show that Pashtun ethnicity has facilitated the Taliban's organizational resilience and its transition from insurgency to governance, particularly through network-based mobilization and access to territorial sanctuaries. Simultaneously, the selective use of Pashtunwali has contributed to local legitimacy in Pashtun-majority areas while constraining broader national acceptance. The analysis further highlights the dual effect of ethnic dominance in the post-2021 political order: strengthening short-term stability and internal cohesion while exacerbating political exclusion and ethnic grievances. By specifying the mechanisms through which ethnic identity is transformed into mobilization capacity, this article contributes a mechanism-based framework to debates on ethnicity, insurgency, and governance in Afghanistan, offering a non-deterministic and analytically grounded understanding of conflict dynamics in multiethnic societies.

Keywords: Pashtun; Taliban; mobilization; insurgency; governance; Afghanistan

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity continues to occupy a central position in contemporary debates on armed conflict, insurgency, and state fragility, particularly in societies marked by prolonged violence and weak institutional capacities. Recent conflict studies emphasize that ethnicity does not inherently generate violence; rather, it becomes politically salient through processes of mobilization, social organization, and competition over power and resources (Mehran et al., 2023). In conflict-affected states, ethnic identity often intersects with historical grievances, governance failures, and security dynamics, shaping how armed actors recruit support, establish territorial control, and claim legitimacy.

Afghanistan represents one of the most enduring cases of protracted conflict, in which ethnicity, religion, and geopolitics have interacted over several decades. Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban's return to power, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the internal drivers of conflict and governance in the post-intervention period in Afghanistan. Recent analyses highlight that the Taliban's resurgence cannot be explained solely by military strategy or external support, but must also be understood in relation to local social structures, patterns of authority, and identity-based networks embedded within Afghan society (Giustozzi, 2021).

Within this context, the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, hold a particularly significant position. Contemporary studies underline that Pashtun dominance in Afghan political history has shaped long-term patterns of inclusion and exclusion, influencing access to political office, security institutions, and economic resources (Giustozzi, 2021). These dynamics have become increasingly visible since 2021, as the Taliban's governing structure has remained overwhelmingly Pashtun-dominated, despite official claims of inclusivity. Policy reports and academic analyses indicate that this concentration of power has contributed to renewed ethnic tensions, especially among Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities, thereby reinforcing the relevance of ethnicity in Afghanistan's current political landscape (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Recent scholarship on the Taliban has largely emphasized ideological governance, gender policies, humanitarian crises, and regional geopolitics following the group's return to power (Termeer, 2023). At the same time, a growing body of literature has revisited the role of Pashtun identity and Pashtunwali in shaping local legitimacy, social order, and patterns of obedience in Taliban-controlled areas (Eslami & Safari, 2022). These studies demonstrate that Pashtunwali continues to inform social norms related to authority, protection, and dispute resolution, particularly in rural and border regions. However, existing analyses often remain divided between cultural explanations that risk determinism and political accounts that marginalize ethnicity as merely incidental.

As a result, the analytical gap does not lie in the absence of studies on Pashtun ethnicity or the Taliban, but rather in the lack of conceptual clarity regarding how ethnic identity functions within insurgent mobilization and governance. Much of the recent literature acknowledges the Pashtun background of the Taliban, yet stops short of specifying the mechanisms through which ethnic networks, norms, and solidarities are converted into organizational capacity (Kinnaree et al., 2025). This gap becomes especially problematic in post-2021 Afghanistan, where the Taliban has transitioned from an insurgent movement to a governing authority, requiring sustained legitimacy, compliance, and social control across diverse ethnic constituencies.

This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing ethnicity as a form of mobilization infrastructure. From this perspective, Pashtun identity is understood as a configuration of social networks, normative frameworks, and collective meanings that can be activated under specific political and historical conditions. Rather than treating ethnicity or Pashtunwali as deterministic causes of conflict, this approach highlights their enabling role in facilitating recruitment, territorial sanctuary, legitimacy, and insurgent governance. Recent conflict scholarship increasingly adopts such mechanism-based perspectives, emphasizing the interaction between identity, organization, and political opportunity structures in armed movements (Wimmer et al., 2009).

Employing a critical narrative review methodology, this study synthesizes recent academic and policy-oriented literature on Pashtun identity, Taliban organization, and post-2021 conflict dynamics in

Afghanistan. By situating the analysis within contemporary theories of ethnicity and armed conflict, this article seeks to clarify the processes through which ethnic identity is transformed into mobilization capacity. In doing so, it contributes a conceptually grounded framework for understanding the role of ethnicity in sustaining insurgency and shaping governance in Afghanistan’s evolving political order.

This study is grounded in a perspective that views ethnicity not as an inherent or automatic cause of conflict, but as a social and political resource that can be activated under certain conditions. In the context of armed conflict, ethnic identity becomes relevant when it is embedded in social networks, organizational structures, and governance practices. From this standpoint, Pashtun identity and Pashtunwali are understood as enabling and conditioning factors that shape Taliban mobilization and governance, rather than as deterministic drivers of violence.

2. METHOD

This study employs a critical narrative review to analyze how Pashtun ethnicity functions as mobilization infrastructure within Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. This approach is suitable for examining complex and context-dependent phenomena such as ethnicity, insurgency, and governance, where the aim is analytical synthesis rather than primary data collection (Ferrari, 2015). The review focuses on recent debates surrounding ethnic identity, mobilization, and conflict dynamics in post-2021 Afghanistan.

The literature was selected based on three criteria: relevance to ethnicity and insurgency studies, focus on Taliban dynamics after 2021, and academic or institutional credibility. Sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy reports published between 2021 and 2025. The analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis, identifying key patterns related to ethnic mobilization, network-based recruitment, legitimacy construction, and governance practices (Giustozzi, 2021).

To ensure analytical rigor, the study applied source triangulation by comparing academic literature and policy-oriented analyses. While the research relies exclusively on secondary data, this approach allows for a theory-informed understanding of how ethnic identity is activated as a political resource in insurgent movements. The main limitation lies in the dependence on existing interpretations; however, critical engagement with recent and diverse sources strengthens the validity of the analysis (Wimmer et al., 2009).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main analytical findings of the study by examining how Pashtun ethnicity operates as mobilization infrastructure within Taliban insurgency and post-2021 governance. Rather than focusing on descriptive accounts, the analysis emphasizes key mechanisms through which ethnic identity is translated into organizational capacity, legitimacy, and political control.

Table 1. Ethnicity as Mobilization Infrastructure in Taliban Insurgency and Governance

Mechanism	Function	Main Implication
Social networks	Kinship and tribal ties	Sustained recruitment
Territorial sanctuary	Pashtun border areas	Mobility and protection
Normative legitimacy	Selective Pashtunwali use	Local compliance
Organizational continuity	Insurgent networks reused	Rapid power consolidation
Ethnic dominance	Pashtun-led governance	Stability vs. exclusion

As summarized in Table 1, Pashtun ethnicity functions not as a deterministic source of conflict but as an enabling structure that supports Taliban mobilization and governance. These mechanisms provide the analytical foundation for the following discussion, which elaborates how ethnic networks, norms, and territorial ties operate across different dimensions of insurgency and political authority.

3.1. Ethnicity as Mobilization Infrastructure in Taliban Insurgency

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that Pashtun ethnicity has played a crucial role in sustaining Taliban insurgency, not as an inherent or primordial cause of violence, but as a form of mobilization infrastructure that enables collective action under conditions of protracted conflict and weak state authority. Recent conflict scholarship emphasizes that ethnic identity becomes politically meaningful when it is embedded in organizational structures, social networks, and political opportunity contexts, rather than when it exists merely as a cultural marker. In this sense, ethnicity operates as a latent resource that can be activated strategically by armed actors (Mirdad et al., 2025).

In the Afghan context, Pashtun identity has provided the Taliban with access to dense and enduring local networks that facilitate recruitment, coordination, and organizational continuity over prolonged periods of conflict. These networks are historically rooted in tribal organization, kinship relations, religious institutions, and patterns of local authority that predate the emergence of the Taliban itself. As several studies suggest, the Taliban did not create these networks but rather embedded itself within existing Pashtun social structures, enabling the movement to mobilize support more effectively than rival armed groups lacking similar social penetration (Staniland, 2025). This embeddedness helps explain the Taliban's capacity to survive leadership losses, military pressure, and institutional disruption across different phases of the conflict.

One of the most prominent mechanisms through which ethnicity functions as mobilization infrastructure is network-based mobilization. Pashtun tribal affiliations, kinship ties, and religious education networks—particularly madrassas located in southern and eastern Afghanistan and across the Afghan–Pakistani border—have functioned as informal but resilient channels for recruitment and coordination. Rather than relying primarily on centralized command or ideological indoctrination, the Taliban has leveraged social proximity and interpersonal trust within Pashtun communities to sustain mobilization (Mehran et al., 2023). This form of recruitment is often relational rather than ideological, grounded in obligations to family, tribe, or local authority figures.

An important insight from recent conflict literature is that ethnic-based mobilization often proves more durable than purely ideological appeals, particularly in fragmented and protracted conflict environments. While ideology provides a unifying narrative, it frequently lacks the social embeddedness required for sustained collective action. In the Afghan context, Pashtun identity offered the Taliban a pre-existing mobilization infrastructure grounded in kinship, tribal affiliation, and local social authority. These ethnic networks reduced coordination costs, enhanced trust, and lowered the risks of defection, allowing the Taliban to maintain mobilization capacity even when ideological coherence weakened or political conditions shifted (Kraus & Zürcher, 2021).

These networks significantly reduce the transaction costs associated with mobilization. Trust derived from shared ethnic identity minimizes the risks of defection and infiltration, while social obligation reinforces participation even in the absence of material incentives. As a result, Taliban recruitment has frequently been locally grounded and socially embedded, allowing the movement to regenerate manpower despite sustained counterinsurgency operations prior to 2021 (International Crisis Group, 2022). This helps explain why military setbacks did not translate into organizational collapse, as mobilization remained rooted in decentralized and socially embedded infrastructures rather than in formal institutions alone.

A second key mechanism relates to territorial sanctuary and spatial continuity. Pashtun-inhabited areas along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border have historically offered strategic depth for Taliban operations, serving as zones for retreat, regrouping, and logistical coordination. Recent analyses emphasize that the effectiveness of these sanctuaries cannot be explained solely by geographical terrain or weak border enforcement. Instead, cross-border Pashtun social ties have played a critical role in facilitating protection, concealment, and logistical support (International Crisis Group, 2022). These ties enable insurgents to blend into local populations, access safe houses, and secure material assistance without relying on formal supply chains.

In this context, ethnicity operates as a connective structure linking insurgent strategy to territorial and social space. The continuity of Pashtun communities across borders allows the Taliban to transcend

state boundaries, undermining conventional counterinsurgency strategies based on territorial containment. Moreover, the social legitimacy derived from shared identity often discourages local communities from cooperating with external security forces, further enhancing the Taliban's operational resilience (Kinnaree et al., 2025). Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how Pashtun ethnicity functions not as a cause of insurgency, but as an enabling infrastructure that integrates social networks, spatial continuity, and organizational endurance within Taliban insurgent practice.

3.2. Pashtunwali and the Construction of Local Legitimacy

Beyond mobilization and territorial sanctuary, recent scholarship increasingly highlights the role of Pashtunwali in shaping local legitimacy and patterns of compliance in Taliban-controlled areas. Contemporary studies caution against interpreting Pashtunwali as a cultural determinant of Taliban violence or political behavior. Instead, Pashtunwali functions as a normative repertoire—a set of socially recognized principles and practices—that can be selectively activated to frame authority, regulate social relations, and resolve disputes within Pashtun communities (Eslami & Safari, 2022). This perspective underscores that Pashtunwali does not operate independently of political power, but gains relevance when it is incorporated into governance strategies.

The Taliban's engagement with Pashtunwali is best understood as selective and instrumental, rather than comprehensive or traditionalist. Elements such as *jirga* (tribal council), *nanawatai* (protection and asylum), *melmastia* (hospitality), and *nang* (honor) have been invoked to legitimize Taliban authority at the local level, particularly in rural areas where customary norms continue to shape social expectations. By aligning certain governance practices with familiar normative frameworks—such as dispute mediation, protection of local communities, and enforcement of moral order—the Taliban has been able to present itself as a culturally resonant authority rather than a purely coercive force (Terpstra & Freerks, 2017).

However, the use of Pashtunwali as a governance tool also reveals important limitations. Its selective and instrumental application often generates tensions between local customary expectations and centralized Taliban authority, particularly when religious decrees override established mechanisms of dispute resolution. Moreover, the reliance on Pashtunwali-based legitimacy remains largely confined to Pashtun-majority areas, limiting its effectiveness as a unifying framework for governance in Afghanistan's multi-ethnic society. These constraints highlight that Pashtunwali functions as a contextual source of local legitimacy rather than a comprehensive or transferable model of national governance (Mehran et al., 2023).

This selective incorporation of Pashtunwali has become especially salient in the post-2021 period, as the Taliban transitioned from an insurgent movement to a governing authority. Maintaining order and compliance in this phase required more than military dominance; it demanded forms of legitimacy that could operate at the community level. Recent analyses suggest that Pashtunwali has facilitated Taliban governance by providing symbolic justification for authority claims and dispute resolution mechanisms, particularly in areas where formal state institutions have historically been weak, inaccessible, or distrusted (Zyla, 2025). In such contexts, the Taliban's ability to draw upon customary norms has enabled a degree of social acceptance that cannot be explained by coercion alone.

However, the literature also emphasizes the limitations and contradictions inherent in this strategy. While Pashtunwali has enhanced Taliban legitimacy within Pashtun-majority areas, it has simultaneously constrained the movement's appeal beyond these communities. Non-Pashtun groups—such as Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks—often perceive the Taliban's governance practices as ethnically biased and culturally exclusionary, reinforcing perceptions of Pashtun dominance and political marginalization. As a result, the same normative framework that facilitates local compliance in Pashtun regions may undermine broader national legitimacy in Afghanistan's multi-ethnic society (Mirdad et al., 2025).

Importantly, recent studies underline that Pashtunwali is neither uniformly applied nor universally accepted across Pashtun communities themselves. Interpretations of Pashtunwali vary significantly by region, tribal context, and local power relations, and its application is frequently subordinated to the Taliban's ideological, security, and strategic priorities. In practice, Taliban governance often blends selective elements of Pashtunwali with rigid interpretations of Islamic law, producing hybrid forms of

authority that are contested even within Pashtun society. This variability further challenges deterministic accounts that portray Pashtunwali as a stable or homogeneous cultural force.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument that Pashtunwali operates as a conditioning factor rather than an autonomous driver of insurgency or governance. Its influence lies in shaping the form and legitimacy claims of Taliban authority, not in generating violence or political order independently. By framing Pashtunwali as a contingent and instrumental resource, this analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural norms interact with organizational capacity and political strategy in insurgent governance.

3.3. Ethnic Dominance, Governance, and Post-2021 Political Order

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has significantly intensified debates concerning ethnic dominance, political exclusion, and the prospects for inclusive governance in Afghanistan. Despite official narratives emphasizing national unity and Islamic brotherhood, recent policy reports and human rights assessments consistently indicate that governance structures under the Taliban remain heavily concentrated in Pashtun hands. This concentration is particularly visible within security institutions, provincial administrations, and key decision-making bodies, where leadership positions are overwhelmingly occupied by Pashtun elites linked to Taliban networks. Rather than representing a rupture from the insurgent period, this pattern reflects the direct translation of Taliban mobilization infrastructure into governing authority (Rahimi, 2021).

From an institutional perspective, the post-2021 political order demonstrates continuity between insurgent organization and state-like governance. The same Pashtun-dominated networks that enabled the Taliban to mobilize fighters, secure territorial control, and sustain insurgency have now been repurposed to staff administrative positions and enforce political order. This continuity has allowed the Taliban to consolidate power rapidly and maintain internal cohesion during a period of severe economic crisis and international isolation. In this sense, ethnic dominance has functioned as a stabilizing factor in the short term, facilitating command-and-control, loyalty enforcement, and organizational discipline within the new regime (Adeli, 2021).

However, the literature also highlights the exclusionary consequences of this governance model. Non-Pashtun groups—particularly Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks—have experienced limited political representation and restricted access to decision-making processes at both national and subnational levels. Human rights reports document patterns of marginalization, localized repression, and unequal treatment in areas such as security provision, land disputes, and access to public services (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). These dynamics have reinforced perceptions that the Taliban's rule represents not merely an Islamist project, but also a continuation of Pashtun political dominance within Afghanistan's multi-ethnic society.

The exclusion of non-Pashtun groups has contributed to persistent ethnic tensions and, in some cases, sporadic resistance. While large-scale armed opposition has remained limited since 2021, localized forms of dissent and unrest indicate unresolved grievances rooted in political exclusion and ethnic inequality. Recent analyses suggest that the absence of meaningful inclusion mechanisms has undermined trust between the Taliban authorities and non-Pashtun communities, reducing the prospects for long-term political stability (International Crisis Group, 2022). In this context, ethnic dominance functions as a double-edged sword: it consolidates power internally while generating centrifugal pressures externally.

Comparative studies on insurgent-to-government transitions indicate that armed movements relying heavily on ethnic dominance often encounter similar governance dilemmas after assuming power. While ethnic-based networks can facilitate rapid consolidation and internal cohesion, they frequently constrain broader political inclusion and national legitimacy. The Taliban's post-2021 governance trajectory reflects these comparative patterns, resembling cases in which insurgent movements successfully convert military authority into political control but struggle to institutionalize inclusive governance in plural societies (Terpstra & Frerks, 2017).

These findings align closely with instrumentalist theories of ethnic politics, which argue that ethnic dominance can enhance the organizational effectiveness of armed movements and governing coalitions,

while simultaneously constraining broader political integration (Wimmer et al., 2009). Ethnic networks provide cohesion, loyalty, and mobilization capacity, but they also narrow the social base of authority and intensify exclusionary governance practices. In Afghanistan's deeply plural society, this trade-off has become increasingly visible under Taliban rule (Mirdad et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the post-2021 Afghan political order illustrates the ambivalent role of ethnicity as mobilization infrastructure. The Taliban's reliance on Pashtun-dominated structures has facilitated rapid consolidation and short-term governability, yet it poses significant challenges for inclusive governance, national legitimacy, and long-term state-building. Without mechanisms to broaden political participation and address ethnic grievances, the durability of the current political order remains uncertain, suggesting that ethnic dominance, while effective in the short run, may undermine stability over time.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the role of Pashtun ethnicity in Taliban insurgency and post-2021 governance by conceptualizing ethnicity as mobilization infrastructure rather than as a deterministic cause of conflict. Based on a critical narrative review of recent literature, the study shows that Pashtun identity has functioned as an enabling structure that supports recruitment, coordination, territorial sanctuary, and organizational resilience. These mechanisms help explain the Taliban's capacity to sustain insurgency and rapidly consolidate power after returning to authority in 2021.

The analysis further demonstrates that Pashtunwali operates as a conditioning and legitimizing factor in local governance, particularly in Pashtun-majority areas. While its selective use has contributed to local compliance and administrative control, it has also limited the Taliban's broader legitimacy in Afghanistan's multi-ethnic society. At the political level, Pashtun-dominated governance structures have strengthened short-term stability and internal cohesion, yet simultaneously intensified ethnic exclusion and grievances among non-Pashtun groups.

Overall, the findings highlight the dual effect of ethnicity as both a resource and a constraint in insurgent governance. By specifying the mechanisms through which ethnic identity is transformed into mobilization capacity, this study contributes a non-deterministic and analytically grounded framework for understanding insurgency and post-conflict governance. This perspective offers broader insights into how ethnicity shapes political order in multi-ethnic conflict settings beyond the Afghan case.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. As the research relied primarily on secondary data, including academic books, journals, and reports, no direct human subject involvement or primary data collection was required. Therefore, ethical approval was not necessary. However, the study adhered to the highest ethical standards in the use of sources, ensuring proper citation and respect for intellectual property.

Informed Consent Statement

As this study relied on secondary data sources, no direct involvement of human participants was necessary. Therefore, informed consent was not required. However, in accordance with ethical standards, all sources used in the research were properly cited, and any data derived from external reports, publications, or publicly available information was handled with full respect for confidentiality and intellectual property rights.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, MHLA, AF, and AR; methodology, MHLA, AF, and AR; validation, MHLA, AF, and AR; formal analysis, MHLA, AF, and AR; resources, MHLA, AF; writing-original draft preparation, MHLA, AF, and AR; writing – review & editing, AF, AR, and ZR.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. Due to the nature of the data being secondary sources, access may be subject to availability and copyright restrictions.

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Notes on Contributors

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