



Taliban Firmly in Control of Afghanistan Two Years After Takeover

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Two years after taking control of Afghanistan, the Taliban have consolidated power and are improving the country's security and economic situation. These positive changes are taking place at the expense of women's rights and the activities of international organisations, which are both severely restricted, and the exclusion of ethnic minorities from participation in governing the state. Despite the intransigence of the Taliban, the lack of a political alternative will encourage the West to increase cooperation with the government to pursue common interests, such as the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, but without formal recognition of the regime.

Stabilisation without Democracy. From the time the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the overall security situation in the country has improved. According to the UN, between 15 August 2021 when the Taliban took over Kabul and 30 May of this year, 3,774 civilian victims of armed attacks in Afghanistan were documented, including 1,095 killed and 2,679 wounded. For comparison, from January to June 2021, the number of civilian casualties was 5,183 (including 1,659 killed), and in 2020, 8,820 (3,035 killed). In the last two years, most people died as a result of explosions involving improvised explosive devices or suicide attacks, and the perpetrators were most often members of the ISIS faction Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). Most of the attacks were carried out in the first weeks after the change of power. In the last year, ISIS-K activity has decreased. This may indicate that the Taliban have succeeded in weakening this organisation, as it is the main threat to them. In the last year, the activity of armed groups of representatives of the previous government, including the biggest one, the National Resistance Front, have also subsided. This means that there is currently no significant armed force threatening Taliban control of the state.

The improvement in the security situation, however, comes at the cost of stricter societal rules based on the Taliban's radical interpretation of Sharia law and retreat from the democratic progress of the last two decades. The Taliban

simply ignore the conditions set for them for the recognition by the international community regarding respect for human rights and the formation of a representative government, expressed, for example, in UN Security Council resolutions. In the last year, the Taliban took further steps to limit the presence of women in public life, including banning their education at universities, work in foreign NGOs and UN agencies, and access to parks and closing beauty salons. There are still cases of the murder and/or torture of members of the previous government and military, and of people suspected of belonging to ISIS-K. The Taliban also reintroduced public corporal punishment and executions. Although media activities have been allowed to continue, journalists are subjected to pressure and scrutiny by provincial committees of the Department of Information and Culture. The Taliban, originating from Sunni Pashtuns, do not want to include representatives of ethnic and religious minorities in the government. The system of state management is increasingly consolidating around Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, who resides in Kandahar, and the Taliban strongly reject any information about divisions within the movement.

Despite international sanctions and the suspension of development aid, the Taliban managed to stabilise the economy, although it remains difficult. In 2022, the country's GDP decreased by 2.4%, but the year before it dropped by as

much as 20.7%. Annual inflation fell from 18.3% in July 2022 to 3.5% in February this year, and in July, deflation of 2.8% was recorded. The Afghani strengthened against major currencies and the amount of cash in circulation increased. Budget revenues increased, mainly from customs duties and increased exports (to \$1.9 billion in 2022, compared to an average of \$0.8 billion in 2019-2021). Despite the relative macroeconomic stability, the situation of most Afghans remains terrible. According to the UN, two-thirds of them are food-insecure, and the number of people in need of humanitarian aid has increased this year from 24 million to 28.8 million.

The International Situation. The Taliban government has still not established official diplomatic relations with any country, although a few have maintained their embassies in Kabul (including neighbours China, Russia, and the UAE). The main area of international cooperation remains the provision of humanitarian aid through UN agencies and NGOs. The largest UN humanitarian appeal in history, amounting to \$4.44 billion for 2022, raised about 75% of that total. The main donors were the U.S. (\$1.2 billion, 36% of the total raised), the UK (\$454 million, 13.7%), and Germany (\$444 million, 13.4%). The needs of the UN agencies in Afghanistan in 2023 were estimated at \$4.6 billion, but by June, only 9% of it had been met. Restrictions introduced by the Taliban, such as the prohibition on women working and the activities of selected NGOs, as well as international sanctions, hamper the provision of assistance.

The socio-economic problems and authoritarian rule have prompted many Afghans to leave the country, which is a challenge mainly for neighbouring countries. According to UNHCR estimates, 1.6 million Afghan people have left their country since August 2021, mainly to Iran (1 million) and Pakistan (600,000). However, contrary to fears, Afghanistan has not become a source of mass migration to Europe. From January to June 2023, Afghans submitted 55,021 applications for international protection in the EU (compared to 45,475 in the same period in 2022), representing 11% of all applications. Most of them enter Europe legally. A small number of Afghans are detained while crossing the EU border in an irregular way (7,163 in the first half of this year against 17,300 in the same period of 2022).

Neighbouring countries are trying to maintain good working relations with the Taliban, focusing on limiting the terrorist threat from organisations operating from Afghanistan. In the last year, relations between the *de facto* Afghan authorities and Pakistan and Iran deteriorated and border clashes occurred more often than in previous years. Pakistan, which previously supported the Afghan Taliban, is in the most difficult situation, as the frequency of attacks by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and ISIS-K has increased since August 2021. The first official contacts between the *de facto* Afghan government and India also contributed to the deterioration of Pakistani-Afghan relations. The actions of the Taliban

against ISIS-K, an organisation with global ambitions, make the Taliban a *de facto* partner of the West in counterterrorism.

A positive gesture towards the West, opening up new opportunities for cooperation, was the Taliban's announcement in April this year of a ban on the cultivation of poppy seeds and the production of drugs, including opium, of which Afghanistan was the largest source (about 80% of world production). The lengthening list of common interests allows the West to explore the possibility of intensifying cooperation with Afghanistan. An example is the first official meeting between U.S. and Taliban representatives since 2021, which was held in Doha on 30-31 July this year, presented as a confidence-building measure. It was attended by the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan, Thomas West, and the head of the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Mutaqqi. They discussed, among other things, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, respect for human rights, and the future of Afghan foreign exchange reserves frozen in the U.S.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Two years of international isolation, economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressure have not weakened the Taliban nor induced them to meet the demands of the international community to respect women's rights and to form a representative government. The further reduction of human rights and the introduction of strict religious rule point to a re-creation of the radical version of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from the late 1990s. The improvement of the economic situation, the breakdown of armed opposition, and the weakening of ISIS-K will further increase the Taliban's resistance to external pressure. The main challenge for them will be the succession of power in the event of the death of the supreme leader, which could strengthen the divisions between the different factions. However, the likelihood of them losing power in the near future is slim.

The lack of a political alternative to the Taliban and the reluctance of the international community to intervene again in Afghanistan make maintaining the status quo the most likely scenario. In the long run, this may lead to a situation similar to North Korea or Myanmar where the existence of the state that is isolated and hostile to the West still requires humanitarian assistance from the outside. Recent U.S. actions suggest that it and its partners will deepen the "engagement without recognition" strategy, intensifying contacts with the Taliban only in areas where both sides have converging interests. This may concern the fight against international terrorism, the reduction of drug trafficking or the provision of humanitarian aid. Unlocking Afghan's foreign exchange reserves and integrating the country more into international trade would reduce humanitarian needs and the burden on donors. It would also be an important step in building mutual trust and creating new opportunities to influence the situation in Afghanistan.