

Issue

Brief

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Taliban 2.0: Stronger or Moving Towards Fragmentation?

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Abstract

Two years after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, the debates around whether the group remains intact or has become divided have surfaced once again. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Kabul in August 2021, there were speculations that the country could be going into a civil war or the Taliban would eventually come to a split. This brief analyses the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's resurgence in Kabul and weighs in on the ongoing debates about the group's internal divisions.

The fall of Kabul was a massive blow to the United States (US) and its allies, with their reconstruction efforts and capacity-building initiatives coming to naught. Experience with the Taliban's first rule (1996-2001) raised fears about the group going back on their commitments to the Doha Agreement and reprising their repressive rule, thereby undoing any progress that had been recorded in the preceding two decades. At the same time, some analysts expected a 'Taliban 2.0' that would be less brutal, with international pressure through financial blockades and political isolation possibly taming their extremist tendencies.¹ In the subsequent months, however, the group showed its familiar policies on women and girls, press freedom, governance issues, ethnic minorities, and use of violence.

The seeming invincibility² of the group after their return to power soon gave rise to questions about the difficulties in transitioning from an insurgency to a government, their ability to govern Afghanistan as a modern-day state, and the organisational structure and strength of the group. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) took over an impoverished country mired in an economic crisis and receiving little foreign aid.³ Two years later, these difficulties have compounded. It would appear, however, that the IEA is in a better position this time around, with its growing diplomatic engagement with China, Iran, and Russia and other countries even in the absence of *de jure* recognition. The Afghan embassies in approximately 14 countries now have Taliban officials in charge. While the terrorist threat of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) persists, the National Resistance Front (NRF) has failed to present a strong opposition. Despite sanctions and reduced aid, along with public recrimination for their actions, the group has refused to reconsider contentious issues.

Beginning with the formation in September 2021 of an all-male Pashtun-dominated Cabinet, the group has aimed at rendering women invisible from public life. While these restrictions were initially said to be only temporary, women have still been unable to access their rights at the time of writing, and the continuation of the Taliban's discriminatory policies is causing the erosion of the country's progress in the last two decades.

This brief analyses the internal divisions within the Taliban to understand the implications of the reassertion of power by the Emir on policy-related areas and in clamping dissent, on the traditional differences over the Kandahari and Kabul factions of the group.^a By mapping the making of the so-called ‘Second Emirate’,⁴ with an emphasis on the formation of the Cabinet and the question of women’s rights, this brief attempts to understand how the squabble for power manifests in the group’s decision-making and whether the differences are potent enough to dent the stability of the IEA.

“It would appear that the IEA is in a better position this time around, with its growing diplomatic engagement with certain countries even in the absence of *de jure* recognition.”

a The members of the Taliban are divided along ethnic, tribal, regional lines. The most commonly acceptable manifestation of the group’s differences is reflected in the power struggle between the Kandahari faction—referring to the city in southwestern Afghanistan where the current Emir and his coterie of supporters are stationed and the Kabul faction—in the country’s capital where the seemingly more pragmatic-minded leaders reside, e.g., Sirajuddin Haqqani and other *de facto* members of the interim cabinet.

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Fragmentation and Factionalism: The Case of Insurgent Groups

Owing to a degree of decentralisation and flexibility in how the Taliban is structured and how its officials act, the group has historically been perceived as being inclined towards fragmentation.⁵ According to Watkins, fragmentation is a manifestation or consequence of factionalism; a group can be factionalised but still be cohesive and strategic.⁶ This can explain the nature of the current Taliban rule.

The leadership of the Taliban has evolved from its original clerical base, which comprised the Amir al-Muminin—the spiritual head—followed by the deputy leader, other executive officers, a leadership council or *shura*, and specialist commissions, along with the council of Ulema.⁷ In the decade after US invasion, when the Taliban regrouped and waged an insurgency against the US and NATO forces, the group adopted a polycentric structure.⁸ Soon after, divisions on questions of succession and the group’s position on a peace deal with the ‘enemy’ began emerging.

The Taliban has three factions—the Haqqani network;⁹ the political wing led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar; and the military wing represented by Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob and Mullah Abdul Qayam Zakir.¹⁰ In 2007, the Miran Shah Shura (Haqqani network) and the Peshawar Shura declared their autonomy from the Quetta Shura. By 2015-16, they were operating under the Quetta Shura, but subsequently, by 2017, as the Taliban became more organisationally complex, the different shuras diverged again. The Mashhad Shura (the Shura of the North) and the Rasool Shura emerged after 2017, alongside the Quetta Shura.¹¹

As the Taliban regained power in 2021, its transition from an insurgency to a government exacerbated the existing differences between the different factions.

Formation of the Cabinet

After taking over the presidential palace in Kabul, the Taliban dashed any hopes of an intra-Afghan understanding. On 7 September 2021, the IEA announced the formation of a ‘caretaker government’, which led to questions around leadership and governance.¹² Formed after three rounds of senior appointments, the caretaker Cabinet comprises Pashtun men, most of them

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graduates of Pakistani *madrasas*, with no representation of minority groups or women.¹³ The spokesperson of the group, Zaibullah Mujahid, stated that the cabinet would attempt to include members from other parts of the country.¹⁴ The initial 33-member cabinet included UN-sanctioned leaders, with top positions monopolised by the older guard and offices granted on the basis of loyalty and duration of service. On 21 September and 5 October, 17 and 38 more people were appointed, respectively.¹⁵

Figure 1. Prominent Taliban Cabinet Members



Source: Congressional Research Service¹⁶

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As the process of cabinet formation began, differences over the extent to which the group will prioritise inclusivity and ethnic representation and the question of whether former administration members will be included in the cabinet took centre stage.¹⁷ There were also differences between the political and military sections of the group regarding who deserved more credit for the victory, with reports of brawls at the presidential palace between Mullah Baradar and Sirajuddin Haqqani and their followers in the initial days.¹⁸ Between 15 August 2021 and 15 March 2022, 33 instances of infighting were reported.¹⁹ While the group’s spokesperson rejected any assumptions about their focus on inclusivity or inducting certain leaders in the cabinet,²⁰ the initial lineup was military-heavy,²¹ which did not support an inclusive government and had reservations around the Haqqanis securing key portfolios like interior, intelligence, passport, and migration. Many of the initial appointments were therefore rewards for military victories.²² In the subsequent appointments, there were efforts to include ministers from the ethnic minority-dominated areas of Panjshir, Baghlan, and Sar-e-Pol but these were not given senior positions.²³

Two years after the IEA’s resurgence, there is no clarity on the cabinet graduating from its interim status. The Taliban has attributed the delay to a lack of international recognition and the absence of a council and a constitution, in addition to deficiencies in governance.²⁴ While Abdul Salam Haqqani announced in September 2022 that a final decision had been made regarding the permanent cabinet, there was no progress on the ground.²⁵ For the time being, however, the tensions between the different camps have diffused because of the careful balancing during the final cabinet formation.^{26,27}

Women’s Rights under the Taliban

The group’s views on women and girls have served as a test for ‘moderation’.²⁸ The new cabinet does not have any women or minorities, and the IEA spokesperson has said the sole duty of women was reproducing and furthering the Afghan nation.²⁹ These views were in contrast to those of Taliban officials such as Inamullah Samagani who urged women to join the government according to *sharia*.³⁰ At their first press conference on 17 August 2021, the Taliban expressed their intention to protect women’s rights to education and work within the framework of *sharia*—which they had committed to even before they came to power.³¹

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A week after assuming power, the Education Commission announced the reopening of all primary schools³² from 28 August 2021, following pandemic-induced lockdowns and the fighting in Kabul. A few weeks later, the Ministry of Education announced the opening of secondary schools for male pupils and tutors³³ but deferred questions about secondary schools for girls. The education minister assured people that the Taliban is not opposed to women’s rights and promised that a plan allowing girls to study within the tenets of Islam will be released by 7 October 2021.³⁴

During this period, secondary schools for girls remained functional in certain northern provinces.³⁵ There were also concessions allowing women to work in universities and enrol in postgraduate programmes, though only in Islamic dress. There were also discussions about segregated classes up to the sixth grade.³⁶ In Balkh and Kunduz, Taliban commanders reportedly encouraged girls’ education.³⁷ The spokesperson of the Ministry of Vice and Virtue Akif Muhajer assured that this template would be applied throughout the country.³⁸ The reopening of schools in these provinces was also a result of lobbying by teachers’ unions and local communities. However, similar efforts did not work in Kandahar.

Despite these exceptions, the group hardened their position on girls’ education. In January 2022, it blamed the lack of facilities to facilitate segregation as the obstacle to the opening of schools.³⁹ However, Taliban leadership backtracked on its decisions to reopen schools following a meeting in Kandahar on 20 March 2022, likely due to conservative elements of the group registering their objection to the decision to allow girls to go to school.⁴⁰ This reflected the importance of conservative elements in decision-making.⁴¹ The inability of the moderates and the pragmatists to present an effective counter to calls for closure led to the Emirate jumping ship; either Akhundzada did not expect the Ulema to go against the consensus, or he was aware of the disagreement and delayed the decision on opening the schools, only to find that the leaders had switched sides. Declaring a national ban while allowing provincial leaders to respond to local demands and take their own decisions⁴² prevents the escalation of differences and encourages obedience⁴³—a strategy that the group followed in the 1990s and has continued in the present.⁴⁴ However, there are also concerns about the weakening of the centre as more autonomy is given to the periphery.⁴⁵

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Over the years, several Taliban leaders have sent their girls to private schools in countries like Qatar, as well as within Afghanistan. This contradiction between their personal preferences and their commitment to the group is concerning, especially since most of these leaders refuse to speak out in public, fearing reprisals from the leadership. By calling for the opening of schools for older girls, they risk jeopardising their own situation.⁴⁶ The disagreement with the conservatives, the public debacle before the international community, and the patchy implementation of the education ban point to the disparate leadership of the group. These developments also indicate the complex nature of contesting demands within the Taliban.

The reassertion of the Emir’s authority was also seen as a response by the movement’s senior leaders who till then seemed to have no say in policymaking. The attack on women’s rights continued with bans on women’s access to universities and work in national and international NGOs. While the UN and Taliban officials arrived at an understanding to exempt the health and education sectors from the ban, the final decision showed a disregard for the possibility of a complete stoppage on aid and other humanitarian services by the Taliban.⁴⁷ The group has been consistently using the addendum—“within the framework of Islamic law” and “as per sharia” to justify their policies, with no clear articulation of what it actually means in practice.⁴⁸

The RAND Corporation analysed the group’s messaging on the educational rights of women and the role of Western countries, with the aim of understanding whether there were any differences in the Pashto/Dari, Arabic, and English language tweets.⁴⁹ While the Pashto tweets highlighted the importance of locating women’s rights within the framework of Islamic principles, the English-language tweets emphasised the importance of foreign aid and criticised Western ideals. The report also pointed to the possibility of the group tailoring its contents on individual policy issues to specific groups, without concern for contradictions.⁵⁰ The group’s media wing projects two narratives in parallel: one to satisfy the international audience and the other rejoicing over violence and destruction.⁵¹ It is these contradictory messages and the strategic approach to public messaging that the group has adopted to suit its needs that lead to an exaggerated understanding of the differences within the group—i.e., while the group’s public messaging shows differences, they are superficial and not deep enough to dent the group’s cohesion.

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As per tweets by senior Taliban officials, the Emir has three responsibilities—setting policy priorities and maintaining cohesion; appointing government officials; and guiding the group spiritually.⁵² In July 2022, a new law further consolidated Akhundzada’s power to oversee all rulings, granting him the power to reject rulings by other ministers while ensuring that his approval is endorsed by everyone.⁵³ In tandem with the Administrative office of the Prime Minister which the Taliban retitled after the fall of the Republic, there also emerged an administrative office of the Emir in Kandahar.⁵⁴

Since at least 2015, the office of the Amir al-Muminin has become a source of divisions.⁵⁵ Since the group regained power, the Amir has been living in Kandahar, with reports suggesting that he has become dismissive of dissent and increasingly disinclined to hold talks with Taliban leaders.⁵⁶ In a shift from past practices, he has occasionally appeared in public, such as to appoint a local official or attend the *jirgas*. These deliberate public appearances are aimed at avoiding long spells of disappearances, which have previously raised speculations about the death of the leader, such as in May 2017.⁵⁷

Additionally, the emir has overruled several cabinet decisions,⁵⁸ and backtracked on the question of women’s rights. Since August 2021, the tax and revenue collection inside the country has also been increasingly centralised and regularised with the dismantling of smuggling routes and channelling trade through formal border check points. This was done to ensure that the money was reaching the central coffers and the patronage networks of the local commanders are no longer viable.⁵⁹ This overhaul in the country’s political economy is considered at odds with reports about internal fissures within the group.⁶⁰ There were also recent reports about the emir working to create his own military force.⁶¹

However, there have been instances of cabinet reshuffling. As per Watkins, many provincial and local level officials were transferred frequently.⁶² In the beginning of 2021, Abdul Manan Omari, the de facto Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, was replaced by Mohammad Essa Saadi. De facto ministers for higher education, urban development and land, vice and virtue, and disaster management were also replaced.⁶³ The emir appointed Mullah Muhammad Nasir Akhund as the Minister of Finance and Mullah Abdul Qahir Idris as the Deputy Minister of Finance,⁶⁴ and most recently, Mullah Abdul Kabir was appointed caretaker prime minister. While the spokesperson Zaibullah Mujahid

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framed this as a regular cabinet reshuffle to ensure that there are “no obstacles and delays in the affairs of the administration”,⁶⁵ an alternate view perceived it as the further consolidation of power by the conservatives in Kandahar.⁶⁶

Abdul Kabir was appointed Deputy Prime Minister at the first meeting of the cabinet in October 2021⁶⁷ and played a crucial role in the peace negotiations with NATO. Assessments over the implications of his appointment as caretaker prime minister and how it has tipped the scales in the dispute between Kabul and Kandahar remain divergent; one view suggests that the appointment is temporary and devoid of any decision-making rights, being primarily an effort to give traction to other communities.⁶⁸ Even ten days after the change, a congratulatory message to the Turkish president on his re-election was sent under the name of the previous prime minister. Another view argues that the appointment is intended to strengthen the Haqqani faction, as Abdul Kabir belongs to the Zadren tribe.⁶⁹

The appointment also has the potential to undermine Haqqani, with Abdul Kabir doubling down on his tribal support base. The Zadren tribe is not homogeneous in its support of the Haqqanis;⁷⁰ meanwhile, Abdul Kabir is considered a confidant of the emir and thus, his ascendancy ensures Akhundzada’s efforts to aggrandise power.⁷¹ As the Quetta Shura does not have control in Loya Paktia, Abdul Kabir’s appointment will help the emir establish his authority in the region. This development also reflected the emir’s efforts to reinforce control and quell dissent. In understanding dissent within the group, Watkins accords this ‘micromanagement by the emir’ as coming from a place of weakness.⁷² As per him, Akhundzada’s efforts to enhance his surveillance over its local officials through the establishment of the ulema councils and the purification drives emanate from his fears about his authority being undermined.⁷³ In the case of Kabir, the deliberate overshadowing of the other two deputies, Mullah Baradar and Mullah Yaqoob indicates that Kabir’s appointment is pre-emptive. The emir has been trying to shift from a decentralised to a centralised system, which has led to a vertical hierarchy and a shifting balance of power.⁷⁴ Akhund’s appointment was apparently made to pre-empt any competition between the more powerful factions of the group.⁷⁵

Other analysts saw the appointment as a reflection of a contemporary Taliban and its growing willingness to engage with the international community and break away from the conservative ideals of Akhund.⁷⁶ Speaking at a gathering

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a few days after his appointment, Abdul Kabir asserted that the current government is inclusive and that, if the world creates no problems for them, they will do the same.⁷⁷

While Mullah Akhund resumed his duty in July after returning from Kandahar,⁷⁸ the reshufflings prompted responses from other Taliban leaders. Speaking after the appointment, Sirajuddin Haqqani criticised the monopolisation of the government by people from religious seminaries and urged the Emirate to involve everyone in the government.⁷⁹ This was not the first time that he had expressed his dissatisfaction; in February 2021, he had criticised the monopolisation of power. Mujahid pushed back, stating that the emir and government officials cannot be insulted publicly.⁸⁰ There were talks of Sirajuddin Haqqani being appointed Deputy Prime Minister during the March 2022 *jirga*,⁸¹ and as late as June 2023 he had made discreet references to corruptions of power.⁸² The frequent cabinet mix-ups happen despite their adverse impact on civilians, civil society and foreign governments' engagement with the local leaders.⁸³

The 14th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council noted that Sirajuddin Haqqani was trying to bring lucrative projects under his control and that rivalry over the Kandahari and the Kabul factions was becoming more potent.⁸⁴ It also pointed to the growing relationship between the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which has deepened the divisions within the latter, leading to the emergence of a dangerous militant wing and a less militant yet conservative group.⁸⁵ The death of a military commander and the governor of Balkh province, both close to the emir in an accident and suicide attack also raised suspicions about their deliberate targeting owing to internal tribal differences.⁸⁶

However, these differences have always existed and extend beyond the question of girls' education to include the Taliban's degree of engagement with the international community and the inclusivity of the government. As indicated by the trajectory of policymaking around women's rights, local commanders and other leaders will find ways to assert their control at the district level, irrespective of national policy.

As indicated by the debate around women's education, the Kandahari faction of the Taliban is in ascendance.⁸⁷ Despite these developments, the spokesperson has rejected the possibility of the capital shifting to Kandahar.⁸⁸ In the last few

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months, however, there were reports of senior officials being asked to move to the city, prominently the spokesperson Zaibullah Mujahid and another official Inamullah Samangani. Some official foreign delegations also met a few officials here instead of Kabul.⁸⁹ There is a general acceptance among analysts of the existence of a more ‘internationally oriented’ faction of the Taliban.⁹⁰ Their actions are not because of a difference in ideals, but because of pragmatism.

The Taliban perceive themselves as the rightful followers of Islam and the victors of a two-decade long war, reinforced by their Pashtun identity.⁹¹ However, the group harbours fears around transforming from an insurgency to a government, internal disputes over power and policy, and the lack of recognition from other Muslim states, which have criticised them for being un-Islamic and un-Afghan. Their de facto engagement with some countries has sharpened their perceptions of being a state.⁹² Yet the group’s leaders are still receptive to international perceptions, with the emir’s latest Eid message making a case for an improved condition of women inside the country as per ‘Islamic family law.’⁹³ The officials reject any assertions made by the international community and organisations like the UN pointing to instances of internal rifts within the group.⁹⁴

Despite pushbacks, the implementation of any policy, especially related to women, will be based on the decree of the emir as he aggrandises power. While there could be local differences, at the national level, the conservatives will prevail for the time being. The Minister of Education announced in June that the Emirate will establish ten *madrasas* in each district to ensure a solid foundation for the future of Afghanistan.⁹⁵

The Taliban are slowly consolidating their position in the country. They are of the view that the international community will engage with them at some level irrespective of whether they bow to pressure, thus precluding the need for the relatively moderate factions to push back at the obstinacy of the conservatives.⁹⁶ Leaders of the group such as Mawlawi Yaqub Mujahid and the spokesperson have highlighted that the international community has no say in internal issues.^{97,98} Any humanitarian support contingent on the reformation of the group is also unwelcome in the country. This weakens the leverage that the international community had thought to employ on the group and which has failed to affect change in the last two years.

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During his Eid al-Adha prayer, Akhundzada noted that there was no pressure on them to “compromise on Islam”.⁹⁹ Even though there will be differences, fragmentation has now become the permanent state of the Taliban; the supreme leader will continue to hold power, while the de facto engagement of the group with countries in the region will preclude their need to prioritise de jure international recognition over internal cohesion.

“The Taliban are of the view that the international community will engage with them at some level irrespective of whether they bow to pressure.”

In a recent post on the platform X (formerly Twitter), Anas Haqqani, a senior leader of the IEA and the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani rejected the presence of a separate ‘network’ in Afghanistan, referring to the Haqqani Network.¹⁰⁰ It was in response to comments made by the newly appointed British High Commissioner to Pakistan who highlighted the presence of the Haqqani Network inside Afghanistan in the same category as other terrorist groups, placing it distinctly from the Taliban. The defensive rhetoric expressed by Haqqani highlights the importance that the IEA should be perceived as united as under the current leadership holds for the leadership. Since wresting power in 2021, the group has been preoccupied with prioritising internal cohesion, even if the quest for unity caused its prospects in front of the international community to deteriorate.

The past two years have seen the Taliban making the transition from an insurgency to a rudimentary functioning state. The group initially faltered, scrambling to secure control and govern the country.¹⁰¹ The delay in the formation of the cabinet also raised questions. Two years since the formation, the group’s spokesperson deemed the cabinet appointments as temporary and political and assured the coming of a permanent cabinet with more technical people.¹⁰² But as discussed in the first section, the potential flare-up of internal differences and power dynamics within the group makes the transition to a permanent cabinet difficult, as it would require overhauling the existing one.

The back-and-forth over the question of women’s education did force into focus a different manifestation of the rift within the movement—the reassertion of power by the emir. Many senior Taliban members publicly articulated their disagreements with the decision. Yet, the authority of the emir is still considered absolute. While the former’s relative distance from politics has been historically perceived positively among the ranks, the power centre in Kabul has been characterised in a negative way, with suspicions of its ‘corrupting, sinful influence.’ Even though the spokesperson made it a point to ensure that the capital is not shifting to Kandahar any time soon, many heads and sub-heads of ministries anyway spend more time there.

While the movement is currently infested with myriad differences—ideological, practical and how different groups conceptualise the Islamic Emirate—the consolidation of power by the Emir precludes the possibility of a serious threat to the movement’s group’s unity, at least for now. 

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