

US withdrawal and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan: Future Policy Directions

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Introduction

On August 31, 2021, the US government marked the end of its 20-year-long war in Afghanistan. As a result, Taliban and its allies took over the country's nearly-full control, initiating the process of completion of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. With this withdrawal, Afghanistan, ravaged by over four decades of war and instability, was - as BBC Journalist Lyse Doucet put it - turned "upside down and inside out".¹ Observers, both within and outside Afghanistan, were wondering how the country will fare under a Taliban regime. Then, the Taliban announced a 33-member caretaker cabinet (on September 7, 2021), which had no women and consisted of mostly Pashtun Taliban and Haqqani veterans, hardliners and loyalists; with only 2 Tajiks and 1 Uzbek, and no Hazaras, named in the setup. Nonetheless, with this formal set-up, regional diplomatic engagement with the Taliban began, with China offering USD 31 million in aid² and Pakistan - often accused on tacitly backing the Taliban and hosting the Haqqani Network on its territory - organising a ministerial-level meeting (attended by Foreign Ministers of China, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) on Afghanistan.³

Against this backdrop, this policy brief informs our readers on the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and what the future holds for the war-torn country under a Taliban regime. The brief discusses recent developments in the country, Taliban's PR campaign and the (grim) situation for gender and media rights under the Taliban regime. In its concluding section, the brief proposes short, medium and long-term recommendations

that could be considered by the international community, particularly the western bloc, when dealing with the Taliban regime. These recommendations focus on ensuring gender and media rights, evacuation of under-threat Afghan and foreign nationals, clear messaging on the Taliban from the western bloc, a possible working relationship with the Taliban regime and reviving Afghanistan's economy.

The 'new' Taliban

Since their takeover, and in their media statements, the Taliban have demonstrated a 'new' side to their political ideology and messaging. A major shift is that the Taliban of 2021 are politically aware and proactive. The group's political office in Doha (Qatar), established in 2013, may have provided the group with the exposure, training and the opportunity to engage in the art of political negotiation and diplomacy. The fact that the US agreed to recognize the group in Doha peace talks also

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gave the Taliban the 'legitimacy' it sought and a 'position of strength'. As a result, both the Ghani government in Kabul and the people of Afghanistan receded

to a position of weakness. Ziaulhaq Amarkhil, former governor of Nangarhar province and while talking to Tolo News in Pashto, also argued that the US negotiations with the Taliban not only undermined democracy and democratic norms in Afghanistan, but they also laid the foundation for the fall of the civilian setup in Kabul.⁴ The Taliban also reportedly used their 'position of strength' to convince the Afghan army troops to surrender and uploaded the surrender videos on their social media channels and handles.



Also, practicing their art of diplomacy, the Taliban recently claimed that China was its principal and “closest partner”.⁵ This statement carried important undertones as the Taliban’s leadership has often refrained from commenting excessively on the Uyghur Muslims from China. Uyghurs born or living in Afghanistan, with the Taliban’s recent wooing of Beijing, now fear extradition to China.⁶ Also, China, for geopolitical reasons, wants to protect its investments in Afghanistan, especially those focusing on mineral extraction, and has, therefore, indicated its willingness to engage with the Taliban.

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Taliban in the media

Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s official spokesperson, had previously refrained from appearing in public (video) interviews. Yet, soon after the group’s takeover, he appeared in his first-ever public media interaction in Kabul on August 18, 2021. For some, the appearance was both impressive and smartly curated. Mujahid not only took questions from nearly all local and international journalists, but he refrained from commenting on issues that were of serious concern to local and international human rights groups. For instance, his answer to a question on the Afghan women’s future in the local job market was, more or less, vague. He indicated that the group would let women work, however, his statement also carried a caveat; women would only be allowed to work under the scope of Sharia.

The Taliban now have spokespersons who are fluent in multiple languages, including English. Taliban leadership’s interviews with the international, especially English, media indicates their willingness to widely disseminate their messages on the global stage. Similarly, a story by TRT News⁷ in Kabul focused on the infamous and suicide-ready 313 Badri Brigade and interviewed one of the brigade’s officers. Fluent in five languages, the officer, in English, professed to be a ‘martyrdom seeker’ and had lost his brother in the brigade. Similarly,

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Taliban’s ‘official’ Al-Emarah (The Emirate) websites are published in Pashto, Urdu, Dari, Arabic and English languages, indicating the Taliban’s focus on regional languages and wider dissemination of its messages⁸ and propaganda. It is worth noting that the Taliban’s messaging on different networks and different languages also varies according to its target audience. For instance, where mainstream accounts of Taliban spokespersons (e.g., Zabihullah Mujahid) publish conciliatory and neutral messages, accounts claiming to be media wings of the Taliban publish messages that promote war and celebrated the killing of resistance leaders in the Panjshir valley.⁹

Therefore, the ‘Talib of 2021’ (member of the Taliban), is not someone who, as widely perceived in the West, has necessarily studied and trained in a religious seminary (madrassa). They seem to be a group now beyond the madrassas that utilized modern media including social media extensively. The Taliban leaders are actively seen on national and international media; something rare during their first regime (1996-2001) in Afghanistan. This, in short, is what the Taliban of 2021 is all about: a tech-savvy, PR-heavy multi-lingual militant group that, in the past two decades, learnt the nuances of media messaging, propaganda, political manoeuvring and narrative manipulation.

Taliban, Al Qaeda and IS-K in Afghanistan

The Taliban have reassured the global community that they will forbid terrorist groups, especially Al Qaeda and the IS-K (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province), from committing terrorist acts in other countries. Al Qaeda

is neither as strong nor as influential as it was in 2001. However, many fear Al Qaeda’s revival under the Taliban regime, considering the latter still defends Osama bin Laden and denies his involvement in the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰

Al Qaeda’s leadership also recently issued a statement congratulating the Islamic Emirate (read: Taliban) for its victory in Afghanistan. An excerpt from the statement noted: *On this historic occasion, we would like to offer our congratulations to the leadership of the Islamic Emirate, specifically Haibatullah Akhundzada.*¹¹ It is worth noting that Ayman al Zawahiri, in the past, has given "bay'ah" (or pledge of allegiance) to all Taliban heads, including Mullah





Omar, Mullah Akhtar Mansur and Hebatullah Akhundzada. This statement and the group's pledge also mean that Al Qaeda does enjoy a working relationship, however, due to international pressures and prior commitments, the Taliban may allow Al Qaeda to carry out limited tacit activity within Afghanistan; which may be limited to recruitment or social media propaganda.

As for the IS-K, the group remains a problem for the Taliban. The Kabul airport attack on August 26, 2021, which claimed nearly 200 lives (mostly Afghans), brought into perspective the seriousness of the IS-K threat in Afghanistan. China quickly called on the Taliban to take stern action against the IS-K after the attack, with Chinese spokesperson Zhao Lijian claiming that the Taliban had assured Beijing of not allowing any forces to harm China through incursions made via Afghanistan.¹² On paper, statements from the Taliban suggest that the group intends to act against the IS-K. When it comes to action, the practicalities of such actions are both vague and complex. In their local media talks, Taliban spokespersons have hoped that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which marks an end of foreign occupation, will encourage IS-K fighters to stop conducting terrorist attacks. Such statements sound more like wishful thinking than a pragmatic policy layout.

Human Rights and the Future of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime

Concerns for human rights particularly gender rights in Afghanistan arise from the Taliban's harsh treatment of women in the 1990s. Then, the Taliban imposed a ban on women's education and proactively discriminated against women by allowing them to work outside their homes. Today's women in Afghanistan, who have until now enjoyed relative freedom, equal rights and access to education and work are reminded of the suffering, restrictions and curbs of the 1990s when they see the Taliban patrolling streets and governing the country. Therefore, since the Taliban's takeover, a common sight in Kabul has been the protests carried out by young Afghan women against the Taliban.

The Taliban have deliberately remained vague in their response when it comes to their policy direction on women, with the women's ministry more or less also disbanded. When asked to clarify their policy on the matter, the Taliban's generic answer is their "support for women's rights under the Sharia law". No further explanation is provided on what that means in practice. In a recent interview with the BBC, Taliban

leader Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai had clearly indicated that "women will not be in the cabinet or top government positions [in their government]. But they could work at a lower level".¹³ This statement reaffirms

that the Taliban's perception of women in Afghanistan has not changed. They see women as 'incapable' of holding senior or decision-making roles. This is a problematic hyper-masculine understanding of women's role in society, particularly in Afghanistan.

Future of Afghanistan: Governance and moving from 'Security' to 'Humanitarian' perspective

Before the Taliban's announcement of a caretaker setup on September 7, 2021, the group's political leadership was working behind the scenes to form what they called an *inclusive* government, without explaining whether this inclusiveness was based on ethnic¹⁴ and religious lines. Now that the governance setup is established, regional engagement with the regime also started; at least from Afghanistan's neighbours initially as China has already announced USD 31 million in aid for Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the western bloc's three major concerns in Afghanistan remain:

- » the country not being used for terrorism against the west,
- » provision of gender and basic rights and
- » avoiding a major refugee crisis which will lead to more refugees heading towards Afghanistan's neighbours and Europe.





Progress on these issues can only take place if there is some ‘working relationship’ with the Taliban regime. Working with the Taliban on these issues also presents the dilemma of negotiating with leaders who are still under UN and US sanctions and placed on the ‘global wanted terrorist’ lists. For instance, Haaqani Network’s head Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is on the FBI’s most-wanted list with a bounty up to USD 10 million on his head¹⁵, was announced as Afghanistan’s Interior Minister. Similarly, Siraj’s youngest brother Anas Haqqani - who was sentenced to death in 2016 but was released by the Kabul government in exchange for the release of Western captives in 2019 - has remained at the forefront of peace negotiations and intra-Afghan dialogue since the Taliban’s takeover. At home, in Afghanistan, Taliban supporters and sympathisers see Siraj and Anas as ‘heroes’. Their supporters propagate their stories as those who sacrificed a lot to win this war against ‘foreign invaders’.¹⁶

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These sentiments, especially from supporters of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network, present a major dilemma for the western bloc. To ‘get things done’, both in the short and long term, some level of interaction will need to take place with the Taliban leaders. However, by interacting with figures like Siraj and Anas, the western bloc will be seen as legitimising terrorists. Policymakers, donor agencies and leaders in the western bloc will need to decide whether a paradigm shift on Afghanistan is required; and if listed terrorists are seen as such and remain under sanctions or they are seen as major stakeholders, worth negotiating, in the future.

western bloc, refuses to negotiate or deal with the Taliban, there remains a strong possibility that Russia, China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Qatar, will jump in. The aforementioned regional actors were already seen as Taliban enablers and, therefore, their recognition of the Taliban-regime may not come as a surprise. Therefore, a clear policy direction on Afghanistan is required, which would tie-up aid and other perks to provision of basic human rights; including gender and media rights. The United Nations and its members also need to ensure that Afghan and foreign nationals are not abandoned. That is why, as a matter of urgency, the international community needs to work with the Taliban representatives, in some capacity, to get the Kabul airport up and running and negotiate the evacuation of foreign nationals and legitimate foreign visa holders from Afghanistan.

Clear Messaging:

Since the Taliban’s takeover, messaging from the western bloc is more or less mixed. Where the bloc has so far refused to recognise a future Taliban government, initial statements also indicate that some sort of a working relationship with the group may be established. Whether the bloc recognises a Taliban regime or whether it still considers it a non-state (violent) actor, the messaging needs to be clear and precise. Mixed messaging will only create confusions and hurdles in formulating long-term policies on Afghanistan, which would negatively impact the common Afghan people.

Medium Term Engagement

Policymaking and the Taliban’s social media content:

The Taliban have so far (smartly) disseminated their messages and propaganda on the social media. For policymakers in the western bloc, countering the Taliban’s social media messaging presents a major challenge. The content of Taliban’s messaging also differs when it comes to the its multi-lingual online platforms. In this regard, it becomes integral that policies towards the Taliban are not formulated based on their positive and neutral messaging in the English media. Instead, to get a true picture of the situation on the ground, analysis of social media posts in Dari, Pashto and, to some extent, Urdu languages, especially from Afghan activists and media personnel in the country, also becomes important.

Policy Recommendations

When it comes to adopting a policy direction on Afghanistan, the international community can look at its engagement with the Taliban regime in three phases: short term, medium term and long term.

Short Term Engagement

Provision of basic human rights:

Women’s and media rights are currently at risk in the country. Pressure on the Taliban regime can only be exerted if the western bloc has some line of communication with the Taliban. In a scenario where the international community, especially the



Access to Afghanistan's National Reserves:

The US has frozen Afghanistan's access to its national reserves of nearly USD10 billion. Moving forward and if the western bloc accepts the Taliban as the governing body in Afghanistan, access to these reserves needs to be made conditional on utilizing it for stabilizing shocks to Afghanistan's economy and provision of basic human rights. Economy remains a major governance challenge for the Taliban. Afghanistan is heavily reliant on foreign aid and technical support and the Afghan economy will crumble if the international community decides to fully suspend this support. This could result in migration, food and economic crisis, with millions migrating to neighbouring and western countries. This migration also poses a threat to regional security with terrorists posing as refugees moving into neighbouring countries.

Long Term

Counter-Terrorism:

The international community can, in a controlled and limited manner, work with the Taliban to sustain a peaceful and secure Afghanistan that is not a threat to regional and global security. The possibility of working with the Taliban regime and not allowing Afghanistan's soil to be used for terrorism remains crucial. The Taliban's desire and need for some form of international recognition can be made conditional to the group ensuring no terrorist activity (terrorist propaganda, recruitment and operations) takes place within Afghanistan's territory.

Socio-Economic well-being of common Afghans:

In the long run, the 20-year achievements, under the US and coalition forces, in education, healthcare and the economy need to be consolidated and protected in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis in the country. The World Bank has estimated the gross domestic product (GDP) of Afghanistan to be around USD 19.87 billion in 2020; compared to 4.055 billion in 2002.¹⁷ Annual growth averaged 9.4 per cent between 2003 and 2012, driven by a booming aid-driven services sector, and strong agricultural growth.¹⁸ Aid flows decreased from around 100 per cent of GDP in 2009 to 42.9 per cent of GDP in 2020¹⁹. Now that the Taliban are in control of Afghanistan and the foreign aid to Afghanistan has dried up, this could cause a serious economic and humanitarian crisis in the country including the possibility of refugee influx to other countries. A policy layout on aid provision, for the long-term well being of the Afghan people, is therefore urgently required.

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[9] Several tweets in published (on September 5 and September 6, 2021) by an account, with over 70,000 followers, claiming to be the Urdu language translation handle for Taliban's Pashto transmission celebrated the killing of various anti-Taliban resistance leaders in Panjshir. Source: <https://twitter.com/EmartIslamiUrdu>

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[13] BBC (2021). Afghanistan: Taliban asked if there will be a place for women in new government. BBC News. Accessed 4 September, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-58407424>

[14] Major ethnic groups of Afghanistan include Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimaq, Turkmen, Baloch, Pashai, Nuristani, Gujjar, Arab, Brahui, Qizilbash, Pamiri, Kyrgyz and Sadat, among others.

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About this brief

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