



Indian Council
of World Affairs



JANUARY 2023

THE “CRISIS” IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE TALIBAN REGIME

DR. ANWESHA GHOSH





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The “Crisis” in Afghanistan and the Taliban Regime

First Published, January 2023

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ISBN: 978-93-83445-71-4

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ABSTRACT



Afghanistan's recent history has been punctuated with several instances of regime change; and such incidents have caused political 'crisis' in the country, time and again. The immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Afghan Republic in 2021, witnessed a repeat of the same. After waging a twenty-year insurgency, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. The developments that followed, paved the way for a severe, multi-faceted and interlocking humanitarian, economic and political crises in Afghanistan. In view of the most recent regime change and crises in Afghanistan, this Sapru House Paper looks at the earlier attempts at state formation in Afghanistan and in the process identifies the major forces that have tried to influence the earlier regime changes in the country over the past century. The paper then turns its focus to the post-2001 United States (US) led era in Afghanistan and engages with the major political developments that led to the disintegration of the Afghan Republic in August 2021. The third and fourth segments focus on the present Taliban regime and the immediate challenges faced by Afghanistan respectively. The paper then looks into history to consider how secure the Taliban's second stint in power might be. It ends by discussing three plausible medium-to-long term scenarios for Afghanistan, which may have a concurrent presence over the next few years

Keywords: Afghanistan, State-formation, Taliban, US- withdrawal, crisis, plausible scenarios.

INTRODUCTION



After waging a 20-year insurgency, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021. The US military withdrew from the country on 30 August, a day ahead of schedule, ending its 20-year military presence in Afghanistan. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a key ally of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, also decided to leave the country around the same time. With the departure of Western troops, 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 Former US President Barack Obama had once described Afghanistan as “a war of necessity”, a war the America needed to win. President Joe Biden, despite America’s humiliating defeat, insisted that withdrawing US and NATO forces was the right decision for putting an end to Washington’s longest war. He argued that Americans should not be fighting wars and dying on behalf of those who lack the will to do so themselves. Although technically America’s war in Afghanistan had ended at the immediate aftermath of the departure of the US troops, there was little clarity

Afghanistan’s history has been punctuated with several instances of regime change, and those incidents have paved the way for political “crisis” in the country, time and again. The immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 witnessed a repeat of the same.

1 “Will There Be Women in the Taliban’s New Government?” *BBC News*, September 1, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMgr7nkFLjo> (Accessed April 12, 2022).

as to what the future holds for the Afghan nation or for some of the key protagonists, the USA and the Taliban. At that point, it seemed much of Washington's foreign policy establishment was finally coming to grips with the idea that these exhausting, expensive wars in the Greater Middle East are not only costly—\$6.4 trillion and counting—but are also weakening US standing in the world, especially vis-à-vis its strategic competitors, China and Russia.²

Afghanistan's history has been punctuated with several instances of regime change, and those incidents have paved the way for political "crisis" in the country, time and again. The immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 witnessed a repeat of the same. With the disintegration of the Islamic Republic and return of the Taliban in Kabul, there was chaos all around. Soon a desperate scramble to leave Afghanistan started. The suddenness of the developments made common Afghans anxious and fearful about their future and the future of the people who will be left behind. As the world grappled with several questions about what life would be under the Taliban, there were protests and bombings—a sense of despair and gloom engulfed the country. Amidst all this, the new rulers of Afghanistan managed to put forward an "interim government", which was seen taking actions reminiscent of their brutal rule of the late 1990s.

Following US withdrawal from Afghanistan, billions of dollars in Afghan central bank reserves and international development aid

2 Marwan Bishara. "What's Next for the US, the Taliban and Afghanistan?" Al Jazeera, August 19, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/19/whats-next-for-the-us-taliban-and-afghanistan> (Accessed 12.04.2022).

were frozen to prevent it from falling into the Taliban's hands. These developments triggered and paved the way for severe, multifaceted and interlocking humanitarian, economic and political crises in Afghanistan. Although in the course of the past 1 year, the international community has attempted to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan, the coveted prize of "formal recognition" of the new regime by the international community has not come the Taliban's way. Observers, both within and outside Afghanistan, have been wondering about the direction the country would head from here. The state of anarchy in the immediate aftermath of the disintegration of the Afghan Republic triggered widespread anxiety within the international community as they were wary about the potential ramifications of a volatile Afghanistan for their respective countries.

In view of the most recent instance of regime change in Afghanistan and the multiple crises that ensued, this Sapru House Paper looks at the earlier attempts at state formation in Afghanistan and in the process identifies the major forces that have tried to influence the earlier regime changes in the country over the past century. The paper then turns its focus to the post-2001 US-led era in Afghanistan and engages with the major political developments that paved the way for the disintegration of the Afghan Republic in August 2021. The third and fourth segments focus on the present Taliban regime and the immediate challenges faced by Afghanistan, respectively. The paper then looks into history to consider how secure the Taliban's second stint in power might be. It ends by discussing three medium- to long-term scenarios for Afghanistan, which may have a concurrent presence over the next few years.

1. THE “CRISIS” IN AFGHANISTAN: CONTESTATIONS OVER STATE FORMATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



It is difficult to understand when and where to begin when it comes to discussing the “crisis” in Afghanistan: Which crisis are we talking about? What is the reference point of the beginning of that crisis? Was it only political crisis that accompanied regime change in Afghanistan or was it accompanied by other forms of crisis? Is there any common thread that connects the recent and earlier crises? This paper attempts to engage with some of these questions as it looks at several attempts of state formation in Afghanistan before focusing on the most recent attempt. The first segment of the paper, by this description, tries to engage with one-century-old crises of state building in Afghanistan, but it does that only in order to contextualize the most recent crisis. The detailed analysis of factors that led to the regime changes in the past and the nature of crisis that followed are beyond the scope of this paper.

The crisis in Afghanistan has had a cyclical nature. The political developments of the past hundred years indicate that Afghanistan’s crisis had a chronic element to it and kept recurring and re-emerging within a gap of almost 10 or 20 years. While discussing the attempts of state building in the context of Afghanistan, the current section

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identifies four factors and forces that have been competing to create a state in Afghanistan, namely: (1) the constitutional movements since 1919 that attempted to build the Afghan state at various points in history; (2) the attempts by external powers to create and control a state through their proxies; (3) the attempts of the Islamists from the late 19th century to the present to form a state; and (4) struggles and contestations of different ethnic groups (especially, the Pashtuns and the *Farsiwan*, that is, the Persian speaking population) over the identity of the Afghan state. If one studies the history of Afghanistan from the late 19th century till the present day, one will witness that the mentioned forces—independently, as well as in collaboration with one another—have tried to influence the form and identity of the Afghan state in the course of the past century.

Attempts at State Formation

Afghanistan stands as an “excellent case” with which to explore “weak state syndrome”.³ Several factors, historical, geo-political, ethnographic, political and economic, are responsible for making it a weak as well as a conflict-prone state. Located at a crucial geo-strategic position, Afghanistan is at the crossroads of a region that has always invited contest between neighbours—the Central Asian Republics to the north and west, Pakistan to the south and east, Iran to the west, and China and India to the further east. Afghans have not been strangers to foreign invasions. Since the third century AD, they have been invaded by the Arabs, Iranians, Turks and Mongols. Czarist Russia and imperial Britain played out the “Great Game” of

3 Larry P. Goodson. *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taleban* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 12.

seeking ultimate control of the buffer lands of the Afghans, and later the country was witness to the Cold War rivalry being played out there. Apart from its geo-political location, the rugged topography isolates it internationally, magnifies the distance between the people and the state and is partially responsible for its lack of economic development. Afghanistan's population is also divided by deep and multifaceted cleavages along ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, tribal and racial lines. Afghans have also been accustomed to power struggles amongst themselves in their own homeland and have largely resisted radical reforms, which they felt did not conform to their traditions and belief systems. All these factors have combined to help sustain Afghanistan as a "weak state" that has witnessed a number of "crises" in its recent and not so distant past.

Premodern states or authorities in the form of dynastic rules, empires and kingdoms have existed in the region for centuries. After the arrival of colonialism, the political structure and the cultural mosaic of this common civilizational sphere were radically changed with the introduction and imposition of the Euro-centric national state system and the ideology of nationalism.⁴ Contemporary Afghanistan was formed as a "modern state" during the reign of Amir Abdurrahman (from Barakzai Pashtun tribe) in the 1880s, as a result of rivalries between British and Russian Empires, and particularly with the support that Amir received from the British Empire.⁵ Afghan scholars like Yakub Ibrahimy have argued that the colonial powers empowered the Pashtun elite and provided them with

4 Yakub Ibrahimy. "State Formation in Afghanistan: A Theoretical and Political History," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 38 (2018), pp. 172-174.

5 Ibrahimy, Op.cit.



ideological, organizational, financial and coercive resources to rule over an ethnically diverse and heterogeneous society. The Pashtun-dominated Afghan state subordinated other ethnic groups of the country and constructed an official discourse, and that discourse converging with the colonial knowledge attempted to naturalize and historicize the formation of the Pashtun-dominated state.

While talking about earlier attempts at state formation in Afghanistan, it is important to understand the significance of the Durand Line. Named after Sir Mortimer Durand, the origins of the same can be traced back to the “Great Game” of colonial competition between Great Britain and Czarist Russia in the 19th century. Afghanistan, historically situated at the crossroads between different Persian, Central Asian and South Asian polities, emerged as the main staging point of this Great Game of colonial expansion. The Durand Line, delineated in 1893, divided the Hindu Kush into Afghan and British spheres of influence, in the process dividing the homeland of different Pashtun tribes. Although Pashtuns continued to remain the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, a larger number of Pashtuns remained in Pakistan—a country that emerged after the partition of the British India in 1947.

The border-drawing process occurred arbitrarily, paying no heed to whether the border would divide communities in the region or whether the topology of the Hindu Kush would allow for an actual enforcement of this border. Making things worse, the Afghan and British negotiators used different maps that were insufficiently sized, creating immense ambiguity as to where the border was

The negotiations surrounding the Durand Line ultimately raise ethical and practical concerns. The border was drawn without input from the communities inhabiting these areas, and the arbitrary division of tribal communities from the start socially delegitimized the Durand Line as a political boundary.

(theoretically) located.⁶ The negotiations surrounding the Durand Line ultimately raise ethical and practical concerns. The border was drawn without input from the communities inhabiting these areas, and the arbitrary division of tribal communities from the start socially delegitimized the Durand Line as a political boundary. The mapping process moreover created significant ambiguity as to where precisely the border lied. Most Pashtuns have perceived this border as arbitrary and coerced, and the Durand Line has emerged as perhaps the most defining issue in relations between Islamabad and Kabul. The drawing of the Durand Line ultimately served as the conclusion of the British attempts to consolidate control over the Hindu Kush to contain Russian expansionism into South Asia. An important component of the negotiations and the ultimate agreement between Durand and Abdur Rahman Khan are the formal signatories of the Durand Agreement. On the Afghan side, it was Abdur Rahman Khan in his role as Amir who signed the agreement. In the subsequent decades, this has motivated the argument that the Durand Line cannot be considered an international boundary as the agreement was struck by the Amir personally, not by the

6 S. K. Lambah. "The Durand Line." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2021), pp. 42–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45341803>

The preliminary foundation for a national state was laid when Afghanistan gained independence by relinquishing the British protectorate status after the Anglo-Afghan Treaty in 1919, under the leadership of King Amanullah.

Emirate of Afghanistan.⁷ Pakistan, however, has insisted that the Durand Line constitutes a legal international boundary separating the two countries, a claim that successive regimes in Afghanistan (including the Taliban) have rejected.

Although the rise and development of a modern state started in mid-19th century, the state did not possess a national character. The preliminary foundation for a national state was laid when Afghanistan gained independence by relinquishing the British protectorate status after the Anglo-Afghan Treaty in 1919, under the leadership of King Amanullah. One of his major programmes was the modernization of the country. One of the foremost attempts of creation of a modern state in Afghanistan was seen in the form of a constitutional movement under Amanullah Khan. Amanullah Khan launched a plethora of political, social and economic reforms, and in 1923, the state promulgated one of the earliest constitutions in the Islamic world. King Amanullah was fascinated by the cultural and social developments of European countries, and he tried to build Afghanistan into a modern state and did that by mechanically emulating the European development model. He introduced a number of social reforms that included complete emancipation of women, introduction of monogamy, compulsory education for both

7 Ibid.

sexes and the separation of religion from politics and the state.⁸ His reforms hampered the interests of many social strata within and outside the state apparatus, especially feudal landowners. Deprived of their privilege, the feudal landowners and highest religious circles were engaged in instigating public opinion against the state under the pretext that the state violated Islamic laws and traditions. The opposition of the feudal lords and conservative religious leaders eventually paved the way for a political crisis, when in 1929 Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik, known as *Bache-Saqaw* (the water carrier's son) organized a group of armed men and launched a major assault on Kabul to overthrow King Amanullah and establish an Islamic state in the country. King Amanullah fled to Kandahar and then to Italy and sought asylum there.⁹

Habibullah's short rule collapsed because he could not offer a policy of social development that would appeal to a wide spectrum of the population nor was he in a position to consolidate his rule. The situation paved the way for the end of his 9 months of rule and the rise of General Mohammad Nadir. To legitimize the state and his rule as the head of state, King Nadir promoted Islam as a state religion. He also used Islam to draw people behind him but portrayed Habibullah as a bandit of Tajik ethnicity who sieved the throne from the Pashtuns.¹⁰

8 Ibid.

9 F. R. Farid. *The Modernization of Afghanistan*, cited in *State Revolution and Superpowers in Afghanistan* (New York, London: Praeger, 1990).

10 Ludwig W. Adamec. *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (University of Arizona Press, 1975), pp. 177–178.



Typically, in Afghan history, the transition phase between one king and another has been tumultuous, with the only exception of the succession of Zahir Shah and that was because the true administrative powers rested with his uncles, Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim (1930–1946) and Shah Mahmood (1946–1953).

In 1930, King Nadir called a *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly of Tribal elders) to endorse the new constitution of Afghanistan and to confirm him as the king of Afghanistan. Apart from defining the obligations of the king, it further stipulated that all future kings of Afghanistan must be of Pashtun ethnicity and of Hanafi School of Islam.¹¹ Since King Nadir seized power with the help of the Pashtun tribes, he exempted them from paying taxes and from serving in the armed forces. He relied on these tribes for consolidation of his rule and pursued a policy of “divide and conquer”, pitting one ethnic group against the other to perpetuate their instability and then prevent them from organizing an uprising against him.¹² In 1933, King Nadir was assassinated by a supporter of King Amanullah, and he was succeeded by his 19-year-old son Mohammad Zahir.

Typically, in Afghan history, the transition phase between one king and another has been tumultuous, with the only exception of the succession of Zahir Shah and that was because the true administrative powers rested with his uncles, Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim (1930–1946) and Shah Mahmood (1946–1953). They tried to uphold Nadir Shah’s vision for a slow-paced

11 Hafizullah Emadi. *State Revolution and Superpowers in Afghanistan* (New York, London: Praeger, 1990), p. 7.

12 Ibid.

The economic, political and social crises that encapsulated the country on one hand and the struggles of various social strata within the state apparatus on the other, hastened the crisis of legitimation of the state.

modernization programme, which would not upset the traditional elements of the society. During his reign, the dominant religious class of *Ulamas* was in a very powerful position due to their opposition to Amanullah; thus, for the legitimacy, the regime had to secure their approval. They did this by giving the religious element a large degree of influence over civic and criminal laws. During Zahir Shah's period, the state modernized and equipped the army and police force not only for the purpose of defending the country against foreign invasion but also for suppressing opposition and internal resistance. The policy of building a national ideology for the state was formulated in 1936 when the state tried to declare Pashto as the official language of the country.

In order to give the state a "democratic shield", a new constitution was introduced in 1964 that accorded the Persian language equal status to Pashto and nominally allowed the establishment of political parties. During the constitutional period (1964–1973), four prime ministers were appointed, but none could actually tackle the overwhelming impact of the World War II, which brought the termination of financial and technical aid to Afghanistan. The economic, political and social crises that encapsulated the country on one hand and the struggles of various social strata within the state apparatus on the other, hastened the crisis of legitimation of

During the Communist period (1978–1992), there was a growing tension between the traditionalists and those urban elites influenced by modern ideas.

the state. This crisis eventually paved the way for the takeover of the state by Mohammad Daoud and the proclamation of Afghanistan as a Republic in 1973. In 1977, a new constitution for the Republic was approved, which was endorsed by Daoud Khan, in yet another attempt to build a state through a constitutional way.

The competition of the “Cold War” brought a sizable quantity of development assistance from the USA and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to Afghanistan with the hope of winning the country to their side. During the Communist period (1978–1992), there was a growing tension between the traditionalists and those urban elites influenced by modern ideas. The latter had access to education and concepts of society that transcended both the local village-based hierarchies and those of Islamic clergy, leading to growing tensions between traditionalists and modernizers. The Soviet-backed government started to implement socialist programmes by issuing a series of eight decrees, including land reform decree without much regard to consensus and social conventions.¹³ In 1979, in response to the increasing fears of Islamic resistance both within Afghanistan and in the newly declared Islamic Republic of Iran, the USSR intervened in the country in support of the Leftist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan

13 Raja Anwar. *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A First Hand Account* (London and New York: Verso, 1988).

Afghanistan and Central Asia more generally, long subject to imperial designs, came to feature prominently on the world political state at the height of Cold War as the USSR became entangled in conflict between the Marxist regime of PDPA and the predominant Islamist rebel force—the *Mujahideen*.

(PDPA) government demonstrating a blatant example of an external power’s attempt to create and control a state through its proxies. Thus, Afghanistan and Central Asia more generally, long subject to imperial designs, came to feature prominently on the world political state at the height of Cold War as the USSR became entangled in conflict between the Marxist regime of PDPA and the predominant Islamist rebel force—the *Mujahideen*.

From late 1979 till February 1989, the Soviet military forces remained in Afghanistan, a period that was also marked by fierce resistance from the *Mujahideen* who were mainly financed and equipped by the USA, the various Gulf States, the Pakistani Intelligence Agency—the ISI, as well as by China and Iran.¹⁴ At this point, the USA supported the *Mujahideen* whom they regarded as “freedom fighters” despite they being Islamic militants. Osama Bin Laden was among those who received US assistance, as were many of those who later supported the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹⁵ For a decade, the Soviet troops remained bogged down in Afghanistan while

14 Arpita Basu Roy. *Contemporary Afghanistan: Conflict and Peace Building* (Har-ananad Publications, 2010).

15 David Seddon. “Imperial Designs: A Deep History of Afghanistan,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2003), p. 191.



thousands of tons of arms crossed from Pakistan into Afghanistan. These arms were bought with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Saudi Arabian funds from the USA, Britain, China, Egypt and Turkey among others.¹⁶ The *Mujahideen* were fed, cared for and supplied with every necessity and were recruited from among thousands of refugees who took refuge in neighbouring Pakistan. Some 3 million Afghan refugees settled in Pakistan and 2 million in Iran. From this period onwards conflict-displaced Afghans constituted one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world, and subsequent regime changes (and political crisis that followed) in the country kept increasing the number of Afghans seeking refuge in a foreign country. William Maley has pointed out that the war in Afghanistan produced a multilayered destruction of politics, economy and society in ways which remain massively apparent at the beginning of a new century.¹⁷ The process of disintegration of the Afghan state started during the war in the 1980s but accentuated after the Soviet withdrawal.

Even after the Soviet withdrawal, the Moscow-backed regime under President Najibullah survived for 3 years. The regime altered certain policies whereby they decided to go back to more traditional patterns of power and also gave up revolutionary rhetoric.¹⁸ The period that followed between 1992 and 1996 saw the various *Mujahideen* factions fighting each other to grab power,

16 Mohammad Yousuf and Mark Adkin. *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story* (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1992).

17 William Maley. *The Afghanistan Wars* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 153.

18 Oliver Roy. *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 213.

The Taliban emerged in the Afghan political scene at a critical juncture when peace seemed elusive with violent factional clashes taking the form of a civil war between different *Mujahideen* factions.

which led to a new phase of the conflict in Afghanistan. All the different factions were working as proxies for the interests of their regional power sponsors, namely Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran, Russia, India and the Central Asian States of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the other. The state institutions that were untouched during the Soviet era rapidly disintegrated, and ethnic divisions came to the fore so much that the capital Kabul was carved up along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, largely between Hazara and non-Hazaras (Shia' and Sunni') adherents of Islamic faith. This phase in particular saw how both ethnic factors and the involvement of external players turned Afghanistan into a contested geography, whereby each force wanted to dominate the other in their bid to form the Afghan state.

The Taliban emerged in the Afghan political scene at a critical juncture when peace seemed elusive with violent factional clashes taking the form of a civil war between different *Mujahideen* factions. The word “Taliban” in Pashto means “students”.¹⁹ Heavily backed by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), the group was formed in the early 1990s in the madrassas and refugee camps of the Pakistani side of the Durand Line (the Afghanistan–

19 Lindsay Maizland. “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council of Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan> (Accessed 12.04.2022)



Initially, the Taliban was seen as a stabilizing force and was welcomed by the inhabitants of the conflict-torn country who looked to this group for peace and security in the country.

Pakistan land border drawn by the Britishers, which Afghanistan has never formally accepted), where they were indoctrinated and brainwashed. More and more Afghans joined the Taliban movement with the twin slogans of ridding their country of death and destruction and enforcing the *Sharia*. Some observers have looked at this movement also as a mechanism by which Pakistan tried to erase the Pashtun identity (that links the people of Pashtun ethnicity on both sides of the Durand Line) and divert the “Pashtunistan” question (a demand that Pakistan had to encounter for time to time) to other causes. Initially, the Taliban was seen as a stabilizing force and was welcomed by the inhabitants of the conflict-torn country who looked to this group for peace and security in the country. The Taliban seized the capital, Kabul, from President Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik whom they viewed as anti-Pashtun and corrupt. That year, the Taliban declared

During their rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of *Sharia* or Islamic law and were widely condemned for massacres against Afghan civilians, harsh discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, denial of United Nations (UN) food supplies to starving civilians, destruction of cultural monuments, banning of women from school and most employment, and prohibition of most music.

Afghanistan an “Islamic Emirate”, with Mullah Mohammed Omar, a cleric and veteran of the anti-Soviet resistance, leading as *Amir al-Mu’minin* or “commander of the faithful”.

During their rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of *Sharia* or Islamic law and were widely condemned for massacres against Afghan civilians, harsh discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, denial of United Nations (UN) food supplies to starving civilians, destruction of cultural monuments, banning of women from school and most employment, and prohibition of most music. Their treatment of women and the denial of basic rights came under criticism from the international community. Restrictions and discriminatory policies against women made them essentially invisible in public life. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice required women to wear the head-to-toe burqa, or *Chadri*, banned music and television and jailed men whose beards it deemed too short.²⁰ Although during that initial phase, they were an ultraconservative militia, who imposed their rule by force, they were not yet a terrorist group. The regime was recognized by only three countries, namely Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Taliban controlled some 90% of the country before its 2001 overthrow after the US invasion in response to the 9/11 attacks by Al Qaeda. The USA at that point had one goal: to crush Al Qaeda and conquer the Taliban. The United Nations implemented various sanctions on the “Islamic Emirate”, which were further tightened in 2001.

²⁰ Ibid.



Overall, principles of the post-2001 constitution were conceptually rich and coherent, but there was a deficiency in the implementation process both by the USA and the political elites of Afghanistan, who were entrusted with the responsibility of implementation of the value and principles of the Afghan Republic.

Within a very short period of time, the USA was able to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan.

What began as an objective to go inside Afghanistan to take out Al Qaeda safe havens there very quickly moved into a mission to try to build a secure, stable and democratic Afghan state that was inclusive and would last for the Afghan people. The post-2001 Republican order that emerged after the ousting of the Taliban from Afghanistan enjoyed a conceptual coherence. Conceptually, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Constitution that was drafted and passed in 2003 were able to bring together the four major forces that have had influenced the state-formation process in Afghan polity. It was also able to take into account different external power interests in Afghanistan—all important geo-political players, both regional and global, had space and role in Afghan polity and no power felt excluded, although it was absolutely certain that it was an US-led era and America was the most important power in the country. It managed to address the basic concerns and sensitivities of various forces. Overall, principles of the post-2001 constitution were conceptually rich and coherent, but there was a deficiency in the implementation process both by the USA and the political elites of Afghanistan, who were entrusted with the responsibility of implementation of the value and

principles of the Afghan Republic. The following section broadly attempts to engage the USA's policy trajectory and role of political elites in order to understand how those led to the disintegration of the Afghan Republic in August 2021.

2. US WITHDRAWAL AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN



Making a deep dive into the history of the past 20 years to identify the factors that led to the collapse of the Afghan state is beyond the scope of this paper. There was no one cause of the Taliban victory and the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and its forces. Yet in order to contextualize the fate of Afghanistan today, this segment looks at the major political developments that led to the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and it concludes by arguing that the announcement of the withdrawal was a key factor that led the Taliban to act. It then briefly and broadly touches upon a few of the many factors that have contributed to the breakdown of the Afghan Republic.

Political Developments Leading to 15 August 2021

By 2003 or 2004, the USA thought that it has successfully completed its mission of eliminating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, even though Bin Laden was still absconding. It was then the USA's attention shifted to Saddam Hussain in Iraq, which resulted in the shift of the USA's focus from Afghanistan. This period gave the Taliban a great opportunity to regroup themselves, and they started inching back towards Afghanistan from the safe sanctuaries from



By 2003 or 2004, the USA thought that it has successfully completed its mission of eliminating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, even though Bin Laden was still absconding. It was then the USA's attention shifted to Saddam Hussain in Iraq, which resulted in the shift of the USA's focus from Afghanistan.

Pakistan. In Afghanistan, although the USA's ferocious firepower was targeting the Taliban, they were killing civilians too. This was also a period when Afghans were getting disgruntled with US army actions on grounds, many of which would hurt the sentiments of a conservative society. As a result, the narrative of "foreign occupation" started emerging, which benefitted the Taliban. Ten years into the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, there was growing pressure for a political solution in Washington. In February 2011, Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, signalled a major shift in the US policy when she recognized the preconditions for talks with the Taliban—"insurgents to lay down arms and renounce violence, accept the framework of the Afghan constitution and separate from Al Qaeda"—as the outcomes of negotiations.²¹ This was at the height of the "surge" announced by President Barack Obama that was expected to change the military situation on the ground. After that the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 1988 on 17 June 2011, which separated the Taliban sanctions list

21 Hillary Clinton. "Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses," speech delivered at Asia Society, New York, February 18, 2011, 2009-2017. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>

.(Accessed 12.05.2022)

from the Al Qaeda sanctions list, established under the Resolution 1267 in 1999. This was followed by the Security Council Resolution 2082 on 17 December 2012, which eased travel restrictions on Taliban members to enable them to travel and participate in peace and reconciliation talks. This paved the way for a “peace and reconciliation” trend, and the Taliban realized that the Americans were tired of the war and hence decided to wait out. Eventually, events led to the opening of the Taliban office in Doha with support of the Obama administration, marking one of the initial steps towards the legitimization of a terrorist group.

Throughout this period, the USA depended the most on Pakistan to provide the ground line of communication and supplies to the US troops in Afghanistan. Pakistanis, on the other hand, played a double game—they helped the Americans, while simultaneously helping the Taliban movement, which by then had turned to be an insurgency. All these developments were happening alongside the public testimony by US Admiral Mike Mullen calling the Haqqani network “a veritable arm” of Pakistan’s ISI.²² In a blunt message to Pakistan, the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded greater cooperation from the country to “squeeze” the Haqqani network, saying that: “You can’t keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors”.²³ Although successive

22 Elisabeth Bumiller and Jane Perlez. “Pakistan’s Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2011. www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html

23 “Snakes in Your Backyard Won’t Bite only Neighbours: Hillary to Pak,” NDTV, October 21, 2011. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/snakes-in-your-backyard-wont-bite-only-neighbours-hillary-to-pak-573412> (Accessed 12.05.2022).



dispensations in Washington since President Bush identified the epicentre of the problem to be in Pakistan, they could never take concrete steps to address the issue. On the contrary, they kept rewarding Pakistan irrespective of their actions. In 2018, the co-founder of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was reportedly released from a Pakistani prison at Washington's behest to negotiate with the US administration, signalling a significant breakthrough for the Taliban and ISI.

Various dialogue processes took off. Pakistan wanted to ensure that the Taliban have greater acceptance this time initiated the Quadrilateral Coordination Council with the USA, China, Afghanistan and Taliban. The "Heart of Asia" process was hosted by Istanbul. Russia also entered the scene with troika—the USA and China, an extended troika, that added Pakistan and then the Moscow platform that included Afghanistan, the Taliban and regional countries. In the meantime, the Taliban group in Doha was getting adept at handling media and conference diplomacy even as the USA ended its combat operations by concluding Operation Enduring Freedom on 31 December 2014 and commenced Operation Resolute Support,²⁴ which restricted the US and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) role to "training, advising and assisting" the Afghan forces as they began to take the lead in combat. During Obama's tenure, the number of US troops dropped

24 "US Forces-Afghanistan and Resolute Support Transition of Authority Ceremony," U.S. Central Command, July 12, 2021. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2691935/us-forces-afghanistan-and-resolute-support-transition-of-authority-ceremony-jul/> (Accessed 12.05.2022).

Several negotiations between the USA and the Taliban then led to the signing of the US–Taliban Peace Agreement in February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, in the absence of the Afghan government of the day. Nonetheless, it received unanimous endorsement of the UN Security Council.

down to 8600,²⁵ and the Trump administration further reduced the number to 2500.

A major breakthrough came in 2018 when the Trump administration appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation, who began direct talks with the Taliban. It was a step forward in the legitimization process. Khalilzad began by setting out four objectives—a ceasefire, cutting links with Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups, intra-Afghan peace talks and withdrawal of foreign forces, underlining that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”.²⁶ Eventually, he dropped most of the conditions and focused on a time-bound unconditional US withdrawal in return for safe passage. Other issues were much lower in priority and were pushed to the sidelines without any timeframe.

Several negotiations between the USA and the Taliban then led to the signing of the US–Taliban Peace Agreement in February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, in the absence of the Afghan government of the

25 “Biden Must Decide on US Troops in Afghanistan as Deadline Looms,” Al Jazeera, February 26, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/at-pivotal-moment-in-afghanistan-war-biden-weighs-a-dilemma> (Accessed 13.05.2022).

26 “Nothing Is Agreed until Everything Is Agreed’: US Envoy on ‘Progress’ of US-Taliban Talks,” Dawn, January 26, 2019. www.dawn.com/news/1459928 (Accessed 13.05.2022).



day. Nonetheless, it received unanimous endorsement of the UN Security Council. A document titled “Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the US as a state and is known as the Taliban and the USA”²⁷ was signed, and at that point nobody even questioned the rather strange agreement between the two entities that did not recognize each other. Moreover, there was an attempt to present the deal as “peace deal” that was rather inappropriate, since in essence was a withdrawal agreement.

One of the important provisions of the deal, about the date of withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan by 1 May 2021, was agreed upon without much difficulty. In the agreement hardly any conditions, be it a comprehensive ceasefire or a political process in Afghanistan, were imposed on the Taliban. There was a pact on intra-Afghan negotiations, which eventually began on 12 September 2020 amidst much hype and publicity in Doha in the presence of several key stakeholders and international organizations, but the talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban did not make much progress. The last favour the USA did for the Taliban was, however, to “persuade” the Afghan government to release more than 5000 Taliban prisoners to further peace talks, adding to its further marginalization. Some of those freed prisoners

27 US Department of State. “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” February 29, 2020. www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf (Accessed 13.05.2022).

later returned to the battlefield and joined the Taliban onslaught against cities around the country in 2021.²⁸

Ever since assuming office, President Biden was faced with the choice of either keeping to the 1 May deadline or finding other options. Ambassador Rakesh Sood, a former Indian envoy to Afghanistan, argued, “he had the option to change the flawed narrative of forever wars or take action against the safe havens, but he chose to cut the Gordian knot by redefining the objective, declaring that the mission had been accomplished by killing Osama bin Laden and destroying Al Qaeda, and assuring the American people that their security could be ensured by over-the-horizon kinetic options such as drones”.²⁹ In his 14 April 2021 announcement, President Biden stated that the “war in Afghanistan was not meant to be a multigenerational undertaking” and America has achieved the goals with which it went into Afghanistan and “it was time (for US) to end the forever war”.³⁰ Renowned commentator on Afghanistan, Rory Stewart argued, “the progress that Afghanistan achieved in the past twenty years was being protected by a very light international presence of on 2500 soldiers (at the end), very few casualties from international forces in the last five years...

28 “The Taliban Commander Who Led Attack on Afghan City Was Released from Prison Last Year, Official Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-commander-who-led-attack-on-afghan-city-was-released-from-prison-last-year-officials-say-11628010527> (Accessed 12.05.2022).

29 Rakesh Sood. “Distant Dream of Peace after US Exit, What’s next for Afghanistan?” *Global Asia*, September 2021. https://www.globalasia.org/v16no3/feature/distant-dreams-of-peace-after-the-us-exit-whats-next-for-afghanistan_rakesh-sood (Accessed 12.05.2022).

30 “Joe Biden Explains US Troops Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *CNN*, April 15, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=un1CcbrkuZ0> (Accessed 27.10.21).



it could have been sustained almost indefinitely”.³¹ After Biden’s announcement, NATO allies also decided to withdraw their remaining 8000 troops.³² This decision sped up Taliban’s decades-long ambition to recapture Kabul.

By June and July 2021, the Taliban swept through their non-traditional areas like the North and North East, as well as the Western parts of Afghanistan. In the second phase, they got hold of the border crossing points which were of significant importance. 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. Finally, even though military analysts around the world thought that it would be as easy for the Taliban to capture or hold on to the provincial centres and leave alone the major cities, at the end all the provincial centres and major cities fell with a span of few days. One of the most pivotal events in the process of the withdrawal was the way the USA left Bagram Airbase on 1 July 2021. After nearly

Even though military analysts around the world thought that it would be as easy for the Taliban to capture or hold on to the provincial centres and leave alone the major cities, at the end all the provincial centres and major cities fell with a span of few days.

31 Rory Stewart. “Biden Afghanistan Withdrawal Marks the End of Liberal Interventionism: Rory Stewart Interview,” *The New Statesman*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX4H_GxTdBA&ab_channel=TheNewStatesman (Accessed 12.05.2022).

32 “NATO Allies Decide to Start Withdrawal of Forces from Afghanistan,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 15, 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_183086.htm (Accessed 12.05.2022).

20 years, the USA sneaked out of its biggest airfield in the country by shutting off the electricity in the middle of the night without notifying the base's new Afghan commander who discovered the Americans' departure more than 2 hours after they left.³³ It was not just a withdrawal of 2500 US forces, but they also took 17,000 contractors who were responsible for maintaining the Afghan Air Force, without informing the Afghan counterpart.³⁴ Reflecting on the incident, the former National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib³⁵ later said: "We ran of all kind of ammunitions for our air force. There were no air guided missiles, no close air support was available, fixed wing aircraft didn't have the ammunitions necessary to be able to fight"; he added that the US contractors were doing everything from a logistical perspective, so their sudden departure made a tremendous impact on the Afghan Air Force's fighting ability. Among other things, this decision had a profound impact on the morale of Afghan soldiers fighting on the ground.

The speed with which the Afghan army, trained and equipped by the USA, collapsed within a span of a few months had shocked many observers. Ziaulhaq Amarkhil, former governor of Nangarhar province, while talking to *Tolo News* in Pashto, said that the US negotiations with the Taliban not only undermined democracy and democratic norms in Afghanistan but also laid the foundation

33 "US Left Baghram Airbase, without Notice," *The Hindu*, July 6, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-left-afghan-airbase-without-notice/article35178577.ece> (Accessed 12.05.2022).

34 "US Left Bagram Airbase at Night with no Notice, Afghan Commander Says," *BBC*, July 6, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57682290> (Accessed 27.10.21).

35 Hamdullah Mohib (Former National Security Advisor, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) in an interview titled "Face the Nation," December 19, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5t8KheW004&ab_channel=FacetheNation (Accessed 1.8.2022).



Much of the money directed towards Afghanistan after 2001 was wasted in creating an inflated and corrupt structure, while the Taliban could finance its operations far more cheaply drawing from local sources and extortion, and spending almost all its money on its goals and operations rather than corruption.

for the fall of the civilian setup in Kabul.³⁶ The Afghan army was modelled after the US army, and its foundation was based on sophisticated reconnaissance units, real-time intelligence using a drone and aerial surveillance and monitoring, and air support. Since 2014, the Afghans led in combat and in the process lost over 50,000 security forces compared with less than a hundred US and NATO troops killed in action, proving their fighting mettle. Undoubtedly, corruption was rampant in the system and that impacted the morale, but institution building was never meant to be a quick affair. A report³⁷ by Anthony H. Cordesman attempted to identify factors that contributed to this, and some of the following issues were pointed. First, the civil and military aid efforts of the donor states and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were not properly coordinated, and efforts to create integrated civil military structure were never effective. Second, Afghanistan continued to remain dependent on outside aid for some 80% of its income, and it saw narco-trafficking (that was not government's income) become Afghanistan's major source of export. Much of the money directed towards Afghanistan after 2001

36 "Amarkhil Discussed Collapse of Former Govt," *Tolo News Youtube*, September 6, 2021.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWt1RtXeFc&t=1025s> (Accessed on 12.05.2022).

37 Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces," Center for Strategic International Studies, August 17, 2021. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reasons-collapse-afghan-forces> (Accessed on 12,5,22)

was wasted in creating an inflated and corrupt structure, while the Taliban could finance its operations far more cheaply drawing from local sources and extortion, and spending almost all its money on its goals and operations rather than corruption. Third, 2007 onwards, the USA and NATO and the Afghan government denied the existence of critical problems in the organization, training, equipment and leadership of Afghan forces, and they reported levels of success in both forces' development and in combat in the open-source reporting that were clearly untrue. Fourth, the actual combat core of the Afghan army was very small, overburdened with combat assignments, and they were highly dependent on active US intelligence, combat troop support, airpower and contractors for their operations. With the departure of the international troops, the support system disappeared. Ammunition replenishment to forward bases dried up as supply chains collapsed. Medical evacuation was no longer feasible—aircraft, helicopters and drones were grounded. GPS tracking and targeting ended as proprietary software from weapon systems was removed. The soldiers had been trained to fight like an army, not as a guerrilla; thus, they were crippled.³⁸ The manner in which the Bagram evacuation was carried out by the USA played an important role in shaping the course of Afghanistan's recent history leading to the disintegration

The UAE's political difficulties in consolidation of the federation had an indelible mark on its initial interaction with the neighbouring countries that later became members of the GCC.

38 Rakesh Sood, "What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?" Observer Research Foundation, August 31, 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/what-went-wrong-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 17.05.2022).

While talking about factors responsible for the current fate of Afghanistan, the role of the top Afghan leadership and the corrupt political elites of the country can hardly be exaggerated.

of the Afghan Republic and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August 2021.

While talking about factors responsible for the current fate of Afghanistan, the role of the top Afghan leadership and the corrupt political elites of the country can hardly be exaggerated. Perhaps the most succinct explanation of the breakdown was in the *New York Times* op-ed by a three-star general of the Afghan army, Samy Sabet, “We were betrayed by politics and presidents”.³⁹ Throughout the history of the war, the failures of the Afghan government were driven by ineffective and hopelessly fractious leadership at the top. Politics driven by self-interest as opposed to national interest at the highest level was a major challenge. Many of Afghan elites who held powerful positions had dual citizenships, who returned to Afghanistan after 2001 from Western countries, where they had sought exile during the earlier period and were citizens of those countries. Therefore, when they realized that the situation was deteriorating in Afghanistan, they could leave without much problem—they had the least accountability towards the country and its people.

39 Rakesh Sood, “Afghanistan: The Sum and Substance of the US-Taliban Deal,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, March 6, 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/afghanistan-sum-and-substance-us-taliban-deal-25340> (Accessed 28.05.2022).

The “Afghan Interim Government” that replaced the Taliban regime was not chosen by the people. Into the vacuum created by the USA’s bombing of the Taliban had come the old commanders and factions who had been defeated by the Taliban—or hung on in the resistance—during the first Emirate. By helping the Americans to oust the Taliban, they captured governorships, both provincial and district, ministries, army corps and police headquarters. About four-fifths of the first cabinet were military men or civilian members of tanzims (political-military factions). At least 20 of the first 30 provincial governors, Antonio Giustozzi assessed, were “militia commanders, warlords or strongmen”, whereas “smaller militia commanders also populated the ranks of the district governors”.⁴⁰ Those gaining positions of power in the post-2001 state then imported men, patronage networks and organizational structures that had developed over many years of war into the post-Taliban state, again directly influencing the political sphere.⁴¹ This grab for power, which was then sustained by US backing and international funding, was seen across Afghanistan and coloured the nature of the Republic for the next 20 years.

In addition to local influence, the warlords benefited from political legitimacy as well as financial support including cash handouts

40 Antonio Giustozzi. *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), p. 16.

41 One example was appointments by the new defence minister, General Qasim Fahim, leader of the Shura-ye Nazar network within Jamiat-e Islami which had captured Kabul (thereby gaining the ministries of defence, interior and foreign affairs and the NDS). In February 2002, he appointed 38 generals as the new general staff; 37 were his co-ethnic Tajiks and 35 were with Shura-ye Nazar. Of the 100 generals he appointed in total, Giustozzi wrote, 90 belonged to Shura-ye Nazar.



Despite everything, there was a sense of ownership, hope and a powerful sense of possibility amongst the people towards the Afghan Republic, although they remained highly critical of the political leadership and the political elite throughout this period.

from international actors.⁴² The warlords' growing influence and demand for an ethnic-based power-sharing political system severely challenged the vision of reconstructing the centralist state model in the earlier phases of the post-Taliban state-building efforts.⁴³ Unlike the prewar periods, when the state designed top-down strategies of social control, the new powerholders decided the nature of their relationship with the state. When appointed in attractive government positions, the relationship was cooperative, but if dismissed from office, the friendly relationship could be replaced by active hostility. Moreover, the open contestation between the top leaders of the country for power, position and monetary gain, sometime at the cost of national interest (which was blatantly displayed before and after every Presidential election over the past 20 years), had a severe impact. The centralist state and its leaders lacked a meaningful relationship with local communities, particularly in rural areas, and with passage of time this gap only increased. The BBC journalist David Lyon (who served as a communication advisor to President Ghani 2017–2018) in his recent book *The Long War* observed, “Former President Ashraf

42 Antonio Giustozzi. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2009), pp. 88–89.

43 S. Yakub Ibrahim. “Afghanistan’s Political Development Dilemma: The Centrist State Versus Centrifugal Society,” *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2009).

Ghani lived in isolation, with little contact to the country beyond the manicured lawns of his huge compound... He trusted very few people, and some he did trust exploited their access in their own interest”.⁴⁴ Far too much of the government effort was absorbed in the bitter infighting over influence and resources in a country where control of personnel brings power through patronage network.⁴⁵ Despite everything, there was a sense of ownership, hope and a powerful sense of possibility amongst the people towards the Afghan Republic, although they remained highly critical of the political leadership and the political elite throughout this period. Eventually, the manner in which the Former President Ashraf Ghani and his allies fled from Kabul on 15 August at the most critical time only reiterated that their distrust and anger for the leadership was not misplaced.

3. THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN



From May to August 2021, amid rising levels of insecurity, targeted killings and attacks targeting civilians, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan through a military offense that swept

From May to August 2021, amid rising levels of insecurity, targeted killings and attacks targeting civilians, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan through a military offense that swept across the country, reaching the capital city on 15 August.

44 David Lyon. *The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan since 9/11* (New York: St Martin Press, 2021), p. 9.

45 Ibid.



The footage of Afghans clinging on to a US Air Force plane in a desperate bid to flee the Taliban rule will remain a defining image of the decades-long military intervention by Western powers.

across the country, reaching the capital city on 15 August (see Figure 1). By the evening of the fateful day, former President Ashraf Ghani fled the country with his allies and the “victorious” Taliban captured ARG, the Presidential palace,⁴⁶ and several government offices in Kabul and declared the “war is over”.⁴⁷ They announced, “We have reached what we were seeking, the freedom of our country and the independence of our people”.⁴⁸ The international military forces took control of Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport from 15 August, until the departure of the US personnel on 31 August. The situation at the Kabul airport was chaotic, with thousands of people gathering in its vicinity hoping to get access to flights in order to flee Afghanistan. The footage of Afghans clinging on to a US Air Force plane in a desperate bid to flee the Taliban rule will remain a defining image of the decades-long military intervention by Western powers. On 26 August, the Islamic State Khurasan province (ISIL-KP) carried out a suicide attack outside the airport killing 72 civilians and injuring several others.

46 “Taliban Enters Afghan Presidential Palace after Ghani Flees,” *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/taliban-continues-advances-captures-key-city-of-jalalabad> (Accessed 2.8.2022).

47 “Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Flees Country ‘to Avoid Bloodshed’ as Taliban Enter Kabul,” *Independent*, August 15, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/central-asia/afghanistan-taliban-ashraf-ghani-flee-b1902917.html> (Accessed 2.8.2022).

48 “Taliban Says Afghanistan War over as President Flees: Live,” *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/taliban-says-afghanistan-war-over-as-president-diplomats-flee> (Accessed 2.8.2022).

Amidst this chaos, there were some talks about an “inclusive” government, although it was not clear why the Taliban would want this, because it has already emerged as the “victorious” side. In the Taliban leadership, the people who were fighting on the ground were different from the people who were negotiating with the Americans in Doha. The head of the political office, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was declared deputy even in the lifetime of Mullah Omar did not have a prominent presence in the Taliban structure, to the surprise of the international community. The faction that was most active was the armed faction—the Haqqani group being the foremost among them. Within the next few months, several fault lines became apparent.

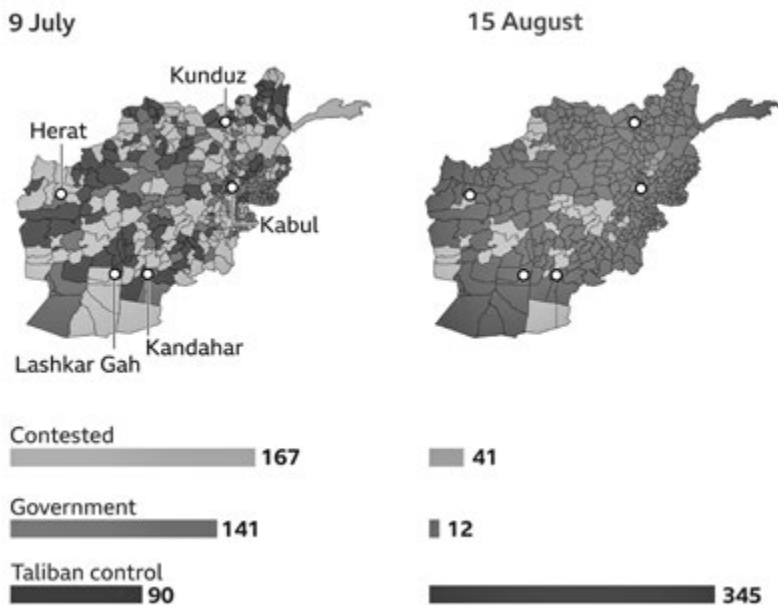


Figure 1. Territorial gains made by the Taliban between 9 July and 15 August 2021.

The first fault line was between the Taliban and the rest of the country, the majority of whom did not want the Taliban. Resistance took various forms, be it flag protests (where Afghans had objected against the removal of the Afghan flag)⁴⁹ as a symbol of Afghan pluralism, protests by women who wanted their right to work or protests in favour of education for girls. The second fault line is seen in the clash between the Taliban and the anti-Taliban groups such as the National Resistance Front (NRF), which is a military alliance and is continuing armed resistance in certain areas under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud, son of Legendary Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. New groups such as the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement have also made claims of providing resistance in small pockets in the past few months.⁵⁰ The third fault line can be seen in the clash between the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Taliban. After the Taliban takeover, ISKP continued its attacks, this time targeting the Taliban not as insurgent competitors but as illegitimate governing authorities. Finally, the factionalism within the Taliban movement—reportedly the movement leadership—

Expanding its influence within and beyond the region,
the UAE is not shying away from making bold moves
as far as its foreign policy is concerned.

49 “Deadly Protest in Jalalabad against Removal of Afghan Flag,” Al Jazeera, August 20, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/18/at-least-two-killed-by-shots-fired-at-flag-protest-in-afghanistan> (Accessed 3.8.2022).

50 Masood Farivar, “Afghan ‘Fighting Season’ Ushers in New Anti-Taliban Groups,” VOA, April 27, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-fighting-season-ushers-in-new-anti-taliban-groups/6542148.html> (Accessed 3.8.2022).

is currently divided into at least three groups. The first group is the Doha group consisting of the US peace negotiations team led by Mullah Baradar, the second is the military wing led by Molavi Yaqoob, the son of Mullah Omar, and the third is the Haqqani network wing led by Sirajuddin Haqqani.⁵¹ The most significant and potentially influenced dispute is the disagreement between Haqqani and Yaqoob, which some reports have indicated has led to fighting between the two parties.⁵² However, it is important to note that despite consistent rumours about the rifts among diverse factions, the Taliban have managed to put up a consolidated front, as of now.

Afghanistan under the Taliban Regime

On 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced a 33-member, entirely male “caretaker cabinet”, which 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.⁵³ In November 2022, they expanded their interim cabinet by adding 27 new members in compliance with orders from the Taliban’s supreme leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada,⁵⁴ which, however, did

51 “Challenges to the Taliban Rule and Potential Impact for Region,” Washington Institute, February 9, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

52 “Yaqoob and Haqqani Factions Fight over Taliban Government,” The Hindustan Times, September 1, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/yaqoob-and-haqqani-factions-fight-over-taliban-government-101630474732128.html> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

53 “The Taliban Announces New Government in Afghanistan,” Al Jazeera, September 7, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/taliban-announce-acting-ministers-of-new-government> (Accessed 3.8.2022).

54 “Taliban Expand Interim Cabinet, 27 New Members Named,” Deccan Chronicle, November 23, 2021. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/middle-east/231121/taliban-expand-interim-cabinet-27-new-members-named.html>



The political and security landscape of Afghanistan is very different from that of the previous years. The key actors in the Afghan landscape are the so-called Islamic Emirate (which no country has recognized), which have the Haqqani network and other Taliban factions as the two major components.

not alter the ethnic or gender balance of the cabinet. After seizing power in Afghanistan, the Taliban had declared an “amnesty” across the country. At a press conference, Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, assured that Taliban sought no revenge and that “everyone is forgiven”.⁵⁵ However, as months passed by, there were several reports that suggested the opposite. According to the UN, there were “credible allegations” of more than 100 extrajudicial killings in Afghanistan in the first 4 months of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, with most blamed on the country’s new rulers. In many of the cases, the bodies were publicly displayed as was done during their previous stint in power. Between 15 August 2021 and 15 June 2022, UNAMA recorded 160 extrajudicial killings, 178 arbitrary arrests and detentions, 23 instances of incommunicado detention and 56 instances of torture and ill-treatment of former Afghan National Security Forces and government officials.⁵⁶

The political and security landscape of Afghanistan is very different from that of the previous years. The key actors in the Afghan

55 “Taliban Declares Complete Amnesty across Afghanistan,” *The Economic Times*, August 18, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/taliban-declares-complete-amnesty-across-afghanistan-says-everyone-is-forgiven/articleshow/85418061.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 3.8.2022).

56 “Human Rights in Afghanistan 15 August 2021-15 June 2022,” UNAMA, July 2022. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_human_rights_in_afghanistan_report_-_june_2022_english.pdf (Accessed 3.8.2022).

landscape are the so-called Islamic Emirate (which no country has recognized), which have the Haqqani network and other Taliban factions as the two major components. Undoubtedly, this Taliban seems to be relatively larger and diverse in its composition as compared with the 1990s, the key actors in the political and security landscape of Afghanistan at present. Then we see the presence of groups like Islamic State Khorasan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which are active in either side of the Durand Line. Therefore, broadly speaking, there are three major Pashtun-dominated armed groups active in the entire stretch from former North West Frontier Province to the South, and all these groups are rooted in the vast rural spaces of the southern, eastern regions and across the Durand line where the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan primarily reside. Therefore, it is a rural phenomenon that one is witnessing at present in the security-political landscape of Afghanistan after August 2021.

In the course of the past 1 year, the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities under the new regime has been another area of concern. Discriminatory practices, extortion, extrajudicial killings and forced displacement have all resumed. There have been many reports⁵⁷ detailing the forced displacement and systemic genocide against the Hazara population, targeted violence and eyewitness reports of the mass killings of 600 Tajik hostages and crimes against humanity in Panjshir.

Months after seizing power, the Taliban's interim cabinet established a *de facto* Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and

57 Ibid.



Months after seizing power, the Taliban's interim cabinet established a de facto Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (which took over the premises of the former Ministry of Woman's Affairs, the latter having been abolished by the new regime), triggering a renewed concern for the human rights in the country, especially those of women.

Prevention of Vice (which took over the premises of the former Ministry of Woman's Affairs, the latter having been abolished by the new regime), triggering a renewed concern for the human rights in the country, especially those of women. More recently, they also dismantled Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission. The imposition of restrictions has considerably affected the vibrant Afghan media landscape that existed in Afghanistan before the Taliban takeover; arbitrary arrests, summons, torture, threats and warnings to journalists have been regularly used to control the media. The UNAMA has recorded violations affecting 173 journalists, of whom 163 were attributed to the Taliban regime.⁵⁸ Despite the new regime's promises to respect the rights of Afghans and provide amnesty for people who supported US efforts, the Taliban has largely failed to implement their promises into action.

There has been a massive rollback of women's rights in Afghanistan. To date, no woman holds any high-level political appointments nor are women allowed any active role in political life. The Taliban

58 Ibid.

have deliberately remained vague in their responses to questions pertaining to policies on women and have given a generic answer saying: “they support for women’s rights under the Sharia law”. No further explanation has been provided on what that meant in practice. Women have been largely barred from work. If there was any hope that the Taliban would pay heed to repeated calls from Afghanistan’s civil society and the international community to uphold women’s rights, the decree⁵⁹ for women to cover their faces in public has dashed it. Afghan women have tried to fight back—taking to Kabul streets and protesting, even in the face of violence from the Taliban and attempts to ban protest. Amnesty International’s recent report describes the situation of Afghan women as “death in slow motion”.⁶⁰

According to Dr. Davood Moradian, Director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Afghanistan, what happened in Kabul on 15 August 2021 can be described in one word—“politicide” or genocide of political order. He argues, “It was not a regime change, it was not a revolution, neither was it a Coup d’etat. A political order was killed that day. On August 16, it was not only Ashraf Ghani or the political elite, who lost his job; hundreds of people lost their

Taliban leaders have not articulated a clear vision about how to take Afghanistan forward or how they plan to structure the state.

59 “How the Taliban Are ‘Eliminating Women’ in Afghanistan,” DW, May 9, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-taliban-are-eliminating-women-in-afghanistan/a-61736998> (Accessed 1.8.2022).

60 “Afghanistan: Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls under Taliban Rule,” Amnesty International, 27 July 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5685/2022/en/> (Accessed 3.8.2022).



job and identity...A person was a journalist till August 15, did not have the identity of a journalist the very next day”. He viewed this phenomenon as “politicide” and argued that Afghanistan lost statehood, it does not have a national army and the country does not have a government endorsed by the people of the country; it was a totalitarian collapse and every single aspect of Afghan life was affected because of this.⁶¹ As they were in the 1990s, the Taliban are committed to establishing an Islamic State based on their interpretation of (Islamic) *Shariah*. Yet, the Taliban movement itself appears to contain diverse views about the forms that an Islamic order might take. Furthermore, Islamic constitutions in other countries, as well as previous Afghanistan constitutions, provide very different models, as well as insight into possible future evolutions. So far, Taliban leaders have not articulated a clear vision about how to take Afghanistan forward or how they plan to structure the state. A lot of discussion in the international media over the past few months surrounded around access to girls’ secondary education, but questions about the kind of curriculum and education system the Taliban will propagate (for both boys and girls) were not asked. The Taliban seemed to have softened their traditional rhetoric on some issues, such as girls’ primary education (which they did not allow during their previous stint in power), but have cautioned that the implementation of policy commitments requires security, resources and time.

61 Dr. Davood Moradian, Director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Afghanistan, speaking at Sussex University, UK, November 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5d0JNx6hY8&t=1076s> (Accessed 1.8.2022).

4. CHALLENGES FACED BY AFGHANISTAN



The manner in which the regime change happened in Afghanistan in 2021 brought a lot of uncertainty to the country and forced it into multiple challenges, both complex and interconnected.

Deep Humanitarian and Economic Crisis

The UN lists Afghanistan among the world’s largest humanitarian emergencies, estimating that over 18 million people—nearly half of the population—could be acutely food insecure between June and November 2022.⁶² According to the WHO (Table 1), 40% of vulnerable population are children under the age of 5. The Taliban takeover prompted Washington and other donor countries to swiftly suspend financial assistance for Afghanistan, isolate the Afghan banking sector and strictly enforce long-running sanctions on dozens of members of the male-only Taliban government. Both rural and urban areas of the country have been hit by income loss and have contributed to the deterioration in food security. In addition to the challenges of COVID-19, natural calamities like drought and earthquake in Afghanistan have only added to the

The manner in which the regime change happened in Afghanistan in 2021 brought a lot of uncertainty to the country and forced it into multiple challenges, both complex and interconnected.

62 “Taliban Tout Governance Gains, Urge US to Release Afghan Assets,” Voice of America, July 26, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-tout-governance-gains-urge-us-to-release-afghan-assets/6674199.html> (Accessed 5.8.2022).



severity of the overall humanitarian crisis. The Taliban Foreign Ministry tried to leverage the disaster to secure the removal of international sanctions, return of frozen funds and render more international assistance, but the international community tactfully evaded those demands while providing emergency relief to the Afghan people. NGOs have yet to find a payment mechanism that can reliably transfer large volumes of money for projects in Afghanistan from outside the country. They are also wary of the Taliban diverting relief funds to reward their fighters. According to reports, the Taliban has been trying to direct humanitarian aid to preferred beneficiaries.⁶³

Table 1. Key statistics: Afghanistan
18.4 million population in need of humanitarian assistance
>300,000 displaced persons in need of humanitarian aid in the last 2 months alone
>90% of 2300 health facilities at risk of closure
>153,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 7103 deaths as of 26 August 2021
40% of vulnerable population are children under the age of 5
Source: World Health Organization, December 2021. ⁶⁴

Over the past year, Afghanistan has been facing an acute cash crunch because of the collapse of its banking sector. A World Bank Private

63 “U.N. Says Taliban Interfering with Aid, Resisting Cash Plan,” Reuters, June 24, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-says-taliban-interfering-with-aid-resisting-cash-plan-2022-06-23/> (Accessed 1.8.2022).

64 “WHO Afghanistan Emergency Plan: Meeting the Health Needs of Afghanistan’s Crisis-Affected Populations,” World Health Organization, Sep-Dec 2021. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/who-afghanistan-emergency-plan-meeting-the-health-needs-of-afghanistan-s-crisis-affected-populations>

Afghanistan has been facing an acute cash crunch
because of the collapse of its banking sector.

Sector Rapid Survey conducted in the end of 2021 showed that job losses and declining purchasing power had significantly dampened consumer demand (Figures 2 and 3). US President Joe Biden issued an executive order in February aimed at unfreezing half of the \$7 billion for humanitarian aid to benefit the Afghan people. The rest would be held for ongoing terrorism-related lawsuits in US courts against the Taliban. The Taliban has consistently urged Washington to lift the curbs and “unconditionally” release \$7 billion of frozen Afghan funds held in the USA to enable the Taliban to deal with the country’s deepening economic and humanitarian crises. Although there are reports that the USA and the Taliban have exchanged proposals to enable the release of funds held in the USA, no concrete step has been taken towards that because of serious differences between the two sides.⁶⁵ The UN and foreign governments have injected almost 1 billion dollars of currency into Afghanistan, but cash shortages persist. The UN has recently launched a Humanitarian Exchange Facility⁶⁶ to trade dollars for Afghan currency while circumventing the Taliban regime; unsurprisingly, the Taliban authorities have resisted its implementation.

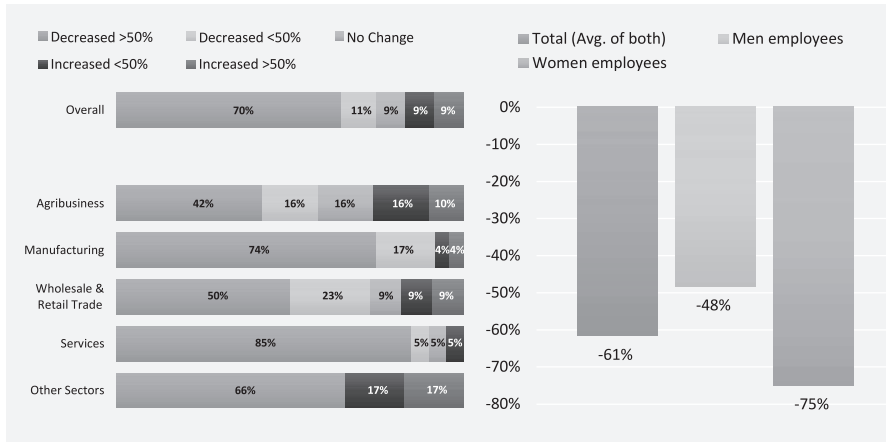
65 “US and Taliban Exchange Proposals for Release of Funds: Report,” Al Jazeera, July 27, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/26/us-and-taliban-exchange-proposals-for-release-of-funds-report> (Accessed 5.8.2022).

66 “U.N. Aims to Launch New Afghanistan Cash Route in February: U.N. Note,” Reuters, February 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-un-aims-launch-new-afghanistan-cash-route-february-un-note-2022-02-10/> (Accessed 1.8.2022).



Figure 2. Consumer demand by sector of activity (% of respondents).

Figure 3. Average % drop in employment.



Source: Afghanistan Development Update, October 2022 (World Bank).⁶⁷

Security Challenge

Despite several statements by the Taliban not to allow foreign militants to reside in the country, Al Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, ISKP, TTP and many other terrorist outfits have found safe haven in Afghanistan. It is evident that the departure of the USA and coalition forces from Afghanistan have led to a more permissive environment for terrorist groups. The targeted killing of Al Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri by a US drone strike at a safe house in

67 “Afghanistan Development Update,” October 2022. World Bank Report. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d7d49962c0c44fd6bb9ba3bfe1b6de1f-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-October-2022.pdf> (Accessed 31.10.22).

Kabul⁶⁸ only highlights that the regime continues to harbour transnational jihadis who pose a security threat to the region and beyond. The prominence of the Haqqani network-associated militants in the security apparatus of the new government merely exacerbates security risks. India, for example, will be worried that Pakistan-aligned militant organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad might be allowed increased freedom to use Afghanistan for logistics, recruiting and planning, in order to carry out possible attacks against India.

Over the past year, ISKP, which is the Afghanistan affiliate of the larger Islamic State group, has been carrying out frequent attacks and has become more deadly since the withdrawal of NATO forces. ISIL-KP has carried out a series of bloody attacks in Afghanistan in Kabul, Kunduz,⁶⁹ Kandahar⁷⁰ and Nangarhar provinces. The group has particularly targeted mosques used by the ethnic minority

ISKP's openly adversarial relationship with the Taliban takes advantage of the new government's weakness and its struggle to establish basic social services and preoccupations to bolster its own recruiting, fundraising and territorial control within Afghanistan.

68 "Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri Killed in US Drone Strike," Al Jazeera, August 1, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/1/al-qaedas-ayman-al-zawahiri-killed-in-us-drone-strike-reports> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

69 "Afghanistan: Dozens Killed in Suicide Bombing at Kunduz Mosque," Al Jazeera, October 8, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/blast-hits-a-mosque-in-afghanistans-kunduz-during-friday-prayers> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

70 "Afghanistan: Suicide Attack Hits Kandahar Mosque during Prayers," BBC News, October 16, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58925863> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

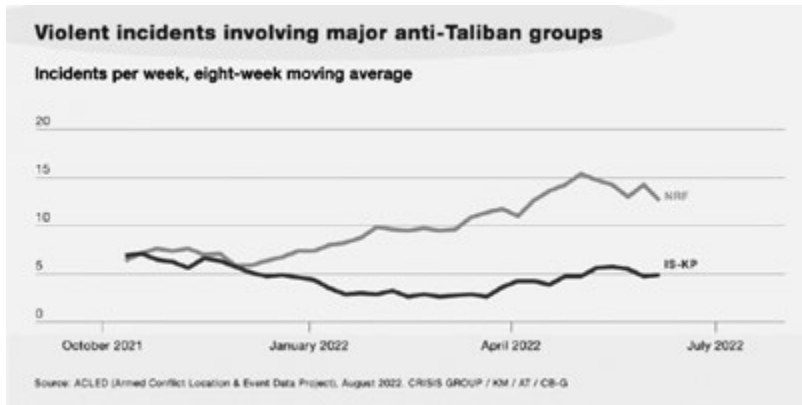


Shia Hazara community. The insurgents carried out bombings in areas where they previously had little presence. ISKP's openly adversarial relationship with the Taliban takes advantage of the new government's weakness and its struggle to establish basic social services and preoccupations to bolster its own recruiting, fundraising and territorial control within Afghanistan. ISPK fighters had launched missiles into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in an effort to undermine the Taliban's claim to control Afghanistan's borders and territory and to gain more recruits from Afghan and Central Asian extremists.⁷¹ The US government estimated in October 2021 that ISKP could reconstitute its ability to conduct external operations against the USA in 6 to 12 months.⁷² But after intense Taliban operations against the group, ISKP attacks decreased in the first half of 2022. By contrast, anti-Taliban attacks in the north, where opposition groups are most active, have seen an uptick in the past few months, suggesting that these groups may be benefiting from the end of heavy snows in the mountains and gaining momentum. Most analysts agree that the pace of NRF attacks surpassed that of ISKP strikes in the spring of 2022, trending upward into the summer (see Figure 4, illustrating the number of attacks by both groups). The worsening security situation is only worsening the existing humanitarian crisis within Afghanistan.

71 Richard Weitz. "Afghanistan Adrift One Year after the Taliban Takeover," Middle Eastern Institute, August 9, 2022. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistan-adrift-one-year-after-taliban-takeover> (Accessed 1.8.2022).

72 "Nonstate Threats in the Taliban's Afghanistan," Brookings Institute, February 1, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/01/nonstate-threats-in-the-talibans-afghanistan/> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

Figure 4. Violent incidents involving NRF and ISKP.



Source: International Crisis Group Report, August 2022.⁷³

Inclusive Political Settlement

The group is also being pressed by the international community to govern the country through a broad-based political system where all Afghan groups have their representation to ensure long-term national stability. The cabinet announced by the Taliban was a “caretaker one” and is not inclusive in nature. In response to UN Security Council pressure to be more “inclusive, representative and unified”, the Taliban expressed that “we are ready for inclusivity but not selectivity”.⁷⁴ However, no substantial steps towards this can be seen. While making a rare appearance at the Taliban’s “Great Conference of Ulema” in the Afghan capital, the Taliban supreme

73 “Afghanistan’s Security Challenges under the Taliban,” International Crisis Group Report, August 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> (Accessed 31.10.22).

74 “Ready for Inclusivity, Not Selectivity,” Al Jazeera, October 9, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/9/taliban-ready-for-inclusivity-not-selectivity-ahead-of-talks#:~:text=The%20Taliban's%20E2%80%9CIslamic%20emirate%E2%80%9D%20is,for%20an%20inclusive%20Afghan%20government> (Accessed 10.8.2022).



leader Haibatullah Akhunzada in July 2022 expressed his displeasure with the interference of the world in Afghanistan’s “internal affairs” and hinted that the Taliban is unwilling to take directions from the world about how to run the country.⁷⁵ Despite changes in their policies on many other issues (especially after the Ukraine crisis), neither China nor Russia has substantially altered its policies on Afghanistan. Unlike Western powers, Russia and China have sought to focus on UNAMA’s mandate on economic and humanitarian problems rather than gender issues, human rights violations, etc., and have formally described the Taliban as Afghanistan’s “de facto authorities”. To further their economic and security interests, Moscow and Beijing might consider deeper engagement with the Taliban regime, but it is unlikely that they will break with the international consensus about the recognition of the regime.

5. LESSONS FROM HISTORY THAT MAY FAVOUR THE TALIBAN REGIME



Compared with previous governments, the Taliban can point to much that is in their favour. Presently, the Taliban control almost the entire territory of Afghanistan, which means it is governed by one authority. Those who opposed the Taliban

Although there is information about armed opposition today, yet none of the armed resistance forces have so far managed to touch base with all the ethnicities across the country; as a result, a “national movement” that can counter the Taliban is largely lacking.

75 “Taliban Supreme Leader Addresses Major Gathering in Kabul,” Al Jazeera, July 1, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/1/taliban-supreme-leader-addresses-gathering> (Accessed 10.8.2022).

regime in the 1990s, not only factional fighters and leaders but also intellectuals and professionals, could find refuge in the north, as it was not under Taliban control. They could at least remain in the country. This time the speed of the collapse meant there was no time even to organize an opposition. Although there is information about armed opposition today, yet none of the armed resistance forces have so far managed to touch base with all the ethnicities across the country; as a result, a “national movement” that can counter the Taliban is largely lacking. The exodus of many of Afghanistan’s brightest, aided by international evacuations, has stripped the country of many Afghans who were likely to have joined or lead civilian or military resistance.

After 2001, the Taliban managed to get strong support and backing from Pakistan. It provided a safe haven for the Taliban leaders who could reorganize, regroup and eventually galvanize the movement. Pakistan was fundamental to the Taliban’s ability to start an insurgency and thereafter steadily consolidated their gains. Today, most of Afghanistan’s neighbours are engaging with the new administration, and no regional country yet looks to be interested in playing any active role in nurturing the Taliban’s opposition, the way the Taliban was nurtured by Pakistan. Some of the Republic’s senior officials have found sanctuary in Tajikistan, Iran or Turkey, but there is as yet no sign that they are being allowed, at least openly, to agitate and organize from those countries or that they are being supported to do so. Yet, history also provides warnings of how, if Afghanistan does begin to fall apart, neighbourly support to opposing factions can fuel conflict, as it did in the 1990s, even after the major international players had lost interest in the conflict.



Today, most of Afghanistan's neighbours are engaging with the new administration, and no regional country yet looks to be interested in playing any active role in nurturing the Taliban's opposition, the way the Taliban was nurtured by Pakistan.

The group's political office in Doha has provided the Taliban with the exposure, training and the opportunity to engage in the art of political negotiation and diplomacy; as a result, the group enjoys a greater degree of legitimacy from international community compared with the 1990s, when only three countries agreed to engage with them. Even before their return to power in Afghanistan, Taliban delegations were hosted at various regional and global capitals for talks, which provided the insurgent groups with a kind of importance and legitimacy that it never enjoyed earlier. Despite criticism about the non-inclusive nature of the Taliban's "interim" cabinet, the diplomatic engagement with the Taliban began immediately after they took over Kabul. Because they were in helm of the country, many countries decided to engage with the Taliban keeping their national interest in mind. Many countries have tried to maintain some contact with the Taliban through the Doha channel.

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The Taliban can point to their relative unity, especially when compared with the array of factions that made up the *Mujahideen*, who fell to fighting among themselves even before the defeat of the PDPA in 1992. Although there were reports of factional rivalry within Taliban, the group has managed to keep it under wraps so far. The Taliban's decision to prioritize internal coherence, including by rewarding cadres and the different networks within the movement with government posts, has meant a very exclusive administration. This carries its own risks that mullahs are appointed instead of experienced professionals who could have done a better job, that most Afghans do not recognize the government as representing them at all and that relations with potential donors are endangered when other countries, both regional and further afield, continue to demand "inclusive government".

The Taliban have seen that the vast flows of foreign money that had been coming into the country—over 40% of GDP until 15 August—stopped overnight. The banking sector is paralyzed for want of hard currency, and the country's foreign reserves have been frozen and put out of reach of the new administration. UN and US sanctions that had applied to the Taliban or its leaders now apply to the Taliban government and, therefore, inevitably also to Afghanistan. Yet the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover has urged various countries and international UN agencies to engage with the Taliban. Various conferences



A country like India, which did not have any formal engagement with the regime before August 2021 and was one of the countries to withdraw its diplomatic presence from Kabul after the Taliban takeover, saw the merit in engaging with the regime in the process of sending humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

were held to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, and efforts were made to address the crises in the country. In many of these deliberations, the Taliban were also invited to take part and were given a platform to voice their concerns. The USA initiated limited humanitarian waivers from September 2022; also, on December 22, the UN enacted exemptions for humanitarian activities and “other activities that support basic human needs”.⁷⁶

A country like India, which did not have any formal engagement with the regime before August 2021 and was one of the countries to withdraw its diplomatic presence from Kabul after the Taliban takeover, saw the merit in engaging with the regime in the process of sending humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The devastating earthquake and the need for coordination of relief materials sent by India provided New Delhi with a reason to deploy some personnel and reopen its embassy in Kabul.⁷⁷ It is true that large amounts of humanitarian aid have been promised, yet these are drops in the ocean compared with the vast funds that had flowed into the country. No country has yet recognized the new government, not even the Taliban’s main backer, Pakistan. Moreover, the economic

76 “Security Council Paves Way for Aid to Reach Desperate Afghans,” UNSC Press Release, December 21, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108642> (Accessed 1.8.2022).

77 “Earthquake Relief Assistance for the People of Afghanistan,” Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, Press Release, June 24, 2022. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35440/Earthquake_Relief_Assistance_for_the_people_of_Afghanistan (Accessed 7.7.22).

catastrophe that was inextricably and inevitably linked to the Taliban decision to seek power through military victory could yet undermine the new government. Hungry people rarely rebel, but competition over scarce resources could prove a centrifugal force that undermines Taliban unity and the leadership's control of its own commanders. Whether revenues from border posts, drugs and mines continue to come reliably to the central coffers will be important to watch.

It is important to remember that the Taliban's rise to power in 2021 was viewed differently by the Afghans. Although civilians in some places had, as in the 1990s, seen the Taliban as a liberating force that has brought a blessed end to violence, elsewhere, the Taliban feel like a force of occupation. The urban centres, which were beneficiaries of the US-led era, associated the Taliban's victory not with bringing peace and order but with killing large numbers of people in mass-casualty attacks and through IEDs and targeted killings. In much of Afghanistan's countryside as well, the death toll from the insurgency over many years has been high. In 2001, the country emerged from isolation and destitution with a hope for better days. After 20 years of US intervention, the context of 2021 Afghanistan was completely different. Those who felt that there would be an end to the senseless violence and insurgency soon succumbed to the terror of what the collapsing economy would mean for them and their families. Isolation and destitution have once again engulfed the country, and poverty, hunger, lack of livelihood opportunities and discrimination at various levels have become the enemies of the Afghan people. Repeated attacks and killings especially in Kabul have put a question mark over the Taliban's ability to provide security let alone governance or rights.



The situation that continues in Afghanistan is still evolving, and it is being closely watched by the world.

The situation that continues in Afghanistan is still evolving, and it is being closely watched by the world. Although it is true that Afghanistan's issues have taken a back seat for the international community after the crisis in Ukraine, countries are aware of the implications of an unstable Afghanistan. The disturbing reports about human rights violation, elimination of woman's rights and harbouring of international terrorist groups have heightened the concerns of the international community, and they have been pushing the regime to act against those, but their intention to act on those concerns are highly questionable. The execution of the Al Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri in Kabul by the US drone strike only reiterated that the apprehension was not misplaced.⁷⁸

6. PLAUSIBLE SCENARIOS: WHAT'S THE ROAD AHEAD FOR AFGHANISTAN?



Given the nature of the evolving situation in Afghanistan, it is difficult to predict with certainty the definite course the country will take in near future; nonetheless, this paper attempts to put forward three plausible medium- to long-term scenarios for how the situation in Afghanistan might play out from here.

1. **Survival of the regime without recognition:** The previous segment of this paper has tried to identify factors that may go

78 "How the C.I.A. Tracked the Leader of Al Qaeda," New York Times, August 2, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/02/us/politics/cia-qaeda-al-zawahiri.html?fbclid=IwAR24rRAujP_KHO51wF8Th1DDO2ayC2HDq7aZT8gj28ShS0ICCA4zxUB-c94 (Accessed 7.7.22).

in favour of the Taliban dispensation and that might help it survive for more time than it was thought. During the time of the interim cabinet formation, there were several conjectures about the factionalism within the Taliban. Subsequently, the presence of the Chief of Pakistan's ISI, General Faiz Hameed, in Kabul to discuss the formation of the interim government further said to have highlighted the disgruntlement among some factions about Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan's internal matters.⁷⁹ In the course of the next few months, there were reports about several issues over which different Taliban factions held divergent positions that led some to think that the regime might not be able to survive in the long run. The deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation of the country only added heft to that argument that Afghanistan under the Taliban will descend into a complete chaos and the regime will not be able to survive. However, that did not happen. It is true that the Taliban at present lack both state legitimacy and state capacity, which are the essential components of running a state. However, historically in Afghanistan one has rarely seen the state combines both capacity and legitimacy, so the Taliban is not facing any unprecedented challenge here, and it is quite possible that they are not particularly concerned about the legitimacy

The deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation of the country only added heft to that argument that Afghanistan under the Taliban will descend into a complete chaos and the regime will not be able to survive. However, that did not happen.

79 "Pak ISI Chief Faiz Hameed Meets Former Afghan PM in Kabul, Discusses Formation of Coalition Govt," *India Today*, September 5, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pakistan-faiz-hameed-meets-gulbuddin-hekmatyar-afghanistan-govt-1849474-2021-09-05>



or acceptance from the people they are ruling. They, however, would be interested in recognition and legitimacy from external actors in order to have access to resources they need to actually run the state. Despite issues and challenges, there is a possibility that the regime will continue to survive. The form and manner in which the Taliban will rule Afghanistan might not be acceptable to the international community, Afghan diaspora or even a major segment of Afghans living in Afghanistan; nonetheless, they will continue to rule the country. There is a willingness among the regional countries and global powers to cooperate with the regime on counterterrorism. It is therefore possible that most countries would not interfere in the way the Taliban regime governs as long as they cooperate on counterterrorism. International recognition is not very likely to come the regime's way, but given the experiences of the past 15 months, regional and global powers might continue to engage with the regime. So far, the regime's ambiguity/lack of clarity on certain issues seems to be working to their advantage as they help them in managing their differences within their own constituencies; also, this ambiguity is allowing them to sustain a certain appeal as far as international audience is concerned.

2. **Balkanization of Afghanistan:** The second plausible scenario could be the Balkanization of Afghanistan. The most probable threat to the Taliban seems to be from the movement itself. In the medium- to long-term future, there could be the emergence of different island of competition within various Taliban factions. In the past few months, several fault lines could be seen within the Taliban with reported tension between Mullah Yaqoob, son of first *Emir-ul-Momeen* Mullah Omar, and the Haqqani

So far, the various factions within the Taliban have been able to disguise and put a cover on their internal differences and rivalries; however, in the future, these contestations between various factions of the Taliban may play out.

faction controlling important positions in the interim cabinet.⁸⁰ So far, the various factions within the Taliban have been able to disguise and put a cover on their internal differences and rivalries; however, in the future, these contestations between various factions of the Taliban may play out. The differences between the Taliban under Yaqoob and the Haqqani network under Sirajuddin Haqqani could lead to pro-Afghanistan and pro-Pak factions within the ruling regime in the future. Although the Taliban leadership exercises its judgement rather than blindly take orders from the Pakistani deep state, the Haqqani network is a family run terror factory aided and abetted by the Pakistani ISI operating through retired army officers with jihadist inclinations.⁸¹ Taliban's support for TTP could be an important factor in shaping of the dynamics between various factions within the movement. How the dynamics within various predominantly Pashtun armed groups shape up would be important to watch. Some of the existing rivalries also map on the politics of various tribes among the Pashtuns; it needs to be seen whether the Taliban and Haqqani's can insulate the regime from the broader intra-Pashtun dynamics. Over a certain period, the differences and rivalries between various factions may come out in the open, thereby triggering violence, with

80 "Yaqoob and Haqqani Factions Fight over Taliban Government," *The Hindu*, September 1, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/yaqoob-and-haqqani-factions-fight-over-taliban-government-101630474732128.html>

81 *Ibid.*

each group controlling territories and fighting each other as in the mujahideen days of the 1990s. The rapid expansion of bases by groups like ISIS-K and anti-Taliban resistance forces (which continues to have the presence in the northern part of the country and which is likely to expand) would only heighten the conflict and violence in the country. With the west turning its back on Afghanistan for the time to come, Russia and China primarily interested in protecting the bordering Central Asian Republics and Xinjiang province from the spread of jihad from Afghanistan; Kabul will go dark for the world till the next major terror attack.

- 3. Neutral country-led approach:** The first aircraft to land at the Kabul airport after the US departure was that of Qatar Airways, which brought a team of technical experts to assist the Taliban to resume operations at the airport, on the latter's request. Earlier, after the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August, the USA reached out to Qatar to help shoulder the evacuation of tens of thousands in a chaotic and hurried airlift.⁸² Given its ties with both Washington and the Taliban, the tiny peninsular Arab state was seen to be uniquely placed to play an important role in Afghanistan. Doha was not only the place where the US–Taliban peace agreement was signed, but it also became a mediating force between Washington and the Taliban, which has maintained a political office in Qatar since 2013—an example of the Gulf country's strong connections to the group. After suspension of the US Diplomatic Mission in Kabul, it was moved to Qatar, and most of West's engagements related to Afghanistan have been facilitated by Qatar. Although it must be mentioned that

82 Anwesha Ghosh. "Qatar's Emergence as a Key Player in Afghanistan," ICWA Viewpoint.

Qatar's involvement in Afghanistan seems to have reduced in the course of the past few months and countries such as China and Russia have also started more regular engagements with the regime, yet countries like Qatar, which are perceived as neutral, are likely to play an important role in issues pertaining to Afghanistan. Norway came forward in hosting talks between the Taliban and international community in January 2022. Such exercises can be expected in the future as well. It is important for the international community to remain engaged with the Taliban regime and to reach out to all factions, whether it is more conservative elements within the movement or the ones which are pro-reform. Ostracizing the regime completely would give the conservative elements within the movement an upper hand, who would then argue that although the regime was keen on engaging with the international community, the latter deserted them, and that would give more space and power to the more hard-line elements within the movement to implement a more regressive and conservative approach. A balance of carrot and stick policy needs to be adopted by the international community towards the regime, and it is imperative to assess which policies work and which do not while keeping Afghans at the helm. There has been some conversation about synthesizing both visions of Afghanistan, and neutral countries could play an important role in facilitating and coordinating these exchanges between the two sides in the future.

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CONCLUSION



Although the situation in Afghanistan is still evolving, the past year has shown the world that the ideological contours of the Taliban, that is the fulcrum of their worldview, whether on issues related to gender, participation in public life, human rights, minority communities, issues of governance—how to deal with citizen-state contract—remain the way they have been in the 1990s.



Although the situation in Afghanistan is still evolving, the past year has shown the world that the ideological contours of the Taliban, that is the fulcrum of their worldview, whether on issues related to gender, participation in public life, human rights, minority communities, issues of governance—how to deal with citizen-state contract—remain the way they have been in the 1990s. There may have been a reduction in large-scale fighting and day-to-day insecurity in the country (as compared with the past decade), but that is primarily because the group that was responsible for the bulk of those attacks is today ruling the country. Discussions over the past 12 months have largely centred around the question of legitimacy from external powers. However, the regime’s crucial challenge lies in winning legitimacy from the people they govern. Disgruntlement with the Taliban rule—for the lack of employment opportunities, food insecurity, lack of basic

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rights, the threat of summary execution or forced disappearance—could eventually translate into concerted civic resistance. There has been mounting evidence of active and passive resistance to the Taliban rule over the past few months—for example, there have been more protests in the past few months than in all the years of the first Emirate, especially by women. As far as armed resistance is concerned, despite the Taliban’s rigorous attempt to dismantle it, armed resistance exists in Afghanistan. However, so far, none of the armed resistance forces have managed to touch base with all the ethnicities across the country; as a result, a “national movement” that can counter the Taliban is largely lacking at present.

Security and counterterrorism will remain a concern for both regional and global powers. The assassination of the Al Qaida chief Ayman al-Zawahri by drone in Kabul demonstrates that the USA retains substantial capacity to take action against entities that pose threat to American interest even after the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan almost a year ago. For Afghanistan’s regional neighbours, the situation is trickier. Counterterrorism remains a key focus, and regional connectivity is another concern. Even though the specific interests of each neighbour may vary, they share concern over Afghanistan becoming a hot spot for terrorist and extremist groups. This is why Afghanistan is expected to be a

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consistent topic in Asian bilateral and multilateral discussions for the days to come. It is understandable that even a year after the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan, no foreign government has officially recognized the regime and that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future; however, the statements, initiatives and engagements over the past year indicate that some sort of a working relationship with the group will be there. While it is acutely important for the international community to remain engaged in Afghanistan and not abandon the Afghan people, at the same time, it is critical to ensure that their engagement with the Taliban should not end up strengthening the regime. The coming days are going to be crucial, and the international community has to tread cautiously. The Taliban have proved their capacity of running a successful insurgency. Now, they face far more complex task of running a country.







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