

How the Taliban Transitioned From Insurgency to Governance

BIC STORIES FROM THE FIELD, SERIES – COMMENTARY

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In August 2021, the collapse of the Afghan republic and the departure of Western powers paved the way for the advent of a new “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” two decades after the collapse of the first Taliban regime. In August 2022, the Brussels International Center travelled to Kabul to document whether the Islamist group had successfully managed to take over governmental institutions in order to run a country on the brink of collapse.

On August 15, the BIC witnessed Taliban fighters parading in Kabul to celebrate their return to power, one year exactly after their takeover of the Afghan capital. Two weeks later, on August 31st, they took to the streets again to mark the one year anniversary of the day the last US-led forces hastily exited the country. They showcased equipment left behind by foreign troops and called for their government to be accepted as legitimate internationally.¹

¹ “Afghanistan’s Taliban mark anniversary of US-led force withdrawal”, Al Jazeera. August 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/31/afghanistans-taliban-mark-anniversary-of-us-led-force-withdrawal>

Some Afghan civilians cheered too, grateful for a Taliban victory that, in their view, finally brought peace to a country wrecked by twenty years of war and occupation. Others mourned for their bygone civil rights and longed for the days when they did not have to beg for bread.

"Warlords do not necessarily make good leaders in peacetime. Governance requires other skills, and so far the Taliban have not been able to demonstrate that they are capable of managing the country," one Pakistani diplomat told the BIC.

Interviews conducted by the BIC with a dozen political leaders, civil servants, humanitarians, and diplomats nevertheless reveal a mixed picture one year after the fundamentalists' return to power.

"To be honest, I am deeply surprised by their ability to manage the country. Taxes have never been collected so well, the airports are functioning, and they even paid the debts of the previous government to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for electricity supplies," a foreign diplomat stationed in the Afghan capital told the BIC, half incredulous. "On the other hand, a worrying phenomenon is the fact that they are gradually replacing skilled officials in certain ministries with people close to them, thus destroying their technical capacities."

"We work under pressure. In my department, 50% of the staff have left the country and 30% have resigned or been fired before being replaced by people close to the Taliban. This brain drain is dramatic", said a civil servant who has been working at the Ministry of Public Health for the past 15 years.

Several staffers at the human resources department half-heartedly confirmed this tendency. "It is true that in the management positions, they have mostly placed people close to them. But in the past too, you had to have connections to get a job, and corruption was widespread," one civil servant told the BIC.

However, at least one institution seems to be immune to this trend: the Ministry of the Economy, where the new government's propensity to surround itself with experts is welcomed. "Under the previous government, it was impossible for me to talk to the minister, but now I see the new one regularly to share my ideas," one economics researcher employed at the Ministry told the BIC. "I find them very willing to listen and learn," he added.

This is not the first time the Taliban have tried their hand at governance. They controlled the country from 1996 to 2001 before they were ousted by the US-led coalition. Then, during the war, they established "shadow governments" in areas de facto under their control that settled legal disputes, levied taxes, and even provided public services.²

For twenty years, the Taliban's evolution from a "disparate insurgency to a government in waiting" was made possible by using, on segments of the population, a set of strategies and tactics that included coercion, co-option, and co-operation to induce civilian compliance with their rule. When persuasion alone failed, they employed coercive methods.³

The objective of coercion was not only to eliminate any opposition to the insurgency, but also to send a message to dissuade others from opposing or obstructing the Taliban. We see this strategy continuing to this day, according to the book "Negotiating Survival" by Dr Ashley Jackson, the co-director of the Centre for the Study of Armed Groups at the Overseas Development Institute.

Now that they are back in power, the Taliban seem inclined to provide services to communities that they perceive as loyal while diverting support from areas that they deem had received disproportionate support under the previous government.

A confidential report by an international NGO that the BIC was able to read documents cases of aid diversion at a time when humanitarian needs have tripled in the country over the past year.

In the provinces, aid packages from relief organisations are commonly distributed by local Taliban officials who abuse their position by handing out these packages to their own families, friends, and members of the same ethnic group. "We have also seen situations where the Taliban force international NGOs to work with

² "How the Taliban Won Afghanistan: Years of Shadow Government, Steady Recruitment, Patience", The Wall Street Journal. August 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/live-afghanistan-taliban-news/card/BFhE0BwSxGmXoRdPyaUL>

³ "From Insurgency to Government in Waiting: Taliban Tactics and Strategy", Dr. Niels Terpstra. February 2022. <https://www.armedgroups-internationallaw.org/2022/02/04/from-insurgency-to-government-in-waiting-taliban-tactics-and-strategy/>

contractors who are close to them. The idea that the Taliban have stopped corruption is a myth," one humanitarian worker told the BIC.

Following the fall of Kabul, the country's new masters unveiled a cabinet of ministers composed exclusively of Pashtun men, with historic members in key positions. One exception was the appointment of Abdul Latif Nazari as deputy minister of economy. His nomination seemingly achieved two objectives for the mullahs, offering them the skills of a technocrat while throwing crumbs to the advocates of an "inclusive" government.

"I wasn't surprised when they knocked on my door," said the deputy minister from his vast office in the centre of the capital, jealously guarded by three fighters armed with assault rifles. Abdul Latif Nazari outlined to the BIC the major ventures on the agenda of the new government, starting with the "TAPI" project, a gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For twenty years, TAPI had remained a pipe dream, but the end of the war and the return of security have convinced the countries involved of the renewed feasibility of this project. For Afghanistan, the stakes are high.

According to several sources with direct knowledge of this file, TAPI would create 4,000 jobs, provide a massive supply of gas, and bring in an estimated 16 billion dollars over 30 years. It would also help break Kabul's isolation by reinstating it on the regional scene.

"It makes sense for them to go down this road, they are right," said a foreign diplomat, before adding, with a bit of scepticism: "But do they have the shoulders for such a project?"

Turkmenistan, which has the most to gain from this project to export its gas, is willing to cover all expenditures on behalf of Kabul to build the nearly 800-kilometres long section of the pipeline that would snake through Afghanistan.

"This would mean no investments on our parts and only benefits," said a civil servant at the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum. But the fact the Afghan banking system is not functioning due to Western sanctions is hampering this prospect as the State would not be able to receive such a money transfer.

Since the fall of Kabul, sanctions imposed by Western countries, including the freezing of the national reserve by the United States and the disconnection of the central bank from the international banking system, have had devastating effects on the country's economy.

The new authorities hope that a project such as TAPI would help tackle the economic crisis but even if this gas pipeline ever comes to fruition, it will not be enough to compensate for the suspension of international funding. Before the collapse of the Islamic Republic in August 2021, foreign aid, which was cut off overnight, represented about 40% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 75% of public spending.

The implementation of a project such as TAPI is also hindered by the international isolation of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," which is not recognized by any country. This state of affairs could continue as long as the Taliban trample on the rights of its population, particularly those of women, who have been deprived of most of their basic rights.

"The good news is that unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban are now willing to interact with the international community. In this respect, they have learned from their mistakes," a senior Pakistani diplomat told the BIC.

"Now, the negotiations between the Taliban and the international community should not be seen as a zero-sum game. We need a movement where everyone makes an effort. The Taliban, on their part, must be able to meet demands for political inclusiveness and respect for human rights, including education for girls," he added.

Negotiations have been taking place between Washington and Kabul over the past year, most recently in Uzbekistan in late July, to determine how to return some of the central bank's assets to the new government. But, as the Wall Street Journal reports, the Biden administration recently decided not to unfreeze these assets and suspended the talks after the US drone strike against al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴

⁴ "U.S. Rules Out Releasing Billions in Afghan Funds After Strike", The Wall Street Journal. August 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-rules-out-releasing-billions-in-afghan-funds-after-strike-11660564801>

This decision is a blow to hopes for economic recovery in Afghanistan, where millions of people live in extreme poverty. The presence of the al-Qaeda's leader in the heart of the Afghan capital, undoubtedly hosted by the Taliban, has also rekindled fears that the country may be used as a terrorist base.

"Zawahiri has set the negotiations back four steps. We have reached a deadlock, neither party is willing to take the first step. However, a solution must be found quickly because in the meantime the humanitarian crisis is worsening," said a Qatari diplomatic source.

"They (the Taliban) should be allowed access to 25% of the national reserve and then we see what they do with it. If they manage it properly, we'll give them a quarter again, and so on. We have tried the stick, now we must try the carrot," insisted the Doha official.

The question of lifting sanctions is a dilemma for Western powers, who do not want to reward a repressive regime but risk prolonging the suffering of the population by maintaining their punitive measures.

However, several diplomatic sources told the BIC that they dared to be cautiously optimistic, pointing out that the ideological divide within the Taliban could eventually lead to concessions, particularly on secondary education for girls, which has been suspended since the Islamists returned to power.

"Twenty years ago, Qatar was also against education for women. But we have changed, and I think it will take the Taliban half that time to evolve," said the Gulf diplomat. "There is a second line of leaders within the movement who are more open-minded, more educated and who want to interact with the world. For the moment, they don't have a say, but in a few years they could become ministers."

The prospects of an economic recovery are dim without Western sanctions being rescinded, which can only happen if the new de facto authorities dramatically improve their human rights record and demonstrate that their relation to Al-Qaeda is no more. Foreign diplomats interviewed by the BIC have acknowledged that, contrary to their initial assumptions, the Taliban have shown some level of governing proficiencies. Yet, for administrations to function more efficiently they will have to backtrack on their propensity to hire ideologically-aligned individuals rather than experienced civil servants.

About the BIC

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