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Authors

Ajmal Burhanzoi
University of Toronto



Dealing with the Taliban: A Two-Pronged State of Confusion

SYNOPSIS

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August of 2021, communication between the Taliban and the international community has been deeply fraught. On the one hand, the Taliban have sent mixed messages to the international community through confusing and often contradictory statements regarding their national and foreign policy. On the other hand, the international community has also reverted to reactionary measures and statements, in protest of the Taliban's missteps.

At the core of this two-pronged state of confusion lies the fact that Taliban are suffering from internal rifts and power struggles that lead to mixed messages, which have subsequently confused international audiences. The international community has thus far incorrectly assumed that the Taliban is a monolith; however, in reality the group is an amalgamation of several factions that have significant differences of opinion on important issues. The international community therefore needs to understand the ongoing intra-Taliban struggle, and engage with Taliban from a position of international solidarity.

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About the Authors



Ajmal Burhanzoi, University of Toronto

Ajmal Burhanzoi is a Ph.D. candidate at University of Toronto specializing in IR and comparative politics. His dissertation research, supported by the SSHRC fellowship and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, focuses on the effect of great power rivalry on opposition movements in developing states. Ajmal was born in Kabul City and went to grade school there. He graduated from high school in Peshawar, Pakistan, where he lived for six years as an immigrant who had escaped the Taliban. He completed his BA at Kabul University and his MA at Ball State University in the US. He has more than a decade of work experience in Afghanistan. Recently, he conducted his doctoral field research there, taught IR at the American University of Afghanistan, and managed research and development projects funded by the USAID and SIDA. He is bilingual by birth (Dari and Pashtu) and knows Urdu at an intermediate level.

Problem

Policymakers around the world have generally treated the Taliban as a monolithic and highly centralized group. While this may have been the case in some respects, the Taliban's efforts to govern Afghanistan since August of 2021 are indicative of growing rifts and divergent visions and interests among different factions. These internal differences have not only wrought a high level of confusion inside Afghanistan, but they have also made engagement with the Taliban challenging for the international community. At the regional level, because there are a number of important geo-political and geo-economic interests at stake, rival neighbouring states have pursued competing interests in Afghanistan, which have a significant effect on the Taliban's internal competition and fragmentation.

Essential Background

The Taliban, as an armed group, emerged in 1994 and took control of Kabul in 1996 for the first time. After they were overthrown by the US and its allies in late 2001, the Taliban mounted a bloody insurgency until it overthrew the US-backed government in August of 2021. During this time, the Taliban have often been considered a monolithic and centralized group by the international community. However, rifts and factionalization within Taliban became apparent after the death of the movement's founder Mullah Omar was announced in 2015, thus sparking a succession competition among different factions that each wanted their leader to ascend to the position of "Amir-ul-Momeneen" (leader of the faithful).

Although Akhtar Mansoor became the leader of the Taliban in 2015, there were concerns within the Taliban that his ties with Pakistan were too close.¹ Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqoob, therefore formed a faction alongside three other leaders who opposed the choice of Mansoor as the Amir. These internal tensions even led to the emergence of a splinter group lead by Mullah Abdul Manan Niazai.² Although Mansoor was killed in 2016, these internal tensions within the Taliban leadership have persisted.

Since the Taliban took control in 2021, these internal rifts have become more apparent. In fact, Taliban leader Mullah Ghani Bradar allegedly engaged in a gun fight with the powerful Haqqani faction in the Presidential Palace.³ While Bradar later dispelled the rumors of his death in a radio message, the fact that an armed clash allegedly took place suggests that conflict has been brewing among Taliban factions. This internal conflict prompted the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) Chief Lt General Faiz Hameed, to allegedly rush to Kabul to calm things down.⁴

One notable area of disagreement among the Taliban leadership is girls' education. To date, the situation on the ground remains volatile. The Taliban initially announced that girls would be allowed to go to school; however, on the first day of classes, girls beyond grade six were turned away. This reversal in the Taliban's position is indicative of an ideological disagreement at the leadership level, and of a brewing internal power struggle among Taliban factions. Some leaders, such as Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the former head of the Taliban's political office in the Gulf state of

1 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/rifts-appear-among-afghan-taliban-top-ranks-over-successor-to-mullah-omar/article25795265/>

2 <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-rifts-exposed-afghanistan/31880018.html>

3 <https://cnn.it/3dCHeig>

4 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/talibans-mullah-baradar-hurt-in-clash-with-haqqanis-report/articleshow/85960477.cms>

Qatar and now Deputy Foreign Minister, have openly criticized the Taliban's ban on girls' secondary school education.⁵ Yet, this ban is not uniformly imposed across the country. For instance, girls in the Khanabad district of Kunduz province started attending high school as expected, on the second day of the new year, because the local Taliban in control of affairs there chose to do so.⁶

Strategies and Solutions

Macro-level divisions within the Taliban leadership appear along three cleavages: (1) leaders who were and are still engaged in international diplomacy (e.g. Mullah Bradar and Abbas Stanikzai); (2) leaders who believe they have more grassroots and organic support inside Afghanistan (e.g. Mullah Yaqoob); and (3) leaders who believe they fought the most during the jihad, and thus deserve a bigger share of postwar power (e.g. the Haqqani network).⁷ These divisions have the potential to worsen the already dire situation. Regional and international actors could act as spoilers by exploiting these divisions in pursuit of their narrow interests; or, they could take a calculated stance grounded in shared interests, aimed at bringing Taliban policy into harmony with the international community's expectations. The latter course of action is only possible through multilateralism, and by steering the cacophony of Taliban infighting into a harmony of interests inside Afghanistan, which benefits domestic, regional, and international actors alike. Unless a multilateral, human right-focused approach to engaging the Taliban is developed and led by neutral international organizations, self-interested neighbouring states will be free to exploit and intensify rifts among different Taliban factions, with adverse prospects for the future of Afghanistan and its people, and potentially severe consequences for global security.

Recommendations for Canada

Canada should act as the voice of reason at this critical juncture, in order to mitigate the current humanitarian disaster and prevent a worsening security crisis. To do that, Canada ought to raise the alarm on Afghanistan through a concerted effort at the United Nations, highlighting actual and potential adverse outcomes in Afghanistan, and spearheading efforts towards a multilateral engagement with the Taliban. Canada is well positioned to use its image as a "soft power" in and through the UN system to mobilize this initiative, and take tangible steps to engage the Taliban.

5 <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-rifts-exposed-afghanistan/31880018.html>

6 Author's phone conversations with relatives who still live in Khanabad.

7 <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-rifts-exposed-afghanistan/31880018.html>