



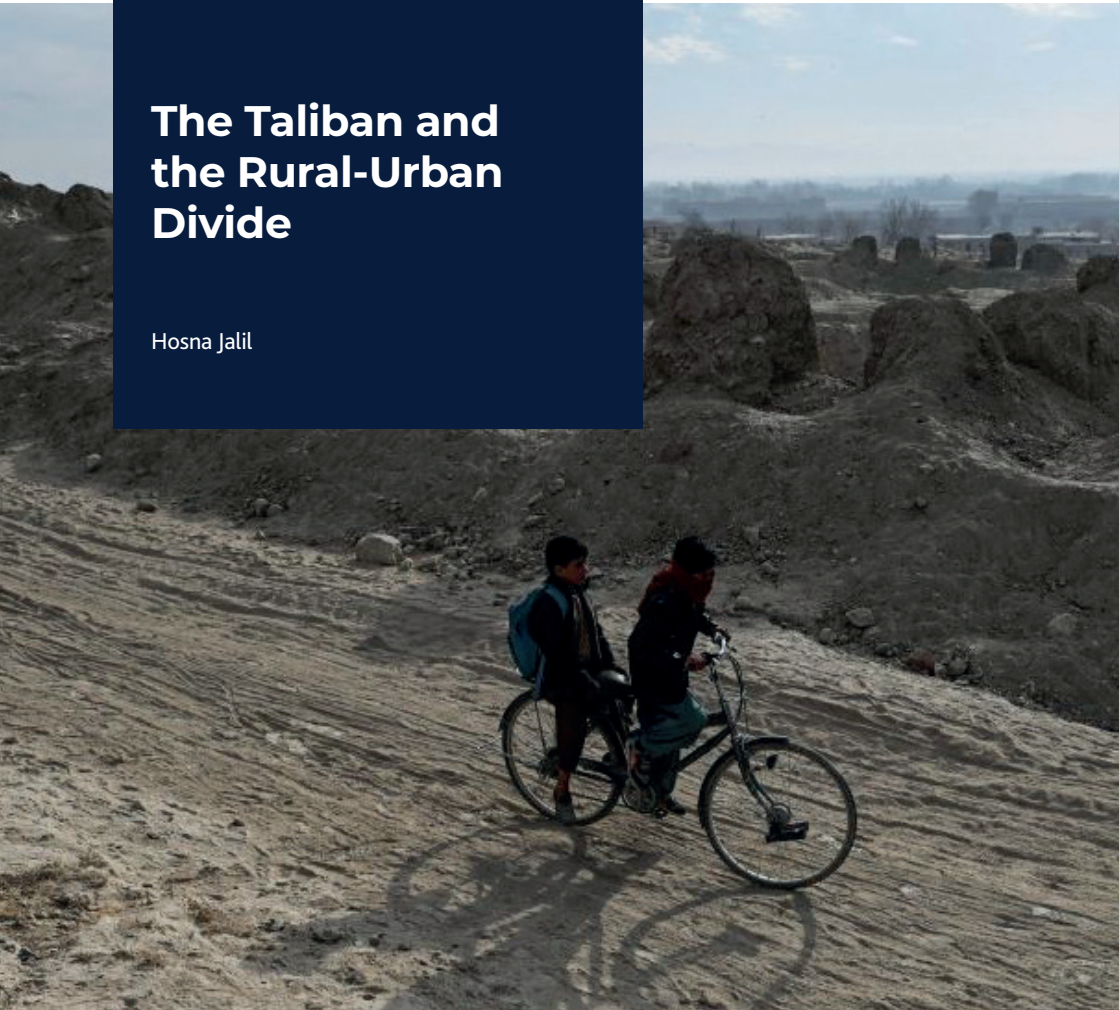
PeaceRep

Peace and Conflict
Resolution Evidence
Platform

AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH NETWORK

The Taliban and the Rural-Urban Divide

Hosna Jalil





THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



PeaceRep
Peace and Conflict
Resolution Evidence
Platform



Conflict and
Civiness
Research
Group
at LSE

Afghanistan Research Network

This series highlights the work and analysis of the Afghanistan Research Network (ARN), a project convened by LSE / PeaceRep, and the Civic Engagement Project (CEP). The network brings together over 20 Afghan researchers (and several non-Afghans) with diverse expertise and backgrounds investigating a range of issues. This project aims to support Afghan researchers who were recently forced to leave Afghanistan; to ensure expert and analytical provision; inform contextually-appropriate international policies and practices on Afghanistan; and to deepen understanding of evolving political, security, and economic dynamics.

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL
Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: info@peacerep.org
Website: PeaceRep.org
Twitter: [@Peace_Rep_](https://twitter.com/Peace_Rep_)

The Afghanistan Research Network is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

About the author:

Hosna Jalil, an Afghan native residing in the United States, brings nine years of experience in business, security, and women's affairs in Afghanistan. As Deputy Minister for Policy and Planning in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, she developed a National Development Strategy for Afghan Women, focusing on economic empowerment. She also played key roles in creating a National Police Strategic Plan and combating illegal mining. Hosna served as CEO of Aria Medica, launching a pharmaceutical distribution platform in major cities. Alongside her professional work, she volunteered on the board of the Afghanistan Startup Community. Hosna holds a BSc in Physics, an MBA, and a Master's in Strategic Security Studies. She contributes to the Women's Peace and Security Working Group at the United Nations and advises the GLO.ACT Women's Network, combating human trafficking and smuggling.

Cover images: Getty Images. All images may be subject to copyright. ©2023

Design: Smith Design Agency

Submitted March 2023, published June 2023.

Contents

Introduction	01
<hr/>	
The Nature of the Divide	03
<hr/>	
Taliban Exploitation of the Divide	06
<hr/>	
Can the Taliban Bridge the Gap Between Rural and Urban Afghanistan?	09
<hr/>	
The Divided Taliban	12
<hr/>	
Conclusion and Recommendations	14
<hr/>	

Introduction

The urban-rural divide is not a country specific phenomenon; it is a global issue that has been perpetuated by societal, economic, and political factors. In some countries this division is channelled or finds expression in more positive ways or is at least managed through well-defined social and political channels. Yet in some other countries the same differences manifest in more violent forms. In Afghanistan, the recent fall of the Republic has negatively highlighted the significance of the divide in the country and exposed the fragility of its social fabric.

Afghanistan has a long history of failed governments, coups and civil conflicts, and this division arguably has been at the core of it. In the century between gaining independence from British rule in 1919 and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, 17 regimes were overthrown by armed opposition, the majority of which were fostered in and led by the rural communities (PBS, 2021). Time and time again the conflicting sides have been identical in characteristics, yet with different names: traditionalists versus modernists, mullahs versus democrats or communists, or rural versus urban in general terms. Regardless of the labels used over time, the tension has been between rural and urban communities. The recent fall of the government was not much different and brought the rural-urban divide to light again. Thus, we aim to unravel how the divide could account for the recent fall of the Republic and whether it could ever be utilized as an internal pressure point against the Taliban to talk and agree to an inclusive and representative government that upholds human rights values, and to soften their policies.

For the purposes of our argument, it is important to first make a clear distinction between the urban and rural areas and what sets them apart. Population and geographic territory are the two main factors that the Afghan state has used to classify rural and urban areas. The country is comprised of 34 provinces which are classified into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade provinces. All provincial centres and the districts surrounding 1st grade provincial capitals are labelled as urban areas and the rest are sub-urban and rural areas (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2018, p.6).

However, these geographic and demographic factors alone hardly account for the regime collapse. Rather, the rural-urban divide has other dimensions that must be identified in order to understand how the division contributed to the collapse of the regime. The next section identifies the different dimensions of the divide as a basis for understanding its role in violent conflict in Afghanistan, and how the Taliban exploited it in their 20 years of struggle. Next, the paper considers whether the Taliban may bridge the divide or whether they may in turn become its victim. Finally, the paper considers whether and how the divide might be exploited by those seeking to resist the Taliban.

The Nature of the Divide

The contrasts between urban and rural areas are extreme and plenty and become evident to anyone traveling from Kabul or other major cities to the most peripheral areas. The further one travels from the urban areas, the more evident are the differences. The underdevelopment becomes noticeable, schools and other amenities are scarce or non-operative, and the weariness from years of war is tangible. Living a rural life for 17 years and moving to urban cities in Afghanistan, and reflecting on the contrasts, however, four aspects of the rural-urban divide emerge as potentially producing political divergence between the two groups: economic disparity, political representation, security or territorial division, and access to information and government services.

Despite massive efforts and billions of dollars allocated to revive the Afghan economy, the change in rural livelihoods has been limited. The Afghan economy was largely reliant on foreign aid and a large contracting industry. Urban centres proved to be the main beneficiaries, with most funds being channelled through the five major provinces – Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Nangahar, and Herat. This resulted in tangible development gains in urban areas, but further increased the economic disparity between rural and urban areas. Moreover, most of the funding institutions and organizations implementing projects were also headquartered in those same urban centres.

Second, the rural-urban divide was reflected in different experiences of security and an increasing de facto division of the country into government-controlled, contested, and Taliban-controlled geographies. In 2014 the government and NATO adjusted their strategy, focusing on defending the urban and populated areas – partly because the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were unable to fill the security void created by NATO's partial withdrawal. The decision contributed to a further widening of the rural-urban divide. In part, this decision may have been a result of the government's attempt to reduce the existing grievances that had been created among the rural communities, and the concern about "killing one innocent villager, producing two more fighters for Taliban". This policy shift, however, only encouraged the Taliban to strengthen their grip over the rural areas, which became progressively more isolated from the rest of the country. The government did not have an alternative policy to counter the Taliban in rural areas and instead focused its resources on combating them in urban centres.

Over time this shift in priority contributed to the emergence of three spheres of influence, one controlled by the government, another by the Taliban, and the third remaining contested and being neither one nor the other. The Taliban systematically expanded its areas of influence and consolidated control in rural areas, while the government's ability to exert control slowly diminished. Often the government's control did not extend much beyond its bases or checkpoints and it could only really control district centres and main roads. In a series of interviews done in 2018-19, few people believed that the government's military operations were effective any longer and stated that the Taliban normally returned as soon as a government operation was over.

Meanwhile, this shift of priorities had two particular implications that added to the severity of the division. First, in proportion to the government's inability to take full control of territory beyond the urban centres or to monopolize the use of power, the Taliban effectively filled the security gap. This hindered efforts by the government or civil organizations to implement developmental projects in Taliban-controlled or contested areas that might have had an impact in addressing the socio-economic gap. In fact, many of the government's major industrial and developmental projects were taking several years beyond the expected date to materialize. For instance, it took 4000 British troops to escort a convoy of trucks bearing turbine parts for Kajaki Dam in Helmand, and once the British left, the situation again deteriorated, preventing delivery of cement needed to install the turbine (Chandrasekaran, 2013). Second, the Taliban effectively filled the gaps by providing services of their own, especially in the form of rough and ready justice, which established a tangible connection with rural communities.

Thirdly, it is also imperative to view the divide from a cultural and ideological perspective based on different levels of exposure to, and consumption of information, and to examine how the Taliban used the information space in rural areas to their advantage. First, different levels of access to information led to misperceptions among rural communities about urban communities. Second, in more general terms rural Afghanistan does tend to be more conservative and religiously oriented than the urban areas, and this is not entirely new. King Amanullah's clash with the (mainly rural) conservatives was an early case of competition between the two social groups to shape the country's overall direction. Much as communism was entirely viewed from an anti-religious perspective in rural areas, democracy arguably was seen in the same light.

The disproportionate focus on urban economic development, combined with a deepening territorial division over the last two decades did not help bridge this ideological gap. Exposure to democratic values and access to information remained relatively higher in urban areas.

Different perspectives on democracy, with some associating it negatively with decadent Western popular culture while others understand it in terms of freedom and opportunities, well illustrate how the three different dimensions of the rural-urban divide are interrelated and contribute to each other. Considering that the consumption of information through media and education plays a vital role in shaping views and perceptions, Afghanistan has historically lacked a developed public education system capable of covering both urban and rural communities. Access to media has been a scarcity, either due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, or the Taliban's hostile stance towards the consumption of media. Today urban centres like Kabul and other major cities are more likely to view democracy as economic freedom and opportunity rather than associating the term with western popular culture and lack of morality (Democracy International, 2012). The disparity in perspectives about the meaning of democracy could potentially correlate with the public's exposure to democracy in practice, with this disparity only reinforced by the deepening territorial division.

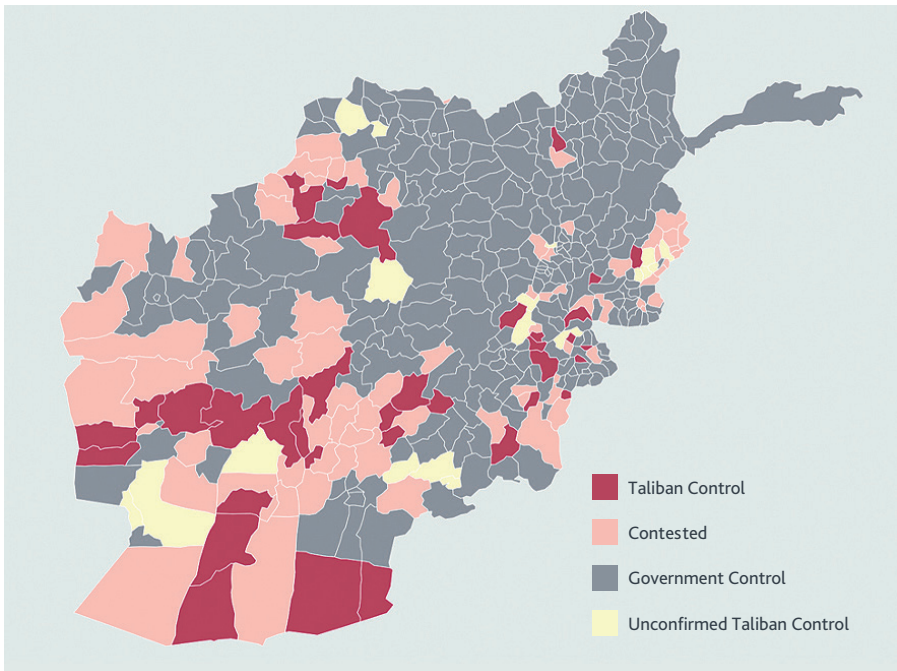
To summarize the argument so far, there has long been a rural-urban divide in Afghanistan, which can be thought of in terms of three major dimensions: economy, security and cultural or ideological. Although the division long predates the establishment of a democratic government, arguably the economic disparities increased with the infusion of funds focused on the urban economy, as well as in terms of security owing to the government's inability to exert its influence over the whole country. Two further questions arise: to what extent did the Taliban contribute to enlarging these disparities, and how effectively did they utilize these grievances to gain popular support and ultimately to force the government collapse in 2021? The next section addresses these issues.

Taliban Exploitation of the Divide

Over the last two decades the Taliban gradually evolved. In 2002 it seemed practically eliminated from the political and economic landscape and on the verge of total annihilation. Yet from this position it managed to rebuild to a point where it heavily influenced or controlled a significant portion of the rural areas and ran a parallel economic and political system. It remains hard to view ideological differences as the only motive for the last two decades of conflict. Rather, the Taliban may have been partly motivated by their exclusion from the political and economic system. Political and economic exclusion was the common grievance they shared with a number of warlords and influencing figures who were under prosecution and sought protection from their tribes in the rural areas. These shared grievances helped the Taliban to build an alliance with them against the central government. Allah Gul Mujahid and Mullah Tarakhil were two of the known figures who sheltered Taliban fighters in their home districts surrounding Kabul city, aiding the Taliban's advance towards Kabul city. One had more than ten criminal cases with the judicial system and the other was accused of grabbing more than 2000 acres of land and was under investigation by the former government.

The generally lower level of education in rural areas played an important role in the Taliban's ability to exploit the ideological and cultural differences. At the end of the 20th Century, thousands of Afghans died fighting communism, barely having an idea of the ideology or what it stood for. Initially, they fought against Soviet invasion. After the Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, they then fought against Dr. Najibullah's regime for another three years, mainly on the grounds of its association with communism. Similarly, in the last two decades democracy was widely viewed as being contrary to cultural and religious values in rural areas. The same could not be said about the urban population. With access to education and information, urban populations were more likely to believe that democracy and religion could co-exist. The term 'democracy' does not signify a representative government for many Afghans. In a nation-wide survey, democracy had two connotations for people, first economic freedom and opportunities and second, an association with Western popular culture, as well as a lack of morality (Democracy International, 2012).

The government's inability to create a common understanding of democracy and democratic values that was shared by the urban and rural population produced a gap in perspectives, which was well exploited by the Taliban. By harnessing this gap in understandings, the Taliban successfully created an anti-democracy narrative, which proved attractive for communities that were socially, politically, or economically disconnected from the urban areas. By linking 'democracy' with immorality while emphasizing their strict interpretation of Sharia Law, they succeeded in portraying themselves as defenders of cultural and religious values. Meanwhile, the government's inability to stay in touch and persistently communicate with people in rural areas beyond its military presence meant the ideological differences only deepened over time.



Source: FDD's Long War Journal, 2017

The Taliban's effective strategy of hit and run progressively created an area of influence, hindering the government's ability to exercise effective control in rural areas, challenging the government's presence in rural areas by making the logistical difficulty and human cost of maintaining rural military outposts unsustainably high. Data from the Long War Journal suggests this strategy brought about an inflection point between 2017-18. As of November 2017, the Taliban controlled 73 districts of Afghanistan, while the government controlled 217 and another 117 remained contested. While the districts under the Taliban's control remained more or less the same until mid-2021, the number of contested districts increased from 117 in 2017 to 200 in the following year, showing an increasing challenge to the government's ability to hold military outposts in rural areas (Roggio, 2022).

Moreover, as a result of the government's inability to monopolize power, the Taliban began to exploit the gap left by poor governance, making the rural-urban divide increasingly tangible in terms of politically distinct geographies and spheres of influence. Taliban-controlled rural areas were increasingly governed by a so-called 'shadow government', together with an informal economy incorporating opium production, illegal mining and Taliban taxation or protection fees. In return, as a form of service provision, their main focus was on delivering justice. This approach proved quite successful for two reasons. First, it successfully undermined the government's claim to be the source of law and the provider of justice. Second, provision of justice either due to the absence of the government system or the public's existing distrust in that system, further increased public support and recognition of the Taliban in rural communities.

The Taliban exploited the rural-urban divide in a number of ways. They were able to successfully claim to be defenders of rural values against urban populations and their foreign supporters, just as previous generations of rural insurgents had done. This strategy helped them to gain supporters and recruits across more and more rural areas, allowing them to progressively contest and then control more and more of the rural territory. In the growing areas that they contested and controlled they were able to undermine or prevent the spread of government information while reinforcing their own anti-government narrative linking democracy to foreign immorality.

Can the Taliban Bridge the Gap Between Rural and Urban Afghanistan?

Despite the assumptions which formed a prevailing narrative among the international community in support of the US-Taliban agreement (Doha agreement) that with the takeover of the government by the Taliban, the latter would address the grievances of the rural communities, the rural and urban gap is still evident economically and politically and is potentially widening. Half a million Afghans lost their jobs in the first six months of Taliban rule. According to the UN, the projected number reached a million by mid-2022, including women, minorities, and civil servants associated with the former Republic (UN, 2022). This is in addition to the 13.28% unemployment rate reported in 2021.¹ The urban areas will be the majority in terms of losing their jobs. The Taliban replaced the majority of civil servants residing in urban areas with their members from the rural communities. The grieving parties are reversed but the gap is not minimized. Under Taliban rule, unlike the Republic years, the urban population feels that the rural population have stolen their job opportunities. Since the Taliban continues to appoint only their members in the government and not members of all other communities – with exceptions at lower ranks – it will divide the rural population as well.

The humanitarian crisis that has resulted from the state's collapse and the cutting off of foreign aid that had previously contributed 75%-80% of the budget, further reduces the availability of public services, including healthcare. This crisis hits the rural communities harder due to the higher rate of poverty, lack of livelihood, poor service delivery, and unreliable transportation options. Four out of five poor people in Afghanistan live in rural areas (World Bank, n.d.). Meanwhile, humanitarian aid distribution is concentrated in urban areas, covering the increasing internal displacement trends (Lang, 2022). These figures represent the limited change in the equation, economically and politically, despite the reigning insurgency of the rural populace.

The issue of political representation, much disputed between the rural and urban communities for the last two decades, is also not resolved. Before the Taliban's return to power, the rural population was united against the urban population, which was equated with minority elites who dominated the political structure and economic resources. However, after taking control of the country, the Taliban divided rural communities into Taliban and non-Taliban rural populations.

In the northern and central provinces, the group embraced some non-Pashtun anti-government local commanders and fighters to strengthen its sphere of influence which helped reinforce the Taliban 2.0 narrative in non-Pashtun territories. The Taliban 2.0 was a political and media savvy term crafted around the Doha agreement which implied a more moderate version of the Taliban regime that could win the group international recognition as the new Afghan government. The non-Pashtun commanders from the rural areas joining the group disapproved of their ethnic representatives in the Republic. The Taliban's narrative to these groups suggested that they would construct a more inclusive political structure. However, the Taliban did not live up to their promises.

Soon after their takeover, the Taliban leadership began to shrink their circle back to their trusted Pashtun commanders, dismissing or replacing their non-Pashtun commanders. Their only commander from the Hazara ethnic group, Mawlawi Mahdi Balkhabi, played a pivotal role in seizing control in the central provinces but disappeared from the public sphere after less than a year of Taliban rule. According to Reuters, he was shot dead by the Taliban forces near the border with Iran while fleeing the country (Yawar and Ahmad, 2022). Later on, they replaced Mawlawi Arif, another non-Pashtun commander from the Uzbek tribe, who was the head of the Aqina-Andkhai railway, with a Kandahari Talib Commander. The cleansing process continued with the replacement of non-Pashtun figures such as their deputy minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Qari Salahuddin Ayobi, and their provincial police chief in Samangan, Mawlawi Habibullah Hamas. These leaders had enabled them to gain victory in the northern and central provinces without their Pashtun troops. These cases of replacement undermined the hopes for political representation within the Taliban of the non-Pashtun Taliban supporters in these rural areas.

In addition to the persistent anti-Taliban civil resistance in urban areas, indicating that the Taliban does not have a support base in urban areas, it is also noteworthy that they do not represent all the Pashtuns in rural areas either. The tribal disputes between the Nurzai and the Achakzai – the tribe of late Gen. Abdul Raziq – is an evident example as they have brutally executed its members while advancing towards Kandahar. One of the three publicly announced anti-Taliban armed resistance groups – Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement – is founded by Pashtuns in the Taliban's heartland, Kandahar. The Taliban is predominantly comprised of Pashtuns, but not all Pashtun tribes support them. After one and a half years of reign in the country, it has become apparent that the Taliban's support base in the rural areas seems much smaller than it was portrayed back in 2021.

After twenty years of war, adopting terrorism as a strategy and accommodating some of the most violent terrorists in its structures, a rural insurgency defeated the democratically elected government. And after one and a half years of their reign, the former insurgents could not bridge the divergence between rural and urban Afghanistan. As the country is still struggling between traditionalism and modernism, it seems that almost nothing has changed, and nor has the Taliban. Similarly, their 2.0 narrative suffers from the same rural-urban tensions. The grieving parties are reversed, the urban population formed a civil resistance, and their opponents from rural communities in northern and southern regions took up arms against them akin to their 1.0 version. What now?

The Divided Taliban

The Taliban are not only struggling to bridge the gap between the rural and urban populations in Afghanistan, but their approach to running the country divides them into two factions. Regardless of their differences, for now the factions follow the supreme leader's decisions and implement his policies, but their internal dynamics differ for internal and external affairs policy directions. Prior to their return to power, the Taliban were divided based on their association with different leadership councils (Shuras) based in Pakistan and Iran. After taking over control of the country, their governance approach is an added factor that divides them.

These Taliban factions divide between Kandahar and Kabul. Whereas the Kandahar-based Taliban, predominantly made up of members of Quetta Shura, firmly preserve their rural image, the Kabul-based Taliban is trying to adopt urban etiquette. Their supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, continues to rule the country from Kandahar while committing to preserve the agency of rural Pashtuns at any cost. He believes compromises in any area can negatively impact support from their fighters and future recruits, which is the group's core strength. If the supreme leader must choose active engagement with the international community which entails opening up to a relatively inclusive government, and moderation of their behaviour or support from the "one-hundred and ten thousand Taliban fighters", he will choose the latter.² For him, the modernization of the group could pose an existential threat to the movement. Further, the supreme leader and the Taliban's prime minister, Mullah Hassan Akhund, primarily invest their time in engaging with the council of Ulema, the clerics (Mullahs) in rural areas, and tribal elders over government cabinet meetings. They prioritize sustaining their internal cohesion and footprint in rural Afghanistan over concentrating on running state institutions.

On the other hand, the Kabul-based Taliban, including the group's acting ministers of defense and interior affairs – Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob and Sirajuddin Haqqani – appear to have a different view on public policy that necessitates active engagement with the international community. Although using varying arguments, the Taliban officials in Kabul agree that effective interactions with the rest of the world are vital for the survival of their regime. For some, it is purely personal economic interest, and only urban areas can offer the enabling environment for their licit and illicit businesses, including trucking and construction companies associated with some of the senior Kabul-based Taliban officials. The other officials who covertly oppose their supreme leader harbour political ambitions that may only become evident if their regime survives beyond a few years.

One can conclude that, yet another rural-urban disparity has emerged in the Kabul-based Taliban, as most officials in Kabul long since cordoned off their direct engagement with their respective home villages and rural communities. Some spent more than a decade in Guantanamo, some in the Taliban's political office in Doha, and some in Pakistan. Another factor may be the influence of their age, for the Kandahar-based officials are from the Taliban's 1st generation (now in their 60s and 70s), whereas a considerable number of the Kabul-based leaders are in their 30s and 40s. Hence, the survival of their regime not only fulfils the ambitions of the Kabul-based leaders as a group or movement but also fulfils the ambitions of these young leaders individually.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the pioneer of suicide bombers and a designated global terrorist in the FBI's "most-wanted" list with a \$10 million bounty on his head, surprisingly is claimed to be one of the Kabul-based Taliban who is slightly supportive of a relatively inclusive government (FBI, n.d.). In informal conversations, two senior civilian government officials in the Republic who reside in Afghanistan and two anti-Taliban ministers in the security and defense sector of the former government who now reside outside the country confirmed the claim. The dominant argument on why Haqqani would have a moderate view towards an inclusive government relates to the level of support he enjoys in the Taliban's supreme council – the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In the early 2000s, for many years the Miran Shah Shura – one of the three centers of Taliban power and exclusively composed of the Haqqanis – held grudges against the Quetta Shura over 'concentration of power in the hands of southern Taliban' (Giustozzi, 2019). In this view, analysts believe that Haqqani may see a chance to weaken the supreme leader's power in the Taliban's structure, and strengthen his own position, if non-Taliban figures join the government in the form of an inclusive government. Nonetheless, it still seems challenging to imagine the Kabul-based Taliban seeking to serve with the nation in mind or to believe in moderation.

The divide in viewpoints, however, signals a crackdown within the group. But the crackdown is not sufficiently robust to shake their existing ties, nor is the opposition faction willing to gang up against the supreme leader. The Kabul-based Taliban leaders assess the collapse of the Western-backed democratic government and the Soviet-backed communist government to be due to their internal conflicts, which were successfully exploited by insurgencies. Thus, they are cautious about avoiding such mistakes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The twenty years of an expensive stabilisation and peacebuilding mission in Afghanistan could not bridge the existing gap between rural and urban communities in Afghanistan. Rural communities' grievances over political representation and resource distribution, the security challenges, and rural communities' access to information further widened the divide. There was a dominant perception held by the international community that the Taliban are accepted and represent the majority of the rural population. Just as their regime in the 1990s failed to bridge the gap, they have not been able to improve the situation since taking control of the country in 2021. During the Republic, rural communities shared a common perception about urban communities that somehow united them. However, now, the Taliban divides the rural communities. Additionally, the Taliban themselves are somehow divided into two groups. One lives a rural lifestyle and focuses more on maintaining the Taliban's stronghold in rural areas at any cost, whereas the other is urbanized and has developed a different approach to governance to ensure the survival of their regime.

Neither the rural nor the urban populations' grievances are addressed, and the Taliban regime cannot be supported to bridge the gap as their form of governance is one that should be opposed. Therefore, it might be possible to exploit the divide to create an internal source of pressure on the group – in addition to the existing civic and armed resistance, and the international community's pressures – aiming to form an elected, inclusive government introducing moderate policies.

To weaken the Taliban's grip on power and to soften their stance to a level that they agree to negotiate a settlement in pursuit of an inclusive political structure and moderate policies, the Taliban should be divided and engaged. At this point in time, Afghans are left with no alternative to the Taliban considering that: 1) the Taliban consolidated territorial control in Afghanistan by raising their flag over the last provincial capital – Panjshir – in September 2021; 2) the armed opposition forces do not have the capability to oust their regime for the time being; 3) civil resistance needs more time to expand across the country; and 4) there is no appetite among the international community to support anti-Taliban armed groups.

It is noteworthy that the current situation offers only two choices: the bad and the worse. Dealing with the Taliban, the two dominant courses of action for the international community are engagement and isolation, while for the Afghans the two choices are talk and fight or resist. Afghans can pursue both paths simultaneously, but for the international community engagement with a level of pressure will prove to be more efficient than complete isolation. There are already three internal and external sources of pressure on the Taliban – the women-led civil resistance, armed opposition, and pressure from the international community. If the division among the Taliban is utilized cautiously, it could become a fourth source of pressure. However, it is crucial to ensure that the engagement mechanism with the Taliban, women and the youth civic movement, the armed opposition, and the international community's pressure including sanctions are tightly aligned but loosely coupled.

The Taliban are trained, experienced, and equipped to fight on the battlefield, but they are not efficient in maintaining public order without using violence and fear. Managing civic disobedience, as is proven, is a challenge for them – especially from the women who are at the forefront of the movement supported by young men. Further, the women-led civic movement's access to technology, including smartphone and cameras, media (primarily social media) and the support from their fellow young men can help them expand the scope of their movement over time aiming to preserve their rights to education, their participation in the economy, freedom of expression, social freedom for all, and political inclusivity. The movement's agenda is to a great extent aligned with anti-Taliban armed resistance groups which aim to re-establish an inclusive government but should not associate themselves with the resistance groups or any other warring parties.

Among the armed groups resisting the Taliban, only three groups have publicized their efforts: the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Masoud, Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) led by Afghanistan's former Chief of General Staff of the Afghan Army – General Yasin Zia, and the Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement which is based in southern Afghanistan. Since their establishment after the Taliban's return to power, all the groups have increased their attacks, resulting in an increased number of casualties on the Taliban side. As of February 2023, according to their annual reports, only AFF claims to have killed 361 and injured 364 Taliban members in a year.

According to leaders of NRF and AFF, the groups' ultimate goal is to pressurize the Taliban to negotiate a political settlement through expanding their territorial control. Ahmad Masoud intends to expand his stronghold from Panjshir and Andarab to neighbouring provinces, while Gen. Zia's group have not limited themselves geographically. As of now, none of these groups – neither collectively nor individually – have the capability to mount a serious military challenge, primarily due to logistical supply shortage, nor do the leaders of the NRF or AFF aspire to oust the Taliban regime due to absence of a solid political alternative. However, they are perceived by the Taliban as a serious and growing threat to their regime's survival (Rubin, 2022).

With persistent pressure from civic and military sources, added to the international community's pressure on the Taliban, further seeking to exploit disparities of opinion within the Taliban could also be effective. The immediate course of action could be to engage the Kabul-based Taliban through local and international platforms to highlight their conflicting ideas about social freedom, public policies, economic development, and political inclusion. The public disclosure of their internal conflict adds to their existing internal tensions. However, if the engagement is inefficiently managed, the Taliban could also use the opportunities afforded for engagement in their best interest, as they have a track record of doing so.

References

- "Administrative Structures in Afghanistan." *Afghan Paper*. Retrieved from <http://www.afghanpaper.com/info/dolati/edari.htm>
- Chandrasekaran, R. (2013) 'Dam and other Afghan projects being scaled back as U.S. picks up pace of withdrawal' *The Washington Post* 4 March. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/dam-and-other-afghan-projects-being-scaled-back-as-us-picks-up-pace-of-withdrawal/2013/03/04/565fe7d0-84f1-11e2-98a3-b3db6b9ac586_story.html
- Democracy International (2012) 'Survey on Political Institutions, Elections, and Democracy in Afghanistan' Retrieved from <https://democracyinternational.com/resources/survey-on-political-institutions-elections-and-democracy-in-afghanistan/>
- FBI (n.d.) 'Sirajuddin Haqqani' *FBI Most Wanted* Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorinfo/sirajuddin-haqqani>
- Ghani, A. (2009) 'A Ten-Year Framework for Afghanistan: Executing the Obama Plan ... And Beyond' *Atlantic Council* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03548>.
- Giustozzi, A. (2019) 'The Emergence Of Alternative Centres Of Power To Quetta, The Taliban at War: 2001 – 2018' *Oxford Academic* November. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190092399.003.0004>.
- Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2018) 'Citizen-Centered Governance: A Roadmap for Subnational Reform' May. Retrieved from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/176061540413424342/pdf/131295-WP-P164594-AttachmentSNGPolicy.pdf>
- Jackson, A. (2019) 'Perspectives on Peace from Taliban Areas of Afghanistan' Special Report *United States Institute of Peace*. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/05/perspectives-peace-taliban-areas-afghanistan>
- Lang, H. (2022) 'Fit for Purpose: Getting Humanitarian Aid Right in Afghanistan One Year after the Taliban Takeover' *Refugees International*. Retrieved from: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/8/16/fit-for-purpose-getting-humanitarian-aid-right-in-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-taliban-takeover>.
- PBS (2021) 'A historical timeline of Afghanistan' PBS Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>
- Roggio, B. (2022) 'Mapping the Fall of Afghanistan' *FDD's Long War Journal* 29 August. Retrieved from <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/08/29/mapping-the-fall-of-afghanistan/>
- Rubin, B.R. (2022) 'Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Findings on the Current Situation' *The Henry L. Stimson Center* (October 2022). Retrieved from <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>
- UNICEF (2019) 'Afghanistan Education Equity Profile for Adolescent Girls' *UNICEF*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/5491/file/Afghanistan>
-

UN News (2022) 'Afghanistan: 500,000 jobs lost since Taliban takeover' *United Nations* 19 January. Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110052>

World Bank (2022) 'Rural population (% of total population) – Afghanistan' *The World Bank*. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?end=2021&locations=AF&start=2001>

World Bank (n.d.) 'Poverty Reduction in Afghanistan: Despite Economic Growth, Widening Inequality' *The World Bank*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/publication/poverty-reduction-in-afghanistan-despite-economic-growth-widening-inequality>

Yawar, M.Y. and Jibran Ahmad (2022) 'Taliban kill one of their ex-leaders from minority Hazara community' *Reuters* 17 August. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-kill-one-their-ex-leaders-minority-hazara-community-2022-08-17/>

References

¹ Data originally obtained from the World Bank Databank, 'Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)', retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=AF>. The figure was subsequently revised.

² This was confirmed in an informal conversation in February 2023 with a former government official, still living in Kabul, who will remain anonymous.



✉ info@peacerep.org

 [PeaceRepResearch](#)

 [@Peace_Rep_](#)

 [PeaceRep](#)

www.peacerep.org

www.peaceagreements.org

About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



PeaceRep
Peace and Conflict
Resolution Evidence
Platform

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
info@peacerep.org | <https://peacerep.org> | @Peace_Rep_

University of Edinburgh, School of Law
Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL