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AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE TALIBAN: THE SECOND PERIOD (2021-2026)

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Following a long series of attacks, inter alia on Afghan security personnel and international military forces – including also Austrian Armed Forces personnel as part of the ISAF and RSM peace operations – the Taliban have retaken control of Afghanistan and re-established an Islamist regime (“Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”), which has now been in place for five years. With the withdrawal of US troops in 2021, the war in Afghanistan – which began in 1978 with the coup d’état by Afghan communists – also came to a temporary end.

It must be emphasized that it is very difficult to obtain reliable data from Afghanistan since the US withdrawal. The situation remains volatile and is characterised by humanitarian crises and alarming reports concerning human rights, particularly the dire situation of women who are largely denied access to education. However, these circumstances are unlikely to hinder the Taliban’s consolidation of power significantly: International pressure through sanctions has so far served to unite the regime just as much as the willingness of Gulf States, Russia, China and most of its neighbours to invest and cooperate. Furthermore, Taliban cadres also possess leadership experience from their first period in power from 1996 until their overthrow by the US in 2001, and they continue to maintain links to the Al-Qaeda network, according to UN sources.

Ideology

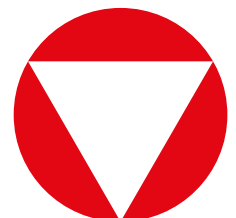
Back to the origins of Islam. The Taliban movement is over 90% ethnic Pashtu and it recruits primarily from the Madrassas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It belongs to the Deobandi movement of the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence, which propagates “total purity”. Its creed is “we must live once again as in the time of Muhammad” and “fight against decadence”.

The life of Muhammad, who successfully rebelled against the corrupt Arab establishment around the year 630, serves as a model for the Taliban.

Victory without fight. The Taliban de facto authorities adopted this approach following its overthrow in 2001 and successfully fought against the US military presence and the governments installed by the US under Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban succeeded in seizing power by utilising Pakistan’s support, operating subversively, winning the favour of a major part of the population, and ultimately persuading the US to negotiate a withdrawal under the leadership of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada.

Strength

Networks & legitimacy. The predominantly Pashtu population provided the Taliban with support and legitimacy through their skilful branding as “liberators” and “fighters against corruption”. They continue to build on this narrative to this day. The Taliban’s strength is particularly evident at the diplomatic level, for example through their long-standing use of a branch office in Qatar and the fact that several EU states, includ-



ing Austria, are negotiating with the Taliban with regard to deportations.

Taliban army. The Taliban is in control of the major part of the country. Their power in northern Afghanistan fluctuates in strength, inter alia due to the presence of predominantly non-Pashtu ethnic groups. The fact that tribal and militia loyalties are often bought is both an Afghan tradition and makes the Taliban appear less homogeneous as a movement. Their military strength is difficult to assess. Estimates of over 100,000 Taliban fighters appear exaggerated, and the combat effectiveness and coordination of formations and loyal militias vary greatly. By comparison, Pakistan has more than half a million soldiers. The Taliban's Special Forces (the Badri 313 Unit and the Red Unit) should not be underestimated: in addition to their combat strength as 'martyrs of the battlefield', they also serve as the regime's propaganda and repression implementers.

Equipment and infrastructure. In August 2021, the US left the Taliban military equipment worth up to seven billion USD, including thousands of assault rifles and vehicles, high-tech specialist equipment (such as night-vision goggles) and military bases. One reason could have been to make use of the Taliban to deter Iran and other neighbours. As a result, the Taliban boast good equipment and combat capability on the tactical level. They are also trying to expand their capabilities in the drone sector.

Fully developed military bases. In September 2025, US President Trump demanded the return of the well-equipped airbase in Bagram, near Kabul. The Taliban brusquely rejected Trump's demand. However, the Bagram agenda could well be pursued through a 'deal' with the Taliban, as the US is looking for military bases in the region.

Police forces with a generous budget. The police forces under the leadership of Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani are currently being set up to execute (repressive)

control of population and territory. To this end, Haqqani has the largest budget of all Taliban ministries. However, significant deficiencies are evident in the struggle against urban crime. Furthermore, for policing purposes, the Taliban remain heavily reliant on militias, whose actions are often arbitrary.

Opponents and conflicts

Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, a security vacuum has developed in the country, which the Taliban's opponents have so far been unable to exploit. Security-related incidents in Afghanistan have actually decreased significantly, whilst they have risen sharply in Pakistan. The hybrid terrorist organisation Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), with its worldwide Caliphate agenda, is one of the Taliban's ideological adversaries. Its isolated attacks (such as the recent one on a Chinese restaurant in Kabul in January 2026) are no short-time threat to the Taliban. However, ISKP is well networked, decentralised and must not be underestimated under any circumstances.

ISKP poaches Taliban militiamen and sympathises with other terrorist groups (e.g. Jaish al-Adl). Such 'symbiotic' alliances could give rise to a trans-regional terrorist base in Afghanistan and displace the Taliban. This scenario would destabilise the entire region (including Central Asia) and consequently have a negative impact on Europe. As an investor, China is in a position to exert pressure on the Taliban to take more decisive action against terrorist groups and create a stable environment.

External and internal conflicts. A potential threat to the Taliban regime's hold on power stems from internal differences (e.g. between the Kandahar and Haqqani factions). Second, the Taliban continue to demand – partly for economic reasons – an eastern border that is, as it were, porous (the Durand Line as the root of the conflict), which Pakistan no longer tolerates. Economic blockades are one of the conse-

quences, with the result that cross-border trade has almost ground to a halt since autumn 2025 and the supply situation in Afghanistan is under threat. Furthermore, the Taliban have so far not managed to enforce their rumoured ban on opium cultivation. As a result, production in Pakistan and Iran has risen sharply, making porous borders profitable for all sides in the opium trade. The Taliban also face challenges on the information front. The regime's collapse has often been predicted in the media. After five years in power, however, consolidation is undoubtedly evident.

Objectives and strategies

Model Emirate & inspirational effect. The Taliban's goal is to create a religious-authoritarian Emirate based on Sharia law, which (from their perspective) is intended to serve as an Islamist export model in the form of a nationally oriented theocracy. The effect of having driven out the superpower USA has inspired jihadist movements worldwide and enabled the Taliban to be seen as an Islamist force of reform. They are masters of propaganda, successful businesspeople (not only in the arms and drugs sectors, but also, for example, in wholesale trade), they dominate social media, suppress any civil resistance and act repressively. However, they also present themselves as tourism managers for adventure holidaymakers in Afghanistan and want more foreigners to visit or invest there.

International recognition. To maintain their power, the Taliban need appropriate strategic supporters, who naturally also make counter-demands. China has been courting the Taliban since 2016 and is focused on Afghanistan's rare earths and a secure environment. Russia was the first country to recognise the Taliban. India maintains good relations with the Taliban regarding its conflict with Pakistan over the Kashmir issue. Over 15 states have established their own diplomatic missions. Norway has accepted a Taliban official in Oslo to handle consular affairs.

Use of proxies against Pakistan. Pakistan has close ties to the Afghan Taliban and is regarded as their 'maker'. Following the Taliban's takeover, there were initial hopes for stable relations. However, things turned out differently as the number of attacks in the 2450 km-long border region began to rise again. This is an asymmetric conflict characterised by insurgencies, terrorist attacks and retaliatory strikes. In the borderland, civilians suffer from attacks, displacement and repression. Since 2021, the main line of conflict has run between Pakistan and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – a militant group ideologically close to the Afghan Taliban, which uses Afghanistan as a base from which to fight against the Pakistani state, where it aims to establish an Emirate. The number of TTP fighters is estimated at around 5,000. The Taliban have made the implausible claim that they do not tolerate militant groups on their territory, justifying the situation by stating that they cannot exercise control over every corner of Afghanistan.

The fragile security situation remains a major challenge – both domestically for Pakistan and regionally. By instrumentalising proxies such as the TTP, the Taliban are able to expand Pashtu influence. India is also said to support the TTP to fight Pakistan indirectly. Pakistan strikes back regularly. The situation escalated in autumn 2025 and early 2026, when Pakistan bombed terrorist cells in Kabul. Thus, this conflict serves as a litmus test for the Taliban, revealing the extent to which the regime harbours terrorists and uses them for its own purposes.

Outlook

Escalation of conflict possible. It is to be expected that the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan will intensify, as their respective demands are diametrically opposed. Pakistan demands an end to attacks by the TTP, Baluch separatists and other extremist groups. The TTP, for its part, sees itself as independent of the Taliban. Furthermore, the Taliban are be-

ing drawn ever deeper into Pakistan's (nuclear) conflict with India. Pakistani drone and air strikes on Afghan territory, such as those most recently in February 2026, could intensify and put pressure on the Taliban.

No easing of tensions in sight. Peace talks between the Taliban and Pakistan in Istanbul collapsed at the end of 2025. Iran also stepped in as a mediator. The Taliban are evidently not adhering to their agreement with the US not to tolerate terrorist organisations on their territory. Pakistan's pressure on the Taliban (and India) to neutralise the TTP will therefore continue to mount. An alliance of militant groups against Pakistan, but also against the Taliban, is conceivable.

Human rights as a divisive issue? The international demand regarding an improvement in the catastrophic conditions for women is a trump card for the Taliban, which they could play to extract concessions from the West. Above all, they are demanding the release of funds frozen by the US amounting to around seven billion USD, which were managed by the former Afghan central bank and are currently held in Switzerland. Disagreements within the Taliban leadership, however, have intensified precisely because of the issue of restrictions on women, amongst other issues.

Between consolidation and destabilisation. The Taliban's hold on power is not set in stone, yet most neighbouring countries and regional powers have already accepted their rule. Compared with other militant groups, the Taliban are viewed by several states and neighbours as the best possible option to avoid another civil war, to contain ISKP, prevent further foreign interventions in Afghanistan and limit the spread

of militant Islamism. However, the Taliban will likely continue to push their nationalist agenda. The Afghanistan–Pakistan border region will therefore remain a militant geostrategic pawn. This situation could only change if all states involved would follow a comprehensive peace and economic agenda.

Conclusions

Europe's ability to exert influence on the region has declined. However, the Taliban's diplomatic ties with European states are growing due to the issue of deportation and repatriation, which lends the Taliban additional legitimacy. The EU's Talent Partnership with Pakistan, which has been in place since 2024, should be extended to the population of Afghanistan in a certain way to address EU skill shortages. The EU should therefore continue its engagement on the ground, support UN activities and facilitate direct humanitarian support for the population. Austria could increase its participation in various on-site assistance initiatives.

Crisis management and initiatives are managed in particular by the UN Special Political Mission UNAMA, which remains one of the few international actors assisting the people of Afghanistan since 2002. Opposition to the Taliban stems in particular from the Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups. Their representatives have already met several times in the context of the Vienna Process. The aim of this initiative is to "establish a stable, democratic system in Afghanistan [...] inclusive and representative of all ethnic groups, religions and genders." However, the Iran war in spring 2026 has an additional negative impact on humanitarian security in Afghanistan that make these ambitions very challenging.

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