

POSITION PAPER

The Taliban's Current Challenges and Attempts to Redress Its Image

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The August 31st [deadline](#) for handing over Kabul Airport – Hamid Karzai International Airport – seems unlikely to be met as chaos not only persists but perpetuates by the hour. The military operations to evacuate foreign personnel were relatively straight forward after the deployment of 7,200 US troops. Civilians continue to suffer for two primary reasons 1) a shortage of embassy staff to process documents, and in some cases, they [have left](#) the country, 2) Afghans who worked for foreign countries fear persecution and are desperate to leave the country. However, many of them do not have passports as they never expected to face such a predicament.

The other challenge has been the reluctance of airlines to fly into [high-risk airspace](#) coupled with utter chaos at the tarmac and the airport. The United States and its allies are faced with the challenge of arranging more civilian aircraft through contractors as well as airlines while pressing the pedal for documents to be processed quickly. The airport is not capable of accommodating and facilitating hundreds of permanent campers while they await their flights out of the country. Outside the airport, the Taliban started to assert its control by teargassing the crowd waiting to enter the airport's premises while erecting roadblocks leading to it. The scenes of desperation are likely to continue as desperate Afghans

look for an opportunity to reach the airport and leave the country. There has been no news about any talks between the Taliban and the United States regarding the fate of potential asylum-seekers who are unable to enter the airport. It is unlikely that the Western powers are interested in having more refugees in light of their own economic challenges which have been exacerbated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. France is spearheading the [drive to bar](#) Afghan refugees from entering the European Union (EU) while the United States has outsourced its asylum-seeker load to countries in Eastern Europe and Africa. The news of refugee fatigue has been making rounds on social medial platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups in Afghanistan. In the short and long term, human smugglers which mostly operate in Iran with the connivance of the IRGC will be the [benefactors](#) of the West's lackluster political response and lack of bureaucratic readiness to predict and process the documents of those Afghans seeking to exit the country in a timely manner. Prima facie, Iran has also instructed its border security forces to [deny Afghans entry](#) into the country. A grim fate awaits Afghan refugees this time as Turkey has built [a border wall](#) with Iran likely to follow suit. Ankara believes it cannot afford a further influx of refugees after a few million Syrians have already been living in Turkish territories for almost a decade now.

The Taliban, meanwhile, are expected to name officials for various executive and cabinet positions. The eagerly awaited announcement of the new government will help Afghans, as well as the world, get a better idea about the Taliban's future course of action. Most expectedly, [Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar](#) will head the government, along with representatives from like-minded parties such as Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. The Taliban's leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, is quite unlikely to lead the executive office. Besides, naming Baradar as the emir/president of Afghanistan will be somewhat reassuring for the United States, other NATO members, Gulf Arab states, and Pakistan because of his role in the peace talks. Baradar's elevation to lead the Doha Office and peace negotiations means the existence of a communication channel with the United States and NATO at the highest level in Afghanistan, which can eventually pave the way for the Taliban's recognition. Meanwhile, the Taliban have started

the process of political engagement, with the movement's officials [meeting](#) with former President Hamid Karzai and deposed Prime Minister (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. The parleys have already had two rounds and are seemingly proceeding with a degree of trust between the different parties.

If the other political stakeholders agree to a token representation in the Taliban-led government, the anxieties and tensions within the country can lessen significantly. The Taliban's willingness to engage with Karzai and Abdullah signals the fact that former President Ashraf Ghani and his aides were barriers to reaching a settlement with the movement. It is not to say that the ongoing negotiations cannot collapse, however, their continuity itself is an encouraging sign.

The elephant in the room is the Taliban's perspective on the Afghan Constitution which was primarily authored by the United States. The Taliban also has strange views regarding democracy and elections. However, since the Taliban are presenting themselves now as a more moderate outfit compared to the past and if led by Baradar, the prospects of a breakthrough with opposition forces and the international community in the long run do exist. There are no easy solutions when it comes to power-sharing in Afghanistan where democracy is not the most endeared system of government.

Not only has China been [at the forefront](#) in vocally siding with the Taliban, but the latter's top leaders have engaged with Russia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and some African and Asian states. Beijing has already forbidden its citizens in Afghanistan from leaving the country. China is not just engaged in infrastructure projects in the country but also in extracting minerals. Taliban leaders have already offered to cooperate with the United States, the EU as well as India.

For now, Afghanistan faces a momentous challenge on the financial front. The International Monetary Fund has announced to withhold the loan tranche to Afghanistan in the last week of August due to the uncertain situation in the country. While the United States has [frozen Afghan accounts](#) to exert pressure during the evacuation process as well as amid the government formation phase. Kabul, which has foreign exchange reserves worth \$10 billion, will suffer significantly due to its inability to use the US dollar. The readiness of China and

Russia to work with Afghanistan does provide vital breathing space. For now, Afghanistan's trading points with its neighboring countries are operational, hence a shortage of foodstuffs or vital resources like petroleum is not at risk.

Last but not the least, the presence of the deposed President Ashraf Ghani and his first Vice President Amrullah Saleh on the political scene can create impediments for the Taliban. Ghani may be a nuisance in the international media, however, Saleh along with Ahmad Masoud are independent. The stronghold of the Northern Alliance – the landlocked Panjsher valley – can threaten the start of an insurgency against the Taliban. Panjsher Valley, a bastion of resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban, is naturally protected with high mountains and narrow passes. The valley's war-fighting capability remains largely defensive. Kabul is ill-equipped to launch an effective air offensive across the fort-like terrain as much of Afghanistan's airpower was deliberately [moved to Uzbekistan](#) during the last 10 days. Except for a few flyable helicopters, most air assets present on Afghan soil are grounded due to technical issues. There are a couple of choppers in the defiant valley but none of them is a gunship helicopter. The Taliban have their eyes set on the region but are likely to prefer applying tribal and political pressure instead of starting a new hot front. The politicians and warlords hiding in the Panjsher Valley are not popular except probably Ahmad Masoud, the late Ahmad Shah Masoud's son. A conflict over the valley can trigger other similar armed uprisings in other parts of the country too, which the Taliban will not want to start prior to consolidating authority across the country. Turkey-backed warlord Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum is too old and too unpopular to challenge the Taliban militarily or politically by forming an alliance.

To conclude, the Taliban are faced with numerous challenges, fast-fleeting time, lack of capable manpower and a crisis of identity. If the Taliban manages to form a government over the next few days with a degree of tacit approval from its neighbors and the West, the odds of governance are manageable. The Taliban's efforts to use WhatsApp and Facebook to address public complaints met an [unexpected setback](#) when their accounts were deleted by the technology giants. The Taliban understands that Afghanistan today is much more

developed than the one they took over in 1996, from the perspective of infrastructure, resources, and public awareness. The soft image the Taliban's leadership intends to promote may get tarnished by its foot soldiers holding harsher views of Islam and imposing these by force as was done during the period from 1996 to 2001.



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