The New Taliban
Insurgent Evolution

Farhan Sheikh

Abstract: Since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, there has been intense retrospection in literature on how the insurgent group managed to hold out against the US war machine. While most views center on the US failure in insurgency management, this paper suggests four fundamental changes in the Taliban as the key to its triumph: embracing technology, ethnic diversity, increased pragmatism, and recognition of good governance.

Introduction

On August 5, 2021, the city of Zaranj in the Nimruz province of Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. The first provincial capital captured by the Taliban in a blistering summer offensive saw the US-backed government completely disintegrate within nine days, leading to a return to Taliban rule after more than twenty years. The fall of the western-backed Ghani administration (2014-2021) was extensive and sweeping. The insurgents entered Kabul with little bloodshed and immediately filled the power vacuum.

As Taliban leaders and fighters slowly transition from generals and soldiers to ministers and police chiefs, the question arises as to whether the repression of their previous regime will be repeated.[1] The last time the Taliban controlled Kabul, in 2001, its reign was clearly "medieval" for the West. Women were barred from working, studying, and participating in politics. Music, flying kites, and watching television were banned, and there were public executions. Even if there were any hint of understanding in the West, it was squashed by the September 11 attack. The subsequent overthrow of the Taliban government by the US war machine should have catalyzed the western-style development of a prosperous state. But after more than twenty long and bloody years, we now know that this was not the case.

---

[1] Steven Erlanger, "The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Restrain or Support Al Qaeda?" *The New York Times*, August 17, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-al-qaeda.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

There has been much academic discussion about how a rebel group with primitive, traditional values was able to hold out against a militarily superior adversary for more than twenty years.[1][2] However, these discussions mainly focus on the military tactics of the belligerents, the political errors of the incumbent administration, and the incorrect prioritization of war objectives. Few discussions revolve around the simple idea that the Taliban has displayed a high learning potential and have evolved throughout their insurgency following the overthrow of its regime in 2001.

The overarching purpose of this article is to determine the fundamental changes in the rebel-turned-governor group, providing insight into how they impacted the change in their policies during and after their insurgent days. The first section of this article gives a historical overview of the Taliban movement. The second section investigates the Taliban's decision-making approach and its organizational structure. The third section examines the key themes and uncompromising characteristics of the movement. The fourth section explores the evolution of the Taliban during its insurgency. The final section offers concluding remarks.

The Taliban: A Historical Overview

The key to understanding the Taliban is not just diving into Afghan history but appreciating the social norms surrounding the Afghan culture. After the Soviet forces retreated, Afghanistan saw its worst self during the power struggle between the former Mujahideen groups starting in 1992. Widespread acts of violence and sexual abuse occurred everywhere, and local warlords' grip on regional power became even tighter as the central government changed hands.[3]

It is important to note that the values and norms of the Taliban are deeply tied to its place of origin. The group originated in the Kandahar province as a vigilante militia in the summer of 1994. Deeply influenced by a strict interpretation of the Deobandi version of Islam and inspired by the Pashtun code of honor or "Pashtunwali," the Taliban emerged as a force that served to eliminate the chaotic and violent status quo.

Afghanistan is a highly diverse country in terms of population. Its land is dotted with people of varying ethnicities, each with unique values and norms. It is also tribal in nature, where an individual's loyalty to his tribe or clan supersedes his loyalty to any rational-legal authority present in Kabul. Upon its formation, the Taliban consisted solely of Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan.[4]

---

[1] Raffaello Pantucci and Abdul Basit, "Post-Taliban Takeover: How the Global Jihadist Terror Threat May Evolve," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no.4 (2021).
[2] Georgi Asatryan, "The Talibs or the Taliban in Afghanistan," *Iran and the Caucasus* 25, no.4 (2021).
[3] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004).
[4] William Maley, "The Foreign Policy of the Taliban," *Council of Foreign Relations,* February 15, 2000, https://www.cfr.org/report/foreign-policy-taliban (accessed December 10, 2022).

The Taliban initially received backing from local Afghan leaders and businesses, which helped it cement its legitimacy. Another crucial support that accelerated their campaign was the backing of the powerful Pakistani intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).[1] With secure funding and local legitimacy, the Taliban eventually entered Kabul in 1996 and established its first government.

The "medieval" nature of the regime is well documented.[2] The policies promulgated by the Taliban leadership during its stint in power clearly reflect their religious, ethnic, and socio-economic background. Nevertheless, the on-the-ground reality of the social landscape is obscure. A journalist's account of late 1999 tells of kids flying kites and playing soccer in Kabul and Kandahar.[3] He observed criticism against the restrictive anti-girls educational policies, even among Taliban ranks. Some communities resisted Taliban measures against local traditions, even in the Pashtun countryside. Nevertheless, Western debates did not comprehend these cultural undertones, especially after 9/11.[4]

In retrospect, current US policymakers may regret their past decisions; the reality was that such decisions stemmed from myopic policies of neoconservative hawks in the Bush administration. Following the US invasion and the swift collapse of the Emirate, the Taliban offered to surrender unconditionally, which the US refused.[5][6] Torn between the prospects of becoming prisoners or continuing to fight, Taliban leadership escaped through the porous Pakistani border.

The Taliban was not invited when the post-Taliban structure was being formed at the Bonn Conference (December 2001). Attempts to include individual members in political processes such as the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga were unsuccessful. The US and Karzai administrations also did not allow them to form a "moderate" Taliban political party.[7] The extreme marginalization of former rulers did not bode well for the Afghans, as it only prolonged the conflict. As Masoom Stanekzai, head of the Afghan negotiation team said, this was a "historic mistake."

The Taliban eventually mounted a military comeback from the rural, backward districts of their origins. Three factors legitimized its return: the extensive corruption of the warlords-turned-rulers, political exclusion of ethnic Pashtuns in the Northern Alliance-dominated Afghan government, and the hatred of the

---

[1] Maley, "The Foreign Policy of the Taliban."
[2] Rosemarie Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today*, (Johnson, NC: McFarland & Co. Publishers, 2008)
[3] Thomas Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?" *CTC Sentinel* 14, no.3 (2021): 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Alissa J. Rubin, "Did the War in Afghanistan Have to Happen?" *The New York Times*, September 2, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/world/middleeast/afghanistan-taliban-deal-united-states.html (accessed December 10, 2022).
[6] "Text: Pentagon Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/rumsfeldtext_111901.html (accessed December 10, 2022).
[7] Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?," 3.

foreign/US colonialist posture in their homeland. In 2003, the Taliban's founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, formed a new Taliban Leadership Council to unite the fragmented Taliban groups. By 2005, the insurgency was a force to be reckoned with in southern Afghanistan.

In the years to come, the Taliban grew in strength, both in size and strategy. Instead of negotiating a truce, the US stubbornly tried to defeat it militarily. As President George W. Bush said, "You can't talk to them. You can't negotiate with them."[1] His words ran deep into his administration's neoconservative policymaking, which favored brute force over any possible negotiations.[2] When President Barack Obama's troop surge in 2009 failed to press the Taliban to the negotiating table, this approach had to be revised.

The subsequent policy revision made it possible for the Taliban to open a political office in Doha, Qatar in 2013. Further talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban took place in Pakistan, but none yielded credible results. Finally, caving under the pressure of an unpopular "endless" war, President Donald J. Trump directed the initiation of direct negotiations with Taliban leadership, notably excluding the government in Kabul. The direct talks made one thing evident: the Taliban had been diplomatically accepted as a critical party to the conflict. The discussions eventually culminated in the 2020 Doha Agreement concerning US troop withdrawal and included significant concessions to the Taliban.

As President Biden followed through on the agreement on troop withdrawal, the Taliban ramped up its summer offensive, rapidly capturing city after city. Given its long-standing endemic issues, such as bureaucratic corruption and low morale, and the loss of US air support, the beleaguered Afghan National Security Forces collapsed, in many cases giving up without a fight. After entering Kabul without any resistance on August 15, the Taliban proclaimed the war over.

The Taliban's Organizational Structure and Approach to Decision-Making

The Taliban today is not a group of people with a common background. Its ranks include people from different tribes and clans, bound together by a common Islamic ideology. Thus, this bond provides some insight into how the Taliban is structured and how it prioritizes its decisions.[3]

As the Taliban fill the ministries abandoned by the former administration, the world is left to wonder about the thought processes behind its domestic and foreign policies. But to understand this, one must first analyze the organizational structure of the Taliban's "shadow government" during the insurgency.

---

[1] "President Bush, Philippine President Arroyo Hold Joint Press Conference," *The White House,* May 19, 2003, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/20732.htm (accessed December 10, 2022).

[2] Harmonie Toros, "We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists!': Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts," *Security Dialogue* 39, no.4 (2008).

[3] Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Make Policy," *Peaceworks* no.153 (2019).

According to Jackson and Amiri (2019), "the Taliban's policymaking is driven by military and political necessity,"[1] which can be interpreted simply as pragmatism. However, pragmatism can only get an organization so far. The Taliban is not a political party but rather a reactionary or a militaristic group. It seeks legitimacy through its interpretation of Islamic law, which is highly dependent on the ordinary people's perception of Islamic authority. This, in turn, reinforces its political entity—what they refer to as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the Taliban's structure is unique because it has both vertical and horizontal organizational features. The vertical chain of command is clear and hierarchical, with the "amir-ul-momineen" (lit., "commander of the faithful") at the top. The Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council), of which the leader is separate, functions under him and plays an advisory role. The Rahbari Shura comprises members who are the leader's deputies and ministers and are involved in day-to-day affairs, something from which the top leader is generally removed. This vertical control structure presents a seemingly transparent chain of command, but the on-the-ground reality is quite different.

The Taliban is also structured horizontally in the form of networks and fronts led by military commanders. The local fronts, or the Mahaz, obtain recognition as part of the movement from the Rahbari Shura. In return, they gain a substantial degree of autonomy, as long as they do not violate core policies. Many authors have cited this horizontal structure as key to the resilience of the Taliban movement;[2][3] the absence of micromanaging effectively serves to avoid splits within the organization. The horizontal structure also allows tribes and clans other than the original Kandahari group to join the movement and rise within its ranks. One of the best examples of such extensions is the group led by the Haqqanis, popularly known as the "Haqqani Network." It has a different tribal base, it is older than the mainstream "Kandahari" Taliban, and during the Soviet War, it maintained close ties with the ISI. Its leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is now head of the powerful Ministry of Interior Affairs and wields considerable influence within the Taliban leadership.

The vertical structure of the Taliban provides a centralized command authority and provides religious legitimacy to the leader. This also keeps its members under one flag and ideology. The horizontal feature of its structure provides elasticity and adaptability. Such characteristics are useful in militaristic situations when guerilla warfare is essential for survival but showcase a particular flaw; policy and decision-making at the top might not fully translate at the bottom, which is the primary concern of international human rights

---

① Jackson and Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy."
② Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future," *Peaceworks* no.160 (2020).
③ Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?"

organizations. Guarantees and promises made by the leadership may not be passed down to individual fighters, which may impede proper governance.

It took more than three weeks for the Taliban to announce an interim government after the fall of Kabul in August 2021. There have been reports of power struggles over the allotment of ministerial positions,[1] but the delay in forming a government can be logically attributed to the stunning nature of the Taliban takeover. The sudden collapse of the Republic's security and law enforcement agencies, coupled with Ashraf Ghani's flight, naturally made whatever preparation the insurgent group had made insufficient.

It can be argued that if President Ghani did not flee, it would not have made a difference whether the Taliban could have entered Kabul. A transition would have been imminent, albeit a thought-out one. However, the sudden vacuum created by the collapse of the former administration created a dilemma. Compromising with their foes in order to enter Kabul was one thing, but voluntarily sharing power after assuming an uncontested seat of power was another. Such a line of thinking explains the Taliban's decision to fill its interim cabinet with its entire senior leadership, ignoring domestic and international observers' calls for "inclusivity."

Nevertheless, during the initial months, the Taliban governance style was quite similar to the one it had employed in its "shadow government" during the insurgency days. For example, Acting Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoub announced that his ministry would take responsibility for the delayed Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline.[2] Generally, these types of actions are handled by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the scope of which has been claimed by Yaqoub. These overlapping scopes reflect the horizontal command-and-control style of the organization, which is still prevalent in the fledgling government. In some way, the Taliban's dependence on its insurgency-era governance style is necessary to transition from fighting to ruling. Even so, as long as this two-track authority system between the formal hierarchy and informal network continues to endure, it will eventually undermine domestic ministries and institutions and turn the state into a form of oligarchy.

Unyielding Characteristics of the Taliban

The oppressiveness of the Taliban during its first stint in power from 1996 to 2001 has been etched into every Afghan's memory. Drawing from the tribal codes and a strict interpretation of Islam, its rule gained no international recognition, except from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Pakistan.

---

[1] "IntelBrief: Taliban Infighting Poses Early Challenge to Governing Afghanistan," *The Soufan Center*, September 20, 2021, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-september-20/ (accessed December 10, 2022).

[2] "Taliban pledge mega gas pipeline project's security in Afghanistan," *The Anadolu Agency*, October 30, 2021, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-pledge-mega-gas-pipeline-projects-security-in-afghanistan/2407241 (accessed December 10, 2022).

After its recent takeover and even during the Doha Talks (2018-2020), the Taliban repeatedly gave assurances that its rule would be inclusive, women-friendly, and observant of international human rights.

However, states and international organizations alike are skeptical. Even though they realize that the Taliban is desperate for any form of international recognition, they have little reason to trust the group. The reason for this is that the rigid characteristics of the Taliban need to demonstrate some flexibility before its assurances can be taken seriously.

Twenty years ago, gaining international legitimacy through domestic acts remained low on the Taliban's priority list. Nevertheless, the fact that the Taliban has made pledges since the beginning of the Doha Talks is a sign that the Taliban has evolved somewhat. However, there are three key characteristics of the organization that have endured: emphasis on internal cohesion, high threat perception, and ambiguous messaging.

Emphasis on Internal Cohesion

Perhaps the most enduring characteristic of the Taliban's behavior after August 15, 2021, was its continued prioritization of maintaining the group's internal cohesion and unity. When the Taliban's leadership debates policies or makes strategic decisions, it has a consistent track record of making choices that prioritize the group's integrity or at least its appearance of having integrity.[1]

This particular aspect is a double-edged sword. While it is necessary for the central leadership to be united, especially in a resource-hungry country like Afghanistan, the group will struggle to gain popular favor when confronted with a choice that may benefit the Afghan people at the cost of creating discord among Taliban ranks.

Three weeks after assuming power, the Taliban announced its upper cabinet would consist of its entire senior leadership. The announcement was followed by rumors of a rift between influential leaders.[2] Regardless, the announcement revealed the group's careful balancing act regarding designating governance groups, and that measures were being taken to alleviate internal tensions.

High Threat Perception

Rebels and insurgent groups require strong survival instincts, especially when caught in a protracted conflict. Maintaining a survivalist attitude requires constant vigilance and quick resolution of potential

---

[1] Andrew Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no.9 (2021): 1.
[2] Shabullah Yousafzai, "Mullah Baradar, Haqqani dispel rumours of Taliban rifts," *The Express Tribune*, September 16, 2021, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2320508/mullah-baradar-haqqani-dispel-rumours-of-taliban-rifts (accessed December 10, 2022).

threats. After over two decades of guerilla warfare against a superior enemy, the Taliban, at both the organizational and individual levels, is guided by a threat perception heightened to the point of paranoia.[1]

This feature directly impacts the government's interaction with the population. The Taliban leadership seems shrewdly aware of how decades of struggle and hardship have shaped perceptions, especially on the individual level, towards that of instinctual brutality, which can, in turn, be highly disruptive when transitioning into a governing entity. For example, in late August, a Taliban spokesperson urged women to stay in their homes because its fighters had not yet been trained not to hurt and harass women.[2]

Days after Kabul's fall, former Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh announced armed resistance to the Taliban authority in the Panjshir Valley, a bastion of anti-Taliban forces throughout the years. The announcement was followed by a speedy, large-scale military mobilization by the Taliban to crush the rebellion. By early September, Taliban forces had overwhelmed the valley. The group's swift response to the resistance announcement indicates that the Taliban perceive any varying degree of threat as a danger to its survival.

The Taliban's response to protests also reflects how threat perception guides the organization. Small-scale protests led mainly by women erupted in Jalalabad, Herat, Kabul, and other cities during the first few weeks of its takeover. These protests were met with violence and aggression by Taliban fighters. By mid-September, all kinds of protests and demonstrations were banned unless approved by the organization.[3]

Ambiguous Messaging

The Taliban's ambiguity in messaging, especially regarding their future intentions, is another trait that has endured for years. However, that does not mean that the Taliban is always opaque when communicating. For instance, the Taliban's public messaging was very transparent during the insurgency, putting out clear messages for an armed struggle against the foreign invaders and illegitimate puppet government. When alluding to future intentions, though, the messaging becomes ambiguous. Whether it is about the return of girls to secondary schools, women's rights, or journalism, the Taliban masks its intentions behind the familiar phrase: "in accordance with Islamic laws and values…"[4] Such murky messaging contrasts with its clear rhetoric on ousting the previous administration and makes one fact apparent: the Taliban's messaging

---

[1] Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," 4.
[2] Norimitsu Onishi, "A Taliban Spokesman Urges Women to Stay Home Because Fighters Haven't Been Trained to Respect Them," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/world/asia/taliban-women-afghanistan.html (accessed December 10, 2022).
[3] Akhtar Mohammad, Peter Beaumont, and Patrick Wintour, "Taliban ban protests and slogans that don't have their approval," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/taliban-ban-protests-and-slogans-that-dont-have-their-approval (accessed December 10, 2022).
[4] Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," 8.

is very transparent when it comes to assigning blame, such as when listing the wrongs of the previous government or the social factors that are harmful to Afghan society, but its public messaging becomes quite vague when the question of future constructive ideas and intentions is raised.

There are two possible reasons for such vagueness. One, the Taliban believes that being vague strengthens its hand during negotiations and communication with other actors, domestic or international. Second, the ambiguity results from a lack of concrete consensus among the senior leadership. The Taliban rank and file consists of diverse ethnicities from different tribes and clans and being ambiguous may therefore help maintain cohesion within the group, reinforcing the previous idea that the Taliban prioritizes organizational unity.

The Taliban's Evolution

On February 20, 2020, just days before the Doha agreement signing between the US and the Taliban, the New York Times published a striking opinion piece. The article, titled "What We, the Taliban, Want," was rich with captivating thoughts about peace, stability, and self-determination.[1] What made the article so remarkable was that it was written by Sirajuddin Haqqani, a wanted Talib with a $10 million bounty on his head. Publishing an op-ed by a wanted individual in one of the US's most reputable newspapers certainly required a shrewd and sophisticated approach to public relations, something that the Taliban did not possess even at the height of its power in 1996-2001. Haqqani's article is just one of many examples of how the Taliban has demonstrated that it is an organization capable of evolving. As the Taliban handles its newfound responsibilities, it is necessary to understand what type of fundamental changes it has undergone, such as its understanding of modern technology, its heightened ethnic tolerance, and its recognition of the importance of good governance. Understanding these changes may add clarity to the future of Afghanistan.

<u>Embracing Modern Communications Technology</u>

Perhaps the most remarkable evolution in the Taliban's policy and inner workings is how it handles media and communications. When it was in power before 2001, the Taliban banned televisions and preferred to communicate with the population through print media and radio. Taliban management also monopolized the use of phones.

---

[1] Sirajuddin Haqqani, "Opinion | What We, the Taliban, Want," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

As its insurgency progressed, the Taliban eventually started using all available communications facilities, from conventional radios to websites and social media. The Taliban has also grown to be more accepting of the use of television, even actively appearing on local news channels.[1]
Far before its takeover of Kabul, the movement already ran a website accessible in over five languages, and its spokespersons were active on Twitter. Over time, the group mastered the art of hashtags and creating content targeting its supporters. Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's head of Political Office in Doha, and Zabihullah Mujahid, one of the Emirate's spokespersons, have both steadily amassed a large following on Twitter—nearly half a million each.

The Taliban's attitude toward communications is far more pragmatic than before, despite being shaped by military necessity from the insurgency era. Nevertheless, it can be argued that such a pragmatic shift indicates that the Taliban has accepted the rapid spread of media, technology, and the Internet, and believe that they can no longer control it.[2] Instead, the group has learned to embrace technology.

Ethnic Diversity in New Recruits

The Taliban originated from the heart of the Pashtun tribal areas, meaning early recruits were almost exclusively ethnic Pashtuns. Even during the Taliban's initial rule, the northern belt, including the Afghanistan–Tajikistan border, was not controlled by the group. These areas were inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, who fiercely resisted Taliban rule. When the US invaded Afghanistan, this resistance proved crucial and facilitated the overthrow of the Taliban.

The Taliban's current membership is still predominantly comprised of Pashtuns, but the majority has significantly decreased. This is because the Taliban has effectively projected its mission to the masses, transforming from a Pashtun-based insurgency that gained loyalty through tribal links to a pan-Islamic fighting force confronting foreign invaders. Many experts believe this was the key to the Taliban's complete military success over the Republic's forces.[3]

The group's success in attracting other ethnicities to its cause is credited to not only its ability to tap into religious sentiment but also its growing alienation by the population over corruption, incompetent governance, crooked judicial systems, and unpopular leadership choices. The "shadow government"

---

[1] Jim Waterson, "Female presenter interviews Taliban spokesman on Afghanistan television." *The Guardian*, August 18, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/17/female-presenter-interviews-taliban-spokesman-on-afghanistan-television (accessed December 10, 2022).
[2] Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?" 6.
[3] Frud Bezhan, "Ethnic Minorities Are Fueling the Taliban's Expansion in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/15/ethnic-minorities-are-fueling-the-talibans-expansion-in-afghanistan (accessed December 10, 2022).

operated during the insurgency offered an alternative vision, drawing throngs of rural Afghans into the Taliban's ranks.

As the Taliban surrounded Kabul, it first captured other provincial capitals, prioritizing the northern provinces. It sent its best non-Pashtun commanders to oversee the northern operations, giving them a military edge that they never had before.[①] After the Taliban captured Panjshir, historically known as a stronghold of anti-Taliban forces, it appointed a local Panjshiri to oversee the valley's security.

Ethnic diversity within the Taliban has strengthened the group's standing in many ways, especially militarily. However, it also makes the movement unpredictable. Each ethnicity has its own set of values and beliefs. Since the Taliban has consistently prioritized internal unity and cohesion above all else, having a diverse fighter base will force the Taliban to make concessions or risk internal division.

Increased Pragmatism

In the early days of the insurgency, the Taliban shut down schools (specifically those for girls) in all the districts and areas it captured, citing schools as symbols of the government's influence. Sometime after 2009, the Taliban gradually shifted from attacking to taking control of government schools. This approach was also reflected in a new version of *layha* (lit., "code of conduct"), which removed the education system as a target of the Taliban. In its 2013 Eid-al-Fitr message, the group's leadership proclaimed that "our young generation should arm themselves with religious and modern education because modern education is a fundamental need in every society in the present time."[②]

Up until 2010, there was open hostility toward nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The insurgents described them as "tools of the infidels" and effectively banned them. New versions of *layha*, on the other hand, focused on cooperating with them when practical. In 2011, a Taliban representative said that Mullah Omar had ordered a halt in killing people who worked for organizations building roads as long they did not work with the enemy. NGOs were asked to register with the leadership council and were taxed. There were some exceptions to this shift, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and US military-funded projects.[③]

The above policy shifts throughout the insurgency can be described as pragmatic. In her analysis of the *layhas*, Kate Clark (2011) explains that the fundamental explanation for the policy shifts toward education

---

[①] Scott Peterson, "Afghanistan: Taliban strategy to take Kabul ran through northern ethnic recruits." *Christian Science Monitor*, August 20, 2021, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2021/0820/Afghanistan-How-the-Taliban-won-over-northern-ethnic-minorities (accessed December 10, 2022).
[②] Jackson and Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy."
[③] Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?" 9.

and NGOs is a simple acknowledgment of the reality: going against them would eventually anger the local population and alienate the Taliban's shadow government.[①]

The group's increasingly pragmatic actions sometimes collided with its traditional thinking. As Watkins (2021) summarizes, the Taliban grows most pragmatic when the actor with which it is engaging has something it badly needs and does not publicly pressure the group with any potential conditions.[②] There are a couple of reasons for such a pragmatic shift over the past few decades.

First was the death of Mullah Omar and the elevation of Mullah Akhtar Mansour to the top post, which precipitated the leadership's growing openness to engaging with international actors. Even though Omar will always retain a legendary reputation among Taliban supporters, Mansour's experience as his deputy made him recognize the flaws of the group's previous rule. He knew that the Taliban would need international recognition to realize its political ambitions and opened the group to aid agencies and NGOs working in the education and health sectors. When the surge of US troops began to abate, Mansour also restructured the Taliban's hierarchy, introducing Red Units, an elite military unit that came under the direct command of the provincial governor putting it above the standard chain-of-command. In a nutshell, a change in thinking at the top led the Taliban to be more pragmatic.[③]

Second, the long war has instilled a survivalist mentality, which has bolstered a practical way of thinking among the group. Fighting for twenty years against the most powerful military in history forces a group to adapt or face annihilation. The lengthy war also made the Taliban realize that it needed to learn how to govern instead of just fighting for survival.

Overall, the Taliban can be pragmatic when needed, which means that aid agencies, NGOs, and even state actors have increased capacity to influence the group's policymaking. International actors can carefully leverage the Taliban's desire to achieve international recognition to coax the movement into making favorable policies.

Recognizing the Importance of Good Governance

As the Taliban filled out the power void left by the Ghani administration, the group appointed its senior leadership to the same ministries as the previous administration. This implies that the Taliban has silently accepted the scope of a modern Afghan state, created by the previous Western-backed government.[④]

---

① Kate Clark, "The Layha: Calling the Taleban to Account," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2011, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/20110704_CKlark_The_Layha.pdf (accessed December 10, 2022).
② Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," 10.
③ Jackson and Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy."
④ Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," 6.

Another striking feature of the new government is that the cabinet members appear to favor those who held ministerial ranks back in the 1990s. The cabinet selections contrast with military movements, where military ranks determine the positions of importance. Logically, the selection seems to prefer prior experience in governance. Some ministries have also called former experts and technocrats to return to their former duties.

The Taliban has inherited an economically crippled country. Afghanistan faces an extreme humanitarian crisis with over $9.5 billion frozen by the US. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates that Afghanistan's economy will shrink by 30 percent,[1] with as much as 97 percent of the population at risk of falling below the poverty line by mid-2022.[2] In the face of financial catastrophe, the Taliban has determined that good governance is the best way to win local support, which the group recognizes as vital to its hold on power.

Conclusion

After the August 15 takeover, many observers and stakeholders would likely consider the Taliban's track record during its first stint in power to understand its policymaking and political actions. However, such an approach is misguided, erroneous, and myopic. Recent actions and their current policies indicate that the Taliban has, in fact, evolved.

The movement has ideologically solid roots, which are considerably influenced by its geographical origin. Adhering to a strict interpretation of the Deobandi school of Islam and inspired by Pashtun tribal values, the Taliban reigned brutally and harshly over most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Its severe rule deprived it of international recognition until it was ousted by the US. After transforming into an insurgency, the Taliban steadily underwent fundamental changes over two decades, signaling that it is an organization capable of learning. Finally, after striking a deal with the US, the Taliban marched unopposed into Kabul in August 2021.

When the Taliban announced its interim government cabinet, certain features echoed the past. The cabinet consisted entirely of Taliban senior leadership, indicating the group's aversion to discord within its ranks. Its response to protests and rebellions also mirrored its high degree of threat perception.

---

[1] International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook, October 2021, Middle East and Central Asia: Trade-Offs Today for Transformation Tomorrow*, (Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2021), file:///Users/rafarmer/Downloads/reo-october-2021-english.pdf (accessed December 10, 2022), 16.

[2] "97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP," *United Nations Development Programme*, September 9, 2021, https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp (accessed December 10, 2022).

Nevertheless, the Taliban's pragmatic decisions regarding media and NGOs reveal that it has evolved since its days as insurgents. One of the fundamental changes within the group is its embrace of the rapid spread of modern communications technology and the Internet to advance its political goals. Other transformations that have changed the group's decision-making processes are ethnic diversity among recruits and recognition of the importance of good governance.

The Taliban is Afghanistan's new reality. International actors should constructively engage with it in the interest of the Afghan people—something that can only be done effectively by first understanding the movement's history and evolution.

Bibliography

[1] Asatryan, Georgi. "The Talibs or the Taliban in Afghanistan." *Iran and the Caucasus* 25, No.4 (2021): 420-431.

[2] Bezhan, Frud. "Ethnic Minorities Are Fueling the Taliban's Expansion in Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2021. https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/15/ethnic-minorities-are-fueling-the-talibans-expansion-in-afghanistan (accessed December 10, 2022).

[3] Clark, Kate. "The Layha: Calling the Taleban to Account." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2011. https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/20110704_CKlark_The_Layha.pdf (accessed December 10, 2022).

[4] Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars.* New York: Penguin Group, 2004.

[5] Erlanger, Steven. "The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Restrain or Support Al Qaeda?" *The New York Times*, August 17, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-al-qaeda.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

[6] Haqqani, Sirajuddin. "Opinion | What We, the Taliban, Want." *The New York Times*, February 20, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

[7] "IntelBrief: Taliban Infighting Poses Early Challenge to Governing Afghanistan." *The Soufan Center*, September 20, 2021. https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-september-20/ (accessed December 10, 2022).

[8] International Monetary Fund. *Regional Economic Outlook, October 2021, Middle East and Central Asia: Trade-Offs Today for Transformation Tomorrow*. Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2021. file:///Users/rafarmer/Downloads/reo-october-2021-english.pdf (accessed December 10, 2022).

[9] Jackson, Ashley, and Rahmatullah Amiri. "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Make Policy." *Peaceworks* No.153 (2019).

[10] Maley, William. "The Foreign Policy of the Taliban." *Council of Foreign Relations,* February 15, 2000. https://www.cfr.org/report/foreign-policy-taliban (accessed December 10, 2022).

[11] Mohammad, Akhtar, Peter Beaumont, and Patrick Wintour. "Taliban ban protests and slogans that don't have their approval." *The Guardian*, September 9, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/taliban-ban-protests-and-slogans-that-dont-have-their-approval (accessed December 10, 2022).

[12] Onishi, Norimitsu. "A Taliban Spokesman Urges Women to Stay Home Because Fighters Haven't Been Trained to Respect Them." *The New York Times*, August 25, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/world/a

sia/taliban-women-afghanistan.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

[13] Pantucci, Raffaello, and Abdul Basit. "Post-Taliban Takeover: How the Global Jihadist Terror Threat May Evolve." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, No.4 (2021): 1-7.

[14] Peterson, Scott. "Afghanistan: Taliban strategy to take Kabul ran through northern ethnic recruits." *Christian Science Monitor*, August 20, 2021. https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2021/0820/Afghanistan-How-the-Taliban-won-over-northern-ethnic-minorities (accessed December 10, 2022).

[15] "President Bush, Philippine President Arroyo Hold Joint Press Conference." *The White House,* May 19, 2003. https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/20732.htm (accessed December 10, 2022).

[16] Rubin, Alissa J. "Did the War in Afghanistan Have to Happen?" *The New York Times*, September 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/world/middleeast/afghanistan-taliban-deal-united-states.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

[17] Ruttig, Thomas. "Have the Taliban Changed?" *CTC Sentinel* 14, No.3 (2021): 1-15.

[18] Skaine, Rosemarie. *Women Of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today*. Johnson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008.

[19] "Taliban pledge mega gas pipeline project's security in Afghanistan." *The Anadolu Agency*, October 30, 2021. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-pledge-mega-gas-pipeline-projects-security-in-

afghanistan/2407241 (accessed December 10, 2022).

[20] "Text: Pentagon Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld." *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/rumsfeldtext_111901.html (accessed December 10, 2022).

[21] Toros, Harmonie. "'We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists!': Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts." *Security Dialogue* 39, No.4 (2008): 407-426.

[22] Waterson, Jim. "Female presenter interviews Taliban spokesman on Afghanistan television." *The Guardian*, August 18, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/17/female-presenter-interviews-taliban-spokesman-on-afghanistan-television (accessed December 10, 2022).

[23] Watkins, Andrew. "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months." *CTC Sentinel* 14, No.9 (22021): 1-14.

[24] Watkins, Andrew. "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future." *Peaceworks* No.160 (2020): 3-24.

[25] Yousafzai, Shabullah. "Mullah Baradar, Haqqani dispel rumours of Taliban rifts." *The Express Tribune*, September 16, 2021. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2320508/mullah-baradar-haqqani-dispel-rumours-of-taliban-rifts (accessed December 10, 2022).

[26] "97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP." *United Nations Development Programme*, September 9, 2021, https://www.undp.org/press-

releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-

poverty-mid-2022-says-undp   (accessed

December 10, 2022).