



2021

2022

2023

2024

2025

2026

TALIBAN 2.0

THE FIVE YEAR LEDGER

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SAT Study | 03 | August 2026**Authors**

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Executive Summary

- The Taliban's return to Kabul on 15 August 2021 ended two decades of Western-backed republican government and opened the period this study terms **Taliban 2.0**.
- Five years after the Taliban's return to Kabul, "Taliban 2.0" is not a story of moderation. It is the **reconfiguration of an inherited state around an unelected, Taliban-controlled militant political order**. The movement inherited ministries, courts, provincial administrations, revenue systems, infrastructure and a functioning civil service from the Islamic Republic; it subsequently removed or excluded large numbers of Republic-era personnel and replaced them with Taliban appointees and loyalists. The result is a state apparatus operating under a narrower political and ideological framework, not a fundamentally transformed model of governance.
- This study's central finding is blunt: **Taliban 2.0 is institutional evolution without ideological rupture**. It is not moderation, and it is not simply 1996 repeated. It is the same doctrinal project, now equipped with a functioning bureaucracy, a national budget, and diplomatic relationships it did not have the first time.
- The social record is particularly stark. **1.1 million secondary-age girls remain excluded from education**, around 100,000 female university students were affected by the 2022 higher-education ban, and as per UNESCO, the projected economic cost of that exclusion reaches US\$9.6 billion by 2066. The 2024 morality law further codified restrictions on public and private life. In the media sector, 219 of 547 outlets closed, the number of journalists fell from 11,857 to 4,759, and Afghanistan ranked 175th of 180 countries in press freedom in 2026.
- Beneath the girls'-education crisis lies a parallel shift for boys: **registered madrassas have grown from roughly 5,000 in 2021 to more than 23,000 by 2025**, enrolling upwards of 3.65 million children, as public schools, universities and teacher-training colleges are repurposed into religious seminaries and the national curriculum is reoriented toward religious instruction at the expense of science, language and civics. Independent researchers and rights groups warn this shift risks producing a generation more susceptible to militant recruitment than the one it replaces.
- The security record is equally consequential. The UN has identified 20+ militant organisations and up to 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, while Russia's February 2026 assessment placed the wider terrorist presence at 20,000–23,000. The TTP alone is estimated at 6,000–6,500 fighters.
- The pattern echoes the 1990s: In 2024, a senior Al-Qaeda leader publicly called on jihadists worldwide to relocate to Afghanistan for training; the group continues to draw funding reportedly channelled through an office in Somalia, and, following the collapse of the Assad government, researchers have tracked foreign fighters, including Syria veterans, moving toward Afghanistan's northern provinces. Similar to the 2000s, Afghanistan is again functioning as a magnet and way-station for transnational jihadist networks, not merely a host to domestic militancy.
- At the same time, anti-Taliban resistance has persisted and diversified, led by the NRF and AFF, alongside smaller fronts including the Afghanistan Liberation Movement, People's Sovereignty Front and Sepahiyan-e Mihan. NRF-claimed operations rose from 40 in 2022 to 380 in 2024, while the UN recorded 277 opposition attacks between August 2024 and July 2025.
- By July 2026, **Badakhshan had emerged as the clearest convergence point between armed resistance and the foreign-militant threat**, with an AFF operation in Zebak claiming the highest single-engagement toll of 21 Taliban fighters killed and 37 wounded. Afghanistan's wider militant ecosystem includes TTP, ISKP, Al-Qaeda and TIP/ETIM, with UN monitoring identifying more than 20 militant organisations.
- The economic record does not support a narrative of recovery sufficient to offset these pressures. Domestic revenue reached AFN 241 billion in FY2024–25 (19.8% of GDP), but Afghanistan has absorbed a cumulative 25% GDP contraction since 2021, with a single-year contraction of 24.4% in 2023 accounting for most of that decline, and ran a 36.1% current-account deficit in 2025. The opium ban cut cultivation by 95%, but collapsed farmer income from US\$1.36 billion to US\$110 million with no replacement livelihood in place.

- Crucially, opium's decline has not ended Afghanistan's narcotics economy: UNODC recorded a further fall in cultivation to just 10,200 hectares in 2025 and a 48% drop in farmgate income, even as seizures of methamphetamine linked to Afghanistan rose by roughly 50%, driven by the country's abundant wild ephedra supply. Local Taliban commanders and traffickers have been documented taxing, and in some cases holding influential roles tied to, this shifting drug economy, indicating the movement's financial interest is migrating from poppy to synthetic production rather than disappearing.
- For Pakistan, the consequences are immediate: 600+ TTP attacks were recorded in Pakistan in 2025, with 245+ confirmed Afghan nationals among terrorists neutralised. Bilateral trade fell from approximately US\$2.46 billion in 2024 to US\$1.77 billion in 2025, while more than 1.7 million illegal Afghan immigrants had been repatriated from Pakistan under Islamabad's repatriation policy.
- Diplomatic engagement has expanded without resolving the underlying legitimacy problem. Russia formally recognised the Islamic Emirate in July 2025, but Afghanistan's diplomatic network remains fragmented. Of 65 overseas missions, 37 are Taliban-controlled, 14 remain with former-Republic diplomats and eight are closed. The Taliban also remains subject to the UN's 1988 sanctions regime, with senior figures individually listed.
- The study's central finding is therefore straightforward: Five years of Taliban rule have not resolved Afghanistan's core political, social or security problems; they have reorganised them under a more centralised system. The critical question for the next five years is whether exclusion, militant presence, economic weakness and regional security friction remain contained or begin reinforcing one another. Badakhshan, the TTP threat, ethnic and political exclusion, women's restrictions, economic indicators and Pakistan–Afghanistan security relations should consequently be treated as the principal early-warning indicators of Afghanistan's next phase.

TALIBAN 2.0 AT A GLANCE

AUGUST 2021 – JULY 2026



15 AUG 2021

Taliban return
to Kabul



5 YEARS

Uncontested rule
completed as of
August 2026



2.4 MILLION

Girls excluded
from secondary
education



20+

Militant groups
reported present
in Afghanistan



175th / 180

Afghanistan's
2026 press-freedom
ranking (RSF)



A. WOMEN, GIRLS & SOCIAL RESTRICTIONS



Mid-Sept 2021

Girls' secondary
education (grades 7–12)
closed; 23 Mar 2022
reopening order was
reversed within hours.



100,000

Female university
students affected by
the Dec 2022
university ban.



1.1 MILLION

Secondary-age girls
out of school
(UN Women, 2024).



US\$9.6 BILLION

Projected economic
cost of the university
ban by 2066
(UNESCO).



31 JUL /
21 AUG 2024

PVPV ("morality")
law ratified /
gazetted.



39 LASHES
+ 1 YEAR

Penalty for "insulting"
the Taliban supreme
leader under the Jan
2026 Criminal
Procedure Code.



B. SECURITY & ARMED RESISTANCE



700+

Hazara killed or
injured in ISKP
attacks, Aug 2021–
mid-2022 (HRW).



20+

Militant groups
reported present on
Afghan soil (UN
Monitoring Team).



6,000–6,500

TTP estimated
strength.



277

UN-documented
armed-opposition
attacks, Aug 2024–
Jul 2025

NRF: 165 | AFF: 55
Other fronts: 57



40 → 380

NRF claimed
operations,
2022 → 2024
(9x increase)



21 KILLED /
37 WOUNDED

Highest reported
single-engagement
toll of the period
(AFF, Zebak district,
Badakhshan,
23–28 Jul 2026).



BADAKHSHAN PROVINCE

Current center of gravity of armed resistance.



C. ECONOMY, NARCOTICS & DRUGS



19.8% OF GDP

Domestic revenue,
FY2024–25
AFN 241bn;
+14.4% y/y



–25%

Cumulative GDP
contraction since 2021;
–24.4% in 2023
alone



36.1% OF GDP

Current-account
deficit, 2025



–95%

Opium cultivation
change since 2022 ban
Farmer income:
US\$1.36bn →
US\$110m (–92%)



12,800 →
10,200 HA

Opium cultivation,
2024 → 2025
(UNODC)



+50%

Methamphetamine /
synthetic-drug
seizures linked to
Afghanistan,
2023 → 2024
(UNODC)



MEDIA, DIPLOMACY & GOVERNANCE



219 / 547

Media outlets closed
within one year of
takeover (RSF).



11,857 → 4,759

Afghan journalists,
2021 → 2026
(RSF).



175 / 180

Afghanistan press
freedom ranking,
2026 (RSF).



37 / 14 / 8
Afghanistan's 65
overseas diplomatic
missions:
37 Taliban-controlled
14 former-Republic
8 closed



RUSSIA
JULY 2025

First state to
formally recognize
the Islamic Emirate.



5,000 →
23,000+

Registered madrassas,
2021 → 2025
(3.65 million students
enrolled)



E. TRANSNATIONAL MILITANCY & REGIONAL IMPACT



UP TO
13,000

Foreign terrorist
fighters in Afghanistan
(UN estimate,
Dec 2025)
Across 20+
organisations



20,000–
23,000

Foreign terrorist
fighters
(Russian MFA
estimate,
Feb 2026)



600+

TTP attacks
in Pakistan,
2025.



245+

Confirmed Afghan
nationals among
terrorists
neutralised in
Pakistan, 2025.



10 / 34
PROVINCES

Afghan provinces
where Al-Qaeda
training camps have
been documented.



SOMALIA

Reported Al-Qaeda
external funding
channel (UN
Monitoring Team).

SOURCES: UN Women | UNESCO | UN Monitoring Team | UNAMA | UNODC | RSF | HRW | ICC | Russian MFA | Afghan authorities / open-source reporting

NOTE: Figures represent reported estimates and may vary by source, methodology, and reporting period.

SAT Research Desk

1. Taliban 2.0

1.1 Framing the Argument

A movement that wins a war is not yet a government; what it does with victory is the whole of the subsequent story.

The Taliban's return to Kabul on 15 August 2021 marked one of the most consequential political transitions in contemporary South Asia. It signified far more than the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; it represented the restoration of a religio-militant movement that had spent two decades transforming itself from a defeated regime into one of the world's most resilient insurgent organisations. While international attention largely focused on the speed of the Republic's collapse and the humanitarian consequences of the withdrawal of foreign forces, a more enduring development was unfolding. That was the transition of the Taliban from insurgency to governance.

That transition, however, did not begin with the construction of a new Afghan state. The Taliban inherited an existing state apparatus: ministries, provincial administrations, courts, security institutions, customs and revenue systems, universities, hospitals, infrastructure, regulatory bodies and a large civil service developed under the Islamic Republic. The central question, therefore, is not simply what institutions the Taliban created after 2021, but what it did to the institutions it inherited.

Hierarchy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan



Government & Core Cabinet

The officials responsible for the daily administration of the country, based in Kabul.



Other Key Officials



In the years that followed, large numbers of Republic-era officials, security personnel and administrators were removed, displaced or excluded from state structures. At the same time, the Taliban members and loyalists were appointed across ministries, provincial administrations, security organs and other institutions.

The resulting system was therefore less a new state emerging from institutional innovation than an inherited state apparatus progressively reconstituted around the Taliban's own personnel, ideology and command structure.

This distinction is critical to any assessment of post-2021 governance. Administrative continuity should not automatically be interpreted as administrative improvement. The continued functioning of ministries, customs offices, courts or provincial administrations reflects, in significant part, the institutional infrastructure inherited from the Republic; the relevant assessment is whether those institutions became more representative, professional and effective, or were instead subordinated to a narrower political and ideological order.

Against this backdrop, one of the most contested concepts in contemporary Afghanistan studies has emerged: "Taliban 2.0." Widely used in policy discussions, media commentary, and diplomatic discourse, the term generally implies that the Taliban has evolved into a more pragmatic, administratively capable, and internationally engaged political actor. Yet the concept itself remains poorly defined. For some, it reflects ideological moderation; for others, it simply describes tactical adaptation undertaken to ensure regime survival.¹

This study argues that both interpretations oversimplify Afghanistan's contemporary political reality. The Islamic Emirate has undoubtedly evolved in important institutional respects, but this evolution has occurred without a corresponding transformation of its ideological foundations.

More importantly, the institutional changes since 2021 must be assessed against the baseline the Taliban inherited, rather than against the institutional weakness of its first Emirate. The comparison is not between a 1996 insurgent movement and a 2026 state alone; it is between the institutions inherited from the Islamic Republic and the system that has emerged after their Taliban-led reconfiguration.

The defining feature of post-2021 Afghanistan is therefore neither ideological moderation nor complete continuity. Rather, it is the coexistence of institutional reconfiguration and ideological continuity, producing a governing system that retains much of the administrative machinery of the Republic while placing it under a substantially narrower political authority and ideological framework.

This distinction also matters for the security dimension of the study. The Taliban's political authority is not that of an ordinary, internationally recognised government operating outside a sanctions framework.

The United Nations Security Council's sanctions regime against the Taliban originated with Resolution 1267 (1999), which imposed measures on the Taliban in response to its support for Usama bin Laden and Al-Qaida. In 2011, through Resolutions 1988 and 1989, the Security Council separated the Taliban sanctions regime from the Al-Qaida sanctions regime. It established a dedicated 1988 Sanctions Committee for individuals and entities associated with the Taliban that constitute a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan.² The 1988 regime continues to impose targeted measures, including an asset freeze, travel ban and an arms embargo, on designated individuals and entities. Senior Taliban figures remain among those individually listed under the regime, including Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Amir Khan Muttaqi and Abdul Ghani Baradar, while the Haqqani Network is also listed as a Taliban-associated entity.³

This sanctions history is an important part of the context in which the Taliban's transition from an armed movement to Afghanistan's de facto governing authority must be assessed.

1.2 The Doha Agreement: A Promise Record

Much of the framework for assessing Taliban conduct since 2021 was set three years earlier, in the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed by the United States and the Taliban in Doha on

29 February 2020. The agreement was never signed by the Afghan Republic government, but it structured the final eighteen months of the war and set specific, verifiable commitments against which the Taliban's subsequent conduct can be measured.

The prisoner release illustrates the pattern. As a confidence-building step preceding intra-Afghan negotiations, the agreement required the Afghan government to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and the Taliban to release up to 1,000 pro-government detainees.⁴ The Republic completed its release by mid-2020 under sustained US pressure, despite President Ashraf Ghani's objection that he had made no such commitment.⁵

Independent research obtained by Foreign Policy, based on a sample of 108 profiled former prisoners, found that 68 percent had already rejoined the insurgency within months of release; two senior US officials, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley, later told Congress that “many” of the released fighters had gone back to fill Taliban ranks, directly strengthening the force that would take Kabul the following year.⁶

Intra-Afghan negotiations fared no better. The Taliban treated the Ghani government as illegitimate and refused to negotiate with it as a state counterparty, walking out of prisoner-exchange discussions in April 2020 and stalling the substantive talks that nominally opened in September 2020.⁷

When China separately offered to convene a dedicated intra-Afghan dialogue in Beijing, first in 2019 and again in 2021, the Taliban agreed only on condition that Republic officials attend “in their personal capacity” rather than as government representatives. Meaning, the Taliban never sat across the table from the Republic as a government for even a single day of talks before taking Kabul by force in August 2021.⁸

The political outcome the talks were meant to produce never materialised. On 16 August 2023, the Taliban formally banned all political parties. More than 70 had been registered before 2021, declaring that parties have no basis in Sharia. Electoral commissions had already been abolished in late 2021, and Freedom House now rates Afghanistan an “effective one-party state.”⁹

Political leaders who might have anchored the pluralism the talks envisioned instead operate from exile; Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh from abroad, Atta Mohammad Noor among them, while politicians who remained inside the country have faced detention or worse. Former MP Mursal Nabizada was shot dead in her Kabul home in January 2023, and RFE/RL documented a further escalation of detentions of politicians, journalists and filmmakers through 2024.¹⁰

The counterterrorism guarantee, the agreement's central bargain, has fared no better. The Taliban pledged that Afghan soil would not be used by Al-Qaeda or any other group to threaten the United States or its allies. The evidence documents the opposite outcome in detail: Continued Al-Qaeda presence assessed by UN monitors as “unchanged” since 2021, training camps operating in ten provinces, and a senior Al-Qaeda leader's 2024 public call for foreign jihadists to relocate to Afghanistan, alongside the Somalia and Syria-linked recruitment pipelines; this study identifies as a revival of the pre-9/11 pattern the Doha Agreement was explicitly designed to prevent.

Table 1.2 — The Doha Agreement: Commitments vs. Outcomes

Doha Commitment (Feb 2020)	What Was Promised	What Actually Happened
• Prisoner release	Afghan government to free up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners; Taliban to free up to 1,000 pro-government detainees, as a trust-building precondition for talks	Republic released ~5,000 by mid-2020; independent research found 68% of a sampled cohort had already rejoined the insurgency within months; US defence leadership later confirmed “many” rejoined Taliban ranks
• Intra-Afghan negotiations	Taliban to enter substantive negotiations with the Afghan government and other Afghan stakeholders toward a political settlement	Taliban refused to treat the Republic as a legitimate negotiating partner; walked out of talks in April 2020; at China-hosted Beijing talks, would only let Republic officials attend as private individuals; took Kabul by force in Aug 2021 without a settlement
• Inclusive political outcome	Talks were intended to produce a negotiated, pluralistic political roadmap for post-war Afghanistan	All 70+ registered political parties banned (Aug 2023); electoral commissions abolished (2021); opposition leaders in exile or, for those who stay stayed, subject to detention and in at least case assassination
• Counterterrorism guarantee	Taliban pledged Afghan soil would not be used by Al-Qaeda or any other group to threaten the US or its allies	UN monitors assess the Taliban–Al-Qaeda relationship as unchanged since 2021; training camps active in 10 provinces; public 2024 call for foreign jihadists to relocate to Afghanistan; new Somalia and Syria recruitment pipelines documented (Chapter Four)

Source: SAT compilation from primary agreement text, US congressional testimony, UN Security Council Monitoring Team reporting, and contemporaneous reporting cited in the notes to this section.

Understanding this interaction is essential for explaining Afghanistan's domestic trajectory and its implications for regional security. The central question of this study is therefore not whether the Taliban has changed. It plainly has. The question is what changed, what was inherited, what was dismantled or replaced, and what ideological foundations remained intact beneath that institutional reconfiguration.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study adopts a systems-based approach. Rather than analysing isolated developments, it examines how ideology, institutions, governance, security, economy, diplomacy, and regional politics interact to shape the contemporary Islamic Emirate. In doing so, it seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of Taliban rule towards an integrated understanding of Afghanistan's evolving state structure.

The principal objectives of the study are to:

- Examine the ideological foundations of the Islamic Emirate and assess the extent to which they have remained consistent since the movement's emergence.
- Analyse the institutional transformation of the Taliban from an insurgent movement into the governing authority of present-day Afghanistan.
- Assess how institutional evolution has influenced Afghanistan's domestic stability and regional engagement.

1.4 Why "Taliban 2.0"?

The phrase Taliban 2.0 emerged almost immediately after the movement's return to power in August 2021. It was initially used by journalists and policymakers to distinguish the contemporary Islamic Emirate from the Taliban government that ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. The comparison reflected observable differences in administrative sophistication, media engagement, diplomatic outreach, and governance practices.¹¹

Unlike the first Emirate, the post-2021 government inherited a functioning state apparatus, including ministries, regulatory agencies, customs administrations, universities, healthcare systems, and digital bureaucratic infrastructure. Rather than dismantling these institutions, the Taliban largely retained and reconfigured them to operate within its own ideological framework. Ministries continued to function, public services resumed, customs revenues expanded, and provincial administrations were integrated into a centralised chain of command. These developments contributed to the perception that the movement had become more institutionalised and administratively capable.

At the same time, many of the movement's foundational principles remained intact. Political authority continued to derive from the office of the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin rather than constitutional representation. Religious legitimacy remained central to governance, while restrictions on women's education and public participation, limitations on political pluralism, and the absence of electoral institutions reinforced perceptions of ideological continuity.

The term Taliban 2.0 therefore captures a genuine transformation in the movement's administrative capacity but risks obscuring the persistence of its underlying ideological worldview. Throughout this study, the concept is used not as a normative label but as an analytical framework for examining where continuity ends and change begins.

What "Taliban 2.0" Actually Changed, 1996 vs. 2021–2026

Governance structure: Unchanged. Both Emirates concentrate ultimate authority in the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin, outside any constitutional or electoral check; no national election has been held in either period.

Girls' education: Unchanged in substance. Secondary and higher education for girls was banned under the first Emirate and remains banned today. 1.1 million secondary-age girls are currently out of school by policy, not capacity.

State capacity: The one real change. The 1996 Emirate never controlled a functioning national bureaucracy; the 2021 Emirate inherited one and now collects domestic revenue equal to 19.8% of GDP, a governing tool the first Emirate never had.

International sanctions exposure: Continuous. Senior figures governing today, including Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Amir Khan Muttaqi and Abdul Ghani Baradar, remain individually listed under the UN Security Council's 1988 Sanctions Committee, the same regime originally imposed over the movement's sheltering of Usama bin Laden.

1.5 From Insurgency to Government

The Taliban entered Kabul in August 2021 with distinct advantages and significant constraints. During the insurgency, it had developed parallel institutions, including shadow governors, judicial mechanisms, taxation systems, and local administrative structures, that enabled it to exercise authority in areas beyond government control. These experiences provided an institutional foundation absent during the first Emirate.

This process of institutional adaptation, rather than ideological reinvention, forms the central focus of the chapters that follow. Each subsequent chapter examines a different dimension of this transformation, from ideology and governance to security, economy, diplomacy, and regional implications, to assess how the Islamic Emirate has sought to consolidate authority while remaining rooted in its original conception of political legitimacy.

For regional states, treating the Islamic Emirate as a functioning counterpart on trade, border management, and security coordination is now unavoidable in practice. But policy built on the expectation that this functionality will, over time, soften the movement's positions on militancy, governance, gender, or minority rights has no support in the first five years of evidence, examined section by section in what follows.

The practical question for foreign and security policy is therefore not whether the Emirate can be dealt with, but what kind of engagement is consistent with a government that entered Kabul with a two-decade insurgent infrastructure of shadow governors, judicial commissions, and taxation networks already in place, retained and absorbed the ministries and provincial administration it inherited rather than rebuilding them, and continues to run political authority through the office of the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin rather than through any constitutional or electoral process.

"Taliban 2.0," as used throughout this study, names that combination, not a judgment that the movement has moderated. Military victory gave the Islamic Emirate control of the Afghan state; the sections that follow trace what five years of converting that control into administrative routine have, and have not, changed.



2. Ideas that Shape the Emirate

2.1 The Ideological Foundations of Taliban Rule

States are not governed by institutions alone; they are governed by the ideas that give those institutions purpose.

The central proposition of this study is that institutional adaptation has occurred without ideological rupture. Rather than revisiting that conclusion, this section examines why such continuity has persisted. It explores the intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and religious concepts that continue to shape the Islamic Emirate's understanding of political authority, legitimacy, governance, and statecraft.

Taliban ideology should not be understood as either static or monolithic. Instead, it reflects the convergence of multiple intellectual, historical, and social influences that have evolved over decades of conflict, insurgency, and governance. These include the Deobandi tradition, Hanafi jurisprudence, Afghanistan's socio-political context, the experience of armed jihad, and the movement's own evolution from insurgency to state authority.

2.2 Historical Origins of the Taliban

The Taliban emerged in southern Afghanistan during the autumn of 1994 amid one of the country's most turbulent historical periods. The Soviet withdrawal, followed by the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, failed to produce political stability. Instead, Afghanistan descended into violent competition among rival mujahideen factions. Kabul suffered extensive destruction, provincial administrations fragmented, and local commanders exercised authority through competing patronage networks. Widespread insecurity, corruption, and lawlessness eroded public confidence in the post-jihad political order.¹²

Against this backdrop, Mullah Mohammad Omar and a small group of religious students (taliban) launched a movement that promised to restore security, disarm predatory commanders, and establish governance based on their interpretation of Islamic law. What began as a localised initiative in Kandahar rapidly expanded into a national movement, drawing support from communities exhausted by prolonged conflict and institutional collapse.

Within two years, the Taliban had captured Kabul and proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Although its first administration (1996–2001) achieved varying degrees of territorial control and internal order, it remained internationally isolated, diplomatically constrained, and administratively underdeveloped. Following the United States-led intervention in late 2001, the movement was removed from power but reorganised into an insurgency that would continue for the next two decades.

2.3 The Intellectual Foundations of Taliban Ideology

The ideological architecture of the Taliban rests upon several interconnected foundations. While these influences vary in their relative importance, together they provide the conceptual framework through which the movement understands governance and political authority.

Deobandi Thought

The Taliban's primary religious orientation is rooted in the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, established in nineteenth-century British India with the founding of Darul Uloom Deoband in 1866. Emerging in the aftermath of the 1857 uprising against British rule, the Deobandi movement sought to preserve Islamic scholarship, religious education, and moral discipline during a period of profound political change.¹³

The tradition emphasises adherence to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, the authority of religious scholarship, personal piety, and the implementation of Islamic principles in individual and collective life. Many Taliban leaders received their religious education within seminaries influenced by this intellectual tradition in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Hanafi Jurisprudence

Alongside Deobandi scholarship, the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence provides the principal legal framework informing Taliban governance. The Hanafi tradition has historically been the dominant legal school across Afghanistan and much of Central and South Asia, offering a well-developed body of jurisprudence that addresses matters of governance, justice, commerce, family law, and public administration.

Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood Lineage, and the Question of a “Mother Network”

A common shorthand in regional commentary describes Al-Qaeda as the “mother” of the Taliban. The historical record supports a more precise formulation, and the precision matters for policy analysis. The two movements did not descend from one another but were produced by the same mobilisation infrastructure of the anti-Soviet jihad, and were subsequently bound together by an act of religious submission, bay’ah, that has never been publicly renounced by either side.

Fusion, not filiation. What bound the two movements together was not common origin but a deliberate, hierarchical religious commitment made after the fact. When bin Laden relocated from Sudan to Jalalabad in May 1996, he did so as a guest of Afghan mujahideen commanders, several months before the Taliban captured Kabul; the Taliban leadership subsequently extended and formalized his protection.¹⁴ Bin Laden pledged bay’ah, religious allegiance, to Mullah Omar as self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu’minin in 1998, a pledge renewed by Zawahiri to Mullah Mansour in 2015 and again to Hibatullah Akhundzada in 2016.¹⁵ This pledge formally subordinates Al-Qaeda to the Taliban’s religious leadership rather than the reverse; the historical relationship inverts the “mother network” framing even as it confirms the underlying point that the two movements are ideologically and operationally fused rather than incidentally co-located.

The relationship has outlasted every attempt to sever it. Mullah Omar’s refusal to surrender bin Laden after the September 2001 attacks, a refusal made explicitly on the grounds that doing so would violate the obligations of hospitality (melmastia) and the sanctity of the pledge owed to a guest, cost the first Emirate its government.¹⁶

Twenty-one years later, the relationship reasserted itself in near-identical form. On 31 July 2022, a United States drone strike killed Zawahiri on the balcony of a safe house in Kabul’s Sherpur neighbourhood, a property US officials identified as owned by an aide to Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban’s interior minister, deputy leader, and head of the Haqqani network.¹⁷

Zawahiri and his family had been sheltering in the house for months; senior Haqqani-aligned Taliban officials were aware of his presence, in direct contravention of the 2020 Doha Agreement’s explicit commitment that the Taliban would not harbour Al-Qaeda members on Afghan soil.¹⁸ Taliban spokesmen publicly denied any knowledge of Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul and, more than a year later, continued to dispute the basic facts of the strike.¹⁹

Read alongside the UN Monitoring Team’s assessment that senior Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent leaders remain based in Kabul and that the group’s overall status in Afghanistan has been essentially unchanged across the five years of Taliban rule, the Zawahiri episode is best understood not as an isolated security failure but as confirmation that the bay’ah relationship established in 1998 continues to structure Taliban conduct in practice, even where it is denied in public diplomacy.

This is the throughline the Muslim Brotherhood genealogy makes visible. Al-Qaeda supplied the transnational, vanguardist theory of jihad against “apostate” and foreign power; the Taliban supplied the sovereign territory and religious authority required to host it; and neither side has been willing, in nearly three decades, to formally dissolve the bond between them.

Afghan Social Context

Religious doctrine alone cannot fully explain the Taliban’s governing philosophy. The movement emerged within Afghanistan’s unique social and historical environment, where tribal structures, local customs, and community-based mechanisms of authority have long influenced political organisation.

The Legacy of Jihad

Many senior Taliban figures participated in the anti-Soviet jihad during the 1980s before later fighting in the civil war, the first Islamic Emirate, and the insurgency against the United States and NATO between 2001 and 2021. These experiences reinforced a worldview in which military resistance became closely associated with religious obligation, national sovereignty, and political legitimacy.

Lessons from Insurgency

Perhaps the most significant difference between the first and second Islamic Emirates lies not in ideology but in organisational experience.

International assessments frequently assume that administrative modernisation will gradually produce political moderation; the ideas traced in this section, from Deobandi scholarship and Hanafi jurisprudence through the Muslim Brotherhood lineage of the movement's closest ally to the organisational memory of two decades underground, point to a different trajectory.

Since returning to power, the Islamic Emirate has strengthened revenue collection, bureaucratic coordination, provincial administration, and diplomatic engagement while maintaining continuity in its conception of political legitimacy.

Rather than replacing ideology, institutional adaptation has reinforced the movement's ability to implement it. Ideology functions here not as an obstacle to governance but as the framework through which governance is organised, justified, and exercised, and administrative reform has not been accompanied by corresponding change in political philosophy.



3. Five Years of Taliban Rule

3.1 State Control, Governance and Regional Security

The Taliban won the war in 2021. The five years that followed are therefore the more important test: not whether the movement could seize the state, but what it has done with the state it captured.

The return of the Taliban to Kabul on 15 August 2021 ended two decades of insurgency. It transferred control of Afghanistan's state apparatus to a movement that had previously governed through shadow institutions, religious courts, taxation networks and parallel administrative structures. Five years later, the central analytical question is no longer whether the Taliban can hold territory. It is whether the system it has built around that territorial control can be understood as durable state formation.

The evidence points to a more complicated answer than either "state failure" or "successful transformation." Ministries function, customs revenues are collected, provincial administrations operate, and the regime has demonstrated a stronger capacity for domestic revenue extraction than many early post-2021 forecasts anticipated. At the same time, political authority has become more concentrated, women's participation in public life has contracted sharply, media space has narrowed, and Afghanistan continues to host a significant ecosystem of militant organisations with consequences well beyond its borders.

The defining feature of the first five years is therefore not institutional collapse, but **selective institutional adaptation**. The Taliban has retained much of the inherited machinery of the Afghan state while changing the principles, personnel and political hierarchy through which that machinery operates.²⁰

Taliban 2.0 is not a story of political moderation. It is a story of tighter state control, deeper administrative penetration and stronger enforcement of the Emirate's ideological order, without corresponding political pluralism or social inclusion.

3.2 From Insurgency to State Authority

Winning power is the beginning of governance, not its conclusion.

The Taliban entered Kabul in 2021 with an unusual advantage over many revolutionary movements. It had already accumulated practical experience in administering territory. During the insurgency, shadow governors, judicial commissions, taxation mechanisms, intelligence structures and military commissions operated across large parts of Afghanistan. These parallel institutions were not simply instruments of wartime disruption; they provided the movement with an administrative learning curve before it captured the formal state.²¹

The post-2021 order therefore contains a structural duality.

Administrative institutions inherited from the Republic remain visible, while political authority is rooted in the Emirate's conception of religious sovereignty. Ministries, courts and provincial administrations continue to perform recognisable governmental functions, but they do so within a system in which ultimate political authority does not derive from elections, constitutional checks or a competitive legislature.

3.3 Inheriting the Machinery of the State

Contrary to widespread expectations, the Islamic Emirate did not dismantle Afghanistan's administrative apparatus after assuming power. Instead, it adopted a strategy of selective institutional continuity.

Most government ministries remained operational. Provincial administrations continued to function. Customs authorities resumed revenue collection, while existing bureaucratic procedures were adapted to align with the Emirate's governing philosophy. Although senior political leadership changed, a few technical and administrative personnel continued while many were replaced with ideologically aligned

personnel. Others fled the Taliban-run country.

The survival of these institutions should not be mistaken for constitutional continuity, political legitimacy or institutional independence. The Republic's political framework was dismantled, while its inherited administrative machinery was selectively retained. The result is an inherited bureaucracy operating under a radically different conception of political authority.

The World Bank's post-2021 assessments underline the broader point. Despite a severe economic contraction, Afghanistan's public administration did not collapse. By 2024–2025, the economy had returned to modest growth, while domestic revenue collection and fiscal administration had strengthened.²²

Keeping ministries open is not the same as building accountable institutions. The Emirate has preserved the machinery of government while concentrating political authority at the centre, weakening independent scrutiny and eliminating the constitutional mechanisms that previously constrained executive power.

Instead, the Islamic Emirate largely retained the inherited machinery of the state while redefining the principles under which it operated.

This distinction is central to understanding Taliban 2.0.

3.4 Centralisation of Political Authority

Although administrative institutions continued to function, political authority became increasingly centralised around the office of the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin, currently held by Hibatullah Akhundzada, who governs from Kandahar rather than Kabul, itself a structural statement about where ultimate authority sits relative to the nominal seat of government. Strategic decisions relating to governance, legislation, appointments, and national policy derive legitimacy from this office, and are transmitted to the capital through a small circle of Kandahar-based clerics informally known as the "Kandahar secretariat."²³

The location of decision-making is itself significant. Reporting in 2026 indicated that Akhundzada chaired cabinet sessions in Kandahar, demonstrating the gap between the formal location of ministries in Kabul and the political centre of gravity of the Emirate.²⁴

The cabinet appointed on 7 September 2021 illustrates how that authority is distributed beneath Akhundzada. Mohammad Hasan Akhund, a founding-era Taliban figure with no military or technocratic background, was named acting Prime Minister; Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the Haqqani network and son of the network's founder Jalaluddin Haqqani, became Minister of Interior and First Deputy Leader; and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, became Minister of Defence and Second Deputy Leader.

Day-to-day command of the armed forces runs through Fasihuddin Fitrat, an ethnic Tajik from Badakhshan who led the seizure of Panjshir from the National Resistance Front in September 2021 and was appointed Chief of General Staff, a rare non-Pashtun appointment at that level, though one that reporting indicates still depends on validation from the Kandahar secretariat rather than independent authority.²⁵

The resulting structure is better understood as four overlapping centres of power rather than a frictionless single hierarchy.

At the apex is the Kandahar-based clerical faction built around Akhundzada's religious authority and doctrinal conservatism, which exercises ultimate ideological and political authority.

A second centre is the Kabul-based militant-pragmatic network associated with Sirajuddin Haqqani, particularly through the Interior Ministry and the Haqqani network.²⁶

A third is the defence and military establishment associated with Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, within which the formal military command structure, including Chief of General Staff Fasihuddin Fitrat,

operates.

The fourth is the formal administrative machinery of the cabinet, ministries, provincial governors, district administrations and specialised commissions through which decisions are implemented across the country.

These centres overlap rather than operate as autonomous institutions, with the first retaining ultimate political authority.

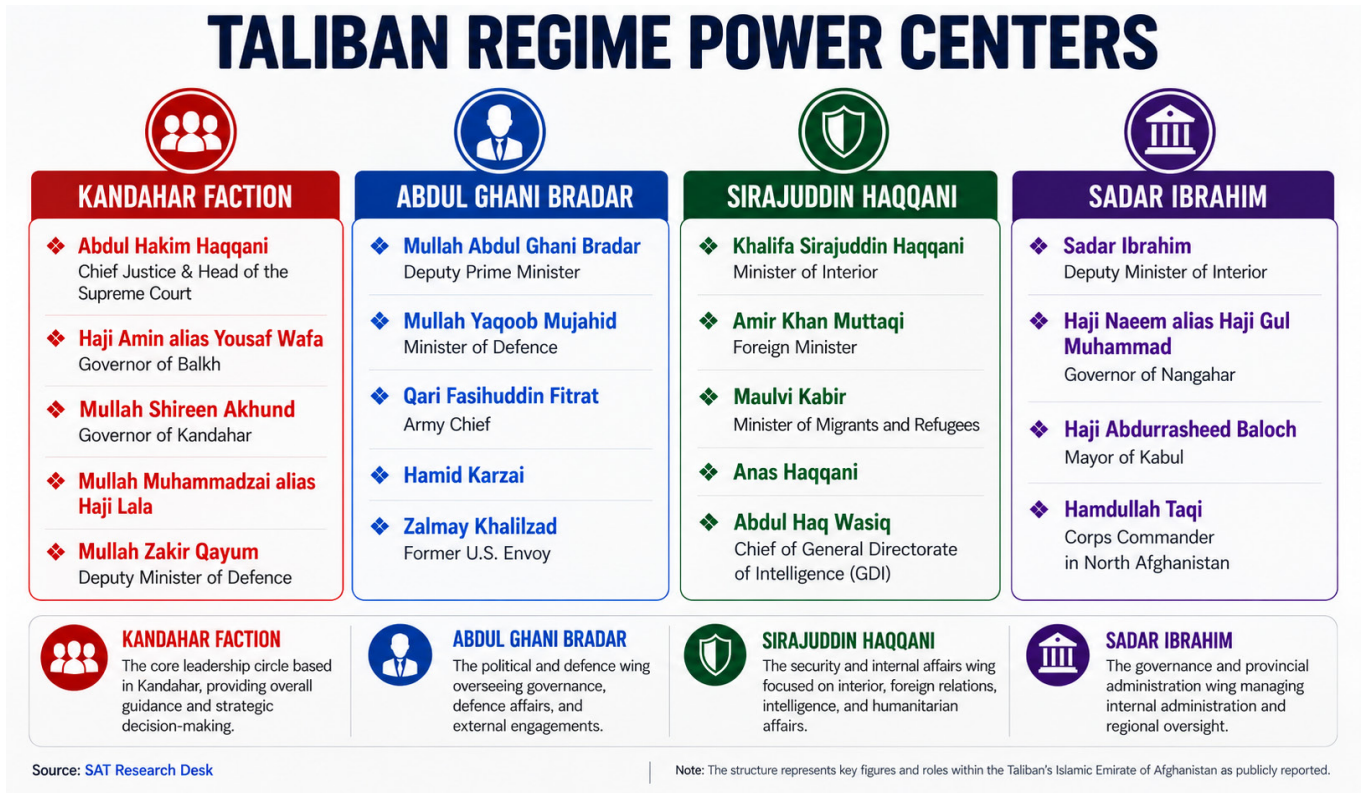


Figure: The Four Overlapping Centres of Power in the Taliban Regime (SHU/Kandahar clerical faction; Abdul Ghani Bradar/administrative network; Sirajuddin Haqqani/Interior Ministry; Sadar Ibrahim/security network).

Senior figures on both sides have in different forums acknowledged tension between them. Taliban chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has publicly dismissed reports of internal discord as “unauthentic and fabricated lies,” while independent reporting has documented friction over provincial appointments, including the posting of a Pashtun governor, Mullah Yusuf Wafa, to the ethnically mixed north-central province of Balkh, which fuelled resentment among Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara communities already largely excluded from senior office, and over control of revenue from mining and mineral contracts, where senior officials, including Sirajuddin Haqqani himself, have publicly acknowledged that nepotism affecting a small number of influential families is undermining governance.²⁷

The May 2023 cabinet reshuffle that saw Prime Minister Hasan Akhund's authority curtailed was widely read by analysts as a deliberate signal to the Haqqani network that no single bloc, however senior, operates outside Kandahar's oversight.²⁸

The same central oversight extends to internal security within the movement's own ranks. In February 2023, Qudratullah Panjshiri, who had served as the Taliban's own governor of Panjshir province from September 2021 to June 2022, was arrested on suspicion of membership in ISKP, a reminder that institutional consolidation and internal security vetting have proceeded together, and that the ideological boundary the Emirate polices most anxiously runs through its own appointees as much as through external opposition.²⁹

The assassination of Khalil Haqqani, Sirajuddin's uncle and the Taliban's acting Minister for Refugees

and Repatriation, in a bombing inside the Ministry's Kabul compound on 11 December 2024, claimed by ISKP, underscored that this factional landscape is not merely rhetorical. The attack killed a sitting cabinet minister from the Haqqani network inside a government building more than three years into Taliban rule.

These developments do not suggest the emergence of a liberal or democratic political order. Rather, they indicate the consolidation of a governing system that has become increasingly capable of exercising state authority within its own ideological framework.

A framework that operates through named factions, named institutions such as the provincial Ulema Councils, and specific, recurring administrative mechanisms rather than through abstract "centralisation" alone.

Below this contested apex, governance is coordinated through cabinet ministries, provincial governors, district administrations, and specialised commissions. While ministries possess administrative responsibilities, their authority operates within a centralised political framework that emphasises ideological cohesion and organisational discipline over technocratic autonomy. This model differs substantially from the constitutional arrangements of the former Republic, where executive authority was formally constrained by constitutional institutions, electoral processes, and competing political actors.

Provincial governance has followed the same logic. The creation of provincial Ulema Councils and the centralisation of senior appointments strengthened the leadership's ability to monitor provincial officials and rotate personnel. Such reshuffles can prevent the emergence of autonomous regional power bases, but they also limit the development of locally accountable institutions.³⁰

Under the Islamic Emirate, institutional coherence is achieved through hierarchical decision-making and the management of factional balance rather than political competition, a distinction that matters because it means apparent administrative stability can coexist with real, if generally undisclosed, contestation over who actually controls policy.

The result is not an absence of factionalism, but a system in which factionalism operates beneath a highly centralised ideological hierarchy.

3.5 Governing Through Adapted Institutions

The transition from insurgency to government required the Taliban to expand its administrative capabilities beyond security and justice. Ministries responsible for finance, commerce, public works, agriculture, health, education, telecommunications, mining, transport and border management continued operating, but their political environment changed.

The most important adaptation has been the combination of inherited administrative procedures with new mechanisms of ideological oversight. The clearest of these is the network of provincial Ulema Councils that Akhundzada began establishing across all thirty-four provinces from 2022. These councils were the bodies of religious scholars, many of whom underwent orientation training in Kandahar to align them with the supreme leadership's expectations, that in practice now hold authority over provincial governors, mayors, and police chiefs on matters the councils deem religious in character, a parallel structure of clerical oversight layered on top of, and in some instances superseding, the formal chain of administrative command.³¹

The self-proclaimed Amir also moved in 2022 to claim direct control over appointments to all senior provincial positions, a centralisation that produces the frequent, closely choreographed reshuffles of governors, deputy governors, and police chiefs that Kabul has announced at regular intervals since, for example, the August 2023 reassignment of the governors of Parwan, Logar, and Takhar, and a similarly broad May 2026 restructuring that moved sitting governors of Faryab, Baghlan, Khost, and Badghis into new provinces or ministries in a single decree.³²

These rotations serve a dual purpose evident even in the personnel involved. They distribute loyalist commanders across provinces to prevent any single figure from accumulating an independent regional

base, while also functioning as one of the few visible channels through which Kandahar rewards, tests, or disciplines subordinate officials.

Following 2021, ministries responsible for finance, commerce, public works, agriculture, health, education, telecommunications, mining, transport, and border management continued operating with varying degrees of effectiveness. Administrative procedures were gradually standardised, while revenue collection, customs administration, and financial oversight received increasing attention. Although administrative capacity varies considerably across provinces, the overall trend has been one of increasing institutional consolidation, achieved, as the Ulema Council structure illustrates, at least as much through parallel religious oversight mechanisms as through conventional bureaucratic reform.

This arrangement produces a state that is neither purely bureaucratic nor purely revolutionary. Formal institutions matter because they provide continuity and technical capacity. Informal networks matter because they determine access, influence and trust. Religious authority matters because it provides the ideological basis through which the Emirate legitimises political decisions.

Hence, rather than constructing entirely new bureaucracies from scratch, the Islamic Emirate sought to adapt existing institutions to its own governing philosophy while reducing dependence on international assistance.

3.6 The Civil Service and State Capacity

The civil service provides perhaps the clearest illustration of the difference between administrative survival and institutional transformation.

The numbers expose the contradiction. The civil-service workforce rose from 405,863 employees in 2021 to 407,563 in 2023, but women fell from 90,155 employees (22 per cent) to 86,396 (21 per cent). Female employees ordered to remain at home were later reduced to a flat 5,000 afghanis, roughly US\$70, per month before UN reporting indicated that their employment was terminated in January 2026.³³

Afghanistan's inherited bureaucracy remained necessary to operate the state, but its composition changed after 2021. Women's participation declined, while many experienced officials left the country. UN and European assessments have documented continuing restrictions on women's employment, including the removal of women from many government functions outside sectors such as health and education.³⁴

The consequence is a paradox. The Emirate has increased its control over the bureaucracy at precisely the moment when Afghanistan requires greater technical capacity in public finance, healthcare, engineering, education and infrastructure. Administrative control can preserve political discipline, but excessive personnel exclusion weakens the human capital required for state development.

The first five years demonstrate that the Taliban can maintain bureaucratic continuity while narrowing the social and political space within which that bureaucracy operates without reproducing the professional and socially diverse administrative base that existed before 2021.

3.7 Public Services and Justice

Basic public administration has generally continued across most provinces, while healthcare and humanitarian assistance remain heavily dependent on international organisations. The distinction matters because a functioning ministry is not identical to a self-sustaining public-service system.

Justice illustrates the same pattern. The Emirate retained a recognisable three-tier court structure but dissolved the constitutional and legislative framework of the former Republic. Supreme Court and provincial judicial structures continued, while judges and religious scholars assumed greater authority over legal interpretation.³⁵

The post-2021 judiciary is therefore an example of institutional continuity combined with legal rupture. The state retained courts because courts are indispensable to governing a modern territory. It changed

the legal philosophy under which those courts operate because the Emirate considers religious legitimacy, rather than constitutional sovereignty, the ultimate basis of law.

3.8 The Political Economy of State Survival

The durability of the Emirate cannot be separated from its fiscal capacity. The immediate post-2021 shock was severe: external assistance was suspended or redirected, foreign assets were frozen, banking channels deteriorated and household incomes fell. Yet the state did not collapse.

The resource picture is equally constrained. By early 2025, the Ministry of Mines reported roughly 200 mining contracts signed since 2021, while work at Mes Aynak had resumed. Afghanistan's mineral potential is frequently estimated in the trillions of dollars, yet financing, infrastructure, regulatory uncertainty, environmental concerns and limited international recognition continue to prevent that potential from becoming a diversified industrial base.³⁶

Domestic revenue collection became the critical bridge between political control and administrative survival. Customs, taxation, licensing, state-owned enterprises and natural-resource management assumed greater importance as external budgetary support declined.

By 2025, domestic revenue collection had strengthened substantially. The World Bank reported that domestic revenue reached 19.8 percent of GDP in 2025, while the wider economy continued to grow modestly. Yet GDP growth did not translate proportionately into improved living standards: rapid population growth, weak investment and structural constraints continued to reduce GDP per capita.³⁷

The fiscal figures are more revealing when placed against the depth of the 2021 shock. The study records a cumulative economic contraction of roughly one-quarter of GDP in the first two years after the takeover, followed by a further 24.4 percent contraction in 2023. Domestic revenue nevertheless reached approximately AFN 241 billion in FY2024–25, equal to 16.6 percent of GDP and 14.4 percent above the previous year, while external grants fell to about US\$2.9 billion.³⁸

These figures do not amount to economic transformation. They show a regime that has shifted the fiscal burden inward after the withdrawal of much of the external financial architecture. Revenue extraction has expanded, but poverty, unemployment, weak private investment, restricted banking access, demographic pressure and humanitarian dependence remain. The state has become more effective at extracting resources from a weak economy; it has not demonstrated that those resources are being converted into broad-based development.³⁹

3.8a Poverty, Health, and Malnutrition: The Human Cost

The fiscal indicators above capture the state's balance sheet, not the population's. On the population side of the ledger, the picture is considerably worse. The World Bank estimated that 48 per cent of Afghans were living below the national poverty line in 2025, while UNDP separately found 75 per cent of the population "subsistence-insecure," unable to reliably meet basic housing, healthcare, food and heating needs even where they are not formally counted as poor.⁴⁰

Child malnutrition data make the point most starkly. The World Food Programme projected that malnutrition among women and children would reach nearly 4.9 million people in 2026, a new high, as close to one-third of the population, some 13.8 million people, faced acute food insecurity. UNICEF's July 2026 nutrition assessment found 3.7 million children under five at heightened risk of undernutrition, with wasting having worsened across 26 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces compared with the previous year; children under two accounted for 83 per cent of severe acute malnutrition cases recorded. Separately, nearly half of Afghan children under five are estimated to be stunted, and roughly 80 percent of households cannot afford a nutritious diet.⁴¹

These are not the metrics of a state that has stabilised the population it governs, even where it has stabilised its own revenue base. WFP's specialised nutritious-food distributions, the frontline defence against child wasting, were suspended entirely in May 2025 for lack of funding; by mid-2026 the agency could reach only about one in seven acutely malnourished women and children in need. The gap between administrative recovery and human welfare is, on this evidence, widening rather than

closing, a divergence this study returns to directly in Chapter Nine, where it forms part of the evidentiary basis for the connection drawn between economic desperation and militant recruitment.

3.9 Governing Society: Education, Women and Information

The social order constructed after 2021 is not an incidental by-product of administrative consolidation. It is one of the principal arenas in which the Emirate has sought to translate ideological authority into everyday governance.

Education is the clearest example. Afghanistan remains the only country in which girls and women are formally excluded from secondary and higher education. UNESCO and UNICEF reported in January 2026 that approximately 2.2 million adolescent girls were barred from secondary school, while the broader education system faced a severe learning crisis.⁴²

The scale is strategic rather than marginal. The study records approximately 2.2 million adolescent girls excluded from secondary education, while Afghanistan's median age is about 17.4 years. A government restricting the education of a large share of its future workforce is therefore imposing a measurable human-capital constraint on a country whose demographic pressure is already severe.⁴³

The consequences extend beyond rights. Afghanistan has one of the world's youngest populations, making education and skills development central to its future labour supply. A system that excludes millions of girls from secondary and higher education is therefore simultaneously narrowing the country's human-capital base.

Restrictions on women's employment compound the problem. The removal of women from government, NGO and other formal employment reduces household incomes, weakens service delivery in sectors where female workers are indispensable, and narrows the pool of skilled labour available to the state.⁴⁴

The information environment has changed in parallel. Reporters Without Borders ranks Afghanistan 175th of 180 countries in its 2026 World Press Freedom Index and describes a media environment increasingly deprived of pluralism and dissenting voices.⁴⁵

The contraction is quantifiable: 219 of the 547 media outlets operating before the takeover had closed within the first year, while the number of working journalists fell from 11,857 to 4,759. By 2026, Afghanistan ranked 175th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, compared with 122nd in 2021. The result is not simply tighter regulation; it is a sharply reduced institutional space for independent scrutiny.⁴⁶

RSF Data | Five-Year War on Journalism (10 August 2026 Assessment)

Reporters Without Borders documents more than 20 national directives and numerous provincial decrees since September 2021 that have dismantled Afghan press freedom. This is an evolution RSF describes as moving from administrative censorship to "a prison for information."

In January 2026, the Taliban's new Code of Criminal Procedure legalised the repression: Article 19 prescribes 39 lashes and one year in prison for insulting the Taliban supreme leader; Article 23 prescribes 20 lashes and six months for insulting Emirate leadership; Article 24 requires citizens to report contact with government opponents. RSF notes media professionals receive no exemption.

Women have been systematically pushed out of Afghan media: November 2021 rules forced women TV presenters to cover their faces on air, and March 2025 Kandahar guidelines banned women's voices from radio broadcasts entirely.

March 2022 and July 2024 measures banned rebroadcasting VOA and Radio Free Europe content and banned broadcasting images of living beings, with enforcement expanding to more than 20 provinces, a repression RSF says has driven hundreds of Afghan journalists out of the country.

The broader pattern is consistent: institutional capacity has expanded, but the social space within which citizens can challenge, influence or independently scrutinise the state has contracted.

Administrative consolidation has not translated into political or social opening. The opposite pattern is clear: the stronger the state's enforcement capacity has become, the more effectively the Emirate has institutionalised restrictions on education, employment, media and public dissent.

3.9a The Madrassa Expansion and the Retreat of Secular Education

The contraction of secular schooling has been matched by an unprecedented expansion of religious seminaries. Registered madrassas rose from approximately 5,000 in August 2021 to more than 23,000 by September 2025, enrolling upwards of 3.65 million children, according to research by the Afghan civil-society network Hamrah, corroborated by independent reporting from inside the country.⁴⁷ Public schools, universities, and teacher-training colleges have in numerous documented cases been converted directly into madrassas; the Abdul Hai Habibi High School in Khost, formerly equipped with a science laboratory, library and computer lab and serving 6,000 students, is one such example.⁴⁸

This expansion has been actively directed rather than incidental. In July 2023 the Taliban leadership decreed the recruitment of 100,000 new madrassa teachers by the end of that year, a target referenced in UN Secretary-General reporting to the Security Council.⁴⁹ A leaked internal curriculum review, produced during the Doha negotiations and reported by the exile outlet Hasht-e Subh, proposed a comprehensive "Islamization" of the national curriculum; analysts describe the resulting system as designed to produce, in the words of one assessment, "a pipeline of indoctrinated foot soldiers" rather than an educated workforce.⁵⁰

Field reporting corroborates the shift at the classroom level. Interviews with students across Kabul, Herat, Helmand, Ghazni, Ghor, Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamiyan describe reduced instruction in science, English, Persian and civics alongside expanded religious content, with the change most pronounced in the south.⁵¹ Human Rights Watch's 2024 study of boys' education found rising corporal punishment and the systematic removal of female teachers, while researchers interviewing serving educators describe curricula built around an austere Deobandi interpretation of Islam emphasising loyalty to the Taliban's supreme leader and framing jihad as a legitimate path for young men.⁵²

The strategic implication extends beyond the classroom. A generation of Afghan boys is being educated within an institutional structure historically associated with militant recruitment, at a scale several multiples larger than existed under the first Emirate or the Republic.

Whether or not this system deliberately produces fighters, it measurably narrows the pool of Afghans equipped for, or oriented toward, an economy, civil service, or political order outside the Emirate's own ideological framework, which is a long-horizon security and governance risk this study treats as distinct from, but related to, the exclusion of girls documented above.

3.10 The Opium Ban and the Rural Economy

The prohibition on opium cultivation demonstrates another form of state capacity. UNODC recorded a 95 per cent fall in poppy cultivation following the Taliban ban. Yet the same policy sharply reduced farm income derived from opium, creating a difficult transition for rural communities.⁵³

The 95 per cent fall in cultivation also produced a severe rural income shock. Estimated farmer income from opium fell from roughly US\$1.36 billion to US\$110 million, more than 92 per cent, without a comparable replacement income stream established across the rural economy.⁵⁴

The policy therefore illustrates the difference between enforcement and development. The Emirate has demonstrated that it can impose a nationwide prohibition. The more difficult task is creating alternative livelihoods capable of replacing the income lost by farmers without generating new forms of rural insecurity.

3.10a From Poppy to Powder: The Rise of Synthetic Narcotics

The opium ban has not ended Afghanistan's role in the global drug trade; it has redirected it. UNODC's November 2025 survey recorded a further decline in cultivation to 10,200 hectares, down from 12,800 in 2024, with 2025 opium production falling 32 per cent to roughly 296 tonnes and farmer income falling

48 per cent, from US\$260 million to US\$134 million, as the average price of dry opium fell 27 per cent to US\$570 per kilogram.⁵⁵

Over the same period, seizures of methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs linked to Afghanistan rose by approximately 50 per cent, prompting UNODC to warn that drug-control strategy must move beyond opium to address a synthetic market that is, in the agency's own words, easier to produce, harder to detect, and less vulnerable to climate shocks than poppy cultivation.⁵⁶

Afghanistan's mountains host substantial wild stands of ephedra, the plant from which ephedrine, a key methamphetamine precursor, is extracted, giving traffickers a domestic input that requires no imported chemicals and can be processed in rudimentary rural laboratories.

UNODC first documented this shift in a dedicated 2023 technical study, identifying Bakwa and Khashrud districts of Farah province as centres of production.⁵⁷

Evidence increasingly ties this shift to the Taliban's own revenue base rather than treating it as an entirely separate criminal economy. Academic analysis of the Taliban's drug-trade taxation system documents the continued application of religious levies (ushr and zakat), conventional taxes, protection payments, and in-kind support extracted from traffickers, alongside the ongoing involvement of local Taliban commanders in the trade.⁵⁸ Field research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime similarly found that major traffickers who financed the Taliban's insurgency were given a ten-month grace period to sell existing opium stockpiles after the 2022 ban, using the time to diversify into mining and methamphetamine production; some were reportedly rewarded with influential roles inside Taliban structures, including negotiating mineral and trade contracts.⁵⁹

The regional consequences are already visible in interdiction data. In October 2025, the Pakistan Navy intercepted two vessels in the Arabian Sea carrying approximately 2.5 tonnes of crystal methamphetamine ("ice") alongside 50 kilograms of cocaine, illustrating the trafficking routes now radiating from Afghan production sites.⁶⁰ UNODC's 2026 World Drug Report placed this within a wider global pattern, recording 755 distinct new psychoactive substances in circulation in 2024, five times the number reported four years earlier, and linked part of the surge directly to the gap left by the collapse of Afghan heroin output.⁶¹

The opium ban is frequently cited as evidence of the Emirate's governing capacity. The evidence assembled here raises questions on that reading.

Rather than eliminating Afghanistan's narcotics economy, Taliban ban has driven a substitution toward a synthetic product that is cheaper to produce, harder to interdict, and, on the available evidence, still connected to Taliban revenue streams through taxation and the accommodation of traffickers within the movement's own structures.

3.11 Security Without Peace

The end of the twenty-year war produced a genuine security transformation. Frontlines disappeared, large-scale conventional battles largely ceased, and inter-provincial movement became safer across much of the country. The reduction in conventional fighting has changed the form of insecurity; it has not resolved Afghanistan's wider security crisis.

But the end of one war did not create a comprehensive peace. Afghanistan's security environment shifted from conventional warfare toward terrorism, militant competition, localised resistance, border insecurity and transnational threats.

The December 2025 UN monitoring assessment cited in the study estimated that more than twenty terrorist organisations remained active in Afghanistan, with up to 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters. It estimated approximately 6,000 TTP fighters, 2,000–3,000 ISIL-K members and 400–1,500 Al-Qaeda operatives, alongside ETIM/TIP, IMU and Jamaat Ansarullah.⁶²

The February 2026 Russian assessment placed the wider militant presence at 20,000–23,000 terrorists operating inside Afghanistan, more than half foreign nationals, including approximately 5,000–7,000

TTP fighters and around 3,000 ISIL-K members. The significance is not the precision of a single estimate but the persistence of the same finding across successive assessments: Afghanistan remains an operating environment for a large and diverse militant ecosystem.⁶³

The most important analytical distinction is between groups the Taliban considers a direct threat to its own authority and groups whose presence it has tolerated or failed to dismantle. The Taliban has fought ISKP intensely because ISKP rejects the Emirate's legitimacy and challenges its monopoly over armed and religious authority. TTP and Al-Qaeda present a different problem because their presence has not produced the same direct challenge to the Taliban's claim to rule.

This selective security response is why the Taliban's war against ISKP cannot by itself be treated as proof that Afghanistan has become a comprehensive counterterrorism partner.

3.12 Russia and the Regionalisation of the Threat

Russia's assessment is particularly significant because Moscow has simultaneously pursued deep engagement with the Islamic Emirate and expressed concern over the militant ecosystem inside Afghanistan.

In February 2026, the Russian Foreign Ministry estimated that 20,000–23,000 members of international militant organisations were operating in Afghanistan, more than half of them foreign nationals. The assessment put ISKP at roughly 3,000 members, TTP at 5,000–7,000, Al-Qaeda at 400–1,500, and identified additional organisations including ETIM/TIP, IMU and Jamaat Ansarullah.⁶⁴

The significance of the Russian assessment lies not only in the numbers but in the geography of the threat. Moscow's principal concern is that militant networks operating from Afghanistan can project instability toward Central Asia and the wider Eurasian space. This overlaps with concerns already expressed by Pakistan, China, Iran and Central Asian states.

The spillover is no longer theoretical. On 26 November 2025, a drone attack originating from Badakhshan killed three Chinese nationals at a site in Tajikistan; a second attack four days later killed two Chinese workers. In January 2026, armed militants reportedly crossed from Afghanistan into Tajikistan before being engaged by Tajik border forces. These incidents place the consequences of Afghanistan's militant environment directly on neighbouring territory.⁶⁵

Afghanistan's security problem has therefore become regionalised. Pakistan faces TTP and other cross-border networks; China remains concerned about ETIM/TIP and attacks affecting Chinese nationals and interests; Tajikistan and other Central Asian states face infiltration risks; and Russia is concerned about recruitment, radicalisation and militant movement toward the CIS.⁶⁶

Afghanistan Remains a Regional Security Liability

Territorial control has not ended the regional threat. Afghanistan continues to provide an operating environment for transnational militant organisations, while neighbouring states absorb the consequences through cross-border attacks, infiltration, trafficking and heightened border militarisation.

3.13 Pakistan: The Most Immediate External Test

For Pakistan, the security consequences are the most immediate. The record compiled by the SAT Research Division documents repeated cases in 2025–2026 in which Afghan nationals were identified among suicide attackers, facilitators or infiltrators involved in major terrorist incidents in Pakistan, including attacks in Dera Ismail Khan, Islamabad, Bajaur and Bannu.⁶⁷

SAT Case Record | Named Cross-Border Attacks Traced to Afghan Territory (2025–2026)

11 Nov 2025, Judicial Complex, Islamabad (G-11): suicide bomber Qari Osman, alias Zubair, resident of Achin district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, killed 12 people and injured 27 outside the court complex.

10 Oct 2025, Police Training Centre, Dera Ismail Khan: suicide bomber Ajmal alias Khalid, son of Haji Noor Jan, resident of Wardak province and former member of Taliban security forces, killed 7 and injured 13.

10 Nov 2025, Cadet College Wana, South Waziristan: suicide bomber Janullah alias Zahid Ayyubi, resident of Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, was one of five terrorists in a VBIED attack that killed 3.

16 Feb 2026, Malangi security post, Bajaur: twin suicide bombings by Ahmad alias Qari Abdullah/Abu Zar, an Afghan national from Balkh province and former Afghan Taliban Special Forces member, martyred 11 security personnel and 2 civilians, including a minor girl.

2 Apr 2026, Domail Police Station, Bannu: Ehsanullah alias Khaksar, an Afghan national from Kandahar province, killed 5 civilians including 3 women and 1 child in a VBIED attack.

Pakistan's official record: over 300 Afghan nationals killed while fighting alongside terrorist groups inside Pakistan have been identified by name, family and home address; more than 245 confirmed Afghan nationals were among terrorists neutralised in 2025 alone.

The 2025 figures underline the scale of the problem. The SAT dossier records 1,957 fatalities and 3,603 injuries from cross-border terrorist violence in Pakistan during 2025, more than 245 confirmed Afghan nationals among neutralised terrorists, and more than 600 TTP attacks. These figures indicate a sustained cross-border security problem rather than a handful of isolated incidents.⁶⁸

Afghan Nationals' Involvement in Terror Attacks

Date	Incident	Terrorists Identified
• 07 Aug 2025	54 Afghan nationals killed	Ahmad; Abdul Wali; Sakhi Jan; Muhammad Akbar; Amir Salam; Ghani Jan; Taj Wali; Muhammad Afzal; Rafi Ullah; Sabir; Zubair; Nasir Ullah; Said Khan; Abdullah; Baja
• 07 Aug 2025	16 Afghan nationals killed	Zahir Khan; Imran Khan; Molvi Hameed; Ghazi; Molvi Sharafat; Sozad; Shumalai; Meera; Ulfat; Shahabud Din; Molvi Arif; Masrwali; Qari Hamad; Ammar; Ammar; Ayub; Sami Ullah
• 03 Sep 2025	2 Afghan nationals killed	Abdul Aziz alias Qasid Mohajir; Shabbir Ahmed alias Bilal Muhajir
• 25–26 Apr 2025	45 Afghan terrorists neutralised in North Waziristan, Pakistan	Lal Nabi; Mujahid; Gul Khan; Ali Ahmad; Nasrullah; Khan Agha; Ajab Gul; Wali Ur Rahman alias Kausar; Comd Muhammadullah alias Shaheen; Yasinullah Rohani; Samiullah alias Zulfiqar; Muhibullah alias Mukhlis; Asmatullah alias Asim; Najibullah alias Umar; Abdul Rahman alias Saqib; Nangyalay; Hukam Khan; Zaitullah Muhajir alias Zaitullah Inqilabi; Haseenullah alias Ali Haider; Amrullah; Zalmay; Rahim; Muhammad Haroon Umari alias Umar; Muhammad Ayub; Lal Gul; Shamsullah; Asad; Shams ur Rehman; Abdullah alias Haidri; Sher Ahmad alias Umar Mukhtar; Samandar; Sayed Kamin; Zubair; Comd Gul Zaman alias Abuzar; Afriday; Abdullah; Sakhi; Siraj; Mustafa; Ibrahim; Mamoor

Afghan Nationals Involved in Suicide Bombing / Terrorist Attacks

Date	Incident	Terrorist(s) Identified
04 Mar 2022	Suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Yasin at Imam Bargah, Kucha Risaldar, Peshawar, Pakistan	Yasin
18 Jul 2023	Suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Ghairat Ullah in Hayatabad, Peshawar, Pakistan	Ghairat Ullah
31 Aug 2023	Vehicle-borne suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Zarar in Bannu, Pakistan	Zarar
07 Sep 2023	Suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Abu Bakar in Bannu, Pakistan	Abu Bakar
26 Nov 2023	Suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Rabeen Ullah in Bannu, Pakistan	Rabeen Ullah
26 Mar 2024	Vehicle-borne suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Mutaqi in Besham, Pakistan	Mutaqi
15 Jul 2024	Vehicle-borne suicide bombing by Afghan terrorist Usman Ullah in Bannu, Pakistan	Usman Ullah
23 Mar 2025	6 terrorists neutralised in North Waziristan, Pakistan	Salim; Subhan; Qayyum; Muhabat Ullah; Eslah Eslah Ud Din; Atta Ullah
26 Mar 2025	Afghan terrorist Ajmal neutralised in Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan	Ajmal
07 Apr 2025	Afghan terrorist neutralised	Zareen Dardmand
24 Apr 2025	1 Afghan terrorist killed in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, Pakistan	Bacha Zarin
25 Apr 2025	3 Afghan terrorists killed in Tank, Pakistan	Ibrahim; Sher Wali; Mudam
25-26 Apr 2025	45 Afghan terrorists neutralised in North Waziristan, Pakistan	Lal Nabi; Mujahid; Gul Khan; Ali Ahmad; Nasrullah; Khan Agha; Ajab Gul; Wali Ur Rahman alias Kausar; Comd Muhammadullah alias Shaheen; Yasinullah Rohani; Samiullah alias Zulfiqar; Muhibullah alias Mukhlis; Asmatullah alias Asim; Najibullah alias Umar; Abdul Rahman alias Saqib; Nangyalay; Hukam Khan; Zaitullah Muhajir alias Zaitullah Inqilabi; Haseenullah alias Ali Haider; Amrullah; Zalmay; Rahim; Muhammad Haroon Umari alias Umar; Muhammad Ayub; Lal Gul; Shamsullah; Asad; Shams ur Rehman; Abdullah alias Haidri; Sher Ahmad alias Umar Mukhtar; Samandar; Sayed Kamin; Zubair; Comd Gul Zaman alias Abuzar; Afriday; Abdullah; Sakhi; Siraj; Mustafa; Ibrahim; Mamoor
17-20 Jul 2025	9 Afghan terrorists neutralised	Sadaqat; Abu Zar; Samad; Khakyar; Lawangeen; Lawangeen; Hijran; Abu Dajana; Saqib; Saif
07 Aug 2025	54 Afghan nationals killed	Ahmad; Abdul Wali; Sakhi Jan; Muhammad Muhammad Akbar; Amir Salam; Ghani Jan; Taj Wali; Muhammad Afzal; Rafi Ullah; Sabir; Zubair; Nasir Ullah; Said Khan; Abdullah; Baja
07 Aug 2025	16 Afghan nationals killed	Zahir Khan; Imran Khan; Molvi Hameed; Ghazi; Molvi Sharafat; Sozad; Shumalai; Meerat; Ulfat; Shahabud Din; Molvi Arif; Masrwali; Qari Hamad; Ammar; Ayub; Sami Ullah
Aug 2025	2 Afghan nationals killed	Jamshid; Hafeez
02 Sep 2025	2 Afghan nationals killed	Abdul Aziz alias Qasid Mohajir; Shabbir Ahmed alias Bilal Muhajir
30 Sep 2025	1 Afghan national killed	Abdul Basit, resident of Helmand

The relevant analytical point is not to generalise from individual attackers to Afghan nationals as a population. The issue is the use of Afghan territory for recruitment, training, facilitation, planning and infiltration. That distinction is essential both analytically and politically.

Pakistan's policy evolution since 2021 also matters. Islamabad initially pursued repeated diplomatic engagement, including ministerial visits, special-representative missions, border meetings and formal demarches. When these mechanisms failed to produce the desired reduction in cross-border militant activity, Pakistan increasingly shifted toward containment, border controls and calibrated force.

Pakistan's diplomatic record also matters to the balance sheet. Since 2021, Islamabad conducted four Foreign Minister visits, two Defence Minister/DG ISI missions, five Special Representative visits, five Secretary-level meetings, one NSA visit, eight Joint Coordination Committee meetings, 225 Border Flag Meetings, 836 protest notes and 13 formal demarches. The record indicates that repeated diplomatic and security channels preceded the shift toward coercive measures.⁶⁹

The resulting dispute is therefore no longer simply about border management. It concerns the division of responsibility between a state exercising territorial control and a neighbouring state facing attacks planned or supported from that territory.

3.14 Minorities and the Limits of Security Provision

The state-society relationship is also tested by the ability of the Emirate to protect minorities from violence. The Hazara community has remained particularly exposed to ISKP attacks, while human-rights organisations have also documented abuses and displacement associated with Taliban operations.⁷⁰

The Hazara case illustrates the cost of this security deficit. Human Rights Watch documented at least 13 ISKP-claimed attacks against Hazaras between August 2021 and mid-2022, killing or injuring more than 700 people; the September 2022 Kaaj educational-centre attack alone killed 53 people and injured roughly 100. Continued sectarian attacks demonstrate that territorial control has not translated into equal protection.⁷¹

The Taliban's campaign against ISKP has reduced the group's ability to seize territory, but it has not eliminated its capacity to conduct high-casualty attacks. The persistence of sectarian violence therefore illustrates the limits of territorial control as a substitute for comprehensive security.



3.15 Five Years on: The Balance Sheet

The first five years of Taliban rule can be summarised through six linked outcomes.

Area	Five-Year Record	Assessment
Political authority	self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin remains ultimate authority; senior appointments and provincial governance are centrally controlled.	Power concentrated without electoral or constitutional accountability.
Bureaucracy	405,863 (2021) → 407,563 (2023); women 90,155 (22%) → 86,396 (21%); female home-based employees later terminated.	Continuity of machinery alongside political and gender exclusion.
Fiscal control	AFN 241bn domestic revenue in FY2024–25; +14.4% y/y; 16.6% of GDP.	Greater revenue extraction, not proof of broad-based development.
Economic condition	25% cumulative GDP contraction after 2021; –24.4% in 2023; modest recovery thereafter.	Stabilisation from a severe contraction, with structural weaknesses unresolved.
Mining	200 mining contracts reported since 2021; Mes Aynak activity resumed.	Resource potential remains largely unrealised amid financing, infrastructure and governance constraints.
Rural economy	Poppy cultivation –95%; farmer opium income US\$1.36bn → US\$110m.	Enforcement reduced cultivation; replacement livelihoods remain unresolved.
Information	219/547 pre-2021 media outlets closed; journalists 11,857 → 4,759; 175th/180 in 2026.	Independent scrutiny has contracted sharply.
Education	2.2m adolescent girls excluded from secondary education; median age 17.4.	Human-capital loss is being institutionalised in a very young society.
Terrorism	>20 terrorist organisations; up to 13,000 foreign fighters in UN 20; 20,000–23,000 in Russian Feb 2026 estimate.	Territorial control has not removed Afghanistan's transnational militant infrastructure.
Pakistan	>600 TTP attacks in 2025; >245 confirmed Afghan nationals among neutralized terrorists; 836 protest notes and 13 demarches since 2021.	Security pressure persisted despite extensive diplomatic engagement.

The five-year balance sheet is not a ledger of governance achievements. It is a record of what the Taliban has consolidated, what it has dismantled, and what it has failed to resolve.

Political authority has been concentrated around the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin; constitutional checks have been removed; the inherited bureaucracy has been retained but politically subordinated; domestic revenue extraction has expanded; women have been progressively excluded from education and employment; independent media has contracted; and militant organisations continue to operate from Afghan territory.

The figures make the character of that consolidation clear. The civil-service workforce rose from 405,863 to 407,563 between 2021 and 2023, but women's representation fell from 22 per cent to 21 per cent and female employees ordered home were ultimately terminated. Domestic revenue reached approximately AFN 241 billion in FY2024–25, 16.6 per cent of GDP and 14.4 per cent higher than the previous year but this followed a roughly one-quarter cumulative GDP contraction after the takeover and another 24.4 per cent contraction in 2023. Poppy cultivation fell 95 percent, but estimated farmer income from opium fell by more than 92 per cent. Meanwhile, 219 of 547 pre-2021 media outlets closed within the first year, journalists fell from 11,857 to 4,759, and Afghanistan ranked 175th of 180 countries in press freedom in 2026.⁷²⁷³⁷⁴⁷⁵

The harder conclusion follows from these figures. Revenue extraction has not produced structural economic transformation; a functioning payroll has not produced an inclusive bureaucracy; territorial control has not removed transnational militant networks; the suppression of conventional warfare has not ended violence; and administrative continuity has not produced constitutional accountability.

The December 2025 UN assessment identified more than 20 terrorist organisations and up to 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, while the Russian February 2026 estimate placed the wider militant presence at 20,000–23,000. For Pakistan, the SAT record documents more than 600 TTP attacks in 2025 and more than 245 confirmed Afghan nationals among neutralised terrorists. The central result of five years of Taliban rule is therefore not political normalisation, economic transformation, or regional security, it is coercive control that remains contested rather than settled, challenged by the growing roster of anti-Taliban groups documented in Chapter Five and unconverted into legitimacy, sustainable finances, or a resolved security environment.⁷⁶⁷⁷⁷⁸

Claimed Achievements vs. Documented Record

Security: The Taliban cite the end of conventional war and reduced ANDSF-era combat casualties as their central achievement.

Reality: SAT and UN data record the substitution of one conflict for another. Over 20 terrorist organisations and up to 13,000 foreign fighters remain on Afghan soil, and cross-border attacks on Pakistan, China and Tajikistan increased through 2025–26.

Anti-corruption and revenue collection: Domestic revenue rose to 19.8% of GDP in 2025 on stronger tax enforcement, which the Taliban present as administrative competence.

Reality: World Bank data shows this has not translated into broad-based development. Poverty and food insecurity have increased, and the current account deficit widened to 36.1% of GDP the same year.

The opium ban: Cultivation fell 95% after the April 2022 ban, a policy Taliban officials tout internationally as a counter-narcotics success.

Reality: Farmer income from the harvest collapsed by more than 92% (from roughly US\$1.36bn to US\$110m), with no comparable licit livelihood programme to absorb the shock, deepening rural poverty in producing provinces.

None of these claimed achievements involves a change in the underlying distribution of political power,

the treatment of women and minorities, or the toleration of transnational militant groups, the areas this study treats as the central measure of what five years of Taliban rule has, and has not, changed.

3.16 What Five Years Actually Changed

The Taliban of 2026 operates through a more extensive state apparatus than the movement possessed in 1996, but the significance of that change is not that the movement has become a conventional government. The significance is that an inherited modern bureaucracy now gives the Emirate greater reach over taxation, appointments, justice, information, education, borders and social regulation.

That reach has not been matched by a change in political purpose. The evidence assembled in this study shows continuity in the underlying conception of authority. Power remains concentrated around the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin; political pluralism remains absent; women's exclusion has been codified rather than reversed; and militant groups continue to operate from Afghan territory. Institutional evolution has therefore increased the practical reach of the ideological project rather than displaced it.

This is visible in the treatment of women, the restructuring of the judiciary, the centralisation of appointments, the regulation of information and the selective approach to militant organisations. In each domain, the state has become more capable of translating political authority into administrative practice.

The distinction is therefore fundamental to the meaning of Taliban 2.0:

Taliban 2.0 is not a moderate Taliban. It is a more institutionally capable Taliban.

That distinction explains much of Afghanistan's post-2021 trajectory. The first Emirate possessed limited administrative reach. The second Emirate has inherited a modern state apparatus and has demonstrated a growing ability to use that apparatus to consolidate ideologically driven political authority.

SAT Assessment | Five Years of Consolidation, Not Normalisation

Five years after Kabul, the Taliban has not produced an inclusive or transformed Afghan state. It has produced a more tightly controlled one.

The measurable record is a larger domestic revenue take alongside a weak economy; a functioning bureaucracy alongside the exclusion and termination of female employees; retained courts alongside the removal of constitutional safeguards; a 95 per cent fall in poppy cultivation alongside a more than 92 per cent collapse in farmers' opium income; and nationwide territorial control alongside more than 20 terrorist organisations and up to 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters identified by UN monitoring.



4. The Ideology That Remains

4.1 Women, Minorities, the Islamic Emirate, and the Regional Militant Ecosystem

An emirate is not measured by the ministries it opens, but by the freedoms it forecloses.

It examines four domains in which the Islamic Emirate's conduct since 15 August 2021 has been most closely documented and most consequential: the treatment of women, the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, the Emirate's own conception of itself as an Islamic Emirate rather than a nation-state, and its posture toward the constellation of militant groups that continue to operate from Afghan soil.

Across all four domains, the pattern is consistent.

Where administrative modernisation has proceeded, it has proceeded to entrench, not moderate, the movement's founding ideology. Restrictions on women have not loosened with bureaucratic maturity; they have been codified into law. Violence against minorities has not been suppressed by a consolidating state; it has continued alongside official expressions of regret. The Emirate's self-description as the seat of the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin, a title claimed to encompass authority over Muslims beyond Afghanistan's borders, signals a project that is doctrinally larger than the state it administers. And the Emirate's documented tolerance of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), its ambiguous but unbroken historical bond with Al-Qaeda, and its unresolved war with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) together demonstrate that Afghan territory remains embedded in a live regional militant ecosystem, not a closed post-conflict state.

Five Years, Four Domains

Women: 1.1 million secondary-age girls out of school; 100,000+ female university students barred since December 2022; a 35-article "morality" law (PVPV) restricting women's voice and presence in public, gazetted August 2024.

Minorities: at least 113 Hazaras killed and 25 injured across 11 documented incidents (Aug 2021–Jun 2024) by one count alone, plus a 2022 Taliban military offensive into Hazara-majority Balkhab that displaced over 25,000 residents.

Militants: 20+ organisations and up to 13,000 foreign fighters documented on Afghan soil by the UN, including TTP, Al-Qaeda, ISKP and TIP/ETIM.

State response: sustained, publicised operations against ISKP; no comparable campaign, arrest record, or facilitation-network action against TTP or Al-Qaeda in the same period.

4.2 The Islamic Emirate as a Concept: Sovereignty Bounded by Doctrine, Not by Borders

The Taliban's chosen name for the state it governs, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Imarat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan), is not a stylistic preference. It is a claim about the source and scope of political authority. Where a republic derives legitimacy from a citizenry and a constitution, an emirate governed by a self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin derives legitimacy from religious office. Hibatullah Akhundzada was elevated to that title on 25 May 2016, four days after the death of his predecessor Akhtar Mansour in a US drone strike, when the Taliban's leadership council pledged bay'ah (religious allegiance) to him as self-proclaimed "Amir al-Mu'minin."⁷⁹ The Taliban's own 2016 announcement instructed that "all people are required to obey the new Amir al-Mu'minin (self-proclaimed)", a formulation that frames obedience as a religious duty rather than a civic one.⁸⁰

This is analytically significant for two reasons.

First, the Amir al-Mu'minin title, historically associated with the Abbasid and Ottoman caliphs, carries no inherent territorial limit; it implies authority over the community of believers (ummah) rather than over a defined citizenry, even where the Taliban has in practice confined its writ to Afghan territory.

Second, it is precisely this title that other jihadist movements in the region have invoked to bind themselves, formally, to Kabul. Within hours of the Taliban's 2021 return to power, TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud publicly renewed his organisation's pledge of allegiance to Akhundzada as self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin, describing the Taliban's victory as vindication of the wider "jihadi project."⁸¹

Al-Qaeda's then-leader Ayman al-Zawahiri did the same in 2016 on Akhundzada's appointment, pledging "jihad to liberate every inch of the lands of the Muslims... from Kashgar to al-Andalus, from the Caucasus to Somalia... from Kashmir to Jerusalem."⁸² Neither pledge has been publicly rejected by the Taliban leadership.⁸³

The practical consequence is that the Islamic Emirate functions simultaneously as a sovereign government seeking diplomatic normalisation and customs revenue, and as the doctrinal reference point for a wider network of allied and affiliated armed movements that regard Kabul's victory as a template and Akhundzada's office as a source of religious legitimacy extending beyond Afghanistan's frontiers.

This dual character, state actor and ideological metropole, is the analytical key to why Al-Qaeda, TTP, and other groups continue to find sanctuary logic, not merely physical shelter, in post-2021 Afghanistan. It is this doctrinal expansiveness, rather than any declared territorial ambition, that constitutes the "ideological" dimension of the Islamic Emirate's regional posture. The model is designed to be exported even where the government insists it is not.

4.3 Women Under Taliban 2.0: The Architecture of Exclusion

If any single indicator distinguishes rhetoric from record in the Taliban 2.0 debate, it is the treatment of women. An area where the Emirate has had five full years, complete administrative control, and no battlefield distraction to act differently than it did between 1996 and 2001. It has not.

The edicts, in sequence. Girls were barred from secondary school within a month of the takeover, with grades 7–12 closed from mid-September 2021 while boys' schools reopened.⁸⁴ On 23 March 2022, Taliban officials announced secondary schools would reopen for girls; the order was reversed within hours on instruction from Akhundzada himself, and it has never been implemented since.⁸⁵ Women were barred from Kabul University in September 2021 and universities were ordered to enforce gender segregation from February 2022.⁸⁶ On 20 December 2022, the Taliban banned women from all public and private universities "until further notice," turning away an estimated 100,000 female students already enrolled.⁸⁷ The same December 2022 order barred Afghan women from working for domestic and international NGOs; a further decree in April 2023 extended the ban to United Nations agencies operating in Afghanistan.⁸⁸ By January 2023, women were additionally barred from sitting private university entrance examinations.⁸⁹ Beauty salons, among the last women-run workplaces in the country, were ordered closed in 2023.⁹⁰ By 2024, UN Women assessed that 1.1 million secondary-school-age girls remained out of school,⁹¹ with the Afghan economy projected to lose US\$9.6 billion by 2066 due to the university ban alone.⁹²

Codification. On 21 August 2024, the Ministry of Justice published the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV Law) in the official gazette, having been ratified by Akhundzada on 31 July 2024.

Running to 35 articles across four chapters, it was the first time the Taliban's moral-conduct rules had been formally enacted as law rather than issued as administrative decree.⁹³ The law bars women from raising their voices in public, including singing, reciting poetry aloud, or speaking loudly, and requires the face and body to be fully covered at all times outside the home. It mandates that women travel only with a "sane and adult" mahram (male chaperone).⁹⁴

UNAMA head Roza Otunbayeva called it “a distressing vision for Afghanistan’s future,” warning that the law grants morality inspectors “discretionary powers to threaten and detain anyone.”⁹⁵ The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) went further, stating the law’s effect was to render women “faceless, voiceless shadows,” and called for its immediate revocation.⁹⁶ Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid dismissed international criticism as evidence of “arrogance” among non-Muslim critics and a “lack of awareness about their religion” among Muslim ones.⁹⁷

Timeline of Core Restrictions on Afghan Women, 2021–2025

Date	Measure
• Sept 2021	Girls’ secondary schools (grades 7–12) closed nationwide; women barred from Kabul University
• Feb 2022	Gender-segregated classrooms ordered at universities
• 23 Mar 2022	Girls’ secondary schools ordered reopened, then closed again within hours on Akhundzada’s instruction
• May 2022	Akhundzada decrees full face and body covering for women in public
• 20 Dec 2022	Women barred from all public and private universities (100,000 students affected)
• Dec 2022	Afghan women barred from working for domestic and international NGOs
• Jan 2023	Women barred from private university entrance examinations
• Apr 2023	Ban extended to Afghan women working for UN agencies
• 2023	Women’s beauty salons ordered closed nationwide
• 31 Jul–21 Aug 2024	PVPV (“morality”) Law ratified and gazetted; 35 articles; bars women’s public speech and singing; mandates full covering and mahram escort
• 2025	UN assessment: three consecutive academic years of secondary/higher education denial to Afghan girls; 1.1 million girls out of school

Sources: compiled from Al Jazeera, Feminist Majority Foundation, UN Women, USCIRF, OHCHR, and UNAMA reporting cited in this chapter’s notes.

The pattern across this timeline is not one of episodic restriction followed by administrative consolidation. It is escalatory and cumulative. Each institutional “maturation” of the Emirate, a functioning Ministry of Justice, a functioning gazette, a functioning enforcement apparatus under the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, has been the vehicle through which restrictions on women were formalised, not moderated. This is the empirical core of this study’s argument that Taliban 2.0 represents institutional capacity placed in service of an unaltered ideology.

4.4 Ethnic and Religious Minorities: Persecution Under a Government That Claims to Protect

Afghanistan’s Hazara community, predominantly Shia Muslim and ethnically and linguistically distinct from the Pashtun-majority Taliban leadership, has borne the most sustained pattern of lethal violence against any Afghan minority since 2021, from two overlapping sources: ISKP’s sectarian terrorism, and documented Taliban-linked displacement and abuse.

The ISKP campaign. Human Rights Watch documented at least 13 ISKP-claimed attacks against Hazaras between August 2021 and mid-2022, with at least three more attributed but unclaimed, killing or injuring more than 700 people.⁹⁸

Individual incidents illustrate the pattern: on 21 April 2022, a bombing at the Seh Dokan mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif, one of the city’s largest Shia mosques, killed at least 31 people and wounded 87, part of a coordinated wave of blasts that day that also struck Kunduz and Kabul.⁹⁹ In the first week of August 2022, ISKP-claimed attacks on predominantly Hazara neighbourhoods of Kabul killed or wounded more than 120 people.¹⁰⁰ On 30 September 2022, a bombing at the Kaaj educational centre in the Hazara-majority Dasht-e-Barchi district of west Kabul killed 53 people and wounded around 100, most of them young women sitting university-entrance practice exams.¹⁰¹ Attacks continued through 2023 and 2024: an IED strike on a Shia mosque in Pol-e-Khomri in October 2023; a bombing at a west Kabul sports club the same month; a commuter-bus bombing in west Kabul in November 2023; and, on 29 April 2024, a gunman’s assault on the Imam Zaman Mosque in Guzara district, Herat province, which killed six worshippers including a child.¹⁰² The Institute for Conflict Management calculated at least 113 Hazaras killed and 25 injured across 11 documented incidents between 15 August 2021 and June 2024, a partial count, by its own description.¹⁰³ On 12 September 2024, ISKP claimed an attack that killed 14 Hazara pilgrims returning from Shia shrines in Iraq; Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated the government was “making serious efforts to search for the perpetrators.”¹⁰⁴

SAT Case Record | Named Sectarian Attacks on the Hazara Community (2022–2024)

21 Apr 2022, Seh Dokan mosque, Mazar-e-Sharif: bombing killed at least 31 and wounded 87, part of a coordinated multi-city blast wave that also struck Kunduz and Kabul.

Aug 2022, Hazara neighbourhoods, Kabul: ISKP-claimed attacks killed or wounded more than 120 people in a single week.

30 Sep 2022, Kaaj educational centre, Dasht-e-Barchi, Kabul: bombing killed 53 and wounded around 100, most of them young women sitting university-entrance practice exams.

29 Apr 2024, Imam Zaman Mosque, Herat province: gunman killed six worshippers, including a child.

12 Sep 2024, Hazara pilgrims returning from Iraq: ISKP-claimed attack killed 14; the Taliban government’s response was a statement that it was “making serious efforts to search for the perpetrators.”

Cumulative toll: the Institute for Conflict Management counted at least 113 Hazaras killed and 25 injured across 11 documented incidents between August 2021 and June 2024 alone, by its own description, a partial count.

Taliban-linked abuses. Independent of ISKP's campaign, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum documented a June 2022 Taliban military offensive in Balkhab district (Sar-e Pol province) against a Hazara commander, accompanied by reports of summary executions, property destruction, and communications blackouts; more than 25,000 predominantly Hazara residents were displaced by the operation, with aid access to the mountainous region severely constrained.¹⁰⁵

Beyond the Hazara-specific record, the Taliban's treatment of former Afghan Republic officials and ANDSF personnel more broadly follows the same pattern of stated amnesty and documented impunity. Human Rights Watch found that more than 100 former security-force members were killed between 15 August and 30 October 2021 alone, and a New York Times investigation documented 490 former officials and ANDSF members killed or forcibly disappeared in the Taliban's first six months in power. By 30 June 2023, UNAMA had confirmed 218 extrajudicial killings, 14 enforced disappearances, over 144 instances of torture and ill-treatment, and 424 arbitrary arrests and detentions of former government and security-force affiliates since the takeover, despite the Taliban's public "general amnesty" announcement, which UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called "a betrayal of the people's trust."

UNAMA recorded a further 27 killings of former ANDSF members between January and September 2025, and in the first quarter of 2026 alone documented five more killings, nine torture cases, and 23 arbitrary detentions, including former personnel killed after being forcibly deported back to Afghanistan from Iran.



Human Rights Watch's October 2021 assessment concluded that the cumulative pattern of ISKP bombings and targeted killings against Hazaras, sustained without effective state protection, met the threshold of crimes against humanity, a finding the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, has since echoed in calls for accountability mechanisms.¹⁰⁶

The strategic significance for this study is not simply humanitarian. A government that presents itself domestically and diplomatically as having “restored order” after decades of war has been unable, or, in the reading of several rights monitors, unwilling, to protect a sizeable ethnic and sectarian minority from a rival jihadist movement operating inside its own claimed territory even as it has displaced members of that same minority through its own operations.

This is a direct empirical challenge to the “administrative competence” narrative examined earlier in this study. State capacity has been selectively deployed, robust where revenue and control are concerned, comparatively passive where minority protection is concerned.

4.5 The Regional Militant Ecosystem: Why Everyone Is Still There

The persistence of transnational and cross-border militant organisations inside Afghanistan five years after the Taliban's return to power is not incidental. It follows from the doctrinal logic. An Emirate whose legitimating title implies authority over believers everywhere, led by a movement that spent two decades hosting, training alongside, and receiving the bay'ah of allied jihadist factions, has structural incentives reinforced by kinship networks, shared Deobandi-Salafi lineage disputes, and battlefield history to tolerate rather than expel groups that do not directly threaten it.

The UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which reports periodically on threats linked to the Taliban, ISIL/Da'esh, and Al-Qaeda, has been the most consistent independent source documenting this ecosystem. Its findings, cumulative across successive reports through 2024–2026, include the following:

- **Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).** Estimated by the Monitoring Team at approximately 6,000–6,500 fighters, based principally in the Afghan provinces of Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Paktika, and Paktia, with leader Noor Wali Mehsud reported to spend time in Kabul.¹⁰⁷ The Team's 37th report (covering July–December 2025) found TTP “enjoys preferential treatment among terrorist groups” operating from Afghan soil and thrives on “tolerance or active support” from the Taliban.¹⁰⁸ The Team's July 2024 (15th) report had already identified TTP as the largest militant group present in the country.¹⁰⁹ A separate assessment found TTP had received advanced military equipment, assault rifles, night-vision and thermal-imaging devices, sniper systems, and drone-attack systems, most of it supplied, according to the monitors, by the de facto Taliban authorities.¹¹⁰ The Monitoring Team's assessment that some senior Taliban figures increasingly regard TTP as a liability, while others remain actively supportive, illustrates internal division rather than institutional resolve to act.¹¹¹
- **Al-Qaeda.** The Monitoring Team's most recent reporting places senior leaders of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in Kabul itself, and describes Al-Qaeda's broader role in the region as that of a “service provider” supplying training, ideological material, and logistical linkage to other groups while itself avoiding overt attack operations that would draw international pressure onto its Taliban hosts.¹¹² The Monitoring Team assessed Al-Qaeda's overall status, strength, and position in Afghanistan as essentially unchanged across successive reporting periods since 2021, that is, five years of Taliban rule have not visibly degraded the relationship.¹¹³
- **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).** The Monitoring Team notes that ISKP leadership remains largely composed of Afghan Pashtuns, with a substantial share of foot fighters drawn from Central Asian states, and that the group operates religious schools in parts of northern Afghanistan and border areas near Pakistan providing ideological and, in some documented cases, child recruitment and suicide-operative training.¹¹⁴
- **Turkistan Islamic Party / East Turkestan Islamic Movement (TIP/ETIM).** The Monitoring Team

documented members concentrated in Badakhshan province, moving with Taliban logistical support including the issuance of Afghan identity documents, and financing themselves partly through poppy cultivation and mining activity, with roughly 250 members reported to have joined Taliban police units in 2025.¹¹⁵

- **Foreign-fighter training.** The same reporting cycle referenced foreign-fighter training camps in Badakhshan province, a province this study identifies elsewhere (Chapter Eight) as the current centre of gravity for anti-Taliban resistance activity, underscoring that Badakhshan functions simultaneously as a resistance hotspot and a militant-training corridor.¹¹⁶

Documented Militant Presence in Afghanistan, per UN Monitoring Team Reporting (2024–2026)

Group	Estimated strength / footprint	Principal areas	Documented relationship to Taliban
TTP	6,000–6,500 fighters	Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Paktika, Paktia; leadership partly Kabul-based	“Preferential treatment,” tolerance/active support; reported equipment transfers
Al-Qaeda / AQIS	Not publicly quantified; senior leaders based in Kabul	Nationwide, low profile	“Service provider” role; status “unchanged” since 2021
ISKP	Cell-based, mobile; leadership largely Afghan Pashtun, rank-and-file partly Central Asian	Northern and eastern Afghanistan, Pakistan border areas	Open armed conflict; ideological rejection of Taliban legitimacy
TIP/ETIM	Concentrated presence	Badakhshan province	Logistical support incl. Taliban-issued identity documents; 250 joined Taliban police (2025)

Source: UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reports (15th–37th), as reported in *Dawn*, *Hasht-e Subh*, *Amu TV*, and *Security Council Report*, 2024–2026; see notes.

The consistent Security Council finding that “no Security Council member” has supported the Taliban’s own claim that no terrorist groups operate on Afghan soil, is itself the clearest available indicator of the gap between the Emirate’s declared and observed posture.¹¹⁷

The Somalia and Syria Pipelines: A Familiar Pattern Repeats

The pattern in Afghanistan increasingly mirrors the pre-and post-9/11 period, when the country served as the organising hub for a global network of foreign jihadist volunteers.

In 2024, senior Al-Qaeda figure Sayf al-Adl issued a public call for jihadists worldwide to migrate to Afghanistan to obtain training before conducting attacks abroad, the clearest open invitation to foreign fighters since the Taliban’s 2021 return.

The UN Monitoring Team separately identified Al-Qaeda training camps operating in ten of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces, including Badghis, Helmand, Ghazni, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Parwan, Uruzgan and Zabul.¹¹⁸

Two specific national pipelines illustrate the pattern.

First, UN monitors report that Al-Qaeda continues to receive external funding reportedly channelled through an office in Somalia, connecting the Afghanistan-based leadership to East Africa's own long-running jihadist economy and its kidnap-for-ransom operations targeting Afghan businessmen.

Second, following the collapse of the Assad government in Syria, researchers have tracked the movement of foreign fighters, including members of Central Asian factions such as Katibat Imam al-Bukhari and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that fought in Syria's civil war, relocating toward northern Afghanistan.

Separate analysis of Syria's unresolved foreign-fighter question concludes that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan offers a demonstrably “welcoming environment for battle-hardened jihadis” for those unable or unwilling to integrate into Syria's post-Assad security structures.¹¹⁹

The parallel to the 2000s is direct rather than hypothetical. Where the pre-9/11 Emirate drew Arab, Central Asian and Southeast Asian volunteers into a single transnational network centred on Kandahar and Kabul, the post-2021 Emirate is again functioning as a destination and training hub for fighters displaced from unrelated conflicts in Somalia and Syria.

International policy attention, however, has moved elsewhere. The United States conducted more than 124 airstrikes against militant targets in Somalia in 2025 alone while remaining, in the assessment of one leading terrorism-research institute, ‘largely unengaged’ with the reconstituted militant infrastructure inside Afghanistan itself.¹²⁰

4.6 TTP: The Inaction That Speaks

Among the militant relationships examined in this section, the Taliban's posture toward TTP is the most diagnostic, precisely because of what the Taliban has not done. Pakistan's principal demand of Kabul since 2021 has been narrow and consistent that Afghan soil not be used as a base for attacks against Pakistan. The Taliban has repeatedly stated, publicly, that it does not permit this.¹²¹ Pakistani officials, including army spokesperson Lieutenant General Ahmad Sharif Chaudhry, have as directly and repeatedly stated the opposite, asserting in November 2025 that TTP “is a branch of the Afghan Taliban” and that TTP has pledged allegiance to Akhundzada.¹²²

Security Council Report's December 2025 monthly forecast recorded the Pakistani military's own characterisation, following cross-border strikes in October 2025: “Afghanistan is being used as a base of operations against Pakistan, and there is proof and evidence of that.”¹²³ By late 2025, UN monitors were logging more than 600 TTP-linked attacks inside Pakistan for that year alone, a majority of the suicide operatives reportedly Afghan nationals, and increasingly complex, coordinated, multi-attacker operations.¹²⁴

What makes this significant analytically is the counterfactual the Taliban itself supplies. When the Taliban has judged a group to be a genuine existential threat, as with ISKP, it has mounted sustained, publicised counterterrorism operations, arrests, and military campaigns. No comparable campaign exists against TTP.

The 2022 Balkhab operation against a Hazara commander demonstrates the Taliban is capable of rapid, forceful internal military action when it perceives a political threat.

SAT Case Record | Militants Killed in Pakistan, Openly Mourned in Afghanistan

6 Jul 2026, Waziristan operation: Muhammad Wahab alias "Sayad," a Gul Bahadur-affiliated fighter from village with as a resident militians with as no indication of any Taliban against this network he belonged to.



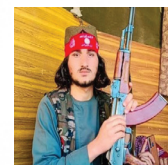
4 Jul 2026, North Waziristan operation: Wali Rahman alias gihis, Frost Khost province, was killed; condolence beanined publicly in his native village.



27 Jan 2026, Guldara district, Kabul: at the funeral of TTP-affiliated Ayud Zakir, an Alghan Taliban-Linked scholar led anti-Pakistan slegans and called the team and Uzbekistans of Pakistar, a funeral inside the capital, for a fighter killed fighting Pakistani forces.



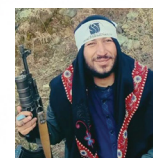
10 November 2025, South Waziristan: Janullah alias Zahid Ayyubi, an Afghan national from Nangarhar, was identified as one of the suicide bumburs involved in the attack on Cadet College Wana. A condolence 2December 2025.



24 Oct 2025, Kunduz: a condolence ceremony for Mulla Sadam alas Huzafa, one of four TTP terecrists (three merr them Afghan nationals) Maajd Khama Kari.



11 Jul 2025, Bajaur operation: TTP-linited Afghan militant Osama Haider, son of Gol Haider, Nangarhar, was killed during a security forces operation in Bajaur. A condolence gathering was held in his native village on 14 July.



10 Jun 2024, Wardak: Nusratullah allas Alif, a terrorist killed during an operation in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, was mourned at a condolence ceremony helid at Seikai Dara, Wardak in Sadati Khailo proctice.



19 Jul 2024, Paktia: Usmanullah Kamran, an Afghan national cantonment, ware to be commemorated through a Fatiha Khuwani at his residence in Agrora village, Jani Khel. displayed at the residece ahead of the ceremony.



Kunar, Afghanistan — date not specified: Maulana Abdullah Bajauri, a senior TTP commander from Bajaur, tied in 2022 explosion.

After relocating to Afghanistan following Operation Zarb-Reb-a-Azb, he served with TTP Bajaur, iniierly joined Jamaati-ul-a-hater rejoined TTP; his were held in Kunar.



The Pattern: TTP militants killed in cross-border operations are not treated as fugitives inside Afghanistan. Their funerals are held openly, their photographs are displayed publicly, and no Taliban action against the facilitation networks that hosted them has been documented.

Moreover, Afghan nationals involved in attacks inside Pakistan have repeatedly been commemorated inside Afghanistan through funerals, condolence gatherings, public banners and religious ceremonies. The cases span Wordak, Nangashar, Paktia, Kunduz and Kunar, indicating that the phanemonon is not confined to a single locality. In at least one case, a Taliban-linked cleric used the funeral platform to openly direct hostility toward Pakistan and neighbouring Central Asian states.

Taken together, these cases provide a documented indicator of the environment surrounding Afghanistan-based militant networks: individuals killed while participating in cross-border terrorism can continue to receive public commemoration in their communities, while the cases compiled here do not document corresponding Taliban action against the networks with which these individuals were affiliated.

The absence of an equivalent campaign against a group its own neighbour accuses of taking the lives of hundreds of Pakistani soldiers and civilians annually is therefore not best explained by incapacity. It is better explained by the ideological kinship: shared ideological ancestry, historical fighting alongside one another against Western and Republic-era Afghan forces, and TTP's own explicit self-description as a "branch" owing religious allegiance to Akhundzada. Inaction, in this reading, is itself a data point, arguably the clearest available evidence that Taliban 2.0's institutional modernisation has not been accompanied by a willingness to sever ideological fraternities forged during the insurgency era.

4.7 ISKP: The Rejectionist Rival Within the Same Ideological Universe

Islamic State Khorasan Province occupies a distinct position in this ecosystem. It is simultaneously the Taliban's most lethal domestic enemy and, doctrinally, its mirror image taken to a more absolutist conclusion.

The doctrinal rift. ISKP is a Salafi-jihadist affiliate of the Islamic State, adhering to the doctrine of tawhid al-hakimiyyah (the unity of governance), which holds that any ruler who does not implement the entirety of Sharia as ISKP defines it is, by definition, not a legitimate Muslim authority.¹²⁵ On this basis, ISKP refuses to recognise the Taliban's Islamic Emirate as legitimate at all. It rejects the whole premise of an Afghan emirate, a state bounded by Afghan nationalism and Pashtun identity, in favour of a borderless caliphate under a single caliph, and it explicitly denounces national borders as a colonial, un-Islamic ("kufr") invention.¹²⁶

ISKP propaganda routinely brands the Taliban an apostate, "Pashto-centric ethno-nationalist movement," dismisses the Deobandi Hanafi tradition underpinning Taliban jurisprudence as doctrinally deficient, and applies takfir (excommunication) to Taliban leaders on the grounds that diplomatic engagement with non-Muslim governments and toleration of some pre-Islamic customary practice constitute apostasy.¹²⁷ The group has also sought to delegitimise the Taliban leadership with the epithet "Mullah Bradley," implying covert cooperation with Washington.¹²⁸

A dispute over religious authority, not merely territory. In 2023, ISKP publicly rejected a fatwa issued by the Islamic Emirate intended to consolidate Taliban religious authority, and simultaneously issued recruitment appeals to lower-ranking Taliban fighters, treating the dispute explicitly as a contest over who holds legitimate religious authority in Afghanistan, not merely a military rivalry.¹²⁹ Analysts at the Hudson Institute have characterised ISKP's post-2021 attack campaign as a deliberate attempt to deny the Taliban the ability to claim it has "brought an end to war in Afghanistan", targeting the Emirate's central legitimating narrative of restored peace.¹³⁰

Operational scale. Independent of its Hazara-focused sectarian campaign, ISKP's most internationally consequential recent operation was the March 2024 attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow, which killed at least 143 people, an indication that the group's operational reach and ambitions extend well beyond Afghanistan's borders despite its being, by most measures, the weaker party in its domestic conflict with the Taliban.¹³¹

The UN Monitoring Team's most recent assessments describe ISKP as retaining "significant operational and combat capability and the ability to rapidly replace fighters," aided by expanding cyber-enabled recruitment and propaganda infrastructure that the monitors link to the group's ability to plan complex attacks, including the February 2026 gun-and-bomb assault on a Shia mosque near Islamabad.¹³²

Why the ISKP conflict matters to this study's thesis. The Taliban-ISKP war is frequently read internationally as evidence of Taliban moderation, proof that Kabul is now a partner, not a permissive host, in counterterrorism. This study's assessment is more precise. The conflict is best read as an intra-ideological struggle over the correct scope and method of the same underlying project, that is, Islamic governance under a singular, unelected religious authority, rather than a contest between an extremist movement and a moderating one.

The Taliban's war on ISKP does not indicate that the Emirate has abandoned religiously grounded, exclusionary governance; it indicates that the Emirate insists on being the sole legitimate arbiter of what that governance should look like within Afghanistan's borders, while continuing to tolerate other movements such as TTP and Al-Qaeda, chief among them, that do not challenge its own claim to religious primacy.

The evidence assembled in this study does not support the proposition, sometimes advanced in international commentary, that administrative maturation under Taliban 2.0 has produced or is producing ideological softening.

On women's rights, the opposite pattern holds. Each advance in bureaucratic capacity, a functioning Ministry of Justice, an official gazette, a dedicated enforcement ministry, has been used to formalise, codify, and enforce restrictions more comprehensively than in the pre-2021 insurgency period, culminating in the 2024 PVPV Law.

On minority protection, state capacity has been asymmetrically applied: robust and rapid where the Taliban perceives a political threat (Balkhab, 2022), largely absent where a sectarian rival (ISKP) is doing the killing.

On the militant ecosystem, documented UN monitoring across multiple reporting cycles finds continuity, not change, in Al-Qaeda's status, and active tolerance, not merely passive failure, in the case of TTP. Only against ISKP, the one actor that directly disputes the Taliban's own claim to religious authority, has the Emirate deployed its accumulated institutional and security capacity at full force.

SAT assesses that this selectivity is itself the clearest evidence available that Taliban 2.0's institutional evolution operates in service of an unaltered ideological core, rather than in tension with it.

Reversal, rather than further codification, of restrictions on female secondary and higher education would be the clearest sign that this assessment is wrong; so would a documented, verifiable reduction in TTP's operational freedom of movement inside Afghan territory, a publicly acknowledged rejection of Al-Qaeda's bay'ah to Akhundzada, a measurable reduction in ISKP's capacity to strike Hazara and other minority communities accompanied by credible accountability mechanisms, or any shift in the Taliban's own messaging away from the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin framework toward a bounded, Afghanistan-specific conception of authority. None of these indicators had moved in a reform direction as of mid-2026.

These findings carry direct implications for how regional and international actors calibrate engagement with the Islamic Emirate. Expectations that continued diplomatic and economic engagement will, of itself, produce moderation on women's rights or minority protection are not supported by the first five years of evidence, and policy premised on that expectation should be revisited.

Pakistan's core security concern is TTP's use of Afghan territory. This is not a peripheral irritant to an otherwise cooperative relationship but a direct consequence of the ideological kinship this study documents, unlikely to be resolved through economic incentives alone.

The Taliban's war against ISKP, while a genuine and important counterterrorism function that other states have reason to support in narrow operational terms, should not be read as evidence of a broader moderation of Taliban governance; the two are analytically separable. Moreover, the persistence of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership presence in Kabul, five years after a peace agreement premised on its removal, remains an unresolved point of international concern that institutional engagement with Kabul has not resolved.

The five-year record examined in this study suggests that "Taliban 2.0" should be read less as a rebrand and more as a rollout.

What has changed since 2001 is capacity; the ability to gazette a law, staff a ministry, monitor a

population, and selectively project force against a doctrinal rival. What has not changed is the underlying claim to unaccountable religious authority that produces, as a direct output, the restriction of women, the vulnerability of minorities, and a structural tolerance for allied militant movements that share the Emirate's ideological lineage.



5. The Challenge of Armed Resistance

5.1 Opposition Movements, Badakhshan and the Geography of Insurgency

Military victory may establish political authority, but enduring stability depends upon the state's ability to manage persistent opposition.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 ended large-scale conventional conflict but did not eliminate armed opposition. Instead, Afghanistan entered a new phase of conflict characterised by localised insurgencies, asymmetric attacks, information warfare, and political contestation.

Armed Opposition to the Taliban, Five Years On

Claimed NRF operations rose from roughly 40 in 2022 to about 380 in 2024 — a ninefold increase in reported operational tempo in two years.

The UN documented 277 armed-opposition attacks across a single twelve-month window (Aug 2024–Jul 2025): 165 attributed to NRF, 55 to AFF, and 57 to smaller fronts.

The single highest-casualty engagement of the entire five-year period came in July 2026: 21 Taliban fighters killed and 37 wounded in a multi-day AFF operation in Zebak district, Badakhshan.

Badakhshan — bordering Tajikistan, China's Xinjiang region and the Wakhan Corridor — remains the current centre of gravity of armed resistance to Taliban rule.

5.2 Evolution of Armed Resistance Since 2021

The collapse of the Islamic Republic created a fragmented opposition landscape rather than a unified resistance.

Several armed groups emerged or reconstituted themselves following the Taliban's takeover, each differing in leadership, organisational structure, operational reach, and political objectives. Among the most prominent are the National Resistance Front (NRF), the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), and smaller localised networks operating across parts of northern and northeastern Afghanistan.

Despite periodic operational activity, the resistance remains fragmented and geographically concentrated, limiting its ability to fundamentally alter the national military balance.

The roster of groups opposing the Taliban has continued to expand into the study's sixth year. Two further former Republic officials entered the battlefield in 2026: former Vice President Amrullah Saleh's Afghan Green Trend, which had spent its first four years in exile publishing leaked Afghan government documents, began publicly claiming direct attacks in 2026, including strikes on Taliban fuel tankers in the Salang Valley; and former 215th Corps commander Lieutenant General Sami Sadat's Afghan United Front (AUF) launched its first claimed attack in Kandahar province on 1 August 2026, followed by roughly twenty further claimed operations concentrated in Helmand and Kandahar.¹³³

Table 5.2 — Anti-Taliban Armed and Political Resistance: Full Roster

Entity	Leadership / Type	Primary Area of Activity
National Resistance Front (NRF)	Ahmad Massoud; armed insurgent front, HQ in Tajikistan	Panjshir, Andarab (Baghlan), Kabul, Herat, northern provinces
Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF)	Gen. Yasin Zia (former ANA Chief of General Staff); armed insurgent front	Badakhshan, Panjshir, Baghlan, Kapisa
Andarab Resistance Front	Local armed network; cooperates with NRF	Andarab valley, Baghlan province
Afghanistan Liberation Movement (ALM)	Armed insurgent front, UNAMA-documented since 2023	Multiple provinces incl. Kabul-area
People's Sovereignty Front	Armed insurgent front, UN SG-documented	Northern/northeastern Afghanistan
Sepahiyān-e Mihan ("Soldiers of the Homeland")	Local activists and former security personnel; emerged mid-2026	Badakhshan (Yaftal-e Payeen)
National Mobilisation Front (NMF)	Coalition of youth activists and former security personnel; formed March 2026	Northern and eastern provinces
National Battle Front	Armed insurgent front, UN SG-documented (2024–2025 reporting)	Not fully specified in UN reporting
Islamic Liberation Front	Armed insurgent front, UN SG-documented (2024–2025 reporting)	Not fully specified in UN reporting
Afghan Green Trend	Amrullah Saleh (former Vice President); document-leak network turned claimant of direct attacks in 2026	Salang Valley and northern supply routes
Afghan United Front (AUF)	Lt. Gen. Sami Sadat (former 215th Corps commander); armed front launched August 2026	Helmand, Kandahar
Turkestan Freedom Tigers	Armed network referenced in asylum country-guidance reporting	Northern Afghanistan
National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan	Political umbrella body (incl. Atta Mohammad Noor); NRF and Jamiat-e Islami suspended cooperation with it in 2024	Exile-based political coordination
Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan	Diaspora political platform; February 2025 conference drew 90+ participants from anti-Taliban factions	Exile-based; political roadmap advocacy

Source: FDD's Long War Journal, "Resistance to Taliban Rule Persists in Afghanistan," August 2026; European Union Agency for Asylum, Country Guidance: Afghanistan, 2024–2025; UN Secretary-General reporting to the Security Council, Aug 2024–Oct 2025; some entities listed have limited verifiable presence beyond public claims

This roster highlights the central analytical point: Five years into Taliban rule, organised opposition has not been eliminated. It has diversified in leadership pedigree, geographic reach, and political orientation. Even as no single faction has yet demonstrated the capacity to seriously contest national control.

5.3 The Geography of Resistance

Resistance activity has been concentrated primarily in Afghanistan's mountainous northern and northeastern provinces rather than uniformly distributed across the country.

Several factors explain this pattern:

- Rugged terrain favourable to guerrilla warfare.
- Historical experience with anti-Taliban mobilisation.
- Established local networks.
- Proximity to international borders.
- Difficulties associated with sustained state presence in remote districts.

5.4 Badakhshan: Afghanistan's Emerging Strategic Fault Line

Among Afghanistan's northern provinces, Badakhshan has assumed growing strategic importance.

Operationally, Badakhshan offers terrain conducive to dispersed insurgent activity. Mountain ranges, remote valleys, and limited transport infrastructure complicate sustained security operations while providing opportunities for small-unit manoeuvre and concealment. These geographic characteristics have historically made the province difficult to govern, irrespective of the ruling authority in Kabul.

5.5 External Dimensions of the Resistance

Although the resistance remains primarily an internal Afghan phenomenon, its implications extend beyond national borders.

Neighbouring states closely monitor developments in northern Afghanistan because of concerns related to cross-border security, irregular migration, narcotics trafficking, and the potential movement of militant actors. At the same time, exiled political figures, diaspora communities, and transnational media networks contribute to sustaining international attention on resistance activities.

From a regional perspective, the persistence of armed resistance reinforces the importance of intelligence cooperation, border management, and sustained diplomatic engagement aimed at preventing localised instability from generating broader geopolitical tensions.

5.6 Five Years, Five Phases: The Documented Arc of Resistance

The preceding sections describe the geography and character of anti-Taliban resistance in general terms. SAT's internal tracking of group statements, the UN Secretary-General reporting to the Security Council, and open-source claims allow this arc to be dated and quantified with more precision than is typical in open literature on the subject. The trajectory divides into five identifiable phases.

Phase one — conventional defeat (15 August–6 September 2021). The National Resistance Front (NRF) was formed on 17 August 2021 by Ahmad Massoud, son of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, from remnants of the Afghan National Army and local Panjshiri fighters; former Vice President Amrullah Saleh simultaneously declared himself caretaker president from the Panjshir Valley. The Taliban's multi-directional offensive via Baghlan, Parwan, and Panjshir captured Bazarak and secured full control of the valley by approximately 6 September 2021; NRF spokesman Fahim Dashty was killed during the offensive, and both Massoud and Saleh relocated into exile in Tajikistan.

Phase two — guerrilla pivot (2022). The NRF reorganised as an insurgent rather than territorial force. The Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) was founded in March 2022 by General Yasin Zia, the former Afghan National Army Chief of General Staff, together with other former Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and intelligence officers. Resistance groups claimed approximately 40 operations for the year, concentrated in four to five provinces (Panjshir, Baghlan, Takhar, Kapisa).

Phase three — sustained campaign (2023–2024). AFF claimed more than 100 operations in its first full year, with IED and ambush activity expanding toward Kabul, Parwan, and Kapisa. By 2024, NRF claimed activity across approximately 20 provinces, a roughly fourfold expansion in claimed geographic reach since 2022, and approximately 380 operations for the year, a roughly ninefold increase in claimed annual tempo over 2022’s baseline. AFF separately claimed 229 Taliban fighters killed across 87 attacks between February 2024 and February 2025.

Phase four — UN-documented plateau and dip (August 2024–H1 2025). UN reporting to the Security Council attributed 277 armed-opposition attacks to resistance groups in the twelve months to July 2025 — approximately 165 to NRF, 55 to AFF, and 57 to smaller fronts including the newly recorded Afghanistan Liberation Movement and People’s Sovereignty Front — concentrated in Kabul, Kunduz, Herat, Takhar, and Parwan provinces. The first half of 2025 registered a reported decline relative to the 2024 peak, even as political outreach from exile continued.

Phase five — the July 2026 concentration. The final weeks of the Taliban’s fifth year in power produced the sharpest compression of high-casualty, multi-actor activity documented across the entire post-2021 period.

In mid-July 2026, a newly identified group, Sepahiyan-e Mihan (“Soldiers of the Homeland”), composed of local activists, former security personnel, and residents, stormed the district headquarters, police posts, and intelligence sites in Yaftal-e Payeen (Yaftali Sufla), Badakhshan province, disarming personnel, seizing equipment and vehicles, raising its flag, and withdrawing before Taliban reinforcements arrived; the group subsequently issued a code of conduct.

Between 23 and 28 July 2026, AFF conducted a multi-day operation in Zebak district, also in Badakhshan, claiming 21 Taliban fighters killed (including named commanders), 37 wounded, two drones downed, and the temporary seizure of positions, at a cost of one AFF fighter killed, the highest single-engagement toll claimed across the full five-year period. Further AFF and NRF operations followed within days in Badakhshan and Herat.

SAT Watch | Badakhshan, July 2026 — The Five-Year High-Water Mark

A new armed group, Sepahiyan-e Mihan (“Soldiers of the Homeland”), seized district headquarters, police posts and intelligence sites in Yaftal-e Payeen with no prior warning, disarming Taliban personnel, seizing vehicles and equipment, and raising its own flag before withdrawing.

Days later, AFF claimed its largest single engagement of the entire five-year period in Zebak district: 21 Taliban fighters killed, 37 wounded, and two drones downed, against a claimed cost of one AFF fighter.

Five years after “victory,” the Taliban is still fighting multi-day engagements against organised armed opposition inside its own claimed territory. In the same province this study identifies as the country’s foremost security fault line.

5.7 Why July 2026, and Why It Matters for This Study

Five factors distinguish the July 2026 period from every prior point in the resistance’s five-year arc:

This study’s contribution is to connect this trajectory to the ideological record. The resistance movements examined here are not, for the most part, organised around restoring women’s education or protecting the Hazara community.

NRF and AFF are predominantly former-ANDSF and Panjshiri/Tajik-linked formations with their own political objectives, and this study does not attribute Hazara protection to their agenda. Nevertheless, the broader climate that has produced five years of sustained, geographically widening, and, as of July

2026, intensifying armed opposition is inseparable from the governance record set out in this study: a centralised, unelected religious authority; a codified and expanding architecture of social restriction; documented episodes of ethnic coercion (Balkhab, 2022); and a state that has shown itself capable of decisive internal military action when it perceives a political threat, yet has not translated that capacity into inclusive governance.

Resistance recruitment, in other words, draws on the same well of exclusion in the specific cases of women and minorities. Badakhshan's emergence as the current centre of gravity, the same province the UN Monitoring Team identifies as hosting TIP/ETIM concentration and foreign-fighter training camps, illustrates a broader point that the province functions simultaneously as a resistance corridor and a militant-training corridor, underscoring that Afghanistan's north has become the most consequential barometer of the Islamic Emirate's unresolved legitimacy problem, both political and religious.

The Islamic Emirate exercises nationwide administrative reach, but that reach has not translated into uncontested control, still less into legitimacy.

Armed resistance persists in several northern and northeastern provinces, reflecting localised grievances, favourable terrain, and the continuing adaptation of opposition movements. It remains fragmented and geographically concentrated, capable at present of tactical disruption rather than strategic reversal. However, its continued activity requires sustained Taliban security deployments, complicates governance in affected districts, and shapes regional perceptions of Afghanistan's stability.

Badakhshan has emerged as the most strategically significant of these provinces, for its terrain, its border location, and its recurring resistance activity, while the Salang Pass remains Afghanistan's principal logistics corridor, making its security vital to national cohesion and military mobility; the information domain, meanwhile, has become an increasingly important theatre of competition between the Islamic Emirate and opposition movements in its own right.

SAT assesses northern Afghanistan, particularly Badakhshan, Baghlan, Panjshir, and Takhar, as the clearest early-warning zone for how this contest develops, and watches in particular for changes in the frequency and sophistication of attacks, expansion beyond traditional operational areas, evidence of sustained recruitment, increased coordination among resistance groups, prolonged disruption of strategic transport corridors, and shifts in Taliban force deployment and posture.

The persistence of armed resistance does not currently threaten the survival of the Islamic Emirate, but it does shape Afghanistan's evolving security environment and compels the government to devote resources to internal security that would otherwise support governance and development.

The post-2021 conflict in Afghanistan is, in short, no longer defined by a nationwide insurgency seeking to seize power, but by a contest between a consolidated state and fragmented opposition movements seeking to challenge its authority. The significance of that resistance lies less in its current military strength than in its potential to exploit geographic vulnerabilities, local grievances, and strategic corridors.

ATTACKS BY ANTI-TALIBAN RESISTANCE GROUPS

1 JUNE – 28 AUGUST 2026



82

TOTAL ATTACKS
(1 Jun – 28 Aug 2026)



112+

TALIBAN KILLED
(Minimum Confirmed)



45+

TALIBAN INJURED
(Minimum Confirmed)



14

PROVINCES
AFFECTED

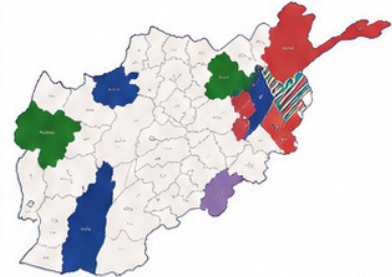


DIVERSIFIED
TACTICS

Ambushes, Clashes,
Rocket Attacks,
Targeted Operations

AFGHANISTAN UNITED FRONT (AUF)					28 ATTACKS		
#	DATE	NATURE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	KILLED	INJURED	TYPE
1	27 Aug	Offensive operation against Taliban highway post	Highway connecting Faryab–Ghor	Faryab / Ghor	2	3	Offensive
2	25 Aug	Attack on checkpoint (2x M16 + 1x AK seized)	Daman District	Kandahar	3	–	Checkpoint
3	24 Aug	Attack on Taliban official	Delawar, Arghandab District	Kandahar	1	–	Targeted
4	21 Aug	Attack on Taliban intelligence officer	5th District, Kandahar City	Kandahar	1	–	Targeted
5	19 Aug	Attack on military corps entrance	205th Corps entrance, Kandahar City	Kandahar	5	3	Assault
28 ATTACKS IN 12 PROVINCES					MINIMUM TOTALS:		37+ 16+

ATTACKS ACROSS AFGHANISTAN



- AUF Activity
- NRF Activity
- AFF Activity
- Sepahiyen-e-Mihan Activity
- AGT Activity
- Multiple Groups Active

PROVINCES AFFECTED (14 TOTAL)

● Kandahar	13	● Nangarhar	3
● Badakhshan	11	● Helmand	3
● Kabul	5	● Ghor	2
● Herat	5	● Paktika	1
● Baghlan	5	● Kunar	1
● Faryab	4	● Nuristan	1
● Kunduz	4	● Balkh	1

NATIONAL RESISTANCE FRONT (NRF)					18 ATTACKS		
#	DATE	NATURE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	KILLED	INJURED	TYPE
1	25 Aug	Attack on military vehicle (5th Police Zone)	Faizabad	Badakhshan	3	2	Vehicle Attack
2	20 Aug	Rocket attack on security position	Guzargah-e Nour District	Baghlan	1	2	Rocket Attack
3	15 Aug	Attack on police zone (7th Police Zone)	Kunduz	Kunduz	3	0	Zone Attack
4	12 Aug	Rocket attack on military compound	Kunduz Army Corps	Kunduz	–	–	Rocket Attack
5	7 Aug	Attack on Taliban personnel	Ganj Chehel Dokhtar, Rabat Sangi	Herat	2	0	Targeted Attack
18 ATTACKS IN 6 PROVINCES					MINIMUM TOTALS:		15+ 11+

AFGHANISTAN FREEDOM FRONT (AFF)					23 ATTACKS		
#	DATE	NATURE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	KILLED	INJURED	TYPE
1	28 Aug	Clashes with newly deployed Taliban reinforcement forces	Zibak District	Badakhshan	–	–	Clashes
2	26 Aug	Attack on Taliban checkpoint (Ali-Khil area)	PD16, Kabul	Kabul	3	2	Checkpoint
3	25 Aug	Clashes with Taliban reinforcement units	Zibak District	Badakhshan	10	6	Clashes
4	21 Aug	Ambush targeting Taliban commander	Bati Kot District	Nangarhar	1	2	Ambush
5	19 Aug	Rocket attack on governor's office & security post	Faizabad	Badakhshan	4	5	Rocket / Small Arms
23 ATTACKS IN 8 PROVINCES					MINIMUM TOTALS:		19+ 18+



SEPAHIYAN-E-MIHAN

(HUMANITARIAN FRONT)

1 ATTACK

DATE	NATURE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	OUTCOME	TYPE
17 Jul	Surprise assault on district HQ / police command; flag raised	Yafai-e Payeen (~17 km from Faizabad)	Badakhshan	District held ~2-5 hrs; police commander + up to 15 Taliban captured (group soon claim)	Assault
 District centre held briefly; Taliban commander and up to 15 fighters captured; ~40 weapons and vehicles seized. Forces withdrew before dawn (group claim).					



AFGHAN GREEN TREND (AGT)

4 ATTACKS

DATE	NATURE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	TYPE
6 Jul	Operation targeting Taliban intelligence chief	Marmal District	Balkh	Targeted Operation
8 Jul	Attack on Taliban base in central market	Dawtari District	Ghor	Base Attack
8 Aug	Attack on Taliban oil tankers (rockets & AKs)	Salang District entrance	Parwan	Rocket / Small Arms
20 Aug	Attack on Taliban dormitory ("Operation Green Piece")	Chal District	Takhar	Dormitory Attack



4 ATTACKS IN 4 PROVINCES

NATURE OF OPERATIONS (TYPES)



Targeted Operations
Attacks on Taliban officials, commanders, intelligence personnel.



Checkpoints & Patrol Attacks
Attacks on checkpoints, patrols and security posts.



Clashes & Counterattacks
Direct clashes with Taliban forces; defensive or offensive engagements.



Rocket / Missile Attacks
Ranged attacks on compounds, airfields, vehicles and concentrations.



Vehicle & Base Attacks
Attacks on military vehicles, bases, dormitories and infrastructure.



High-Value Targets
Attacks on government buildings, military compounds and senior figures.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Steady resistance activity across 14 provinces.



Badakhshan, Kandahar, Kabul, Baghlan and Kunduz most frequently targeted.



Tactics include ambushes, clashes, rocket attacks, vehicle and checkpoint strikes.



Resistance groups remain active across multiple fronts despite heavy Taliban presence.

Source: Open-source reporting, official group claims, media & X posts

Note: Figures are minimum confirmed based on official claims and open-source reporting.

Note: This infographic presents reported anti-Taliban resistance activity recorded between 1 June and 28 August 2026. Figures are based on available official group claims and are subject to subsequent verification or revision.

6. Afghanistan in the Regional Order

6.1 Diplomacy, Geopolitics and Strategic Engagement

Geography gives a state its location; diplomacy determines its influence.

Immediately following August 2021, many governments adopted a cautious approach toward the new authorities in Kabul. Formal diplomatic recognition remained limited, while concerns relating to governance, terrorism, and humanitarian conditions shaped international responses. That began to change in December 2023, when China became the first country to formally accept credentials from a Taliban-appointed ambassador, followed in July 2025 by Russia, which became the first state to formally recognise the Islamic Emirate as Afghanistan's legitimate government; by 2025, more than a dozen countries, including Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Uzbekistan, had accepted Taliban-appointed ambassadors without extending formal recognition.¹³⁴

Despite these constraints, diplomatic engagement did not cease.

Regional governments maintained embassies, appointed diplomatic representatives, facilitated humanitarian assistance, and established regular political dialogue with the Islamic Emirate. Engagement increasingly focused on practical issues including border management, trade, migration, counterterrorism, transit connectivity, and regional security.

The Taliban has not secured broad international legitimacy; instead, regional states have increasingly dealt with the authorities because security, trade, migration, connectivity and geography make disengagement difficult.

Unlike previous Afghan governments that relied heavily on Western political and financial support, the Islamic Emirate has increasingly focused on neighbouring states and Eurasian partners. This regional orientation is driven less by diplomatic choice than by the constraints created by limited recognition, financial restrictions and continuing disputes with Western governments.

Afghanistan therefore occupies a contested but increasingly connected position within the regional order. This is less a story of Taliban diplomatic success than of regional states' practical inability to disengage. This is an engagement driven by geography and unavoidable exposure, not by any obligation those states owe Kabul.

This distinction between engagement and recognition has become one of the defining characteristics of Afghanistan's post-2021 diplomacy. Many states have expanded working relationships with Kabul while postponing decisions regarding formal recognition.

SAT Data | Afghanistan's Fragmented Diplomatic Network (65 Missions, August 2026)

Of Afghanistan's 65 overseas political, consular and permanent missions, 37 (56.9%) are directly under Taliban supervision, 6 (9.2%) engage with the Taliban Ministry of Foreign Affairs without hosting a Taliban-appointed diplomat, 14 (21.5%) still operate independently under former-Republic diplomats, and 8 (12.3%) have closed outright, including Washington, London, Oslo and Tokyo.

China (2023) and the UAE (2024) accepted Taliban-appointed ambassadors without extending formal recognition to the Taliban government. Russia went further in July 2025, becoming the first state to formally recognise the Taliban administration outright.

In July 2024, the Taliban Foreign Ministry announced it would no longer recognise consular documents, passports, visas and civil paperwork, issued by 14 missions it deemed uncooperative, including London, Berlin, Paris, Ottawa and Canberra, using consular pressure as a tool against Afghans who reject Taliban control of their diplomatic representation.

Afghanistan's seat at the UN in New York, Geneva and Vienna remains held by former-Republic representatives, meaning bilateral control of embassies has not translated into control of the country's international voice, recognition, accreditation and operational control remain three distinct and

unresolved questions five years on.

6.2 Pakistan: Cooperation and Strategic Complexity

Pakistan remains Afghanistan's most consequential bilateral relationship, but it is also the one in which Taliban rule has generated the sharpest security friction.

Pakistan shares a 2,600-km border with Afghanistan and remains one of its largest trading partners. Bilateral trade reached US\$1.998 billion in FY2024–25, while Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan, Kharlachi, Badini and Angor Ada remain major crossing points for bilateral commerce.¹³⁵

Since 2021, however, Islamabad's central concern has been militancy emanating from Afghan territory, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP/Fitna-al-Khawarij). Pakistan has repeatedly demanded that Kabul take “concrete and verifiable” action against TTP and deny terrorist groups the use of Afghan soil.¹³⁶

Pakistan's position hardened as attacks continued. In January 2026, the Foreign Office stated that its basic demand from Kabul was that terrorists operating from Afghan territory must not attack Pakistan, while Pakistan's military leadership assessed that around 70% or more of such attacks were being carried out by Afghan nationals.¹³⁷

The dispute has extended beyond terrorism into border management and bilateral trade. Pakistan has repeatedly linked border measures to security incidents and the use of Afghan territory for attacks, while Islamabad continues to describe Torkham and other crossings as important for legitimate trade and movement.¹³⁸

Pakistan nevertheless has not abandoned diplomacy. It has continued bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism efforts, maintained diplomatic channels and participated in regional engagement with Kabul, including the August 2025 Pakistan–China–Afghanistan trilateral meeting in Kabul.¹³⁹

The policy has therefore shifted from broad engagement based on expectations of cooperation to conditional engagement based on security outcomes. Islamabad continues to support a peaceful, stable and regionally connected Afghanistan and has facilitated trade and economic connectivity, but increasingly treats the TTP question as the threshold issue in the bilateral relationship.¹⁴⁰

6.4 China: Stability, Connectivity and Strategic Investment

China's engagement centres on security, connectivity and economic interests.

Beijing has consistently emphasised regional stability, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic connectivity. Afghanistan's geographic location presents opportunities to strengthen transport networks linking South Asia, Central Asia, and Western China, while its mineral resources offer long-term investment potential.

Chinese engagement has remained measured and pragmatic, focusing on diplomatic dialogue, infrastructure, mining, and security cooperation rather than large-scale financial assistance. Stability in Afghanistan is also viewed as important for the security of China's western regions and the broader success of regional connectivity initiatives.¹⁴¹

6.5 Iran and Central Asia

Iran shares extensive historical, cultural, economic, and religious ties with Afghanistan.

Since 2021, bilateral engagement has expanded across trade, energy, border management, and refugee issues. At the same time, periodic tensions relating to water resources, border security, and migration remain source of friction.¹⁴²

Afghanistan's northern neighbours Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, have similarly adopted pragmatic engagement strategies. Their priorities include border security, electricity exports, railway connectivity, trade facilitation, and preventing the spread of transnational militancy.

For Afghanistan's northern neighbours, engagement is driven by exposure: instability in Afghanistan directly becomes a regional security problem.

6.6 Russia and the Emerging Eurasian Framework

Russia has steadily expanded its engagement with the Islamic Emirate through diplomatic dialogue, regional security forums, and economic contacts.

Moscow increasingly views Afghanistan through the combined lenses of terrorism, narcotics, Central Asian security and Eurasian connectivity.

The involvement of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and Central Asian states in regional Afghanistan forums reflects a broader shift toward practical coordination without political consensus on the Taliban's system of governance.

6.7 Indo-Taliban Engagement

India's relationship with the Taliban is the clearest illustration of how history shapes present-day diplomacy. It is also the one relationship in the region that cannot be read simply as "engagement replacing isolation"; it has moved through outright hostility, humanitarian pragmatism, and now a geopolitically driven reset, without ever settling into an easy or fully resolved relationship.

Historically the anti-thesis of Pakistan's. When the Taliban first took Kabul in September 1996, only three states recognised the Islamic Emirate; Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. India did not. New Delhi instead treated the ousted government's defence minister, Ahmad Shah Massoud, as a partner, backing his Northern Alliance (the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) with small arms, ammunition, uniforms, food and medicine, and reportedly two Mi-17 helicopters.

India also ran a military field hospital at Farkhor air base in Tajikistan, the same facility to which the mortally wounded Massoud was being evacuated when he died on 9 September 2001, two days after being attacked by Al-Qaeda suicide bombers posing as journalists. Massoud himself, in a 1997 interview, framed the fight in explicitly anti-Pakistan terms; Indian officials of the period have since said the same calculus applied in reverse. Support for Massoud was, in effect, a way of containing Pakistan's influence in Kabul.

This origin point matters for the argument that follows.

India's posture toward the Taliban has never been ideologically neutral ground. It began as the direct antithesis of Islamabad's, and that historical polarity continues to colour how both capitals read each other's current Afghanistan policy.

2001–2021: Reconstruction Diplomacy. After the Taliban's fall, India rebuilt a substantial civilian footprint, an embassy in Kabul and four consulates (Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif), and committed more than US\$3 billion in development assistance over two decades, including the Salma Dam (renamed the Afghan-India Friendship Dam) in Herat, the Zaranj-Delaram highway, the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul, and thousands of scholarships.

Security costs were real on this side of the ledger too. The Jalalabad consulate survived a 2013 suicide attack, and India had already closed the Herat and Jalalabad consulates in March 2020 on security grounds, before the Taliban's return.

August 2021: Rupture, Not Full Severance. As Kabul fell on 15 August 2021, India evacuated embassy staff and roughly 120 Indian nationals via IAF C-17, and the Taliban subsequently searched the shuttered consulates in Kandahar and Herat. New Delhi did not formally close the embassy, a deliberate choice to avoid signalling severance of relations, but for nearly a year it operated with no Indian diplomatic presence on the ground.

Physical visas already issued to Afghan nationals not yet in India were invalidated immediately, replaced by a restrictive "e-Emergency X-Misc" category requiring FRRO registration within seven days of arrival. New visa issuance for Afghans was effectively suspended for close to four years. The Ministry

of External Affairs only resumed processing, and only in six limited categories (medical patients and attendants, business, students, UN staff, and existing-visa holders), from late April 2025, formally announced 29 May 2025.

The Refugee and Stranded-Student Question. UNHCR figures put registered Afghan refugees in India at roughly 19,300 as of 2023-24, a figure that specifically excludes an estimated 13,000 Afghan students who have been stuck in India since 2021, unable either to complete their studies normally or to return home, plus former Afghan National Army and government personnel in continuing legal limbo.

India hosted more than 240,000 refugees and asylum-seekers overall by the end of 2024, of whom Afghans and Myanmar nationals form the two largest groups, but India has no domestic refugee law and does not extend Afghans the same automatic protections it grants some other groups.

This is one of the clearer points of continuing friction rather than warmth in the relationship, whatever the diplomatic headlines say.

Security Incidents Inside Afghanistan. The Sikh and Hindu community, historically closely tied to India, has borne repeated attacks under Taliban rule.

On 18 June 2022, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) gunmen and a car bomb struck the Karte Parwan Gurdwara in Kabul, killing two (a community member and a Taliban guard) and wounding seven, in an attack ISKP explicitly linked to remarks by an Indian ruling-party spokesperson; this followed a March 2020 ISKP assault on Kabul's Shor Bazaar Gurdwara that killed 25. India issued emergency visas to 111 Hindus and Sikhs in the aftermath.

Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu population, estimated at around 220,000 in the 1970s, has fallen to a reported 140 or fewer today. These episodes are a direct, continuing cost of the relationship that predates and sits alongside the diplomatic reset described below.

Humanitarian Channel, Sustained Throughout. Even while political ties were frozen, India kept a humanitarian pipeline open. Roughly 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat delivered to Afghanistan via the UN World Food Programme between 2021 and 2023 (an initial 40,000 MT overland through Pakistan, later shipments of 20,000 MT and more routed through Iran's Chabahar port after the land route became unreliable), alongside around 200-250 tonnes of medical aid, including anti-TB drugs and roughly 500,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses and a Rs 200 crore development-assistance allocation plus Rs 100 crore for Chabahar in the FY2022-23 budget. India also reopened a "technical team" at its Kabul embassy in June 2022, short of restoring full diplomatic staffing, to help oversee this aid. Earthquake relief for Kunar province was again routed through Chabahar in 2025.

2025: Rapid Political Thaw, Driven by Regional Realignment more than Taliban Reform. The turning point was a UAE-facilitated meeting in Dubai on 8 January 2025 between Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Taliban Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, the most senior contact between the two sides since 2021.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar spoke to Muttaqi by phone in May 2025 and reportedly welcomed his condemnation of the 22 April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack. The pace then accelerated. Visa issuance resumed in May 2025; a UN Security Council sanctions committee granted Muttaqi a temporary travel-ban exemption; and from 9-15 October 2025 Muttaqi made a six-day visit to New Delhi, the first visit to India by any senior Taliban official, and the first ministerial-level Kabul-Delhi meeting since 1996.

Muttaqi met Jaishankar on 10 October 2025. The visit was not without friction on India's own terms. A Muttaqi press conference on 12 October 2025 that excluded women journalists drew public criticism from Indian reporters, press bodies and opposition politicians before a group of women correspondents secured access three days later.

Following the visit, India handed over the Afghan embassy building in New Delhi to Taliban-appointed staff and posted its own chargé d'affaires back to Kabul; in January 2026, senior Taliban Foreign Ministry official Mufti Noor Ahmad Noor arrived in New Delhi to take charge as chargé d'affaires of the

Afghan mission.

Analysts have linked the speed of this shift less to any change in Taliban conduct than to the deterioration in India-Pakistan relations following the May 2025 India-Pakistan military conflict, and to unease in New Delhi over China's deepening support for Islamabad, the "enemy's enemy" logic that shaped India's Massoud-era policy resurfacing in a different form a quarter-century later.

Trade Remains Modest and Structurally Constrained. India's exports to Afghanistan were valued at US\$333.5 million in 2024, led by pharmaceuticals (US\$100.3 million), vehicles (US\$33.3 million) and apparel (US\$29.8 million).

Because Pakistan does not permit India-Afghanistan transit trade across its territory except on rare one-off humanitarian exceptions, nearly all of this trade moves by air or via Chabahar, a structural bottleneck absent from Pakistan's own, much larger, land-based trade relationship with Afghanistan.

It must be noted that India has still not extended formal recognition to the Islamic Emirate; only Russia has done so, in July 2025, and the balance sheet is genuinely mixed rather than uniformly warming, expanding political contact and trade on one side, continuing visa restrictions, unresolved refugee status, stranded students, and periodic attacks on the Indian-linked Sikh and Hindu community on the other.

What has not changed is the underlying strategic pattern set in the 1990s: India's Afghanistan policy continues to be shaped substantially by its relationship with Pakistan. Hence, India's Taliban policies remain, in this sense, Pakistan's antithesis.

6.8 The Gulf States

Gulf engagement has been more consistent in form than India's, but equally short of recognition. China was the first state to accept a Taliban-appointed ambassador's credentials, in December 2023; the UAE became the second in August 2024.¹³³

Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani made his first trip outside Afghanistan since 2021 to Abu Dhabi on 4 June 2024, meeting President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, and returned in January 2025 with intelligence chief Abdul Haq Wasiq for a second MBZ meeting. FlyDubai became the first international carrier to resume regular service to Kabul. Saudi Arabia's embassy in Kabul resumed consular services in December 2024, its ambassador Faisal Talq al-Buqami having returned to post in July 2024, with subsequent talks focused on expanding Hajj and Umrah quotas for Afghan pilgrims. Qatar remains the diplomatic hub of choice. It has hosted the Taliban's political office since 2013, recognises Suhail Shaheen as the group's envoy, brokered a US-Taliban detainee exchange in January 2025, and hosted a UN-convened envoys' meeting in Doha in February 2024.³³

The pattern across the Gulf, however, runs mainly in one direction: senior Taliban figures (Haqqani, Muttaqi, Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar) travelling to Abu Dhabi and Doha, rather than Gulf foreign ministers travelling to Kabul.

No Gulf state has matched Russia's step to full recognition, and none has sent a foreign minister to Kabul in the period covered by this study, the reciprocal, higher-visibility gesture the Taliban continues to seek and has not yet obtained from its Gulf partners.

Named Taliban-Appointed Diplomats and Mission Closures

Iran (Feb 2023): Tehran embassy transferred from former-Republic diplomats to a Taliban team led by Fazl Mohammad Haqqani as chargé d'affaires; Iran did not extend formal recognition and described the change as an internal Afghan matter.

China (Dec 2023): Taliban spokesman Bilal Karimi accepted as Kabul's representative in Beijing, presenting credentials to President Xi Jinping in early 2024.

UAE (2024): Badruddin Haqqani accepted as ambassador; Abu Dhabi did not extend formal recognition.

Uzbekistan: Abdul Ghafar Bahr appointed ambassador, presenting credentials to Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov; Tashkent embassy and Termez consulate now operate within the Taliban network.

Pakistan: the Islamabad embassy and Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta consulates operate under Taliban-appointed diplomats Sardar Ahmad Shakib, Abdul Jabbar Takhari, Mohibullah Shakir and Mohammad Habib Nasir respectively.

Missions Closed Outright: Washington/New York/Los Angeles (March 2022), London (September 2024), Oslo (September 2024), Tokyo (February 2026) and Canberra (2026), the former-Republic diplomatic network is not merely losing ground to the Taliban, it is shutting down.

6.9 The West and the Recognition Question

Relations between the Islamic Emirate and Western governments remain frozen in almost the same place they were in September 2021. No Western state has extended recognition, no Western embassy has reopened in Kabul, and no Taliban ambassador sits in Washington, London, Paris or Brussels, a sharp contrast with Beijing, Moscow and Abu Dhabi.

Formal diplomatic recognition remains withheld across the West, and the reasons cited are not abstract. Governance without consent, the codified exclusion of women from education and public life, continued sanctuary for TTP and Al-Qaeda, and the absence of any political-inclusion mechanism remain the key pretexts. None of these standing conditions has moved in five years.

Nevertheless, practical engagement has persisted in areas such as humanitarian assistance, sanctions implementation, financial stabilisation, and counterterrorism dialogue. This engagement should not be read as strategic cooperation or political acceptance of the Islamic Emirate. Much of it is driven by the need to contain the risks emanating from Afghanistan, prevent further humanitarian and economic deterioration, manage terrorism and transnational security threats, and retain channels through which Western governments can influence or respond to developments inside the country. Afghanistan therefore remains a security and humanitarian problem that cannot simply be disengaged from, rather than a strategic partner.

The distinction between functional engagement and political recognition therefore remains central to understanding Afghanistan's contemporary international position.

Reality Check | What “Western Engagement” With Kabul Actually Amounts To

Money: Of Da Afghanistan Bank's roughly US\$9.5 billion in foreign reserves, some US\$7 billion remains frozen in the United States more than four years after the takeover with a share earmarked toward 9/11-related legal claims rather than the Afghan population.

Diplomacy: Zero Western governments have reopened an embassy in Kabul or accepted a Taliban-appointed ambassador on their own soil, a position unchanged since August 2021.

Sanctions: Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Amir Khan Muttaqi and Abdul Ghani Baradar remain individually listed under active US Treasury and UN 1988 Committee sanctions, the same instruments first imposed over the movement's sheltering of Usama bin Laden.

Aid, not recognition: Western humanitarian funding is channelled through UN agencies and NGOs on a deliberately “people, not the regime” basis engaging with Afghans while deliberately bypassing the Taliban government.

The Islamic Emirate's foreign policy has increasingly centred on regional engagement rather than immediate global normalisation. Faced with limited formal recognition, Kabul has pursued relations with Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian states through trade, security dialogue, transit connectivity and diplomatic channels. However, this engagement has not translated into consistently improving relations. The Taliban's refusal to accommodate key demands from neighbouring states, particularly on militant activity, border management and other bilateral disputes, has repeatedly turned geographic interdependence into diplomatic friction. Regional governments have therefore engaged

Kabul not because outstanding differences have disappeared, but because Afghanistan's security, migration, trade and geographic position make sustained contact unavoidable.

This distinction is important. Regional engagement reflects necessity as much as opportunity. Neighbouring states seek access to Afghan markets, transit routes and connectivity projects, but they also seek to contain terrorism, cross-border militancy, narcotics trafficking, migration pressures and instability emanating from Afghan territory. The Taliban's own policy choices have consequently limited the extent to which regional engagement can translate into political trust or strategic alignment. Afghanistan's location still gives it potential importance as a corridor linking South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Eurasia, but that potential remains conditional on security, predictable state behaviour and workable relations with its neighbours.

Afghanistan is therefore not simply moving from isolation into regional integration; it is being drawn into a regional order that is simultaneously engaging with and managing the risks posed by the Islamic Emirate. Regional states have largely separated practical engagement from political recognition, maintaining working channels where their interests require them while retaining serious reservations over security, governance and the Taliban's conduct. The result is a relationship of managed necessity rather than strategic convergence.

The defining feature of Afghanistan's contemporary foreign policy is therefore not diplomatic success, but the tension among geographic dependence, regional necessity and Taliban policy choices. Afghanistan cannot insulate itself from its neighbours, while neighbouring states cannot afford to ignore developments inside Afghanistan. This produces engagement even where political trust is weak and bilateral relations are deteriorating.

Pakistan's approach illustrates this most clearly. Islamabad has continued to maintain diplomatic channels and economic connectivity, but increasingly treats security, particularly the prevention of attacks from Afghan territory and verifiable action against the TTP, as the threshold issue for enhanced cooperation.

Engagement, therefore, does not equal alignment; nor does continued contact indicate that bilateral relations are improving. It is increasingly a mechanism for managing risks that neither side can simply walk away from. Hence, the broader regional pattern is likely to remain similar. Pragmatic contact where interests require it, pressure where security is threatened, and limited political accommodation where the Taliban's policies continue to generate friction.



7. Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

7.1 Between Strategic Necessity and Security Competition

Geography has made Pakistan and Afghanistan neighbours; security determines the limits of their cooperation.

Few bilateral relationships in South Asia combine such geographic exposure with such persistent strategic friction. Though that exposure runs overwhelmingly in one direction. Afghanistan depends on Pakistan for trade access, refuge for millions of its citizens, and a functioning economic lifeline; Pakistan's stake in Afghanistan is defined by the security costs Kabul imposes on it, not by any comparable dependence running the other way. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2,670-kilometre border, overlapping ethnic and linguistic communities, extensive trade routes, refugee movements and interconnected security environments.¹⁴³

The Taliban's return to Kabul in August 2021 initially generated expectations in Pakistan that relations could improve. Islamabad had maintained channels with the Taliban during the preceding peace process and expected that its longstanding engagement could translate into greater cooperation after the takeover.

Five years later, that expectation has not been realised. Trade and diplomatic contact have continued, but TTP activity, cross-border militancy, border disputes and refugee pressures have progressively overshadowed the relationship.

Pakistan's own current position is explicit. It remains open to dialogue and economic cooperation, but progress is conditional on Afghanistan preventing terrorist attacks from its territory.

The relationship is therefore best understood as managed interdependence under security pressure.

7.2 From Strategic Expectations to Security Reality

The post-2021 relationship exposed a fundamental gap between political familiarity and strategic convergence.

Pakistan continued diplomatic engagement with Kabul, facilitated trade and transit, and participated in regional initiatives. Yet the persistence of attacks attributed to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP/Fitna-al-Khawarij) became the central bilateral dispute.

Pakistan maintains that TTP operates from Afghan territory and has repeatedly demanded “concrete and verifiable” action against the group. In January 2026, Pakistan's Foreign Office stated that attacks by terrorists present on Afghan soil, including Afghan nationals, remained the core problem in bilateral relations.

In June 2026, Islamabad stated that attacks emanating from Afghanistan had crossed a threshold of tolerance and that it was seeking an “unequivocal commitment” that Afghan territory would not be used for terrorism against Pakistan.

The result has been a shift in Pakistani policy. Engagement remains available, but no longer on the assumption that dialogue itself will produce security cooperation.

7.3 TTP and the Security Fault Line

Security is now the defining variable in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

Pakistan identifies TTP/ as the principal militant threat emanating from Afghanistan, while also raising

concerns regarding ISKP, BLA-linked activity and other militant networks operating from or through Afghan territory.

In May 2026, Pakistan formally protested a 9 May vehicle-borne IED attack on the Fateh Khel Police Post in Bannu, which killed 15 police personnel and injured four others. Islamabad stated that its investigation and technical intelligence indicated that the attack had been masterminded by terrorists residing in Afghanistan. Pakistan again demanded concrete and verifiable action against TTP, BLA and ISKP elements.

Pakistan has also linked the security problem to the broader regional militant ecosystem. In June 2026, the Foreign Office specifically cited both TTP and ETIM, noting that Pakistan and China face overlapping security concerns originating from Afghanistan.

The core dispute is therefore not ideological disagreement between two governments; it is whether Afghanistan is preventing armed groups operating from its territory from attacking Pakistan.

7.4 From Border Friction to Armed Confrontation

The security dispute has increasingly moved beyond diplomatic exchanges into direct border confrontation.

Pakistan closed major crossings following serious fighting in October 2025, including Torkham, Chaman, Kharlachi, Angoor Adda and Ghulam Khan. The clashes followed Pakistani strikes against alleged TTP targets in Afghanistan and Afghan retaliation against Pakistani positions.

The confrontation escalated sharply again in February–March 2026, when Pakistani forces conducted strikes against what Islamabad described as terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan. Fighting subsequently spread along multiple points of the shared frontier. UN-linked reporting cited by Reuters indicated that the March escalation displaced more than 100,000 people.

Pakistan has framed its military actions as self-defence against attacks originating from Afghan territory and has repeatedly stated that it retains the right to respond when its security is threatened.

This marks a significant deterioration from the expectation in 2021 that the Taliban's return would facilitate a more cooperative security relationship.

7.5 The Border and Trade Costs

The border is simultaneously Pakistan's principal security frontier and Afghanistan's fastest route toward maritime trade.

Pakistan shares a border of more than 2,600 kilometres with Afghanistan and remains one of Afghanistan's largest trading partners. Major crossings include Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan, Kharlachi, Badini and Angor Ada.

Bilateral trade reached approximately US\$2.46 billion in 2024 before falling to around US\$1.77 billion in 2025, according to the data cited in the study. The decline coincided with repeated border closures and the deterioration of bilateral relations.

The economic consequences are not confined to governments. Border closures disrupt traders, transporters, farmers, labourers, exporters and border communities on both sides.

Afghanistan has nevertheless begun reducing its dependence on Pakistani routes. In 2025, Afghan traders increasingly used Iran's Chabahar port and overland routes through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan as repeated Pakistan border closures disrupted established transit routes. Afghanistan's total trade nevertheless reached nearly US\$13.9 billion in 2025, according to Afghan commerce

ministry data reported by Reuters.

The diversification gives Kabul alternatives, but it does not eliminate Pakistan's geographic advantage. Pakistan remains the shortest route to the sea for much of Afghanistan, while Afghanistan remains Pakistan's indispensable western gateway to Central Asia.

7.6 Refugees and Repatriation

Afghan displacement remains one of the longest-running dimensions of the bilateral relationship.

Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghans since the Soviet intervention in 1979. The issue became significantly more contentious after Islamabad launched its Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan in October 2023.

By late November 2025, more than one million Afghans had repatriated from Pakistan during 2025 alone, according to UNHCR.

The wider repatriation process has involved the repatriation of more than 1.7 million Afghans since the launch of the policy, against estimates of approximately 3.8–4.4 million Afghans residing in Pakistan when the plan was announced.

For Pakistan, repatriation is linked to security, documentation and domestic administrative pressures. For Afghanistan, large-scale returns place additional pressure on employment, housing, food security and public services.

The refugee issue has therefore become inseparable from the wider deterioration in bilateral trust.

7.7 Economic and Regional Connectivity: The Cost of Insecurity

Both countries have strong economic incentives to preserve connectivity.

Projects including CASA-1000, TAPI and the Trans-Afghan Railway could connect Pakistan with Central Asian energy, transport and trade networks. Afghanistan's position makes it a potential land bridge between Central and South Asia.

Yet persistent insecurity raises the cost and risk of such projects.

Pakistan's western connectivity strategy depends partly upon a stable Afghanistan, while Afghanistan benefits from access to Pakistani ports and markets. The same security dispute that threatens bilateral trade therefore also threatens the larger regional connectivity agenda.

7.8 Diplomacy: Still Open, But Conditional

Despite the deterioration, Pakistan has not abandoned diplomacy. Islamabad continues to state that dialogue with Afghanistan remains possible and has participated in bilateral and regional initiatives. Pakistan and China have also continued consultations on Afghanistan, with Beijing playing a role in efforts to reduce tensions.

Pakistan's position in June 2026 was particularly clear that if Kabul provides verifiable assurances that Afghan territory will not be used for attacks against Pakistan, diplomacy has “very bright prospects.” This represents a conditional rather than open-ended engagement strategy.

Pakistan is not demanding the abandonment of bilateral trade, connectivity or diplomatic relations. It is demanding that these relationships operate alongside a credible security arrangement.

The unresolved question is whether Kabul is willing and able to provide that assurance in practice.

7.9 Future Trajectories

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations are unlikely to return to the expectations that accompanied the Taliban's return in 2021. For Islamabad, the relationship is no longer principally a question of whether the Taliban can be engaged; it is whether engagement can produce a security environment Pakistan can live with. The persistence of attacks attributed to TTP and other militant networks has steadily narrowed the space for political goodwill, while geography, trade and the movement of people continue to make complete disengagement impractical.

Three trajectories remain plausible.

• Managed Friction

This is the most likely medium-term trajectory. Pakistan will continue to keep diplomatic channels open, pursue trade and transit where possible, and engage Kabul through bilateral and regional mechanisms. But cooperation will increasingly be calibrated against Pakistan's security interests. TTP attacks, militant activity from Afghan territory and border incidents are likely to continue producing periods of heightened tension, crossing closures, diplomatic pressure and, where Islamabad considers them necessary, security responses. Engagement under this scenario is therefore a means of managing an unavoidable relationship, not evidence of strategic trust.

• Conditional Stabilisation

Relations could improve if Kabul moves from assurances to demonstrable action against TTP and other groups operating from Afghan territory, coupled with more effective border coordination and sustained security communication. Pakistan has repeatedly made clear that its demand is not the abandonment of relations with Afghanistan, but that Afghan territory should not be used to attack Pakistan. If that security condition is met in practice, Islamabad would have greater room to expand trade, transit, diplomatic engagement and regional connectivity.

• Strategic Deterioration

If attacks continue and Kabul remains unwilling or unable to constrain militant networks, Pakistan's reliance on diplomatic engagement is likely to give way to a harder security posture. Repeated border closures, tighter movement controls, economic pressure and further Pakistani military responses could become recurring features of the relationship. The relationship would increasingly be shaped by Pakistan's direct security exposure rather than the political familiarity and expectations that accompanied the Taliban's return in 2021.

Kabul could seek to reduce its dependence on Pakistan by diversifying trade and transit. Chabahar provides access to the Arabian Sea through Iran, while routes through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan connect Afghanistan to Central Asian and Eurasian markets. Access to Indian markets can be maintained through Chabahar or air corridors, while China offers another economic and strategic channel. None, however, is a straightforward substitute for Pakistan.

Each alternative carries its own costs and strategic conditions. Iran's exposure to war, sanctions and instability around Chabahar creates uncertainty; northern routes are longer and dependent on multiple transit states; and Chabahar and air corridors to India face their own capacity, cost and geopolitical constraints. Afghanistan would therefore be diversifying its dependencies, not escaping them.

The security constraint is also broader than Pakistan. Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian states all have direct concerns about terrorism, militant spillover, border security and armed groups operating from Afghan territory. The Taliban's extremist policies add another layer of concern for several of these states. Greater connectivity with Afghanistan will consequently remain conditioned by how these

governments assess the security risks emanating from Afghan soil.

Pakistan nevertheless retains a distinct geographic advantage. For much of Afghanistan, Pakistani territory remains the most direct route to the Arabian Sea, supported by established trade networks, border crossings and commercial infrastructure. Alternative corridors can give Kabul additional options and bargaining space, but they cannot reproduce Pakistan's combination of proximity, established connectivity and maritime access at comparable cost and scale.

A prolonged deterioration would therefore push Kabul towards costly diversification while pushing Islamabad towards tighter security and transit controls. Afghanistan could enhance links with Iran, Central Asia and China, but doing so would require greater expenditure, longer supply chains and accommodation with multiple states whose own security concerns constrain their willingness to strengthen engagement.

The likely outcome is not the replacement of Pakistan, but a more fragmented regional relationship in which Kabul attempts to reduce its exposure to Pakistan while Pakistan responds to the security threat on its western frontier. The resulting competition would extend beyond bilateral ties into the wider geopolitical environment involving Iran, Central Asia, China and Russia.

The decisive variable would remain security. If Kabul fails to address the militant threat emanating from its territory, Pakistan is likely to prioritise containment over accommodation. Furthermore, because the same militant ecosystem concerns Afghanistan's other neighbours, continued insecurity would constrain Kabul's ability to turn alternative trade routes into a reliable substitute for the relationship it is seeking to escape.



8. Afghanistan's Strategic Future

8.1 State Durability, Social Cohesion and Regional Security

Territorial control is not the same as durable stability.

Five years after the Taliban's return to Kabul, the central question is no longer whether it can retain power, but whether the political order it has created can contain the pressures generated by its own governance model.

The Islamic Emirate controls Afghanistan's territory and state apparatus, yet armed resistance persists, transnational militant groups remain present, political exclusion continues, and relations with neighbouring states remain heavily security-driven.

The next phase will therefore test not the Taliban's ability to seize or hold power, but the consequences of how it exercises that power.

8.2 The Core Strategic Problem

The Taliban's post-2021 system has concentrated political authority, restricted political participation and retained a narrow conception of legitimate governance.

That model may suppress open political competition, but suppression does not eliminate grievances.

Afghanistan's principal future risks are therefore interconnected:

Political and ethnic exclusion, localised armed resistance, transnational militant activity, economic fragility, and regional insecurity feed one another rather than operating in isolation. Section 8.7 sets these out as five discrete risks with the specific evidence behind each; the point to hold onto here is their interdependence: if these pressures reinforce one another, territorial control could coexist with persistent internal instability.

8.3 Political and Ethnic Exclusion

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state comprising Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Aimaq, Baluch, Nuristanis and other communities.

The concentration of political authority within a narrow Taliban leadership structure leaves limited meaningful representation for many of these constituencies.

The strategic risk is not that ethnicity automatically produces conflict. It is that political exclusion can turn existing ethnic and regional identities into vehicles for mobilisation.

The experience of the Hazara community demonstrates the consequences of identity-based persecution. If perceptions of Pashtun political dominance and unequal treatment of Tajik, Uzbek or other communities deepen, ethnic grievances could increasingly intersect with existing resistance networks.

Northern Afghanistan is particularly important in this regard. Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan and Panjshir combine ethnic sensitivities, difficult terrain and established opposition activity.

Ethnic fragmentation is not inevitable; allowing exclusion to harden existing fault lines makes it more likely.

8.4 Resistance and the Northern Fault Line

The persistence of the NRF, AFF and smaller resistance groups demonstrates that Taliban control has not eliminated armed opposition. Chapter Five's full roster records at least fourteen such entities active by mid-2026, evidence that opposition has diversified in leadership and geography even as no single faction has demonstrated the capacity to seriously contest national control.

The northern belt is the most important indicator. Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan and Panjshir combine resistance activity with terrain, borders and historical opposition to Taliban rule.

Badakhshan is particularly significant because it borders Tajikistan and contains the Wakhan Corridor linking Afghanistan towards China. Its growing resistance activity and militant presence give the province significance beyond its local security environment.

The Salang corridor is equally important. As Afghanistan's principal north-south logistical artery, prolonged disruption would affect military movement, trade and national connectivity.

For the region, increasing attack frequency, geographic expansion, recruitment or coordination among northern resistance groups would constitute an early warning that localised opposition is becoming a broader strategic problem.

8.5 The Militant Ecosystem

Afghanistan's security challenge extends beyond anti-Taliban resistance.

The country remains associated with the presence or activity of ISKP, TTP, ETIM/TIP and other militant networks, each presenting different threats.

- ISKP challenges Taliban authority through terrorist attacks.
- TTP uses Afghan territory to threaten Pakistan.
- ETIM/TIP and other foreign militant networks create wider regional security concerns.
- NRF and AFF challenge Taliban authority through localised armed resistance.

The resulting problem is not one insurgency but a militant ecosystem operating alongside an unresolved domestic resistance problem.

For neighbouring states, this distinction matters. A government can suppress one form of opposition while still failing to prevent its territory from becoming an operating environment for others.

8.6 Regional Security

Afghanistan's unresolved internal security problems increasingly shape its relations with its neighbours.

Pakistan's primary concern is TTP and cross-border militancy. China's concerns include militant activity and western frontier security. Iran faces migration, water and border pressures. Central Asian states remain concerned about terrorist spillover and narcotics trafficking, while Russia increasingly focuses on transnational terrorism and threats to Central Asia.

Afghanistan's security problems therefore do not stop at its borders.

The greater the militant presence and the weaker the mechanisms for controlling it, the greater the pressure on neighbouring states and the harder regional connectivity becomes.

8.7 Five Strategic Risks

The evidence assembled in this study points to five principal risks for the next decade:

- 1. Political Exclusion:** Continued concentration of power could deepen grievances among excluded communities.
- 2. Armed Resistance:** Unresolved grievances could sustain or expand northern opposition.
- 3. Transnational Militancy:** TTP, ISKP, ETIM/TIP and other groups could continue generating threats from Afghan territory.
- 4. Economic Fragility:** Weak employment, investment and productive growth could reinforce social discontent. With roughly half the population below the poverty line and child malnutrition indicators still worsening (Section 3.8a), this is not a distant risk but a present condition.
- 5. Ethnic polarisation:** Persistent perceptions of unequal representation could transform political grievances into ethnic fault lines.

These risks are mutually reinforcing. Economic hardship can deepen grievances; exclusion can facilitate resistance; resistance can provoke further coercion; and militant activity can increase regional isolation.

8.8 Indicators for 2027–2031

Those interested in Afghanistan studies should track a limited set of indicators rather than rely on isolated political developments:

- Resistance activity in Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan and Panjshir;
- TTP, ISKP and ETIM/TIP presence and operational activity;
- Ethnic representation in senior and provincial institutions;
- Incidents of ethnic or communal persecution;
- Security and uninterrupted operation of the Salang corridor;
- Cross-border attacks and military incidents;
- Employment, trade and domestic revenue trends;
- Security assessments and intelligence cooperation involving Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran and Central Asia.

The direction of these indicators will reveal whether Afghanistan's present stability is becoming more durable or merely more controlled.

Hence, Taliban 2.0 is best understood, on the evidence assembled across this study, not as a completed political settlement but as an evolving experiment in post-insurgency state formation.

Strategic resilience will therefore depend upon managing these risks collectively rather than addressing them in isolation.

The next phase of Afghanistan's evolution will be determined by factors beyond institutional consolidation. Political inclusion, social cohesion, economic opportunity, and regional confidence will

be the key determining factors. State authority might have been consolidated, but its durability will depend on whether governance becomes more economically sustainable, politically inclusive and socially cohesive. This is due to the fact that the ability to govern effectively is necessary but no longer sufficient on its own. For neighbouring states, the strategic objective should be an Afghanistan that serves as a source of connectivity rather than confrontation.

The coming decade will determine not whether the Islamic Emirate survives, but whether it matures into a state whose institutions command durable legitimacy across Afghanistan's diverse society and its wider regional environment.



9. Strategic Considerations and Recommendations

9.1 The Trajectory Ahead

Five years of evidence point to a state with extensive coercive control but unresolved vulnerabilities in governance, society, economy and regional security.

The argument of this chapter follows a simple deductive structure, worth stating before the evidence is laid out in full. Chapters One through Eight establish two premises.

First, the Taliban inherited a functioning state apparatus in 2021 but replaced large sections of its personnel and institutional architecture with its own members and loyalists, placing the inherited machinery under a centralised religious authority while leaving and in several areas deepening the country's underlying political, economic and security vulnerabilities.

Second, four interlocking trends, examined separately in Sections 9.1.1 through 9.1.5, point to a deteriorating risk environment:

- A socioeconomic base too poor to absorb further shocks;
- An armed opposition that has diversified rather than disappeared;
- An education system being expanded on an ideological rather than developmental basis;
- A regional militant ecosystem increasingly supported by foreign fighters, cheap drones and emerging financing methods.

Taken together, these trends recreate several of the structural conditions that preceded Afghanistan's descent into civil war in the 1990s and its subsequent emergence as a staging ground for transnational violence. The difference is that today's threat environment combines those historical vulnerabilities with a wider regional militant network, more accessible technology and far greater cross-border exposure.

The conclusion that follows is not a prediction of collapse. It is a statement of exposure and risk. Pakistan carries the most immediate security consequences of this trajectory, while Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian states face their own direct exposure to militancy, border insecurity, displacement and transnational criminal activity. The wider international community faces the secondary consequences if these pressures deepen and spill beyond the region.

Sections 9.1.1 through 9.1.5 therefore examine the principal drivers of this risk in turn. Sections 9.2 through 9.6 translate those findings into policy considerations for Pakistan, the wider region and the international community.

9.1.1 Poverty, Displacement, and the Militancy Pipeline

The first premise concerns the population the Islamic Emirate governs, not the institutions it operates. The World Bank estimated that 48 per cent of Afghans were living below the national poverty line in 2025; UNDP separately found 75 per cent of the population “subsistence-insecure,” unable to reliably meet basic housing, healthcare, food and heating needs even where they are not formally counted as poor.¹⁴⁴

Chapter Three (Section 3.8a) sets out the human cost behind these figures in more detail: close to 4.9 million women and children were projected to face malnutrition in 2026, wasting had worsened in 26 of the country's 34 provinces, and WFP's specialised nutrition programmes had been suspended entirely for lack of funding since May 2025. A regime that has stabilised its own revenue base while roughly half its population remains poor, and whose child malnutrition indicators continue to deteriorate, has not

solved the problem this study is concerned with. It has simply moved the burden of that problem from the treasury onto the population.

That burden is now a regional one. The International Rescue Committee recorded nearly 3.6 million Afghans fleeing the country in the two years following the 2021 takeover alone, contributing to a total of roughly 8.2 million Afghans displaced globally against 6.3 million more displaced inside the country.¹⁴⁵ The destination matters as much as the number: more than 99 per cent of those who left went to Iran and Pakistan, not to Europe or North America, and only around half a million Afghans have applied for asylum in the EU since 2021.¹⁴⁶ The crisis is therefore, first and foremost, a regional one; the burden falls overwhelmingly on Afghanistan's already-strained neighbours, not on the West.

Poverty and displacement on this scale do not operate in isolation from the militancy; they feed it. Chapter Three details how the collapse of the legal opium economy pushed rural households toward methamphetamine production precisely because it required no land, no years-long crop cycle, and no imported chemicals. This is a response to desperation that has simultaneously enriched the trafficking networks and local commanders this study links to Taliban revenue. The same logic applies more broadly. A population in which roughly half lives in poverty and three-quarters struggles to meet basic needs is the population in which armed groups, whether the Taliban itself during its own insurgency, TTP recruiters, or ISKP, have historically found their most reliable recruitment pool.

Poverty does not mechanically produce militancy. But in an economy this constrained, militancy is often the only reliably paying employer which is precisely why the next section turns from economic desperation to the armed groups it sustains.

9.1.2 A Return to the 1990s? The Civil War Risk

If poverty supplies the recruits, the second premise concerns who is doing the recruiting, and how fractured the resulting landscape has become. This study's evidence on political exclusion (Chapter Three), ethnic and sectarian grievance (Chapter Four), and a diversifying armed resistance now including at least fourteen distinct entities (Chapter Five) points toward a specific and serious risk that Afghanistan is drifting back toward conditions resembling the 1992–1996 civil war that followed the collapse of the Najibullah government. However, this time with a wider array of armed actors, more sophisticated weapons, and deeper regional entanglement than existed three decades ago.¹⁴⁷

This is not merely this study's own extrapolation. A 2026 geopolitical risk assessment modelling Afghanistan's forward trajectory concluded that under a plausible escalation scenario, widening Taliban internal fracture, intensifying Badakhshan and Takhar resource conflicts, and ISKP exploiting the resulting security vacuum, “the regime does not collapse but its monopoly on violence degrades to the point where the country returns to the fragmented conditions of the 1990s civil war, albeit with different actor configurations.”¹⁴⁸ The scenario is already partly underway. The border crisis documented throughout Chapter Seven is not incidental to this risk but one of its clearest present-day symptoms. The International Crisis Group, citing Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies reporting, documents how militants operating from Afghan soil routinely embed among civilian populations and use them as human shields during Pakistani security operations along the border, a tactic that both drives casualties and complicates the evidentiary record on civilian harm.¹⁴⁹

The comparison to the 1990s matters less for its historical precision than for where the consequences would land, and in what order. A renewed Afghan civil war would not stay contained within Afghanistan's borders. The first-order effects would be regional: accelerated refugee flows into Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia; expanded operating space for TTP, ISKP, Al-Qaeda and the TIP/ETIM networks documented in Chapter Four; and renewed pressure on the Salang and Badakhshan corridors this study identifies as Afghanistan's most consequential internal fault lines. The second-order effects would be global, following the same pathway that turned 1990s Afghanistan into the staging ground for September 11, a permissive environment in which the Somalia- and Syria-linked foreign-fighter pipelines examined next could scale substantially, projecting risk outward from South Asia to the wider world.

The sequencing is the point. Before the world absorbs any second-order shock, the region absorbs the first and two further trends already under way, examined next, determine how quickly that sequence could accelerate.

9.1.3 The Madrassa Expansion and the Case for Regional Cooperation

The third premise operates on a longer clock than the first two, which is exactly what makes it easy to underweight. Chapter Three documents the scale of the shift: registered madrassas rose from roughly 5,000 in 2021 to more than 23,000 by 2025, enrolling upwards of 3.65 million children, as public schools, universities and teacher-training colleges are directly repurposed into religious seminaries and the national curriculum is reoriented away from science, language and civics. Left unaddressed, this is not simply an education-policy failing. It is the demographic pipeline through which the next generation's militant recruitment pool is currently being built, at a scale several multiples larger than existed under the first Emirate.

The time horizon is the reason no single neighbouring state can address this through unilateral border or security policy. Today's madrassa curriculum shapes the fighters, financiers, and sympathisers of the 2030s and 2040s, not primarily the 2020s; a policy response calibrated to today's threat picture will already be a decade out of date by the time this cohort matures. That argues for regional powers such as Pakistan, China, Iran, the Central Asian republics and Russia among them, to treat curriculum monitoring and educational-radicalisation tracking as a shared, standing security interest requiring joint mechanisms, rather than leaving it to bilateral diplomacy or Western human-rights advocacy alone, both of which have shown limited leverage over Taliban education policy across the first five years of this study's coverage period.

A slower-burning risk of this kind is also the one most likely to compound with the faster-moving ones already described, and it is already doing so in one province in particular, examined next.

9.1.4 The Somalia and Syria Precedent: Regional Implications

The fourth premise concerns who is arriving in Afghanistan from outside it, not who is being produced inside it. Chapter Four's findings on the Somalia funding channel and the Syria-to-Afghanistan foreign-fighter movement carry a specific regional implication that deserves emphasis on its own terms. Historically, the movement of experienced jihadist fighters into Afghanistan has preceded, not followed, an expansion in that network's regional and international attack planning. This was the pattern of the 1990s, when Arab, Central Asian and Southeast Asian volunteers who trained in Afghanistan later carried that experience into conflicts and attacks across multiple continents.

The re-emergence of this pattern now channels fighters from two unrelated but active conflict theatres, Somalia and Syria, into the same Afghan training infrastructure this study documents across ten provinces. That convergence suggests South and Central Asian states should not treat Al-Qaeda's Afghanistan presence as a bilateral US-Taliban legacy issue left over from the 2020 Doha process. It is, on the evidence assembled here, an early indicator of renewed regional and transnational attack capability being rebuilt inside Afghan territory, with Pakistan, the Central Asian republics and Chinese interests in the region among the most exposed by direct geography.

What distinguishes the present moment from a simple repeat of the 1990s is the tooling now available to the fighters this pipeline delivers, the subject of the final premise.

9.1.5 Disruptive Technology in a Volatile Neighbourhood

The fifth and final premise is the multiplier. The same actors described above now have access to cheap, difficult-to-intercept weapons and financing tools that did not exist the last time Afghanistan fragmented. On the Taliban's own side, ACLED data shows the movement's forces began using drones in a military capacity in February 2026, with at least twelve recorded cross-border strikes into Pakistan

by mid-2026; the Taliban are separately reported to be building domestic drone-production capacity through front companies recruiting Afghan engineers and robotics specialists.¹⁵⁰

On the militant side of the ledger, TTP formally announced a dedicated “Air Force” unit in December 2025, and Pakistani security data recorded more than 400 quadcopter- and drone-related militant incidents in the final months of 2025 alone, commercial platforms costing as little as US\$200 to US\$1,000 per unit, deployed in saturation numbers that strain conventional electronic-warfare defences. TTP and allied networks have separately sought commercial drones modified to strike targets up to ten kilometres from the border.¹⁵¹

Financing compounds the problem rather than constraining it. Cryptocurrency is emerging as an additional mechanism for sanctions evasion and the procurement of drone-related components. Chainalysis recorded a sevenfold surge in state-linked cryptocurrency sanctions evasion in 2025, including the direct use of digital assets to procure drone components, with one sanctioned government publicly advertising drones and other military hardware for sale against cryptocurrency payment.¹⁵² A Taliban government that is itself heavily sanctioned, already reliant on informal hawala-style financial networks, and, as Chapter Three documents, already extracting revenue from a growing synthetic-narcotics trade, sits closer to this financing model than most observers currently assume.

Read together, Sections 9.1.1 through 9.1.5 do not describe five separate risks but one compounding trajectory: an impoverished population supplies recruits; a fragmented armed landscape absorbs them; an expanding madrassa system produces the next cohort; foreign pipelines from Somalia and Syria connect that cohort to transnational networks; and cheap drones and sanctions-evading finance give all of the above more reach than the last time this configuration produced a civil war. This study characterises that combination, in plain terms, as a ticking bomb in a region that can least afford one to detonate.

What follows translates that diagnosis into recommendations for the three audiences positioned to defuse it before it does: Pakistan, the wider region, and the international community.

9.2 For Pakistan

Of the three audiences addressed in this chapter, Pakistan has the least time to deliberate. It is not a bystander to the trajectory described in Section 9.1; it is the state absorbing the largest immediate share of its cost. More than 3,500 Pakistani security personnel and civilians have lost their lives in TTP attacks since the Taliban's 2021 return to power, and militant violence inside Pakistan has risen every year since, up 34 per cent in 2025 alone on top of a 67 per cent rise the year before.¹⁵³ The five recommendations below follow directly from that evidence, in descending order of urgency.

1. Hold the line on calendared, verifiable TTP benchmarks as the actual price of normalisation, not as one item on a broader diplomatic agenda. The UN Monitoring Team's own assessment that TTP fields approximately 6,000–6,500 fighters operating principally from Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Paktika, and Paktia (Section 7.4) is not a negotiating data point; it is a direct statement of the threat Pakistani forces face on their own soil.¹⁵⁴

2. Treat counter-drone investment as an immediate defence-budget priority, not a future contingency. Section 9.1.5 records more than 400 quadcopter- and drone-related militant incidents in the final months of 2025 alone and a formally announced TTP “Air Force” unit; this is a capability gap that widens every quarter it goes unaddressed.

3. Continue to document, and press international partners to acknowledge, militants' use of civilians as human shields during cross-border operations, established in Section 9.1.2. Pakistani accounts of these engagements are too often received internationally as unverified claims, while civilian-casualty figures from Pakistani strikes are treated as established fact; both halves of that picture deserve the same evidentiary standard.¹⁵⁵

4. Keep counter-TTP cooperation and the recognition question on separate tracks, to avoid incentivising cosmetic gestures from Kabul that satisfy neither Pakistan's security requirements nor international human-rights conditionality. This is a distinction easily lost when engagement is treated as a single undifferentiated relationship rather than as separable tracks with separable benchmarks.

5. Recognise that the refugee and repatriation question (Section 7.6) is not a side issue to the security relationship but a direct component of it: Pakistan's own fiscal and administrative capacity to manage the repatriation of illegal Afghan immigrants is finite, and burden-sharing support from international partners should be sought explicitly on those terms rather than assumed.

9.3 For China, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics

Afghanistan's security risks are not uniquely Pakistan's to manage, even though Pakistan bears the largest immediate share of them. Three considerations follow for the region's other major stakeholders.

1. China should use Wakhan Corridor security and its mining and connectivity interests in Afghanistan as leverage to press for verifiable action against TIP/ETIM concentration in Badakhshan, where the UN Monitoring Team has documented Taliban-issued identity papers and the movement of roughly 250 TIP/ETIM members into Taliban police units in 2025 (Section 9.1.4).

2. Russia and the Central Asian republics should expand independent border and intelligence monitoring of Badakhshan given its documented dual function as both a resistance corridor (Chapter Five) and a foreign-fighter training corridor (Section 9.1.4). The same province functions as both simultaneously, which is precisely why it is this study's principal early-warning indicator.

3. All regional states should avoid security-cooperation frameworks that implicitly legitimise Taliban governance without parallel attention to the human-rights record documented throughout this study; counterterrorism cooperation and political recognition are separable questions, and collapsing them into one undermines leverage on both.

9.4 For the International Community and Multilateral Institutions

International policy has spent five years oscillating between two positions: extend recognition in the hope of moderation, or withhold it in protest. Both have already been tried, and both have failed to change Taliban conduct on the indicators this study tracks. Seven considerations follow, addressing the conditionality framework first, then the funding and monitoring mechanisms that give it teeth.

1. Replace binary recognise/isolate framing with calendared, benchmarked conditionality tied to specific, verifiable indicators: restoration of girls' secondary and university education, documented protective or accountability measures for minority communities, and demonstrable reductions in TTP and Al-Qaeda operational latitude, rather than general assessments of "improved behaviour."

2. Preserve targeted humanitarian and civil-society funding channels even as broader bilateral assistance contracts elsewhere. US foreign-assistance awards with Afghanistan activities were terminated as of mid-2025, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction wound down on 31 January 2026, narrowing independent oversight capacity at precisely the point this study identifies rising resistance activity and sustained militant presence.¹⁵⁶

3. Fully resource the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which this study relies on throughout as the most consistent independent verification mechanism tracking TTP, Al-Qaeda, ISKP and TIP/ETIM presence; its reporting is a public good disproportionate to its cost.

4. Treat poverty and livelihoods (Section 9.1.1) as a security variable, not solely a humanitarian one. The evidentiary logic this study draws between economic desperation and recruitment into both

the narcotics economy and armed groups means humanitarian funding cuts and security deterioration are not parallel trends but the same trend.

5. Extend financial-crime monitoring capacity, of the kind already applied to Iranian and Russian sanctions-evasion networks, to Afghanistan-linked cryptocurrency flows before, not after, the drone-financing model documented in Section 9.1.5 matures inside Afghanistan.

6. Calibrate expectations of intra-Taliban moderation. Research on the movement's internal decision-making finds strong vertical chains of command and limited evidence that private disagreement with senior rulings translates into altered policy. This is a pattern consistent with the centralised authority this study documents throughout.¹⁵⁷

7. Support evidentiary preservation and accountability mechanisms for documented atrocities against the minorities in Afghanistan, especially the Hazara community, consistent with calls already made by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.

9.5 For Research, Media, and Track II Institutions

Every recommendation above depends on evidence that someone has to keep collecting. Three practices distinguish reliable tracking from restating Taliban or resistance claims at face value.

1. Track Badakhshan as a composite early-warning indicator, combining armed-resistance reporting, TIP/ETIM movement data, and foreign-fighter training-camp reporting, rather than treating militancy and resistance as separate analytical categories — Sections 9.1.2 through 9.1.4 show why they are not.

2. Separate claimed attacks from independently documented attacks as a standing methodological rule, not a caveat. This study's own approach, distinguishing group-claimed figures from UN-documented figures throughout, should be the analytical norm: NRF's claimed 2024 operational tempo of roughly 380 operations sits well above the lower, independently documented attack count of 277 for the following twelve-month window, and the gap itself is analytically significant.

3. Expand province-level monitoring of PVPV law enforcement to detect divergence between Kabul-level policy announcements and local enforcement intensity, a gap existing reporting does not yet capture systematically.

9.6 Regional and Multilateral Mechanisms

None of the fifteen recommendations above can be implemented by a single entity or a state acting alone, and this study does not recommend that any single entity or government attempt to do so. Two tracks are available, and they are not mutually exclusive.

1. Use existing platforms where they fit. The UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team already performs the technical monitoring function this study relies on throughout; its mandate and resourcing should be extended explicitly to cover the madrassa-curriculum, drone-proliferation and crypto-financing indicators identified in Section 9.1, rather than requiring a new standalone body.

2. Use existing platforms where they fit. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), both of which already include Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran and the Central Asian republics as members or partners, are underused as venues for the joint intelligence-sharing and curriculum-monitoring mechanisms this chapter recommends, and require far less new diplomatic infrastructure than a bespoke Afghanistan-specific body.

3. Where gaps exist, build narrowly. Where no existing mechanism fits, a dedicated regional working group on transnational militant financing, drawing explicitly on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) existing sanctions-evasion methodology and extending it to the cryptocurrency-drone financing

pattern documented in Section 9.1.5, would fill a genuine gap rather than duplicate existing UN or SCO functions.

In every case, the international community's most useful role is not to lead this effort but to enable it: sustained funding, technical capacity-building, and intelligence-sharing infrastructure placed at the disposal of the regional states that bear the first-order exposure this study documents, rather than a return to the externally designed, insufficiently regionally owned frameworks that characterised pre-2021 international engagement with Afghanistan.

9.7 Concluding Assessment

Section 9.1 opened with two premises and five compounding trend lines; Sections 9.2 through 9.6 translated them into recommendations for Pakistan, the region, and the international community. Five years on, the verdict is unambiguous. Taliban 2.0 is not a rebrand, and it is not reform. It is the same movement, now exercising control over an inherited state. What has changed is not the movement's political project but the scale of the machinery available to enforce it. The Taliban inherited ministries, courts, provincial administrations, revenue systems, infrastructure and a functioning civil service; rather than building a fundamentally new model of governance, it removed large numbers of Republic-era personnel, filled state institutions with its own loyalists, and placed the inherited machinery under an unelected religious authority. Ideological continuity has therefore been accompanied not by meaningful institutional progress, but by the Taliban's increasing control over the institutions of the state.

Every audience addressed in this study needs to internalise that distinction, because policy built on the assumption that administrative functionality would eventually produce moderation has already failed once, in the five years since August 2021.

Administrative functionality is not legitimacy. A system capable of collecting taxes, operating customs, issuing passports and maintaining bureaucratic routines does not, by those functions alone, become representative, accountable or rights-protecting. A government that excludes girls from education, restricts women from public life, suppresses political dissent, marginalises minorities and permits a persistent militant ecosystem to operate from Afghan territory cannot have its political legitimacy inferred from its administrative routines.

The record is stark. The Islamic Emirate collects revenue, operates customs and conducts regional diplomacy. At the same time, it has excluded 1.1 million girls from secondary education, affected approximately 100,000 women through the higher-education ban, presided over severe restrictions on women and media, and failed to eliminate an armed ecosystem involving TTP, Al-Qaeda, ISKP and TIP/ETIM. Armed resistance has also persisted, with Badakhshan emerging as a particularly important fault line rather than disappearing with the Taliban's seizure of power.

These developments should not be treated as isolated shortcomings alongside an otherwise successful governing model. They are central to assessing the model itself.

External actors therefore should not confuse access with influence or engagement with transformation. Five years of evidence points to a more limited and harder conclusion. The Taliban can be engaged, but engagement has not demonstrated an ability to change the political foundations of the Emirate.

Future policy should consequently be built around named, verifiable outcomes rather than assurances: measurable action against TTP and other militant networks; restoration of women's access to education and public life; meaningful inclusion of Afghanistan's ethnic and political constituencies; and reduction in armed resistance and sectarian violence.

The trajectory of Badakhshan, the treatment of Afghan women, the composition and activity of the militant ecosystem, and the depth of ethnic and political exclusion should remain the principal indicators of whether the current order is becoming more entrenched or becoming increasingly vulnerable to the contradictions it has itself created.

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