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Afghanistan Monitor

October 2022

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Contents

Introduction	1
Political situation	3
Humanitarian situation	5
Economic situation	6
Foreign engagement	8
Sanctions regime	8
Security situation	9
Human rights and women's rights	11
Opinion corner	13
The emirate's first year	13
Afghanistan and Pakistan future perspectives of one year after the Taliban takeover	17
End Notes	19

Introduction

The Afghanistan Monitor will be a regular publication from Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Pakistan that covers the political, economic and humanitarian situation since the Taliban takeover. Each issue will feature experts' analysis of the country's latest developments. This first issue summarizes the events one year after Western forces left Afghanistan and the Taliban established themselves as the de facto authorities in the country.

Currently, Afghanistan is immersed in one of its most critical phases, even more so than the periods of violence and instability that characterize the past two decades. On 15 August 2021, the world looked on with trepidation as the situation reached a critical juncture, with the Afghan Taliban assuming control of the country. The takeover was swift, with little resistance from the masses, followed by the abrupt withdrawal of the United States and other Western forces.¹ While there was little doubt about a Taliban revival with the Americans' exit and in the absence of a negotiated settlement, a military takeover by the group was almost expected. The manner and speed with which Afghanistan fell to the Taliban was unprecedented.

Since then, the situation has led to new debates and unaddressed questions regarding the Taliban and

changes in domestic governance, political freedoms, human rights and especially women's rights, counterterrorism assurances and the overall commitment to regional peace and stability. Initially, answers to these questions remained vague. The past year has somewhat set the tone regarding the Taliban's policies, which is an indication of how the group intends to govern the country.

Even within the confines of the interim set-up, the real test for the Taliban is by no means limited to securing power but revolves around legitimacy, acceptance, performance and, of course, recognition. Domestically, the performance of the new de facto authorities is debatable. There has been some overall improvement in the security of the country with the notable exception of recurring attacks by transnational terrorist groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKAP).² However, the Taliban have yet to deliver on human security.

While the Taliban are still trying to consolidate their position and power within their ranks as well as within the country, without a doubt, governance remains a huge challenge, as the group, it seems, does not have the expertise or manpower to run the ministries and the country's bureaucracy.³ This is primarily because the majority of educated Afghans have left the country. The Taliban have not only inherited weak institutions but

a non-existent economy, an ongoing humanitarian crisis and the adverse effects of natural calamities. In other words, the group is struggling to govern.

Although the Taliban have time and again assured that they would work towards the formation of an “inclusive government” and have expanded their cabinet to include a few members from other ethnic factions,* unfortunately, the structure to date is not reflective of a representative political dispensation in which all ethnicities in Afghanistan or women are being adequately represented. Likewise, the inability of the Taliban to fulfil their pledges of reform pertaining to basic yet fundamental rights, such as girls’ education and women’s role in public life, continue to be major impediments.

The Taliban have allowed private media channels to continue operating and often engage in public debates and discourse, but many journalists have been at risk.

The pursuit of stringent policies by the de facto authorities continues to be a major stumbling block to progress and is keeping the international community at bay from

Afghanistan. At least 41 individuals in the de facto cabinet and senior-level administration are under sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council Committee pursuant to its resolution 1988 (2011).⁴ Despite the Taliban’s assurances that they would not allow for Afghanistan to be once again used as a base for international terrorist groups, the fact that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed on Afghan soil in July 2022 places the willingness and ability of the Taliban to prevent extremism into question.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Afghanistan appears to have been put on the backseat by the international community. It is more and more being viewed as a regional issue that warrants a regional response. However, no conflict should take precedence over the other, and this is especially true with Afghanistan. History has shown that events in Afghanistan are not limited to the region but have global ramifications. A collective response and engagement with Afghanistan are necessary. Thus, the Afghanistan Monitor aims to provide insights into the latest developments in Afghanistan to keep the country’s future on the agenda.

* Apart from Abdul Salam Hanafi, who is from the Uzbek ethnic faction, members of the Tajik ethnic faction have been included in the group, such as Qari Fasiuddin, Qari din Hanif, Nazir Pashtun, Norullah Noori, Haji Mohammad Azim Sultanzada, Haji Mohammad Bashir, Haji Nooruddin Azizi and Haji Ghulam Ghaus.

The monitor is divided into two segments, the first segment will be reporting on political, humanitarian, economic, security, human rights and foreign engagements and the second segment will have an experts' opinion corner.

Political situation

Governance remains a huge challenge for the Taliban as Afghanistan's de facto authorities. The Taliban are struggling in their attempt to consolidate their power and formulate policies to achieve limited security, clamp down on corruption and revive the economy towards Afghan institutions like the bureaucracy, army and police. This is

partly because of the huge brain drain that Afghanistan has experienced and due to the lack of expertise, human resources and a clear plan of action on how to govern the country.⁵

Afghanistan's governance appears to be functioning on an ad hoc basis through state structures and institutions that the Taliban inherited from the previous government. In their efforts to govern, the Taliban continue to focus on their traditional approach of justice and dispute resolution according to their understanding of Islamic law. However, despite a focus on justice and dispute resolution, it is unclear if the group has a comprehensive penal code and functioning judiciary.⁶

Portfolios of Afghanistan's de facto authorities

Hibatullah Akhundzada Amir ul Momineen (Commander of the Faithful)	
Mullah Muhammad Hasan Akhund Acting Prime Minister	Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Acting Deputy Prime Minister
Mullah Rahmatullah Najib Acting Deputy Director of Intelligence	Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob Acting Minister of Defence
Mawlawi Taj Mir Jawad Acting Deputy Chief of Intelligence	Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs
Mullah Abdul Haq Wasiq Acting Head of National Directorate of Security	Sirajuddin Haqqani Acting Interior Minister
Mullah Hedayatullah Badri Acting Minister of Finance	Habibullah Agha Acting Minister of Education
Sheikh Abdul Kareem Haider Acting Minister of Justice	

When the Taliban came into power, they declared amnesty across the country to former Afghan officials, soldiers, contractors and translators who worked for the international forces. Since then, some individuals have reconciled with the group, such as the former Afghan Minister of Education, Ghulam Farooq Wardak, who joined the de facto authorities in June. And Dawlat Waziri, a former high-ranking military official, returned to Afghanistan as a result of reconciliation with the Taliban. But despite the announced amnesty, there have been claims that the Taliban have continued to target members from the opposition often describing their attacks as law-and-order actions against criminals and kidnappers.⁷

In an attempt at “unifying Afghans” and “to discuss challenges facing the country”,⁸ including governance, the economy, national unity, security and social issues, the de facto authorities held a Loya Jirga (Grand Council) on 30 June 2022, with 3,000 tribal and religious leaders, politicians and entrepreneurs.⁹ But the initiative excluded women and prominent figures, such as former President Hamid Karzai and former Chief Executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah to name a few, and thus fell short of the inclusivity that the Taliban have been claiming.

When the Taliban came into power, Minister of Justice Sheikh Abdul Kareem Haider noted that they planned to revive the 1964 Constitution temporarily.¹⁰ Yet, in his latest statements, he argued that a comprehensive constitution can only be established based on Islamic sources of law as per interpretations of the Hanafi school* of thought, if directed by the Taliban’s Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.¹¹ This is yet another example of the incoherent policies implemented by the Taliban since they took over.

While the Taliban aim to present a cohesive organization to the outside world, there appears to be differences and divisions within their rank and file. This has been highlighted in the Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which distinguishes between moderate and hard-line blocs within the Taliban.¹² These differences and divisions are not only causing internal problems but are also affecting some policies of the group. An example of this is the Taliban’s initial decision to allow girls to return to school followed by a reversal of that decision, which indicates fundamental policy differences within the group between the more moderate Taliban and the hardliners.

* The Hanafi school is one of the four major schools of Sunni Islamic legal reasoning and repositories of positive law.

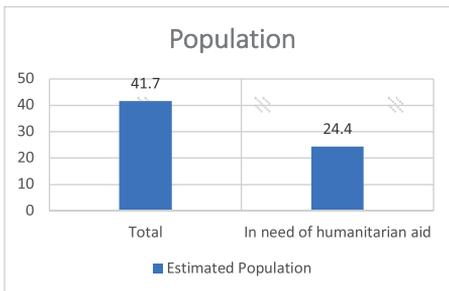
Humanitarian situation

Afghanistan ranks as the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, and there continues to be a serious risk of widespread famine. More than 24 million people – more than half of the Afghan population – are now living in poverty and are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. That is an increase of 30 per cent from 2021.¹³ A staggering 95 per cent of Afghans face dangerous levels of hunger in a food emergency that is only likely to worsen, considering the state of affairs in Afghanistan, from the traditional security threats to the little-studied possible effects of climate change, such as famine and drought.¹⁴ These issues do not appear to be priorities of the Taliban administration.

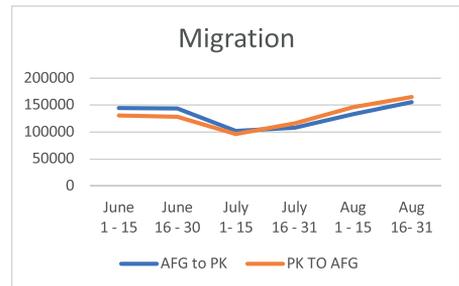
The provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan by international partners, including the United States, which has provided US\$775 million, is reassuring and reportedly being delivered to around 20 million people across all 401 of the country’s districts.¹⁵ The

second biggest donor, Germany, provided in 2021 600 million Euros of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.¹⁶ In 2022, Germany pledged an additional 200 million Euros of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.¹⁷ But this is not enough to sustain the Afghan population in the current food emergency. According to Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), not only did his office not have enough funding but only one third of the resources needed for the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan has been received.¹⁸ Therefore, ambivalence surrounding the future of international assistance has strained the Afghan economy.

Observers argue that at this stage, a collective and coordinated effort by the international community is needed to deal with the looming crisis. In such dire circumstances, it is important for the international community to push towards a consolidated effort to ensure that Afghanistan does not



Source: International Organisation of Migration



Source: International Organisation of Migration

further collapse into a humanitarian disaster that will then require more financial support as well as create different and enhanced challenges regarding refugees, among other issues.

The multiple crises in Afghanistan were further exacerbated by an earthquake that struck the country's south-eastern region on 22 June 2022, which killed more than 1,000 people and affected shelter, education, health facilities and markets.¹⁹ The disaster left more than 300,000 Afghans in need of humanitarian aid.²⁰ According to the UNOCHA report, at least 100,000 people have been directly affected by the earthquake for which a sum of US\$110 million is urgently required, for emergency response and relief activities in provinces that are most affected such as Paktika and Khost.²¹ The International Organization of Migration also established humanitarian hubs in Barmal, Giyan and Spera. This was followed by another earthquake on 5 September 2022, in Kunar City near Jalalabad, causing 8 deaths and many injuries.²²

Economic situation

Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has been plunged into economic and financial crises that have resulted in an exponential increase in poverty and inflation.²³ In addition to weak institutions,

the Taliban inherited a non-existent economy. Afghanistan has long been heavily dependent on foreign aid, which comprises 45 per cent of its gross domestic product value.²⁴ The Taliban takeover disrupted the availability of basic services, cash inflow and access to overseas assets and international payments by correspondent banks due to concerns about money laundering and terror financing.²⁵ This led to a liquidity crisis, a decline in investment confidence and an exodus of skilled people.²⁶ Thus, the Taliban are facing a financial deficit of about 44 billion Afghani (about US\$500 million) for the fiscal year 2022–2023.²⁷

Nevertheless and despite their limited capacity, the Afghan de facto authorities have taken measures to clamp down on corruption and generate domestic revenue through customs and tariff duties.²⁸ For example, between September and December 2021, they collected around US\$400 million in total revenue through taxes and on the increased export of natural resources, such as coal.²⁹ The group has kept official revenues flowing, and a “handful of holdovers from the former government are maintaining sophisticated financial-management software set up by the American-backed regime to run their revenue-collection systems.”³⁰

The de facto authorities announced a budget for the fiscal year 2022, which has given some cause for optimism.³¹ According to a report by the United States Institute for Peace (February 2022), “the Taliban budget is nearly balanced — and realistically projects no aid flows directly into the budget. Though the revenue projections may be somewhat optimistic, in general the budget seems relatively prudent and compares well in this regard against past Afghan budgets.”³²

In June 2022, Mullah Ghani Baradar Akhund, Deputy Prime Minister, inaugurated the Afghan Invest private company to attract foreign investment. The company was established by 13 investors as a Joint Stock Company in Kabul. Investors are expected to finance US\$250 million to US\$300 million in the energy, mining, infrastructure and agriculture sectors. However, no significant progress has been reported since then.³³

Additionally, Afghanistan received three projects from the World Bank and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Fund in June 2022, totalling US\$793 million. These projects will provide urgent and essential food, livelihoods and health services to the people of Afghanistan.³⁴ All three projects will be implemented off-budget and out of the Taliban administration’s control through United Nations agencies and non-government organizations. Afghanistan’s Chamber of Commerce

and Industries and Russia’s Business Council for Cooperation with Afghanistan signed a deal on 24 June 2022 to expand trade between the two countries, despite the international trade sanctions on both countries.³⁵

At the same time, the ongoing war in Ukraine has unfolded a series of challenges by diverting political attention and much-needed economic support away from Afghanistan. There has been a notable decrease in global donor funding for Afghanistan. For instance, the ongoing United Nations appeal of funds for Ukraine is more than 80 per cent fulfilled, while the appeal for Afghanistan is around 38 per cent fulfilled.³⁶

Afghanistan is a wheat-dependent country and relies on imports from the neighbouring Central Asian States, which obtain their fertilizers from Russia. Thus, in addition to the war in Ukraine compounding the price of commodities worldwide, the Russian ban on exports of food and fertilizers to keep prices and supply stable at home has made it difficult for other countries to import fertilizers. Eventually, this will adversely impact crop cultivation and lead to smaller crop yields to meet the demands of countries like Afghanistan.³⁷ In September 2022, Russia signed a deal with the Taliban to export oil products, gas and wheat to Afghanistan.³⁸

Foreign engagement

Afghanistan's de facto authorities have yet to receive international recognition even though they have been extensively engaging with the international community, regional countries and international organizations, either directly or through their Doha office, for such recognition as well as humanitarian and financial assistance. Since the Taliban came into power, most of the international, and especially Western, engagement has been limited to Doha-based discussions because all Western countries have kept their diplomatic missions closed in Afghanistan. Yet, regional stakeholders, such as China, Iran, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Turkey and Uzbekistan, have maintained their diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and have regularly sent high-level delegations to Kabul to engage with the Taliban government.

Since they took over Kabul, the Taliban have taken part in several regional initiatives, including the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2022 and the Tashkent Conference in July 2022.³⁹ In addition, they have visited several capitals, most notably Oslo in January 2022,⁴⁰ where the group engaged in closed discussions headed by Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt. European officials as well as representatives of Afghan

civil society, such as Jamila Afghani, a women's rights activist, attended the talks.⁴¹ The group continues to conduct meetings regularly with the US State Department's Special Representative and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan Thomas West and the heads of United Nations agencies.

Although no country has yet recognized the Taliban government, several States from Europe and the Middle East began to engage over the past year, leading to the reopening of the European Union Mission in Kabul in January 2022. They were followed by India in June, which is the latest country to have re-established a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.⁴²

Such measures indicate that, unlike in the past, there is a growing realization within the international community of the need to remain engaged with the Taliban. While the group continues to seek international recognition, the lack of progress on honouring pledges made in the Doha Agreement continues to be a major stumbling block in the way of recognition.

Sanctions regime

In the aftermath of the United States' and Western forces' withdrawal, the uncertainty in Afghanistan halted the financial functionality of international banks. The primary

concern of these institutions is the danger of money laundering and the financing of terrorism. This hesitancy has contributed to the catastrophic humanitarian crisis that is unfolding in the country and that threatens to push 97 per cent of the population below the poverty level.⁴³ On 22 December 2021, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2615, which acknowledges that

“humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan” are not in violation of the 1998 sanctions regime.⁴⁴ In addition, the US Department of Treasury also issued general licenses and guidance to facilitate humanitarian assistance, thus permitting payments and action to mitigate the looming humanitarian crisis.⁴⁵

License	Purpose
GL 14	Authorizing humanitarian activities in Afghanistan: authorizes United Nations, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Bank United States Government etc. ⁴⁶
GL 15	Transaction related to commodities, medical, components and software updates in Afghanistan ⁴⁷
GL 16	Non-commercial, personnel remittances to Afghanistan ⁴⁸
GL 17	Official business with United States government ⁴⁹
GL 18	Official activities of certain international organizations and international entities ⁵⁰
GL 19	Certain transactions in support of non-governmental organization ⁵¹
GL 20	Authorizing transactions involving Afghanistan or governing institutions in Afghanistan ⁵²

US Department of Treasury' general licence

Security situation

Since the Taliban assumed power, violence levels are much lower, and Afghanistan's security landscape is significantly more peaceful than during the previous administration's tenure. Many analysts believe that one reason for the improved security is that the Taliban were one of the

biggest security threat under the old government. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, attacks against civilians have decreased by more than 50 per cent.⁵³ Similarly, according to a July 2022 report of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “since the Taliban takeover, armed conflict and civilian casualties significantly

declined in Afghanistan.”⁵⁴ However, the rising threat and incidence of terrorism in Afghanistan emanating from transnational terrorist groups, primarily the Daesh regional affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), challenges the Taliban’s capacity to deliver security. Since its emergence in late 2014, the ISKP has brought immense confusion and disorder to the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan. The ISKP has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks the country has experienced in its recent history, refusing to discriminate between Afghan civilians, military forces and groups that oppose it, like the Afghan Taliban. The ISKP has been engaged for years in a bloody conflict with the Afghan State and with the Taliban, fighting over influence, territory and resources. From August 2021 to June 2022, the ISKP was responsible for more than 700 civilian deaths and more than 1,400 were injured.⁵⁵ The ISKP primarily targets civilians, the Shia community, minorities and members of the Taliban.⁵⁶

The ISKP not only challenges domestic security but there has been a major spike in attacks on Afghanistan’s neighbours, primarily Pakistan, followed by Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Domestically, the ISKP has been responsible for the increase in violence, including the 26 August 2021 attacks outside Kabul airport that killed an estimated 200 people,

including 13 American soldiers, and a rocket attack targeting Kabul airport four days later. In October 2021, a suicide attack on the Shia community in Kunduz left more than 70 people dead and injured more than 140. The attack was claimed by Muhammad al-Uyghur, an alleged Uyghur member of the ISKP.⁵⁷ This is another worrying sign because the Kunduz atrocity was the first time that the ISKP publicly confirmed mobilization of an ethnic Uyghur to carry out an attack in Afghanistan on its behalf, further highlighting the rise of the ISKP and its close association with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, which is also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party, and the infiltration of Uyghur fighters into its ranks. It also demonstrated the ability of the ISKP to forge transnational terrorist alliances within the region. Whereas the Taliban’s aspirations for governance are limited to the borders of Afghanistan, the ISKP is a branch of the Islamic State, which aspires for a global caliphate.

The latest attack by the group was on the Russian Embassy in Kabul in September 2022.⁵⁸ Other attacks targeted the Shia community, a Sikh temple in Kabul, mosques and prominent Taliban figures, including Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, a Taliban religious leader who was killed in August 2022, followed by the September killing of Mujeeb ur Raehman Ansaari, a popular cleric

known for his pro-Taliban stance.⁵⁹ The ISKP's attacks have particularly increased in areas where it previously had little or no presence, such as Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz, Balkh and Takhar provinces.

Given these developments, there are serious concerns of transnational terrorist elements taking advantage of the situation in Afghanistan. This sentiment and fear have been echoed by the former UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Deborah Lyons that "Afghanistan's collapsing economy is heightening the risk of extremism."⁶⁰ And the rise in ISKP's attacks not only raises doubts on the Taliban's ability to honour their commitments regarding counterterrorism assurances but also their capability to deal with transnational terrorist groups operating within the country.

Human rights and women's rights

Despite the pledges of reforms pertaining to human rights and women's rights, the Taliban government has failed to uphold and respect basic and fundamental human rights.

Women and girls are now deprived of their most basic human rights – education, employment and free movement. According to the

International Labour Organization, more than 500,000 individuals, mostly women, have lost their jobs since the Taliban came to power, and the number is expected to increase.⁶¹ According to a recent survey by Save the Children, more than 1 million children nationwide are engaged in child labour because half of Afghanistan's families have put their children to work to keep food on the table. Livelihoods is another glaring example of the sudden decline.⁶²

Although children returned to schools in March 2022, after months of uncertainty, the Taliban reversed their previous decision to allow Afghan girls to return to high schools. In addition to preventing half the population from fulfilling their ambitions for the country, it also sheds a negative light on future ambitions of the Taliban. The Taliban have also disbanded significant institutions and ministries, such as the Afghan Parliament, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commissions and the Ministry of Women's Affairs.⁶³

The Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, established after the dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, has released several guidelines for women based on the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law and revolving around observing the hijab,⁶⁴ traveling with a close male relative (Mahram) and restrictions on

higher education.⁶⁵ According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, from August 2021 to July 2022, 87 incidents of gender-based violence were reported.⁶⁶ The same report disclosed that despite the Taliban's proclaimed amnesty across the board, around 160 extrajudicial killings of former government and security officials took place between 15 August 2021 and 15 June 2022.⁶⁷ The report also mentions restricted freedom of media and with regard to any form of dissent. The Taliban have cracked down on protests and the media through the arbitrary arrest of journalists, protestors and civil society activists on numerous occasions.⁶⁸

Opinion corner

The emirate's first year

Adam Weinstein

The Taliban have consolidated power since their takeover of Afghanistan more than a year ago. Pockets of resistance exist, but there is no current threat to the Taliban's overall control of the country. This monopoly on power is due to the Taliban's military grit and a failure of governance on the part of the former Afghan government. The American military withdrawal acted as a catalyst for the Taliban's ascent, but the group was gradually gaining territory before it took place. The Taliban took advantage of a legitimacy vacuum in Afghanistan but do not enjoy their own legitimacy across Afghan society. It remains unclear whether the Taliban will fully make the transition from insurgency to government, but their first year in power offers some indications about Afghanistan's future.

Few silver linings

Neither global condemnation nor the United Nations' and United States' sanctions have altered the Taliban's calculus on human rights or ties with groups like al-Qaeda. The Taliban's leadership has proved frustratingly intransigent and unable to fully

transition from a hardline insurgency to a de facto government. But when measured against the worst fears of many Afghans and the international community, there remains some positive developments that should be encouraged.

First, the Taliban did not engage in mass revenge killings during the takeover of Kabul and other cities. This does not detract from the various abuses that have occurred, including targeted killings, public beatings, harassment at checkpoints and other human rights violations. But the Taliban did not engage in widespread and systemic retaliation in the immediate days and weeks after their takeover, nor did they halt the evacuation process.

Second, freedom of movement was re-established on the nation's highways. This achievement is often emphasized by the Taliban, which partly credits their self-professed legitimacy to rule with their ability to keep Afghans safe. But it should be emphasized that the primary reason that roads were unsafe was due to the Taliban's checkpoints, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and fighting. It is also important to remember that this newfound freedom of movement exclusively applies to men and only women accompanied by close male relatives.

Third, the Taliban did not completely dismantle independent news networks, and they have allowed only limited debate to occur on national television, including some criticism of Taliban positions. Severe constraints on freedom of the press have occurred, including the gradual removal of most women journalists from public life and the detention and torture of journalists.⁶⁹ But few observers predicted that any semblance of independent press would survive the Taliban's first year in power.

Fourth, the Taliban have encouraged diplomatic missions to remain in the country to open the door to future engagement. Many countries have been reluctant to return, and the suicide blast that occurred outside the Russian Embassy in Kabul on 5th September 2022 is a good example of the risky security environment.⁷⁰

Last, independent assessments of the de facto Taliban government indicate lower rates of corruption than with the previous government.⁷¹ This development is significant and necessary for the long-term resilience of Afghanistan's economy, which will assuredly receive less international aid over time. However, nepotism is still rampant within the ranks of the Taliban regime, which is itself a form of corruption that has resulted in qualified technocrats being replaced by incompetent Taliban loyalists.

These limited positive developments may seem underwhelming to the outside observer and fall short of what is required of the Taliban. But they are not insignificant to the approximately 40 million Afghans who must live and work under the Taliban.

Incoherent policymaking process

Just as when it was an insurgency, the Taliban includes different spheres of influence, such as the Haqqani Network or the senior Kandahar figures close to the emir. But it remains a cohesive movement, and internal disagreements are unlikely to lead to splinter groups.⁷² The Taliban appear to have retained aspects of the polyhierarchical decision-making process that served the group so well as an insurgency. Life under the Taliban can therefore vary from locality to locality, and the existence of girls' secondary education in some provinces and not in others is just one example. But official nationwide policy positions are still made by the Taliban's Emir Hibatullah Akhunzada. It is these policies that will most influence whether the Taliban receive international recognition or not, and the senior leadership has demonstrated little pragmatism.

The Taliban's policies are applied unevenly even when they are made official. For example, the general amnesty announced by the Taliban

government was only partially enforced. There was no widespread and systematic targeting and retaliation against former government officials and members of the security forces. It is also significant that former leaders like Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah are still permitted to meet with foreign diplomatic delegations in Kabul and, in the case of the latter, to repeatedly leave and return to Afghanistan. But numerous incidents of targeted killings, disappearances and torture against former members of the Afghan government, security services and civil society have been reported, and this has rightfully eroded confidence in the amnesty.

The Taliban have clumsily resorted to semantics, hedging and circular whataboutisms in their external messaging. The group refers to their cabinet as an interim or caretaker government even though it is obvious that the Taliban does not view this as a transitional period of rule. When asked about the ban on girls' secondary education, Taliban spokesmen often point to private schools and provinces where girls are permitted to attend school. Or they offer vague assurances that the matter is under consideration without providing any reasonable timeline. When backed into a corner, they oscillate between claims that girls' secondary education is anathema to Afghan culture or present circumstances do now allow for it. Religious arguments against

girls' education have been widely debunked by Afghan and regional scholars.

Diplomatically and economically isolated

Afghanistan under the Taliban is a diplomatically and economically isolated country. The Taliban have fraught relations with their neighbours, including Pakistan and Iran. The Afghan Taliban have provided sanctuary for the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan while the group continues to target Pakistan's security forces across the border. The Taliban periodically engages in cross-border skirmishes with Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The late leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahri, was killed by a United States drone strike in an apartment in Kabul that was reportedly owned by Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani.

Both of these actions are violations of any plain reading of the United States–Taliban agreement signed in Doha in February 2020. While the agreement arguably does not require the Taliban to expel al-Qaeda leaders from its territory, it does call on the Taliban to “send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan”. It also requires the Taliban to “instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [...] not to cooperate

with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies". Al-Qaeda clearly falls into this category, and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan is actively attacking Pakistan, which is a major non-NATO ally of the United States. But neither side is likely to throw out the agreement just yet because it offers a face-saving mechanism for dialogue.

Afghanistan remains economically isolated and aid-dependent. The United Nations' and United States' sanctions that were aimed at the Taliban as a terrorist group and insurgency became applicable to the Taliban as the de facto government of Afghanistan.⁷³ The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control has published seven general licenses that function as exceptions to the United States' sanctions for certain types of activities and transactions.⁷⁴ These general licenses have mitigated some of the harm of United States' sanctions but are unable to overcome the "chilling effect" that deter banks and the private sector from engaging in transactions in Afghanistan. In short, Afghanistan does not offer enough economic potential to overcome the sanctions risk it presents.

The Taliban are also responsible for the country's economic isolation. Its leadership has adopted positions and implemented policies that make it next to impossible for sanctions to be lifted. They have effectively

barred half the potential workforce from employment and have not fostered a business environment that is conducive for investment or trade. Aid has continued to Afghanistan in spite of the Taliban and not because of their efforts.

Conclusion

One year of Taliban rule has demonstrated that the group has firm control over the country. Assessments of imminent civil war, Taliban factionalization and a full return to the dystopian emirate of the late 1990s have proved to be exaggerated for now. But the Taliban have gradually introduced increasingly draconian measures – particularly for women, and Afghanistan continues to face significant threats and stressors. These include terrorist attacks, economic isolation, severe gender discrimination and hunger.

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Afghanistan and Pakistan: Future perspectives one year after the Taliban takeover

Nargis Nehan

Although endowed with rich natural and human resources, Afghanistan and Pakistan are still among the most disconnected neighbouring countries. Post-colonial differences never allowed the two countries to build trust, cooperate and facilitate connectivity for the region to prosper. While Afghanistan and Pakistan could become the region's economic hubs by connecting South Asia with Central Asia, they have become barriers to regional connectivity. Divisive politics influenced the policies of the countries towards each other more than the needs and aspirations of their citizens.

While Pakistan expects to be appreciated for hosting millions of Afghans, Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban and providing a safe haven for their leaders. Moreover, while Afghanistan expects Pakistan to support the peace process, the former Afghan

government supported the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and criticized Pakistan on the international stage.

Transnational pipeline projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI)* and the Central Asia-South Asia renewable energy infrastructure (CASA)* could have created thousands of jobs for the younger generation, supplied energy to Pakistan and generated revenue to Afghanistan. Today, they have become impossible dreams. There is a lack of cooperation between the two states at a time when both are sinking into poverty and are in dire need of energy, revenue and employment opportunities. Maybe a stronger engagement of the European Union in development, transformation and economic prosperity in the region could change that. But first, Afghanistan and Pakistan would have to decide to cooperate and build each other up.

Even though women are not involved in formulating and executing the two countries' policies, they are most affected by the highly masculine, conservative and male dominance of the new administration. The historically strong cultural and social bonds are shared by people across the

* CASA would bring 1300 megawatts of surplus electricity from Central Asia to high demand electricity markets in South Asia.

* The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline would be a 1814km natural gas pipeline running across four countries.

border. What happens in one country influences the other. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of extremism and militarization has affected women in both countries, reducing their mobility and participation in state affairs. The question that begs attention of women leaders and activists from both countries is whether they can distance themselves from male politics and look at their homeland from the region's context. Can they advocate for trust and alliance to normalize relations between these two countries? Can they focus on what they have in common as victims of extremism? Can they change the two countries' strategic thinking and narrative about each other?

The ordinary people of both countries love each other and stand by each other on bad days like brothers and sisters. A Pakistani's dream is to travel by road to Bamyan and Mazar for summer vacation while an Afghan loves to spend Eid in Lahore and Karachi.

Every crisis carries hidden opportunities that could be identified and explored only by solution-oriented leaders who can think and act outside the box. Afghanistan's current situation, whereby girls are deprived of education and women of work, political participation and freedom of movement, requires the moral support of all who believe in justice, liberty and equality. Women

from Pakistan and Afghanistan have a historic opportunity and responsibility before them to join forces to support Afghan women and girls in reclaiming their rights and to advocate to develop friendly relations, to end extremism in these countries and the region and to lay the foundation for a South Asian Union.

How women from Afghanistan and Pakistan come forward to respond to the situation for girls and women in Afghanistan collectively can set the example of their strategic vision and leadership in the history of the women's movement, especially for Islamic countries. Either they let Afghanistan drown in extremism and deprivation by following the men's politics or they stand with the Afghan women and support them to reclaim all of their rights. Whichever road the women ultimately choose will decide whether women are still followers or strategic leaders.

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