U.S. Must Lead International Efforts to Block Recognition of Taliban as Afghan Government

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan is seeking international recognition and aid, and some countries are actively debating whether to recognize the government.

The "new Taliban" looks a lot like the old Taliban, with no respect for basic rights—journalists tortured, women living in terror, and regime opponents executed.

The U.S. must refuse international recognition for the Taliban while preparing for a future where terrorist groups again enjoy safe haven in Afghanistan.

In August 2021, as the Biden Administration was pursuing a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban seized control of the country with a rapid military offensive. Now, the Islamist fundamentalist group is seeking international recognition. At the time of this writing, no country in the world has formally recognized the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan—although China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia have signaled varying degrees of openness to doing so.

The Taliban has also been pressing the United Nations to receive a new representative from Afghanistan to replace the existing one. The "caretaker" Taliban government is comprised of hardliners and officially designated terrorists. The U.S. should lead international efforts to block any recognition of the Taliban as the formal government of Afghanistan.

A Terrorist Government

The Taliban announced its so-called caretaker government in September. One thing is clear: The "new Taliban" looks a lot like the old Taliban. Not only were no women appointed, the country's women are once again living in fear, and forced to cover up to Taliban satisfaction when outdoors. While a small number of ethnic minorities received a few relatively junior positions,[1] no leaders of Afghanistan's significant minority groups—the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, and the Hazaras—were included.

Despite early speculation that former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, former chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah, and pardoned warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar would form part of the caretaker government,[2] all were excluded.

Instead, the Taliban government is populated by key Taliban officials from the first Taliban government in Kabul (1996–2001) and by those actively involved in the insurgency against U.S. and Afghan forces. Several new senior Taliban officials are considered war criminals by the international community. Mullah Mohammad Fazil (deputy defense minister) and Mullah Noorullah Noori (minister for borders and tribal affairs) are accused of ordering the massacres of ethnic Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, for example. At least 14 members of the Taliban's caretaker government are under some form of U.N. sanctions.[3]

Perhaps most concerning, several new government ministers are members of the notorious Haqqani network, a terrorist outfit with close links to al-Qaeda that was responsible for some of the deadliest terrorist attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani network is recognized as one of the most bloodthirsty terrorist organizations operating in the Afghanistan–Pakistan space. The group predates the Taliban, but over the past two decades has become increasingly intertwined with the Taliban organization, even as it maintains its own separate lines of command and control. According to a 2021 United Nations report, the group enjoys the "most combat-ready forces" and "retains semi-autonomous status while still reporting to the Taliban Supreme Council."[4] In 2016, Haqqani network leader Sirajuddin Haqqani was named "deputy emir" of the Taliban.

U.S. officials believe that the Haqqani network was involved in a suicide attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul in 2008, and in a 2009 bombing of a

CIA outpost in Khost that represented the deadliest single attack on the CIA in the organization's history.[5] The Haqqani network is also believed to have orchestrated the 2011 suicide bombing of the Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul,[6] and two brazen assaults on the U.S. embassy and a U.S. military base that year.[7]

In 2011, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen described the Haqqani network as a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.[8] The same year, Sirajuddin Haqqani (who carries a $10 million FBI bounty)[9] published a violent manifesto[10] advocating global jihad outside Afghanistan's borders.

After the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan this year, Haqqani network leaders, who are also Haqqani family members, were given four ministerial positions in the new Taliban government: Khalil ur-Rehman Haqqani (refugees minister); Najibullah Haqqani (communications minister); Abdul Baqi Haqqani (minister of education); and Siraj Haqqani (interior minister).

In addition to overseeing internal security in Afghanistan, Sirajuddin was granted the right to nominate governors for Afghanistan's eastern provinces. Meanwhile, "for all practical purposes, Anas Haqqani, brother to Sirajuddin Haqqani, and his paternal uncle, Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani, now govern Kabul."[11]

In fact, Khalil (who carries a $5 million FBI bounty), was named head of security in Kabul days before a suicide bomber killed 13 Americans and more than 160 Afghans in an attack on the Kabul airport.[12] The Biden Administration blamed the shadowy regional offshoot of the Islamic State, IS-K, for the attack. But the Haqqani network is known to maintain links to IS-K, whose current leader was a former Haqqani network mid-level commander.

The United Nations

The question about Taliban participation in the United Nations was raised during the September 2021 U.N. General Assembly gathering in New York. In the end, nobody spoke for the Afghan people during the event.

Some U.N. members seem eager to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but most are unwilling to do so at this time. The current Afghan representative is a holdover from the previous Ghani government. In order to replace him, the U.N. would have to accept the credentials of the de facto Taliban government in Kabul—something the Taliban has formally requested.

Recognition by the U.N. would mean that the Taliban would inherit Afghanistan's existing membership in other U.N. bodies, including the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Commission on the Status of Women. Considering the Taliban's track record of destroying UNESCO cultural sites, such as the two Buddhas of Bamiyan, and its well-established record of mistreating women and girls, it would be preposterous to allow the militant outfit in either organization.

Recommendations for the U.S.

Although it might not admit it, the Taliban believes it needs international recognition to access international aid and assistance. The U.S. should lead on the international stage and:

- **Refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.** The Taliban would benefit from international legitimacy and the U.S. should do everything it can to deny the terror group of this.

- **Refuse to allow the Taliban to represent Afghanistan in international organizations, such as the U.N.** The U.S. must use all the influence it has to block the Taliban from taking Afghanistan's seat at the U.N. Considering that at least 14 members of the Taliban's caretaker government are under U.N. sanctions it would be ridiculous for the U.N. to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

- **Oppose efforts to terminate U.N. Security Council sanctions on terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan or to remove individuals from the sanctions list.** The Taliban, al-Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State, and many associated groups are currently under U.N. sanctions. In addition, a number of individuals associated with those groups are also listed as subject to U.N. sanctions. The U.S. should oppose any attempt to terminate U.N. sanctions on these groups or to remove these individuals from the sanctions list, even if they are part of the new Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan.

- **Prepare for the worst.** It is unlikely that the Taliban and Haqqani network are willing to break ties with international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. The U.S. should begin preparing for the possibility of

future terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan. To that end, it should redevelop intelligence assets inside the country, as well as the ability to conduct kinetic operations, including using drones. The U.S. should consider aiding resistance forces, such as the National Resistance Front, and coordinate with concerned neighbors, such as Tajikistan and India. Finally, the U.S. should evaluate contingencies to re-establish a small counterterrorism presence inside Afghanistan, should that become necessary.

Conclusion

More than a month after sweeping across Afghanistan, the Taliban now has the problem of governing—which it is quickly realizing is different from leading an insurgency. Food is in short supply and money is drying up. Already, members of IS-K have conducted attacks against the Taliban.

Many Western commentators seem to be hoping—based on nothing—that the Taliban has become more moderate and pragmatic since it last ruled Afghanistan. They hope that the Taliban will live up to its pledge not to harbor international terrorist groups. Even if that were true of some of the more pragmatic Taliban factions, the most extreme elements of the Taliban—including the Haqqani network—are now empowered in Kabul. The Haqqani network and al-Qaeda are "increasingly intertwined."[13]

Meanwhile, the Taliban has already dashed all hopes that it has developed any respect for human rights. The group has already canceled women's sports and secondary education, conducted public hangings, tortured journalists, and banned music.

Again, the new Taliban looks a lot like the old Taliban. The U.S. should not throw the Islamist fundamentalist organization a lifeline by conferring international recognition and legitimacy.

Quite the opposite, the U.S. should be planning for the worst; for a future in which al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups are again enjoying a safe haven in Afghanistan, with the potential to launch terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its interests and allies abroad.

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Endnotes

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12. Dan Lamothe, "Suicide Bombing Lays Bare Challenges of Gate Security Mission at Kabul Airport," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/security-gates-kabul-airport/2021/08/27/0e5314b2-0760-11ec-ba15-9c4f59a60478_story.html (accessed September 27, 2021).

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