

TWO YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE: KEY OUTCOMES

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Abstract. The article attempts to showcase the transformation of the Taliban based on a comparative analysis of the movement's characteristics development when the Taliban first came to power in 1996 and when they regained control in 2021. A detailed examination of the normative and legal foundations of the movement, its economic policies, and methods of foreign policy reveals and helps to better understand the nature of the Taliban movement's authority. The author addresses questions about why, despite the efforts of almost the entire global community, radical forces returned to power and what prospects modern Afghanistan, as a whole, and the Taliban movement, in particular, hold.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Taliban, Central Asia, security, Islamic State of Khorasan, terrorist organizations, humanitarian aid.*

«ТАЛИБАН» БИЛІГІНІҢ ЕКІ ЖЫЛЫ: НЕГІЗГІ НӘТИЖЕЛЕР

Еркін Тұқымов

Аңдатпа. Мақалада «Талибан» қозғалысының 1996 жылы билікке алғаш келуі мен 2021 жылы Кабулды басып алғаннан кейінгі ерекшеліктеріне салыстырмалы талдау негізінде талдау жасалған. «Талибан» қозғалысының табиғатын жақсырақ түсінуге мүмкіндік беретін қазіргі Ауғанстан үкіметінің «Талибан» идеологиясының, экономикалық саясаты мен дипломатиясының құқықтық және реттеуші аспектілеріне шолу ұсынылады. Халықаралық қауымдастықтың күш-жігеріне қарамастан, радикалдық күштердің елді тез арада бақылауға алуының себептері ашылып, «Талибан» мен жалпы Ауғанстанның даму перспективалары да көрсетілген.

Түйін сөздер: *Ауғанстан, «Талибан», Орталық Азия, қауіпсіздік, Хорасан Ислам мемлекеті, лаңкестік ұйымдар, гуманитарлық көмек.*

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ДВА ГОДА ПРАВЛЕНИЯ «ТАЛИБАНА»: ОСНОВНЫЕ ИТОГИ

Еркин Тукумов

Аннотация. В статье анализируется процесс трансформации движения «Талибан» на основе сравнительного анализа характеристик группировки во время ее первого прихода к власти в 1996 году и после захвата Кабула в 2021 году. Предлагается обзор нормативно-правовых аспектов идеологии талибов, эконо-мической политики и дипломатии современного афганского правительства, что позволяет лучше понять природу движения «Талибан». Выявляются причины, почему, несмотря на усилия международного сообщества, радикальные силы чрезвычайно быстро вернули себе контроль над страной, а также обозначаются перспективы развития движения «Талибан» и Афганистана в целом.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, талибы, Центральная Азия, безопасность, Исламское государство Хорасан, террористические организации, гуманитарная помощь.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the armed conflict in Ukraine, the situation in Afghanistan does not attract the same level of attention from the global community as it did two years ago. On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan definitively came under the control of the Taliban movement. This was preceded by negotiations between talibs and the then-government of Ashraf Ghani and the United States, with Qatar's mediation.

However, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be closely monitored by neighboring countries, including those in Central Asia. Even though Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, the situation in Afghanistan holds significant importance for its national security and interests. The primary concerns, in our view, are not only terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. While all these issues undoubtedly exist and

pose a considerable negative potential for Central Asia, the countries in the region are also highly concerned about the transit of goods and raw materials to South Asian countries, namely Pakistan with its population of 230 million and India with its 1.5 billion inhabitants.

For Kazakhstan, the transit of goods and raw materials through Afghanistan represents the most direct route to South Asia and the Indian Ocean ports, which holds immense economic and political significance today. Efforts in this direction have been ongoing for some time, initiated under the previous leadership and continued under the Taliban. For example, Uzbekistan, in collaboration with Kazakhstan and other interested parties, plans to implement the Trans-Afghan project. According to the Uzbek Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies (ISRS), "the construction of the railway will cost \$4.6 billion and take 5 years. Freight delivery

between Uzbekistan and Pakistan will take 3-5 days and cost 30-40% less than the current rates.” [1]

The benefits of cooperation are evident for Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, and the Taliban themselves. However, the prospects and stability of the new government in Afghanistan and the guarantees of security from the Taliban to potential investments made from the countries in the region are not entirely clear.

In this context, several pertinent questions arise concerning the assessment of risks and opportunities for the new Taliban government. Key questions, in my opinion, include: how effective and sustainable can the Taliban become as a provider of Afghanistan's national security? Will they be able to achieve at least partial international recognition and unite the country? How quickly can they grow into capable state managers in the complex task of governing a nation?

Methodology

The research employs the method of discourse analysis of expert community assessments, content analysis of statements, public speeches, and press conferences of official representatives of the Taliban movement and other international parties.

In the study, comparative analysis and the historical method are used to demonstrate the distinctive and similar features of the Taliban in different years - during their first rise to power in 1996 and their second rise to power in 2021.

In addition to these methods, the article utilizes the analysis of official documents - reports and conclusions of international organizations, in particular, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution

2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban movement.

Discussion

There are different assessments of the prospects and possibilities of the Taliban movement. Some experts believe that, under certain conditions, the Taliban could become a provider of Afghanistan's national security, considering, of course, the Taliban's vision of public policy and its resources in ensuring Afghanistan's security. This point of view partly explains why the USA and their allies engaged in negotiations with the Taliban and left the country, despite the Afghan government's official arguments to stay and prevent the destruction of the progress made through joint efforts.

A lot was at stake. Over 20 years, the USA and their allies invested a vast amount of financial, military, and intellectual resources to build a new, "democratic" Afghanistan, where an inclusive government involving Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and other minorities would jointly govern the country, sharing common values. Training government officials, the army, and intelligence services through Western organizations was supposed to contribute to building sustainable and effective institutions capable of functioning without external influence. According to research conducted by Brown University, "the war in Afghanistan cost the USA over \$2.3 trillion, or \$300 million per day for 20 years.[2] In the country, an entire generation of Afghans grew up without experiencing Taliban rule, raised in conditions of relative freedom and human rights, although not without challenges.

However, the Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani did not merely succumb to the pressure of the Taliban; it fell rapidly, and the Afghan army hastily surrendered

to the banners of their former adversaries. The project of Afghan statehood, modeled on Western society with its elections and inclusiveness, essentially failed. The external consensus, primarily among the Western coalition, about the futility of staying in Afghanistan, led to the country's swift takeover in just two weeks, whereas during the first period, it took two years for the Taliban to achieve the same.

Afghanistan has entered a new stage of his contemporary history, which is undoubtedly comparable in some aspects to the first stage of the Taliban's rise to power in the country during the period of 1995-2001. However, there are also differences, which may not be significant at the moment but could potentially become stable trends. A comparative analysis will help us better understand the nature of Taliban's authority, answer questions about why, despite the efforts of almost the entire global community, radical forces returned to power, and what the prospects are for Afghanistan as a whole and the Taliban movement in particular.

To start with, during the negotiations with the previous government and the USA, the Taliban made several prominent promises that ultimately were not fulfilled. These promises mainly concerned the formation of an inclusive government, ensuring security within the country, respecting human rights, and women's rights, particularly girls' education and women's employment. None of these commitments were honored, and this laid the foundation for the current strategic problems in the country. First of all, this led to the complete non-recognition of the Taliban government by the UN and the entire global community, even including Pakistan, where the movement

was organized in 1994. Currently, there is active monitoring of the Taliban's activities to assess their compliance with the agreements. Whether the Taliban will evolve is a difficult and complex question, but it will ultimately determine not only the country's internal development and international community's support but also the survival and international recognition of the Taliban.

So far, there have been no indications of such intentions, which is one of the main outcomes of the Taliban's two-year rule. The Taliban did not feel compelled to uphold the promises of the Doha Agreement from February 2020. On one hand, these promises were seen as purely tactical maneuvers, permitted within the context of Islam. It is said in a Hadith of the Prophet, "War is deception." On the other hand, there were no significant consequences for the Taliban themselves in case of breaching the agreements. The USA and its allies are unlikely to engage in war with the Taliban, at least in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the lack of a unified response from the international community to the violations indicated different interests among the countries regarding the Taliban's rise to power. Despite a consensus regarding the recognition of the Taliban as an official government, there are differing views on acknowledging the movement as a terrorist organization.

Regarding the perception of Taliban in Central Asian region, while in the years 1996-2001 and earlier, all the capitals of Central Asia unanimously supported the Northern Alliance in its opposition to the Taliban, today, Central Asian countries, except Tajikistan, which has a particular position, have shifted to more pragmatic approaches. These countries do not officially recognize the Taliban as

the legitimate government but continue to engage with it on certain issues of mutual interest, such as the Trans-Afghan corridor, food supplies, humanitarian aid, terrorist organizations originating from Central Asia but present in Afghanistan, water issues, and more. For instance, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have begun the final stage of negotiations on the construction of the Trans-Afghan railway line, estimated to cost between 4.6 billion to 8.2 billion dollars, with a planned completion date of 2027. Expeditions have already commenced in Afghanistan to determine the route of the railway and conduct a feasibility study of the project.[3] In general, the list of issues is quite extensive, and their ongoing resolution cannot solely rely on official recognition.

"Taliban 1996" and "Taliban 2021"

In the third edition of his seminal work "Taliban," Ahmed Rashid compares the Taliban of 1996 and 2021 and comes to the conclusion that "these are different Taliban in terms of generation and mentality. The first Taliban resisted any form of modernization, hanging computers and televisions on trees. They were united in their goal to rid the country of anything foreign, including those providing humanitarian aid. However, the 2021 Taliban are different in terms of education, experience, and rituals. Those who were in exile in Pakistan are better educated and politically astute, while their peers who stayed in Afghanistan for the war are uncompromising. Even more radical are those Taliban who were released from Guantanamo and Afghanistan's prisons, who will be unforgiving towards those who enjoyed life in Qatar and Pakistan while being part of the Taliban all this time." [4]

Other researchers are less categorical about the evolution of the Taliban, believing that there have been no fundamental changes in their ideological perception of the world. For example, Sayed Madadi, a former high-ranking official in Ashraf Ghani's government, concludes in his article "The dangers of empowering the Taliban" that during the war with Western forces, the Taliban "learned diplomacy and negotiation tactics, but their medieval thinking remained just as rigid." [5]

However, even though there may not be noticeable changes in their ideological foundation, there are political differences. One significant difference between the post-August 2021 military-political situation and the first Taliban takeover is that in Afghanistan today, despite remaining pockets of resistance, major ethnic communities like Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks are not providing unified and individual armed resistance to the Taliban, despite their absence in the new government. This is in stark contrast to the situation in 1996-2001 when the country was effectively divided into zones of influence between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance (officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), which had a force of up to 60,000 people and controlled 10 north-central provinces of the country. The Northern Alliance primarily consisted of Tajiks and Uzbeks, opposing the Taliban, which was predominantly composed of Pashtuns. Thus, the conflict back then was mainly of an ethnic nature.

In this sense, it is suggested that the majority of Afghanistan's population, exhausted by 45 years of war since 1978, perceived the new takeover by an ambiguous organization like the Taliban as something inevitable but at the same

time understandable and acceptable, especially in contrast to idealistic Western values that seemed foreign and ineffective in the deeply traditional Afghan society. Most Afghans, regardless of their ethnic background, embraced the Taliban's rule with the expectation of a safer life and understandable rules in an Islamic society, albeit in a more "rigid packaging."

From the other side, while the Taliban offers a platform for an "ideal" Islamic state based on the traditions and norms of pure Islam, the ideas of Deobandism are not embraced by all Afghans, especially non-Pashtun ethnicities. This could potentially lead to ethnic divisions similar to the period of the first Taliban rule. Experts believe that behind the facade of the "peaceful" Talibanization of Afghanistan, there may be agreements among external powers, primarily Pakistan, which is described as the "main orchestrator of the situation in Afghanistan." [6]

However, as demonstrated by rich global experience, very often, "children" stop listening to their "parents" and may challenge them, showing their independence. The fact that the Taliban has significantly strengthened and gained considerable military-political experience over almost 30 years of its existence forces Pakistan to listen to their opinions. The current situation in Afghanistan can be described as a strategic consensus of interests among different players, including, first and foremost, the Taliban. It is noteworthy that Islamabad has also not recognized the Taliban government, despite being one of the three countries that recognized their first takeover.

A much more significant challenge for the Taliban today is the internal situation, specifically their ability to govern the country without experience in state

administration. For example, shortly after coming to power, a serious political scandal erupted in Kabul, where sons and relatives of high-ranking Taliban members started occupying top positions in the central government and ministries, replacing more competent candidates. The scandal escalated to the point that the head of the Taliban, the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, had to intervene and issue a directive prohibiting all relatives of high-ranking Taliban members from holding any official positions. The logic behind this decision is pure pragmatism: it is one thing to fight against Western forces when the Taliban had all the necessary experience and combat abilities, but it is another to govern a state where they currently lack sufficient qualifications. The Taliban's governance also requires skilled administrators, and the leader of the Taliban seems to understand the weak points of the new government, although it does not necessarily mean that he intends to rectify them.

One of the fault lines that could cause a major rift and become a factor in a new civil war is the growing disagreements within the Taliban itself. According to an analytical report by the UN Security Council, "disagreements exist between the 'pragmatists,' who want to demonstrate greater interaction with the international community, and the arch-conservatives who adhere to Deobandi theological beliefs that are incompatible with certain values and policies of the international community. While the Taliban remains a cohesive and united organization, the presence of internal disagreements has created conditions for weakening the de facto regime governing the country." [7] The report's writers believe that internal rifts within the Taliban's leadership could

eventually lead to the breakdown of unity, providing grounds for the resurgence of a civil war in Afghanistan.

Equally critical for the Taliban government and the broader geopolitical environment of Afghanistan is the country's return to being one of the most reliable havens for the international terrorists.

Despite their commitments to fight terrorism, the Taliban has in practice facilitated even greater freedom of action for various terrorist organizations, of which there are approximately 20 in the country according to the UN. Some of the most well-known and significant among them are: "Al-Qaeda" (around 400 militants), IS-K (from 4,000 to 6,000 militants, including family members), "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan" (from 4,000 to 6,000 militants), "East Turkestan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party" (between 300 and 1,200 militants), "Jamaat Ansarullah" (from 100 to 250 militants), "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (from 150 to 550 militants), "Hatiaba Imam al-Bukhari" (80-100 militants), "Islamic Jihad Group" (200-250 militants), "Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan" (around 140 militants).[7]

The majority of these terrorist organizations support the Taliban and share their ideological beliefs. However, there are also those that challenge the Taliban, such as the National Resistance Front, the Afghanistan Liberation Front, and others. Among them, the most serious opponent of the Taliban is the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), which was established as an ISIL affiliate back in January 2015. "IS-K is responsible for almost 50% of all civilian killings in Afghanistan recently, primarily in Shiite areas." [8].

Humanitarian Catastrophe Threat

Long-term negative trends affecting the economic situation in Afghanistan include permanent political instability, high investment risks, practically non-existent infrastructure, low quality of human capital, climate change leading to reduced arable land, increased drought, and climate migrants. The arrival of the Taliban has added to this the sharp reduction in foreign financial aid and restrictions imposed by the Taliban on their own citizens. For instance, after August 2021, "the proportion of working women in the country's economy decreased to 15%, and the Afghan economy itself contracted by 30-40%." [8]

According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's economy was valued at \$20 billion in 2020, the last year before the Taliban's rule. International assistance in the form of grants financed around 75% of the country's government expenditures.[9]

In this regard, the conflict in Ukraine, though not acknowledged by anyone, undoubtedly distracts the attention of the world's most developed countries and the largest donors of international aid from the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the global increase in the price of wheat and energy resources inevitably affects the cost of humanitarian aid to Afghans and the internal prices within Afghanistan.

The food security situation has significantly worsened since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. While the situation with food was somewhat managed through international food aid programs during the presidencies of Hamid Karzai (2004-2014) and Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), providing external assistance became considerably more

complicated with the arrival of the Taliban due to their human rights suppression policy and their internationally unrecognized status. Consequently, the international community froze Afghanistan's billions of assets due to fears of them falling into the hands of the Taliban.

Difficulties with providing humanitarian aid from the international community does not mean it has ceased completely. In January 2022, the United Nations requested €4.4 billion in humanitarian aid to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. The USA has already pledged \$300 million within this initiative.[10] Kazakhstan also provided 5,000 tons of wheat flour as humanitarian aid last year. Numerous other countries have also provided or are ready to provide humanitarian assistance.

However, the problem lies not only in the clearly insufficient scale of aid from the international community but also in the distribution of this aid within Afghanistan. Even before the Taliban, the distribution of humanitarian aid was subject to significant criticism, accused of corruption and lack of transparency. The withdrawal of almost all international forces from Afghanistan in 2021 neutralized all control systems for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

As a result, according to international assessments, Afghanistan leads the world in the number of people experiencing acute food shortages, with over 23 million people in need of food assistance, and approximately 95% of the population suffering from malnourishment.[11]

Despite predictions of a humanitarian catastrophe with millions of refugees and mass starvation at the time of the fall of Ashraf Ghani's government,

Afghanistan did not face such a scenario. Two factors played a role here: firstly, Afghanistan remains deeply agrarian, with over 70% of the population living in rural areas, where people have learned to survive during decades of war. Secondly, humanitarian aid did not entirely stop with the arrival of the Taliban and continued to be provided to Afghan farmers through grants. In 2022, more than 9 million Afghan farmers received assistance from the FAO through various projects aimed at livestock development, increasing vegetable production, cash transfer programs, and irrigation infrastructure reconstruction.[12]

As a result, some forecasts suggest that Afghanistan's wheat harvest this year could reach 5 million tons, which is 25% or 1 million tons more than in 2022. Considering that the country's current internal wheat demand is around 6.5-7.5 million tons, experts believe that Afghanistan may achieve self-sufficiency in the near future.

Taliban Economy Revenues

Despite positive trends in food security, the country's economy lacks a clear vision for overcoming the ongoing crisis. Nonetheless, the Taliban continues to expand a complex taxation system to prevent economic collapse. The total revenue, according to the World Bank, amounted to 193.9 billion Afghanis (approximately \$2.2 billion USD) from February 22, 2022, to March 21, 2023 [13].

Another important source of revenue for the Taliban's budget is the export of food, coal, and textiles, which increased to \$1.9 billion USD in 2022 compared to \$850 million in 2021. Equally important and potentially a key source of income could be gold, lapis lazuli, and other

precious metal mining. As of 2020, the mining industry brought the Taliban \$464 million, and this figure likely increased after the Taliban came to power. In general, according to various estimates, the potential of natural resources, including rare earth materials, copper, and natural gas, in Afghanistan exceeds \$1 trillion USD.[8]

Despite promises to counter drug trafficking, similar to terrorism, the Taliban officially banned it, but they continue to profit significantly from it. The Taliban control drug traffickers and collect taxes from the sale of opium and methamphetamine. In 2022, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, drug traffickers and farmers made profits of \$1.2 billion USD, with the Taliban collecting taxes ranging from 5% to 7%. Methamphetamine generated \$150 million USD in revenue for the Taliban.[7, p.15]

Women's rights

The Taliban, adhering to their commitment to Deobandism, a radical branch of Islam characterized by puritanism, extreme intolerance towards other Islamic branches, and rigid adherence to the norms of pure Islam, including the role and position of women in religion, from the very beginning established rules of conduct for Afghan women in everyday life.

As early as their first rule in 1996, the Taliban imposed very strict rules for women, which have remained largely unchanged since then and were reintroduced from August 2021. Experts have counted around 30 such rules: women are only allowed to work at home with rare exceptions for doctors and nurses (since men cannot treat women); women are prohibited from

leaving the house without a "mahram" (father, brother, or other close male relative who has access to the harem) or husband accompanying them; women cannot access regular medical assistance since there are few female doctors, and men cannot treat women; girls are not allowed to go to school, and young women are barred from universities and other educational institutions; women must be covered from head to toe and cannot show any part of their body, and so on.[14]

The situation with women's rights has further worsened with the Taliban's return to power. For example, "while previously wearing a hijab was considered acceptable, under the new norms, women are required to wear a niqab or burqa." [8]

Certainly, from the very beginning, the Taliban's spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, declared that "women can participate in society in accordance with Islamic law," but in practice, they became the first government in the world to ban education for women, which became one of the main reasons for the UN's non-recognition of the Taliban's official status and the imposition of sanctions, including freezing foreign accounts.

On the one hand, the unprecedentedly harsh requirements for women can be explained by Deobandism ideology and a rather primitive approach to understanding governance and society following medieval norms. On the other hand, over the course of 20 years of relatively free life in Afghanistan, a considerable number of independent women emerged, especially in major cities, ready to defend their rights, and this might have been a preemptive move by the Taliban to intimidate and subjugate the entire society.

Conclusion

The first conclusion is that in the first two years of Taliban rule, neither the pessimistic scenarios of a humanitarian catastrophe, millions of refugees, nor a new civil war have materialized. Similarly, the cautiously optimistic assumptions about the pragmatism of the Taliban and their desire for international recognition in exchange for agreements on an inclusive government and human rights have also not come to pass.

"Taliban 2021," while not significantly changing their religious and ideological views from "Taliban 1996," has adopted a more pragmatic approach in domestic politics, attempting to find their formula for governing a complex society with a "perpetual war" and "everyone against everyone" syndrome. Having monopolized power in the country, the Taliban has managed to establish relative order and security, and most Afghans are trying to adapt to the "new-old rules."

The prospects of this situation and the viability of the social contract with the Taliban will largely depend on their ability to be the provider of security in the country and create at least minimal conditions for the economic survival of the majority of Afghans. While the Taliban is familiar with the first issue and has resources to solve, they face significant challenges with the second, which require finding compromises. This leads to the question, to which there is no clear answer yet, of whether the Taliban are capable of evolving their political and ideological views towards more moderate and constructive ones.

The second conclusion is that the main threat to the Taliban within the country comes not so much from other terrorist organizations, whose overall resources are insufficient for effective

confrontation with the Taliban without external support, but from potential fault lines within the Taliban itself, between the so-called "pragmatists" and "orthodox." During their temporary weakness, other internal forces might exploit this situation, potentially leading to a civil war within the country.

The third conclusion is that Afghanistan is no longer of such interest to major external players. Today, they are preoccupied with resolving problems in other regions of the world, from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia. While it is challenging to predict how long this situation will last, in the foreseeable future, other regional countries, especially neighboring countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and some Arab countries, will take the lead in actively engaging with Afghanistan.

In the event of a gradual evolution of the Taliban towards deradicalization of the regime, restoring women's rights in possible conditions for an Islamic emirate, establishing a more inclusive government, and achieving full stabilization of the military-political situation in the country, Afghanistan could begin a gradual integration into trade, economic, energy, and transportation-logistics interactions with Central Asia, potentially leading to a more simplified visa regime for Afghan citizens.

However, at present, the more likely scenario appears to be the conservation of the situation, with internal problems gradually escalating and increasing risks of destabilization.

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