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The Social Lives of Hezb-I-Islami: Social Cohesion of an Insurgent Group

Afghan insurgent movements present an interesting puzzle to analysts' typical understanding of resilient armed groups; they have weak organisational structure and outdated equipment, yet they are an effective fighting force. It is therefore relevant to look at alternative aspects of these organizations to understand their resilience. To this end, through analysis of rare video footage shot by a journalist embedded with Hezb-i-Islami, this paper focuses on the narratives and praxis around which the group constructs its social cohesion. The paper thereby seeks to contribute to a more multi-faceted understanding of the social cultures of militant groups.

Inspired by Robert Putnam, this paper focuses on social cohesion on a 'horizontal' solidarity level rather than on the classical Bourdieu-style, 'vertical' hierarchical level. This paper does not use the concept of social capital in the strictly Bourdieuan sense (as a tool for analysing struggles over power-positions), nor in the way that Putnam uses it (as a tool for analysing the cohesion of a pluralistic society). Rather, it operationalizes the concept for analysis of how this Hezb-i-Islami group builds internal (bonding) and external (bridging) relatedness.

The paper discusses how the concept of social capital lends itself to this type of analysis, highlighting the dynamic between individuals and society, and showing how they mutually shape each other; i.e., individ-

uals contribute to a collective identity whilst simultaneously capitalising on being a part of it. Such analysis brings to the fore the key points that individuals relate to in choosing to be part of the group, while also showing how the group constructs togetherness. Through social capital, generalised trust becomes manifested as sociability, and social cohesion is in turn determined by how that sociability is translated into asserted action. Construction of the necessary internal motivation to achieve this state can be seen as the *sine qua non* of most social communities, and not least militant Islamist groups.

This paper shows how the group strengthens its internal relations through social activities such as sight-seeing and picnics, and the collective construction of a semi-mythical self-identity. Religious themes contribute to social cohesion both through a shared, ritualised praxis, and through the construction of narratives of *jihad* that function to elevate the group to a uniquely privileged position. The group also implements local judicial councils and appoints local leaders, thereby building bridging social capital which they

capitalise on through access to local shops, medical assistance and more. It is concluded that the group has active agency in establishing strong and cohesive relations, both internally and with local communities, and it is argued that this contributes to its resilience as a militant movement. It is noted that analysis of social culture is an often overlooked aspect of research on militant movements, yet it offers significant insights into the structure and motivations of these groups. This is especially relevant as the focus on Afghanistan moves away from military strategies and towards political negotiations.