

TRIESENBERG PAPER

One Year After - Afghanistan and the Region A Reality Check

Summary

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Afghanistan is presently ruled essentially by decree from Kandahar, and the Taliban deliberately conducts a strategy of intimidation, distortion, and promulgation of neo-absolutist rule in its most aggressive form through a political system they describe as implementing Islamic Law – Shari’a. The Taliban are succeeding in co-opting - by forcing, bribing, or tricking - Afghanistan’s elite into collaboration, or at least passive silence while simultaneously cleverly exploiting Western readiness for humanitarian assistance, Afghanistan fatigue, crisis exasperation, and numbness to suffering. Taliban strategies to suppress the media are augmented by clever use of Western crisis exasperation; combined with charm, falsification, and distortion, this successfully creates alternative realities. Most importantly, the Taliban have ensured that Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world with effective gender apartheid, where girls are denied education, women are widely excluded from economic and public life and are prohibited from working with international NGOs which try to assist the Afghan population. This abuse is particularly egregious against the Hazara and other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida, the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and related groups continue to enjoy a safe haven in Afghanistan and have partly embedded in Taliban structures. While in opposition to the Taliban, the regional franchises of the so-called Islamic State, notably its chapters called the "provinces" of Khorasan and Hind, remain active in the country.

The Taliban movement has also begun to assert control in the north and north-east; the winter conditions there are more severe and drastic, exacerbating poverty and issues of food and aid distribution. There seem to be increasingly **separate realities north and south of the line Herat – Kabul – Jalalabad**: north of the line, more numerous groups are looking for "liberation from" the Taliban and believe that they could overcome the Taliban, provided they find some support. However, south of the line, many people in rural areas profess that they saw the Taliban as "liberators" (caution: see experiment of Khmer Rouge); across the country, elites refuse to stand up against the Taliban, and more broadly seek "accommodation with" the Taliban.

Through control of state institutions left over from the Islamic Republic, the Taliban have collected close to \$2 billion in 2022 through taxation, while – partly as result of their restrictive policies – nearly half of Afghanistan’s population is in need of humanitarian assistance. The de facto authorities expect the international community to continue providing this assistance: the Taliban pursues an ongoing initiative of trying to charm internationals and those seeking to ‘do

good' to help and send money; these monetary donations are then taxed to the fullest so the Taliban can calculate with and ensure continuing income. The Taliban hope that the international community will ignore Afghanistan and – for the sake of convenience and expedience – end up recognizing them as rulers while also continuing to provide them with subsidies. The Taliban also benefit from the fact that influential powers in the region do not prioritize inclusive governance and human rights in Afghanistan – compared to the maintenance of stability and their own interests in the country and region.

In our times of multiple crises and the Ukraine War, the Taliban cleverly exploits international crisis exasperation and fatigue, particularly Afghanistan fatigue and general numbness to suffering. In view of the winter (“winter is the death for the poor” an Afghan proverb says), the Taliban were trying to accelerate international concessions by exploiting the severity of the season and climate – putting Afghanistan’s impoverished population under even more pressure. Taliban know how and are able to instrumentalize/weaponize incoming resources and aid against those the aid was to benefit and whom they want to penalize. The Taliban also have smart policies and methods to continuously finance and support sympathetic Afghans abroad: through money skimmed-off international assistance; buying the allegiance of select Afghans abroad, or facilitating that they can be payed-off by third parties; and luring those living abroad over to the Taliban’s side, preparing them eventually to return and join the Taliban.

The Taliban leadership issued an unsigned decree in April 2022 (during the poppy harvest) that prohibited narcotics production, and deferred implementation to this year’s harvest season. By doing so, the price of opium increased at least fourfold in the anticipation of lowered production in the 2022-23 season – however, as there is nearly no access to wide parts of the Afghan landscape, there is no way to judge how this decree has actually affected production.

The Taliban – and notably the Haqqani Network – maintain shelter for Al-Qaida as shown by the death of Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri in Kabul. While the so-called “Islamic State” is present with franchises, it does not aspire to again control territory in Afghanistan in the short term. Its rivalry with the Taliban carried out through ideological challenges and targeted attacks will continue to have a destabilizing effect in Afghanistan and the region. In a race towards ideological supremacy between these competitors, Afghanistan is becoming a laboratory for radicalization, and a *hornet’s nest* for global terrorism.

Key Points

The people of Afghanistan have had to suffer a state of war/ acute crisis since 1979 = 43 years (nearly 1.5 generations): the 1978 Communist coup, 1979 Soviet occupation, followed by inner-Afghan Mujahedin war; international post-9/11/2001 intervention based on right to self-defense by the United States, backed by UN SC Resolutions and Article V of NATO

Afghans and Afghanistan are confronted simultaneously with multiple crises: Food and malnutrition; mistreatment of girls and women; economic, employment, financial, and liquidity crises; as well as environmental crisis, especially drought and flooding.

Fundamental conceptual and moral quandary:

What comes first: development, or moral-ethical principles?

Or: moral-ethical principles and legal standards / fundamental rights, versus survival of the people and economic development?

Afghanistan is the only place on earth where girls and women are subject denied education and participation in active economic and public life; an implemented system of gender apartheid.

Dramatically reduced information flow out of Afghanistan -

Stringent information control and disinformation, self-censorship by media, social media, resulting in little concrete information leaving the country.

Much more violence: public executions, disappearance of people, incarcerations, and more elimination of personal freedom than the Taliban admits.

The Taliban are intensely targeting former Afghan National Defense and Security Personnel.

Taliban infighting between Haqqani Network members and other groups. Victory will likely go to the Kandahar-based faction that emphasizes cohesion and adherence to their interpretation of Shari'a.

Taliban has NOT changed from the 1990s: it holds to same fundamentalism and misogynistic principles.

Taliban instrumentalizes/weaponizes aid and humanitarian assistance domestically, reduces free movement of international presence, and challenges diplomatic representations in Kabul (Russia, Pakistan) with the result that certain states withdraw their bilateral missions. Seemingly that's what the Taliban desires.

Taliban expects International Community to continue humanitarian assistance and feeding of more than 28 million Afghans, while apparently enriching itself through taxation (almost \$2 billion in 2022) and sales of arms left by retreating international forces, natural resources, and drugs

Taliban movement has become more PR savvy and media aware, knowing what the IC wants to see and hear, while being intransigent with its absolute objectives.

The neo-absolutist system erected by the Taliban - the "Islamic Emirate" excludes compromise and therefore accommodation through engagement is likely unattainable.

Taliban's pervasive socio-cultural warfare internally, against Afghan culture, against other ethnicities and against women.

Afghanistan has become, once again, a pawn in the great power game - Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and others, with tensions between India and China looming large.

Afghanistan has become a hub for terrorism, a hornets' nest for terrorists with international connections – Al-Qaida, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement / Turkistan Islamic Party, but also the so-called "Islamic State" (Da'esh).