

INTERIM AFGHAN GOVERNMENT THREE YEARS ON: AN ASSESSMENT

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August 26, 2024

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



August 15, 2024, marked three years since the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ (IEA) assumed power as the de facto, though not de jure, political authority in Afghanistan. Over the past 3 years, Taliban's governing structure has evolved and taken shape, into what can be defined as an authoritarian yet selectively pragmatic governing style. The IEA have managed to establish a fair degree of stability and security throughout the country, demonstrated pragmatism in economic matters, clamped down on corruption, and banned poppy cultivation. They have increased their diplomatic outreach and enhanced trade with neighboring and regional countries. However, at the same time, the performance of the group has been open to much debate and criticism, particularly due to the IEA’s inability or unwillingness to fulfill pledges of reform. This had been agreed to in the Doha agreement; issues specifically pertaining to human/women’s rights, inclusivity, and counter-terrorism assurances. Hence, their overall performance has shown both positive developments and significant drawbacks, suggesting that the Taliban's performance is still a work in progress.

Since assuming power, the IEA have been functioning under an interim set up, headed by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of the group, who has prioritized specific objectives such as governance (institutional changes, remodeling and building state institutions) guided by

Sharia law, and addressing economic affairs. However, all this is being done in the absence of a formal legal and administrative framework, as the group suspended the previous constitution of 2004. Although the Taliban have said that they are currently in the process of creating a new constitution and legal framework grounded in Sharia, the absence of a recognized governing framework raises legitimate concerns about the future of Afghanistan as a state.

While the current interim setup is a continuation of the IEA's governance system employed during their previous rule in the 1990s, they have included eight non-Pashtuns (including the IEA's chief of army staff Qari Fasihuddin Fitrati) from Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups. Moreover, under the IEA's Commission for Contact with Personalities, since August 2021, over 950 individuals, including former ministers, governors, and members of the previous parliament, have returned to the country. Such measures indicate a shift within the group towards greater inclusivity, even if limited.¹ This is noteworthy, given that historically the group has exclusively been Pashtun. Moreover, the IEA continues to retain and function under ministries established by the former government of Afghanistan under Ashraf Ghani (with the exception of the Women's Ministry, which has been replaced by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue) asserting that they have kept more than 500,000 members from the previous administration.

Since taking control, the Taliban have been actively exploring opportunities to attract and generate economic and infrastructure development, through both domestic initiatives and foreign investments. The Taliban have embarked on a number of domestic infrastructure projects revolving around constructing and repairing roads, highways, bridges, and canals throughout the country. ²

With a relatively stabilized economy compared to the days of the Republic, revenue collection has increased along with the elevation of the value of the national currency (Afghani). In 2024, the National Procurement Commission of Afghanistan under the Ministry of Economic Affairs has approved 24 new projects, including the construction of roads, dams, electricity and communication networks across the country. In particular, the development of the Qosh Tepa Canal project on the Amu River in Balkh is a significant project that has been initiated. In February 2024, construction on the second phase of the 177 km long (110 miles) Canal was initiated which extends from the Dawlat Abad district of Balkh province to the Andkhoy district of Faryab province. ³ Moreover, the Taliban have actively been pursuing cooperation in the fields of connectivity, trade, infrastructure,

¹ "952 Ex-Officials Return to Afghanistan Via Contact Commission", August 20, 2024, Tolo News, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190325>

² Pamela Constable, "In Kabul, Taliban rulers are changing the face of the capital," The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/06/kabul-taliban-reconstructiondevelopment/>, accessed June 30, 2023

³ The first phase of the Canal, nearly 108 km long, was completed in October 2023.

education, defence, vocational training, and healthcare with China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Turkiye, the UAE, Qatar, India, and Japan.

In a significant diplomatic shift from their isolation in the 1990s, the Taliban have been actively seeking integration into the international community through diverse channels, including hosting foreign delegations and participating in regional and global interactions. Currently, there are 41 foreign missions and international organizations functioning inside Afghanistan. Moreover, the IEA has 39 active political and consular missions across the world. It is important to note that a major diplomatic achievement for the Afghan Taliban was achieved in January 2024, when Bilal Karimi, Taliban's Ambassador to China, presented his credentials to President Xi Jinping, making China the first nation to formally acknowledge Taliban's ambassador in the Embassy of Afghanistan in Beijing.

However, despite these visible improvements, significant concerns persist regarding political and social cohesion, the denial of basic human rights, ongoing discrimination against women – and presence of Transnational Terrorist Groups (TTG) – all of which cast a shadow over the Taliban's aspirations to be a legitimate entity in the eyes of the people of Afghanistan and recognized as member of the global community. Despite initially pledging to uphold women's rights in accordance with Islamic law including supporting women's access to education and involvement in public life, they have deviated from these commitments, imposing stricter restrictions. Although a handful of prominent Taliban members have voiced their support for women's rights, ongoing restrictions highlight challenges the Taliban continues to grapple with in terms of balancing their ideological commitments with the expectations of the Afghan people and the international community particularly in areas concerning public life and human rights.

The most significant factor that continues to undermine the future of Afghanistan and the region are threats emanating from TTG such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Despite counterterrorism assurances from the IEA, terrorist threats persist undermining the Taliban's credibility as a responsible stakeholder within the international community. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)' report of April 2024,⁴ reiterates concerns already highlighted by the United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reports⁵ on Afghanistan about the Taliban's tolerance

⁴ "QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), April 2024, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2024-04-30qr.pdf>

⁵ For previous report, please see "Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," UNSC, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/N2343179.pdf>, accessed January 29, 2024.

towards terrorist groups like the TTP and Al-Qaeda.⁶ While the Taliban have been taking steps to counter the ISKP, they have not implemented the same approach towards the TTP, leading to heightened tensions with Pakistan. While the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is crucial, it has always been complex, and the current situation remains no different. The relationship has further deteriorated due to the increase in attacks by the TTP operating from Afghanistan, coupled with the unprecedented rise in casualties of Pakistan's security and law enforcement personnel.

The Taliban seem to have adopted a compartmentalized approach particularly towards neighbouring states, prioritizing the concerns of certain countries over others. The Taliban's approach is both flawed and ill-conceived because the threat level that regional countries face from terrorist groups in Afghanistan is uniform. All threats and concerns should be addressed with equal priority, ensuring that none is ignored at the cost of the other. Moreover, while the Taliban may be hesitant to take decisive action against certain groups out of fear that they might redirect their attacks at the Taliban, this approach is shortsighted. Given the transnational nature and interdependencies of these terrorist groups, it is only a matter of time before they turn their aggression toward the Taliban. Therefore, the Taliban need to make a judgment whether it is more advantageous to have a friendly and secure neighborhood or to allow disparate terrorist elements to cause friction and keep the region destabilised. In particular, a constructive Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relationship remains pivotal for shaping the future of the region. Therefore, it is essential for Kabul to meaningfully address Islamabad's specific concerns. The need for the two countries to work together to resolve shared challenges and realize immense opportunities cannot be stressed enough. Also, now that the Taliban are in power, they will need to meet these basic yet pivotal expectations if they wish to be seen as a legitimate and recognized member of the international community.

Given the transnational nature of threats originating from Afghanistan, including those posed by terrorist groups, it is crucial for regional countries to advocate for a robust regional framework or mechanism to engage with the Taliban. By adopting a unified approach, the immediate region would gain a collective advantage to influence the Taliban and press them to fulfill their pledges of reform, whether related to human rights, women's rights, or counter-terrorism.

⁶ Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," UNSC, "Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," UNSC, July 22, 2024, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/N2343179.pdf>.

Conclusion

Three years after seizing power, the Taliban appear to be managing well, and even without formal recognition, they have demonstrated an ability to govern effectively. In the absence of international acknowledgment, the Taliban are actively engaging with the international community, entering into agreements, and adapting to the current status quo, which increasingly seems to be becoming a 'new normal.' However, a palpable discrepancy persists between the Taliban's stated policies and their practical implementation. To prevent this status quo from solidifying, it is imperative that the international community regards Afghanistan as a collective responsibility, necessitating a coordinated and unified approach, that balances patience with persistence. For the Taliban, this is an opportune moment to recalibrate and focus on building an Afghanistan that is inclusive, responsible, and accountable, with the ultimate aim of serving the best interests of the whole country. An Afghanistan that is at peace with itself and with its neighbors, will certainly be good for Pakistan and for the international community.