What does 6 months of Taliban rule tell us about the future of Afghanistan?
What does 6 months of Taliban rule tell us about the future of Afghanistan?

Afghanistan stands at the intersection of South and Central Asia and so developments in the country can have far-reaching implications for its neighbors.

All of the conquerors who invaded the Indian subcontinent entered through Afghanistan, from Alexander the Great to the Mongols and the Mughals. The Afghan wars of the 1980s and the global “War on Terror” have changed South Asia’s regional security structure. As a result, what happens in Afghanistan does not necessarily remain in Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, this report considers Afghanistan’s security situation a little over six months after the Taliban unveiled its interim cabinet in September last year.

Since the Taliban takeover, security incidents in Afghanistan have decreased by 90 percent, from 600 a week to fewer than 100, while armed clashes declined by 98 percent, from 7,430 incidents to only 148. Arguably, the past six months under the Taliban regime have been the most peaceful period in Afghanistan for four decades.

Though the Taliban deserve credit for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan, their return to power automatically restored peace and stability in the country.

TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN: A HUB FOR TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM?

Ahead of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s return to power, there were widespread fears that the country would once again become a hotbed of transnational militancy and terrorism, as was the case during the 1990s. There was speculation that jihadists would flock to the country in greater numbers after the departure of the Americans, to live in the Taliban’s “Islamic emirate.”

However, the evidence after six months of Taliban rule suggests that this has not been the case so far. According to the UN, militants have not, with some negligible exceptions, traveled to the country. However, counterterrorism experts warn that it will take terrorist groups in Afghanistan between 12 and 18 months to revive and relaunch recruitment campaigns. Therefore it is too soon to reach a conclusive verdict on whether or not Afghanistan is becoming a hub of transnational terrorism.

It is important to understand the reasons why Afghanistan is not attracting militants now in the same way it did in the 1990s.

Experts warn that it will take terrorist groups in Afghanistan between 12 and 18 months to revive and relaunch recruitment campaign.
Firstly, there is the absence of a charismatic figurehead such as Al-Qaeda's former chief, Osama bin Laden, who drew militants to Afghanistan in large numbers. Other than Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who replaced bin Laden as head of Al-Qaeda in 2011, there is no notable leader to attract militants to Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a shadow of its former self and lacks the organizational wherewithal and resources to recruit more militants.

Secondly, under the 2020 Doha Agreement with the US, the Taliban pledged that they would not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for terrorism against any other country. So, while they have not cut ties with Al-Qaeda, they are making sure that militants do not enter Afghanistan.

Thirdly, during the 1990s Afghanistan was the only global jihadist zone. Now there are several conflict zones, including Somalia, Nigeria, Mali and Libya in Africa, and Syria, Iraq and Yemen in the Middle East. Instead of heading for Afghanistan, therefore, militants have been attracted to other conflicts.

The local and regional natures of Muslim conflicts have also hindered the militant movement in Afghanistan. Jihadist militants around the world are more invested in these local and regional conflicts. In the current era, therefore, a Middle Eastern militant is more likely to fight in Syria, Iraq, Yemen or Palestine rather than Afghanistan. Similarly, South Asian militants are drawn to regional conflicts in Kashmir or Afghanistan, for example, more so than conflicts between Muslims in the Middle East.

As a result, while Afghanistan might hold some allure for Central and South Asian jihadists, Middle Eastern, European and African militants are more invested in conflicts in their own respective regions.

This dynamic is further explained by the evolution of a global militant movement that is now less focused on high-profile terrorist attacks such as the 9/11 attacks on the US in 2001, the 2005 London bombings or the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In other words, the era of the “terror spectacular” is over and now jihadist militant groups are more focused on low-end attacks in which acts of terrorism carried out by a lone actor are the order of the day. Therefore there is no need to travel to different conflict zones.

The withdrawal of foreign forces is an equally compelling reason for militants not to travel to Afghanistan. For the past four decades, the presence of Russian or American invaders has been the driving force of global militancy. With the US withdrawal, the attraction of fighting against a superpower involved in invasions of Muslim countries has been removed and the so the lure of Afghanistan to jihadist militants has decreased.
Finally, global travel restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have hindered the ability of militants to travel from other parts of the world to Afghanistan.8

THE CHALLENGE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE

Arguably, the local Daesh franchise in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), poses the most formidable discursive and territorial challenge to the Taliban’s interim regime.

Ahead of the US withdrawal, ISKP carefully positioned itself as the anti-Taliban jihadist group, with a view to attracting hard-line Taliban factions and other rebel groups operating in Afghanistan, such as Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

ISKP has ratcheted up its anti-Taliban propaganda, criticizing the group for signing the Doha Agreement with the US, softening their stance on Shiites, and their increasingly close relationship with China while ignoring Beijing’s atrocities against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province.

In addition, ISKP has been critical of the Taliban for embracing nationalism to regain power while compromising on Sharia principles9. Its propaganda offensive has put the Taliban on the defensive and hindered their transition from an insurgent group to a governing authority10. ISKP has aggressively dished out propaganda about the Taliban’s status as a pariah government dependent on international aid and humanitarian assistance, in an attempt to portray its own framework for a self-styled caliphate as the best answer to the multitude of problems confronting Afghanistan11. It maintains that despite a number of compromises made by the Taliban, the international community has still not recognized their Islamic emirate and Washington froze $9.5 billion of Afghan assets held in the US Federal Reserve12.

Rather than compromising on Sharia principles, therefore, ISKP has been urging hard-line Taliban elements instead to implement them. This kind of propaganda has left the Taliban in no man’s land; the group is not in a position to become
more moderate to cope with governance challenges, nor can it maintain a rigid ideological position that would contribute to its international isolation14.

ISKP has carried out several high-profile attacks in an attempt to subvert the Taliban's claims of being a stabilizing influence on Afghanistan and to shake people's trust in the interim regime's ability to guarantee peace; the very least that Afghans expect of the Taliban is to provide them with a peaceful environment. To undermine this, ISKP has targeted Shiite places of worship in Afghanistan and ambushed Taliban convoys in various parts of the country15.

The Taliban's traditional strength was their insurgent and guerrilla-warfare capabilities; they could choose the location and timing of an attack to their advantage. As an asymmetric and agile group, they used territory as a force multiplier and dominated the Afghan threat landscape.

This situation was turned on its head after the US withdrawal. The Taliban are now static and ISKP is agile. The Taliban are on the defensive, tasked with securing main population centers and highways, while ISKP can target the Taliban at places and times of their choosing.

Likewise, during the time US forces were stationed in Afghanistan, the Taliban's narrative of freeing the country from foreign occupiers resonated with the masses. Now, the Taliban have become prisoners of their own rhetoric while ISKP's ideological propaganda has gained traction among hard-line Taliban factions16.

INTRA-TALIBAN DIVISIONS

Internal divisions are another major challenge the Taliban is confronted with. Though the internal cracks are nowhere near the point at which they might split the movement, the leadership has faced great difficulties in balancing internal requirements with the demands of the Afghan masses. In a way, the Taliban have become prisoners of their own ideological framework, unable either to become more moderate or to continue with their hard-line policies17.

To effectively govern Afghanistan and to meaningfully engage with the international community, which would pave the way for diplomatic recognition, the Taliban need to show pragmatism. However, if they become more moderate without creating a consensus within their own organization, particularly at the rank-and-file level, they run the risk of dividing their movement18.

For the foot soldiers of the Taliban there is no concept of a life beyond fighting and the implementation of the Sharia system. Consequently, the Taliban are finding it difficult to make the transition from insurgent group to governing authority, a transformation that requires them to disarm their cadres and repurpose them to serve the people while also maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan.

The transition from a force that opposes the status quo to one the represents it is proving to be more difficult than the Taliban anticipated19. To maintain the organizational coherence that enabled them to return to power, the leadership is prioritizing the group's interests over the collective interests of the Afghan people. Therefore the interim cabinet announced in September was all male and Taliban-heavy. They have prioritized consolidating their grip on power over turning their attention to the more critical task of preparing their cadres for post-insurgency life.

This circumspect behavior of the Taliban leadership is alienating the Afghan masses and testing the patience of the international community. For instance, despite promising that education would resume for girls in the sixth grade and above at the start of the new Afghan year, the Taliban decided to prolong the ban on this because of differing opinions on the issue within their ranks. The decision was widely condemned by regional and international powers20 and it could negatively affect humanitarian assistance.

Afghanistan has changed a lot in the past 20 years. The Taliban would not be able to rule the Afghanistan of today with the playbook they used in 1996. Afghanistan has changed a lot in the past 20 years. The Taliban would not be able to rule the Afghanistan of today with the playbook they used in 1996.
upon their cadres that in transitioning to a post-insurgent life they must prioritize the aspirations of the Afghan people over group interests.

Likewise, they will have to accommodate other political and ethnic groups in the power equation to build an inclusive and broad-based government.

How the Taliban navigate these challenges will be critical for their own trajectory and that of Afghanistan21.

THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE FRONT AND OTHER ANTI-TALIBAN GROUPS

In addition to the ISKP, other armed resistance efforts are slowly gaining momentum in Afghanistan. In recent months, significant pockets of resistance have emerged in the Panjshir Valley and the Andarab district of the northern Baghlan province. Reprisal killings by the Taliban and the repression of officials affiliated with the regime of former President Ashraf Ghani have spurred the resistance into open opposition.

The interim regime’s reluctance to accommodate non-Taliban and non-Pashtun political and ethnic groups in the government has also contributed to a revival of the anti-Taliban resistance22. While the Taliban have overseen reductions in levels of violence and armed clashes, the coming summer months will offer a better understanding of their ability to maintain order in the country.

The next six months will also be informative regarding the wherewithal of the anti-Taliban resistance. As of now, its participants are divided, under-resourced and directionless. A lack of external funding and internal cohesion is undermining the ability of this resistance to confront the Taliban.

From the Taliban perspective, the resistance remains more of a challenge to be tackled rather than a threat that needs to be countered23.

The most prominent anti-Taliban group is the National Resistance Front. Based in Panjshir valley, it was founded and is led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of former Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. It has the support of Amrullah Saleh, the former vice president of Afghanistan24. Although the NRF was overrun by the Taliban in Panjshir last year after weeks of heavy fighting, the group is far from dead.

New groups that have emerged since January include the Afghanistan Freedom Front, the Turkestan Freedom Front, the Afghanistan Liberation Movement, Tehrik Islami Azad Milli Afghanistan, and the Islamic People's Freedom Party of Afghanistan. A number of Ghani regime officials are involved in the anti-Taliban resistance, including former defense and interior minister Bismillah Khan, former chief of general staff Yasin Zia, former interior minister Massoud Andrabi, and Hazara Militia leader Abdul Ghani Alipoor25.

The coming summer months will provide a good indicator of the efficacy and future of the anti-Taliban resistance. As previously mentioned, it currently lacks funding, cohesion and direction. At the same time, however, the growing public discontent with the interim Taliban regime could turn the resistance into a formidable challenge.

The Taliban are currently relocating units from southern to northern Afghanistan in an attempt to preempt any resistance from the NRF or other groups. However, Taliban resources are stretched thin as they are also trying to secure major population centers and highways, leaving the countryside poorly protected26.

CONCLUSION

There is no imminent risk of Afghanistan sliding into civil war or of an implosion of the Taliban movement. All of the anti-Taliban groups are weak and rudderless.

Short of granting diplomatic recognition, countries in the region and the wider international community want to work with the Taliban, despite their differing views, to make sure that Afghanistan does not become a hub for transnational terrorism.

However, the Taliban cannot take the continuation of this arrangement for granted and delay their response to the demands of the international community for an inclusive and broad-based government, and for girls of all ages to be allowed to continue their education.

How the Taliban manages to navigate internal contradictions with regard to their role as Afghanistan's interim regime will determine the future trajectory of the country, and the militant movement, under their rule.


REFERENCES


