

Afghanistan: A New Diplomatic Strategy, or a Façade of Legitimacy?

As the Taliban continue to secure power in Afghanistan, the international community has begun to engage in limited diplomacy with the new regime. How is the diplomatic presence of the Taliban, what happened to the Afghan embassies and consulates, and has anything really changed for the group?

REVITALISING MULTILATERAL PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES –
ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the seven months since the Taliban took control of the Afghanistan government last August, they have still been unsuccessful in their attempts to acquiesce a recognition of legitimacy from any singular State or international institution. The several preconditions for recognition, such as the EU's list of five conditions for 'operational engagement'¹, have yet to be met by the new regime. However, another issue related to this pursuit of recognition has been the often-times confusing nature of Afghanistan's diplomatic relations, which includes a seemingly contradictory official Taliban position that is at odds with Afghanistan's embassies

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-sets-five-conditions-for-future-operational-engagement-with-taliban/>

and other diplomatic missions internationally, most of which were installed during the prior government. Added to this mix are the positions of some international actors who have started formal engagement with the Taliban, yet seemingly deny recognition of their legitimacy. At the heart of this is the question of who represents Afghanistan, and how do international actors engage with those representatives? A question that, with millions of Afghans suffering from famine and other humanitarian issues, will urgently need to be addressed.

2. DISCONNECTED AFGHAN DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

One of the more notable elements to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has been a concerted effort to claim that this Taliban regime is more moderate and a different type of regime to the one that governed Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, years that were marked by extreme oppression of women and minority groups as well as brutal punishments under an extremely strict interpretation of Sharia law. This type of new self-characterisation of the Taliban as less extreme has been a typical line of rhetoric used by Taliban spokesmen towards international media. For example, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said on 17 August 2021, on the eve of the Taliban's seizure of Afghanistan, that the Taliban would respect women's rights within the norms of Islamic law, keep private media independent, and would seek no reprisals against those who worked with the former government or foreign forces².

Similarly, the Taliban had, according to reports from *Foreign Policy*³, sent 'uncharacteristically polite' messages to diplomatic staff based abroad in the 65 Afghani embassies and other international consulates, asking for meetings between ambassadors, all of which were installed during the government of former President Ashraf Ghani, and the Taliban acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. While some diplomats showed an interest in meeting with the Taliban, most were hesitant including one unnamed European-based ambassador who said⁴:

"[The Taliban] will say 'look, the minister spoke to the ambassadors today and gave them instructions, that literally means that you are under their jurisdiction."

² <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/17/1028391403/afghanistan-women-taliban-government>

³ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/07/afghanistan-diplomats-representation-terrorist-group/>

⁴ Ibid.

This hesitance to engage with the Taliban is understandable for a group that continues to be associated with terror-networks and was once leading an insurgency against the regime that these diplomatic staff worked for. The Taliban, for their part have claimed⁵ that there is an amnesty for those who worked for and with the former regime, but these diplomatic missions have expressed denial, including one ambassador in a Western country as reported by *Foreign Policy*⁶:

"Nobody can trust the Taliban. Forget about their amnesty; that's all [public relations] for the international community. Every day, we see that they're killing people, civil society, former government officials."

With this disconnect between the governing regime in Afghanistan, and the diplomatic missions abroad also operating under a flag, albeit different, of Afghanistan, what can these missions do? Unfortunately, such services have become understandably constrained due to a lack of funding, limited to caretaker services for local Afghans as well for their own staff and families wary of returning to a country that they could face reprisals⁷. But for some representations, there have been symbolic pushes on their host countries to hold the Taliban accountable on issues such as human rights abuses. After all, as no country has formally recognized the Taliban government, these embassies representing the former government are still technically the legitimate representations of Afghanistan and can thus continue to exist and operate.

3. CAUTIOUS INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Despite this, there is evidence that the Taliban have been trying to gain a foothold in these international representations. One notable example occurred in Rome⁸, where a former diplomat, Mohammad Fahim Kashaf, entered the Afghan embassy in Italy on 4 January 2022 claiming he had been named the new ambassador by the Taliban and proceeded to physically attack the current ambassador. Italian police were called, and Kashaf was escorted away. For their part, the Taliban while denying Kashaf's appointment as ambassador, claimed that he was still employed and that 'his termination is illegal'⁹.

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/17/1028391403/afghanistan-women-taliban-government>

⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/07/afghanistan-diplomats-representation-terrorist-group/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-embassy-rome-taliban/31640987.html>

⁹ Ibid.

Beyond embassies and consulates, the Taliban has also begun engaging with the international community in more direct diplomatic capacities. Some Western media outlets¹⁰ expressed shock when the Taliban, like most governments throughout the world, published a formal statement¹¹ about Russia and Ukraine on 25 February 2022, urging 'for restraint by both parties', that 'all sides need to desist from taking positions that could intensify violence.' The irony, given the nature of the Taliban's own insurgency and arrival to power, has not been lost by commentators¹².

However, the new Taliban-led Ministry of Foreign Affairs has indeed been engaging in other channels of direct diplomacy. On 5 October 2021, even despite their former role as an enemy of the Taliban as part of the NATO forces that occupied Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, the UK sent their Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Sir Simon Gass, with the British embassy to Afghanistan's Martin Longden, to meet with Muttaqi in Kabul¹³. Taliban Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Abdul Qahar Balki, said over *Twitter*¹⁴:

"The meeting focused on detailed discussions about reviving diplomatic relations between both countries, assurance of security by [The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan] for all citizens entering legally & humanitarian assistance by UK for the Afghans."

In addition to British officials, Japan's ambassador to Afghanistan, who has relocated to Doha following the events of August 2021, also visited Kabul in November 2021 for talks with the Taliban¹⁵. Other States have gone further by reopening their embassies. Qatar, who had played a large role in hosting the 2020 US-Taliban talks that led to a deal resulting in the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, have again stepped in to play a role in engaging the Taliban

¹⁰ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10551037/The-TALIBAN-call-Russia-Ukraine-resolve-crisis-peaceful-means.html>

¹¹ <https://qz.com/2133634/the-taliban-is-calling-for-peace-in-ukraine/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-british-officials-hold-talks-with-the-taliban/a-59418495>

¹⁴

https://twitter.com/QaharBalkhi/status/1445353742589628424?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1445353742589628424%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dw.com%2Fen%2Fafghanistan-british-officials-hold-talks-with-the-taliban%2Fa-59418495

¹⁵ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-december-3/>

diplomatically. US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, stated¹⁶ on 12 November 2021 that the Qatari embassy in Kabul would:

"Establish a US intersection... to provide certain consular services and monitor the condition and security of U.S. diplomatic facilities in Afghanistan."

The UAE too reopened their embassy in Kabul on 21 November 2021, providing an alternative diplomatic channel between the US and the Taliban on the ground¹⁷. Meanwhile, the EU has said¹⁸ that the EEAS plans to reopen a representative office in Kabul for its own officials that could be used by diplomats from European Member States.

The Taliban themselves travelled to Europe on 22 January 2022, representing their first visit to Europe since their seizure of power¹⁹. Meeting in Oslo, Taliban representatives, including Muttaqi, met officials from the US, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and Norway. With no country yet to declare legitimacy of the Taliban, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, tweeted²⁰:

"As we seek to address humanitarian crisis together with allies, partners, and relief orgs, we will continue clear-eyed diplomacy with the Taliban regarding our concerns and our abiding interest in a stable, rights-respecting and inclusive Afghanistan."

The nature of this 'clear-eyed diplomacy' certainly seems ambiguous, given that despite a formal recognition of legitimacy, these actions of engagement seem to be treating the Taliban as a country representative like any other. On such performative grounds, whether the recognition is declared does appear to be a moot point.

Then again, recognition does indeed appear to be a symbolic goal for the Taliban, that would pave the way for their ability to speak at institutions such as the UN

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/0f29bc21-e486-451d-932e-75c4dd1e6850>

¹⁹ <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220124-taliban-leaders-meet-western-diplomats-in-oslo-to-discuss-afghan-human-rights>

²⁰

https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1485283880244555781?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwc amp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1485283880244555781%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.france24.com%2Fen%2Fmiddle-east%2F20220124-taliban-leaders-meet-western-diplomats-in-oslo-to-discuss-afghan-human-rights

General Assembly, an ability that was denied to them last September²¹, and would begin opening the door to other channels of international cooperation such as foreign direct investment. As it stands, monetary assets and reserves in Afghanistan continue to be blocked by the US and other international partners on the premise of the Taliban's illegitimate government²². Any foreign financial support is limited to humanitarian aid, which itself has been heavily affected by the Taliban takeover.

4. DOMESTIC CONDITIONS CONTINUE TO WORSEN

Could this change any time soon? Could the international community have a change of heart regarding the Taliban? This is highly unlikely. So far, most international partners have viewed the Taliban's rhetorical commitments to being fairer and better custodians of Afghanistan as having little substance. After all, these conditions are mainly related to domestic, not international commitments. The Taliban, for instance, has yet to reopen schools for girls despite their promises to do so²³. Reports are widespread of violent reprisals against women and minorities, as well as former institutional workers such as judges that operated during the prior regime²⁴. The judicial systems themselves have been scrapped and replaced by a form of religious courts that operate with little oversight and as a tacit tool of oppression against victims of domestic violence²⁵.

The Taliban say that they are improving the situation for ordinary Afghans, and that their transition to governance is taking time²⁶. However, the evidence instead shows the situation getting worse, and reverting to the five years of the first rule between 1996 and 2001. The Ministry of Virtue and Vice, the religious police that replaced the former Ministry of Women's Affairs, recently instructed all government employees, all men, that they all must have a beard or risk dismissal²⁷.

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58632147>

²² <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/18/us-wont-let-taliban-access-afghanistans-financial-assets-held-in-america.html>

²³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/afghanistan-talibans-backtrack-on-school-re-opening-for-girls-irreversibly-impacts-their-future/#:~:text=While%20many%20girls%20were%20waiting,to%20immediately%20leave%20the%20schools.>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-60323638>

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilFi_Rgm-T8

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-bars-government-employees-without-beards-work-sources-2022-03-28/>

It recently ordered that public parks be now segregated by sex, and that women can no longer take flights without a male chaperone²⁸. A *Vice* documentary²⁹ also highlighted how many within the Taliban are expecting even stricter measures to be put back into place just as before, especially those designed to restrict the freedoms of women. How can the Taliban then be seen to keep their promises, when a court judge claims³⁰ that 'there is no abuse against women'? Or when a Taliban official himself says³¹ that his daughter does not deserve equal rights as a woman?

What will be critical in the foreseeable future is how the international community balances this line between engagement and recognition of the Taliban. The leftover diplomatic missions from Afghanistan, are themselves under threat by the Taliban, along with so many of their own civilian population. The steps that countries and international institutions have taken to engage with the Taliban will have to remain measured, balancing the alleviating of humanitarian suffering through cooperation against holding accountability for a regime with seemingly little moral scruples. Unfortunately, while this diplomatic path is being established, the prospects for Afghan civilians appears to remain bleak.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilFi_Rgm-T8

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

About the BIC

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