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Afghanistan

Ahl-e Hadith



This brief report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this brief report is to provide updated background information for use in the processing of asylum cases. The focus of the report is on the treatment of individuals and communities belonging to the Ahl-e Hadith faith in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban authorities.

The EUAA COI Report Methodology has been applied in the writing process.¹ This brief report is based on a synthesis of online interviews with two sources who have knowledge on the topic supplemented with available written sources. It should be noted that due to the scarcity of publicly available open sources in English and Dari regarding the Ahl-e Hadith community in Afghanistan, the online interviews serve as the primary source for this brief report.

Both sources started the interviews by stating that Salafism has become synonymous with Ahl-e Hadith in Afghanistan, and thus use these terms interchangeably.² This is a useful reading guidance, should the interviews in Annex 1 become relevant or applied as a direct source. This report refrains from defining Salafism and refers to an explanatory clarification published in 2022, in which it stated:

‘Salafism is a collective term for different directions within Sunni Islam that are linked to a certain interpretive tradition. Although it is sometimes associated with terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS), it is important to emphasize that Salafism does not legitimize extremism or violence as such.’³ For a more detailed definition we refer to the full report.

During the interviews, the sources were consulted on how they prefer to be referenced, and thus are referred to according to their own request. Care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The individual sources should not be held accountable for the content of the report.

The consulted sources were informed about the purpose of the report and that their statements would be included in the published version of the report. Minutes were written for each interview and forwarded to the sources for approval, giving them the opportunity to amend, comment or correct their statements. Both sources have approved their statements, which can be found in Annex 1.

For the sake of transparency, accuracy and reader-friendliness, the paragraphs in the minutes of the interviews in Annex 1 have consecutive numbers. The numbers are applied in the footnotes when a statement is referred to.

¹ EUAA, *EUAA Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, February 2023, [url](#)

² Researcher on Afghanistan: 2; Antonio Guistozzi: 1

³ Nationale Center for forebyggelse af Ekstremisme, *Udfordringer relateret til salafisme og jihadi-salafisme i Danmark; Historik, aktuelle udviklinger og praktiske erfaringer [Challenges related to Salafism and Jihadi-Salafism in Denmark; History, current developments and practical experience]* 2022, [url](#), p. 15

This brief report is available on the website of the Refugee Appeals Board <https://fln.dk>, and thus is available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process, as well as to the public.

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 19 October 2023.

2. Ahl-e Hadith in Afghanistan

2.1 Ahl-e Hadith communities

Ahl-e Hadith is an Islamic movement that emerged in northern India in the nineteenth century⁴ and was founded by Hadith scholars. They propagated that the Quran, Sunnah and Hadith were the sole sources of authority in matters of faith, and that rational disputation was forbidden.⁵ According to a researcher on Afghanistan, Ahl-e Hadith followers claim to depend on the words and actions of the Prophet himself.⁶

According to multiple sources, the Ahl-e Hadith movement is often considered a South Asian variant of Wahhabism,⁷ and one source states that the followers of Ahl-e Hadith are puritanists.⁸

In Afghanistan, the Ahl-e Hadith community resides in a predominately Hanafi⁹ religious environment,¹⁰ which according to Oxford Reference, is rejected by the Ahl-e Hadith movement as a legal school of Islam.¹¹

A researcher on Afghanistan stated that the Ahl-e Hadith community has existed in Afghanistan for a long time, preceding the rise of Salafism during the Mujahedeen's war against the Soviet Union in the 1980's.¹² Although Salafism is a newer school of thought, both interviewed sources assessed that in Afghanistan today Salafism has become synonymous with Ahl-e Hadith.¹³ A key distinction is that Salafis have the "zeal of the convert," leading to more extreme behaviour.¹⁴

The provinces with the highest prevalence of Salafi communities in Afghanistan are Kunar, Nuristan, Nangahar and Laghman. Salafi communities can also be found in other provinces, such as Badakhshan and Kunduz. According to the source, Salafis do attempt to convert members of other sects into their own.¹⁵

⁴ Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 March 2018, [url](#)

⁵ Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 March 2018, [url](#); Oxford Reference, *Ahl al-Hadith (People of the Tradition)*, 2000, [url](#)

⁶ Researcher on Afghanistan: 1

⁷ Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 March 2018, [url](#); Oxford Reference, *Ahl al-Hadith (People of the Tradition)*, 2000, [url](#); Sheikh, M., *Det nye regime i Afghanistan rummer markante splittelser. Vesten står endnu afventende [The new regime in Afghanistan is significantly divided. The West is still in waiting position]*, 9 May 2022, [url](#)

⁸ Sheikh, M., *Det nye regime i Afghanistan rummer markante splittelser. Vesten står endnu afventende [The new regime in Afghanistan is significantly divided. The West is still in waiting position]*, 9 May 2022, [url](#); Bowker, J., *Ahl al-Hadith (People of the Tradition)*, 2000, [url](#)

⁹ The Hanafi school is the largest of the four traditional Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

¹⁰ Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 March 2018, [url](#)

¹¹ Bowker, J., *Ahl al-Hadith (People of the Tradition)*, 2000, [url](#)

¹² Researcher on Afghanistan: 2

¹³ Researcher on Afghanistan: 2; Antonio Guistozzi: 1

¹⁴ Researcher on Afghanistan: 2

¹⁵ Researcher on Afghanistan: 11



SIGAR, Map of Afghanistan¹⁶

2.2 Rites and rituals

According to a researcher on Afghanistan, the rites, rituals and norms of Ahl-e Hadith followers have distinct characteristics, which makes them identifiable from those of Hanafis.¹⁷

During prayer, Ahl-e Hadith men will raise their hands to their shoulders, while Hanafis raise them to their ears. Ahl-e Hadith men will do so again during the *Ruku* part of the prayer,¹⁸ when the Imam says *Allahu Akbar*. Followers of Ahl-e Hadith also conclude their prayer by saying *Ameen* aloud, whereas Hanafis express it silently to themselves.¹⁹

Visual traits further set Ahl-e Hadith community apart. Unlike Hanafis who trim their beards, male followers of Ahl-e Hadith do not trim their beards and instead let them grow.²⁰ In

¹⁶ SIGAR, *Special Inspector general for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, 30 January 2023, [url](#)

¹⁷ Researcher on Afghanistan: 8

¹⁸ Researcher on Afghanistan: 8

¹⁹ Researcher on Afghanistan: 8; Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 march 2018, [url](#)

²⁰ Researcher on Afghanistan: 9; Dhaka Tribune, *What is the Ahl-e Hadith Movement?*, 11 march 2018, [url](#)

addition, they will hem their trousers to cut off halfway down their shins. These features make them recognizable.²¹

2.3 Taliban's treatment of Salafi communities

The Salafis in Afghanistan do not differentiate between Salafi communities in general and Ahl-e Hadith. Similarly, the general public in the country does not differentiate between Salafi trends within these groups, perceiving them all as Salafis.²²

The Taliban are internally diverse and have different views regarding the Salafis.²³ Moreover, there are differences in how local Taliban authorities treat Ahl-e Hadith members.²⁴

In general, there is a hostility towards the Salafis, primarily from the Deobandi and Sufi community in the southern parts of Afghanistan.²⁵ Conversely, Salafis accuse all Hanafi Muslims of being modernists who have renounced the caliphate, and thus consider Deobandis and Sufis as extreme Hanafis.²⁶ According to the Salafi community, they experience discrimination and complete exclusion from the state apparatus and government positions. For instance, there are no Salafi police officers nor intelligence officers in the country, and Salafis are underrepresented in the civilian bureaucracy at the provincial level.²⁷

In northern parts of Afghanistan, in Badakhshan in particular, the Taliban is reported in some neighbourhoods to have restricted the activities of Ahl-e Hadith members, and closed some of the mosques.²⁸ In the southern parts of the country, the Salafis have been opening new madrasas and mosques, but the Taliban have shut them down.²⁹

Furthermore, the Salafi communities do not have *Qariadars* - including in areas where the Salafis make up the majority.³⁰ Qariadar is an elderly figure at the bottom of Afghanistan's informal governing system,³¹ who is an indirectly elected representative in every village, also locally known as a *Malik* or *Arbab*. The Qariadar's responsibility is to work as an intermediary between the village and the district state administration.³² He is an influential figure and can for instance

²¹ Researcher on Afghanistan: 9

²² Antonio Giustozzi: 1

²³ Antonio Giustozzi: 8

²⁴ A researcher on Afghanistan: 4

²⁵ Antonio Giustozzi: 8

²⁶ BBC Persian, آیا مشکل سلفی‌ها و طالبان حل می‌شود؟ [Will the problem of Salafis and Taliban be solved?], 1 April 2022, [url](#) ; For an overview of the structure of Sunni sects, please see Annex 2

²⁷ Antonio Giustozzi: 9

²⁸ A researcher on Afghanistan: 6

²⁹ Antonio Giustozzi: 11

³⁰ Antonio Giustozzi: 10

³¹ Antonio Giustozzi: 10

³² Daudzai, H., *Post-Taliban State-Building in Afghanistan*, 25 November 2019, [url](#) p. 221

mediate when someone is detained, if tax-related issues occur, or any other concern that might develop between the government and the community.³³

2.3.1 Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP)

Many Ahl-e Hadith scholars have declared allegiance to the Taliban,³⁴ including, Sardar Wali Thaqib, the head of the Ahl-e Hadith Association of Afghanistan, who was assassinated in Kabul in July 2022.³⁵ While there is no conclusive proof of culpability with regard to this assassination, suspicion has fallen on hardline Salafis sympathetic to ISKP.³⁶ Some ISKP leaders and members claim to belong to the Salafi tradition.³⁷

A researcher on Afghanistan opined that members of Ahl-e Hadith are universally met with suspicion due to the overlap between the Ahl-e Hadith community and Salafism, and because of the insurgency and terrorism campaigns conducted by the ISKP. However, the source has not seen any documented incidents of the Taleban killing Ahl-e Hadith members based on their faith.³⁸

The ISKP has particularly been recruiting for the past 4-6 years among the larger Salafi communities. Some Taliban officials have argued that the support for ISKP is widespread among the Salafi community, and therefore, a push back is needed. Other senior Taliban members of the Taliban favour a more surgical approach and believe that targeting communities is counter-productive.³⁹

³³ Antonio Giustozzi: 10

³⁴ A researcher on Afghanistan: 7

³⁵ Al-Jazeera, اغتيال رئيس جمعية علماء أهل الحديث في أفغانستان [Assassination of the head of the Association of Ahl al-Hadith Scholars in Afghanistan], 14 July 2022, [url](#)

³⁶ A researcher on Afghanistan: 7

³⁷ A researcher on Afghanistan: 5

³⁸ A researcher on Afghanistan: 5

³⁹ Antonio Giustozzi: 5

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Annex 1: Meeting minutes

Online interview with first source

Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow on Terrorism and Conflict, 4 October 2023

Taliban's perception of the Ahl-e Hadith community

1. Salafis in Afghanistan do not differentiate between Salafi communities in general and Ahl-e hadith. Nor does the general public in the country differentiate between Salafi trends within the groups. There are all seen as Salafis.
2. In Pakistan however, there is different understanding of Salafi groups and varieties of trends.

Salafis and ISKP

3. In reality, there are some differences among the Salafi communities. One community calls itself Salafis in Eastern Afghanistan, with pockets in the Northeast. Other communities are Salafis, but they are not as visible. Another trend is the Hizb ut-Tahrir groups. All of these trends within the same or overlapping ideology compete with each other.
4. The majority of the madrasas in Afghanistan are Hanafi, but there are several Salafi ones. Salafis distinguish themselves in visible ways from Hanafis. They distinguish themselves through praying for one. Salafis are a somewhat new sect that emerged in the 1970's.
5. The ISKP has been recruiting especially for the past 4-6 years among the larger Salafi communities. Some Taliban officials have been arguing that the support for ISKP is widespread among the Salafi community, and therefore a push back is needed. Other members of the Taliban among the higher level of policy-making believe that targeting communities is counter-productive and the approach should be surgical.
6. There is always a wider area in the society or a milieu, where people have sympathy towards members of the same community, and therefore support and allow a terrorist community to operate. Those parts of the community are difficult to target from the central government point of view – and the Taliban are still debating this. As a Salafist, joining the ISKP means your community will be targeted.

7. Another problem is that when people are killed or disappear in Afghanistan, it is difficult to know their identity. We cannot investigate. So we cannot know whether it is a person belonging to the ISKP, a sympathizer or just a civilian who got picked up by mistake.

Taliban's treatment of Ahl-e Hadith community

8. The Taliban are internally diverse and have different views regarding the Salafis. There is a hostility towards the Salafis in general. The Deobandi and Sufi community in the south are the most hostile.
9. There is discrimination against the community. They complain about being totally excluded from the state apparatus. There aren't any Salafi police officers nor intelligence officers. They are underrepresented in the civilian bureaucracy on the provincial level. They are excluded from governmental level.
10. At the bottom of Afghanistan's governing system is the figure of "Qariadar". The Qariadar is an elder, selected by the government, who represents the local community and operates in an interface between the government and the community. The Qariadar is influential and can mediate when someone is detained, or something tax-related comes up, or any other issue that might appear between the government and the community. But Salafi communities do not have Qariadars. Not even in areas where the Salafis are the majority.
11. The most *Salafised* provinces in Afghanistan are Kunar, Nuristan, Nangahar and Laghman. There are also pockets in other provinces, such as in Badakhshan and Kunduz. Salafis do attempt to convert members of other sects into their own. In the south of the country, the Salafis have been opening new madrasas and mosques, but the Taliban have closed them down.

Online interview with second source

A researcher on Afghanistan, 19 September 2023

Taliban's perception of the Ahl-e Hadith community

1. There is a fundamental theological difference between Ahl-e Hadith and the Taliban, who belongs to the Hanafi school. Ahl-e Hadith claim to depend on the sayings and actions of the Prophet himself.
2. The Ahl-e Hadith community has existed in Afghanistan for a long time, and is much older than Salafism, which arose during the Mujahedeen's war against the Soviet Union. The Salafi school of thought is synonymous with Ahl-e Hadith in Afghanistan, but Salafis have the zeal of the convert, and thus are more extreme in behaviour.
3. In the 90's, under the Taliban government, there was widespread disapproval of members of Ahl-e Hadith, because of their beliefs and practices.

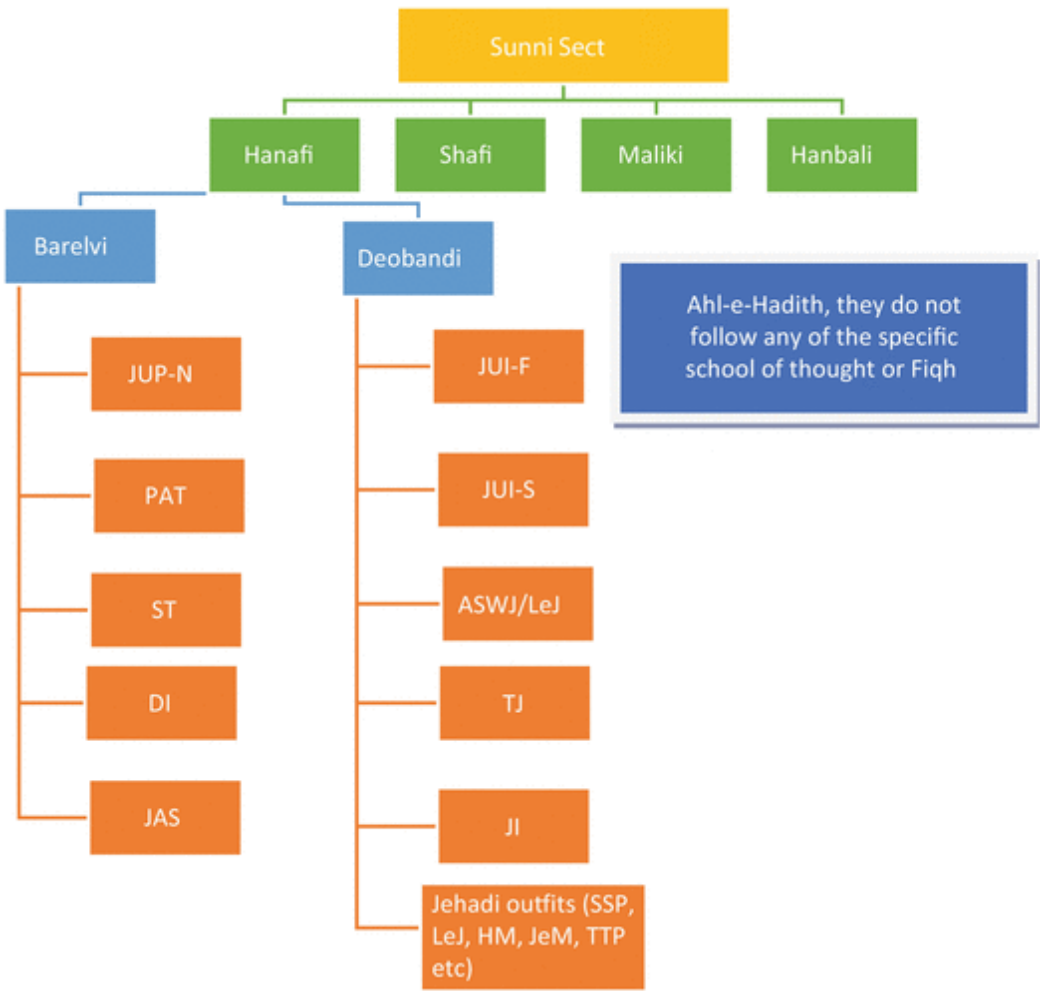
Persecution of Ahl-e Hadith members

4. There are differences in how local Taliban authorities handle Ahl-e Hadith members. Since the researcher is not currently in Afghanistan, it is difficult for him to gauge the situation clearly.
5. Due to the overlap between Ahl-e Hadith and Salafism, and because of the insurgency and terrorism campaigns conducted by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), members of Ahl-e Hadith are universally met with suspicion. But the source has not seen any documented incidents of killings of Ahl-e Hadith members by the Taliban based on their faith. Some ISKP leaders and members claim to belong to the Salafi tradition.
6. In northern parts of Afghanistan, in Badakhshan in particular, the Taliban is reported in some quarters to have restricted the activities of Ahl-e Hadith members, and closed some mosques.
7. Many Ahl-e Hadith scholars have declared allegiance to the Taliban. One, the head of the Ahl-e Hadith Association of Afghanistan Sardar Wali Thaqib, was murdered in Kabul in July 2022. Though there is no conclusive proof of culpability with regard to this assassination, suspicion has fallen on hardline Salafis sympathetic to ISKP.

Ahl-e Hadith's rites and rituals

8. The rites, rituals and norms of Ahl-e Hadith's members have some identifiable distinctions from that of Hanafis. The hallmarks of Ahl-e Hadith's prayer ritual include saying "Amin" out loud at the end of prayer, whereas Hanafis express it silently to themselves. When performing the prayer, the Hanafis will raise their hands parallel to their ears, displaying the palms of their hands outwards. Ahl-e Hadiths will do the same, but only raise their hands to their shoulders. They will do so again during *Ruku* position, when the Imam says "Allahu Akbar".
9. Besides the differences in prayer, male members of Ahl-e Hadith can be distinguished by their refusal to shave or trim their beards. Male members of Hanafi will trim their beards, while Ahl-e Hadith members will not trim it at all. Furthermore, Ahl-e Hadiths will hem their trousers to cut off halfway down their shins. People displaying these hallmarks of Ahl-e Hadith attire can be specially profiled at checkpoints, though there is no general policy in this regard.

Annex 2: Illustration



This figure shows the structure of the Sunni sects in Pakistan.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sewag, Z., *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, “The Intra-Sunni Conflicts in Pakistan”, 11. November 2016, Palgrave Macmillan, [url](#)