

Current policy challenges and
potential ways forward

TALIBAN RULE IN AFGHANISTAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are no good options for Afghanistan, the only country in the world where girls are banned from going to school. Government is under the control of authoritarian theocrats from just one tribe. Two thirds of the population need basic assistance, and are living in a state of “famine equilibrium”, in the words of William Byrd, of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP). The Taliban have no incentive to change while the world funds just enough humanitarian aid to keep people alive, and little in funding for longer-term development. International leverage to put pressure on the Taliban has proved to be very limited.

Three years since the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Taliban have not built a more inclusive government, for women or ethnic minorities. Instead, restrictions have tightened, women have been banned from working for the United Nations (UN), there is a murderous campaign against soldiers and politicians from the former Republic, and the Taliban have provided a safe haven for thousands of international terrorist organisations, including al-Qaeda.

The Taliban’s divinely ordained view of authority has no concept of compromise with secular powers, and attempts to bring them to the negotiating table are unlikely to be fruitful unless they have a compelling incentive to change course. This has become urgent in the continuing disastrous conditions for Afghan women and the raft of new restrictions both on them and on all of society, introduced in a decree by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in August 2024.¹

This is not a static situation. Increased tensions within the Taliban administration, and resistance to their rule in the countryside, could lead to a wider civil war, where rival militias compete for control and Afghanistan becomes an ungoverned space. This happened in the early years of the 1990s, beginning three years after the Russian withdrawal. There is an opportunity to stop history from repeating itself.

An independent assessment by former Turkish foreign minister Feridun Sinirliolu, commissioned by the UN, and completed in November 2023, said that “a key component missing from current engagement is intra-Afghan dialogue”. One party to that dialogue is clear—the current administration in Kabul. But there were no recommendations to help shape the other party to the dialogue, the non-Taliban opposition, which is currently divided. That is what is currently missing in international discourse about Afghanistan. Supporting civil society voices inside and outside the country to restore inclusive government would also be beneficial while engaging in more focused aid.

¹ <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-propagation-of-virtue-and-prevention-of-vice-law-translated-into-english>

1 | INTRODUCTION

NATO's longest engagement ended in the humbling collapse of Kabul on 15 August 2021, leaving Afghanistan in the hands of theocratic misogynists. American hopes of a more moderate approach than during Taliban rule in the 1990s, "Taliban 2.0", soon proved to be groundless.

Although there are divisions within the movement, as outlined in Section 2, "Inside the Taliban", the hardline clerics in Kandahar set the rules and have the power to enforce them. Restrictions have become tighter by the month, particularly against women, as outlined in Section 3, "Taliban Governance". This section also outlines the economic crisis facing the country, and shows how the Taliban have effectively captured the aid system, and control much of the cash coming into the country.

The United States administration claims to have a functioning counterterrorist relationship with the Taliban, sharing information against the Islamic State (IS) group, whose Afghan affiliate is Islamic State—Khorasan Province (ISKP). But Section 4, "The Taliban and Terrorism", describes how the ISKP is still very active, carrying out hundreds of suicide bomb attacks inside Afghanistan. Many other terrorist groups have been given a home by the Taliban, including al-Qaeda and other groups threatening Afghanistan's neighbours. The Pakistani Taliban, the TTP, have also been given a new lease on life by the change of administration in Kabul.

The access given to terrorist groups in Afghanistan has complicated the Taliban's relations with the outside world, even with countries like Russia and China, which have sought to normalise relations, exchanging ambassadors although not formally recognising the administration. "Taliban International Relations" are considered in Section 5.

Section 6 looks at "Opposition to the Taliban", or the various alternatives to Taliban rule, which have been gathering strength in 2023, after recovering from the initial shock of the loss of the Republic. The opposition lacks coherence and is likely to remain weak until it can be brought together by a third party, with a credible plan for a return to constitutional government.

Section 7, "Policy Options", analyses the effect of international policy to date, and considers alternatives.

Introductory Notes:

1. Afghanistan is a country of many tribes and ethnic identities. In a population of around 40 million people, Pashtuns, based principally in the south and east, are probably the largest tribe, but they are not a majority. In the absence of a census for fifty years, these facts are contested. Tajiks are the second largest grouping, based principally in the northeast, with Uzbeks and Hazaras in the northwest and centre as smaller groupings. (Hazaras follow the Shia faith, while most of the rest of the country are Sunni Muslims.) There are many other smaller tribal groupings. To strengthen their grip, the Taliban have engaged in forcible resettlement of Pashtuns into areas in the north and centre of the country, displacing other minorities.

2. Since the government in Afghanistan is not recognised internationally, it is often referred to as the "de facto" administration, with ministers described as "acting" or "interim". For textual clarity, these qualifiers have not been used in this paper, but this should not imply any endorsement of the Taliban administration.

3. Note on sources: Information has been referenced where possible. Much of the material in this paper, in particular in mapping the opposition in Section 6, comes from the author's original research and private conversations.

2 | INSIDE THE TALIBAN

Any analysis of the Taliban in government comes with strong caveats. We do not know in detail what is happening in this highly secretive organisation. The categories used in this report for different factions are not recognised by the Taliban themselves but externally proposed, and are not discrete and clean-cut.

The Taliban head Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada has followed the model of his predecessor, Mullah Muhammad Omar, in saying little and appearing rarely. A scholar, not a military leader, his extreme adherence to the movement was indicated when he proudly stated that his son had died as a suicide bomber.

Like Omar, Akhunzada has declared himself *Amir ul-Muminin*, the “commander of the faithful”, a mystical title that confers military, priestly, and secular authority on the bearer. *Amir* is the traditional Afghan spelling of *Emir*, and it is a matter of profound importance to the Taliban that the country is now the Islamic *Emirate* of Afghanistan, not a republic.

This led to lengthy discussions in their talks with the United States in Doha in 2019 when the Taliban insisted on their government being called the Emirate of Afghanistan, as if the legitimate government of the country, although in exile. (A compromise was reached in the final deal under which they were described in convoluted terms as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognised by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban”).²

In public, the movement claims to be disciplined and coherent. But fault lines developed soon after the takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban fall into three different groups—the “Doha Taliban”, the “Kabul Taliban”, and the “Kandahar Taliban”. These are analytical categories used for understanding, and are not accepted by the Taliban themselves.

“Doha Taliban”

The “Doha Taliban” are labelled as such not because they are based in Doha, but because they engaged in negotiations there before the fall of the Republic. They became practised at saying what the outside world

wanted to hear. American negotiators were deceived that their somewhat more socially liberal line would be adopted in government. Early indications were good. In his first press conference after the Taliban took Kabul, their long-term spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that women and girls would be treated along normal Islamic lines. A news agency reported, “The Taliban have encouraged women to return to work and have allowed girls to return to school, handing out Islamic headscarves at the door.”³

But the Doha Taliban could not deliver on these expectations, and American hopes of a “Taliban 2.0”, more reasonable than the first iteration of the organisation, turned out to be baseless, as familiar figures from the negotiations were sidelined into second-rank jobs when the government was appointed. The top negotiator, Abdul Ghani Baradur, was appointed deputy prime minister, but wields little power. There were reports of violent arguments between him and more hardline “Kandahar Taliban” in the early days of their time in power, and he disappeared for months.

Two other Doha negotiators, Amir Khan Muttaqi and Shir Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai, were appointed to the foreign ministry, as minister and deputy, but they too appear to wield little more than symbolic power. They are the public face of the administration, but do not determine its policies. Muttaqi, for example, has made commitments to Western diplomats concerning foreign prisoners that he has not been able to fulfil. Stanekzai is often absent from the country for long trips in Dubai.

“Kabul Taliban”

The most significant fault line is between the “Kabul Taliban”, who are in more prominent government positions than the Doha group, and the “Kandahar Taliban”, the ideologues under Akhunzada. The Kabul Taliban include most of the cabinet, and notably the defence minister, Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob, the son of the movement’s founder, Mullah Omar. There have been indications that they might be willing to take a more socially liberal stance on women and girls, if only as a trade for international recognition.

The “Kabul Taliban” are closely aligned with the Haqqani network, formerly a separate insurgent group based

² <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

³ <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-1d4b052ccef113adc8dc94f965ff23c7>

across the frontier in North Waziristan in Pakistan, where the Pakistani government allowed them to operate, but who are now fully integrated into Taliban structures. The Haqqani network were responsible for the worst attacks in Kabul before the fall of the Republic, killing hundreds of people indiscriminately in massive truck bombs. Their leader, the Taliban interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is still on the FBI wanted list, with a price of US\$10 million on his head. He was hosting the al-Qaeda leader in Kabul, Ayman al-Zawahiri, when Zawahiri was killed by an American drone strike in 2022. More than fifty of those either holding cabinet positions or other senior roles in the administration are sanctioned as terrorists by the UN.⁴

“Kandahar Taliban”

Far from any relaxation as the Taliban consolidated power across the country, social and political restrictions have become tighter. The Amir, Haibatullah Akhunzada, rules from Kandahar with a small group, and has been tightening his grip, weakening Kabul’s control. The Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, has been instructed to spend more time in Kandahar, where Akhunzada has established his own committees to shadow the cabinet in Kabul. The prime minister, Mullah Muhammad Hasan Akhund, is ageing and infirm, and frequently absent from office.

As tensions grew in 2023, Sirajuddin Haqqani was said to be bringing heavy weapons into Kabul to face off an attack from the south, while in Kandahar, Akhunzada brought back suicide bombing units from the front line against the IS group, to defend his inner circle in Kandahar.⁵

The arguments between the more reformist groups in Kabul and the ideologues in Kandahar rarely come out into the open, but in the spring of 2023, Shir Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai and Sirajuddin Haqqani were both filmed speaking out against the closure of girls’ schools. The videos were quickly taken off social media, but it was a brief window into the tensions that divide the movement.

It is a paradox of absolute power, that as opportunities

for constructive dialogue are limited, there is no safety valve for tensions, which can only grow. Apparent unity under an authoritarian leader may be false. The Taliban are victims of a phenomenon that has been observed before in Afghan history—unity built in the face of a foreign invader tends to fracture into division once there is no external threat. And just as they control more of the country than at any time before, the Taliban’s identity as an exclusively southern-dominated Pashtun group is exposed. The Taliban’s hold on power, backed up by the threat of violence rather than any accountable mechanism of consent, is more fragile than it seems.

3 | TALIBAN GOVERNANCE, WOMEN’S RIGHTS, AND THE ECONOMY

The defining feature of Taliban authority is the absolute power of the *Amir-ul-Muminin* at the top of the Emirate. With all social interaction judged by a very particular Afghan version of Sharia law, there is no space for other political ideas, and none of the accountability mechanisms of a functioning democracy.

Since 2016, the Amir has been Haibatullah Akhunzada, but there is no clarity on what underpins his authority. One constitutional expert, Haroun Rahimi, describes the Emirate as a “highly underspecified and undertheorised political system”.⁶ There was an attempt to write a formal constitution during the last Taliban administration in the 1990s, but it came to nothing.

The lack of a coherent ideology is partly explained by the roots of the Taliban, who emerged as a nationalist Afghan Islamic reaction to the chaos and banditry that engulfed the country in the years after the Soviet defeat in 1989. Governance then was improvised by leaders schooled in Deobandi madrassas, or religious schools, in Pakistan. The movement had a singularity, a creation only for Afghanistan, unlike any other Islamist political movement. Much of its notions of social control, and in particular the tight restrictions on women, came not from any Islamic law school, but from rural tribal customs

4 <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>

5 *ibid.*

6 <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/remaking-of-afghanistan-how-the-taliban-are-changing-afghanistans-laws-and-legal-institutions>

in the Pashtun south.

There have been some changes in this second iteration in power. It is becoming clear that while not abandoning their Deobandi roots, the Taliban have moved far closer to the mainstream thinking of Salafist Muslim groups like al-Qaeda and IS, in looking for inspiration back to the origins of the faith in the early centuries after the Prophet Muhammad. Taliban governance is now said to be “in accordance to the understanding of the early generation of Muslims and Jurists”.⁷ This was revealed in a book endorsed by the Amir, written in April 2022 by the Taliban acting chief justice, Abdul Hakim Haqqani. Although the government they replaced in 2021 was an “Islamic Republic”, where Sharia law was the ultimate authority, it was unacceptable to the Taliban because it was democratic; laws were human-made.

Haqqani’s book is the best guide we have to how the Taliban see authority. The acting chief justice describes two kinds of states. The first, which taxes its people, and where laws are human-made, is seen as exploitative, the kind of state the Emirate was set up to avoid. The second, based purely on divine law to guide its people, is the perfect state. Apart from Sharia law, the main requisite of this state is said to be an Islamic army.

The lack of clear constitutional authority beyond the divine means that power emanating from the Amir is unquestionable, with no right to appeal, and no need for the state to win consent for any actions. The nature of this state permits arbitrary acts by security forces with no recourse to the law for those affected. The public has no mechanism to hold such forces accountable.

This is a practical problem for those arguing for democracy or a more inclusive government. The Taliban seem to have a hermetically sealed *Weltanschauung* with no space for other ideas, and no concept of the idea of compromise. Therefore, in their minds there is no negotiation possible with secular power. This reality poses a challenge to those outside who are pursuing intra-Afghan dialogue, as recommended in the UN Sinirlioğlu report in December 2023 (considered in more detail in Section 5, “International Relations”). Constructive dialogue would be difficult as there is no agreed paradigm for it—the two sides would share no points of reference. It would be likely to fail without determined international support

⁷ *ibid.*

to shape the opposition.

Taliban interpretation of Sharia is not widely accepted by the Islamic world, particularly in the application of harsh punishments such as amputation for robbery, and whipping and stoning of homosexuals and adulterers. During the Doha negotiations in 2019, the head of the Islamic Republic’s negotiating team, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, asked his Taliban counterparts which country they saw as their Islamic model. They could not name a single one, rejecting even Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁸

Continuity of the Afghan State

Despite the lack of a functioning constitution, Taliban governance is facilitated by the remarkable continuity of the Afghan state across almost five decades of disruption by war.

When the Taliban took over in Kabul they did not deliver sweeping institutional reforms, but took over the governing system of the Republic. Since the 1970s, the civil service has endured with not many changes through the years of democratic, communist, mujahidin, Taliban, republican, and Taliban government once more.

The Taliban ministerial system is for the most part identical to what was established in the 1970s. And at the subnational governance level, with some minor differences, provincial and district borders are also as they were.

This continuity means that visible symbols of former regimes remain. For example, hanging in the entrance hall of some ministries, are portraits of ministers over fifty years. The only signs of difference are the clothes and haircuts—the men in suits or turbaned with Afghan clothing, shaven or bearded as the situation demanded. (Where there were women ministers during the twenty years of the Afghan Republic after 9/11, those portraits are not currently on display).

Even where there were changes during the years of the Republic, such as in the fundamental reordering of the Corps structure in the army, the Taliban has taken over that system without a change.

This institutional inertia has given the bureaucracy some leverage. When the Taliban swept to power in August

⁸ Mujib Rahimi, speaking at a conference at King’s College, London in July 2023.

2021, senior ministers were appointed for their loyalty and ideological soundness, and many are functionally incapable at this level. But beneath them is a competent civil service. Despite the many problems of the Republican government before 2021, not least the corrosive effect of rampant corruption, Afghanistan was far better governed then than when the Taliban took over the war-ravaged country in 1996. In 2021, they inherited a functioning country, with governing systems that were intact. Apart from the radical measures on women's rights, detailed below, the only significant change from the practical governance of the former Republic was in the justice sector, where the Taliban dismantled the existing structure, replacing it with their own arbitration courts, under their interpretation of Sharia law.

The Afghan Economy and Development Challenges

Governing Afghanistan following the withdrawal of most international support would have challenged the most competent of governments. The economy faced the significant shock of the loss of 40 per cent of GDP when most aid stopped. The World Bank calculates that inflation is running at *minus* 10.2 per cent.⁹ Revenues are collected, but are lower than forecast, and are nearly all from three customs posts. More sophisticated revenue streams, such as income and sales taxes, are not currently being collected at any scale. The Taliban take a rigorous line on theft and corruption, so a larger proportion of revenues that are collected reach central funds than under the Republican government before 2021, but from a far smaller economy. A veteran observer, William Byrd, who was formerly with the World Bank in Kabul and is now an analyst with the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), says that, "there is no comparison at all" with what he described as the "non-management of the economy" the last time the Taliban were in government.¹⁰ However, this early progress risks being derailed as Akhunzada strengthens his grip, demanding large sums for his own office, as well as unaccountable amounts in a special fund that he disburses. As Byrd notes, "Whereas during the first Taliban regime in the 1990s there was little money in government coffers and

then Taliban leader Mullah Omar reputedly made cash payments himself, that is no way to operate the \$2 billion per year national budget the Taliban now control."¹¹

A modest increase in imports in 2023 demonstrated limited economic recovery, but according to Byrd, stabilisation at this lower level is a "famine equilibrium" that "leaves most Afghans falling short of their subsistence needs, necessitating large amounts of humanitarian assistance to prevent an actual famine from materializing."

The World Bank calculates that two thirds of families "face challenges in livelihoods and consumption".¹² Poverty and lack of access to health services, including birth control, have also worsened Afghanistan's demographic crisis as very large rural families do not have the means to sustain themselves.

Aid delivery has been severely compromised by the Taliban's restrictions against women, and their demands that they manage aid. Development funding for longer-term projects has been limited in this environment, with most donor funding going into meeting basic humanitarian needs. The funding need runs at US\$3 billion a year, for food, basic health, and education for 25 million people, more than half of the population. Donor fatigue and competing demands elsewhere mean that this sum is not being raised. In an effort to breathe life into transitional development schemes, in 2024 the World Bank moved to its Afghan plan "3.0", with schemes for agricultural support and income generation through microfinance, etc. This goes through the Afghan Resilience Trust Fund, aimed at women participants.

Multilateral institutions, UN agencies, and the World Bank are responsible for disbursing most of the funding, which amounts to a figure of US\$40 million a week. This has helped to stabilise the currency, and a post-Republic liquidity crisis was ameliorated as the Taliban were allowed to access new Afghani banknotes that had been printed in Poland.

Afghanistan's reserves of US\$7 billion are out of reach in international banks. Half of the reserves, some US\$3.5

9 <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/18a1ccff0457effb0a456c0d4af7cce-0310012024/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-April-2024.pdf>

10 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-taliban-rule-new-shocks-weaken-afghan-economy>

11 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/afghanistans-crisis-requires-coherent-coordinated-international-response>

12 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-economic-monitor-august-31-2023>

billion, have been frozen in American banks, pending a court case by 9/11 victims claiming the cash should fund compensation claims. The other half is now in the “Afghan Fund”, set up in Switzerland with the intention to return the money to benefit the Afghan people. However, the US Treasury Department has ruled that the money cannot be released until the central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), proves its independence. An assessment of DAB for USAID found that it still lacked independence from the Taliban regime, “and had deficiencies in anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism”.¹³ All three members of the DAB Executive board are sanctioned by the UN as terrorists. Aid and development funding is similarly tainted by Taliban interference. The Taliban have infiltrated the entire aid sector, setting up hundreds of their own non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to apply for foreign funds, and forcing all NGOs to sign up to a code of conduct. Officials in government departments dealing with aid have been replaced by Taliban loyalists.

In the absence of other channels, most aid goes through the UN, but a USIP report for USAID found that “the Taliban have effectively infiltrated and influenced most UN-managed assistance programming”. There is no understanding in the Taliban administration of the need for the UN to be independent, instead “the Taliban appear to view the UN system as yet another revenue stream, one which their movement will seek to monopolize and centralize control over”.¹⁴ USIP has described the UN’s approach as “deference” to the Taliban. The United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR, has found the UN’s apparent inability to protect its programmes “deeply troubling”.¹⁵

The aid flows also mean that the Taliban can freely use revenue from taxation—around US\$2 billion a year¹⁶ for other purposes, including security.¹⁷ Beyond the aid propping up a repressive misogynist administration, SIGAR has also warned of an “increased risk” of aid

going into the pockets of terrorists: “There is an increased risk that terrorist and terrorist-affiliated individuals and entities may have illegally benefited from State spending in Afghanistan.”¹⁸

Given this evidence, it is hard to see how any country can send funds to Afghanistan with the certainty that the Taliban will not benefit from it. As early as 2022, even before the Taliban banned women from working for UN programmes, the UN had flagged Taliban interference at all levels with aid distribution.¹⁹ By 2024, there were reports of Taliban officials going house to house to extract aid that had not gone through their system.²⁰ However, while capturing the tools to control aid, the Taliban have shown little interest in taking responsibility for the normal functions of a modern government. As Byrd observes, “There has been minimal attention to social service delivery or to providing a social safety net for the poor; these areas of governance have been largely ceded to international humanitarian assistance.”²¹

Women’s rights

It is in restricting the role of women in the workplace that, as well as causing clear social and human damage, the Taliban have most affected the economic capacity of Afghanistan. It is hard to quantify the loss of women from the workplace, but one UN estimate puts it around US\$1 billion a year.²² The restrictions did not all come in at once. When the Taliban first took power, women were encouraged to return to work and girls to go to school. But this was not the real face of the new government. Just as in the first Taliban administration in 1996, there has been constant talk of girls being able to go to school “when the war is over and the time is right”. That time has never come. The one glaring exception to continuity in governance was the Taliban’s conversion of the Ministry for Women into a new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice, the main mechanism to exert moral authority.

13 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2023-07-30qr.pdf>

14 *ibid.*

15 *ibid.*

16 <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d7d49962c0c44fd6bb9ba3bfe1b6de1f-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-October-2022.pdf>

17 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/wrestling-humanitarian-dilemma-afghanistan>

18 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2024-04-30qr.pdf>

19 https://reliefweb.int/attachments/479a85f3-b52e-44cb-ba3c-27d75503e99b/220622_Afghanistan_SC%20Briefing%2023%20June_CAD%20version_Cleared.pdf.pdf

20 <https://www.bushcenter.org/series/captured-state>

21 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-taliban-rule-new-shocks-weaken-afghan-economy>

22 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-04/SEO%202023-Executive%20Summary_English.pdf

High schools were closed to girls within days of opening in the autumn of 2021. Other restrictions were incremental. The main measures follow:

- 23 December 2021: Women were not permitted to travel more than 72km without a *mahram*, a related male guardian.
- 27 March 2022: Women and girls' access to parks was severely curtailed; domestic and international plane travel without a *mahram* was banned.
- 27 May 2022: Clothing rules tightened, so that if women left their home, they had to be covered from head to foot. There was a reference in this restriction to a preference for women to not leave home at all.
- 21 May 2022: Female television presenters were required to cover their faces. (There was a brave, if short-lived act of solidarity in response by male TV presenters who wore face masks.)
- 1 June 2022: All girls in grades 4 to 6 were required to cover their faces while commuting.
- 23 August 2022: Women government workers were asked to stop coming to work.
- 11 November 2022: Women were prohibited from entering parks in Kabul, and from all public baths, sports clubs, and amusement parks in Faryab Province.
- 20 December 2022: Universities were closed to women.
- 24 December 2022: Women's right to work for national and international NGOs was suspended.
- 4 April 2023: Afghan women were banned from working for the UN.
- 5 July 2023: Women's beauty salons were banned. This restriction is believed to have thrown some 50,000 women out of work, as well as closing the last private space where they could meet.

In August 2024, further restrictions on women were at the core of the decree by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.²³ In 35 articles across more than 100 pages (not including footnotes), the decree laid down strict guidelines across all of life. Women were told to cover their faces, and not speak or sing.

Some Taliban restrictions have an obsessive and degrading quality. Female inspectors have been hired

to conduct intimate examinations in primary schools, sending girls home when they exhibit signs of puberty. The Taliban's new restrictions have licensed abuse against girls and women behind closed doors. Reports of forced marriages, including of young girls, are increasing. And while it is hard to get accurate data on domestic abuse, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is on the increase.

The closure of NGO and UN roles to Afghan women has put the Taliban on a collision course with the aid community. Since December 2021, the UN has tracked 173 Taliban directives concerning humanitarian assistance, including 37 related to restrictions on female participation in aid provision. The UN faces a significant challenge because its rules require equal access to all for jobs, so in continuing to operate, it is acting outside its own rules; it could be said to be operating illegally. The ban on women working for the UN led to a hastily convened conference in Doha in May 2023 between the UN Secretary-General António Guterres and senior diplomats engaged in Afghanistan from a number of concerned countries. But while the envoys had meetings on the side with the Taliban, they did not engage prominent Afghan women civil society activists, leading to protests that their interests were being excluded. There were two subsequent UN meetings in Doha, where again Afghan women were not in the room. (These meetings are considered in more detail in Section 5, "Taliban International Relations".)

There is growing traction, following a major international campaign, to have the situation declared as one of "gender apartheid". Although this is not a technical term requiring any international action, the campaign has put more pressure on Western governments to deliver change.

Is the Opium Poppy Ban Effective?

Beyond social restrictions, the one significant policy change made by the Taliban was to ban the cultivation of opium poppies. This has had the effect of cutting annual rural income by around US\$1bn, and the losses have been borne by the poorest—sharecroppers and farmers who rent land. There are tough times ahead for these people as their coping strategies are exhausted.

Satellite imaging shows that the poppy growing ban has been effective at least in the south and west, where more than 80 per cent of Afghan poppies were grown,

²³ <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-propagation-of-virtue-and-prevention-of-vice-law-translated-into-english>

although poppies were still planted in ten provinces. David Mansfield of Alcis, the organisation that carried out the survey, warns, “Enduring reductions in cultivation could lead to a growing economic crisis, political instability, and an outflow of migrants from rural Afghanistan to Europe.”²⁴

The ban had the unintended negative effect of increasing income to larger landowners, whose stockpiles of opium increased in value as prices went up. The Taliban stopped the growth of poppies, but did not immediately take on the trade. Stockpiles will not last forever, so there is likely to be increased resistance from large landowners in the Pashtun heartland of Kandahar and Helmand in the south if the planting ban continues, or if a trading ban is successfully imposed. These narco-barons have been supportive of the Taliban up to now, and bankrolled their march to power, but that support is conditional on being allowed to continue their activities. They have developed alternatives such as ephedrine and methamphetamine production, but there are signs that the Taliban could also move against these products, while widening action against poppy growing, and ban trade. David Mansfield has been tracking narcotics production in Afghanistan since the late 1990s, and describes the potential for tighter restrictions as a “major inflection point in the history of illicit drug production in Afghanistan—this is most definitely uncharted territory.”²⁵

More than half of Afghan poppies in 2023 were grown in Badakhshan in the northeast, where the Taliban have been facing growing unrest against their rule, and an attempt to enforce a ban is likely to provoke worsening opposition.

4 | THE TALIBAN AND TERRORISM

The Taliban offered a number of concessions in order to secure the withdrawal of international troops in 2021—most importantly, to sever links with terrorism. The evidence is strong that they have done the opposite, and turned Afghanistan into a hub for international jihadi groups. The most detailed accounts of the consequences of this have come in UN sanctions committee reports,

²⁴ <https://www.alcis.org/post/opium-popyy-return>

²⁵ <https://www.alcis.org/post/taliban-drug-crackdown>

published twice a year. A 2023 report concluded, “Promises made by the Taliban in August 2021 to be more inclusive, break with terrorist groups, respect universal human rights, grant a general amnesty and not pose a security threat to other countries seem increasingly hollow, if not plain false.”²⁶

The UN reports have found that more than 20 groups now operate under Taliban protection, with secure training camps and passports for fighters. Many of the groups are opposed to governments in neighbouring countries, including China, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, and are developing into what the UN calls a “serious threat to Central Asia in the longer term”.

The most visible display of this link was the killing of the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a house rented by the Taliban interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in an upmarket housing estate close to the centre of Kabul in July 2022.

Other groups opposed to the Taliban, notably the ISKP, have also grown stronger in the ungoverned space of rural Afghanistan. There are shifting loyalties and alliances between these different groups. While the Taliban’s most serious security threat is the ISKP, some Taliban units locally have good relations with them. This is particularly true of the Haqqani network in the east of the country. The Taliban need to continue to prove their jihadi credentials as a violent group as they compete for recruits with the ISKP. This is a strong counterweight to voices inside the movement that urge moderation to secure international recognition.

Al-Qaeda

Before the fall of the Republic, the al-Qaeda leadership, in hiding in Afghanistan and Pakistan, were restricted from communicating with their troops, limiting their ability to operate as a cohesive organisation with strategic direction. Today, al-Zawahiri’s successor as leader Saif al-Adel meets his commanders openly in Afghanistan and moves without hindrance in and out of Iran.

Links between the Taliban and al-Qaeda are said by the UN to be “strong and symbiotic”, with al-Qaeda

²⁶ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>

now “rebuilding operational capability” from its base in Afghanistan. So close are the ties that the Afghan ministry of defence now uses reportedly al-Qaeda training manuals.

The Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies gained enormous global credibility among jihadi fighters by supporting the ouster of US forces from Afghanistan—a blow against what al-Qaeda doctrine describes as the “far enemy”. Now, from its stable base in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda is able to plan attacks on the governments in the Middle East it defines as the “near enemy”. The UN has described this as “strategic patience”. But while there are no reports of active plans by al-Qaeda, “its intent remains firm, bolstered by its affiliates’ abilities to carry out external operations”.²⁷

Witnesses have described seeing many foreign fighters training in former American and NATO bases around Kabul. They have come from Africa, the Arab world, and South-East and Central Asia. And as well as being the global hub for al-Qaeda, Afghanistan is now the host of an affiliate “al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent”, AQIS, whose recruiting capability increased hugely after the fall of Kabul, enabling them to project violence into Pakistan and India from their new safe haven in Afghanistan.

The current leader of AQIS, Usama Mahmood, is a Pashtun Pakistani once known by Afghan intelligence as “al-Zawahiri’s gate keeper”, as he used his Pakistan connections to keep al-Zawahiri safe after he took over from Osama bin Laden. Mahmood lives in Kandahar, where he and Abdullah bin Laden, Osama’s son, frequently visit the Taliban leader, Akhundzada. They are significant voices urging that the Taliban hold to policies that will keep Afghanistan isolated from the West. Mahmood’s involvement has strengthened ties across the frontier with Pakistan, forging deeper links between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.²⁸

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Pakistan made significant errors in backing a Taliban takeover. First, they mistakenly believed that they had a

27 Letter dated 3 July 2024 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council.

28 Sources for much of this information are intelligence officials from the former administration.

counterterrorism deal with the Taliban, which turned out to be worthless. Second, they calculated that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan would diminish the Pakistani Taliban, the TTP. The opposite has happened, and the change of government in Afghanistan has left the TTP significantly strengthened, with the addition of hundreds of high-value prisoners released from Afghan jails.²⁹ It renewed itself under its leader Noor Wali Mehsud, with a more coherent media strategy and localised organisational structure, successfully absorbing several other splinter groups. The TTP have a clearer focus on taking power in Pakistan specifically reversing previous statements about global jihad.³⁰

Following the Afghan Taliban model, the TTP have appointed “shadow governors” of areas in Pakistan they want to control, and they live and train inside Afghanistan close to the Pakistan border, contrary to agreements made between Islamabad and the Taliban.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The UN reports have assessed that the Islamic State affiliate that uses an old name for the region, Khorasan, is “the most serious current terrorist threat in Afghanistan, neighbouring countries and Central Asia”. Its leader, Sanaullah Ghafari, is well educated and is successfully recruiting among minority Afghan tribes, such as Uzbeks and Tajiks, who face discrimination by the Taliban. The ISKP claimed 190 suicide attacks inside Afghanistan in the year to June 2023, including several against international targets, forcing the temporary closure of the Saudi and Russian embassies. They are also the most active jihadist group to carry out attacks from Afghanistan in other countries, killing hundreds of people across Central Asia, and around 150 in a music hall in Moscow. ISKP operatives have also been identified in Europe.

There are some reports of the emergence of a new affiliate, Islamic State Pakistan Province, ISPP, focused specifically on Pakistan, and operating closely with the ISKP.

Other regional groups

Apart from the TTP, several other regional Islamist groups

29 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/pakistan/pakistans-twin-crises>

30 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover>

operate freely under the Taliban umbrella. The principal ones are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), operating against Uzbekistan; the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), operating against China; and the Baloch Liberation Army, operating against Pakistan. The Taliban are reported to use troops from these regional groups as foot soldiers against the ISKP in return for support inside Afghanistan.

5 | TALIBAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Taliban administration in Afghanistan has not been formally recognised by any state.

A country with no adherence to basic human rights, particularly for women, no attempt to create a government inclusive of Afghan minorities, and where most members of the government are sanctioned as terrorists, is not widely seen as worthy of recognition.

At the UN, and in more than twenty Afghan embassies, representatives appointed by the former Republic remain in post. This anomalous situation is the cause of considerable tension between the Taliban and the outside world. It is also a live argument within many countries. This is examined in more depth in Section 7 on “Policy Options”.

In the absence of formal recognition, there has been a sort of “creeping recognition” by a number of countries, which have normalised relations, and exchanged diplomatic missions, which are in effect embassies. These include China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran. The main Western presence in Kabul is the European Union mission, which has remained open, with a small staff dealing mostly with humanitarian aid.

However, even those countries that have normalised diplomatic relations remain cautious because of the Taliban’s support for cross-border terrorism, and inability to prevent attacks inside Afghanistan. Following attacks, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iran all downgraded their embassies. The former Iranian Ambassador to Kabul, Muhammad Rez Bahrami, tweeted that his country was not considering recognition because of the “inevitable deepening of internal rifts between the Taliban

factions”.³¹ There have been exchanges of fire across the Iran/Afghan border, in arguments over water rights.³²

The Taliban have shown little desire to compromise in the three meetings held by the UN in Doha. The Taliban held meetings on the sidelines in the first two, but were in the room for the third one, in June 2024. Despite full acceptance by the UN of a Taliban agenda, comprising the economy and counternarcotics, and the absence of Afghan opposition groups, including women, the Taliban still sent a low-level delegation, led by the government spokesman. The meeting was widely condemned by Afghan opposition groups, and this strand of international engagement seems to have little future.

Meanwhile, the former Turkish foreign minister Sinirlioğlu delivered his report in December 2023, proposing a two-stage process for Afghanistan’s return to full nationhood. In the first stage, there would be a series of confidence-building measures for a gradual resumption of more normal diplomatic engagement, which would include the opening of permanent country offices in Kabul, embassies in all but name. Confidence-building measures include increased economic and alternative livelihoods funding in recognition of the Taliban’s counterterrorism support (although this is disputed by the UN Sanctions Committee reports), and as a reward for the ban on opium poppies. Full recognition in the second stage would come only after the Taliban lifted restrictions on women and agreed to a more inclusive governance process. Sinirlioğlu also proposed that there should be a UN envoy for Afghanistan, which the Taliban have rejected. They have also cut off further contact with the current human rights envoy, Richard Bennett, after he supported moves to declare their regulations on women as “gender apartheid”. Many Western countries signed up to the Sinirlioğlu plan, but without Taliban consent it has little traction. The Taliban are holding out for nothing short of full recognition.

There is growing support in some Western countries for groups opposed to the Taliban. Ahmad Massoud, the leader of one of the principal anti-Taliban groups, the National Resistance Front, has been hosted in the Elysée Palace by President Macron, amid reports that France

31 <https://www.afintl.com/en/202306304494>

32 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-iran-and-the-taliban-are-clashing-over-water>

may be willing to support military action against the Taliban.³³ The United Kingdom is considering support for non-military opposition groups, as are Republican lawmakers in the United States, where the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives passed a motion agreeing to support the Vienna Process for a democratic Afghanistan.³⁴ (The Vienna Process is considered in more detail in Section 6, “Opposition to the Taliban”.)

Russia

Russia has an interest in continuing good relations with the Taliban to further its anti-Western interests and influence in the global south, and potentially to open new trade links. It kept its embassy open during the change of administration in Kabul in August 2021, and its ambassador was the first diplomat to meet the new regime. The head of the Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who would later become notorious in Ukraine, visited Kabul soon after the arrival of the Taliban to scope out plans for Russia’s future role. But although Russia has invited Taliban officials to Moscow for several rounds of meetings there is little substance in the relationship. Trade between the two countries remains very low, and promised shipments of fuel and wheat have not materialised.³⁵ Russia experienced the Taliban’s failure to prevent terrorist attacks first-hand with an explosion at their Kabul embassy in 2022, which killed a Russian diplomat, among other people, and briefly forced its closure.

China

China too has attempted normal relations with the Taliban, hosting them for talks in Beijing, and at meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, treating them as representatives of a recognised power. China has delivered considerable aid to the Taliban, and has ambitious plans for the extraction of gas, copper, and rare earth minerals. Many Chinese families are now resident in Kabul ahead of wider industrial and commercial development. Deals signed in 2023 amount to US\$6.5 billion, a huge figure that dwarfs the GDP

of Afghanistan. But with no functioning legal code or mining law it is hard to see the final contracts amounting to anything close to this figure.³⁶ The Taliban have struck a separate deal with al-Qaeda to share the proceeds of several gold mines, revealing their different priorities.³⁷ One of the main mining areas in the China contract is in Takhar in the northeast, the scene of some of the worst fighting between the Taliban and its opponents. Security concerns also prevented the extraction of copper from one of the largest remaining untapped mines in the world, at Mes Aynak in Logar Province south of Kabul, although orders to begin mining were given in 2024. China’s narrow border with Afghanistan lies in the Uighur homeland of Xin Jiang, and concerns about Taliban support for the Uighur insurgent group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, override any plans it has for mining or industrial development.³⁸ However, China is close to completing a road from Xin Jiang across the Pamir mountains and down the Wakhan valley to make a direct road link with Afghanistan for the first time.

Gulf states

Since 2013, when the Taliban opened a public political office in Doha, Qatar has played an important role in legitimising the movement. In its role as an international mediator it hosted the talks in 2018 and 2019 between America and the Taliban that ended the American and NATO war in Afghanistan. Although subsequent talks between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban came to nothing, Qatar strengthened its position as a reliable American ally, while still being able to engage insurgent groups. The Taliban’s large presence in Doha remained after its takeover of power in 2021. Some Western countries, including the US, opened large Afghan-interest sections in their Doha embassies to manage engagement with the Taliban without travelling to Kabul. Doha is also one potential location for a headquarters of Afghans opposed to the Taliban, although they do not currently form a coherent group. (This is considered in detail in Section 6, “Opposition to the Taliban”.)

The UAE competes with Qatar for influence, although it

33 <https://www.wafayee.com/2024/09/interview-with-ahmad-massoud-we-are.html>

34 <https://8am.media/eng/u-s-house-resolution-1433-taliban-deemed-terrorists-and-call-for-support-for-the-vienna-process>

35 <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90584>

36 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Afghanistan-s-6.5bn-mine-deals-with-China-others-dig-up-questions>

37 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/22/al-qaeda-taliban-afghanistan-gold-mining>

38 <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-china-taliban-uyghurs-security/32444038.html>

has not formally recognised the Taliban administration (as it did along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia the last time the Taliban were in power). But while an American ally, and host to the former Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, the UAE has also called the Taliban “brothers”, reviving links with the Haqqani network and other senior Taliban leaders, and allowing them to launder money.³⁹ Sirajuddin Haqqani’s mother is an Emirati. The UAE values these relations with the Haqqani network, while Qatar’s relations are with the less powerful “Doha Taliban”. The UAE has also won a contract to manage airports in Afghanistan in competition with Qatar.

Central Asia

Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours are divided. In a sensible move to regulate trade, the Taliban has consulates at border posts in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. But in both the Tajik and Uzbek capitals, the actual embassies remain in the hands of the Republic. This has led to confusion. In one farcical episode, the Taliban government was found to have mistakenly paid US\$800,000 to the Afghan embassy in Tajikistan, which the diplomats of the former Republic would not hand back.⁴⁰

The current head of the Afghan mission in the Tajik capital is Amrullah Saleh, the vice president of the former Republic, who has pretensions to be the de facto leader of the Republic-in-exile since President Ghani fled the country. Tajikistan also hosts Ahmad Massoud, the leader of the National Resistance Front, one of the groups currently engaged in fighting against the Taliban. Both Saleh and Massoud are ethnic Tajiks, and the government of Tajikistan is balancing the protection of ethnic interests against the need to trade with Afghanistan, and in particular to sell it electricity, produced by Tajikistan’s considerable surplus from hydro-electric schemes. The revival of the CASA-1000 deal to bring hydro-electric power from Central Asia into Afghanistan and Pakistan, brokered by the previous government, will strengthen the Taliban.⁴¹

Dushanbe’s pragmatic stance will be tested as other

armed groups also request space in Tajikistan to enter Afghanistan to fight against the Taliban. Nearly all planes and helicopters in the Afghan air force flew across the border north to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan after the fall of the Republic. Neither country has yet allowed their use against the Taliban. The factor that could tip the balance in favour of permitting military action to be launched from their territory would be further evidence of Taliban support for terrorism.

Tajikistan further hedges its bets by allowing Russia some influence as it continues its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the CSTO, a six-member alliance of former Soviet countries chaired by Russia. Uzbekistan pulled out of the CSTO more than a decade ago.

United States

The Biden administration faced criticism for the debacle of the collapse of the Afghan Republic. This has paralysed constructive planning in the administration for Afghanistan, although American aid has continued to flow into the country. President Biden remained adamant that the withdrawal was right, insisting that, according to American intelligence, the Taliban are adhering to counterterrorism commitments. In an unscripted aside at the end of a press conference in June 2023, he said, “Do you remember what I said about Afghanistan? I said al-Qaeda would not be there. I said we’d get help from the Taliban. What’s happening now?... I was right.”⁴²

This assessment is at variance with that of other international analysts, but the US has doubled down. In a report released on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in 2023, the National Counterterrorism Center Director, Christy Abizaid, reported that “a new intelligence assessment states al-Qaeda is at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its revival is unlikely”. This finding, with no details attached, is significantly at variance with the many pages of detailed evidence showing increased terrorist activity in Afghanistan from other analysts, in particular the UN Sanctions Committee reports, as outlined in Section 4. The UN reports have been clear about the Taliban’s close links with al-Qaeda,

39 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/afghanistan-qatar-uae-taliban-haqqani-trumped-how>

40 <https://eurasianet.org/taliban-accidentally-wires-money-to-tajikistan-based-opposition>

41 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/statement/2024/02/23/casa1000resumptionafghanistan>

42 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/30/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-supreme-courts-decision-on-the-administrations-student-debt-relief-program>

and support for the TTP. This “negates the group’s numerous assertions that Afghanistan’s soil will not be used for carrying out attacks against other countries”.⁴³

European Union

With no American leadership on Afghanistan, there is an opportunity for other Western countries to fill the vacuum. The EU has kept its mission open, principally to channel aid effectively. The EU envoy for Afghanistan, Tomas Niklasson, is the most frequent Western visitor to Kabul. There are also ambitions to assist in establishing an “inclusive and representative government through negotiations”.⁴⁴ This would involve discussing the future of Afghanistan with groups other than the Taliban, but so far no European country has been willing to shape the space for these negotiations.

6 | OPPOSITION TO THE TALIBAN

Part of the reason for the strength of the Taliban is that they face a divided and fractious opposition. Even with the internal rivalries described in Section 2 (“Inside the Taliban”), the Taliban have more unity and sense of direction than any other groups in Afghanistan.

After more than four decades of conflict, there is no shared sense in the opposition of the kind of country that should replace the Taliban. The Afghan Republic did not have deep roots, and since its fall Afghans have tended to emphasise ethnic divisions, opening up arguments about the flag, the national anthem, and language of citizenship, which are all contested. The flag and the anthem of the former Republic are seen as symbols of Pashtun dominance by some minorities. In a phenomenon that has been observed elsewhere, diaspora who are remote from the business of real government tend to accentuate divisions among themselves.

Those trying to build unity are hampered by the lack of mature political organisation. Apart from the questions over national symbols such as the flag and the anthem, and the arguments over whether Afghanistan should be

a federal state, there is some scepticism over democracy itself, after the very low turnout in the last highly disputed election for the Republic in 2019. One of the many failures of the twenty years of the Afghan Republic was the unwillingness of successive presidents to allow modern political parties. In their absence, Afghanistan’s warlord traditions were difficult to counter. Tribal politicians, backed up by militias with a history of fighting among themselves, were prominent.

But behind the corrupt old order, the years of relative progress under the Republic did give some space to a new generation, not burdened with the rivalries of the civil war years. These technocratic ministers and officials, often educated overseas, are now trying to build new alliances to rebuild hope for a future government in Afghanistan that is inclusive of women and minorities.

After the shock of the collapse of the Republic in August 2021, it took some time for any opposition to the Taliban to emerge. Afghan political and civil society leaders were scattered in exile across the world, dealing with the distraction of resettlement. That changed by 2023. As one of the emerging leaders, the ambassador to the UN in Geneva for the former Republic, Nasir Andisha, put it, “It has been two long years of processing grief and overcoming the anguish of abandonment and collapse but also two years of engaging in self-reflection, reorganization, and resistance.”⁴⁵

In the absence of political parties, different factions have appeared since 2021, mostly divided along ethnic lines, or grouped by historical connection. The constitution of the Republic, adopted in 2004, is widely criticised as being too centralised, conferring power on the president with little accountability. Some groups want a more federal structure, others propose different methods of decentralising the constitution, and dozens of “road maps” back to power have been written, with many differences, but a generally shared sequence of negotiations with the Taliban, leading to a transitional government based broadly on the existing constitution, ahead of amending it with the consent of the people.

There is also a growing acceptance among opposition groups that as the Taliban show no sign of softening their opposition to negotiations, there may be a need to

43 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf?OpenElement>

44 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/european-union-and-afghanistan_en?s=234

45 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/afghanistans-next-generation-must-rise-above-the-talibans-reality>

accept some military action as leverage. This is particularly problematic for those Western governments that are beginning to want to help shape the space for Afghan voices outside the Taliban administration.

It is a dynamic situation, and groups are fluid, with communication through shifting WhatsApp groups. But some shape for the main groups may be described as follows. Some are exclusively political and constitutional, others have military wings.

Political Groups:

Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan

This is the most ambitious attempt so far to build an umbrella for the non-Taliban opposition. There have been four Afghan-led meetings, held in Vienna, and facilitated by the former Balkans UN High Representative, the Austrian diplomat Wolfgang Petritsch, who initiated the process.⁴⁶ The aim is to build a sustainable framework, engaging Afghans from as wide a base as possible, across generations and tribes, to reconcile different approaches to restoring constitutional government in Afghanistan. Of all of the opposition groupings, the Vienna Process is the closest to having the broad consent needed to be the legitimate voice of non-Taliban Afghanistan. But the process has received only limited funding from a private foundation, and no state support, so it currently lacks the leverage to build the “big tent” that will be needed for the return to constitutional government in Afghanistan.

Center for Dialogue and Progress Geneva (CDP-G)

The CDP-G initiative is led by the Geneva ambassador for the former Republic, Nasir Andisha. This has brought together a diverse group of young professionals, civil society, and emerging political leaders in exile, with the aim of linking these groups back to civil society and like-minded groups in Afghanistan. Meetings in Antalya, Turkey, have been attended by people who have come from inside Afghanistan, including some close to the Taliban administration. The CDP-G has close links to the Vienna Process.

National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan (NRC)

Also known as the “Ankara Shura” and based in Turkey, the NRC was formed by leaders of the former armed groups who defeated the Soviet Union in the 1980s—notably Muhammad Atta Noor, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and Ismail Khan.

The influence held by these leaders was never diminished during the years of the Republic. Already wealthy from their leadership of the 1980s resistance, they added to this after 2001 through capturing resource flows when Afghanistan received large volumes of reconstruction assistance. Some played significant roles as provincial governors, one was a vice president.

They have a thorough plan to return to power, with a detailed prescription for required amendments to the constitution, in particular more power for parliament and with directly elected provincial and district governors. They remind the international community of the Taliban’s commitment to negotiate. But they warn that they could mobilise their militias once again. The language used in their manifesto is clear. In the absence of negotiations, there would be “systematic strengthening and expansion of national resistance in multiple provinces of the country, as a legitimate option in defence of people’s rights and deliverance of the country”. While this may seem an empty threat, since their militias are degraded, the NRC cannot be ignored.

Younger Afghans would prefer these former militia leaders to be sidelined, remembering how they fought against each other in a vicious civil war in the early 1990s. Aware of this negative perception of their history, the NRC are treading carefully, stating that they will coordinate their public statements to avoid “competition for strengthening a particular party or faction at the expense of other parties and tendencies”.

Afghanistan National Movement for Peace and Justice (ANMPJ)

The ANMPJ is led by a group composed mostly of former ministers from the Afghan government. The two most prominent members are the former National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, and the former Defence Minister, Muhammad Masoom Stanekzai. The ANMPJ demands more engagement from the international community

⁴⁶ <https://www.viennaprocess.org>

and the UN to restore constitutional government in Afghanistan. The plan includes the highly impractical suggestion that the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation be reinstated to try to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban. This was a body set up during the Republic, which never delivered in its aim of delivering a negotiated peace. Their plan is also distinctive for calling for an “Islamic scholars’ institution”, which would presumably test Taliban Islamic credentials. The group has no military wing.

Political Groups with Military Wings:

National Resistance Front (NRF)

The NRF is led by Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary 1980s guerrilla commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud. This has been the most active military group, with continual low-level attacks since the fall of the Republic, although they have never been a serious threat to the Taliban, and were less militarily successful by 2024 than in previous years. They draw their support from the second largest tribal group, the Tajiks of the northeast of the country, and advocate a federal system as the only way of ensuring Tajiks hold political power.

Massoud has a high profile in Europe, where he launched an autobiography in French and English. But he has not yet shown widespread Afghan support beyond his Tajik base.

Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF)

The AFF is led by General Yasin Zia, the former head of the Afghan army, and one of the new generation of military officers, trained in the West, who emerged to take leadership roles in the army during the last years of the Republic. This is a military organisation with a limited but growing political profile. The AFF carry out targeted assassinations against Taliban leaders, filming them to amplify the effect of the attacks on social media.

Afghanistan United Front (AUF)

The AUF is led by another former senior Afghan army officer of the new generation, General Sami Sadat. This is principally a political organisation. Sadat launched a political office in the United States in 2023, and is planning military action in the future, drawing support from former soldiers of the Republic who want to take

revenge for their defeat.

Sadat’s AUF and Zia’s AFF have similar political aims of a return to the Afghan Republic, uniting under the symbols of the flag and national anthem as before, and initially under the existing constitution. This simple political platform does have appeal for Pashtuns, but they will need to work to ensure minorities feel protected.

Other groupings

There are many other opposition groupings, which exist in overlapping networks, but mostly without the organisational capacity of those mentioned above. Many women’s leaders in exile have retained their networks inside the country, but they have struggled to secure even the minimal funding they need from donors to support their work. In 2024, prominent women leaders came together in an international alliance. Despite repression, there is now a surprisingly active opposition movement inside Afghanistan, particularly among women, but it has an incoherent political programme, and is resentful of the prominent women civil society leaders who fled the country.⁴⁷

Bringing coherence to this diffuse and scattered community has been difficult. Building a coherent alternative to the Taliban that could win the consent of the Afghan people will only happen with the support of concerned Western governments. There are levers that can be pulled; the network of ambassadors of the former Republic is a significant facilitator, and there are other circles, women, and youth, as well as the formal groups listed above, that could be brought in.

7 | POLICY OPTIONS

The response of the international community to the Taliban takeover has been incoherent from the start. Beyond a widespread acceptance that the administration will not be recognised or take the Afghan seat at the UN, there is no agreement on how to move forward. Many countries appear to hope that continuing engagement will encourage the Taliban to ameliorate their harsh restrictions, particularly on women, and open the space

⁴⁷ <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/event/anthony-hyman-memorial-lecture-2023-repression-and-resistance-struggle-womens-rights>

for dialogue with other Afghan groups. But the opposite has happened, as shown in the August 2024 decree from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, further tightening restrictions on women while outlawing non-Pashtun cultural practices such as celebration of the Persian New Year, *Nawruz*.

The danger of leaving this to fester is clear. As thousands of young men emerge from hardline madrassas, extreme religious schools, every year, the social gains that created a relatively more open, liberal, and global society over the last twenty years of international intervention, where women had different expectations for their lives, are being eroded. Furthermore, the Taliban are altering the tribal makeup of the country by forced movements of Pashtuns into ancestral Hazara and Tajik lands in the north. As a prominent young civil society activist, Shagofar Ghafari said, “Our enemy is moving, we do not have time to wait to act.”⁴⁸

Even for Islamic countries, the Taliban’s treatment of women is a sticking point. The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) met in an emergency session in January 2023 to discuss the Taliban’s ban on women working for aid organisations and agreed that it was “contrary to the purposes of Islamic law”.⁴⁹

There are three broad principles that are widely agreed. Any engagement should:

- Put the inclusion of women and tribal minorities at the top of any discussion.
- Work closely with other international partners.
- Engage countries in the region.

But there is little agreement beyond these principles. International unity has broken down as a number of countries, including most of Afghanistan’s regional neighbours, have effectively normalised relations, opening embassies—recognition in all but name. And there is no possibility of agreement in a Security Council that is paralysed over Ukraine and Gaza. Russia and China would move to normalise relations with Afghanistan, while others want to continue to insist on human rights issues, in particular the rights of women, as leverage.⁵⁰

48 This comment was made at a meeting of the Vienna Process in December 2023.

49 <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-oic-women-rights/32218592.html>

50 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-06/afghanistan-21.php>

Non-recognition of the Taliban has been helpful in allowing space for alternative approaches. The Geneva ambassador Nasir Andisha, is clear about the value of this:

“Non-recognition of the Taliban regime has created an enabling environment for the civil and political forces to coalesce around common values and principles and demand for restoration of human rights, fundamental freedom, and an inclusive and representative government. International civil society, parliamentarians, academic institutions, women’s rights groups, associations of veterans, and friends of Afghanistan are actively supporting these endeavours.”⁵¹

The Sinirlioglu report to the UN in 2023 remains the blueprint for moving forward for many countries. Its twin-track approach—limited engagement, with full recognition depending on improvements in women’s rights and moves to an inclusive government—depends on Taliban agreement. But the Taliban have rejected one of its key elements, the appointment of a UN envoy for Afghanistan, at the same time as banning the current human rights envoy, Richard Bennett, because of his backing for the movement to describe the situation in Afghanistan as “gender apartheid”.

Arguments over levels of engagement have divided Western governments. One example was the forced resignation of Tobias Ellwood as chairman of the UK Commons Defence Committee. He argued that continuing to isolate Afghanistan risked pushing the nation to a “fiscal cliff”.⁵² He said that more engagement would mean that women’s rights could be a “negotiation tool”, which led to predictable response from those who do not believe that rights are negotiable. “Security is not just the absence of war,” said a former Afghan MP, Fawzia Koofi, “but includes women’s rights. We should stick by our principles.”⁵³ A former Afghan minister, Shukria Barakzai, said, “Simply engaging with them gives diplomatic legitimacy to the Taliban without holding them to account.”⁵⁴

51 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/afghanistans-next-generation-must-rise-above-the-talibans-reality>

52 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/tobias-ellwood-is-being-the-talibans-useful-idiot>

53 <https://twitter.com/Fawziakoofi77/status/1681075755466326018?s=20>

54 https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/06/taliban-afghanistan-women-ban-mahboub-seraj-nobel-diplomacy/#cookie_message_anchor

Some Afghan women leaders believe there should be engagement. Mahbouba Seraj, niece of the reformist King Amanullah, who ruled Afghanistan in the 1920s, said: "If we don't sit down and talk to them and see what it is exactly that we can do and they can do, the ones who are going to be paying for it...are the poor people of Afghanistan, the women and children."⁵⁵

The most eloquent argument for more engagement, while stopping short of recognition, is by the then deputy head of the UN mission in Kabul, Markus Potzel, who has had long-term involvement in Afghanistan, including as German ambassador. Potzel's case in a speech to the Security Council is worth quoting at length:

"If the Taliban do not respond to the needs of all elements of Afghan society and constructively engage within the very limited window of opportunity with the international community, it is unclear what would come next. Further fragmentation, isolation, poverty, and internal conflict are among the likely scenarios, leading to potential mass migration and a domestic environment conducive to terrorist organizations, as well as greater misery for the Afghan population. That's why we have to engage. The objective of our engagement is to promote governance in Afghanistan that works for the benefit of the Afghan people and respects the norms of the global community. While success is not certain, continued qualified engagement remains the most realistic chance of achieving these objectives."⁵⁶

This approach is designed to empower those members of the Taliban, and there are many, who do want girls to go to school and disagree with the harsher restrictions against women.

If this approach were followed, it could build on the very limited agenda of the third Doha meeting between the Taliban and the UN in 2024, on economic and environmental issues, as well as counternarcotics. This would involve funding the World Bank's transitional development programmes, designed to stabilise the economy, although as described in Section 3 (Taliban Governance, Women's Rights, and the Economy), Taliban infiltration of the UN and other funding mechanisms means there has to be acceptance that any funds

that go into Afghanistan will go through their hands. However, it is hard to see how more engagement would increase leverage to improve conditions for women. Attempting to engage the Taliban ignores the nature of the organisation. They have no concept of negotiation for a more inclusive government. The emirate is divinely inspired, and cannot compromise with any other authority in the same physical space.

Whatever level of engagement with the Taliban is adopted, there should be support for civil society, local education, women's networks, and media inside Afghanistan to build resilience for the future. While these are complex operations for governments to fund, UK government schemes, along with private funding mechanisms, have successfully shown that small amounts of money sent in this way to networks inside Afghanistan have had a good effect.

Another way of using leverage on the Taliban is to ensure that there could be a constitutional alternative to their administration, dedicated to democratic government in a country united under one flag with equal rights for women and minorities. If there are to be negotiations with the Taliban, there is a need to build space for an opposition. Without it, negotiations will only legitimise the Taliban, as happened when the Kabul government was excluded from negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Doha in 2019. Opposition leaders have appealed for international support in order to build coherence in their fragmented movement. Only then will there be any chance of intra-Afghan dialogue succeeding in improving the lives of Afghan people.

This will not be easy. The landscape of the opposition, divided not by political stance, but tribe and history, is difficult to navigate for countries that want to support Afghanistan. But a truly feminist foreign policy could embrace this robust approach, which would more quickly deliver a return to equality for women.

In the absence of American leadership on Afghanistan, there is an opportunity for European countries to fill the vacuum with a coherent set of policies that are not expensive and might help to find a way out for the 40 million people currently imprisoned by a barbarous regime.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ <https://unama.unmissions.org/briefing-deputy-special-representative-markus-potzel-security-council-0>

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