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INSIDE AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE FALL

Report on Fact-Finding Trip
(May 8-19, 2022)



The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a source of national and international security.

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TRIP REPORT INTRODUCTION

The occupation of Afghanistan by Taliban forces—and their drive to erase the liberties and rights guaranteed by the national constitution—has instigated an exodus from the country, particularly by those best equipped to lead. Many others remaining in Afghanistan express a desire to leave. The result is a leadership vacuum which is gradually being filled by Islamist extremists and their totalitarian regime. There are concerns of mass starvation and violence, and the possibility of a new war among local factions. Amidst these existential threats, the absence of religious freedom in the forms of religious repression and enforced religious norms is both a root cause and driving force behind these challenges.

Dr. Charles Ramsey traveled to Afghanistan from May 8-19, 2022 to conduct field research in collaboration with the Religious Freedom Institute. Through his research, he engaged with current and former government officials, scholars, university faculty, diplomats, and civilians to assess the political, religious, and social conditions affecting governance and security in Afghanistan.



RFI's Associated Scholar Dr. Charles Ramsey meeting with officials in Afghanistan during his fact-finding mission.

AFGHANISTAN IN CONTEXT

Religious freedom in Afghanistan is spiraling towards an all-time low. There were modest gains made over the past two decades, but the nation is once again at the precipice of disaster. The Taliban exercised a nearly unimpeded takeover of Afghanistan after NATO forces withdrew in the summer of 2021 and the elected government collapsed.

The rapid fall of the regime sparked an emergency evacuation of the international community and of Afghans who supported their work. With energies focused on the closure of diplomatic offices and the withdrawal, there has been limited contact with actors remaining in Afghanistan.

RFI determined that a fact-finding trip was needed to ascertain the situation on the ground. We also recognized that beyond the formal diplomatic processes, there is a pressing need to understand actors within the regime and to identify those willing to support policies that protect the rights and human dignity of all citizens.

Two fundamental concerns emerged from our fact-finding trip: the oppression of women and the exclusion of religious and ethnic minorities in governance.

Addressing these has become a precursor for international engagement with the present regime. If both are not addressed, and the flow of aid and trade not restored to sufficient levels, then the economy will collapse and the nation will again descend into a state of war.

The erasure of women from the public square and the threat of violence against non-Pashtun communities is pushing migration and hindering international investment and cooperation. Girls must be allowed to return to school and women must remain free to seek employment.

The regime must vocally condemn atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities, including the Shi'a Hazara community, and bring those culpable to justice.



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OBSERVATIONS: KEY CHALLENGES

The Oppression of Women

The policies of the Taliban regime are a clear and unambiguous manipulation of religion for political ends. The decision to close secondary schools for girls, the mandate for women to be fully veiled in public, and the requirement of women to be accompanied by a male chaperone are not consistent with the belief and practice of Islam as held by the religious tradition to which the Taliban belongs. Senior representatives of the Deoband tradition – highly regarded authorities in this denomination (*firqa*) – have condemned these practices and appealed to the regime to reverse this course of action and these policies.¹ The argument that the previous regime disregarded shari'a is unacceptable.

“The Taliban,” as one scholar explained, “have taken the valid principle that ‘need makes licit (*mubah*) forbidden things’ and changed this into the inverse principle, namely ‘necessity renders forbidden things that are allowed.’”² Such reasoning simply amounts to unfaithfulness in matters of religion (*khiyanat fi-l-din*).

It is important to recall that “women's empowerment” in Afghanistan has been developing under its own steam. Afghan women have their own standards, which do not necessarily look like those of the West. Afghan women, regardless of how they are dressed, are engaged with global issues. Many follow the news and have a keen sense of the world.

This does not mean, however, that they idealize the condition of women in the West. In Afghanistan, the concept of rights is held in tension with that of duty. The Western view, which some feel has been imposed upon Afghanistan, emphasizes the individual as opposed to the communal conception of rights and obligations prevalent in Islamic tradition. Honor is very important, and this is expressed in the fulfilling of obligations by members of the family.

As one respondent explained, “Now, we have over 100,000 young men who have fought valiantly for their homeland, and who need to be integrated into society. They came to Kabul believing it was like Las Vegas, rampant with casinos and prostitution.”³

The soldiers on the street want to see promises fulfilled that the foreign occupation has been replaced by a righteous rule. In their eyes, shari'a applied is seen first and foremost in the clothing of women and the appropriate public interactions between women and men. “They need time to realize that we are also good Muslims,” the respondent shared, “and that we all desire a government consistent with our beliefs and cultural values.”⁴

This is a dangerous predicament for Afghan families, particularly in urban areas, because gender norms are being used to convey the strength and religious legitimacy of the regime.



This is exacerbating the financial needs of families where women are wage earners. It also spreads confusion and misinformation about the esteem of women in the home and society, which can lead to many forms of abuse. Important steps were taken over the past 20 years to open the way for female participation in society. These gains are absolutely necessary for the country to progress towards even the most basic goals of sustainable development, and this is a fact known to all.

There are reports from high-level officials that the gender policies are political in nature. It is a show of strength to supporters and to opponents such as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), an adversary who seeks to oust the Taliban and institute their own rule similar to what was seen in Syria and Iraq. The policies are also seen as leverage for negotiations with the international community.

The Taliban is holding women hostage as a means to bargain for international recognition and the normalization of relations with other countries. The bold declarations from the Taliban's central leadership in Kandahar, as some Taliban actors believe, are attempts to remain relevant in the international media and to create leverage for future negotiations. It is taken for granted that, at some point, the global community will open channels with the current regime and seek to mediate a more sustainable form of government. The U.S. strategy has been to isolate the Taliban in order to weaken their position in future negotiations or to foment a popular uprising.

But these policies have adversely effected the entire society and hinder women's abilities to care for their families, access medical care, or pursue education and employment. No Muslim majority country has recognized the present regime, and their policies towards women are regarded as unacceptable the world over.

Security Threats to Shi'a and Other Religious Minority Communities

How the Taliban treats Hazaras is an essential barometer to gauge their claim to have changed and deserve international recognition. The Hazara community in Afghanistan, who are predominantly Shi'a, have experienced systematic violence and discrimination for over 40 years. This trend continues unabated, which has led to a drastic reduction to the population in the country, and appears to be escalating in 2022.

One British parliamentary report estimates that the Hazara population has dropped from 19% to just 9% of the total national population over the past two decades.⁵ This oppression is well-known today due to its documentation by journalists and in popular media, including the famous *Kite Runner* book and film. Attacks have targeted places of worship and the homes of religious leaders as well as hospitals and schools. In 2020 alone, there were 19 attacks, leading to over 115 fatalities, perpetrated against this community.⁶ The Taliban blames the attacks on others. But if the regime is not perpetrating the attacks, they certainly are not doing enough – if anything – to prevent them,



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The Taliban are doing little to communicate support and solidarity for victims in the Hazara community. The Taliban say that peripheral extremist groups are to blame, like Lashkar-e-jhangvi and IS-K, and that these groups perpetrate attacks to destabilize the regime. These extremists do not regard the Taliban as ideologically pure or committed enough to a global Islamist agenda. They seek to take control of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan as they did in portions of Syria and Iraq. Attacks against the Shi'a, in this light, are intended to destabilize the country and to draw neighboring countries into military conflict.

There has been a working assumption among policymakers that the Taliban is utterly opposed to the Shi'a, but this does not appear to be the case for the current regime. ISIS and other militant extremists have mined this cleavage to great advantage in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

The Taliban, however, maintain open relations with Iran, and there are ample Shi'a mosques and shrines in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar, and other major cities. The country depends heavily on Iran as a major trade partner, and it does not want to jeopardize this relationship or awaken their ire. One example of the Taliban's position is discernible in the willingness to appoint Hazaras to high-level government positions in the present regime. Prior to the fall of the Ghani presidency, the Taliban appointed Maulawi Mahdi as shadow governor of Bamiyan, where he established Shi'a law courts and functioned as an emissary to attract more Hazaras into supporting the new regime.⁷ This shift, though still nascent and distrusted by many, can also be seen in the appointment of Dr. Abdul Latif Nazari as Deputy Minister of Economy and Dr. Muhammad Hassan Ghyasi as Second Deputy Minister of Public Health.

Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddha statues, dating back to the 6th century, were destroyed by the previous Taliban regime in 2001.





The Taliban claim they are a 'caretaker' government to rule until adequate stability can be ensured to support a political process. But concrete steps are required before anyone takes the supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada at his word.

These few cases are often put forth by Taliban representatives to substantiate the claim that the new emirate is not a form of ethnic nationalism – or Pashtūn rule – but rather based upon the vision to establish a faithfully Islamic system of governance open to all Afghan citizens.

The present position of the Taliban regime is that Shi'a are free to worship and participate in society and government without prejudice. The experience of this minority community, however, indicates otherwise. In April 2022, attacks targeted schools and mosques in a Hazara neighborhood.⁸ The clear intention was to intimidate and demoralize the minority community.

From the vantage of Taliban representatives, these were enemy attacks intended to destabilize the regime. “We are clearly aware of Western and even Pakistani interests in preventing the regime from taking a firm grip of the government,” as one representative explained. “They want to mobilize militias to resist the Taliban so that they can funnel arms and nefarious characters to prevent the government from functioning properly. We see this in Panjshir, and in IS-K attacks, and can only conclude that these are ultimately funded by our state enemies who use these as proxies here, and in other regions.”⁹

Whether this is the case or not is yet to be confirmed.

Other religious minorities remain in the country under precarious security conditions, despite the Taliban's claims that the religious and civil rights of all minorities are protected.¹⁰ The Ahmadiyya and Baha'i religious communities, which have endured violent attacks and marginalization in Afghanistan under various regimes, continue to practice their respective faiths in private to avoid punishment. Hindus and Sikhs emigrated en masse in 1996, and the community dwindled from 250,000 to just a few hundred. Of the estimated 250 Hindus and Sikhs remaining in the country at the end of 2021, nearly 140 who attempted to flee the country were unable to emigrate.¹¹ In October 2021, members of the Sikh community reported a Gurdwara in Karte Parwan was vandalized. Ongoing harassment and threats toward the estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Christian converts remaining in Afghanistan have forced members of this minority—who have historically been ostracized—to sever communications and move to undisclosed locations.¹²

Intra-Taliban Conflict

The Taliban are not one unified group. There are significant cleavages in the movement. The differences are such that many refrain from using the term “Taliban” in their ranks, as they regard this name to have outlived its usefulness. The present regime refers to itself as the Emirate, so as to contrast itself with the former Republic.



The Taliban's new flag for the Emirate symbolizes their aspirations for Afghanistan and flies across the country.

The difference, they would say, is that the Emirate model of governance is derived from Islamic sources whereas the Republic was not. The envisioned model will include power-sharing and will provide opportunities for all Afghans. But the policies implemented thus far are concerning. The Taliban claim they are a “caretaker” government to rule until adequate stability can be ensured to support a political process. But concrete steps are required before anyone takes the supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada at his word.

The Taliban is primarily composed of Pashtuns from the tribes populating southern and eastern Afghanistan. Despite shared ethnicity, these tribes compete for resources and opportunities. The two principal factions are that of Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kandahar and of Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul. Baradar was captured in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi in 2010 and remained in custody for eight years until he was released as part of a plan to facilitate the peace process.^{13,14}

He was active in Taliban negotiations with the United States as the head of the political office in Doha, and he signed the agreement on the withdrawal of U.S. troops on behalf of the Taliban.

Sirajuddin Haqqani draws support from the eastern region, but his influence extends deep across the border into Pakistan. His infamous “Haqqani Network” has been blamed for some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan, including a truck bomb in Kabul in 2017 that killed more than 150 people.¹⁵

These two leaders draw from different tribal allegiances among the Pashtūn, but they also differ in strategy. Though this claim is disputed, it appears that Haqqani is less of an ideologue and more of a businessman, with more secular inclinations than many would expect. Haqqani is purportedly prepared to open higher secondary schools for girls and is committed to preventing terrorists from operating in Afghanistan.

He also wants to normalize the economy, as his representatives claim, and to engage with Afghan leaders in exile. Haqqani is an energetic entrepreneur, while Baradar is a steady traditionalist.

Historically, Kandahar has run the military and Paktia has run the government. Many are waiting to see if this narrative will be reenacted by these key players. But even if the Taliban succeed in limiting in-fighting, history shows that if they fail to bring others to the table, then their exclusive approach to governing will inspire insurgencies from those wanting a seat at the table.

One of the most common questions asked during the fact-finding trip was whether “there was a deal.” According to many Afghans remaining in the country, the Taliban came to an accord with the previous regime that was brokered by the United States, whereby the Taliban and the Ghani regime, following some inevitable skirmishes, would agree to shared governance. The troops, however, abandoned their posts rather than fighting for an unforeseeable purpose.

“This is not Ukraine,” as one Talib fighter explained to me, where soldiers are fighting off foreign invaders. Rather “these are fellow Afghan brothers.”¹⁶

The Taliban captured the first provincial capital on August 6, 2021. Within a week the Taliban were nearing Kabul, which they entered on August 15, 2021. Ashraf Ghani, whose presidency was characterized by pervasive corruption and political crises, fled the country that same day and remains in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷

Awaiting orders outside the city, the Taliban eventually entered and established control once it was clear that there was little resistance and that criminal elements were taking advantage of the situation.

Many Afghans interviewed believe that the core elements of the “deal” remain viable, and must be re-negotiated now that other parties have fled the country. The current regime has called for the formation of a Reconciliation Commission that would lay the groundwork for a national loya jirga to formulate a path forward.

In the meantime, the present regime is unable to pay salaries for government employees and some from the Taliban ranks are being lured to extremist factions like IS-K. There are also rumors that ethnic militias are preparing attacks against the Taliban. Unless leaders are brought to the table soon, the present humanitarian crisis will go from very bad to worse.

OBSERVATIONS: SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Taliban's strategy, according to my hosts, is to wait and gradually be recognized as the legitimate leadership. In this way, the "system becomes the system." But even Taliban members reject this strategy to enshrine authoritarianism and dictatorship. They want representation, clear political processes, and leadership who work according to a constitution.

The Emirate also wants international recognition. The present regime's leadership wants formal status as rulers of the land. They want embassies and recourse to assets held abroad.

"Is this recognition good for the people?" I asked my host. "Does it open the way for a sustainable future?"

The response was slow but resolute.

"If you back down now, what is left to negotiate?" he said. "Everything the Taliban does is to strengthen their hand to avoid power-sharing with competing Afghan parties."¹⁸

Currently, senior leaders travel freely and continue to have unchecked access to the resources of the country while thousands face acute food shortages, and others risk their lives to escape from the country in hopes of reaching the shores of, well, anywhere else.

"What do I say? What message should I take back with me?" I asked Afghans this in classrooms, homes, stores, and even over cups of tea with Talibs.



Their responses can be summarized in two ways. *Do not forget us. Do not make it easy for Taliban leaders to hold all the power. Stop letting them travel everywhere to make deals.* These were some of the most common ones. But I also frequently heard words of hope. *We will live. Afghan women are strong and intelligent. Afghanistan has a future.*

It is essential that the international community not cave in to the demands of the Taliban. It is also essential that the international community does not dismiss Afghanistan as a lost cause.

This generation of Afghans was born with rights enshrined in a constitution. They now live under the shadow of fear. There is utter confusion and frustration about the way forward, and the darkness may well deepen before a new day dawns.

Though plagued by factionalism, the Taliban is united in recognizing that there will be a reckoning. They know that isolation will lead to their demise. To avoid this, they want other parties to join the present Emirate, thereby crystalizing and legitimizing this system of governance before the international community.

This must not be allowed to happen. There must be a power-sharing deal, but one that is forged in accordance with the 2004 constitution ratified by the people of Afghanistan. In a land of deep ethno-linguistic differences, the only way forward is for the vast range of parties to collaborate according to clearly defined agreements.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The stability of Afghanistan depends on strategic engagement with the current regime and Afghan citizens before another long and drawn out war begins, and another generation of Afghans knows only rumors of peace. To this end, RFI offers the following recommendations:

1

The international community should limit any action that recognizes the present Taliban regime as the rightful rulers of Afghanistan or authorizes their position of power. The present regime is a “care-taker government” and all symbols, currencies, and policies must be treated as non-binding until a fair and formal process can be ratified by the people of Afghanistan.

2

All donors must connect funding, including humanitarian aid, to tangible outcomes in the protection of women’s rights with regard to access to schooling, choice in clothing, and freedom of employment and mobility. Money spent in the country is inevitably filtered into the coffers of the Taliban leadership, thus undermining the impact of sanctions and isolation techniques.

3

There are credible opposition groups that require resourcing and accreditation in order to engage with the Reconciliation Commission being introduced by the present regime. Such representatives are best suited to broker steps towards greater political inclusion for all Afghan citizens, particularly ethnic and religious minorities.

4

Governments should facilitate evacuations of Afghan citizens under threat, including religious minorities pursuing emigration due to security risks, and resettle those Afghan refugees and displaced persons awaiting final resettlement.

5

The United States Congress should designate funds to help Afghan citizens, particularly those with technical specialization and government, return to Afghanistan.

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