



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Five Years On: Assessing Governance, Stability and Foreign Relations under Taliban Rule¹

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Five years have elapsed since the Taliban gained control over Kabul when the government of Ashraf Ghani collapsed due to the hasty and disorganized withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. No doubt, the Taliban restored peace in the country with no more large-scale fighting and violence, as roads and highways are now generally safe and secure. However, this is because the very group, which was once responsible for violence, has assumed control of the country and centralized its authority through coercion.

The Taliban also succeeded in reducing the area under poppy cultivation and the production of opium. The Taliban chief, Hibatullah Akhundzada, issued a decree for this purpose in April 2022 —banning cultivation of poppy, production of opium, heroin and their business.^{3,4} However, the country is still facing multiple challenges on domestic and external fronts.

Shortage of Food

Afghans are facing poverty, unemployment and shortage of food. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), 14 million people face severe hunger and “one in three Afghans is now in the grip of acute food insecurity.”⁵ Women and children are in a distressed condition. 3.7 million children and 1.2 million pregnant and breastfeeding women are suffering from malnourishment.⁶ Similarly, 60,000 malnourished children were admitted to hospitals in Ghazni province alone this year.⁷ A similar situation is prevalent in 12 other provinces.

Health Problems

Health services are in a deteriorating condition. Hospitals lack doctors, equipment and medicines, and the majority of the population has no resources to go abroad for treatment. Women and children are

¹ This IPS Insight is an academic's perspective on Taliban's five years in power.

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³ In 2022, poppy was cultivated on 233,000 hectares land which subsequently reduced to 12,800 hectares in 2024, and 10,200 in 2025. See – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan Opium Survey 2020 Cultivation and Production – Executive Summary, accessed August 7, 2026, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210503_Executive_summary_Opium_Survey_2020_SMALL.pdf

⁴ The Taliban destroyed standing crop over 4,000 hectares of land in 2025. See – UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2025, visited August 7, 2026, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_Opium_Survey_2025

⁵ Nathalie Minard, “Afghanistan hunger crisis intensifies as millions left without food aid,” UN, August 4, 2026, retrieved August 7, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/08/1168069>

⁶ UN Women, Gender alert: Four years of Taliban rule: Afghan women resist as restrictions tighten, 2025, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/08/gender-alert-four-years-of-taliban-rule-afghan-women-resist-as-restrictions-tighten>

⁷ Majid Baryal, “At least 60,000 child malnutrition cases reported in Ghazni this year,” Amu TV, August 6, 2026, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://amu.tv/249287/>

facing the worst health-related issues ever. Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios at the international level. According to the UN, 50 per cent increase has been witnessed in maternal mortality this year (2026).⁸ The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) says that approximately one Afghan woman dies every two hours due to preventable complications related to maternal mortality.⁹

Lack of Shelter

Finding shelter to live is another serious problem in Afghanistan, and 4.2 million people are facing this issue.¹⁰ These include people affected by natural disasters, IDPs, female-headed families and refugees who have returned from Iran and Pakistan. The UN needs at least \$500 million to arrange temporary shelters. Without proper shelters vulnerable people may suffer heavily during the coming winter season.

Human Rights

The human rights situation is deplorable. Women and girls have been deprived of their fundamental human rights. Girls are not allowed to attend colleges and universities. The Taliban regime has even prohibited universities from teaching books written by women.¹¹ Women's movement outside their homes has been restricted. They are not allowed to go out without Mahram "unmarriageable kin," They cannot go to the market even to purchase basic necessities. Shopkeepers have been forbidden to sell cosmetics.

Religious and ethnic minorities are in trouble. The Taliban removed the Uzbek language from Jowzjan University's signboard and Uzbek and Persians-language billboards from Samangan University and replaced them with Pashto and English. The Taliban claim that they want to remove "foreign terms" from administrative and official documents.¹² This has created resentment among ethnic minorities.

The Taliban regime is also victimising the Shia community. According to a prominent Afghan Shia leader, Ayatollah Waez-Zadeh Behsudi, Shia students have been directed to "either adopt the *Hanafi* sect or abandon their studies."¹³ He says that *Fiqh-e-Jafria* has been excluded from the curriculum. The Taliban are also following a hostile policy towards the Ismaili community in Badakhshan province. Their thirty-three Jamatkhanas (places of prayer) were closed in January this year. Taliban officials argue that the buildings will be used as mosques.¹⁴

Extra Judicial Killings

The Taliban announced a general amnesty when they regained power. But they failed to honour their words. The Taliban regime is targeting security personnel of the former government. The UN has reported 218 extrajudicial killings, 14 enforced disappearances, over 144 cases of torture, and 424 arbitrary detentions between 15 August 2021 and 30 June 2023.¹⁵ Most recently, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan documented eight cases of killing, five of torture and 29 cases of arbitrary detention

⁸ UN Women Report 2025, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/afghanistan-gender-alert-2025-08-en.pdf>

⁹ Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2026: Afghanistan, March 31, 2026, retrieved August 7, 2026, https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2026/04/22144320/Afghanistan-HCA-2026_March-2026-Short.pdf

¹⁰ Humanitarian Action Needs Analysis and Response, Afghanistan 2026, accessed January 28, 2026, <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1502/document/humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-afghanistan-2026/article/emergency-shelter-and-nfi>

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan; Events of 2025, visited August 7, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/afghanistan>

¹² Nazanin Mohseni, Taliban leader issues decree to assess and replace "Foreign Terms" in administrative documents, April 5, 2026, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://kabulnow.com/2026/04/taliban-leader-issues-decree-to-assess-and-replace-foreign-terms-in-administrative-documents/>

¹³ "Taliban pressure is driving people away from the Government, says senior Shia cleric," Afghan International, May 28, 2026, accessed August 11, 2026, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202605280771>

¹⁴ Afghan International, "Taliban shuts down over 30 Ismaili places of Worship in Badakhshan," July 28, 2026, retrieved August 11, 2026, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202607280565>

¹⁵ UN, Afghanistan's Taliban responsible for revenge killings, torture of former officials, August 22, 2023, visited August 8, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139962>

of former government officials between April and June 2026.¹⁶

Former Afghan military personnel living in exile are also being targeted. Two former officers—General Ekramuddin Saree and Mohammad Amin Almas were assassinated in Iran in December last year. Earlier, another political and military figure, Maroof Ghulami was killed in Mashhad. The Taliban regime claims that these incidents occurred due to “personal enmity or revenge.” Thus, these killings are not investigated.

Recognition

Except for Russia, no other country has recognized Taliban government. Moscow’s decision was not unexpected. In fact, the Taliban have been in contact with Russia since 2010. They sent Maula Muhammad Essa as their envoy to Moscow in 2014.¹⁷ The Taliban regime and Russia signed an agreement in Moscow on May 7, 2026, to strengthen bilateral military cooperation.¹⁸ Russia has agreed to provide an air defence system to the Taliban regime besides repairing two radars.

As far as other countries are concerned, they have adopted await-and-see policy. This is a major setback for the Taliban. No doubt, several countries, including Pakistan, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and India have re-opened their embassies in Kabul.

NRF and IS-K

The Taliban are facing two strong rivals—Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and the National Resistance Front (NRF). The IS-KP targets Taliban leaders through bomb blasts and suicide attacks. The NRF is led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of a prominent Jihadi commander, Ahmad

Shah Massoud, who was killed by al-Qaeda operatives in September 2001. NRF is active in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Kapisa, Panjshir and Parwan provinces. Its tactics include hit-and-run, ambushes on Taliban checkpoints in far flung area and assassinations of Taliban officials through explosive devices.

US interests in Afghanistan

The US interests in Afghanistan are in direct clash with those of China and Russia. President Trump wants to regain control over Bagram airbase to keep close watch on China and Russia. Beijing and Moscow consider that if the US once again get foothold in Afghanistan, this will create unrest in Central Asia and Xinjiang province of China.

The US also makes pretensions to prevent Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for terrorist groups. It is showing inability to make Afghan Taliban follow the spirit of the Doha Accords, as Afghanistan continues to host transnational and regional terrorist organizations such as TTP, ISKP, and Al-Qaeda.

Relations with neighbouring countries

All neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are suffering due to the presence of more than two dozen terrorist groups in that country.¹⁹ These groups have over 60 terrorist camps in different Afghan provinces.²⁰

Pakistan

Pakistan has suffered the most due to terrorism from across the border. Mainly, the TTP and the BLA are responsible for these gruesome terrorist activities. The UN Report 2024 says that TTP is “the largest terrorist group” in Afghanistan and receives growing support from the Taliban to conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan. This has

¹⁶ Former Afghan security personnel still face killings and torture, says UN, Afghan International, July 28, 2026, accessed August 9, 2026, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202607282338>

¹⁷ Saeed Shinwari, Interview with General Sami Sadat, leader of Afghan United Front, retrieved August 9, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1498073645148058>

¹⁸ Syed Fazl -e- Haider, “Russia and Afghanistan Sign Military Cooperation Agreement,” Jamestown Organization, July 15, 2026, accessed August 9, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/russia-and-afghanistan-sign-military-cooperation-agreement/>

¹⁹ UN Security Council Report March 2025, accessed August 8, 2026, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-03/afghanistan-28.php>

²⁰ Pakistan tells UN over 60 militant camps in Afghanistan threaten national security, urges aid for Afghans, Arab News, August 8, 2026, visited August 8, 2026, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2615740/pakistan>

caused a sharp increase in terrorism in Pakistan, which has been ranked among the ten countries most impacted by terrorism every year since the inception of the Index in December 2012. Pakistan carried out air strikes in Afghanistan targeting terrorist camps. It repeatedly asked Kabul to ban terrorist groups or expel them from Afghan soil. But the Taliban are reluctant to do so.

India is also supporting terrorists, especially the BLA. Officials of the Indian secret service say that “we gave Baloch everything, from money to guns...everything.”²¹ According to some observers, “India is waging a well-calibrated, low-level proxy war against Pakistan through Afghanistan.”²² These tactics are ‘tactical’ in nature, that is, who, when, and how to target, and the scale of the covert strike.”²³

China

Beijing has economic as well as strategic interests in Afghanistan. It has made a huge investment and does not want instability in that country. China also wants to extend China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.

However, China has also expressed concern over the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. According to Chinese envoy to the UN, Sun Lei, terrorist groups based in Afghanistan remain a serious threat to the country and its neighbours.²⁴ It is worried about presence of members of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan. The group aims to establishment of an autonomous Islamic state for the Chinese Uyghur population.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan opposed the Taliban’s return to power because a Tajik terrorist group, Jamaat Ansarullah (TJA), also known as Tajikistani Taliban is based in Afghanistan. It wants to topple the government in Tajikistan and establish an Islamic emirate there on the pattern of the Taliban regime in Kabul. The group has hundreds of militants in Afghanistan.²⁵ Tajikistan has deployed troops along its border with Afghanistan to meet any eventuality. Five Chinese miners were killed and five other injured in two separate drone attacks in Tajikistan from Afghanistan in 2025.

Uzbekistan

Tashkent is concerned about ISIS-K and other terrorist groups i.e. Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari, the Islamic Jihad Union, and Jamaat Ansarullah.²⁶ In April 2022, ISKP claimed firing rockets from Afghanistan targeting a military post in Termez in southern Uzbekistan. In July the same year, rockets were again fired from Afghanistan toward Termez. It damaged a build. No one was injured in the attack. Uzbekistan is urging Kabul to prevent the ISKP and other terrorist outfits from using Afghan soil for cross-border terrorism. It has deployed security personnel along its 144-km border with Afghanistan.

Tashkent thinks that the economic collapse of Afghanistan may destabilize the whole region. Therefore, it is strengthening ties with the Taliban regime in railway, transport, trade and investment.²⁷

²¹ Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy’s Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

²² Ibid., 10–11.

²³ “Excerpt: My Enemy’s Enemy by Avinash Paliwal,” *Hindustan Times*, October 24, 2017, accessed August 8, 2026, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/excerpt-my-enemy-s-enemy-by-avinash-paliwal/story-XeyDV6kM8FOzadeasMPwBN.html>

²⁴ “Terrorist groups in Afghanistan pose serious regional threat, Says China,” *Afghan International*, August 6, 2026, retrieved August 7, 2026, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202608069491>

²⁵ Radio Free Europe, *Tajikistan concerned about Taliban plots to infiltrate from Afghanistan*, September 25, 2021, retrieved August 8, 2026, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-concerned-taliban-plots/31477716.html>

²⁶ The US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Uzbekistan*, visited August 8, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/uzbekistan/>

²⁷ Lailuma Qadiri, *Afghan, Uzbek Officials Discuss Afghan-Trans Railway Project*, *Tolo news*, July 22, 2026, retried August 8, 2026, <https://tolonews.com/business-200136>

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is worried about the construction of Qoshtepa Canal, which passes through Afghan provinces of Jawzjan and Faryab bordering Turkmenistan. Ashkhabad believes that the canal will cause shortage of water in the Amu River passing through its territory, posing a serious threat to the country.

Iran

Tehran welcomed the US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, it is concerned about the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and treatment meted out to Shia/Hazara community. The two countries have a long-standing dispute over the distribution of water from Helmand River. Tehran alleges that Kabul has been depriving

it of its due share of water. The Taliban are criticizing Tehran for mass expulsion Afghan refugees. 1.9 million Afghans returned from Iran last year.

Conclusion

Five years after the Taliban came into power, the group has managed to bring relative security and minimized opium cultivation; however, these gains are largely overshadowed by the country's deepening humanitarian crisis, human rights situation, political exclusion, and the persistent presence of terrorist groups. Therefore, to ensure long-term stability in Afghanistan, Taliban will have to address the grievances of Afghans, improve relations with regional countries, and take strict and verifiable action against terrorist organizations.

