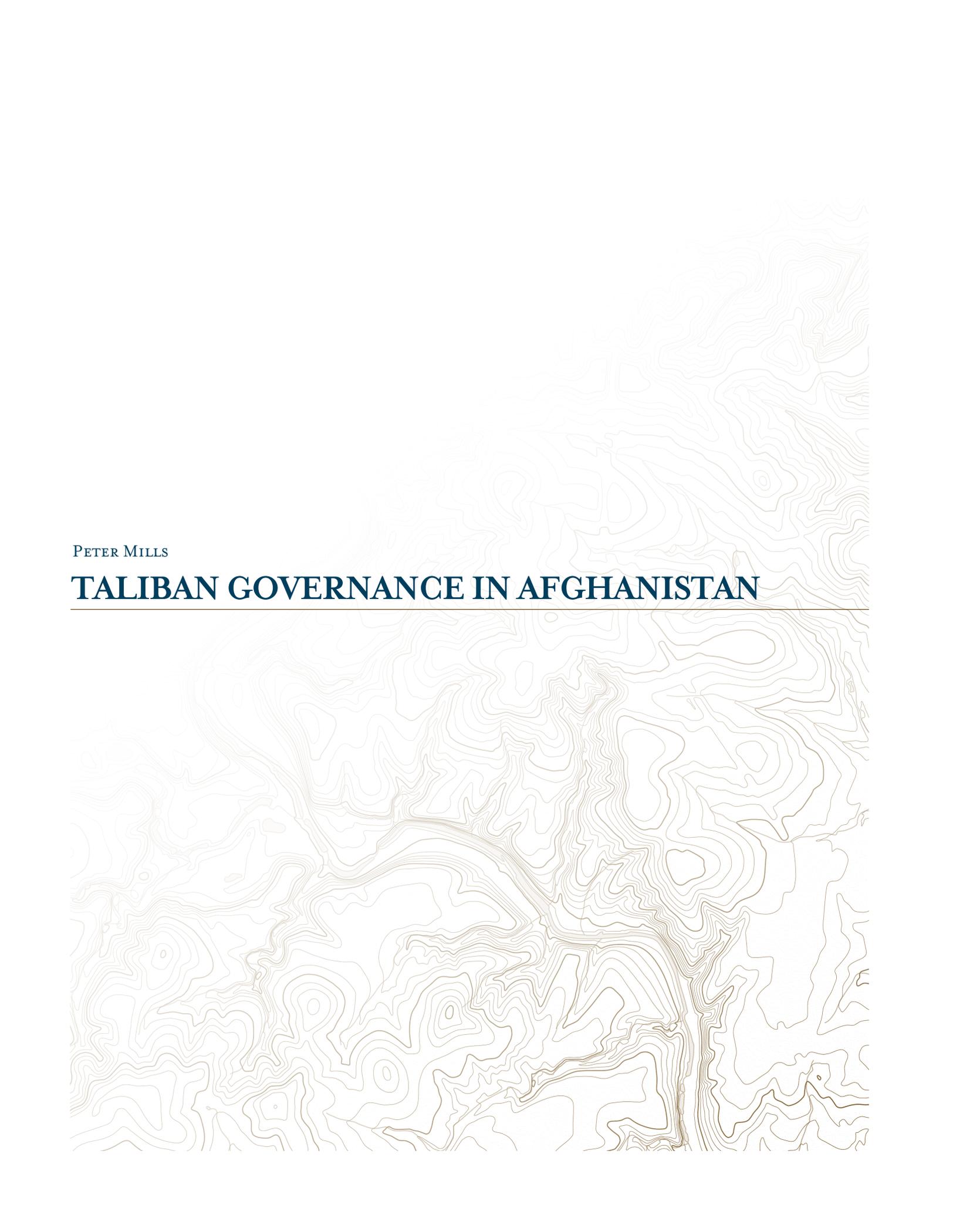


PETER MILLS

TALIBAN GOVERNANCE IN AFGHANISTAN



The background of the entire page is a detailed topographic map of a region, likely in Afghanistan, showing intricate contour lines and geographical features. The map is rendered in a light, muted green color against a white background.

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Cover: Map of Afghanistan - Vector illustration (Photo by Artist pop_jop via <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/02-afghanistan-white-10-gm1073317128-287300945> [Modified to include the Taliban Flag])

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TALIBAN GOVERNANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

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TALIBAN GOVERNANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Executive Summary

The Taliban achieved its primary objective by taking over Afghanistan in 2021. It now presides over a weak state that is unable to address long-term socio-economic and security challenges. Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is worsening tensions within the Taliban as he expands his power within the regime and his policies are exacerbating the economic crisis the country faces. The Taliban faces opposition from domestic groups, which it can suppress in the short term at the cost of aggravating their underlying political grievances over the long term. The Taliban also provides a safe haven for Salafi-jihadi groups that it does not control and is permitting to gain strength. It is unlikely to be able to restrain or prevent those groups from conducting an attack outside of Afghanistan should they choose to do so.

The Taliban's inability to address the long-term challenges it faces will render it vulnerable to growing domestic opposition and degrade its ability to control Salafi-Jihadi groups in Afghanistan.

I. The Taliban Supreme Leader, Factionalization, and Decision-making

The Taliban is not a homogeneous organization but rather remains a broad coalition of factions with sometimes competing tribal, ethnic, political, business, and ideological relationships. These factions are often difficult to neatly categorize and remain imperfect broad categories rather than strict groupings. Two of the most significant Taliban factions remain the Haqqani Network – with its support base primarily in southeastern and eastern Afghanistan – and the “Kandahari Taliban” with its support base primarily in southern

Afghanistan. The split between these factions is partially reflective of the fact that each draw upon a different Pashtun tribal confederacy.¹ The Haqqani Network leader Sirajuddin Haqqani also serves as the Taliban Interior Minister and maintains relatives in key positions of power within the Taliban government. The Taliban's supreme leader and *de facto head of state* Hibatullah Akhundzada rule Afghanistan from Kandahar with a small inner circle of religious leaders and supporters, often referred to as the “Kandahari Taliban.” Akhundzada

The Taliban's supreme leader and de facto head of state Hibatullah Akhundzada rule Afghanistan from Kandahar with a small inner circle of religious leaders and supporters, often referred to as the “Kandahari Taliban.”

does not exert sole control over his powerbase in Kandahar, however, as Taliban leaders like Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoub and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, share Akhundzada's Kandahari background but disagree with his policies. Baradar and Yaqoub rule primarily from Kabul and work with the Taliban cabinet based in Kabul, a group sometimes referred to as the "Kabul Taliban."² This group of "Kabul Taliban" can overlap with the Haqqani Network which exerted command and control over Taliban forces in and around Kabul during the Taliban's insurgency.³

Finally, the Taliban movement has expanded to incorporate "Tajik Taliban" and "Uzbek Taliban" groups since the mid-2010s as part of a strategy to expand the Taliban's support into northern Afghanistan.⁴ The Taliban Army's Chief of Staff Qari Fasihuddin is the senior Tajik Taliban commander and has the greatest influence among Tajik Taliban leaders within the Taliban government. The Taliban Agricultural Minister and former 209th Corps Commander Attaullah Omari and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi are the two highest rank Uzbek Taliban leaders within the Taliban government.

Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is taking steps to further expand his power, which will likely exacerbate tensions within the Taliban movement among the factions at the national level, as well as among non-Pashtun commanders in the Taliban's lower echelons. Akhundzada presides over a fractious Taliban movement that comprises many overlapping factions covering a complex set of tribal, ethnic, political, business, and ideological relationships. He has become more autocratic and willing to override other Taliban leaders' decision-making after having consolidated power over the Taliban government throughout 2022.⁵ Akhundzada has established control over the regime's security policy and is further centralizing power by establishing his own security forces separate from those that report

to the Defense Ministry. Top Taliban leaders—including Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoub, and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar—lead their own factions within the Taliban movement, which undermines regime efforts to align socio-cultural and economic policies. Akhundzada has demonstrated his ability to advance his preferred policies, nonetheless. For example, he forced his cabinet to abruptly reverse its plans to reintroduce secondary schooling for girls in March 2022.⁶

Akhundzada: Consolidating Power in Kandahar and Within the Regime

Akhundzada is the ultimate decision maker within the Taliban government and is consolidating his power in Kandahar. Akhundzada is shifting regime decision-making from Kabul to Kandahar, where he lives in relative seclusion. He relies on a narrow clique of ultraconservative religious leaders who are predominantly from Kandahar to support and implement his policies within the Taliban government. Akhundzada forced the Taliban spokesperson and other officials to relocate from Kabul to Kandahar in early April 2023 as part of this shift in power from Kabul to Kandahar.⁷ Most Taliban cabinet meetings initially took place in Kabul, however, over the course of 2022, they shifted to meeting directly with Akhundzada in Kandahar.⁸ Akhundzada's efforts to build a parallel governing system in Kandahar and shift decision-making away from Taliban leaders in Kabul led to rare public criticism from Sirajuddin Haqqani and Yaqoub in early 2023.⁹

The Supreme Leader does not exert sole control over the Taliban movement's base of power in Kandahar, however. The Taliban leadership is predominantly Pashtun and predominantly from Kandahar and its neighboring provinces.¹⁰

[Akhundzada] has become more autocratic and willing to override other Taliban leaders' decision-making after having consolidated power over the Taliban government throughout 2022.

Key leaders maintain power bases in Kandahar while overseeing Taliban ministries in Kabul. Yaqoub maintains patronage networks in Kandahar while also running the Ministry of Defense from Kabul.¹¹ The cofounder of the Taliban movement, Abdul Ghani Baradar, also remains influential in southern Afghanistan and maintains a working relationship with Yaqoub.¹²

Akhundzada is expanding his power over Taliban governance to ensure regime officials implement his edicts. Akhundzada has created provincial religious councils since late 2022 to monitor provincial Taliban officials and oversee the implementation of Akhundzada's decrees.¹³ He has charged the Attorney General's office—renamed the Chief Directorate of Supervising and Implementing Decrees—with this mission.¹⁴ This office also has the power to monitor and prosecute Taliban officials within the Defense and Interior Ministries, as well as the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI).¹⁵ Akhundzada directly appoints district commanders and low-level government officials within the central government.¹⁶ Akhundzada's rhetoric has repeatedly emphasized obedience to his decrees on both the Taliban movement and the Afghan population.

The Supreme Leader is also developing a security force that is loyal to him rather than the Taliban regime despite broad alignment among leaders on defense issues. All Taliban leaders want the government to survive and support violently repressing anti-Taliban groups, including Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF). Akhundzada is building a 40,000 strong military force separate from the Taliban military and police, however, because he does not trust top Taliban leaders, including Yaqoub and Sirajuddin.¹⁷ A UN Security Council report stated that Akhundzada previously tried to fire Yaqoub and Sirajuddin, who control the majority of the Taliban security forces after they publicly criticized

his policies in early 2023.¹⁸ Akhundzada aims for his military to share his Noorzai Pashtun tribal background without any loyalties to other senior Taliban military commanders.¹⁹ Akhundzada's Noorzai tribe has traditionally been one of the weakest and most socio-economically disadvantaged Pashtun tribes compared to other tribes in southern Afghanistan. Akhundzada's favoritism towards his own tribe is not unusual in Afghan politics, but it does disempower traditionally higher social-status Pashtun tribes, contributing to friction within the predominantly Pashtun Taliban movement.

Akhundzada's consolidation of power is exacerbating tensions between Taliban factions in Kandahar and Kabul, but Taliban leaders continue to give priority to maintaining regime cohesion. Sirajuddin gave a speech publicly criticizing the Taliban leadership for monopolizing power, failing to address the Afghan people's concerns, and violating their rights, in mid-February 2023.²⁰ This speech implicitly targeted Akhundzada's leadership and demonstrated a rare example of public dissent within the Taliban leadership. Other Taliban leaders including Yaqoub, and Baradar's allies, expressed support for Sirajuddin by giving speeches echoing his critiques several days later.²¹ Akhundzada's faction condemned the public criticism and reasserted that all Taliban members have a religious duty to obey Akhundzada.²² Akhundzada did not remove Baradar, Sirajuddin, or Yaqoub from their positions, however, and these leaders de-escalated their public criticisms of Akhundzada in mid-late 2023. Both sides' decision to refrain from escalating the dispute suggests that Taliban leaders are reluctant to risk regime cohesion, despite deep disagreements within the leadership.²³

Akhundzada removed his Finance Minister, Hidayatullah Badri, in early 2023 after Badri contested Akhundzada's ad hoc and erratic withdrawals from the Taliban treasury.²⁴ Badri continued to informally exert power over the Finance Ministry even after Akhundzada

[Akhundzada] relies on a narrow clique of ultraconservative religious leaders who are predominantly from Kandahar to support and implement his policies within the Taliban government.

reassigned Badri to the Afghan central bank, however.²⁵ This further indicates there are constraints on Akhundzada's ability to sideline key Taliban powerbrokers within the regime.

The Supreme Leader is also sidelining relative newcomers from Uzbek and Tajik backgrounds to the regime's ranks. Akhundzada has appointed loyalists from Kandahar across the Taliban government, both in Kabul and in the provinces.²⁶ Uzbek Taliban commanders such as Salahuddin Ayoubi, Makhdom Alem, and Attaullah Omari played a critical role in enabling the Taliban conquest of northern Afghanistan in 2021. These commanders subsequently found themselves detained, demoted, and sidelined from military command authority over the course of 2022.²⁷ Akhundzada responded to dissatisfaction among important Uzbek Taliban commanders by separating them from their power bases in northern Afghanistan and assigning them to positions in Kabul and southern Afghanistan with little power.²⁸ Tajik Taliban commanders also occupy subordinate positions within the regime, but Akhundzada has not marginalized them to the same degree as Uzbek commanders. The Taliban Chief of Army Staff, a Tajik Taliban commander, notionally commands all Taliban military forces, but his power diminished over the course of 2022.²⁹ The Taliban Commerce Minister has a Tajik background and plays an active role in coordinating Taliban trade policy—but he does so under Baradar's direction—who retains ultimate control over Taliban economic policy.³⁰

Divisions in Regime Policymaking

Akhundzada's isolationist beliefs undermine the regime's broader efforts to engage with other countries for economic and military gains. Akhundzada believes that international engagement undermines Afghanistan's independence and has stated that

Akhundzada's isolationist beliefs undermine the regime's broader efforts to engage with other countries for economic and military gains.

ideological differences preclude a lasting agreement with the international community.³¹ His perspective diverges from others within the regime, namely Sirajuddin, Baradar, and Yaqoub, who express more pragmatic views based on balancing between multiple international actors to improve the Taliban's economic and military capabilities. Baradar, the head of the Taliban's Economic Commission, regularly speaks about encouraging international investment into Afghanistan.³² Yaqoub sought to increase military and trade ties with Qatar, UAE, and India from mid-2022 to early 2023.³³

Regime factions are not aligned on sociocultural policies, which is resulting in inconsistent implementation of some of Akhundzada's edicts. Akhundzada has issued edicts for extreme social policies—particularly with regard to banning women's education—that other Taliban leaders oppose. Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Stanekzai has offered the

most public pushback by speaking every several months since mid-2022 about the importance of girls' education.³⁴ Stanekzai escalated his rhetoric on January 10 stating that when Islamic leaders issue an order against Islamic law—as Stanekzai had previously characterized Akhundzada's ban on girls' education—everyone has the right to reject it.³⁵ Sirajuddin, Yaqoub, and Baradar shared Stanekzai's criticisms in February 2023, which set conditions for Taliban leaders to disobey Akhundzada's edicts.³⁶ Some Taliban officials have quietly defied Akhundzada's ban by sending their daughters to secret schools, for example.³⁷

Akhundzada also struggles to implement edicts governing Taliban members' behavior, including measures limiting corruption and extrajudicial killings. Akhundzada issued multiple edicts banning “unnecessary or extravagant” second, third, and fourth, marriages for Taliban officials, but many Taliban commanders continued to engage in multiple marriages despite Akhundzada's decree.³⁸

Akhundzada has repeatedly issued decrees banning nepotism in Taliban government appointments, indicating it remains an ongoing problem.³⁹ Taliban security forces continue to engage in rampant extrajudicial killings in violation of the Taliban's stated promise of amnesty for people affiliated with the former Afghan government.⁴⁰ Afghan journalists reported that Akhundzada came into conflict with his director of intelligence over the high number of Salafists killed during Taliban counter-ISKP operations in April 2023. Akhundzada warned his security officials that the Taliban government would not

survive if it failed to prevent extrajudicial killings.⁴¹ Akhundzada's failure to enforce his decrees among the Taliban movement's members suggests that, despite his consolidation of power, there are limits to his authority and to Taliban members' obedience to the Supreme Leader, a core aspect of the Taliban movement. Mid-ranking Taliban commanders can use their relationship with senior Taliban leaders, such as Sirajuddin, to avoid accountability for fighting with other Taliban commanders and violating Akhundzada's edicts.⁴²

II. Taliban Policies Exacerbating the Economic Crisis

Afghanistan is facing an economic crisis, which the Taliban government is unlikely to correct given the government's weak institutions and insufficient revenue. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) has shrunk by 30-35% since 2021 and 60-70% of the Afghan population is unable to afford food and other necessities.⁴³ Banks are unwilling to facilitate financial transactions in Afghanistan despite US exemptions due to concerns about money laundering and terrorism financing given the Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadi groups.⁴⁴ Although Taliban leaders frequently highlight the relative improvement in security in Afghanistan compared to 2021, the regime lacks the legal institutions to guarantee investors' property rights and provide legal recourse for investor contract disputes. Taliban-run Afghanistan has no constitution, no clear rule of law beyond Akhundzada's edicts, and individuals are systematically denied access to legal representation.⁴⁵

The Taliban is unlikely to generate sufficient revenue through taxes to address the economic crisis. The Taliban government collected approximately

\$2.1-2.3 billion in tax revenue between March 2022 and March 2023. Part of this revenue generation came from more customs revenue due to reduced local corruption at border posts.⁴⁶ The Taliban Ministry of Agriculture also collects *Ushr* and *Zakat*, which are traditional Islamic taxes on land and charity respectively, separately from the Ministry of Finance. The Taliban's revenue collection is close to the \$2.5 billion that the former Afghan Republic collected in 2019, despite the economic contraction since

Some Taliban officials have quietly defied Akhundzada's ban by sending their daughters to secret schools.

2021. This \$2.5 billion in revenue is far below meeting the former Afghan Republic's \$11 billion in spending, due to the halt in foreign financial assistance.⁴⁷ The Taliban government has prioritized paying state salaries and maintaining the state bureaucracy, which leaves little money left for development projects and public services.

The Taliban still depends on international financial assistance to stabilize Afghanistan's currency and maintain public services. The UN injected \$1.85 billion in cash to support humanitarian operations and prevent the Afghan currency from collapsing and worsening the economic situation in Afghanistan in

2022.⁴⁸ Taliban-run Afghanistan received \$2.6-3.5 billion in overall humanitarian aid in 2022.⁴⁹ The Taliban remains reliant on this foreign assistance to maintain public services, including public health.⁵⁰ The Taliban government can maintain the state's bureaucratic capacity in the short term but its ability to provide public services will decline as foreign funding enabling those services declines.

The regime's use of state funds for patronage rather than public goods is exacerbating its budgetary problems. The Taliban government is collecting significant mining revenue but top Taliban leaders divert some of this money from the central government.⁵¹ Akhundzada is funneling *Ushr* and *Zakat* taxes collected by the Agriculture Ministry into separate accounts controlled by himself.⁵² Sirajuddin diverts significant revenues from chromite mining operations in eastern Afghanistan to fund his patronage networks before it goes to the Taliban central government.⁵³ Yaqoub controls substantial unspecified revenue streams and diverts this money to his patronage network before these funds go to the Finance Ministry.⁵⁴ Baradar is working to centralize all mining revenues under the Ministry of Mines, which one of his allies heads.⁵⁵

Akhundzada's hardline policies and the Taliban's diversion of humanitarian aid disincentivize international aid to Afghanistan, which will likely exacerbate the country's economic crisis. The international community does not recognize the Taliban regime as the legitimate Afghan state and has signaled that the Taliban must form an inclusive government and allow girls' education, to obtain recognition and financial support.⁵⁶ Although Sirajuddin, Yaqoub, and Baradar want to implement less extreme socio-cultural policies to facilitate foreign investment in Afghanistan, Akhundzada and his hardline supporters are unwilling to change policy no matter how severe the consequences may be for Afghans in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Akhundzada's edict banning women

from working for NGOs in December 2022, which the regime extended to women working for the UN in April 2023, suggests the Taliban government's policies are becoming more extreme, not less.⁵⁸ This move led to the UN halting its operations for a month following the April ban.⁵⁹ Taliban

interference with the UN's distribution of humanitarian aid, including seizing aid or directing who receives it, tripled from early 2022 to early 2023.⁶⁰ The UN's \$4.6 billion 2023 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan was only 5.4% funded as of mid-April 2023.⁶¹ The UN revised the budget for this

Humanitarian Response Plan downwards to \$3.2 billion in August 2023.⁶²

The Taliban's steps to resource its government, namely generating more tax revenue, drive protests across the country. Local shopkeepers began staging protests in late 2022, temporarily closing their shops, to protest greater Taliban taxation.⁶³ Local shopkeepers staged further protests in major Afghan cities, including Herat and Kabul, in early 2023.⁶⁴ Local Taliban authorities temporarily reduced taxes in response to some of these protests.⁶⁵ These protests suggest the Taliban's ability to raise further revenue without provoking political blowback is limited.

Taliban commanders' expropriation of economic resources in northern Afghanistan is exacerbating local discontent towards the Taliban government. The most significant conflict over resources occurred when one of the only Hazara Taliban commanders, Mawlawi Mehdi Mujahid, revolted in June 2022 in the Balkhab District of Sar-the Pul Province. Afghan journalists reported that unspecified Taliban leaders feared Mujahid was gaining too much power due to his control over revenues accruing from coal mines in Balkhab.⁶⁶ Mujahid publicly accused the Taliban of sidelining the Hazara ethnic group from the government, indicating that ethnic tensions also played a role in

The regime's use of state funds for patronage rather than public goods is exacerbating its budgetary problems.

the conflict.⁶⁷ While the Taliban government ultimately quashed the revolt, conflicts over resources occurred across northern Afghanistan. Pashtun Taliban commanders often fail to restrain Pashtun nomads from seizing land from Uzbek, Turkmen, or Tajik locals in northern Afghanistan, leading to protests and occasional skirmishes.⁶⁸ While the

Taliban government has so far been able to control these local revolts, the combination of marginalizing local Taliban commanders, and alienating locals through redistribution of land could undermine the Taliban's control and increase support for anti-Taliban groups in northern Afghanistan over time.

III. The Taliban and Domestic Opposition

The Taliban is able to suppress popular anti-regime protests, but the regime's security forces do not effectively combat domestic terrorist and armed opposition groups. Domestic terrorist and armed opposition groups could pose a greater threat to the Taliban regime over time. The Taliban's security forces have limited resources and capability and struggle to deal with multiple simultaneous threats, despite receiving up to half of the Taliban budget. Taliban security forces try to quash threats as quickly as possible which often involves widespread extrajudicial killings and targeting of civilians. These killings generate discontent towards the Taliban government and fail to address underlying political grievances. Taliban policies, including the marginalization of non-Pashtun Taliban commanders, will exacerbate these grievances, particularly in northern Afghanistan. ISKP's infiltration within Taliban security forces will hinder the Taliban's ability to defeat ISKP over the long term.

Suppressing Domestic Opposition

The Taliban movement quickly represses protests against its policies which are broadly unpopular among Afghans. A *Tolo News* poll in late 2022 indicated 90% of Afghans support girls' education in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Gallup polls

in December 2022 indicate significant majorities of Afghans disapprove of Taliban policies restricting women's rights and express profound pessimism towards the Taliban government and the future of Afghanistan under the Taliban.⁷⁰ The Taliban has repeatedly violently repressed peaceful demonstrations advocating for girl's education.⁷¹ The Taliban Ministry of Interior banned all unauthorized demonstrations in September 2021.⁷² Afghans have defied this ban and continue to protest the Taliban, particularly in response to Taliban extrajudicial killings, and in support of girls' education.⁷³

The Taliban government does not allow public criticism of the Taliban and ruthlessly suppresses Afghan civil society organizations. Civil society activists and journalists who cross the Taliban are intimidated, tortured, and disappeared.⁷⁴ For example, the Taliban GDI detained a prominent Afghan education activist campaigning for girls' education, Matiullah Wesa, in March-October, 2023.⁷⁵ The Taliban government never formally charged Wesa with a crime, but anonymous Taliban officials indicated Wesa was arrested due to his meet-

ings with Western officials regarding women's education in Afghanistan, which annoyed unnamed senior Taliban leaders.⁷⁶ Even Taliban members who publicly criticize the government risk being detained by the government.⁷⁷ The Taliban

The Taliban is able to suppress popular anti-regime protests, but the regime's security forces do not effectively combat domestic terrorist and armed opposition groups.

government repeatedly arrested its former Kabul police spokesperson Mobeen Khan in 2022-2023 for criticizing corruption within the Taliban and the government's diplomatic outreach to Pakistan.⁷⁸

Demonstrations supporting girls' education in traditional Taliban support zones likely create political pressure on Taliban leaders to contest Akhundzada's ban on girls' education. Protests against Taliban policies regarding girls' education have taken place in areas typically associated with support for the Taliban.⁷⁹ In one instance in September 2022, local school principals unilaterally reopened girls' schools in Gardez, Paktia Province, before the Taliban GDI forcibly shut the schools several days later.⁸⁰ Paktia is typically a Haqqani Network stronghold. Shortly after the protests, Sirajuddin demanded the removal of the Taliban's ban on girls' education during a Taliban leadership meeting in October 2022.⁸¹ Sirajuddin's complaints did not change the Taliban government's policy towards girls' education and several months later the Taliban extended its ban on girls' education to ban women from universities.⁸² Sirajuddin's failure to impact Akhundzada's decision making behind closed doors may have contributed to his decision to escalate rhetorically and reiterate his criticisms publicly in early 2023.

Taliban Domestic Security Operations

The Taliban faces several significant domestic challenges to its rule. In general terms, they fall into two categories—representatives of pre-Taliban leaders and groups that do not accept the Taliban's rule and members of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) that were the target of attacks by United States, Afghan, and Taliban forces before the Taliban takeover and remain at odds with the Taliban today. The first category includes groups such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), both are

anti-Taliban groups formed following the Taliban capture of Kabul and are led by or associated with former Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) officers and former Afghan government officials. The NRF is led by the son of former Afghan warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, Ahmad Massoud, and operates in mostly Tajik areas of northeastern Afghanistan. The AFF operates across ethnic boundaries in both southern and northeastern Afghanistan and is led by former

Takhar governor and former Afghan National Army Chief of Staff Yassin Zia. The NRF and AFF seek to overthrow the Taliban government and restore a more decentralized version of the former Afghan Republic. The NRF and AFF are both relatively new insurgent groups that are still seeking to establish themselves as an insurgency capable of threatening the Taliban's hold over Afghanistan. ISKP operates separately from the NRF and AFF and espouses a completely different transnational Salafi-jihadi ideology, however. ISKP not only seeks to overthrow the Taliban government in Afghanistan but also seeks to build a transnational state in line with the Islamic State's *desired caliphate*. ISKP has operated in Afghanistan since 2016 and remains ensconced in eastern Afghanistan.

The Taliban has been expanding its internal security forces in an effort to keep up with these challenges but is struggling to do so. The Taliban Army Chief of Staff stated that the Taliban planned to increase its military from 150,000 to 200,000 in April 2023.⁸³ This followed a prior increase from 80,000 in late 2021 to 150,000 by mid-late 2022.⁸⁴ The Taliban government is attempting to create a centralized security force akin to the former ANSF to contain armed anti-Taliban groups. These centralized security forces, including 200,000 police in the Ministry of Interior, number 350,000 personnel across the Defense and Interior Ministries according to the Taliban.⁸⁵ The Taliban may be exaggerating their troop numbers, but the continued increases suggest lingering anxiety over its ability to control Afghanistan.

Civil society activists and journalists who cross the Taliban are intimidated, tortured, and disappeared.

The Taliban lacks the funding necessary to replicate the ANSF even though the government spends up to 40% of the Taliban budget on security forces.⁸⁶ The Taliban government's total annual collected revenues – \$2.3 billion – are less than the United States' annual contribution to the ANSF – \$3.1 billion in 2020.⁸⁷ The Taliban struggles to pay and feed its soldiers due to its funding shortages and in some cases, Taliban soldiers continue to “live off the land” and rely on locals for food.⁸⁸ The Taliban Ministry of Defense maintains an Air Force with several dozen operational aircraft, including helicopter gunships, and transport aircraft. The Taliban Air Force is only a third the size of the former Afghan Republic's Air Force, however.⁸⁹ Scarce financial resources and a lack of international recognition will hinder the Taliban Air Force's ability to service its operational aircraft.

The Taliban's special forces groups are limited and split across Taliban factional lines. These Taliban special forces are, by Afghanistan standards, well-trained, equipped, professional troops capable of rapidly redeploying to locations across Afghanistan.⁹⁰ The Taliban's army maintains only one special forces brigade, according to the Taliban Chief of Army Staff.⁹¹ This unit is almost certainly composed of former elements of the Taliban's former *Lashkar-e Mansoori* and *Lashkar-e Omari* units.⁹² The *Mansoori* and *Omari* units were originally based in Kandahar and organized by Mohammad Yaqoub. The Ministry of Interior's Badri 313 unit has been a Haqqani Network special forces group since at least 2015 and was heavily involved in executing Haqqani Network complex suicide attacks in Kabul during the Taliban's insurgency.⁹³ All of these units are reported to be “martyrdom units” which include suicide bomber elements.

The Taliban security forces units struggle to address multiple simultaneous domestic security threats. The Taliban repeatedly deployed forces from southern

Afghanistan in 2022, particularly Helmand and Kandahar, as well as Panjshir Province to deal with the NRF insurgency.⁹⁴ A revolt by a former Taliban commander in Sar-i Pul Province in June 2022, combined with local internal Taliban dissent, forced the Taliban to pull forces from across northern Afghanistan to deal with the revolt in Balkhab District, Iar-i Pul Province.⁹⁵ This included redeploying forces from Panjshir and Baghlan Provinces where the Taliban still faced an ongoing insurgency from the NRF.⁹⁶ The Taliban government's limited number of trained, effective, centralized security forces necessitates a rapid overwhelming response to revolts as the Taliban government cannot afford multiple persistent threats.

The Taliban deployment of security forces from southern Afghanistan to maintain Taliban control in restive areas of northern Afghanistan possibly contributed to increasing insecurity in Kandahar. The AFF conducted seven attacks on Taliban forces in Kandahar in the first half of 2022.⁹⁷ This increased to 12 attacks on Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan from October 2022 to January 2023.⁹⁸ The AFF likely exploited the Taliban's diversion of forces to northern Afghanistan for its September offensive against the NRF to conduct a surge of attacks in Kandahar.⁹⁹ Afghan journalists have also reported an increase in criminal activity in Kandahar since the Taliban took over in late 2021.¹⁰⁰

Attacks carried out by the NRF and AFF have tripled in mid-late 2023, which suggests their ability to sustain an insurgency against the Taliban may be growing over time. These attacks increased in quantity, sophistication, and occurred in areas where these groups had not previously operated. The average number of NRF attacks per month increased from three in the first half of 2023 to ten in the latter half of 2023, while the average number of AFF attacks per month increased from three to

The National Resistance Front and Afghanistan Freedom Front are both relatively new insurgent groups that are still seeking to establish themselves as an insurgency capable of threatening the Taliban's hold over Afghanistan.

nine over the same period.¹⁰¹ The NRF began claiming attacks in Nuristan Province for the first time in 2023, indicating an expansion of NRF activity into eastern Afghanistan. Both the NRF and AFF carried out just three attacks in Kabul in 2022 but carried out seven and 11 attacks in Kabul in late 2023, respectively. These attacks also increased in sophistication; earlier attacks typically featured targeted assassinations of low-level Taliban officials and attacks at isolated checkpoints, later attacks targeted larger Taliban bases and district and provincial officials.¹⁰² Yaqoub gave a speech on December 1, 2023, calling on the anti-Taliban groups to lay down their arms and accept Akhundzada's offer of amnesty.¹⁰³

The behavior of Taliban security forces exacerbates the challenges they face in quelling opposition to Taliban rule. Taliban abuses towards civilians, particularly extrajudicial killings, drive long-term support for anti-Taliban groups. Taliban counter-ISKP operations in eastern Afghanistan in late 2021 relied heavily on extrajudicial killings, with over 100 bodies found in one canal alone.¹⁰⁴ These widespread extrajudicial killings provoked protests from locals.¹⁰⁵ Similar Taliban extrajudicial killings in Panjshir in late 2021 and 2022 against suspected NRF supporters also provoked local protests.¹⁰⁶ The Taliban executed hundreds of former ANSF following their victory in late 2021 and continued to do so throughout 2023.¹⁰⁷ Anti-Taliban groups cite these extrajudicial killings as justification for their attacks targeting Taliban fighters and officials.¹⁰⁸ These operations are not aberrations – Taliban operations against real or suspected anti-Taliban groups continue to be marked by systemic torture and extrajudicial executions of civilians.¹⁰⁹ The Taliban government previously tried to impose accountability on its forces through its “Clearing of Ranks Commission,” which had a stated mission to remove Taliban members accused of war crimes and criminal activity, from late 2021 to early 2022. This commission did not prevent Taliban forces from carrying out further widespread extrajudicial

killings during campaigns in June and September 2022, however.¹¹⁰

Taliban attempts to adopt a more selective and negotiated approach toward ISKP are unlikely to succeed over the long-term. The Taliban government invested heavily in expanding the GDI's capabilities in 2022-2023 which improved the Taliban's ability to selectively target ISKP cells and Salafi religious leaders expressing support for ISKP.¹¹¹ Taliban forces continue to target Salafi civilians under flimsy pretexts, however, and there is no rule of law, which means Salafi civilians have little ability to protest or address grievances after being targeted by Taliban security forces. Taliban intelligence officials in eastern Afghanistan induced hundreds of suspected ISKP fighters and supporters to

The behavior of Taliban security forces exacerbates the challenges they face in quelling opposition to Taliban rule.

surrender in 2021-2022 after mediating with local Salafi elders.¹¹² ISKP fighters who surrendered complained that the Taliban failed to provide the funds it promised to provide to those who surrendered.¹¹³ Surrendered ISKP fighters also complained that they feared retaliation from ISKP, which suggests that ISKP networks in eastern Afghanistan were not degraded as heavily as the Taliban claimed.¹¹⁴ The Taliban government's attempts to negotiate with local Salafi elders and religious leaders were also undermined by the Taliban's refusal to incorporate Salafis into local Taliban provincial governance or local religious councils.¹¹⁵ The continued lack of rule of law, failure to uphold promises during negotiations with local Salafi elites, and the exclusion of those elites from local power, will all hinder the Taliban's ability to undermine support for ISKP.

Taliban policies towards the non-Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan could also exacerbate discontent with the Taliban government.¹¹⁶ These policies range from banning the teaching of Shi'a Islamic jurisprudence, which many Hazaras in central and northern Afghanistan follow, to imposing the use of Pashto over Dari, the language spoken by the majority of the population in northern Afghanistan.¹¹⁷ The Taliban government has

also forcibly seized land from religious and ethnic minorities in northern Afghanistan, leading to local protests.¹¹⁸ Locals oppose Taliban commanders forcibly marrying their daughters, particularly in non-Pashtun minority communities in northern Afghanistan; these forced marriages by Taliban commanders have become common across Afghanistan.¹¹⁹

Akhundzada's efforts to appoint loyalists from his ethnic and tribal background to positions in northern Afghanistan may push disaffected commanders to defect to anti-Taliban groups. Akhundzada's campaign to expand his control risks alienating Taliban support bases which were critical to the Taliban movement gaining control over northern Afghanistan. The Taliban marginalized several Uzbek Taliban commanders in northern Afghanistan in early 2022 and replaced them with Pashtun Taliban commanders. Some of these marginalized Uzbek Taliban fighters joined ISKP and began conducting attacks targeting the Taliban in Faryab Province in late 2022.¹²⁰ An expert familiar with ISKP described defections to ISKP in north-west Afghanistan as modest as of mid-2022.¹²¹ Tajik Taliban members initially resisted Akhundzada's appointment of a Pashtun governor in Badakhshan in July 2023 and did not allow the Pashtun governor to take office in Badakhshan until September 2023.¹²² Local Tajik Taliban commanders in north-eastern Afghanistan previously defected to the NRF in Panjshir and Badakhshan Provinces after falling out with the Taliban movement.¹²³

ISKP has infiltrated the Taliban's security forces, which undermines the regime's counter-ISKP efforts. Taliban security forces have repeatedly arrested local Taliban officials on charges of working for ISKP, particularly in northern and central Afghanistan.¹²⁴ The ISKP member responsible for organizing the assassination of a senior Taliban religious leader on August 11, 2022, was reportedly an active Taliban member from an influential family in Logar Province.¹²⁵ Taliban

Deputy Defense Minister and senior Taliban commander Fazel Mazloom admitted in February 2023 that anti-Taliban forces are operating within the Taliban's ranks.¹²⁶ ISKP informants have supported ISKP attacks on high-value Taliban targets, including senior Taliban leaders, and will likely hinder Taliban counter-ISKP operations.¹²⁷

The Taliban will likely struggle to control the ISKP's infiltration of the Taliban's security forces due to ideological disagreements and internal power struggles. Akhundzada is attempting to purge suspected ISKP sympathizers within the Taliban's ranks, but this purge will not address systemic issues driving Taliban defections to ISKP.¹²⁸ Hardline elements within the Taliban have previously defected to ISKP over concerns the current Taliban government is not ideologically extreme enough.¹²⁹ ISKP propaganda tries to exacerbate these ideological divisions by highlighting Taliban government actions hardliners disapprove of, such as diplomatic engagement with non-Muslim countries.¹³⁰ Taliban members who have been marginalized from power due to internal power struggles have also previously defected to ISKP.¹³¹ Akhundzada's consolidation of an autocratic system is narrowing the number of Taliban powerbrokers which risks pushing marginalized Taliban commanders towards anti-Taliban groups, including ISKP.¹³²

Taliban control over Afghanistan is vulnerable to an increase in armed opposition groups' capability and organization and worsening Taliban infighting. The Taliban would struggle to maintain control across all of Afghanistan if armed opposition groups received significant foreign assistance. The Taliban's ability to decisively quash revolts could be imperiled if Taliban infighting undermines the Taliban's ability

to mobilize and coordinate security forces. Akhundzada's policies, including the marginalization of local commanders, could undermine Taliban control in northern Afghanistan over time. Taliban security operations are unlikely to decisively defeat opposition groups, including ISKP.

The Taliban government has also forcibly seized land from religious and ethnic minorities in northern Afghanistan, leading to local protests.

IV. The Taliban's Relationship with Salafi-jihadi (SJ) Groups in Afghanistan

The Taliban provides a safe haven for Salafi-jihadi groups that it does not control and is permitting to gain strength. It is unlikely to be able to restrain or prevent those groups from conducting an attack outside of Afghanistan should they choose to do so. The Taliban government maintains command and control over Tajik jihadists in northern Afghanistan and maintains an alliance with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban has failed to fulfill its stated commitments to neighboring states concerning relocating jihadist groups and is likely failing to prevent those groups from planning future attacks. The absence of an effective Taliban security strategy is enabling these groups to embed themselves in Afghanistan and grow stronger.

The Taliban government exerts command and control over the Tajik jihadist group Jamaat Ansarullah even though it remains outside the Taliban military's formal order of battle. Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), which also calls itself Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan, is composed of Tajikistan nationals and ultimately intends to overthrow the government of Tajikistan.¹³³ JA is currently based in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, and works closely with members of the Taliban government, and other Salafi-jihadist organizations.¹³⁴ JA worked with the Taliban Army Chief of Staff to support the Taliban's summer 2021 offensive and soon thereafter The Taliban government appointed them as Taliban border guards along the Badakhshan-Tajikistan border.¹³⁵ JA leader Muhammad Sharipov, also known as Mahdi Arsalan, reportedly met with the Taliban cabinet in Kabul in late 2021 and shortly thereafter received additional military equipment from the Taliban.¹³⁶ Although JA likely only has a few hundred active militants, unconfirmed reports from mid-2022 suggest that JA has already tried to

The Taliban will likely struggle to control the ISKP's infiltration of the Taliban's security forces due to ideological disagreements and internal power struggles.

stoke unrest across the border in Tajikistan.¹³⁷ The Taliban government continues to support JA despite its clear and unambiguous transnational objectives.

The Taliban remains allied with Al-Qaeda (AQ) which may be keeping a low profile in Afghanistan to reduce risks to the Taliban government. AQ runs training camps in southern Afghanistan in coordination with local Taliban leaders and leads units in Kunar and Nuristan Province.¹³⁸ AQ's presence in traditional Taliban strongholds suggests AQ continues to maintain a strong relationship with diverse strands of the Taliban movement across Afghanistan.

The US drone strike which killed AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul on July 31, 2022, demonstrated an enduring relationship between Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani and Al-Qaeda.¹³⁹ The Taliban covered up the event — never officially acknowledging Zawahiri's death — and pivoted to blaming the United States for violating the Doha Agreement by conducting a drone strike inside of Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰

The Taliban not allied with, but nonetheless unable to control other SJ groups like the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) as exemplified by the Taliban's failure to satisfy its stated commitments to relocate them elsewhere. The Taliban promised the Chinese government in late 2021 to relocate TIP, also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, from Badakhshan Province, which borders China, to eastern Afghanistan.¹⁴¹ TIP leaders released footage showing them celebrating Eid in northern Afghanistan in May 2022, indicating they continue to operate strongholds there, however.¹⁴² The UN reported that TIP cooperated with ISKP to plan and conduct attacks targeting Chinese nationals in Afghanistan in mid-2022.¹⁴³ Not only is the Taliban

unable to relocate TIP militants as it promised to do, but it is unable to prevent TIP from planning attacks on Chinese citizens within Afghanistan.

Terrorist groups in Afghanistan enjoy unprecedented freedom of movement and are using that freedom to embed themselves and build strongholds within Afghanistan.¹⁴⁴ The TIP began establishing new military bases in Baghlan Province in mid-2022 – indicating an expansion beyond its traditional safe havens in Badakhshan, northern Afghanistan.¹⁴⁵ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan moved some 300 fighters to Pul-i Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan Province in November 2022, indicating it may also be seeking to expand its presence there.¹⁴⁶ Afghan media reported foreign fighters affiliated with other unknown groups have moved to other parts of northern Afghanistan, including Faryab, Panjshir, and Takhar provinces in late 2022.¹⁴⁷ The Taliban government is unable or unwilling to prevent Salafi-Jihadi terror groups from entrenching themselves

The Taliban remains allied with Al-Qaeda which may be keeping a low profile in Afghanistan to reduce risks to the Taliban government.

within Afghanistan, particularly in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban's ability to control these groups and prevent them from launching attacks abroad may weaken as these groups grow in strength.

The Taliban's ability to prevent Salafi-jihadi groups from planning attacks abroad could decline over time. The Taliban's command and control problems could also undermine its ability to control Salafi jihadi groups. Not all Taliban factions agree with restraining Salafi Jihadi groups, and some may choose to shelter Salafi Jihadi groups – as the Haqqanis continue to shelter Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan. The Taliban government remains a weak state that will continue to struggle with internal infighting, scarce resources for its state and security forces, and oppressive policies that increase discontent towards the government over time. A Taliban state that remains weak, or weakens further, while Salafi-Jihadi groups strengthen in Afghanistan, will increasingly struggle to control those groups.

V. Outlook

The future of the Taliban governance in Afghanistan depends on whether Akhundzada gains or loses power within the Taliban regime. The following scenarios are based on how Akhundzada's role could change, or not change, and what the implications would be for Afghanistan and the region. Each scenario includes observable indicators that will enable ISW to assess the trajectory of the Taliban regime as the situation in Afghanistan changes.

Scenario I: Akhundzada remains the supreme leader and increases control over the Taliban government. Akhundzada has so far been able to suppress discontent within the Taliban movement and anti-Taliban movements cannot currently

replace the Taliban government's control over Afghanistan. Akhundzada's ability to suppress public dissent, replace senior Taliban leaders in government, develop his own loyal security forces, and successfully implement his edicts, would all indicate his hold on government is strengthening. Akhundzada's control over the Taliban government will perpetuate an isolated, weak, Taliban state, with limited prospects for economic growth and continuing security challenges. Akhundzada's continued control over the Taliban would allow him to perpetuate and strengthen extreme socio-cultural policies which severely curtail women's rights, and political freedoms for Afghans. Akhundzada's Taliban government will have both a limited capability and

limited ideological desire to control Salafi Jihadi movements within Afghanistan.

Scenario 2: Akhundzada's control over the Taliban government weakens over time. Some of Akhundzada's policies, such as the opium ban he directed in 2022-2023, risk undermining support for the regime among the traditional Taliban support base in southern Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ Some within the regime, including Sirajuddin Haqqani, have attempted to weaken Akhundzada's religious legitimacy and leadership.¹⁴⁹ Akhundzada's failure to handle these internal challenges, and other pre-existing political and economic challenges, would diminish his ability to act as the ultimate decision-maker within the Taliban government. Worsening Taliban infighting and command and control issues would indicate Akhundzada's grip on government is weakening. Akhundzada's inability to suppress public criticism, replace senior Taliban leaders, implement his edicts, or develop his own security forces, would also indicate his power over the government is weakening. Increased infighting within the Taliban government would reduce the government's ability to control SJ and opposition groups. The economic crisis in Afghanistan will persist, resulting in continuing refugee flows from the country. Akhundzada's weakening control over the Taliban government would undermine his ability to implement his edicts, leading to fractured Taliban policies locally within Afghanistan. The TTP would remain uninhibited from carrying out attacks in Pakistan.

Scenario 3: Akhundzada is replaced by a new Taliban supreme leader. Replacing Akhundzada without fracturing the Taliban movement would require cooperation among the senior-most Taliban leaders Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mohammad Yaqoub, and Sirajuddin Haqqani. It would also require acquiescence or support from senior Taliban religious leaders. Cooperation among these Taliban leaders is difficult to achieve due to pre-existing

competition and mistrust between them but is still plausible.¹⁵⁰ Yaqoub and Sirajuddin previously cooperated on rhetorical campaigns criticizing Akhundzada, indicating that it is possible for these leaders to overcome mistrust and competition to some extent.¹⁵¹ They would likely find agreeing on a new supreme leader much harder. Coordinated rhetorical campaigns amongst senior Taliban leaders against Akhundzada and calls from the Taliban religious leadership for a new supreme leader would indicate that Akhundzada is facing serious pressure to resign. The Taliban government would be somewhat stronger, less internationally isolated, with some economic growth, in the event a new Taliban

supreme leader with broader support and less extreme views comes to power. This government would still be authoritarian but could relax some of Akhundzada's policies, particularly with regard to girls' education. A slightly stronger, less internationally isolated, Taliban state would have greater ability to control Salafi Jihadi groups but would

still face questions surrounding their willingness to do so. Al Qaeda maintains connections to Taliban leaders across multiple factions and would retain a safe haven under a new Taliban supreme leader.

The future of the Taliban governance in Afghanistan depends on whether Akhundzada gains or loses power within the Taliban regime.

Implications for US policy

US or international recognition of the Taliban government is highly unlikely to alter Akhundzada's decision-making or policies. Akhundzada's rhetoric indicates he does not regard other states as legitimate and there is no indication this has changed or will change in the future. Akhundzada's perspective towards girls' education and socio-cultural policies are core to his ideology and unlikely to change regardless of any policies undertaken by the international community.¹⁵² Akhundzada's meeting with the Qatari Prime Minister on May 12, while unusual because Akhundzada does not typically meet directly with foreign officials, did not indicate a shift in policy.¹⁵³ Akhundzada continued to clamp down on

women's education and Taliban policy towards sheltering terrorist groups did not change. The Taliban government has failed to crack down on the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) safe havens in Afghanistan which support the TTP's ongoing insurgency inside Pakistan, despite increasing pressure from the Pakistani government throughout 2023.¹⁵⁴

United States diplomatic engagement with the Taliban may help address the United States' information gaps regarding the situation in Afghanistan but it is unlikely to impact Taliban decision-making. United States dialogue with Taliban leaders may help improve its understanding regarding what is going on within Afghanistan and the Taliban government. The United States may be able to cooperate with the Taliban on targeting ISKP commanders to help prevent attacks outside of Afghanistan. The United States will not be able to meet or engage diplomatically directly with Taliban Supreme Leader Akhundzada as he will not meet with non-Muslims. US engagement is unlikely to change Taliban policies as it will be unable to influence the prime decision maker within the Taliban government. Cooperation between the United States and the Taliban will remain politically fraught for both sides regardless of who is the Taliban supreme leader.

The Over-The-Horizon (OTH) Counter Terrorism (CT) strategy, while capable of killing select AQ or ISKP leaders, will not adequately address the threat posed by these groups in Afghanistan. Prior US campaigns targeting Taliban or AQ leadership did not defeat those groups and a few targeted killings will not do so today. The Taliban has a stated intent to acquire air defense systems in order to prevent foreign drones from operating over Afghanistan.¹⁵⁵ While this is not a concern in the short run, this suggests the Taliban are unlikely to cooperate with an OTH strategy targeting non-IS Salafi-jihadi groups. US drones already face hurdles due to a lack

of bases in neighboring countries which necessitates long flight times that reduce time on station.¹⁵⁶

US security cooperation with countries neighboring Afghanistan – particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan – could help mitigate the Salafi-jihadi threat emanating from Afghanistan. Although the situation within Afghanistan could change in the future, in the interim the United States can only prevent instability from spreading beyond Afghanistan and destabilizing the region. The SJ threat from Afghanistan will likely continue for the foreseeable future, with attacks already increasing in Pakistan.¹⁵⁷ The United States can mitigate these threats by expanding security cooperation and intelligence sharing with countries neighboring Afghanistan – primarily Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan – all of whom have previously worked with the United States. ISKP is recruiting in all these countries and has conducted attacks targeting them with a stated intent to conduct more attacks.¹⁵⁸

The threat from Salafi-jihadi groups in Afghanistan could worsen over time. The longer the Taliban government controls Afghanistan the more Salafi-jihadi groups will strengthen themselves by embedding themselves into local Afghan communities. Internal divisions and scarce resources will hinder Taliban efforts to build and maintain state capacity in Afghanistan. Absent CT pressure SJ groups will grow their recruiting efforts and expand their bases in Afghanistan, as several groups, like TIP have already done. Other groups like the TTP are already expanding their recruiting and fundraising presence in Afghanistan to support attacks in neighboring Pakistan. The strengthening of SJ groups while Taliban state capacity remains the same or declines will erode the balance of power between the Taliban government and Salafi-jihadi groups. This shift suggests the Taliban government's ability to control Salafi-jihadi groups may decline over time.

United States diplomatic engagement with the Taliban may help address the United States' information gaps regarding the situation in Afghanistan but it is unlikely to impact Taliban decision-making.

Appendix A: Taliban Factions

The Haqqani Network. The Haqqani Network predates the Taliban movement and is currently a semi-independent branch of the Taliban movement based in southeastern Afghanistan, as opposed to the original Kandahar branch of the Taliban movement. The group originally dates back to the late 1970s when its leader Jalaluddin Haqqani declared jihad against the Afghan monarchy. Throughout the 1980s it established deep roots in southeastern Afghanistan in *Loya Paktia*; comprising Khost, Paktia, and Paktika Provinces.¹⁵⁹ The Haqqani's primarily draw their support from Ghilzai and Karlani Pashtun tribal confederations based in southeastern and eastern Afghanistan, as opposed to the Kandahari Taliban who draw predominantly on the Durrani Pashtun tribal confederation based in southern Afghanistan.¹⁶⁰ The Haqqani Network joined the Taliban movement in 1995 and its then-leader Jalaluddin Haqqani served in the first Taliban government as the Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs.¹⁶¹ The Haqqani Network's separate tribal support base and safe haven based in Miranshah, Pakistan – separate from the Kandahari Taliban safe haven in Quetta – helped it maintain separate lines of command and control during the Taliban insurgency against the former Afghan government.¹⁶² The current Haqqani Network leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is dual hatted as the Taliban Minister of Interior and also maintains ties to the Taliban intelligence service, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). Sirajuddin commands significant numbers

of Taliban security forces and his forces often lead operations targeting anti-Taliban forces across Afghanistan. Sirajuddin's relatives play a key role within the Haqqani Network and include important Taliban leaders, such as Minister of Refugees Khalil Haqqani and Deputy Army Chief of Staff Haji Mali Khan.

Kabul Taliban. The “Kabul Taliban” includes much of the Taliban cabinet, which is predominantly based in Kabul. “Kabul Taliban” can also refer to local Taliban networks based in and around Kabul, including neighboring provinces such as Wardak, Nangarhar, or Parwan Province. These networks enabled Taliban complex attacks in Kabul during the Taliban's war against the former Afghan Republic.¹⁶³ The Haqqani Network, was heavily involved in funding and directing this Kabul attack network.¹⁶⁴ The Taliban movement moved additional forces from southern Afghanistan to help secure Kabul following the Afghan government's collapse in August 2021. The split between “Kabul Taliban” and “Kandahari Taliban” covers both political and regional splits between different Taliban factions. These political splits include both ideological disputes and disputes over the distribution of power.

Kandahari Taliban. The “Kandahari Taliban” refers to Taliban leaders who are originally from or have much of their support base in the Greater Kandahar area. This includes the first Taliban supreme leader and founder of the Taliban movement Mullah Omar, and the current

US security cooperation with countries neighboring Afghanistan – particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan – could help mitigate the Salafi-jihadi threat emanating from Afghanistan.

Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada. Most Taliban leaders in the Taliban's 1990s and current Taliban government have a Kandahari Pashtun background.¹⁶⁵ During the Taliban's insurgency from 2002-2021 the Kandahari Taliban operated predominantly in Quetta, Pakistan, and was sometimes referred to as the "Quetta Shura Taliban".¹⁶⁶ Other Taliban factions like the Haqqani Network maintained safe havens separate from the Kandaharis based in Miranshah and Peshawar. Some media reports use "Kandahari Taliban" to refer to Akhundzada and his inner circle who remain based in Kandahar however there other Taliban subfactions with a Kandahari support base who are not part of Akhundzada's inner circle.¹⁶⁷ The Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar and Taliban Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoub both have a Kandahari background and have at times opposed Akhundzada's policies. Yaqoub and Baradar also both share a connection to Mullah Omar – Yaqoub is his son and Baradar cofounded the Taliban movement with Omar.

Uzbek Taliban. The "Uzbek Taliban" typically refers to Uzbek Taliban commanders who joined the Taliban movement over the course of the Taliban insurgency. Many of these Uzbek Taliban commanders come from northwestern Afghanistan, particularly Faryab Province. These Uzbek Taliban commanders played an important role in enabling the Taliban to conquer northern Afghanistan during its summer 2021 offensive. Many of these same Uzbek Taliban commanders have seen their power diminish since the Taliban government came to power in August 2021 due to concerns over alleged sympathy with ISKP and competition over the distribution of power.¹⁶⁸ For example, Taliban Deputy

Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi is ostensibly one of the highest-ranked Uzbek Taliban leaders, yet Hanafi is often relegated to handling administrative matters and has the weakest portfolio among the three Taliban Deputy Prime Ministers.¹⁶⁹ The sidelining of Uzbek Taliban commanders has already produced one, albeit brief, intra-Taliban revolt in Faryab Province.¹⁷⁰ Sidelined Uzbek Taliban commanders could be willing to support whichever Taliban faction promises to restore them to positions of power within the Taliban government.

Tajik Taliban. The "Tajik Taliban" refers to Afghan Tajik commanders who joined the Taliban movement during its insurgency period, enabling the Taliban movement to better extend its control into northern Afghanistan.¹⁷¹ Many of these Tajik Taliban commanders come from northeastern Afghanistan, particularly Badakhshan Province. One of the highest-ranking Tajik Taliban commanders is the Taliban Army's Chief of Staff, Qari Fasihuddin, who played an important role in the Taliban summer 2021 offensive in northern Afghanistan.¹⁷² Some Tajik Taliban leaders joined the movement prior to its insurgency period and occupy ministerial portfolios within the current cabinet, but often lack significant political power within the Taliban movement. Minister of Economy Qari din Mohammad Hanif is one such leader, however, like Abdul Salam Hanafi, Hanif fulfills a primarily administrative function and lacks power within the movement. The continuing presence of armed anti-Taliban groups in northeastern Afghanistan has likely given local Tajik Taliban commanders more leverage within intra-Taliban politics. Consequently, Tajik Taliban commanders have generally not been sidelined to the same degree as some Uzbek Taliban commanders.

Appendix B: Anti-Taliban Groups

Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF). The AFF is a relatively recent anti-Taliban group founded in March 2022 and led by the former Governor of Takhar and former Afghan National Army Chief of Staff Yassin Zia.¹⁷³ Unlike the NRF, the AFF conducts operations in both southern and northern Afghanistan.¹⁷⁴ The AFF has refrained from conducting major military operations, like the NRF in Panjshir, but it does conduct small-scale guerrilla attacks in Kandahar and Kabul. The AFF's ability to conduct attacks in southern and northern Afghanistan suggests it has support across multiple ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). ISKP's primary goal is to undermine and eventually overthrow the Taliban government. ISKP has an intense rivalry with the Taliban, and both compete for legitimacy as an Islamic movement. ISKP has several lines of effort to weaken the Taliban government. This includes directly attacking the Taliban government, particularly through assassinating Taliban leaders. ISKP's propaganda effort also highlights the Taliban's contradictions and poor governance. ISKP's ability to exploit Taliban infighting has enabled it to infiltrate the Taliban government, hindering the Taliban's counter-ISKP effort. ISKP also carries out attacks against foreign diplomatic facilities. These attacks undermine international confidence in the Taliban's ability to control the

security situation in Afghanistan and deter potential international investment into Afghanistan. These attacks also put the Taliban in the position of protecting states like Iran, Pakistan, and China, which ISKP uses to undermine the Taliban's Islamic legitimacy. Finally, ISKP continues to attack religious minorities to increase sectarian tensions in Afghanistan and attack economic infrastructure to reduce to Taliban's ability to deliver basic services.¹⁷⁵

National Resistance Front (NRF). The National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan is the largest armed anti-Taliban group unaffiliated with Salafi Jihadi terrorism. The NRF is led by Ahmad Massoud, son of the famous Ahmad Shah Massoud who resisted the Soviet Union from the Panjshir Valley in northeastern Afghanistan during the 1980s. Ahmad Massoud began organizing a "Second Resistance" in 2019 which evolved into the NRF in August 2021 when the Afghan Republic collapsed.¹⁷⁶ The NRF's stated primary goal is to establish a decentralized democratic republic in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁷ The NRF's predominant areas of operations center around the Panjshir Valley and neighboring provinces. While the NRF's ability to operate in certain parts of Afghanistan grew throughout 2022, its overall capabilities remain limited.¹⁷⁸ Any attempt by the NRF to openly control terrain in Afghanistan typically leads to a swift Taliban counteroffensive which pushes the NRF back into the mountains.¹⁷⁹



TALIBAN POLICIES TOWARDS GIRL'S EDUCATION and Internal Tensions

The Taliban took power in Kabul on August 15, 2021 and have increasingly restricted women and girl's right to access education since then. The policy remains controversial with some Taliban leaders, some of whom have publicly criticized Supreme Leader Akhundzada for approving the ban.



Endnotes

- 1 The Taliban movement draws upon the two largest Pashtun tribal confederacies – the Durrani and the Ghilzai – with the Kandahari Taliban drawing upon the Durrani while the Haqqani Network draw upon the Ghilzai. Rivalry between these Pashtun tribal confederacies stretches back centuries and sometimes influences competition within the Taliban movement. Thomas Ruttig. “Loya Paktia’s Insurgency: The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity.” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/20090224-HQN-as-autonomous-T-entity.pdf>; Ron Synovitz, Will The Taliban Stay United To Govern, Or Splinter Into Regional Fiefdoms? *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-govern-regional-factions/31428069.html>
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