



Navigating a Complex Terrain in Afghanistan: The Ideological Obduracy of Taliban 2.0

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Abstract

Taliban 2.0 today remains strikingly similar to the regime it established in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Systemic violence against women, minorities and supporters of the deposed government continues to increase across the country.

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Analysis

The human catastrophe and economic suffering of ordinary Afghans has not prevented the Taliban from unleashing a regime of retribution that essentially reverses the fragile progress on human security achieved during the past two decades of international community's intervention in Afghanistan. The international community's strategy of isolating the Taliban while employing aid and assistance strategically as a tool to bring about change its behaviour has not yielded any tangible results. It is time for a new approach that seeks to directly engage – and gain control over – the insurgent group that now rules Afghanistan.

Women and human rights

On 28 May, the Taliban [rejected](#) the United Nations Security Council's call to lift its strict constraints on Afghan women and stated that the Council's claims were "unfounded". This was in response to [concerns expressed by Richard Bennet](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, that secondary schooling for girls remains suspended, a strict form of hijab has been enforced and women are denied opportunities to participate in political and public life. In short, the Taliban regime has yet again implemented gender segregation, repression and confining women to their homes.

Discrimination against women is only one aspect of the Taliban's overall policy of reversing the achievements of the past twenty years by establishing a state run according to a regressive interpretation of Islam. The Taliban also continue to persecute members of minority communities and elements associated with the previous regime including troops who served in the Afghan National Army. Media reports suggest this has occurred on a large scale. Where the Taliban regime has been less successful is its project to combat negative media coverage. Although media representatives continue to be harassed and [pressured not to publish anything anti-Taliban](#), print and social media reports detailing such incidents do continue to emerge. While these may be tip of the proverbial iceberg, they do provide an indication of what Afghanistan has been experiencing under the Taliban.

Engagement vs Recognition

Notwithstanding [promises made by certain Taliban spokespersons](#), few believed that the Taliban had become a reformed and moderate entity. It was, however, expected that the group's search for international recognition and financial assistance would keep its worst tendencies under check. The hard line stance taken by the Emirate has three implications.

Firstly, the group wants to dictate the terms of its engagement with the international community. It is announcing loud and clear that the world will have to deal with it – as a group that professes a particular undiluted ideology and linkages that ties it symbiotically with Al Qaeda. Secondly, the Taliban's intransigence points to the domination of the hardliners, led by the Haqqani terrorist organization, over the moderates, who include Mullah Baradar. And thirdly, as the Taliban struggles to establish a modicum of governance within the country, they are adhering to a hard line position in order to retain the allegiance of cadres and commanders. Establishing a purist regime based on Islam and free from any internal opposition has become a new goal for thousands of fighters, who may have lost their sense of purpose following the victory over the United States with some even joining the opposition and Islamic State.



The proposition that the international community can use aid as a bargaining tool with the Taliban might therefore be misplaced. Since the primary drivers of the Taliban worldview are internal, external leverage for change is likely to be limited. In short, the Taliban may not change even if the international community links the flow of aid and assistance desperately needed by ordinary Afghans to some degree of reform. Instead, the regime could seek to use its notoriety and the concern of the international community to keep a certain amount of international attention and assistance flowing into the country.

Future pathways

The objective would have to be to bring about internal changes and use pressure points to compel the Islamic Emirate to mend its ways. This calls for carefully crafting an engagement strategy that clearly identifies, strengthens and mainstreams the moderates within the Taliban. Such engagement needs to be linked with deliverables on the ground. Isolating the Taliban completely would only empower the hardliners. Every move by the international community should be directed towards establishing an inclusive government in Kabul. An opposition in the form of the National Resistance Front and other such groups are gaining ground within Afghanistan. Any long-term engagement strategy needs to be contingent on the amount of support such groups elicit from the Afghans in building a sustainable political system of their choice.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This text was first published on the SWP website as a "[Point of View](#)" piece, June 10, 2022.

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