

The Taliban in Afghanistan: Expectations and Priorities for European Partners to Address

Discussion paper following the 17 November 2021 hybrid webinar event, "*The Resurgence of the Taliban: Plotting a New EU Course of Action for Afghanistan*".

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – DISCUSSION PAPER

By Ben Lowings – Political Analyst

1. INTRODUCTION

On 17 November 2021, the Brussels International Center in conjunction with The Egmont Institute organised a hybrid webinar called "*The Resurgence of the Taliban: Plotting a New EU Course of Action for Afghanistan*". Among topics discussed were the political fallout from the takeover of the Taliban, what impacts the new Taliban rulers will have on issues such as security and human rights, and how the international community, especially the European Union, should respond.

2. DOMESTIC QUESTIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

2.1 What can we Expect from the Taliban in Government?

"People ask me if the Taliban are going to show they are moderate, warm and fuzzy to the international community, but I am afraid it will be the other way around, because there is not a lot of appetite to intervene or do something about it."

Roya Rahmani, Distinguished Fellow at Georgetown University,
Former Ambassador of Afghanistan to the US

The Taliban in Afghanistan: Expectations and Priorities for European Partners to Address |
Ben Lowings

Brussels International Center

The world generally has regarded the Taliban in power with suspicion, viewing their promises to be a less extreme than their tenure during 1996–2001 as an exaggeration at best, and as lies at worst. It is no wonder, given the extreme nature of the well-publicised atrocities committed then, including public executions, amputations, and other brutal punishments for a variety of claimed crimes. And likewise, the reestablishment of the formerly feared Ministry of Vice and Virtue, at the expense of the former-Ministry for Women has been met with alarm.

Specific individuals and groups are already being targeted, including former journalists, public prosecutors, and other public figures. Many professional women have been forced into either fleeing the country or hiding, having now found their positions untenable under the Taliban’s extreme view of a woman’s place in society. Similarly, education opportunities for girls of high school and university age have been greatly restricted.

2.2 The Question of Human Security

“I think a very important topic is security. You have tens of thousands of Afghans who live in fear at the moment, and some of them are being actively hunted by the Taliban, journalists, former prosecutors, activists... But you also have many Afghans that are very happy with the Taliban in power who say, now that the war is over, peace is back”.

Wilson Fache, BIC Middle East Consultant

The next question, is then a practical one: can the Taliban, who have been an insurgency for 20 years successfully run a country and transition to governance? The evidence so far is mixed. As some civilians in Afghanistan have testified, an end to the fighting between former-government forces backed by US forces against Taliban insurgents has brought a period of welcome calm and reduced danger from active conflict.

On the other hand, Afghanistan is in a position of a looming humanitarian catastrophe threatening many with the real prospect of starvation. It is doubtful that any new government, especially the Taliban with whom many important international partners have severed economic ties and frozen financial assets, would be able to address these severe humanitarian challenges alone without international support.

“But will they stay long, that kind of a security or definition of security that if there's no suicide attack, if there's no bombing, that's security? No. People need food, people need medicine, people need freedom to get out and talk, people need human security that they can feed their children today and then they have food for tomorrow, and that is not there unfortunately.”

Dr. Sima Samar, Member of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement

3. CONFIGURING THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

3.1 A Unified International Response?

This turns us to the question of the international response. How should the international community react to the Taliban? Generally, the international community has been unified in their demand that the Taliban respect their own promises, although admittedly different countries have highlighted different things which could have implications for which demands are respected.

“Countries in the region, China, Russia, EU, US... we all want the same thing: inclusive government, anti-terrorism... and then, participation of women and girls in education and work. The weight everybody attaches to a number of these elements is different of course, but by and large and certainly on inclusivity and anti-terrorism, we are all on the same line. I don't think this has ever happened in history.”

Arnout Pauwels, Deputy Head of EU Delegation in Afghanistan

3.2 Untangling European Doublethink

On this point, one of the more heavily publicised responses has been from the EU, who have indicated they intend to work with the Taliban, but not offer them international recognition, which for them is contingent on many factors such as an inclusive government and a respect for human rights. Such work with the Taliban could be, for instance, continuing the provision of humanitarian aid assistance, which is consistently claimed to be an apolitical gesture irrespective of the government in charge.

However, Member States of the EU have also undermined their own demands for respecting human rights and humanitarian assistance by sounding the alarm about the 'threat' of migrant; the consequences of Afghans fleeing the Taliban and attempting to reach Europe. This hypocrisy has been condemned and continues to expose a fundamental doublethink at the heart of European policymaking regarding both developing countries and countries in conflict.

"I mean what has happened in the EU during the weeks following the fall of Kabul is shameful.... is shameful. We've had three or four heads of states of government going to microphones and saying not one single Afghan on my territory. In what world do we live today? "

Jean-Louis De Brouwer, Director of the European Affairs Program
at the Egmont Institute

And this hypocrisy is not only devastating for people in desperate need, but also an example of short-term thinking. Other countries have already noticed the potential of weaponizing the perceived migrant 'threat' to the EU; we have seen in recent months countries such as Belarus and Turkey are prepared to weaponize migrants on European borders to exert pressure on the EU. Do European Member States truly want to experience this type of political blackmail just because of their unease with hosting individuals in true desperate need?

"We have sort of given, if you like, the refugees as hostage to some of the worst dictatorships in the world and they can blackmail us when and how they like."

Shada Islam, BIC Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

4. HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

"But I have to say, I'm critical of the international community also, they say inclusive government, anti-terrorism, and then human rights. I think human rights should be the first agenda; when they respect the human rights then we reduce a lot of other programs in the country."

Dr. Sima Samar, UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on
Internal Displacement

One of the key guiding principles for re-orientating the European relationship with Afghanistan will need to have the wellbeing of the Afghan people at its heart. Indeed, there has been a lot of solidarity from the international community on things such

The Taliban in Afghanistan: Expectations and Priorities for European Partners to Address |
Ben Lowings

as the proliferation of terrorism and the symbolic issue of inclusive government, but more can be done to focus on civilians. This is precisely why human rights is such a fundamental concern, and why the rise of the Taliban has prompted such worry. The international community will need to establish sufficient ways to monitor human rights abuses and enforce sanctions for such abuses, which will require cooperation and support for such instruments as those under the auspices of the United Nations.

Likewise, humanitarian concerns will have to be holistic. To attempt to solve problems for civilians within Afghanistan itself will require careful, targeted engagement with sufficient monitoring and accountability. And, despite some calls to the contrary in Europe, there will need to be better support for those Afghans that have been forced to flee, with more effective legal pathways for entry. None of these measures will be simple, but should we claim to have some responsibility for the humanitarian suffering of many people given the actions of the West in Afghanistan for many years, solutions will need to be implemented and difficult conversations and compromises will need to be made.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"



Author

Ben Lowings | Political Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466