

# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF TALIBAN RULE

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*Rule of Law - Security - Governance*

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**AML/CFT:** Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism

**AIJA:** Afghan Independent Journalists Association

**AFN:** Afghan Afghani

**ANDSF:** Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

**AIHRC:** Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

**BRI:** Belt and Road Initiative

**BBC:** British Broadcasting Corporation

**CPEC:** China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

**ETIM:** Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement

**EU:** European Union

**GDP:** Gross Domestic Product

**IEA:** Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

**ISKP:** Islamic State Khorasan Province

**MoUs:** Memorandums of Understanding

**MoWA:** Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (after dissolution)

**NGOs:** Non-Governmental Organizations

**NRF:** National Resistance Front

**NFF:** National Freedom Front

**RMJ:** Resistance Movement for Justice

**TTA:** Tehrik-e-Taliban Afghanistan

**TTP:** Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

**TPMA:** Third-Party Monitoring Agent

**UN:** United Nations

**UNAMA:** United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

# PROLOGUE - HOW IT HAPPENED

The collapse of the Afghan government on August 15, 2021, marked the conclusion of two decades of war in Afghanistan, and international efforts, primarily led by the United States, to establish stable governance institutions in Afghanistan. The initial phase began in December 2001 in Bonn, Germany, where Afghan and international stakeholders devised a plan to form a new government, excluding the Taliban. This led to the Bonn Agreement, appointing Hamid Karzai as the head of the interim administration and establishing a constitution with a centralized presidential system in a country characterized by significant urban-rural divides and no history of centralized democracy.

Despite U.S. aspirations for a government upholding the rule of law, human rights, and democratic principles, actual funding fell short. Corruption within the Afghan government, particularly during Karzai's presidency, was a persistent issue, hindering progress and eroding public confidence. Even as violence escalated, and the Taliban re-emerged, a surge of U.S. forces in 2009 did not effectively address governance challenges, including corruption fueled by international aid.

The 2014 election of Ashraf Ghani did little to restore public trust, leading to a power-sharing arrangement with Abdullah Abdullah in a National Unity Government. However, structural weaknesses and corruption persisted, as acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2018.

In February 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed an agreement for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, with peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government commencing in September 2020. Despite the agreement, the Taliban's failure to fulfill commitments, especially in counterterrorism and violence reduction, drew criticism. President Biden's decision to withdraw all U.S. military personnel by September 11, 2021, marked a pivotal moment.

The collapse unfolded within four months, beginning in April 2021. Key contributing factors included the Afghan government's failure to anticipate the U.S. departure, exclusion from U.S.-Taliban talks, insistence on Taliban integration, the Taliban's unwillingness to compromise, President Ghani's exclusive governance style, and the government's long-standing issues of centralization, legitimacy struggles, and endemic corruption. As the U.S. withdrew, the Taliban rapidly seized control of provincial capitals, with Kabul falling on August 15, 2021.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.sigar.mil/>



Taliban fighters take control of the Afghan presidential palace after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 15, 2021 [AP/Zabi Karimi]

This marked a new and complex reality that the world is still grappling to grasp: a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Initially rooted in the triumph of jihadist ideology, the current situation poses internal and external challenges for the Taliban, Afghanistan, and stakeholders. This report focuses on critical aspects, from the Taliban's governance style and international interactions to public perceptions and the future trajectory of Afghanistan. By addressing knowledge gaps, the analysis aims to provide insights into the dynamics shaping Taliban rule, its impact, and current challenges, and avenues that stem from it.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report provides a detailed analysis of the two years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Utilizing thorough desk research spanning the last two years and insights gathered from interviews with key informants, including experts inside and outside Afghanistan, this study covers various dimensions offering a comprehensive, unbiased, and critical view of the de facto rule so far.

The beginning depicts insights from the individuals who have seen and experienced firsthand life under the Taliban since August 2021. The responses are based on the subjective experiences of journalists, development professionals, teachers, businesspersons, and activists. There is some objective critique from subject matter experts as well who have been studying and working on the region for decades.

Then, the report thoroughly covers the administrative strategies employed by the Taliban, focusing on establishing and functioning government structures and policies. It sheds light on the diplomatic engagements of the Taliban, tracing the evolution of their relationships with the international community and the resulting geopolitical implications for Afghanistan.

Human rights and civil liberties under Taliban rule are critically examined, assessing the impact of policies on individual freedoms, gender, and minority rights. The report also scrutinizes the effects of Taliban governance on public health and social welfare initiatives.

Additionally, it explores the economic and trade policies, and fiscal measures, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities within Afghanistan's economic landscape. Additionally, it analyzes the Taliban's efforts to establish peace and maintain security across the country and broader region.

Education and essential public services are additional focal points, with the report examining Taliban policies and their consequences for access to education, public utilities, and critical services.

By addressing these diverse themes, this research report offers an in-depth understanding of the complex dimensions of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, serving as a resource for stakeholders, policymakers, and the global community to inform decision-making and future evaluations.



# DAILY LIFE: NOTABLE CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL SHIFTS, TRENDS, AND INSIGHTS FROM NATIVES

**W**e conducted interviews through 2022 - 2023 to gather insights into the evolving dynamics of daily life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. A central theme that emerged from the respondents' perspectives is the diminishing presence of women across various sectors, a phenomenon attributed to historical, cultural, social, and political factors.

The closure of girls' schools and universities has raised widespread concerns due to its anticipated socio-economic repercussions. Beyond the immediate impact on human capital development, the move is seen as perpetuating gender discrimination, hindering women's economic empowerment, and constraining opportunities for sustainable economic growth. Respondents stressed the urgency of prioritizing and investing in girls' education to foster a prosperous and equitable society in the long term. Secret schools and alternate means of education like female madrassahs have become a norm, the former being more discreet of course, but they are not deemed as sustainable solutions to the problem.

The role of clerics has taken on added significance, with a noticeable shift in attitudes among religious leaders towards supporting girls' education. The endorsement from clerics is identified as a crucial factor in breaking down barriers and creating an environment conducive to equal educational opportunities for girls.

However, a shadow looms over freedom of expression, with the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law and authoritarian rule imposing significant constraints on dissenting opinions. Societal shifts are apparent in restrictions on social gatherings, travel, and dress codes, curtailing individual freedoms. Many artists have fled the country and those who remain inside the country face persecution, living in fear. Music is banned in public places and wedding halls. “The Taliban are against all kinds of art”, said a male student who previously studied music at Kabul University, but does not anymore as the government has banned performing arts programs in the institutions – even for men.

Widespread unemployment, particularly impacting women, has contributed to food insecurity and left millions in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. While schools and universities remain closed for girls and a majority of women is out of work, some of them are resorting to alternate means of education and work through virtual learning and starting businesses of their own.

“Female-owned cottage industries and small businesses are supported by the Taliban as women are required to leave their house, or so is expected of them”, said a Kabul-based entrepreneur who runs a home-based clothing business.

The media landscape faces extensive censorship, with limitations on international broadcasting and increased detentions of journalists and critics, stifling freedom of expression, causing an estimated 80 per cent of women journalists to lose their jobs or leave the profession. Security and human rights concerns persist, with reports of arbitrary detentions, and torture.

In terms of governance, the effectiveness of mechanisms addressing public grievances is perceived to have limitations. While efforts are made to address certain issues like security and corruption, the strict interpretation of Islamic law raises concerns about individual freedoms, particularly women's rights. Access to grievance redressal mechanisms for human rights is challenging, with apprehensions about transparency, accessibility, and accountability.

The interviews also shed light on the situation of minority groups under the new regime. While the Taliban has expressed intentions to respect minority rights, practical implementation remains uncertain. Monitoring diverse sources is emphasized as crucial for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the treatment of minority groups.

Reports on austerity measures undertaken by key figures in the government raise questions about the effectiveness of claimed efforts to address economic challenges. The ground realities challenge the narrative of economic recovery, prompting a need for scrutiny and evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This section is based on data gathered from key informant interviews (KIIs)

# GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

In the past two years, Afghanistan's governance under the Taliban become increasingly authoritarian and reminiscent of the 1990s. The Taliban's rule has been marked by exclusionary practices, particularly favouring the Pashtun ethnic group. This approach has been repressive towards all forms of opposition, offering minimal opportunities for minority groups and those associated with the previous governments. Inclusive government is a distant dream, despite symbolic gestures.

Under the leadership of Haibatullah Akhundzada, decision-making has become highly centralized, dismissing input from other factions and leaders. This centralization has reversed the Taliban's prior, more decentralized processes. Haibatullah's regime has faced criticism for its strict interpretation of sharia, leading to decisions that have stripped girls and women of rights, including education and employment opportunities. A notable example is the December 2022 edict banning women from working for NGOs in Afghanistan, causing a suspension of vital humanitarian services. Girls' education ban is another 'administrative issue' – which the Taliban have still not been able to resolve.

The Taliban have managed to stabilize the Afghan economy, which was previously severely impacted by banking sanctions, international seizures of Afghan central bank assets, and the termination of Western development aid. In response, they strengthened the Afghan currency, decreased inflation, partially restored imports, doubled exports, and demonstrated a more effective collection of customs and taxes compared to the corrupt leaders of the Afghan Republic. However, as development economist William Byrd aptly describes, this stabilization resembles a "famine equilibrium,"<sup>3</sup> suggesting that economic improvement is precarious and may be sustained under challenging and restrictive conditions.

The stabilization of the Afghan economy by the Taliban, albeit under famine-like conditions, has not mitigated the humanitarian crisis. The repression of women, minorities, and political critics has jeopardized essential Western humanitarian aid. There are concerns that China's economic efforts in Afghanistan may not compensate for the loss of Western aid, as the Taliban's actions fundamentally conflict with international standards.

Internally, there are power struggles within the Taliban, with leaders such as Abdul Ghani Baradar and military commanders like Mullah Yaqub seeking to influence decision-making. The possibility of internal power changes, including reinstating the Rahbari Shura leadership council arrangement, is being considered by dissatisfied Taliban leaders. However, Haibatullah's resistance to rescinding controversial policies and decentralizing decision-making poses a significant challenge to such changes.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>

The Taliban's struggle to contain terrorism within Afghanistan, especially from the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), adds to the complexities of governance. While the Taliban has attempted to appease international actors, ISK's urban terror campaign remains a challenge. The potential for terrorist attacks abroad originating from Afghanistan raises questions about external support for anti-Taliban groups. While peace prevails relevantly, its sustainability remains uncertain.

The situation is also complicated by uncertainties surrounding the Taliban leadership succession, potential defections, and weak resistance from groups like the National Resistance Front (NRF). The Taliban's grip on power remains strong, but internal power struggles, economic challenges, and the ability to counter terrorism will shape Afghanistan's governance in the coming years.<sup>4</sup>

However, while centralization of power, lack of inclusive governance, and anticipated terror threats are paramount challenges, there are some welcoming developments. \*Majid Folad, a journalist based in Zabul notes that minority communities, particularly in the northern regions, now experience increased security, with major development projects underway. This is in contrast to the challenges faced by the Pashtun majority in the war-torn south and east. Notably, the Hazara community, a Shia minority, reports improved security for their lives, religious places, and ceremonies. The Taliban's efforts in providing enhanced security have resulted in a decrease in major attacks against Shia minorities, particularly by groups like the ISKP. Minorities holding high positions in the government and the reported destruction of ISKP operational cells within the country further contribute to improved minority relations. Despite these developments, it's essential to acknowledge ongoing challenges and criticisms surrounding Taliban governance.<sup>5</sup>

The present government functions in an interim capacity, lacking a specified timeline for the establishment of a permanent administration. This absence of a clear timetable may stem from the significant internal tensions caused during the formation of the current cabinet, with different factions within the Taliban vying for positions.

A former member of parliament<sup>6</sup> says, “Road safety has notably improved, and the Taliban have undertaken anti-poppy cultivation efforts, displaying a strict approach to drug control. There is no concrete evidence of the Taliban's willingness to form an inclusive government, posing a potential obstacle to long-term political stability.”

He added that their approach reminds him of President Ghani's reluctance during his final days in office, as they assert their power and reject the prospect of the Doha Agreement on power-sharing. The Taliban's current stance emphasizes their authority and the intention to dictate actions without accommodating an inclusive government, including opposition groups. Despite encouraging the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>

<sup>5</sup> Respondent requested anonymity under a pseudonym

<sup>6</sup> Respondent requested anonymity

return of people to Afghanistan, the Taliban have strictly prohibited political activities, compelling leaders to refrain from media interactions and maintain a subdued presence. The prospect of an open discussion on an inclusive government remains elusive under the current administration.

In terms of service delivery, despite a turbulent transition, the Taliban have integrated effectively with the Afghan state. Many lower and middle-ranking public servants, excluding those in the judiciary and security sectors, have retained their positions and continue to receive reduced salaries. The World Bank, UN agencies, and the IEA have established arrangements to sustain health services at pre-August 2021 levels.

“We have made sure to ensure citizens’ life and property, crime is minimal and offences against women have gone down, Mujahid asserted. There are of course problems, but we must keep in mind the years of war and conflict that the society has gone through. Despite heavy odds, the Islamic Emirate has meanwhile met all the requirements – nationwide peace and security, stabilization of the economy, over the past two years to qualify for becoming part of the global community”, said the Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid in an interview<sup>7</sup>.

In a deal with the IEA, the UN sends regular cash shipments of \$40 million to operate in the country, primarily directed toward essential food assistance and basic health services, indirectly contributing to stabilizing the Afghan currency and preventing a complete economic collapse.

The Taliban continue to pay female schoolteachers, and enrollment in primary schools for both genders has increased in certain areas with improved security, \* but another factor that accounts for the number of female students is that some of them are deliberately repeating the year as past grade 6, there is no way for education.<sup>8</sup>

The Taliban have also met the country's electricity import bill, ensuring power supply to most regions, albeit with regular blackouts. Progress is being made on pre-2021 water management projects, although resource limitations pose challenges to further advancements.

Presently, there is no indication of intra-Afghan dialogue or reconciliation beyond the Taliban offering protection to Afghan politicians associated with the previous regime who opt to return. Despite the Taliban's pledge of amnesty for all, documented cases of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture, particularly targeting former military officials, raise serious doubts about the IEA's capacity and willingness to uniformly enforce amnesty.<sup>9</sup> The latest United Nations report on extrajudicial killings in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover reveals alarming findings. The report substantiates concerns about the treatment of former government security personnel by the Taliban, indicating ongoing revenge killings and enforced disappearances of ex-police, army, and intelligence officers. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented a significant number of extrajudicial killings, particularly in the first four

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<sup>7</sup> <https://matrixmag.com/about-time-for-world-to-recognise-taliban-regime-zabiullah-mujahid/>

<sup>8</sup> Respondent requested anonymity

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/23/taliban-in-government-a-grim-new-reality-is-settling-in>

months post-Taliban takeover, with 148 cases reported. After this period, an additional 70 extrajudicial killings were recorded between January 1 and December 31, 2022, with such incidents persisting into 2023. Arbitrary detention of former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) members by the Taliban, marked by enforced disappearances and lack of information provided to families, constitutes severe violations of international law. Despite Taliban attempts to attribute these actions to "personal enmity or revenge," the report emphasizes the need for accountability, transparency in investigations, and compensation for victims' families.

However, official Taliban reports say that individuals are currently under legal investigation for acts of revenge. They also claim there are no political prisoners and that the only detainees are members of the armed opposition, former officials who are corrupt thieves or kidnappers, and those arrested for criminal offences according to the law. It appears that practices toward the officials of the former government are inconsistent, with the amnesty being implemented in some cases and not others.<sup>10</sup>

On one hand, the Taliban's mixed treatment of amnesty and punishment raises questions on the credibility of their claims of "just" Islamic rule, on the other, there are some commendable outcomes the Sharia-based government has reared—for instance, the reduction and eventual elimination of poppy cultivation. Haibatullah Akhundzada issued a directive in April 2022 outlawing the growing of the poppy, which is used to make opium, a significant component of the narcotic heroin. Anyone breaking the law would have their pitch destroyed and face Sharia-compliant penalties, said the directive. A Taliban spokesman told the BBC that the prohibition was put in place because it violates their religious convictions and is necessary to prevent the spread of opium, which is obtained from poppy seed capsules<sup>11</sup>. More than 80% of the opium in the world used to be produced in Afghanistan. In Europe, opium from Afghanistan accounts for 95% of the heroin sold.

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has fallen by 85% since the Taliban's rise to power. The ban, imposed by religious leaders, is considered the most successful counter-narcotics effort in human history. The provinces of Helmand, Farah, and Nimroz have seen the greatest reductions in cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia65787391#:~:text=In%20April%202022%2C%20Taliban%20supreme,penalised%20according%20to%20Sharia%20law>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/afghanistan-poppy-cultivation-falls-by-85-per-cent-taliban/>

# HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

In the Taliban's inaugural press conference after seizing Kabul in August 2021, spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid declared the group's dedication to upholding women's rights within the confines of Sharia. He pledged non-discrimination against women. While the Taliban have made similar claims in the past, these words quickly proved hollow.<sup>1314</sup>

## Women's Mobility and Right to Work, Girls' Education, and Civil Liberties

In the past two years, the Taliban have reportedly committed severe human rights violations, particularly against women. They dissolved the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) - tasked with safeguarding women's rights in all 34 provinces - replacing it with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which issued restrictive decrees impacting women's and girls' rights. Women who opposed these measures experienced unjust detention and violence.

Though women make up almost half of Afghanistan's population<sup>15</sup>, i.e. 49.5 %, the World Economic Forum (WEF) slated Afghanistan as 146<sup>th</sup> (last of all countries) on the gender gap index, given the recurrent plight of women's rights in the country.

The regime has rebranded the Attorney General's Office as the General Directorate for Monitoring and Follow-up of Decrees and Directives. Additionally, the Taliban has abolished institutions such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Commission to Eliminate Violence Against Women, shelters and safe houses for abused women, civil society-led protection and empowerment programs, and women-led organizations. They have also revoked laws and policies aimed at combating violence and harassment against women.

Their most repressive measure so far is the closure of girls' schools above grade. Shortly after assuming power, they announced that girls' schools would remain closed for some period. However, schools were supposed to resume in March 2022, but hours after on the day of reopening, female students above grade 6 were sent home<sup>16</sup>. To date, education for girls above grade 6 is banned in Afghanistan.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/we-are-committed-in-principle-to-women-participation-says-taliban-minister/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6682727/The-Taliban-says-committed-WOMENS-RIGHTS-Afghanistan-peace-negotiations.html>

<sup>15</sup>

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?end=2022&locations=AF&start=2022&view=bar>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/23/taliban-orders-girls-schools-shut-hours-after-reopening>





Women protest the Taliban's decision to cancel the return of high school-aged girls to the classroom, in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 26, 2022. (Bryan Denton/The New York Times)

By the conclusion of 2021, the first four months of the Taliban's rule indicated a continuity in their treatment of women, resembling their approach from the 1990s<sup>17</sup>. Various measures, including a mandated dress code, the need for a chaperone (mahram) in public, and a prohibition on women and girls in public parks, increasingly restrict their access to public spaces. In August 2022, reports emerged of 60 women university students being barred from leaving Afghanistan as they lacked a mahram, prompting many women to avoid solo travel.<sup>18</sup>

In the past two years, the situation has further deteriorated. The Taliban issued a decree specifying that the preferred form of hijab, equated with women's attire or covering, is for Afghan women to either wear a burqa (providing full coverage from head to toe) or to remain at home<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, the Taliban prohibited women from working for the U.N. and NGOs, imposed restrictions on their access to public parks, and hindered their participation in sports. The regime also nullified thousands of divorce cases settled under the previous government. In July 2023, they ordered the

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/two-years-talibans-gender-apartheid-afghanistan>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/how-talibans-hijab-decree-defies-islam>



closure of beauty salons, leaving approximately 60,000 women without a source of income to sustain their families<sup>20</sup>.

Zarifa Ghafari, former mayor of Maidan Wardak and Afghanistan's first female mayor, says, "The Taliban, reminiscent of their 90s-era counterparts, have demonstrated a lack of change or transformation, despite discussions during peace negotiations about a potential '2.0 Taliban'. Disappointment stems from the realization that they continue to enforce similarly harsh decisions, diverging from the practices of Islam observed in numerous other countries. The stringent policies imposed on women's lives are Taliban-made rules, justified in the name of Islam or the country's cultural context, but not reflective of similar practices in other Islamic nations."

Until December 2022, women could attend universities, but currently, female students and instructors are barred from both public and private university campuses. A more enduring threat that has surfaced in the past two years is the "madrassafication" of the Afghan education system, which perpetuates the Taliban's misogynistic beliefs for future generations. This takes three forms: the revision of regular public school curricula to align with the Taliban's interpretation of Islam, the encouragement of boys and girls to attend madrassas instead of public schools, and the creation of new "jihadi madrassas" in every province, providing boys with military and Islamic education. The Taliban is also increasing investment in madrassas for both genders. Parents are more inclined to send their girls to madrassas due to fewer instances of harassment, such as expelling taller or physically larger girls under the age of 12 from public schools.

Dr Omar Zakhilwal, politician and former envoy, says, "Female presence in different sectors has significantly been restricted but not eliminated. Women previously as well did not command a major share in Afghan businesses - their great economic loss came through losing job opportunities as the Taliban banned women from education and work."

UN experts say that the situation of women and girls' rights in Afghanistan has reverted to that of the pre-2002 era when the Taliban last controlled the country, effectively erasing progress on women's rights in the intervening 20 years<sup>21</sup>.

An Amnesty International report concludes that the dismantling of former government structures, including the MoWA and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and the conversion of the judicial system into the religious-based sharia system, reduced the protections previously available to women and girls. This led to an increase in reports of domestic violence and forced marriages. There was no reliable mechanism to which women victims of domestic violence could turn. Courts and prosecution units that were previously responsible for investigating and adjudicating cases of gender-based violence remained shut. The Taliban

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/25/world/asia/taliban-beauty-salons-afghanistan.html#:~:text=110-Taliban%20Shut%20Beauty%20Salons%2C%20One%20of%20Afghan%20Women%27s%20Last%20Public,only%20businesses%20violated%20Shariah%20law>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-un-experts-say-20-years-progress-women-and-girls-rights-erased>



voices within the Taliban opposing these restrictive measures, the West is currently unable to assist them due to fears and the impossibility of returning to Afghanistan while Afghans remain isolated. Women working in various sectors, including the workforce, health ministry, and airports, encounter hardships. They do not receive proper and timely payments, face segregation, and navigate numerous challenges. The objective is unequivocal: an active endeavour to make them entirely invisible 100%.”

The Taliban's intelligence agency has been accused of detaining, and in some cases torturing, about 50 journalists during the past two years, free press groups have reported.<sup>27</sup> More than 80% of Afghanistan's women journalists have had to stop working since 15 August 2021. And of the roughly 12,000 journalists – male and female – that Afghanistan had in 2021, more than two-thirds have abandoned the profession. More than half of the 547 media outlets that were registered in 2021 have since disappeared, according to the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA). Of the 150 TV channels, fewer than 70 remain. Of the 307 radio stations, only 170 are still broadcasting. The number of news agencies has gone from 31 to 18.<sup>28</sup>

Another point of criticism of the Taliban is the mistreatment of former government officials and politicians, as there have been reports of some being killed, jailed, or kidnapped post-Taliban takeover. However, some of the occurrences have shown rather a “softer” image of de facto rulers. For instance, the Taliban had announced amnesty for all opponents, given they cooperate with the interim administration. The reports say that more than 600 political and former government figures have returned to Afghanistan from abroad since leaving the country post- – Taliban takeover.<sup>2930</sup> “For those who left (the country) and feel threatened, the main goal of the commission (that was set up to ensure such returns) is to eliminate their concerns about risks. I assure you that we will welcome them,” Mujahid said.

However, a majority of former politicians and officials still live abroad continuing to hold meetings and continuing advocacy for a more inclusive governance. Presently, there seems no possibility of the Taliban forming a more “formal” and inclusive set-up, as the group has not announced yet how long it aims to run in an interim capacity<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/female-afghan-journalists-describe-life-under-taliban-misogyny/7248022.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/afghan-journalism-still-resisting-after-two-years-taliban-persecution>

<sup>29</sup> <https://pajhwok.com/2023/07/18/over-600-politicians-ex-officials-return-to-afghanistan/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183993>

<sup>31</sup> Based on author's interview with a politician and former envoy

# ECONOMY AND TRADE

Under President Ashraf Ghani's Western-backed government, 43% of Afghanistan's GDP and 75% of public spending were funded by foreign aid, with 90% of Afghans living below \$2 a day. Following the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. blocked Afghan central bank reserves, the European Union suspended development aid, while Germany and Finland halted aid, despite maintaining humanitarian aid.

The transition in August 2021 brought about a fundamental shift in Afghanistan's aid-dependent economy. The economic fallout was significant in the aftermath of the crisis, driven by interrelated shocks<sup>32</sup>:

1. Fiscal shock: Civil servants ceased receiving salaries, development spending abruptly ended, and basic public services faced disruptions.
2. Confidence crisis and central bank foreign asset freeze: A bank run ensued as correspondent banking relations were severed, with foreign banks expressing concerns about the Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) regime and the chilling effects of sanctions.
3. Fiscal contraction and financial sector challenges: A sharp decline in aggregate demand occurred, accompanied by disruptions in supply chains as import/export activities halted. This led to business closures, layoffs, and an overall sharp drop in output.

To date, Afghanistan's economy remains precarious, heavily reliant on external assistance, and marked by a feeble private sector. Over the past two years, the economy contracted by a significant 25 per cent. In 2022, the Afghan economy contracted by 6.2 per cent, following a substantial 20.7 per cent contraction in 2021. Inflation sharply declined, transitioning into deflation since April 2023. The economy is adjusting to structurally lower aggregate demand, improved supply conditions, and a stronger Afghani. However, persistent deflation may lead to further economic deterioration.

Despite facing a considerable trade deficit driven by substantial imports in specific categories, Afghanistan experienced a surprising appreciation of its currency. In 2022, the country's exports achieved a noteworthy milestone, totalling US\$1.9 billion, primarily fueled by the trade in food, coal, and textiles. However, a concerning trend emerged as exports showed a declining trajectory starting from February 2023. Conversely, imports surged to US\$6.3 billion in 2022, witnessing a remarkable 32 per cent increase in the first seven months of 2023, totalling US\$4.4 billion. Intriguingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the import surge might not be directed toward Afghanistan's domestic consumption, contributing to the unexpected appreciation of the currency

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<sup>32</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d7d49962c0c44fd6bb9ba3bfe1b6de1f-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-October-2022.pdf>



despite the persistent trade deficit. Most transactions rely on the informal Hawala system due to limited formal financial sector engagement<sup>33</sup>.

Since April 2023, the country has entered a deflationary phase, attributed to improved supply, the appreciating Afghani, and the economy adjusting to structurally lower aggregate demand.

The World Bank's Third-Party Monitoring Agent (TPMA) survey<sup>34</sup> reveals that supply conditions are better, as major markets nationwide have sufficient essential food and non-food commodities. Deflation dynamics reflect the impact of depleted household savings, reduced public spending, and shocks to farmer income from poppy cultivation bans. These factors have further affected the already weak aggregate demand. The Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey reveals that poverty affects one in every two Afghans, while about 15 million people are food insecure. To cope with the economic downturn, households have increased the participation of marginalized labour market members, such as youth and women.

The Taliban's restrictive policies regarding women's education and employment are expected to further impede the country's recovery. Despite a cessation of conflict, half of the Afghan population still faces poverty, with over two-thirds facing humanitarian needs, a 60 per cent increase since 2021.

While households have reported slight improvements in meeting basic needs since the 2021 economic downturn, persistent deprivation and vulnerability persist. However, these gains may have depleted available coping strategies and household resources. To make ends meet, Afghan households have increasingly mobilized additional labour, particularly among the youth and women. According to the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey (round 3), the overall surge in labour supply has outpaced demand, resulting in a doubling of unemployment. Female participation in the labour force has tripled compared to 2020, with women predominantly involved in domestic industries such as garment and food processing<sup>35</sup>.

Numerous businesses struggle to operate at full capacity. A Private Sector Rapid Survey<sup>36</sup> in March-April 2023 revealed that just over half of the surveyed firms were fully operational, while another third operated below their full capacity. The primary challenge cited by these businesses was a subdued demand, followed by uncertainties about the future and limitations in the functionality of the banking system. Other notable difficulties faced by surveyed firms included an inefficient payment system, heightened costs of doing business, challenges in accessing imported inputs, and difficulties in securing loans. Among the surveyed firms, nearly half reported an improvement in the security environment. However, responses to security conditions varied

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<sup>33</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/210d5f24dc33a3460beff3447fceedcf-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-20231003-final.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-economic-monitor-october-30-2023>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

<sup>36</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/210d5f24dc33a3460beff3447fceedcf-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-20231003-final.pdf>

significantly based on factors such as firm size and the gender of the firm owner. Female-owned firms were notably twice as likely to report a deterioration in security compared to their male-owned counterparts.

Interestingly, a substantial number of surveyed firms indicated that their businesses did not have to engage in any unofficial payments or bribes while fulfilling various operational requirements. This encompassed areas such as tax payments, customs clearance, participation in public procurement processes, and requests for government services. These insights provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by businesses in Afghanistan, highlighting both improvements and persisting obstacles in the economic landscape.

Despite a surge in export value, Afghanistan faces a substantial trade deficit. Imports of certain goods nearly doubled in 2022-2023, while exports only grew by 3 per cent in the first seven months of 2023, contributing to a widening trade deficit. The Afghani appreciated in 2023, despite UN cash shipments and remittance inflows not entirely explaining deficit financing.

Off-budget international aid for humanitarian and basic services is diminishing. Although the economy appeared to stabilize at a low equilibrium by the end of 2022 compared to the immediate decline after the events of August 15, 2021, it now seems vulnerable, with a constricted financial system. Trade and payments are largely conducted through informal channels, and the under-capitalized banking system hinders private businesses' access to necessary financial services<sup>37</sup>. The real sector has faced contraction for two consecutive years, introducing a precarious and uncertain stability. Economic activity across all sectors experienced declines in 2022: the services sector, contributing almost 45 per cent to the GDP, shrank by 6.5 per cent; the agricultural sector, contributing about 36 per cent, contracted by 6.6 per cent; and the industrial sector contracted by 5.7 per cent.

While falling food prices have provided relief to Afghan households, poverty rates remain high. The crisis has resulted in significant unemployment, particularly affecting youth and women.

Although falling food prices have positively impacted Afghan households, monetary poverty continues to affect half of the population, and vulnerability remains high. The significant increase in labour supply has outpaced demand, resulting in a doubling of unemployment and a one-quarter increase in underemployment.

The UN cash shipments for humanitarian and basic service support have been the mainstay of the economy since December 2021. As of mid-August 2023, the UN has delivered approximately US\$ 3.0 billion in cash based on the budgetary requirements for humanitarian and basic services. These cash shipments have been a mainstay for humanitarian and basic service support but have their emerging risks and rising costs. The risks of money laundering and financing terrorism are considerable. Using only one Afghan bank to transfer UN funds could create problems with fair

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<sup>37</sup><https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

competition in the banking sector, as one bank would receive most of the fee and commission revenue.

## Current Economic Trajectory and Trade Ties with Other Countries

The Taliban have mainly focused on economy and trade – given the cash-starved country’s ever-fragile fiscal situation. The Taliban’s diplomatic endeavours are also shaped by the same ambitions.

A commerce expert and former member of parliament<sup>38</sup> said, “The trade and economic landscape has witnessed both positive and challenging developments. On the positive side, there has been a substantial increase in mineral resource exports, particularly to Pakistan, resulting in a doubling of total exports to \$1.8 billion by the end of 2022. Trade relations with Pakistan have strengthened, serving as a crucial trade partner, although limited international trade persists due to banking sanctions, necessitating transactions through intermediaries like Pakistan or the UAE. Uzbekistan has shown flexibility in economic ties, and ongoing discussions with Turkmenistan aim to maintain economic relations. Internally, there is minimal opposition, with concerns about the Taliban’s approach to international relations lingering, raising uncertainties about the country’s economic trajectory.”

In January 2023, the acting Afghan Minister of Commerce and Industry, Haji Nooruddin Azizi, outlined the Taliban administration’s economic strategy, emphasizing a focus on national self-sufficiency. Azizi expressed the intention to encourage the use of domestic products across government administrations and promote support for local products through mosques. Additionally, the Taliban aims to attract foreign investment and boost international trade. Countries such as Iran, Russia, and China have shown interest in trade and investment, with discussions involving projects like Chinese industrial parks and thermal power plants. Despite challenges such as lack of recognition, banking sector sanctions, and security concerns following attacks, Azizi assured efforts to ensure the safety of businessmen. He outlined plans for industrial development, including creating special economic zones on former U.S. military bases. Foreign investors have also shown interest in Afghanistan’s mining sector, valued at over \$1 trillion.

An Afghan businessman<sup>39</sup> said, “The Taliban focused on utilizing local resources, extracting minerals, and managing customs to address the economic fallout. While the construction sector faced a decline, other sectors like food, agriculture, and aviation saw relative stability. They eliminated poppy cultivation and shifted focus to mining, particularly emphasizing Chromite, Graphite, and Talc. Despite facing sanctions, Afghanistan has maintained trade relations with Iran, experienced a lower rate of trade with India, and increased trade with Pakistan and Central Asia.

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<sup>38</sup> Respondent requested anonymity

<sup>39</sup> Respondent requested anonymity

The government is actively working on developing the energy sector as a key opportunity for economic growth.”

All in all, the Taliban seem determined to attain economic self-sufficiency amid international sanctions. This pursuit is driven by a necessity arising from the Taliban's international isolation due to a crackdown on women's rights, hindering efforts to access foreign reserves and Western funding. The government is focusing on domestic revenue to finance projects, relying less on foreign aid that previously covered three-fourths of public expenditures. Challenges include strained relations with Pakistan, disruptions in economic ties, and financial constraints limiting government projects. The Taliban are exploring avenues like oil extraction, lithium mining, and infrastructure improvements for future exports. Yet, the effectiveness of these efforts is uncertain as power shortages, layoffs, and disruptions persist, highlighting the complex reality of achieving self-sufficiency.

Imports from January to October 2023, totalling more than \$6.3 billion, were 25% higher than last year. Food items and coal are noted as Afghanistan's primary exports to various countries<sup>40</sup>. In November Afghanistan's exports were valued at \$227 million, with imports standing at \$681 million.

Abdul Salaam Jawad, a spokesperson for Afghanistan’s Ministry of Commerce told media that coal exports reached \$252 million in November 2023. One Afghan factory exported 60 tons of raisins to Russia.

Whereas the Western countries do not engage on a deeper level with the de facto rulers, countries like Iran, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan seem to be close trade partners of Afghanistan.

**Pakistan:** While relations between Islamabad and Kabul have recently deteriorated because of refugee expulsions and security concerns, Pakistan has remained Afghanistan's top trading partner, with Pakistan’s exports to its neighbour exceeding \$1.37 billion this year<sup>41</sup>.

**Russia:** The de facto administration has notably increased its oil imports from Russia, surging from 246,000 tons in 2022 to over 710,000 tons by the end of 2023. This expansion in oil trade has translated into a trade volume exceeding \$300 million. The mechanisms employed by the Taliban's financially constrained sector to facilitate substantial payments to Russia remain unclear, particularly in the context of international sanctions that have restricted banking transactions with Afghanistan since the Taliban assumed control in 2021<sup>42</sup>. In the preceding year, the Taliban

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-boosts-russian-oil-imports-trade-amid-banking-sanctions/7407123.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-boosts-russian-oil-imports-trade-amid-banking-sanctions/7407123.html>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-boosts-russian-oil-imports-trade-amid-banking-sanctions/7407123.html>



leadership and Russia entered a provisional agreement for the import of 1 million tons of gasoline, 1 million tons of diesel, and 500,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas.

Despite the separate Western sanctions imposed on both the Taliban and Russia, no restrictions are preventing them from engaging in trade outside of U.S. and Western financial systems and jurisdictions, according to Kimberly Donovan, the director of the Economic Statecraft Initiative at the Wilson Center.

**China:** Economic collaboration between China and Afghanistan gained momentum through significant trade agreements and investments. The Taliban, seeking economic revitalization, entered into mining agreements exceeding \$6.5 billion with key nations, including China, Iran, Turkey, and Britain. Notably, China secured access to Afghanistan's lithium deposits through a substantial \$10 billion agreement, aligning with the global push for clean energy transition and fostering economic development<sup>43</sup>.

The extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan emerged as a pivotal move, promoting economic connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative, involving China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, holds the potential to reshape the economic landscape of the region.

China's engagement in Afghanistan is driven by broader strategic goals. Recognizing the historical instability of Afghanistan and its potential ramifications for regional security, China seeks to play a stabilizing role. The economic imperatives of Afghanistan, facing a pressing need for international support and recognition, align with China's goals of fostering economic development and integration in the region.

**Iran:** Afghanistan and Iran have strengthened economic ties with a focus on energy cooperation, marked by discussions on electricity exports, tariff rates, and the extension of key deals. Recent high-level visits resulted in the signing of significant memorandums of understanding (MoUs) covering mining, steel production, transport, civil aviation, and free trade zones, aiming for a \$10 billion trade volume<sup>44</sup>. Joint economic committee meetings in Tehran underscored a comprehensive approach to collaboration, while strategic access to the Chabahar Port and transportation cooperation initiatives highlight a shared interest in regional connectivity. Iran holds a 35 per cent share of Afghanistan's import market<sup>45</sup>.

**Uzbekistan:** Trade ties between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan involve discussions on transit fees, boosting Afghan exports, and forming a joint working group to address cargo transportation issues. Despite the absence of official recognition, trade relations appear normal, with ongoing talks about economic cooperation and joint initiatives. Challenges include discussions on the Qosh Tepa canal

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<sup>43</sup> <https://thegeopolitics.com/from-historical-bonds-to-modern-alliances-decoding-chinas-relations-with-afghanistan/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/afghanistan-iran-strengthen-energy-economic-ties-2023-11-14-0/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/491062/Tehran-Kabul-discuss-ways-of-boosting-annual-trade-up-to-10b>

and transboundary water agreements, with potential room for negotiation and compromises in trade relations<sup>46</sup>. In October 2023, both countries developed a "roadmap" to increase mutual trade to \$3 billion, and signed export-import contracts worth \$1.2 billion, with discussions covering investment, industry, trade, agriculture, water management, mining, geology, energy, and transport<sup>47</sup>.

## Trends Observed in the External Sector

After achieving record-high exports in 2022, Afghanistan experienced a decline in monthly exports in 2023, leading to a growing trade deficit. The surge in imports of high-end consumption goods and industrial raw materials, including prepared food, vehicles, spare parts, stone, glassware, chemicals, and iron and steel, has contributed to the trade imbalance. Notably, a significant portion of these increased imports is not intended for domestic use and is not financed through Afghanistan's forex market, leading to currency appreciation despite the expanding trade deficit.

In the second half of 2021, political uncertainty, security issues, and financial sector disruptions caused a contraction in trade. However, trade rebounded in 2022, marked by a substantial increase in exports, reaching \$1.9 billion, primarily driven by food exports to Pakistan and coal exports. The merchandise imports in 2022 remained stable compared to 2019, resulting in a reduced trade deficit of \$4.4 billion.

The trade deficit widened in the first seven months of 2023, with merchandise exports growing moderately, reaching \$0.91 billion, while merchandise imports maintained strong growth, reaching \$4.4 billion. The trade deficit during this period was \$3.5 billion, up from \$2.4 billion in the same period in 2022.

Food remains a major export group, with exports surging in 2022, driven by increased food exports to Pakistan. However, the momentum has slowed in 2023, with monthly export data indicating a declining trend since February. Notably, coal exports, a significant contributor to the trade balance, declined in 2023.

Imports have surged across various categories, including textiles, prepared food, vehicles and parts, tires, stone, and glassware. This increase is inconsistent with Afghanistan's challenging economic situation, raising questions about the origin and destination of these imports. Iran, China, and Pakistan have been significant trading partners, with the UAE's share in Afghanistan's imports witnessing a substantial increase.

Despite the widening trade deficit, the Afghan Afghani (AFN) has appreciated against major currencies. This puzzling situation is partly explained by unidentified external financing sources, as a significant portion of imported goods is not intended for domestic consumption and is not paid

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<sup>46</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/trade-and-transit-top-agenda-as-uzbek-delegation-visits-afghanistan/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/10/31/uzbekistan-and-afghanistan-sign-export-import-contracts-worth-12-billion>

from Afghanistan's forex market. Additionally, the appreciation of AFN is influenced by factors such as the ban on foreign currencies for domestic transactions, limited domestic money supply, higher remittances, and UN dollar shipments<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/210d5f24dc33a3460beff3447fceedcf-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-20231003-final.pdf>

# PEACE AND SECURITY

The security situation in Afghanistan has drastically gone better compared to how it was during the war years 2001-2021. Afghanistan was in a constant state of war for almost 40 years but now there is no active insurgency or armed opposition to the Taliban. However, volatility persists because of the presence of terrorist organizations inside Afghanistan, says Michael Kugelman, an expert on South Asia.

Sporadically, there are different opposition groups, militant outfits, and alliances among them. ISKP is recognized as the most formidable threat, particularly in the eastern provinces, prompting the Taliban to undertake counteractions. The National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Masoud, faces significant limitations in terms of presence and operations. Additionally, the region contends with the existence of diverse terrorist groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), with concerns extending to Pakistan, China, and Central Asian republics. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA) or Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) maintains ideological partnerships with entities such as Al-Qaeda, TTP, and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Numerous sporadic opposition groups, like the Resistance Movement for Justice (RMJ) and the National Freedom Front (NFF), have emerged since the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

These groups operate in different regions, reflecting ethnic and ideological diversity. The current opposition to the Taliban is in its infancy phase, with little support from outside. Their only chance of survival and eventual success lies in a socio-political upheaval against the Taliban regime.

The presence of international terror outfits such as ISKP, Al Qaeda, ETIM, and TTP remains a concern for other countries and also poses a threat to TTA's control.

Longstanding fears were affirmed in July 2022, when the U.S. government located Al-Qaeda leader Aimen al-Zawahiri in Kabul, Afghanistan, before killing him in a drone strike. The fact that the Taliban would bring Zawahiri back to Kabul, despite repeated assurances to U.S. negotiators both before and after the Doha agreement that they had distanced themselves from al-Qaeda, significantly elevated concerns<sup>49</sup>.

Though Al-Qaeda was subdued in the region after its leader's death, with the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history<sup>50</sup>. Within hours of the Taliban's entry into Kabul, the TTP became the first militant group to officially express its celebration. In a statement issued on August 17, 2021, the TTP announced the return of the Taliban to power as a significant triumph for the

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/after-al-zawahiris-killing-whats-next-us-afghanistan>

<sup>50</sup> <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>

jihadi cause.<sup>51</sup> Publicly reiterating his group's allegiance, TTP leader Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud openly renewed the pledge of loyalty to the Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.

While the Afghan Taliban leadership openly discourages its members from engaging in hostilities against the Pakistani state<sup>52</sup>, the group's grassroots view supports the TTP as a religious and national obligation. This perspective is rooted in ideological beliefs and longstanding tribal and personal connections developed over the past two decades of insurgency.

The Afghan Taliban initially mediated a ceasefire deal between Pakistan and TTP which eventually failed. As a result, TTP-perpetrated violence through 2023 reached an eight-year high, resulting in the deaths of over 500 security personnel in the first ten months alone. The Pakistani government's decision on undocumented Afghan migrants' expulsion is deemed as a reaction to the Afghan Taliban's inability to dissociate themselves from the militant group<sup>53</sup>.

ISKP, despite a decline in overall violence and territorial expansion concerns, has persisted in conducting notable attacks. The Taliban have taken measures to counter ISKP, eliminating key leaders, potentially including those involved in the Kabul airport attack. However, it remains active, carrying out high-profile attacks, killing Taliban governors, and demonstrating connections to a transnational network with funding and guidance from ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and Somalia, influencing operatives in the Maldives. Despite disruptions in propaganda, recent releases indicate a resurgence in its messaging efforts<sup>54</sup>.

The Taliban's approach to managing terrorist groups within Afghanistan encompasses three main components: enablement, restrictions, and crackdowns. While publicly asserting their commitment to preventing the use of Afghan territory for attacks against other nations, a closer examination reveals a more complex strategy. The Taliban provide havens<sup>55</sup>, safety, and material support to certain militant groups, such as Al-Qaeda and the TTP, but with specific limitations. Notably, they discourage attacks<sup>56,57</sup> against the U.S. and its allies, indicating a level of control over their allies.

Recent efforts include preventing militant groups from disclosing their locations in propaganda, and showcasing a measured restriction on information dissemination. The Taliban's attempt to

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<sup>51</sup> Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud (Abu Mansur Asim), "Congratulations to Islamic Amirate on behalf of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," Umar Media, August 17, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> "Zabihullah Mujahid interview with Saleem Safi for Geo News Jirga program," Geo News, August 28, 2021; Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture," Program on Extremism, August 16, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-afghanistan-deportations-asylum-seekers/32662001.html>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-under-taliban-afghanistan-terrorist-safe-haven-once-again>

<sup>55</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> <https://extremism.gwu.edu/al-qaeda-the-taliban-and-future-of-us-counterterrorism>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-Assessment-Prospects-for-AQ-in-Afghanistan-and-Globally-Through-2024-June2023.pdf>

dissuade their fighters from joining foreign jihadist groups suggests an evolving strategy<sup>58</sup>. However, the degree of control over the diverse militant landscape remains uncertain.

In dealing with ISKP, the Taliban's crackdown involves targeting high-profile leaders, a counterintelligence campaign within their ranks, and punitive measures against populations associated with ISKP, particularly the Salafi population in eastern and northern regions. This multifaceted strategy stems from a perceived need for self-preservation, viewing ISKP as a potent internal threat capable of eroding the Taliban's strength.

The broader terrorism landscape in Afghanistan depicts varied group dynamics, with the TTP actively expanding, while al-Qaeda exhibits a more cautious approach. The Taliban's nuanced strategy appears driven by geopolitical considerations, maintaining ideological alignments, and a delicate balance between jihadist ambitions and safeguarding their regime's survival against potential external actions<sup>59</sup>.

Terrorism remains a concern for Afghanistan's handful of economic partners, including China and Russia. Both have asked the de facto rulers on multiple occasions to fulfil their regional and international commitments, amongst which eliminating terrorism remains the most recurrent demand.

Stakes are high for China as it strengthens and expands economic activity in Afghanistan, including the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the neighboring country. China has expressed that it is ready to step up counterterrorism and security cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan to jointly fight terrorist threats such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. "It is important that [the] Taliban take the security concerns of its neighbours seriously and take stronger measures to counter various terrorist forces within Afghanistan," said the Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang<sup>60</sup>. Beijing has long alleged that ETIM militants use Afghan soil to wage cross-border attacks against China.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-184593>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-under-taliban-afghanistan-terrorist-safe-haven-once-again>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-asks-afghanistan-s-taliban-to-address-neighbors-terrorism-worries/7081901.html>

# DIPLOMACY

August 15, 2023, marked two years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, a milestone the Islamic Emirate celebrated by emphasizing that its rule is “open-ended” and faces no challengers<sup>61</sup>. The Taliban’s chief spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, also told the Associated Press in an interview that the government is winning “the recognition of officialdom”: “Our interaction with China, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Pakistan and other countries in the region is official. We have embassies, travel, and consulates. We have businesses. Traders come and go and transfer goods.”<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Salma Malik, a security expert and scholar, said, “This current Taliban regime is much different than the previous one. More savvy, more nuanced. Despite engaging the US and its allied forces in a 2-decade-military conflict, they eventually were recognized by the same Western powers as main stakeholders who could provide them with a safe exit from Afghanistan. Hence, Doha process and a bloodless exit for the US from Afghanistan.”

Malik emphasized that the Taliban's diplomatic efforts, despite lacking formal recognition and enduring a short initial international backlash, have proven successful. Two years later, the international community, formally or informally, is actively engaging with the Taliban regime. Countries seek access to strategic routes and resources, leveraging diplomatic channels to maintain influence, often at the expense of competing interests. Notably, the Taliban has adeptly conducted diplomacy and external outreach, showcasing a shrewd approach to navigating international relations.



Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang (L), Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (C) and Afghanistan's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, pose after a meeting in Islamabad [Photo by Pakistan Information Department via AFP]

<sup>61</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-education-5bc5477a8e4599ac431e4d2e27ebaf85>

<sup>62</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/2-years-of-taliban-diplomacy/>



Their diplomacy is self-designed, driven by economic interests, with little to no influence exerted by external powers like the US or China. Global powers find themselves with limited influence over the Taliban, evident in the unsuccessful attempts to alter their stringent social policies and human rights practices, notably concerning women's rights. However, experts believe that given China's increasing role in the region, it may hold more sway over the de facto rulers.

Dr Aamer Raza, a political science scholar, says, "Taliban have so far attempted to conduct foreign relations in a way to not offend regional states such as China and Russia. They have shown a willingness to discuss and compromise issues of separatist or extremist militant groups using Afghan soil. They are also attempting to bring in more foreign involvement in the Afghan economy. The challenge for the Taliban lies in how they reconcile domestic pressure with international compulsions."

"Despite offers of financial assistance and international recognition from the US and Western states conditioned on policy changes, the Taliban remains indifferent to such diplomatic incentives. The situation differs concerning terrorism, with China exerting more effective pressure on the Taliban. China, concerned about security issues like ETIM and ISKP, has leveraged its position to prompt anti-terrorism operations by the Taliban, especially against groups targeting Chinese interests. Unlike Western nations, China refrains from scrutinizing the Taliban's human rights practices, signalling a pragmatic approach. The Taliban, acknowledging China's potential contributions, proved more responsive to Chinese influence in addressing terrorism concerns. Chinese efforts to press the Taliban on terrorism concerns are more successful and effective than Western pressure on the rights issue, particularly women's rights", says Kugelman.

While engagement with the Taliban is inevitable for the international community as it has nearly adjusted to the idea of a theocracy ruling over Afghanistan, dealing with the Taliban is not free from challenges and tightropes.

The Taliban have been claiming since assuming power that they deal with the world with "pragmatism" and mutual respect. However, their approach has fallen short of the promised pragmatism and engagement. Examining their relations with key neighbours sheds light on their diplomatic standing.

In the case of China, its "3-3 policy" fosters smooth relations, emphasizing respect for Afghan sovereignty and non-interference<sup>63</sup>. Hence, its alliance with the Taliban is transactional, driven by economic opportunities. China, concerned about regional peace and security, particularly regarding ETIM<sup>64</sup>, invests significantly in Afghanistan, with deals like a \$150 million annual investment in oil extraction and a \$10 billion offer for lithium extraction.

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/isolated-taliban-find-active-diplomacy-with-china/7109217.html>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-china-taliban-uyghurs-security/32444038.html>



Iran's engagement is cautious<sup>65</sup>, balancing historical ties with concerns over Sunni extremism. Despite tensions, Iran facilitated Taliban opposition meetings to encourage internal reconciliation. Border clashes strained ties, reflecting skepticism toward the Taliban's promises.

Pakistan, initially supportive, faces strained relations due to a surge in cross-border terrorism. Pakistan's significant humanitarian<sup>66</sup> and diplomatic efforts have not prevented rising tensions, with the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) carrying out hundreds of attacks.

## International Community VS Taliban

The Taliban's diplomatic performance in the past two years has left much to be desired, marked by weak promises, an inability to address crucial issues, and a failure to reassure the international community. But the international community, on the other hand, is equally responsible for the matters gone shaky as since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, its dominant mode of engagement with the new rulers of Afghanistan has been one of pressure and leverage. This approach has rested on the widely held assumption, among experts and diplomats alike, that the Taliban regime could not survive without engaging with the international community.

The belief that foreign aid could moderate their behaviour has pervaded international discussions, with some asserting that Western powers hold the "upper hand" due to the Taliban's perceived weakness. However, this perspective stems from a flawed understanding of aid conditionalities and the internal dynamics of the Taliban. Despite this, the notion that the Taliban's reliance on foreign aid would make them amenable to international demands has guided the approach of the United States and like-minded countries, including Canada, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Norway, and the European Union's major contributors. This strategy became apparent shortly after the Kabul takeover, with Secretary of State Antony<sup>67</sup> Blinken and President Biden<sup>68</sup> emphasizing points of leverage and incentives in dealings with the Taliban. The focus on conditionality persisted over the past two years, culminating in the introduction of the "Taliban Sanctions Act"<sup>69</sup> in May 2023, the latest effort to enhance the leverage approach.

Contrary to expectations, the Taliban regime has demonstrated resilience and maintained state capacity despite a significant reduction in foreign aid. The regime generates revenue through taxation, presenting a fiscally responsible budget, albeit with a focus on security rather than service provision. While the international community emphasizes aid conditionalities and sanctions, the Taliban's priorities lie elsewhere. Donors continue to provide off-budget humanitarian assistance

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<sup>65</sup> [https://twitter.com/khamenei\\_ir/status/1431554721844797442](https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1431554721844797442)

<sup>66</sup> <https://mofa.gov.pk/humanitarian-assistance-to-afghanistan/#:~:text=The%20consignment%20is%20part%20of,shelters%20and%20emergency%20medical%20supplies.>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-afghanistan/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>69</sup> [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/05-31-23\\_taliban\\_sanctions\\_act.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/05-31-23_taliban_sanctions_act.pdf)

to circumvent direct funding of the Taliban. The regime, playing a game of chicken, appears indifferent to the population's well-being, challenging the leverage of humanitarian aid. External funding is decreasing, but the Taliban explore alternative sources and economic cooperation in the region.

The idea that international recognition can moderate the Taliban persists despite evidence to the contrary. The Taliban, valuing sovereignty and feeling unjustly treated, prioritize internal cohesion over recognition. Dangling the prospect of recognition may backfire, further damaging diplomatic ties. The discrepancy between international expectations and the Taliban's priorities creates a diplomatic deadlock. The Taliban's dedication to ideological consistency signals virtue to their domestic audience, fostering cohesion.

Adam Weinstein, a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute, writes, “Some may argue that engaging with the Taliban normalizes its policies, but that ship sailed the moment U.S. diplomats publicly sat down with Taliban leaders in Doha in 2018, culminating in an agreement signed in 2020<sup>70</sup> and a photo op between then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Baradar later that same year. Continued outreach is necessary, even if it is laborious and discouraging for now.”<sup>71</sup>

“Now that we have demonstrated our resilience and consolidated peace, it is time for the United States and others to formally recognize our government because it is the right of the people of Afghanistan, and withholding it is not a positive step,” Zabihullah Mujahid said in an interview<sup>72</sup>.

On the question of the international community's engagement with the Taliban, Imtiaz Gul, journalist and analyst, says that despite their nonrecognition, all major countries continue to engage with Kabul, primarily because of the vulnerabilities that millions of Afghans currently face. Curbs on women's freedoms remain a big, across-the-board concern for nearly all countries, something the Taliban leaders are generally averse to discussing.

“For most countries, including the United States, disengagement would mean punishing these vulnerable Afghans. Are most countries ready – at least for the time being – to re-strategize and redefine the terms of engagement with Kabul and Kandahar? What is the trade-off for universal women's rights? Should the international community let the millions of Afghans starve and suffer just because the Taliban regime has restricted life and livelihood options for females?<sup>73</sup> Most focal persons for Afghanistan tend to prefer “engagement despite...” in the interest of the hunger and poverty in the country.”, says Gul.

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/taliban-afghanistan-diplomatic-strategy-united-states/>

<sup>72</sup> <https://matrixmag.com/about-time-for-world-to-recognise-taliban-regime-zabiullah-mujahid/>

<sup>73</sup> Based on the Gul's discussions with Thomas West, the US special envoy as well as Afghanistan-focused diplomats of the UK, Germany, and China

# THE CHANGE WITHIN

Despite all the repression that has been highlighted and all the criticism of the headstrong policies of the Taliban, a layman still believes that the return of the Islamic Emirate has certainly brought peace to Afghanistan. While some contend that this peace is an expected outcome, given that those formerly in opposition now hold positions of power, it is crucial to acknowledge the formal peace deal that has been signed. Although this agreement may be challenging for some to fully comprehend, it remains an undeniable reality shaping the current state of affairs.

But that is not the only reality. Present-day Afghanistan is not only shaped by the Taliban but its people too – both inside and outside the country. The most opposing voices against the Taliban are the young generations who saw the Taliban for the first time in August 2021. People who spent the previous 2 decades in a more moderate Afghanistan, though war-stricken, had dreams and ambitions that were almost crushed once the Islamic Emirate took over<sup>74</sup>.

Armed opposition to the Taliban may be weak if not absent, but they have faced ideological opposition from their own people since day 1. There have been protests, meetings, exhibitions, conversations, and all kinds of mediums that one can think of. While peace may have been restored, there is no way around basic human rights including the girls' right to work, women's right to education, and other rights of individuals that are currently being withheld by the Taliban.

In March 2023, the Taliban detained Matiullah Wesa, a prominent Afghan education activist and co-founder of the nonprofit organization PenPath. He had been a vocal advocate for education for girls in rural Afghanistan. After the ban on schools, PenPath's focus shifted significantly toward campaigning for the reopening of such sites. PenPath operates almost 40 underground schools that teach more than 5,000 girls from grades one to nine<sup>75</sup>. Wesa was released in October 2023, after almost 7 months of captivity.

Not listening to the dissenting voices has not served the Taliban well and the brain drain remains a persistent issue. Tens of thousands of Afghans, mostly educated individuals who worked under the previous U.S.-backed government, have fled their country over the past two years fearing Taliban persecution. The US, Canada and several European countries have admitted more than 150,000 Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers since the Taliban seized power in August 2021. The number of refugees and undocumented migrants is even more in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Millions of Afghans are scattered around the world as refugees, asylum-seekers and emigrants,

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<sup>74</sup> Based on the author's interview with a former INGO worker based in Kabul

<sup>75</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Afghanistan-s-secret-schools-for-girls-defy-Taliban-ban>

according to the U.N. Refugee Agency, which has ranked Afghanistan as the fourth-largest refugee-exporting country in the world after Syria, Venezuela and Ukraine.<sup>76</sup>

The Taliban's refusal to listen to their people comes at a heavy cost: Afghanistan is losing the best of its minds and workforce. But not every opposing voice has been able to leave the country. A majority remains behind, some choose to, and they have shown true resilience in the face of repression.

In response to the closure of schools and universities for girls in Afghanistan, many young women have shown remarkable resilience by turning to entrepreneurship to overcome economic challenges. Frimah, a former economics student and now the sole provider for her family after the death of her husband, embodies the determination of these women. She shares, "When I was a university student, my family would support me. When the Islamic Emirate came to power, our universities closed, and we were obliged to stay home."

Expressing their concerns, businesswomen like Nabila are calling on the Islamic Emirate for support: "We ask the Islamic Emirate to provide work opportunities for us and open schools and universities for girls and women."

Despite their entrepreneurial spirit, some businesswomen report a decline in sales compared to the previous year. Shukria, another entrepreneur, emphasizes the need for government assistance: "We ask the Islamic Emirate to provide work opportunities for those women who are working in the field of handicrafts. We ask the government to hold exhibitions so that we can display our products and initiatives."

Shakira, who has become the primary breadwinner due to her husband's unemployment, echoes the sentiments of many, saying, "My husband used to work, but now he is unemployed, and I have become the breadwinner. I ask the Islamic Emirate to provide us with working opportunities."

Salma Yousufzai, the head of the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, sheds light on the magnitude of female entrepreneurship in the country: "9,126 women have been registered in the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry who are working all over the country. They have different licenses from the private sector."<sup>77</sup>

Aside from business ventures, Afghan girls and women have also been able to organize art competitions and book exhibitions, despite extreme vigilance. "After the closure of secondary schools, I could not continue my studies as I was in 10th grade. Therefore, I started painting one year ago, and today I showcased my artwork, which shows the problems, pains and sufferings of Afghan girls and women," said Homa Rajabi, 16, who turned to art after the closure of schools.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-call-for-stop-to-afghan-brain-drain-/7115958.html>

<sup>77</sup> <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-186225>

<sup>78</sup> [https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_st/features/2022/12/19/feature-01](https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2022/12/19/feature-01)



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Meanwhile, artists and booksellers asked the Islamic Emirate to support women. “We ask them to reopen schools and universities and jobs for women and give women a share in all affairs,” said Arezo, a trainer of painting.<sup>80</sup>

“Please recognize women. It is not right that men work, and women stay at home. When they said that men and women have equal rights, they should also pay attention to it,” said Zahra Ahmadi.<sup>81</sup>

While some hold on to art and books, others raise their voices differently. “We protested on the streets, compiled reports, were interviewed by the local and international media, and wrote on social media against the Taliban for months. A women protestors’ group was formed, and we continued to raise our voices for justice on the streets the protests were leading to a people’s movement, but the Taliban got concerned because we were the only power that was fighting against them with nothing in hand.”, says a woman rights activist who had to flee the country fearing for her life.

“Unfortunately, the condition of women protestors has not improved so far. Most of us live with an unknown future, financial problems, and a very bad psychological condition. The programmes announced for the evacuation of the people at risk are very slow and insufficient. However, we have been displaced from our country and had to flee, we need a secure place to continue our struggle. While Afghan girls and women continue to face violence, discrimination, and intimidation, the international community has failed to hold the Taliban accountable for violation of human rights”, she added.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://amu.tv/47452/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://thefrontierpost.com/book-and-visual-art-exhibition-held-in-kabul/>

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/afghanistan-art-exhibition-in-kabul-portrays-ability-of-women-amid-suppression20230821044823/>



Women occupied just 6.5% of ministerial positions in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over the country, according to January 2021 data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international organization of Geneva-based international organization of national parliaments.

Now, the country joins the ranks of only a dozen other countries where no women are serving in high-ranking positions in government. Before the Taliban's takeover, around 27% of the Afghan parliament was comprised of women, ranking it in line with the United States, where women make up 26.8% of all members of Congress according to the IPU.<sup>82</sup>

“But all this has changed. The Taliban do not let women acquire education, let alone participate in politics or holding a high-ranking government position”, says a former female politician and parliamentarian.

Girls and women have also found solace and a sense of community via social media where they talk about their struggles and aspirations. There are some secret WhatsApp groups too for informal exchange of ideas on educational, cultural, religious, and other matters. “These groups are helpful in terms of seeking psychosocial support as well. Currently, I am part of three different groups as such. But we have to be discreet about it as there is always a chance of an infiltrator who may inform the authorities and label it as immoral. We do not want to be caught”, said a religious studies scholar based in Mazar-e-Sharif.

The interviews we conducted with young and elderly men and women inside Afghanistan mostly aspire for one thing: a peaceful Afghanistan with sufficient livelihood, safety, and equal rights for all individuals regardless of gender, ethnicity, and religion. While the present situation entails pessimism and disappointment, the general sentiment of most Afghans is optimism and resilience. “I do not know how long this would go on, you know, our fight for equal rights, education, and more agency. But until I and those related to me do not achieve that, we will not rest”, says a female English teacher based in Kandahar.

“I believe that the Taliban are part of Afghan society, just like most of us. We can not dissociate ourselves from them or vice versa. From what I know, they are still taking time and adjusting to the new realities. They are trying, at least. They can not disappoint their jihadist foot soldiers by simply opening the educational institutions right away. But, they will one day. As a father of young girls, I am deeply concerned for their education and future. As for people like me, we must protest through our words and writing. Someday, our rulers will listen.”, says a religious scholar and academician based in Kabul.

“The nature of exclusion in Afghanistan under the Taliban is less ethnic and more ideological. Inclusivity is a fair demand but we should define inclusivity here in terms of ideology, meaning

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<sup>82</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/09/asia/taliban-government-women-global-comparison-intl/index.html>

that the Taliban need to provide more space to people who have a different worldview than them.”<sup>83</sup>

The Taliban may be critical of the voices abroad who they claim are driven by the “Western agenda”. But, when it comes to people inside Afghanistan, there is no denying that Afghans themselves want a quality life under the Taliban that ensures the right to work, education, property, and movement. These are not the demands of the “foreign agents” but the Afghans themselves. Afghans are pleading. Will the Taliban listen?

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<sup>83</sup> Based on author’s interview with a scholar and academician

## CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Today, the withdrawal of direct aid from major Western powers, declining humanitarian assistance, and the country's exclusion from the global financial system because of the sanctions represent daunting challenges. This crisis is accompanied by complications arising out of an obscurantist rights regime, denial of women's rights, the absence of an inclusive government, and a fragile economic economy. These pressing problems are rooted in three crucial factors:

- a) the unstructured and reckless engagement of the international community with Afghanistan after the Bonn Conference in January 2002,
- b) the abrupt manner in which the Taliban assumed power following the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government<sup>84</sup>,
- c) the to-do-or-not-to-do approach of the international community as far as engaging with the Taliban regime is concerned.

In charting the way forward for engagement with the Taliban in post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is imperative to shift strategies away from coercion towards a more constructive approach. The international community should move beyond sanctimonious posturing on issues such as women's rights and democracy, which were not prioritized during years of military involvement<sup>85</sup>. Rejecting isolation, sanctions, or support for political opposition is crucial, recognizing their limited impact. Acknowledge the historical cohesion of the Taliban and work towards practical solutions, emphasizing counterterrorism, human rights, and stability.

Maintaining a clear ranking of priorities is essential during engagement, with counterterrorism taking precedence. Recognize the internal dynamics of the Taliban and the potential for change, understanding that meaningful shifts may take years. Retain leverage by withholding full recognition while allowing limited cooperation on specific issues like disaster relief, counternarcotics, and education. Sustain open communication channels for potential future dialogue, humanitarian aid, and development assistance. Acknowledge that social change may outpace political transformations in Afghanistan. The way forward demands a pragmatic, patient, and committed approach, acknowledging the complexities of Afghanistan's social fabric rooted in conservatism and tribal traditions. Balancing the promotion of human rights with cultural sensitivity is crucial for a collaborative, diverse, and adaptable strategy involving all stakeholders. This recalibrated engagement should be anchored in a profound understanding of Afghanistan's history, societal structure, and lessons learned from past endeavours.

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<sup>84</sup> <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-05-IP.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/taliban-afghanistan-diplomatic-strategy-united-states/>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. International Community

- Foster diplomatic dialogue with the Taliban, emphasizing human rights, inclusivity, and gender equality in governance.
- Align international aid with tangible improvements in human rights, inclusive governance, and educational opportunities for marginalized groups.
- Rigorously monitor and document human rights violations, holding the Taliban accountable and advocating for transparent investigations.

## 2. Taliban

- Demonstrate commitment to diversity by forming a representative and inclusive government that represents all groups and segments of Afghan society.
- Prioritize the reopening of educational institutions for girls, recognizing the pivotal role of education in societal prosperity.
- Engage transparently with the international community to build trust and garner support for Afghanistan's socioeconomic recovery.
- Ensure basic civil liberties and freedoms including those of education, work, movement, expression, and property.

## 3. International Aid Organizations

- Collaborate closely with local entities to deliver humanitarian aid, focusing on addressing food insecurity, healthcare, and education, with a keen awareness of cultural sensitivities.
- Advocate for the protection of human rights, emphasizing the empowerment of vulnerable groups and capacity-building for sustainable development.
- Facilitate inclusive dialogues between the Taliban and civil society, ensuring diverse voices contribute to shaping the nation's future.

## 4. Civil Society and Afghan Citizens

- Strengthen community-led initiatives for education, especially for girls, through innovative and inclusive approaches.

- Advocate for human rights, freedom of expression, and inclusive governance through diverse and peaceful means.
- Engage in constructive dialogue with the Taliban to communicate concerns and aspirations, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.
- Afghan clergy must stay united as an advocacy group when it comes to promoting girls' education in the country.

## **5. Media Organizations**

- Uphold an independent and diverse media landscape, providing platforms for varied voices and perspectives within the constraints imposed by the Taliban.
- Act as vigilant watchdogs, documenting and reporting on human rights violations to keep the international community well-informed about the realities in Afghanistan.
- Prioritize unbiased reporting, discourage anti-Taliban and pro-western propaganda, and instead report facts as they are with impartiality.

These recommendations underscore the need for collaborative, culturally sensitive, and diverse efforts to address immediate challenges and promote a stable, inclusive, and prosperous future for the Afghan people. Embracing diversity in strategies and approaches is key to navigating the complex dynamics of Afghanistan's current landscape.

# ANNEXURE I – TIMELINE OF TALIBAN’S EDICTS AND DIRECTIVES

## **1. AUGUST 13, 2021**

Ordered imams to bring them lists of unmarried women aged 12 to 45 for their fighters to marry.

## **2. AUGUST 2021**

Announced amnesty for opposition and former pro-republic officials and urged women to join the Taliban’s government.

Invited women to join the government.

## **3. AUGUST 19, 2021**

Declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a form of government.

## **4. AUGUST 20, 2021**

Carried out house-to-house search looking for journalists and individuals with ties to the republic and Western forces.

## **5. AUGUST 25, 2021**

Ordered women to stay indoors at home because soldiers are not trained to respect women.

## **6. AUGUST 30, 2021**

Declared a ban on co-education and prohibited men from teaching girls.

## **7. SEPTEMBER 8, 2021**

Announced a caretaker government.

Banned protests and slogans that don’t have prior approval from the Taliban.

## **8. SEPTEMBER 12, 2021**

Ban girls from secondary education.

## **9. SEPTEMBER 17, 2021**

Replaced the Ministry of Women’s Affairs with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

## **10. SEPTEMBER 20, 2021**

Ordered professional/working women to stay home until further notice.

**11. SEPTEMBER 27, 2021**

Ordered barbers not to shave men's beards.

**12. SEPTEMBER 28, 2021**

Indicated they might temporarily implement the 1964 Constitution.

**13. SEPTEMBER 29, 2021**

Women were banned from attending and teaching at Kabul University.

**14. OCTOBER 1, 2021**

No decree or specific order concerning women was tracked during this month.

**15. NOVEMBER 22, 2021**

Banned women from television dramas.

**16. NOVEMBER 23, 2021**

Stormed the Afghan Independent Bar Association.

**17. DECEMBER 4, 2021**

Haibatullah Akhundzada issued a decree about women's rights, outlined the importance of women's consent during Nikah, that a woman is not property, but a noble and free human being.

**18. DECEMBER 26, 2021**

Banned women from travelling long-distance (72 km/45 miles) road trips without a mahram.

Banned drivers from playing music in cars and having women passengers without hijab.

**19. DECEMBER 29, 2021**

Closed public baths for women in Balkh.

**20. DECEMBER 31, 2021**

Ordered clothing stores to remove mannequin heads.

**21. JANUARY 2022**

Note: In January the Taliban met with representatives of the U.S., France, Britain, Germany, Italy, the European Union and Norway in Oslo to discuss Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.

**22. JANUARY 3, 2022**

Closed public baths for women in Balkh.

**23. JANUARY 7, 2022**

Ordered coffee shop owners in Herat not to serve women if they are not accompanied by a mahram.

**24. FEBRUARY 2022**

Ordered NGOs to replace board members and those in leadership positions with Afghans living inside Afghanistan. Source: Copy of the order.

Ordered universities to enforce gender-segregated classrooms.

Banned women from traveling abroad without a mahram and a legitimate reason.

In February the Taliban in Geneva signed a document vowing to “facilitate principled humanitarian action in Afghanistan and to ensure the protection of humanitarian workers and aid...”

**25. MARCH 2022**

By verbal instruction of Haibatullah, women must not be employed in offices and must not leave home. The order was issued by the Ministry of Interior and signed by Qari Ihsanullah Sohail, Chief of staff of the deputy for security affairs. Source: Copy of the edict.

**26. MARCH 2, 2022**

March 2: Banned women from entering health centres without a mahram.

**27. MARCH 13, 2022**

Ordered enforcement of segregation of women's and men's offices.

**28. MARCH 17, 2022**

Announced the reopening of girls' schools at the start of the 1401 (March 2022) school year.

**29. MARCH 18, 2022**

Banned foreign TV series.

**30. MARCH 20, 2022**

Canceled the Nowroz public holiday.

**31. MARCH 24, 2022**

Announced that schools for girls grade 7 and up will remain closed.

**32. MARCH 27, 2022**

Banned women from traveling abroad without a mahram and a legitimate reason.

**33. MARCH 28, 2022**

Ordered male civil servants to grow beards or risk being fired.

**34. APRIL 6, 2022**

Dictated different days for men and women to visit parks.

**35. APRIL 22, 2022**

Banned TikTok and PUBG, insisting they were leading Afghan youths astray.

**36. APRIL 29, 2022**

Announced three days of week for female and three days for male university students.

**37. MAY 5, 2022**

Stopped issuing driving licenses to women.

**38. MAY 7, 2022**

Issued an order that women are not allowed to use public transport if they are alone.

Issued recommendation and implementation plan regarding proper hijab, stating the best hijab is for women to wear a burqa or stay home.

**39. MAY 16, 2022**

Dissolved the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

**40. MAY 19, 2022**

Ordered female TV presenters on air to cover their faces.

**41. MAY 29, 2022**

Issued an order that women are not allowed to use public transport if they are alone.

**42. JUNE 1, 2022**

Ordered female students in Ghazni in grades 4-6 to cover their faces while commuting to school or face expulsion.

**43. JUNE 2, 2022**

Banned poppy cultivation through a decree.

**44. JUNE 28, 2022**

Held an all-male gathering of 4,500 clerics and leaders in Kabul. Claimed men can sufficiently represent the views of female relatives.

**45. JULY 18, 2022**

Directed women employees of the Ministry of Finance to send a male relative to take their jobs if they want to be paid their salaries.

**46. AUGUST 7, 2022**

Removed Ashura as a religious public holiday.

**47. AUGUST 10, 2022**

Female flight attendants are removed from their jobs.

**48. AUGUST 16, 2022**

Made attending religious classes mandatory in universities, adding five new religious subjects to the existing eight.

**49. AUGUST 23, 2022**

Established female moral police department

**50. AUGUST 25, 2022**

Issued an order banning women from going to parks where park authorities cannot ensure segregation between men and women.

**51. AUGUST 29, 2022**

Ordered female university students to cover their faces in classrooms.

**52. SEPTEMBER 8, 2022**

Made attending daily religious classes (offered by Ministry of Vice and Virtue agents) mandatory in all government offices. To keep their jobs, they must pass a test.

**53. SEPTEMBER 11, 2022**

Closed secondary and high schools for girls that had briefly opened in Paktia.

**54. SEPTEMBER 17, 2022**

Prohibited the hiring of former government employees of Hajj and Religious Affairs, Supreme Court and Ministry of Education and ordered their termination. Source: Copy of the order.

**55. SEPTEMBER 20, 2022**

Banned female students from taking videos and photos on university campuses.

**56. SEPTEMBER 26, 2022**

Ordered media outlets that female TV guests must cover their faces.

**57. OCTOBER 6, 2022**



Expelled hundreds of pubescent female students in Kandahar.

**58. OCTOBER 7, 2022**

Blocked women from choosing agriculture, mining, civil engineering, veterinary medicine and journalism as their study major. Taliban said these subjects are too difficult for women.

**59. OCTOBER 13, 2022**

Ordered removal of non-Islamic policies in ministries.

Ordered male teachers and students to sign a pledge to observe Sharia in Kandahar.

**60. OCTOBER 28, 2022**

Removed women's seat from Commission of Media Violations.

**61. OCTOBER 30, 2022**

October 30: Whipped female university students in Badakhshan for wearing jeans under their long coats.

**62. NOVEMBER 6, 2022**

Closed public baths for women in Badghis.

**63. NOVEMBER 10, 2022**

Banned women and girls from parks and gyms.

**64. NOVEMBER 11, 2022**

Nineteen people, including nine women, were, flogged in public 39 times each for adultery, theft and running away from home in Takhar.

**65. NOVEMBER 14, 2022**

Taliban supreme leader reinstated Hudud and Qisas punishments in cases such as robbery, kidnapping and sedition.

**66. NOVEMBER 15, 2022**

Five men accused of theft and kidnapping received between 30 and 39 lashes in public.

**67. NOVEMBER 17, 2022**

Taliban flogged a man and a woman in Bamyan.

**68. NOVEMBER 20, 2022**

The Ministry of Hajj of Taliban ordered mosques to praise the Taliban supreme leader and refer to him as "Amir" in Friday prayers.

**69. NOVEMBER 23, 2022**

Three women were among several other people flogged by the Taliban in Logar province in front of thousands of onlookers in a football stadium.

Taliban also enforced their sharia interpretation on a man and a woman in Laghman by flagging them in public.

**70. NOVEMBER 30, 2022**

In Samangan, two women and three men were flogged for moral crime.

**71. DECEMBER 1, 2022**

Taliban flogged 21 people including six women in Kabul.

**72. DECEMBER 4, 2022**

Taliban publicly whipped seven people including a woman in Ghor.

**73. DECEMBER 6, 2022**

Taliban lashed 5 people accused of extramarital relationships, drinking alcohol and smuggling drugs in Khost.

**74. DECEMBER 7, 2022**

The first public execution took place in Farah province attended by Supreme Court justices, military personnel and senior ministers - including the justice, foreign and interior ministers.

**75. DECEMBER 8, 2022**

Taliban's Supreme Court issued the final ruling that twenty-seven people among them nine women be punished by public flogging for alleged theft, adultery and other crimes. Each person was flogged between 25 and 39 times in Parwan.

Three women were among 22 people flogged in Jawzjan. Those flogged were suspected of moral crimes, alcohol consumption, sodomy and selling of narcotics.

Three men accused of theft were given Tazeer punishment in Paktika.

**76. DECEMBER 14, 2022**

Ministry of Vice and Virtue issued a letter to the Ministry of Interior Affairs to improve oversight on production firms that produce taranas (songs without music) to ensure they are in line with Islamic values. A copy of the order is available.

Two women and 25 men were publicly flogged in Zabul and Helmand provinces.

**77. DECEMBER 18, 2022**

Two women and three men accused of moral crimes and theft were flogged in Kapisa.

Twelve people including one woman accused of moral crimes, drinking alcohol, and theft received between 23 and 35 lashes in public in Ghor.

**78. DECEMBER 19, 2022**

Twenty-two men and women accused of adultery, running away from home, sodomy, theft and smuggling narcotics were lashed in the sports stadium in Jawzjan.

**79. DECEMBER 20, 2022**

One person accused of entering a stranger's house "with the wrong intention" was lashed 39 times in Maidan Wardak.

Twelve people accused of moral crimes and theft were flogged in Helmand.

**80. DECEMBER 22, 2022**

Taliban Ministry of Education banned girls beyond grade 6 from attending private courses.

Two women were among 23 people flogged in Uruzgan. They were accused of moral crimes, robbery, sodomy, and theft.

Twenty-one people including four women accused of moral crimes were lashed in public in Badakhshan.

**81. DECEMBER 24, 2022**

Taliban banned female staff from working for I/NGOs.

Nine people including one woman accused of moral crimes were flogged in Khost. One person accused of theft had his hand chopped off in Laghman.

**82. DECEMBER 25, 2022**

Nine people accused of moral crimes and theft were flogged in public in Kunduz.

**83. DECEMBER 27, 2022**

Taliban<sup>87</sup>. banned women-run bakeries in Kabul.

Six including two women accused of moral crimes were publicly flogged in Laghman.

**84. DECEMBER 28, 2022**

One person accused of selling and purchasing narcotics was punished in public under Tazeer punishment.

**85. DECEMBER 31, 2022**

Taliban lashed five people including one woman accused of moral crimes and theft in Paktia.

**86. JANUARY 1, 2023**

A letter issued by the Finance Department of Balkh Province instructed the education department to deduct 18,000 Afs from teachers' salaries paid by UNICEF and transfer the amount to the government's revenue account.

**87. JANUARY 3, 2023**

Kabul Education University suspended the salaries of two of its professors who resigned to protest the university ban on female students. Source: Copy of the letter.

**88. JANUARY 3, 2023**

Taliban closed blind girls' schools in Nangarhar and Kunar.

**89. JANUARY 10, 2023**

Taliban appointed the leadership members of the Ulema Council of Kabul from among its members.

**90. JANUARY 11, 2023**

Taliban's Herat Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued a letter banning women from visiting historic places. Source: Copy of the letter.

**91. JANUARY 13, 2023**

The AGO's Department of Guidance and Islamic Invitation administered a one-hour written test assessing the religious knowledge of AGO staff. Source: Copy of the test questions. Note: Employees are required to attend a 2–4-hour daily lecture and training on Islamic teaching.

**92. JANUARY 16, 2023**

Taliban instructed travel agencies not to sell tickets to women without a mahram.

**93. JANUARY 16, 2023**

Taliban instructed poets not to compose musical prose.

**94. JANUARY 16, 2023**

Taliban instructed elders in Panjshir to hand over the list of those who worked in the intelligence agency of the republic and those who worked with the foreign agencies.

**95. JANUARY 18, 2023**

Taliban intelligence instructed the Kabul province governor to arrest 13 members of former armed forces officers.

**96. JANUARY 21, 2023**

The Ministry of Higher Education in a letter to institutions of higher education ordered the exclusion of females from university entry exams. Source: Copy of the letter.

**97. JANUARY 24, 2023**

Supreme Court issued a letter to Southwest Intelligence and police citing a report from an independent judicial monitoring committee that had expressed concern about the torture of detainees in inmates. Threatening the abusers with dismissal and severe punishment. Source: Copy of the letter.

**98. JANUARY 25, 2023**

The Ministry of Vice and Virtue issued a letter to MoPH summarizing the findings of the Vice and Virtue's monitoring report, expressing concern that only 5% of health workers have complied with the hijab and physical appearance [beard] requirement. Source: Copy of the letter.

**99. JANUARY 25, 2023**

Ministry of Higher Education in a letter to Kabul University, instructed female lecturers to sign their time sheets on the last Thursday of the month in a designated location in the north entrance of the campus. Source: Copy of the letter.

**100. JANUARY 25, 2023**

The Taliban verbally informed pharmacies that selling contraceptives is haram and Islam and therefore, pharmacies must refrain from selling them.

**101. FEBRUARY 1, 2023**

Taliban instructed hospitals in Kabul that their medical staff must wear black hijab (Arabic long gown) and mask at all times.

**102. FEBRUARY 1, 2023**

Taliban verbally instructed female government medical staff to be accompanied by a mahram while going to their offices in Kandahar.

**103. FEBRUARY 1, 2023**

Taliban closed a Karate club in Farah province. It operated despite the earlier ban on female sports clubs.

**104. FEBRUARY 2, 2023**

The district governor of the Nasi district of Badakhshan issued a letter prohibiting inter-Suni/Shia marriage. Source: Copy of the letter.

**105. FEBRUARY 17, 2023**

Tribal elders banned a woman from taking a mehria for her marriage. Taliban have banned bride prices (toyana) across the country. Mehria is a woman's right under Islamic rules.

**106. FEBRUARY 18, 2023**

Taliban conducted the exit exam for only male medical students.

**107. FEBRUARY 22, 2023**

Taliban closed four medical centers run by female doctors in Ghazni because male patients were treated by female doctors.

**108. FEBRUARY 22, 2023**

The Taliban removed the students and closed a few private education centers because of having female students.

**109. MARCH 4, 2023**

Taliban invalidated thousands of divorce cases that were decided during the republic.

**110. MARCH 6, 2023**

Taliban instructed institutes of higher education to only admit male students in the forthcoming academic year (the academic year started on March 22).

**111. MARCH 10, 2023**

Taliban announced gender-segregated visits to shrines in Herat.

**112. MARCH 12, 2023**

Taliban banned issuing transcripts and certificates for female university graduates.

**113. MARCH 13, 2023**

Small Businesses Council of Parwan issued a circular to its members that operate beauty salons and instructed them to require their clients to "take an ablution" before they initiate a service. Source: Copy of the decree.

**114. MARCH 15, 2023**

Taliban ordered restaurants in Takhar not to serve women without mahram.

**115. MARCH 17, 2023**

Taliban's Hajj and Religious Affairs ministry declared the celebration of Nowroz as an act against sharia. The ministry instructed mullah imams of mosques throughout the country to inform the public to refrain from celebrating Nowroz, Christmas, Birthdays, Lovers' Day [Valentine's Day],

Women's Day and April Fools Day, as these are significant days for Kafirs (infidels). Source: Copy of the directive.

**116. MARCH 20, 2023**

The Emir issued a decree barring officials from hiring relatives in government positions.

**117. MARCH 25, 2023**

In Balkh province, the Taliban have segregated banking services based on gender.

**118. MARCH 25, 2023**

The Emir issued a verbal decree re-tasking the Attorney General's Office as the "General Directorate for Monitoring and Follow-up of Decrees and Directives."

**119. MARCH 30, 2023**

Taliban's Emir issued an order to courts to re-examine and invalidate legal cases that had been settled by the republic courts and did not comply with Sharia.

**120. APRIL 4, 2023**

The Taliban prevented female Afghan staff of the UN from reporting to work.

**121. APRIL 5, 2023**

The Taliban's MPVPV issued an edict banning women from going to restaurants in Herat. Previously they had issued an edict on May 12, 2022, instructing restaurant owners to segregate male and female diners. Source: Copy of the edict.

**122. APRIL 13, 2023**

The 'girls' schools committee' (headed by Sheikh Mohammad Ayoub Ansari) provided Mullah Haibatullah with lists of proposed school subjects for girls and boys from grades 1 to 12. According to the committee's recommendation, girls and boys, grades 1-4 will share the same curriculum, but above that girls will be taught special subjects that are simply modern and scientific subjects. At the same time, girls and boys will receive more intensive religious education. The main religious subjects for girls will focus on recitation of the Quran, ethics, hadith, history of Islam, the prophet's life, Arabic language, rights of spouse, and children and unacceptable traditions and customs). Source: Copy of the report.

**123. APRIL 19, 2023**

The Taliban ordered the Shia community in Balkh to celebrate Eid on the day the Taliban's Supreme Court declared Eid rather than following the announcement from Iran's religious authority to declare Eid a day later, which Shia traditionally follow.

**124. MAY 4, 2023**



In a recorded voice message, the head of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Kandahar, Mawlawi Abdulhai Omar verbally ordered all the provincial departments to ban girls and women from going to health centres and cemeteries. In his message, Mawlawi Omar claims that “women/girls wear makeup when they go to these places and pretend they are ill. “Anyone whose daughter or sister is like this, if she has a brother, arrest her brother. If she has a father, punish her father and punish him for not correcting her daughter.” Source: audio clip

**125. MAY 5, 2023**

Taliban banned young women (usually not married) from going to health centers and shrines in Kandahar province.

**126. MAY 10, 2023**

Taliban warned education directorate staff and teachers of Khost to choose between termination and keeping a long beard. Copy of the letter.

**127. MAY 11, 2023**

Taliban officials verbally directed media outlets not to produce content about women's hygiene issues.

**128. MAY 18, 2023**

Taliban banned “hena bandan” a type of pre-wedding ceremony in Kandahar province.

**129. MAY 20, 2023**

Taliban and local elders imposed ceilings on women and widows' dowry in Parwan province.

**130. MAY 28, 2023**

Taliban instructed health workers not to carry smartphones while on duty in Helmand province. Copy of the letter.

**131. JUNE 1, 2023**

The Taliban Ministry of Higher Education issued a directive to Kabul University ordering lecturers to avoid the use of certain Dari words in their research and to use the full title of “national and religious” figures.

**132. JUNE 8, 2023**

Banned foreign NGOs from providing educational programs including Community-Based Education. According to UNICEF, it will impact half a million students, specifically 300 thousand girls.

**133. JUNE 15, 2023**

Banned grooms from joining his bride in the wedding saloons, The ban extended to filming of wedding ceremonies, serving food at the time of prayer, and having dress changing rooms for women in the wedding halls.

**134. JUNE 17, 2023**

Banned women from participating in radio and TV shows where the presenters are men.

**135. JUNE 18, 2023**

Instructed beauty salons to have a facility for their clients to perform a religious ablution before putting on makeup.

**136. JUNE 18, 2023**

Taliban Ministry of Higher Education is reported to have allowed female university students to defend their monographs and attend exams of the final semester online. The rest of the semesters and education affairs of female university students are suspended until further notice.

**137. JUNE 24, 2023**

Banned all women's beauty parlours across the country.

**138. JULY 1, 2023**

Taliban's Ministry of Education issued a circular to local and international NGOs stating that according to NGO law, all NGOs are required to open a bank account for each project and that NGOs are not allowed to have more than one project linked to the same bank account. Source: Copy of the letter.

**139. JULY 6, 2023**

Taliban's Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice announced the ban on beauty salons [all run by women for women] because services provided by the salons were forbidden by Islam. Owners of beauty salons were given one month's notice to wind down their businesses. Source: Copy of the letter.

**140. JULY 9, 2023**

Taliban's Directorate of Preaching & Propagation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a letter to its representatives in provinces and overseas instructed them to perform daily prayers collectively and to adjust their appearance according to Shariah and the Prophet's sunnah. Source: Copy of the letter.

**141. JULY 11, 2023**

Taliban suspended activities of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan following the desecration of the Quran in a protest in Stockholm on June 28. Context: On June 28, in a rally in

Medborgarplatsen Square in Central Stockholm an Iraqi migrant, Salwan Momika tore some pages of the Quran and set it on fire.

**142. JULY 15, 2023**

The International Relations Department of the Ministry of Public Health of the Taliban issued a letter ordering a full ban on the activities of Premiere Urgence-Aide Medical International (PU-AMI), a French health organization. MoPH did not give a reason for the decision. Source: Copy of the letter.

**143. JULY 17, 2023**

Taliban abolished the Attorney General's Office (AGO). The new institution established to replace AGO is called, the Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of Decrees and Orders which no longer investigates or prosecutes cases directly. That function is taken over by the court and police. Source: Copy of the decree.

**144. AUGUST 26, 2023**

Taliban Minister of Vice and Virtue during his visit to Bamiyan announced that women are henceforth not allowed to enter Band-e Amir National Park.

**145. SEPTEMBER 2023**

In Helmand, the Department of Information and Culture, through mullahs in mosques, has instructed media outlets not to feature women in their programs without prior approval from the department. Additionally, the department has warned women against using social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter), and other similar tools. These messages were delivered through mosques on behalf of the governor and the department. Source: Contacts on the ground.

**146. SEPTEMBER 2023**

In Uruzgan, the governor issued an audio-recorded message banning women from working remotely with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Source: Contacts on the ground and copy of the audio message.

**147. SEPTEMBER 16, 2023**

Officials from the Department of Vice and Virtue have issued verbal warnings to clothing store owners in Bamiyan to refrain from selling glamorous/party dresses to women. This directive has been reiterated in local mosques as well. Source: Contacts on the ground. Also reported by online media.

**148. SEPTEMBER 17, 2023**

The Taliban's Ministry of Commerce and Industries suspended the organization of trade exposition events until further notice. Source: Copy of the letter.

**149. OCTOBER 2023**

The General Directorate of Intelligence in Helmand issued a directive to Imams and neighborhood representatives (Wakeels and Arbabs), instructing them to compile a detailed list of residents, including copies of their national IDs, full addresses, and phone numbers. Imams are further tasked with monitoring individuals participating in the five daily prayers and reporting those who miss prayers for three consecutive days, per the provided instructions. Source: Contacts on the ground.

**150. OCTOBER 19, 2023**

An official letter from the Taliban to government offices, educational centers, and hospitals in Helmand and Paktia announced a ban on the use of smartphones. The directive emphasized that individuals caught using smartphones on the job would face termination. Source: contacts on the ground.

**151. OCTOBER 20, 2023**

The Taliban's Ministry of Economy has instructed NGOs in Kabul that women are not permitted to hold the position of director within an NGO. Source: Contacts on the ground.

**152. OCTOBER 22, 2023**

The Kandahar religious police conveyed through a letter to elementary schools and women's madrasas that, moving forward, the only accepted form of hijab is the burqa. Source: Contacts on the ground.

**153. OCTOBER 25, 2023**

The Taliban, in Faryab, prohibited private videography/photography firms from hiring female employees to work at wedding ceremonies. Source: Contacts on the ground.

Source: United States Institute of Peace<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/two-years-talibans-gender-apartheid-afghanistan>

## ANNEXURE II - PROFILES OF KEY INFORMANTS/SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

### **Dr. Aamer Raza**



Dr. Aamer Raza is a Fulbright alumnus and a professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Peshawar. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

### **Kathy Gannon**



Kathy Gannon is a Canadian journalist and author. She is the news director of the Associated Press for Afghanistan and Pakistan. For 35 years, she covered Afghanistan and Pakistan for the Associated Press as chief correspondent and later as news director. She has covered the 2006 war in south Lebanon, the Iraq war, the Central Asian States, and Azerbaijan. Gannon was the only Western journalist allowed in Kabul by the Taliban in the weeks preceding the 2001 U.S.-British offensive in Afghanistan.

### **Zarifa Ghafari**



Zarifa Ghafari is an Afghan activist, politician, author, and entrepreneur. She is a former female mayor of Maidan Shahr, the capital city of the Wardak Province, Afghanistan. She received the 2022 International Women's Rights Award at the United Nations Geneva Summit. She was included by the BBC in the list of 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world for 2019. She is the Founder and General Director of Peghla FM, also the Founder and CEO of Assistance and Promotion of Afghan Women (APAW), and featured in a Netflix Doc. (In Her Hands).

### **Michael Kugelman**



Michael Kugelman is the director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute and a leading specialist on Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan and their relations with the United States. He is also a columnist for Foreign Policy magazine. He is the editor and co-editor of 11 books, and he has written for The New York Times, Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, and other publications, covering topics ranging from U.S. policy in Afghanistan to terrorism to water, energy, and food security in the region. Mr. Kugelman received his M.A. in law and diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University.

### **Muzammil Shinwari**



Muzammil Shinwari is the Former Deputy Minister of Trade and Commerce in Afghanistan. During the last two years, Shinwari has been leading Afghanistan's endeavor to accede to the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the same time, he led numerous regional and bilateral integration initiatives within the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Economic Cooperation (SAARC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

### **Dr. Salma Malik**



Dr. Salma Malik is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies at Quaid-I-Azam University. She specializes in the areas of War, Arms Control and disarmament, Military Sociology, and South Asian Affairs, and her research areas include Conflict Management and transformation, Human Security, CBMs, and micro-disarmament. She is an alumnus of Uppsala University, Sweden, the Asia Pacific Center for Strategic Studies APCSS, Hawaii, and a Visiting Research Fellow at Sandia National Labs, New Mexico, USA.

**Dr. Omar Zakhilwal**



Dr. Omar Zakhilwal is an Afghan politician and Former Ambassador to Pakistan. He was also honoured with the highest government award, ‘The Wazir Akbar Khan Medal,’ for recognition. He holds a PhD in economics from Carleton University in Canada and has also consulted for various international organizations, including the World Bank and UNDP.

*Note: Names and profiles of other key informants, such as students, teachers, development professionals, journalists, and activists inside Afghanistan, cannot be disclosed due to security concerns.*