

CORH Values – Season 3, Episode 2

Najm al-Din on Afghanistan

In August 2021, the United States left Afghanistan after twenty years of conflict and nation building only to see the fledgling democracy fall into the hands of the Taliban. I look in detail at this geo-political conflagration with Dr. Yousefi and examine the roots of Islamism and its effects on the shape of the modern Islamic world. We also delve into the history of Afghanistan, the complicated ethnic makeup of the region, and the mistakes that have been made by the occupying powers over the years.

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Transcript:

Hello and welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments. Daniel Veidlinger. Again, this season's topic is going to be fire. Over the summer, Northern California was assailed by a number of very serious wildfires. The Dixie fire alone consumed over 1 million acres of forest, and the skies were filled with smoke for weeks upon weeks. That inspired us to think about fires, a theme. And we're going to be talking about different approaches to fire in different cultures around the world. The role of fire in various religions, mythical origins of fire, and other metaphorical uses of the idea of fire and conflagration. I'm very happy to have Najm al-Din Yousefi here with us is a professor of Islamic history here at California State University Chico, with a focus on early Islamic history as well as modern Middle Eastern issues. We're very happy to have him here. Hello, Dr. Yousefi. Hello, Dr. Veidlinger. I'm glad to be here. Thank you for having me. So one of the fires that has been going on for a long time now in Asia is in Afghanistan. The US was there for two decades, spent, maybe \$2 trillion trying to put out this particular fire as they say, and whether they had been successful or not. That is of course, up in the air right now. It's very difficult to know, I think, how things are going to play out there. But I would love to talk to you about some of the background to what happened there, and some of the theoretical issues and religious issues that are all connected to this complicated conflagration known as the Afghan conflict. So let's start with this term, Islamism, that one hears a lot about the course as a religion called Islam. But then there's also movements known as Islamism. And I think a lot of the listeners have probably heard that the Taliban who have now replaced us as the major power in Afghanistan indeed has taken over from the elected government. It is now controlling Afghanistan. So one hears that they're Islamists. And I wonder if you could speak a little bit about what that term actually means and how it differs from just the true Islam. Islamism is a modern ideology. It's part of a larger movement called Islamic revival. Of course, all these terms are coined and used by, by modern observers, analysts, scholars. They are not used by Muslims or by those who pursue these ideologies. But it is important to make a distinction between Islam and what is Islamic broadly and what is known as Islamism. Islamism refers to a broad movement that began in the 18th century. And it caught on mostly in the 19th century. Islamism sought to revive what it claimed to be the pristine and pure teachings of Islam as reflected in the scripture that we're on and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in the Hadith. In doing so, it diverged from established schools of thought within Islam, especially within Sunni Islam. Because Sunni Islam is known to, to include four different schools of law first and foremost. And those schools of law interpret the sacred sources of law, namely the pore on and tradition of the Prophet Mohammad in various ways. Now, Islamism diverged from, from that thinking and try to come to grips with the sources from a different point of view. For example, the Wahhabi movement that started in the 18th century in, in Arabia, the Arabian Peninsula. By an itinerant. A preacher called Muhammad ibn Abdullah hub, try to purify Islam and get rid of everything that had been added to Islam by either Muslim scholars or by foreign cultures. So Sufism, Greek philosophy, the sciences, all the way to even legal interpretations of legal scholars were viewed with a lot of suspicion. And they try to, to, to purify Islam by getting rid of these extraneous things that had been added to Islam. Now, what is important for understanding Islamism is that it was a movement that try to, to address a lot of problems that Muslim societies were dealing with. In other wars. It reflects that on, on the issues that Muslims were dealing with, economic issues, being subservient to colonial powers. And they felt that going back to their pristine roots would be the best way to revive the old

glories. Now, Islamism is an umbrella term. It refers to so many different movements, one of which, for example, being Salafism. Salafism is in fact, the movement that became dominant in later 19th century and early 20th century aspires to, to revive the teachings of the self, meaning the pious forefathers or predecessors, the early generations of Muslims, the first 34 generations of Muslims who experienced the prophet Muhammad and his, his presumably true teachings as they try to present. So it sounds to me like there are some parallels here with what went on in the Western Christian world where you have the protestant revolution exact. And Martin Luther's thought that the Catholic Church had been moving too far away from the original teachings and the individual people should actually go back and read the Bible more carefully. Listen to the words of the Bible rather than the various accretions of scholastic ideas that had built up over hundreds of years by the church that were different than what you might read in the Bible. That's an excellent parallel to draw. In fact, this is kind of it textualists approach and kind of puritanical. It bears a lot of resemblance to two American fundamentalism, for example, that emerged as part of the Protestant movement, late 18th, I'm sorry, late 19th, early 20th century. That try to accentuate actually what Martin Luther had set about sola scriptura. So these folks, the Sufis, and the hobbies, they denigrate what has been passed down from the founders of schools of laws. And, and they emphasize the, the, the true teachings of Islam imbedded in, into text itself, in the scripture itself and in the reports of the prophet's words and deeds known as Hadi. Rest of the, rest of the Salafi is except that it's not that they just go to the ground. They also accept, yes, at the various schools of jurisprudence that built up all sorts of laws based on that over the years that they kind of rejects. They frown upon those schools of law. Because there was this concept that, that emerged in those schools of law called Cup lead or any relation. So you would go through the channel of an interpreter and you, and you lake that interpreter. The selfies and hobbies and other Islamist essentially said, why would you go through the channel of another person when you have access to the prophet Muhammad himself and his early followers, on the one hand, they give the authority to the individual to, to engage with the text and understand them, apply them in their day-to-day life. But at the same time, they don't give a lot of leeway to human reason. And that's what makes them, that's what makes them more of a textualists. They don't want to have a lot of wiggle room, so to speak, for your interpretation and my interpretation and a third person's interpretation. They would like to to go with what the text itself tells us to do. So that's what make, make them, that's what makes them more of a tradition at nist. Yes, then rationalist. Okay, I understand that. So in a tradition that I'm more familiar with, the Jewish tradition, you've got the Talmud for example, right? And maybe in a sense, the Talmudic schools are in some sense similar to these schools of jurisprudence that you were mentioning. They are where they can interpret things quite broadly. I mean, famously, there's a biblical passage that says an eye for an eye, right? Those are the words. If you take somebody's eye out than your eye should be taken out as, as payment and return to the Talmud. Of course, interpret that to mean some monetary payments equal in value to an eye rather than actually an eye. That's a really good example because if you read the texts that says that, but the Talmudic tradition interpreted quite differently to be precisely knots an eye for an eye, but something else of equal value. So those kinds of strategies I guess are also deployed in the mocked up is I don't know, It's not have MET hubs. The vase, jurisprudential schools, those kinds of interpretive strategies are deployed. And a lot of this, a lot with or I guess all slop is by definition are against that kind of very wide interpretation. Words. They are indeed against those white interpretations. And when you look at it, all religions, including Judaism, rabbinic Judaism, have had this kind of textual, textualists. Backlash, care rights. For example, the Carolina movement in Judaism was very textualists and was against Talmudic interpretations. I, since I'm a scholar of communication and religion, obviously I immediately think, well, Protestants, the Protestant turn back to the text emerge with Martin Luther. Within decades of the printing press itself being invented and Bibles being printed. And now in the Middle East and South Asia, the printing press kinda came towards the end of the 18th century. And that seems to be when these movements also arose there. And I'm wondering if they might have been also connected to the rise in prints that was going on that premise of the world at that time that enabled people to get access to grants more easily than they would have in the past. Do you think that that's a possibility? No question. There has been a lot of influence coming from mass communication technologies from the early days of newspaper and these things all the way to our present day Twitter and Facebook that were widely used by, BY, have been widely used by the Islamist groups and organizations and whatnot. But one important thing to note is that Islamism became popular gradually in the age that, that people in the, in South West Asia and South Asia began to receive news from different corners of the world and became more familiar about what was going on in the world. They became aware of how Western cultures and Western countries had advanced technologically and scientifically and how they were expanding their empires.

For example, the British Empire was expanding, the Russian Empire was expanding. They became aware of the struggle that the Ottoman Empire was having against those who are their empires. And all of these brought up the question of why Muslim countries were in such an unfortunate situation. And it is only natural for every culture that when they are faced with pressing questions, one of the most accessible options is to go back to one's roots with the glory, the glory days exactly of the past, because that is what people are familiar with. They have that readily available in their culture. Whether it's mythical or real, that's beside the point. The point is that it is a resource at their disposal. And most, if not all cultures are more than willing to tap into those resources and use them at will. We've seen that in the United States where someone started this, the slogan Make America Great Again, again. And you know, whether it was the myths of great America or the de facto greater maker. At some far past. You know, it caught on and you know, a very significant, considerable portion of the population came to, to, to identify with that slogan. So there is nothing unnatural or out of ordinary about Muslim countries. Predilection to go back to there. Old days of glory. Let me add that not every Islamist movement has been against schools of jurisprudence about right. So let's bring this up to have that brings us to the teletype. Have them because you have one hears that. In fact, there was an isis attack in presumably was isis or some non Taliban group that attacked the soldiers at the airport on the last couple of days. It wasn't Taliban. And the news report saying, in fact, tell about an isis or enemies as well. And many people don't realize that even Al Qaeda and Taliban a kind of ideological enemies, although Al-Qaeda was given safe passage, gonna stand by the Taliban in 2000, which of course led to 9 11. But so could you talk a little bit about what specific ideologies the Taliban might have and how that might differ from some of the other Islamists. Well, the Taliban, it's a movement that originates from Dale Bondi religious schools. In Pakistan. The Taliban were seminary students or teachers at those schools in Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent, the vast majority of Sunni Muslims have always followed the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. So that's one thing that sets them apart from other Islamist. How you run these, except the Hanafi school day, our Hanafi, they are Hanafi school. Zionism kind of offshoot of the Taliban, are part of that. Not an offshoot, but are part of that because they received all their training India Bondi schools. Okay. However, there has been this tendency within the deal Bondi tradition to tone down personal interpretation and amplify tradition. And some of them try to, to get rid of personal interpretation, you know, to, in order to bring gain or to give more, give more importance to, to tradition. So that's what makes them more like, like Hobbes than, than other Sundays. But, but nevertheless, it would be a mistake to say that the Taliban or the Dubai and you are not following a school of law because they are, that's part of their tradition. And that also is yet another reason that trying to navigate this field of conflict in accord with, with different schools of Islamic thought can be misleading because also new Muslims there or Hanafi, the Tajiks for example, who are against the Taliban or Hanafi Sunni also. So explaining this in terms of religious or sectarian differentiation explains a part of the problem, but not all of the problem. The root cause of the Afghan problem, has little to do with different brands of Islam. And it has a lot to do with the failure of founding and modern nation state and defining a national identity. Because Afghanistan is unique in so many ways. And so our, its problems. Geographically, it's unique. It's an overlap of Central Asia, the Iranian plateau, and the Indian sub-continent. It's a landlocked and it's thoroughly tribal. And even though Ahmad Shah Durrani in the 18th century started building this empire that stretched from Central Asia, Southern Central Asia, all the way to the Arabian Sea and large parts of but we've just done and Pakistan. But still he had to deal with a lot of tribal strife and, you know, in fighting and audio issues. And that fell apart right away after his death. And, and then Afghanistan had to deal with, with, with the big imperialist game between Russia and Great Britain. And Great Britain was there historically. For a very long time it was part of the Iranian Empire. Even though practically it was very much autonomous. But, but the Iranian empires always appointed governors and viceroys. And you know, but Afghanistan has almost always been ruled by tribal warlords. And because establishing a nation state requires some memory, some collective memory of the past, every nation state has done this. A nationalistic project, requires that one would reach out and say, We are the people who did this and that, and we can do it again now. And they would embark on defining a national identity. Afghanistan has failed time and again to do that. And there's very little besides Islam that binds them together. And Islam turns out to be more of a dividing factor than uniting. So the only thing that you nice them is that over 95% of people are Muslim. But at the same time, these Muslims have been scattered in ragged, remote areas ruled by different tribes. They follow different brands of Islam, Hazare or are Shia, mostly Tajik or Sunday Hanafi Pashtuns are mostly overwhelmingly suddenly Hanafi. And then you add Salafism to this. You add all these Arab fighters who have explored that their brand of Islam to there. Let us not forget that, that Saudi money that, that spread all, all this message of Wahhabi Islam in order to

counter the Iranian version of, of Shizhen, turned out to, to add to this conflict and make it even more complicated. So it is in this context that I see that, that Afghanistan's problems stem more from its failure in founding a modern nation state than from, from its peculiar way of, of practicing Islam. Afghanistan is not unique in terms of its ethnic diversity, but it is unique in that these ethnic groups have, for a very long time lived in semi autonomous or autonomous regions that have been more or less recalcitrant and have not given, aimed to outside or even domestic central authority, right? So the central authority, even under their own do rami Empire, was always a bit of a veneer. And maybe they could, they swore allegiance to uranium for a ride. And the emperor had to make deals with, with different tribes and even within his own Pashto and tried, he had to work out a lot of rivalry with, with another section of the Pashto and at the expense of other Pashtuns who were not quite on board. And those other Pashto would try to unseat him or overthrow him. And these things have been going on for quite a long time from 19, I think 999 until the coming of the Soviets. That's the only exception that there was some, some degree of central authority exercised in Afghanistan. So this has been the big trouble for the Afghan people. And I don't have any idea how this can be overcome, how this can be resolved. And I don't know of anyone who has a solution to this. And that maybe a good point to switch to what the United States has been trying to do in Afghanistan and he is up to up to two months ago, right? I was going to ask you. So like the way you're telling it sounds like there's not much to us could have done to really cobbled together a well-functioning modern nation state with a sense, a strong sense of African identity. There's not much the US or anyone else could have done 20 years. Yeah, certainly not a 120 years. This a nationalistic project is something that takes generations. In Afghanistan. You're dealing with all these different ethnic groups that hail from different areas and feel entitled to some form of autonomy in those areas. And the question is, how can you bring them on board and make him part of a national identity and national project. I would say because as you rightly pointed out, Islam is going to be part of that national, is going to be a major element of that national identity. It's going to take generations for the Afghans to define that. And because the, the, the divisions are so deep between these different. Interpretations of Islam. We have to give Afghans enough time to work it out on their own. All we can do or by we, I mean the outside world is to provide support as long as this is done in a peaceful and cooperative manner with the Taliban in power. However, I don't see how that can be done peacefully and in a cooperative way because they are by nature, by their very nature, very exclusivist. They have already started pushing the Hazara out of their areas. The Mazar-i-Sharif, the Tajiks. They have already imposed restrictions on girls and going to school on women going back to work. They have spread this anti Xia message, which also started with deal Bondi schools in Pakistan 40 years ago, more than 40 years ago, when they started circulating fatwa about the HSI and not belonging to the Muslim community. I don't see how we can have a short-term solution to this problem. Yeah, cuz I was going to point this out. What you were saying about the difficulties of uniting Afghanistan under the age of seven mirror. The Taliban also largely represent the past June, the past June group from Afghanistan. So that's about 40 percent of the country. And they have a different language, different cultures, different traditions than most of these other groups. So in as much as they tried to exert their power over the country, they're going to end up running into actually the same problems over time that any other group. It's just that they happen to be from a part of Afghanistan themselves. But in as much as they're trying to extend their power over all the other people in Afghanistan. They are going to run into the same problems as well with the one difference. They are Muslim. So they can at least use that. And I guess that's what they're trying to do. As a banner around which everybody can rally says he look, whatever happens in Afghanistan, It's always going to be the case that some group is going to try to rule over all these different people, right? Be it the Russians, the British, the Americans, or the Pashtun. Now, if it's the past June, at least we are Muslim. So that gives us, maybe some, gives them more sympathy from non Pashtun people around, around Afghanistan. That's how I see so than others, they have an easier time, but eventually, they don't give the autonomy and the rice to interpret Islam according to their own traditional ways, to the other people who are on Afghanistan there that the Taliban's eventually going to run into the same problems that everybody else has tried to conquer that area. And they did during their five-year, right? Yeah. And we've know what happened during their five-year rule or six year rule. And I know from 995, 96 to 2001, the northern area, you know, the punchier valley, where the Tajiks are and the areas of those other ethnic groups did not submit to, to Taliban rule. And there were other groups that were trying to break away from their rule. But you brought up a very important point. The Taliban represents as much their brand of Islam as their represent Pashto national sentiment. Because the Pashtun, being a very substantial percentage of the population, have been marginalized throughout Afghan history. The only way they could assert themselves was through having autonomous self rule in certain areas

right now they are trying to assert their rule through political channels. So India and they're going to have to figure out a way to share power. And that can not come to pass with that political will to define mechanisms that different ethnic groups can do some form of power sharing. But both Prime Minister's Ghani, the reason one, and the Karzai were both plus two, they were both Pashtun? Yes. And yet you see that there were those Pashtuns who felt that they didn't belong to this. In part because they saw this as a, as a foreign instrument of intervention. And there was a lot of corruption going on. So it, somehow, as much as the 20-year of us rule accomplished important things. For example, in giving education to women and giving them right to, to work outside home and did a lot of important things. But left a lot of other afghans on affected by these developments. So much so that the Taliban were able to come back and to recruit. Add more from, from the people who could have been part of the system propped up by the United States, but now they joined the Taliban. One other issue that we're dealing with is traditional patriarchal culture that cuts across different ethnic and religious groups. Shia, Sunni, Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik. So it's really hard to tell that the Afghans and force them to accept certain values that are important to most of the world. While there are still not on board and don't understand how this can work. This is the dilemma or the paradox of, of liberal ideology. On the one hand, you have to give people a choice. And on the other hand, you don't want to give in to what seems to be oppressive and discriminatory. So so how do you deal with this? I don't I don't have an answer for that question. Yes. Certainly something that is not easy to figure out. There's no doubt about that. Afghanistan, very much like Pakistan, had to define itself Vis-a-vis Hindu nationalism. Pakistan. And just as you know, Indian Muslims who were a minority and they were in some way disaffected. They felt that, you know, they needed to have a different identity. And the Hindus were more or less successful in creating a nation state, an independent nation state. So whatever nation state Pakistan was going to create and Afghanistan, by extension, was going to be something different than, than Hindu nationalism. In fact, deal Bondi schools where in fact a response to Hindu nationalism because they felt left out of that whole thing and being the target of, of much aggression and other things and that they needed to find a solution to that. Yeah, I've asked you to point out that what people don't realize necessarily just seeing the news about Afghanistan today and the Taliban implementing a strict form of sharia law and all of that is a, traditionally, there's been a lot of Sufism in Afghanistan and one of the greatest of all the Sufi think is Rumi, that many of the listeners have probably heard about hails from that area originally. So the question is, what has happened to the Sufi undertone of a lot of daily life, daily Islamic life in that part of the world has sort of been pushed out by these new movements? Or is it still there? Sadly enough, Sufism has been very much marginalized by the new Salafi puritanical Islamist movements. Sufism would provide some kind of solution. More flexible version of Islam. That, that, that has more room for different sects and different ways of life. And Sufism has a long and rich history in the Indian sub-continent and in Afghanistan. And yet the, the modern Islamist movements, Wahhabism is particularly hostile to Sufism and modern Islamist movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan, not to mention the Indian. India itself have become hostile to Sufis. So that has left very little room for, for Sufism. And that brings me back to some kind of vague solution that I had, which is we have to give support to Afghans themselves to work this out and find solutions from their own reservoir of cultural resources to, to find something that defines them and binds them together and would overcome their deep divisions and conflicts. And that's easier said than done. Well, but they do say the good fences make good neighbors. Then maybe the whole idea of having one country called Afghanistan is also not necessarily something you have to pursue. Maybe having separate nations that are based upon like there's a bit tongue area. Have a baton nation, have a diary nation, have the Tajiks joints, and she has done maybe these things would be better solution. And why does it have to be that there has to be one country called Afghanistan? This because some people decided on that years ago. I don't have an answer to that, but what history offers is that these borders were drawn. In, in haphazard and arbitrary fashion, the British in India decided that they wanted to have that buffer between, Between India, Russia and Iran. And they support that the Afghans to have some kind of self-rule. Why that the same time maintaining their, their control over the Afghans as much as they could, because the British themselves could not control the Afghans for too long. In fact, there were three British Afghan Wars and the Afghans would never giving to any outside influence. Back to your question. Probably. Some kind of a separate nation states would be a solution. And we have seen this essentially coming out of some other countries, for example, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia being another example. There are separatist movements have been like the Catalan and the Basques, Eritrea, and the borders in the Middle East. Most of them are arbitrary and very new. Hardly a 100 years old. So who's to say that, that, you know what more there is genuine and what is not. The only countries that had been there long enough for 1000 years or longer, are essentially Iran.

And the Ottoman Empire, which became Turkey, even Egypt, almost never existed as an independent country. It was always a province or, or a part of the Roman Empire or the Arab Empire. And you know, despite episodes of being independent under the fatty meats for example, and later. But, but probably redrawing the borders would be another solution. That's a good point because now the dimension, I mean, the two most stable in a sense countries are Iran and Turkey, even though internally They've got their political problems. But still there's never a question of an existential question about whether they're going to cohere as countries. It's sort of pretty clear that they will. And it probably is connected to all this. You said that they just have a deep history and an awareness of the people that we are a kind of nation and that goes a long way. The other countries have had this huge problem of national identity. How to define the national identity? Was America has a two, yes. And our own way, Syria has had it. Marat has had in Lebanon, has had it. Israel has had it in a different way with its 20% of Arabic Arab population and Iran and Turkey, because of their long history, have not had the same issues, at least the same way that Pakistan and Afghanistan and these other countries have had. Even Pakistan with a sizable, but which people are very much disenfranchised in Pakistan and day have had their own separatist movements and so on. So the question of how to define a national identity is a big question. And religion plays a big role in that, but he's not the only factor. Let's hope that at least we don't have anymore conflagrations coming out of Afghanistan. Of course, the debate has always been in the last couple of weeks about, well, even if America leaves, whatever happens in Afghanistan, as long as it stays in Afghanistan, it's not our problem. The real interesting thing of course, is no way to know, but we'll see if there will be any international issues that spread out from Afghanistan or if they do just kind of keep whatever problems there are with him and borders. And he's hard to believe that, that Afghanistan's problems will stay in Afghanistan. We already know of al-Qaeda and isis recruiting and expanding their domain of influence in Afghanistan. And they will continue to operate from there. And they would, even under the Taliban day would destabilize the situation and they would attack other communities, in particular Du Shi a people, and these will not stay in Afghanistan. However, you look at it. So I would say the international community does have a responsibility to deal with at the extremist groups, even though India and they would for whatever reason end up recognizing the Taliban. But these extremist groups did not coming to being independently on their own. But they received a lot of support from the outside world, including the US ally Saudi Arabia. So we need to deal with these extremist groups. And I don't know how I don't think anybody knows how. Well. Thank you very much. Dr. Yousefi, I really learned a lot about the area. I appreciate your deep knowledge of these issues, and I wish you all the best. You're welcome. Thank you, Dr. Veidlinger, for having me and for this opportunity to share my thoughts. Great. Take care. You too. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at [CSU Chico.edu slash C O R H](http://CSUChico.edu/CO RH). That's [CSU CH ICO.edu slash CO RH](http://CSUChico.edu/CO RH). I want to point out that the opinions expressed here and do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our department.