



## Introduction

Since the Taliban regained power with the seizure of Kabul on 15 August 2021, they have been consolidating a totalitarian, misogynist regime that is contrary to the most basic human rights, while living conditions for the population, especially for women, have worsened day by day. Their actions have shown that their religious, social and political radicalism is similar to that of the Taliban of the 1990s.

Externally, its main objective is to gain international recognition and the release of frozen Afghan assets abroad. Power and decision-making are in the hands of Taliban strongman Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada and the most extreme faction in Kandahar. They are unwilling to relent in their aim to impose a radical Islamic emirate, with women and girls ostracised.

But despite the restrictions, in Kabul<sup>1</sup> women can be seen in the city, especially in the Hazara neighbourhood. In general, they do not wear burqas, but hijab and black clothes, as imposed by the Taliban, although there are some who defy the Taliban dictatorship by wearing different coloured clothes and covering their heads with a dupata or headscarf. Many are seen alone or with other women, without a mahram (male family companion), which is essential for travel, although they do not have many places to go either.

There are no men who dress in the Western style; now they all wear the shalwar kameez, a traditional outfit of loose-fitting trousers and tunic, as the Taliban canons dictate. The question of dress is not a trivial issue in the history of Afghanistan, especially in Kabul. It is also a symbol of progress or regression or stagnation in modernisation processes. As early as the 1920s, King Amanullah attempted a programme of reform and modernisation that included abolishing the veil and ordering the wearing of Western clothes in Kabul. They were the symbolic reflex of reforms, although, in the end, "resentment grew among conservative religious leaders, tribes and dissident members of the royal family"<sup>2</sup>. The reforms ultimately cost him the throne.

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<sup>1</sup>The descriptions of the atmosphere of Kabul and its people are based on the author's impressions during her visit to the country in November 2022. It was her first return to the Asian country after the Taliban seizure of power.

<sup>2</sup>REQUENA, Pilar. Afghanistan. Editorial Síntesis. Madrid, 2011. P. 33.

At first glance, there are fewer controls than before and there is less perceived tension. But it is a false sense of security because, as soon as one begins to scratch the surface, fear and terror emerge in a large part of the population. The Taliban are here to stay, at least for the time being. And there is a fundamental difference from the Afghanistan of their previous period: Kabul and other cities have been rebuilt, the Taliban have found themselves with refurbished ministries and offices, modern cars and weapons abandoned by the Americans, and they are very comfortable in these new circumstances. But they are up against a population that, over the last 20 years, has enjoyed, especially in the cities, a certain freedom and rights that they are not ready to lose. They are tired of war and armed resistance, such as that led by Ahmad Masood, the son of the legendary Ahmad Sha Masood, the "Lion of Panjshir", who was killed by Al Qaeda two days before the 9/11 attacks, will find it difficult to advance without outside support<sup>3</sup>.

Afghans feel abandoned by an international community that left without looking back. "The world and our neighbours have been very unfair to Afghanistan," says women's rights activist Mahbouba Seraj<sup>4</sup>. "The international community made a big promise to the Afghan people. They said: we are going to develop and rehabilitate the country and provide good governance for the people. And one day they abandoned the people of Afghanistan," adds Muhammad Yousef, founder and director of the NGO Aschiana<sup>5</sup>.

They do not want to return to arms, but call for more pressure on the Taliban not to take away the limited freedom they had and to respect their human rights. Some, however, already recognise that if it is necessary to return to fighting, they will do so, although they are aware that, for the time being, they would not be able to count on outside help or support. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has continued

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<sup>3</sup>REQUENA, Pilar. Taliban 'apartheid' against women. *5W*, 15/08/2023. Available in:

<https://www.revista5w.com/temas/conflictos/el-apartheid-taliban-contra-las-mujeres-87951>

<sup>4</sup>SERAJ, Mahbouba. Interview conducted on 14 November 2022 in Kabul, where Mahbouba Seraj, journalist and women's rights defender and co-founder of the Afghan Women's Network, lives. She runs a shelter for mistreated women and advocates dialogue with the Taliban since, she says, they are the de facto authorities in the country. This has earned her strong criticism from Afghan activists, especially from exile. A Nobel Peace Prize candidate, she is 75 years old and the niece of former King Amanullah Khan.

<sup>5</sup>YOUSEF, Muhammad. Interview conducted in Kabul, 15 November 2022. Muhammad Yousef is dedicated to helping and educating street children and now also children from vulnerable and needy families through the NGO Aschiana <http://www.aschiana.org/> which he founded in the mid 1990s,

to receive reports of human rights abuses and violations, including against former government officials and security personnel, in violation of the general amnesty announced in August 2021.

The *de facto* authorities claim to have achieved good results in terms of revenue and trade and to have reduced corruption and increased the eradication of poppy fields. Articles in *The Kabul Times*, a publication used by the Taliban regime to "sell its achievements" and decisions in English<sup>6</sup>, are dominated by reports of new projects, progress in trade relations, agreements with foreign countries and companies, good relations with neighbours, or criticism of UNAMA for its negative reports, etc. However, forecasts indicate limited prospects for growth and poverty reduction. Investment in development is very low and millions of Afghans are dependent on international aid. The humanitarian crisis is unprecedented, with a very real risk of systemic collapse and human catastrophe.

There has been rapid economic decline, hunger and risk of malnutrition, inflation, drastic increases in both urban and rural poverty, a nearly collapsed public health system, stifling of the media and civil society, an almost total exclusion of women and girls from public life, and severe limitations or closure of human rights organisations. In 2023, 28.3 million people (two thirds of the population) are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance to survive. The country is in its third consecutive year of drought and continues to suffer the effects of 40 years of conflict and recurrent natural disasters. In addition to unimaginable human costs, this crisis is reversing many of the gains of the past 20 years.

## Repression and human rights violations

Since coming to power, the Taliban have continued to commit human rights violations and have imposed a regime of fear and terror. They have subjected those they consider to be their opponents to extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and illegal detention with impunity. Executions and public floggings have been carried out to punish crimes

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<sup>6</sup>*The Kabul Times* is not published every day, but its interest lies in the issues that are prominent and most important to the Taliban. It is under the Directory of Government Newspapers under the Ministry of Culture and Information. It also has a website: <https://thekabultimes.com/>

such as murder, theft, "illegitimate" relationships or the violation of social norms<sup>7</sup>.

According to a report<sup>8</sup> by the Afghan organisation Rawadari, in the first half of 2023, "terrorist attacks and armed conflicts have decreased compared to previous years, resulting in fewer civilian casualties. However, other forms of human rights violations, especially targeted and extrajudicial killings, remain frequent and are carried out by both Taliban and outsiders". In addition, they have imposed increasing restrictions on the lives of citizens, continue to violently repress peaceful protests and rallies, and "have carried out arbitrary and illegal arrests of former government officials, protesters, human rights activists, journalists and political opponents"<sup>9</sup>. The population lives in an atmosphere of repression and suffocation. "Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners and the use of cruel and inhuman punishments are other serious cases of human rights violations committed by the Taliban"<sup>10</sup>. This research also concludes that the Taliban have continued their vendetta against former employees of the former government.

In its August report this year, UNAMA claims that at least 218 former military personnel and officials have been killed in extrajudicial executions since the Taliban took power, despite a general amnesty ordered by their supreme leader, along with another order against torture or ill-treatment of detainees. "In most cases, individuals were detained by the de facto security forces, often briefly, before being killed," reports UNAMA<sup>11</sup>. The Taliban Foreign Ministry claims that it is not aware of any cases of non-compliance with the order and that if there were any, they would be investigated. "No military personnel from the previous administration have been arrested, detained or tortured for their activities in the security institutions," it says in a statement published by the UN in its report. The UN makes no secret of its concern at the impunity with which the Taliban operate. At least 800

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<sup>7</sup>AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL The State of the World's Human Rights. Report 2022/2023. *Amnesty International*, 27/03/2023, p. 76.

<https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/pol10/5670/2023/es/>

<sup>8</sup>RAWADARI. Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: Mid-year Report 1 January to 30 June 2023. Published August 2023, p. 4.

[https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RW\\_AFGHumanRights2023\\_English.pdf](https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RW_AFGHumanRights2023_English.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Idem

<sup>10</sup>Idem

<sup>11</sup>UNAMA. A barrier to securing peace: Human rights violations against former government officials and former armed force members in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021-30 June 2023.

[https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a\\_barrier\\_to\\_securing\\_peace\\_aug\\_2023\\_english\\_0.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a_barrier_to_securing_peace_aug_2023_english_0.pdf)

incidents of human rights violations against former government and military officials have been recorded, including arbitrary arrests, disappearances and torture. Islamic courts have already been established throughout the country, applying Sharia or Islamic law according to the Taliban's extremist interpretation.

"There seems to be a certain conformism in the international community towards the de facto government that currently rules Afghanistan. There is a certain resignation. A great military and development effort was made. Something was clearly done wrong because it didn't take hold in Afghan society. And after a few years, the Taliban regained power"<sup>12</sup>, says Carlos Castresana, a Spanish prosecutor specialising in international human rights law. And, he continues, it is an authoritarian regime with a religious authority in Kandahar rather than the political authority in Kabul, which has flatly stripped women of their status as human beings.

## **Gender apartheid**

The repression of women began as soon as they came to power and had already been implemented in the mainly rural areas that had been falling under Taliban control in recent years. They closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which issues restrictive and abusive decrees on the rights of women and girls. When women protest, they are met with illegal arrests or violent repression.

They did not impose the burqa, contrary to what they did in the 1990s, in an attempt not to provoke international anger, but women must wear black hijab. In Kabul, many, in what could be a symbol of quiet rebellion, do not respect it at all and this angers the Taliban. Some have said that there will be no secondary or university education until women abide by all limitations on their freedom. In other words, they have to give up all their rights in order to enjoy the right to education. But in addition to being banned from education beyond primary school, they are barred from parks, gyms, beauty salons and public baths and from working for NGOs and the UN. And public punishments, including floggings and

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<sup>12</sup>CASTRESANA, Carlos, Interview by the author in Madrid, 11 September 2023.

executions, hallmarks of their brutality, have been reintroduced.

The Taliban have not only deprived women of their human rights but, through their discriminatory policies, deny them employment opportunities. Prohibiting them from working outside the home and deliberately excluding them from the social sphere has serious and detrimental consequences and has led to the spread of poverty and other devastating consequences for the country. And the situation of women and girls continues to deteriorate with increased risk of exposure to violence and abuse and with serious consequences for physical and mental health. It also has a negative impact on the economy and the provision of vital humanitarian services.

Violence ranges from murder and honour killings to forced and child marriages and beatings, sale of girls and organs, child labour, human trafficking. UN experts have expressed deep concern about the absence of legal protection for women, the systematic application of discrimination and the normalisation of gender-based violence. "Women do not have access to legal professionals. Some women lawyers continue to provide legal services from their homes, but in most localities they are barred from entering courtrooms"<sup>13</sup>.

"I think it is appropriate and in no way unconscionable to describe the current situation in Afghanistan as gender apartheid. We should be much more energetic as international community, because humanity has to be defended by the states and it is our elected representatives who are not up to the response that this situation would demand"<sup>14</sup>, says Castresana. "In this case, we are talking about gender apartheid, which, in recent years, has been used to describe the terrible persecution of women and girls in Afghanistan," says William Schabas, professor of international law and human rights at Middlesex University in London. "But there is no crime of gender apartheid in the Rome Statute, but there is a crime of gender-based persecution. And so the crime is more adequately addressed through the notion of crimes against humanity in the International Criminal

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<sup>13</sup>OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER OF HUMAN RIGHTS. UN. Experts: Taliban treatment of women may be "gender apartheid", 11/07/2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/07/experts-taliban-treatment-women-may-be-gender-apartheid#:0a%20total>

<sup>14</sup>CASTRESANA, Carlos. Op, cit.

Court"<sup>15</sup> .

"The situation is going from bad to worse. Our rights are being erased, one by one. It is really apartheid. But I don't see any reaction from the world. That's what really worries me. We are not sleeping, we are fighting. What is the world doing? They put us in this situation. And what are they doing now? Nothing. The women of Afghanistan are dying every day, even though they are the bravest and most resilient women I have ever seen," says an outraged Mahbouba Seraj<sup>16</sup> .

On 20 December 2022, the Taliban Ministry of Higher Education issued an order to public and private universities, suspending women's education until further notice. Female and male students protested in several cities, but the Taliban dispersed them with water cannons, beatings and arrests. Girls and women have been ostracised and made invisible in public life for the past two years. "I think I am living in a darkness with no future, I feel like I am in a prison, before I had my daily walks and a schedule of things to do but now it is empty. The Taliban are cruel to women", says Zakia Alikzada sadly<sup>17</sup> . She would like to be active in civil society, but is very afraid of being arrested. "Unfortunately, no one listens to the voice of Afghan girls and women. There is no hope," she concludes.

When it comes to the situation of women and girls, progressively all their rights have been annihilated, disintegrated, denied until they no longer really exist as human beings. "They are denied the right to move, the right to education, the right to work, the right to travel, everything except staying at home under the tutelage of men. They are the ones who suffer most from the consequences of the Taliban regime," denounces Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International. The human rights organisation has investigated, together with the International Commission of Jurists, the situation of women and has come to the conclusion that the Taliban are responsible for crimes against humanity of gender-based persecution, "which is extremely serious and the kind of crime that should demand an immediate reaction from the international community"<sup>18</sup> .

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<sup>15</sup>SCHABAS, William. Interview by the author in London, 13 September 2023.

<sup>16</sup>SERAJ, Mahbouba, op.cit.

<sup>17</sup>ALIKZADA, Zakia, is a journalist based in the Afghan capital. She is married and has a young daughter. The interview was conducted at her home in Kabul on 9 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup>CALLAMARD, Agnès. Interview conducted in London by the author, 12 September 2023.



There are some exceptions. In the health sector, women who work in the health sector can go to health centres and provide their services, which are essential to serve women in a segregated and very conservative society. "There are nurses, midwives and doctors. But if young girls cannot go to secondary schools and then study nursing or medicine, what will happen to the country in the near future?" asks Mohamed Ayoya<sup>19</sup>, UNICEF's representative in Afghanistan.

Mental health problems among girls and women are worsening. Isolated, persecuted and hopeless, many report suffering from anxiety and depression in what is already being described as a mental health crisis and a "pandemic of suicidal thoughts". Activists say there has been an increase in women's suicides since August 2021. Concrete figures are hard to come by and it is feared that this is only the tip of the iceberg. The anguish and despair are easily perceptible in Afghan women. According to TOLONews, last year, there were 250 suicide attempts in the country, 188 of them women.

Maryam Marof Arwin, director of the Organisation for Strengthening the Welfare of Women and Children in Afghanistan, says she receives reports of at least nine to eleven suicides of women every month, many of them young girls. But she warns that, due to family reluctance and pressure from the Taliban, the issue goes unreported. "The Taliban try to suppress reports of suicides. Most of the time they do not allow the media to publish them. But we are seeing an increase in the number of suicides and we are concerned about the situation of women, especially girls"<sup>20</sup>, she explains.

Depression is widespread, the ban on education and unemployment exacerbate the already dire economic conditions of dozens of poverty-stricken families. "Hope among women is at very low levels. Girls are not in a good frame of mind. Behavioural data shows that more than 90 per cent of women have depression or feel mentally ill. They cannot speak out. They cannot live freely," says Alina<sup>21</sup>, a professor at Kabul University,

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<sup>19</sup>AYOYA, Mohamed. He was UNICEF's representative in Afghanistan at the time of the author's interview in Kabul on 8 November 2022. Mohamed Ayoya is now UN Under-Secretary-General.

<sup>20</sup>REQUENA, Pilar. Taliban 'apartheid' against women. *5W*, 15/08/2023. Available at: <https://www.revista5w.com/temas/conflictos/el-apartheid-taliban-contra-las-mujeres-87951>

<sup>21</sup>ALINA is a fictitious name, the real name is avoided for security reasons. The interview was conducted in this

who adds that health problems are at an all-time high.

"Women's rights are at the basis of Western culture, but not of Afghan women's culture", defends Abdul Haq Hammad, head of publications at the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture, "in Western culture, from the age of 18, parents no longer control their daughters, but that goes against our culture. Westerners allow girls to travel around the country alone, but here you have to pay attention to Islamic Sharia. They cannot go alone. It is the culture of the Afghan people. It is Islam. Another demand from Western countries is that women and men work together in the administration. Islam says that men and women should be separated"<sup>22</sup>.

Against this background, a recent report by human rights experts warns of systematic "gender apartheid and persecution" in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. "Serious, systematic and institutionalised discrimination against women and girls is at the heart of the Taliban ideology and government, which also raises concerns that it may be responsible for gender apartheid," says the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, Richard Bennett<sup>23</sup>. For Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, "the UN and some Western institutions and governments spread propaganda that does not reflect reality".

It has always been said that Afghanistan was one of the worst places to be a woman. Today, it is certainly the worst. But this time the Taliban leadership may not get off scot-free. In 2022, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, asked the Prosecutor's Special Adviser on Gender-Based Persecution, Lisa Davis, a law professor, to draft a *Policy on the Crime of Gender Persecution*<sup>24</sup>. The document provides a roadmap of legal arguments that could be used to investigate and prosecute gender-based harms as crimes against humanity. On 31 October 2022, the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber authorised the prosecutor to resume the investigation into the situation in Afghanistan, including allegations of persecution. "The Taliban's alleged conduct,

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professor's office in one of the faculties of Kabul University on 8 November 2022, when there was still university education for women. Shortly afterwards, the Taliban decreed its closure.

<sup>22</sup>HAMMAD, Abdul Haq. Interview conducted at the Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul, 17 November 2022.

<sup>23</sup>Afghanistan: Taliban may be responsible for gender apartheid. *UN News*, 19/06/2023.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137847>

<sup>24</sup>The full document of 7 December 2022 can be found at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022-12-07-Policy-on-the-Crime-of-Gender-Persecution.pdf>

including acts of flogging, torture, disappearance and arbitrary detention, is used to impose gender-based deprivations of basic fundamental rights," explains Davis. "We have seen this pattern before and it is time to hold perpetrators accountable"<sup>25</sup>.

### **The secretive Taliban regime**

The Taliban of 2021 have tried to present themselves as different from those who held power at the end of the last century. Although they have not changed ideologically, they know that they cannot ignore today's radically different circumstances. Afghan society has changed and they seek international recognition and do not want to lose power and return to armed struggle. "We want an Islamic system that reflects the values of the Afghans," Anas Haqqani commented in an interview in August 2021, echoing what has become a Taliban cliché. "All official announcements are made through our spokesman," he added. "That is our strength. We don't have several people making statements"<sup>26</sup>. And the only voice they respond to is that of the most radical, Mullah Akhundzada from Kandahar.

"We had hoped that the Taliban, who had promised change to the Afghan people, both in Doha and in Kabul, would come with a new mentality. But, unfortunately, they haven't. It's not an inclusive government. It is only the Taliban regime. The Tajiks, the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, the different ethnic Afghans, are not represented in it. Nor are the women. Every day, some 6,000 people leave the country, crossing the border illegally. Every day, professionals lose their jobs and religious people take their jobs. It's a brain drain," says Ziauhq Amarkhil<sup>27</sup>, former governor of Nanghahar. He says the Taliban need internal legitimacy, but for that to happen, they would have to respect human rights and form an inclusive government. He points out that there is no comparison between the situation they found in 1995 and that of 2021. In 1995, there were no social networks, no electricity, no internet.

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<sup>25</sup>ABRAMIAN, Jackie. Holding the Taliban accountable. *The Progressive Magazine*, 14/08/2023.

<https://progressive.org/latest/holding-the-taliban-accountable-abramian-20230815/>

<sup>26</sup>KAKAR, Ahmed-Waleed. Taliban, the next generation: an interview with Anas Haqqani. *New Lines Magazine*, 30/08/2021. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/taliban-the-next-generation/>

<sup>27</sup>AMARKHIL, Ziauhq. Interview conducted by the author in Kabul, 13 November 2022. Ziauhq Amarkhil was an advisor to former President Ashraf Ghani and Minister of Parliamentary Affairs during the republic. He founded and leads a political and social movement called "Nation Stability".

"We have to find a way to make this work," explains Obaidullah Baheer<sup>28</sup>, professor at the American University in Kabul, "it is a reality that Afghanistan is not the same and the Taliban will have to come to terms with that reality. Afghans are not the same as they were then who had just come out of a civil war and were very tired, ready to accept whatever policies the Taliban put forward. The main problem is that there are two visions of Afghanistan: that of the Taliban and that of urban-educated Afghans. And no society that tries to eliminate the other vision can succeed. So the solution is to mix them together to create a third vision that accommodates both sides.

The Taliban needs to understand the importance of having the support of the people. "I am not a member, not a supporter of the Taliban, but I know they are in power now and I am smart enough to accept that reality," continues Obaidullah Baheer, "I want them to do better for the Afghan people, because we are tired of executive changes. We are tired of interventions. We are fed up with wars. We are fed up with foreign conferences where they decide for us. We have to sit down together and find our own way. We can do it if people let us. It's time to learn from each other". But he himself acknowledges that it is very difficult to reach the Taliban leader who is very isolated and does not see the reality on the ground, does not perceive the discontent and grievances. "Unless we change the circumstances that gave rise to Taliban thinking, we will not kill the snake. We are not going to give up, giving up is never an option. We are trying to convince the Taliban to include different ideologies, different ethnicities within their structure, because at the end of the day, unless the system is more inclusive, people will not see themselves in the government. They will not feel protected," he concludes.

One of the biggest failures of the Taliban emirate is the lack of system, of organisation, but it is a united movement. There are no serious internal divisions that could lead to a break-up. They have spent 20 years without money, without food, fighting, and yet they have maintained unity. "The Taliban is one unit, one leadership, and we all listen to the

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<sup>28</sup>BAHEER, Obaidullah. Interview conducted in Kabul, 8 November 2022. Obaidullah Baheer is a professor at the American University in Kabul, which closed after the arrival of the Taliban and moved to Qatar and teaches online. He lives in Afghanistan, but also travels abroad. He is also a political analyst and advocate for girls' and women's education. He is criticised for his willingness to talk to the Taliban. He is the grandson of Gulbudin Hekmatyar, one of the most bloodthirsty mujahideen and warlords, nicknamed during the 1990s civil war "the Butcher of Kabul."

leader. When the Taliban leader issues a decree, it is carried out," says Abdul Haq Hammad<sup>29</sup>. "This is propaganda against us by foreigners, the Taliban are not divided into several parties or factions, that is completely false. The Taliban is a unit whose undisputed leader is Sheikh Akhundzada and we all have absolute respect for him," adds Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Hayatullah Muhajer Farahi<sup>30</sup>.

Mahbouba Seraj is also in favor of dialogue with the Taliban because, according to her, it is the only way to do her job. Because of this willingness to dialogue, she is often criticised by Afghan refugees. "I can leave the country whenever I want, but I will not leave. This is my country. The women need me. I have a US passport. I am afraid. I am not a martyr. And I am not an extremely brave person at all. For us to survive, we have to be together, the women in the diaspora and the women in the interior. And I have to talk to the Taliban. I have to be able to work with them because I have things to do. Right now they are the de facto government, whether I like it or not. And I have women to protect. I can't just ignore them. I have a duty"<sup>31</sup>. A few weeks ago, a video of Mahbouba was posted on social media in which, in a meeting with the Taliban regime's spokesman, she told him that it was unacceptable to ban women from education and warned him of the consequences of such measures against women.

But it is clear that the one-track, extremist thinking is what rules among the Taliban, when you talk to them about the most thorny issues. "The dignity that a whole nation prides itself on has to be saved with this sharia. If there is a crime and the government does not punish the criminal, the system collapses. Criminals must be punished," explains Abdul Haq Hammad<sup>32</sup>, "but if the martyr's family says: we don't want him to be killed. Then he is pardoned and is free. If we implement Sharia, corruption and crimes will disappear completely. When one crime is punished, thousands more are prevented because it is a good lesson for others".

They have managed internal divisions and factional rivalries. They have survived

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<sup>29</sup>HAMMAD, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup>MUHAJIR FARAHI, Hayatullah. Interview with the author in Kabul, 7 November 2022.

<sup>31</sup>SERAJ, op.cit.

<sup>32</sup>HAMMAD, op. cit.

economically, better than many expected. There were all kinds of signs of economic collapse, of fiscal collapse, of withdrawal of foreign funding, of barriers to banking that are still in place, of difficulties in trade, with Afghans so dependent on imports of food, fuel or electricity. The younger generation of Taliban think that if they succeed, they will be able to stay in power forever. And they wonder if, in the end, the death of 100,000 martyrs was to end in a fight for girls' education. They are focused on the day-to-day economic issues of getting food and work for their own and the population. All of this somehow forces them to behave differently, because they are ministers and hold real ministries. Meanwhile, the mullah and the people around him in Kandahar rule in the name of the dead.

Like Golam<sup>33</sup>, a middle-aged Taliban, many former fighters are still waiting for the leadership to give them a job to make up for the hunger, cold and horror of years of jihad, fighting against the Afghan government and foreign troops. "This is not a Taliban victory. It is the victory of the people of Afghanistan. It is for everyone," he says.

### **The blow to education**

Prior to the total ban on access to secondary education and university, the Taliban already made it difficult for women to enrol in courses and in the national examination for university entrance. In some cases, they were prevented from entering university buildings. In addition, they were banned from taking certain subjects. But after months of such restrictions, they went one step further and, by decree, on 20 December 2022, ordered the closure of universities for women. And on 28 January 2023, the Taliban Ministry of Higher Education officially sent a letter to public and private universities banning women and girls from participating in the university entrance exam (Kankor). Now only girls up to the sixth grade and students of health training centres are allowed to attend schools, subject to strict compliance with Taliban rules<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup>GHOLAM. Author interview in Kabul, 9 November 2022. After he recounted all his experiences on the battlefield over the years, he cut me off and demanded that I not give his name when I asked him about the violation of human rights by the Taliban and the killing of former soldiers and policemen of the republic. His fear of saying anything that was not in line with the dictates of the regime was evident.

<sup>34</sup>RAWADARI. Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: Mid-year Report, 1 January to 30 June 2023. Pp. 25-26. August 2023. [https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RW\\_AFGHumanRights2023\\_English.pdf](https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RW_AFGHumanRights2023_English.pdf)

"Islam says education is compulsory. There are secret schools. People want education for their daughters. If they don't reopen the schools, Afghans will not keep quiet. They will take to the streets, they will go to protests, they will go against the Taliban. Everybody says that, in the last 20 years, our only achievement has been that our girls and women go to school, to university, to work in the economy, in the government. It is not possible to build our country without women, without girls' education," denounced Matiullah Wesa, a Kandahar-born human rights and education activist. "If you want to build Afghanistan again, if you want a peaceful Afghanistan, if you want Afghanistan to be a powerful country in the world, the only way is to support education, women's rights and respect the education of women and girls. I fight for education, I have been in prison, my family has been in prison. We work in the remote areas. I have received death threats"<sup>35</sup>, he said. He was arrested in Kabul on 27 March by the Taliban. He has been in prison ever since.

He founded PenPath 14 years ago with his brother. It is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting education, especially in rural areas and remote villages in Afghanistan. Matiullah Wesa demanded that the Taliban reverse their decisions to ban secondary and university education for women. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said after his arrest that he was to be investigated in connection with "suspicious information about him" and for "organising meetings and making contacts that were a cause for concern". Other Taliban leaders have accused him on social media and local news channels of being a spy and working against the interests of the country. His only crime, in reality, is fighting for education. He and his brother often carry books and school supplies donated by Afghan philanthropists, earning them the nickname 'walking librarians' or 'book-carrying brothers'. Since the Taliban ban on girls' higher education, Penpath's work has shifted to campaigning for the reopening of schools and university for girls and women. In late August, actress Angelina Jolie joined the international campaign for his release<sup>36</sup>.

The Taliban obey the emir without question, but it appears that the education debate

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<sup>35</sup>WESA, Matiullah. Interview conducted at his home in Kabul, 10 November 2022. From the outset, his love for education and commitment to girls' and women's education was evident.

<sup>36</sup><https://www.wemu.org/npr-national-news/npr-national-news/2023-08-21/angelina-jolie-urges-support-for-jailed-afghan-man-who-championed-higher-ed-for-girls>

could eventually erode that loyalty. Conservatives want to restrict women's access to education. But there is a camp that is considering education but with limits on fields of study, for example, allowing women to learn only medicine. And there is a commission to review secondary and tertiary curricula to remove content deemed un-Islamic. Politically, the fight for education gave the emir the opportunity to appeal to the grassroots Taliban, who he believes agree with his ideas on women<sup>37</sup>.

"We consider it our responsibility to help our young generation of women and girls. We try to find ways to share our knowledge with them to empower them. We have to hide our programs from the Taliban because we are not allowed to organise workshops, seminars. We are not doing any political activity. We think it is very important for us to study because when we educate a mother, we educate a nation. It is very important for us to have empowered women who work for their country and never give up"<sup>38</sup>, explains Zual who, together with other young women, organises online and underground classes.

"The American University, for security reasons and not knowing what would happen, decided to leave for Qatar. Other universities segregated their classes. Most of the universities had different days for men and women, others put a separation cloth between male and female students. We are telling the Taliban that if they want to be recognised as legitimate rulers of the country, they have to abide by certain rules. They have to grant us certain rights. They won a war after 20 years of fighting and they will do what they want but we are trying to safeguard what we can"<sup>39</sup>, says Obaidullah Baheer.

"I wanted to go to university to continue studying. And my great hope is to become president and make my country better. There are many problems, in the villages they don't have access to medicine, or anything. Unfortunately, at the moment, many young women don't have the food for the soul that is education and every day we are sadder and sadder. We have lost hope"<sup>40</sup>, Narges laments. Her sister, some friends and she

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<sup>37</sup>INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis. Asia Report N°329 | 23 February 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/329-taliban-restrictions-womens-rights-deepen-afghanistans-crisis>

<sup>38</sup>ZUAL. For security reasons, the surname is omitted. Interview conducted in Kabul, 12 November 2022.

<sup>39</sup>BAHEER, Obaidullah, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup>NARGES. For security reasons, the surname is omitted. The interview was conducted at the clandestine school where she teaches in Kabul on 10 November 2022.



work together in a clandestine school in a Kabul neighbourhood where they teach various subjects, always in fear of being discovered and arrested by the Taliban or of being killed in an attack on the way back and forth. "I used to be a teacher. Now, I teach clandestinely at home and online<sup>41</sup>", says Basira, a member of an association supporting victims of terrorist violence, especially Hazaras, and defending human rights.

"There are many problems at the university, but I am here for the students. I can teach them everything I learned in Tehran. Every day they come to my office and tell me: <Oh, you are our hope>. And I encourage them to continue their studies because this situation cannot be forever<sup>42</sup>", explains Alina. "We are confused. Our lives are in danger. The expert teachers ran away, there is no level".

"We have a huge demand from parents, elders, religious leaders, women, asking us to provide facilities for their children, boys and girls, to go to school. We are hoping that this will potentially lead the authorities to understand that girls' schools from grade six onwards should be reopened<sup>43</sup>", explains Mohamed Ayoya, adding that the normal curriculum is being implemented in the schools.

Even so, there is every indication that, sooner or later, curricula will also be changed and all education will be adapted to Islam. The Afghan daily Hasht-e-Subh obtained the Taliban's plan to change school curricula. The process would have been completed in December 2020 and would have been carried out by an ad hoc Taliban committee. In addition to removing a number of textbooks and subjects from the educational curriculum, there are numerous proposals to change the content of the books. The aim would be to make the curricula resemble those of the previous Taliban government in the 1990s. These include: removing images of living beings, propagating Jihad, justifying violence, bloodshed and destruction, prohibiting any defence of democracy and human rights, opposing education and women's freedom, propagating the Taliban narrative of history,

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<sup>41</sup>BASIRA. Surname and details of the organisation are omitted to avoid identification. Interview conducted clandestinely in Kabul, 7 November 2022.

<sup>42</sup>ALINA is a fictitious name. This university lecturer, an ethnic Hazara, asked to preserve her identity for security reasons. The interview was conducted at Kabul University, in one of the faculties that were still open, on 8 November 2022.

<sup>43</sup>AYOYA, Mohamed, op.cit.

focusing on the Islamic world and ignoring the non-Islamic world, especially the West. They also seek to alienate Shias, demonise the UN, ban the celebration of Nowruz or introduce restrictions on festivals and ceremonies, and condemn Afghan historical personalities. Noorullah Munir, Taliban Minister of Education, already said at the end of October 2021 that the curriculum would change and conform to the Taliban interpretation of Islam. According to the Taliban, maintaining the current curriculum is a continuation of the alleged "cultural invasion of the West" that endangers the Taliban's interests<sup>44</sup>.

Changing the school curriculum is only part of the Taliban's aim to change education so that it revolves around Islam. There are even reports of reducing subjects to the most basic ones, more religion and technology. But, in addition, and here lies the greatest danger, there are the new madrassas that prepare the future Taliban. These schools resemble, and are reminiscent of, the madrasas in which the Taliban were trained from an early age in Pakistan. The result can be seen. They grew up indoctrinated in an extremist worldview. What we find, at the moment, is the terrible reality that they ban girls' schools but open madrassas to train the next generation of Taliban, extremists and suicide bombers.

### **Economics and humanitarian assistance**

The Taliban hide the details of their finances, but leaked budgets suggest that they collect enough revenues -mostly from customs duties- to maintain a rudimentary state. "The taxes that the previous regime collected went into the pockets of the warlords or the corrupt and the government. But with the Taliban, with the Islamic Emirate, all taxes go to the national bank, directly, without any corruption, to the government budget. It is our revenue<sup>45</sup>", explains Abdul Haq Hammad.

But the situation is far from good and there is a clear economic crisis and the absence of a productive system. The 'Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023', published by the

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<sup>44</sup>BAHESH, Hasib. Taliban Modify Education Curriculum to Propagate Violence and Bigotry. *Hasht e Subh*, 16 September 2023. <https://8am.media/eng/exclusive-taliban-modify-education-curriculum-to-propagate-violence-and-bigotry/>

<sup>45</sup>HAMMAD, Abdul Haq, op.cit.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in April 2023, reflects the persistent fragility of the Afghan economy and the critical nature of foreign aid. Per capita spending for about 85% of the population is below the 2020 poverty line. The report notes the negative impact on economic prospects of labour and educational restrictions on women and girls.

The private sector continues to face challenges related to political and legal uncertainty, in particular with regard to international bank transfers, withdrawal limits, visa issues, access to foreign markets and unreliable electricity supply. Challenges in the financial sector have resulted in the Afghan economy relying heavily on informal payment channels. The cash import mechanism established by the UN to support humanitarian operations transferred USD 2.59 billion between 1 December 2021 and 15 May 2023 and has been instrumental in stabilising the currency and economic stimulus.

Afghanistan's economic crisis is widespread and has far-reaching ramifications. The economy immediately went into freefall, with the freezing of \$9.5 billion in central bank reserves, loans and the sudden suspension of direct development aid. Dollars sent by the UN for aid operations are closely watched by the Taliban who lack alternative sources of foreign exchange because most of Afghanistan's central bank assets are frozen abroad<sup>46</sup>.

The situation remains extremely difficult and grim for the Afghan population, for women and girls it is tragic. "The agricultural labour force has decreased due to the drought. The options to migrate from rural areas to the cities have disappeared because of the lack of jobs in the cities. We had a country where 75 per cent of the national budget came from foreign aid. Forty per cent of GDP was foreign aid. A lot of the economic means or livelihoods depended on that international support. So there is a need for solutions that focus on a local economy. Afghanistan is the sixth country most affected by climate change. Female-headed households are the most vulnerable and the country has the highest percentage of widows in the world, due to decades of conflict. Before the collapse of the republic, we were probably one of the ten poorest countries in the world. So with

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<sup>46</sup>INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, op.cit.

the withdrawal of US forces, this crisis multiplied due to international sanctions"<sup>47</sup>, explains Nasratullah Haqpal, researcher and political analyst.

"The government is doing everything possible to achieve a good economy for the people of Afghanistan. It is involved in various projects. When they are implemented, there will be more employment. Our budget comes from our own tax revenues, but in the previous government 77% came from abroad. We are waiting for the Americans to release the frozen money"<sup>48</sup>, Muhajir is convinced of the benefits of the Taliban system.

"However, if we look at the situation of child malnutrition, we see a significant increase in cases, especially of moderate acute malnutrition and severe acute malnutrition. There are many more malnourished children than before. Every month, between 40.000 and 50.000 children are admitted to one of the 2.400 treatment centres established throughout the country. And this is worrying because severe malnutrition is one of the main causes of child mortality. Food insecurity is also very worrying because it diminishes people's economic capacity," warns Mohamed Ayoya, UNICEF representative<sup>49</sup>. "There are some 14 million children at risk. I continue to work for street children and also for internal returnees' children and their families. We also have educational activities, vocational training and a child psychosocial programme. They also have psychological problems and we provide them with a welcoming environment"<sup>50</sup>, adds Mohammed Yousef.

Ihsanullah Ghafoori, director of research at AREU<sup>51</sup>, explains that "the first reason for the economic crisis is drought. Since 2018, there has been severe drought in some parts of the country. That has a big negative impact on the economic conditions of citizens. At that time, there was also insecurity and we could not travel to remote areas. On top of that, there was Covid19. And the last reason is the change of government because it is not recognised in the framework of international trade. And the traders, the businessmen, have no access to their foreign exchange reserves"<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup>HAQPAL, Nasratullah. Interview conducted in Kabul, 12 November 2022.

<sup>48</sup>MUHAJIR FARAHI, Hayatullah, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup>AYOYA, Mohamed, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup>YOUSEF, Muhammad, op.cit.

<sup>51</sup>AREU - Afghanistan *Research & Evaluation* Unit is a think tank, based in Kabul and founded in 2002.

<sup>52</sup>GHAFOORI, Ihsanullah. Interview conducted in Kabul, 15 November 2022.

With regard to the cultivation of opium, which served to finance the Taliban, the latest measures taken by the Taliban indicate their intention to reduce and even eradicate its production. On 8 March 2023, the Taliban issued a decree banning the cultivation of cannabis in Afghanistan, supplementing the previous edict of 3 April 2022, which abolished the cultivation of narcotic drugs, including opium poppy. Some field reports indicate that opium poppy cultivation has already been greatly reduced throughout the country and that eradication of opium poppy fields is largely underway.

The UN recognises that humanitarian aid alone will not be sufficient to sustainably address the large-scale human suffering of the Afghan people in the medium to long term. The aim must be to reduce the number of humanitarian caseloads and to help Afghans, especially women, girls and other vulnerable groups:

- a) increase its resilience to crises
- b) maintain their means of subsistence
- c) to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms
- d) strengthening social cohesion and building social capital
- e) preserve the hard-won development gains of the last two decades, including in the provision of services<sup>53</sup>.

## Resistance

The political opposition in exile, consisting of former officials and political figures of the republic, continues to attempt an intra-Afghan dialogue, seeking international support for their efforts, while advocating non-recognition of the Taliban. The number of armed opposition attacks and clashes with the de facto authorities has decreased compared to 2022. UNAMA recorded attacks for which three of the main armed resistance groups operating in Afghanistan claimed responsibility: National Resistance Front, Afghanistan Freedom Front and Free Afghanistan Movement<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup>UNITED NATIONS AFGHANISTAN. United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan 2023-2025. *United Nations Country Team in Afghanistan*, 2023.

[https://afghanistan.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/UNSF%20Afghanistan\\_formatted\\_20230629.pdf](https://afghanistan.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/UNSF%20Afghanistan_formatted_20230629.pdf)

<sup>54</sup><https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/170/30/PDF/N2317030.pdf?OpenElement>

Despite relative security, serious concerns remain about the presence of foreign terrorist groups. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other terrorist groups remain on Afghan territory. In the absence of meaningful and inclusive sustainable development, the risk remains that the attractiveness of some of these extremist groups to the population will increase.

For Ziauhq Amarkhil, former governor of Nanghanar and politician, "people are tired of war and conflict. And if the resistance fighters take over or seize the country, the Taliban will fight back and take it back and who will pay the price? Why not talk to each other? Now it is the Taliban's turn. The Taliban need to be flexible, to change and to respect each other. Let's sit down together and find a solution. We don't want to fight anymore. I don't want other people to be victims of war anymore. We have lost everything. 90% of the population is suffering mentally, physically"<sup>55</sup>.

"I am a non-violent activist. I don't want more civil wars. I just want people to rise up. But it will be meaningless if the Taliban continue to ignore and disregard the demands of the people", says Obaidullah Baheer. "That is what will determine the success or failure of the Taliban"<sup>56</sup>. "We have the best security in Afghanistan, in the whole country. The killings are over. For the last 40 years, people have been killing each other every day, in chaos. But the situation now is the best. Life is normal and violence is over"<sup>57</sup>, stresses Taliban Muhajir.

The possibilities for movement have been increased by security and it is now possible to reach any part of the country, something that appreciate researchers and analysts who, for years, could not easily go to much of the country. "Recently, we have travelled to six provinces by road, without incident, without any problems. The US ambassador has said that they will not allow anyone to go to fight the Taliban"<sup>58</sup>. Countries that used to support the NRF or the Northern Alliance, such as India and Russia, are now trying to establish

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<sup>55</sup>AMARKHIL, Ziauhq, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup>BAHEER, Obaidullah, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup>MUHAJIR FARAH, Hayatullah, op.cit.

<sup>58</sup>GHAFOORI, Ihsanullah, op.cit.

good relations with the Taliban. And other countries, such as Uzbekistan and Iran, value the stability created by the Taliban.

There is a succession of allegations of human rights violations by the Taliban in the Panjshir valley, the focus of the resistance, and appeals to foreign countries to support their struggle. "The Taliban have taken revenge on the ordinary people for the losses they have suffered, they have taken revenge on the local population of Panjshir, on the civilians. They torture and imprison and there are many locals who have been forced to leave their homes because of the Taliban's torture, just because they are from the Panjshir and in many ways support the resistance. Panjshir was not prepared. It was the safest province for the last 20 years, but the Taliban entered the valley from four sides and controlled it. We believe that the UN and European countries just handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban without thinking about the Afghan people"<sup>59</sup>. This is the account from the Panjshir mountains of commander Khalid Amary of the National Resistance Front (NRF).

However, the NRF is the only one, for the time being, that can cause problems for the Taliban. Increasing repression has not prevented it from continuing its operations against Taliban rule. Led by Ahmad Masud, it remains the main Afghan resistance. Masud has vowed to continue the fight despite the loss of his rear base in the Panjshir Valley. The Taliban have been able to take out some key resistance figures but asymmetrical tactics on the battlefield resulted in the loss of some important Taliban commanders. "In Panjshir, the Taliban's vicious tactic of targeting civilians on suspicion of their affiliation to the National Resistance Front is causing widespread misery and fear"<sup>60</sup>, denounces Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General. "So we are talking about collective punishment, including extrajudicial executions, torture, hostage-taking, illegal arrests, burning of houses and fields, etc... I don't know what can be said about this government of the Taliban, the de facto authorities. The first point to make is that the scale of violations in Afghanistan is mind-boggling"<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup>AMARY, Khalid. The interview was conducted by whatsapp call during the author's stay in Kabul in November 2022.

<sup>60</sup>MASSARO, Chris. 2 years after US withdrawal Afghanistan resistance group yearns for Western help as they take on Taliban. *Fox News*, 29 August 2023. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/2-years-us-withdrawal-afghanistan-resistance-group-yearns-western-help-take-on-taliban>

<sup>61</sup>CALLAMARD, Agnès, op.cit.

The US refuses to recognise the Taliban and maintains sanctions against its leaders, but continues to reject calls from some of its former Afghan allies for help in toppling the extremist regime. Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Afghan vicepresident and Uzbek warlord who supported US special forces in toppling the Taliban in 2001, has said he would be able to muster enough forces to defeat them again, if the US supports him. Two other former Afghan generals, Sami Sadat and Khoshal Sadat, have spent several months in the US seeking the support of veterans, lawmakers and other groups for a possible war against the Taliban, but the response is unequivocal: "The United States does not want to see a return to violence in Afghanistan and we do not support armed opposition to the Taliban," said a US State Department spokesman. He added: "We call on all parties to exercise restraint. It is the only way Afghanistan can meet its many challenges.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 left its former allies in the country without military support and disappointed opponents of the Taliban. "We feel betrayed. We feel alone. We are empty-handed," Ahmad Masud told the Aspen Security Forum in July. The numerous anti-Taliban factions also lack support from Afghanistan's neighbours for a variety of reasons, including fears of a spillover of armed conflict into the region.

### **Islamic State Khorasan Province**

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid described as "unfounded" and "just negative propaganda" information about the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), presented in August by Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the Counter-Terrorism Office, to the UN Security Council, which maintains that the threat from the terrorist group remains high in the Asian country: "The situation in Afghanistan is increasingly complex, and the fear of weapons and ammunition falling into the hands of terrorists is materialising. The ISKP's operational capability in the country appears to have increased, and the group has become more sophisticated in its attacks against Taliban and international targets"<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup>UNITED NATIONS. Terrorist Groups Remain Significant Threat in Conflict Zones, Neighbouring States, Senior



The ISKP has increased the number and complexity of its deadlier and more destructive attacks, putting pressure on the de facto authorities and raising concerns in the West about the possible regeneration of a group that could once again pose a serious international threat. Its recent attacks have been directed against Taliban and other symbolic targets and against Shia Muslim minorities, particularly the Hazara ethnic group. Attacks have increased in urban areas, with hundreds injured and killed. It has also attacked the Pakistani and Russian embassies and stormed a hotel where representatives of Chinese companies were staying.

In her address to the Security Council in March, the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, stated that ISKP posed "a growing threat" and expressed concern about the Taliban's ability to meet the challenge. The Islamic State Khorasan Province attacks Hazaras in schools, mosques and during festivities. There have also been attacks on markets, hospitals, funerals, weddings or religious services. General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), claimed, also in March, that ISKP has become emboldened and is capable of conducting "a foreign operation against US or Western interests abroad in less than six months, with little or no warning"<sup>63</sup>.

Taliban security forces have conducted ongoing operations and night raids against Islamic State terrorists and civilians accused of aiding them. The Taliban assault and detain people without due process, according to research by Human Rights Watch (HRW). In some cases, they have forcibly disappeared or killed detainees, dumping or displaying bodies in public areas. "The Taliban have gone after them in ways that are actually counterproductive, because they have dealt with them in the same way that everyone who has been in power in Afghanistan has dealt with insurgencies, which is to say in the most brutal way possible, which means that a lot of resentment is aroused

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Official Tells Security Council, Noting Force Alone Can Exacerbate Matters  
<https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15396.doc.htm>

<sup>63</sup>SELDIN, Jeff. US General: Islamic State Afghan Affiliate Closer to Attacking Western Targets. VOA, 16 March 2023.  
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-general-islamic-state-afghan-affiliate-closer-to-attacking-western-targets/7008633.html>

in local communities and that leads to more recruits," says Patricia Gossman, associate director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch<sup>64</sup>.

For Javid Ahmad, a researcher at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Centre, the ISKP "now have unlimited access to the black market, to buy not only small arms, but also fertiliser for explosives, small commercial drones. They have access to sophisticated communications equipment. They are buying laser-guided sniper weapons. They have access to night vision goggles'. The Taliban deny this and repeat that the emirate has full control over the country and does not allow anyone to use it against the security of any other country. "These kinds of groups are only looking to fulfil their agenda, to achieve their objectives and also to weaken the current government to show how weak they are, how they are able to use these people for their own political, military and intelligence objectives and goals. That's why in terms of Daesh, this is a threat, but not a threat to challenge the country, although it creates concern"<sup>65</sup>, says researcher and analyst Nasratullah Haqpal.

"The world knows that the way Afghanistan is going, it's not going to be good for anyone. This has become a hub for terrorist groups from all over the world: Al Qaeda, ISIS and hundreds of others. And all of them are sitting very comfortably in Afghanistan at the moment. The world has to do something about it"<sup>66</sup>, warns Mahbouba. "Our commitment is the Doha agreement. But as far as terrorists are concerned, Afghanistan has never been a centre of terrorists. As for al-Zawahiri's death, there is no evidence that it was him and he was not a senior member of ruling Islam. Maybe he was an ordinary person, like thousands of people living in different parts of the world"<sup>67</sup>, replies Taliban Abdul Haq Hammad.

But there is also the fear that if the hardline decrees are not implemented, ordinary Taliban will say that they did not fight a jihad so there will be no change and they could

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<sup>64</sup>MACKINTOSH, Eliza. No one feels safe': The Taliban promised to provide security to Afghans. New data shows threat from ISIS is growing. *CNN*, 19 May 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/19/asia/isis-k-attacks-afghanistan-taliban-cmd-intl/index.html>

<sup>65</sup>HAQPAL, Nasratullah, op.cit.

<sup>66</sup>SERAJ, Mahbouba, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup>HAMMAD, Abdul Haq, op.cit.

defect and swell the ranks of Daesh. The Taliban deny that they are offering sanctuary to the ISKP; on the contrary, they claim to be fighting them. The relationship with Al Qaeda is more complicated because it is historical and based on family ties, intermarriage and so on. There is no doubt that Zawahiri's presence in Kabul did a lot of damage in the face of claims that they were complying with the Doha agreement.

Under the pretext of providing greater security against internal enemies, the Taliban have installed more than 60.000 video surveillance cameras on the roads and streets of Kabul. And there will be more, according to Abubakar Siddique, RFE/R Radio Azadi's correspondent<sup>68</sup>. The Interior Ministry also said on 30 August that it planned to expand the surveillance network to the rest of the country over the next four years. According to Bloomberg, the Taliban are working with Chinese technology giant Huawei Technologies to install the security camera system. Although the de facto authorities claim that the surveillance system will help them improve security and fight crime, observers fear that they will also use the camera network to stifle dissent and impose their repressive policies.

## External relations

So far, no country in the world has officially recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The US and its allies want their demands to be met. And it seems that their policy of pressure has failed. But there are other countries, especially those around Afghanistan, that interact, dialogue or negotiate with the Taliban.

In Beijing's latest decision, China has appointed Zhao Xing as ambassador to Kabul. Kabul hopes that others will follow, as the Chinese is the first ambassador to the Taliban, and that this will be the starting point for an increase in diplomatic relations between the two countries at the highest level and the beginning of a new chapter. China is thus intervening in the local economy and politics and trying to increase its influence in the

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<sup>68</sup>SIDDIQUE, Abubakar. The Azadi Briefing: Is The Taliban Creating A Surveillance State In Afghanistan? *Radio Free Europe*, 1 September 2023.  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/azadi-briefing-taliban-surveillance-state-afghanistan/32574507.html>

region and the world. Its recent diplomatic step is very important for the Taliban, as it could be a stepping stone to official recognition and encourage other countries to new relations with Kabul according to their interests. In the mining field, Chinese companies have signed several agreements with the Afghan Islamic Emirate.

From the outset, the Taliban aspired to gain legitimacy on the world stage. Their actions, however, seem destined to shut them out. They do not comply with such a basic principle as behaving in an internationally acceptable manner, they do not protect and promote human rights, and there is no inclusive governance. It is crucial to allow freedom of expression, including dissent, without fear of arbitrary arrest, particularly of those who speak out against the discriminatory and repressive treatment of women and girls. So, for the time being, international recognition and a seat at the UN does not seem forthcoming.

What is being discussed is the idea that some more embassies, particularly Western ones, should return to chargé d'affaires or similar status, but never to ambassadorial level. The relationship with many of the UN agencies is difficult, as the Taliban want more control over them. But, in general, what was promised at the beginning, which is freedom of access to the air, to the country, is being fulfilled. The Taliban have expressed some dissatisfaction with the United Nations because all reports about them are negative and this does not help their international recognition.

But neither are they as isolated as in the 1990s, when only three countries (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) officially recognised them and the rest of the world ostracised them. Now there is dialogue with representatives of quite a few countries. Data also show that in the first year there were 378 diplomatic meetings with at least 35 countries. And Kabul has "embassies" in 16 countries, according to Taliban Prime Minister Mohammed Abdul Kabir, who claims that the world has no other way than to interact with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. On 25 March, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid specified that the Taliban were currently serving in several Afghan embassies, including those of China, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan and Qatar, in addition to consulates in Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Countries and organisations in the region have had and continue to have bilateral and multilateral contacts with the Taliban authorities. Discussions cover a range of issues, such as inclusive governance, human rights, including women's rights and freedoms, counter-terrorism, border security, the fight against drug trafficking and economic cooperation.

The Taliban regime has already announced the creation of an investment consortium of Russian, Iranian and Pakistani companies and engagement with a Chinese company on lithium mining and economic infrastructure. New infrastructure plans or deals or negotiations are announced every day, as can be seen in *The Kabul Times* or in accounts such as the following: On 5 March, the Islamic Republic of Iran inaugurated its permanent commercial centre in Kabul; Work on the Andkhoi-Sheberghan railway began on 13 March; On 29 April, a transit route for Turkmen oil to Pakistan via Kandahar was inaugurated; On 1 May, plans were announced for a new railway line connecting Central Asia to South Asia via Mazar-e Sharif, Herat and Kandahar. On 9 May, the project for the first train between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan was approved.

"The foreign minister is trying to establish relations with more countries, but we have very good relations with our neighbours. The borders will be open for export, import, business. The main difficulties are caused by the problem of non-recognition of Afghanistan"<sup>69</sup>, says the Deputy Minister of Culture and Information. In the region, countries such as India, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan are interested in Afghanistan. "There is a big agreement with Russia about the fuel they need. And they are trying to convince it because it is one of the big players in international politics. Similarly, we have our air corridor with China, because we have bought fighters from China"<sup>70</sup>, analyst Ihsanullah Ghafoori says. "And there is no clear strategic policy on how to engage with other regional governments.

"We want a prosperous Afghanistan. Therefore, we want to have good relations with our neighbours, with the countries in our region and with the world, especially with the United

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<sup>69</sup>MUHAJIR FARAHI, Hayatullah, op. cit.

<sup>70</sup>GHAFOORI, Ihsanullah, op. cit.

States. After 42 years, Islam has achieved total security in Afghanistan. There is no fighting, no killing. You can travel all over the country without anyone killing you"<sup>71</sup>, proclaims Abdul Haq Hammad.

But there are problems in relations with some of its neighbours such as Pakistan, which is very concerned about what it sees as Taliban support for the TTP. Terrorist attacks by the TTP in Pakistan have increased by 50 per cent since the Afghan Taliban took power. Tajikistan has repeated that it does not recognise the self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has criticised the Taliban for ignoring the rights of Tajiks in Afghanistan and said he would only support the creation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Since then, the border between the two countries has been closed. At the same time, thousands of Afghan refugees and critics of the Taliban regime fled to Tajikistan.

Still, the recent resumption of border market activities between Tajikistan and Afghanistan might indicate some improvement in relations. The aim is to bring cultures closer, support local producers and create jobs for residents of the border areas<sup>72</sup>. The Taliban leadership insists, as does Mawlawi Abdul Bakir, deputy prime minister, that the emirate maintains good relations with its neighbours and that disputes that have arisen, such as over water rights with Iran, have been resolved through dialogue.

"At the moment, the international community is divided. We are in a time when realpolitik dominates and all countries are looking for ways to maintain or reinforce their part in the world. So several countries are willing to make deals with the Taliban at the cost of human rights. That has been a major obstacle to the Security Council being able to take much stronger action. I think, in general, the international community has not found a way to go over this terrible situation, whether or not to engage with the Taliban or to want to protect women, but it cannot engage with a government that is so clearly practising some of the most serious discrimination against its own people"<sup>73</sup>, says Agnès Callamard. "In the case

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<sup>71</sup>HAMMAD, Abdul Haq, op.cit.

<sup>72</sup>BAKOZODA, Hiromon. На таджикско-афганской границе возобновили работу совместные рынки. Таджикикистан начал сотрудничество с Талибаном?, 2 September 2023.

<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32575770.html>

<sup>73</sup>CALLAMARD, Agnès, op.cit.

of Afghanistan it seems for those reasons of geopolitics, the US, France and Britain would want one thing and China and Russia want another. And in this impasse, the Taliban live comfortably installed without the Security Council being able to take strong decisions"<sup>74</sup>, adds Castresana.

## Talks in Doha

The first official talks between the United States and the Taliban since August 2021 were held in Doha, Qatar, on 30-31 July. The US delegation was led by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West, who was accompanied by Rina Amiri, Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights, and Karen Decker, Chief of the US mission in Afghanistan, based in Doha. Leading the Taliban delegation was the de facto Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mutaqi.

According to the State Department statement<sup>75</sup>, the US urged the Taliban to "reverse policies responsible for the deteriorating human rights situation in Afghanistan, particularly for women, girls, and vulnerable communities", and expressed grave concern about "detentions, media repression, and limits on religious practice". It concluded with a mention of the Taliban offensive against opium poppy, but with concerns about "processed opiates and synthetic drugs" and a positioning of counter-narcotics as an avenue for further dialogue. And the delegation "noted" the Taliban's "continued commitment" to move Afghanistan away from being a base for attacks against the US and its allies, acknowledging "a decrease in large-scale terrorist attacks against Afghan civilians".

The State Department also said that "US officials pressed for the immediate and unconditional release of the detained US citizens, noting that these detentions were a significant obstacle to positive engagement". In December, the US government confirmed the release of two Americans who had been detained by the Taliban, and alluded at the time to more US citizens being held in the country but did not identify them.

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<sup>74</sup>CASTRESANA, Carlos, op.cit.

<sup>75</sup><https://www.state.gov/meeting-of-u-s-officials-with-taliban-representatives/>

Meanwhile, Taliban foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said on Twitter: "In the meeting, the two sides discussed confidence building, taking practical steps in this regard, removal of blacklists and lifting of sanctions, unfreezing of DAB reserves, Afghanistan's economic stability, counter-narcotics and human rights issues". Kabul reiterated that it was crucial for confidence building that blacklists and bounty lists be removed and that bank reserves be unfrozen so that Afghans could establish an economy not dependent on foreign aid.

Both sides emphasised the continuation of such meetings, understanding and interactions. The Taliban version omitted specific mention of women's rights. Instead, the Taliban emphasise economic issues. It is clear that for them the main interest is economic and financial, as they seek access to the former republic's central bank funds totalling \$7 billion frozen by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in August 2021. However, in late July, it emerged that a US-funded audit of the Taliban-controlled Afghan central bank had failed to secure Washington's endorsement for the return of bank assets from a \$3.5 billion Swiss-based trust fund. The Afghan central bank must demonstrate that it is free "from political influence and interference", as well as proving it has "adequate" anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing controls<sup>76</sup>.

The Doha talks were widely criticised, especially by Afghans in exile and opponents inside the country. The US special representatives for Afghanistan issued a press release stating: "Afghans and human rights advocates have strongly urged us to engage directly with the Taliban". Afghan social activists and human rights defenders made it clear that they did not accept direct US engagement with the Taliban, much less on their behalf. Afghans believe that Washington intentionally marginalises genuine women's rights advocates and only listens to those activists, men and women, who actively lobby on behalf of the Taliban.

The Doha talks do not seem to have achieved anything in relation to the Taliban's respect

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<sup>76</sup>PUTZ, Catherine. A Very Quiet Meeting in Doha: US Officials Meet With Taliban Representatives. *The Diplomat*, 4 August 2023.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/a-very-quiet-meeting-in-doha-us-officials-meet-with-taliban-representatives/>



for human and women's rights. Nor does it appear that this is really the priority of the US, which is more interested in maintaining ties with the Taliban leadership to monitor potential threats from terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

### **The Hazaras and the repression of minorities**

"They are trying to provoke a sectarian war. But it won't happen because no one can divide us on the basis of Shia and Sunni. In Afghanistan, the good thing is that we are mixed. And I hope there will be no more attacks on Hazaras"<sup>77</sup>, explains Ziauhq Amarkhil. "It has always been regrettable. That's what extremism and terrorism has always been about. They pick the easiest target and attack it. And, unfortunately, the Hazaras have always been the ones they thought they could attack without any major repercussions"<sup>78</sup>, adds Obaidullah Baheer.

On 6 September 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, raised the plight of the Hazaras, stating that the community has been subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, which adversely affect their economic, social, cultural and human rights. He stressed that "there are reports of arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, summary executions and enforced disappearances. In addition, there are reports of an increase in inflammatory speeches, both on the internet and in some mosques during Friday prayers, including calls to kill Hazaras"<sup>79</sup>. In addition to being Shia, ISKP terrorists accuse Hazaras of having been trained by Iran to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

In September 2022, The Hazara Inquiry<sup>80</sup>, an enquiry into the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan and Pakistan, led by British parliamentarians and experts, published its reports on their plight in Afghanistan. The report revealed that, as a religious and ethnic minority, the Hazaras are in grave danger of genocide at the hands of the ISKP and the

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<sup>77</sup>AMARKHIL, op. cit.

<sup>78</sup>BAHEER, Obaidullah, op cit.

<sup>79</sup>OCHAB, Ewelina U. Yet Another Attack On The Hazara In Afghanistan. *Forbes*, 1 October 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2022/10/01/yet-another-attack-on-the-hazara-in-afghanistan/?sh=321afd4a2fa6>

<sup>80</sup>AA.VV. The Hazara Inquiry. 25 January 2023. <https://www.hazarainquiry.com/>

Taliban. This finding compromises the responsibility of all states to protect the Hazaras and prevent possible genocide under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) and customary international law. As the report states, "When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, the situation of the Hazaras was significantly affected and the gains made over 20 years in addressing the marginalisation and discrimination faced by this minority group were reversed. The return to power of the Taliban has led to more injuries as a result of targeted attacks, including the bombing of schools, places of worship and other Hazara centres. This trend is likely to continue. There is an urgent need to provide protection to the community, in line with international obligations under the Genocide Convention". Despite the increase in attacks on the community, the Taliban did not introduce any special measures to protect the community.

"In the last 20 years, the Hazara have advanced very fast in the field of education after being very low for decades", explains Karimi<sup>81</sup>, a Hazara and former member of the republic's parliament. "They are the most educated, hard-working people, they are very knowledgeable. Maybe that has also created some kind of animosity among everyone else because they are smarter than them. The Hazara girls and women are the ones who have probably made the best use of these 20 years, have studied and researched the most"<sup>82</sup>, says Mahbouba.

Abdel Ansari, a human rights activist, but above all for the rights of his ethnic group, the Hazara, takes stock of what has happened since the Taliban came to power: "There have been brutal attacks and killings of Hazaras and their property has been occupied and looted, they lost their lives and their property as well. Our offices have been surrounded three times by the Taliban, this one where we are meeting is clandestine, they don't know it until now. The best students at the university were Hazaras because their parents encourage them and push them forward. For Hazaras, there is no difference between men and women, not even in education. All boys and girls are educated. Also in rural areas. The Hazara community has opened schools and universities in these decades.

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<sup>81</sup>KARIMI, name changed, for security reasons. Interview conducted in Kabul, 10 November 2022.

<sup>82</sup>SERAJ, Mahbouba, op.cit.

The attacks against Hazaras started in 2011 and have continued. Hazaras are flexible and committed people. We don't want violence, we hate conflict. We seek education to build the country and the world. We are supporters of democratic independence, human rights, civil society. We support human rights and women's rights. We have a long history, a long culture"<sup>83</sup>.

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)<sup>84</sup> called on 4 August in Bangkok for urgent and concerted international action to protect Afghanistan's Shia and Hazara community. Afghanistan's Shia community -whose members are predominantly Hazaras- face systematic discrimination, targeted attacks, marginalisation, persecution and harsh restrictions by the Taliban. They have imposed prohibitions on the freedom of religion or belief of Shias and Hazaras. In addition, they are responsible for forced displacement and disappearances of Hazaras, their exclusion from humanitarian aid, as well as arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings of civilians throughout Afghanistan. In their recent edicts, the Taliban have banned Hazaras from organising, participating in and practising Muharram ceremonies (Shia religious acts of mourning) throughout the country. Following the ban, the Taliban have again raided Muharram processions and opened fire on Shia mourners, killing and injuring Shia civilians. The Taliban have also blocked internet connection in the attacked areas. The attacks have affected the community in Kabul, Herat, Ghazni and Balkh provinces. In addition, the Taliban have coerced members of the Shia-Ismaili community to convert to Sunnism in order to receive humanitarian aid in the Afghan province of Badakhshan"<sup>85</sup>.

Since the Taliban takeover, at least 700 Hazaras have been killed or injured in 13 targeted attacks by Islamic State affiliates. Several international human rights groups and monitoring bodies<sup>86</sup> have expressed deep concern about the increase in attacks against Hazaras, raising alarms. Taliban sanctions against Shias and Hazaras include: removal of the Shia Personal Status Law, ratified by President Hamid Karzai in 2009; banning the

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<sup>83</sup>ANSARI, Abdel. Name changed for security reasons. He is a human rights defender, head of an association that helps victims of terrorism. Interview in Kabul, 7 November 2022.

<sup>84</sup>[ Statement] [Afghanistan Protect the persecuted Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan " FORUM-ASIA.pdf](#)

<sup>85</sup><https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities>

<sup>86</sup><https://www.appghazara.org/post/the-hazara-inquiry-afghanistan-report>

teaching of the Shia Jafari doctrine curriculum in higher education; removal of the Shia bank holidays (Ashura) from the country's calendar; restrictions on Muharram ceremonies. As of July 2022, more than 25,000 mainly Hazaras were displaced from their ancestral lands by the Taliban's military campaign, according to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Since their return to power, the Taliban have launched systematic attacks on indigenous ethnic and religious groups, including Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks. Sufis, Sikhs and Hindus also fear persecution by the Taliban and the ISKP. There were fears that some of Afghanistan's non-Muslim minorities could disappear. Two years on, those fears are being realised. Afghanistan's last known Jew fled the country shortly after the Taliban took power. The Sikh and Hindu communities are believed to have been reduced to a handful of families. Under Taliban rule, Sikhs and Hindus have faced severe restrictions, including on their physical appearance, and have been banned from celebrating their religious festivals in public, leaving many with no choice but to flee. Draconian restrictions imposed by the Taliban on Sikhs and Hindus have forced many to leave the country. Many have moved to India, where most face a life of poverty. Niala Mohammad, director of policy and strategy at the non-profit Muslim Public Affairs Council in Washington, said the situation for religious minorities in Afghanistan -including Hindus, Sikhs, Bahai, Christians, Ahmadis and Shia Muslims- has deteriorated sharply under Taliban rule. "The situation continues to deteriorate as extremist political factions claiming to represent Islam, such as the Taliban, rise to power in the region", said Mohammad, who previously served as South Asia analyst for the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. "This exodus of various religious groups has left a vacuum in the social fabric of the country"<sup>87</sup>.

## Conclusions

"The International Criminal Court has had jurisdiction over Afghanistan for more than 20 years. I hope that now, after the arrival of the Taliban, the investigation, which has been

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<sup>87</sup><https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-sikh-hindu-muslim-taliban-restrictions/32559175.html>

dormant for many, many years, will be activated and that we will have some results"<sup>88</sup>, says Prosecutor Castresana.

Those who thought that these Taliban were moderates or Taliban 2.0 were very wrong. In these two years their repressive, authoritarian, discriminatory and criminal policies have not ceased. They have imposed a gender apartheid, condemning women to social ostracism. The continuing violations of women's and human rights require urgent attention and coordinated action and response at local, regional and international levels.

The country is in the midst of a terrible humanitarian crisis, despite the efforts of UN agencies and NGOs to alleviate the suffering of the population as much as possible. The problem of food insecurity is very serious. Beyond emergency aid, long-term efforts must continue.

But the international community, especially the US, continues to fail to exert the necessary pressure on the Taliban and does not seem to have a concrete plan. Washington has shown that its priority are not human rights, women's rights, democracy or welfare in Afghanistan. It only wants to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a sanctuary for jihadist terrorists who might attack its citizens or its interests.

The Taliban have shown no responsibility or commitment to upholding human rights and values. On the contrary, the regime's daily actions and attitudes show a total disregard for international laws and norms. To counter this situation, the international community must play an effective and active role in supporting the Afghan people against the Taliban's oppressive policies.

"There are many things the international community can and should do, addressing its division and inability to act. I think for many countries, Afghanistan has fallen off the radar. They are worried with other situations, particularly Western Europe, the United States, Canada. They are all neglecting their responsibilities to the Afghan people and in particular to Afghan women and girls. It is absolutely shameful. What we are doing to

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<sup>88</sup>CASTRESANA, Carlos, op. cit.

Afghan women and girls is beyond words. It is really disgusting"<sup>89</sup>, says Agnès Callamard.

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<sup>89</sup>CALLAMARD, Agnès, op.cit.