



# Analysing Taliban Rule in Afghanistan

Ajwa Hijazi

Working Paper



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CENTRE for AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES

# **Analysing Taliban Rule in Afghanistan**

*Working Paper*

**Ajwa Hijazi**



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Return of Afghan Taliban as Rulers of Afghanistan</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Structure of the Government</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Overview of Current Governance Dynamics and Prospects of Stability in Afghanistan</b>	<b>7</b>
Economic Landscape	8
State of Civil Liberties	10
Political Landscape	12
Security Conundrum	14
International Linkages	16
<b>Assessing Sustainability of Taliban Rule</b>	<b>19</b>
Ensuring Internal Security	19
Delivering on the Humanitarian Front	20
Consolidation of Power	22
Establishing Diplomatic Engagement and Trust	23
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>



## Abstract

*The fall of Kabul in August 2021 marked a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's history, signifying the withdrawal of foreign troops and the Taliban's return as the de facto rulers of the country. Their resurgence prompted global apprehensions about their capacity to govern effectively and sustainably. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this paper draws on secondary sources to analyse the Taliban's performance across key domains: economy, politics, civil liberties, security, and diplomacy, over the past three years. The analysis highlights that while the Taliban have managed to sustain their government despite a lack of international recognition and have taken steps to revive Afghanistan's struggling economy, their governance has been marred by significant shortcomings in upholding civil liberties. The paper argues that the future sustainability of the Taliban regime hinges on four critical factors: ensuring internal security, addressing humanitarian needs of the population, consolidating control over the country, and engaging diplomatically to achieve international recognition.*

**Keywords:** Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan, Fall of Kabul, De facto Rule, International Community, Humanitarian Crisis.



## 1. Introduction

The Taliban is an ultra-conservative political and religious fundamentalist group that has profoundly impacted the people and state of Afghanistan for decades. The word 'Taliban' comes from the Arabic word 'Talib', which means student.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of the Taliban can be traced back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. However, they formally emerged globally in the mid-1990s through the Afghan civil war. The Taliban's trajectory has been marked by their rise in the 1990s with the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), their fall following the US-led intervention in 2001, and their resurgence as the de facto rulers of Afghanistan in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Their return coincided with the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan after nearly two decades.

Upon assuming power, one of the most daunting challenges for the Afghan Taliban has been transitioning from an insurgent group to a political government and securing international recognition.<sup>3</sup> They were tasked with governing Afghanistan in a context significantly different from their previous rule (1996–2001). In the present era, their earlier totalitarian approach to governance is proving untenable for achieving sustainability. Initially, the Taliban made promises, including allowing women to study and work, among others.<sup>4</sup> However, over time, they reneged on these commitments, instead resorting to the suppression of women and the stifling of dissenting voices.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, this led to widespread international condemnation, as many countries have tied the prospect of diplomatic engagement with the Taliban to the fulfillment of their pledges for inclusive governance. As a result, the Taliban government remains unrecognised by any country.

In August 2024, the Taliban marked the third anniversary of their rule in Afghanistan. Yet, the country continues to grapple with a humanitarian crisis, a security conundrum, and numerous governance challenges. Despite these issues, the Taliban have shown

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Hai Mutma'in, *Taliban: A Critical History from Within* (Berlin: Gmbh, 2019), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Graham Harrison and Luke Harding, "The Fall of Kabul: A 20-Year Mission Collapses in a single day," *Guardian*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/15/the-fall-of-kabul-a-20-year-mission-collapses-in-a-single-day>.

<sup>3</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left* (London: Yale University Press, 2023), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Shruti Menon, "Afghanistan: The Taliban's Broken Promises," *BBC*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/62469204>.

<sup>5</sup> Michaela Cavanagh, Uta Steinwehr, Jan D. Walter, Ahmad Hakimi, "Fact check: Have Taliban kept their Promises?" *DW*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-have-the-taliban-kept-their-promises/a-62649985>.





relative progress in certain areas of economics and law enforcement. Over the past couple of years, tighter border controls have led to increased customs revenue and higher export levels. However, this achievement reflects less on the Taliban's leadership prowess and more as an indictment of their NATO-backed predecessors, who were often mired in allegations of corruption.<sup>6</sup>

The comeback of the Afghan Taliban has garnered significant global attention characterised by various predictions regarding how Afghanistan would fare under the Taliban and how the Taliban would navigate their international relations. The world must be aware of how Afghanistan is being governed since the spill over of internal turbulence in Afghanistan is felt at the regional and international levels, mainly in the form of increased refugees, drug trade, and the threat of terrorism. In this context, the paper aims to explore sustainability of the Taliban's rule by examining the current economic, political, security, and diplomatic dynamics in Afghanistan. The first section provides an overview of the Taliban's performance across these domains, while the second section evaluates the prospects for the regime's sustainability, considering various indigenous and on-ground factors.

## 2. Return of Afghan Taliban as Rulers of Afghanistan

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan with ruthless authority from 1996 to 2001, enforcing their strict interpretation of Sharia law. They were removed from power in 2001 by US and NATO forces through Operation Enduring Freedom, launched in the aftermath of 9/11. Initially, the Taliban were dismantled and scattered for several months. However, they gradually began regrouping despite financial and logistical constraints. This period of resurgence marked the beginning of a prolonged conflict between the Taliban and international forces.<sup>7</sup>

The protracted conflict between foreign troops and the Taliban eventually resulted in the Taliban gaining more territory and the U.S. government losing the leverage to oust them from Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> In 2021, Mark Milley, President Biden's top military advisor,

<sup>6</sup> "Life under the rule of the Taliban 2.0," *Economist*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/05/01/life-under-the-rule-of-the-taliban-20>.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 16.

<sup>8</sup> John F. Spoko, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction*, report (Arlington: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.



acknowledged that the US lost the war in Afghanistan due to a series of flawed and pivotal decisions made by successive administrations. The 20-year conflict made the Taliban more adept and experienced in dealing with foreign powers.<sup>9</sup> By 2018, driven by geostrategic and geopolitical compulsions, the US decided to engage the Taliban in talks. At that point, the Taliban were in a position of strength. These negotiations culminated in the signing of a peace treaty in February 2020, which paved the way for the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan.

Following the peace treaty, the Taliban steadily began consolidating their control over Afghanistan. Given their momentum, their eventual takeover of the entire country appeared inevitable. However, the speed with which they recaptured Kabul in 2021 shocked analysts and the international community. The Taliban launched their final campaign to seize Kabul from all directions, following a series of carefully orchestrated steps:

- They manifested their presence in areas where they were strong, which comprised about 1/3rd of the country.
- They captured northern districts of Afghanistan, which was an upset for President Ghani's administration.
- Moreover, as their next strategic move, the Taliban seized the border areas with Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan.
- Taliban deliberately avoided taking control of provincial capitals, initially because they did not want to be directly embroiled in a clash with the Afghan security personnel deployed there.<sup>10</sup>

The Taliban gained momentum amid a growing perception that the Afghan National Security Forces offered little to no resistance. They also benefitted from intelligence provided by their personnel strategically embedded within key institutions in Kabul. Ultimately, on 15 August 2021, and to the surprise of many, the Taliban seized control

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<sup>9</sup> Karoun Demirjian and Alex Horton, "U.S. Lost War in Afghanistan through Miscalculations Spanning Multiple Administrations, Milley tells Lawmakers," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/09/29/afghanistan-hearing-milley-austin-mckenzie/>.

<sup>10</sup> Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban*, 12.



of the country. President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan, and dramatic scenes of the Taliban entering the presidential palace were broadcast live to a global audience.<sup>11</sup>

The Taliban returned to Afghanistan's driving seat with more land under their control and more power at their behest than their previous rule. However, after they assumed power, they faced the challenge of governing a war-torn country amidst international sanctions.

### 3. Structure of the Government

First and foremost, the Taliban faced the challenge of establishing a structure of the government. The interim government, comprising 33 individuals, was announced by Zabiullah Mujahid, chief spokesperson of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA), in his first official appearance on 7 September 2021. Although the Taliban claimed inclusivity, the current cabinet is overwhelmingly Pashtun-dominated, and it has no female representatives;<sup>12</sup> plus, no representative from Panjshir.<sup>13</sup> Most cabinet members are senior Taliban leaders.<sup>14</sup> The exclusion of external political figures and women from the cabinet underscores the Taliban's myopic approach to governance, undermining the legitimacy of their government.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

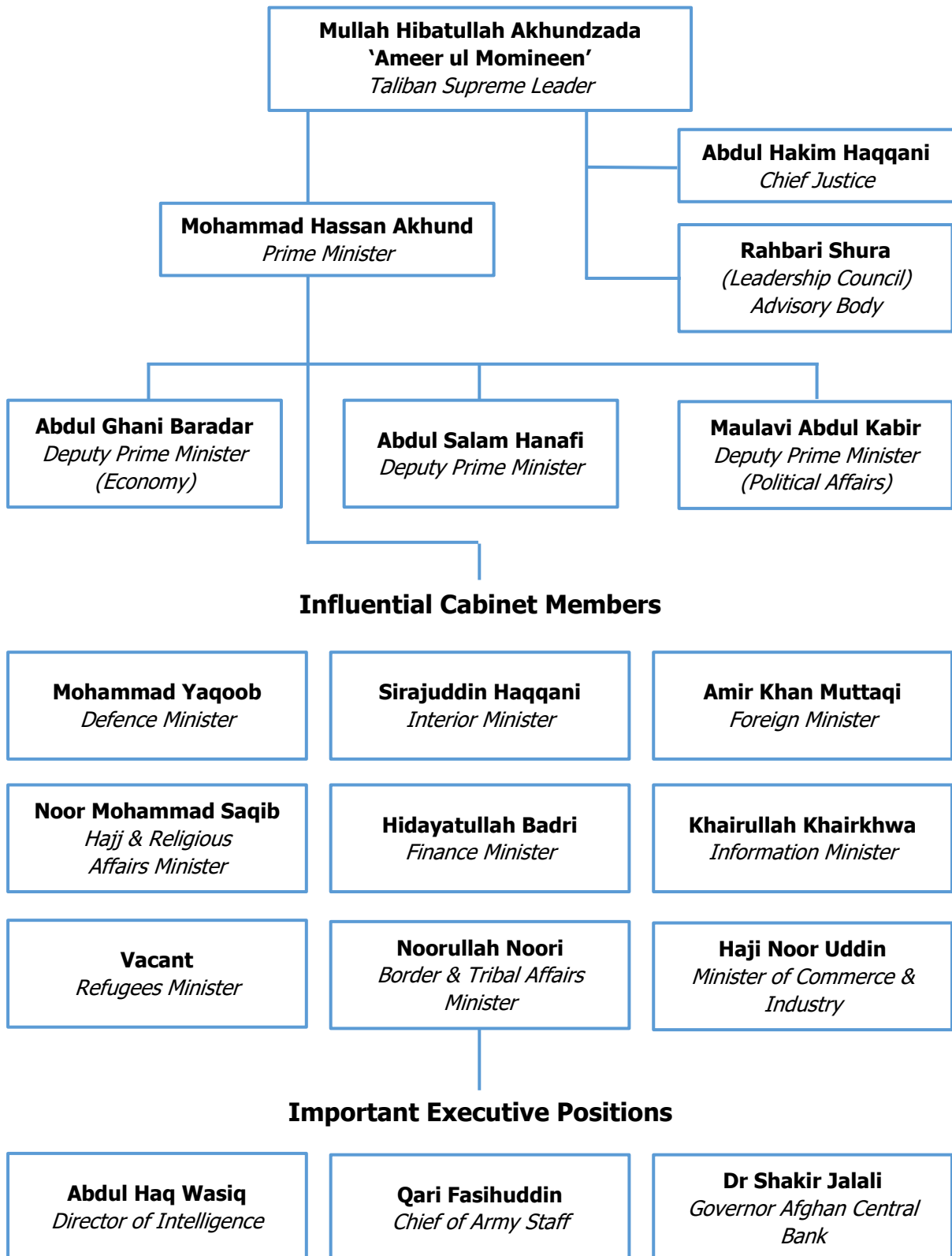
<sup>12</sup> Obaidullah Baheer, "What to Make of the Taliban's 'Exclusive' Caretaker Government," *Al-Jazeera*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/9/8/what-to-make-of-the-talibans-exclusive-caretaker-government>.

<sup>13</sup> Aamir Khan and Aqsa Durrani, "The Future of Afghanistan under Taliban-led Regime: Challenges and Likely Scenarios," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1-21.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Watkins, "One Year Later: Taliban Reprise Repressive Rule, but Struggle to Build a State," *United States Institute of Peace*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/one-year-later-taliban-reprise-repressive-rule-struggle-build-state>.



**Figure 1: Key Appointments in Taliban’s Caretaker Set-up**



**Source:** Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left* (London: Yale University Press, 2023), 94. **Editor’s Note:** The Minister for Refugees, Khalil Rahman Haqqani, was killed in an explosion in Kabul on 11 December 2024.



Later, the Taliban expanded the cabinet with more ministries and made several adjustments to the internal structure and working of the various ministries. For instance, Taliban leadership re-established the 'Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice,' responsible for implementing Shariah Law in IEA.<sup>15</sup>

After assuming power, the Taliban discarded the constitution of 2004 that was functional in the country.<sup>16</sup> Instead of presenting any new constitutional replacement, they announced enactment of specific provisions from the constitution of 1964 which, according to them, 'are not in conflict with the Islamic Sharia Law.'<sup>17</sup> They cite 'sharia law' in various administrative issues. In addition to that, several restrictive decrees have been issued and imposed by the Taliban leadership, and in their speeches, they have been referring to the disposition of the leadership for many cases, i.e., banning political parties.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. Overview of Current Governance Dynamics and Prospects of Stability in Afghanistan**

For over three-plus years, the Afghan Taliban have consolidated their power in Afghanistan after the country slipped out of the control of US and NATO forces. During this time, the Taliban have faced the task of managing and addressing challenges across political, societal, economic, diplomatic, and security domains. This period under Taliban rule calls for a comprehensive assessment of their performance across these critical areas, which is addressed in this next section of the paper.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

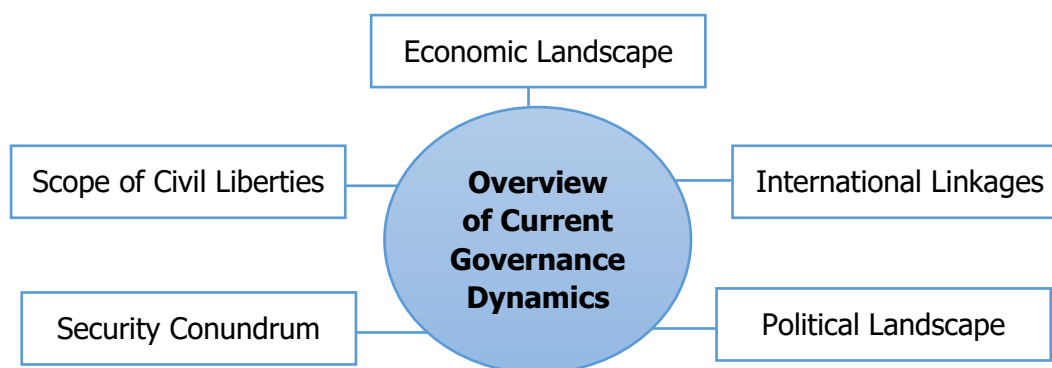
<sup>16</sup> William Malley, "Taliban Rule and Anti-Constitutionalism," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/taliban-rule-and-anti-constitutionalism/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Say They Will Use Parts of Monarchy Constitution to Run Afghanistan for Now," *Voice of America*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-say-they-will-use-parts-of-monarchy-constitution-to-run-afghanistan-for-now/6248880.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Malley, "Taliban Rule and Anti-Constitutionalism."



**Figure 2: Overview of Current Governance Dynamics in Afghanistan**



**Source:** Author's own.

#### 4.1. Economic Landscape

When the Afghan Taliban took over, the country's economy was impoverished and dependent on foreign aid. Right after the Taliban assumed power, international aid and assistance amounting to almost USD 8 billion per year was halted. This aid was the primary stimulator of the Afghan economy.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, various states and international organisations also started freezing the Taliban's assets. The US froze around USD 9.4 billion of Afghan Central Bank assets, significantly affecting the country's macroeconomic variables.<sup>20</sup> So, tackling the complex economic crisis amidst international sanctions and diplomatic isolation was one of the foremost challenges that the Taliban had to face.

A World Bank report highlights that the Taliban have achieved notable revenue collection, driven by the imposition of additional fees, duties, and taxes. The Afghan currency has also shown significant appreciation, accompanied by a surge in merchandise exports.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the World Bank report indicates a 9.4 percent decrease in the prices of goods and services compared to the previous year. However, the report provides a nuanced perspective, attributing these developments less to robust economic management and more to specific external and internal factors,

<sup>19</sup> William Byrd, "Two Years into Taliban Rule, New Shocks Weaken Afghan Economy," *United States Institute of Peace*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-taliban-rule-new-shocks-weaken-afghan-economy>.

<sup>20</sup> Sajid Iqbal, "Comparative Analysis of Taliban Regimes to Assess the Global Challenges in Afghanistan: A Realist Perspective," *Global Foreign Policies Review* 6, no.2 (2023): 76-86, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023\(VI-II\).07](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023(VI-II).07).

<sup>21</sup> Wardah Rehman, "Afghanistan's Parallel Crisis under the Taliban: Exploring the Limited Options," (paper, International Association for Political Science Students, Montreal, 2023), [https://iapss.org/storage/2023/06/Policy-Paper-1\\_Afghanistan\\_Rehman\\_IAPSS.pdf](https://iapss.org/storage/2023/06/Policy-Paper-1_Afghanistan_Rehman_IAPSS.pdf).



including subdued domestic demand, the easing of global supply chain pressures, and the relative strengthening of the Afghan currency.<sup>22</sup> In fact, an earlier World Bank report in April 2024 titled 'Navigating Challenges: Confronting Economic Recession and Deflation', cited that economic prospects of Afghanistan were bleak. The contraction of GDP coupled with declining external financing is likely to keep the threat of economic stagnation intact until at least 2025-26. This economic stagnation would further exacerbate poverty and unemployment in the country. These factors raise questions about the sustainability of economic trends under the current regime.

According to the World Food Programme's (WFP) food security update published in May 2024, a continuous deflationary trend has been evident since April 2023, along with the dwindling household savings, intensified unemployment, and fatal impact of opium cultivation ban on farmers' income.<sup>23</sup>

Another significant economic risk is the persistent drought in the country. In Afghanistan, the irrigation system depends on snow melt from the mountains, which falls into the rivers and is further used to water crops. However, according to environmental experts, the rise in temperature due to climate change is causing less snowfall, leading to less snow-melted water, and hence, there is not enough water for the rivers. A country whose 30 percent of the GDP comprises agriculture is definitively impacted by water scarcity. This grim situation is coupled with increased food insecurity and comparatively less humanitarian aid to the country. On the other hand, the Taliban have initiated building a 280 km long canal to divert water for irrigation to the Northern provinces. However, this project would take years to complete and is already being contested by neighbouring countries.<sup>24</sup>

The economic overview of Afghanistan reflects that the Taliban have tried to revive the devastated economy to an extent, mainly through their tough revenue collection system and stringent action against the export of cash. However, a large portion of

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<sup>22</sup> The World Bank, "Afghanistan Economic Monitor," November 2024, Accessed December 1, 2024, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/f8f8bf7e7a984835270e283e06ef27e2-0310012024/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-November-2024.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> CDP, "Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis," Accessed September 5, 2024, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis/>.

<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Xu, Charlotte Greenfield and Robert Birsel, "Prolonged Drought Deepens Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis," *Reuters*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/prolonged-drought-deepens-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis-2023-08-11/>.



the population is still embroiled in poverty and needs humanitarian assistance.<sup>25</sup> According to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (HNRP), The international community imposed sanctions with the expectation that they would pressure the Taliban into adopting a more inclusive approach, aligning with their stated commitments. However, over the past 3-4 years, the Taliban have steadfastly pursued a path of non-inclusivity, disregarding international condemnations. These sanctions, rather than compelling the Taliban to change, have disproportionately impacted the Afghan population, exacerbated their economic hardships while leaving the ruling regime largely unaffected in their governance approach.<sup>26</sup> Various UN agencies have estimated that if provision of aid is not ensured, two-thirds of the population will face severe food insecurity.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.2. State of Civil Liberties

One of the primary global concerns regarding the Taliban's return to power was the fear that they would suppress civil liberties, as they did during their rule from 1996 to 2001. These apprehensions were validated soon after their government was established in 2021, with gender segregation, silencing of dissent, and extrajudicial killings becoming prevalent in Afghanistan.

Over the past few years, women have borne the brunt of the Taliban's non-inclusive governance. The regime has systematically curtailed women's rights through severe restrictions on education, employment, and participation in public life, underscoring its regressive approach to societal inclusion.<sup>28</sup> Over the past 3-4 years, the Taliban have issued over 100 decrees directly targeting and curtailing the rights of women and girls.<sup>29</sup> Initially, the Taliban implemented strict restrictions on co-education in universities, allowing women to be taught only by other women or older men.

<sup>25</sup> Byrd, "Two Years into Taliban Rule, New Shocks Weaken Afghan Economy."

<sup>26</sup> Wazhma Sadat, "Why Sanctions Against the Taliban Aren't Working," *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/29/taliban-sanctions-act-us-afghanistan/>.

<sup>27</sup> Rehman, "Afghanistan's Parallel Crisis under the Taliban: Exploring the Limited Options."

<sup>28</sup> Lyla Schwartz, Zainab Hassanpoor, Hannah Lane and Elizabeth Klapheke, "Economic Constraints and Gendered Rules: Understanding Women's Perspectives of how Government-Imposed Restrictions Impact Women's Mental Health and Social Wellbeing across Afghanistan," *SSM-Mental Health* 6, no.2 (2024): 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2024.100327>.

<sup>29</sup> Belquis Ahmadi, Joyana Richer, Jill Baggerman, William Byrd and Scott Worden, "Where is Afghanistan Three Years into Taliban Rule?" *United States Institute of Peace*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/09/where-afghanistan-three-years-taliban-rule>.





However, in late 2022, they escalated these measures by issuing an edict banning women from attending universities altogether.<sup>30</sup> At the time, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that this decision would affect approximately 90,000 women. Beyond education, the Taliban also imposed severe limitations on women's participation in the workforce. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), female employment in 2022 was 25 percent lower than in mid-2021. Further exacerbating the situation, the Taliban prohibited women from working for various international NGOs. This led to the suspension of operations by organisations such as Save the Children and CARE, which relied heavily on female staff to deliver humanitarian assistance.<sup>31</sup>

In 2023, Afghanistan ranked last among 177 countries in the Women, Peace, and Security Index by Georgetown University, reflecting the devastating impact of the Taliban's policies on women's rights and inclusion. The Taliban continued to enforce non-inclusive measures. On 21 August 2024, they issued a 'vice and virtue' law that imposed further restrictions, including a ban on women's voices and faces in public, among other oppressive regulations.<sup>32</sup>

The Taliban's sweeping restrictions on women across various aspects of life have drawn widespread international condemnation and sparked local protests. The international community has repeatedly questioned how the Taliban intend to address governance challenges while excluding women from active participation in society. Despite these criticisms, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, has defended their policies, claiming that women are being provided with 'comfortable lives as per the provisions of Islamic Sharia.'<sup>33</sup> This assertion, however, starkly contrasts with the lived realities of Afghan women, who face severe limitations on education, employment, and public life.

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<sup>30</sup> Silija Thoms, "How the Taliban are Violating Women's Rights in Afghanistan," *DW*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-taliban-are-violating-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/a-66143514>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Afghan Women Endure Draconian Taliban, 23 Years after 9/11?" September 11, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/11/afghanistan-women-taliban-rights/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Afghan Women Being Provided 'Comfortable' Lives: Taliban Chief," *Al-Jazeera*, June 25, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/25/afghan-women-being-provided-comfortable-lives-taliban-chief>.



According to United Nations, the Taliban's treatment of women has cost them both international and domestic legitimacy. It has also made the Taliban's international recognition nearly impossible.<sup>34</sup> Currently, the Taliban's policies are not aligned with their obligation to comply with the human rights of women.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, in the past three years under the Taliban rule, press freedom has been severely curtailed. After assuming power, the Taliban launched strict crackdown against dissent from human rights activists, journalists, and members of civil society. Over 600 media outlets have been closed in this regard, and numerous journalists had to leave the country. According to the World Press Freedom Index 2024, Afghanistan dropped a further 26 points from the previous years and ranked 178 out of 180. While journalists are being compelled to make editorial decisions in fear, some also opt for self-censorship to appease the Taliban.<sup>36</sup>

Religious freedom for minorities in Afghanistan remains a critical concern for the international community. The Taliban, through various decrees, edicts, and official communications, have imposed severe restrictions on the religious practices of Afghan minorities. The Hazara Shia community, in particular, faces systematic persecution, including allegations of forced evictions by the Taliban. Taliban have been criticised for failing to protect the Hazara Shia from targeted attacks by ISIS-K. Other religious minorities, such as Christians, also face heightened scrutiny and governmental restrictions that severely impact their access to employment, education, and other essential services, exacerbating their marginalisation.<sup>37</sup>

### 4.3. Political Landscape

The Taliban have established complete dominance over Afghanistan's political landscape, with their supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, consolidating his

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<sup>34</sup> "Afghan Women Ban Makes Taliban Recognition Near 'Impossible': UN," *Al-Jazeera*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/22/afghan-women-ban-makes-taliban-recognition-near-impossible-un>.

<sup>35</sup> Qazi Zada, Sebghatullah, and Mohd Ziaolhaq Qazi Zada, "The Taliban and Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan: The Way Forward," *International Journal of Human Rights* (2024): 1-36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2369584>.

<sup>36</sup> Roshan Noorzai and Noshaba Ashna, "Afghanistan Third Worst in World for Press Freedom," *Voice of America*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-third-worst-in-world-for-press-freedom/7596697>.

<sup>37</sup> "Freedom Focus Report: Afghanistan's Christians Fight to Survive Under the Taliban," *Persecution.Org*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.persecution.org/2023/07/13/afghanistans-christians-fight-to-survive-under-the-taliban/>.



authority by systematically suppressing and sidelining dissenting voices. This centralisation of power has left little room for political pluralism or opposition, further entrenching the Taliban's authoritarian grip on governance.<sup>38</sup> Since August 2021, he had centralised his rule by issuing decrees and creating parallel institutions from his tightly-knit Kandhar office.<sup>39</sup> Contrary to their claims of forming an inclusive government, the Taliban are currently running a non-inclusive Pashtun-dominated government, in which, similar to the previous Islamic Emirate, power is concentrated in the hands of a top few religious leaders.

Afghanistan's current government is referred to as a 'caretaker set-up,' as the Taliban have yet to provide a clear timeline for transitioning to a permanent structure. A key reason for this delay appears to be the need to manage internal divisions within the Taliban ranks. Factional rivalries emerged after the fall of Kabul, as the focus shifted from fighting a common enemy to governing a fragmented country. These tensions were particularly evident during the formation of the cabinet, with competing factions vying for influential positions. Since August 2021, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, has repeatedly reshuffled provincial governors to address administrative inefficiencies and curb tendencies toward political patronage. This approach reflects an effort to maintain internal unity and assert centralised control, though it also underscores the challenges the Taliban face in transforming from an insurgent group to a functioning government.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the Taliban have taken a strong stance against political activities in the country. A day after marking their second anniversary of attaining control of Kabul, the Taliban banned all political parties. While announcing the decision, the justice minister, Abdul Hakim Sharraee, stated there was no Sharia basis for political activities.<sup>41</sup> This decision is equivalent to turning Afghanistan into a totalitarian state

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<sup>38</sup> Haroun Rahimi, "The Taliban in Government: A Grim New Reality is Settling In," *Al-Jazeera*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/23/taliban-in-government-a-grim-new-reality-is-settling-in>.

<sup>39</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Taliban's Three Years in Power and What Lies Ahead," *Brookings*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-talibans-three-years-in-power-and-what-lies-ahead>.

<sup>40</sup> "Mullah Hibatullah appoints New Governors and Corps Commanders in Several Taliban-Controlled Provinces," *BNN*, April, 2023, <https://bnn.network/breaking-news/mullah-hibatullah-appoints-new-governors-and-corps-commanders-in-several-taliban-controlled-provinces/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Ban Afghan Political Parties, Citing Sharia Violations," *Voice of America*, August 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-ban-afghan-political-parties-citing-sharia-violations/7228136.html>.



with almost no space for political entities other than the Taliban. Since then, the Taliban have intensified crackdown on rival Islamist parties. This approach reflects their broader strategy to consolidate their authority, further entrenching their governance model.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.4. Security Conundrum

Overall, the Taliban have tried establishing a general semblance of security. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2022, there was a general decrease in violence in the country.<sup>43</sup> However, the broad security landscape of Afghanistan is still inhabited by specific threats. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Unit's 2023 report identified three significant aspects of Afghanistan's security trend: the presence of regional and global terrorists, anti-Taliban resistance forces, rifts, and bifurcation in Taliban ranks.

Two types of terrorist groups are present in Afghanistan: pro-Taliban, i.e., TTP and al-Qaeda, and the other against Taliban, i.e., Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K).<sup>44</sup>

al-Qaeda increased its activities after the Taliban's takeover in Kabul and accelerated its messaging. Even though over the years, particularly following the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in a US drone strike in July 2022, the organisation's morale and operational capacity has been weakened,<sup>45</sup> a United Nations Security Council report published in July 2024 indicated that al-Qaeda had regrouped in Afghanistan and was aiming to conduct beyond-the-border attacks.<sup>46</sup>

Another terrorist group on which the Taliban enjoys leverage is Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Under the Taliban rule, TTP significantly expanded its operations and has revived its insurgency against Pakistan. TTP enjoys a comfortable presence in the eastern region of Afghanistan regarding material resources and recruits, which, in some instances, are also from the Afghan Taliban. The UN Monitoring Report in July

<sup>42</sup> Abubakar Siddiqui, "Taliban Clamps Down On Activities of Rival Islamist Parties," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-islamist-political-parties/32988314.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Amina Khan, "Interim Afghan Government in Power – Two Years On," *Institute of Strategic Studies*, Islamabad, August 28, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-interim-afghan-government-in-power-two-years-on/>.

<sup>44</sup> Mir, "Two Years Under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a Terrorist Safe Haven Once Again?"

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmad Mukhtar, "Afghanistan After 3 Years Of Taliban Rule: Women Silenced and Oppressed as ISIS and Al Qaeda Regroup," *CBS News*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-taliban-new-rules-women-rights-quashed-isis-al-qaeda-regroup-3-years/>.



2024 indicated that TTP had become the largest terror group in Afghanistan, getting support from both Afghan Taliban and some factions of al-Qaeda.<sup>47</sup>

Over the past three years, ISIS-K, which considers Khorasan province part of its Islamic State, has posed a significant challenge to the Taliban leadership. Notable attacks include the August 2021 bombing at Hamid Karzai International Airport, the assassination of a provincial governor in March 2023, and the bombing of a mosque later that year. According to a Pentagon assessment, Afghanistan is being used as a launching base by ISIS-K to carry forward attacks across the globe.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, ISIS-K has been involved in numerous mass casualty attacks against Pakistan over the past three years. One of the deadliest attacks by a terrorist group in Pakistan occurred on July 30, 2023, at a political rally in the Bajaur district near the Afghan border, resulting in approximately 54 casualties.<sup>49</sup> More recently, in October 2024, a suicide bombing at a mosque in Pakistan's Hangu district killed at least 40 people, further highlighting the escalating regional threat. While the Taliban have taken steps to mitigate the group's activities like the targeted killing of a senior ISIS-K leader involved in the August 2021 airport bombing,<sup>50</sup> persistent attacks underscore the ongoing challenge posed by ISIS-K to stability in the region and beyond.

Another security challenge in Afghanistan stems from the rivalry between the Taliban and the anti-Taliban faction known as the National Resistance Front (NRF), based in the Panjshir region north of Kabul. This rivalry dates back to the 1990s when Ahmed Shah Massoud led resistance efforts against the Taliban. Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the NRF, now led by Ahmed Shah's son, Ahmed Massoud, launched an offensive but was quickly overpowered by the Taliban. Although the NRF has since re-launched its fight, its scattered presence in Panjshir and lack of international support limit its ability to mount a full-scale offensive against the Taliban.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hassan Belal Zaidi, "TTP Now Largest Terror Group in Afghanistan," *Dawn News*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1845334>.

<sup>48</sup> "Instability in Afghanistan," *Council for Foreign Relations*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Palmer and Mackenzie Holtz, "The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-threat-pakistan-trends-and-scenarios>.

<sup>50</sup> Mir, "Two Years Under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a Terrorist Safe Haven Once Again?"

<sup>51</sup> Siddhant Kishore, "The National Resistance Front: A New Chapter in the Afghan War?" *South Asia Voices*, May 13, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/the-national-resistance-front-a-new-chapter-in-the-afghan-war/>.



#### 4.5. International Linkages

On the international front, the Taliban have struggled to attain recognition. Their rigid stance on key issues, including non-inclusive governance, anti-women policies, and inadequate counterterrorism efforts, has prevented regional and global actors from reaching a consensus on formal engagement with the regime. Tensions between the international community and the Taliban intensified after August 2021, as these concerns became increasingly apparent.<sup>52</sup>

Currently, the Taliban and the international community are experiencing a two-faceted dilemma.<sup>53</sup> The international community faces the dilemma of disassociating the provision of humanitarian aid from other political considerations. The intended aim of the sanctions regime against the Taliban was to pressure them into being more inclusive in governance. However, the Taliban have treaded on their path of non-inclusivity despite the consequence of international isolation. Now, the people of Afghanistan are the ones who are affected due to the absence of sufficient humanitarian aid. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban encountered the dilemma of attaining international recognition amid their resistance on the issues of civil liberties.

Despite the abovementioned scenario, diplomatic engagement between the world and the Taliban has been visible recently due to the compulsions of geopolitics. In their quest to integrate globally, the Taliban have participated in various international interactions and hosted foreign delegations. Although no government has formally recognised the Taliban government, many states are operating their embassies in Afghanistan, and many have also accepted diplomats appointed by the Afghan Taliban.

In the last week of July 2023, the US conducted two days of official talks with the Taliban in Doha, the first time since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The talks were held on human rights, drug trafficking, and the economy. Moreover, the US stated its openness to a technical-economic dialogue in the future.<sup>54</sup> This development

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<sup>52</sup> Graeme Smith and Ibraheem Bahiss, "The World Has No Choice But to Work With the Taliban," *Foreign Affairs*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/world-has-no-choice-work-taliban>.

<sup>53</sup> Rehman, "Afghanistan's Parallel Crisis under the Taliban."

<sup>54</sup> "Taliban, US Hold First Official Talks since Afghanistan Takeover," *Al-Jazeera*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/1/taliban-us-hold-first-official-talks-since-afghanistan-takeover>.



was seen in the context of China solidifying its bilateral relationship with the Afghan Taliban. For China, the central location of Afghanistan in the region holds value for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Besides, China has also previously shown an inclination to invest in the natural resources of Afghanistan that are worth USD 1 trillion.<sup>55</sup> China also became the first country to grant the de facto rulers the first international resource deal when it signed a 25-year oil extraction deal with the Taliban.<sup>56</sup> Notably, the Taliban achieved a significant diplomatic breakthrough in January 2024 when their ambassador was formally acknowledged by China.<sup>57</sup> In October 2024, Russia announced that a 'principal decision' had been made to remove Afghanistan's ruling Taliban from Moscow's list of terrorist organisations, signaling another potential shift.<sup>58</sup>

The strategic importance of Afghanistan has compelled regional and global powers to maintain avenues for bilateral relations with the Taliban. The Taliban, in turn, have leveraged negotiation skills honed during interactions with the US and other nations during the 2020 peace and withdrawal agreement in Qatar. Although excluded from the first UN-led Doha meeting in May 2023 and boycotting the second in February 2024, the Taliban participated in the third UN-led Doha meeting of special envoys in June 2024.<sup>59</sup> This participation emboldened their diplomatic standing, especially as discussions on their treatment of Afghan women were notably absent from the agenda.

However, on the regional front, the Taliban face a strained relationship with neighbouring Pakistan, one of the three states to recognise their previous rule over Afghanistan (1996-2001). The issue of TTP's resurgence, safe havens, and increased

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<sup>55</sup> Kelly Ng and Suranjana Tewari, "Afghanistan: Taliban Welcomes First New Chinese Ambassador Since Takeover," *BBC*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-66805404>.

<sup>56</sup> Ryosuke Hananda, "Taliban build Ties to U.S. Rivals with New China Oil Deal," *Nikkei Asia*, January 23, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Taliban-build-ties-to-U.S.-rivals-with-new-China-oil-deal2>.

<sup>57</sup> Khan, "Interim Afghan Government Three Years On."

<sup>58</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Envoy: 'Russian Leadership' Decides to Delist Taliban as Terrorist Group," *Voice of America*, October 5, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/envoy-russian-leadership-decides-to-delist-taliban-as-terrorist-group/7811394.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Ajwa Hijazi, "Future-Proofing Pakistan's Foreign Policy in an Evolving Geopolitical Context," (paper, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad, 2024), <https://casstt.com/future-proofing-pakistansforeign-policy-in-an-evolvinggeopolitical-context/>.



contentions on the border are the prevalent points of disgruntlement between the two states.<sup>60</sup>

There have also been significant ups and downs in the bilateral relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran closely observed the unfolding of Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and maintained civil relations despite their concern about the rise of the Sunni extremist group in its neighbourhood. However, a deadly border clash over water flow restriction to Iran occurred between the two states in May 2023 which cast a shadow of scepticism on their relationship.<sup>61</sup> There have been other serious challenges like issues of immigrants, drug trafficking and smuggling. While on the trade front, over three years, both countries have signed several memorandums of cooperation regarding trade and transit, especially about the Chabahar Port. In the first three months of 2024, Afghanistan had a trade volume of around USD 695 million with Iran.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, India has sought to strengthen its presence in Afghanistan over the years, primarily to counter Pakistan's influence in the region. However, like many other nations, India shut down its embassy in Kabul following the Taliban's takeover in 2021, reflecting the broader uncertainty surrounding the new regime. However, over the past three years, it has attempted to maintain a balancing relationship with the de facto rulers, where the latter also requested India to re-invest in the country's urban development sector and restart work on stalled infrastructure projects.<sup>63</sup> In its quest to have critical access to Afghanistan's mineral resources and access to transit trade with Central Asia, India has continued its engagement with Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Abid Hussain, "Taliban's Ties with Pakistan Fraying Amid Mounting Security Concerns," *Al-Jazeera*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/17/talibans-ties-with-pakistan-fraying-amid-mounting-security-concerns>.

<sup>61</sup> Sayed Basim Raza and Ureeda Khan, "2 Years of Taliban Diplomacy," *Diplomat*, August 17, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/2-years-of-taliban-diplomacy/>.

<sup>62</sup> Vali Kaleji, "Iran-Afghanistan Relations under Iran's New President," *Manara Magazine*, September 12, 2024, <https://manaramagazine.org/2024/09/iran-afghanistan-relations-under-irans-new-president/>.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Storey, "India's Delicate Dance with the Taliban," *The Lowy Institute*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/india-s-delicate-dance-taliban>.

<sup>64</sup> Akmal Dawi, "US Unfazed as India Engages Taliban," *Voice of America*, March 28, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-unfazed-as-india-engages-taliban/7547600>.





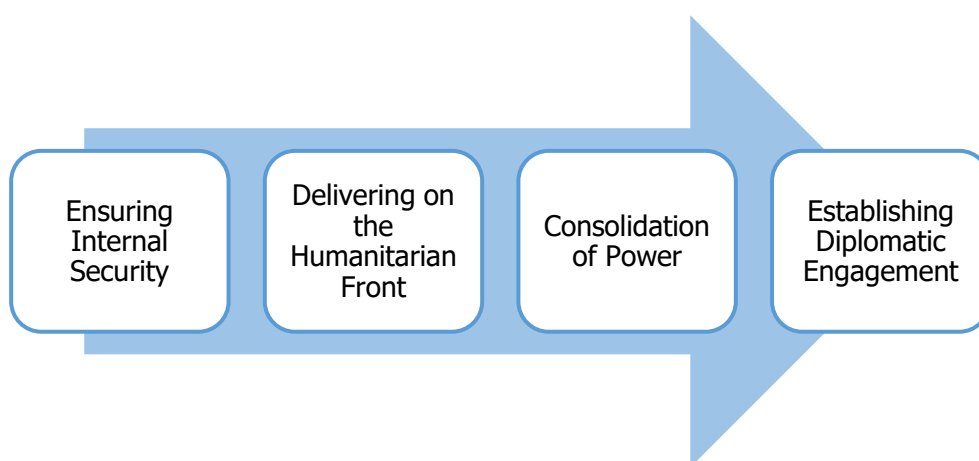
## 5. Assessing Sustainability of Taliban Rule

For the Taliban, the governance landscape in Afghanistan has proved markedly different from their previous rule. The advent of social media, the rapid flow of information, and Afghanistan's evolved socio-political dynamics presented new challenges. The Taliban's rigid and authoritarian posture, characteristic of their earlier rule, was unlikely to gain domestic or international acceptance in this changed environment. Initially, they projected a 'new demeanor' that appeared to embrace inclusivity and adaptability to contemporary times. However, over time, these claims have largely failed to materialise.

An analysis of these governance dynamics reveals that the Taliban have managed to sustain their de facto rule despite the absence of international recognition. However, they have broadly failed to protect the civil liberties of the Afghan population. Domestically, the Taliban exert unchallenged dominance over Afghanistan's governance and political landscape, with approximately 23 armed groups, including political factions, posing no significant threat to their authority.

The critical question remains: how sustainable is the Taliban's rule in the face of Afghanistan's current socio-political realities? The longevity of their regime will likely hinge on four main factors:

**Figure 3: Factors Affecting the Sustainability of Taliban Rule**



**Source:** Author's own.

### 5.1. Ensuring Internal Security

Since August 2021, the Taliban have achieved a reduction in overall violence in Afghanistan. For the first time since 2004, no conflict has escalated to the level of



outright war. Furthermore, the Taliban have managed to cultivate a general perception of improved security. By December 2022, two-thirds of Afghan households reported feeling safer compared to the previous year, indicating some level of public acknowledgement of this relative stability.<sup>65</sup>

Conversely, as discussed before, a significant challenge for the Taliban remains the persistent insurgency by ISIS-K. Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, ISIS-K has waged relentless attacks against the de facto government's infrastructure. Moreover, the group has broadened its targets to include Pakistani, Chinese, and Russian interests within Afghanistan, signaling its intent to destabilise the region. The continued activities of ISIS-K not only undermine the Taliban's ability to maintain domestic security but also tarnish their international credibility, highlighting their failure to safeguard foreign missions and interests within Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup> While the Taliban managed to significantly reduce major ISIS-K attacks in 2023, the group has shown resurgence in subsequent months.<sup>67</sup> A key challenge for the Taliban moving forward will be to consolidate their gains in law and order and develop a comprehensive strategy to curtail ISIS-K's capacity to launch high-profile attacks both within Afghanistan and abroad. Effectively addressing this threat will be critical for the Taliban to reinforce their domestic legitimacy and improve their standing on the international stage.

## 5.2. Delivering on the Humanitarian Front

Among the challenges faced by the Taliban, service delivery remains on top. While the Taliban have surprised observers with their robust revenue generation system, they have disappointed both domestic and international stakeholders by retracting from their pledges of inclusivity. However, the most pressing issue for the de facto government remains the deteriorating human security situation, which international watchdogs warn is likely to worsen further.

In December 2022, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2664, providing exemptions to asset freeze measures to facilitate humanitarian work

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<sup>65</sup> Khan, "Interim Afghan Government in Power."

<sup>66</sup> "IntelBrief: Islamic State Khorasan Remains a Stubborn Threat in Afghanistan," *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-march-29/>.

<sup>67</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban Counter-Terrorism and Resurgence Prospects," *ICCT*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>.



by select international organisations in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> Despite this initiative, it has had little impact in alleviating the severe humanitarian crisis.<sup>69</sup> According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), by May 2023, Afghanistan had become the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with the number of people requiring assistance increasing from 28.3 million at the start of the year to 28.8 million.<sup>70</sup> By 2024, the estimated number of people in need of humanitarian aid has decreased slightly to 23.7 million.<sup>71</sup> However, funding remains critically insufficient, with only 25 percent of the required aid for humanitarian response secured so far this year. This funding shortfall underscores the ongoing struggle to address Afghanistan's mounting humanitarian needs effectively.

Amid rising poverty, escalating food insecurity, and the absence of international recognition, the Taliban face a critical challenge in addressing the humanitarian needs of the Afghan population. Meeting these needs is unlikely without substantial international assistance, which remains severely constrained due to the Taliban's restrictive policies, particularly those targeting women.

Addressing Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis is not only a moral imperative but also a key factor in the sustainability of the Taliban's rule. To achieve this, the Taliban must devise a pragmatic plan to engage with the international community, fostering an environment that facilitates relief operations while respecting mutual concerns. However, the ongoing ideological standoff between the Taliban and global actors leaves the Afghan people bearing the brunt of this impasse, further deepening the crisis. An overview of the last two years of Taliban rule reveals that the group has focused on governing in a self-reliant manner despite numerous challenges.<sup>72</sup> While this approach has ensured the survival of their de facto rule, it has failed to shield the general public from widespread poverty and food insecurity.

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<sup>68</sup> United Nations, "Adopting Resolution 2664 (2022), Security Council Approves Humanitarian Exemption to Asset Freeze Measures Imposed by United Nations Sanctions Regimes," December 9, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15134.doc.htm>.

<sup>69</sup> Wazhma Sadat, "Why Sanctions Against the Taliban Aren't Working," *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/29/taliban-sanctions-act-us-afghanistan/>.

<sup>70</sup> Humanitarian Update, "Aid Agencies Release a Revised Response for June to December," *OCHA*, May 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-update-may-2023>.

<sup>71</sup> "Three Years On: Afghans Are Paying the Price for the World's Neglect," *NRC*, August 13, 2024, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/august/3-years-neglect-in>.

<sup>72</sup> Romain Malejacq and Niels Terpstra, "Why International Leverage Has Failed With the Taliban," *Lawfare*, July 30, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/why-international-leverage-has-failed-with-the-taliban>.



### 5.3. Consolidation of Power

Another critical factor influencing the sustainability of Taliban rule is their ability to resolve internal disputes and consolidate their dominance across the country. Despite their centralised appearance, the Taliban's internal functioning is shrouded in secrecy, with increasing indications of factionalism and parallel structures of power.

The current political landscape in Afghanistan echoes previous instances of divided governance, such as the contentious relationship between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, which led to accusations of running parallel administrations. According to insider accounts, by 2023, the Presidential Palace in Kabul had expanded to encompass four neighbouring buildings, each representing a separate sphere of influence. One building is designated for the Prime Minister, another for the Deputy Prime Minister, while the remaining are controlled by Mullah Baradar and Yaqoob in one, and Sirajuddin Haqqani in the other. This fragmentation within the Taliban's ranks underscores significant challenges in maintaining a unified command structure. If left unresolved, these internal divisions could undermine their governance capacity and erode their authority over the country.<sup>73</sup>

Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Hibatullah Akhundzada has exercised absolute control over the government, frequently using his authority to veto cabinet decisions. However, persistent reports point to growing tensions between the Kandahar-based leadership, centered around Akhundzada, and the Kabul-based leadership. In his effort to consolidate power, Akhundzada has relied heavily on his Kandahar-based affiliates, effectively centralising governance. Reflecting patterns from their previous rule, significant Taliban offices remain in Kandahar, and most major decrees in recent years have been issued from there. This centralisation not only underscores Akhundzada's grip on power but also highlights the geographical and political divide within the Taliban's leadership, raising questions about the regime's internal cohesion and long-term stability.<sup>74</sup>

This situation has fueled dissent within the Taliban's ranks. Key figures within the government have publicly criticised the concentration of power, calling for greater

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<sup>73</sup> Ahmed Ali, "Faith and Faction: Internal Conflicts Among Afghan Taliban," *Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7681>.

<sup>74</sup> "Taliban Slam 'Baseless and Biased' UN Report About Rifts in Their Ranks," *Diplomat*, June 12, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/taliban-slam-baseless-and-biased-un-report-about-rifts-in-their-ranks/>.



inclusivity and responsiveness to public demands.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, supporters of the leadership continue to emphasise obedience. However, internal divisions are increasingly visible. In a recent visit to the northwestern provinces, his first since 2021, Hibabullah Akhundzada urged unity and discipline among Taliban members to address these growing rifts.<sup>76</sup>

While reports of dissent within the Taliban ranks are eagerly highlighted by international media, the likelihood of significant political upheaval remains low for now. The Taliban's government has, thus far, demonstrated resilience against disruptions. However, this stability is not guaranteed indefinitely.<sup>77</sup> A cohesive leadership would better position the Taliban to achieve their domestic objectives and advance their diplomatic goals on the international stage.

#### 5.4. Establishing Diplomatic Engagement and Trust

Since the fall of Kabul, the Taliban's international relations and regional diplomacy have been shaped by sanctions, widespread international condemnation, and collective non-recognition by the global community. Despite these constraints, the Taliban have actively engaged with regional players such as China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Iran. According to their spokesperson, Afghanistan maintains official relations with these states, evidenced by the presence of consulates, embassies, and ongoing trade activities.<sup>78</sup> Despite the absence of official recognition, the Taliban have demonstrated diplomatic agility in attracting global attention. Recent developments, such as talks with international actors in Doha, the appointment of a Chinese envoy in Kabul, and the operation of consulates in several countries, highlight their efforts to engage with the world.

However, achieving full international legitimacy will require more than symbolic gestures. To secure official recognition, the Taliban must address global concerns by altering their authoritarian stance, particularly on issues of civil liberties, inclusivity

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Watkins, "What's Next for the Taliban's Leadership Amid Rising Dissent?" *United States Institute for Peace*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/whats-next-talibans-leadership-amid-rising-dissent>.

<sup>76</sup> Arshad Mehmood, "Taliban Leader Meets Key Commanders in First Northern Visit Since 2021," *Medialine*, October 9, 2024, <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/taliban-leader-meets-key-commanders-in-first-northern-visit-since-2021/>.

<sup>77</sup> Watkins, "What's Next for the Taliban's Leadership Amid Rising Dissent?"

<sup>78</sup> Riyazat Butt, "The Taliban Believe their Rule is Open-Ended and Don't Plan to Lift the Ban on Female Education," *AP News*, August 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-education-5bc5477a8e4599ac431e4d2e27ebaf85>.



and terrorism. The sustainability of their rule ultimately hinges on the extent of pragmatism and flexibility they are willing to adopt in pursuit of international acceptance.<sup>79</sup>

Afghanistan's instability is not only detrimental to its own future but also poses significant challenges to its neighbours. Pakistan offers a particularly complex and illustrative case study of the Taliban's diplomatic capabilities. Afghanistan's internal instability has deeply impacted Pakistan, primarily through spillover effects such as the ongoing refugee crisis<sup>80</sup> and the resurgence of terrorism, particularly TTP.<sup>81</sup> Initially, Pakistan welcomed the Taliban's ascent to power, hoping for greater regional stability. However, over the past three years, the Taliban's inability, or unwillingness, to address Pakistan's legitimate concerns about the use of Afghan soil by the TTP has strained relations. This failure has hindered the potential for cooperative ties between the two states, highlighting a critical gap in the Taliban's diplomatic strategy.

The discussion above highlights a mixed record for the Taliban on the diplomatic front. On one hand, they have managed to establish de facto diplomatic relations with several states, despite facing a stringent international stance. On the other hand, they have failed to capitalise on the opportunity to build strong bilateral relations with their immediate neighbour, Pakistan, reflecting a significant shortcoming in their regional diplomacy.

## 6. Conclusion

When the Taliban assumed power in 2021, the world was uncertain about their approach to governance in Afghanistan. An analysis of their rule since mid-2021 reveals a mixed record of successes and failures. While they have managed to ensure the survival of their government and achieved bare minimum economic stabilisation, their inability to provide inclusive governance rooted in civil liberties and tackle cross-border terrorism has been a significant shortfall. This failure has perpetuated their

<sup>79</sup> Adeel Irfan, Aneel Waqas Khan and Javed Iqbal, "Contemporary Challenges and Taliban Regime in Afghanistan," *VFAST Transactions on Education and Social Sciences* 11, no.2 (April-June 2023): 20-27.

<sup>80</sup> Zia-ur-Rehman, "Afghans Flee to Pakistan. An Uncertain Future Awaits," *New York Times*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/world/asia/pakistan-afghanistan-refugees.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "Analysis: How TTP's Resurgence Came to Pass," *Dawn News*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1763906/analysis-how-ttts-resurgence-came-to-pass>.



global non-recognition, leaving the Taliban's rule constrained by both domestic and international challenges.

The sustainability of the Taliban's rule is closely tied to their ability to deliver essential services to the Afghan population, resolve internal divisions to establish a unified government, and pursue effective diplomacy to gain international recognition. Furthermore, their long-term stability depends on addressing the growing concerns about cross-border and transnational terrorism, particularly the activities of groups like ISIS-K and TTP, which undermine both regional and international security. Achieving these goals will require a pragmatic approach from the Taliban, balancing their rigid ideological standpoints with the realities of governance and global engagement. Failure to address these interconnected challenges risks further isolating the regime and exacerbating Afghanistan's instability, with significant implications for the region and beyond.

Afghanistan's history has been marked by persistent turbulence, characterised by conflict, civil war, and internal discord. Throughout these struggles, the Afghan people have borne the brunt as collateral damage. Today, they once again find themselves caught in the middle of a standoff between the Taliban regime and the international community over sanctions. The continuation of this impasse threatens to deepen the already dire humanitarian crisis. This crisis, however, is not inevitable. Its resolution depends on the willingness of both the current set-up under the Taliban regime and the global community to steer their differences and collaborate to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the Afghan people for whom peace has remained an elusive dream for decades.









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