

One Year of Taliban Rule: Continuity and Change in Afghanistan

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Summary

Although international media focus has moved away from Afghanistan, the country remains an important and urgent concern for its neighbouring South Asian states and the broader international community. The first anniversary of the Islamic Emirate presents an important juncture to reflect on change and continuity in Afghanistan.

The swift Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 surprised the most seasoned observers of the country. It even surprised the Taliban, a group that had spent the better 20 years as a shadowy insurgent fighting force, as it scrambled to bring order to Kabul streets. At the same time, Afghans struggled to flee the country amidst chaos, violence, fear and desperation. While the Taliban recently [celebrated one year of its rule](#) as the victorious restoration of Afghan sovereignty following four decades of war, conflict, and foreign occupation, much remains uncertain in the country and its future.

An International Crisis Group [report](#) concluded that the Taliban rule had brought “a measure of unfamiliar calm to Afghanistan...But all is not well”. Armed resistance to the Taliban rule continues. Reports of clashes between the Taliban and local cells of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) or the [National Resistance Front](#) form daily news. Both groups present an ideological and territorial battle against the Islamic Emirate, and neither conflict looks to resolve in the near future. The ISKP further threatens the broader social fabric of Afghan society. For instance, the ISKP attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul on 18 June 2022 compounds concerns about the fate of religious minorities in Afghanistan.

Moreover, roadside bombs and attacks on public places [targetting civilians](#) ensure that a spectre of fear and unease shadows the lives of ordinary Afghans in the Islamic Emirate. The Taliban intimidation remains an omnipresent and visible menace. Protesting against government policy is met with coercion. A public demonstration, led by a group of some 40 women protesters chanting “bread, work and freedom”, was forcibly dispersed by Taliban soldiers firing weapons in the air earlier in the month. Richard Bennett, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, denounced this [“use of excessive force”](#). Meanwhile, activists and journalists continue to be silenced as many [languish in prison](#) or face [detention and violence](#). As counter-terrorism expert Andrew Watkins [maintains](#), “The Taliban’s first year in power has seen the group gradually grow more repressive.”

The unfolding indecision and confusion over banning girls’ secondary education has been a point of contention not just as a human rights issue but also as a window into the inner workings of the Taliban, including the [factional tensions](#) within the leadership of the government. These [divisions](#) suggest that consensus on the broader vision of the Islamic Emirate is conflicted. This is perhaps unsurprising since the somewhat decentralised

umbrella-like structure of the Taliban, which provided the group with advantageous, adaptive flexibility as an insurgent force, now poses challenges to the government and governance. This also implies that a broader vision of the Islamic Emirate remains opaque and mired in ambiguity and contradictions. The task of governing the country (known more for its diversity and difference than its unity) appears fraught with internal fissures.

For the international community, the question now is not so much ‘whether’ to engage with the Taliban but more so, ‘how’ and on ‘what terms’ to engage with the group and navigate the moral, ethical and diplomatic rigmaroles engagement presents. This matter remains a point of contention, and [opinions differ](#). The UN Security Council, for instance, remained [deadlocked this week](#) on whether to exempt some Taliban leaders from travel restrictions placed under a [2011 Security Council resolution](#). While no state has accorded the Islamic Emirate formal *de jure* recognition, the inescapable realisation that the Taliban are here to stay has seen countries reopen their diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. Not engaging with the Taliban is not an option for many of Afghanistan’s neighbours. The threat of a spill-over of instability, Islamist radicalism and refugees is all too real. Ayman Al Zawahiri’s [presence in Kabul](#) provides vindication for ongoing Al Qaeda-Taliban relations. The unfolding economic situation has only worsened, and the humanitarian crises in the country are compounded by famine and natural disasters. India, which had close ties with the previous Afghan political dispensation and a historically difficult relationship with the Taliban, became the 15th country to [reopen its embassy in Kabul](#) – a move which looks to alter India-Afghanistan relations and possibly the broader geopolitics of the region.

The Afghan Taliban continue to promise much but deliver little. A year on, the doubts the international community held about the Taliban’s guarantees to uphold and protect the rights and freedoms of marginalised Afghans, including women, minorities and political opposition, have proven to be sound. Suspicion of Taliban ties to outlawed radical jihadism also appears true. The Taliban’s internal contradictions and factional infighting transpire into incoherence in fundamental areas of government policy. Whether the international community can use this towards substantive policy redirections of the Islamic Emirate is difficult to say. Nevertheless, what happens in Afghanistan matters. Consequently, we see a growing number of countries looking to find some working arrangement with the Taliban which serves common mutual self-interests.

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